

The Christmas Tree

December 2009

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Mara tip-toed quietly down the hall and stopped short of the living room. She had heard her parents' voices when she got up for a glass of water, and when she heard them say "Christmas" she decided to linger a while and listen.

"But if the tree isn't there, how can we have Christmas?" said Mara's mother.

"It has to be perfect. If it's not, we simply can't do it," Mara's father answered.

"No," conceded Mara's mother. "I don't suppose we can. We'll just have to find the perfect one. Otherwise, it simply won't happen."

"Mara! What are you doing up?" Her father rounded the corner, surprising her.

"Why...I...I was thirsty, so I came out for a glass of water," Mara said, startled by her father's sudden appearance.

"Well off to bed with you. It's late." Mara's father swooped her up in his arms and tucked her back in to her bed.

But Mara couldn't sleep. She was stunned by what she thought she heard. No Christmas? How could there be no Christmas? No tree or lights or stockings hanging by the fire. No cookies or milk left out for Santa. No carols or stories. No figs. It seemed too terrible to be true.

Mara tossed and turned all night. When she woke up in the morning she knew what she must do. She remembered what her mother said about a tree. If they didn't have the perfect Christmas tree there would be no Christmas.

Mara would find the perfect tree. She would save Christmas.

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The next morning on her way to school, Mara turned left to the park instead of right to the bus stop. She hated missing school, but it was only a couple of days before Christmas and she knew that unless she set out right away to find the perfect tree, there would be no Christmas.

Mara wandered through the park, looking carefully at the trees. Most of them were elms and maples, now bare of leaves, branches heavy with snow. Several pines lined the park's boundaries, and Mara eventually found them. She circled their thick trunks and stared steadily up into their boughs. As beautiful as they were none of them seemed perfect to Mara. After several fruitless hours, she sat down on a fallen tree trunk to rest.

Mara sat with her chin in her hands, wondering what to do. She just *had* to find the perfect tree. But where could she look? Even if she found the perfect tree here in the park, she knew she couldn't cut it down. She didn't have an ax anyway.

The snow in front of the fallen trunk lay perfectly white and sparkled with the morning sun. It looked so soft and pure that Mara thought of the angels who come on Christmas Eve to decorate the Christmas tree. She couldn't wait for the angels to come to her house. They always left it warm and happy and smelling good. It was a smell Mara could never quite explain, but it made her think of lilac bushes, daisies, grass, hot chocolate, and the soft fluffy comforter she wrapped herself in every winter. Thinking of the angels made her want to see them now, so she laid herself out in the snow and made one, right there under the line of pines that ringed the park.

She lay in the snow and stared up at the sun glinting through the needle canopy above. Watching the sun sparkle and wink like diamonds on the trees made her think of a story she had heard about an Enchanter and Enchantress who lived somewhere on the edge of the forest. So far on the edge, in fact, that it could be said they lived on the horizon, where the earth meets the sky. The only way to find them was to walk into the sunset. The sun always looks as if it is sinking steadily at dusk. But it is not. There is a precise

moment every night when the sun actually sets, an exact moment when the sun and earth meld together perfectly, like a puzzle. At this moment the sun pops. That is, it flashes with a bright green light. To find the Enchanter and Enchantress, you had to step into the popping of the light at the precise moment of dusk.

The Enchanter and Enchantress were rumored to be very wise and very kind. Mara was sure they would help her. They could tell her where to find the perfect tree. Mara sat up in the snow, happy now that she knew what to do. She dusted off her clothes and walked toward the sun, which by now had crossed over its highest point and was heading west. Mara had spent the entire morning at the park without realizing it. She walked away, leaving a perfect angel in the snow.

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Mara trekked up the hill at a remarkably steady pace. She had been following the sun all afternoon, through forests and fields, over rivers and dales, and had finally arrived at the horizon's foothills. It was almost dusk and the sun was dropping steadily. She had to make it to the top of these hills at the exact moment the sun touched them. If she missed it, she would have to wait a full day to walk into the sunset.

The sun seemed to sink faster while Mara climbed. Gasping for air, she leaped the last few steps up the hill and dove into the sun as its rays touched the earth. Fortunately for Mara, her timing was perfect; her body slipped right through the exact place at the precise moment when the sun pops. Momentarily blinded by the flash of green light, Mara could not see her surroundings and could not brace herself for the fall. She tumbled on the ground and landed flat on her back.

Mara wasn't sure if she made it through. The fall had made her dizzy, and her eyes showed reverse shadows of light when she opened them. She lay on the ground, getting her bearings.

"What's this?" she heard a voice say. "A monkey? I've only seen monkeys roll and dive like that."

“Why no, Papa. It’s a little girl,” another voice answered.

Mara drew her legs up into herself and blinked wildly until she could see. All she could make out at first was two figures, very tall thin figures wearing very tall thin hats and glimmering robes that emitted a soft green light.

“Are you the Enchanter and Enchantress?” Mara asked shyly. Although she was happy to be here and excited to meet them, she was nevertheless awed by their presence.

“Enchanter and Enchantress?” said the Enchanter. “What a silly notion. We do not enchant anyone or anything, young lady. Who told you such a thing?”

“Oh, well, I’m terribly sorry to intrude. I was told that the Enchanter and Enchantress live here. I really need their help.” Mara was crestfallen. “Might you know where I can find them, sir?”

“Sir!” exclaimed the Enchantress. “How sweet. No need to call him sir. We are the Moooses. He is Hal Moose and I am his wife, Becky Moose.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Moose, but I was so hoping to find the Enchanter and Enchantress,” Mara replied. “Now I don’t know what I’ll do.”

“Dear, dear,” the Enchantress helped Mara to her feet. “Come and have something to warm you and tell us what troubles you. You may not be as far as you think from what you seek.”

“Do you mean you know the Enchanter and Enchantress?” Mara said excitedly, taking her seat at the old wooden table that filled the room.

“*Enchant* is such an ambiguous word,” said the Enchanter. “Enchanters aren’t in business to fascinate people. Dear me, no. They’re *magic*!” As he spoke, the Enchanter’s robes grew a brighter, sparkling green. And when he said “magic” he waved his arms in the air so quickly that Mara saw hundreds of stars shooting out from his sleeve. They encircled the room in a long whirlwind that was not, in fact, windy at all.

Not one dish was displaced; not one candle flickered. Yet the stars moved so fast it seemed to Mara that they would explode.

But just as quickly as the ribbon of stars came from the Enchanters right sleeve, they disappeared up his left sleeve. The Enchanter stood smiling at the foot of the table, quite pleased with himself.

"Show-off," the Enchantress said to the Enchanter as she set a plate of tea and cookies in front of Mara. "Come and get your tea. And you wonder why we had to move here, beyond the horizon," she shook her head. "Here, dear," she poured Mara a cup of tea.

"*You* are the Enchanter and Enchantress?" Mara could barely speak. She was so amazed that she was almost afraid to say another word. But she knew she must speak. She had to tell them of her quest for the perfect tree.

"Yes indeed," said the Enchanter. "We most certainly are. Now tell us, won't you, why you sought us out." Hal Moose pulled a chair up to the table, poured his tea, and set cookies on his plate—without touching a thing. He stood smiling in his green robes on the far side of the room while the furniture and food settled themselves. His long, white beard curled up in small ringlets, and then uncurled, without a helping hand.

"Stop that," scolded the Enchantress. "You look as if you have tentacles growing from your chin when you do that. Come, come. Drink your tea. Now tell us, dear," she turned her attention to Mara, "why you're here. You dove through the sun at just the right moment to land in our home. You're quite a brave girl, and lucky too. Most who try do not succeed. What is it that fueled such bravery and determination?"

"Well," Mara began shyly, "I heard my parents say...that is, we...."

"Don't be afraid," said the Enchanter, now seated next to Mara and slurping his tea.

"Christmas is going to be cancelled. Unless we have the perfect tree, there will be no Christmas," Mara finally blurted.

The Moores gasped in unison and looked at each other in alarm. “No Christmas!?” said the Enchanter. “Preposterous. How can there be no Christmas. It’s unheard of,” he blustered.

“You said you must have the perfect tree,” the Enchantress laid her hand on top of Mara’s. “What do you mean?”

“I heard my parents say that without the perfect Christmas tree we would have no Christmas. You see, the angels come on Christmas Eve to decorate our tree. They place hundreds of sparkling lights on it so that Santa can find his way there. And they put *szalon cukor*, small candies, on the tree for us. But most important, they leave a bell on the tree and ring it when they’re done. The bell tells us that Jesus has been born. If we don’t have a tree, how will Santa find us? And how will we know when it’s time to sing carols to celebrate Jesus’s birth?” Tears sparkled on Mara’s lashes as she spoke. She couldn’t bear to think that there might not be Christmas.

The Enchanter and Enchantress listened gravely to Mara. When she finished, they sat quietly, deep in thought for some time staring into the fire that burned brightly on the hearth. “There is only one thing to do,” the Enchanter finally spoke. “You must go to the Land of the Fairies. You may find your tree there.”

“Yes,” agreed the Enchantress, “That would be your wisest course.”

“The Land of the Fairies?” asked Mara. “I don’t know where that is. Where shall I go? What shall I say to them?”

“The Land of the Fairies is ruled by three fairy princesses. The fairies, like us, regard all life as sacred—all life, including flowers, grass, and trees. You must go to each princess and tell her of your plight. She will direct you to the trees, where you may find what you are looking for,” the Enchantress said.

“Be very careful as you travel,” warned the Enchanter. “There are other than fairies in the Land of the Fairies.”

His face took on a darkness that made Mara uneasy. “The princesses must be nice,” she said. “But what else besides fairies are there?”

“The princesses are quite nice. Very judicious. They don’t see many humans, so they will be pleasantly surprised to see you, I trust,” the Enchanter said. “But there are also pixies there, and they can be quite mischievous. “

“Pixies? Aren’t pixies fairies too?” Mara knew a little about fairies and pixies from the stories her mother read to her when she was little.

“Yes,” said the Enchantress, “they are cousins of the fairy. But where fairies are kind and caring, pixies like to tease and play jokes. It’s not that they are mean-spirited, mind you, they are simply naughty. There are, however, mean-spirited beings out and about in this world. Be careful who you trust as you go on your journey. Do not always believe what you hear. Rather, believe what’s in your heart. Only you can know what’s in your heart.”

With those words of wisdom and a satchel of supplies for her journey, the Enchanter and Enchantress sent Mara on her way.

“What a sweet child,” the Enchanter said, dabbing his eyes. “I hope she finds what she is looking for.” Together they watched as Mara disappeared over the top of a hill.

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Mara traveled the path the Mooses had laid out for her. She easily found her way through the wildflower fields and blackberry thickets, and when she saw the dense copse of willows she knew she must be nearing Lily Pad Forest, which was not, technically, a forest.

Lily Pad Forest was the name given the south end of the tarn that fed the rivers winding through the Land of the Fairies. Mara stopped when she reached the edge. The tarn's water was a brilliant emerald green. Floating on the surface were the largest lily pads Mara had ever seen, some as big as her head, and on each of them bloomed perfect creamy white and shell-pink lilies. Mara was mesmerized by their fragrance and beauty.

It was very quiet at Lily Pad Forest and very still. It was easy for Mara to lose herself in her thoughts there, with no interruptions. She was contemplating how to cross the tarn so that she could enter the Land of the Fairies and find the princesses. She thought perhaps the best way would be to walk on the lily pads, like stepping stones. She stood up, ready to take the first step onto a lily pad, when it shook violently under her toes. Mara fell backwards in surprise, barely landing on the bank.

"Oh my!" she exclaimed, "What happened?"

The lily pad continued to tremble, and what appeared to be sparks shot out from under its lily. Mara crouched down eye-level with the lily to see what was causing such a stir. As her gaze reached just low enough, the lily seemed to spring right off the pad, and it bopped her in the nose.

"Ouch!" Mara fell backwards again, rubbing her nose.

"What's the big idea?" a voice called from the lily pad. "What do you mean by stepping on me?"

"Well...I...excuse me please," Mara struggled to find the right words. She had never been addressed by a lily pad before. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm so sorry."

"Sorry, schmorry," the voice returned. "Keep your big fat toes off me."

From the bank Mara peered at the lily pad to locate the source of the voice. Under the lily itself she spotted a tiny foot.

"My big fat toes?" she replied. Another tiny foot emerged. "Certainly I will. If you keep your little pointy toes off me."

"Pointy toes!" The tiny feet flew out from under the lily. They were attached to a tiny winged body which was now fluttering angrily in front of Mara's eyes. "I'll show *you* pointy toes!" It continued, and jabbed its feet at Mara's shoulder.

Mara stepped back just in time. "What on earth are you?" she asked.

"*What* am I? That's a fine thing to ask. *Who* am I is a more polite question, don't you think?"

"Polite?" Mara said. "You're really something to talk about polite. First you startle me so that I almost fall into the water. Then you nearly kick me. And you want to talk about polite?"

"I am a pixie," the pixie said as she buzzed furiously around Mara's head. "And my *name* is Marika. Now *what* are you? And, more importantly, *what* are you doing *here*?"

"I'm a human," Mara replied. "And my name is Mara. The Enchanter and Enchantress sent me here to the Land of the Fairies. They thought the fairy princesses might be able to help me. A pixie, huh? Yes, they warned me about you."

"A human? We haven't seen humans here in a very long time. The Mooses sent you, did they? Then I guess you must be all right. They don't associate with riff-raff. But I'm not sure why they had to warn you about me. There's nothing wrong with me." Marika fluttered her eyes at Mara and smiled sweetly.

"Right," said Mara. "Nevertheless, I need to find the fairy princesses. Can you help me?"

"Maybe," said Marika. "Why do you need to find them?"

Mara explained everything to Marika about her quest for the perfect Christmas tree. Distressed by the possibility there would be no Christmas, Marika readily agreed to help, and she led Mara into the Land of the Fairies.

Once through Lily Pad Forest and the Rainbow Rivers, Mara and Marika arrived in the Fern Fjord, a majestic and lush valley. The ferns lining the valley were colossal, towering over Mara like buildings and making Marika seem like a bug. The pair made their way through the dense ferns, each telling the other

about the wonders of her own land. As they went on chattering, Mara barely noticed the tracks made in the spongy earth below her feet, but as the ferns grew sparse and the companions approached open fields, the tracks and their paths became evident.

“What are these?” Mara stopped and bent down to take a closer look. Marika swooped down too, inspecting the ground.

“Horses!” yelled Marika excitedly. She shot up in the air like a rocket, spraying pixie dust in circles around her. “I *love* horses! Where are they? Can you see them?” She buzzed high and low like a dragon-fly, trying to get a glimpse.

“I don’t see any,” said Mara. “And even if there were horses around you probably would have scared them off by now, buzzing around like that. What’s the big deal anyway? They’re just horses.”

But Marika was gone.

“Marika? Hey! Marika! Where did you go?” Mara was concerned. The pixie was her guide, after all, and if she deserted her now Mara wasn’t sure what she would do. She decided to move forward, following one of the paths the horses had made in the tall grass.

She pushed and swished and pulled as she made her way along the path. The grass was so tall and thick she couldn’t see over or through it. But amid all the swishing she made as she went, Mara suddenly heard the sound of hoofs beating the ground, followed by a wild whinnying.

“Yeeeiha!” a voice rang out from somewhere in the grass. It sounded a lot like Marika.

“Oh no!” said Mara and dove into the grass just as a horse came barreling down the path with a wild look in its eyes. On its back Mara saw a flutter of tiny wings, and trailing out behind it was a swirl of pixie dust. Marika had stolen a horse.

Mara got up and ran in the direction the horse had come from. She didn’t have to struggle through the grass very long before she came to a clearing. But the clearing was not exactly clear. Dozens of horses

milled nervously around, clearly disturbed by the pixie's shenanigans. Mara approached them slowly and attempted to calm them down.

"Shhhh," she tried to comfort them. "It's all right now."

"All right?" a voice said. "Are you serious? Did you see that little nit? She rode off on Ted. Poor old bloke. He didn't even see it coming. We never do, you know. Those pixies. They steal us every chance they get."

Mara's mouth fell open as her eyes found the horse who had answered her. "Are...are you talking to *me*?" She asked.

"Of course I am, love. You were talking to me weren't you? Why shouldn't I answer back then?" the horse said.

"Ahhhh, yes. Of course," said Mara. She stood still for a moment, collecting herself. "She does this often, then, catching and riding off on you?"

"They all do," the horse replied. "Mischievous pixies. Can't seem to help themselves, you know. They need their joy rides. Well what are you doing here?" asked the horse.

"Where, exactly, is here?" asked Mara. "Marika, the pixie who stole your friend, was my guide. She was taking me to the fairy princesses."

"Well, you're very close," said the horse. "Ella, the princess of the Purple Kingdom, lives just beyond this clearing." He motioned for Mara to follow him. It was only a few steps to the edge of the clearing, and the kind horse bobbed his head from side to side to clear the rest of the path. "There," he nodded.

Mara blinked. The land before her rolled out into fresh lawns and manicured flowers. Puffy clouds hung in the sky, wisping their way around a tall, spiraling castle. The sight itself was beautiful enough to make someone stare, but what made Mara blink was the hue. Everything in the land was cast in various

shades of purple. The birds fluttering about, the apples hanging in the trees, even the trees themselves radiated with a purple glow.

“The Purple Kingdom,” Mara said. “Yes, now I see why it’s called that. Is everything here purple?” she asked, looking keenly at the beautiful pine trees that lined the pathway to the castle.

“Of course!” said the horse. “Except for us. We, too, belong to Princess Ella, but we are not purple, at least not outside of the kingdom’s borders. We go where we please. When we’re out here, we take on our own shades. When we’re in there, we’re purple.”

“Oh,” Mara was disappointed as she continued to stare at the pines. “Princess Ella must be very kind.”

“Princess Ella is indeed very kind and artistic too. In her castle halls hang the most beautiful drawings, that she has created herself. And in the air floats the most beautiful music, that she plays herself,” said the horse.

“But why is everything purple in her land?” asked Mara.

“Princess Ella has a purple heart and a purple soul. Because she is so kind and good, everything she touches takes on the tone of her heart and soul. So everything in her realm has a purple hue,” explained the horse.

“That makes sense,” Mara said. “But once the things in her land leave her land, do they take on their own shades, like you?”

“No,” said the horse, “we are special creatures who have free reign of all the realms. We belong to Princess Ella, but we also belong to Princess Hannah and Princess Erzsi too. And,” he continued, “we belong to no one. Whatever grows in Princess Ella’s land is grown through her love and kindness, so it becomes a part of her own perfection. Thus, it is purple, as her heart and soul are purple.”

“Well,” Mara sighed, “then there is no point in going to Princess Ella myself and asking her where to find the perfect tree. Her trees may be perfectly formed, but they are all purple. Purple might be perfect for her, but it is not perfect for me. I suppose I must move on, then. Can you direct me?”

“Where to, my friend?” asked the horse.

“I would like to find the other two fairy princesses. Can you tell me how to get to their lands?” Mara asked.

“It would be my pleasure,” replied the horse, and he directed her on her way.

Mara was only part way down the path when she heard galloping feet come up swiftly behind her. Turning aside quickly, she moved out of the way. Just as Mara expected, it was Ted galloping wild-eyed down the path, Marika whooping and hollering at the reins, pixie dust flying willy-nilly behind. What Mara didn’t expect, however, was to see another horse and rider following behind, chasing down Ted and Marika. They traveled so fast they went by in a blur—a splendid purple blur. Before Mara knew what she was seeing, the horse and rider stopped, wheeled around, and trotted back to meet her.

“Princess Ella!” Mara exclaimed and bowed in a deep curtsy. Princess Ella dismounted her horse and came toward Mara. Her hair was long and so deeply purple that it almost looked brown. Tufts of purple tulle swirled around her as she moved. She seemed to glide rather than walk, and it wasn’t until she was right in front of Mara that she realized the princess flew. Transparent silky wings fluttered like hummingbirds on her back.

“It is you,” the fairy princess said. “I have been expecting you. You may rise.”

Mara stood tall but kept her eyes fixed on the ground. She had never been in the presence of a princess before, much less a fairy princess. “You have?” she asked. “But how did you know I would be here?”

"The Mooses," replied Princess Ella. "We have ways of communicating, you see. Especially in matters as important as this."

"So you know why I've come?" Mara asked.

"I do. And you are welcome to any tree in my land," the fairy princess graciously offered.

"You are so kind," said Mara, "But I can't take any of the trees in your land. You see, your trees are purple, and I'm afraid a purple Christmas tree won't quite do."

"Of course they are purple," said Princess Ella. "What else would they be? Is purple not perfect?"

"Well," began Mara, "to you, perhaps, yes. But it will not make the perfect Christmas tree where I come from."

Princess Ella contemplated this for a moment. She could not fathom why Mara did not find a purple tree perfect. "Suit yourself," she said at last. "But I must be off. That naughty pixy is at it again, and I must release my horse from her spell. You are welcome to stay here, but I understand that you are looking for my sisters too. If you keep on this path, you will come to the land of Princess Erzsi, just across the Mellow Marsh."

"Thank you. Thank you ever so much," said Mara as the fairy princess mounted her horse.

"Keep alert," said Princess Ella. "You never know whom you may meet on your way." Before Mara could say another word, the fairy princess was off after Marika and the runaway horse, leaving behind a purple cloud.

Princess Ella was the second person to warn Mara of strangers she might meet on her journey. She thought that if the pixie was any indication of the unpleasant creatures she might meet, she was quite safe.

As she rounded a bend in her path, she noticed that the purple fringes that marked the borders of Princess Ella's land were fading, and the land was taking on a pinkish hue. Strange, she thought. Perhaps it is the sunset. Mara looked into the sky in the direction she thought might be west, but she didn't see a setting

sun. She walked on, contemplating the sky. Just as it was becoming pinker, it suddenly seemed to drain of all color. It's not that it turned gray; rather, it turned no color at all. Mara's mouth fell open. The no-color encompassed only a portion of the sky, as if an oval doorway of nothing was opened. But as Mara watched, the no-color spot grew—and it was spreading to where she stood. When the gray enveloped her, Mara felt distinctly cold, like icicles dropped out of the sky and prickled her skin. But the sky—and her skin—were dry. Mara wrinkled her nose as the icicle cold went up her nostrils. She closed her eyes tightly for a moment.

“Ah, what have we here?” said a voice that sent icicles up Mara's spine. She quickly opened her eyes. Before her stood a woman dressed in shades of gray. At least Mara thought she was dressed. The woman seemed surrounded by waves of gray water or mist or cloud—Mara could not determine which—and she seemed to float there in the lapping gray. Her hair was neither gray nor white, and her skin was the same. She was colorless.

“Wh- who are you?” Mara asked.

“Do you not know?” the woman said. “I am the Ice Queen. The rightful ruler of this land.” The Ice Queen reached out to touch a tree branch, heavy with fruit. As her fingers brushed it, the color drained from the branch, which turned a stiff, cold gray. The fruit fell to the ground, rotted. Mara realized then that the no-color permeating the sky was actually the aura of the Ice Queen. Everything she touched lost its color, and she moved through the world in waves of gray.

“I know who you are,” continued the Ice Queen. “And I know why you're here.”

“Y-you do?” Mara stuttered, both from cold and fear.

“Of course. You are here to find the perfect tree. But your quest is a foolish one,” said the Ice Queen.

“Foolish?” said Mara. “How can you say such a thing? Without the perfect tree there will be no Christmas.”

“Then so be it,” said the Ice Queen. “There is no such thing as perfection, foolish one. You failed before you even set out. Why seek perfection when you can be just as content with mediocrity. Surely there must be a tree somewhere in your land that is simply good enough.”

Mara was speechless. She could not understand why someone would choose to give up before she even started. Mara stood staring at the Ice Queen for some time. But the longer Mara stood in the Ice Queen’s presence, the more the icy feeling penetrated her heart. As she looked around the land that had been beautiful hues of purple and pink only moments before, she saw only gray. With the gray came the no-color feeling of despair. Mara began to doubt her quest and herself.

The Ice Queen observed the color drain from Mara’s face. She smiled a mirthless smile and moved closer to Mara.

“Stop where you are!” A voice, strong and solid, rang through the colorless gloom.

The Ice Queen stopped only three steps from Mara, her smile replaced with distress.

“It is her,” hissed the Ice Queen. “Again!”

The colorless aura surrounding the Ice Queen shrank noticeably in front of Mara’s eyes. As the Ice Queen shrunk into herself, the sky and trees began to glow pink. Mara looked in the direction of the pinkness, now lighting the way like the dawn sun. In the midst of the pink stood a fairy with long pinkish-golden hair curled in ringlets and pink velvet robes trailing behind her.

“That’s right,” said the fairy. “It is me, Princess Erzsi, and you are trespassing where you are not wanted. Leave this land immediately—spread your despair elsewhere!” Princess Erzsi raised both of her arms above her head, and a powerful pink light washed over Mara and the Ice Queen.

“This is not over yet,” hissed the Ice Queen as she slinked off into the trees. “You will be unhappy yet. Just wait and see—what comes around goes around.” As the Ice Queen disappeared, the world filled back in with color.

“You must be Mara,” said Princess Erzsi. “I’ve been expecting you. There have been rumors that the Ice Queen was back, defiling the land and its people, so I thought I better come find you before she did. Are you all right?”

“Yes, I think so,” said Mara. “I am so glad you showed up when you did. It was so strange. One moment I felt strong and right, and then when she looked into my eyes and the color disappeared from the world, I suddenly felt that everything about me was wrong. How does she do that? Why does she do that?”

“The Ice Queen is, sadly, a miserable woman. She has the potential for fullness and happiness right there at her fingertips, but for some reason she chooses misery. And if that weren’t bad enough, she wants to spread her misery to everyone she sees. Did she spread it to you? Am I too late?” Princess Erzsi was concerned for Mara’s well-being.

Mara had to think a bit before answering. The Ice Queen had succeeded in spreading some of her misery to Mara, and Mara was slow to shake it off. “I think I will be ok,” she said. “But I really do need to find the perfect Christmas tree. Where can I look?”

“Follow me,” Princess Erzsi said, and they set off to the heart of her kingdom.

When they arrived, Mara saw the most beautiful trees.

“Aren’t they spectacular?” Princess Erzsi beamed.

“Yes, yes they are,” said Mara. But her face did not show any joy. As beautiful as the trees were, they were all pink. “They are most certainly beautiful,” she continued, “but they are pink.”

“Well of course they’re pink,” laughed Princess Erzsi. “And pink is perfect!”

“Yes, I can see that it is perfect for you,” said Mara. “But it is not perfect for me.” She sighed audibly.

Princess Erzsi frowned. She hated to see Mara so sad. “I am sorry the trees that grow in my land do not suit your idea of perfection,” she said. “But you must not give up. Perhaps in my sister’s land you will find what you are looking for. You must go to Princess Hannah.”

Princess Erzsi showed Mara the way, and Mara set out once again on a new path. She walked and walked, but she did not notice the pink hues fading behind her. Her eyes were cast to the ground as she trudged her way along, and a sadness weighed on her heart. Perhaps the Ice Queen was right, she thought to herself. Surely there must be some tree that is simply good enough. Why should she continue on with her futile quest?

Walking with her head bent low, Mara did not see the trees and fields gradually turning to deep shades of blue. It was not until a sparkle caught her eye that she looked up. There along the bend in her path were the most beautiful turquoise flowers and grass Mara had ever seen. And scattered over all of them was a fine sheen of gold, glittering in the sun.

"Wow," Mara stood marveling at the scene. "Ouch!" she suddenly lurched forward. Something had smacked her in the back of the head.

"That's what you get for stopping." It was Marika, flying in circles around Mara's head, leaving swirls of pixie dust in her wake.

"What'd you do that for? And where have you been?" Mara was happy to see Marika, but slightly annoyed by the smack to her head.

"Riding into the sunset," said Marika. "And boy was Princess Ella mad that I was riding into it on her horse! Fairies are supposed to be gentle and kind, but when you make them angry....."

They continued on the path together, and Marika told Mara of her adventure with Princess Ella, from their chase through the Mellifluous Mountains to Marika's daring escape into the Mellow Marsh, where she nearly drowned in its stickiness.

"I had a feeling you'd be on the road to one of the fairy princess's lands, so I thought I'd come and see if you needed any more help."

“Help indeed!” an angry voice echoed across the blue gold-speckled field. “You call this help? Look what you did to my beautiful flowers!”

Marika shot up in the air like an arrow. “Princess Hannah!” she whispered loudly to Mara and flew behind her, out of the princess’s sight.

“Princess Hannah!” Mara stared in awe at the sight before her. The fairy princess glided like a ballerina across the tops of the flowers that dotted the fields. She was so graceful that every move she made seemed to Mara like she was dancing. Her blue satin gown hung like the midnight sky around her, and her feet were clad in slippers, ribboned up her legs.

“Hello, Mara,” Princess Hannah said, stopping just before her. “I thought I might find you here. But I didn’t expect to see that little urchin. Where is she?”

“Urchin!?” Marika flew out from behind Mara, enraged. “Who are you calling urchin?”

“You know full well who. And why. What business do you have coming into my kingdom and marring all my trees with that pixie dust of yours?”

Marika flushed slightly. “I was just having some fun,” she said. “Don’t bend your wings all out of shape over it.”

“Remove it this instant!” demanded Princess Hannah. “Or else....” She pirouetted in anger.

“All right, all right,” Marika said begrudgingly. “I’ll take off the dust. But it does make them prettier, you know.”

“Marika!” Princess Hannah raised her voice.

Marika burst up in the air, spiraling around like a windmill. All the pixie dust lifted from wherever it lay and flew into Marika’s twirl. Mara watched, amazed, thinking of her mother’s vacuum cleaner. Within seconds the pixie dust was gone.

“Thank you,” said Princess Hannah. “Now you must come with me,” she said to Mara.

Mara and Marika followed Princess Hannah into the heart of her kingdom. Princess Hannah's castle was surrounded by a moat of the deepest blue water. The castle itself was blue and was actually quite hard to see. Sometimes its blue melded with the blue of the sky. And then Mara would blink her eyes and it melded with the water that surrounded it. Music floated up from the castle windows, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Nutcracker Suite*, and other ballets Mara was sure she had heard before. Everywhere Princess Hannah went, she danced. Even the flowers of the fields seemed to dance when Princess Hannah came near.

"Here we are," said Princess Hannah when they arrived at the castle moat. "You are welcome to look wherever you like and to take whatever you need. Surely you will find the perfect tree here."

"You are most kind," said Mara. "Just like your sisters." But deep within her Mara felt the sadness of doubt scoring her heart. Princess Hannah's land was, after all, shaded in blues. Even though they were the most beautiful blues Mara had seen, she knew all the trees would be blue. And a blue Christmas tree was simply not the perfect Christmas tree.

"Then why do you look so sad?" asked Princess Hannah.

"All of your trees are blue," Mara replied.

"Of course," said Princess Hannah. "And the most perfect blue at that."

"They are most certainly a perfect blue," Mara agreed. "But a blue Christmas tree is not perfect for me. But I thank you, Princess Hannah, from the bottom of my heart." And Mara took her leave of the Land of the Fairies.

Mara didn't know where to go or what to do next. She wandered, forlorn, away from the Land of the Fairies, back toward Lily Pad Forest. Marika, feeling badly for her new friend, followed with her in silence. After some time, they neared a stream whose water was a deep blue-green.

"We must be nearing the border of Princess Hannah's land," Mara sighed, and seated herself next to the stream. Her head dropped on her arms.

“Why so glum?” Marika flitted around Mara, flicking balls of pixie dust at her head in an attempt to lighten her mood.

“The Ice Queen was right,” Mara said. “There is no point in trying to find what I’m after. It was foolish of me to even come.” Tears streamed silently down Mara’s cheeks.

“No point in trying!? Now *that* is foolishness. To say such a thing. Tsk tsk,” a voice called out from....somewhere. Mara couldn’t tell quite where.

Marika stopped flinging pixie dust and landed abruptly on Mara’s shoulder. “It cannot be,” she said in amazement as the owner of the voice stepped out from behind a stone.

“Cannot be what?” asked Mara, raising her head from her arm.

“Hermine,” Marika whispered, “the Most High Elf.”

“Ah, but it is,” said Hermine, bowing deeply to Mara and Marika. “I am here.”

“The Most High Elf?” Mara said. “I didn’t know there were elves in the Land of the Fairies.”

“There usually aren’t,” said Hermine. “I do not live here. I am merely passing through.”

“You see,” said Marika, “Hermine is elvish for Great Hunter. The Most High Elf passes from land to land, hunting what she wishes.”

“Yes, this is most true,” said Hermine.

“What are you hunting for?” asked Mara.

“For you,” said Hermine.

“Me?” Mara shrank back in fear, eyeing Hermine’s bow and arrow.

The Most High Elf laughed. “Do not be frightened,” she said. “I mean you no harm. I am searching for you to help you. And just in time, it seems. You’re crying.”

Mara’s tears began anew. “I can’t help it,” she said. “I am hunting too. Or at least I was hunting. But I failed.”

The Most High Elf and the pixie exchanged glances.

"You've seen the Ice Queen," said Hermine.

"How did you know?" asked Mara.

"It's written in your tears," said Hermine. "They are tears of doubt and despair. Only the Ice Queen can cause people to doubt themselves. She must be stopped."

"But how?" asked Marika. "She drains color from the world. She leaves everything she touches stiff and cold and lifeless."

"She takes away hope," explained Hermine. "But she can be conquered if you do not give up hope. "

"How can I not give up hope when I have searched everywhere?" asked Mara.

"You have not searched quite everywhere," replied Hermine.

"Really?" said Mara. "Where, then, do I look?" she asked excitedly.

"Did you believe when you set out on this quest that you would find the perfect Christmas tree, that you would find perfection?"

"Well, yes, of course," said Mara.

"Why?" asked the Most High Elf. "Did someone tell you that you could?"

"Well," Mara had to think about this for a moment. "No," she said at last. "No one told me that I could. I just knew I could."

"I see," said Hermine. "So you believed in yourself. You see, perfection may be something we seek in life, but we cannot expect others to have it for us. Perfection lies within. You must seek it in yourself."

"I don't understand," Mara said after some contemplation. "How can I find a Christmas tree inside of me? It is a tree, after all, that I'm looking for."

"Is it truly?" asked Hermine, raising her eyebrows slightly.

Marika had been twirling restlessly while Hermine and Mara spoke. She, too, was confused by what the Most High Elf said. "But the Ice Queen," she said. "I still don't understand. I've run into her so many times, you see, and she turns the best into the worst. Look at me, after all...."

"You are not bad," said Hermine sternly. "One too many run-ins with the Ice Queen only made you believe you are. But it is not so. You don't need her to believe in you. She doesn't believe in anything, poor soul. You only have to believe in yourself."

Mara had been standing facing the stream for a long time while Hermine and Marika talked. What Hermine said began, slowly, to make sense to her. She set out on this journey because she knew she had it in her to find what was right, to find the perfect Christmas tree, and to save Christmas for her family. As she gazed out over the aquamarine water, the gray in her heart slowly dissipated, and Mara again began to feel the stirrings of joy. A smile slowly stretched her mouth as she surveyed the opposite shore line.

"Oh my goodness!" Mara jumped up and down, clapping her hands. "There it is! Look, look! There it is!" she pointed across the stream.

There, on the other side, was the most perfect Christmas tree any of them had ever seen.

"You did it, you did it!" Marika somersaulted through the air.

The Most High Elf smiled. "See what you can do when you believe in yourself?" she said.

"I see, yes I do see now," Mara cried with joy.

"Wait just one minute," Marika stopped mid-somersault and hung upside down in the air. "That may be the most perfect Christmas tree, but it's here. *Here*, in the Land of the Fairies. Not *there*, where Mara lives."

"Ohhhh," Mara fretted. "You're right. How will we ever get it home? I don't even have an ax."

Hermine shook her head. "There you go again, doubting yourself," she said. "Marika, what's pixie dust for? I mean, besides to agitate horses, anger fairy princesses, and pelt people in the head with?"

Marika paused for a moment, upside down in the air, and then twirled around in a flutter of wings. “To fly!” she exclaimed. “I can help Mara get her perfect tree home, can’t I?”

“You most certainly can,” said Hermine. “You can do what you were meant to do—and that is to do good.”

* * *

Mara raised her head from her pillow and shook it. Pixie dust lit up the room. She looked at her clock. Just after midnight. She slipped silently from her bed and made her way down the hall to the living room. She paused just at the entrance, leaning against the wall with her eyes closed, and working up the courage to peek around the corner.

Ding-a-ling! Ding-a-ling-a-ling!

Mara smiled when she heard the bell tinkle, and she inhaled deeply. There it was, the smell. Lilac bushes, daisies, grass, hot chocolate, and her soft fluffy comforter. She peeked around the corner.

Standing in the living room was the perfect Christmas tree. Lights and pixie dust sparkled on the branches. *Szalon cukor* shimmered in the lights. And there, at the top, was the bell Mara had just heard. She wasn’t too late after all. She had done what she set out to do— and made it in perfect time.