

## **DREAMGUARDS**

**By Angeliki Darlasi**

### **Prologue**

--Really, mum, these people really exist?

--What do you think?

--We don't know. It would be nice if they did.

--Well then, they probably do exist.

--If we dream of them, then they must exist, isn't it?

--Yes, I think that's right.

--Why don't you write a story about dreams? This way we will dream of them more often...

--Great idea. I may just do that. What do you think Ali?

--I don't dream. Neither with closed not open eyes.

--Never?

--Never.

### **I. The Fairytale of Ezra and Aishe**

#### **The Land of the Dreamguards**

There was once a very distant country, beyond the limits of the world, lost in the depths of the mind and forgotten in the immensity of the heart. No map marks this country nor has any daring seafarer, like Sabah, ever visited it. No traveler mentions it in his writings and no imaginative liar like Baron Minhausen could ever describe it. This country was very well hidden from indiscreet eyes and adventurous sprees.

On its three sides, its borders were washed by a great and deep sea. No one could traverse it without consequences. Wild fish with big teeth, sirens with shrill voices and huge creatures capable of swallowing entire cities stalked the blue waters, protecting it from pirate and enemy fleets. No ship would dare approach that sea, even though from a distance it looked calm and peaceful.

The only side of the country where there was no sea was in the north. But there too it was difficult for a traveler to pass. Immense and always snow-covered mountains, with peaks that touched the sky, cast a shadow on the northern borders of the country. Legend had it that in the wild forests of these mountains roamed green dragons, not to mention the wildest dragons of all time, the black dragons. With such border guards, then it was impossible, even for the most adventurous explorer, to even approach those mountains. Even if we assume that any adventurous explorer managed not to turn into a column of ice from the snow and ice, he could hardly escape getting roasted by the fiery breath of some dragon.

In that land, then, lived the most weird and unusual people, people who, however strange it may seem, had a pair of big transparent wings on their backs, so transparent as if they were made out of glass. These wings had no particular color, rather they acquired a different one very time; the blue of the sky, the turquoise of the sea, the green of the trees, the red of the poppy, the gold of the sun, and the silver of the moon.

In all other respects, these people had many similarities with common humans. They went to school, they studied, traveled, had families and friends, and anything else a person could imagine common people did. But the most important thing of all was what these people did for a living. All the people of this country had from the moment of their birth the same job. A very strange, beautiful, and important job: to guard the dreams of simple common humans.

Every newborn baby that was born in the countries of humans acquired from its first dream its own Dreamguard, a protector of its dreams, from that distant country. From that moment on, the specific Dreamguard would have as his sole mission to guard the dreams of his protégé. So, every Dreamguard carried on his shoulders the dreams and with his big wings he flew up to the immense dreamways. As one might expect, the Dreamguards had a lot of work trying to keep dreams alive and furthermore to help people so that they would not forget their dreams but rather to remember them and to keep dreaming.

This then in a few words the distant Country of the Dreamguards, perhaps the most ancient and blessed country since the creation of the world. And these, in a few words, were the Dreamguards, one of the oldest and most sacred generations of people.

And the Dreamguards were as many as the dreams of human beings.

## **Ezra and Aishe**

Among the Dreamguards lived also a loving couple: Ezra and Aishe. Ezra was a well-built man with turquoise eyes and Aishe a beautiful and well-meaning woman with long silky hairy, silvery-green like an olive leaf, and big almond-shaped eyes. Both Ezra and his wife came from the oldest families of the Dreamguards. The origins of their families were so old that they disappeared in the depths of time and reached as far back as the first dream of the first human, and even further back: to the first dream of God himself. It was to be expected then that they were highly respected among the Dreamguards. Everyone admired them because they both worked tirelessly and ceaselessly, executing their mission to the fullest. Ezra, in fact, belong to the group of the Chosen, the highest body of Dreamguards, elected by the people of the country and which made sure that the laws were obeyed and that order was maintained.

They lived together in a big house that looked a lot like those small castles of another era and which we often see abandoned in the Lands of the Humans. The site of the house was especially privileged. Built on top of a hill, it overlooked the sea on one side and the Land of the Dreamguards on the other. The house once belonged to Ezra's father and before him to his grandfather and so on and so forth. Many generations of Dreamguards had grown up there. It was reasonable then that at some point Ezra would want to raise their his own children as well, the next generation of Dreamguards.

But the years were passing and Ezra and Aishe had no children. This was the only grievance and complain they had in an otherwise happy life.

--Pity...

--What a pity they don't have any children...

--Well, they can't have it all.

--They work a lot. Perhaps they don't have time to raise a child.

--Yes, but I know very well that they would like a child.

--It would be a big blow to Ezra not to have a child. He comes from one of the oldest and most respected family of our land.

This is more or less what the Dreamguards often said among themselves but luckily Ezra and Aishe did not pay attention to gossip. They kept living, loving one another, and working very hard. Only in their prayers to God did they reveal their sadness and begged that they too would have a child. They promised they would love it more than their own selves...

### **Ersi as in “Dewdrop”**

The years passed and one beautiful August day a little girl was born among the other Dreamguard children. At precisely the moment that Ali, in some other land, was dreaming that he was running carelessly in a green field, his girl-Dreamguard was born, who has as her sole mission to guard his dreams. She was a beautiful little girl with turquoise eyes (like her dad) and silky hair, silvery-green like an olive leaf (like her mum). Her skin was so white, almost transparent, that her little blue veins would show. She was a sweet little girl, small and quiet, so her parents looked for a suitable name. They searched and searched and after studying very carefully the list of names in the name books, they chose one they thought most appropriate. That's how it came to be that the little girl got her name, which according to their books it meant “dewdrop” in some ancient language: they called her Ersi. What did it matter that she was smaller and more fragile than all the other children-Dreamguards? It was her destiny not to be forgotten so easily, neither in the Land of the Dreamguards nor in the Land of the Humans.

Ezra and Aishe were very proud of their daughter's birth. They sat for hours over her cradle and watched her. They sang to her and begged god that she be happy, sound and strong. They were so happy that they didn't worry that her wings were very small and weak, not like those of other children. Not did they mind the silly gossip that circulated about their daughter.

--She will die.

--Her gaze vanishes in the distance.

Or:

--She will die.

--Her skin is so white, it looks transparent, ready to disappear.

Or even:

--she will die.

--Her wings are weak. Her wings are small, very small to carry the weight of dreams.

In any case, they all said with certainty:

--She will die, sooner or later. Such a shame...

This is what the Dreamguard said because it was written in the chronicles of their country that sometimes, when, at the moment a small little baby is dreaming, its dream is violently interrupted, then its Dreamguard is born weak and with small wings. Some

Dreamguards even died right after the moment of their birth. Ersi's parents, of course, believed that their daughter would grow up and that everything would pass. Because Ezra and Aishe were not just anyone. So when they said that Ersi would grow up and that all would be fine, they must have known what they were saying so no one dared doubt them. Nevertheless, gossip would persist and makes its rounds. Everywhere. In the market, at the feasts, during the children's games. Everyone, young and old were talking about the daughter of Ezra the Chosen One; everyone spoke about that little girl, Ersi; everyone spoke of a small transparent dewdrop.

--When she was born...

--Soon after..

--The little baby, Ali, was dreaming his first dream...

--It was beautiful his dream...

--But a little melancholy, a little sad.

--He was an unhappy little child.

--Then lightning stuck.

--No, an army was passing by.

--Lightning struck when the army was passing by.

--Vicious warriors...

--With guns and knives.

--Someone raised his gun and shot the sky.

--He aimed his gun at the child's head.

--A small movement...

--Yet so big!

--The little boy was startled.

--The little boy stopped dreaming.

--He stopped dreaming?

--He stopped dreaming.

--Poor boy...

--That's why Ersi's wings...

--Are small.

--Are weak.

--she won't make it.

--Poor girl...It's over now. She is doomed.

--How will the little boy dream?

--Ersi won't be able to guard his dreams.  
--that soldier...  
--The sounds..  
--the lightning was to blame.  
--that gun.  
--What if Ezra is a Chosen One. He won't be able to save her.  
--What a sad story...One should pity them.  
--Yes, Pity them. All of them.

So from then on no one spoke of Ersi's transparent skin, not of her turquoise eyes, nor of her smile but only about how small Ersi's wings were.

"She need just a little bit more care. That's all. She will grow. She will get strong, and everything will be fine." Ezra kept repeating to himself.

"just a little bit more care. That's all. She will grow. She will get strong, and everything will be fine." Aishe kept repeating to herself. In the mean time, Ezra and Aishe spread white carpets in their castle, a neutral color, so that Ersi would not be bothered, so that colors would not blind her. They covered the windows with thick white silk curtains so that the sunlight would not dazzle her and the silver reflections of the moon would not sadden her. They kept the doors closed so that the noise would not tire her and the laughter of the other children would not upset her.

--We will keep her in here, in the white security of nowhere and all will be fine, Ezra kept saying.

--She will be calm in the white silence of nothingness and all will come out right, said Aishe.

But even though Ezra was an Elected One, he could not do as he pleased. His daughter had a purpose and a job like all the other Dreamguards of the land. For her to remain closed up in the white castle she needed a special permission form the Elders, that is from the council of respected and wise old men of their country, which was the highest council of the entire land. Some even said that the council very often took its orders from the angels themselves.

One rainy winter night them Ezra ands Aishe appeared before the Council of elders. They wanted special permission to keep Ersi at home so that she could grow up without the burden of dreams, without getting exhausted by the painful task of guarding the dreams of that child. They were determined and ready to do anything so that they daughter would grow strong and live.

We have no idea what they asked of the Elders because the Elders did not speak with words but with their eyes. They were so wise that it was enough to just look whoever was before them in order to pose the right questions. This meant that whoever could not feel the questions of the Elders was not worthy of attending their wise council, that his demand was not just or reasonable and should withdraw. Ezra and Aishe proved that they could understand their questions. So we may never know what the Elders asked them but we know the answers they gave them. As we also know that they responded with bravery and sincerity.

--She is weak, wise elders, our daughter.

--Very weak. Like a tender shoot.

--Like the stem of a flower

...

--Yes, it's true.

--Her wings are very small.

--But they will grow.

...

--There have been other Dreamguards like her. They too had small wings when they were born. They too were weak but when they grew up they were able to fulfill their duty.

...

--With a lot of patience and great perseverance.

--With more rest and quiet.

--With more care and understanding.

--With more affection.

--With countless caresses and kisses.

--With infinite love.

...

--We will try.

--We will do all we can.

--And even more.

--We will make it.

...

--She won't shame you.

--She won't let you down.

--She will fulfill her mission to the utmost.

...

--Even our own life.

--Even our own life.

...

--I promise.

--I promise.

Ezra and Aishe waited outside the closed doors of the Council of Elders. After a while came the answer written in a sealed parchment: they could keep their daughter protected in the white castle as long as she came out to world when she grew stronger. And then either she would live like everyone attending to her duty or she would follow the fate of all those whose wings could not stand the weight of dreams.

So after the permission of the Elders, Ersi could live isolated in their white castle. At the time she was only two and she had to live for many years away from the cries, the colors, the laughter, the joy, the sorrow, and the weight of dreams. In other words she had to live away from all that could upset a young and weak Dreamguard but at the same time away from everything that a child needs—whether a Dreamguard or not—to grow and develop properly.

### **The Loneliest Child**

Ezra and Aishe watched their daughter grow up and they believed that they had taken care of everything that could upset or sadden her. Indeed, thanks to their efforts, Ersi was growing calmly and had begun to get stronger. She tried her first steps and the fluttering of her wings. The white carpets kept her from getting startled by loud noises, the closed doors prevented her from getting upset by the voices and laughter of the streets, and the curtains protected her eyes from getting injured by the light and colors. Every day that passed she took even greater steps, made even greater efforts to fly.

The days passed and the girl stood on her own two feet. Much as she tried, however, much as she fluttered her wings, she could not lift herself more than a few feet of the floor before falling down again exhausted in the rocking chair.

--It doesn't matter. One day she'll make it.

--She is still young.

--Day by day she will grow even stronger.



--One day she will fly so high that everyone will envy her.

--She needs to be patient and persistent.

--She needs love.

Her parents kept giving courage to each other and felt very pleased that they had managed to foresee everything. Or at least that's what they thought, because in their attempt to protect her they failed to foresee something very basic: loneliness. And the truth was that Ersi felt very, but very lonely, shut up in that white silky castle. Let's not forget that since the day she was born she had never seen the moon or the sun, the stars or the flowers, the mountains or the sea. No one ever heard her speak since she had never played with children. She did not know how to sing since she never heard the chirping of the birds. The little one knew nothing but the white color of the castle and the sound of silk rustling on the curtains.

So she was in no position to even make up false stories about herself or imagine things—perhaps imagination was better than nothing. It would at least help her get over her loneliness a little.

So on the one hand she grew stronger without the concern of others' dreams while on the other she kept wilting closed up in the white security of nothingness. Her skin was no longer so transparent but her eyes were always teary, ready to run, like the leaves that are covered with small morning dewdrops. She was a very lonely child-Dreamguard and in that she was not different from other lonely children. She may even have been the loneliest child in the world.

Ezra was nearly sick from worry not knowing what he could do so that his daughter would have some company. He thought of getting her a nightingale but he was afraid its chirping would make her sad. He thought of building her a fountain but he was afraid that the sound of running water might upset her. He thought of an animal but he feared that the care an animal needed would tire her and that any germs it carried might make her sick. He thought over and over again for a solution but he could not find one. He loved his daughter so much that the mere thought of anything happening to his daughter distressed him.

--There must be something that could help her. Something that would make her forget how lonely she is. Something that would give her strength and make her wings stronger, Ezra murmured over and over.

Aishe, on the other hand, could not stand seeing her husband so sad and her daughter so lonely and cheerless. Her heart was breaking. One day she said to Ezra with determination:

--Dear, I don't think there is anything else that could help Ersi. We did all we could but this loneliness harms her even more. Do you not see that?

She spoke with a calm and whispering voice, peeking through the half-opened door of Ersi's room, who sat silently in her rocking chair.

--It seems to me that we have to live with the fact that our daughter will always have weak wings. It's time we let her out of her loneliness. She will live as long as she will, but at least she won't wither away in a mute castle. She'll go out into the world and we will be by her side to help her.

Poor Ezra did not reply. Only a quiet sob escaped him. Ersi going out into the world! That was easier said than done. He did not want his daughter to be unhappy but then again, he could not let her go out into the world the way she was weak and without grown wings. He knew that there were many who would look at her with suspicion and would push her aside just only because she was different from the rest.

Here we have to admit that not matter how good the Dreamguards were at their work and no matter how devoted they were to their purpose, there were many who were harsh, particularly with those Dreamguards who did not have big wings. This was a prejudice for many years. How could someone change it? Most Dreamguards believed that those who had small wings could not make people's dream fly high. Therefore they did not do their job right, they did not carry out their purpose. This was enough to consider them inferior and to make fun of them, to insult them and to isolate them. And because of this the Dreamguards with small wings were forced to live in the margin.

At the great councils of the Dreamguards, Ezra had tried many times to change their opinion, to convince them that all Dreamguards are equal. And these attempts of his begun long before his daughter was born with this weakness, with this difference. He wanted to convince them that the difference of some people did not mean that they were inferior. He had mentioned to them that many of those 'weaklings' had other special gifts. He incessantly gave speeches at the assembly with a loud and brave voice, defending a Land of Dreamguards without preconceptions and prejudice among its inhabitants, telling them more or less the following:

"Dear fellow citizens, try to think calmly. I have mentioned so many examples. There are at least as many more. Let's remember again the story of Serios the Dreamguard. Do

you not remember that even though Serios was born with small wings he had unrivaled bravery? Have you forgotten his courage? Have you forgotten his self-sacrifice? Have you forgotten already that because he could not fly high he asked the help of a lightning? And the lightning heard his appeals and shot him up to the sky making him a star so that he could brighten up in this way the dream of his protégée. Does it also escape you that in order to honor him for his heroic deed, the Council of Elders declared that Serios could illuminate the dream of many other humans as well? And since then Serios became a shining star that shines in the sky casting his light on people's dreams.

Or furthermore...why no remember the story of the Nightingale? Did she not also have very feeble wings but instead had a superb voice? Do you forget that she stood faithfully by her duty to protect the dreams of her protégée from forgetfulness? Do you forget that in order to achieve that she chose to sing every day reminding us of the need to dream? Was not God himself also moved by her constant singing and so he turned her into a bird? A bird that may not have the strength to fly very high but has such a beautiful voice that when she sings the whole world stand still to listen and dream.

I beg of you, fellow Dreamguard citizens, not to forget them. Besides there are so many stories of worthy Dreamguards with weak wings. Think calmly and reasonably and you will see that I am right.”

In vain did Ezra shout and beg. In vain he insisted for the council's opinion would not change. Nor did the Dreamguards' prejudice against those who were born with a similar defect change. How then could he agree with Aishe's view to send his daughter out into the world with weak wings? He knew they would mock her, that they would hunt her down, that in the end they would force her into isolation once more. And that loneliness would be worse than the one she lived in now.

Tears started running down Ezra's cheeks. Deeply saddened he looked at the beautiful colors of the sunset vanishing behind the immense snow-capped mountains.

--Poor little Ersi! She will not even be able to dream of such a sunset, he whispered moved by the beauty of the colors.

And at that moment something sparkled in his mind and he understood. He understood what the solution to his problem would be. And so that moment became definitive for Ersi's life (and as it would become obvious later for his and for that of Aishe, but also for many other lives as well). Because you see, there comes for all of us a moment which can make our life unique, almost heroic, almost like a fairytale. The point

is whether each one of us will be able to recognize that unique moment that can make our life special.

Fortunately for everyone, Ezra was wise enough to realize that that was the one and only, his very own moment. Enchanted he gazed at the fading colors of the sun and at those of the rising moon while an unspeakable happiness overwhelmed him. He knew now that what he could do, what was left for him to do for his daughter was only one thing: to give her dreams. Her own, her very own dreams.

### **The Ancient Law of the Dreamguards**

It may seem a simple matter to give someone dreams. But it is the most difficult thing in the world because dreams are personal. Everyone of us makes his own dream according to his character, his desires, and needs.

The Dreamguards, however, did not feel the need to dream. Quite the opposite, they felt the need to protect the dreams of others. So how could Ersi feel the need to dream if she had no idea what dreams were?

It wasn't just that that made Ezra's case difficult. Giving dreams to his daughter meant violating the ancient law of the Dreamguards. It was a law the first Dreamguards of the world had decreed, taking a sacred oath before the angels. This law said that Dreamguards can never, but never, have their own dreams but that they would dream and guard the dream of those they protected.

None of the Dreamguards until then, no matter how daring, wily, brave, or ruthless he was had dared violate this rule and dream his own dreams. This would mean that he was changing in a certain way his own destiny. And the Dreamguards would never dare do such a thing.

But Ezra the chosen was determined to make his daughter happy and for him there was no other way but to give her her own dreams, her very own dreams, or at least a way to acquire her own dreams. He decided then that there was no other solution. He would help Ersi dream no matter what the price. Besides, he knew that the price was heavy, very heavy even for the strong shoulders of a Dreamguard like himself. He knew that the penalty was very heavy for whoever dared violate this ancient law: it decreed eternal exile from the land and banishment to the land of humans. It meant that the defiant Dreamguard lost the right to protect the dreams of humans, lost his wings and was banished forever from the Land of Dreamguards to the Land of Humans.

If then Ezra insisted on his decision, it was understood that he would be exiled forever since he would have violated the law and not Ersi. But this thought did not discourage him at all. The only thing he cared about was giving dreams to his daughter so that she would be able to dream and get rid of her loneliness. In this way, with time she would grow stronger wings, go out into the world and live a normal life. She would not be forced to be subjected to the ridicule and contempt of her fellow citizens but she would work like everyone else, would have a family like everyone else and maybe one day she would narrate to her children the beautiful dreams she had dreamt as child locked up in a white castle. When Ezra thought of all these he didn't care for the punishment. He only wondered, with some bitterness, if after years Ersi would remember the face of her father. It was his only wish: that every now and then his daughter would remember him...

This is what Ezra thought during that fleeting moment—because, you see, thoughts travel faster than air. Moreover, he had decided that he would abandon the country on his own, before the council ejects him. At least he would be leaving on his own accord and not give his rivals the pleasure of revenge by announcing to him the decision of exile. He would disappear forever from that harsh country. And if Ersi remembered him every now and then, fair and good. Otherwise, for him it would be enough that he had managed to give his daughter a beautiful life.

## **Old Morpheas**

But how does one give dreams to another, especially to people who had forgotten how to dream? Let alone to people or Dreamguards who had never dreamt dreams of their own! In order to realize his scheme, Ezra decided that there was only one way: he had to call old Morpheas.

Morpheas was a sweet and peaceful, very old man, who once in some human country, people thought that he was one of their many gods. They believed that he was the god of sleep and dreams. Ezra did not know if this was true. He did know, however, that for years now Morpheas had dedicated himself to making the most beautiful fabrics. He weaved these fabrics with thread made of silver moonbeams and of golden sunbeams and on these dreams he created the most fragile and beautiful dreams: human and divine. Some even say that God himself was so impressed with the creations of the old

man that he ordered a beautiful blanket of dreams to cover himself when he felt sad. It was a blanket, which had on it a world as God had dreamt it in his very first dream.

One winter day then, when the snow reached two meters and the cold wind froze even one's breath, Morpheas' carriage arrived at Ezra's castle. He led him to the part of the house where they kept the isolated Ersi. They entered her room without speaking. Ersi sat quietly in her rocking chair.

--Do you see her, old Morpheas?

--I see a beautiful little child.

--What else do you see, old Morpheas?

--I see a sad little child.

--Only that, old man?

--I see a very lonely child.

--Anything else?

--I see a little child that must dream.

--This little child, old Morpheas, is my child.

--It is your child. I see...

Ezra did not have to explain anything else to him. Let's not forget that old Morpheas, who had the profound wisdom of the need of dreams and the great knowledge of faith, could see in Ezra's eyes his decision to give to the child dreams at the expense of his life. Ezra did not need to tell him more to realize that that father needed beautiful dreams for his child, dreams that would let the mind travel and the heart fly, dreams that would keep her company, pulling the girl, like a gentle hand of the wind, out of her loneliness; dreams of flight, that would make her travel the sky and the depths of the sea and from there back to the safety of the earth, to the four points of the horizon, to the ends of the world, and then back to the serenity of her room; dreams with spring aromas, shades of autumn, winter glaze, and summer peace. Old Morpheas understood it all. He understood by just looking at the face of that restless man and the small wings of the sad child. He felt it in the air of the house and in the dull color of the day.

He thought for a little. Just for a little. At first he thought of saying no. He could not make dream for a girl-Dreamguard. He knew that he would, in a certain way, become complicit in the crime. They may punish him or more likely have his good reputation shaken. For years now he was known to be a calm and respected old man.

Right at the moment when old Morpheas was thinking of refusing, Ersi tried to open her little wings and to fly: for yet another time though she could not and she fell to the

floor. Then something sparkled in the eyes of old Morpheus and he changed his mind right away. (Some said it was that feeble fluttering of the girl that made him reconsider his refusal. Some say that what sparkled in his eyes was the image of that girl trying to fly; that image nailed in his eyes like piece of broken glass and that made them hurt. Yet some others added that if old Morpheus had not made the dreams that were asked of him, he would never be able to forget the image of that little child with the weak wings. Or even that the dreams that he would design from then on would not be as happy as they were before he had met the little girl.)

Who know what old Morpheus really thought? It doesn't mater. What matters is that he said to Ezra with conviction:

--Agreed then. I will send you so many rolls of dreams that you would dress your daughter's castle from the basement to the attic. The rest is my business.

The two men shook hands. And for a just for a little while it seemed to both men that a weak smile formed on the girl's face.

Weak but surely a smile.

Translated by George Syrimis