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The mouse leapt from the boat down into the grass and disappeared in the direction of the tree. Emma and Carl followed slowly. As they approached, Emma discovered the quetzal was not the only animal in the tree. An eagle was sitting on one of its roots; high up, an orangutan was dangling, and on a broad branch, there was a bison crunching on a twig. Butterflies, dragonflies and hummingbirds flitted around between flowers and green leaves. In one place, there was a camel, and somewhere else, a polar bear. A striped snake, a giraffe, a penguin, a koala bear, a lizard, a frog and a sheep and even more creatures, the names of which she didn't know. By rights, many of these animals should not be able to climb, but they all seemed to be doing just fine in the enormous treetop.

Carl tugged at her sleeve.

"Is it really Aunt Stella's panther? I'm so pleased it's not dead."

They stopped in front of the black animal, which stood perfectly still. Emma thought it was much more than just Aunt Stella's panther. It was the largest panther anywhere in the world. All panthers rolled into one. Yes, more than that. It was bigger and stronger and more beautiful than any other animal. In a way, it was all animals in the world rolled into one. And all the trees and plants, too. It was huge! Big, wild and wonderfully alive.

"It can't die," she whispered back to Carl. "If it dies, everything dies."

The panther looked as if it was smiling. Just a little. Emma felt that days were going by between heartbeats. As if they had entered a place that stretched infinitely farther back and forward in time. Then it raised one of its big paws and placed it on her brow. First Emma felt the warmth, and then pain as its four claws hit her skin. Then the panther moved its paw to Carl's brow. He let out a subdued gasp, but the golden eyes of this predator held his gaze.

Emma knew that from now on, they, too, were part of this place.

"Thank you," she mumbled.

She couldn't think of anything else to say.

The panther nodded to them, almost imperceptibly. Then it jumped up onto



one of the tree's roots, and they understood that they had to leave, but they were reluctant to do so.

As soon as the boat slid away from the shore, the quality of the light changed. It was night-time again, but now it was cloudy, and little pieces of white fluff descended from the sky. They spent the rest of the journey home half asleep. Emma only just remembered to tie the boat to the mooring. When they finally reached their room, Carl was just about to crawl straight under the duvet, but Emma muttered "Wait" and helped him off with his outdoor jacket and boots. He was sound asleep before she managed to get into her own bed. She fell asleep immediately, her fingers clasped around the green feather under her pillow.