

# THE UNICORN CHRONICLES

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## 1. MAIDENS

I am a unicorn. My father was a great white stallion. My mother was a rhinoceros. I hope you are impressed because I rarely share such personal information. I don't live in your world, but I'm only a breath away, surrounded by piney trees, rich soil and critters of every size. We unicorns created this world to keep ourselves safe.

Once we lived in your world. I remember the day we left. A hunter in the forest saw my sister emerging from a river, gleaming like the moon. The hunter was enchanted by her and called together his friends to give chase. But my sister knew that men could never catch her, so she playfully waited for the hunters to draw close before bounding out of view. My sister encountered a beautiful young maiden sitting under a tree. The girl reached out, stroked her mane and rubbed gently rubbed her horn. Unicorns love little girls - their adoration feeds our souls. My sister was so content, she laid her head in the lap of the maiden. Looking up at the girl, my sister saw her eyes overflow with tears. This was a trap. The hunters lassoed her and led her home. She bucked and reared but could not escape. I never saw her again.

We are magical creatures. Souli, our sun fairy friend, opened the door to a new dimension - parallel to yours - where we would could live our lives without hunters and maidens. Many joyful years passed. but the longing to rest my head in the lap of a maiden never left my mind - or that of my brothers and sisters. I kept watch at the door to our world, just in case a maiden appeared. Only young girls would be able to see the shimmering door.

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Three cousins lived many miles away from one another but got together at least once a year. The boy couldn't talk yet, but the two girls made up for that with happy chatter, asking questions and making up answers. They knew that reality and fantasy were two very different ways of being, but sometimes they preferred the gray area in between that contained both.

Carly was the oldest. She had long brown hair and a broad smile. Behind her bright eyes revealed a fierce intelligence. She often hid her intelligence behind goofiness and drama. Sometimes she felt like she was spying on her world more than seeing it because she often caught glimpses of things that didn't fit into the reality of the adults in her life.

Bella was a few years younger. She had kinky hair and deep brown eyes. Her beauty was only surpassed by her need to dance. She could barely sit still because moving helped her think. Like Carly, she caught glimpses of the unreal that her parents' could not see. Her baby brother shared her visions with squeaks of joy.

Every year, Carly and Bella, along with their families, visited a wonderland on the beach. They stayed in a log cabin with different rooms. The main area had a comfy fireplace they considered their living room. The adults filled a big bowl with apples and

oranges in case anyone wanted a snack. The big fireplace room down the road was shared with other visitors to the wonderland. The adults liked to take them there because there was a cafe where they could drink large mugs of coffee and eat tasty treats for breakfast.

The two girls were finally old enough to walk to and from the big fireplace room without their parents. They would leave the little boy behind and venture forth along the path to the log cabin. They danced rather than walk and played tag or created adventures. Sometimes deer accompanied them. These quiet creatures had huge eyes and some even had two large horns. Even though the girls wanted to run their hands down their smooth hairy bodies, the deer remained out of their reach - more often than not, running away.

After a playful day running from the waves at the beach and peering at the tide pools, they came back to their rooms to clean up for a feast that would celebrate Thanksgiving. The feast would include many more adults in a room that barely contained them all. They knew this feast was important to their families, but that didn't mean it was always fun. Yes, the food was delicious and all of the people seemed happy to share. But they had to sit at the table for what felt like forever and they weren't allowed to explore outside the room.

Finally, they returned to the log cabin, their bellies full. The adults seemed happy and relaxed in the living room, with the fireplace burning brightly. They liked playing games or drawing pictures or creating wonderful things through the guidance of their grandma. However, the girls felt like something was missing.

The next morning, they went to the big fireplace room. The adults were happy to hang out. The girls were not. "Can Bella and I go back to the living room?" Carly asked.

"Of course," said their grandpa. "We'll be there shortly. Take these muffins to eat while you wait. Then we can go back to the beach for more fun."

The girls jumped up with glee. The little boy wanted to come with them, but was still too little to be without an adult. Besides, he'd probably need a nap. Carly had never taken naps and Bella was too excited to even think about sleeping.

On their way up the path, they followed a deer who veered off the usual path. The shimmering door was hidden behind a shrub. Neither had remembered ever seeing it before. They were even more surprised to see the sign in front. "That's my name!" Bella said with recognition. "I see your name too, but what does the rest say?"

"It says 'welcome, Carly and Bella,'" read Carly.

"Should we go in?" asked Bella.

"I don't know," said Carly. "Maybe we should ask." Bella was more adventurous than her cousin. She walked through the shimmering entrance and disappeared. Carly thought about going back to the big fireplace room to get help from the adults, but her curiosity was so intense, she followed Bella through the shimmering door.

"What is this place?" Carly asked. She looked behind her and saw the shimmering door. At least we still have a way back, she thought.

"It's beautiful," said Bella.

The wood had tall pine trees, but unlike the pine needles the girls knew oh so well, they had soft edges. Clover covered the ground. The cousins played hide and seek and jumped in large piles of pine needles, staying close to the shimmering door. Tired but happy, they sat under a tree and ate their muffins.

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I shivered with excitement. I had sensed the two girls and even though Souli warned against it, I invited them in. I watched them play until they were tired and sat beneath my favorite tree to munch on something. But I was afraid. I knew there were no hunters in this world, but it had been so long since I'd seen a human, I was scared to get too close to them. It had been so long since I lay my head in the lap of a maiden, but I couldn't bring myself to meet them. Just when I finally felt brave enough to introduce myself, the girls stood up and ran through the door.

I was sad when they left. What if they were afraid of me? What if they didn't like me? Confused yet hopeful, I ran to my family and told them what I saw.

My unicorn family was not happy with me. "I know most little girls love unicorns, but what if they grow up to become hunters?" asked one brother.

"Why would you do this after what happened to our sister?" another asked.

"I don't know," I said. I did know, but I said I didn't so they wouldn't be angry at me anymore. And here I thought I'd make them happy.

"Yes you do know." Souli appeared out of nowhere, the way fairies did. Her long golden hair shined with the sun. She was small enough to ride my back through the wood yet tall enough to look down at me when she stood. "We're not angry, just concerned."

I wanted to understand what she meant, but I was so stunned by the contrary reaction of my brothers and sisters, I couldn't think.

"I long for a maiden to lay her head in my lap," I admitted.

"I know, dear one. All of your brothers and sisters feel the same way. I'll grant you two more earth days to keep the door open - and only for those two girls. Be careful." My brothers whinnied and my sisters shook their heads. I danced with joy.

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When Carly and Bella went back through the hidden door, they found the muffins in their hands. As they moved back to the path, they saw the adults coming toward them.

"Corns!" said Bella's brother. The girls giggled as the adults tried to correct him. Only the girls knew what he meant.

When they all got back to the living room, the girls were hungry and ate the muffins - for a second time. "Let's bring apples next time," Bella whispered to Carly. Carly wasn't sure why she thought this a wonderful suggestion but she agreed.

For reasons they didn't understand, after eating the girls were exhausted. Bella opted for a nap and Carly read her book. The adults were surprised and took advantage of the quiet time to either take their own naps, read or talk. One of them went out to get all of them a late lunch. By the time he returned, everyone was awake and hungry. The sun was out and they gathered their things together to wander to the beach before the sun hit the horizon.

Carly and Bella searched for shells - preferably abalone shells. "I want to go back to through the magic door," said Bella.

"Me too, but let's wait until tomorrow. And don't tell anyone about it!" said Carly.

"I won't, but you can't either," said Bella.

"Okay. Pinky swear." The girls wrapped a pinky finger around the other's pinky finger and squeezed in agreement.

The next day, they went with the others to the big fireplace room to have breakfast in the cafe. Again, the adults agreed it would be okay for them to return to the living room on their own. They did go back, but only to gather a few apples. They walked through the shimmering door hidden from the sight of others. The wood smelled sweet and they sat next to their now favorite tree.

Just as Carly brought an apple to her lips to take a big bite, a beautiful white unicorn with a rainbow colored mane walked towards them. Bella sat with awe and dropped her apple. Without thinking, Carly held her apple out to the unicorn. The unicorn cautiously and softly grabbed the apple, eating it whole - seeds and all. Bella stood and gave the elegant beast her apple. The unicorn grabbed it between her teeth and ran off.

"Did you see that?" Carly asked - too stunned to believe her eyes.

"It was a real unicorn," said Bella.

"I love unicorns," Carly said with a mix of excitement and sadness that the unicorn had run away.

"Me too," said Bella.

Before they could talk more about their amazing find, they heard a great big roar.

"What was that?" asked Bella. Her question was answered when a great big bear burst from a bush. He was twice their size, his large paws clapping their air. Bella froze in a combination of fear and wonder.

Carly grabbed her hand and dragged her back through the door. "Bears are scary," said Bella.

"That bear didn't seem to want to hurt us but I was scared anyway," said Carly.

The girls returned to the living room a few minutes before the adults.

"Bear!" said the little boy.

"No, that toy is your elephant," said one of the adults. Bella smiled a knowing smile at her baby brother. He laughed and laughed and laughed.

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The next day, I waited for the girls to return. I knew they would. How could they not? I was so lost in my musings, I spooked when Souli and my brother appeared behind me. My brother laughed and Souli shushed him. This brother was more of a trickster than the others. "Tell her," said Souli.

"I called bear to scare the girls away. I mean, why should you have all the fun?" he said.

"There are two girls and six of us unicorns. Everyone could take turns." I said.

"You're willing to share?" he asked

"It never occurred to me not to share," I said and I meant it. I'd do anything for my family.

Souli flew away and my siblings wandered off, leaving me to wait by the door. I waited and waited until the sun went down. I knew the girls were too young to go out at night by themselves, so I joined my family for a night of fun and frolic.

I was sad the girls didn't return, especially since there was only one more day before Souli closed the door to their world. I thought of going through to find them, but I knew better. Dangers lurked in their world that could hurt me.

My patience was rewarded when the two girls came through the door. I bucked and jumped with joy. The girls clapped and laughed at me, sharing my joy. However, I could feel their agitation.

"Don't worry about bear," I said. "He's our friend. My brother was just trying to scare you."

"We almost didn't come back," said Bella.

"I knew he wasn't mean or dangerous," Carly said proudly. "We tried to come to visit yesterday but our family had other plans. It makes me so mad when they don't listen to what we want to do."

"I was scared after seeing bear, but Carly insisted we come back anyway and if I didn't come with her, she'd come all by herself," said Bella.

"That would have been okay for her, but not for you," I said. The girls giggled. I had always love young maidens, even though they could be mean or whiny or ever so demanding. "Would it be all right if I lay my head in your lap?" she asked Carly.

"I'd love that," she said, barely containing her excitement. Bella pouted, but I knew just what to do.

"It's okay, brother," I said. My brother was bigger than me but we shared a rainbow mane. My tail was white, but his tail was the same rainbow color as his mane.

I could see Bella open her eyes and mouth, amazed by the appearance of my brother. He and I gently came forward, laid down and nestled our heads in their laps. Carly immediately stroked my head and mane. Bella was as unsure as my brother, but both relaxed as he lay his head in her lap. Instead of stroking him, Bella gave him kisses all over his head. He made soft snorting sounds in contentment



Bear came lumbering over. At first the girls were scared, but bear - being the silly bear that he is -- started dancing for them. The girls laughed even more when bear started posing in silly positions, making funny faces. So enthralled were the girls, they didn't notice when my other brothers and sisters took turns replacing me and my brother, their heads carefully laying in the laps of the girls.

For unicorns, laying in the lap of a maiden sends us into something that resembles sleep, but we continue to sense our surroundings while our minds drift. This state is kind of like dreaming - like watching a weird movie. In our case, it isn't a movie it's real. We travel to other worlds than ours or even that of humans.

"Where do unicorns come from?" Carly asked. My brother and I lay beside the girls. Bear wandered off and my sisters continued taking their turns to dream while laying in their laps.

"What can we tell them?" My brother asked.

"Only the words our mouths will let us say." Souli had cast a spell on us. She feared we might tell visitors too much if any dared to enter our wood. We could only reflect what was already known. We knew we were legends in the minds of humans.

"The Greek writer Ctesias and later Aristotle described us, claiming we came from India," I said.

"Is that where you're from?" asked Bella.

"I can't answer that. I can tell you that a few hundred years later, there was a Roman naturalist - Pliny the Elder - who also described us. His Encyclopedia of Natural History considered fact for 1,600 years," I said.

"Tell them how he described us," my brother prodded. "He was so wrong," he said to the girls.

"Pliny claimed unicorns were the fiercest of animals and impossible to capture alive. He said we have the body of a horse, the head of a stag, the feet of an elephant, the tail of a boar, and a single black horn three feet long in the middle of our forehead. Can you believe it?"

The girls laughed and shook their heads.

"The scholar Isidore of Seville said we are very strong and would pierce anything that attacked us. She said that we fight with elephants and kill them by stabbing them in the belly," my brother said.

"It isn't true, promise," I said, noting the eyes of the girls were growing larger. "In China, we are known as kirin. They were right when they said we could walk upon grass without disturbing a single blade."

"They thought we could tell when people were basically good or bad," my brother chimed in. "I think they were right."

"Not always," I said, thinking about my poor sister who I still missed. "In Chile we were known as the camahueto and--"

"That's bull," my brother said before dancing with amusement.

"He's only saying that because they thought we had the bodies of a bull or cow," I said. I so wanted to tell them about our parents - a great stallion and a rhinoceros - but I couldn't because of Souli's spell. "When Cosmas Indicopleustes visited the King of Ethiopia he saw four brass statues of unicorns. He wasn't the first to claim that our horn could heal any illness - which it can - but only if we are alive. We can't live without our horn. He was right when he said we would throw ourselves from a cliff rather than to be captured. Fortunately, our horns protect us even if we have to leap off the highest cliff."

I could see that the girls were getting tired, periodically drifting into the dreams of those who laid in their laps. Finally, the last of my family wandered off, more satisfied than I had seen them in a very long time. As soon as they left, the girls awoke.

"Oh no," said Carly. "I don't know how long we've been gone, but our families might be worried."

"Not at all, Carly. Time in your world stops when you are here, I said.

"We have to leave tomorrow and go home. Will we ever see you again? We come back here every year for Thanksgiving" asked Bella.

"I'd love to see you next year, as would all my brothers and sisters. I'll do what I can to convince Souli. Here - take these two stones. Bring them with you next year and hopefully, Souli will let you use them to see the door and can come back to our wood."

I knew the stones were more symbolic than a real way to return. I also knew that little girls easily forget even the most extraordinary of things. Their little brother could sense my world, but had no way to talk about it - yet. She hoped the girls would still return even though she would have to tell them Bella's brother could not enter their wood - at least not yet. I ran off to join my family. This was a fine day for all of us and it was time to celebrate.

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Sure enough, when Carly and Bella walked back through the door they felt the same way they did before they entered. Today they would pack up the things, take one more walk along the beach and return to their separate homes.

"I can't wait until next year," said Bella.

"Me neither," replied Carly. "No telling."

"But I don't like secrets."

"How about this. Tell your parents you learned a new story. You can tell them all about the history the unicorns shared. I bet they'll think you learned it in school."

"I can do that. I love telling stories."

"If you need to say more, talk to your brother."

"I can do that too," Bella said with a smile. Her brother was better at keeping secrets but when it came down to it, she was never quite sure what he knew and what he didn't. Maybe she'd learn more when he could talk.

Each cousin ventured home. Bella told unicorn stories to her brother along the way while their parents focused on helping them get from one place to another, making



sure they ate and changed her brother's stinky diapers. Carly surprised her mommy by quietly drawing on their long ride home. I can hardly wait until next year, she thought.

## 2. SECRETS

Carly went back to her usual routine of school and play. She had many adults in her life and enjoyed their different types of attention. She also had friends from school who she'd also play with outside of school. Her unicorn adventures burst into her mind at least once a day, especially just before she fell asleep. She told Mommy about her adventure as though it were a story she learned. Her friends also heard the story. Carly tried to convince her friends that it was real, but they didn't believe her. Just as well they think it a story, Carly thought.

One day the wind was loud, the rain hard and the sky filled with lightening followed by great booms of thunder. Carly talked to Bella on the phone and told her how scary the weather was. Bella laughed because they were in the middle of a blizzard.

"Did you tell anyone?" asked Carly.

"Only as a story," said Bella. "Now everyone thinks I'm a great storyteller."

"Bella, you are a great storyteller even when it isn't about unicorns."

"Did you tell anyone?" asked Bella.

"Same as you," said Carly.

Even when the lightning and thunder were gone, Carly still had trouble falling asleep. She was a deep sleeper, so when she finally fell asleep, it would take a lot more than thunder to wake her up. She lay in bed thinking about the unicorns and finally drifted off.

She knew she wasn't awake because she found herself back in the unicorn wood. The unicorn who had talked to them seemed to smile as she moved her head through Carly's legs so that Carly was on her back. Carly had always like horses from afar, but had never ridden one.

"Tighten your legs around my body and hold onto my mane," said the unicorn. Carly did as she was told, the white mane clutched between her hands. The unicorn took off in a gallop. Carly almost fell off, but discovered what she needed to do with her legs to keep her safe. In silence, the unicorn ran through the forest until they came to a big meadow. The unicorn stopped so Carly could dismount. Carly was amazed by the many colored flowers that bloomed in the meadow.

"You can lay in my lap," she said, sitting in the soft grass.

"Never in dreams," said the unicorn. "But I'm still glad you came."

"What about Bella?" asked Carly.

"Bella visited earlier," said the unicorn. "She said to say hi."

"What's dreamtime? Is this real?"

"I don't have an answer I can give you."

"Souli won't let you?"

"Yes, the sun fairy is very particular about what we can say. But that's not the reason. I simply don't know the answer."

"My teacher told me that saying 'I don't know' is not okay. She says we have an answer but we are too scared or frustrated or angry to say."

"Your teacher is wise," said the unicorn. "I can tell you that right now, we are both sleeping. I can also say that once you talk to a unicorn, you can share dreams. What I don't know and can't know is whether or not this is real."

"Why?" asked Carly.

"Such is the nature of dreams, I imagine," said the unicorn. Carly didn't like this answer, but accepted it. She reached out to the unicorn, combed the mane with her fingers and kissed the horn. That was all she could remember once she woke up.

"Are dreams real?" she asked her mommy over breakfast.

"No one really knows, but probably not," said Mommy. "Did you have a bad dream?"

"No, I had a wonderful dream."

"Maybe that means you'll have a wonderful day."

Most of Carly's days were wonderful. The exception was meals. Carly was very particular about what she ate and when. She didn't know why, but she could only eat certain foods at certain times. The adults didn't always understand this, nor could she explain why it had to be so. That said, every once in a while she would try something new and delicious. She had gotten better at knowing what she wanted and when, but food choices continued to be complicated in ways she couldn't explain.

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Bella and Carly had met me in dreamtime! I admit I was shocked and overjoyed to see each of them. First one and then the other. My brothers and sisters were more than a little jealous.

Time stops in our wood, but we are able to track the movement of time in other worlds. Time in the human world is easy. Time moves from one moment to the next, moving in a straight line. Time in other worlds can be difficult - like the one where everything moves backwards or the one where everything happens at the same time. But we unicorns have a different relationship to time because we are immortal.

I sensed Bella and Carly lived thousands of miles from each other. They communicated with machines once in a while, but I know very little about those machines. In fact, I don't understand machines. They seem to move and do other things like a magic I've never known. How wonderful they can share over such a long distance.

"You really like those girls." I jumped when Souli suddenly appeared

"Yes," I said respectfully.

"They are young, so you could track them or talk to them in dreamtime for many years. I imagine they will have access to the door for years to come as well."

"I'm so thankful you let them come to our wood," I said.

"Fate is fate. I hope you feel the same way when they are no longer maidens," she said. I knew what she meant. I didn't look forward to leaving them behind, but for now - I was ever so happy to know them.

I continued visiting the girls in dreamtime - more often with Carly than Bella. Carly was obsessed with unicorns. I knew she collected all things unicorn. This made me feel proud of who I am.

One night, Carly told me all about the adults in her life. There are so many! I could tell she loved them all, but sometimes moving from one to the next made her tired and cranky. She had to shift not only some of her familiar things and routines, but her entire sense of being. Thankfully, she also had school. Her friends were also young maidens and together they did fun stuff or just played around.

I learned that Carly had always lived primarily with her mommy, but now a new adult also lived with them. Her description of Boris reminded me of the hunters except he was always kind and burnished no weapons that could hurt me - not that he would ever be able to enter our realm. Only maidens were allowed.

"How was your day?" I asked Carly.

"I don't want to talk about it," she responded. I could see she was frustrated and mad.

"Is that the same as saying 'I don't know'?" I asked.

"Maybe," she said. I could tell she didn't want me to keep asking her questions, but I wanted her to feel better.

"What do you need?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. She saw the frown on my horsy face, but it didn't seem to matter. She fell into a deeper sleep and left me. I pondered her mood, but I also knew there was nothing I could do about it.

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It wasn't as though the changes were all that big. Carly, Mommy and Boris had moved into a different house that was only a short walk from where she once lived. Her uncle lived there now. She loved her new room even more than her last one, but now Mommy and Boris had their own room. She knew this was important to her mommy but it was the kind of change that confused her. She could open the door if she wanted, but when it was closed - she felt like she was all alone. She knew this wasn't so, but she felt it anyway, especially since this changed their morning routine.

Carly thought she was getting used to the new arrangement. Why wouldn't she? She still spent lots of time with her grandparents and her daddy. It shouldn't be such a big deal. Rather than pursue this line of thought, she set it aside to sort out in dreams

with the unicorn. However, she found she couldn't talk about it with the unicorn. Instead, she found herself using her dreams to sulk and feel sorry for herself.

"Who wants breakfast?" asked Boris.

"ME!" she shouted. Once Mommy and Boris woke up, the weirdness she felt when she saw their closed door vanished because they were together again. Boris knew she loved pancakes and he made them even better than Mommy or Nana. The morning was followed by a full day of fun. Carly fought to stay awake, but fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

"My friends think I'm just telling a story when I talk about you," said Carly.

"Yes," said the unicorn.

"That's not fair," said Carly.

"I can help you forget you ever saw us," said the unicorn. Carly could see how this might be helpful, but the unicorn looked so sad - reflecting her own feelings.

"I'd rather remember," she said.

The next morning, she was still so tired, she could hardly get out of bed. She dragged through the day. After school and everything else she did during the day, she went to stay with Nana.

"Do you believe in unicorns?" she asked Nana.

"No, but I know you do," said Nana. Hard as she tried, Carly couldn't ask her the questions she really had.

Christmas was coming, so she and Nana made cookies. The best part of baking was tasting the cookies before and after they were baked. They had a secret ingredient that made them taste even better than other cookies. She and Nana smiled at the secret they shared. Decorating the trees with sprinkles and snowmen with chocolate bits and candy was also fun. Fortunately, she couldn't eat as many as they baked so that she had cookies to bring to school. When they asked about the secret ingredient, she smiled a knowing smile. Some secrets were easy to keep.

The next morning Carly was even more tired than the the previous day. This time her nose was running and she couldn't stop sneezing. She hated having a cold, but she also liked it. She would miss school and her friends for a few days, but she'd also get to watch television or read when she wasn't sleeping.

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"Why don't Carly's friends think I'm real?" Carly's friends were also young girls, so what was the big deal? Besides, I could tell it was frustrating Carly and I wanted nothing more than to make her happy.

"You know why," said Souli. Yes, I knew why - I just didn't like it.

"Greetings." Souli's sister, Luna, the moon fairy, was here for a visit. She had her own world to manage - not unlike ours. The griffins lived in her wood. I remember sharing the world with them until they decided hunting us was the best way to fill their bellies. I had made friends with Dorf - a young griffin - and I missed him. His dark humor

made me whinny. But he had no choice but to leave our wood with Luna. I understood but I didn't like it much.

"What say you, sister?" asked Souli. Luna stroked my horn and combed my hair with her fingers. I tried my best to stay awake to listen to the two of them talk.

"All is well," said Souli. "What brings you to our wood?" I was so close to falling asleep, I sensed rather than saw Luna frown. I could also sense she thought I was sleeping.

"The old king died a few days ago and now the griffins are fighting to be the next king," said Luna. "The transition from old to new king has always gone smoothly, but not this time."

"They will work it out," said Souli. "They always do."

"True, but in the past their rituals of choosing the next king wasn't so mean," said Luna. "I understand their traditions but I haven't seen them this nasty and cruel for almost 5,000 years."

"Times change," said Souli.

I surprised the fairies by shaking my head awake. "Is Dorf okay?" I asked.

"I thought you were sleeping but I should have known better," said Luna, pulling back so I could shake again. This time the shake started with my ears and went all the way down to my tail. Luna and Souli moved out of the way of my horn.

"She's a clever one," said Souli and I nodded my head with pride.

"Dorf is fine, but unlike you, child, he's now an adult," said Luna.

"When will I be an adult?" I asked. The fairies laughed. I knew unicorns didn't age, but it had never occurred to me I wasn't an adult or that griffins grew up to become adults.

"Dorf is the one picking fights," said Luna. "He's nothing like you remember."

"I don't believe that. Bring him here," I said. "I'll set him straight." The fairies laughed again, only this time they were laughing at me. I hate it when adults laugh at me as though I don't know anything. I may see me as a child, but I've lived for thousands of years.

"Actually, Luna, she might be able to help," said Souli. I jumped with surprise at her words.

"If we met in dreams, my new best friends could also help," I said.

"Carly and Bella are little girls," Souli explained to Luna. "They are both very clever. Dorf wouldn't hurt a unicorn or a maiden - no griffin would. What could it hurt?"

"Next time they are both in dreamtime here in the wood, I'll bring Dorf to meet them," Luna said. "I've run out of other ideas."

"We will need more than one visit," I said. "You know how Dorf gets."

"I wish I didn't," said Luna. "Fine. Two visits."

I could hardly wait until the meeting of all of us.

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When Carly woke up into her dream of the unicorn wood, she felt like herself - her cold was gone.

"You still have a cold, but not while you're dreaming," said the unicorn as if reading her mind. "I need your help."

"Me? You want me to help? How?" Carly said with enthusiasm.

"Carly!" Bella exclaimed, appearing before Carly out of nowhere.

"Bella!" said Carly, taking the smaller girl into her arms for a big hug.

"I feel so much better here," said Bella.

"Me too! I have a bad cold."

"Me too!" Carly hadn't seen Bella in person or in her dreams for ever so long.

"Let me tell you two about griffins."

"Griffins?" both the girls said at the same time.

"Do you know what a griffin is?" asked the unicorn. Both Carly and Bella had seen pictures but couldn't remember details. "Griffins have the head and wings of an eagle with a body and tail of a lion."

"Don't they protect buildings in my world?" Bella asked.

"They do?" Unlike Bella who lived in a big city with tall buildings, Carly resided outside a big city and only visited on occasion.

"Those are gargoyles," said the unicorn. "Griffins used to live in our wood, but Luna, the moon fairy, moved them to another world because they started hunting and hurting us for fun."

"Are they mean?" asked Carly.

"Not exactly. They aren't particularly nice or even clever, but they are fiercely loyal - especially to their mates - and sometimes their friends."

"Do you have a friend who's a griffin?" asked Bella.

"Dorf was my best friend. Luna told me that griffins honor friends and would never hurt them," said the unicorn.

"Would Dorf hurt us?" Carly asked with fear.

"No because I wouldn't let him," said the unicorn. "Griffins have been around longer than we have, but unlike unicorns, griffins aren't immortal and grow up to be adults."

"That sounds boring," said Carly, making Bella giggle.

"One of your historians said they were once dinosaurs," said the unicorn. Bella and Carly jumped with joy - they loved dinosaurs.

"Why are you so sad?" Carly asked the unicorn.

"Dorf grew up," said the unicorn. "and now he wants to be the new king."

"Sounds like you're scared, not sad," said Carly.

"I told the fairies I'd talk to him, plead with him to stop picking fights, but I'm scared he won't listen," said the unicorn. Carly stroked the unicorn, hoping to help her feel better.

"You want our help when you talk to him?" Bella asked. Carly smiled. Bella had a way of getting down to the main issue.

"I need you to be here when I talk to him," said the unicorn.

"Why?" asked Bella.

"I'm not sure, but I sense you can help," said the unicorn. "Are you willing?"

"Yes!" the girls shouted together. They stopped cheering and dancing when Luna appeared. She and Souli looked a lot alike, but where Souli was gold, Luna was silver.

"Ready?" Souli asked them.

"Yes!" shouted the girls, this time with the unicorn chiming in.

### 3. GRIFFINS

I'm really not all that brave, but I am curious. Carly, Bella and I were excited to see Dorf, although for different reasons. In this case, they were curious and I had to be brave.

"What up?" asked Dorf, suddenly appearing with Luna by his side.

"I'll leave you for now, but behave yourself, Dorf," said Luna just before she disappeared.

I couldn't help myself and reared and jumped with joy.

"Still the frolicker, eh?" said Dorf with his familiar smile. I felt my entire being relax. Even if he was an adult, Dorf was still Dorf. "Who that?"

"These are my new friends - Bella and Carly," I said.

"Humans? For real?" he said. "Go ahead, touch my feathers. I know you want to." Griffins didn't usually have a sense of humor. My friend was different that way. The girls pet his feathers, ooing and ahing. When he goosed Carly, I was afraid she'd be scared. But Bella started laughing which made Carly laugh. Dorf winked at me and I joined in the laughter.

"I've missed you," said Dorf.

"I've missed you too," I said, "I hear you're picking fights with the others."

"I want to be king," he said flatly.

"Of course you do," I said. "But do you have to be such a bully?"



"As a matter of fact I do," he said.

"You won't be a good leader if you're mean to your followers," said Carly.

"No one wants someone yucky in charge," piped in Bella.

"It is our way," said Dorf.

"No it isn't," I said. "I know the old king had no children, but surely there are better ways to select the next king. You don't have to pick fights with everyone."

"And chickens have lips," said Dorf.

"Chickens have beaks, not lips," said Carly.

"It was a joke, little one," he said with a smile. I couldn't help but smile back.

"If you bully your way to kingship, you'll have to lead with fear instead of respect," I said.

"Your point?" he asked. His intensity made me cringe.

"Ruling with fear is exhausting and you will likely end up with no friends," I said.

"I'll always have you," he said.

"Not if Luna has anything to say about it." I said. I could see Dorf struggling with the idea. Despite his arrogance, he'd always been reasonable.

"You don't understand," he said. He roared and squawked, flapped his great wings and disappeared.

"I'm sorry we failed you, unicorn," said Carly.

"Will he come back?" asked Bella.

"Luna said two visits so yes, we'll talk to him again," I said. "Hopefully it'll happen sooner rather than later. Sadly, this visit turned out the way I thought it would."

I talked with the girls about the nature of bullies before they went back to their bodies. I had to come up with a plan.

\*\*\*

Carly woke up feeling more like herself. She was on the other side of her cold. Her dream with Bella and the unicorn seemed to help.

At school while hanging out with her friends, two of the boys wanted to join them but the girls refused. Carly thought they'd go away but instead, they teased them - saying horrible things about how they looked and taking swipes at their families. One of her friends was so hurt, she cried. The boys laughed and ran away. Carly thought she saw pride in their faces as though they had won something.

"They remind me of Dorf," said Carly.

"Who's that?" asked one of her friends.

"It's a long story," said Carly. "What should we do?"

"I'm telling our teacher," said another friend.

"Let's do that together," suggested Carly.

Their teacher was a round man with bushy eyebrows around Carly's mommy's age. He was a funny looking adult who snorted when he laughed.

"I was bullied when I was a kid," he told them. "I learned that bullies are really insecure but they want to feel in control."

"I feel that way a lot," said Carly.

"But you don't get mean like they do," her friend said.

"What did you do about it?" Carly asked.

"Sing." The girls were so stunned by his answer, they couldn't talk. "They would get so confused, they'd go away. It didn't always work, but when it did - I felt powerful."

The next day, the boys returned to her group of friends to taunt them. This time they had a plan. They stood up, grabbed each others' hands and moved in a circle, singing "Ring Around the Rosies." To the girls' surprise, the taunting got even worse. The boys imitated them as they wandered off, calling them babies.

"Well that was disappointing," said one of Carly's friends.

"Why do they have to be so mean?" another asked, not expecting an answer.

"I have an idea," said Carly.

Sure enough, the next day the boys returned. The girls stood up straight, marched around the boys and sang "God Bless America." Instead of making fun of them, the boys joined in singing and marching with the girls. Carly led them marching and singing all around the playground. Soon other kids joined them. The bell rang and they all cheered.

"My dad is in Afghanistan," one of the boys told Carly as they walked to class. "Hi, I'm Dan."

"I'm Carly. Is he safe?"

"I don't know," said Dan. "We talk on Zoom all the time, but he won't talk about what he's doing. I'm scared for him"

"I would be too," said Carly. Dan was the meanest of the bullies.

"I miss him," Dan continued. "He always knew what to do. My mom tries but she's worried all the time. Makes me mad."

"So you take it out on us," Carly said.

"I guess," he said. Carly wondered if Dan really understood.

"If you want to hang out with us you can," she said. "Otherwise, please leave us alone."

"Maybe I will and maybe I won't," he said. Carly rolled her eyes.

\*\*\*

I met up with Carly in dreamtime. Bella had been there earlier.

"Can I ask you a question?" asked Carly.

"Of course," I said. "I don't know if I'll have an answer or will be able to answer even if I do, but I'll try."

"There's these boys at school who like to tease me and my friends," she said. "Our teacher said we should sing whenever they're mean."

"What a wonderful idea," I said with enthusiasm because yes, it really was a wonderful idea.

"And now I have a new friend," said Carly.

"Again, wonderful," I said. "So what's the question?"

"When it's just us, he's great," said Carly. "But when he's with his friends he gets mean, especially if I'm alone and not with my friends. What should I do?"

I took a few minutes to think about how to answer - partly because I didn't know, but mostly because I could feel an idea trying to peak out from my mind. "How about asking your friend, Dan, to help you."

"Why would he?" she asked. I could see she was frustrated.

"Why indeed," I said. I had no experience dealing with bullies. My siblings and I teased each other all the time but not in a mean way. But isn't this what Dorf was doing with the other griffins? I had much to ponder.

I woke up with Souli by my side. I told her Carly's story to get her take on it.

"Isn't that why you sought the help of your girls?" she asked. "Perhaps Carly will provide you with answers on how to deal with Dorf." She kissed my head and wandered off into the wood.

Maybe she was right. Fairies know and do things I don't understand.

It seemed to take forever for Carly to return but it was really only a few weeks. I didn't know for sure, but I suspected Souli had something to do with it.

"How are you?" I asked. "What's going on with Dan and the boys?" I was having trouble hiding my excitement.

"They're fine," she said. Maidens could be ever so frustrating. Either she forgot our previous conversation or nothing changed.

"Are they still being mean to you and your friends?" I asked, now trying to hid that frustration.

"No," she said. This was going nowhere.

"Why not?" I loved maidens but they could also be very frustrating. I sensed that indeed something had happened.

"I talked to Dan, said Carly. She didn't sound happy. "He introduced me to each of the other boys. I talked to each of them with while Dan was there. I invited each of them to play. At first, we played dodge ball, but they were so competitive, they got even meaner. One of my friends got hit in the stomach!"

"That doesn't sound good," I said.

"It wasn't. We tried other games but we always lost and the boys got even meaner because they thought we were all losers."

"Sounds even worse."

"Dan could see I was unhappy. He also said he and his friends were having problems in math. I said I could help - as could my best friend. We loved math. Our teacher let us use the room after school so we could help them."

"And did you?" I could sense Carly's unhappiness slowly turn to pride.

"We helped all but one, but he ended up helping my best friend with her science project. Now we all hang out together - except sometimes. They're still mean sometimes, but it's easier to walk away."

Inspired by Carly's report, I could finally feel a plan coming together in my mind. Carly and I talked a little more before she went back to her body.

"Souli, I have an idea," I said.

"Do tell," she said.

"Can I bring the maidens to the world of griffins? If we work together, I think we can help Dorf become king but without all the fighting." I had to argue with her, but I can be very pushy so she said it was okay.

\*\*\*

Carly was so happy to see Bella when she came to visit. They only got to see each other a few times a year. They spent a lot of time talking about unicorns.

"Seems you two share a story," said Nana. "I wish I could visit unicorns in my dreams." The girls laughed because they knew adults weren't allowed there. "Bedtime," she said.

Usually Carly and Bella fought against going to sleep. They wanted to watch television or play together. This night, they happily got into the pajamas and went to bed.

"I'll see you in the unicorn wood," said Bella.

"I can hardly wait," said Carly.

They awoke in the wood. The unicorn was so happy to see them together she pranced with joy. Souli was also there, smiling her knowing smile.

"I have a surprise for you," the unicorn said. The girls cheered. They both loved surprises. "I'm going to take you to the world of griffins."

"You said they were fighting," said Bella. "Will they hurt us or eat us?"

"No, especially in dreamtime," said the unicorn. Carly wasn't so sure, but she trusted the unicorn. Souli flew around them, going faster with each round. Suddenly they found themselves in a dense forest, the trees so high they couldn't see the tops of them. Wind blew through the shiny blue leaves. The soft ground was a bright orange

and the tree trunks were purple. Carly stared in awe while Bella talked about what she saw.

"Weird," said Carly.

"Beautiful," said Bella. Carly realized Bella was better at accepting this peculiar forest. It took her a few minutes to adjust during which time the griffin appeared.

"Hello, Dorf" said the unicorn.

"What up?" he asked. "Why you here in our wood?"

"We have an idea on how to make you king," said Souli.

"Nothing to be done," said Dorf. "I done everything I can."

"What's the idea?" said Carly.

"You tell him, Carly," said the unicorn. At first Carly was confused. What did she know about helping a griffin in a land that was new and strange? "Tell him about how you solved the problems you had with the boys."

Carly told the story while Bella asked her countless questions. Carly wanted Bella to hold her tongue, but also found her questions helped her tell the story.

"What does that have to do with me? I can't even carry a tune," said Dorf when Carly finished.

"I suggest that instead of picking fights or commanding your pack, you talk to each griffin one at a time. "

"What if they're the ones who pick a fight?" he pursued. Carly could tell he wanted this suggestion to work but couldn't get past his anger and bravado.

"Don't fight," Carly said before she could think about it. She remembered how good she felt when Dan finally asked her to help him with math. "Ask them what they need."

"They only need me," Dorf said with a squawk.

"No, they don't," Bella said, looking at Carly for approval.

"Yes they do," said Dorf.

"No, they don't." Carly rolled her eyes as Bella and Dorf went back and forth until the two of them couldn't help from laughing.

"Everyone needs something, Dorf," said the unicorn.

"What if I can't satisfy their needs?" asked Dorf. Carly could see a crack in Dorf's confidence.

"Whether you can or can't, asking makes them respect you," said the unicorn.

"Really?" Carly could see the crack grow larger.

"Ask them questions like I do," said Bella. Bella was younger but Carly could see the wisdom of her words.

"I'm better at fighting," said Dorf. "I hate being nice."

"No you don't," said Bella. They four of them laughed.

"What if I don't want to?" asked Dorf.

"Do it anyway," said Carly. "That's what I did and everything worked out."

"Carly knows these things," said Bella before Dorf could reject the idea.

Dorf sighed. "Fine, I'll try."

"Don't try, do it," Carly said, parroting what her mommy said whenever she didn't want to do something.

Carly woke up in here bed. At first she was confused about where she was. This happened periodically because she moved around so much.

"Carly, do you think we helped?" Carly remembered where she was when she heard Bella's question. Bella always had questions.

"I hope so," said Carly. "We won't know until we find out."

"Duh," said Bella. They laughed and got ready for the day.

#### 4. BERBAIDS

During the summer, Carly and Bella only visited the unicorns' wood a few times in their dreams because their minds were full of other things. School was out and there was lots to do and lots of time to think about what they were doing. They actually visited more than they thought, but more often forgot their dreams. Nor did the girls talk to one another as much. Bella's little brother, Teddy, started talking. He loved Bella's stories of the unicorns so much, he made up his own stories about Dorf. Most of his talk was baby babbling, so his mama and Bella figured he was riffing on the stories Bella told. Carly and Bella laughed about it, knowing that he wasn't allowed in the unicorns' wood.

The leaves turned brown and orange. Soon it would be Thanksgiving again and they would all get together for their yearly gathering. The girls were excited because the unicorn promised the door would be open. After all, they had saved the griffins. Souli, the fairy, wanted to reward them.

After settling into their rooms at the lodge, the girls said they wanted to go for a walk on their own. They promised they wouldn't go far. When their parents hesitated, Nana stepped in and said it was okay because she had adult things to talk about with their parents. However, they would need to be back in an hour. Carly and Bella had learned that time stopped in this world once they entered the unicorns' wood, so they knew they could keep their promises to come back in time.

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I admit, I was more than a little excited to see the girls. As a unicorn, even though we can talk to maidens in their dreams, the joy of laying our heads in their laps could only happen if their came through the door.

"They will be here soon," Souli told her.

"When is soon?" I asked.

"Soon is when it's time." I didn't understand, but I knew Souli also knew I didn't understand. She tried to explain, but since there is no time in our woods, the idea of linear time made no sense to me.

"How's Dorf doing as king of the griffins?" I asked.

"He's doing better than my sister, Luna, expected. Dorf is trying to find ways to help the griffins understand unicorns. He wants to reunite our worlds again."

"Woo hoo!" I said, kicking up my front legs. I like to dance.

"We'll see, little one," Souli said.

"Will he come visit when the maidens are here?" I asked.

"Maybe," said Souli. Her crooked smile usually meant yes. I kicked up my back legs with joy.

\*\*\*

It didn't take long for the girls to find the door to the unicorns' wood. Dreamtime was fun, but nothing compared to the wonder of this magical place in person. The unicorn was there to greet them.

"It's okay - they're here," the unicorn called out. Her brothers and sisters galloped into the clearing, snorting with glee. The unicorns took turns and lay their heads in the laps of the girls. So lost in the joy of seeing each other again, none of them talked very much. The girls relaxed, stroking the manes of each unicorn.

"I didn't know how much I missed this," said Carly.

"I know, right?" said Bella.

The girls didn't remember leaving the wood, but they must have done so because they heard Nana call out to them.

"Did you have fun?" asked Nana.

"Yes," they said quietly. Carly felt like she had taken off a sweater of jittery excitement, replacing it with a warm cozy blanket. Nana had a quizzical look on her face.

"You must have done a lot of running to be so quiet," she said.

"Yeah, we ran around a lot," said Bella.

"I'm hungry," said Carly.

"Good, because we're going out to dinner," said Nana.

The restaurant was familiar and the food was yummy. Carly hadn't remembered being so hungry and ate almost everything on her plate. Corn on the cob was one of her favorite foods. She was surprised to see Teddy eat it with glee.

"Corns," Teddy said.



"Yes. Very good, Teddy" said his mama. Bella and Carly exchanged a look and started laughing.

"We love corn," said Bella.

"And muffins," said Teddy.

"That's what he calls griffins," Bella whispered to Carly.

"He does have a thing for talking about corn muffins," said his daddy.

The girls went to bed without incident. They knew they would visit the unicorns' wood in their dreams and besides, it made their mommies happy.

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"Hey little ladies," said Dorf. He didn't usually visit in dreamtime, but I asked him to join us. I didn't want to scare the maidens.

"Dorf!" they said, hugging him. So much for fear.

"I just stopped by to say hello," he said. "See you soon in the wood." He spread his great wings and took to the sky.

"Where are the other unicorns?" asked Bella.

"I have a surprise for you," said the unicorn. The girls cheered. They loved surprises. "I understand you're going to the aquarium." This had been a family tradition. On Thanksgiving day, they'd go to the Monterey Aquarium before feasting on turkey and other delicious treats.

"What's the surprise?" asked Bella. The unicorn smiled a knowing smile.

"Can you give us a hint?" asked Carly.

"There's a place at the aquarium where the biggest fish swim."

"Jellies?" asked Bella.

"Those are little fishes," said Carly.

"I only know about the one where a mermaid lives," said the unicorn.

"Mermaids aren't real," said Carly.

"They can disguise themselves," said the unicorn. "Souli said only certain people can see through their disguises."

"People like us?" asked Bella.

"Yes, people like you," said the unicorn.

"I'll believe it when I see it," said Carly.

The next morning, the family went to their favorite breakfast place. The girls surprised the adults by asking, asking again and asking again and again if they were really going to the aquarium. The adults laughed at their excitement and answered yes each time.

"Let's go see the jellies," said Nana as they entered the aquarium.

"Can we go see the big fish first?" asked Carly.

"Big fishes, big fishes," said Teddy. This surprised the girls, but they were too excited to care too much.

"We're going to see the jellies first, Teddy," said his daddy. "We'll meet the girls after."

The tank with the biggest fish wasn't very crowded because it was kind of boring. The girls were surprised to see Teddy standing before the tank. Bella followed him.

"What are you looking at?" she asked her little brother.

"Her," he said.

By the time Carly caught up, she saw both of them standing very still with their hands on the glass. A big sunfish pressed his nose against the glass. Sunfish were funny-looking and looked more like a swimming dinosaur than a fish. Carly remembered how scared Teddy had been last year when a fish came up to him.

In a blink, Carly saw the sunfish transform into a beautiful woman with glowing green eyes. Instead of legs, she had a fish tail. "The mermaid," she said.

"She's beautiful," said Bella.

"Berbaid, berbaid," said Teddy, as the adults joined them.

"She's a mermaid," Carly said.

"Berbaid, berbaid," he insisted.

"Berbaid it is," said Bella. The girls giggled.

"There you are," said Nana as the adults joined them. "Teddy, don't run off like that. We thought you were lost."

"Berbaid beautiful," said Teddy. The adults laughed at him. She could see they were surprised that Carly and Bella didn't laugh with them.

"I guess ugly is the new beautiful," said Boris.

"What a surprise," said Bella. The mermaid smiled and swam away.

"A beautiful surprise," said Carly. She knew the adults couldn't see what they saw, but she was still amazed that Teddy could.

Thanksgiving dinner was complicated. They shared a room with other adults and a few toddlers. Carly struggled through dinner, trying to find what she wanted to eat. There were lots of choices - almost too many choices. The noise in the room didn't bother her as much as the loud laughter from the adults. She wanted to laugh with them, but she had a hard time understanding what was so funny.

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"Like the maidens, you're in for a surprise." I was so lost in my thoughts, I jumped when Dorf spoke.

"Don't sneak up on me like that," I said. "What's the surprise?"

"If I told you, it wouldn't be a surprise," he said as he spread his wings and flew off.

Unlike the maidens, I don't like surprises and Dorf knew that. However, I couldn't help but wonder what the surprise could possibly be. I was pondering this when the maidens joined me in the wood. "I'm so happy to see you," I said. But the maidens kept looking around with frowns on their faces.

"Where's Teddy?" asked Bella.

"I don't know anyone by that name," I said. I nuzzled Carly, hoping she would sit so I could lay my head in her lap.

"We have to find him," Carly said, pacing back and forth. "Is Souli around?"

"She's always around even if we can't see her," I said. "She sees all."

"We need to talk to her," said Carly. "Make her come here. Please?" I wanted to help, but Souli would show up when she showed up. The unease of the maidens was contagious. My brother burst through the trees.

"Did you hear?" he said. "There's a human in the world of the griffins."

"How do you know that?" I asked with a sharper tone than intended.

"I told him," Souli said, appearing out of nowhere like she often did.

"My brother?" asked Bella. "Is he okay?"

"He's fine," said Souli.

"We had to bring him with us," said Carly. "He wouldn't leave us alone and I thought since he's so little, it would be okay."

"It's not okay and you know that," I said. I didn't want to have to lose my maidenfriends but I feared the worst.

"You broke the rules," said Souli before she disappeared.

"What should we do? We have to find my brother," said Bella. "He can be annoying but he's still my brother. Will the griffins hurt him?"

"Souli said he was fine so no, they won't," I tried to reassure them.

"We need to get him back," said Carly.

"I don't know how to help you with that," I said.

"Where did Souli go?" asked Carly.

"I don't know," I said. "By that, I mean that I really don't know. Souli will help when she's ready."

"We'll wait," said Bella

The girls sat down. I tried to lay my head in each of their laps but they were so anxious, I couldn't relax into joy.

\*\*\*

Carly and Bella sat in the wood waiting. Carly was worried. They had to get Teddy back, but how? She knew they shouldn't have brought him with them. The adults said he could play with them outside, so they had no choice. Carly told Bella they should wait to go through the door until Teddy wasn't around, but she ran ahead with Teddy following. She and Teddy went through the door before Carly. When Carly walked through, only Bella and the unicorn were there. Carly knew she wasn't an adult, but she also understood she needed to be responsible - to the adults and to Souli and the unicorn. She wanted to be angry with Bella but was too worried to go there.

The frantic girls heard a toddler's laughter in the wind. "Where is he? I don't see him," said Bella.

Dorf landed with Teddy on his back. "Dorf my friend," said Teddy as Dorf let him climb off of him. "Muffins are fun."

"You shouldn't have come here," said Bella. Carly could see she was very angry. She could also see that Teddy didn't care she was angry. Usually he cried when she yelled at him but not this time.

"Muffins," he said. He told them all about meeting Dorf and the griffins in his toddler babble.

Carly could see Bella's anger disappear as she warmed up to her baby brother. "They're beautiful like the mermaids," said Bella.

"Corns too," said Teddy.

"We need to go back right now," demanded Carly. "Teddy, you can't be here. I don't want to get into any more trouble."

"Too late for that." Souli appeared from behind Dorf. Dorf snickered and spread his wings to fly away.

"Bye Dorf," said Teddy. Dorf snorted as he flew took to the sky.

"Your brother is very clever, Bella," said Souli.

"This is the first time he's followed me," she said.

"Maybe, maybe not," said Carly, thinking about the mermaid incident at the aquarium.

"Please don't be mad, Souli, said Bella. "Please don't ban us from the unicorns' wood."

"I won't, but only because Teddy had already followed you here before," she said.

Carly was stunned. She knew that couldn't be true. They had been so careful. "When?" she asked.

"In dreamtime," said Souli. Carly sighed relief.

"How?" asked Bella. "Is it my fault?"

"Yes and no," said Souli. "It happened once, hundreds of years ago."

"I remember," said the unicorn. "The king of griffins had him destroyed."

"You promised they won't hurt him," said Bella.

"They won't," said Souli. She held Teddy's hand and he looked up at her adoringly.

"Are you my nana?" he asked.

"No, little one," said Souli. "I am Souli. I am a fairy."

"Where's Nana?"

"She's at the lodge," said Bella, taking his other hand.

"Teddy has been visiting the griffins in dreamtime," said Souli. Carly grabbed his hand from Souli.

"We have to go back now," she said.

"Yes, but know that if he follows you through the door again, you will come here to the unicorns' wood but he will go to the land of the griffins. Because of meeting you two girls, Dorf has decided it would be okay for Teddy to visit."

"No way," said Bella.

"I don't know if we can stop him," said Carly. She didn't see how this could end well.

"No worries," said Souli. "I've learned how much you care about him and will make sure he's protected. Fortunately, boys tend to forget our magical worlds. Girls do too, but not enough to forget having been here."

"I no forget," said Teddy. Carly knew Teddy enough to know he probably wouldn't.

"Maybe, maybe not," said Souli, smiling at Carly. Her brilliant smile made Carly smile back.

"Can we go now?" demanded Bella.

"Of course," said Souli.

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The girls returned, crankier than when they left. Teddy was a happy guy. Carly did notice he didn't babble about Dorf, the griffins or the unicorns, and she was thankful. A trip to the beach helped raise her spirits, but Bella seemed more concerned about keeping an eye on her brother than gathering shells.

Carly had a hard time getting to sleep. She didn't want to go to the unicorns' wood in dreamtime. Fortunately, she slept through the night.

"Did you go?" she asked Bella.

"Go where?"

"To the unicorns' wood."

"Why would I go there?"

Carly didn't want to argue with Bella. She figured if Bella hadn't gone to the wood in dreamtime either. Nor would Bella talk to her about it.

"What's up, Carly?" asked Boris.

"Nothing," she said.

"No corns," said Teddy.

"We can go where they serve corn for dinner," said her mommy. "Would that work for you?"

"I guess." Like Bella, Carly didn't want to talk.

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"Will the maidens ever return?" I asked Souli.

"Of course," she said. "Here's Carly now."

"What's wrong?" I asked her.

"I don't know," Carly replied.

"Carly--"

"I mean - I'm confused. I love Bella but now she wants to pretend you don't exist and we never even came here."

"That happens more than you know," I said. "You humans are funny that way."

"I don't want to be funny - and I don't want to forget." I could tell that nothing I said would help her feel better, so I nosed my way between her legs until she was mounted on my back. "Hold on."

I took her for a ride around the forest. At first she was scared and held on tight. I kept going until she relaxed enough to move with me instead of bouncing around. "Woohoo! This is fun" she said. I returned us to the clearing and she dismounted. "My legs feel funny," she said.

"You're not used to riding a horse, let alone a unicorn," I said. "Just so you know, you can only ride me when you come visit - not in dreamtime."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Has Bella ridden you?"

"Not yet."

"Good."

Carly gave me a kiss before she left the wood.

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"Ready?"

"Yes, mommy, I'm all packed," said Carly. Today they would go home. Carly was glad, especially since Bella hadn't said more than a few words to her. She could tell the adults were baffled by this, but she didn't care. Since Bella, Teddy and their parents had to catch a plane to go back home, they had to say their goodbyes. Carly took Bella aside.

"I'll miss you, Bella."

"I'll miss you too," said Bella.

"We can still talk on the phone."

"Yes."

"And see each other in dreamtime."

"Maybe - maybe not," said Bella. This made them both laugh. Carly was relieved.

"Hey Teddy."

"Hey Carly."

"Did you have fun?"

"Yes, yes, yes. Love corns and muffins and berbaisds."

"Will you see him again in dreamtime?"

"Don't encourage him, Carly," said Bella.

"What dweamtime?" The girls laughed. They hugged one another and got into their separate cars to return home.

"Mommy, have you ever ridden a horse?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I'd like to try it. Can I?"

Boris and her mommy didn't know how to answer and laughed instead. Carly didn't mind. Life was good.

## **ROCKS**

Carly was busy being busy and busy being bored. She went to school part of the time but did most of her schoolwork at home. The world was so different. She was different. And she missed her friends.

Carly was happy her mommy was home all the time, except for sometimes. Boris kept his regular schedule. Sometimes they'd go hiking, but now that the days were getting shorter and darker, and the weather was getting wetter, they didn't get out as much. Thanksgiving was different from other years and she didn't know what to expect when Christmas and Hannukah came around.

Bella and her family moved in with her grandparents, but they had to stay six feet away from one another, so playing together was hard. Sometimes they'd meet in the Unicorn Wood and give each other the big hugs they couldn't share in the real world.



Carly found that even then, she couldn't get past the worry that they'd spread the virus that was plaguing their world. Bella wasn't worried, but she didn't worry all that much about anything. Except for her brother, Teddy.

\* \* \*

Something was going on in Carly's world I didn't understand. No one ever got sick in the Unicorn Wood. We lived and sometimes someone died, but that was rare. Souli keeps trying to explain sickness to me, but I still can't wrap my head around it. Carly tried to explain, but she doesn't like to talk about it. Fine by me, so long as she visits me. Unfortunately, she doesn't visit as much as I'd like.

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As Carly's physical world got smaller, her mind expanded with every new thought or idea. She liked thinking about what she knew and learning so she could know more. She longed to be an adult. Then she could make her own decisions. As it was, she was the one who reminded her mommy and Boris to wear masks to protect themselves from getting sick.

These were her last thoughts before falling asleep and waking up in the Unicorn Wood. She hugged the unicorn, sat down and stroked the unicorn's mane. She felt herself relax, listening to the animals talk to one another in the wood.

Carly was startled by the sound of a big burp.

"Don't look at me," said the unicorn.

"Sorry," they heard a voice say.

"Who said that?" asked Carly.

"I did. Sorry about that."

Carly looked around but didn't see anyone. The sound came from a bush.

"I didn't know plants could talk," she said.

"They can't," said the unicorn. They heard a second burp.

"My bad."

"Who are you?"

"Come and see."

The unicorn stood up so Carly could go look in the bushes. All she could find was a painted rock. It looked like something her mommy could have painted. Burp. "Did you make that sound?" she said to the rock.

"Sorry. I couldn't help myself."

"Unicorn, you never told me rocks could talk."

"That's because most of us can't. Most rocks are too dull to talk, but not me! Go ahead. Pick me up."

Carly picked up the rock. It had a face painted on it with big eyes, eyelashes and lips that moved when it talked. "Are you alive?"

"Everything is alive."

"That's not true." Carly felt silly arguing with a rock, but this was the Unicorn Wood where she was constantly surprised.

"Rocks grow, just like you. Yeah, we grow slow, but such is life." The rock smiled at her and she couldn't help but laugh. "Since I've gotten your attention, I need to ask you for help."

Carly looked to the unicorn who snorted and cantered away. She stared down at the rock, uncertain what to do next. "What do you need?" she asked, wary of the answer.

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Rocks can be so rude. You'd think they'd have better manners having lived so long. Then again, I've had a long life too. Still, Carly is my friend, not the rock's friend. Oh well. I know that if anyone can help rock, Carly can. I hope she succeeds on her elemental journey even though I can't stay with her and help. I may not like rocks, but they are completely trustworthy.

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"What do I need?" the rock repeated, "I need help finding my family."

"Where did they go? And why did the unicorn go away in a huff?"

"Unicorns hate it when we rocks ask anyone to go on elemental journeys – not that I blame them."

"What's an elemental journey?" Carly liked watching the rock talk. Her soothing voice and reminded her of her mommy.

"Don't be deliberately stupid – it's a journey through the elements. Everyone knows that."

"I don't," Carly said with a pout.

"Save the emotion for the journey," the rock said, "you'll need them."

So much for a soothing voice. She'd have to remember that rocks could be snippy. Before she could ask more questions, she could feel the wind pick up.

"Put me in your pocket. I can see through anything," said the rock. "Are you ready?" said the rock once Carly put it in her pocket.

"Ready for what?" Before she could get an answer, the wind started to circle around her, but was calm where she stood.

"Now we're ready," the rock said. "You're in the eye of the storm, but not for long. Woo hoo!" The wind moved under her feet in a circle and scooped her up into the air. It was kind of like flying, but she couldn't see anything. She could feel herself rising higher and higher. Finally, the wind subsided, and she found herself standing on a huge rock.

“You might want to avoid looking down,” said the rock. Of course, that was exactly what she did. Below she could see a globe, except it wasn’t a globe, it was the real earth. Was she in space?

“I told you not to look down,” said the rock. “The realm of air is far above the earth but I’ve created an air bubble around you so you can breathe. This is one of my best friends – an asteroid that circles the earth.

“Hey yous,” said a deep voice that seemed to surround them.

“Hey yous back,” said the rock.

“Who said that?” asked Carly. The deep voice laughed.

“This asteroid is even older than me!” said the rock. “How goes?” asked the rock.

“Same old same old,” the deep voice responded. “I haven’t seen a human in this realm for eons. Why’d you bring her here?”

“She’s helping me find my family.”

“Cool,” said the asteroid. “Hey girl.”

“Hey asteroid,” Carly said.

“I guard the first doorway,” said the asteroid.

“To where?”

“Another realm,” the asteroid said with irritation. “Is she going to be this dumb throughout her journey?”

“I’m not dumb,” Carly said. She hated when anyone called her dumb just because they knew more than she did.

“Good to know,” said the asteroid. “To continue on your elemental journey to the water realm, you have to answer three riddles.” Carly loved riddles – even the silly ones. She was also good at solving problems but was wary of the riddles this asteroid would ask.

“What if I get the answer wrong?” Carly asked.

“Our journey will come to an end, you’ll wake up and I’ll have to continue missing my family,” the rock said. Carly didn’t like it when others said things designed to make her feel guilty, but what could she do? Nothing except move forward as best she could.

“Ask away,” said Carly.

“Hold on – I have to dawn my riddle attire.” The asteroid shaped and reshaped itself. Thankfully, Carly’s spot remained calm. She watched in awe as the stone reshape itself. “Perhaps you recognize me.”

“You look like the Sphinx. I thought the Sphinx was in Egypt.”

“Yeah, well, that used to be me,” said the asteroid. “I found humans so ridiculous, I broke away from the earth to wander space. I had no idea space was so big! That’s why I stay between your earth and the moon of the Unicorn Wood. That way I can watch both worlds. Otherwise, existence would be oh so boring.”

“You’ve been watching us?” Carly asked.

“Sometimes. There’s so much to watch!” This was not reassuring, but what could she do?

“Ask me your riddles.”

“It is greater than God and more evil than the devil. The poor have it, the rich need it and if you eat it, you’ll die. What is it?”

“I don’t know,” Carly said.

“We can’t leave here unless you answer,” said the rock.

“Couldn’t I just wake up?”

“You could,” said the rock, “but you won’t go back to the Unicorn Wood until you complete your elemental journey.”

“What is your answer?” asked the Sphinx asteroid.

“I’ve got nothing,” said Carly.

“Correct. Nothing. Nothing is greater than God, nothing is more evil than the devil, the poor have nothing, the rich need nothing and if you eat nothing you’ll die.” Carly was relieved she’d stumbled on the answer. She hoped the other riddles were easier than that one.

“Next. I’m all around you but cannot be seen. I can be captured but cannot be held. I have no throat, but I can be heard. What am I?” Just as the Sphinx asteroid finished, she felt the air swirl around her.

“What’s with the wind?” asked Carly.

“Exactly. Wind can be captured, cannot be held, has no throat, but can be heard. Well done.”

“Uh ... great.” Carly hoped she would know or stumble upon the right answer for the last riddle.

“I forgot how much I love doing this,” said the Sphinx asteroid. “Okay. I can be long, or I can be short. I can be grown, and I can even be bought. I can be painted or left bare. I can be round, or square. What am I?” Carly didn’t have an answer. “Well? You can’t leave unless you answer correctly. I’m happy to have company and if you get too annoying, I can shake you off into space.”

Carly didn’t know what to do. “Carly, take me out of your pocket,” said the rock. “Look at what you’re seeing that isn’t me.” Carly rolled her eyes. Now the rock was spouting riddles. She tried to look at anything but the rock but all she could see was her hand – and the colorful nail polish. That was it!

“Fingernails!”

“Exactly right,” said the Sphinx asteroid. “Your reward is ... gravity! Time for me to boomerang into the clouds and back into space. I’m sorry to see you go but I’m happy to you get to dive.”

“Dive?” asked Carly. “Dive where? Into what?”

“Uh oh,” said the rock. “Put me back in your pocket. We’re going down.” Before she could ask another question, the Sphinx asteroid dropped below her feet so fast, she lost her footing. For a moment she thought she was flying. Then she fell down on her butt. She got to her feet and saw they were in a cloud. Birds swirled around them.

“This is where my boomer rings,” said the Sphinx asteroid before disappearing into the sky. All she could see below her was water – from one horizon to the next. Without the Sphinx asteroid, she was falling fast. She screamed with horror.

“No worries,” said the rock from her pocket, “the water will hug you.”

Hug me? she thought. She was too busy pondering what this meant to notice her body had turned upside down. She put her arms and legs together, took a deep breath and bulleted into the water. Rather than crashing into the water, the water reached up and cradled her. She held her breath as long as she could.

“Your bubble of air is still there,” said the rock. Carly took a breath in, thankful she breathed air, not water. The mermaids that Teddy had called bermmaids swam around her. Their green eyes and toothy smiles were a joy to behold.

“Welcome,” said one of the mermaids. “We are the guardians to the next realm.”

“This is the water realm,” said the rock. “The air realm was all about thinking and riddles. The water realm – well, you’ll see.”

Carly didn’t know how to feel. On the one hand, she was in awe of the beautiful mermaids who swam around her. On the other hand ...

“How do you feel?” asked the mermaid.

“Happy to be here,” she said.

“No, you’re not,” said the rock. “Mermaids know when you’re being truthful.”

“I’m not lying,” Carly said.

“No, but you’re also not being truthful.”

“Are you calling me a liar?” Carly said angrily. She hated it when people lied.

“No, you’re not,” said the rock.

“Tell me what to say,” whined Carly.

“How do you feel?” the mermaid asked again.

“I want to go home,” said Carly. “I want to wake up at home,” she corrected herself.

“The mermaid didn’t ask what you wanted, she asked how you feel,” said the rock.

“I’m frustrated,” said Carly.

“That’s not an emotion,” said the rock.

“Then what is it?” Carly didn’t like this conversation, so she did what she often did when frustrated and cried. Her tears made the mermaids swim away. “Why did they go away? What am I doing wrong?”

“Your tears weren’t real tears, so the mermaids swam away,” said the rock. Carly could tell the rock was uncomfortable saying this. “I’m sorry.”

Carly knew it wasn’t the rock’s fault, but what was she supposed to do? She tried to swim away, but there was nowhere to go. She tried to swim up to the surface, but there wasn’t one.

“How do you feel?” The mermaid surprised her.

“Why are you so mean to me?” said Carly.

“How is my question mean?” asked the mermaid. Carly could tell she had hurt the mermaid’s feelings.

“I’m sorry,” said Carly, “but I don’t know what you want from me.”

“How do you feel?”

“I’m scared.”

“Scared of what?”

“Everything. I’m scared I can’t help the rock. I’m scared to be swimming in an ocean that never ends. I’m scared I’ll wake up sick and maybe die.”

“Thank you,” said the mermaid who gave her a big hug. Her skin was cold, but the warmth of her hug was soothing. “What are you doing?”

“Tell her the truth,” said the rock.

“I’m traveling through the elemental realms to help rock find his, I mean hers, I mean its family.”

“Thank you,” said the mermaid. “How does that make you feel?”

“Fine,” said Carly. Again, the mermaid swam off. “What did I do wrong this time?”

“Does rescuing my family only make you feel fine?” asked the rock.

“Yes, no, I’m confused,” said Carly, tears running from her eyes again.

“Mermaids don’t understand confusion,” said the rock.

“And I don’t understand mermaids,” said Carly.

“Yes, you do,” said the rock. “It’s YOU you don’t understand.”

“How can that be? I’m me,” said Carly.

“How does rescuing the rock’s family make you feel?” Again, the mermaid surprised her.

“It’s the right thing to do,” said Carly. “I feel good about it.”

“Thank you,” said the mermaid, giving her a hug.

“I appreciate your hugs, but I still don’t know what you want from me.”

“How does that make you feel?” asked the mermaid.

“I tired of your stupid questions!” yelled Carly.

“Why?” asked the mermaid.

“Because they make me mad,” said Carly. “I don’t like feeling angry.”

“Thank you,” said the mermaid before she swam off.

“That went well,” said the rock.

“It did? Why?” Before she could get an answer, she saw a whale swimming towards them. Instinctively, Carly tried to swim away. Only when she saw the giant mouth close over her did she realize she was about to be eaten. The whale swallowed them whole, but that wasn’t the scary part. The water inside the stomach of the whale swirled around her, picking up speed with each swirl. All of a sudden, she was thrust through its blow hole, high into the sky. But instead of falling, the water carried her to an erupting volcano, dropping her in the opening. Fire and lava surrounded her. She looked down and found herself on the back of a huge bird.

“Howdy,” said the bird. “I’s a phoenix and this is the fire realm.” The phoenix flew her to an outcropping of flaming rock and set her down. She figured the rock’s bubble was keeping her safe from the fires around her. “What in tarnation are you doing here?” Contrary to his appearance, his voice of the phoenix was deep. She recognized he had a southern accent.

“What’s a tarnation?”

“It’s my way of showing amazement,” said the phoenix. He ruffled his massive feathers made of fire. “This ain’t the right place for a purdy little thing taking a wander.”

“I’m here too,” said the rock from her pocket.

“Oh, it’s another one of you,” said the phoenix before breaking out into deep laughter. “Some of your kin is around here. Their yapping is enough to drive a grown phoenix insane.”

“That’s why were here,” said Carly. “We want to rescue them.”

“Rescue them?” said the phoenix. “Why? They darn near love it here, bless their hearts. Ask them yourself.” The phoenix scooped her up and flew deeper into the volcano. The fire kept changing colors from blue to red to yellow. The phoenix landed on another outcropping next to a ladder. When Carly looked up, she couldn’t see where the ladder ended.

“Hey y’all,” said the phoenix. The rocks all started talking at once. Their yapping and chirping made her laugh. She better understood why they bothered the phoenix, but she also couldn’t stop laughing. She laughed so hard she farted. This made the rocks laugh.

“What’s so funny?” roared the phoenix.

“I don’t know,” Carly and the rocks seemed to say at the same time. This made them all laugh harder. Carly laughed so hard she could feel tears falling from her eyes.



Her tears fell onto the rocks and they sizzled. This made the rocks laugh harder. Finally, Carly caught her breath and the laughter of the rocks quieted down.

“That was fun,” said the rock in her pocket. “How is everyone? Who wants to go home?” The rocks started yapping at the same time – some wanted to go home, and others wanted to stay. “Carly, you’ll need to sort who wants what and separate those who want to go home from those who don’t. Good thing you have deep pockets.”

Carly looked down at what must have been a few dozen rocks. Some were painted and many weren’t. Carly picked up one of them and asked, “Do you want to go home?”

“No, I like it here.”

She picked up a rock that wasn’t painted. “What about you?” The other rocks started laughing again.

“That’s a dull rock. They don’t care.”

“Take me,” said another rock.

“And me.”

Carly put those who wanted to go home into her pockets. They weighed her down, but she could still walk.

“What now?” she asked the phoenix.

“Either climb the ladder back or give me the four words,” said the phoenix.

Heavy with rocks in her pockets, Carly started climbing up the ladder. She climbed and climbed but she still couldn’t see the top of the ladder. Each rung took effort, and she was getting tired. She stopped at another outcropping and called for the phoenix.

“Are you fixin’ to give me the four words?”

“I don’t know what they are,” she said. The rocks snickered and felt heavier.

“Yes, you do,” said the phoenix.

Carly was too annoyed to think about it and continued climbing the ladder. At the next outcropping she called for the phoenix.

“How much further?”

“Hereabout whatever.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Don’t I know it,” said the phoenix.

Again, Carly climbed the ladder, but still couldn’t see the top. She stopped at the next outcropping. “I can’t do this anymore,” she said.

“That dog won’t hunt,” said the phoenix. “Give me the four words.”

“I don’t know what they are,” shouted Carly. The phoenix was acting like a dull rock. “I’m too tired to keep going.”

"I reckon you are," said the phoenix.

"Hey rock, do you know the four words?" she asked.

"I can't help you there," said the rock.

"Why am I not surprised?" said Carly.

"Rock just gave you two of the words," said the phoenix.

"I can't?" she asked.

"Nope," said the phoenix.

"I give up," she said.

"Suit yourself," said the phoenix. "I can fly her all day," For some reason, this made the rocks laugh. She didn't see the humor and was in no mood to laugh. She needed help and no one was going to help her unless she said four words that could be almost anything. She thought about the words the rock said. I can't help you there. Two of those words were part of the four words she needed to say. While quietly contemplating this, a wave of lava burst up through the volcano. It was getting way too hot for Carly.

"I can't do this alone," she said. "I need your help."

"Those are the four words," said the phoenix as he swooped between her legs and flew upward.

"The four words were: I need your help?" she asked the phoenix.

"Yep. Hard to find, harder to say," said the phoenix. Carly had never thought asking for help was all that hard, but maybe it was.

The phoenix rose into the air above the volcano and down its side to a forest. Carly hoped it was the Unicorn Wood, but the trees looked different. They were bigger and taller than any trees she had ever seen – even the redwoods. "This is as far as I can go," said the phoenix. Before Carly could object, the phoenix bucked her off and she fell through the air towards the trees.

"Whee!" said the rocks. At first Carly struggled in the air, flapping her arms as though she could fly. She closed her eyes just before reaching the trees. However, instead of falling through the trees, the trees reached out their branches to break her fall before placing her gently on the ground. Only then did Carly open her eyes.

"Thank you trees," she muttered.

"You're very welcome." The voice whispered, as though telling her a secret.

"Who said that?"

"I did," whispered the voice. "I'm a dryad, a tree spirit. Welcome to the earth realm"

"Why can't I see you?"

"You're looking right at me."

“All I see is a tree.”

“I live in trees,” whispered the voice. “And I travel through the roots from one tree to another.” Carly didn’t understand, but what else was new.

“I’m trying to take these rocks home,” she said. “Can you help me?” Asking for help was much easier since the volcano.

“Yes and no,” whispered the voice.

Carly waited for clarification, but the dryad was silent. Maybe she needed to do more than ask for help.

“Can I help you?” asked Carly, hoping that was what she needed to do.

“Not so much,” whispered the voice.

“What do I need to do?” she asked.

“Are you sure you want to leave? It’s very peaceful here.”

“I need to take the rocks to the Unicorn Wood,” said Carly. “They want to go home and I’m helping them.”

“Good for you,” whispered the voice. “You’ll need to dig a hole.”

“With what?”

“You have hands, don’t you,” whispered the voice.

Carly knew better than to ask questions for which she was unlikely to get an answer. She saw a soft patch of dirt and clawed the dirt until she formed a hole.

“More,” whispered the voice. “You need to go deep if you want to go anywhere.”

Carly kept digging, breaking a few nails in the process. “Is that deep enough?” Her hole wasn’t huge, but it wasn’t small either.

“Yes,” whispered the voice.

“Now what?”

“Fill the hole.”

Annoyed and frustrated, Carly started shoving dirt into the hole. The rocks snickered.

“You’re doing it wrong,” said the rock.

“The dryad just said to fill the hole.”

“I did,” whispered the voice. “But not with dirt.”

“With what?”

“With you.”

“You want me to lie down in the hole?”

“No,” whispered the voice. “Fill the hole.”

Carly had answered the riddles in the air realm, shared how she felt in the water realm, asked for help in the fire realm, but was baffled by what seemed like the dryad's riddle. She sat in the hole and cried, her tears turning to mud on her face. This was unfair. How was she supposed to fill the hole with herself without sitting in the hole? She curled up and cried herself to sleep.

She woke up in her bed. There was no dirt on her hands and her painted nails were unbroken. But she was tired as though she hadn't slept a wink during the night.

Carly went about her day. She was tired and cranky and nothing anyone said or did helped her feel better. She wanted to sleep but had rejected the idea of naps when she was younger. At least that's what everyone said.

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I knew Carly's elemental journey would take time, but I don't like waiting. I was worried she might not come back. The sphinx, the mermaid, the phoenix and the dryad are complicated and have all kinds of rules. Most of those who take the journey get stuck in one of the realms.

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For almost a week, Carly fell asleep after another exhausting day and woke in her dream sitting in the hole. The rocks had gone quiet, weighing down her body. The dryad kept saying, "Fill the hole." She'd wake up the next morning tired and frustrated.

Carly was so tired and cranky her mommy called the doctor. Carly hated it when her mommy was worried. The doctor told them to wait and see – call back in another week if there was no change.

On the tenth night of sitting in the hole, Carly was giddy and hyper with fatigue. She dug another hole.

"Digging another hole?" whispered the voice of the dryad. "Interesting, but not deep enough."

Carly kept digging until the two holes merged to make a big hole. She laid down in the hole. "Am I there yet?"

"You're where you are," said the dryad. "Fill the hole."

Carly woke up in her bed and dragged through still another day. It had been two weeks. Her mommy took her to see the doctor and she even got a test for the virus. That night she didn't go to the forest, but she could hear her mommy crying in the next room.

The next morning, her mommy gave her a big hug and said she was virus free. Carly was relieved even though she was too tired to be concerned. She knew she hadn't caught the virus, but she also couldn't tell anyone that she was stuck in a hole.

Mommy took Carly to talk to someone. This someone did what Nana did – helped people with their problems. Carly talked a little bit, answered questions, but avoided talking about the Unicorn Wood or her elemental journey. The only person she

spoke to about these things was Bella. Bella wasn't much help. Carly tried explaining the elemental journey and the rocks, but Bella couldn't wrap her head around it.

"Fill the hole," said the dryad.

Maybe it was because she was so tired or maybe it was because of her mommy's worry or maybe it was because talking to that someone sparked something. Carly found herself talking to the hole about the Unicorn Wood and her elemental journey.

Carly talked and talked – more than she usually did. She talked about how her way of thinking helped her answer the riddles from the sphinx from the air realm. She talked about how hard it was to express what she was feeling to the mermaid in the water realm. She talked about learning to ask for help from the phoenix in the fire realm.

"Is the hole filling up?" she asked the dryad.

"Yes," it whispered. "Fill the hole."

Of course, that's what she'd say, thought Carly. So, Carly kept talking. She talked about her life, about how complicated yet simple it had become because so many people were getting sick. She talked about her friends. She talked about her family. She talked and talked about everything she thought and felt. Finally, she was too tired to talk any more.

"Good girl," whispered the dryad. "You filled the hole."

Carly looked down at the hole. It didn't look filled to her. She was weary from all the talking, but also relieved.

"Now jump into the hole," whispered the dryad.

"Oh goody, we're finally going home!" chirped the rocks.

"You're doing great, Carly," said the rock.

Carly jumped into the hole. However, just when she thought she'd hit the bottom, the dirt fell away. She found herself falling down the hole – not so fast that she was scared, but down she went. With this fall, Carly whooped with joy. She'd learned she could trust that the rock and the elements would protect her. And protect her they did.

All that talking lifted the heaviness of the rocks and of her sense of being. She'd periodically bounce off the walls of the hole as she fell. Then she saw mirrors or portals or screens. She didn't know what they were, but as she fell, she caught glimpses of herself doing ordinary tasks. She did homework, she went to class online, she went to the supermarket, she talked with her friends. Each glimpse made her smile – even the icky ones. She had a full life.

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I was so happy to see Carly fall from the sky I almost didn't catch her in time. And boy, was she heavy. She removed the rocks from her pocket, carefully placing them on the ground. They chirped their annoying chirps. Their chirps were always annoying, but their joy was contagious.

I'm so proud of Carly. I'd lost a few too many friends to the elemental journey. Souli says they're all fine but couldn't visit me anymore. Carly gave me a tired hug. She was so tired she said she'd tell me about her journey another time. I knew she would, but she needed time to recover from her journey. I would wait patiently.

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Carly woke up the next day more refreshed than she had felt in weeks. She bounded out of bed early and made breakfast for her mommy and Boris. Her mommy cried tears of joy and the morning was filled with burnt pancakes and hugs. Talking into the hole had made her feel more whole. Her mommy kept a close eye on her for the next few days, but Carly continued waking up her usual self. Her mommy was so relieved Carly didn't have to go back to talk to that someone. However, Carly knew that talking was a way of figuring out what she thought, how she felt and what she thought about how she felt.

Carly didn't visit the Unicorn Wood for many weeks after her elemental journey. One night, she had a nightmare that she was stuck in the hole. Nor could she talk her way through it. She was tired the next day and a little freaked out.

She decided she needed to talk to someone, but she didn't know who. Besides, it was Christmas. The family got together to celebrate even though they kept their distance and wore masks. Bella and her family had gone home, so she was the only kid. That meant LOTS of presents, mostly for her.

She'd only met her great aunt a few times, but she knew her family thought she was weird but cool. She handed out the presents her great aunt sent them. She was tired from opening so many glorious presents. At first she was amused by the silliness in the presents everyone opened. Everyone laughed. Then she opened hers. It was a book and she liked books. But this was a special book. It had a unicorn on the cover that looked like the one from the Unicorn Wood and it was filled with blank pages. Except the first page that read: "may all your journeys – even the elemental ones – be recorded in your name."

Carly couldn't help but wonder if her great aunt ever visited the Unicorn Wood. Somehow, she found this comforting.

That night, Carly woke up in the Unicorn Wood. She hugged the unicorn with joy. She even visited the rocks who chirped their joy.

"Thank you," said the rock.

"You're welcome," she said. "I'm glad you're home."

"I need your help, unicorn," Carly said, sitting so the unicorn laid its head in her lap.

"Talk to me," said the unicorn.

Carly told the unicorn all about her elemental journey. More importantly, she talked about the meaning of her journey, how it made her feel and how it changed the way she lived her life. The unicorn listened. When Carly was done, the unicorn looked up at her.

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Carly's story of her elemental journey was one of the best I'd ever heard, and I've heard many. She told me more about her family. I hoped her great aunt would reach out to her at the right time and I wasn't disappointed. Her great aunt's elemental journey had taken almost a year in her world.

I had promised Carly I would look after the rocks and I was good to my word. The rocks needed someone to listen to them. I gathered the other unicorns, along with other animals of the Wood and asked for their help. Even Souli pitched in. No way I could listen to them as much as they needed to be heard.

## 6. SCULPTURES

Life was back to normal – well kinda sorta. Carly was back in school, and they no longer had to wear masks. But new fears taunted her and her classmates. She knew they lived in a safe neighborhood, but would that really keep them safe? They started doing drills in case someone entered the school and wanted to hurt them. But that only scared her and her friends even more. She tried to comfort her friends because that seemed to be her new job, but what could she really say or do?

She facetimed with Bella who had started going to school but remained her usual fearless self. Bella told Carly she had spent so much time fighting and playing with her little brother during the lockdown, she hadn't even thought about the unicorn wood.

That night, Carly fell asleep thinking about her best friend, Eva. She and Eva were a lot alike but also very different. Like Bella, Eva didn't seem to be afraid of anything. Unlike her, Eva's schedule was full of activities outside school. She seemed to like being busy or maybe she had to do things because her mom worked long hours.

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Carly tried to explain her new fears to the unicorn. Nothing in the wood was all that threatening so the unicorn couldn't understand.

"Hello?" Carly heard a new voice.

"Over here," said the unicorn. A girl of around six crept fearfully into the clearing where Carly sat with the unicorn's head in her lap.

"Are you going to stab that girl to death?" the girl asked from a fighting stance. "I won't let you do that."

Carly laughed and the girl stood back with a puzzled look on her face. "We're all safe here."

"What is this place?" asked the girl. The unicorn stood and explained. Carly was a little jealous when the unicorn laid its head in the girl's lap.

"Should I leave?" asked Carly with more resentment than she intended.

“You don’t need me as much as she does,” replied the unicorn. Carly could feel her sleeping body twitch and turn. She knew the unicorn was right but that didn’t stop a wave of sadness from washing over her. “I know, Carly,” the unicorn continued. “But you’re growing up.”

“Does that mean I’ll never come back to the wood?”

“Not yet,” replied the unicorn. “But eventually, yes.”

“I like it here,” said the girl.

“Me too,” said Carly, “especially when a unicorn sits in my lap.” Another unicorn quietly trotted over to Carly and laid its head in her lap. This unicorn was twice the size and a wee bit awkward, but comforting.

“Better?” the big unicorn asked Carly. The wave of sadness subsided, and Carly relaxed. Carly barely noticed her lifelong unicorn friend leading Megan deeper into the wood. “Do you know why I’m here?” asked the big unicorn.

“Will I ever see the other unicorn again?”

“Maybe, but aren’t I good enough for you?” Carly was taken aback by the question. “I know, I’m bigger and the other unicorns say I ask too many questions, but can’t you see I’m here for you?”

Carly sighed. She hated it when adults asked her questions – especially about how she felt. She felt what she felt. Maybe she wasn’t as safe here as she thought.

“How’s life?” asked the unicorn.

“Fine,” Carly answered.

“Oh please,” said the unicorn. “Do you really think you can hide your feelings from me?”

“Fine. Life is a little weird but less weird than it was before,” she said.

“And you?” asked the unicorn. “Are you less weird?” This made Carly laugh out loud.

“Me? I’m always weird.”

“Always?” Carly was stunned into silence. Usually, her flippant comments shut down further questioning, encouraging a change of subject. “Am I asking you tough questions?”

“Yes... no... maybe,” said Carly. “The other unicorn didn’t ask so many.”

“Of course not,” said the unicorn. “But you’re growing up and, well, I can’t help but ask questions. It’s my nature. Do questions bother you?”

“I’m usually good at answering questions,” Carly said with more confidence than she felt. She hadn’t planned on saying that, but something about this new unicorn challenged her and she was determined to meet the challenge.

“Are you?”

“Not always, no,” she said. “Is that what you wanted to hear?”



“What do you think?” This was going nowhere fast. Even the unicorn could see that. “Follow me.” The unicorn got up, barely missing her head with its giant horn. She followed the unicorn deeper into the wood.

The trees were denser, hiding the sun so that it was hard to see her way forward. More than once she bumped into a tree while following the glowing unicorn. “I keep walking into tree trunks. Are you?”

“Yes,” said Carly. The unicorn led her into small meadow with a stream running through it. The unicorn waded in the water. “Can you swim?”

“Yes,” said Carly, following the unicorn into the water. The water was clear, and she could see small fish swimming. But when she stepped into the water, she couldn’t feel it.

“Did you think you’d get wet?” asked the unicorn.

“Yes,” she said, proud how she was answering the unicorn’s questions.

One second the unicorn was wading and the next it was swimming. The stream was less a stream and more of a softly moving river. She hesitantly followed the unicorn. Yes, she could swim, but she wasn’t always confident in her swimming abilities.

“No worries,” said the unicorn. “You can’t drown. Well, that’s not completely true, but the water itself poses no danger.” Carly waded deeper into the water ever so slowly. “Can’t you just get in already? Do I have to help you with everything?”

Carly didn’t like the question and didn’t answer. She held her breath and dove underwater. She managed to surface, but barely. When she did, she saw an impossibly big wave.

“Scared?”

“No,” Carly said with less confidence than she felt.

“Scared now?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Ready?”

“No,” she said with more fear than she intended.

“Too bad,” said the unicorn. “Did you think you had a choice?” Before she could answer, the giant wave rose even higher. “Ready to surrender?”

Before Carly could answer the wave crashed down over her. She was tossed about, rolling in the dancing water. She tried but failed to hold her breath, expecting to inhale water. But that didn’t happen. Even under water she didn’t lose her breath. Maybe breathing wasn’t a thing in my unicorn dreams, she thought.

Carly could feel rather than see the mermaid who hugged her from behind, swimming her through the water. The unicorn swam alongside them. I didn’t know unicorns could swim, thought Carly.

In addition to not having to worry about breathing, Carly could see the multitudes of fish with clarity – like she did when she wore a face mask in the water. They seemed to smile at her although when she thought about it, she didn't know fish could smile.

The gentle movements of the mermaid made her drowsy, like she was in a rocking cradle. She wanted to see where they were going, see the extraordinary creatures that surrounded her, but couldn't keep her eyes open.

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Carly woke up tired as though she had never slept. She knew she had, but that didn't seem to make any difference. She still felt like she was under water. At least she wasn't wet.

"Bad night?" asked her mommy.

"I guess," she said.

"You'll sleep better tonight." Carly wasn't convinced.

Carly did her morning routine and even got to school on time, despite feeling like a space cadet. Her art teacher wore her usual bright clothes that draped like curtains her round body. Carly thought she was a little weird, so of course, she liked her. Eva told her she thought their teacher was far too happy and excited all the time. She also claimed that the teacher made sure everyone knew she loved their work, even when it wasn't very good. Carly couldn't disagree.

The teacher told them that the next day, they would be making clay sculptures and then painting them. Carly liked that. She and her mommy had painted rocks since she was little.

"You will shape a figure of sorts so think about what you want to make," the teacher said. "Today, I want you to draw a figure you can make with clay." Carly just wanted to do the painting part but already knew what figure she would create.

"I'm going to make a diorama of my room," said Eva. Carly admired Eva's building skills. She had helped her uncle build a doghouse. He said she'd make a great architect.

Carly drew unicorns. She thought she was better at sculpting than drawing, but that would have to wait until the next day.

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"You don't feel it?" the unicorn asked.

"Feel what?" Carly asked. The mermaid had settled them down on the sandy bottom. Creatures she did and did not recognize swam around them.

"Everything," said the mermaid.

Carly was confused and annoyed, even though the unicorn's head laid in her lap. "Whatever," she said.

"You look familiar," said the mermaid.

"I think we've met. You were with Teddy," she said.

“Ah yes,” said the mermaid. “He called us berbaid. Is he your father?”

Carly laughed. “He’s too little to be my dad.”

“So, he’s your son,” said the mermaid.

“He’s my cousin,” said Carly.

“I don’t know what that is, but no matter,” said the mermaid. “Why did you bring her here?” the mermaid asked the unicorn.

“She doesn’t know how she feels,” said the unicorn.

“I do too!” shouted Carly.

“Do tell,” said the mermaid.

“I’m mad because you think I don’t know how I feel,” Carly said triumphantly.

“Excellent start,” said the mermaid.

“Is it?” asked the unicorn.

“Consider listening to this unicorn and thinking about the questions,” said the mermaid. “Hanging out with this unicorn means you’re changing.”

“How am I changing?” asked Carly.

“You’re becoming more you,” said the mermaid.

“What does that even mean?” asked Carly. She couldn’t hide her irritation.

“Who would she be if she wasn’t becoming her?” asked the unicorn.

“Whomever everyone else believes she is,” said the mermaid.

They sat in silence as Carly tried to understand what she was hearing. Who was she? The mermaid was right. So far, she relied on the adults in her life to tell her. But was that really who she was?

“Is it?” asked the unicorn. Carly was not happy the unicorn seemed to read her mind. She didn’t like it when anyone did that, even if they were right.

“I’m Carly,” she said.

“How do you feel, Carly?”

“I don’t know,” she replied.

“You know that’s not an answer,” said the mermaid.

“Fine. I find the unicorn’s questions incredibly irritating.”

This was going nowhere. Carly wanted to wake up.

“You can’t wake up until we finish,” said the mermaid. So, both of them could read her mind, she thought. “There are no secrets here.”

“I have lots of secrets,” said Carly. “People tell me their secrets and I agree not to tell anyone else.”

“That’s a lot of secrets,” said the mermaid. “Secrets can be a heavy burden.”

Carly had to think about that because yes, sometimes those secrets felt like a burden she had to lug around. On the other hand, carrying the secrets of others made her feel powerful.

“Is it worth the power?” asked the unicorn.

“The unicorn is concerned you also carry the emotions of those whose secrets you carry.”

“I don’t understand.”

“When someone tells you a secret, they usually have strong feelings about those secrets,” said the mermaid. “It’s up to you to separate the secrets from those feelings. If you don’t, they weigh heavily on your heart and mind, even if you don’t know it.”

Carly didn’t like the idea of that one bit. She thought about how the adults in her life struggled with one another while trying to protect her. Sometimes they said things about each another and she was asked to keep their comments to herself. She thought about how much she did and did not share how she felt with her friends – even Eva. The waters started swirling around them.

“Think about how you feel,” said the mermaid.

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Carly woke up in her warm bed. She didn’t know if she was damp from sweat or if being under water in her dream carried over. She wanted to forget her dream but couldn’t. How many secrets do I carry? she asked herself. How many of them make my life harder? Who am I? So many questions – just like the unicorn. She didn’t know she giggled out loud.

“What’s so funny?” her mommy asked. “Sleep well?”

“It’s no secret, no,” she said, keeping her giggles from leaking out. Her mommy gave her a hug. Carly usually loved hugs but was still irritated from her dream and felt her body stiffen.

“Are you getting sick?” Her mother had that look she gets when she’s pretending to be calm but is freaking out.

“No, mommy,” said Carly, forcing herself to smile. She had perfected the forced smile. This is one of my own secrets, she thought.

Carly went to school but was lost in her own thoughts. The questions the unicorn asked took all of her attention. Her friends were concerned but she gave them her forced smile and said she had a lot to think about. Unlike the adults in her life, her friends too often knew when she was hiding something.

“Whaddup?” asked her friend Eva.

“Nothing,” she replied.

“I don’t believe you,” said Eva.

“Do you know who you are?” she asked Eva. “I mean, you, not who everyone tells you, you are.”

"I am what I do," said Eva. "I dance, I play sports, I like building things. My mom says I'm smart."

"But how do you feel?" asked Carly.

"Fine."

"What I mean is, how do you feel about what you do?" asked Carly.

"Fine," said Eva before running off to join their friends.

Carly wanted to be fine, but she wasn't. She needed answers. She sat in contemplation and barely heard the bell ring. Fortunately, her next class was art. It was sculpting clay time and, of course, she'd make a unicorn.

"Shape a figure – an animal, a person or even a place," said her teacher. "We'll let them dry and then you'll paint them. However, make sure the shape is recognizable. No painted lumps of clay."

Carly figured her teacher was talking to her. She had shown her teacher some of the rocks she had painted.

"Well done, Carly," said her teacher. Carly looked at her work. It vaguely resembled a unicorn, but it wasn't right. She wanted smash it back into a mound of clay. "Don't destroy it, keep working on it." Did her teacher just read her mind?

"But it's all wrong," she said. "The legs are too fat, the head is too big and I'm worried the horn will break off."

"Figure out how to fix it," said the teacher. This feedback didn't make her feel any better. Fine, she thought as she poked holes through its head and through its body. She used a toothpick as the horn.

"The toothpick doesn't look right to me," said her teacher. Carly groaned, even though she knew her teacher was right. She covered the toothpick with clay. She smoothed out the edges, holes and all, focusing on the detail rather than the entire thing. I've made a holey unicorn, she thought to herself.

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As Carly laid in bed, she hoped she wouldn't visit the unicorn wood. She was too tired to think and feel or to think about how she felt. Sure enough, she woke up the next day from a dreamless sleep.

"You look much better today," said her mommy. This time Carly's smile was real, even if her mommy couldn't always tell the difference. After all, Carly had learned the forced smile trick from her mommy.

"I get to paint my clay today," she said. Carly didn't realize how much she looked forward to it.

Carly was more than a little surprised by her unicorn. She totally forgot what she had done. It looked weird and she liked it.

“There’s paints, but you can also glue on decorations,” her teacher said. The table was filled with buttons, gems, beads and glitter. She would avoid the glitter. She didn’t want to spend hours trying to wash it out of her hair.

Carly collected an assortment of goodies to glue onto her unicorn. “Why all the holes?” asked her teacher.

“That’s where the unicorn stores secrets,” she said before she could think about it, surprising herself with her answer. But it felt right. She took a moment to recognize this feeling. Yes, it felt right because it WAS right.

Carly glued a bunch of colorful round pebbles together. She laughed to herself because yes, she wouldn’t paint rocks, but she would use them. They dried while she coated the unicorn with bright colors of paint. She couldn’t seem to paint straight lines like she could on the rocks, so she splattered it all over. She attached her dried pebbles to the opening in the unicorn’s belly. Then she glued two curved pieces of glass on each side of the head. Class ended and she would have to finish it the next day.

“The room I built doesn’t look like my room,” said Eva, “but it’s the room I had in a dream.” Carly had seen Eva’s work. Even though it was supposed to be a room, it was more like a dome with windows.

“My sculpture isn’t from my dreams,” said Carly. She had yet to tell her friends about the unicorn wood. Keeping it a family secret – at least amongst her and her cousins – seemed like the right thing to do.

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“Do I look like I have holes in my head and body?” asked the unicorn. They were back to sitting on the sand under water with the mermaid.

“Can’t you see that’s where she put all the secrets she carries?” said the mermaid. Carly sat quietly, mostly because she wanted to hear more from them about her sculpture.

“Do I really keep secrets in my belly?” said the unicorn.

“Must you be so literal?” asked the mermaid. “She’s doing abstract art.”

“What does that mean?” asked Carly.

“It means you’re using clay to go beyond what is real to what is authentically you,” said the mermaid, “That way you better express your thoughts and feelings.”

“I don’t do abstractions,” said the unicorn. “I barely do fractions.”

“Yet you have reactions,” said the mermaid.

“About my actions,” said Carly. She loved playing with words.

“Are you making fun of me?” asked the unicorn.

“Yes!” said Carly and the mermaid at the same time. This made all of them laugh.

“But I want your sculpture to look good,” said the unicorn. “Can you at least do that for me?”

“I can and I will,” Carly said with confidence.

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Carly’s unicorn looked wild. The paint was splattered, the belly full of colorful pebbles, the head surrounded by glass. She painted cotton balls for the main and tail. And yes, she sprinkled them with glitter. That’s why she wore her hair up. She tried focusing on the details of the eyes. This time her steady hand drew the lines. Her detail surprised even her.

“Well done, Carly,” said the teacher. The teacher had said the same thing to everyone in the class – even those whose sculptures were unrecognizable or made no sense. Carly knew her unicorn and Eva’s room were the best. She knew her teacher knew because she winked at them as they were leaving.

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Carly decided to take the lead in the conversation. “Do you like the unicorn I made?” She figured both the unicorn and the mermaid could see her creation through her eyes.

“Yes... no... maybe,” said the mermaid. This made Carly giggle. Usually she didn’t like being mocked, but now she could better see how silly this answer was.

“Were you trying to make me?” asked the unicorn.

“You were my inspiration, but I went in my own direction.”

“Excellent,” said the mermaid. The unicorn looked confused.

“How does that make you feel?” asked the unicorn.

“Good,” she answered. “It looks like how I feel.”

“Which is?”

“I carry many secrets but it’s up to me to think about how those secrets make me feel.” Carly surprised herself with her answer. She smiled a genuine smile.

“Thank you for visiting me, Carly,” said the mermaid.

Before she could respond, the water swirled around her and threw her up in the air. She landed gently onto solid ground. The unicorn snorted.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Mermaids are weird,” said the unicorn.

“The best people are,” she said. Together they laughed.

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Carly found herself laughing as she woke up refreshed and ready for a new day. In art class, hers and Eva’s sculptures stood out. Eva’s room had amazing detail but instead of a floor, she painted the night sky.

“Are we the best or what?” said Carly after class.

“The best as always,” said Eva. “Your unicorn is almost as weird as you are.”

“We love our abstractions,” said Carly. Sometimes she said things even she didn’t understand. Her mommy would have laughed but Eva looked confused. “I like your room – it says a lot about how you feel.”

“It does?” asked Eva.

“You’ve even told me that sometimes the word feels upside down.” This seemed to satisfy Eva. Carly was glad because she wasn’t even sure what she meant.

“You’re weird,” said Eva.

“We both are and proud of it.”

## 7. BESTIES

The secrets of others that Carly carried no longer had the emotional punch they once had, thanks to the mermaid. What a relief. She had no idea how burdensome they’d become. However, this wasn’t always easy. She tried to explain this to Bella, but Bella didn’t understand.

“Why does anyone even need secrets?” Bella asked Carly during one of the rare occasions they saw each other in the unicorn wood.

“You don’t,” said Carly, “but other people do.” Carly was glad big new unicorn sat in her lap because her old friend sat in Bella’s lap.

“A secret isn’t a secret if someone tells you,” Bella said.

“They are if the person telling you their secret asks you not to tell anyone else.”

“Why would they even do that?” asked Bella.

“Because they trust me not to tell anyone else,” Carly answered, regretting she’d even mentioned her challenges with secrets. “You keep the unicorn wood secret, don’t you?”

“I tried telling my dad, but he didn’t believe me,” said Bella.

“How’s Teddy and the baby?” Carly asked Bella. As Bella talked about how cute the new baby was, Carly listened. She also thought more about secrets, but Bella didn’t notice. Yes, her thoughts were her own.

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Carly mentioned her ideas about secrets to Eva. Eva immediately understood. “I try not to dwell on secrets people tell me,” Eva said. Carly could tell that somehow, Eva didn’t take on the emotion behind those secrets and didn’t feel burdened by them. Lucky Eva.

“Who are we?” Carly wasn’t aware she said those words out loud.

“We are Carly and Eva,” said Eva.

“I know, but what does that mean?” asked Carly.



"It means you ask silly questions." Carly could tell she had irritated Eva.

"What's on your agenda for today?" asked Carly, hoping the change of subject would sooth Eva's irritation.

"My basketball team has practice and then I'm going out to dinner with my uncle," she said. Eva knew Carly didn't like basketball. Carly met Eva's uncle once and didn't like him either but didn't tell her. He was too big and too loud and always laughed at his own jokes, half of which Carly didn't understand. Eva thought he was larger than life and laughed with him even if she didn't understand the joke.

"Sounds like a good night for you," said Carly.

"What about you?" asked Eva.

"Gymnastics," she said.

"Oh, that," Eva said rolling her eyes.

"Hey, you do your things and I do mine," said Carly with a little more anger than she expected.

"Fine," said Eva. "But what I do is challenging. What you do is silly."

"It is not," whined Carly. "Not everything is about what you do!"

"How would you even know?" sniped Eva.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Carly sniped back.

"Not everything is about you, Carly."

Carly was glad when the bell rang. She slowed down to avoid being anywhere near Eva. What kind of friend says things like that?

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Carly sat in the grove with the big unicorn head laying in her lap. Carly was still angry at Eva but pouted instead. They sat in silence for a long time. Carly was surprised because this unicorn usually asked her questions.

"Am I only what I do?" she mused.

"No." Carly looked up. An older woman with pink hair and bright velvet robes appeared out of nowhere. She sat down and her giant shaggy dog laid his head in her lap. "Those who focus only on doing usually have trouble being." Carly couldn't hide her look of confusion. "You don't have to do to be."

The unicorn woke up and quickly rose, bowing before the colorful woman. "Carly, this is the Empress of the Wood."

"Pleased to meet you," said Carly.

"Yes... no... maybe," said the Empress with a smile. "This is my dog. He's stinky but sweet -- at least most of the time." The dog's eyes closed when Carly leaned over to scratched him behind the ears.

“Should I leave now?” asked the unicorn. Carly had never seen a unicorn behave with such deference.

“No need,” said the Empress. “As you were.” The unicorn folded and laid his head back in Carly’s lap. The dog had rolled over and the Empress gently stroked his belly before looking up at Carly. “You love it here in the unicorn wood, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do,” answered Carly. She was getting better at answering questions. “What do you do as the Empress of the Wood?”

“I am, but I don’t always do,” answered the Empress with a snort. “Just like you.” Carly thought that too many people in her life were obsessed with what they did, especially the adults. Carly liked her activities but didn’t believe they defined who she was. “Who are you to ask me what I do?” said the Empress, her sharp tone reflecting how Carly felt. Carly could feel the unicorn stiffen. “Don’t mind the unicorn. They’re all afraid of me. Why? Well, that’s a long story even though it doesn’t really explain it.”

“I’d like to hear that story,” said Carly. The unicorn jumped up, the horn grazing her cheek, and ran away. Carly wiped away the blood that dropped from her face.

“I’m afraid you’ll take that scratch with you,” said the Empress. “Unicorns don’t like hearing the story.”

“Why?” asked Carly. She felt naked without the unicorn.

“I haven’t told anyone the story for a long while,” said the Empress. “But that’s a secret between you and me.” Carly sighed. Another secret?

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” said Carly.

“Don’t you want to hear it?” the Empress asked. Carly sheepishly nodded her head. “I must warn you. I don’t exactly tell my stories.”

“What do you mean” Carly asked.

“You’ll see,” said the Empress.

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In the blink of an eye, Carly found herself sitting on a beautifully carved wooden throne. She saw she had pink hair. Ah, she thought, I’m in the story – a dream within a dream. Carly was a big reader and had learned that some stories were told in third person and others in first person. First person stories came from the point of view of the main character. A third person story did too but didn’t use the same pronouns. “I and we.” They used “he, she and they.” This was definitely a first-person story and she was the Empress. The fact Carly had no control over what she did or say only bothered her a little bit.

Carly looked around. The grove was filled with all kinds of animals – some of which she didn’t recognize. The Empress’ dog sat quietly by her side on a big velvet pillow, alert to everything around them. The animals chirped, barked, howled and roared, creating a symphony of sound. “Quiet!” The sound was quickly replaced by silence. Carly could feel her head aching. It was a deep ache unlike any headache she had ever felt. Somehow the silence made it both better and worse.

“Hurting?” asked a little mouse.

“I’m afraid so,” said Carly. All of the animals, except the dog and the unicorns, slipped away quietly. “Unicorns, why are you still here?” demanded Carly.

“We believe we can help you,” said a unicorn Carly had yet to meet.

“You can’t,” said Carly. The pain pounded in her head, pulsing agony with each heartbeat.

“We think that if we gently poke you with our horns in all the right spots, we can give you relief,” said the unicorn. Unicorn acupuncture? Carly asked herself.

“That’s ridiculous,” Carly said rather than felt. “But do it anyway. I’ll try anything.” The unicorns surrounded her, their horns firmly pressing against her flesh without breaking the skin. Carly could feel the ache subside. The unicorns gracefully stepped back. Carly sighed with relief. However, without the pain, she couldn’t think clearly. “You took away my mind!” she shouted.

The unicorns lowered their heads in shame. Carly wanted to feel bad for the unicorns, but the anger of the Empress was just like how she’d been feeling about Eva. She also felt like she did when she didn’t get enough sleep – spacy and fuzzy.

“Isn’t the pain gone?”

“Yes, but I’ve lost my mind!” Carly shouted.

“Which would you rather have,” asked the unicorn, “pain or mindlessness?”

“Neither,” snapped Carly. “This is all your fault. You unicorns must really hate me.”

“No, we want to help you.”

“Take your rainbows and go away,” Carly said.

Carly felt her body collapse and fall asleep into a dream. So now she was having a dream within a dream within a dream. However, this dream was more like a cartoon. She liked the cartoons on television when she was younger, but now she only watched full length animated movies. The mermaid was right. She was changing.

Cartoon unicorns surrounded her. Unlike the unicorns in the wood, these unicorns couldn’t stand still, bucking and rearing. Their animated faces expressed how they felt which changed every few seconds. Carly knew she was safe, but the movement around her made her dizzy. “Stop!” she shouted. The unicorns didn’t stop. “Stop moving!” she cried. They didn’t.

Carly could feel her stomach rumble, threatening to release its contents out her mouth. Carly hated puking. Because this was an animated dream, her dry heaves were overly dramatic, almost to the point of silly. One of the unicorns poked her in the butt and she tasted the contents of her stomach in her mouth before they flew out of her body. The cartoon unicorns laughed and continued dancing around her, making her nauseated again. She shut her eyes. When she opened them again she was back in the dream within a dream. The dog was licking her face and the unicorn she didn’t recognize looked at her with concern.

“Better?” asked the unicorn.

“Yes,” said Carly, “but I’m still missing part of my mind. Why are you doing this to me?” Carly shivered with rage. The other unicorns quietly wandered back with heads hung so low their horns dragged along the ground.

“We’re all so sorry,” said the unicorn. The others gently shook their heads.

“All of you – get away from me or I’ll sick my dog on you.” The unicorns galloped away. Why was the Empress so angry? Did the unicorns really make her sick?

Carly clamped her eyes closed. Behind her eyes she could see the cartoon unicorns dancing around her again, making her sick to her stomach again. When she opened them, she found herself back in the unicorn wood, back in her own dream body without pain or mindlessness.

“Now do you understand?” the Empress asked.

“I think so,” said Carly. In truth, she was didn’t. She’d seen how mommy acted when she had one of her migraines. It wasn’t pretty. “Will I get those headaches?”

“Yes.. no... maybe,” said the Empress with a soft smile. “I hope not.”

“I know why you were angry but why did you blame the unicorns?”

“Why indeed,” said the Empress. “Seeing what happened through your eyes showed me the real reason the unicorns fear me. I thought it was because I’m a bit louder and wilder than the others in the wood. But no, it’s because I’ve blamed them for my pain and mindlessness. I’m so sorry.”

Carly was surprised by how many unicorns suddenly surrounded them, gently poking at the Empress. Her dog licked away the wet tears falling from the eyes of the Empress. Carly could feel tears of joy and relief drip down her cheeks.

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Upon awakening, Carly had a slight headache, but nothing like she’d experienced in her dream or her dream within a dream or even her dream within a dream within a dream. She laid in bed thinking about the Empress’ story.

“Hey sleepyhead,” said her mommy, “It’s late.” Carly could tell her mommy was concerned. “How are you doing?”

“I’m fine,” Marly said with a smile that was both real and forced. “Just thinking about the dream I had.”

“Did you get that scratch on your face in your dream?”

“Maybe,” said Carly. She ran to the mirror and saw the scratch. “It doesn’t hurt.”

“I bet it’ll heal without a scar,” said her mommy. “I bought a doll to give Bella for her birthday.”

Carly knew Bella didn’t play with dolls very much. Her jaw dropped when she saw the pink-haired doll that looked like a younger version of the Empress.

“By your expression, I think I bought the right thing,” said her mommy.

“It will give Bella and me something to talk about, that’s for sure,” said Carly. She gave her mommy a big hug.

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“Why is she called the Empress?” Carly asked the unicorn. No one else was around so Carly didn’t worry about asking such questions.

“Who?”

“The Empress of the unicorn wood.”

“Oh. She isn’t the Empress anymore,” said the unicorn.

“What happened to her?”

“She evolved into Strength,” said the unicorn.

“I don’t understand.”

“In your world, you have pictures on cards that show this,” said the unicorn. “I think you call them tarot cards?”

Carly played card games but never with tarot cards. Tarot cards were colorful but they contained symbols she didn’t understand. Judging by the number at the top of the card, she saw Strength had a higher card number. This didn’t tell her much, but that wasn’t what niggled at her brain.

“Why are you answering questions instead of asking them?”

“You asked, I answered,” said the unicorn.

“But why—” Before she could ask her next question, Carly faded back into a deep sleep.

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Carly woke up struggling to remember her unicorn dream. Sometimes she forgot her dream adventures into the unicorn wood until someone or something triggered her memories. That’s what happened when her uncle came over with his dog. His dog was smaller than that of the Empress, but just as stinky and sweet.

“Shall we facetime with Bella?” he asked.

“Of course,” she said, remembering her layered dreams that told the Empress’ story.

Carly and some of the adults in her life surrounded the computer screen. Her great aunt was visiting and joined them. Carly didn’t know her very well, but the purple highlights in her hair reminded her of the Empress. Her uncle’s dog was licking her aunt’s face, reminding Carly that the Empress of the unicorn wood was no longer the Empress.

Bella appeared on their screen with the doll in her hands. The baby was asleep, but Teddy bounced up and down. Together they sang happy birthday. Bella blew out the candles on the unicorn cake her parents had gotten her.

Following the birthday call, her mommy went back to bed. Her head was hurting. Carly hoped that like the Empress, her mommy would evolve into Strength, whatever that really meant.

Her great aunt surprised her by taking out a deck of tarot cards. "Just so you know, there are no unicorns in this deck," she said with a knowing smile. Carly hid her surprise with her forced smile. "What a smile," said her great aunt rolling her eyes. Their laughter was so loud, Carly was afraid they'd disturb her mommy.

Her great aunt laid out six cards. "Let me tell you a tarot story," she said "The Empress lived in the forest and protected all of the plants and animals. However, too often she had headaches, maybe because she was allergic to many of those plants and animals." Carly's eyes widened. "Kinda like your mommy." Carly released the breath she didn't know she was holding.

"The Empress wanted more control over her life and her body, so she transformed into the Emperor. She liked the power she wielded but her responsibilities were a heavy burden."

"Like the burden of keeping secrets."

"Well said. She was constantly having to do things to make sure her kingdom ran smoothly, which gave her no time to think about the meaning of life. That's when she turned into the Hierophant. She loved learning new things and then connecting those learnings to other learnings so that she learned even more."

"Like school?" Carly asked.

"Something like that. But eventually, she started feeling lonesome because everything she learned was in her head and she wanted to share her ideas with someone else."

"Like a best friend?"

"Well said again. She loved her best friend which is why she transformed into the Lovers. I call them besties. Although the besties cared about one another, they were very different and disagreed about many things. After many arguments, she stopped fighting for her opinions and started seeking bigger ideas where those opposing opinions could both be true. Does that make sense to you?"

"Not really."

"Let me think of an example," her great aunt said. "Suppose you liked unicorns, but your bestie liked mermaids. Instead of arguing about which one is better, you could create a world where unicorns and mermaids were besties."

"Okay," said Carly, "I think I understand."

"The Empress turned Emperor turned Hierophant turned Lovers could now see how differences were just that – differences."

"One isn't better than the other," said Carly, "they're just different."

"Well said. But that wasn't enough. She wanted to know the truth. More than that, she wanted to fight for truth so that differences could all peacefully co-exist."

“Is that what the Chariot is all about?”

“Yes. The Chariot doesn’t like to fight but will if it means fighting for truth. Yes, facts are facts, but truth is a little more complex than that. The Chariot leads his horses through the facts and opinions to get to the truth. At least that’s what he tries to do. He is brave but that bravery makes him tired. It takes Strength to continue moving forward.”

“Strength,” Carly said to herself out loud.

“Strength isn’t just about being strong,” said her great aunt. “it’s about moving through conflict or change without hurting anyone.”

Carly better understood what the unicorn meant but now she had even more questions – not questions for the Empress turned Strength, but questions for her great aunt.

“Have you ever gone to the unicorn wood?” she asked.

“Not that I remember,” her great aunt answered. Carly looked at her face, trying to see any signs that she wasn’t telling the truth, but couldn’t see any. “Sounds like you’re going on adventures in your dreams.”

“How did you know?”

“Know what?,” her mommy said. She looked tired but without pain. Carly had learned to know the difference. More than that, the Empress taught her more about the mindlessness than can follow. “Did your great aunt tell you your future?” Her mommy smiled her forced smile.

“No, we were talking about the present,” said her great aunt. “It’s so sweet how you and Carly have the same smile,” her great aunt said. This made Carly giggle.

The rest of the day was filled with activities, mostly with her family. At the end of the day, they dropped off her great aunt so she could fly home. Carly wasn’t a big hugger but felt good about hugging her great aunt.

“The Empress is you,” her great aunt whispered in her ear, “and her story ends when she embraces the World. Watch out for the unicorn horns.” They smiled at one another, although Carly’s smile also showed her confusion.

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“Did my great aunt come to the unicorn wood when she was my age?” she asked the unicorn.

“Most young girls do,” said the unicorn. “But then they grow up forget they were ever here. I’m always sad when that happens because then I start forgetting them too. Are you starting to forget?”

“Not yet.” The unicorn’s answer didn’t tell her anything that she hadn’t already figured out. “Are the other unicorns still scared of the Empress?”

“Who?” asked the unicorn.

“The Empress. She told us her story that explained why the unicorns are afraid of her.”

“Didn’t I tell you that the Empress evolved into Strength?” asked the unicorn. Carly could tell this conversation was going nowhere. “Did I say something wrong?”

“Not at all,” said Carly. The unicorn snorted at her forced smile. “I’m sorry. Sometimes the rules of the unicorn wood are frustrating because I don’t always know what they are.”

“Such is life.” The Empress was dressed differently and instead of a dog, a lion accompanied her. “Anger and frustration can take you back to old experiences. Those negative feelings can also propel you forward like they did with me.”

“How?” asked Carly.

“Acceptance and forgiveness,” said Strength. “Moving forward helps you know who you are. For that I have you to thank.”

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Carly woke up thinking about anger, frustration, acceptance and forgiveness. She also thought about the tarot reading which led her to thinking about Eva. How could she accept Eva’s unwillingness to understand her? How could she forgive Eva for hurting her feelings?

For the next few days, Eva wouldn’t even talk to her. Carly wanted to talk to Strength or the unicorn about it, but her sleep was dreamless.

Carly didn’t like Eva very much, but she did miss her. She had other friends, but Eva had been her best friend. How can I fix this? She asked herself, determined to find a way back to Eva.

“Eva, we need to talk,” she said.

“I have nothing to say to you. Go walk on a balance beam or something. I have important things to do.” Carly was even more hurt. How could this keep happening? What was she supposed to do?

Carly told her mommy about what happened. “I’m so sorry, honey,” she said. “Either she’ll decide disagreement isn’t such a big deal or she won’t. Either way, you’ll be fine, promise.” Carly knew her mommy was right but that didn’t make her feel any better.

“Can we agree to disagree?” she asked Eva. Carly tried different ways of engaging Eva.

“No, we’re too different,” said Eva while walking away. Carly quietly cried during the rest of the day. She didn’t think anyone noticed even though her eyes were redder than usual.

“What happened?” asked her mommy. Carly couldn’t stop herself, feeling her breath catch while tears fell down her cheeks. “Eva still won’t talk to you?”

“I don’t think she ever will again,” hiccupped Carly.

“I’m so sorry.” Carly cried until she had nothing left, leaning into her mommy’s comforting embrace.



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Carly and the unicorn sat in silence for what felt like a long time.

"I lost my best friend," she finally said.

"Don't you hate it when that happens?" said the unicorn. Carly wanted to laugh but pouted instead. "Did you know we have a new Empress of the wood?"

"No," said Carly.

"She blames unicorns for her pain too. Why would she do that?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Yes, you would know," said the unicorn. "You'd know better than anyone.

"She needs your acceptance and forgiveness," said Carly without thinking.

"Why?"

"That's the only way she can move forward." Carly surprised herself with her own words. "Blame is dumb."

"Do you really believe that?"

"I try to believe that." Carly realized she had been blaming herself for what happened with Eva. It wasn't her nature to blame others for her failings. However, like she said herself – blame is dumb.

"Believe what?" A purple-haired Empress wandered into the grove followed by a small yapping dog.

"Pain can come from anger," said Carly. "Anger makes people do nasty things like blaming others for their pain." Carly was again surprised by her own words but felt the truth of them.

"How wise of you to say so," said the purple-haired Empress. "Thank you for helping me move forward." The Empress wandered back into the wood.

"That was fast," said the unicorn. "She hadn't even gotten around to blaming us unicorns for anything. Thank you."

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Carly woke up with a genuine smile on her face. She felt better than she had in days. She looked in the mirror. Other than puffy eyes, she looked like herself again.

"Eva, I've been very mad at you – we've been mad at each other," she said. "This needs to stop. Wait, are you okay?" Eva looked like she'd barely slept.

"The season is over," said Eva. "Not that you care." Carly thought about how she felt after preparing for and participating in a gymnastics meet. When her performance was done, even if she won, she felt an emptiness she couldn't explain.

"That must be hard," said Carly.

"It is."

“I’ve missed you,”

“Me too,” said Eva. “It’s just that we’re so different.”

“Only when it comes to what we do,” said Carly. “Otherwise, we’re a lot alike.”

“I guess,” Eva said. “I’m sorry I got so mean. I didn’t know what else to do.”

“Me neither,” said Carly. “We don’t have to be best friends, but we can still be friends.”

“You don’t want to be my best friend anymore?”

“Do you?”

“I do and I don’t,” said Eva.

“I do,” said Carly, “except for when I don’t.” This made them both laugh. Their laughter made them laugh harder. It had been too long since they’d laughed together.

“I’ve missed you too,” said Eva, giving her a big hug. Carly was surprised – Eva hated hugs – but welcomed her best friend’s touch.

Carly was so relieved and happy she couldn’t stop smiling. Like the Empress, she had moved forward. Same with Eva. Now their friendship would move forward too.