

Wish Upon a Unicorn



Vicki Blum

OLASTIC



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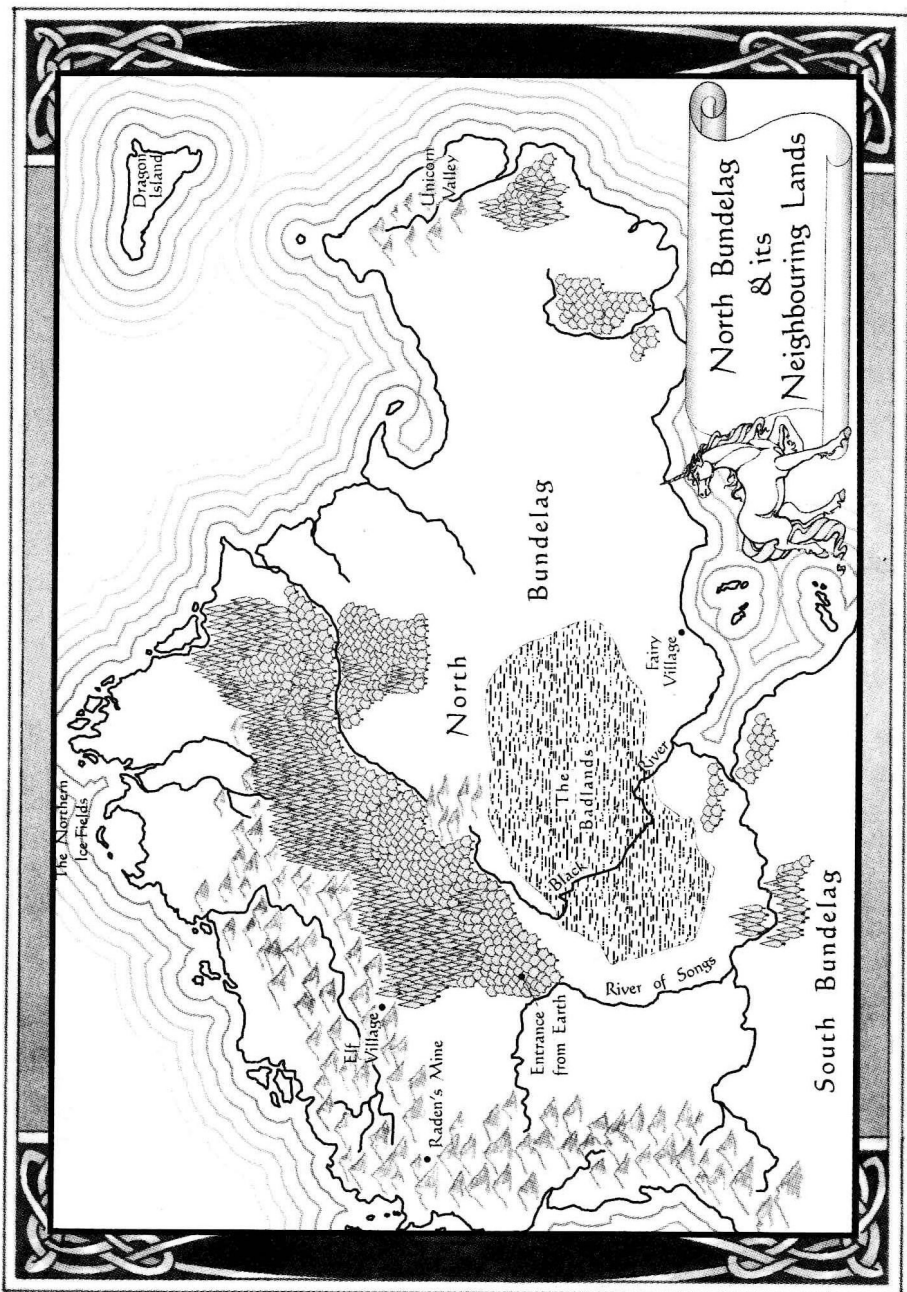
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*To the students and staff of
Good Shepherd School.*



. . . he hath as it were the strength of a unicorn.
Numbers 23:22





Chapter 1



Arica's troubles all began when she fell through the crack in her grandmother's kitchen floor.

Though Arica loved her very much, she knew her grandmother was not the usual kind. Grandmother kept lizards in her bathroom sink. Wild plants hung from her ceiling in bunches. Strange bottles stood in rows on her pantry shelf. A painted stick and a cloak hung in her front hallway. And she had cracks in her floor big enough to fall through.

Arica fell for a very long time. She didn't remember the cellar being quite so far down. But then she had always seen the cellar as a good place to stay out of. It was too dark, and had odd damp smells and

strange noises coming out of corners. The two times she had gone down, not very eagerly, were to get bottled peaches. But they weren't all the way in the back. They were kept close to the stairs because they were Grandmother's favourite and the reason for most trips to the cellar.

Arica landed with a thud on the hard, cold floor. The jolt rattled her teeth, took her breath entirely away and jarred every bone in her body. She lay where she fell, trying to gasp but not doing very well, and wondered how long it would take her to die from lack of air. Would it be long and painful, quick and easy, or somewhere in between?

That's when she noticed the trolls. Two of them had come out of nowhere and were standing over her. She wasn't sure how she knew what they were, since she'd never seen a troll in her life until this moment. But she could tell by their large, glowing red eyes; by their pale, warty skin; and, now that her breath was returning, by the terrible way they smelled. She tried to yell for help, but she was still too short on air to make a sound.

Not that it would have brought the help she needed, anyway. Grandmother was gone — this was the reason Arica was here watering plants in the first place. And the nearest neighbour was ninety-two years old.

"Ugly little thing, isn't she?" said one of the trolls.

He spoke in a language other than English, yet Arica understood every word.

"Yes," said the other, practically shuddering.

"But it's not her fault," the first admitted. "It's all that human blood running through her veins."

"Still, you have to agree she's frightful, even for a human," the second went on. "She has hair like a scrub mop and eyes with hardly any colour." He shivered. "She looks like a bundle of sticks put together with string. What do you want her for, anyway?"

"Never mind about that," said the first. "Pick her up and let's get going."

"I'll be worn out before we're halfway there," the second one whined. "I have a better idea. You take one end, I'll take the other."

At that point, Arica regained enough of her wits to start hitting and kicking for all she was worth. It didn't take her long to realize the trolls were much stronger and quicker than they looked. In a moment, a door in the farthest, darkest corner of the cellar opened with an eerie creak and Arica was plunged headlong into icy darkness.

By this time her breath had come back enough for her to begin to scream. But her opened mouth was quickly stuffed with an old, ratty handkerchief. Arica now found it so hard to breathe that she had to quit struggling or risk fainting dead away.

The trolls continued downward. It looked to Arica like they were taking her through some kind of long, underground tunnel.

She tried to remember if she'd ever heard Grandmother speak of her cellar, or what might lie under it, and came up with a blank. Well then, had her grandmother ever spoken of trolls? She couldn't recall any talk of them since she was a kid — and that had been only in stories.

Well, what about her parents? Father called Arica his "little princess" every now and then — mostly on birthdays. But that had nothing to do with trolls. (Besides, the title never really suited her, anyway. Princesses, at least the ones she'd heard of, didn't love sports, climbing trees and wearing faded blue jeans.)

And her mother? All Arica ever got from her were lectures on keeping her face and hands clean, being more tactful and getting her schoolwork done. Arica was absolutely, completely, bet-your-life-upon-it certain that her mother had never brought up the subject of trolls.

The tunnel ended suddenly. Arica and her captors spilled out at the base of a steep hill in the centre of a thickly wooded forest. Arica looked back, then stared in amazement as the cave opening blinked out of existence behind them, leaving only a blank wall of hill, trees and foliage.

She started to struggle anew and was rewarded with a sharp jab between the shoulder blades. By the time her back quit hurting, the ground had levelled off, and glimmers of light were beginning to peek through the darkness overhead. Soon the sky had grown bright enough for her to make out the branches of the surrounding trees and a pale sliver of moon.

A flock of birds drifted overhead, black blotches against the lightening sky. Their silhouettes sprinkled across the second moon's silver face.

The second moon? Arica looked back again, just to make sure. On one side of the sky was a slender arc of light; on the other a swollen, gleaming disk. Her heart thudded. No one she knew of had ever talked about a place with more than one moon.

Arica wished her father and mother had done a better job of warning her. They were good parents — she wasn't complaining about that. They often lectured her, with love and care, on not speaking to strangers and on getting home before dark. But when they had talked of all the dangers lying in wait for children who wandered off, they hadn't mentioned anything like this. They had led her to believe such places existed only in fairy tales!

The trolls dropped her so suddenly her face hit dirt. The rag was jarred from her mouth. She rolled, tasting mud and dead leaves. One of the trolls made

a grab for her leg and missed. She could hear the other one grumbling, somewhere above and behind her.

“Come here, you filthy beast,” the troll growled.

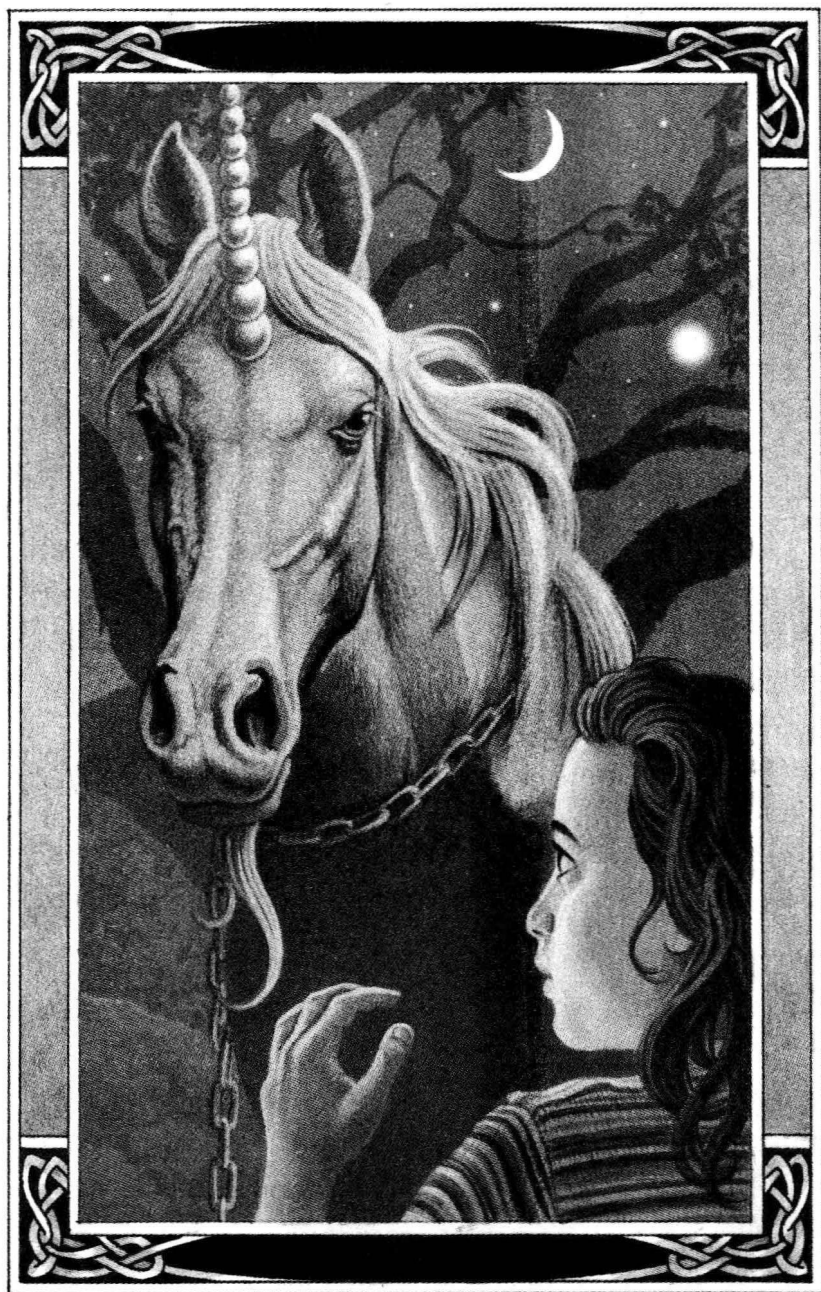
It took Arica a moment to realize the troll was not talking to her, but to someone or something else standing nearby. By the time she had figured this out and struggled to her knees for a better look, the troll had dragged the “filthy beast” close enough for her to see.

She stared up at the creature and gasped in dismay. A silver chain wound tightly around its neck, then ran down in a tangle through its mane and hung off one shoulder. The chain was so tight that in places the animal’s flesh was chafed and reddened.

The “beast” was actually a horse.

Arica had always loved horses more than anything in the world. She drew them, read stories about them, and pasted pictures of them in scrapbooks. She’d even had lessons at a real riding school. Then there were the two weeks she’d spent at her uncle’s ranch, chasing cows from one end of it to the other.

But Arica, in all her experience with horses, had never seen one so dazzlingly white in colour and so perfectly formed. Its mane and tail appeared not to hang but to float like silver clouds. Its legs were slender and shapely; its hooves were small and trim;



She stared up at the creature and gasped in dismay.

its fine neck was delicately arched.

Almost without thinking, Arica leaned toward the animal, reaching out with her hand. It turned its face toward her. The touch of its nose against her fingers was like an angel's kiss.

That's when she saw the horn.

It grew from the centre of the animal's forehead, like a stack of solid gold rings that started large and narrowed to a point. Then the unbelievable truth slowly dawned on Arica's groggy mind: this was what the storybooks called a unicorn.

Arica toppled backward in surprise, landing in a damp, slimy patch of forest moss. Before she could recover, a troll grabbed her by the shirt and yanked her upward. She twisted helplessly in his grasp. His harsh chuckles seemed to come from far away.

"Get over here and help me lift her," he growled to his companion. "We haven't got all night, you know!"

Arica felt herself being lifted high in the air, amid a series of groans and complaints from the trolls. The next moment, she was slung like a sack of prairie wheat over the unicorn's bare back. Lacking the strength to sit upright, she fell forward, her face burying itself in the animal's mane.

The trolls were now arguing about which direction to take, their words getting louder and angrier by the moment. Arica struggled to balance herself

between the unicorn's shoulder blades so that she wouldn't slither to the ground at its first step.

The shouting rose to a peak, then abruptly ended. The next moment one of the trolls, whether in rage at his fellow or simply out of spite, yanked fiercely on the silver chain.

Arica could never have been prepared for what happened next. Perhaps it was because she loved horses so much. Or perhaps it was because of the cruel treatment she and the unicorn were being forced to endure, or maybe it was something else entirely.

As the chain tightened, digging into the animal's flesh, Arica felt a stab of pain go through her. It was the unicorn's pain: like fire and ice, like needles and knives, like a jolt of pure electric power.

And then the ground rose up to meet her.



Chapter 2



Arica came to her senses face down in a patch of wild rose bushes. At first she thought it had all been a bad dream. She felt cold and painfully stiff in the joints — probably, she thought, from having fallen out of bed.

Then she felt the bush's thorns pierce her skin, and she opened her eyes to the sight of two hooves attached to the ends of some very horsey-looking legs. She shifted her gaze upward. Sure enough, there was a chest, body, head and — no, it couldn't be — a golden horn.

She struggled up through the tangle, her head spinning. The unicorn stood motionless, one large

brown eye fixed sadly upon her. She stared back, and felt a sudden urge to wrap her arms around its neck for whatever comfort and warmth she could get. She had an eerie feeling, from the way it looked at her, that this was the best friend she'd ever had — like she'd known the animal all her life. She shrugged the idea aside and turned warily toward the trolls.

The second moon was high overhead now and sent a splash of silver light down into the clearing where they stood. For the first time since she'd been taken, Arica was now able to get a good look at the trolls.

Troll One was the larger of the two, the one giving all the orders. He was about Arica's own height but at least twice as wide, with thick, heavy arms that dangled almost to his knees. Large red eyes, a beak-like, dirt-encrusted nose and a black-toothed slit of a mouth completed the distasteful picture. He was dressed like an eighteenth-century gentleman come upon hard times. He wore a tattered white shirt and a coat and breeches of blue satin, which might possibly have been clean at one time. His feet were large, hairy and bare.

Troll Two was smaller, dirtier and clad only in rags.

They were arguing again, about how to get Arica back up on the unicorn. Troll Two wanted to simply sling her aboard. Troll One's plan was to force the unicorn down on its knees.

Arica wasn't keen on any plan that might involve more pain for the unicorn. After managing to get up on two wobbly feet, she took one step toward the animal and toppled headfirst between its front legs. Troll Two's plan won out in the end, and Arica landed back on top of the unicorn with a heavy thump. The animal flinched. For the first time in her life, Arica felt glad that she was small and thin for her age.

She would have kicked the trolls in their ugly shins or stomped on their feet, right then and there, if she'd had the courage. She had never felt so helpless, not even when Ernie Elaschuk had pushed her and her new white sweater face-first into a mud puddle. But then Ernie Elaschuk was only an ordinary schoolyard bully. These trolls, she was beginning to discover, were playing a much more vicious game.

The sky was paling into dawn. Arica couldn't quite figure that one out. She'd only just fallen through her grandmother's kitchen floor, and it had been early evening then — hardly suppertime, as she recalled. Now, barely an hour later (by her guess), the moons were fading rapidly in a brightening sky.

Arica sighed and shrugged. After she figured out the unicorn, the two moons, the trolls (and why she understood everything the trolls said), she'd definitely look into this strange change in time.

It was now becoming easier to make sense of the direction they were taking. The trees had thinned