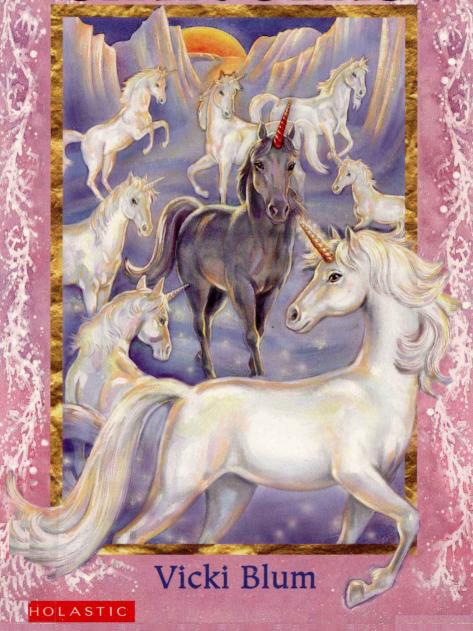
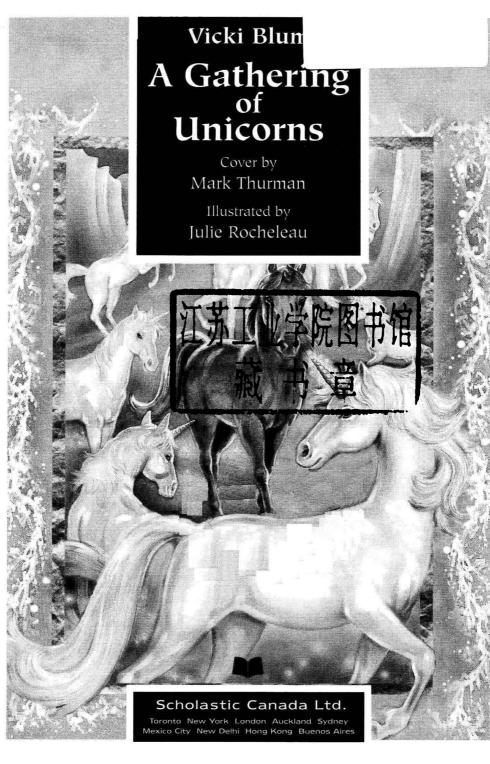
# A Gathering of Unicorns





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# Chapter 1

Arica looked up from her math test to see an elf standing in the classroom doorway.

It wasn't a pretty elf like the ones found in story-books — small and slender, with locks of cornsilk hair, delicate pointed ears, and dimpled cheeks. This elf had a thatch of brown hair that sprang out like the bristles of an old brush, huge floppy ears half-covered by an ugly hat, and a short, rain-barrel body. But that wasn't the worst of it. The poor thing was badly in need of a good scrubbing. His clothing was wrinkled and grimy, and a smear of half-dried mud ran from his brow to his chin.

She knew it was Nue right away. But that was

impossible. He was in Bundelag, where he had gone after helping to bring her kidnapped mother home. However, Arica had learned that when it came to the magical land of Bundelag, almost anything was possible — ever since she had fallen through the crack in her Grandmother's kitchen floor and ended up there herself. So this must be Nue — here to give her an important message. Convinced that this was the case, she leaped from her desk and rushed up the aisle.

"Arica!" her teacher's voice barked, bringing her skidding to a halt. "Where are you going?"

Arica stared helplessly at her teacher's frowning face and wondered how to explain why she had left her seat without permission. Lying was not an option, but she couldn't tell the truth either. And she had to keep everyone's attention away from the door. If her teacher or one of her classmates saw the elf, then what would she do?

"I . . . uh . . . I didn't mean . . . " she stammered helplessly, then risked a glance at the doorway.

The elf was gone. Arica blinked and rubbed her eyes, feeling relieved and confused at the same time. Maybe he had never been there in the first place. Maybe she had only imagined him. She had been more tired than usual lately — ever since her last trip to Bundelag and that long, gruelling journey to Dragon Island.

"I'm sorry," she said to her teacher. "I don't know what came over me."

As she slunk meekly back to her desk, she hoped she wasn't coming down with a fever, or some strange sickness that might make her see things that weren't really there. There were so many odd illnesses going around these days. But she didn't feel sick, only a little dizzy and confused. After a few minutes of staring at the numbers on the page, she managed to focus her thoughts on her test again. By lunchtime, she almost believed that she had made the whole thing up.

Then after school the elf turned up again. Arica was rounding the corner of the building to join her friends for a quick game of soccer when she bumped into her cousin, Connor, coming from the other direction.

"Oh, there you are!" he cried. "I've been looking all over for you. You'll never believe what's happening! Do you remember the elf, Nue? Of course you do! Well, somehow he's turned up here, and he's joined our soccer game — uninvited. He keeps stealing the ball. Thank goodness he's covered up his pointed ears. But sooner or later someone's going to knock his hat off and find out he's not human." He shivered, imagining the worst.

"Not if I can help it," said Arica, and she took off running.

Winter had come to Alberta, and with it a cold November wind that whipped her hair about her stinging face and snatched her breath away. Snow had fallen a few days ago and disappeared again, leaving behind a playing field of lumpy, half-frozen soil covered with dead brown grass. Soon the snow would return deeper than ever, so they had to play soccer while they still had the chance.

She arrived at the game just in time to see Nue kick the ball, sending it spinning wildly into the air. Three players dived after it, but somehow Nue got caught in the middle. They all went down in a heap of thrashing limbs while the ball sailed merrily away. Arica paused for a moment and shook her head. The poor elf was nearly as bad at sports as he was at riding Grandmother's stallions.

"Oh, wow," said Connor, thudding to a halt beside her. "It's too bad we can't let him stay and play on the other team. He would destroy their game plan in no time."

"That's just what I was thinking," Arica said with a giggle. "Come on, let's get him out of there."

The goalie had caught the ball and sent it hurtling back toward the centre of the field. Arica and Connor sprinted toward Nue. He ignored them and took off after it. Arica made a grab for his arm, but he just elbowed her out of the way and kept on going. Connor had a better plan. He stuck out his foot and tripped the elf in mid-flight, sending him sprawling onto the grass. A minute later they had him well away from the other kids, pinned up against the chain-link fence that separated the schoolyard from the street beyond.

"What do you think you're doing?" demanded Arica.

A stream of gibberish spilled from Nue's mouth. Arica frowned. Connor shook his head as if to clear his ears. Nue saw their confusion and tried talking louder and faster, which worked about as well as spinning tires on ice.

"Of course," Arica said. "It's beginning to make sense now."

"What makes sense?" asked Connor.

When Raden came to Arica's house to kidnap her mother, he had spoken to them in English — though with an unusual accent. It shouldn't have surprised her that her uncle had learned English, for if what he said was true, he had been to Earth many times.

But Nue had been here only once before, and he had stayed inside Grandmother's house the whole time. Grandmother would be furious that he was here again, unless she was the one who sent him. However, Arica doubted this was the case. There were quicker and easier ways of contacting her than sending a scatterbrained elf. In the past, Grandmother had relied on Arica's bond with the unicorns.

"We've got to take Nue to Grandmother's house right now," she explained. "That's where the magic begins. Without that magic, we're never going to understand him." And she headed off, dragging Nue along by the coat sleeve.

Thankfully, Nue decided to cooperate, and they made good time. On Grandmother's street, they paused at the crosswalk to check for cars, then dashed to the other side. A few moments later, they were at her front door. Arica grabbed the key from its hiding place beneath the potted plant and inserted it into the lock. She pushed the door open, yanked Nue inside by his collar, and had him pinned to the wall before Connor even had the door closed behind them.

"Talk fast, and you had better make it good!" she said through clenched teeth.

"I'm so sorry, brave Arica," Nue gabbled. "I meant no harm. I couldn't help myself. I love games. I went to your home just as the Fairy Queen would have wanted, but you weren't there. I searched until I found the place where you go to learn, but there were human children everywhere, and I could see that you were very busy. I was forced to wait outside for you, and while I was there, some of the human children began playing the most marvellous game. Before I knew it, I was running and chasing and kicking."

"Forget the soccer game," snapped Arica. "Why did you come here in the first place? Did Grandmother send you?"

Nue looked frightened, either because of her impatient tone or from something else, Arica couldn't tell. "Not exactly, brave Arica. Not precisely. But when I overheard your grandmother, the Fairy Queen, talking and saw her eyes grow large and her face turn as white as snow, I knew that she needed you in Bundelag, and I thought I could help. I borrowed one of her grey stallions and rode fast and hard. I didn't fail in my duty. Oh, no! I would never let her down!"

Getting useful information out of Nue was like pulling nails out of boards with your bare hands.

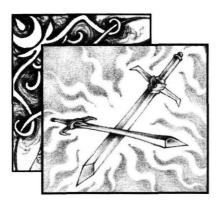
"What did you hear the Fairy Queen say?" Arica asked, resisting the urge to shake him till his teeth rattled.

"It is very bad — "

"WHAT is very bad?"

Nue stared at her gravely with his sad, green eyes. He cleared his throat and wrung his hands and cleared his throat again. His mouth opened. And then Arica heard it.

She'd been half expecting it and wasn't surprised at the tinkling of those tiny bells inside her head, sweet and soft and full of the kind of affection that only Wish could give. \*True Arica,\* came the unicorn's anxious plea. \*Come quickly. We need you. The Fairy Queen needs you. Bundelag is in terrible danger.\*



## Chapter 2

Arica let go of Nue so suddenly that he almost toppled to the floor. Beside her, Connor gasped in dismay. In the ensuing silence, the ticking of Grandmother's clock thundered like drumbeats in her ears.

Ironically, it was Nue who snapped Arica out of her shocked stupor, pushing past her and backing toward the kitchen. "It was the Fairy Queen's spies who brought her the terrible news," he blurted. "Very soon the humans of South Bundelag will invade our country with all the might of their great army, and we will certainly be overcome."

"Connor," Arica began, turning to her cousin. But



Arica felt that familiar out-of-control plunge through blackness . . .

he was already gone. A moment later he returned, carrying the backpack she always kept at Grandmother's house for emergencies along with the one he had recently stashed away for himself.

There was no more need for words as Arica took the pack and hoisted it onto her shoulders. Then she, Connor, and Nue hurried into the kitchen, joined their hands together, and stepped onto the crack that was the doorway to another world. Arica felt that familiar out-ofcontrol plunge through blackness, followed by the jolt of pain as they landed on the concrete floor. They scrambled to their feet, hurried

through the cellar door, and dashed down the long, dark tunnel that led to North Bundelag.

They broke out into a silver wonderland of freshly fallen snow and stood blinking while snowflakes settled at their feet and tiny birds twittered in the treetops above. When their eyes finally adjusted to the brightness, Arica glanced around and decided it must be nearly noontime here, for a lukewarm sun hung high in the sky overhead. Nearby, a grey horse pawed at a snowbank, searching for its lunch. Arica hardly had time to conclude that this must be the stallion Nue had "borrowed" from Grandmother, when the thud of hooves on frozen ground and the crackle of brittle branches filled her ears.

The next moment, the trees in front of them parted, and Arica's grandmother, the Fairy Queen of North Bundelag, burst into view astride her second grey stallion. Arica's dear friend, Wish the unicorn, followed closely behind. Wish's father, Light, the enormous silver unicorn Arica had befriended on her first visit here and the leader of his kind, was the last to appear.

Arica's cry of joy at seeing them all again was choked off when she saw Grandmother's grim face.

Grandmother started by thanking them for coming to Bundelag so quickly. Then she turned to Nue, and her eyebrows lowered ominously.

"You took my stallion and went to Earth without

my permission," she said in a voice that sent shivers down Arica's spine. "I realize you meant well, but that's no excuse. Think of the damage you could have done! If you ever pull a stunt like that again, I'll chain you to your own bedpost. Do you understand?"

Arica felt sorry for Nue as he stood and stared miserably at his shoes, but she was certain he wouldn't make that same mistake again. She had taken the brunt of Grandmother's anger a few times herself, and it wasn't a fun experience.

"I understand," he mumbled into his collar.

That seemed to satisfy Grandmother, for she let the matter drop. "As you know," she continued, speaking now to all of them, "I have a network of spies in South Bundelag. We've known for a long time that they were planning a major assault, but we didn't know how or when. Now we do. Their army is so large that the small bridges spanning the River of Songs would have slowed them down. But the river is frozen now, and they are coming. The information my elves have gathered is that the humans will invade North Bundelag eight days from today at dawn."

The breath rushed out of Arica, as if someone had just kicked her in the stomach with a boot. The long-awaited time had come. Grandmother wasn't talking about skirmishes or small battles any longer, but about a full-scale invasion.

"We know where they plan to cross, and be assured that we'll be ready and waiting," she continued. "And we have more force on our side than they know. Arica, because of their friendship with you, the ogres have made a treaty with us. Yet, although they are brave and loyal to us and to our cause, I fear it still won't be enough. That's why I want you and Connor to take Wish and Light north to troll country and ask the trolls to join us."

Arica looked over to Connor to gauge his reaction, and saw his face whiten with alarm. She couldn't see her own, but she was sure it matched his.

"Why us?" she asked, trying to hide her shiver of apprehension from Grandmother. "Wouldn't the trolls respond better to you?"

Grandmother shook her head. "I have no time to spare, and besides, you've had a lot of experience dealing with them."

Arica opened her mouth to protest that none of that experience had been good, but then Light's gentle, worried voice spoke deep inside her mind.

\*True One,\* he said. \*For hundreds of years, a prophecy has been told among our kind. It says the True One will come, and in our darkest hour she will save us from destruction.\*

Arica swallowed the lump of anxiety that swelled suddenly in her throat. How could she fulfill such a destiny? How would she ever accomplish such a task? She had once told Light that she was small and not very brave. In the face of such grave danger she felt even smaller and more frightened than she had ever felt before. She saw Grandmother's firm but worried face, and Connor's willingness in spite of his fear, and as she looked into Wish's noble, trusting eyes, she knew that she had to try. Her own father, the rightful heir to the throne of North Bundelag, had recently told her that whatever he was meant to do, he believed she would do it for him. All she could do was her best and hope it was enough.

She squared her shoulders with a courage she didn't yet feel, and turned toward Grandmother.

"I won't let you down," she said, as Grandmother's strong arms pulled her close. She would have to remember this moment in the difficult days to come — this feeling of love and safety that only Grandmother could give. Stepping back reluctantly from the embrace, she wished that things weren't happening quite so quickly. She still felt a little breathless and carried away by it all.

"Good luck to you both," Grandmother said. "I'll meet you at the Fairy Village five days from now."

Grandmother gave Connor a hug as well, for although he wasn't her grandson, she had always treated him like part of the family. Then she handed him a leather bag that Arica assumed must contain additional food and clothing for their journey.