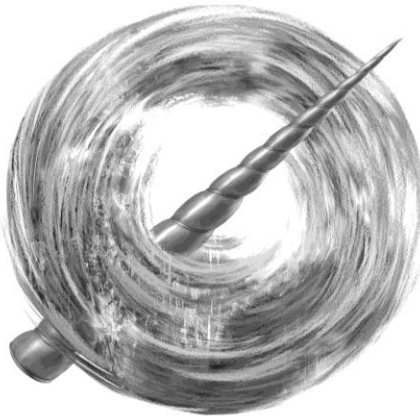


This is a Reading Sample of
"Journey To Osm -
The Blue Unicorn's Tale".
Enjoy!

*Journey
to
Osm*



The Blue Unicorn's Tale
Sybrina
Durant

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Prologue

No Metal. . .No Magic

The entire tribe stood gathered in anticipation of his birth. Not so long ago, they would have been shoulder-to-shoulder, hoof-to-hoof at such a gathering, but their numbers had dwindled.

Bunched together in the Halstable courtyard, every member of the tribe squinted toward a closed door and waited. On the other side, Miral labored to deliver her baby.

The Oracle had foretold this day, but her vision lacked details, so the Metal Horn Tribe of Unicorns were filled with many unanswered questions.

What powerful magic would this foal's horn possess?

Which metal would define his essence?

When would this tiny new unicorn free them?

Would he enter the world with the power to rid them of the evil that hunted them?

Or—would they be forced to suffer for a while yet before the prophecy was fulfilled?

What was taking so long in the birthing room?

Finally, the door opened.

For a few seconds no one could see into the darkened entrance. Dust motes floated in the spectrum of light contrasting against the dim interior. Bits of straw tumbled out into the light.

Something stirred in the shadows.

Then, a tiny unicorn stepped forward on shaky legs. Behind him, his dam nuzzled the foal forward with her soft, velvety snout.

Blue. His body was dull blue, but no one focused on the color of his coat for long because something else was gravely wrong.

There, on his head. . .no metal. Only a small, ugly lump of what looked like. . .hide. It was not even a true horn as of yet.

Of course, all unicorns were born with dull, rounded horns to prevent damage to the mother, but this foal's horn appeared far more stumpy and much more odd than any the tribe had ever seen.

Disappointment rippled through the group as a dull hum of gasps and groans. Slowly, the tangle of mutters resolved into exclamations of disbelief.

"No metal. . .no magic." Only whispers at first. Then shouts: "No metal? No magic!"

The Oracle held up an aluminum hoof to silence the crowd. A hush fell upon them, until one lone, pitiful voice rang out, "We're doomed."

That set off the crowd in yet another round of frenzied outcries.

"No metal, no magic!"

"That thing doesn't even look like a real horn!"

"Look at his hooves. They have no metal either!"

The foal shrunk back, hiding beneath his mother's belly.

Never before, had a metal-less unicorn been born to the

tribe. The foal's own mother, Miral, displayed a stunning horn of a shiny metal called indium, which gleamed as bright and pure as a looking glass. Any unicorn, who peered into its mirrored surface, saw their own image reflected in its soft, silvery veneer.

The magic of Miral's indium horn also allowed her to look straight into another's soul. Her heart ached for her child, for she knew the unforgiving world in which they lived. Without magic, life would be tough for any unicorn, although life had been plenty tough for them all since Magh rose to power and turned MarBryn into a frightening land.

Alumna, the unicorn Oracle, squinted at the tiny newborn. Her vision had foretold his birth and, yes, she had expected a stronger foal, but who was she to question the Moon-Star Spirit? Their savior looked very frail indeed, and in this moment, she had a hard time believing he would ever be anything but weak. However, as the Oracle, she must not let the tribe lose hope because hope was all the Metal Horns had left.

The wise Oracle felt sick at the injustice. This pitiful little thing would forever, be saddled with the disappointment of this day. So much hope had been placed on his small mundane shoulders, and now the entire tribe was ready to collapse under that heavy burden.

All around the Halstable courtyard she heard the mutters of condemnation ... condemnation of ... this little blue foal ... of the prophecy borne of her own magic.

"He's too small, too weak!"

"The prophecy lied!"

"The Oracle was wrong!"

The Oracle wanted to calm down the herd. These ugly comments were not dignified and in no way befitting a unicorn's

good nature. She understood they were scared, and as a result, they were now both giving up hope and giving in to their fears. Nevertheless, this unnatural meanness had to stop.

Unicorns were never mean, but of course, the dark pall Magh had cast upon this land was changing the nature of all things in MarBryn. . .even unicorns.

Still, she would be compassionate, even if the others refused. The rose-colored Oracle called to the baby's mother loudly enough for the whole tribe to hear, "Miral, please forgive us on this most difficult day! If the Moon Star Spirit says he will grow to be a strong stallion, you must believe. We must all believe."

The sorrowful new mother raised her tearful eyes. "Do you really think so, Alumna?" The anguished unicorn's voice rose and fell as she wrestled with her despair in a battle that would not be won that day.

Alumna saw how much Miral wanted her words to be true. She desperately wanted to agree, but before she could find the words, another voice called out.

"No one believes this blue runt will save us! No one."

Tears fell from Miral's eyes as she bowed her head to nuzzle her foal.

"Enough!" Nix, a nickel-horned unicorn whom everyone in the tribe respected, stepped between the crowd and the mother and son. "No one here knows what the future holds," his eyes locked on Alumna's, "but, for better or worse, we must stick together. Savior or not, this foal is now one of us."

Alumna did not know if she should thank him or be offended, but at least the furor of disappointment had dimmed. She went to Miral and leaned forward to gently touch the tip of her horn to her friend's in a gesture of solidarity. Then, she did the same with the

tiny nub of the little blue foal. In that instant, she caught the vision of silvery blue moonlight cascading down through the clear dome of the Halstable. In that flickering image, she saw a magnificent blue stallion with a brilliant horn, aglow with powerful magic.

Hope rose within her once again, but the image faded and the sight of the disfigured little lump of the foal's plain hide horn reminded Alumna that, this was not the first vision she had gotten tragically wrong.

Chapter One

The Bravest Coward

*H*is dull blue coat blended with the dark shadows brought on by nightfall, giving him plenty of cover for his escape. Sneaking out of the Halstable was perhaps his single greatest skill, but then again no one save Ghel cared much about what he did. The tribe had long since given up on him as their savior.

In the two decades since his birth, Blue's horn had grown and was now as pronounced as any unicorn's, but the plainness of it marked him as an outcast. *No metal, no magic.*

That mantra echoed through Blue's mind every single day, although only one member of the tribe had spoken those words to him in recent years. Still, that truth permeated the air and thumped through Blue's body to the same rhythm as his heartbeat.

No metal, no magic.

These four words were why he snuck away from the tribe so often. He could not change the fact that his horn remained a tusk of hard, twisted hide. Not really bone, but certainly not metal, either. He had very little feeling or sensation in the appendage, and he certainly had no trace of magic. He knew because he had tried everything in the world to conjure something, anything, from his horn.

Tried and failed.

Blue failed at most endeavors, except for sneaking out. He was undoubtedly the best of the tribe at that. No one else dared stray far from the Halstable. The once proud herd now ranged only to the grove of trees near the watering hole and back. Even then, the unicorns were often forced to hurry back to the Halstable in order

to escape the roving enemies Magh sent out in search of them. It was a sad state for a species that once roamed freely.

Save for a few protected spots, the entire land of MarBryn had become far too dangerous for unicorns, or any of the other free beings. Evil lurked behind every tree, bush, and rock, and the story of the last unicorn death haunted them all.

Even eight some odd years later, grass still did not grow at the ghastly battle site. Of course, only Blue knew this last fact since tribal decree forbade any unicorn to venture so far.

Half an hour into his journey, Blue again came to the very spot of the metal-horned tribe's last stand against Magh. Just over the ridge he would find another adversary and they, too, would wage battle on this moonless night. But first, the unicorn paused to pay his respects to the memory of all his fallen ancestors who had been killed and mutilated by the vile sorcerer, for no other reason than so the evil mage could claim their magic for himself.

Blue looked first to the barren earth that served as a testament to the unspeakable evil that had occurred there, and then he gazed upward at the stars.

His fate had been written, and while even he had a hard time believing the prophecy, he would forever be duty bound to try to fulfill the vision for himself, and for the remaining Metal Horns.

With a resigned breath he trudged onward to the waiting battle, even though he would surely fail, just like most of his endeavors.

He had no more than crested the hill when the charge came. A big, no. . . a giant—stag sideswiped Blue, sending him crashing to the ground. The air left his lungs in a rush and that was all the advantage the brute needed. Wheeling around, the stag jabbed the tine of a very sharp antler against Blue's jugular.

The battle was over before it even started.

“I thought you wanted to spar,” Gaiso said. “That was an even worse start than last time!”

Once again, Blue had not delivered. He had no real excuse to offer his fighting mentor, but even if he had words, they would have been difficult to say aloud with that antler pressed so firmly against his throat.

The stag took a step back. “Get up. We shall go again, but this time I will not be so easy on you.”

Hours later, Blue limped away from their secret meeting place out on the plains. Bruised, battered, and exhausted, he didn’t even slow down at the barren patch of darkness as he trudged back toward home.

Stiff and sore after the grueling workout, he made such slow time that the sun rose before the Halstable came into view. He did not want to face the wrath of the tribe for sneaking out, so he angled off toward the stand of trees that circled the herd’s watering hole. He knew of a nice shady spot where he could bed down and rest both his weary mind and his battle-ravaged body.

Gaiso never took it easy on him, but Blue knew the stag held back. In a real fight, those massive antlers would finish him off easily enough. However, little by little and week by week, Blue felt himself getting both stronger and more responsive during their sparring matches. He was learning to fight. But would it be enough when confronted with the worst of Magh’s army?

That, was a question Blue could not answer. So, he laid down and closed his eyes, grateful for the whispering winds, which sailed through the trees. A cool breeze dried the sweat from his coat and ruffled his mane.

He slept for a time, until sounds broke through his dreamless slumber. Blue lay still on the cool ground beneath a densely leaved Jughead bush and listened. Voices carried on the flower-scented breeze.

Familiar voices.

I've got to get out of here before they see me! He cast his eyes from side to side without moving his head. Escaping undetected seemed unlikely, but maybe he would get lucky, and they would not linger at this spot for long.

Lying as still as he could, Blue next heard a different kind of noise.

“Ree-arrl...”

The nerve-jangling sound whistled across his nose, leaving a scent in its wake. . .like honey and fear all blended into one.

“Aarrl...”

The sound whizzed past his left ear, cutting through both his fatigue and his desire to keep quiet.

Blue wrenched his head away, trying to escape the noise and, more importantly—the angry little creature responsible for the sound. He shuddered as his mind threw back in time to memories of tortured lungs and desperate gasps for breath. . .to painful welts and an almost out-of-body experience that felt like giant scabrous hands pushing his unresponsive body deeper and deeper into darkness.

When the sound circled around directly in front of him, Blue froze in place and went slightly cross-eyed as he stared into the face of the Buzzy-Biter, hovering just inches from his nose. Instinctively, he leaned his head back while avoiding making any sudden move that might startle the stinging little thing.

Years had passed since his last encounter, because Blue gave the mean little bugs a wide berth. One allergic reaction had been enough to make him wary. This particular bug seemed outraged beyond the norm. From the shaking of what appeared to be tiny, little fists—to the trembling of its antennae, Blue could tell the creature was yelling at him, but he could not understand a single word of the buzzy language.

Still, he whispered back, “Are you talking to me?”

The black and yellow bug vibrated with a low, angry drone and high-pitched buzz. Blue’s spine tingled as the hairs up and down its length rose and trembled. The prick of the Buzzy-Biter’s sharp stinger would burn like fire, and then the anaphylactic shock would take hold.

Blue was on the verge of bursting from his hiding spot when the bug surprisingly went silent. With a final shake of its fist, it buzzed off, leaving a curlicue trail of golden pollen specks shimmering in the sunlight.

Blue sneezed, then, froze again, realizing he still was not alone at the watering hole. A vibrant singsong of “Toodle-loodle-loo” drifted his way.

Next, a high-pitched squeal and exclamation of, “Ooh, that pond scum is thick today!”

There was no need to peek out through the leaves. He knew these voices, but he peeped through anyway. Using his right hoof, he pushed the sunshine-colored flowers away from his right eye. The branch immediately swung back into place, forcing him to move his head over a notch so that he could see out.

From his vantage point behind the bush, he could spy on the small clearing where a few unicorns from his tribe had gathered.

Silubhra, the silver-horned unicorn crooner, stood next to that lime-green buffoon Cornum. Sour in both appearance and attitude, Cornum looked particularly ridiculous today. Lemons and limes dangled from his mane, making him into a galloping fruit stand.

Blue struggled not to laugh out-loud, as Cornum pawed at the attached fruit. Style, the steel-horned unicorn, was always whipping up crazy mane-dos for the tribe. Being all but invisible to the herd, Blue had never been a beneficiary of her magic, and he fervently hoped he never would be, after seeing what she had done to Cornum.

A dark green filly stepped up closer to the water. Shaking her head like a judgmental schoolmarm, she gazed at the dirty pool of water before saying aloud, "Cleaning up this mess may take some extra work."

Beyond the pool, other members of his tribe ambled about. *Oh great*, Blue thought. *The gang's all here.*

That was an exaggeration. Not everyone was there, but Blue was cranky and sore after his night of sparring, not to mention his encounter with the Buzzy-Biter. Now, his nice quiet napping spot had been invaded and he did not feel very sociable.

Not that he ever socialized with most members of the tribe, anyway. He was an outcast, the only unicorn in the land without a metal horn. A fact Cornum loved to point out in subtle ways at every opportune moment, but Blue did not give him, or anyone else many such moments.

This little grove of trees and the watering hole provided the only outside escape for the Metal Horns. Being close to the Halstable, the trees offered a safe enough place to get some fresh air and enjoy nature's beauty. That, could not be said for the rest of MarBryn and even here, there were dangers, which was why the herd only ventured out a couple of times each month.

There was a big open area near the pond in the center of the grove. Thick hedges of heavily perfumed Jughead bushes in full flower bordered the dense outer ring of trees. The cool, sweet-scented shade underneath the bushes provided the perfect place for Blue to nap and hide, so he came here far more often than the others. Of course, he also ventured out on his own to places they would never risk. Still, he did not consider himself more brave than any of them—only more desperate.

If he truly were brave, Blue would come out of hiding now, but he did not want to face his tribe, and with only one way out, he couldn't escape without waltzing right out in front of those present.

Guess I'll be here awhile. Blue pouted, wishing he were anywhere else besides stuck there, hiding in the bushes.

He watched Nix, the nickel-horned unicorn. Everyone knew of his bravery. The unicorns loved to retell the stories of Nix's prowess, and even beyond the Halstable Blue had come across more than one creature who asked if the tales about Nix were true. He and his nickel horn were the stuff of legend all throughout MarBryn.

Nix watched over all of the Metal Horns with his sixth sense for danger. In these uncertain times, his magical ability, both to anticipate trouble and protect the others once it hit, made him indispensable. One blast from his horn could send a culprit with ill intent to an untimely end. As defender of the tribe, the brave thunder-gray unicorn had spent his entire life rushing headlong into danger to protect his fellow unicorns, but the safety of Nix's stable-mate, Silubhra, remained his primary concern. If she ventured outside the Halstable, the great unicorn defender could always be found at her side.

Blue longed to have a magical metal horn like the nickel-horned unicorn, but he was stuck with his ugly plain blue hide-covered horn.

The sun gleamed off Silubhra's silver horn as she warmed up her vocal cords, "La-la-la-la-la-la-lah!"

Blue leaned closer. He loved to listen to her sing. When he moved, one of the little pitcher-shaped flowers of the Jughead bush emptied its contents onto his backside. He tried to brush off the nectar with his tail, but the hairs that touched it stuck to the sweet, sticky stuff, so he left it alone.

Beyond the silver-horned singer, Blue saw Cuprum, the plump, moss green unicorn, dip her copper-horn into the slimy, stagnant pond. The murky water slowly churned and turned crystal clear before his eyes.

Blue smiled. He never tired of seeing that trick. Cuprum's horn allowed her to freshen their water supplies. No matter if it was too salty or too dirty, Cuprum had the ability to decontaminate and distill it into pure, clean water.

Watching the copper-horned unicorn perform her magic, he wished he could get some of the water to wash off the gooey juice. At the thought of water, he swallowed hard and realized just how dry his throat had become.

Thirsty from the vigorous sparring session, he badly wanted to walk right out and get a drink, but a nice refreshing slurp would have to wait, just like always.

He was an outsider. Even here, surrounded by his own tribe.

Chapter Two

It's All In The Horn

*"T*oodle-loodle-loo, toodle-loodle-loo."

The musical sounds floated merrily along to Blue, scrunched down on his belly under the dense hedgerow. Silubhra set the pitch so Cornum, the brass-horned unicorn, could tune his horn.

Unlike other unicorn spires, his ended in a flared bell shape, just like a trumpet. Cornum's magic allowed him to express a wide variety of musical sounds reminiscent of most any wind instrument. And windy he was. Cornum puffed out a lot of hot air whether he happened to be playing music or not.

Sometimes, his horn sounded like a sweet piccolo or an ethereal flute. Others, it emanated the sounds of a bright, metallic bugle or a velvety saxophone. When he felt mellow, his horn could easily produce the low, ponderous tones of a bass tuba, but when upset, Cornum's horn shrilled and screeched and whistled completely out of tune. Given how easily Cornum's fragile sensibilities were disturbed, the other unicorns were assaulted with those sounds quite often.

Be that as it may, Blue enjoyed listening to the duo as they rehearsed. Not that they needed practice. . .they'd performed these songs so many times; they were pitch perfect.

Silubhra, "Silver Tongue", as she was also known, sang along with Cornum's trumpeting accompaniment. In a persuasive lilting soprano, she serenaded the rest of the group,

"In the Friendship Circle,

*we gather in peace.
Red, yellow, green or purple;
north, west, south or east . . ."*

Her voice normally had the power to command anyone's attention, but this time the words of her song faded into the background of Blue's thoughts as he wished for the millionth time that he, too, had a metal-horn and a magical power. Being born without either made him feel like such a failure.

Any color is welcome in the friendship circle. . .except blue. No metal. . .no magic. Even Cornum has magic.

Blue cringed at the thought of spouting off the brash notes that sometimes erupted involuntarily from the brassy unicorn's horn, but ridiculous as he could be, Cornum at least belonged.

As he played, the lemons and limes attached to his mane swayed and bobbed in time to the music.

Okay, so maybe I don't envy Cornum quite as much as I do the others.

Cornum hit a note as sour as the adornments attached to his mane, and just like that, Silubhra stopped singing.

Cornum pranced around as if unaware he had ruined the song. As usual, he nodded his head in time to the beat. The movements caused his elaborately styled yellow-green shaded mane-do to bounce all about.

His mane could not hold all of the fruit in place, not even with Style, the steel-horned unicorn's magical assistance. Two lemons shook loose, falling to the ground.

Blue watched them roll in different directions and barely stifled a laugh. When he looked back up at Cornum, the two displaced lemons had been magically replaced by two more.

“Blat-t-t-t-t.” trumpeted the distracted unicorn’s brass horn. Cornum shook his head back and forth like he’d gone mad. That sent a couple more lemons and limes flying.

“Toodle-loodle-loot?” Silubhra tried to jump back in, but their timing was all off and the song abruptly ended on an odd note as a flying lime barely missed her nose.

Her silvery-white coat colored a bright shade of pink at the near miss. She again turned toward Cornum as if to speak, but this time he was engaged in a battle with the fruit. Biting at it, he twirled in circles like a dog chasing its tail.

Over by the pond, copper-horned Cuprum shook her head at the scene and said to her stable-mate Tinam, “If he weren't such a dandy, he wouldn't find himself in such predicaments.”

“Too true.” The tin-horned unicorn replied with a laugh before bending to help her fill another canteen with fresh water.

The blue unicorn squirmed around behind his bush, trying to keep himself from laughing out loud. Cornum looked so undignified, scrambling around trying to retrieve the fallen fruit, only to have it vanish from the ground and reappear in his mane-do.

Blue noticed Silubhra’s ear swivel in his direction, and quickly choked back his laughter. He did not want to attract anyone’s attention his way, but a whinnying laugh had slipped out.

A succession of rude sounds erupted from the brass-horned unicorn. . . “Bwamp, breeep, deedle-leeet!”

Again, Blue snickered.

“Ahem,” Silubhra said, peering at Blue through the bushes.

He jerked his head up in the direction of her voice, feeling a

nip of embarrassment at being caught by the lovely creature. Where she stood, he could only see her head and silvery mane. Twigs of pure white baby's breath were woven through her long tresses, along with miniature posies of sunny daffodils and violet-colored beautyberries to add bright splashes of color.

The silver-horned unicorn regarded him with one arched brow. Her other eyelid was squinched shut, like the compressed bellows of an accordion. That curious expression seemed out of place on her otherwise flawless face.

She spoke in a whisper. "Blue, if you want to hear our music, you should come out to join us."

Blue's eyes widened. That idea made him feel particularly cranky. "I doubt Cornum feels the same way," he said.

Probably, many more than just Cornum felt that way. None of the others made any effort to include Blue in their activities, but he could not blame it all on them. Most of the unicorns had stopped asking after he had refused their offers so many times.

The dainty little mare angled her head around to catch a glimpse of Cornum from the corner of her eye. The brass-horned unicorn pounded the ground in frustration with both front hooves, causing another piece of fruit to jiggle loose and fall. No matter how many fell, they were immediately replaced.

"Yes," she admitted hesitantly. "He can be brash and brassy, but he does love an audience. Besides," sunlight flashed on her diamond-encrusted horn and the hair of her coat bristled as she turned back to challenge Blue, "You don't make it easy for any of us, avoiding the tribe and singling yourself out the way you do."

The forlorn blue unicorn lowered his head, refusing to meet her eye. He had always known the tribe barely tolerated his presence among them, and here was Silubhra pointing out his failings as a member of the herd.

“No metal. . . no magic,” was all he could think to say. He did not add his failure to be the savior the tribe had hoped for. He didn’t have to.

Concern flickered in Silubhra's eyes as she admonished, “When you start thinking more highly of yourself, the other unicorns will too. No matter what you think, metal horn or not, no one holds your lack of magic against you . . . except for you.”

Before Blue could respond, Cornum called out in a fussy tone, “Silubhra, are we going to finish this song or not?”

Blue's sad eyes met Silubhra's gaze. Her look of compassion made it hard to keep his voice level. “You should go before he comes nosing around here,” he insisted with a touch of pleading.

She was about to reply, but instead sucked in her breath as Cornum approached.

“Just what are you up to over there, anyway? Is our savior hiding in the bushes again?” he asked, his voice going up a scale.

Blood flooded Blue’s face, momentarily flushing it purple.

Rebuttals flew through his brain. *I won't take this from him! I'll fight back! I'll tell him I'd rather have no magic than something so stupid as a trumpet horn!* But instead, Blue shrank backward in an effort to be invisible.

Cornum tried to nudge in beside Silubhra to confirm his suspicions.

“There’s no cause for that kind of talk,” she admonished and in an act of kindness toward the despondent unicorn hiding in the bushes, she swung her derriere around to switch her tail right in the cheeky green stallion’s nose. The action was enough to turn Cornum away from Blue’s hiding spot.

“Have you finally given up trying to get rid of that fruit?” She swung her head around, nudging the flustered brass-horned unicorn back toward the clearing. “You know I can’t concentrate when your fluting is off key.”

Blue sighed, relieved that his secret location would remain safe a little longer.

As Silubhra guided the citrus decorated unicorn back to the center of the group, Cornum shook his head and another lemon fell to the ground. He stamped around it like a dancing donkey, finally skimming the side of it with his back hoof. It rolled in slow motion across the ground toward Blue’s bush.

Blue prepared himself for the worst, in case Cornum came looking for his piece of fruit, but instead, the lime-green unicorn slipped into a full-blown temper tantrum, jumping and bucking and braying his horn until the entire group stopped their various activities to shout in unison, “Cornum, stop that!”

The brass-horned unicorn swung around so fast that two more lemons and at least three limes fell from his mane-do. Red rage turned his chartreuse hide an awful shade of puce.

Nix had had just about enough of Cornum’s antics. “I’ll nix that fruit,” the dark grey unicorn declared.

He sent a magic lightning bolt toward the lemon heading across the ground for Blue’s bush. With a satisfied snort, he blasted it to smithereens, but some sort of backlash ricocheted the charge straight back at the grey defender. Then, in the instant before the blast could harm him or any of the other unicorns, it imploded in a blaze of light, leaving behind a cloud of dark smoke.

“What the heck was that?” Nix demanded of no one in particular. His attention was riveted to flakey bits of citrus peel drifting lazily back to the ground through the smoke.

Shaking his head from side to side, the unicorn defender said, "I've never had that happen!"

The forward blast from Nix's horn charred a few leaves, and blew a heated, acrid wind toward Blue's face. He had squeezed his eyes shut and tucked his chin into his chest, anticipating a horrific burn, but not one bit of heat reached him. Something had repelled Nix's lethal lightning and sent it careening back toward the tribe.

Blue was completely unharmed, although, the top of his face was somewhat blackened and the tip of his horn tingled. He was so shaken that he did not take the time to think about the fact that this was the very first time he had ever felt any sensation in his horn.

Chapter Three

The Outsider

The group of unicorns lingered around the watering hole. They chatted excitedly about Nix's wayward blast but, were talking over each other so that Blue could not discern any of their actual words. All the voices meshed and blended into one cacophonous noise.

He eased to another vantage point, since a raggedy hole now exposed his previous hiding spot, and because he wondered if any of them had an explanation for the backlash and explosion. He did his best to be quiet, even though no one was listening for any sound from him. The attention of the tribe was split between the bewildered Nix, and Cornum, who was still fighting the fruit in his mane.

Style, the purple unicorn responsible for the wayward citrus attached to Cornum, watched his clownish activity with a smirk that Blue could not quite read. Was she angry, annoyed, or silently satisfied at her stable-mate's irritation?

She wore stylish striped leggings with alternating bands of fuchsia and carnation pink. Stepping forward, she declared, "Enough of that. I'll take care of that unruly 'do."

Looking Cornum up and down, she complained, "The way you're always prancing around, I knew it wouldn't stay put. I should've known to juice up this mane-do magic."

Truth be told, Style sometimes let her anger get the best of her. If she were less stubborn, she would have come up with a simpler mane-style at this point, but even from his distant vantage point, Blue could tell by the determined look on her face that Cornum would not be ridding himself of his fruity-do anytime soon.

She primped with the teased pouf of her mane for a moment. Then, she performed the tricky task of adjusting her leggings. She pulled the ones on her front legs taut with her teeth. Those on her back legs required a more acrobatic approach. Standing on three legs, she reached around with the cloven hoof of her right front leg to pull her right back legging up tight. She then performed the same maneuver on the other side. Being double jointed, all unicorns could move like that.

When she was finally done fidgeting and adjusting, she heaved a tortured sigh and tapped Cornum's head with her steel horn. The purple amethysts embedded in her horn sparkled as each citrus fruit fastened even tighter to Cornum's scalp.

"That fruit will not fall out again," she huffed and Blue thought he heard a stifled whimper escape Cornum but, given the distance, he could not be certain.

The one lemon that Nix had blown to pieces was not replaced. A barren patch where it had been was now in Cornum's mane, though no one dared to point out this fact, probably for fear that Style would twist something into their own locks.

Blue looked at the remnants of the fruit spread all over the ground. Plump little fluid sacs glistened in the sun. The essential oils released from the bruised, leathery rind lent a citrine freshness to the air, making Blue's stomach rumble at the memory of one of Tinam's Key Lime Pies. The unicorn chef could conjure up most any type of foodstuff, but he specialized in desserts.

Cornum bent his knee, raising a front hoof to pat a lemon secured tightly to the nape of his neck. He tried to loosen it by pushing at it with one of the tips of his split hoof without luck. This time, Style's magic assured they were all there to stay.

He offered a whiny, "Thanks, Style." That again left Blue struggling not to laugh out loud.

Style shrugged off his sarcastic tone and turned to the bright yellow unicorn with the toque on his head to ask, "Tinam, what's for lunch?"

The chubby fellow's mane stuck straight out like uncooked spaghetti from under his chef's hat. "I plan to conjure up some sweet, steamy carrots drizzled with butter," Tinam said, licking his lips. The look on his face said he could almost taste it.

Now, when the tin-horned unicorn chef said ‘conjure up’, he meant it literally. He could pull together elements from far-flung places to make delicious concoctions nicely packed in tins to be enjoyed now, or later. All he had to do was use his imagination and with a little swirl of his tin horn—*poof!* Another gourmet delight from Chef Tinam magically appeared.

“And we’ll have baked apples sprinkled with brown sugar and nutmeg for dessert,” he coaxed.

Not as tasty as Key Lime Pie. . .nevertheless, the Chef’s words made Blue’s stomach grumble once again.

Tinam did not really have to try to convince anyone to eat the delicious meals he conjured. Everyone loved every dish he dreamed up.

“Sounds spectacular,” said Cuprum. “Come on. Now that we’ve gathered some sweet fresh water to wash it down with, let’s all go back to the Halstable to eat.”

The jolly round unicorn eagerly lifted her copper horn, doing a little skip and a trot. The full wooden canteens strapped around her neck swung back and forth, thudding together like bells with wads of cotton around the clappers.

An old black stallion with a monocle over one eye chimed in, “Lunch does sound good.” He scratched his rough beard with a gnarled hoof, as if deep in thought, then touched his iron-horn to the charred leaves on the Jughead bush where Blue was hiding. The bush suddenly greened up and filled back in with new leaves and shoots.

Iown had a magical way with greenery. Whenever a plant showed signs of wilting or any other damage, he would sweep his iron horn tip across the affected areas of the plant, or through the dirt in which it grew. The soil would deepen to a rich dark brown

color, and the plant would spring back to life. Leaves became greener and more pliable. The flower petals displayed more vivid colors and wafted increasingly fragrant perfumes, with just a little bit of attention from him.

The iron-horned unicorn smiled at his handiwork, gave a wink toward the bush, and then pointed homeward with his iron horn. "Let's go have lunch."

For a brief instant, Blue thought the venerable elder had winked at him, but surely, he was mistaken.

Iown happily led the Tribe of the Metal-Horned Unicorns toward the Halstable, but Nix stopped just on the edge of the grove and gave one last look back.

Blue worried that he had been spotted but Nix swept his gaze right past him and settled on something over on the far side. Blue squinted and made out the form of a yellow and brown Buzzy-Biter hovering above a bush. Could Nix really see the small bug all the way across the clearing? Was super sensitive eyesight how he spotted dangers?

That didn't strike Blue as so much of a magical ability as a freakish talent, but without any magic of his own, he didn't really know how any of it worked, so when Nix shook his head and trudged on toward the Halstable, Blue was again left alone in the grove.

Over across the way, the lethargic insectoid greedily sucked up Jughead nectar through the plump pistil of one of the many small pitcher-shaped flowers adorning the heavily leaved bush. His long, tubular tongue bulged in spots as the thick, sticky nectar rose up through it. His fluttering wings shimmered like stained glass glinting in the sun.

Blue watched the insect while feeling oddly disappointed that the herd had left him there alone, despite the fact he had been

wishing for them to do exactly that.

Chapter Four

Feel The Burn

Blue sighed, lowering his head. “What is wrong with me? Why didn’t I just crawl out from under these bushes and join them? Why do I feel like I don’t belong?” he pitifully asked himself. Then, he answered his own questions with the pathetic mantra, which had been burned into his brain since he was a wee foal, “Oh yeah...*no metal, no magic*. That’s why.”

He twitched his tail slowly back and forth, unaware that the motion swatted away the same buzzing little hymenopter who had frightened him earlier.

“Rearlll!” The very angry critter buzzed past Blue’s ear and around his nose, stopping right at eye level. The unicorn could tell that the insect was enraged and its anger seemed to be directed at him. He was pretty sure the fuming mad creature was giving him ‘what-for’ but all he could make out was, “Buzzzzybiter, buzzzzzybiter!”

Then, he heard something that sounded like a war-cry and with that, the bug zipped past his ear again. Blue swiveled his head to see that it was making a beeline for his backside. Trying to defend himself, he frantically flung his tail back and forth across his vulnerable rump. More hairs clung to the sticky Jughead juice there with every swipe.

The Buzzy-Biter zigged and zagged, neatly avoiding each tail swish.

All Blue heard was, “Buzzy-biter-buzzy-biter-buzzy-biter,” as the hymenopter zeroed in on his backside.

Blue felt the needle penetrate his thick hide, and the painful

pop forced him to stifle the, “Yeow!” that burst from his mouth. It was all he could do to choke back a more emphatic yelp, but despite the stabbing pain, the injured unicorn kept quiet.

The tribe was still within hearing range, and the thought of drawing their attention deterred him from crying out very loud. He did not want them to come back to witness his discomfort. Especially Cornum, who would never keep his snarky remarks to himself.

In the meantime, the stabbing pain of the sting exploded into a deep burning sensation that was quickly becoming unbearable. Blue twisted his head around again to see the Buzzy-Biter still attached to his rear end. Its barbed stinger had penetrated all the way through his hide.

The bug flapped about and droned in a way that made it clear he was stuck. Embedded there in Blue’s flesh, the insect struggled mightily and the sight only made the unicorn feel worse.

Blue began to sweat. . .from the poison already entering his system, or just the fear of what was to come? He did not know, but he had to get rid of the nasty pest. He tried to dislodge it by twitching the hide of his rump.

When that did not work, Blue angrily angled his horn back toward the insect. With one eye trained squarely on the horrid bug, he motioned with his horn-tip to make it clear he intended to bludgeon the creature.

Imminent death made the Buzzy-Biter desperate. It launched into a frenzied struggle to free its sharp barbed end. Blue ground his teeth in pain each time the creature jerked outward; that barbed stinger was not coming out easily. The sickly-sweet stench of the jughead flowers filled the air, adding to the nauseous wave churning through Blue’s gut.

The hymenoptera’s wings batted violently against the air as it

tried to gain enough momentum to escape, but the bellows-like projection between the hook and its body acted like a powerful spring.

The bug's body snapped back viciously against Blue's rump, injecting even more venom into the unicorn.

Two. . . three. . . four more times, the insect's attempt at escape was aborted as even more poison pumped into Blue's system.

On the fifth try, the Buzzy-Biter finally attained enough thrust to break free from its victim, but its venomous weapon remained embedded in Blue's tough hide.

"Bzz-bzz-bzz." The insect zoomed past Blue's head. It bounced end over end across the bush, finally landing with a thud on the soft dirt below. The dizzy creature slowly pushed itself up to a standing position. Weaving back and forth a couple of times, it managed to brush the dirt off its wings before throwing itself into the air.

Blue swore he could hear the insufferable creature laugh as it flew away. Another stinger was already growing out to replace the one lost.

The pain in Blue's rump burned hot and raw. Try as he might, his horn could not reach the tender spot where the Buzzy-Biter's two-inch-long stinger remained buried in his skin. The hooked shape of the sharp object would never allow him to remove it himself.

He needed help.

"I don't feel so good," he groaned. The trees began to swim in circles before his eyes as he shuffled out of the bushes.

He could barely walk and his knees started to buckle. He

understood well enough the dangers of a Buzzy-Biter sting. He had to get back to the Halstable.

Anyone stung by a Buzzy-Biter needed medical attention quickly, but someone with an allergy to the venom needed help even faster. An allergic reaction could be lethal.

Blue fell into that category, and he had just received five times more venom than normally delivered in a Buzzy-Biter attack.

The sun blazed high in the sky, he had no magic, and he was in serious danger. The distance to the Halstable was short, but he feared his grip on life might be even shorter.

Chapter Five

Two-Legged Danger

*B*lue emerged from the little grove of trees on shaky knees. Far ahead, he saw the majestic fortress of the Halstable planted on the grassy plain. The metal-horned tribe had lived there since before the Halstable had arrived on MarBryn and in that moment, Blue only hoped that he could make it back inside those walls.

The structure was, basically, a boxy rectangle with a hollowed-out center, which formed a big courtyard. Originally constructed to house hundreds of unicorns, the long rambling hallways of the massive five-story formation now led to the homes of only twelve. The dozen unicorns were the only survivors of Magh's ongoing pursuit and slaughter.

Far off in the distance, Blue thought he saw a group of creatures walking upright on two legs, approaching the Halstable. There were no discernible footpaths nearby, so he was immediately concerned that the venom in his body was making him hallucinate.

Unsure if the danger was real or not, his instincts told him to hide although time was not his friend. He dodged behind a bush to watch and see if the intruders were real or imaginary.

"Two-leggers . . ." he whispered, lifting a hind leg off the ground to ease the very real throbbing pain. He studied the approaching figures carefully. They too were real, he decided, and he immediately recognized them for what they were.

Many two-leggers populated MarBryn. There were Bugans from Bugansville and Letheans from the Silvan Forest. There were Ragamoffyns from the Red Band of Weita, and many others. Some two-leggers were gentle but, sadly, most two-leggers were no

longer friends of the unicorns.

In the beginning, when the Halstable first came to MarBryn, nearly all two-leggers and other creatures had welcomed them. The manticore welcomed them, too but for very unsavory reasons. Many two-leggers now worked for Magh. Some did so willingly, while others had no choice, since they'd been ensnared under the sorcerer's binding spells. Now, far more two-leggers were dangerous than not.

Magh sent those under his control out to scour MarBryn, their mission always to find and gather all of the unicorn horns and hooves they could. Once, there had been hundreds of unicorns, but the two-leggers had been so successful in taking their horns and hooves that now there were only twelve. Dangerously close to extinction, the tribe now avoided all two-leggers, because it had become impossible to tell the good from the evil.

One on one, no two-legger could overpower a unicorn, especially not one who wielded magic. But unicorns were not prone to violence, nor did they do well with the guilt of taking another life. This left them susceptible to danger from not only the two-leggers, but also other creatures more intent on wreaking havoc. Unicorns could and would defend themselves when necessary, but to lay waste to beings trapped in an evil spell left the herd with a moral dilemma.

What are they up to? Blue watched as blood pounded through the veins in his neck. The poison racing through his system left him confused and unsure. *Why are they so close to the Halstable?*

The unicorn watched them move even closer. They argued and bonked each other on the head, as their voices grew loud and angry.

"Horsehocky!" one yelled at another.

"Blast it all, if you can talk that fudgeluffle smack to me!" the

other yelled back.

Oh, it's only those Cussers from Egada, Blue realized. They were a group of short two-leggers, heads barely topping Blue's shoulders, but he did not want them to notice his presence. Their bark was traditionally worse than their bite, but he did not want to deal with them on this day so he took a step back, trying to become more enclosed by the bushes. Blue tried to stay as still as possible, which was not easy with the throbbing pain.

"Holy-Maroly! You two draggle-draggles cut it out!" their leader commanded, causing the curling mustache above his lips to shimmy. He was taller than the others and his ears were pointier, too. He bopped both of them on the head with his staff for emphasis.

"Snorksnot! That ferfernuggin' hurt!" ranted one of the short stocky Cussers. His beady little eyes and warty nose gave him a decidedly rat-like appearance.

He slapped the shortest Cusser on the back of the head. His leather glove made a loud *splat* sound where the material connected with the other's balding pate.

The little guy rounded on him, red-faced with anger. "Goldangit! If you hit me again, you'll be sorrier than sorry!" he promised, but being smaller and obviously, of lower rank than his larger compatriot, it was obvious he did not pose much of a threat.

"Ding-dong and double dang it! Just keep moving!" the Cusser leader shouted. The handlebars above his upper lip shook violently once again.

Just as the motley crew got within twenty feet of the Halstable's outer wall, its turn-about spell kicked in, causing the loud-mouthed ruffians to make an abrupt ninety-degree twist that pointed them away from the unicorns safeguarded home.

The Cussers were so confused by the change of direction; they began to argue even louder.

“What’re we goin’ this frazzlin’ way fer? There’s no reason fer changin’ dadburn course,” the shortest scruffy Cusser whined. He stamped his feet, like a child having a temper tantrum, but he did not stop walking. He knew better than that.

Their leader seemed just as bewildered as the others, but he kept right on going as if he did not want to them to know that he, too, was as disorientated as they were. He plunged ahead in their new direction and shouted, “Because it’s the way I want to go, you groobstampers! Just keep moving, you buhdangled sluggards! We’ve been at it since dawn, and we won’t be finding any flackity unicorns today!”

“But Magh said we gotta keep huntin’ til we find—” the whiner began.

His leader puffed up his chest in pretense of a brave front, “I don’t care what Magh told us to do! My gut is gnawing on my spine, so I aim to get back to Egada before suppertime.”

He raised his staff again threatening another head bop. That was enough incentive for the other two Cussers to keep on moving. The town of Egada was still hours away and they did not want to miss supper, either.

Everything about the Halstable was constructed with magical properties, which rendered the entire structure invisible to the eyes of all other living beings. Therefore, the Cussers passed by without ever knowing how close their quarry had been. It was a relief to know the Halstable still had magical protection surrounding it.

In the past, most unicorns had thought it humorous to watch creatures approach, and then unwittingly make sharply angled turns that led them away from the outer walls of their invisible

home. It slightly amused the blue unicorn now, despite all the pain he was in, but it also frightened him to learn that even the Cussers were now doing Magh's foul bidding.

At this point, Blue's only comfort was the knowledge that it was still safe inside the Halstable. He was anxious to be inside, because the rest of MarBryn definitely was not safe.

Blue waited until the Cussers were completely out of the area before he moved.

The big voices of the little two-leggers rose and fell with each step they took. As the Cussers rounded a bend the sounds of their bickering all but disappeared from the landscape, but still Blue stayed hidden until their vocalizations faded away altogether. Allergic reaction or not, he would not be the one responsible for revealing the Halstable to these two-leggers, or any others.

His vision was becoming hazy, and so were his thoughts. He lurched away from the bush, the venom in his blood making his back leg so numb that he could not tell if it even touched the ground.

With the Cussers completely out of sight and hearing, he left the grove of trees. He felt weak, and the short distance seemed greater with every step. The smooth, dusty red ground seemed to move in undulating waves.

Blue found himself remembering recent incidents of failures in the magical system. Just a few weeks back, Gaiso had wandered in as if he owned the place. That had alarmed everyone, since he had never been there before.

Until then, none of the tribe knew the stag except Blue, but in true unicorn fashion, the sociable natures of the tribe members soon took over. Gaiso had proved to be such a pleasant fellow. . . what could they do but invite him to stay for dinner? Blue wished he had been there for that meal, even though he rarely dined with

the others.

He wished Gaiso were here to help him now. His body shivered hard as the poison surged through his system. He shuddered again at the thought of what horrors might befall his tribe if any of the random malcontents had slipped through the Halstable's magical defenses the way Gaiso had done.

The Cussers were working for Magh. So were many others, so the Metal Horn tribe needed to be even more careful. Those little two-leggers talked and acted tough, but once upon a time, they had been somewhat kind to the unicorns. There was nothing kind about Magh, or anyone who did his dirty work.

I must remember to tell Alumna about the Cussers, he thought sluggishly.

As he trudged forward, his vision narrowed to a small spot of light at the end of a tunnel of darkness. The Halstable seemed like it was miles away, rather than yards.

His thoughts skittered from one danger to the next until he began to worry about manticores. He hoped one of them did not come swooping down upon him. He cringed as fear forced his eyes skyward, but nothing lurked in the cloudless expanse above.

Manticores were the most feared natural predators of the unicorns. The beasts had the head of a man, big bat-like wings, the powerful body of a lion, and a dragon's barbed tail tipped with a scorpion's stinger. Blue shivered again, when he realized that, if the magical security system ever failed, the manticores would have access to a virtual feast of their favorite meal. . .unicorns.

Thinking of the manticore's needle-like instrument of death reminded him of the much tinier Buzzy-Biter's much tinier barb. The poison made him tired and confused and incapable of a coherent stream of thought. His legs shook, and his rump throbbed with urgent reminders of the painful end awaiting him if the thing

was not removed soon.

He needed a dose of Buzzy-Biter antidote before the poison worked its way completely through his system, but he felt so weak. Each step sent waves of pain shooting through his rump.

“I will make it. I have to make it,” he told himself, “I have to warn the others that the Cussers are working for Magh.”

Replaying this mantra in his mind helped him keep focused and gave him a new surge of energy. He closed his eyes, gritted his teeth, and trudged faster and faster until he was out of breath. Finally, Blue limped up to the large double doors of the Halstable. He inserted his blue hide-covered horn into an indentation where a doorknob would be—if the Halstable had been an ordinary abode.

He could see the indentation, as all unicorns could, but it was invisible to other creatures. As the doors swung inward, he staggered through. They closed immediately behind him.

“Ghel,” he called in a whisper, limping through the maze of hallways to his living quarters. Spent as he was, Blue had to find his stable-mate quickly.

The golden-horned unicorn had saved him more than once, and she would know what to do.

Chapter Six

Only The Heart Knows For Sure

*B*lue and Ghel shared a stall comprised of several rooms.

They had been stable-mates since before the deaths of each of their parents, so it was natural for them to make their home together.

Blue's sire and dam had both become victims of the sorcerer. Blue had only been eight years old at the time of their death. The tragedy of the tribe was made all the worse with the common knowledge that all of the murdered unicorns' magic was exploited and used by Magh to further advance his evil. From Blue's parents, to Ghel's. . .to many, many others. . .all of them had suffered grave losses.

At that young age, he had heard a rumor claiming that Magh used the magic of his mother's indium-horn as a looking glass to keep an eye on events throughout MarBryn. He hated the thought that the despicable sorcerer used his mother's magic to advance his own evil, so the very moment he heard that news, he vowed aloud to Ghel that he would avenge his mother.

Privately, though, he had nightmares about Magh wielding control over his mother's spirit. He hoped the rumors were not true, but some inclination deep inside him confirmed that his mother was still watching over him somehow.

The golden unicorn tried hard to dissuade Blue from vowing to take on such a dangerous mission, but when she realized he was determined, she instead begged him for a promise that he would never do anything rash or venture out on his own trying to accomplish such a feat.

He had refused to deliver such a promise.

Blue never did hear what the sorcerer used his father's platinum horn for, but it was just as well he did not bear that burden, too. He had asked about his father, but few of the surviving unicorns knew much about him, and those who did seemed reluctant to tell him much about his sire, or the magic he had wielded with his platinum horn.

Blue's life would have been unbearably lonely, if not for his bond with the gold-horned unicorn. She had been born just days before him. Being nearly the same age, they had spent a lot of time playing together as ponies. When Blue lost his parents, Ghel's family took him in, even though he had been a despondent and withdrawn young unicorn.

By the time Blue and Ghel turned twelve, Magh had taken the horns and hooves from her parents too. They fell in a battle known as the Great Unicorn Massacre, and their premature deaths left both, Ghel and Blue, orphans with only each other to rely upon. So devastated were the few remaining adults, by the massive losses to the tribe, that there was no one left to pay them much mind. Over time, the bond between Blue and Ghel grew. They were two neglected souls seeking comfort in the only thing that made sense to them—their friendship.

Ghel's magic allowed her to look beyond what lay on the surface of another. When her golden horn rested on the heart girth of another unicorn; she sensed his or her emotional strengths, their hopes, and their dreams.

Her gift made her certain that underneath Blue's plain blue hide thumped the heart of a unicorn meant for greatness. . . even if no one else held that hope. While the rest of the metal-horned unicorns had all but given up on Blue saving them, Ghel had not.

Blue found the golden unicorn in their stall, relaxing on a

long, low sofa. In one split hoof, she held a feather pen. Her flaxen mane hid her expression.

She gazed out a large, dark-glassed window into the central courtyard. She murmured words. . . words to a song, Blue guessed. Her singing voice did not possess the magical allure of Silubhra's, but despite, or maybe because of that, the raw genuineness of her singing spoke directly to Blue's heart.

*"You can't tell a book by its cover.
You must open it to read what's within."*

Looking up, her eyes locked with Blue's, but then his vision went blurry.

She quickly closed her songbook, before whispering, "Blue?"

A low moan escaped the blue unicorn as he stumbled through the doorway. He wanted to speak, to say a thousand things that sprang into his mind at the sight of her, but no words came as he gasped a pitiful sound and crumpled in a heap.

"A Buzzy-Biter. . . the stinger. . ." he managed to whisper before losing consciousness.

Ghel gasped. The stinger was still there jutting from Blue's backside. She remembered the allergic reaction he'd had after a similar attack years ago. This one seemed much worse.

I must act quickly, she thought urgently.

She went to remove the stinger with her teeth, but thought better of it. *What if that, squeezed more venom into the wound?* She gently probed the inflamed place with the point of her golden horn, wiggling the little hooked stinger until one end was more fully exposed. With careful precision she used the tips of her cloven hooves to grasp the sharp barb and extract it from Blue's swollen flesh.

With the stinger removed, the battle was half won, but he

remained in danger. Most unicorns were not allergic to such stings, but Blue was not most unicorns. That was why the pair kept Buzzy-Biter anti-venom in their stall for just such an emergency. One quick dose could quell an allergic reaction, but without the shot, the consequences would be dire.

She pawed around in the drawer where they kept the antidote, but over the years, they had tossed all manner of odds and ends in there. She found the injection pen, but not the actual medicine. "Where's the ampoule?" Ghel panicked and jerked hard on another drawer. The big wooden box flew free and spilled its contents across the floor. She jumped back from the mess, only to hear a loud crack.

"No!" she cried, looking down at the splintered glass capsule lying in a pool of thick liquid. One drop of blood bubbled from her soft padded hoof. "That was the only one!" She bent to pull a sliver of thin glass from her hoof pad. It hurt but she could not worry about her own wound while Blue lay inert on the ground nearby.

Her pulse quickened as another low moan emanated from Blue's throat. She rushed to his side as he expelled what sounded frightfully like a sigh of defeat. Her heart hammered inside her chest. His normally blue muzzle was already tinged with white.

"He's stopped breathing!"

She nuzzled his muscular neck with her soft nose, trying to wake him.

He did not stir.

"Blue," she prodded, nudging him with a hoof. No effect.

She feared the worst, but then he jerked violently, kicking out his front leg as if defending himself from an attacker. He gasped then, and she saw that his breathing was labored, but still steady.

Tears pricked at her eyes, and she shook her horn impatiently. Her muzzle quivered as she listened to his harsh, forced breaths. The Buzzy-Biter poison was killing him.

She leaned her head against his heart so her ear rested just above his right lung. Ghel heard short, wheezing breaths and just beyond that, the faintest heartbeat.

She concentrated on that sound until it pulled her in and up through a dark space inside his unconscious mind. She tried to communicate to him that she was going for help and that he should hang on, but a pinprick of light flashed in the distance. Then, another. And another.

Within moments, colored flashes and arcs of light surrounded her and Blue.

Yes, there he was, lying on the ground—next to her—in the center of a ring of brilliantly colored lights. The entire tribe surrounded them. They stood horn-tip to horn-tip under a glowing golden pavilion of translucent cloth. Beyond the luminous canopy, she saw many unfamiliar faces anxiously watching from within a circling shelter of massive trees with colorful shimmering leaves. All of the creatures gathered there exuded a palpable anticipation of some long expected glorious event that pummeled Ghel's psyche like colossal rogue waves crashing upon a rocky shore.

Then, all went black again.

When next she could see, a multi-hued blue stallion stood before her, pawing at the air in triumph.

"Blue ..." the word fell, awestruck, from her lips before she was flung back into reality.

Lifting her head, she jumped up on all fours. "The prophecy! It's true!" Yes, he looked different, but there was no doubt in her mind that she had just seen a transformed Blue.

“You still have a destiny to fulfill.”

She paced back and forth, weighing the odds for a moment. Blue was reluctant to associate with the rest of the tribe and he would be upset with her for involving the others, but his life was in danger and without the antidote, it was beyond her power to save him.

She told his unhearing ears, “You’re not going to be happy, but I’ve got to bring Dr. Zinko here. I won’t lose you. You are my world, but more than that, the tribe needs you!” She hurried off to find the unicorn with the magical medicinal horn.



Ghel galloped through the halls as if pursued by Magh’s minions. “Dr. Zinko! Dr. Zinko, where are you?”

Rounding a corner at full speed, she nearly slammed into Lauda, the Lead-Horned unicorn.

“Whoa, there, young filly,” Lauda exclaimed. “Are you okay?” The lead-horned mare’s cropped mane curled loosely about her ears like a cap, giving her a grandmotherly appearance.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” Ghel gasped, “But Blue is not. A Buzzy-Biter stung him. He’s unconscious!”

“Unconscious? From a Buzzy- Biter? I know he’s allergic but that seems kind of drastic.” Lauda pondered.

“I’m not sure what’s going on,” Ghel said, “The stinger was stuck. I managed to remove it but I couldn’t give him the anti-venom,” she paused, looked down and lifted her hoof off the floor, revealing a small spot of blood. She sighed and continued, “I . . . I broke the only ampoule we had. Now Blue is in some kind of shock. I’ve got to find Dr. Zinko.”

“Zinko was right behind me,” Lauda said, looking back down the hall. No one was there. “He must have stopped to talk or look at something, but I imagine he will catch up to us soon.”

“This is urgent, Lauda!” Ghel maneuvered around the old mare. “I can’t wait for him to get to us. I’ve got to find him now!”

“Yes, quickly, go find him,” Lauda urged as Ghel disappeared.

Chapter Seven

The Hard Way

The lead-horned unicorn regained her composure and realized she stood but a few feet from her laboratory, where there was an entire cabinet stocked with anti-venom. She slid open a glass door and removed a small box marked *B-B Anti-Venom*. Inside were twelve tiny containers of the stuff.

"I'll rush this to Blue now," she said aloud. "Maybe I can stabilize him until Ghel gets back with Zinko."

When Lauda reached Blue, large white splotches covered his entire body. His breath was so shallow; she could not hear it until her ear was right next to his mouth.

The old mare immediately injected him with the antidote, but to no effect. The poisons had raced through his system, already ravaging his defenses. By the time Dr. Zinko and Ghel made their way to the stall, Lauda was frantically pounding the injection site with her front elbows, thinking that she could speed the anti-venom into Blue's blood stream.

But he just lay there, motionless.

"Lauda, stop. You're wearing yourself out," Dr. Zinko said to the frazzled old mare. "Let me have a look at him."

"The antidote didn't work, Zinko. He's too far gone," Lauda panted from her exertions.

A huge tear hung suspended from Ghel's eyelashes. "Please, save him! He's the best friend I've got in this world." Her voice cracked.

Lauda's heart squeezed hard. "Zinko will save him," she told Ghel gently while swallowing the extra thought, *if anyone can*.

The doctor gave his stable-mate a long, uncertain look, and then acknowledged, "My magic may be the only way to strengthen his system enough to reject the poison."

The zinc-horned unicorn rarely used his horn's magic that way, especially now that he had grown older and weaker, and the act left him exhausted.

Lauda's potions offered sufficient protection to prevent most ailments, and they could even cure some, but not all. Some maladies required his magical touch, and that came at a cost to Zinko's own health. But she knew the doctor would risk this, for Blue was worth the cost.

Lauda tut-tutted as she and Ghel watched the elderly white unicorn physician use his zinc-horn to administer a magical curative to Blue. This was not an injection from his horn to Blue's wound, although they were physically connected. It was a sharing of his own life-force with that of the dying unicorn.

The wound was the conduit for Zinko's horn magic to enter Blue's failing system. A thin bright white stream leapt from the unicorn doctor's magical horn into the wound. Static electricity crackled through the air and the faint scent of ozone hung in the room.

Blue's circulatory and nervous systems had both been severely damaged. His body instinctively latched on to the life-giving energy pouring from the elderly unicorn and rapaciously sucked it up.

Dr. Zinko's face froze; his eyes wide and protruding. His lips pulled back in a tortured grimace and his legs shook furiously as the tip of the wounded unicorn's horn began to take on the faint glow a cloudless blue sky. It was almost impossible to see against his hide,

which was close to the same color as the soft light.

The pale glow began to revolve, until it became a small maelstrom of various shades of blue. The crackle of static grew louder and louder, building into a strong thrum of power.

“What in the world?” Lauda shouted.

Ghel exclaimed, “What’s happening to Blue?”

Lauda had never before witnessed such a thing, and the sight scared the dickens out of her. Her stable-mate, the venerable doctor, looked to be on his last legs—as if every bit of his magic was being siphoned away.

The lead-horned unicorn ran to her mate and shoved his head hard, breaking contact between him and Blue. “Enough! No more, Zinko. I will not let you die!”

As soon as the contact was broken, the glow emanating from Blue’s horn blinked out—as if it had never been there, leaving Lauda to wonder if it had actually happened. She would have tried to convince herself that it was just her eyes playing tricks, but then Ghel said, “That blue light. . .is that normal?”

Lauda ignored Ghel and instead took a long silent look at the blue unicorn. Then, she turned her attention back to her mate. The old stallion swayed slightly from side-to-side, but he managed to stay upright. In a gentler tone, she told him, “Blue is on his own now.”

Lauda’s lead-horn brushed against her mate’s indigo-mane as she leaned in close to inspect the site of the Buzzy-Biter sting. The wounded area had already begun to resume its normal healthy shade of blue.

She straightened, stretching a stitch out of her neck, relieved that Zinko’s horn magic was still so strong. Healing someone so

close to death could take a disastrous toll on Zinko's own health, but still, she had never seen such a look come over his face before.

Had this time almost been too much for him? Or had the fact that Blue had no metal and no magic meant that the doctor had to work harder to save him? And what was that light that flickered briefly in Blue's horn?

Relief flooded through her when the magical physician drew a deep breath, shook his head, and rippled his shoulder muscles to shake off the remnants of using so much of his magic. When he turned to face her, she was pleased to see his own completely unblotched complexion, with no sign of undue stress or strain on his face.

"Don't know how much longer I would've lasted if you hadn't broken the connection between us," the unicorn doctor told her shakily. "Nothing has ever drained my life-force so quickly."

"I know," Lauda said, staring at Blue's horn tip. The dull, blue shade offered no evidence of the glowing light. "I could see you had lost all control. I'm glad I was here to help you break free."

"Me, too," he said with a shiver. "I fear to think how much worse it could have been. I had already delivered a full dose of my metal magic by the time you pushed my horn away, yet something kept pulling more and I could do nothing to stop it."

Lauda's fearful anger at nearly losing her life-long companion put her over the edge. Completely beside herself, she exploded, "If Blue had the sense to let me give him a dose of BB Repellant before he went sneaking off into bug-infested bushes, this would never have happened!" A brusque shake of her head sent her light-gray curls a-flutter.

She turned to regard Ghel over spectacles balanced precariously across her dark gray nose. "There's always some young whippersnapper who refuses to be dosed because they think

it makes their hide smell funny!” she said sternly. Her nostrils dilated as she *harrumphed* indignantly.

Lauda had yet to come up with a formula for the stuff that did not leave an unpleasant odor on the skin. She had mixed countless combinations, using many different ingredients. This latest batch contained birch tar and bog myrtle—both of which stunk to high heaven, but they were effective. Now, lemon eucalyptus and citronella smelled divine, but neither of them worked worth a hoot. Most of the unicorns preferred not to use her bug repelling concoctions because they were so repelled by the odious nature of them. But, then, most unicorns stayed close to home.

The unicorn doctor smiled fondly at his stable-mate saying, “Now calm down, Lauda my dear. I’m sure Blue will use your repellent from now on.”

Lauda furiously ground a hoof into the floor, saying, “Yes, but did he have to learn such a hard lesson first?”

Her question was meant to intimidate, and it did. Ghel bowed her horn in deference but in truth, Lauda was not really trying to lay the blame for Blue’s troubles on the golden-horned unicorn. He brought that on himself.

Dr. Zinko called their attention to Blue, who was starting to come around. “Ladies ... Blue is stirring,” he observed, rescuing Ghel before the lead-horned unicorn could make another remark.

“Well, young stallion,” Dr. Zinko said briskly, “You are one lucky unicorn to have someone like Ghel looking out for you.”

Blue looked around the room at the others, as if confused. “Why are you all looking at me like that?”

Lauda pounced on the remark, asking, “Why?” After a fuming pause, she added, “You almost died, you nincompoop! That’s why!”

You should have gone straight to Dr. Zinko. Or stayed here, where you belong, instead of gallivanting about the countryside. If not for Ghel's quick action, you wouldn't even be talking to us right now!"

The blue unicorn was so taken aback by the old mare's gruffness that his misery came flooding back in a rush. He felt like a wretched mess. Squirming under Lauda's stern scowl, he turned to face Ghel.

She looked so sad and lovely standing there as her golden blonde mane caressed her sweet-clover-honey-colored shoulders. Poor Ghel—she often took on trouble for his sake because, while he was off hiding from the tribe, she was left to answer their questions.

Embarrassed, he flopped over on the floor and closed his eyes to shut out their expressions of scorn and pity. A little voice inside his head niggled at him: *Nobody loves you! Everybody hates you! You may just as well have died!*

He knew, deep down, that it was not true—but like always he struggled with being so different from all the others.

Wallowing in shame, he heard Ghel's reassuring voice filter through his misery. "Don't listen to Lauda. She's just being a grump." She kissed him on the cheek. "You rest now, dearest. I'll bring you some dinner later." Her affectionate gesture comforted him, as a kiss from the golden unicorn always did.

Lauda's antidote, along with Dr. Zinko's healing magic, left him groggy and fighting sleep.

The other three unicorns talked softly, but on the way out Blue heard the doctor say, "I'm glad he made it home alive. He might not be our savior, but he's still a member of our tribe."

I hope you enjoyed reading
this sample of

"Journey To Osm - The Blue Unicorn's Tale".

Some extra features follow
which you might also enjoy.

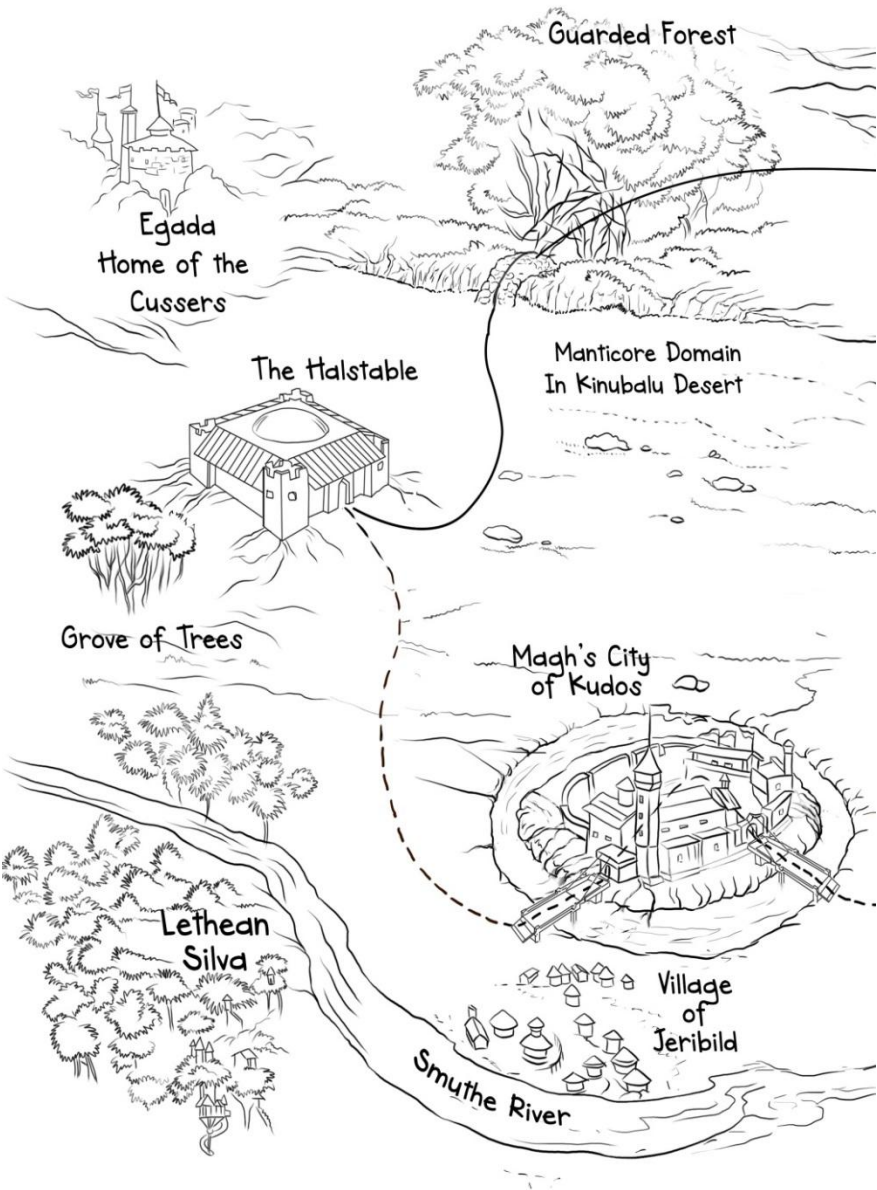
*Map of
MarBryn*

THE MAP OF THE LAND shows two paths.

One is the path the Blue Unicorn and his companions travel in their journey to Muzika Woods. Blue meets up with Gaiso, the stag in the Guarded Forest. Then, in the Phlat Plains, Girasol the Firebird joins the unicorn and the stag. Blue and Gaiso meet Gwyn, the Pendragon in the 7-sided Heptagonos Valley. There, they meet Yegwa, the Spirit of Eternal Spring, who casts an enchantment on everyone except Girasol. The Firebird saves them and they flee through the Rainbow Colored Bands of Weita on their way to the Smaul Mountains. First, they pass the Icy Cold Lake and meet the Cubose. Then, they visit with Icel, the Ice Blink at the top of the world. Finally, the traveling companions make it to their destination: Muzika Woods.

The dashed line shows the route that the Tribe of the Metal-Horned Unicorns take to reach the Muzika Woods. They leave the Halstable in search of someone who can tell them how to get to their destination. They stop in the first city they come to: the City of Kudos. The evil sorcerer, Magh, rules over Kudos. A little Ragamoffyn named Imroz comes to their aid, but Magh's soldiers are in hot pursuit. The tribe finally loses them at the entrance of the Caulis Caverns. They have an encounter with the Blind Blober deep inside the caverns. They escape through the Lickety Split and find their way to the Icy Cold Lake where the Firebird finds them. Girasol guides the tribe to Muzika Woods in time for the arrival of the Moon-Star.

Other places of note on the map are Egada, where the Cussers live; Bugansville, where the Bugans dwell; Lethean Silva, where Magh's best Warriors originated; Manticore Domain in the Kinubalu Desert, where Nix and Ghel encounter a Manticore; the Village of Jeribild, where Magh and many of his servants are from; and finally, Muzika Woods, home of the Nebuls and their Harmonizers.



Egada
Home of the
Cussers

Guarded Forest

The Halstable

Manticore Domain
In Kinubalu Desert

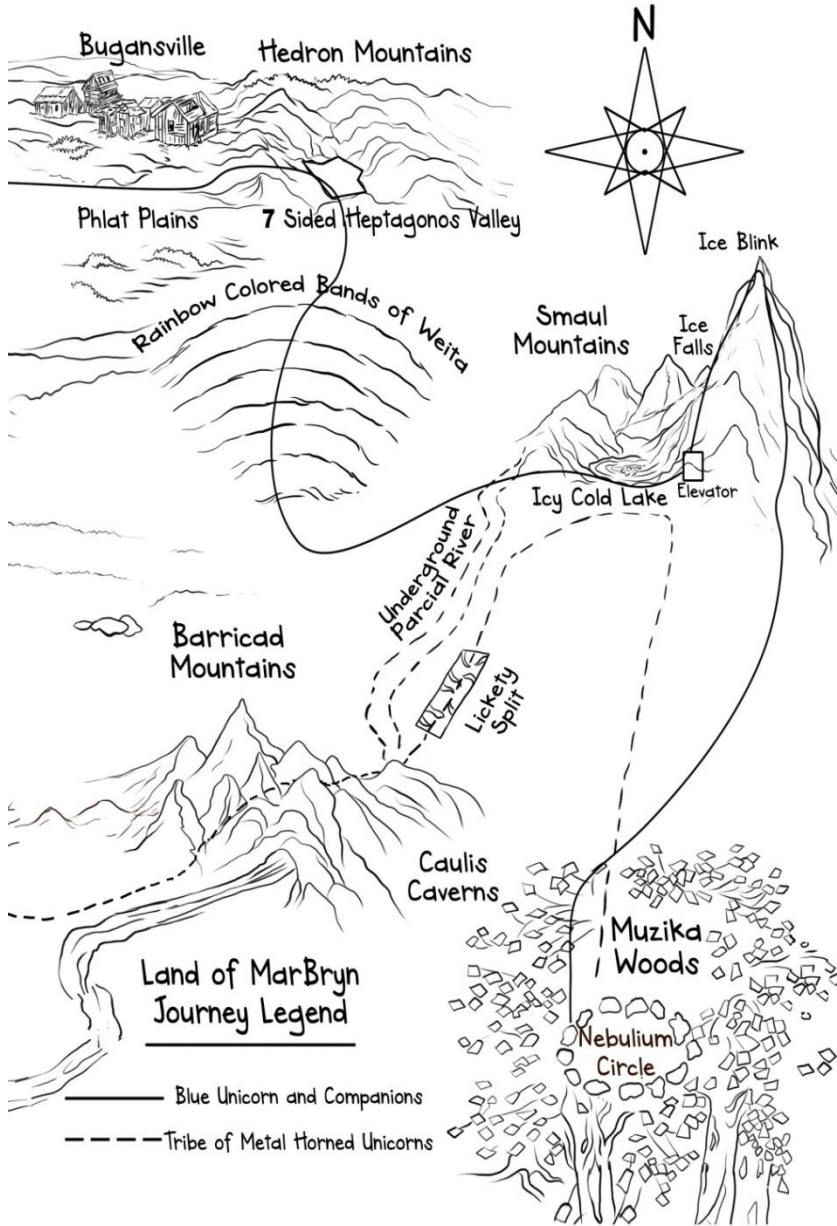
Grove of Trees

Magh's City
of Kudos

Lethean
Silva

Village
of
Jeribild

Smuthe River



Metal-Horn Tribe

Character Details

This is an introduction to the Metal-Horn Unicorn Tribe.

NAME	COAT & MANE COLORING	HORN & HOOF METAL	MAGICAL HERD & CREST	MATE
Blue	Plain Blue	No Metal	No Magic	Ghel
Ghel	Honey colored beige coat with blonde mane	Just gold at first but later embedded with canary yellow diamonds	Empath Herd - Herd Crest— Open heart surrounding the Celtic symbol for love.	Blue
Silubhra	White coat with silvery mane	Silver with embedded diamonds	Communicator Herd - Herd Crest—A Musical staff and smiling lips	Nix
Nix	Thunder Gray	Nickel	Defender Herd - Herd Crest— Lightning Bolt	Silubhra
Style	Purple	Steel with embedded amethysts	Stylist Herd - Herd Crest—a steel comb engraved with a pretty flower.	Cornum

NAME	COAT & MANE COLORING	HORN & HOOF METAL	MAGICAL HERD & CREST	MATE
Cornum	Lime Green	Brass – his is the only horn flared like a bell	Musical Herd - Herd Crest— Brass bugle to match his flared horn – tip.	Style
Cuprum	Moss Green with a red and green mane	Copper	Water Works Herd - Herd Crest—Cup with Alchemy Symbol for Water	Tinam
Tinam	Lemon Yellow with Mane like uncooked Spaghetti	Tin	Chef Herd - Herd Crest— Chef’s Hat or “Toque”	Cuprum
Lauda	Gray	Lead	Scientific Herd - Herd Crest—Potion Bottle	Dr. Zinko
Dr. Zinko	White with Indigo mane	Zinc	Medical Herd - Herd Crest— Stethoscope In The Shape of A Unicorn	Lauda
Alumna	Red	Aluminum with embedded rubies	Navigator Herd - Herd Crest—Crystal Orb as she is the Unicorn Oracle	Iown

NAME	COAT & MANE COLORING	HORN & HOOF METAL	MAGICAL HERD & CREST	MATE
Iown	Black with gray mane and beard	Iron with embedded diamonds	Earthworks Herd - Herd Crest—A vibrant flower growing from the alchemic earth symbol	Alumna
Osm – was the Blue Unicorn	Many shades of blue – from Celeste to Cerulean	All metals tipped with Osmium	Pilot Herd - Herd Crest—A Platinum Wand	Ghel

Pronunciations

Many names of characters and places in this story are somewhat complicated to pronounce. This list is not complete by any means, but it lends insight into the author's thoughts.

Alumna—ah-luhm-nah

Anion—an-Yuhn

Cornum—corn-umm

Cubose—cube-oze

Cuprum—cup-rum

Fleoge—flue-zh

Gaiso—guy-so

Ghel—hard g like gift and rhymes with bell

Girasol—jeer-rah-sawl

Halstable—hall-stah-bull

Icel—I-cell

Imroz – em-rahz

Iown—I-own

Kata—kah-tah

Lauda—loud-ah

Olina—o-lee-nah

Osm—oz-um

Oura—oor-rah

Magh—mm-ah-gh (hard g at end)

MarBryn—mar-brihn

Miral – meer-uhl

Muzika—mew-zee-kah

Nebul—neh-bule

Numen—new-men

Phlat Plains—flat planes

Pici—pee-cee

Pido—pee-doe

Silubhra—sil-loo-bruh

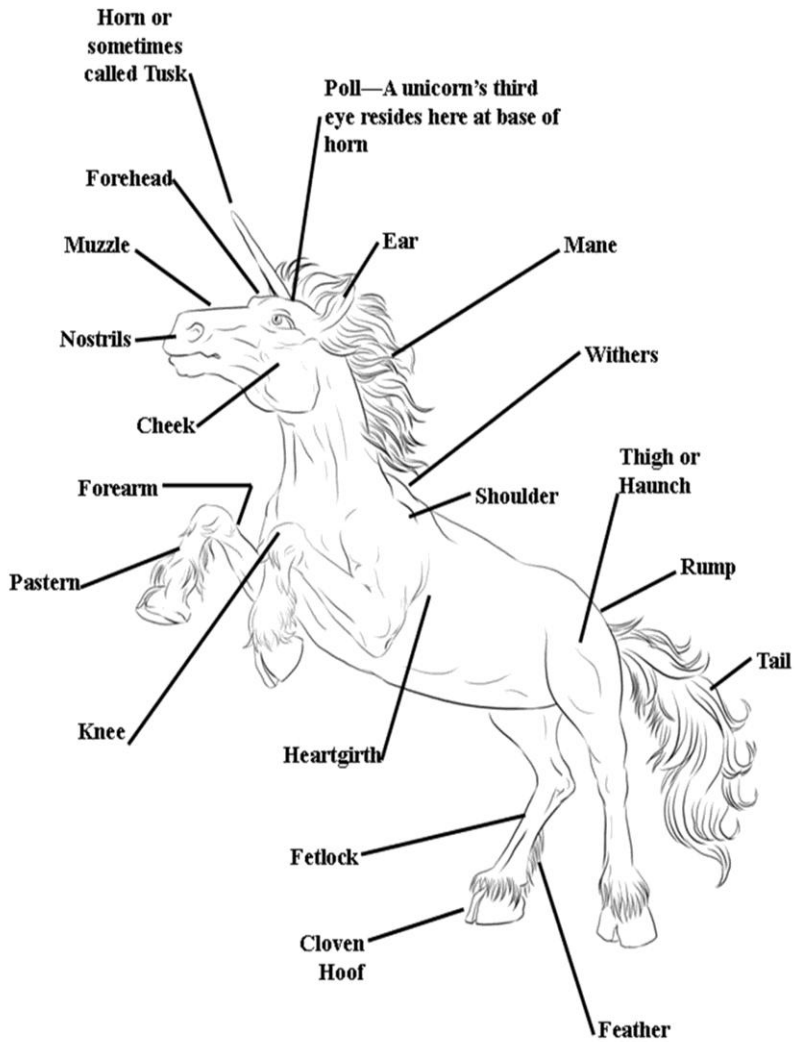
Smaul Mountain – Small Mountain

Tinam—tin-um

Unimaise—you-nih-maze

Weita—wee-tah

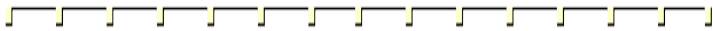
Unicorn Anatomy



Get the *MarBryn Compendium* to learn much more about its denizens and the Tribe of Metal-Horned Unicorns from Unimaise.

Dear Reader:

I hope you enjoyed this book. If you did, please give it a nice review at the online site where you made the purchase or simply at your favorite online review site. You can't begin to imagine how important a review is in helping others learn about a book these days. With over 4,000 new books offered to the public for sale each and every day, it's easy for books by independent authors to get completely lost. Suffice it to say, "The Blue Unicorn needs your help in order for others to know it exists."



This novel has been over 35 years in the making. At the time that I came up with the idea for metal-horned unicorns with magical powers based on the properties of their metal-horns, the only research tools available to me was a hardback dictionary and an incomplete set of encyclopedias.

The world has changed so much since then and I'm so happy to have arrived in a future where the answer for nearly every question I might ever ask is available to me now at the touch of a button. Researching with the internet is the most amazing thing and I truly hope we get to keep it.



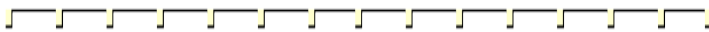
I want to take this opportunity to express my immense gratitude to all of the people who contributed to the ideas and concepts in this story. There have been countless readings and feedback by rough draft readers, proofreaders, content editors, line editors, friends, family and many others who have shared insight and given input.

I'd like to give a special thank you to those who have

corrected my spelling and grammar and other writing frailties. I honestly could not have finished this story without all of your valuable assistance.

I would be remiss if I did not give my heartfelt thanks to the most amazing content editor, Travis Erwin, who understood my vision for the characters and the scenes in my story and breathed life into them in a way in which no one else could have.

Finally, I want to thank the man who has made it possible for me to pursue my writing efforts. Without his loving encouragement and support, I would have never been able to realize my dream of finishing and publishing this book. Thank you, EMR. Thank you for encouraging me to see how far I can go with my dreams and for always being my biggest fan. It means the world to me.



The Blue Unicorn stories are available in several different versions. This novel was written to be enjoyed by any fantasy lover. . . and it is not aimed at any specific age range. It is my hope that anyone introduced to the story through the novel will want to also collect the illustrated books. They will make great keepsake books for anyone's fantasy library collection.

The illustrated book contains 42 magnificent full color fantasy illustrations by Sudipta Dasgupta (Steve to his friends) and his fellow artists at Dasguptarts. The text for that book is much shorter than in this novel but the artwork alone, practically tells the story.

The illustrated book was edited by Kimberly Avery. She was a great asset in helping me simplify the language and tame certain situations to ensure they are suitable for

teens and younger readers.

Dasguptarts also provided the artwork for a toddler's or very young children's version of the story called "Unicorns From Unimaise – The Magical Metal-Horned Tribe". It was edited by Marissa Elliott.

The illustrated book is also available as a black and white 'Read and Color' book. How cool is that? You read a chapter and then color the following illustration.

Speaking of coloring – there is also a coloring and character description book available. Final editing of that book was by Calyie Martin.

Finally, the text of the illustrated version of the book is available as a whisper-synced audio book, narrated by the multi-talented Troy Hudson. Whisper-sync allows you to enjoy the illustrations as you listen to the story.

Most of these books are available in soft and hard cover print.



Lots of readers become so enamored with the world-building efforts of certain authors that they enjoy reading about the processes that the author went through in detailing characters and places in their book. Some notable examples of this type of encyclopedic tome are "The Star Trek Star Fleet Technical Manual", "The Vampire Companion: The Official Guide To Anne Rice's Vampire Chronicles", or "The Sorcerer's Companion: A Guide to the Magical World of Harry Potter". There are many other books of this type that were written with intention of giving inquisitive readers insight into their favorite author's thoughts. Those books inspired me to compile "The MarBryn Compendium", a rather large pictorial

glossary, which delves deeper into the land of MarBryn and its characters.



Over the years, many people have taken an interest in the story of the Blue Unicorn. Britt Brundige, her mother, Sandi Johnson and I co-wrote a sweet little tale titled “The Legend of the Blue Unicorn” that is based on my original story. Britt and her dad, Jim Johnson provided the artwork for that book.



I have future plans to publish a uniquely, interesting version of the Blue Unicorn and the Metal-Horned Tribe’s story by the amazingly talented horror writer—Josh Darling. I also plan to publish an epic 4 book series about the Unicorns in MarBryn that I’m co-writing with the incredible word wizard—Luna Davis.



Last but not least - if you’re a lover of all things unicorn, you can scoop up lots of book related merchandise from my ‘Journey To Osm’ Collection at Zazzle dot com. There, you’ll find Metal Horn trading cards, mugs, stickers, tee shirts, and much, much more.

Visit sybrinablueunicornbook.com for more blue unicorn offerings. *If you would like to listen to the song “Home”, you can hear it at <https://youtu.be/CordwltbeTY>*

Happy reading to you all. . .

Sybrina Durant

I'd love to hear from you. Email me at
sybrina@sybrina.com

***All books are now (or will soon be) available at all
online bookstores. Look them up today!***