

Bauma and the Valley of the Unicorns

Bauma was six years old, and her imagination was so enormous that it barely fit inside her head. Whenever she played, a chair could become a ship, the hallway at home turned into a river full of crocodiles, and her father’s old slippers became two sleepy rabbits.

One afternoon, while she was spending a few days at her grandmother’s house, Bauma went into the garden to look for pretty stones. She found a round one, a reddish one, and another so white that it looked like a tiny piece of the moon.

She was about to go back inside when she heard a sound behind a rosebush.

—Ring-ring!

Bauma carefully moved the branches aside.

On the ground lay a golden bell. It was so small that it fit in the palm of her hand. A star was engraved on it, and a violet thread was tied around its handle.

—Where did you come from? —Bauma asked.

The bell, of course, did not answer.

The girl gave it a ring.

—Ring-ring!

At once, every flower in the garden opened its petals. Leaves began to whirl, and a violet light shone from beneath the rosebush. The glow grew larger and larger until it formed a tiny doorway.

On the other side stood a forest of blue trees.

Bauma looked back at her grandmother’s house. Then she looked at the doorway again. She could hear distant music, as though raindrops were playing little glass bells.

—I’ll only take a quick look —she decided.

She stepped through the doorway.

It closed behind her at once.

Bauma found herself in a marvellous forest. The tree trunks were blue, the leaves shone like stars, and yellow mushrooms lit the path. Transparent butterflies fluttered above her head.

Suddenly, a tiny figure shot down through the branches.

—Watch out! Make way! I don’t know how to stop!

Bauma jumped backwards.

The little figure landed headfirst inside a mushroom. Only her legs stuck out.

—Are you all right? —the girl asked.

She gently pulled her free and discovered a fairy hardly bigger than a spoon. She wore a dress made of green petals, had curly hair and silver wings.

—I’m perfectly fine —the fairy said as she dusted herself off—. Perhaps a little crooked, but perfectly fine.

—What’s your name?

—My name is Spark. I’m a messenger for the fairy queen. Well, I’m still learning to be one. And you must be the brave girl who rang the bell.

—I’m Bauma. But I didn’t know the bell was magical.

—The most magical things hardly ever look magical at first.

Spark flew around Bauma and studied her with folded arms.

—Are you six years old?

—Yes.

—Wonderful! The prophecy said that someone aged six would come.

—What prophecy?

The fairy opened her mouth to answer, but thunder rumbled through the whole forest.

The sky turned grey. The butterflies hid beneath the leaves, and the mushrooms dimmed their light.

—We don’t have much time —said Spark—. Come with me.

Bauma followed the fairy along a narrow path. They crossed a bridge made of roots and passed a pond where fish swam through the air instead of the water.

At last, they reached a clearing.

Three unicorns were waiting for them.

The first was white, with a rainbow-coloured mane. The second was small, round and orange. The third was tall and black, with a silver horn.

—This is Bauma —Spark announced.

The white unicorn lowered her head.

—Welcome to Fantasia. My name is Light.

—I’m Thunder —said the black unicorn.

The smallest unicorn trotted in a circle around Bauma.

—And I’m Honey! Can you run very fast? Do you like apples? Have you ever flown over a cloud? I once tried to bite a rainbow. It tastes like soap.

—Honey! —Light scolded him.

—What? That is important information.

Bauma laughed, but she soon noticed that the unicorns looked worried.

—Why do you need someone who is six years old?

Light pointed to a mountain rising beyond the forest. A castle stood at the top, surrounded by dark clouds.

—Fantasia was protected by the Great Star. Its light gave colour to the flowers, music to the rivers and magic to the fairies and unicorns. But early this morning, the star disappeared.

—Did someone steal it? —Bauma asked.

—We don’t know —Thunder replied—. We only found some footprints leading towards the Castle of Shadows.

Bauma gazed at the castle.

—Who lives there?

The three unicorns and Spark looked at one another.

—The Mist Giant —they answered together.

Bauma swallowed.

—Is he very wicked?

—He is very big —said Spark.

—He is very grumpy —Light added.

—And he has an enormous door —said Honey—. Enormous doors always hide important things. Or enormous cheeses.

—We don’t know whether he is wicked —Thunder explained—. No one has dared to go near the castle for many years.

Another roll of thunder shook the sky. Some of the leaves lost their colour and fell from the trees.

Bauma gripped the little bell tightly.

She was afraid, but she also knew that if they did not recover the star, that wonderful world would disappear.

—Let’s go to the castle —she said.

Light knelt so Bauma could climb onto her back. Thunder and Honey stood beside them, and Spark hid among the girl’s hair.

The unicorns began to run.

They raced through the forest. Their hooves hardly ever touched the ground. When they reached the edge of a ravine, Bauma thought they would stop.

But Light jumped.

For a few moments, they flew.

Bauma saw the whole forest beneath her feet. Beyond it were crystal mountains, golden rivers and villages with houses built inside giant pumpkins.

They landed on the other side of the ravine.

—Again! —Bauma cried.

—When we have saved Fantasia —Light promised.

The path grew narrower until they reached the River of Whispers. The water was lilac, and the bridge had vanished.

—There used to be a stone bridge here —said Thunder.

A voice rose from the river:

—You will need me to cross, but first you must give something to me.

Spark flew closer to the water.

—What do you want?

—A happy memory —the river replied.

—If we give it to you, will we forget it? —Bauma asked.

—No. Happy memories grow when they are shared.

Bauma thought of a memory. She had many: her family’s hugs, games with her friends and nights filled with stories…

At last, she knelt by the riverbank.

—I remember the day I learned to ride a bicycle. At first I kept falling off, but I didn’t give up. When I finally managed it, I felt as though I could travel anywhere.

The river began to glow. Six enormous lily pads rose from the water, making a path to the other side.

—Your memory speaks of courage —the river murmured—. You may cross.

They leapt from one lily pad to the next. Honey tried to drink a little water, and the river tickled his nose.

—Achoo! —sneezed the unicorn.

Three bubbles, a shoe and a frog wearing a crown burst from his horn.

—That has never happened before —said Honey.

—I saw nothing —the frog declared before jumping into the river.

When they reached the foot of the mountain, a wall of thorns blocked the path. The thorns were as tall as trees and twisted like snakes.

Light touched them with her horn, but her magic was too weak.

Thunder tried to force them apart, but the harder he pushed, the more tightly they tangled.

Spark scattered fairy dust over them. She only made the thorns sneeze.

—Perhaps they don’t want us to break them —said Bauma—. Perhaps they only need us to ask.

The girl stepped closer to the wall.

—Dear thorns, we must reach the castle and recover the Great Star. Would you please let us pass?

The thorns stopped moving.

A small rose bloomed in front of Bauma.

—It has been a very long time since anyone asked us kindly —said the flower.

The thorns parted and opened a tunnel.

—Thank you! —Bauma exclaimed.

—Come back whenever you wish —the rose replied—. But bring some water. It is terribly hot up here.

The group climbed the mountain until they reached the castle. Its door was even larger than they had imagined. Suns, moons and stars were carved into the wood.

Thunder knocked three times.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The door slowly opened.

Everything inside the castle was dark. Bauma rang the little bell, and a glowing orb appeared beside her.

They walked along a corridor filled with cobwebs. At the end, they found an enormous hall.

The Mist Giant stood in the middle.

He was so tall that his head almost touched the ceiling. He had a grey beard, a coat full of pockets and boots as large as boats.

The Great Star rested in his hands.

—Put down the star! —Thunder cried.

The giant turned around. His eyes were enormous, but they did not look angry. They looked sad.

—Go away —he said in a voice that made the windows tremble.

—The star does not belong to you —said Light—. Without its glow, Fantasia will disappear.

—I know.

—Then why did you steal it? —Spark asked.

The giant looked at the star. A tear rolled down his cheek and turned into mist before reaching the floor.

—I did not steal it. I found it outside the castle.

Bauma climbed down from Light’s back.

—Why did it fall from the sky?

—Because it was going out —the giant explained—. The Great Star feeds on the laughter, dreams and friendship of Fantasia’s people. But everyone has stopped sharing their magic. The fairies live only with fairies. The unicorns run only with unicorns. The goblins hide their treasures, and the mermaids sing alone.

The Great Star flickered weakly.

—I tried to keep it warm —the giant continued—, but I live alone, and I don’t have enough happy memories to light it.

Bauma walked towards him.

—Why do you live alone?

The giant lowered his head.

—Everyone is afraid of me. Whenever I go near a village, the creatures run away. No one has knocked on my door for many years.

Bauma looked at her friends. They had come to the castle expecting to find an enemy, but instead they had found someone who needed help.

—Perhaps we can light the star together —she suggested.

—How? —asked Spark.

—The river said that happy memories grow when they are shared.

Bauma placed one hand on the star and remembered the day she learned to ride her bicycle. Her courage became a small red beam of light.

Light remembered the first time she had run in the rain. A blue glow shone from her horn.

Thunder thought of his friends. A silver beam joined the others.

Honey remembered the day he had tried to taste a rainbow. His laughter filled the hall and created an orange light.

Spark remembered that even though she was still learning to fly, the queen had trusted her to carry the bell. Hundreds of green lights sparkled from her wings.

But the star still did not shine brightly enough.

—We need your memory too —Bauma told the giant.

—I don’t have any.

—I’m sure you do. Look for a small one.

The Mist Giant closed his eyes.

He remembered a night long ago when he had seen a shooting star from the castle window. He had made a wish: that one day he would find friends with whom he could share his home.

The memory rose from his heart like a violet light.

When all the lights joined together, the Great Star blazed into life.

A mighty glow poured through the windows, swept down the mountain and spread across Fantasia. The trees recovered their colours. The rivers began to sing again. The flowers opened, and the fairies felt magic return to their wings.

The Great Star soared upwards and returned to the sky.

The giant smiled.

—We did it! —Bauma shouted.

Honey began to bounce.

—A party! An adventure like this needs cakes!

That night, every creature in Fantasia gathered outside the castle. There were fairies, unicorns, goblins, mermaids wearing shoes full of water, tiny dragons and birds with star-shaped tails.

The Mist Giant prepared an extremely long table. He served cloud soup, moon biscuits and a cake so large that Honey had to climb onto it to place a cherry on top.

No one ran away from the giant. On the contrary, everyone wanted to meet him.

—You may visit us whenever you like —the fairy queen told him.

—There is room in our meadow for boots as big as yours —Light added.

The giant wept with joy. This time, his tears did not turn into mist. They became tiny stars.

When the party ended, Spark accompanied Bauma back to the magical doorway.

—Will I see you again? —the girl asked.

—Whenever Fantasia needs you, the little bell will ring —the fairy replied.

Thunder and Light bowed goodbye. Honey gave Bauma a golden apple.

—It is for the journey. Or in case you meet a hungry dragon. Or in case you are hungry. Actually, I don’t know what it is for, but it is very pretty.

Bauma hugged the three unicorns and stepped through the doorway.

She reappeared in her grandmother’s garden. The sun had not yet set, and it seemed as though only a few minutes had passed.

—Bauma, have you found any pretty stones? —her grandmother called from the window.

—Yes! And I found something much better too!

The girl opened her hand to show her the bell, but it had disappeared.

In its place was the golden apple.

That night, Bauma left it on her bedside table. Before falling asleep, she looked out of the window.

One star shone brighter than all the others. Beside it flew a tiny figure who still did not know how to stop.

—See you soon, Spark —Bauma whispered.

And from very far away, she heard a little bell.

—Ring-ring!