

The Princess of Arcana: The Lost Unicorn Sneak Peek

Chapter 1

The sun shined brightly through the trees, creating flickering speckles along the ground and warming the summer air. Sweat gathered on Bella's face as she tightened her knees on either side of her horse, Peter, encouraging him to gallop faster. Ahead of them were three round targets, each fastened to a different tree. Bella pulled an arrow from the quiver on her back and nocked it on the string of her bow, careful not to dislodge Lottie, the small axolotl riding in Bella's vest pocket. Lottie wasn't always an axolotl. As a shapeshifter, she could transform into any animal she wanted. But usually, she wanted to be an axolotl, her pink gills waving in the breeze as Bella rode.

Bella pulled back on her bow and released the arrow as she and Peter passed the first target. Before she could check to see where the arrow hit, she pulled another from her quiver and shot again at the second target. Then, once more, she fired an arrow at the last target. Finally, Bella tugged gently on Peter's reins and slowed the horse to a walk, turning him around to see how she did.

Of the three rings that made up each target, she'd hit the second ring on two of them. On the last target, Bella managed to hit the center ring – a bullseye. She grinned. Bella had been practicing shooting her bow from horseback for weeks now. Lottie wiggled excitedly in her pocket.

"I'm getting it at last, Lottie," Bella told her small friend, taking the axolotl from her pocket. Lottie danced back and forth in Bella's palm.

Then she glanced up toward the sun and briefly shifted into a mockingbird. As a mockingbird, Lottie mimicked the bells that rang in the clock tower back in the village where Bella lived. She chimed three times.

"Oh no! I'm late for my lesson." Bella stuffed Lottie, an axolotl once more, back into her pocket and spurred Peter back into a gallop, this time headed for home: the castle.

Bella rushed into the stables in the palace courtyard, quickly leading Peter to his stall, pouring him some water, and promising to return to brush him down properly after her lesson. Then she and Lottie ran toward one of the castle's tallest towers, where her magic professor waited for her.

"Princess Arabella," a stern voice called as Bella ran through the hall. She skidded to a stop as her mother, Queen Magda, stepped into view. "Where

have you been, Daughter? If I am not mistaken, your lesson began ten minutes ago.”

Bella grimaced. “Surely, as the princess, the lesson begins when I arrive, right?”

Her mother shook her head. “No. As the princess, it is your responsibility to fulfil your obligations and be where you are supposed to be, when you are supposed to be there. To respect your subjects. And look at the state of you, covered in dirt and hay and horsehair.”

Bella brushed fruitlessly at her tunic and riding pants in an attempt to clean them, though she didn’t make much difference. “Well, as you said, Mother, I am horribly late. No time to take a bath now.” And before her mother could respond, Bella ran off again, heading up the spiral staircase to the top of the tower.

Bella loved the castle when she slowed down long enough to appreciate it. Aside from all its rules, the palace itself was beautiful. Built by her great-great-great-great grandmother, the stone walls shimmered with flecks of silver and gold and were adorned with various colorful tapestries woven over the centuries. Each tower swept up toward the clouds, topped with a waving flag bearing the royal family’s colors of green and purple.

At last, Bella stumbled to the top of the staircase and through the door to the room where Professor Darro, her teacher, awaited her.

“Good afternoon, Princess,” the young man greeted her with a bow.

“Good afternoon, Darro.” Remembering her mother’s earlier admonishment, Bella returned his bow with a curtsy. “I’m sorry I’m late.”

Darro shook his head and smiled. “Apology accepted, Your Highness. Although, I do hope your tardiness doesn’t reflect your dedication to your studies. The Head Mage is particularly insistent that you learn the magical arts.”

Bella rolled her eyes. “My father is too hard on you.” Though Darro was only a few years older than Bella, he knew more about magic than anyone else in Arcana, except maybe Bella’s father, Benjamin – the Head Mage in question. “I couldn’t ask for a better teacher. Besides, I’ve learned plenty already.” To demonstrate her point, Bella concentrated and whispered, “*Give me light.*” A glowing white light bloomed from Bella’s palm. After a moment, her face relaxed and she closed her fist, snuffing out the light.

"Very good," Darro complimented her. "However, magic is much more than summoning pretty lights, Princess."

Bella smiled. "Then what will you teach me today?"

"Ah, today you practice an essential skill in the magical arts: herb gathering."

"...Oh." Bella felt her enthusiasm deflate a bit. "But, don't you have plenty of those already?" She pointed to the bunches of dried herbs hanging from Darro's ceiling, as well as several shelves containing pots and jars of different plants and potions.

"Collecting these herbs will serve as an exercise in recognizing the correct plants. And in honing your focus, my distractable pupil. It is essential that these herbs are fresh and collected with a clear, focused mind. Or else the memory spell they are used for won't work. Do you understand?"

Bella nodded. "Yes, I do. Fresh herbs, focused mind. A memory spell, you say?"

"Hmm, yes," Darro answered. "You may find it useful in remembering the time of our next lesson. Princess." He raised a single eyebrow. "Here, these are the herbs you will need, and where in the woods you can find them." Darro handed her a heavy spellbook which detailed the recipe for the memory spell. Bella took the book with good grace and rushed from the room, eager to return to the woods and complete her task.

"Perhaps you should bring guards to accompany you, or at least your uncle," Darro called after her, but Bella snorted at the suggestion. She wasn't a little kid anymore. She didn't need a babysitter. The woods were her domain, like the rest of the land would one day be.

Chapter 2

Before embarking on her quest for herbs, Bella returned to the stable to tend to Peter.

"Sorry I had to rush away," she told the horse as she brushed smooth his fur. She checked his hooves for any stones that might be stuck in the horseshoes and placed fresh hay in his stall the way her uncle, a knight of the

realm, had shown her. To make up for her neglect, she scooped extra oats into Peter's trough before bidding him goodbye. "You get some rest."

Bella decided she and Lottie could hunt for herbs on foot since she'd been riding Peter all day. Spellbook under her arm and axolotl in her pocket; Bella entered the summer-green woods and began her search. The first ingredient on the list was jasmine blossom. The picture in the book depicted delicate white flowers. Bella searched the bushes and undergrowth before finally finding the viny plant at the base of a great oak tree.

She reached to pick a blossom when Lottie squeaked in her pocket. The axolotl's eyes were closed, her expression relaxed. Focused. Right, Darro had instructed her to gather the plants with a clear head, or else they wouldn't be effective. Bella took a deep breath and tried to empty her mind, focusing only on the flowers in front of her. Then she plucked several blossoms and carefully stored them in the satchel over her shoulder.

"One down, four to go."

Next on the list was wild parsley. This would be trickier. The plant was small, green, and leafy, like much of the foliage in the forest. But the book also described a particular earthy smell to the herb, which jogged Bella's memory. She'd smelled parsley before, in the castle kitchens when she and her uncle, Kerrick, had snuck in for a snack. A few times. So, each time Bella came across a plant that could be parsley, she sniffed it first. On the third try, she knew she'd found it. Pushing away her memories of the flaky pies she and Kerrick had liberated from the kitchens, she picked a handful of stalks and placed them in her satchel beside the jasmine blossoms.

With the spellbook's help, the newt's eyes (a black and yellow berry, not literal eyeballs) and butterfly moss were not too difficult to locate. Both grew near running water, so all Bella had to do was hike to the bank of the narrow river that ran through the forest. She gathered the berries from between the river rocks and the moss from the trunks of a few willow trees growing nearby.

Lottie then decided that they should take a short break, leaping from Bella's pocket into the slow-moving river water. The axolotl dove beneath the surface, only to splash back up moments later. Bella laughed, sitting down on the riverbank to rest. To amuse her, Lottie transformed into a frog, croaking a wobbly tune, then a large golden fish, before returning to her axolotl form.

"Alright Lottie, we only have one more plant to find. We'd better get moving," Bella eventually called to her friend. Reluctantly, Lottie crawled from the river, drying herself in the tall grass before returning to Bella's pocket. Bella stood and brushed off her pants before pulling out the spellbook once more.

Dragon root was the final ingredient for the memory spell. The root itself, fat and speckled red and purple, grew underground, with only small, fiery red shoots sprouting above the surface. Bella didn't recall seeing such a plant anywhere in the woods. They'd have to search deeper for the dragon root.

For almost an hour, Bella and Lottie scoured the forest floor for the tell-tale red stems that would indicate the presence of dragon root. They wandered further into the forest than Bella had ever been before, though she kept in sight of the main trail that wove through those woods. Lottie even took to the ground in the form of a squirrel, hunting for the root.

At last, Bella heard Lottie's insistent squeaks. They'd split up to continue their search and cover more ground, but now Bella followed Lottie's chattering voice to where the squirrel had begun digging around a cluster of narrow, bright red stalks. In the breeze, they waved and looked almost like flames. Lottie shifted back to her axolotl form and returned to Bella's pocket.

"Yes!" Bella exclaimed, using her hands to dig up the dragon root. Before pulling the root free from the ground, she again remembered Darro's instructions and cleared her mind. Focusing only on gently retrieving the plant, Bella tugged it loose, brushed the dirt off to reveal the red and purple speckled flesh, and added the root to her satchel.

"That's all of them," Bella told Lottie, slinging her bag over her shoulder. "Let's head back home." The sun would set in a few hours, and Bella knew her parents would be upset if she wasn't home for dinner.

Tracking back to the main path, Bella stopped abruptly. She heard a crunch behind her, like a twig breaking under someone's foot. The woods near the castle were pretty safe, though occasionally a beast or bandit wandered too close. However, Bella and Lottie were out further from those familiar trees than they'd ever dared to explore before. Anything could be creeping up behind them.

Slowly Bella turned around, and her breath caught in her throat. She stood face to face with a unicorn.

Bella couldn't believe it. Unicorns were exceptionally rare, even in a land flowing with magic, such as Arcana. This one stood smaller than Peter, who was a full-grown horse. Perhaps it was a youngster, like Bella. Its coat shimmered a brilliant white, with a silvery, almost pearlescent mane and tale. And of course, it had a swirling iridescent horn protruding a few inches from its forehead. The unicorn blinked its golden eyes at Bella, acknowledging her presence.

Bella stepped toward it and felt Lottie squirming nervously in her pocket. The unicorn was a wild animal, after all. But Bella wasn't afraid. The unicorn didn't seem dangerous... just a little sad?

Some magicians could communicate with animals using their senses and emotions. That was how Bella often knew what Lottie wanted or felt. So, as Darro had shown her, Bella reached out with her mind, trying to understand what the unicorn was doing here. And why it might be sad.

A wave of thoughts and feelings washed over Bella, more powerful than she'd ever experienced. Her mind filled with a whirlwind of colors and music. The unicorn snorted, and a word appeared in Bella's mind – somewhere between a thought and an image in front of her eyes: Veracity. It repeated again and again.

"Veracity?" Bella asked. "Is that your name?" She looked at the unicorn, who nodded her head.

Bella wondered if anyone had ever communicated with a unicorn like this before. They were much more powerful than any other magical creatures Bella had encountered or read about. Darro hadn't mentioned it in his lessons, though unicorns were so rare, he probably never thought Bella would meet one. Bella was certainly surprised.

"I'm Arabella," Bella told the unicorn. Should she curtsy? Her mother would probably want her to. Bella wanted to show this magnificent creature respect. But she also wanted them to be friends. She decided against the curtsy. "I'm the princess of Arcana. But you can just call me Bella."

Veracity moved closer to Bella, brushing her head against Bella's shoulder. Bella gently reached out to stroke Veracity's nose, finding it velvety soft. She reached out again with her mind.

"You seem sad, Veracity. Would you mind telling me what's wrong? Maybe I can help."

In her mind, Bella saw a vast stretch of trees, maybe as large as the whole forest. And all alone in the center was one small unicorn. Veracity. Bella felt an emptiness in her chest.

“Oh, you’re lonely. Hey, it’s okay. You’re not alone anymore.” Bella wrapped her arms around Veracity’s neck, trying to comfort her. “But, where’s your family?” Bella figured Veracity must have parents somewhere out there, since she was still a young unicorn herself.

Veracity stiffened and backed away from Bella. Images of thick, black smoke billowed in Bella’s head, blotting out the whole forest. A wildfire. Terrified whinnies sounded in Bella’s mind. Was this a memory? Veracity’s memory? Bella saw a herd of beautiful unicorns, their coats a mix of silver, white, and pale gold, all running away. Running from the flames until they got further and further, out of sight.

Bella blinked away the vision. “Oh, Veracity! I’m so sorry that happened.”

Bella didn’t recall any word of recent wildfires near the castle, nor could she smell any traces of lingering wood smoke in the air or spot any burned trees. The fire must have been very far away, and maybe a while ago now. Veracity had been separated from her family and spent all that time alone.

“I’m going to find a way to help you,” Bella told the unicorn. She looked around, as if she’d be able to spot a solution, or maybe Veracity’s family, hiding in the woods. No such luck. From what Veracity shared with Bella, her herd was far from here. Bella got the feeling Veracity was lost. “I’ll ask my parents if they have any ideas. Between the two of them, they know pretty much everything. And I will come back for you, okay?” Bella promised.

Veracity knickered softly, pressing against Bella’s hands again. Bella felt calmer. A sense of trust came from the unicorn. They were in this together now.