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Opening extract from

Pip Bartlett's Guide to Magical Creatures

Written by

Maggie Stiefvater and Jackson Pearce

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PROLOGUE

The Unicorn Incident

The Unicorns arrived right after the buses.

I could just see them from my classroom window if I leaned really far over my desk and craned my neck. The trailers they came in had the words *EverSun Unicorn Farms* printed on the side. If I leaned farther—

"Pip!" my father said as my elbow accidentally knocked a box of rocks onto the ground.

"Whoops," I replied in a sorry sort of way and ducked to collect them.

My father didn't normally come to school with me. But today was Career Day. The halls and classrooms were full of mothers and fathers eager to talk about their jobs. Both of my parents were geologists, which was why Dad had brought the box of rocks (he called them *geodes*) to show my classmates. Studying rocks wasn't really my thing, but I felt like my dad was still a lot cooler than the parent who made zippers.

But let's face it—*nothing* was as cool as the Unicorns.

Through the window, I saw a woman in a bright blue shirt unload the first Unicorn. It felt a little like my heart and brain were exploding into Unicorn-shaped fireworks. Thanks to my favorite book, *Jeffrey Higgleston's Guide to Magical Creatures* (which I happened to have in my backpack right at that moment), I knew all about Unicorns.

I didn't get to see Unicorns all that often—they were pretty rare in the middle of Atlanta. This particular Unicorn was all shimmery, with a sunshine-colored mane and dark, rolling eyes. As it pranced over the asphalt, sparks flew up from beneath its butter-colored hooves.

"Oh, Unicorns!" my father said in the same voice I used whenever he showed me some new sort of rock—which is to say, he was trying his hardest to sound interested, but in the end, animals just weren't his thing. "How exciting. Who do they belong to?"

I pointed to Marisol Barrera, who sat four seats away from me. My father made an approving noise. Everyone approved of Marisol. She never had chocolate on her cheek. She remembered to brush her hair. Her handwriting was neat. The corners of her homework folders were never crumpled. She wore a blue shirt that matched her mother's, with a tiny, colorful EverSun logo.

Unicorn



SIZE: 30-80"
WEIGHT: 400-3,200 lbs.
DESCRIPTION: Of all of the magical animals, the Unicorn is the most famous, and rightly so. This noble and bold creature comes in all shapes and colors, boasts populations on every continent, and has been the stuff of legend for centuries. These vibrant companions are prized for their looks and

I tried to sit up straighter, like Marisol, but my backbone couldn't sort out how to do it. I ended up slouching.

Oh, well. At least there was one thing I could do that Marisol couldn't. I didn't think *anyone* else could do it, actually. I could talk to magical creatures. *And they could understand me.*

No one believed me about this, unfortunately. Also, I didn't get a lot of practice with it, since the building where I lived didn't allow animals of any kind—even magical ones.

I hadn't ever gotten to talk to a Unicorn before.

"All right, everyone!" Mr. Dyatlov, our teacher, called. "We're going to line up in an *orderly fashion* to see some of the careers outdoors. Let's show our parents how good we can be!"

Mr. Dyatlov was all about orderly. Everything about him was a straight line—his haircut, his mustache, his tie, even his mouth. We learned pretty early in the school year that life was easier if you were as orderly as possible, so we lined up as straight as his eyebrows. In only minutes I'd be face-to-face with the Unicorns. I tried not to dance too much in line, but even after I convinced my heart to stop thumping, my feet kept tapping.

I couldn't be calm!

Especially not once we got to the parking lot, which was full of unusual things. An antiques dealer had brought a very old, strange-looking car. A florist stood beside a van with a pop-up tent full of flowers. A chef dad had set up a grill. A group of moms played stringed instruments. My father set up his box of geodes, which a bunch of my friends were already peeking into. Dad looked pleased, like he'd hatched the rocks instead of finding them.

I counted the Unicorns. There were eight of them! Marisol's mom and dad and their twin grown-up daughters each held the leads of two Unicorns. They looked regal and beautiful. The Barreras, I mean—they were the adult versions of Marisol, all polished and well dressed and wearing clothes that looked like they'd just had the tags popped off.

The Unicorns? Well. They looked *magical*.

"Students! Students!" Mr. Dyatlov said. "Remember—we each need to rotate to every station. And what's the Outdoor Time rule?"

"No running, no going off on our own, and wash our hands when we get back inside!" we all repeated obediently. Satisfied, Mr. Dyatlov waved us off, and we all walked—very, very, very fast—to our first stations.

Obviously, I was going to the Unicorns first. It worked

out pretty well too, since the chef parent was luring everyone in his direction with hot-off-the-griddle pancakes. I would have some time at the Unicorn station by myself!

"Hi there!" Marisol's mom said, smiling at me as I approached. "Do you think you want to raise Unicorns when you grow up?"

"Yes! I mean, maybe! I mean, I don't know—I just love Unicorns! All animals, really," I said breathlessly, gazing at the eight Unicorns. They were each just a little different—a pink mane on this one, a green one on that one. Their hooves were different colors too, and while they all had light-colored bodies, some were a bluish shade and others were more peachy. They each had a perfectly spiraled, pearly horn sprouting from the center of their foreheads.

"It's the strongest substance on earth, you know," one of Marisol's sisters said when she saw me staring at the nearest Unicorn's horn.

"I know! Can I touch it?" I asked.

"Sure!" Ms. Barrera said, but she didn't understand—I wasn't asking *her* permission. I was asking the Unicorn's.

"Always nice to meet a fan," the Unicorn said in a deep male voice. Then he snorted a bit and lowered his head. Since the Barreras couldn't hear what the Unicorn said to me—I was the only one who could—they looked a

little surprised that he was letting me touch him. But I had asked nicely, after all. I reached out and touched the edge of the horn. It felt like the inside of a seashell.

The Unicorn snorted and lifted back up. His liquid eyes of dark magic had turned into liquid eyes of faint disapproval as he observed my untied shoes and wild hair. I guess he was used to people like the Barreras.

He said, "All right, that's enough. They just polished it. I don't want you to get it *grimy*."

"Oh. Sorry," I said.

"For what, dear?" Ms. Barrera said.

"I think I bothered your Unicorn," I told her.

Ms. Barrera chuckled. "Don't mind Fortnight. He's the oldest member of our herd—he can be a little moody. Melody, bring Raindancer over here! She's a little more kid-friendly."

Raindancer whinnied happily as she was led forward. "Oh, yay! Look! Now everyone will see my tail!" The other Unicorns muttered and rolled their eyes as she made a show of swishing her tail back and forth. But it *was* a very impressive tail—all ringlet-shaped, turquoise curls.

"It's very pretty!" I said.

"*Thank you!*" Raindancer replied. "They spent all morning curling it to test the style before our next show. I think it suits me, don't you?"

"Definitely," I said. "Can they do your mane like that too?"

"That would take *hours*," Raindancer told me. "I can't stand still that long!"

I knew exactly how she felt. "Me neither."

The Barreras eyed me. Of course, they couldn't hear Raindancer's side of the conversation, so I seemed to be talking to myself.

"She was telling me about her tail," I explained.

"Of course she was," Ms. Barrera said politely. But she was wearing the eyebrows-raised, half smile that meant, *This child is crazy*. I wished I could get used to that face, but I never did. Magical creatures were a lot more accepting of my power than other humans were. Why couldn't people just believe me?

"Rotate stations!" Mr. Dyatlov called out, and everyone began to shuffle around. A big group of Marisol and about six other kids hurried over from the pancake station. I should have moved on to the dad who had brought a blowtorch and welding mask, but I pretended like I hadn't heard Mr. Dyatlov and stayed with the Unicorns.

"They're amazing, Marisol!" someone called out.

"Thanks!" Marisol said.

The appearance of so many kids definitely affected the Unicorns. They began tossing their heads and blowing out

their nostrils, revealing rainbow-colored skin inside. One of them said, "Look at me!" and another said, "No, look at *me*!" Even Fortnight half reared and said in a low voice, "No, they are all looking at *me*."

I hadn't ever realized that show Unicorns were really *show-off* Unicorns.

Raindancer was thrashing her ringlet-filled tail and craning her neck to check if anyone had noticed it yet. She shoved her muzzle against my arm. "You there—you! The one who can talk to us. Ask those children what they think of my tail!"

I wasn't really great at talking in front of lots of people, but this was basically my first Unicorn encounter, and I didn't want to disappoint her. Raising my voice, I asked, "Hey, everyone! What do you think of that Unicorn's tail?"

But everyone was pelting the Barreras with questions. No one heard me. Raindancer flipped her mane in irritation. As the children got louder, the Unicorns did too. "Child! Child! Look at me! Look over here! No, here! Child!"

Marisol tugged on her mother's hand. "Mom, can my friends go for a ride on Fortnight?"

Ms. Barrera shook her head. "I don't think that's a good idea. Maybe *you* could take him around the courtyard, just to show everyone."

"Not *him*!" shouted four of the Unicorns in unison. "Pick *me*!"

Mr. Barrera switched Fortnight's simple halter for a special silver bridle with a cutout for the horn. As Ms. Barrera gave Marisol a leg up, Fortnight chewed thoughtfully on the bit, which looked as if it was made out of crystal. He didn't seem at all concerned that Marisol might be grimy. Seated on the back of the biggest, most beautiful Unicorn of them all, Marisol looked like an honest-to-goodness princess.

Everyone was looking at her.

"Can she make him run?" one of my classmates shouted.

"*Run?* Not exactly. Unicorns have five gaits, unlike horses, which only have four," Ms. Barrera said. "They are called *walk*, *prance*, *mince*, *frolic*, and *gallop*. I think it's only safe for walking and prancing in a crowd like this."

Marisol and Fortnight began to prance. It was so beautiful I had to close and unclose my hands into fists a bunch of times to distract myself. I had thought everyone was looking at her before. But now all eyes were *really* on her.

Raindancer punched my arm with her muzzle again. "Hey! You! Child-talker!"

"That hurts," I told her, even though it didn't.

"Look at how they're all watching him," Raindancer complained. "That should be me! Tell them it should be me!"

"No one listens to me," I said. Fortnight had gotten a little excited with all of the attention and had begun to mince, but Marisol expertly reined him back in.

"Me either!" Raindancer's hooves clattered. Sparks flew up. "Child-talker! Climb onto my back! We'll show them!"

Climb onto my back!

I knew it was a terrible idea. But—but—*riding a Unicorn*. I'd only read about it in the *Guide*. When would I ever get another chance to actually *do* it?

My mother was always telling me, *Think twice, act once.*

And I *was* thinking. I really was. But it was hard to think about anything other than riding a Unicorn, especially while Raindancer was saying, louder and louder, "Do-it-do-it-do-it-do-it-do-it—"

I thought twice and acted once. Raindancer ducked down and I scrambled onto her back.

She shouted, "Hold on to my mane, grimy Child-talker!"

I just had time to grab two big fistfuls of her swimming-pool-colored mane before she reared and sang out a whinny.

Now all eyes were on *us*.

"What are you doing?" snapped Fortnight, nearly unseating Marisol. "This is my moment! Get back to the others, you silly filly!"

"SILLY FILLY?" roared Raindancer. "Watch this!"

She plunged forward. I wasn't sure what gait she had selected, but it felt a lot speedier than a prance or a mince. It was definitely either a frolic or a gallop. I could see the fancy old car and the pancake grills and the florist van getting farther away than I wanted—

"We have to stay in the courtyard!" I urged her, clinging on tightly to her mane.

"Oh, right-right-right," she sang out. Slowing, she wheeled back toward the crowd, frolicking in an enormous, beautiful circle. Her ringlet tail snapped behind her. The wind cascaded over my ears and whipped at my ponytail. It felt like I was flying. I could just glimpse the envious gazes of my classmates.

It was the best day ever.

"Pip!"

I thought I heard my name, but it was lost in the joyful rush of air. I imagined that I too looked like a princess, as Raindancer whirled her ringlets once more.

"I am the most beautiful-beautiful-beautiful!" she called, in time with her hoofbeats.