

Once Upon a  
Cloudtop Meadow

---

Inal Bilsel

This book is distributed exclusively as part of the digital release of *Once Upon a Cloudtop Meadow* and is not available as a standalone publication. No part of this book may be reproduced, or transmitted in any form or by any means – electronic, mechanical, photocopying, or otherwise – without prior written permission from the author or copyright holder, except in the case of brief quotations for the purpose of reviews or commentary.

© Inal Bilsel, 2025  
All rights reserved.

### **Disclaimer**

This book is a work of fiction and is intended for entertainment purposes only.

It has not been reviewed or approved by any psychological or educational authority. Parents or guardians are encouraged to review the content before sharing it with young readers to determine its suitability.

### **First Edition**

March 2025

For inquiries, contact:  
[inalbilsel@gmail.com](mailto:inalbilsel@gmail.com)

For more information, visit [www.inalbilsel.com](http://www.inalbilsel.com)

Once Upon a  
Cloudtop Meadow



Inal Bilsel

## **A Note to the Reader**

This work is distributed exclusively as part of the digital release of *Once Upon a Cloudtop Meadow* and is not available as a standalone publication.

Rather than a traditional book, it serves as a companion to the album, designed to enhance the listening experience by providing a narrative that unfolds alongside the compositions.

To fully immerse yourself in this story, it is recommended to experience it in conjunction with the music.

Inal Bilsel

*Nicosia, March 2025*

# Contents

Once Upon a Time .....	6
Sleepwalker .....	9
Meet Cloudman.....	12
A Night at the Cloudtop Imaginarium.....	17
A is for “Aga” .....	23
Berceuse For Lulu.....	31
Into The Forest.....	41
K’yango’s Lament .....	47
The Secret Recipe.....	52
Wise Old Druid .....	60
Until Next Time.....	68
Epilogue.....	73

# I

## Once Upon a Time



nce upon a time, there was a place above the clouds—a world so wondrous it could only be discovered by the most curious of hearts. It was a realm of mist and marvels, where clouds formed pathways as soft as pillows, and every corner promised a new curiosity or adventure. Here, huts, creatures of every size, shape, and colour, and even entire forests floated gracefully upon the fluffy clouds.

Over at the distance stood the *Cloudtop Palace*, a towering structure of shifting shapes. No one truly knew what secrets it held. Some said the palace housed a *Hall of Seven Doors*, each one leading to a realm stranger and more wonderful than the last. Others claimed the palace was home to the *Dream Master*, who, according to a legend, crafted the dreams of every child in the world, and sending them down to earth on the backs of shooting stars. But these were

only rumours, and no one – not even *Lulu* – had ever ventured inside the palace to see for herself.

Every night, Lulu would climb over the familiar cloudtop meadow where her adventures always began.

She was never alone for long, for her dearest companion was always waiting for her. The *Cloudman*, her trusted guide and fellow adventurer, was a figure of ever-changing mist and soft, swirling vapor. His form was as mysterious as the world he belonged to. He was a keeper of secrets, a teller of tales, and a boundless well of curiosity. But most of all, he was Lulu's friend. "Another night, another adventure" he would say each time she arrived.

Together, Lulu and Cloudman would wander through the *Cloudtop Meadow*, visiting the floating huts, where peculiar creatures made cups of tea. They gazed in awe at the palace, speculating about what lay behind the Seven Doors. Sometimes they would chase floating lanterns that carried stray dreams too wild to be sent down to earth...

And so, dear reader, this is where our tale begins – not with a waking world of ordinary days, but with a sleeping girl and a realm of endless possibility.

Until next time... keep your gaze cloud-bound.







## II

# Sleepwalker



n a cold winter night, when the moonlight twirled like a curious kitten across the rooftops, so did Lulu sleepwalk, led by her dreams. She quietly tiptoed across the floor, drifted down the stairs, and slipped out the door. With each soft step, the world grew stranger, for there, gleaming under the silvery sky, was the most peculiar thing—a towering beanstalk, not of vines and leaves, but of spinning gears, huffing steam, and gleaming brass.

It stretched into the heavens, puffing gentle clouds from its sides. A sign—written in letters that curled and twisted—read:

*The Beanstalk Elevator—Climb to the Clouds*

*No Ticket Needed!*

Without a thought, Lulu climbed inside the elevator, and with a whirr and a puff, up, up, up she went until the clouds themselves gathered around her like a soft, fluffy blanket. The elevator came to a gentle stop with a final hiss of steam, and the doors opened to reveal a shimmering world made entirely of mist and clouds. There, in the cloud-kissed land, Lulu would wander, her bare feet leaving traces that vanished as quickly as they appeared.

And every night, just as the first light of dawn began to peek through the horizon, the elevator would carry her back down, down, down, to her cosy little bed, where she would wake up, none the wiser to her nightly adventures.

The moon giggled, for it knew that Lulu's journey was far from over... and the beanstalk elevator would always be waiting for her next sleepy step.





### III

## Meet Cloudman



hen the great brass doors of the beanstalk elevator slide open, Lulu stepped into the cloudtops, her bare feet sinking softly into the mist. "Cloudman?" Lulu called into the endless whiteness resembling that of a meadow, her voice echoing faintly. "Cloudman! Where are you?"

A gust of wind swirled around her, swaying her hair, and Lulu turned quickly, peering into the haze. "Cloudman, where are you!" she said louder, her hands resting firmly on her hips. And then, with a burst of soft laughter he appeared – right behind her. "Looking for me?" he said, while touching her shoulder with his index finger. Lulu startled and spun around, nearly tumbling over. "Cloudman! *Don't* do that!" she scolded, though a giggle escaped her. He grinned (or, at least, his face shaped itself into a grin).

The Cloudman was tall and ever-shifting, his body made entirely of fluff and vapor, with swirls of stormy gray and wisps of pale white that drifted and reformed with every movement. His eyes, glowing softly twinkled with mischief. "Couldn't resist," he said, tipping an imaginary hat made of condensed mist. "Now then, Lulu, what's the first rule of the cloudtops?"

"Don't walk off the edge unless you want to land on a rooftop," she recited dutifully.

"Exactly. And what's the second rule?"

"Always stick with Cloudman," she said with a smile, "because he knows all the best places."

"Smart girl. Speaking of which," Cloudman said, leaning closer, his voice lowering to a whisper, "I've got quite the adventure in store for you tonight." Lulu's eyes lit up. "Where are we going?"

*"The Cloudtop Imaginarium, where ideas take form and come alive, where dreams are painted in every colour imaginable, and where creativity bursts into the air like fireworks. Tonight, Lulu, we're going to step into the minds of dreamers and see wonders beyond your wildest imagination."*

Lulu gasped. "The Cloudtop Imaginarium? Is it really real?"

"Oh, it's real, but it's not a place you can find unless it wants to be found," said Cloudman, his form shimmering faintly in excitement. "It's a realm of oddities and marvels—where the thoughts of the most creative beings take shape, and you can wander inside their worlds. It's... a little strange, I won't lie, but it's the good kind of strange."

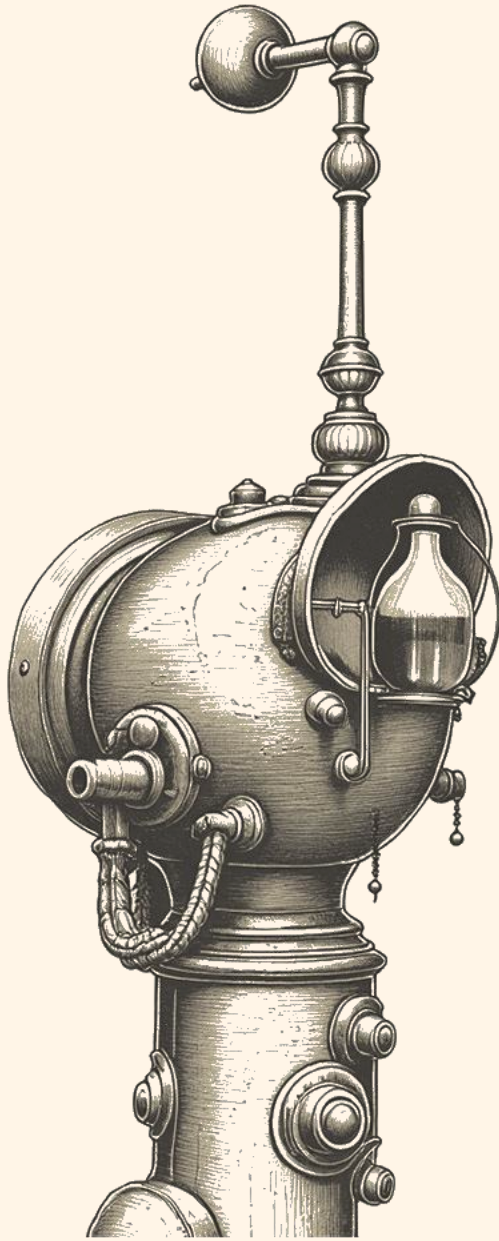
Lulu's curiosity bubbled over like a pot of boiling tea. "Well, what are we waiting for? Let's go!" Cloudman chuckled, holding out a hand. "Hold tight. It's not exactly a straight line from here to there."

Lulu clasped his hand, and together they stepped forward into the mist. As they walked, the clouds swirled and shifted around them.









## IV

# A Night at the Cloudtop Imaginarium



he mist curled around Lulu and Cloudman as they walked through the clouds. Lulu began to notice strange things floating past—tiny dancing figures made of fireflies, books that opened and shut like fluttering birds, and shapes that changed every time she blinked.

"Are we there yet?" Lulu asked, her voice tinged with excitement and impatience. "Patience," said Cloudman with a grin. "The Imaginarium always knows when to make its grand entrance."

And just as he spoke, the air seemed to shimmer. Colours spilled out of nowhere, bright and impossibly vibrant, spreading like spilled ink across the sky. A grand, arched doorway emerged from the mist, its

surface covered in swirling patterns that sparkled and shifted as if alive. Above the door, in letters made of stardust, was written:

### Cloudbottom Imaginarium

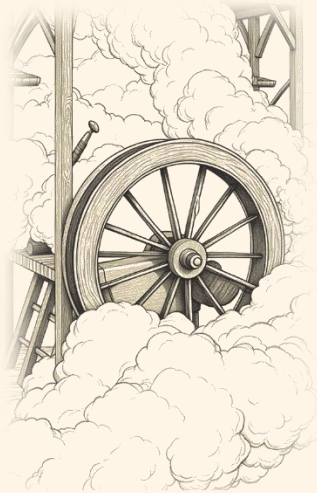
Lulu's breath caught in her throat. "It's... beautiful."

"Just wait until you see inside," said Cloudman, his glowing eyes alight with mischief. He gave her a wink and pushed the door open.

Inside, the world exploded into life – a kaleidoscope of sights and sounds. Paintings painted themselves midair, while sculptures grew like flowers from the ground and music wove itself into shapes that danced and twirled. Lulu saw doors that opened to miniature worlds, glowing fountains that bubbled with liquid colours, and figures who looked

like they were made entirely of paper. Lulu's eyes grew wide open. "Cloudman," she whispered, "I think this might be the most magical place I've ever seen." Cloudman gave her a misty grin. "And we've only just begun."

A great glass dome crowned the central tower, and beneath it, gears turned and buzzed,



powering the unending wonders within. All around, the air was alive with magic. Little creatures, soft and round, floated on bubbles, their tiny wings flapping. Hand in hand, they followed the golden path toward the towering building. As they walked, Lulu marvelled at the smaller oddities scattered along the way: a telescope taller than a tree, its lens rotating on its own to gaze at the stars; a tiny forest of miniature trees that hummed with the sound of wind chimes; and a creature with strange antlers nodded politely as they passed.

Finally, they reached the great arching door of the Imaginarium. It was made of polished brass and adorned with carvings of creatures and shapes that seemed to move when Lulu wasn't looking directly at them. Lulu turned to Cloudman, her face alight with wonder. "Where do we start?" Cloudman chuckled, his misty form billowing with delight. "The Imaginarium has its own ideas about that. Follow me and keep your eyes open – everything here has a story to tell, and some of them might just talk back!"

As they wandered deeper into the Imaginarium, Lulu could feel the very air hum with creativity, as if the walls themselves were alive with possibilities. Each step brought a new wonder: a doorway that opened into a galaxy swirling with stars, a hallway lined with books that whispered their contents into the air, and a

room filled with sculptures that laughed as they reshaped themselves into new forms.

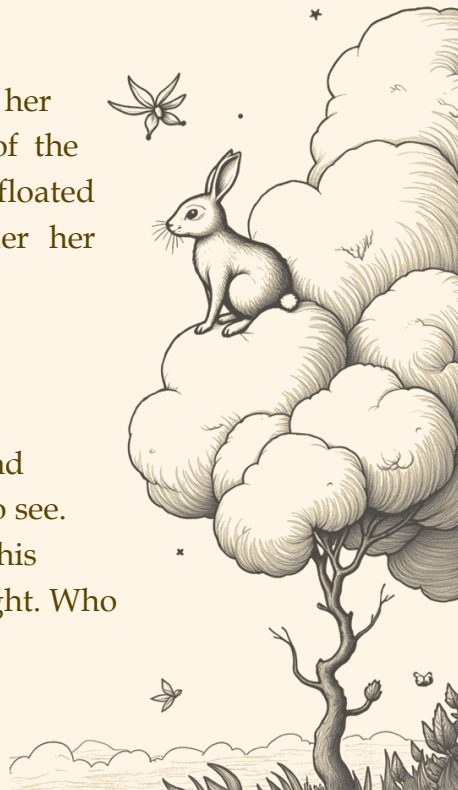
Cloudman led her to a grand chamber where a glowing carousel spun in slow, lazy circles. Instead of horses, its riders were... ideas. Lulu watched, entranced, as one of the ideas leapt off the carousel and burst into a tiny fireworks display before dissolving into the air. "This," said Cloudman, his voice soft with awe, "is where creativity is born, Lulu.

The Imaginarium takes the sparks of imagination and brings them to life.

Lulu reached out, her fingers brushing one of the glowing ideas as it floated past. It hummed under her touch, warm and alive.

"How interesting," she whispered.

Cloudman smiled. "And there's so much more to see. But remember, Lulu – this place changes every night. Who knows what wonders tomorrow will bring?"



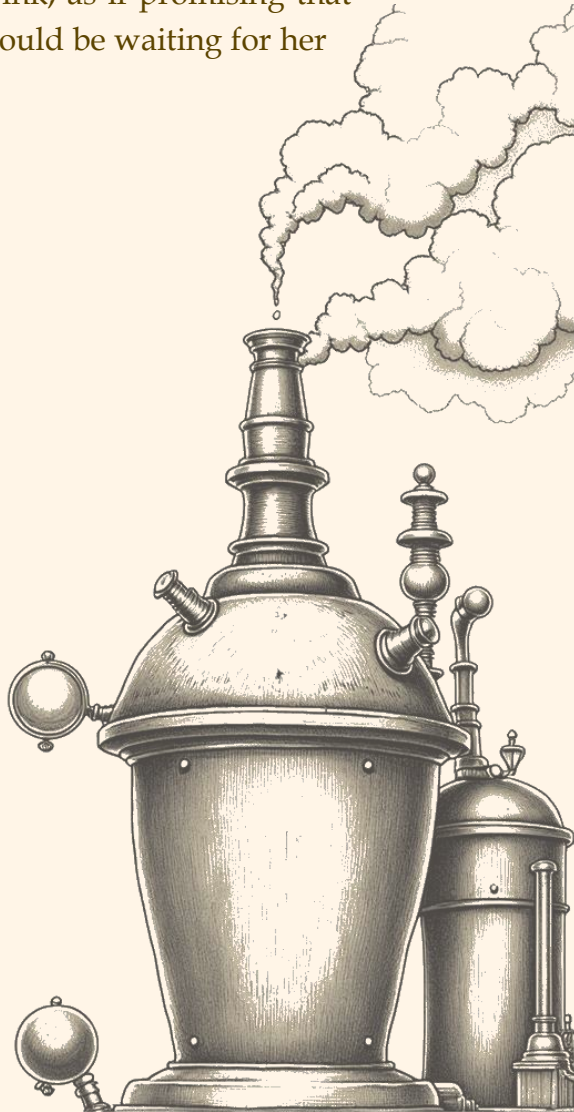
Lulu nodded, her heart swelling with curiosity and joy. The Cloudtop Imaginarium was a world of infinite possibilities, and she couldn't wait to explore every corner of it. As the golden path stretched onward, disappearing into the mist, Lulu and the Cloudman stepped forward, ready to uncover whatever secrets the Imaginarium had in store.

Inside, they had lost themselves in wonder, hours slipping away unnoticed as they explored the impossible and the extraordinary.

As the first pale hues of dawn began to stretch across the horizon, Lulu and Cloudman emerged from the shimmering doors of the Imaginarium, their laughter echoing in the quiet of the cloudtops. As it always happened after their adventures, Lulu slipped in and out of unconsciousness, faintly aware of her bed and the soft touch of the clouds beneath her little feet.

She knew it was time to go, as she was getting rested and ready for the day ahead. Reluctantly, she turned to Cloudman, who gave her an understanding nod and a smile. With a final glance at the Imaginarium's spires disappearing into the morning light, Lulu took Cloudman's hand one last time, and together they walked back to the waiting steam-powered beanstalk elevator.

As the brass doors closed behind her, carrying her gently down to the waking world, the stars above seemed to wink, as if promising that the clouds would be waiting for her return.





## V

### A is for “Aga”



he lair was dark and cool, with walls of glittering emerald stone that sparkled faintly under the light of a single glowing crystal. Lulu tiptoed through the winding corridors, her every step careful and quiet as she made her way toward *Aga's* den. *Aga* was already waiting for her, lounging on a pile of soft mismatched cushions.

“Lulu!” whispered *Aga*, his voice was warm and familiar. She was humanoid in shape, with the sleek green scales of an alligator and eyes that gleamed with mischievousness. Lulu grinned back and waved. *Aga* wasn't her friend's real name, of course, but it was the one Lulu had given her. It all started when Lulu had been watching phonetics songs on television. One particular tune had stuck in her mind—a cheerful melody that repeated, “A - A - A - Alligator!” But little Lulu, too young to grasp the full word, had

enthusiastically sung along with her own version: “A - A - A - Aga!” From that moment, the name had stuck, and the alligator had worn it proudly ever since.

“We need to be quiet,” Lulu whispered, glancing nervously toward the deeper shadows of the lair. “Is it still sleeping?”

Aga nodded, her long tail swishing softly behind her. “For now,” he said, “but we’ll have to move fast. You know how the dragon hates being disturbed.”

The dragon, a slumbering beast of scales and smoke, lay curled in a cavern just beyond Aga’s den. Its snores rumbled like distant thunder, and occasionally, a puff of smoke would escape its nostrils. Lulu had never seen the dragon fully awake, and she didn’t intend to now.

“Ready?” Lulu asked, holding out her hand.

Aga nodded, slipping his clawed fingers into Lulu’s. “Let’s go.”

Together, they crept through the winding passages of the lair, their footsteps barely audible over the dragon’s rumbling snores.

“Almost there,” Aga whispered as they neared the final tunnel.



But just as they reached the exit, a sharp snort echoed through the cavern. Lulu froze, her heart pounding. Behind them, the dragon shifted, one massive eye cracking open to reveal a giant pupil.

“It’s waking up!” Lulu whispered urgently.

“Run!” shouted Aga, abandoning all attempts at stealth.

The two bolted through the tunnel, their feet pounding against the stone as the dragon let out a deafening roar. Smoke billowed through the air, and Lulu could feel the heat of its breath on her heels. They ran as fast as they could, the exit growing closer with every step.

“Faster, faster!” Aga cried, his voice tinged with both terror and exhilaration.

With a final leap, they burst out into the open air just as a great plume of smoke erupted behind them. The dragon’s roar faded as they tumbled onto the soft cloudscape outside, both gasping for breath and laughing with relief.

Waiting for them, leaning casually against his white car, was Cloudman. The vehicle was a peculiar contraption made of swirling vapor and bits of brass, with wheels that didn’t quite touch the ground.

“Trouble with the dragon again?” Cloudman asked, raising an eyebrow.



“Just a little,” Lulu said, moving on while avoiding eye contact.

“You know how grumpy it gets,” Aga added with a grin, still catching his breath.

“Well, hop in,” said Cloudman while opening the door. “We’ve got somewhere special to be.”

The doors swung open with a soft whoosh, and the three of them climbed inside. As soon as Cloudman tapped the dashboard, the car purred to life, rising gently into the sky. It zipped through the cloudtops, leaving trails of shimmering mist in its wake, towards their destination: the *Clouddaurant*, a floating restaurant.

A song crackled through the speakers, a steady, groovy beat filling the air. “I was born yesterday, when they brought my Kamakiri,” Cloudman began to sing – quite badly and out of tune. “When they handed me the keys...”

Aga’s face contorted in sheer displeasure. “Yuck. What is this granddaddy music?” Cloudman spun his head in shock, as if Aga had just insulted the very foundation of civilization itself.

“What?! Why, this is Donald Fagen! A masterpiece!” The music continued. “It’s a steam-powered ten...” Lulu and Aga giggled at the back, exchanging knowing glances. “You and my dad would get along when it comes to music,” Lulu teased.

“But not with you?” Cloudman shot back, his misty face stretching into a mischievous grin. Lulu met his gaze through the rear window, then simply shook her head slowly, her face a perfect picture of exaggerated disappointment. Cloudman gasped dramatically, clutching his chest. “Oh, the betrayal.”

The car continued drifting through the sky, the music carrying them toward the Cloudaurant, where an even stranger adventure awaited. From the speakers, Fagen’s voice sailed smoothly through the clouds – “Steamin’ up that Trans-Island Skyway...”

The Cloudaurant was a dazzling sight, with shining tables and chairs made of glass, and mechanical automaton waiters made of static faces and tons of gears.

The menu here was legendary for its oddities, where nothing tasted the way it looked. Sweets were salty, savoury dishes were sweet, and the colours of the food gave no hint of their flavour.

“I’ll take the *rainbow soup*,” Lulu said, eyeing a steaming bowl filled with shimmering colours.

“And I’ll have the chocolate pudding,” Aga added, though he glanced suspiciously at the greenish hue of the dish.

Cloudman ordered a plate of what looked like ordinary pancakes but turned out to taste like a spinach salad.

The three of them spent the day in laughter, each bite bringing a new surprise. Lulu giggled as her soup turned out to taste like roast beef, while Aga nearly spat out her “chocolate pudding,” which tasted exactly like dill pickles. Cloudman, ever the adventurer, declared that the pancakes were “refreshing.”

As the sun dipped lower in the sky, their meal drew to a close, but the laughter lingered long after the plates had been cleared. For Lulu, Aga, and Cloudman, it had been a day full of surprises, and as they climbed back into the cloudcar, Lulu could feel the familiar sensation of waking up to a new day.







## VI

### Berceuse For Lulu



ulu knocked on Cloudman's door one bright afternoon, the floating rock beneath her feet swaying gently on the breeze. The door swung open almost immediately, and there was Cloudman, practically glowing with excitement. "Ah, Lulu! Just in time, I have a special surprise for you today."

"What kind of surprise?" Lulu asked, her curiosity piqued. Cloudman leaned down and whispered, "We're going to visit the Maestro Somnus."

"Maestro Somnus?" Lulu repeated, her brow wrinkling.

"Indeed! He's the one who organizes all the lullabies. Keeps track of them, preserves the old ones, and even makes new ones for special occasions." Cloudman straightened up and winked. "Today, we're his special occasion."

Before Lulu could fully process this, Cloudman ushered her into the cloudcar. It hummed to life, its vapor wheels spinning lazily as they rose into the sky. The car zipped over the soft expanse of the Cloudtop meadows, its path tracing the golden glow of the late afternoon light.

The house of Maestro Somnus lay at the very edge of the magical forest, just where the trees began to thin, and the mist swirled around the ground. The house itself was astonishingly small—so tiny, in fact, that Lulu wasn't sure how anyone could fit inside. It was no bigger than a mushroom cap, its walls made of brass that shone faintly in the dim light.

“How do we get in?” Lulu asked, peering at the little door, which was no taller than her knee.

“We wait” Cloudman said simply.

Just then, the door creaked open and out stepped the Maestro Somnus—a curious little figure no taller than Lulu's hand. He wore a patchwork coat of mismatched fabrics, and his face was hidden beneath a wide-brimmed hat that drooped over his eyes.



“Cloudman,” the Maestro Somnus said in a voice that was unexpectedly deep for his size. “And Lulu, of course. I’ve been expecting you.”

He raised a hand, and a strange sensation washed over Lulu. The world seemed to stretch and blur, the trees rising higher and higher until they loomed like skyscrapers above her. No—she realized—they weren’t growing. She was shrinking.

In moments, she was no bigger than a dandelion seed, standing beside Cloudman at the entrance to the Maestro Somnus’s house.

“Come along,” the Maestro Somnus said, gesturing them inside.

The interior of the house was nothing like Lulu expected. Instead of walls and furniture, it was a miniature forest, complete with trees, soft moss underfoot, and the scent of damp earth. Red-cap mushrooms dotted the landscape, their spotted tops glowing faintly in the dim light. There was the sound of distant chirping, as though unseen birds flitted through the treetops.

“This is a house?” Lulu muttered, looking around in disbelief. “Feels more like we stepped into a tiny forest.”

The Maestro Somnus ignored her, leading them to a small clearing where a delicate harp stood in the centre. Strings of silvery thread stretched across it, vibrating softly as though playing a song.

Nearby, Lulu noticed a golden-framed mirror glowing faintly, which wasn't so much a mirror as it was an open portal to the endless skies. Suddenly, a thin wisp of cloud trailed out of it. Something just beyond the mirror seemed alive. She stepped closer to look, drawn by the strange pull of the mirror.

“Careful near the mirror,” Cloudman said suddenly, his tone unusually firm.

The Maestro Somnus glanced over from where he stood near his harp. “Yes, yes, best not to linger there. Mirrors hold memories, you know,” he said, tipping his wide-brimmed hat lower. “And not all memories like to stay in one place.”

Lulu hesitated, glancing between them and the mirror. But the strangeness of the house drew her attention elsewhere, and she wandered farther inside.

As she moved through the strange little forest, Lulu came upon something entirely unexpected. Tucked behind a cluster of mushrooms was a small clearing,

and in the middle of it stood a room. Not just any room – a room that looked exactly like her bedroom.

The bed was perfectly made, the pale pink quilt folded neatly just as her mother would do. The chair beside it was angled toward the small desk where Lulu often sat to draw. A soft yellow lamp cast a warm glow, and on the nightstand sat her favourite book, *The Snow Queen*, left open at the page where she'd fallen asleep.

Lulu froze. Her heart twisted with a sudden, strange feeling. "How...?" she whispered, her voice trembling slightly.

Maestro Somnus appeared behind her, Cloudman at his side. "Ah," he said softly, "you've found the testing room."

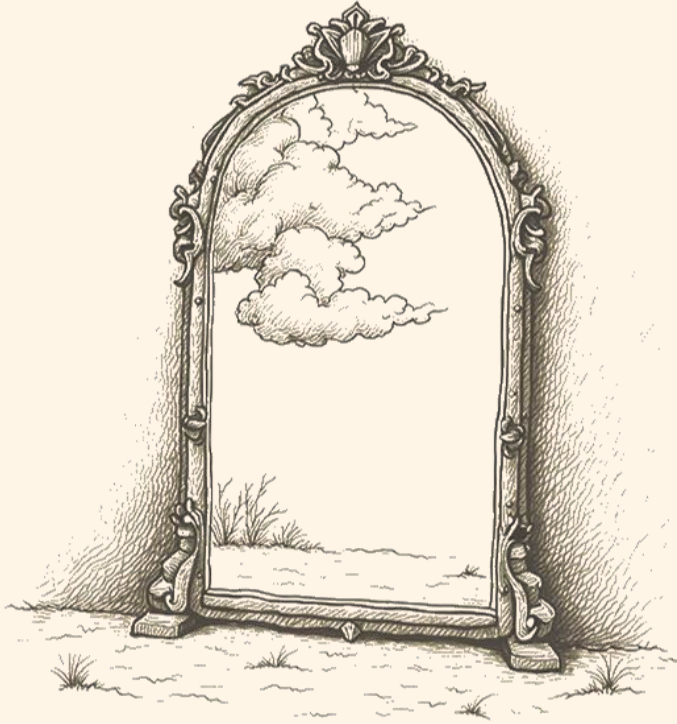
Lulu stayed silent, still staring at the impossible sight before her.

"This is where I perfect my lullabies" said Maestro Somnus "The room transforms to reflect the person the lullaby is for. In this case... it's yours."

Cloudman gave her a gentle nudge. "Your room is lovely, Lulu," he said with a smile. "Full of warmth."

Lulu stepped closer, her fingers brushing the edge of the desk. It was perfect in every detail – so perfect that it made her chest ache with homesickness she never experienced above the clouds.





“Does it... always look like this?” she asked.

“Oh, no,” Maestro Somnus replied with a chuckle. “It changes for everyone. It becomes the place where they feel safest, or happiest. Yours is particularly cozy, I must say.”

Lulu turned to face him, her eyes searching. “How do you know what my room looks like?”

For a moment, the three of them stood in silence, the soft hum of the room’s magic wrapping around them.



Then, sensing Lulu's emotions, Cloudman gave her a playful nudge.

"Come on," he said, his voice light. "We've got muffins waiting for us back home, remember? Can't let Aga eat them all."

The moment broke, and Lulu nodded, wiping at her eyes as though a speck of dust had gotten into them. She followed the two back toward the harp, casting one last glance at the room as it began to fade, its edges dissolving.

"I've prepared something for you," Maestro Somnus said, turning to Lulu. "A lullaby just for you."

"For me?" Lulu asked, in her tiny voice.

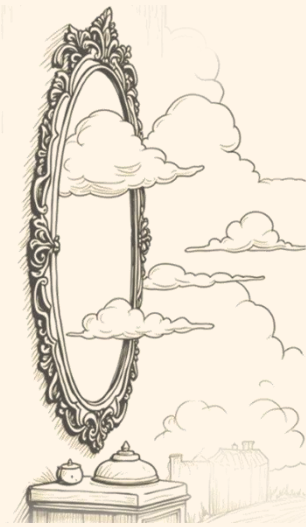
"Cloudman told me you sometimes find it difficult to sleep," Maestro Somnus replied. "This might help." He plucked a single string on the harp, and a soft, ethereal melody filled the air. As Lulu listened, she felt as though the music wrapped around her, soothing and familiar. It was as if the song knew her — her hopes, her fears, and the secret thoughts.

But as the melody continued, the harp began to glow faintly, and Lulu noticed something strange. The mushrooms around them seemed to sway to the music, their glowing caps flickering like candles in the wind.

"Uh, is that supposed to happen?" Lulu asked, pointing at the mushrooms.

The music grew louder, and the ground beneath them trembled slightly. Lulu felt a strange pull, as though the forest itself was drawing her in.

“Enough for now,” Cloudman said quickly, stepping forward. “We don’t want to overwhelm her.”



The Maestro Somnus plucked another string, and the music stopped abruptly. The mushrooms stilled, and the trembling ceased.

“Is it supposed to feel like that?” Lulu asked, her voice tinged with both wonder and unease.

The Maestro Somnus gave her a small, mysterious smile. “Every lullaby is unique. It will do what it’s meant to do.”

After a few more observations, Maestro Somnus led them back to the entrance, where he reversed the shrinking spell and returned them to their normal size.

As they climbed back into the cloudcar, Lulu clutched the tiny vial the Maestro Somnus had given her lullaby captured in liquid form.

Cloudman glanced at her as they began their journey home. “So, what did you think?”

Lulu was quiet for a moment, her fingers brushing the vial. “It was magical” she said softly.

As the cloudcar hummed along, Lulu gazed out at the horizon, wondering what other secrets the Cloudtops might hold.





## VII

# Into The Forest



he rain was light as Lulu, Cloudman, and Aga entered the Enchanted Forest. The trees here were impossibly tall, their branches tangled in a canopy so dense that only a faint glow of daylight seeped through. Drops of rain fell from the leaves above, glistening like tiny jewels before disappearing into the thick moss that blanketed the forest floor.

“Ah, smell that?” Cloudman said, inhaling deeply. His vaporous form shined with delight. “The rain has arrived, which means the *Joyful Mushrooms* have too. Perfect weather for my famous *Joysoup!*”

“Perfect weather for mud,” grumbled Aga, hopping over a particularly soggy patch. He glanced back at Lulu, who was trailing just behind Cloudman.





“What’s the matter, Lulu? Don’t tell me the forest is giving you the creeps?”

“I’m not scared,” Lulu replied, though her voice wavered slightly. “It’s just... different in here. It feels like the trees are listening.”

“Listening? Ha!” Aga twirled around dramatically, splashing water from a puddle with her tail. “Maybe they’re eavesdropping on your thoughts! Watch out, or they’ll know what you’re dreaming about!”

Lulu tried not to laugh but couldn't help herself as Aga struck a ridiculous pose. To shake off her nerves, she began to sing a little tune, her voice echoing softly through the trees.

"Spin Earth, spin around the sun,

Mercury... Sun... Mercury... Sun..."

Cloudman chuckled as they walked, "Well, that's a first. A planetary jingle to lighten the mood. I like it!"

As the song faded, the forest grew thicker and darker. The air seemed heavier, the sounds of dripping water and their own footsteps muffled by the dense foliage. Lulu clutched Aga's hand as they walked deeper, her heart beating faster.

Just when the shadows felt too close, a burst of light appeared – tiny glowing creatures flying around. "Firebugs!" Lulu exclaimed, her face breaking into a delighted smile.

The magical insects twirled and danced around them, their golden light cutting through the darkness. Lulu reached out, and a firebug hovered near her hand, glowing brighter as if to greet her.

"They never fail amaze you, do they?" said Cloudman, watching as the firebugs formed spirals of light above them.

After a while, the firebugs darted away, and the group continued their search. Suddenly, Cloudman exclaimed, "There! Look – Joyful Mushrooms!"

They had stumbled into a small clearing where the mushrooms grew in clusters, their caps gleaming with iridescent hues of pink, blue, and gold. Cloudman knelt beside them, carefully plucking the plumpest ones and placing them in a floating bag of cloud he had conjured.

But as he reached for one particularly large mushroom, a nearby spore pod suddenly burst with a loud pop, releasing a shimmering cloud of spores into the air.

"Ack! It got me!" Aga yelped, shaking her head as the spores settled over them like golden dust.

"Stay calm, everyone," Cloudman said, brushing spores from his misty arms. "It's harmless. Probably."

"Probably?" Lulu asked, her voice tinged with worry.

Before Cloudman could answer, the forest around them began to change. Colours shifted, the green leaves taking on shades of violet and orange. The firebugs, now enormous, drifted lazily around them like glowing balloons, their light casting strange shadows on the ground.

The trees groaned and creaked as their trunks twisted, forming faces with hollow eyes and mouths.



“Oh, great,” muttered Aga. “Now the trees are talking.”

One particularly grumpy-looking tree leaned forward, its gnarled face etched with frustration. “There’s no sun down here! How are we supposed to grow? It’s those greedy canopy trees—monopolising all the light!”

Another tree grumbled in agreement. “Selfish, every last one of them. I haven’t seen the sun in decades!”

As the trees bickered, a tiny sprout near Lulu’s foot wiggled free of the ground.

“I’ve had enough!” the sprout declared in a high-pitched voice. “I’m finding the sun myself!” With surprising speed, it marched away, its little roots pattering against the ground.

Lulu stared after the sprout, stunned, but her thoughts were interrupted by a faint sound in the distance.

“Shh!” she said, holding up a hand. “Do you hear that?” The others fell silent, and the sound grew clearer—a distant, mournful cry carried on the breeze.

“It sounds like someone,” Lulu said, struggling to hear. She frowned, trying to make out the words. “It’s calling... it’s calling someone called... Ugagu?”

The name lingered in the air, strange and unfamiliar, as the forest grew unnervingly quiet.



## VIII

### K'yango's Lament



he deeper they ventured into the forest, the stranger the world became. The trees seemed to stretch endlessly upward, their twisted trunks weaving intricate patterns that shifted with every step. Shadows played tricks on the ground, forming shapes that danced and then disappeared, while faint glimmers of light darted through the underbrush.

Lulu, unbothered by the oddities, laughed and twirled in the rain, hopping from one mossy stone to another. "This is just like a game!" she said, her voice bright and carefree. "What's next? Singing rocks?"

Cloudman chuckled softly, though his glowing eyes darted around the forest with a hint of unease. "Ah, yes, a game," he murmured, his misty form rippling as if to shake off a thought. "One where the rules change as you play."

Aga, on the other hand, seemed completely at ease, snapping her jaws playfully at drifting leaves. "If this is a game, I'm winning," she declared, splashing through a puddle.

The distant cry, faint and mournful, interrupted their laughter. It echoed through the forest, louder now but less frequent.

"*Ugagu*," Lulu whispered to herself, the strange word lingering in her mind.

Their path led them to a brook, its clear water bubbling over smooth stones. The rain had eased into a fine mist, and the forest felt still.

"There's something moving," Lulu said, pointing across the brook. She glanced through the haze. It was small and white, no larger than a pony, but its shape was indistinct, shifting slightly as it moved behind the trees.

"Could be a goat," Aga said, tilting her head. "Or maybe a very fluffy singing rock."

"I think it's an animal," Lulu said, stepping closer to the water. She was about to leap across when Cloudman's hand shot out, his grip firm on her arm.

"Wait," he said, his voice serious. "Remember—you can only cross the river once."

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Lulu asked, pulling her arm free. “I can see the other side right there. It’s not like it’ll disappear!”

Cloudman’s form wavered slightly, as though unsure of his own words. “Just... be careful,” he said at last.

Despite his warning, they all crossed the brook, the cool water splashing against their ankles. On the other side, the strange shape became clearer. It wasn’t a pony at all.

“It’s... a *K’yango*,” Lulu whispered, her eyes wide with wonder.

“A... what?” Cloudman asked, his misty face creasing in confusion.

“*K’yango*!” Lulu repeated, as if that made everything clear. Aga leaned toward Cloudman and whispered, “She means a unicorn.”

The creature was small and delicate, its white fur seemed to glow faintly in the dim light. A single golden horn spiralled from its forehead, and its large, dark eyes were filled with fear.

“Wait a minute,” Aga said, blinking. “How do you know it’s a unicorn? What if it’s just a horse wearing a fancy costume?”

The unicorn—or K'yango, as Lulu insisted—took a cautious step back, its legs trembling slightly.

“She’s lost,” Lulu said, kneeling slowly to meet the unicorn’s gaze. “She’s calling for her mother. Ugagu.”

At the mention of the name, the unicorn stopped trembling, its ears perking up slightly. Lulu reached out her hand, and after a moment of hesitation, the unicorn stepped forward, its horn gleaming in the faint light.

“We’ll help you,” Lulu said gently. “You don’t have to be scared anymore.”

“Well, I hope she knows where she’s going,” Aga said, folding her arms. “This place is getting stranger by the second.”

Cloudman sighed, his shoulders slumping slightly. “Fine, we’ll bring her along. But first, let’s get out of here and back to something resembling sanity.

Home, I say. The Joyful Mushrooms won’t cook themselves.”

The group turned back toward the brook, the unicorn now walking close to Lulu’s side.



The rain had stopped entirely, leaving the air thick with the earthy smell of the forest. As they began their journey home, Cloudman muttered to himself with a wry chuckle, “Although, I think we’ve had one too many mushrooms as it is.”



## IX

# The Secret Recipe



loudman's hut sat on a floating rock, high above the Cloudtop meadow, like a tiny, self-contained world in the sky. The rock itself was lush and green, a perfect little meadow that never changed no matter the season. It was always spring here, with soft grass underfoot and the occasional bunch of dandelions swaying in a breeze.

The hut was modest from the outside—a simple wooden structure with a crooked chimney that puffed little clouds into the air. Inside, the hut was disproportionately large reminiscent of the *Penrose Stairs*. With rooms that seemed to stretch forever and hallways that turned corners where no corners should have been. She had never quite figured out how far it went, but that was part of its charm.



In the garden, a curious collection of broken gnomes stood around a small well, their painted faces chipped and faded. Every now and then, a croaky voice would drift up from the well, but Lulu had never managed to meet the frog that supposedly lived there.

Today, though, Lulu had no time to wonder about gnomes or frogs. She climbed the short staircase to the hut's front door and knocked lightly. From somewhere behind the house, Cloudman's cheerful voice called out, "In the back garden, Lulu! Come on around!"

She made her way around the side of the hut, where Cloudman was crouched among rows of bushes. He was holding a small basket and plucking *Glitterberries*, their bright, sparkling skins catching the light like tiny gemstones.

"Ah, caught me in the act, didn't you?" Cloudman said with a grin.

"Are you picking *Glitterberries* for muffins?" Lulu asked, her face brightening.

"For muffins and for you," he said, standing and shaking the basket lightly so the berries glittered like a kaleidoscope. "Now that you're here, we can bake them together. You know, secret recipes always turn out better with two chefs!"

Lulu laughed and followed Cloudman inside. The kitchen, much like the rest of the hut, was cozy but peculiar.

The cabinets were filled with jars labelled in looping handwriting – things like *Dream*

*Dust, Stardrop Syrup, and Vanilla from Somewhere Else.* There was even a small stove that seemed to float just slightly above the floor.



As they worked together, washing the berries and mixing the batter, Lulu grew unusually quiet. Cloudman noticed but didn't say anything right away. Finally, as she stirred the bowl, she looked up at him and asked, "Cloudman, do you think... do you think there's a medicine that can cure everything?"

Cloudman froze for a moment, caught by surprise. But without pressuring her, he smiled gently and said, "Well, that's quite a question, Lulu." He set down the bowl he was holding and leaned on the counter. "If anyone would know the answer, it might be the *Wise Old Druid.*"

“The Wise Old Druid?” Lulu repeated, trying to picture what he might look like.

“Mm-hmm,” Cloudman said. “He lives near the edge of the Magical Forest—you know, the one we visited recently. They say he knows more about the world than anyone else, and if there’s an answer to your question, he’d have it.”

Lulu’s stirring slowed as she thought about this mysterious figure. “What does he look like? Is he... nice?”

Cloudman chuckled. “Oh, I wouldn’t worry. The Druid is as kind as the forest is deep. If you’d like, we can go and find him—after the muffins, of course!”

Lulu nodded, a small smile tugging at her lips. As they worked, Lulu looked up at Cloudman and asked, “Can I have the recipe? I want to give it to my mum.” Cloudman smiled knowingly. “Does Earth have Glitterberries?”

Lulu paused, then her face lit up. “Well, my grandma lives in the country! They have lots of gardens, and fields, and bees, and honey, and—”

“Do they have Glitterberries?” Cloudman interrupted, raising an eyebrow.

Lulu hesitated, her mouth open mid-thought.

“I rest my case,” Cloudman said with a smile.

“But—” Lulu started to protest, only for Cloudman to dip a finger into the batter and tap it gently onto the tip of her nose.

“Secret recipes are just that,” he said. “They’re secret.”

As they mixed the batter, Lulu began to count under her breath.

“One... two... three...”

Cloudman tilted his head, his misty form rippling with curiosity. “What are you counting, Lulu?”

“I’m counting,” she replied simply, her eyes fixed on the bowl of batter as she stirred.

“Well, that much is clear,” he said with a chuckle. “But counting what?”

“Our time together,” Lulu said, her voice quiet but steady.

Cloudman paused, puzzled. Before he could respond, Lulu’s count reached sixty. She stopped stirring and set the spoon down, her hands still.

“Will I die at age sixty?” she asked, her words soft yet startling.

Cloudman froze, his usual breezy cheer replaced by a sudden, deep stillness. Setting his bowl aside, he knelt beside Lulu and gently took her small hands in his own misty ones. “First, the strange medicine, and now this...”

Is everything alright?" he asked, his tone careful, though his glowing eyes were full of concern.

For a moment, Lulu gazed over the counter, her expression distant. Then, just as quickly, she brightened. "Wow!" she said, pointing at a jar on the shelf. "We need to add these sprinkles too!"

Cloudman blinked and smiled, deciding not to press further. "Sprinkles, of course! No Glitterberry Muffin is complete without them!"

They continued to prepare the muffins, pouring the glittering batter into little moulds and sliding them into the floating oven. As the sweet aroma filled the air, Cloudman pulled out his peculiar telephone. The round dial on the phone wasn't marked with numbers but with colours, each one connected directly to a different friend.

"Let's invite everyone," Cloudman said, spinning the dial. Soon enough, all their friends arrived, including Aga and K'yangó. The group laughed and chatted as they shared the muffins, delighting in their irresistible sweetness. Lulu's worries seemed to melt away as they told stories and joked together.

When it was time to leave, Cloudman packed the remaining Glitterberries into a basket. "If we're going to visit the Wise Old Druid, we'd better bring him something special," he said. Aga gave a dramatic sigh.

“Another adventure already? Don’t you people ever nap?”

As the group stood at the edge of the floating meadow, the sky began to blush with the warm hues of early evening. K’yango, now safely reunited with her mother Ugagu, gave Lulu an encouraging rub. “Be careful,” K’yango said softly. “The forest is full of mysteries.”

Lulu nodded, feeling a mix of excitement and curiosity about the Wise Old Druid and what answers he might have. Together with Cloudman, she stepped onto the shimmering path that led away from the meadow. As they walked into the horizon, the floating hut stood behind them, puffing little clouds into the sky.







# X

## Wise Old Druid



he forest grew darker and thicker as Lulu and Cloudman ventured deeper, the ancient trees towering above them like watchful giants. The air was alive with the hum of insects and the croaking of distant frogs, while the occasional call of an owl echoed through the dense canopy. Firebugs flitted about, their golden glow casting fleeting patterns on the mossy ground.

Lulu shivered slightly, not from fear but from the overwhelming sense that they were walking into something far older and stranger than she could fully grasp.

“Do you think he’ll be awake?” Lulu whispered, glancing up at Cloudman’s ever-shifting form.





“Oh, the Wise Old Druid is always awake,” Cloudman replied, “Even when he isn’t, he is.”

“What does that mean?” Lulu asked, frowning.

Cloudman grinned down at her, his eyes glowing faintly. “You’ll see.”

They continued through the underbrush, their footsteps muffled by the thick carpet of moss. The forest seemed to close in around them, the trees twisting and bending in ways that defied logic. Lulu could have sworn one of the trunks had a face carved into it—no, not carved, but shifting subtly, its hollow eyes watching her as she passed. She quickened her pace, staying close to Cloudman.

After what felt like hours, a faint light appeared in the distance, flickering like a star caught among the trees. As they approached, the light grew steadier, revealing a small, candlelit hut nestled within a dense grove of ivy. The hut seemed to lean slightly to one side, its roof patched with moss and its windows glowing warmly against the darkness.

“This must be it,” Cloudman said, his voice soft.

They stepped up to the wooden door, its surface etched with strange runes. Cloudman knocked, the sound echoing hollowly into the quiet.



A moment later, a deep yet gentle voice called from within. “Come in, come in, wanderers. The night is no place for a child.”

Cloudman opened the door and gestured for Lulu to step inside. She hesitated, peering into the dimly lit interior, and then stepped over the threshold.

The air inside was warm and thick with the scent of dried herbs. Shelves lined every inch of the walls, crammed with vials of colourful liquids, jars of dried roots, bundles of plants, and objects Lulu couldn’t begin to identify. An alchemical setup bubbled quietly in one corner, its glass tubes and flasks glowing with

shifting colours. Bones hung from the ceiling, clinking softly as they swayed.

At the centre of it all stood the Wise Old Druid. He was tall and thin, his beard a wild tangle of white and grey, and his robes were patched together from various fabrics. His eyes, sharp and piercing, softened the moment they landed on Lulu.

“And who might this little traveller be?” he asked, his voice warm with curiosity.

“This is Lulu,” Cloudman said. “She’s the one with the question.”

“A question, is it?” The druid chuckled and stroked his beard. “Well, then. Come closer, child. Let me get a good look at you.”

Lulu stepped forward, her eyes wide as she took in the strange objects that surrounded her. The druid’s hut felt like it belonged to another world entirely, one where the rules of nature bent and shifted. She barely noticed the druid’s outstretched hand until he gently patted her on the head.

“What brings you to my humble home in the magical forest?” he asked.

For a moment, Lulu was too distracted to answer. Her gaze darted from the bubbling potions to the jars of what looked like beetle wings and the strange, twisting plants growing out of pots.



“Go on,” Cloudman said.

Lulu took a deep breath. “I... I want to know if there’s a medicine that can cure everything.”

The Wise Old Druid fell silent. It was not the kind of silence that comes from forgetting what to say, but rather the kind that comes when someone is choosing their words very, very carefully. His sharp eyes studied Lulu, then drifted toward Cloudman.

“Now, that is a question I haven’t heard in a long time,” he said at last. “And from a young girl, no less.”

He turned and began pacing the room, his robes swishing softly against the floor. “What you’re asking about, little one, is a Panacea.”

“A what?” Lulu and Cloudman said in unison.

The druid stopped and gave them a small, amused smile. “Many have sought it,” he murmured, half to himself. “Few have returned. Fewer still have found what they were truly looking for.”

Lulu’s brow furrowed. “But... it *does* exist, right?”

The Druid let out a quiet chuckle. “That, little one, is an excellent question.”

He leaned on his staff, tilting his head as if seeing something beyond the hut, beyond the trees. “There is a kind of magic in the seeking, you see. A journey will always lead you somewhere, whether or not you find what you set out for.”

He gestured to the shelves around him, each one filled with strange and wondrous things. “Many of these ingredients took me years to find, but none compare to what’s needed for the Panacea.

Lulu glanced at Cloudman, who was watching the Druid carefully, his misty form unnaturally still. The Druid straightened and, as if the conversation had not taken an odd turn, began listing the ingredients – each more bizarre than the last.

Lulu’s eyes widened with every item he listed, each one sounding more impossible than the last.

“And,” the druid continued, his voice dropping to a hush, “the final ingredient... is a shard from an object said to rest within the halls of the *Cloudtop Palace*.”

At the mention of the Cloudtop Palace, Cloudman stiffened. His misty form seemed to dim slightly, and his usual cheer vanished. “The Cloudtop Palace?” he repeated.

The druid nodded thoughtfully. “Yes. That will be the hardest of all. Perhaps even impossible. It is a place of

great mystery and power, and its gates are not easily opened.”

A silence fell over the hut.

The druid watched them carefully, his sharp eyes seeming to see far more than they revealed. “Tell me, child,” he said softly, “why do you seek such a potion? What great ill do you wish to cure?”

Lulu was silent, gripping the basket of Glitterberries a little tighter. She was not sure what she had expected to find here, but this was not it.

Cloudman’s glowing eyes dimmed further, and he placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. He didn’t press her for an answer, though his expression betrayed his growing concern.

The druid sighed, his gaze lingering on Lulu for a moment before he turned back to his work. “If you truly wish to pursue this path,” he said, “you will need great courage and greater patience. The journey for the Panacea is not one to be taken lightly.”

Lulu looked up. “I... I want to try,” she said quietly.

The druid smiled faintly. “Then I wish you luck, little one. And I hope you find what you’re truly looking for.”

Cloudman gently led Lulu toward the door. He glanced back at the druid, his face unreadable, before

stepping out into the night. The journey ahead would be long and treacherous, and the shadow of the Cloudtop Palace loomed larger than ever in his mind.

As Lulu and Cloudman stepped out into the forest, the old man watched them go, his eyes lingering on the little girl just a moment longer.

Softly, he whispered –

“May you find what you seek, little one... even if it is not what you think it is.”





## XI

### Until Next Time



The forest was different in the early hours before dawn. The thick darkness had begun to dissolve, unravelling thread by thread into something softer, lighter. The trees no longer loomed as shadows with secrets—instead, they whispered in hushed voices, bidding farewell to the travellers who had passed through them.

The Wise Old Druid's hut, which had glowed like a beacon in the heart of the forest, was now dim and quiet. Lulu paused for a moment and looked back at the hut one last time. She had so many more questions, but the druid had only given her one certainty: the path ahead would not be easy.

She turned to Cloudman, who stood beside her, watching her closely. His misty form shifted gently in the cool morning breeze. "Ready?" he asked.

Lulu nodded, though she wasn't sure if she was ready for anything—not for leaving, not for the questions that still sat heavy in her chest. And yet, she stepped forward.

Together, they made their way through the forest, retracing the path they had taken the night before. The firebugs were still out, drifting lazily through the thinning mist. An owl hooted from somewhere unseen.

As the trees thinned, the world opened up before them. The vast Cloudtop Meadow stretched far and wide, bathed in the softest glow of pre-dawn light. And there, in the distance, was Cloudman's floating hut, floating upon its drifting rock, its chimney still puffing tiny clouds into the quiet air.

It was strange, Lulu thought. Even though she had been here so many times before, she felt as if she were seeing it all differently now—like the moment before a chapter in a book ends, when you know the next page will bring something new.

A familiar voice cut through the stillness.

"There you are! Took you long enough."

Aga stood at the foot of the hill, his arms crossed, flicking her tail impatiently. "Did the old druid make you sit through a thousand years of wisdom?"

Lulu giggled. "No, only about nine hundred."

Aga smiled. "Figures."

Nearby, K'yango stood silently, her large, dark eyes watched Lulu carefully. When Lulu approached, the small unicorn stepped forward and pressed her nose gently against Lulu's forehead, exhaling softly. Lulu closed her eyes for a moment, feeling the warmth of the gesture.

Aga tilted his head. "You look different."

"I do?" Lulu asked.

"Yes. Like you're thinking too hard. Are you planning something?"

Lulu hesitated. "Not yet," she admitted. "But soon."

Cloudman, who had been quiet until now, finally spoke, his voice soft as morning mist. "The journey is just beginning."

His words was a reminder of what lay ahead—the Panacea, the impossible ingredients, and the looming shadow of the Cloudtop Palace, which Cloudman had not spoken about since they left the druid's hut.

But none of that was for now.

Now, she was standing in the middle of the Cloudtop Meadow, surrounded by friends, and yet she could already feel it—the pull, the gentle unravelling of this world as the waking one called her back. It was different from the other times. She wasn't being

whisked away like a feather caught in the wind. She was standing at the edge, aware, knowing that her time here was slipping through her fingers like sand.

Cloudman seemed to sense it, too. He turned to her, kneeling so that they were at eye level. His golden eyes were warm, and there was something in them – something a little sad, a little proud.

“You know you’ll be back,” he said.

Lulu nodded. “I know.”

She looked around, at Aga, at K’yango, at the endless sky stretching beyond them. She wanted to stay longer. She wanted to run through the meadows, to sit by the floating hut and drink something warm while Cloudman told her about the strange corners of the Cloudtop world she had yet to see.

But the sky was growing lighter, the edges of her vision softening.

Cloudman opened his arms, and Lulu didn’t hesitate. She ran into them, hugging him tightly. He smelled like mist and something else, something she could never quite name, something that always made her feel safe.

Aga, never one for sentiment, cleared his throat loudly. "Alright, alright, don't get all mushy. She'll be back."

But when Lulu turned to him, Aga quickly looked away, scratching at the ground with her clawed foot. K'yango dipped her head, her silent way of saying goodbye.

Lulu smiled at them all, holding onto the moment as long as she could. Then, as the first rays of morning light touched the horizon, she felt herself slipping.

She let go.

The Cloudtop Meadow faded. The mist unravelled.

And just like that, she was gone.

Until next time.



# Epilogue

Perhaps, at this very moment, Lulu is still wandering through the Cloudtop Meadow, feeling the soft clouds beneath her feet. Perhaps Cloudman is tending to his garden, carefully picking Glitterberries, already knowing she will return.

And perhaps, just perhaps, the gates of the Cloudtop Palace remain closed... but not forever.

And so, dear reader, some stories do not end with answers, but with questions – questions that stretch far beyond the final page, lingering like the last note of a lullaby.

That is why we use the three dots, the ellipsis.

Until next time... keep your gaze cloudbound.



INAL BILSEL

# Once Upon a Cloudtop Meadow

