



“Mum, you need to come!” I shouted. “I think Sparkles is bunged up again.” I took a cautious step towards the unicorn. She turned her head towards me, eyes crossed from the strain, horn bobbing. It was the third time this week.

Mum appeared from the kitchen and went straight over and lifted Sparkles’s tail. “What’s up, my darling?” she asked softly. She looked closer. “Yep. We need the pūhā juice again. Where on earth is Atutahi?”



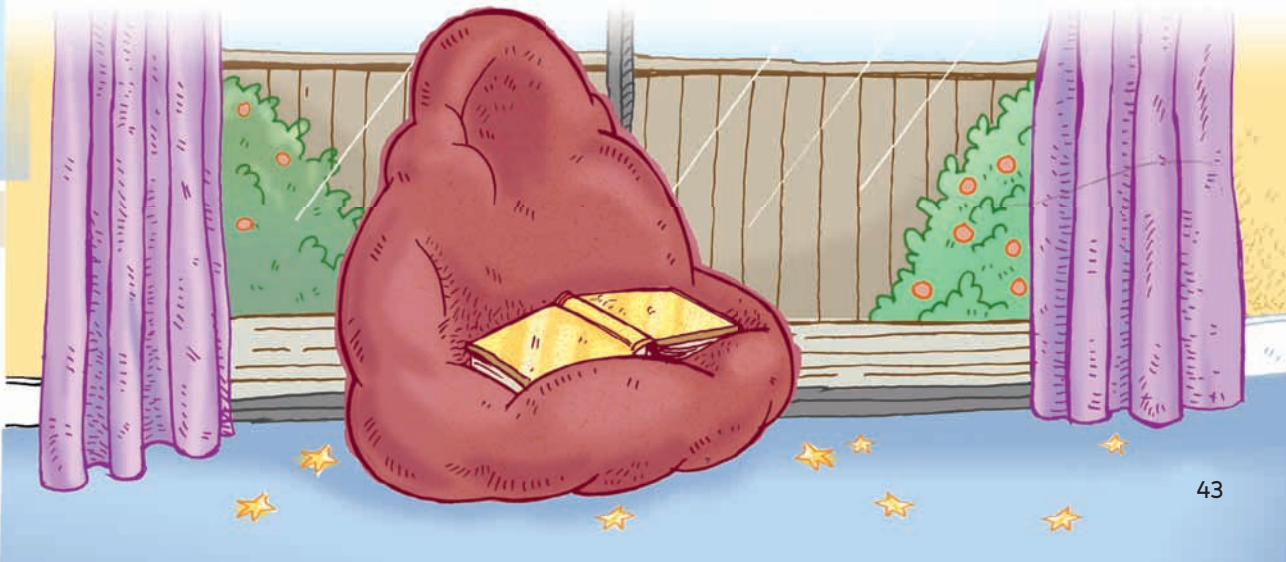
I went outside and yelled my sister’s name as loud as I could. Twice. “What?” The voice came from inside. My sister was slouched in her beanbag, reading a book about spaceship racing – her latest fad. “What have you been feeding your unicorn?” I asked. “Usual,” said Atutahi. “Butterflies.” She couldn’t have sounded less interested if she’d tried.

Mum exhaled loudly. “Sweetheart. We’ve had this conversation. You can’t feed Sparkles on butterflies alone. She needs a balanced diet, you know that. How long since you gave her sunflower seeds? Can you *please* put that book down!”

Atutahi mumbled and turned a page. “No wonder this poor animal’s all stopped up.” Mum took the pūhā juice from the fridge and held out the bowl while Sparkles slurped her tonic. The unicorn finished with a burp. It sounded like a tinkly ringtone.

“Take Sparkles outside, Puanga. And keep her there till she’s you-know-what.” “Why do I have to do it?” I asked. “Make Atutahi. It’s her unicorn.” “You’re right,” said Mum. “Atutahi ...” But my sister had gone.

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This all started six months ago when Mum decided we needed to be more active. "It's time you two stopped staring at screens all day. Get out there! Find some new hobbies. Move those tinana!" she said.

I wasn't so keen, but of course my sister got really excited. I joined a BMX club, and Atutahi took up atmospheric trampolining – but she didn't like wearing the breathing gear. Then she got interested in underwater chess but quit after the first practice when she realised Mum and I wouldn't be cheering from the sidelines. Then came cloud lacrosse and laser golf and finally unicorn polo ... and Sparkles. The polo phase lasted the longest – six weeks – but Atutahi got bored because the competitions were only once a month. Turned out that as well as a varied diet, unicorns need weeks to recover after a game.



Then one day last week, Atutahi arrived home from school dragging a faded yellow spaceship tied to some rope. It was in pretty bad shape, hovering just above the ground like a helium balloon the day after a party. Sparkles sniffed it and turned away.

"Where did you get that?" Mum asked.

"In the empty section behind the dairy," Atutahi said. "It's my spacewaka!"

We sometimes stopped for a look in that section on our way home from school. Old recycling bins, bike racks, those big plastic trays they use for bread ... the grass was so long anything could be buried in it.

The spaceship sank even lower. Atutahi tugged the rope, and it drifted up for a moment. "Spacewaka are an excellent hobby, Mum," she insisted. "And the first race isn't till next weekend, so I've got heaps of time to practise."

"Race?" said Mum.

"Yup," said Atutahi. "Up at the dog park. Spaceship racing from three till four before the kennel club has puppy training. I can't wait!"

"But what about Sparkles?" Mum asked.

"What about her?"



So the next weekend, there we were – me, Mum, and Sparkles – standing in the wind and rain at the dog park. Atutahi hovered, waiting for our old PE teacher, Mr Hamuera, to find his ref’s whistle.

None of the spaceships were flash. They were all second-hand, salvaged from places just like behind our dairy. Atutahi’s was smaller than the others, and it was floating much lower and wobbling up and down. It looked like she was having trouble keeping it in the air at all. Mum and I looked at each other. Her expression said everything. My sister would be lucky to finish this race.

Mr H stood up straight and raised his arm. “Tahi ... rua ... toru ... karawhiua!” He blew his whistle hard out and – amazing – Atutahi lurched over the start line ahead of the others.

“Woohoo!” we yelled. Even more amazing, my sister managed to hold the lead. It seemed like everyone was having trouble. Two of the blue spaceships kept crossing each other’s flight paths. It wasn’t long before one clipped the other and they clunked to the ground. The drivers climbed out looking more hopeless than their ships.

Meanwhile, Atutahi was still out in front, although a diamond-shaped spaceship was coming up fast. She was now flying so low that hot air from her waka blasted the grass. Sparkles cringed down on her haunches as Atutahi passed. Even Mum ducked. The diamond was gaining ground. Atutahi continued to lose altitude. Suddenly her waka tipped towards us on a sickening angle. It looked like the end.

Beside me, there was a sudden flurry. It was Sparkles. I turned just in time to see her launch into the air, hooves galloping on nothing as she climbed higher and higher.

“Puanga!” Mum yelled. “Grab Sparkles’s lead!” But it was too late. The unicorn was away, her beautiful mane swirling in the breeze as she sped towards Atutahi. Sparkles swooped over the diamond spaceship, her back hooves clipping its wingtip with a faint “Ting!”

“Hurry!” Mum yelled. “Kia tere!”

The unicorn spun in mid-air and plunged towards the ground. Like a superhero, she dived under Atutahi’s waka just before they crashed. Then she soared up towards the clouds, the spacewaka balanced on the tip of her golden horn.

“Go, Atutahi!” I screamed. “Go, Sparkles!”

Mum was shouting something very fast in Māori and jumping up and down. Mr Hamuera was blowing his whistle so hard it was a squeak. Atutahi and Sparkles were metres away from the finish line, the diamond ship right behind them.

“Go! Go! Go!” I yelled.



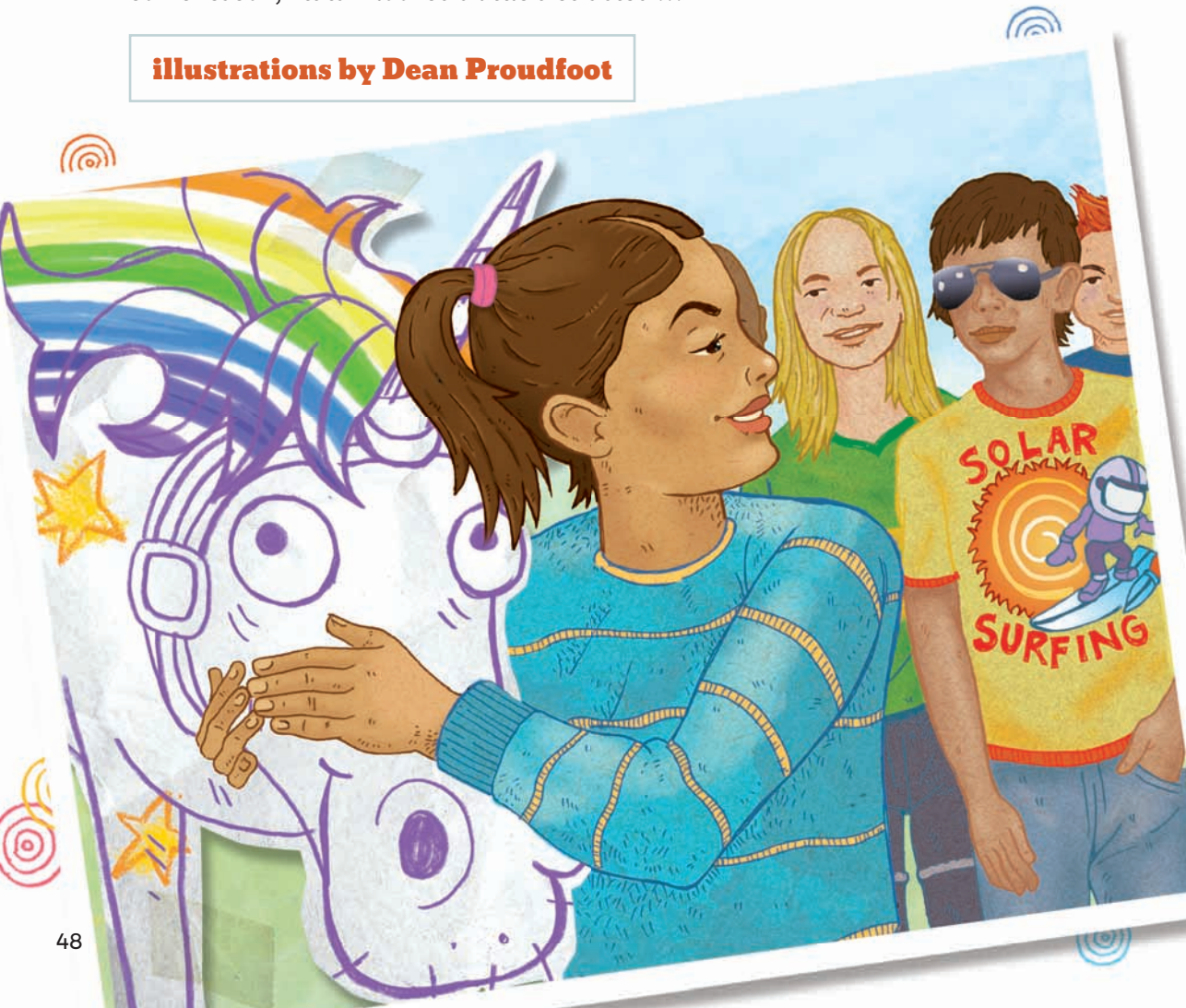
They crossed the line, Atutahi just a glimmer ahead of the diamond ship. The crowd exploded. Sparkles gave the spacewaka one last little push up and off the tip of her horn. Atutahi cut the engines, and the waka floated to the ground, landing softly in the pine needles on the far side of the dog park.

Mum and I ran to the pine trees, grabbing my sister in a big hug. Then we all turned to look at Sparkles trotting towards us, a little slower than usual and breathing heavily. As if on cue, the afternoon sun appeared from behind the clouds. Her horn glinted in the golden light. She looked ... magnificent.

I glanced at my sister. Her face was glowing. I swear her cheeks were wet. She opened her arms to the unicorn. "Sparkles, I love you!" she said.

I snapped a pic of the two of them. It would have made a great shot, but for some reason, Atutahi looked a little distracted ...

**illustrations by Dean Proudfoot**



# Atutahi's Unicorn

by Hinemoana Baker

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