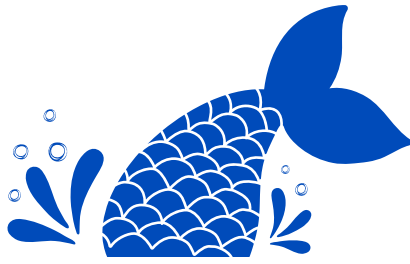




IT'S STORY TIME

Enjoy reading this story with your family or to your furry friends!
Fun twist: Set up your furry friends and act out the story!



MAGICAL MER-BEAR AND THE HUNT FOR BEARIED TREASURE

It was the end of a hot summer day, and the sun was setting slowly on the shimmering waters of Mer-Bear Cove. It had been a fun day full of adventures, and Marina the mer-bear was combing her long hair and getting ready for bedtime.

"Which bedtime story do you want to hear tonight, Marina?" her mother asked, lovingly tucking Marina's shimmery mermaid tail into her waterbed for the night.

"The Legend of the BEARied Treasure!" Marina answered excitedly. She adored reading this bedtime story and never tired of hearing it. Knowing she would choose this, Marina's mother smiled and dived into the fantastical tale.

"Once upon a time," she began, "a village of mer-bears lived far away in an uncharted location only known as the Lost Lagoon. Legend has it that these mer-bears were the first of our kind to encounter real-life pirates! Once only heard of in tall tales, this peaceful meeting was an historic milestone for all sea creatures. In honor of the special occasion, the peaceful pirates offered the mer-bears a bounty of treasure from their voyage. The mer-bears returned the kind gesture by gifting the pirates a trove of rare mermaid jewels."

"Wow!" Marina gasped, visions of sparkly jewels and glittery treasure dancing in her mind.

"Centuries later, it's rumored that pirate treasure and mermaid jewels can still be found inside the Mermaid Sea Castle of the Lost Lagoon," her mother continued, "but the BEARied treasure has never been found."

Marina's mind transported her to an underwater sea castle brimming with untold treasure. She was sure to dream of magical mer-bears, pretty palaces and sparkly sea jewels that night.

"Alright, that's enough fantasy tales for tonight," Marina's mother said. "Sweet sea dreams, darling."

The next day, Marina hatched a plan. The BEARied treasure she had always been enchanted by in stories was on the ocean floor somewhere just waiting to be found – maybe she could be the one to finally find it! She swam excitedly to tell

her best friends, Sage the Seahorsicorn and Benny the Blue Lobster, all about her brilliant plan.

"If we team up and hunt together, there's a chance we could find the treasure!" Marina exclaimed.

"But how will we know where to go?" Sage wondered.

"Professor Platypus once said in class that the Lost Lagoon was probably located beyond the Rainbow Reef," Benny thought out loud. "We could try swimming over there!"

Leaving a trail of bubbles in their wake, the three friends swam away on their mission. They glided over the Rainbow Reef, with colorful coral and schooling fishes sparkling below them. Beyond the reef were vast unexplored waters, and Marina had never journeyed beyond the cove she called home.

"Let's be sure to stick together," Marina said to her friends.

Hardly anything stirred in the ocean beyond the reef. In fact, Marina, Sage and Benny explored for a few hours without even seeing another sea creature. It wasn't until they found themselves in a kelp forest that they encountered a big, purple octopus with fuzzy tentacles. The large creature emerged from the kelp and gave them quite a fright!

"Don't be alarmed, everyone's welcome here!" the octopus said cheerfully. "You three look like you're a long way from home. My name's Ollie – what are your names?"

Marina introduced herself, Sage and Benny to Ollie the octopus. "We're on the hunt for BEARied treasure!" Marina exclaimed. "Have you ever seen the Mermaid Sea Castle of the Lost Lagoon?"

"The Lost Lagoon?" Ollie said. "It hasn't been found in hundreds of years! I don't venture far from the kelp forest, but the story always *tentickled* my fancy when I was a young octopus!"

"Any idea where we should go from here?" inquired Sage.

"Well, you might have some luck in the neighboring seagrass meadow," Ollie replied. "Follow me, I'll help you through the forest."

Grateful for this help, the three friends followed the friendly octopus through the towering kelp forest. When they emerged on the other side, Ollie gave them a friendly wave and wished them luck.

"That was amazing. I've never met an octopus before!" Benny said excitedly.

"Me either! But it's almost getting dark, let's try to get to the seagrass meadow soon," said Marina.

With a newfound determination, the brave mer-bear, blue lobster and seahorsicorn continued on their way. It wasn't long before they came across the underwater seagrass meadow Ollie had mentioned earlier. Filled with flowering plants and smiley sea urchins, the large meadow filled the ocean floor as far as the eye could see. Perhaps there would be a clue pointing to the location of the Mermaid Sea Castle?

"It's getting dark and I'm not sure if we're getting any closer to finding the Lost Lagoon," Marina said to Benny and Sage.

"Did you say the Lost Lagoon?" answered an unknown voice. The three friends whirled around to see where the mysterious voice had come from, but no one was there!

"Who said that?" asked Sage.

"It's me, Stella! I'm down here!" said the voice.

Looking down, they discovered a bright pink starfish nestled among the seagrass on the ocean floor. Stella the starfish wiggled her way free from the sand and floated up to the three of them.

"Hi, I'm Stella! Are you looking for the Lost Lagoon?"

"We are!" replied Marina. "Legend has it that BEARied treasure is there. Do you happen to know where it might be?"

"I don't want to burst your bubble, but I'm afraid that story is likely just a tall tale made up by someone with a big imagination," replied Stella. "Many, many explorers have traveled through here looking for the Mermaid Sea Castle. I've even looked myself – it simply doesn't exist!"

"You mean...the BEARied treasure is just a story? It isn't real?" asked Marina, her sparkly tail lowering in sadness.

"It's okay, Marina," Sage comforted her friend. "We always knew that was a possibility."

"It's getting pretty dark," Benny said, glancing around. "We better start heading back home. Maybe we can try searching for the treasure another day."

"You should be safe getting back in the dark," Stella the starfish told them. "I'd be happy to help you with that!" Suddenly, the starfish's five arms illuminated the ocean floor. Stella was a bioluminescent starfish, and she gave the friends a big

smile as she lit up the dark floor of the deep sea. The friends had never seen a starfish glow in the dark before!

Marina, Benny and Sage started the long journey back to Mer-Bear Cove with Stella lighting the way. They followed their trail back through the seagrass meadow and retraced their path through the kelp forest. When they got back home, they thanked Stella and promised they would visit her and Ollie again. The three friends felt a little disappointed to be returning home without having found any treasure.

As Marina's mother tucked her into her waterbed that night, she was surprised to hear that Marina had no interest in hearing her favorite bedtime story as usual.

"What's wrong, sweetheart? You love that story!" her mother said.

"I used to love it," Marina said sadly. "But it's not true. It's just a made-up fantasy."

"Just because a story is magical doesn't mean it's not true," her mother said gently. "Consider this: you wouldn't have experienced any of today's adventures had you not felt inspired by the magic of the story!"

Marina thought this over and realized her mother's words were true. She had never dreamed of meeting Ollie the octopus or seeing Stella the starfish light up the ocean. She had seen the kelp forest and seagrass meadow for the first time with her very own eyes. Above all, the best part was that she got to do it all with her two best friends by her side. It was then that Marina the mer-bear realized, BEARied treasure or not, the legend she loved so dearly had given her some magical memories to treasure after all!

"You're right," Marina told her mother. "Can we read *The Legend of the BEARied Treasure* again tonight?" And with that, the little mer-bear smiled as she drifted off to sleep dreaming of the magical treasures tomorrow would hold.



THE END

