

ONE

*What is your substance, whereof are you made
That millions of strange shadows on you tend?*

—SHAKESPEARE, “Sonnet LIII”

I was bathing in a lake when I saw the unicorn.

The water was cool and clear; the pollution had vanished years ago. I’m young, but I can remember the times before the Change when the filthy water would catch fire by itself. Now, though, I could leave my clothes next to my blowgun on the shore, grab a bar of Lifebuoy, and wade on in. It was clean enough to fill my drinking flask from.

I was scrubbing myself, enjoying the feel of slippery lather. It was a quiet day—as quiet as it ever gets, only the wind and the rustling of leaves, the accompanying insects. I usually sang when I bathed, to fill up the silence, but that day the silence was fitting and right, and I remained quiet.

I had just scrubbed my face, and I ducked under to wash off the soap. When I came back up, I brushed wet hair from my eyes and spat out a sparkling stream of water. I shook my head rapidly and rubbed my eyes.

There was a unicorn pawing at my clothes on the shore.

I had seen unicorns before, fleetingly. They were shy, cautious creatures that usually bolted when they sensed me, like quick flashes of sunlight on metal. In the five years since the Change I had become used to seeing fairy-tale things, living myths, but as I looked upon this creature I knew I had seen nothing to compare to it for sheer beauty. I felt as if some cold fish had slid across my belly as I marveled in the cool water.

It is an injustice to say merely that its coat was white. Oh, it was white, all right, but it was more than that. It was a white like I remember the best vanilla ice cream, but finer and smoother. Sometimes the sun hit it just right and bright rainbow crescents fanned out like light through a fine spray of water. The hooves were mirror-bright—platinum or silver, I couldn't tell. A distant lighthouse beacon on a lonely night, the spiral horn rose from the noble head: milky white, warm and welcoming.

I can't say how long I watched it. Seconds, minutes, hours. Its tail swished randomly. Its nose was pressed against my backpack, but suddenly the majestic head lifted and it regarded me with two paralyzingly black eyes. Eyes full of life and intelligence. Eyes I could fall into. Lover's eyes. As it moved, the mane shimmered on its muscular neck like a road on a hot day.

We looked at each other. Why did I suddenly have the feeling that I was the one who had no place in the world, that it was more real than I was? I was afraid to move, thinking I might frighten it away. Instead, I did the only thing I could think of to do:

"Hello," I said.

The silky ears pricked up, but otherwise it just stood there, reading my soul with those eyes.

I began walking cautiously toward the shore. Fear flashed in its eyes and I spoke to it in what I hoped was a reassuring voice.

"It's all right," I said. "I won't hurt you. It's all right." I said this over and over again as I inched closer. Soon I emerged, naked and dripping, from the water.

I held out my hands: let's be friends. There was pain in the beautiful face, and my smile disappeared when I saw why. The right front leg was broken. Swollen and discolored, it was made even uglier because such a thing didn't belong on this perfect beast. No wonder it hadn't run away.

"Oh, you poor thing," I said, kneeling.

It backed away, half-dragging the broken leg.

"I want to help you," I said, and stood up.

It looked straight at me. Its eyes were level with mine. "Bwoke," it said in a little-girl voice.

"I know. Here—" I reached out slowly and stroked her shoulder. It felt like ... I don't know. Somewhere between cotton and silk.

It—she, rather—flinched at the touch, but I stroked her mane until she relaxed.

"Bwoke," she said again.

"Yeah, it's broken. Pretty bad, too. I've got to find something to use as a splint so I can set it, okay?"

"Kayyy," she agreed.

I put on my pants and shoes and picked up the blowgun, then slid a handful of darts into a rear pocket. "Don't go away, all right? You'll hurt your leg even worse."

"Bwoke."

"Right." I smiled and darted out to the road, followed it about fifty yards until I came to a driveway leading to abandoned house. I entered cautiously. I wasn't worried too much about squatters or vigilantes, but it never hurts to play it safe. I took a sheet from a musty bedroom, bundled it up, and walked into the garage.

The car parked there was an old Volkswagen. The tires were flat and the windows were caked with dust. I picked up a rag from a work bench and wiped at the front windshield.

There was a corpse sitting behind the wheel. It looked as if it had been there a long time. Years. There was a bottle beside it. The label read POTASSIUM CYANIDE in bright red, with a skull and crossbones beneath. I wondered why he—she? —had done it.

I shrugged. Suicide had never been a viable option to me. I liked life, crazy as it was.

I turned around and picked up two long, thin boards from a small pile against the wall. The eerie feeling that the corpse was watching me made me feel like a dozen mice had skittered down my back.

I hurried from the dead house and ran down the road.

The unicorn was nuzzling my backpack when I arrived.

“No, get away from there,” I told her firmly. There were a couple of weapons in the pack, knives included, and I didn’t want her nosing it open and cutting herself.

“Candy,” she said.

“What?”

“Candy,” she repeated plainly.

“Sorry, little one. I don’t have any...” I trailed off and untied the pack flap to let her see. “Well, I’ll be damned.”

There was a small pack of peppermint candies nestled between a hunting knife and a foil packet of freeze-dried chili. I’d have sworn it hadn’t been there before.

“Candy.”

“Right.” I fished out the packet. Brach’s. Forty-nine cents. Shaking my head slowly, I tore open the plastic, untwisted one of the red and white wrappers, and held the peppermint out in my palm. She took it gently with her mouth and crunched. “Candy,” she said again.

“Be good and I’ll give you candy after I fix your leg.”

“Bwoke.”

I made a splint from strips of the sheet and the two boards. It must have hurt like hell as I bound it tight, but

she never flinched or made a sound.

Thinking about Androcles and the lion, I stood up and gave her another piece of candy.

I made a fire as it grew dark. Supper had been freeze-dried beef and rice and warm instant lemonade. She wouldn't eat anything I offered except peppermint candy.

I washed my utensils after supper and leaned back against a palm tree. It was a nice night. October in Florida is always nice. It's the first lessening of the summer heat, and the first taste of winter is in your mouth. By day the sky is a big blue bowl, and by night it is pure as crystal, stars shining and crickets humming.

I lit a cigarette and looked up at that wonderful sky. After a minute I noticed the unicorn was standing next to me, staring. "What's the matter with you?" I asked.

"Bad," she said in that innocent-girl voice.

"Bad? What's bad?"

She lowered her head and, almost faster than I could see it, flicked the cigarette from between my fingers with her horn.

"Bad," she insisted.

I started to protest, but stopped. Maybe the smoke bothered her. I shrugged and nodded. "Okay, sure. Bad. Gotcha. Smoking—bad."

She nodded approvingly and turned away.

"Schmuck," I added.

She snorted. It sounded playful.

I stood up, stretching. My cigarette was still burning on the ground. I stamped it out and got ready for bed.

My sleeping bag was snuggly warm. I lay in it, thinking, and from time to time I raised my head and looked at the pale form a few yards from me, silent and motionless.

I smiled and rolled over onto my side. Eventually I slept.

* * *

I awoke next morning to find myself staring into lovely black eyes—snowman’s eyes.

She stood over me, lover’s eyes regarding me patiently. The early morning sun caused an occasional pale orange glimmer on her left side.

“Well, good morning,” I said, standing. “How’s the leg?”
“Bwoke.”

“Yeah, right. We’re going to have to teach you a few more words.”

She watched me carefully as I buried last night’s garbage. “Feel like walking a little?” I asked her. “We’ll take it slow and easy. There’s a small town about five or six miles from here. I need some stuff—food and a couple other things. Sound okay to you?”

“Kayyy.”

That voice was so sweet it gave me shivers. I gave her a piece of peppermint—the last one—and stroked her luxuriant mane.

We followed the road until we got into the town.

W OME TO ARCADIA! proclaimed the road sign, with a hole shot through the “welcome.” It must have been that way before the Change; firearms didn’t work anymore.

I left her outside while I went into a pharmacy. I had to smash a window to get in; it was locked and, surprisingly, the large front windows were still intact. I was lucky; looters hadn’t found this place yet.

I unslung my pack and dragged it behind me, top flap open so I could toss in anything I wanted as I walked among the aisles. Ace bandages for the unicorn’s leg. Cigarettes from behind the cash register. And—I smiled when I saw them—a half-dozen small bags of Brach’s peppermint candy.

The pharmacy had a lunch counter to one side. Behind it I found a few canned goods I could use. Mostly beans and franks. I was sick to death of beans and franks. Most of the

cans were dented, and some had scratches on them that looked as if they might be teeth marks. Why would somebody be hungry enough to try to bite his way into a can, but pass up bags of peppermint candy?

The stockroom was mostly empty. The back door, which led to an alleyway formed by the back of the pharmacy and another store, had been pried open. So the place had been looted. Not a very thorough job, though.

I had just turned to leave when something smacked into the wall just above and behind my head. I dropped, rolled behind a stack of cardboard boxes, and snatched my blowgun from its sling. It was an Aero-mag break-down model, all aluminum with piano-wire darts.

A box just above my head thumped and slid back toward me a little. An arrowhead and half a shaft protruded upward from it.

Upward—that meant he was down low and firing high. His bow wasn't too powerful, either; the arrow hadn't gone through the box. I set the pack in front of me as protection, carefully slid two boxes a fraction of an inch apart, and risked a quick peek.

It was a kid. He wore filthy blue jeans and nothing else. His black hair was shoulder length and grimy. His ribs protruded and his belly was distended. His eyes were dull and insane. He couldn't have been more than thirteen years old. As I watched he pulled another hunting arrow from the makeshift quiver strapped onto the back of his right thigh, fitted it, and drew. He barely had the strength to bring the string back to his cheek.

I ducked quickly and an arrowhead sprang into being through a cardboard box, inches to the left of my backpack.

"Kid!" I yelled at the top of my lungs. "Kid! You can have some of my food! Christ, you can have all of it; I don't care!"

Silence. Not even the thump of arrows striking boxes. That unnerved me even more. I ventured another peek and

caught motion out of the corner of my eye just in time to see him coming around the boxes at me, a feral gleam in his eyes as he drew back the bowstring.

There wasn't time to think. I grabbed the pack and threw it at him, raised the blowgun to my lips, and puffed *hard*, grunting as I launched the dart.

It hit him in the eye. He screamed and fell, and was still.

I just sat there, hands clamped around the aluminum shaft of the Aero-mag. I trembled. God, he'd been a kid, just a little kid, and I'd had to kill him...

I drew a shaky breath and stood. Hating myself, I walked over to him and pulled the dart from his eye. I had to. I might need it again.

I found where he had lived, behind some shelving in a corner of the stockroom. It was rank. Roaches crawled everywhere. There was shit on the floor and a small pile of cleanly picked bones on one side. Among them was a human skull.

He hadn't been after my pack.

The unicorn waited patiently outside the pharmacy. How to describe what she looked like in the bright sun? Neon milk? She looked at me strangely as I came out. I was probably pale. No doubt my walk was uncertain.

"Bad," she decided.

I tried to smile. It didn't work. "Yeah," I said. "Bad."

I shouldered my backpack and slung the Aero-mag. "Come on—let's find a library."

If the pharmacy had been undisturbed, the library was a veritable temple. It was untouched and unlocked: not very big, probably twenty or thirty thousand books, but at least there were a lot of high windows and it was well-lit inside. A fine layer of dust had coated everything. The electric clock on the wall had frozen at exactly four-thirty.

The unicorn looked over my shoulder as I thumbed through card-catalog drawers. I couldn't find anything between UNICEF and UNIFORMS, so I looked under MYTHOLOGY. There were about a dozen books listed; I found them, sat down on the floor, leaning against a bookshelf, and began reading.

I learned some damned interesting things—for instance: Unicorns are symbols of purity. The horn is supposed to have healing properties. They are generally meek and shy, but fight ferociously when cornered. They are traditionally pictured as being cloven-hoofed. My unicorn (*my unicorn!*) wasn't. No illustrations showed the prism effect of the light on the coat, nor did any have silver hooves. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* said the legend had originated in Greece about the time the Greeks began trading with the Egyptian Empire, and that it probably sprang from muddled accounts of the oryx or the rhinoceros.

I laughed, and the unicorn watched curiously.

You had to be a virgin to touch a unicorn...

A flush crept up my neck. Okay, so I'd touched her. Being a virgin had some advantages after all. Hooray.

I read until the light was too dim to see by, then set the book aside, rubbed my eyes, and made a small supper. The unicorn just wanted another piece of candy.

I was dying for a cigarette. Earlier in the day I had opened up the pack and found them gone.

"Hey," I'd said to the unicorn, "did you do something with my cigarettes?"

"Bad," was all she replied.

To vent the jitters I was getting from my nicotine fit, I decided to take a walk around the library. There was a browse-a-book section filled with art collections and paperbacks, and on one stand was a largish softcover that had a painting of a unicorn on the front. It was golden and quite beautiful, but nothing compared to the real thing. I picked it up and held it high, squinting in the dying light.

Ariel, proclaimed the title. *The Book of Fantasy*.

“Ariel.” I said it out loud, liking the sound. It was light and sounded like silver. What the hell. I couldn’t keep calling her “unicorn,” and Ariel was as good a name as any and better than most.

I carried the book to the unicorn. “Ariel,” I told her. “That’s your name, okay?”

She snorted.

“I’ll take one snort to mean yes and two for no.”

One more snort.

“Ariel it is, then.”

I set it atop some books on magic and witchcraft I had put aside to read while I walked the next day. Ariel seemed to know I was getting ready to go to sleep and began to pace restlessly around the library. She had tried to lie down earlier, but the splint was too uncomfortable.

I squirmed into my sleeping bag and sleep came quickly.

Just before I dozed off I thought, *I wonder if she’ll ever learn more than baby talk?*