

The Last Unicorns

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“And griffins, and cockatrices, and rocs, and—”

The rain was still falling by the time he reached the little wooden shack that stood in the center of the green, fertile valley. He opened his cloak for an instant to knock at the door, not really expecting a reply.

But it opened, pulled over the roughness of the rock floor by great hairy hands. “Come in,” a voice commanded him. “Hurry! Before this rain floods me out.”

“Thank you,” the traveler said, removing the soggy garment that covered him and squeezing out some of the water. “It’s good to find a dry place. I’ve come a long way.”

“Not many people are about in this weather,” the man told him, pulling at his beard with a quick, nervous gesture.

“I came looking for you.”

“For me? What is your name?”

“You can call me Shem. I come from beyond the mountains.”

The bearded man grunted. “I don’t know the name. What do you seek?”

Shem sat down to rest himself on a pale stone seat. “I hear talk that you have two fine unicorns here, recently brought from Africa.”

The man smiled proudly. "That is correct. The only such creatures in this part of the world. I intend to breed them and sell them to the farmers as beasts of burden."

"Oh?"

"They can do the work of strong horses and at the same time use their horns to defend themselves against attack."

"True," Shem agreed. "Very true. I . . . I don't suppose you'd want to part with them . . . ?"

"Part with them! Are you mad, man? It cost me money to bring them all the way from Africa!"

"How much would you like for them?"

The bearded man rose from his seat. "No amount, ever! Come back in two years when I've bred some. Until then, begone with you!"

"I *must* have them, sir."

"You *must* have nothing! Begone from here now before I take a club to you!" And with those words he took a menacing step forward.

Shem retreated out the door, back into the rain, skipping lightly over a rushing stream of water from the higher ground. The door closed on him, and he was alone. But he looked out into the fields, where a small barnlike structure stood glistening in the downpour.

They would be in there, he knew.

He made his way across the field, sometimes sinking to his ankles in puddles of muddy water. But finally he reached the outbuilding and went in through a worn, rotten door.

Yes, they were there . . . Two tall and handsome beasts, very much like horses, but with longer tails and with that gleaming, twisted horn shooting straight up

from the center of their foreheads. Unicorns—one of the rarest of God’s creatures!

He moved a bit closer, trying now to lure them out of the building without startling them. But there was a noise, and he turned suddenly to see the bearded man standing there, a long staff upraised in his hands.

“You try to steal them,” he shouted, lunging forward. The staff thudded against the wall, inches from Shem’s head. “Listen, old man . . . “Die! Die, you robber!”

But Shem leaped to one side, around the bearded figure of wrath, and through the open doorway. Behind him, the unicorns gave a fearful snort and trampled the earthen floor with their hoofs.

Shem kept running, away from the shack, away from the man with the staff, away from the fertile valley.

After several hours of plodding over the rain-swept hills, he came at last upon his father’s village, and he went down among the houses to the place where the handful of people had gathered.

And he saw his father standing near the base of the great wooden vessel, and he went up to him sadly.

“Yes, my son?” the old man questioned, unrolling a long damp scroll of parchment.

“No unicorns, Father.”

“No unicorns,” Noah repeated sadly, scratching out the name on his list. is too bad. They were handsome beasts . . .”