Unicornucopia

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The cycle had finally turned; I knew the Change had come at last, and magic was returning to the world.

For a thousand years and more magic had been fading, withering, dying, but now the gates of Faerie were open once more, and mana was spilling out into mundane reality.

This was the opportunity not merely of a lifetime, but of a dozen, a hundred lifetimes. The world had been so long without magic that the only wizards left were a few doddering old fools who had hung on past their time, a few crazies who had never realized their spells didn’t work, and only a handful of scholars like myself.

All that magic, and no one who knew how to use it!

Oh, soon enough every fortune-teller and New Age loon in New York would catch on, would realize that real power could be had--but in the interim, I was free to shape the substance of reality to suit myself.

It’s fortunate for all of you that I’m basically a modest, well-meaning man.

I could, I suppose, have had power over all of you. I could have summoned djinni, erected a palace of ivory and gold, enslaved whole nations, taken half of Hollywood as my harem... and to be honest, I seriously considered it.

Hey, who wouldn’t?

On the other hand, I could have ended war and hunger and want, I suppose. I thought about that, too.

But it wouldn’t last. I didn’t want to change human nature--I was afraid I’d wind up the only true thinking person left on a planet of zombies, and I couldn’t face that. And without changing human nature, how could I bring peace? Seriously, now, no idealistic propaganda--do you really think any peace would last out the day?

Magic has limits.

And if I had managed it, I wouldn’t have been able to maintain it; as I said, in a few weeks, months at the most, wizards would be springing up on every side. I would have a head start, and I thought I could keep an edge, but I didn’t think I was going to make it as world ruler, either benevolent or otherwise.

So I looked at other goals. I had a bit of a fling--I mentioned a harem, didn’t I? And I did some traveling, and one thing and another.

But then I decided it was time to settle down. I’d been playing with time a bit, so it was still early, no one else was really aware of the magic yet, though the hints were certainly there. I went back to the university, conjured myself a pleasant little estate on the edge of town, and sat down to think out just what I wanted to do with the rest of my life.

I wanted to study, of course, and learn; I could do that, with or without magic, though the magic wouldn’t hurt any.

And I wanted a home and a family.

I considered that carefully. A home I now had, and infinitely better than my old apartment it was. But a family?

I mentioned the harem, didn’t I?

That was fun, but they really wouldn’t do as a family. I wanted a companion, a woman I could share my life with--and I knew just the person.

Helen Pettigrew.

She and I were old friends, we’d dated a few times, but she had never taken me very seriously. A medievalist specializing in the arcane arts? An instructor without tenure? Why should she take me seriously?

I’d hoped that something might develop between us, but it never really had.

Now, though--now, things were different.

It wasn’t hard to make the date. It was surprisingly easy to convince her to come see my new house, too. I was hopeful.

The expression on her face when she first stepped inside was absolutely priceless. She stared up at the chandelier, at the grand staircase, at the carpets and the statuary and all the rest of it, and her mouth hung open as if she were a kid watching her first fireworks.

“Al,” she exclaimed, “how can you possibly afford it?”

I smiled. “Magic,” I said.

“No, seriously,” she said. “This place must cost a fortune!”

“I am serious,” I said. “It’s magic!”

She closed her mouth to stare at me.

“Really,” I told her. “Come on to my workshop, and I’ll show you.”

I took her hand--I don’t know if I’d have been quite so bold a fortnight before, but a few days in a harem can wear down one’s inhibitions. At any rate, I took her by the hand and almost dragged her back to my workroom, so eager was I to show her.

“Al,” she said, “I know you’ve always studied magic, and alchemy, and all that, but that doesn’t... it isn’t real, you know...”

“It wasn’t,” I said. “But it is now!”

I flung open the door and stood aside, proudly displaying my wizard’s chamber.

“What a mess,” she said.

I had forgotten that the place was in rather a state of disarray. “Come on,” I said, leading her in.

When we reached the center of the room she pulled free, set her feet on the floor, folded her arms, and announced, “I’m in. Now, Al, what was it you wanted to show me?”

“Magic,” I said. I had been prepared for this; I took my wand from the workbench and made a few passes.

I started simple, conjuring flowers, first from the air, and then growing from the floor. I summoned songbirds, made thunder and lightning, and all the while I was explaining my discovery, how I had found that magic was returning.

She looked very dubious indeed.

“It’s not all tricks?” she asked, kicking at an iris.

“No,” I assured her. “It’s real.”

“So just what all can you do?”

“Anything,” I said proudly, if a bit inaccurately. “Anything at all. I conjured up this house and everything in it!”

She cocked her head to one side and stared at me.

I suppose, had I thought about it, I would have realized just how hard all this would be to accept. I had been studying magic for so long that I had forgotten how completely most people disbelieved in it.

“Anything?” she said.

I nodded.

“You mean if I ask you to conjure something up out of thin air, you can do it? Anything I ask for?”

“Anything,” I agreed. “Anything at all.”

“Even something that doesn’t exist?”

I nodded again, but I admit my smile wasn’t quite so sincere as it had been a moment before.

Magic has limits.

“Even something that’s never existed?” she demanded.

“Probably,” I said, choosing discretion. Magic does have limits.

“When I was a little girl,” she said, “I always wanted to see a unicorn. I used to collect them, in fact--stuffed ones, and statuettes, and pictures. If this is real magic, can you conjure up a real unicorn?”

“Of course!” I said, relieved that she hadn’t come up with something utterly bizarre. “What sort of a unicorn would you like?”

“Just a unicorn. A real one, with its own magic--not just a horse with a horn.”

A real, magical unicorn--that was a trifle harder than I had thought at first, as I had never before conjured anything with its own personal magic. “There are several different versions of the unicorn myth,” I said, stalling, while I tried to think of the best way to tackle the job.

“All right, then,” she said, “you said you could do anything, right? So bring me one of each.”

I had put my foot in it, no doubt about it. “This may take awhile,” I admitted.

She smiled--or perhaps, though I hate to say it of the woman I intended to love, smirked. “Try,” she said.

So I tried.

I had no idea how many variations of the myth might in fact exist, so I wasn’t about to try conjuring each one separately. Instead, after consulting a grimoire or two, I fished out an old umbrella stand...

I should explain, perhaps, that I didn’t actually furnish the entire house piece by piece; instead I worked from photographs, conjuring up duplicates of rooms that caught my fancy. Anything I didn’t care for, once that was done, I threw into the workshop for use as raw materials for future spells and transformations.

One such item was a large and ugly wicker umbrella stand that had originally manifested itself in the Victorian conservatory at the back of the house.

I took this unsightly object and placed it horizontally on my workbench, gathered up a few relics and potions, and cast the enchantment Helen had requested.

Almost immediately, a whinny sounded from the umbrella stand, and the tip of a horn appeared, white and gleaming. A head appeared, then shoulders, forelegs, chest, and a moment later a unicorn stood on my workshop floor.

Just how something that size had emerged from the umbrella stand was something of a mystery, as it was very nearly the size of a full-grown horse--but then, it was magic.

Despite Helen’s insistence that she wanted a real unicorn and would not be satisfied with a mere horned horse, this beast looked to me like just that--a rather small, unusually graceful white horse with a two-foot horn on its head.

Or rather, on his head; I had been knocked to the floor by his arrival, and found myself with a view of the creature that left no question of his sex.

The beast was rather confused by his surroundings; his eyes were wide and staring.

Helen, after the initial shock had faded somewhat, saw the animal’s expression and started forward to comfort him.

He shied away, whinnying, just as the second unicorn’s horn thrust out of the umbrella stand. That golden shaft pricked the first arrival’s haunch, whereupon the beast panicked and charged out through the open door.

Helen watched it go, then turned quickly back to the second unicorn as it worked its way out the aperture. Golden hooves clattered out onto the floor of my workshop as the sound of breaking furniture reached us from elsewhere in the house.

The second unicorn was scarcely out of the umbrella stand when a third horn appeared; quickly, Helen stepped forward, once again intending to comfort the new arrival and lead it out of the way.

This beast did not merely shy away; it screamed, shrieked with rage, and thrust at Helen with that gleaming golden horn.

Fortunately, she dodged; I had not yet troubled myself to learn any healing magic.

Of course, when I breathed a sigh of relief at Helen’s escape, it occurred to me that unicorn horn was supposed to have healing properties--to be, in fact, a panacea.

In some versions of the story. Others accounted it an aphrodisiac, or a nostrum against poisons, or attributed to it various other properties.

There were rather a lot of variations on the unicorn myth, I realized.

And I had just summoned one of each. I frowned.

Another aspect struck me.

“Helen,” I called, “forgive me for being indelicate...”

I was interrupted by the unicorn’s second lunge, and the third unicorn’s escape from the umbrella stand. The workshop was becoming rather crowded, with two people and two pseudoequines sharing space with all the customary clutter.

Helen managed to dodge safely, once again; I snatched up a wand, recalled a hasty incantation I had prepared for just such an eventuality, and cast a simple spell.

A trapdoor opened beneath Helen’s feet; I had a quick glimpse of her astonishment before she vanished.

The third unicorn, a black beast with a bone-white horn, was eyeing me balefully, while a fourth had worked its head out of the umbrella stand; I repeated the spell.

The drop really was rather disconcerting.

We arrived unhurt in the basement, atop a pile of mattresses placed there for that purpose; a good magician always has an escape route prepared. Above us I could hear the stamping of several hooves; I winced at the sound of some large glass object shattering.

Helen was lying spread-eagled beside me, staring blankly at the floor-joists overhead. No sign remained of the trapdoors I had temporarily created; the heavy floorboards were unbroken. Light came from a pair of simple wall-fixtures to one side.

“As I was saying,” I said, “if you’ll forgive me for being indelicate, unicorns--for the most part, anyway--are said to have a very decided preference for virgins. From the reactions of those two, my dear, I suspect you don’t qualify.”

She cast me a look I would prefer never to see again.

“Neither do I,” I added hastily.

She scarcely seemed mollified by this, but at any rate she turned her attention back to the floor above us. Something large and heavy fell; a unicorn neighed loudly.

“I,” she said, “am convinced. Either you’ve really learned magic, or we’ve both gone nuts.”

She blinked, then added, “Or I’m dreaming.”

I assured her that this was no dream.

“All right,” she said, sitting up. “So I’m convinced. You can turn it off now, and send all those unicorns away.”

I chewed on my lower lip as I considered the situation.

“Not from down here, I can’t,” I told her. “Come on.”

Together we found the stairs and made our way up to the kitchen, where we discovered a unicorn eating the curtains. The creature shied and ran at the sight of us.

“Was that one we’d seen before?” Helen asked.

I shrugged. “Who knows?” I asked. “As far as I’m concerned, if you’ve seen one unicorn, you’ve seen them all.”

She hit me on the arm; I suppose it was meant in fun, but it hurt, and I didn’t reply.

The dining hall now held half a dozen of the mythological creatures, five white and one black; at our entrance four of them fled, one seemed indifferent, and the last lowered its horn and prepared to charge. I waved my wand in an attempt to turn the creature to stone, and, as we dove for shelter behind the armoire, made a discovery.

Ordinary spells don’t work on unicorns.

I suppose, having worked out the principles of magic long since, I should have known this, but the correct application of theory to fact is not always intuitively obvious.

I saw immediately what the situation was, though, as that nasty little beast prodded at us with its horn, forcing us farther back into the corner; the unicorn was itself sufficiently magical to be immune to other magicks.

That was, to say the least, distressing.

The unicorn thrust forward again, the armoire swayed dangerously, and I used my wand again.

We missed the mattresses this time, or at any rate I did; Helen rolled down the side of the stack before landing on top of me. I knew I had just raised a fine crop of bruises, but thought no bones were broken.

We made our way up the stairs once again, moving far more cautiously this time; unicorns scattered before us, and fortunately we encountered no belligerent variants this time as we made our way back through the house.

I think we both marveled at the variety we saw. True, most were basically white horses adorned with horns--or technically, in most cases, antlers, since the supercranial shaft was usually bone-- but there were some rather astonishing others. Those that stuck to the equine form came in every color of the rainbow and a good many hues not commonly seen, in spectra or elsewhere; sizes ranged from Clydesdale-scale down to miniatures I could have put in my hip pocket. Some had wings--feathered, leathery, or even dragonfly-fashion. And there were creatures that were scarcely equine at all--many, in fact, looked more like rhinoceri.

Or is it rhinoceroses?

I had never taken much interest in the taxonomy of monocerates, and this all came as a shock to me.

Perhaps the biggest surprise came in the foyer, where two naked girls sat upon the grand staircase, chatting cheerily.

For a moment I thought perhaps some remnant of my harem had been overlooked, but neither of these two was at all familiar in detail, though one beautiful woman may often look much like another at first glance.

These two were certainly beautiful. One was a golden blonde, while the other had hair of gleaming white that spilled down the length of her seated body and pooled on the steps and floor around her. Both were young and fresh and perfect.

They looked up at the sound of our entrance.

“Hello,” Helen called. “Who are you?”

They looked at one another, then stood, and I noticed that the white-haired one had a horse’s tail.

“We don’t know,” the other one said. “Not really, anyway.”

“You’re unicorns, aren’t you?” I asked. “You came out of the... the thing in there.” I gestured toward my workshop.

The one with the tail nodded. The other, however, hesitated.

“I think,” she said slowly, “that I came out of a novel, originally. But I got here through the cornucopia, yes.”

“A novel?” Once again, a fact I should have seen sooner struck me.

Had I asked for one of each variety of, say, ape, I’d have found myself with a representative of each species of gorilla, orangutan, chimpanzee, and so forth--perhaps each subspecies, as well. I would not, however, have summoned any of Edgar Rice Burroughs’ mangani, because those never existed.

Unicorns, however, were entirely fictional, and the spell would make no distinction between fictional sources. To the powers of magic, a medieval bestiary is no more real than the newest and most derivative novel--or toy, or even a scrawled manuscript by some horse-besotted schoolgirl.

Thus, I had inadvertently summoned every variety of unicorn ever imagined, from the travel reports of medieval scholars to the saccharine designs of the My Little Pony people.

The numbers would be staggering.

And what was worse, I now realized that I had no idea how to stop the spell before it was complete. Leaving Helen talking to the two girl-unicorns, I ran for my workshop.

Unicorns were spilling out the door at a gallop, little winged ones fluttering overhead; my parlor furniture had all been trampled into kindling, and the broad bay window at the front of the house was smashed out completely, leaving a gaping hole through which unicorns poured in a shining stampede.

I tried fruitlessly to fight the current for a moment, but when half a dozen horns converged on my chest I thought better of the notion.

When I made my way back up from the cellars this time I found Helen sitting on the stairs, talking earnestly with the two unicorns; a third, equine in shape but speaking in clear, bell-like tones, stood nearby, taking part in the conversation.

The steady stream of unicorns charging through the parlor continued; I could see that the fine hardwood floor had long since lost its finish, and the sharp little hooves were now digging up splinters.

What would happen, I wondered, when the floor gave out entirely?

“Helen,” I said, “my dear young visitors--I think it might be a good idea to leave.”

The four of them looked at me questioningly. I pointed at the flying splinters. The parlor floor was vibrating visibly, and starting to sag.

“I believe the gentleman speaks wisely,” the equinoform unicorn said gravely.

The four of us exited through the front door, while the main body of unicorns continued to make use of the ruined bay window.

We were standing on the front lawn, watching, when the first police car pulled up.

“Al,” Helen said, as the officers emerged from their vehicle, “do something.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Send them away.”

I blinked at her in surprise.

“Why?” I asked.

“Why? Because they’re going to arrest us for turning loose all these unicorns!”

“Oh, nonsense,” I said, as the police marched grimly across the lawn toward us. “They can’t possibly charge us with that.”

They didn’t, of course; they arrested us for indecent exposure, creating a public nuisance, and resisting arrest.

We had assigned the humaniform unicorns--the two arrested with us, that is; there were others--the names Cornelia and Una. It was Cornelia, the tailless blonde, who assumed equine form and exploded the roof off the squad car, freeing us.

After that we fled into the park and watched from a safe distance as chaos spread.

It was shortly before dawn when my lovely house began to collapse in upon itself; by noon nothing remained but ruins, and still unicorns were clambering from the wreckage.

By now much of the town was awash in unicorns. A few had been captured and were being ridden by grinning young women; others roamed the streets as their fancy took them. The occasional wail of an ambulance siren implied that not everyone had avoided all those very sharp horns.

The police were far too busy to worry about us.

Helen kept asking me to do something, making suggestions, and I kept stalling.

“Why can’t you stop that spell?” she demanded.

I sighed. “You have a computer, don’t you, Helen?”

She conceded that she did.

“Have you ever had a program start running that you didn’t want to finish, but it wouldn’t accept a break command?”

“A couple of times,” she admitted.

“Well, this is like that. There’s no way to stop the spell without doing the equivalent of rebooting the whole system, and I can’t do that with just this one little wand.” I tried to smile. “Don’t worry,” I told her. “It can’t go on forever.”

She was not happy. After some thought, she began asking why I didn’t do anything about all the other problems--why I didn’t rebuild my house, why I didn’t capture the unicorns, and so on.

I was reluctant to tell anyone just why, but finally, I admitted the truth.

“You remember,” I said, “that I told you magic was loose in the world once more?”

Helen nodded.

“And that I could use it to do anything I wanted?”

She nodded again.

“That was because,” I said, “nobody else was using it. But now they are.” I waved an arm at a small herd of unicorns grazing nearby. “They are. Unicorns are magical. And they’re using up all the magic. There isn’t enough left for me to do anything major. Not with just the wand.”

“Oh,” she said.

Eventually, we decided there was no point in watching any more; we made our way back to Helen’s apartment, put some clothes on Una and Cornelia, ate a hurried meal, and settled down to watch the news.

Thousands of unicorns were not something that could be ignored, and sure enough, the story was reported, after a fashion. Theories ranged from alien invasions to Hollywood hoaxes; there was surprisingly little mention of the possibility of real, genuine, old-fashioned magic.

Three days later, finally, the spell completed its task, and the unicorns stopped appearing.

By then the free-floating magical energy available had been reduced to nothing; I could not conjure so much as a spark with my wand. Those damned unicorns had absorbed every single trace of it.

I was not happy about this, not happy at all. All my dreams of glory were reduced to ash.

Still, I had foreseen this when I first realized that my spells did not work on unicorns. I had spent the intervening time in study and careful consideration of the situation. My own library, my own tools, were buried in the rubble of my mansion, trampled into uselessness by thousands of hooves, but the university library had a few useful texts, and of course I remembered all the basic principles involved.

It seemed to me that there would be a way to resolve this, and restore my ability to work magic, while eliminating the plague of unicorns I had unleashed, the hundreds of beasts that were devouring every lawn and garden in town. If the unicorns were returned to the nothingness whence they came, the magical energy they had absorbed would be freed.

I merely needed the right spell, and not long after the appearances ceased I came upon the way of it. A certain word, a certain gesture, and then tap the unicorn with the wand...

Ah, there was the rub. Tap the unicorn with the wand. But the beasts had scattered to the four winds, flying or galloping in all directions.

I could, I suppose, have hired unicorn hunters, though there might be certain difficulties in establishing the qualifications of any volunteers. I could have waited while they traveled the world at my expense, picking off the silly creatures one by one. I would thus have gradually regained my arts--but what good would it have done?

After all, with a plague of unicorns on the evening news, even the dimmest would-be wizard must realize that magic is no longer quite as impossible as it used to be. I’d be in competition with half a hundred crazies and charlatans for every speck or spark of power.

And after the initial confusion, the creatures were giving no one any trouble; they had scattered quite thoroughly. And almost all the stories agreed that unicorns are shy, retiring beasts, rarely glimpsed by humans. Zapping them into nonexistence would scarcely be doing humanity any great favor; in fact, were I to carry out such a pogrom, I knew I would be cordially hated by entire generations of young girls.

So there was no great good to be served; the only benefit would be a partial restoration of my wizardry.

Which, I realized, I didn’t need.

After all, I had already decided that I didn’t particularly crave power or recognition. I had my studies, and shortly thereafter I had my family, and that was all I really wanted.

So I paid all those vanished unicorns no further heed. And I am, I am pleased to say, quite happy.

Poor Helen, however, is not. She took it into her head to study unicorns, and ignored me when I pointed out that of all the herd that had emerged from my umbrella stand, no two were alike. Nor is she qualified to capture the poor beasts, so everything must be done by proxy.

I think it’s a very good thing I had the sense to let Helen go, and to marry Cornelia instead.