

CHAPTER 20--HORN OF THE UNICORN

Amanda looked out on the horizon as the sun faded reflecting on the earlier events of the day when a strange sight entered her field of view. A long straight pointed horn stuck up out of the water and then submerged again.

“What’s that?” she yelled in disbelief.

Lars snapped to attention and looked in her direction. The strange horn emerged again this time revealing the rounded head from which the horn was attached to. “That’s a narwhal.”

“What’s a narwhal?” Amanda asked as the horned creature submerged itself again.

“A narwhal is a whale that only lives in the Arctic.”

Another narwhal appeared higher up out of the water. It showed off its light colored underbelly and spots on its darker colored grayish topside. Its horn spiraled out of the water.

“How bizarre. I’ve never seen such an animal!”

“A very unique looking creature.”

“What do they use their horns for?”

“The horns only grow on males. I’ve seen two of them fight before with it. Probably over another female.”

“Figures.”

“The horn might be for hunting too maybe. Not for spearing but for disrupting the bottom sediment while looking for fish like flounders in addition to its diet of cod and squid.”

Amanda watched in amazement as another narwhal surfaced to breathe. There now appeared to be three narwhals swimming near them.

“They actually have two teeth, but it is rare for both to form a long horn. I’ve only seen one before with both, quite a sight.”

“How long are those horns?”

He took a closer look. “They all look to be about two meters long. I’ve seen, maybe, half a meter longer before. These narwhals look to be about average size. I would say five meters including the horn.”

Two more narwhals broke the surface to blow. Their horns first jutted up out of the water then their spotted, dark, dorsal finless back emerged.

“The narwhal and the bowhead are the only whales who live full time in the Arctic. They are quite remarkable. They can dive down to twelve hundred meters and stay down for twenty to twenty-five minutes. It is more common for them to swim much shallower around ten to fifty meters.”

Amanda took out her camera, zoomed in, and snapped several photos. “My friends won’t believe me until I show them some pictures,” she added enthusiastically.

“I once saw several dozen migrating, but they usually are in small pods like this. I’ve read they travel in herds of hundreds or thousands sometimes.”

“Wow.” Amanda couldn’t contain her excitement at seeing such a strange animal.

“It’s strange to see a narwhal around here this time of year.”

“Why’s that?”

“It is unusual for them to be this far north at this time of year. They overwinter in the Davis Strait. Then they come up north through the pack ice and are here in large numbers by May and June.”

“Why would they be here?” Amanda wondered out loud again intrigued by Lars’ questioning.

“Sometimes they get stuck in fast forming solid pack ice before they can go south toward Disko Island in October. The Inuit even have a name for it - savssat. More often than not, I am guessing they would die during the winter because of exhaustion from keeping their breathing hole open. These narwhals here don’t look like they would have spent the winter here. They look too healthy and energetic.”

“You can tell?”

“Immaqa.”

It was the second time she had heard that word. “What does that word mean?”

“Immaqa?”

“Yes.”

“It means – look carefully before drawing a conclusion.”

With the unforgiving Arctic climate, this was a prudent way to think. Perhaps this word would be useful back home.

“One can learn a lot by just observing.”

Two of the narwhals surfaced and fought with their horns. Their attention toward the new activity let them both forget the question of why the narwhals were this far north so early in the year.

This new activity made Amanda realize something else, that nature was not a museum, like at a zoo, or perhaps even the feeling one might get, going to a national park. It was spontaneous, and harmonious. It was all encompassing. The fellow creatures of the earth were acting out their lives naturally, if allowed to. It made her realize something else, why she was feeling a little agitated over the cartoon on the airplane.

It was because harmony meant not having a cartoonish view of nature, as that would be a sign of disrespect. It would also be anthropomorphic. No more animated movies, no more talking fishes, sharks, or lions to name but a few.

Another aspect of how this was different from going to the zoo became apparent from watching these dueling narwhals. At the zoo there were too many choices to look at that one ended up being confused. It was simple psychology. Similar to the psychology of superstores where they overwhelmed you with choice so you ended up buying something, anything – things you didn't need.

Perhaps with equal importance, there was the all encompassing near silence of nature to contemplate these animals, unlike a zoo with its crowds of screaming children. The world was an

artificial illusion filled with zoos, amusement parks, and artificial windows into nature.

Amanda's marketing instincts came to the forefront despite her desire to forget anything work related. She recalled an article that she had read of efforts to ban advertising targeted at children. It was Sweden now that she thought about it. Ever since then, she had come to realize that the more cartoon characters a company employed in advertising, the more they had to hide. While the strategy worked on children, it was often carried over to adults too who had grown up with this exposure, or rather, conditioning. Oil companies with talking cars and tigers. Sugary cereals with toucan birds and tigers, cigarettes and camels, artificially colored snacks and cheetahs, or a host of other bastardized versions of animals. Then there were the fast food chains with their colorful assortment of characters and clowns. There was a good reason that these companies used cute little toys and animals to suck in children with happy meals - we'll be happy when you're fat and addicted to our junk. Hook, line, and sinker.

It wasn't just the attribution of human characteristics to animals, but also the cartoonization of reality. One oil company, while avoiding the use of animals, had an advertising campaign with a false swim through of an underwater scene. Other advertising campaigns had created false versions of jungle and forest scenes. It was like the artificial landscaping at the zoo. It was all – lipstick on a pig, and a very dark shade of red it was indeed.

The activity subsided and Lars revealed more about the history of the narwhal. It was how the narwhal helped to fuel the myth of the unicorn. In the Middle Ages, Vikings had passed off narwhal horns as unicorn horns. Unicorn horns that were sold as a cures for epilepsy, as heart strengtheners, and of most importance, as poison neutralizers. Kings and queens drank from

goblets made of alicorn, the name of a unicorn horn. It was custom for the French kings to have all their utensils, cups, and bowls made from alicorn. A tradition continued right up to the French Revolution. Fear of poisoning went along with political intrigue.

Amanda looked at the cup of tea she was drinking out of. It was made of plastic.

An alicorn was also one of Queen Elizabeth I's most prized possessions. A single alicorn was worth enough to buy a large estate and castle back in the day. King Charles V of England gave two alicorns as payment for a debt, which in today's dollars might be around \$1 million dollars. They were symbols of imperial power. The scepter of Russia's czars and of Austria's Hapsburg emperors were both made of alicorn. Two alicorns are among the treasures at Japan's imperial palace.

Amanda always thought unicorns were just pretty to look at growing up. She never thought that people could think they were real.

Yet, the kings of Denmark knew the secret of the alicorn, but kept it to themselves. They even made a throne of alicorn and gold to impress others. All on display in Copenhagen at Castle Rosenborg, home of the crown jewels. Other rulers of Europe were jealous of them because of this display of wealth and fortune.

The narwhals continued to circle around in the lead. Amanda realized that alicorns were like many luxury items of today. People prized them just because others did.

The legend didn't stop at its medicinal properties. It was also used by the Church throughout the Middle Ages to help teach morality.

Amanda made a mental note to look for paintings of a unicorn sitting with a young

woman, a virgin woman, at museums. For according to the folklore, a unicorn could only be tamed by a virgin woman. These images were widely used by the Church to teach morality. People were taught that without chastity, Christians could not know Christ. The idea was a means to motivate commoners toward maintaining sexual purity or perhaps pursue a life in the monastery. On the flip side, the lore had it that hunters would use a virgin to attract the unicorn then kill it for its horn.

“So Vikings made up the idea of the unicorn?”

“No, no. The unicorn myth existed long before. They just took advantage of people’s gullibility to make a handsome profit off it. It was worth ten to twenty times its weight in gold. With such profits to be made counterfeiters even went so far as to straighten out walrus and elephant tusks in the 16th century. I read that even limestone stalactites were sold as alicorns, if you can believe it.”

“Where did the myth come from?”

“From people’s imaginations. There is a unicorn like myth in Chinese history called a Chi-Lin or in Japan, Kirin.”

“Like the bear?”

“Yes. The myth may have come from there over time. Or it could also be from interpretations of the Bible. It is mentioned more than a few times in the King James Bible. I’ve read that when the Old Testament was translated from the original Hebrew into Greek, scholars interpreted the word for a wild ox or ass, as a unicorn. Ever since then, the unicorn has had a holy connection. As for actual events closer to Europe, it seems to be mentioned for the first time

in a Persian court. There are only two animals that have a single horn. Rhinoceroses, which of course look nothing like a horse, and the narwhal. Have you ever heard of an oryx?"

"No."

"The oryx is from Africa and the Middle East. It might be like a deer in your country."

"Ok, I get the idea."

"People may have also confused it to be a unicorn. If you look at an oryx from the side it looks like it only has one horn. It was even portrayed in this way in old Egyptian paintings. But, if you look at it in three dimensions, it becomes clear that it has two horns. Adding to the confusion, mutant goats are sometimes born with only one horn."

"That's quite a mix up. Sounds like people could pick and choose what the unicorn looked like."

"Like many myths, people retell them as they would want to envision it, not as to what is the actual truth. The myth became embellished over time. The unicorn became fleet and fierce, with a white body, tail of a lion, a mane, and legs of a buck. It came to represent the love of purity and innocence."

"Wouldn't anyone ever want proof of its existence?"

"People just thought that 'It couldn't be taken alive.' It was a convenient excuse for not ever producing a live one."

"Amazing what people believed in those days."

"Amazing what people believe in today."

Amanda gave Lars a funny glance of confusion, but wasn't sure why.

Lars described the unicorn as even being on the Scottish and UK royal coat of arms. The unicorn representing harmony through insight and understanding. Its counterpart, the lion, representing a desire to impose order on the world.

She inquired if it was on the Danish coat of arms, but learned that the Danish coat had three blue lions on it. A reflection of the national character to impose order, perhaps a natural order. An order based on harmony with the land.

They amused themselves by continuing to watch the narwhals play before Lars continued with his story.

The deception was even further self-fulfilling when a non-Viking European did find a narwhal horn for themselves, as Sir Martin Frobisher did in the 16th century while looking for a northwest passage to India, he thought it was a marine species of unicorn. Early maps Lars noted even had a picture of a marine unicorn. It had a body of a horse, a fish tail and alicorn. Frobisher's alicorn went to Queen Elizabeth, the same one mentioned earlier.

Reality started to set in during the 17th century as prices for alicorns dropped considerably. But it was only until the early 19th century that the myth, by most accounts, faded away. Though this didn't stop a fake horn from being sold in 1994 for nearly 500,000 pounds at a Christie's auction.

Amanda inquired about whether narwhals were endangered, and learned that while their numbers were stable, many species of rhinos and oryx weren't so fortunate.

“If unicorns did exist before, maybe they were hunted to extinction. If enough people don't care, then rhinos, oryx, or any number of animals that have some useful ‘human value’

could very well become mythical creatures like the unicorn, known only in stories and in books.”

“You make me want to go see these animals while they’re still around. My travel agent said that this trip might just be the first of many. I think she might be right.”

“The unicorn isn’t the first myth to become larger than life as we know it, and it won’t be the last to fade.”

“While we’re talking about mythical creatures, what do you know about the Little Mermaid?”

“The Little Mermaid, you mean the story by Hans Christian Andersen?”

“Yes.”

“What do you want to know about it?”

“I was touring Copenhagen on the airplane stopover to get here with a girl I met on the plane. We stopped to see the Little Mermaid statue in the harbor. We were talking about it, then it became apparent that we seemed to be discussing two very different stories. There was some difference in the book she read and the movie I saw. Do you know anything about this?”

Lars smiled and looked up in the air, gazing at some nearby clouds. “Nice detective work.”

“Huh?”

“Did you happen to see the Disney version of the movie?”

“Yes, why?”

“I can tell you an interesting story about that, but let’s talk about that later.”

They watched in silence as the group of narwhals swam away.

Amanda decided to change the tone of the conversation. “I enjoyed this. Do you think we will see any bowhead whales?”

Lars did not cooperate. “I doubt it. There used to be a lot of bowhead whales around here, but they were hunted to near extinction in the beginning of the 17th century until the early 1900s for lamp oil by Europeans. 1912 seems to pop in my mind. They were much prized because they float when killed.”

“Lars, you know you aren’t cheering me up. ” Amanda commented sarcastically.

“Sorry. I just try to tell it like it is. In order to learn from the past, we must be honest about it.”

“How many are there now?”

“I don’t recall the precise numbers, but maybe only a couple hundred. There are more in the Chukchi Sea between Russia and Alaska. Maybe about 7,000 there.”

The depressing realization made her realize something greater in Lars’ words, in order to learn from one’s own past, one had to be honest with themselves first. Self-deception was insidious indeed.

For all this talk of horns though, she hadn’t asked about the creature she had come this far to see. Was the magic of the polar bear in danger of disappearing too?