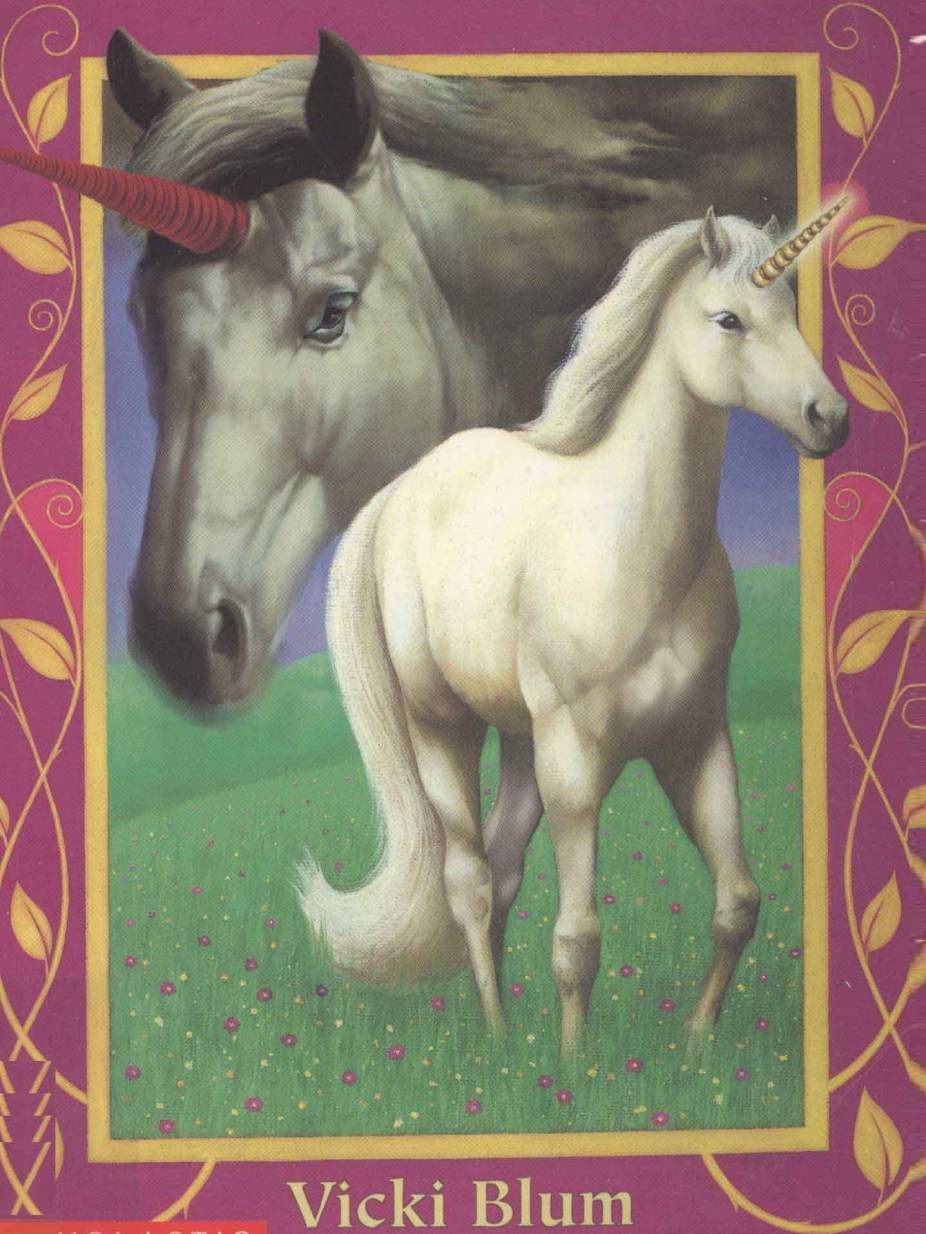


The Shadow Unicorn



Vicki Blum

HOLASTIC



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The
Shadow
Unicorn

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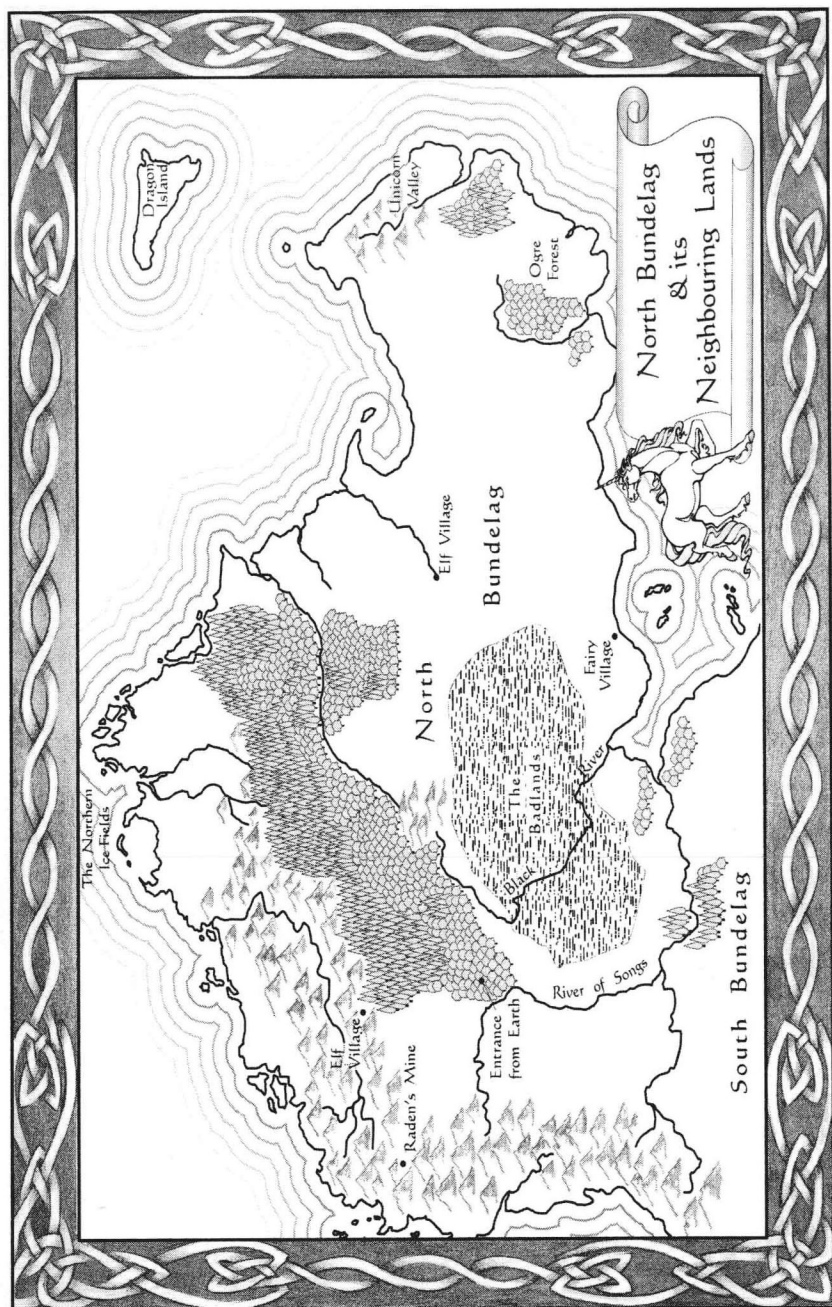
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To my father, Nephi Richards

“ . . . and his horns are like the horns of unicorns:
with them he shall push the people together
to the ends of the earth.”

Deuteronomy 33:17





Chapter 1

For the third time in a week, Arica dreamed about the strange, grey stallion.

She had no idea why she kept dreaming about a horse, especially one she had never seen before. She was beginning to dread the thought of climbing into bed.

In the dream, she stood in an empty corral on a ranch like her cousin Connor's. It was evening, and a huge fire-orange sun was sinking down behind a row of purple mountains to the west. A thin, cold wind whined down off their jagged slopes, plucked at her sweater and tossed dust and hair into her stinging eyes.

As she walked alone across the hoof-marked dirt, she breathed in the thick, sharp scent of animal

manure and the sweetness of ripening hay. Above her head an eagle soared, small and black against the red-gold sky.

Halfway across the corral she saw the stallion. He was tied to a post and had clearly been struggling for some time to break free. Clumps of stringy mane were plastered to his damp, grey coat. The air heaved in and out of his lungs as he strained against the rope around his neck. Two small ears lay flat against his tossing head. Wild eyes stared back at her, showing in them more white than colour. The whinny that came from his throat was almost a scream.

Arica approached the horse slowly, murmuring words of comfort. The thrashing eased until she was able to run her fingers gently over his trembling neck. His hide was sweat-soaked and as rough as tangled yarn. There were sores in places, where something had chafed away the skin.

Then she felt his anger and his fear.

Even in her dream she knew this couldn't happen — not with horses, anyway. She pulled back with a gasp, too startled to think. The animal panicked and reared above her, his hooves whipping at air. She stumbled beneath him and fell to her knees. The last thing she saw was two enormous hooves hurtling down upon her . . .

Arica woke, kicking and gasping for breath, nose-

down on the floor next to her own bed. Her blankets had followed her and were twisted tightly about her face and neck. As she clawed her way up through the tangle of bedding, her eyes fell upon the little glass unicorn her grandmother had given her for her tenth birthday. It glowed palely, casting faint shadows upon the wall above her head. Through the half-open window a restless wind moaned among the treetops, as if in pain.

Help me, it seemed to say as it whispered through the leaves. **Help him. Help us.**

It was a long time before she slept again.

A few weeks later she met up with Connor after school for a game of soccer. After they had played for a while, some more kids from school came along and joined in. For a time Arica simply enjoyed the frantic racing and the fun. It almost made her forget about the dreams. Almost.

She was just about to score on Connor when she saw the unicorn. It was standing on one side of the soccer net, half hidden by the goalpost. No one else could see it because it wasn't really there. It turned when it saw her looking, and walked away as if it wanted her to follow.

She kicked the ball toward the net, then told Connor she had to leave for a minute. The unicorn was already halfway across the field. The closer she got

to it, the more it looked like Wish. But when she finally caught up, it had disappeared.

She stood in the middle of the field, staring around, and waited for it to come back. After a while she gave up and went back to her game.

By the time Arica was done her shower the next morning, she had made up her mind. Out onto her closet floor she tossed binders, books and pencils. From dresser drawer to backpack went jeans, shirts, socks, a toothbrush and whatever else she saw lying around the room that might come in useful. She clattered down the stairs and into the kitchen. Father had just finished his toast. Mother was adding more eggs to a sizzling pan.

The last (and only) time Arica had been to Bundelag, her grandmother had used some kind of magic to make her parents forget she was ever gone. Arica eyed them carefully. Was the magic still in effect? Would it work again? It had better, or she'd never make it past the front door. Her parents, kind and reasonable as they were, would never allow her even one night away if they knew where she was going — let alone a week or more. Her mother and father, she had long ago learned, lived in a very ordered world. They didn't like hitches or bumps, and they insisted on always knowing where she was and what she was up to. Getting to bed on time was their number one rule,

never broken. Her life was not at all like Connor's. He could skip into town with his father at ten o'clock on a school night just for ice cream.

All the way through breakfast she wondered what she could say to convince them she had to go. Somehow, Wish needed her — desperately. In the end she settled for the blunt, hard truth.

"The unicorns are in trouble," she said matter-of-factly, rising to her feet. "I'm going to Bundelag. I don't know when I'll be back."

She felt Grandmother's magic, then. It tingled behind her eyes and shivered over her skin like the gentle brush of a dozen tiny hands. She tiptoed toward the door, holding her breath. When she finally arrived without being stopped, she risked one quick glance over her shoulder.

Father had picked up the paper and was frowning at something on the front page. Mother was at the sink swishing out the pan.

"I'm sorry," she said, knowing they couldn't hear her now, lost as they were in Grandmother's spell of forgetting. "But the unicorns need me. You'd understand if you knew."

Then she left quietly, closing the door behind her.

When Arica arrived at Grandmother's house it was just as she had expected — no one answered her

knock. Naturally the solution could never be as easy as simply telling Grandmother of the problem and turning it over to her. Life — at least her Bundelag-related life — didn't go that smoothly. Sighing, she fetched the hidden key and let herself in, locking the door securely behind her. The front hall closed in around her like a silent tomb. The little sunlight that made it through the shuttered living room windows cast shadows that seemed to reach and crawl. She moved quickly into the less gloomy kitchen, where the morning sun sprinkled off the pans and the shining tiles. Through the kitchen she went, gritting her teeth as she opened the door leading down to the cellar.

Ten minutes later she was back upstairs again. She had covered every bit of cellar wall with her flashlight, then again by touch, just to make sure. There was no doorway to Bundelag that she could find. Yet, just over a month ago when the trolls had carried her off, there had definitely been something there. A crushing sense of urgency was bringing her close to panic. By now she was sure there was only one thing more dangerous than going to Bundelag, and that was not going. Dangerous, at least, for the unicorns.

She took a deep breath. She would try again. She would try a hundred times if she had to. But as she turned to go back down the cellar stairs it suddenly came to her that perhaps the *how* of going was at least

as important as the *where*. Last time she had gone to Bundelag, she had fallen through a crack in Grandmother's floor. Perhaps it hadn't been an accident.

She found the crack easily enough, under a throw rug in front of the dishwasher. It wasn't a very wide crack as cracks go, or very long. No wonder she hadn't noticed it the first time.

Arica held her breath, crossed her fingers behind her back and stepped on the crack.

She tumbled through blackness, while the walls seemed to spin in circles around her head. The fall took longer than she remembered, and the landing felt like it almost loosened half her teeth. She lay quietly for a few moments, trying to figure out if her arms and legs were actually broken or merely battered blue, then concluded that everything still worked well enough. She stood, feeling only slightly dizzy, and imagined making a complaint to Grandmother about the size of that first step. It was a wonder she was still in one piece.

The doorway was easy to find this time. In fact, it stood ajar, as if the last person through had been in too much of a hurry to pull it closed behind.

It was evening in Bundelag, and through the tops of the trees she could see one of the moons just beginning to make itself seen. The other hadn't yet risen. Insects droned. Swallows swooped.

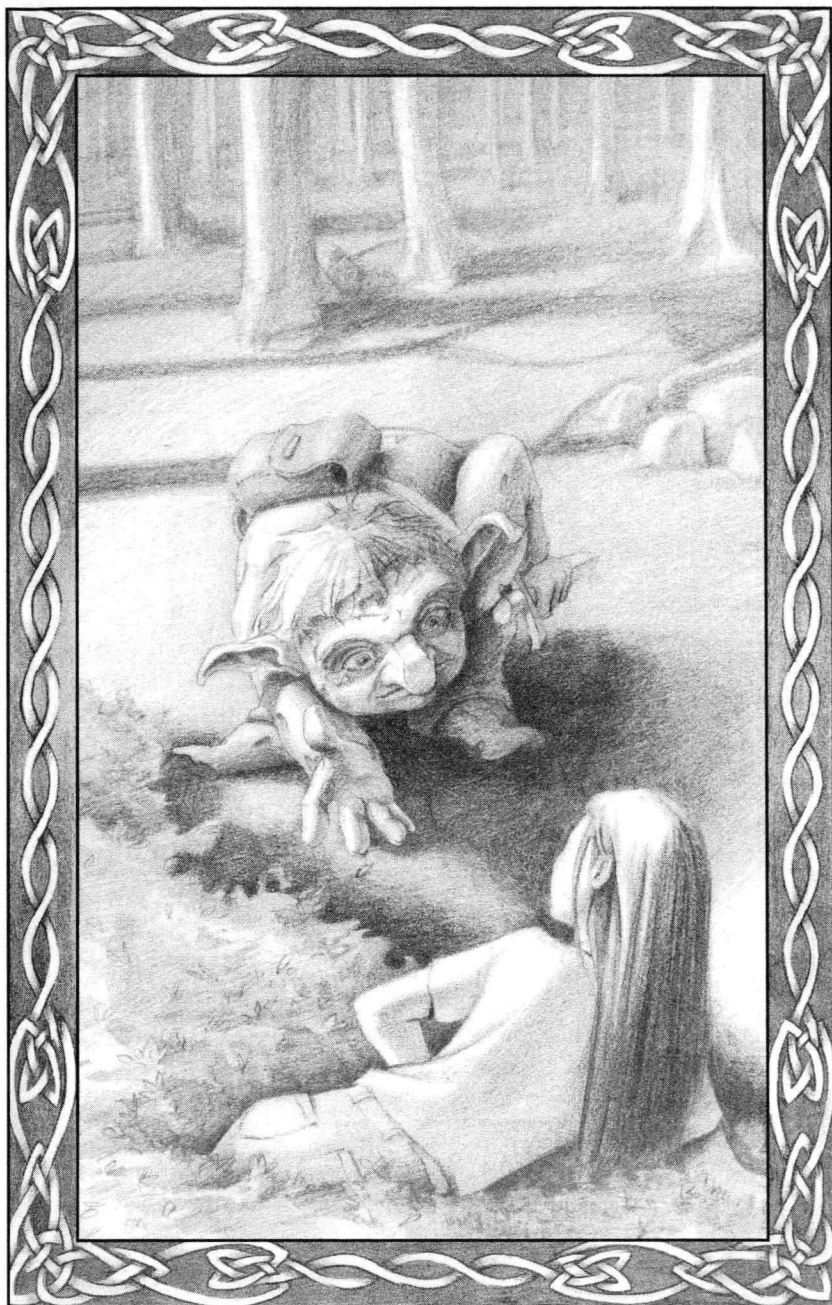
Arica's sense that the unicorns were in trouble was stronger than ever. "Wish?" she called out, tentatively, looking around. Then again, but silently this time, with as much mind-force as she could muster, Wish?

No young unicorn bounded out from the trees to greet her. Arica hitched her pack a little higher on her shoulders, took one huge breath to steady herself, and started walking. If the unicorns were in trouble, then the logical place to go was Unicorn Valley. But after just a few steps, she stopped. She had no idea which direction to go. She had never been to Unicorn Valley, and had no idea where it was. She knew she was still very close to the entrance from Earth. But what good would that do her? Any moment now it would blink out of sight, and she'd be hopelessly lost.

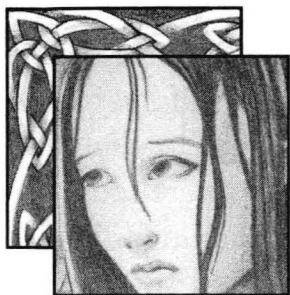
She slumped down onto a fallen log and put her chin in her hands. The sad truth was this: she had never travelled in Bundelag without someone to guide her. First there had been the trolls (if you could call being bound, gagged and dragged as "guidance"), then the elf Perye. And of course there were always the unicorns. What use was she to them if here she was, hardly ten minutes arrived, and already needing someone to help her?

Where are you, Wish? she wondered. Where is Light, and your mother, Song? How can I save you, if I can't even find you?

The next moment something small and dark and dirty darted out from the trees directly toward her. Arica jumped in panic, screamed and fell backwards over the log into a patch of weeds and thorny shrubs.



This elf was old, short and round like a barrel, with hair the colour of dead grass.



Chapter 2

Arica rolled out from the bushes, pulled herself up onto her hands and knees and gazed into the face of the ugliest creature she had ever seen. He was even uglier than a troll, and that was saying something. There was no doubt in her mind, however, that this was not a troll. What she was actually looking at was a very scruffy elf.

The elves Arica had met in her previous visit to Bundelag were small, slender and golden-haired, with pointed ears that arched elegantly upwards. Even the ones forced to work in the mines had a sort of delicate beauty. But this elf was old, short and round like a barrel, with hair the colour of dead grass. The tips

of his large floppy ears just missed clearing the top of his balloon-like head, and he had smears of dirt across his cheeks and chin. His clothing bulged in puckered lumps, dirty and tattered, and his shoes were too large for his feet and pocked with holes. Dangling from his belt was a sheathed sword that dragged in the dirt when he moved.

The elf stepped forward, holding out one grimy hand to Arica. "How do you do, my dear," he exclaimed, bowing graciously. "I'm so pleased to finally meet you!"

Arica stood stiffly without offering her own hand in return. She couldn't help but notice that the top of his head barely reached her chin.

"Who are you? Why are you here?" she demanded, not bothering to keep the suspicion out of her voice.

The elf looked at his hand, frowned, and whipped a dirty rag from his belt. He began scrubbing furiously, talking all the while. "Please accept my most humble service," he babbled, "and may I say what an honour it is to be chosen to accompany you? My nephew Perye has told me about your last great adventure, down to the last detail, and my admiration of you grows with every telling! I will serve you loyally and forever, dear Arica! I wish I could have been there to see you befriend the mighty unicorns and heal Perye's wounds with their magic! Ah, what I would give to