

Michael Swanwick: Hunting the Great White

The rain forest was filled with mist and parrots, so that when the sun rose up high and the birds flew out to seek food, the sky was bright with feathers and rainbows wherever you looked.

"I see him there," Pablo said. "The . . . how-you-say-it?"

"Unicorn," Kurz growled. "Don't you know the word for *anything*?"

"I know plenty words, boss. Spanish, Portuguese, French ... *Ich spreche Deutsche als einem Rheinlander. Aber Englisch ... nicht so gut.* You talk to me German, yes?"

"No. Show me the blind."

The trail could not have been recognized as such by anybody other than its maker. They had to slash their way down it with machetes. But at the end of it was a tidily built blind, overlooking a clearing. The two men made themselves comfortable within it.

"There water down there. Animals come drink, you know?"

"A watering hole," Kurz said disgustedly.

"Yes. But we wait until sun go ..." Pablo made a downward gesture with his hand.

"Dusk." Kurz unslung his rifle. "Good location. I should get a clear shot from here."

Pablo's eyes went wide. "Not shoot! Very bad! Unicorn, he ... what is word for never die?"

"Immortal."

"Immortal! Not die. Boss, you not shoot."

Kurz reached out an enormous hand, seized the little man by his shirt, and shook him.

"You said you'd take me on safari. Just what do you think the word 'safari' means?"

"Photo safari! All other tourists ..." He mimed someone snapping a camera. "Not shoot."

"A safari is a safari." Kurz released Pablo. "Now be quiet."

Hours passed. The sun went down. By ones and twos the great animals of the forest slipped out of shadow to drink. Kurz waited.

Something white and glimmering of starlight solidified from the darkness. It stepped toward with dainty tread.

"No!" Pablo shouted, and simultaneously Kurz shot.

The single-horned beast fell.

Kurz leapt to his feet, and began running toward his fallen prey, rifle in hand. Sometimes they were only wounded. Sometimes they needed another shot.

"Please, please ..." Pablo begged, tugging at his sleeve. "Unicorn immortal. Please not!"

Kurz shoved him aside.

Then he had reached the fallen beast. He stood over it for a moment, admiring its delicate features, the little tuft of beard, the single spiraled horn. It was a beautiful creature. He wondered if he'd just bagged the last of the species.

