

UNICORN

Richard Gradner

Richard Gradner - Unicorn

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About The Book

The year is 4518 BCE. Halim, a Shakti Warrior initiate, lives with his family in Harappa, a fortified city in the Indus River Valley. His father is injured, so the task falls to Halim to find a cure for his mother, who has fallen prey to a mysterious, debilitating disease.

Sanjit, a seasoned Shakti, agrees to accompany Halim to the Kunlun Mountains in search of a sacred medicine from an ancient monastery. Halim's impulsive sister, Taja, insists on joining them too.

When the three travellers confront the Ignogai, a barbaric tribe with a bloodthirsty shaman, they must flee across hazardous and unfamiliar terrain to avoid being captured and persecuted for their Shakti Prana.

With a little bit of magic, determination, and some help from a few extraordinary people, the trio must fight for their lives to make it back home in time to save Halim's mother from certain demise.

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About The Author



From a very young age, Richard lost himself to the world of fantasy. When he was nine years old, he wrote the first few chapters of a spooky ghost story and ignited the spark that became a passion he nurtured over time. When he was 14 years old, Richard wrote an essay as an assignment at school. His English teacher wrote on his paper: “Richard, come see me about this.” She believed he plagiarised the work and questioned his use of names and grammar in the story. He was pretty upset at the time, but now knows that this experience cemented a belief in himself and what he was capable of achieving.

Richard is currently a Director at Mustard, a creative and digital agency and was previously the first Red Bull Marketing Director in South Africa. He’s an energetic, magnetic Scorpio and ex-Chinese Martial Arts teacher. Richard lives life to the full, maintaining a healthy mind and body through the daily practice of Yoga.

Richard is the author of two Speculative Fiction novels: *Return To Lemuria* (2014) and *Unicorn* (2016).

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Dedicated to Adam and Jason. Adventure awaits.

Chapter One

Harappa, Indus River Valley, 4518 BCE

Their round, smiling faces appeared hazy, and the sound of their voices muted, as consciousness slowly returned to Halim.

“He has your eyes, Arja.”

“And your nose, Shan. Awww. Hello, little Halim. You cute, cute baby boy. You’re going to grow up to be a great warrior like your father, aren’t you? Yes, yes, yes!” Arja tickled Halim under his chin. He squirmed his little body from side to side, pulling his face into a toothless smile.

“It’s been seven days. It’s time to do the test,” said Shan looking askance at his wife.

“Yes. I guess it is,” nodded Arja sombrely.

Shan reached into the folds of his cloak and pulled out a small, round, pale blue stone. It was smooth and shiny as if it had been regularly polished. He gently pried open the tiny fingers of his son’s right hand and pressed the stone into his palm. Halim instinctively squeezed his hand around the stone. Shan gently placed his hands, one on top of the other, over his son’s forehead, leant in close and whispered, “Halim. My son. By the power vested in me by my father and his father before him, I charge you with the might of the Peraja Stone. May the gods find favour in your chosen path and lead you forward to your destiny.”

Shan carefully removed his hands and took a step back. Halim appeared to have gone back to sleep. A moment later, his

eyes flickered open, and he began to cry; the shrill sound of his voice piercing the silence like the wail of a startled river bird. Shan pried the stone loose from his tight grip and carefully examined its surface. He smiled.

“The colour is good, and the energy of the stone glows with strength and power.”

Arja moved forward for a closer look. The stone had changed colour, from pale blue to sea green. Tiny golden flecks covered its surface like the glittering reflection of the sun’s rays on the great, wide ocean.

“Ah. So pretty,” Arja beamed with pride. “The gods have blessed us.” She turned to her husband, took his hand in hers and gazed up at him affectionately with a smile on her face.

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“Halim. Give your sister back her toy.”

“But mama, I got it first.”

“That’s not the point, Halim. It’s not yours.”

Halim clamped his tiny hands over his ears, trying his best to shut out his sister Taja’s high-pitched, wailing cry. He picked up the little, wooden unicorn carving and threw it at his sister in annoyance. The statuette clipped the side of her head, resulting in even louder fits of screaming.

“Halim!” Arja reprimanded. “That was unnecessary. Go to your room. This instant!”

“No!” he shouted boldly.

“By the gods, if you do not do as you are told, then you will be severely punished.”

Halim folded his arms and stared at his mother in defiance. She glowered back at him. The tension grew but Halim stood his ground.

Shan walked into the room. “What is all this commotion?” he demanded emphatically.

Arja turned to her husband. “This child of yours is disrespectful,” she said, pointing at Halim. “He made Taja cry, and now he refuses to obey my command.”

Halim turned and ran away down the hall.

“Halim!” Arja shouted. “Where are you going? Come back!”

Halim ran as fast as his little legs would carry him. He ran away from his mother and the look of disapproval from his father. He ran until the tears dried on his face. He ran until his lungs burned from heavy breathing. He ran until he fell down on the soft earth of the forest beyond the walls of the city, rolled onto his back and stared up at the swaying boughs of the trees caught in the wind around him. A smile creased his little face, and the feelings of anger and resentment were gradually replaced by a peaceful serenity he could not explain. He watched as the trees acquiesced to mother nature’s invisible force, his chest still heaving from the effort of the run.

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He was drifting, floating, flying. He was an observer, watching the history of his life from above; looking down on his journey, his adventure. He was beyond time. He was beyond space. He was learning. He was the learner. He listened. He was the listener. He became part of the conception that had already been, yet was also taking place now. The memories flowed, and he became a part of them. Again and again.

“Halim. Halim! Do you hear me, boy? Why are you not listening to my instructions? I told you to follow me, yet here you are again, lost in your thoughts.” Shan fought to restrain his fury.

“I’m sorry, papa. I cannot help myself,” replied Halim timidly.

“That’s the problem right there, Halim,” rasped Shan indignantly. “You’re not focused. You’re not concentrating. What have your thoughts got to do with our practice? Hmm? Exactly. Nothing!”

Halim hung his head.

“Look at me when I talk to you, Halim.”

Halim slowly lifted his head.

“That’s better. Now. I know it’s hard sometimes, but you must push yourself. Do not lose focus. What I’m teaching you is the foundation of the practice. If you lose your concentration, then rather lose it to the practice, not some obscure fantasy in your

head. You must learn to live in the now. This moment is all that matters.”

“Yes, papa.”

“When you truly understand the importance of this lesson, only then will you see the value behind my instruction. Until then, you must listen to me, do what I do, and repeat. Constant repetition builds conviction and purpose. It’s only once you have repeated yourself time and again, will you realise that this is the path.”

“What path, papa?”

“The path to enlightenment, growth and experience,” Shan continued. “You see, Halim, everything is constant, moving. That which stands still fades away and disappears like it never was. Our purpose is to find that which moves, and then move with it. Such is life - a constantly flowing river upon which we must sail and navigate. To sail on the river, we need to repeat the foundational practice until it becomes second nature, part of one’s very being. Only then do we become worthy to join those that direct the ships of change. As a future Shakti Warrior, this is your destiny, my son.”

“I understand papa. I will try harder,” said Halim.

“Good. Now follow me. Observe, then do. Bring your hands together in a prayer mudra in front of your heart. Take a deep breath and fold forward. Breath out. Bend your legs, slowly sit down in a comfortable seat and close your eyes. Now, clear your mind and focus on your breathing, nothing else.”

Halim closed his eyes and focused on his breathing as his father instructed, imagining the air around him as a silver mist flowing deep into his lungs and then throughout his entire body, charging it with powerful Prana.

“Good, Halim. Excellent focus,” said Shan, commending his son. “Now, just as we repeat the movements, we repeat the mantra.”

“Why must we repeat the mantra, papa?” enquired Halim earnestly.

“When we use a mantra, by repeating it, we elicit vibrational

energy. These vibrations permeate one's entire being, overcoming and diminishing the current vibrational energy that you may be subject to until all thoughts are replaced, leading to the silencing of the mind."

"So, we become what we chant?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes," replied Shan. "This is the magic of Yoga. We first prepare the body physically, pulling it this way and twisting it that, until we are soft and flexible like clay, ready to accept the vibrational power of the mantra that will shape us into the direction in which we would like to go."

"I don't understand, papa," said Halim, creasing his brow.

"The only way to truly understand is to experience it for yourself, my son. The sacred mantra that I will teach you today is known as laghiman, the power to cancel out gravity."

"You mean levitation?" Halim asked.

"Yes. Levitation. This is the lesson. Its foundation is the mantra. Study it, repeat it until the words become part of you, and then it will take effect. This is why I get upset with you when you lose your concentration because, without it, you become lost. It's all about your intention, Halim. Now focus and chant with me."

"Dish tyaw day vwah tan naw,
Tee awsh vwah sah jaw yah tay."

"Now repeat this next verse over and over again, and bear in mind your intention to levitate, to rise."

"Lah gahah yah yah jaw yah tay,
Ut kah lal lah jaw yah tay,
Ooh daw nah yah jaw yah tay."

(Thank you, Lord, for allowing me to stretch, to breathe easy, to become. To become light, to rise, to fly.)

Halim began to chant the mantra until it became a repetitive,

flowing, melody. His father was right. Singing the mantra over and over again, created a vibrational energy, that began to shape itself around his body until he became the intention of the words being chanted. There was nothing else, just the mantra. The words of levitation. Halim could feel his body becoming light and buoyant the more he chanted. The weight of his physical body melted away as he gradually overcame the power of gravity. Both father and son chanting in unison, created a powerful intention, causing them to rise gently up and away from the earth.

Chapter Two

Halim was just nine summers old when he woke with a start into a night that was dark and cold. He stared at the shadows from the fire outside as they danced across the ceiling like the fleeting remnants of his nightmarish dream. He closed his eyes, and the shadows followed. They seeped into his eyelids, pushing in-between the slits like tiny, wriggling worms, forcing themselves into his sleep-world, expanding into monstrous beasts and horrifying apparitions. His mind raced. He couldn't go back to sleep. He sat up, hopped off his bed and pulled on his thick, woollen coat. He squeezed his eyes shut and shivered once, before stepping out of his room and into the cold night.

The monotonous, droning sound of a voice became more coherent, as Halim edged closer to the group sitting outside by the fire. The heat from the flames drew him closer, its light quickly dispelling the shadows from his mind, as he listened carefully to the words spoken that portentous evening. He gazed, rapt, between two members of the group, at an old, wizened face narrate the most captivating story. It was one of the elders of the city. Halim had seen him before, at the market, but had never heard him speak. His voice was soft, yet surprisingly clear and discernible against the crackling of the savage flames.

“And so it was told to me by my great-grandfather before he passed,” said the elder, “that Prasad, his grandfather before him, was there to witness the event with his own eyes.”

The group of several men huddled closer together, making

sure that they heard the next part of the compelling story.

“The Clan was under attack by a ruthless tribe of warriors, intent on wiping them from the face of the earth. They had retreated into a deep cave, from which there was no escape. They were trapped.” The elder looked around at his captivated audience.

Halim pulled his coat in tighter, huddling against the cold. The elder continued.

“Prasad was small enough to conceal himself between two narrow rocks in a corner of the cave. He watched, from his hiding place, as the leaders of his clan opened a small, wooden casket and withdrew the horn. Even in the dim light of the cave, it sparkled with a powerful energy of its own. They ground the entire horn down into a fine, white powder, poured a murky liquid over it, and mixed it until it became thick and golden in colour. Prasad watched in awe, as they each took turns to drink the concoction until it was all finished. He watched intently as the group quietly sat down in a circle, facing each other in Baddha Konasana posture, their knees open and the soles of their feet touching. Even from deep within the crevice, he could feel a warm, pulsing wave of energy wash over him. The group of nine held hands, closed their eyes, and then the very air around them began to vibrate. Prasad struggled to focus on the seated figures. The air was thick, his breathing strained. The circle of nine became a complete blur. Prasad rubbed his eyes in disbelief, looked up, and then they were gone. Missing. Vanished.”

Murmurs of astonishment filtered around the group. Even beneath his thick coat in front of the fire, Halim felt a cold shiver run up and down his spine.

The elder looked around at the expectant audience before continuing his story. “When he heard the group of warriors approaching, Prasad squeezed himself farther into the dark crevice of the cave. The warriors became enraged as they searched in vain for their enemy, shouting and arguing with each other in frustration. Prasad remained hidden from sight, long

after the warriors had left the cave, eventually falling asleep and only rising again the following morning.”

A length of silence followed, that broke with a question from a young man to the left of Halim. “What happened to the group of nine?”

“They reappeared a few days later, completely safe from harm. They returned with gifts.”

“What kind of gifts?” another man asked.

“Gifts of enlightenment,” replied the elder. “They came close to the gods and were exposed to a deeper understanding of the Vedas. Then they began to teach others.”

“The Nine Sages!” blurted out another man in the group.

“That is correct. These were the Nine Sages of the Vedas.”

“But I thought they were thousands of years old?”

“There have been many sages, my son,” said the elder bowing his head in reverence. “The Nine are reincarnated every five hundred years or so. They come down to remind us of the ancient prayers and hymns of the Creator, to reaffirm their purity and authenticity.”

Halim felt dizzy. He turned and made his way back to his bed to watch the dancing shadows from the fire on his ceiling transform into the Nine Sages seated in a circle in the cave, vibrating intensely, until they disappeared completely from sight.

~ ~ ~

Many moons later, Halim had an epiphany; that would take him back to that cold and fateful night in front of the fire, listening to the elder tell his fascinating story.

He arrived at Bodhan Dasgupta’s house early one morning, as he always did, ready to learn. Bodhan was Halim’s tutor and a very interesting man. He was well groomed, wore clean, fresh clothes, and exuded a rich, sandalwood fragrance. Despite this, however, he always looked unkempt, as if he had slept in his clothes night after night. His hair was also dishevelled, and rough stubble covered his round face.

“Hello, Halim. You look bright and cheerful this morning,” remarked Bodhan with a smile.

“Hello, Mr Dasgupta. Yes, I guess I am.” Halim smiled in return.

“Fantastic! Well, then, that calls for a very special lesson today. A lesson of magic and adventure.” Bodhan rubbed his hands eagerly together like a little boy ready to receive a prize for good behaviour.

“Oh, wow, I cannot wait. What’s it all about Mr Dasgupta?” enquired Halim.

“Hmmm. It’s all about the first hunt.”

“Ooh. That’s going to be exciting.” Halim felt his heart skip a beat. “Mine’s in two years time, Mr Dasgupta.”

“Yes, I know, Halim. Two years passes by very quickly. It’s now time for you to learn about your path and the acceptance of your fate. As you know, there are only a handful of Shakti Warriors in the city, so the hunt with your father is a very important event.”

Halim smiled with pride.

“It’s your duty to stay by your father’s side, and take part in this auspicious obligation without question, just as he did for his father, and his father before him.” Bodhan amplified his voice to emphasise the significance of this statement.

“Yessir.”

“The hunt is symbolic. It stands for Dharma, the path of righteousness and acceptance of the warrior code. The hunt itself will bring you face-to-face with the mythical unicorn, and your successful acquisition of its horn: a powerful talisman imbued with magical properties.”

Halim’s heart skipped a beat. His throat became dry, and his ears started to ring. Mr Dasgupta’s voice turned into a steady drone, as images of the elder relating his story came back to Halim in waves of nausea. He felt the bile rise in his throat. He balked.

The horn. The sparkling horn with its powerful energy. Of course. It was a unicorn horn.

Halim’s sudden realisation caused him to jump up in excitement. “Is the horn ground into a white powder?”

“Yes. So you know. Did your father tell you?”

“Um, well, no, not exactly. And do I have to drink it?”

“Yes. This is part of the Shakti Warrior ceremony.”

“But isn’t it dangerous?” Halim panicked. Sweat trickled down and into the small of his back.

“No, not really. The Shaman carefully mixes it with datura and other ayurvedic herbs, before blending it into the medicine known as Soma. Then he administers the concoction in a very small dose,” said Bodhan. “It gives the user supernatural abilities and heightened awareness for a limited period.”

Halim’s mouth dropped into a stupor as he gazed at his tutor. “Yes, I’m sure it does,” he murmured to himself. “I’m sure it does.”