



**MY SON  
HEYDARI  
AND THE  
KARKADANN**



**PETER S.  
BEAGLE**



## Praise for Peter S. Beagle

“One of my favorite writers.”

—Madeleine L’Engle, author of *A Wrinkle in Time*

“Peter S. Beagle illuminates with his own particular magic such commonplace matters as ghosts, unicorns, and werewolves. For years a loving readership has consulted him as an expert on those hearts’ reasons that reason does not know.”

—Ursula K. Le Guin, author of *A Wizard of Earthsea* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*

“The only contemporary to remind one of Tolkien.”

—*Booklist*

“Peter S. Beagle is (in no particular order) a wonderful writer, a fine human being, and a bandit prince out to steal readers’ hearts.”

—Tad Williams, author of *Tailchaser’s Song*

“It’s a fully rounded region, this other world of Peter Beagle’s imagination.”

—*Kirkus*

“[Beagle] has been compared, not unreasonably, with Lewis Carroll and J. R. R. Tolkien, but he stands squarely and triumphantly on his own feet.”

—*Saturday Review*

“Not only does Peter Beagle make his fantasy worlds come vividly, beautifully alive; he does it for the people who enter them.”

—Poul Anderson, author of *The High Crusade*

“Not only one of our greatest fantasists, but one of our greatest writers, a magic realist worthy of consideration with such writers as Márquez, Allende, and even Borges.”

—*The American Culture*

“Before all the endless series and shared-world novels, Beagle was there to show us the amazing possibilities waiting in the worlds of fantasy, and he is still one of the masters by which the rest of the field is measured.”

—Lisa Goldstein, author of *The Red Magician*

“Peter S. Beagle would be one of the century’s great writers in any arena he chose.”

—Edward Bryant, author of *Cinnabar*



### **Praise for *In Calabria***

[**STARRED REVIEW**] “Acclaimed fantasist Beagle (Summerlong) sets this charming, lyrical tale of unicorns and love on a poor little hillside farm in the toe of boot-shaped Italy, where 47-year-old Claudio Bianchi scratches out a meager existence for himself, old dog Garibaldi, goat Cherubino, three cows, a pig, and three cats. Claudio writes poetry, too, and one day a golden-white unicorn appears to him as a gentle reminder of the freedom animals and humans have lost. The unicorn becomes the one miracle of Claudio’s life—and the ultimate tourist attraction. He protects her as best he can from hordes of reporters, television crews and helicopters, animal rights activists, yearning yokels, and even the Calabrian ’Ndràngheta mob. After Claudio helps the unicorn deliver her colt, his heart, frozen by an earlier tragedy, warms to Giovanna, the intrepid 20-ish sister of the postman. Neatly playing the strictures of Claudio’s simple rural

life against the shimmering wildness of the unicorn, Beagle's kindly fable shows how a man who seems to have nothing can really have everything—with just a touch of magic.”

—Publishers Weekly

“A novella about love in a world of hardship, loss, magic, and recovery. Beagle's unicorns have never been more bewitching, impossible, and genuine. I cherished every page.”

—Gregory Maguire, author of *Wicked* and *After Alice*

“For me, Peter S. Beagle is one of the essential voices in American literature, so essential that I approach each new book he writes not only with excitement but also with trepidation. Can he possibly do it again? Today I read *In Calabria* from cover to cover. He does it again.”

—Kevin Brockmeier, bestselling author of *The Brief History of the Dead*

“Peter S. Beagle is a master of the magical, but also of the little details of day to day existence that root his characters in the soil, sweat and everyday breezes of their worlds, and make the magical all the more magical when it touches them. It's deep and powerful magic that stirs things to life in the gentle fable of *In Calabria*, but what it stirs—greed, peril, beauty, grief, love, publicity, sorrow, poetry and more—are very much matters of the human heart. Beagle once again explores the magic within us and the magic around us, and does it in unmatched style.”

—Kurt Busiek, author of *Astro City* and *The Avengers*

“Peter Beagle weaves his trademark magic deep in the Italian countryside, using threads of the everyday and the fantastical: poetry and pigs, Mafia bosses and terrible beauty, love and rage, the sacred born of the profane. *In Calabria* holds the power to transform, like the touch of the unicorn at its heart.”

—Laurie R. King, author of the *Mary Russell* series

“What a wondrous gift it is to have a new unicorn story from Peter S. Beagle! In *Calabria* is both elegant and earthy, with a slow build of wonder, and then tension, and then growing dread that propels the reader inexorably toward the miraculous conclusion. Once again Peter Beagle demonstrates why he is one of the greatest fantasy writers of all time!”

—Bruce Coville, author of *The Unicorn Chronicles*

“In *Calabria* is a gorgeous story shaped with elegant prose and stunning imagery . . . It is a unicorn story. It is a coming of age story. It is a story of forgiveness and a story of love. In *Calabria* will speak to each and every reader that ventures through its pages.

—So Many Books, So Little Time

“Beauty, imagination, poetry and magic . . . Beagle has that rare gift – the ability, within just a few words, to transport the reader completely into his universe, making the unfamiliar become vividly real. 10/10 stars.”

—Starburst Praise for *Summerlong*

“Peter Beagle’s novel *Summerlong* is a lovely, tantalizing read that moves through a finely detailed, familiar world into a tale as old and as urgent as language.”

—Patricia A. McKillip, author of *The Riddle-Master of Hed and Dreams of Distant Shores*

“Bestseller fantasist Beagle crafts a tantalizing picture of an atypical Pacific Northwestern couple whose lives are interrupted by myth and mystery. . . .”

—Booklist

“*Summerlong* is beautiful in its love for our messy complexity; for the first step into cold water, for the death that lets us grow again, and the ways we learn to love each other—and ourselves—wiser and better.”

—Leah Bobet, author of *An Inheritance of Ashes and Above*



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—Leah Bobet, author of *An Inheritance of Ashes* and *Above*

“In his first new novel in more than a decade, Beagle creates an intimate drama . . . A beautifully detailed fantasy.”

—*Kirkus*

“It’s been three years since Peter S. Beagle released a short story or essay, and longer than that since his last novel. That’s a long dry spell, especially for someone whose writing was such a big part of my childhood. Fortunately Beagle’s latest novel, *Summerlong*, is due out this September, and it’s absolutely worth the wait.”

—*Pixelated Geek*



## **Praise for *The Last Unicorn***

“*The Last Unicorn* is the best book I have ever read. You need to read it. If you’ve already read it, you need to read it again.”

—Patrick Rothfuss, author of *The Name of the Wind* and *The Wise Man’s Fear*

“Almost as if it were the last fairy tale, come out of lonely hiding in the forests of childhood, *The Last Unicorn* is as full of enchantment as any of the favorite tales readers may choose to recall . . . a delicate, sensitive, yet powerful rendering of all the intangibles that make a fairy tale unforgettable.”

—*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

“*The Last Unicorn* is one of the true classics of fantasy, ranking with Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*, Le Guin’s Earthsea Trilogy, and Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*. Beagle writes a shimmering prose-poetry, the voice of fairy tales and childhood.”

—*Amazon.com*

**Also by Peter S. Beagle**



**Fiction**

- A Fine & Private Place* (1960)  
*The Last Unicorn* (1968)  
*Lila the Werewolf* (1969)  
*The Folk of the Air* (1986)  
*The Innkeeper's Song* (1993)  
*The Unicorn Sonata* (1996)  
*Tamsin* (1999)  
*A Dance for Emilia* (2000)  
*The Last Unicorn: The Lost Version* (2007)  
*Strange Roads* (with Lisa Snellings Clark, 2008)  
*Return* (2010)  
*Summerlong* (2016)  
*In Calabria* (2017)



**Short story collections**

- Giant Bones* (1997)  
*The Rhinoceros Who Quoted Nietzsche and Other Odd Acquaintances* (1997)  
*The Line Between* (2006)  
*Your Friendly Neighborhood Magician: Songs and Early Poems* (2006)  
*We Never Talk About My Brother* (2009)  
*Mirror Kingdoms: The Best of Peter S. Beagle* (2010)  
*Sleight of Hand* (2011)



### **Nonfiction**

- I See By My Outfit: Cross-Country by Scooter, an Adventure* (1965)  
*The California Feeling* (with Michael Bry, 1969)  
*The Lady and Her Tiger* (with Pat Derby, 1976)  
*The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1982)  
*In the Presence of Elephants* (1995)




### **As editor**

- Peter S. Beagle's Immortal Unicorn* (with Janet Berliner, 1995)  
*The Secret History of Fantasy* (2010)  
*The Urban Fantasy Anthology* (with Joe R. Lansdale, 2011)  
*The Unicorn Anthology* (ebook with Jacob Weisman, 2017)  
*The New Fantasy* (forthcoming with Jacob Weisman, 2017)

*My Son Heydari  
and the Karkadann*

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The image features two stylized silhouettes. The top one is a unicorn with a long, spiraling mane and a single horn. The bottom one is a rhinoceros with two horns. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

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TACHYON | SAN FRANCISCO

My Son Heydari and the Karkadann  
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**N**o, they are vanishing now, the karkadanns; at least they are almost gone from this part of Persia. Which is a very good thing, and you'll find no one in the land to tell you otherwise. It is an especially good thing for a man master of the only working elephant herd north of Baghdad. If your business is felling trees and hauling them off to the river, to be rafted downstream to the lumber mill and turned into palaces, ships, furniture, what you will—then you are almost bound to come to me and my elephants. It has been my family's trade for four generations, and my eldest son, Farid, will make the fifth when I am gone. It is our place in the world. It is what we do.

And it is only in this generation—my generation—that we have found ourselves increasingly free of those monsters, those terrible horned demons, the karkadanns. You have never seen one, I assume? No, not likely, coming from Turkey as you do. All the same, you must surely have heard that they are huge creatures, easily the size of Greek bulls, with double hooves, tails like lions, hides like thick leather plates—and that *horn!* Six, even seven feet long they run; and with the power of that great body behind it, they can splinter a cedar or an oak into kindling. I saw it happen just so when I was a boy.

That same horn can also split an elephant like a dumpling. I have seen that happen too.

Why karkadanns hate elephants as particularly and intensely as they do, no scholar has ever been able to explain, not to my satisfaction. I still have nightmares about seeing two karkadanns charging down out of the hills they favor, bellowing that chilling challenge of theirs—like battle horns, only deeper, and with a more carrying tone—and watching helplessly as they went through my herd, slashing left and right, literally spitting elephants on their horns like kebabs, then hurling them aside and going on to the next poor picketed beast. The elephants almost never fought back, never even tried to run

away. Elephants are very intelligent, you know, and perhaps their imaginations simply paralyzed them: they could see what was going to happen, see it so clearly that they could not move. I felt the same way, watching those karkadanns coming.

They trample farmers' fields too, without a thought, most especially during the mating season. The farmers plant extra crops for just that reason, hoping to salvage *something* after the beasts get through with their wheat or their corn, their arbors or their orchards. And as for guards—if you can hire any—or dogs, if you can keep them from tucking tail and fleeing at the first distant smell of a karkadann . . . well, why even discuss it? We lost men too, in those old days, as well as elephants.

The karkadann has no natural enemies. I am told that a thousand years ago, the dragons kept them within reasonable check; but, of course, in our human wisdom, we killed off the dragons in the egg and the nest, because they cost us a lamb or a goat now and again. So—of course—the karkadanns promptly ran wild, and we could only be grateful that at least they were not carnivores, like the dragons. That was our sole blessing, for all those thousand years.

No, we did have one thing else to thank the gods for in our prayers: the fact that karkadanns never

drop more than one foal at a time. As many as two . . . no, it doesn't bear considering. Two to a birth, and they would own the country by this time. And other lands too, perhaps—who knows?

They are entirely vegetarian—though their two curving fangs imply otherwise—and entirely solitary by nature, except for those few weeks when they run mad with lust, and are then very nearly as likely to attack one another as they are elephants or humans. Even the females can be badly hurt during the rut; and more than once I have been gratified to encounter a pack of jackals feasting on the carcass of a karkadann bearing the marks of a comrade's brutal assault. All in all, an unlovely, unadmirable, and altogether detestable creature. And your fascination with it is a complete mystery to me.

But it would not be so to Heydari, my third son. You will meet him at dinner, Farid being away on business. Which is a pity, because I would like you to observe the difference between them. Farid is me in large, as you might say, being that much bigger and that much more ambitious—though not yet that much cleverer, though he thinks he is. I do not always *like* him, I suppose—do you like all *your* children all the time?—but I *understand* him, which is a comfort and a reassurance, and makes for a peaceful association. But Heydari. That Heydari.

You would never take them for brothers if you met them together. Heydari is small and slight, and much darker than Farid, and much less immediately charming. I think he makes a point of it, having seen Farid making friends everywhere, instantly, all his life. He has never been any use with the elephants, and we would be out of business in a month if I put him in charge of my accounts. Yet he is more intelligent than Farid—quite likely more intelligent than all the rest of us—but I cannot see that it has thus far done him much good. All the same, I confess to a feeling for him that I can neither explain nor defend. Especially not defend, not after the time he saved the life of a bloody karkadann.

How old was he? Thirteen or fourteen, I suppose; when else would you be that stupid, in exactly that way? As he told it in his own time—long after he *should* have told it—he found the creature high in those same foothills you came through, being drawn to it by the urgent calling of a ringdove; which, for reasons no one has ever fathomed, is the karkadann's only friend. As curious as any boy, he climbed after the bird and followed it to the entrance of a cave, where the beast lay bleeding its life away, and good riddance, through several deep wounds on its throat and flanks. It was barely breathing, he said, and

the yellow eyes it tried to focus on him were seeing something else.

Like any man in this realm—any man but my son—I would either have helped the miserable monster on its way, or merely sat myself down and savored its passing. But not Heydari, not my softhearted, softheaded boy. He immediately set about fetching the karkadann water from a nearby spring, going back and forth to carry it in his cap. Apart from the stupidity of it, it was a risky matter as well, for the creature was in pain, and it lunged at him more than once with the last of its strength. He treated its injuries with what herbs he could find, and bound them with strips torn from his own clothes, while the ringdove perched on that murderous horn, cooing its approval. Then he went away, promising to return on the following day, but certain that he would find the karkadann dead when he did. I have said that he has never been of any practical use with the elephants, but he has been a kind boy from his childhood. An *idiot*, but always kind.

Well, he did return, keeping his word; and, unfortunately, the wretched beast was living yet. It was still unable to raise more than its head—which it did mostly to snap at him, even with one of those wicked fangs broken off halfway—but its

wounds had stopped bleeding, and its breath was coming a bit deeper and more steadily. My son was greatly encouraged. He brought it more water, and fetched an armload or two of the fruits and vines that karkadanns favor, laying it all within reach in case the creature's appetite should revive. Then he sat close beside it, because he is a fool, and recited the old, old prayers and *sutras* most of the night before he went home.

And climbed back up the next day, and the day after that, to attend to that vile animal's recovery. Mind you, he told *us*, his own family, nothing of this—which, I must say, was the first intelligent thing he had done in the whole mad business. As many losses as we had endured over the years, in terms not merely of dead elephants, but taking into account the cost of workers, of lost time and equipment and the timber itself, we would all probably have fallen upon him and torn him to shreds. To be nursing a karkadann back to health, in order that it might continue slaughtering, destroying . . . you see, even now I am sweating and snarling with rage at my own son. Even now.

Now if this were a fairy tale out of the *Shahnameh*, the boy and the karkadann would become such fast friends that the monster would give up all its evil ways

and turn to loving and aiding humanity, even against its own folk. Hardly. It did stop trying to kill Heydari, having finally connected his ministrations with its survival and recovery; but it permitted no liberties, such as petting or grooming—only the ringdove was permitted that sort of intimacy—and it would clearly have died itself before ever taking food from his hand. He tried to explain to me once why he could not help liking that quality in the beast.

“It was so *proud*, Father,” he said. “No, it was not even a matter of pride—it was just what it was, and not about to yield a fraction of itself to anyone, whatever the cost. Yes, it was a dreadful creature, wicked and heartless like all the rest of its kind . . . but oh, it was magnificent too—splendidly terrible. Father, can you understand a little of what I am saying?”

Of course I hit him. You can’t go around asking your father questions like that.

But that was later, well later. Meanwhile, he was caring for that karkadann every day—I should have been able to smell it on him; they smell like hay just starting to turn moldy—while the ringdove murmured smugly to them both, and his brothers were shouting for him to put his worthless self to some use cleaning the elephants’ quarters. And now and then, so he told me, he would look up from his medicating and

see those yellow eyes fixed on him, and he would wonder what the creature was thinking, what it *could* possibly be thinking at that moment. Which I, or any man with the sense of a bedbug, could have told him, but let that pass. What difference? Let it pass.

Finally, there came the day when Heydari made his way to the cave, and found the karkadann standing erect for the first time. It was grotesquely thin for its great size, and it seemed barely able to lift its head with that monstrous horn, but it stayed on its feet, swaying dazedly from side to side, and looking every moment as though it might crumple completely. Heydari clapped his hands and shouted encouragement, and the karkadann snarled in its chest and made a weak feint at him with the horn. The boy was wise enough to come no closer, but went off to find as much of the creature's preferred vegetation as he could carry in both arms. Then, as always, he simply sat down and watched it eat, rumbling evilly to itself. And as far as I can ever suppose, he was perfectly content.

At least, he was until Niloufar discovered them.

She was a shepherd girl, Niloufar—I knew her father well, as it happens. When I think about it, it's a wonder she had a flock to tend, as many sheep as the old man slaughtered on the day she was born. He

had six sons, which was more than enough for him when he thought about the battles to come over their inheritance, and the celebration of Niloufar's arrival lasted almost a week. So she was undoubtedly spoiled, treated like a princess from her birth, shepherdess or no; but she was actually quite a good girl, when all's said and done. A little bit of a thing, but pretty with it—Farid was already eyeing her, and so was Abbas, my second boy—but I am not sure that Heydari had even noticed her, or remembered her name, for that matter. She'd noticed him, though, or I'm more of a fool than he.

Her flock had winded the karkadann, of course, and were having none of it, but fled in panic to rejoin in the little valley below the cave. Niloufar left her two dogs minding them and—being just as idiotically inquisitive as my idiot son—climbed back up to the cave mouth, having heard a familiar voice there. She knew the smell of a karkadann as surely as any sheep, and she was afraid, but she kept coming anyway. The rest of her family are quite sensible.

The karkadann growled savagely as soon as it saw her, and made as though to charge. Heydari cried out, "*No!*" and the beast halted, being still so weak that it almost fell with the first steps. But Niloufar was mightily impressed with a boy who could make

a karkadann obey, and she said, “Have you actually tamed it, then? I never heard of anyone doing such a thing, not even a wizard.”

It was a great temptation to Heydari to say that he had indeed done this, but he was a truthful boy, even when he *should* lie, and he explained to Niloufar how he had found the karkadann near death and done what he could for it. This impressed her even more, for all that she feared and hated the creatures as much as anyone. And then . . . well, he is not a bad-looking boy, you know—favors his mother more than me, which is as well—and between one thing and another, she said, “I think you must be a remarkable person, and very brave,” which is all any boy of his age cares to hear from a girl. And I am sure he found the wit somewhere to mumble that he thought she was a remarkable person too . . . and all this with that bloody karkadann rumbling and eyeing them, ready to spear them and toss them and trample them to rags, as kind as my Heydari had been to the thing. And I suppose one compliment led to another . . .

. . . and so they began meeting at the cave—always by chance, naturally—to sit solemnly together and eat their lunches, and watch the karkadann gaining strength every day. As great fools as they were, the pair of them, they knew just how dangerous the beast

was, and how unchanged in its nature, for all that it owed its life to Heydari. But they were young, and stupidity is exciting when you are young. I remember better than I should.

As Heydari tells it, Niloufar was always the one asking, “But what will you do if one day it should suddenly turn on us? What is your plan?” That dreaming boy of mine with a plan—*there’s* a notion for you!

But he had been thinking ahead, it turned out. Girls will have that effect on you. He said, “You and I are both quick—we will run in different directions. It cannot follow us both, and I will make certain that it follows me.”

“And how will you do that?” she wanted to know. Smiling, I am sure, for what girl does not want to hear that a boy will risk his life to lure a monster away from her? “How *can* you be so sure that I will not be the one it pursues?”

To which Heydari answered her, “Because I did it a good turn. For such a creature as the karkadann, that is intolerable. It will seek to wipe away the stain on its pride along with me.” Then Niloufar became genuinely frightened for him, which was doubtless exciting too, for both of them. It is exhausting, even *thinking* about the young.

So Niloufar watched over her father's sheep, and Heydari watched over the recovering karkadann; and both of them shyly watched over each other as best they knew how. I am sure she must have practiced chiding and warning him, as he must have copied me telling his mother to be quiet, in the name of all the gods, and let me *think*. I hope they did not reproduce us too closely, those children. It is uncomfortable, somehow, to imagine.

And then there was the ringdove. It is important not to forget the ringdove.

It must have had no family responsibilities, for it was there all the time, or the next thing to it. Now and then it would fly away for a little while, tending to its bird business, but it always returned within the hour. And it always perched on the karkadann's immense horn, and it always cooed the softest, gentlest melody, over and over; and the karkadann would always, sooner or later, close its yellow eyes and fall into as peaceful-seeming a sleep as you can imagine those creatures ever enjoying. Sometimes it would even lie down, Heydari said, and rest its head on its front feet, which are as much like claws as they are like hooves. It would even snore now and then, in the daintiest manner imaginable, like that teakettle we only bring out for company. "You know, the way

Mother snores,” he explained, and I cuffed him for it, even though she does.

Heydari sometimes dozed briefly, with his head on Niloufar’s shoulder, but she herself never closed an eye in the presence of the karkadann. As she told me long afterward, it was not that Heydari trusted the creature any more than she, or that she was less fascinated by it than he was; rather, she liked knowing that he trusted *her* with his safety, his protection, which no one but a sheep had ever done before. At times her eyes would meet the karkadann’s yellow glare, the one as unblinking as the other, and on a few occasions she spoke to it while Heydari slept. “Why are you what you are? Why do you and your folk have no friends, no companions—not even each other—but those birds? Is there truly nothing to you but hatred and rage and solitude? Why are you in the world at all?”

Girls ask questions like that. Sometimes they ask them of men.

The karkadann never showed any sign of interest or comprehension, of course, except for one moment, when Niloufar asked, “The song of the ringdove—does it run *so*?” and she imitated it in her throat, for she had an excellent ear for melody, like all her family, even all those boys. The karkadann made a strange,

perplexed sound; it woke Heydari, who blinked from one to the other of them as Niloufar repeated the run of notes, again and again. The ringdove itself fluffed out its gray and blue-gray feathers, but remained asleep on the great horn, while the karkadann stamped its front feet, and the questioning rumble grew louder. But Niloufar kept singing.

Perhaps fortunately for my unborn grandchildren, Heydari put his hand over her mouth and held it there while he shouted at her. “Are you mad, girl? Do you think you are some sort of wizard, some sort of wisewoman? In another moment, you would have been decorating that horn like a flower, and there would have been nothing, *nothing*, I could do to save you. Get back to your accursed sheep if you are going to behave so!” I myself have never seen him so angry, but this is what Niloufar told me.

Another little girl would have burst into tears and flounced away—but looking slyly over her shoulder, expecting the boy to call her back. Not that one. She drew herself up to her full height, such as it is, and stalked out of the cave and down the hill without a backward glance. And no, Heydari did *not* call, though I am certain he wished to, very much. But he is as stubborn as I am—in that one way at least he is like me—so all he did was stare back at the growling

karkadann, having some notion of stilling it with his eyes. And presently, for that reason or another, the beast did grow quiet, though it did not sleep again, for all the cooing of the ringdove. Neither did Heydari.

He did not leave the cave until Niloufar had driven her sheep homeward; nor did he even look to notice whether she had returned to the valley the next afternoon when he climbed to see to the karkadann. She did not come at all that day, nor the next, nor the next, when at last he *was* watching for her; and when at last he gave that up, he felt older than he was. And that *is* how we grow old, you know, waiting for whatever we insist we are not waiting for. I know this.

By and by, there was no question but that the karkadann was fully restored to wicked health, its wounds entirely healed, and its terrible strength revealed in even the smallest movement it made. It even left the cave to forage for itself, now and again, and to make its way to the spring for water. Yet it lingered on with Heydari, surely not out of need or affection, but as though it too were waiting for . . . something, some certain moment when it would know exactly what to do about this annoying, baffling little creature. Not that there was any mystery about what *that* was going to be. Karkadanns only do one thing.

Why Heydari continued to visit the cave and care for the creature . . . ah, if you ever solve that one,

explain it to him before me, because he still can't say himself. The best he was ever able to tell me was that for him it was like dancing on the edge of a knife blade, or a great abyss, knowing that if you keep dancing there you will very likely fall to your death—but that if you *stop* dancing, you surely will. He said he was terrified every moment, but in a wonderfully calm way, if that made any sense to me. Which it did not, no more than anything he's ever done has made sense, but there you are. There's my son for you.

And after Niloufar stopped coming . . . oh, then nothing much really seemed to matter, living or dying. And there's a boy, if you like, any boy at all. It's a wonder any of them survive to father a new crop of idiots like themselves. He meant it, too. They all mean it. He said he almost wished the karkadann would make up its mind and kill him . . . but at the same time he could not keep from wondering, as he stared at it day after day, whether it might not have some sort of a weak spot, a vulnerable place under all that hide and power that no one had ever discovered. He imagined it being his legacy to Persia, and to me. Boys.

I wonder now and again whether the beast truly felt no gratitude at all toward my son. I have never known an animal—human beings excepted—to be totally

incapable of showing some form of appreciation for a kindness. My wife has tamed a snake enough that it will come to her and take milk from her hand; Heydari himself took such care of a baby elephant when its mother was killed by a karkadann that to this day that enormous animal—Mojtaba, biggest male in my herd—follows him around, holding Heydari's hand with his trunk. And maybe there was some way in which Heydari, all the while knowing better, believed that the karkadann—*his* karkadann—would never, at the last, actually turn on him. Mind you, I say *maybe*.

Very well. There came one hot and cloudless afternoon when the air was so still you almost had to push your way through it, like a great sticky mass of old cobwebs. The karkadann had already been to the spring twice to drink, and now it half-crouched against the cave wall, eyes half-closed, growling to itself so deeply and softly that Heydari could barely hear the sound at all. The ringdove was perched, as ever, on the tip of its horn, its rippling murmur rasping at Heydari's nerves for the first time. He felt the way you feel when a storm is coming, even though it may yet be a day, or even two days, from reaching you: there is a *smell*, and there is a kind of stiff crackle, like invisible lightning, racing up and

down your arms, and you have to think about each breath you take. He found that he was crouching himself, ready to spring in any direction; and at the same time—so he told me—thinking, as he studied the light and shadow playing over the brutal majesty of the beast's flanks and high shoulders, that if it had to be, now would be the time to go. Did you ever think such a thought when you were fourteen years old? I never thought anything like that.

But the boy isn't a total fool, not even then—not all the way through. When the yellow eyes seemed to have closed completely, under the influence of the ringdove's endless cooing, Heydari began edging toward the cave mouth on his haunches, inch by inch, watching the karkadann every moment. He's never said what instinct made him do it, only that it felt suddenly very close in the cave, what with that moldy-hay smell of the creature, and that birdsong going on and on, and he began to feel in need of fresh air. Another foot—two feet at most—and he would simply rise and walk out and down into the little valley . . . and perhaps Niloufar would be there, even though her sheep were not. Not, you understand, that he cared a rap about *that*.

And what finally tipped the balance—what woke the karkadann and set it at last *seeing* my son as it

never had before—I don't imagine he or Niloufar or I will ever know. Heydari says it actually made that same odd puzzled sound before it charged, just as though it didn't know yet why it was being made to do this. Though I don't suppose that's true for a minute, and it wouldn't make any bloody difference if it were. It bloody *charged*.

Coming at him, absolutely silent, it looked twice as huge as it had just a moment before, for all that he had grown so used to the immensity of it in the cave. He shrieked, fell over backward, and rolled some way down the slope, stopping himself by grabbing at clumps of grass and stones. When he stumbled to his feet, the karkadann filled his entire horizon, poised at the cave mouth, staring down at him. It did not move for what he tells me is still the longest moment of his life. Once he said that it would almost have been worth dying on that horn like an elephant to know what was going through the beast's mind. I tried to hit him, but he ducked out of range.

He could see the great leg muscles gathering and swelling like thunderheads as the karkadann set itself, and he thought—or he *says* he thought—of his family, and how sad his mother would be, and how furious *I* would be, and wished he were safely home with us all. That's as may be; but I've always

suspected he'd have been thinking of little Niloufar, and wishing he had had time and sense enough to make it up with her. I hope he was.

In a vague kind of way, he wondered where the ringdove had gotten to. It had flown up the moment the karkadann charged him, and he could not see it anywhere. A pity, for if there was anything in the world that soothed that devil-gotten creature at all, it was the song of the dove. The strange thing was that he could have sworn he still heard it somewhere. Perched in some tree, like enough, waiting patiently for the slaughter to be over, the same as always. Ringdoves aren't smart birds, but they aren't fools either.

Then the karkadann came for him.

He says he never heard the bellow. He says what he'll remember to his last day is—of all things—the sound of the stones of the hillside surging backward under the karkadann's clawed hoofs. That, and the ringdove, suddenly sounding almost in his right ear . . . and another sound that he knew he knew, but it shouldn't be there, it mustn't be there . . .

It was Niloufar. It was Niloufar, singing her perfect imitation of the ringdove's song—and it was Niloufar riding my big Mojtaba straight at the karkadann! Now, as I think I've made abundantly clear to you,

there is no elephant in the *world* who will challenge a karkadann . . . except, perhaps, one who has lost his mother to such beasts, and who sees his adoptive mother in the same danger. Mojtaba trumpeted—Niloufar swears it sounded more like a roar than anything else—laid his big ears back flat, curled his trunk out of harm's way, and charged.

As nearly as I could ever make out from their two accounts, that double impossibility—a ringdove singing sweetly where there wasn't a ringdove, and an elephant half its size attacking head-on, with death in his red eyes—the karkadann must have been thrown off guard, unable either to halt or commit to a full rush, and too bewildered to do more than brace itself for Mojtaba's onslaught. Mad with vengeance or not, the elephant knew enough to strike at an angle that made the broken fang useless as a weapon, and he crashed into the karkadann with his full weight and power, knocking the beast off its feet for—doubtless—the first time in its life. Mojtaba's tusks—five feet long, both of them, if they're an inch—drove into its side, wrenched free, drove again . . .

But poor Niloufar, flattening herself in vain against the elephant's back, was knocked from her hold and hurled through the air. And the gods only know how badly she might have been hurt, if Heydari, my son,

running as fast as though the karkadann were still behind him, had not managed to break her fall with his own body. She hit him broadside, just as Mojtaba had crashed into the karkadann, and they both went down together—both, I think, unconscious for at least a minute or two. Then they sat up in the high grass and looked at each other, and of course that was the real beginning. I know that, and I wasn't even there.

Heydari said, "I thought I would never see you again. I kept hoping I would see your sheep grazing in the valley, but I never did."

And Niloufar answered simply, "I have been here every day. I am a very good hider."

"Do not hide from me again, please," Heydari said, and Niloufar promised.

The karkadann was dead, but it took the children some time to call Mojtaba away from trampling the body. The elephant was trembling and whimpering—they are *very* emotional, comes with the sensitivity—and did not calm down until Heydari led him to the little hill stream and carefully washed the blood from his tusks. Then he went back and buried the karkadann near the cave. Niloufar helped, but it took a very long time, and Heydari insisted on marking the grave. As well as that girl understands him, I don't think she knows to this day why he wanted to do that.

But I do. It was what he was trying to tell me, and what I hit him for, and likely still would, my duty as a father having nothing to do with understanding. The karkadann was magnificent, as he said, and utterly monstrous too, and he probably came as near to taming it as anyone ever has or ever will. And perhaps that was why it hated him so, in the end, because he had tempted it to violate its entire nature, and almost won. Or maybe not . . . talk to my idiot son, and you start thinking about things like that. You'll see—I'll seat you next to him at dinner.

No, we've never called them anything but karkadanns. Odd, a Roman fellow, a trader, he asked the same question a while back. Only other time I ever heard that word, *unicorn*.



# About the Author

**Peter Soyer Beagle** is the internationally bestselling and much-beloved author of numerous classic fantasy novels and collections, including *The Last Unicorn*, *Tamsin*, *The Line Between*, *Sleight of Hand*, and *Summerlong*. He is the editor of *The Secret History of Fantasy* and the co-editor of *The Urban Fantasy Anthology*.

Born in Manhattan and raised in the Bronx, Beagle began to receive attention for his artistic ability even before he received a scholarship to the University of Pittsburgh. Exceeding his early promise, he published his first novel, *A Fine & Private Place*, at nineteen, while still completing his degree in creative writing. Beagle's follow-up, *The Last Unicorn*, is widely considered one of the great works of fantasy. It has been made into a feature-length animated film, a stage play, and a graphic novel.

Beagle went on to publish an extensive body of acclaimed works of fiction and nonfiction. He has written widely for both stage and screen, including the screenplay adaptations for *The Last Unicorn* and the animated film of *The Lord of the Rings* and the well-known "Sarek" episode of *Star Trek*.

As one of the fantasy genre's most-lauded authors, Beagle is the recipient of the Hugo, Nebula, Mythopoeic, and Locus awards, as well as the Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire. He has also been honored with the World Fantasy Life Achievement Award and the Inkpot Award from Comic-Con, given for major contributions to fantasy and science fiction.

Beagle lives in Richmond, California, where he is working on too many projects to even begin to name.