

To Kill a Unicorn

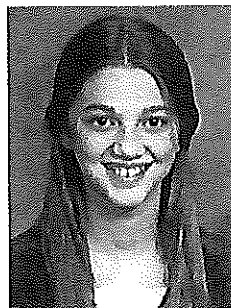
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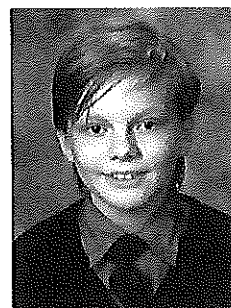
OUR SMALL HUNTING PARTY trotted silently along the woodland path, searching for the white ghost of the forest. We knew the unicorn's weakness now. An old enchanter, passing by my father's castle, had said that a maiden fair of face could trap a unicorn with a golden bridle. We were taking along Jaif's younger sister, Francesca, for that job.

The party was speeding up, making its way quicker now, for we were few. Francesca and her father, who was the Earl of Keshry, Jonathan the dog-keeper and his three finest hounds, me, and my own father. Francesca rode behind the Earl on his gray charger, while I had my own horse: a rather slow brown mare. Jonathan walked, holding the dogs' taut leashes, and Father brought up the rear on a fine black stallion. I looked around, taking in the forest scenery, and knowing that a unicorn would have trouble hiding its snowy fur among the trees. Suddenly, the dogs stiffened and began to bay, nearly startling me off of my horse.

"They've scented the creature," muttered Father to Jonathan. "Quiet them now. They'll frighten it deeper into the woods." He turned on his horse to face me. "Matthew, take Francesca into the meadow, then come back to us. We'll wait in the trees until the unicorn is trapped, then Jonathan will let loose the dogs to keep it in place until we get there. Understood?" I nodded. Father tossed me the heavy golden bridle. Then the Earl let Francesca down off his horse, and I helped her onto mine. She raised a hand in farewell at the remainder of our hunting



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party, then we disappeared into the trees. I knew the way to the meadow, so it was very easy to let my mind wander from guiding my horse. It had been about two minutes riding, before a voice broke the silence.

"Do you really think I should do it?" I was surprised to hear Francesca's question.

"Do what?" I asked, looking sideways at her serious face.

"You know, catch this unicorn. They've always sounded so noble to me, and I don't think I want to help kill one."

I started to reply, but the trees ended and we were in the meadow. I let Francesca down without answering, and began to turn my horse, but she hissed, "The golden bridle, Matthew!"

Uh-oh. I retrieved the bridle from my saddle and handed it down. Then I nudged my brown mare and backed into the forest again. Once hidden behind a sufficient number of trees, I turned to watch.

Time passed. I had long since picked out Father's hiding place, and also that of the Earl. The unicorn had not come yet. How long would we wait? My horse stomped her feet and whinnied softly, and I rubbed my hand along her velvety muzzle.

"Shhh, girl. Quiet now," I murmured. She didn't understand why we were to stand here for hours on end. Come to think of it, I didn't really get it either. All this fuss and bluster, for the sake of killing a rare and beautiful animal. Then suddenly—*Oh, my*. I saw it.

The unicorn stepped from the forest, shedding bits of leaves and thorns. Its long horn glistened as though polished to a shine. I saw at once why many men chased after it—the creature was *so wondrous*. Francesca looked up sharply. I could see her hands trembling, clenched around the golden strands of the bridle. The unicorn warily turned its head in my direction, and I almost met its deep brown gaze. But, the thought of looking into the eyes of something you are about to help to kill—I quickly glanced down at the ground. *It can't see you, Matthew. Don't worry about it.*

The white apparition trotted to stand in front of Francesca, and lowered its head. My heart was pounding, and I watched as the girl reached up and placed a hand on the unicorn's mane. Would Francesca be able to do it? Her other hand still held the bridle. The Earl, I saw, was waving impatiently at his daughter, sending a silent message. *The bridle! Now!*

My horse had stopped moving, and stared at the unicorn with simple wonder. I was staring just as wondrously, struck by the sudden thought that Father and the Earl were going to *kill it*.

Francesca grabbed the golden bridle in both hands. She began to bring it up towards the creature's head; I heard the Earl give a quiet chuckle of delight, but I couldn't bring myself to be triumphant. Had I really set out with a will to murder the rarest animal in the forest? I wanted to tell myself no, I hadn't, but I wasn't sure. At least now I was of a clear conscience.

The unicorn wouldn't die by *my* hands, I swore silently. Father's face, half hidden in shadow where he was concealed, was smiling, the smile of the hunter who has his prey in an inescapable trap.

But no! The unicorn wheeled and ran suddenly, leaving Francesca to sink to the ground. She had whispered something in the creature's ear, I was sure of it, told it that it would die if it stayed. With a cry, the Earl signaled to Jonathan to release the dogs. My heart, which had risen so suddenly, plummeted again. The hounds would catch the unicorn, bring it down in a bloody scene of horror. The Earl signaled again, but Jonathan hadn't let go of the leashes. He held them in a white-knuckled grip, his face stony.

"Jonathan!" Father snapped. "We're losing time!" The dog-keeper shook his head, slowly walking back to stand beside me.

"M'lords, face it," he said softly, "none of us can kill a unicorn." He gestured at Francesca, on her knees in the meadow;

to me, leaning against an elm tree for support; and to his own paled face. Father cursed, mounting his horse and gesturing to the Earl to do the same. I took the reins of my mare and led her into the meadow.

"Francesca?" I asked hesitantly, not sure what she would say. She stood up unsteadily, and gave me a sad smile.

"It's not dead. That's all I could do for it." Without another word, I helped her into the saddle. After I had mounted, we joined Father and the Earl on the edge of the clearing. Jonathan came up beside us, his three dogs sniffing and whimpering with confusion. Francesca shot her father a look that was steely-edged, and my father did likewise to *me*. In frosty silence, our hunting party set off, heading towards home. Jonathan looked at me and smiled.

"I think we've all learned something," he said. "A life as rare as that one isn't easily taken."

I nodded, adding, "And *any* life is hard to take." ❁

