

THE LAST MAIDEN

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A woman ran out of the wood clutching a bundle close to her breast; heavy and still. She stumbled over a tree stump, staggered up again. Then she began to scream.

Down by the river's edge, the unmarried girls stared up the hill. They stood motionless for perhaps the space of a heartbeat, then dropped their work part done and rushed to surround the woman who was already being quizzed by the Summer Guard. All save one. One solitary figure who remained up to her waist in the fast flowing water, hardly able to climb the shallow bank unaided. The one they always forgot.

With a patient sigh, Shalyr fastened the skirt she was washing to a line fixed across the river and clutched at the wet rope with icy hands. Her left took a good grip. Her right was little use. But Shalyr determinedly hauled herself out of the singing river onto her knees in the mud, where she paused to catch her breath before reaching for her stick. She could not run - not any more - yet she made steady progress up the hill in the wake of the other girls, her face that would never be beautiful turned towards the commotion in the centre of the hut circle.

The bundle lay open in the sticky mud, where the woman, Malessa, knelt beside it choking on her own sobs. It was a child, naked and red with blood, his tiny stomach opened by one enormous round hole.

Everyone was there now, standing in a shocked silent circle staring at the dead child. Shalyr quietly joined the back of the group, by habit pulling thick golden hair across her burned face, then leant slightly on her stick to listen.

"I'd say it's obvious what killed him." Jossi jammed the butt of his spear into the mud. "And I say we hunt!"

"Last week it was the goat, before that Ossin's dog..."

"The children are scared to play in the wood these days."

"Who will be next? One of our women?"

Movar, in charge of the Guard that summer, held up his hand for silence, and the many excited voices subsided leaving only Malessa's sobs to break the golden afternoon.

"Did you see anything, Malessa? Anything at all?"

She shook her head without looking up, fingers trembling in the dirt.

"Well, what did you hear, then?" Movar sounded impatient. "Come on, woman! Surely you weren't that far from your child when it happened?"

Malessa let out a high, choked wail and started crying afresh.

"We don't need a woman's testimony to find the truth!" Jossi again. "Even a fool can see what killed the babe - I say we hunt!"

Movar stared at the wood over the heads of the crowd, dark eyes thoughtful. Then his gaze roamed back to the dead child, touching Shalyr on the way. She turned her face to the shadow, wincing.

"There is a curse on the village," he said. "Hunting the unicorn will be dangerous. Men might die."

Jossi seized his spear with a sharp laugh. "The beast will die, not men! Are we cowards, that we skulk in our huts while it kills our animals and our children? Not I! I say we hunt."

His talk inflamed the younger warriors. "Yes!" they cried, waving their spears high. "Let us hunt!"

"We must wait for the Chief's Party to return and discuss this properly," Movar decided. "We can't leave the village unguarded to chase a dangerous beast through the wood."

"The leaves will be on the ground by then," Jossi argued. "And many more children may be killed."

"We will wait," said Movar.

"No, we will hunt!"

Movar took an angry step forwards, raising his own spear, and stood face to face with Jossi while the women drew back, alarmed. Even Malessa stopped crying.

"You will not abandon your posts." Movar's tone was icy. "No-one will. If the unicorn comes to the village, we will kill it. Otherwise - we wait."

And there it remained, an uneasy truce. The young men, led by Jossi, grumbled. Tempers frayed. Scuffles broke out. Then Jossi began to mutter about lures and traps, and maidens used as bait. The other warriors laughed at first, but listened more and more seriously as the green leaves crisped to gold and there was still no sign of the Chief's Party. Movar would not let them hunt, so they planned to make the unicorn come to them. And Movar, anxious to keep the peace, made no protest when Jossi summoned the unmarried girls to the fire ring one crisp evening at the turning of the season.

"We need a volunteer," Jossi announced, marching round the circle. "To rid the village of this menace." He jabbed his finger at first one then another of the girls, all of whom drew back giggling nervously.

From the shadows, Shalyr watched. She had gone obediently to the ring, but been sent away again with a slap for her forwardness. "What unicorn will lay his head in *your* lap, burnt-face?" the men had teased. So she had crept back into the darkness, dry-eyed, the sadness locked deep inside.

Jossi was standing before her little sister now; a girl barely a woman, just turned thirteen. "You, Falie! Come on."

"Yes! I'll do it." Fair-haired Falie stood bathed in the firelight shining like a torch. "The unicorn will come to me. I am not afraid."

"Good girl." Jossi took her wrist, pulled her against his chest, and kissed her lightly. Falie blushed, then ran laughing back to the hut she shared with two of the other girls.

Shalyr, unnoticed by the men at the fire, hobbled after. "Don't do it, little sister," she begged.

"Ah, go jump in the river, Shalyr!" Falie stuck out her tongue. "You're only jealous. He kissed me - did you see? Kissed me on the *lips!*" The other two giggled.

"I think the entire village saw." Shalyr tried not to sound too disapproving. "I ask only for your own safety, little sister. Unicorns are dangerous beasts."

"And I'm a beautiful maiden. It won't harm me. Don't you know anything, sister?"

Shalyr shifted her weight to rest her injured leg. They had not asked her to sit down. "I know more about unicorns than you do, and I know that this maiden business is all nonsense. The beast may well come to take the bait - but it will come for blood. If you sit in that wood alone, sister, you will be just as vulnerable as Malessa's baby. And just as dead."

The other girls were staring nervously at her now, but Falie only laughed.

"Go home, Shalyr, go home and leave the unicorn baiting to those of us who are still beautiful enough to qualify. Go and skulk in your hut. You'll be safe, never fear!" She laughed again, reached out, and slyly tapped the bottom of Shalyr's stick. This, because she was resting on it, brought the crippled girl to her knees.

The others giggled behind their hands. "Yes, go home, Shalyr," they chanted. "Go home and hide your face!"

Shalyr crawled back to her own hut with a sigh, where she prayed in the darkness to the Goddess: *Protect my sister, Lady, please. I didn't bring her out of the fire so that a unicorn could eat her. Let it find its food elsewhere. Let Falie be unharmed!*

But there was no answer, either that night, nor the next day, nor the next night, all through which Falie sat in the wood watched by eager young warriors hiding with sharpened spears. Movar and the older men scoffed and said that if Jossi and his band wanted to stay in the wood all night, then it would serve them right if they came back with stiff necks in the morning. But the unmarried girls glanced uneasily at each other, and Shalyr prayed on until the silence was broken at dawn by shouting and a single shrill scream.

A white-faced group watched Jossi carry her sister's body out of the mist, Shalyr fighting her way to the front in nameless fear. There were golden leaves in Falie's damp hair, and she might have been asleep but for the red stain that was spreading slowly across one small breast. She was breathing only shallowly.

"Well?" After Movar had instructed the healing women to take Falie away, and they had forbidden Shalyr to accompany them, the Guard-chief stood with hands on hips in front of the youngsters. "Did you kill it? Where is the carcass?"

Jossi looked shame-faced. "We wounded it, see!" He lifted his spear. "The beast's blood runs red too."

"So where's the carcass?"

"It escaped into the mist."

"You idiots! You stupid, half-witted fools!" Movar's rage forced all six of them to drop their eyes. "You watched that thing maul the woman, and then you *wounded* it? And let it run off?"

"We'll go back and hunt it down directly," said Jossi. "It can't have gone far..."

"You will not." Movar snatched Jossi's bloodied spear and broke it sharply across his knee. "We have been up all night guarding the village. It's your turn now. I'm not having you fools larking around the woods when there's work to be done here."

The young men melted away, muttering. Jossi, red-faced, bent to retrieve his broken spear, then noticed Shalyr watching. His mouth twisted into an ugly sneer, and he spat at her as she hurried away.

Shalyr crept in to see her sister that night while everyone else was in the fire ring. She could hear their heated discussions in the background but did not listen, her attention being wholly for Falie, who lay in a pool of sweat under furs beside a herb-strewn fire.

"Falie? Little sister? Can you hear me?" Shalyr knelt beside the bed and laid her good hand on the fevered brow.

Falie moaned. Her eyelashes fluttered, her eyes opened. But she looked not at Shalyr's scarred face. Instead she gazed through the rush walls of the hut, out to some secret place where Shalyr could not follow.

"I prayed for you, little sister."

"Shalyr..." One hand crawled out of the blankets, touched her very lightly on the arm. "You were right... I'm sorry, sister..."

"Don't worry about it, Falie. Are you in pain? Can I get you something?"

"No." Falie's hand flopped back. "Oh, Shalyr, but you should have seen it! It was so..." She moaned again, staring, staring, blue eyes wide and full of stars. "It was so - *beautiful*, Shalyr..."

Outside, in the fire ring, there was a lot of giggling. Jossi was striding about in the middle, clearly agitated.

"But when?" he was saying. "When?"

"Last night." More giggles.

"And you, Sasina?"

"This very afternoon, behind the Chief's hut."

"No! In full daylight?"

"We were down by the river. In the *rushes*..."

Hoots of laughter from the older women.

"This is crazy!" Jossi raged. "Every one of you? I don't believe it."

The giggling subsided a little, broken by a bold girlish voice. "We're not the only ones, Jossi. Why do you think it speared Falie? You can't hide the truth from a unicorn, Jossi!"

"You slut!" Loud thwacks, followed by a scream and Movar's angry voice calling for order.

Shalyr frowned, wondering if this could be true. Not that it would have made much difference to the unicorn, which had obviously thought Falie easy prey, maiden or no.

"Great!" Jossi was saying. "So what are we to do now? There's an angry wounded beast out there somewhere, we're not allowed to track it, and there's not a maid left in the entire village to lure it close."

More laughter. Then Shalyr heard her name mentioned and she hobbled to her hut afraid, to lie sleepless without making a fire, her twisted hand clawing into the hard-packed earth as it had not done for many years.

They came for her in the dead time between midnight and dawn. Shalyr curled her left hand round her stick and waited, tense, until the first shadow was almost upon her before she struck. She was rewarded by a soft, surprised grunt, but the others quickly took her stick away. A piece of sacking was stuffed into her mouth, a leather thong wound around her wrists joining useless hand to good behind her back, a strap fastened around her waist. Then they carried her out of the hut and set her down at the edge of the village.

Jossi, rubbing the bruise on his head, jerked at the strap. "Come, bitch," he said. "Let's see if a dying beast wants you, because it's certain no-one else ever will." And he began to lead her towards the wood.

Shalyr hobbled as well as she could without her stick, but was defeated by their forced pace. Her twisted leg hurt, the thong bit her wrists, she could scarcely breathe through the sack. Before long there were stars shining on the wrong side of the mist and she was on her knees in the mud. Jossi amused himself by dragging her for a few paces, but soon became bored of that and instructed his men to carry her into the dripping wood, where they tied her to a tree and removed the sack from her mouth.

Shalyr gasped air, half in a faint, gasped again, then came to her senses to see dried blood crusting the fallen leaves around her legs. Falie's blood? Or the unicorn's? She stared at it, shuddering.

Jossi leaned close. "You enjoy a sacrifice, don't you, Shalyr? Just like the fire, remember? Keep your head down, now, or you'll frighten the beast away before we have a chance to spear it." His fist tightened in her hair, drawing it roughly across her burned face in tangled streamers that hid her tears.

Then they left her bound to await the unicorn.

With the first glimmer of dawn, the beast limped into the clearing. Shalyr's head snapped up, her eyes widened, she stared at the unicorn in silence. It was small and bloodied down one flank. It had broken hooves, a dirty yellow coat, dull eyes. The horn that sprouted between its ragged ears was chipped and stained. Foam dripped from its fangs as it regarded her in equal silence from where it stood resting its injured leg.

Shalyr knew that she should scream, but her throat was tight. Not with fear, but with pity. Falie had said that the unicorn was beautiful, yet to her the creature appeared deformed, weak... dying. As she was. As she.

"Go," she whispered. "They are waiting for you here. Run! Run while you can."

The unicorn limped closer, cocked its head to one side, then dipped its horn to pierce her tunic above the heart.

Shalyr gasped, but still she did not scream. "Are you hungry? Are you going to kill me? Then do it quickly, but go before they wake." She no longer said to run. She could see

that the unicorn was no more able to run than she was herself. They were two of a kind. Wounded. Hurt.

The horn pressed closer, denting her breast. She shut her eyes. Tears splashed on the scars of her leg, but her own eyes were through with crying, and when she opened them it was to see the unicorn weeping like a child: sparkling droplets filled with reflections of a different wood, where a unifoal shone gloriously white, where a pretty girl ran straight-legged...

"Stop it," she gasped. "Please, stop!"

Her heart twisted. Mist curled around the beast's ruined hooves as it hobbled into the wood and vanished from sight. Not a moment too soon. The men, rubbing sleep from their eyes, burst into the clearing to stand over Shalyr.

Jossi reached out to touch the tear in her tunic. His fingers came away red. "You fool!" he raged. "Why didn't you scream? We'll never find it now!" He waved his men into the wood, but after crashing clumsily around for a while they returned, shaking their heads. "You're a useless, good-for-nothing burnt bitch!" His foot swung back, kicked Shalyr on the side of her head.

She felt pain. Then eager hands were releasing her from the tree so that they could beat her more easily. She tasted blood, chewed mud and soggy leaves. And finally the darkness closed around her, though she heard their excited voices long after her vision was gone.

"The Chief! The Chief's back!"

"Leave her."

"Take the thong - we'll say we found her trampled to death."

"There's no hole."

"No time. Come on, she's had it..."

A blade cut the leather from her wrists, slicing her arm, but Shalyr, with her face pressed into the leaves and her head half in darkness, made no move, no cry. Silence settled over her like a blanket.

And then she dreamed. Of a beautiful creature in a halo of shimmering light that dropped to its knees so that she could climb astride, where she clung to the rippling mane with two whole, good hands. Of galloping hooves, carrying her at speed through the mist to a different wood where pain and fire and blood were only nightmares. And Shalyr smiled for the first time in many years.

Late that afternoon, when the Chief's Party had been properly welcomed and feasted in the village, a half-hearted search was made for Shalyr's body. But of the burned maiden there was no sign, nor was the unicorn ever seen again in that wood.

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