

Joy-Catcher

Where the sublime is meant, the sublime results. In a land of windblown grass, a maiden made a vow. She had no riches, no extraordinary beauty, no rare skills, and nothing the world might value. She had herself, and that is what she offered. For her own reasons, she walked to the four-turreted abbey on the hillside, put on a tan robe, and vowed never to take for herself a man. Far away, in the highland plain where the sun never shines and the moon always lights the night, where the wind stirs the glow from the grass, the womb of a unicorn stirred. At the moment that vow ignited inside the maiden, the moment when it gained strength and became her permanent word, a unicorn quickened.

The unicorn would never know the maiden who gave her existence, and the maiden never knew this effect of her vow. It did not matter where the maiden was, or why she made her vow, or even if she kept it. The intent had been intended, and the fidelity that might be engendered a being that would be.

For twelve months the mother held the foal inside her, knitting it together and forming it for birth. Several of the unicorns around her were also swollen with offspring. In some years, there were many maidens. Other years there were few, and some none. They grazed on the purple grass and drank from the mountain springs, as the moon grew and shrank. Unicorns were moon creatures, linked to its cycles and pale luminance, chosen by the mark of their hecatolite horns. The moon grew and shrank, and the foals came, each in her turn.

The unicorn was born on a half-moon night. She lay on folded knees, shivering in the grass and birth fluids. The wetness clung to her fur, slicking it down so her mane lay heavy against her neck. She raised her head, her muscles weak and loose, wind stroking her flanks. She saw the purple grass, and then the midnight blue sky, and then the eyes of her mother, reflecting her own form back at her. Her form was slender, all tapering needle-limbs under a curving neck and pointed face. Her fur was the white of all unicorns and only of unicorns, so flawless it seemed to give off light, and her eyes were the eyes of all unicorns, the purple-blue only found in the edge where the light of the moon merges into the black of the night sky.

"Iseldir," her mother said, and Iseldir knew the first thing she would ever know: herself.

Iseldir trembled as her mother licked her dry. Warmth seeped into her, and with it came strength. She began to shift her legs underneath her, and then to lean forward. She unfolded one across several minutes, slowly extending it so it bent in front of her. She worked the other one out, then started to push off her hind legs. She fell forward, the grass tickling her underside. She did not look to her mother, for this was not something that needed to be taught, nor something that could be done by someone else. She tried again, and again she fell. Her legs bent like blades of grass, thin and unable to hold her frail body. But Iseldir tried, again and again. She struggled to her feet and surprised herself by standing upright, unstable and unsure, but upright. She lifted a leg, and placed it in front of her, and from then on she walked.

Language came quickly to the young unicorn. There were few things to see and to learn the words for in her home. There was the ground, and the wind, and the rivers. There was the moon and the stars that lit the sky, and the luminous grass that lit the earth, and the shine-flyers that flew in the air and crawled in the grass, lighting both. They came and went so quickly. One would ignite when the moon was half-full, and its hundredth descendants would see it full.

When her mother was not near, she asked whatever unicorn was, for they were all unicorns, and all one herd, linked by their grace and their rarity and their path under the moon.

The unicorn had forgotten her reflection in the eyes of her mother when she was born. It was not until she saw another unicorn her age that she saw they were different from their mothers, and from all the grown unicorns.

“Why doesn’t my horn have color inside like yours?” she asked her mother. Her mother’s horn, like any other, was a tapering white cone with a single silver vein that curled around it. At its center, it was broken in on itself, leaving a cavity in the middle. The cavity was lined with faceted crystals crowded in on each other, brilliantly hued.

“When the rainbow crowns the moon, your horn will break open and your stones will show,” her mother said.

“Will they be red like yours?” Iseldir asked, which was a far more important question than what the rainbow was or when it would come. Her mother’s stones were beautiful, all bright and blazing furious against the muted purples, blues and grays of their night land.

“I don’t know,” her mother said. “The color of your horn is the first inclination of your heart.”

“What does that mean?” Iseldir asked. She knew nothing about her heart.

“A red-horned unicorn’s natural emotion is courage,” her mother said. “Orange is joy, yellow anger, green is hope, blue is sadness, indigo is love, purple is compassion, pink is curiosity, brown is cynicism, and gray is fear.”

“Your color tells you who you are?” Iseldir asked.

Her mother shook her head, her mane swaying with the motion. “No, Iseldir. You tell you who you are. Your color is the first thing that enters your mind. You are the second thing you think, after the first passes.”

Which will I be? Iseldir thought. She didn’t know what some of the words, like optimism and cynicism, meant, so she discounted those for the moment. She didn’t think she was particularly angry, though she could think of another young unicorn she played with that certainly might have yellow crystals. She loved her mother, but all unicorns did.

As she went down the list, she felt more and more uneasy. The first thing to enter her mind when her mother listed the colors was that she might be one of the bad ones. That was a fearful thought, which made her fear even more that she might be a gray-crystaled unicorn. That made her more afraid, and that made her more certain. I’m sure I’m not a red-crystaled unicorn, she thought, which made it all the more likely she was gray. She had no hope she might be like her mother. Even that added another layer of worry, because it was a sad thought, meaning her crystals might be blue..

It’s better, she thought, if I don’t think of it at all. A unicorn did not choose the color of her crystals, and there was no use fretting over what must be. Perhaps her horn would show blue or gray or yellow, and there was nothing she could do to change it. Or perhaps she would show orange, or indigo, or purple, or pink, or green, or maybe ‘cynicism’ was a good thing. She did not ask her mother, though. She was already sure they were bad, and she could not bear to add more bad possibilities to her mind.

Her mother tossed her head and snorted. “Don’t worry about it,” she said. “All unicorns are afraid they’ll be whatever color they think is bad. None of them are bad. All feelings are important in their own way and their own measure. And your horn doesn’t define you. It is where you start. You decide where you end.”

I'm not going to worry about it, Iseldir thought, But not because of that. There is nothing to worry about if it's good, and no hope to better it if it's bad. Better to just be.

The moon shone down gray-white rays that bent when they hit the grass, leaving stripes of lavender on dark purple. They were thin beams, sheer filters for and not beacons on the colors they lightened. Dew shone on the blades of grass, reflecting and refracting back into the sky the scattered bands of color gathering around the moon. For the moment they were disconnected fragments, but with every night, they grew and merged. The barren plain stretched from horizon to horizon uninterrupted. Shine-flyers floated through the air, glows of light surrounding a frame so diaphanous that it seemed too gossamer to live to the unicorns. When peering close, the unicorns saw only rounded shapes held together by outlines of brighter light. It was only the unmistakable intent of the directions taken by the shine-flyers that marked them as being and not phenomena. They glowed usually white, but at times pale yellow or blue, by logic unknown to the unicorns.

Iseldir lay on folded knees. Before her, four other unicorns, born near the same time she was, played a game of chase. Sometimes they chased each other, and sometimes they chased shine-flyers or tywynnen, the green glowing plants connected by underground networks of roots, so that when a unicorn was about to tread upon the glowing bulb, it receded into the ground and shot up somewhere else. And sometimes the unicorns just chased, running after the wind or their noses or nothing at all.

One of them broke off and cantered toward Iseldir. When she was close enough, Iseldir saw it was Pryfyn Tan. She was the one who nearly always started the games, gathering all the other unicorns and spurring them to play.

"Come play with us!" Pryfyn Tan said. She jumped back a step and tossed her head side to side.

Iseldir did not want to play. She hated how hard it seemed to be for her. The other unicorns so easily slipped into the games, but it did not work for her. The others never excluded her. She had no reason to feel different or exceptional. She didn't feel different at all. She felt broken, broken she ran with the others and the spark didn't kick up inside her, letting her gallop with lightness and gaiety. She could see the joy in the others' eyes, and it was like they saw a color that was just gray to her, or like she couldn't see any colors at all, and was alone in a black-and-white world.

But Pryfyn Tan's enthusiasm was alluring, and her excitement to have Iseldir part of the game made Iseldir want to try again. So she stood and she ran, following Pryfyn Tan to the others, who were running every which way.

Once she joined in, Iseldir felt better. She liked the feeling of the grass under her hooves and the divots she pressed into the ground with each step. She did like being with the others, even if she felt like she was somehow not doing something right. Her legs felt light and she leaned forward to press forward as fast as she could go. Moments like that gave her hope that she could play like the others, but also made the other moments even more bitter. She wished she could either break through and be light forever or stop trying entirely and be done with the disappointment.

What are they seeing? Iseldir looked from one unicorn to another and saw an utter lack of care. They all had moments where they were sad or upset, but now, they were just playing. Their thoughts were on the game, and being happy, and the lightness of being a unicorn. They saw

something in the play. They felt some strange otherness Iseldir didn't understand, but she understood that she did not have it. She knew there was another dimension to the world that all things were meant to experience and she knew she was locked outside it. And it weighed her down, and it slowed her steps, and it brought her to a walk, and then to stop.

"What's wrong?" Pryfyn Tan asked as she stopped beside Iseldir.

"I'm... tired," Iseldir said. She thought at first it was just an easy excuse, but she was tired. Her breath came fast, and her chest burned. The others were still running, except Pryfyn Tan and Lwain-dlir, who had come up to them when she saw them standing apart. Iseldir was the only one that was tired. She was the last to start playing, and the first to get tired.

"Are you sick?" Lwain-dlir asked.

"No," Iseldir said, but she was lying. She was sick. She wasn't sick in the body. That would have been easier. Sick bodies could be cured. She was sick not in her body but in herself. She didn't think this could be cured, because it was just what she was, like a creature born without eyes.

"You probably just need to rest," Lwain-dlir said.

I always need to rest. Iseldir walked away from the others and returned to the still-bent grass she had been before she joined. She was always the first of the young unicorns to bed down, and usually the last to rise. Even then, she would still get tired. She knew all unicorns had different amounts of energy naturally, but it seemed strange that one as young as herself should have such a small reserve, even compared to the adult and elderly unicorns. Her mother told her it didn't matter, and that unicorns could learn many things and go many places in sleep, when they were most finely attuned to the moon. But mothers said things like that.

Iseldir looked up at the moon. It was waning. The time grew closer to the full moon, when the night was lightest and a unicorn's heart with it. She wondered again about the rainbow, and what the moon would bring for her. She had once been sure her crystals were gray, and then feared they might be blue, which brought her back to gray again. The truth might be something altogether worse. Perhaps she wasn't gray, or blue. It seemed much more likely she was nothing, nothing at all. Nothing was what she felt when she played. Nothing was what she felt throughout the night, and when she thought about the future. Nothing was what she felt when she slept, which she spent more time doing than any other thing. She had been right all along. She was broken. A unicorn's heart and soul was her horn, and her heart and soul was broken.