

SKANDAR AND THE UNICORN THIEF

Also by A.F. Steadman

Skandar and the Phantom Rider

SKANDAR AND THE UNICORN THIEF



A.F. STEADMAN

Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers
New York Amsterdam/Antwerp London
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SIMON & SCHUSTER BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS
An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York 10020

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Also available in a Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers hardcover edition

Interior design by Tom Daly

The text for this book was set in Adobe Caslon Pro.

Manufactured in the United States of America • 1223 OFF

First Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers paperback edition February 2024

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The Library of Congress has cataloged the hardcover edition as follows:

Names: Steadman, A. F., author.

Title: Skandar and the unicorn thief / A.F. Steadman.

Description: First edition. | New York : Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2022. | Series: Skandar ; vol. 1 | Audience: Ages 8–12. |

Audience: Grades 4–6. | Summary: Thirteen-year-old Skandar Smith has always wanted to be a Unicorn rider, but when the mysterious Weaver steals the most powerful unicorn in the world, Skandar must face sky battles, ancient secrets, and bloodthirsty unicorns in order to save his island.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021045661 (print) | LCCN 2021045662 (ebook) | ISBN 9781665912730 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781665912747 (paperback) | ISBN 9781665912754 (ebook)

Subjects: CYAC: Unicorns—Fiction. | Magic—Fiction. | Fantasy. | LCGFT: Fantasy fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.S741135 Sk 2022 (print) | LCC PZ7.1.S741135 (ebook) | DDC [Fic]—dc23

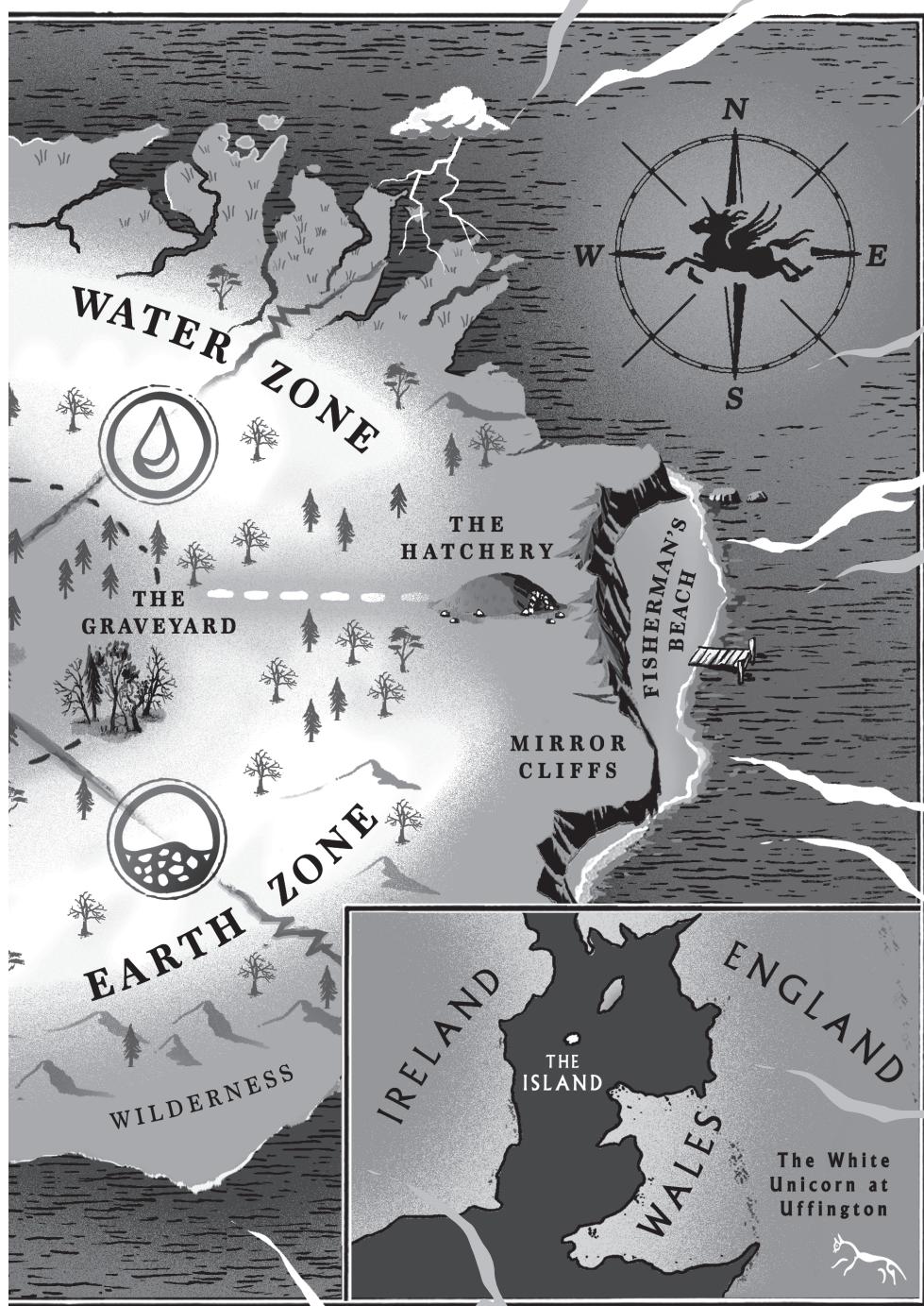
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021045661>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021045662>

**For Joseph—whose selflessness, love,
and infinite kindness gave these unicorns wings**

THE ISLAND





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Prologue

THE CAMERAMAN HEARD THE UNICORNS before he saw them.

High-pitched screeching, murderous growls, the gnashing of bloody teeth.

The cameraman smelled the unicorns before he saw them.

Rancid breath, rotting flesh, the stench of immortal death.

The cameraman felt the unicorns before he saw them too.

Somewhere deep in his bones their putrid hooves thundered, and the panic began to rise—until every nerve, every cell, told him to run. But he had a job to do.

The cameraman watched the unicorns emerge over the brow of the hill.

Eight of them. Malevolent ghouls galloping across the

grassland, skeletal wings unfurling, taking flight.

Like the eye of a shadowy storm, black smoke swirled around them, thunder rumbled in their wake, and bolts of lightning hit the earth far below their fearsome feet.

Eight ghostly horns sliced through the air as the monsters howled their war cry.

The villagers began to scream; some tried to run. But it was far, far too late for that.

The cameraman was standing in the village square when the first unicorn landed.

It snorted sparks and pawed the ground, havoc and mayhem in every rattling breath.

The cameraman kept filming, despite his shaking hands. He had a job to do.

The unicorn lowered its giant head, the razor-sharp horn pointing directly at the lens.

Its bloodshot eyes met the cameraman's, and he saw in them only destruction.

There was no hope for this village now. No hope for him.

But then he'd always known he wouldn't survive a wild unicorn stampede.

He just hoped the camera footage would make it to the Main-land.

Because once you see a wild unicorn, you're already dead.

The man lowered his camera, hoping that his job was done.

Because unicorns don't belong in fairy tales; they belong in nightmares.



CHAPTER ONE

The Thief

SKANDAR SMITH STARED AT THE UNICORN poster opposite his bed. It was light enough outside now to see the unicorn's wings outstretched mid-flight: shining silver armor covering most of his body, exposing only his wild red eyes, an enormous jaw, and a sharp gray horn. New-Age Frost had been Skandar's favorite unicorn ever since his rider, Aspen McGrath, had qualified for the Chaos Cup three years ago. And Skandar thought that today—in this year's race—they just might have a chance of winning.

Skandar had received the poster for his thirteenth birthday three months before. He'd gazed at it through the bookshop window, imagining that he was New-Age Frost's rider, standing just outside the poster frame ready to race.

Skandar had felt really bad asking his dad for it. For as long as he could remember, they'd never had much money—he didn't usually ask for anything. But Skandar had wanted the poster so badly and—

A crash came from the kitchen. On any other day Skandar would have jumped out of bed, terrified there was a stranger in the flat. Usually he, or his sister, Kenna, asleep in the bed opposite, was in charge of making breakfast. Skandar's dad wasn't lazy—it wasn't that—he just found it hard to get up most days, especially when he didn't have a job to go to. And he hadn't had one of those in a while. But today was no ordinary day. Today was race day. And for Dad, the Chaos Cup was better than birthdays, better even than Christmas.

“Are you ever going to stop staring at that stupid poster?” Kenna groaned.

“Dad’s making breakfast,” Skandar said, hoping this would cheer his sister up.

“I’m not hungry.” She turned and faced the wall, her brown hair poking out from underneath the duvet. “There’s no way Aspen and New-Age Frost will win today, by the way.”

“I thought you weren’t interested.”

“I’m not, but . . .” Kenna rolled back again, squinting at Skandar through the morning light. “You’ve got to look at the stats, Skar. Frost’s wingbeats per minute are only about average for the twenty-five competing. Then there’s the problem of their allied element being water.”

“What problem?” Skandar’s heart was singing, even though Kenna was insisting Aspen and Frost wouldn’t win. She hadn’t talked about unicorns for so long he’d almost forgotten what it was like. When they were younger, they’d argued constantly about what their elements would be if they became unicorn riders. Kenna always said she’d be a fire wielder, but Skandar could never decide.

“Have you forgotten your Hatchery classes? Aspen and New-Age Frost are water-allied, right? And there are two air wielders among the favorites: Ema Templeton and Tom Nazari. We both know air has advantages over water!”

Skandar’s sister was leaning on one elbow now, her thin pale face alight with excitement, her hazel hair and eyes wild. Kenna was a year older than Skandar, but they looked so similar that they’d often been mistaken for twins.

“You’ll see,” Skandar said, grinning. “Aspen’s learned from her other Chaos Cups. She won’t just use water; she’s smarter than that. Last year she combined the elements. If I was riding New-Age Frost, I’d go for lightning bolts and whirlpool attacks. . . .”

Kenna’s face changed at once. Her eyes dulled; the smile dropped from the corners of her mouth. Her elbow collapsed, and she turned to the wall again, gathering her coral duvet round her shoulders.

“Kenna, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean . . .”

The smell of bacon and burnt toast wafted under the door. Skandar’s stomach rumbled into the silence.

“Kenna?”

“Leave me alone, Skar.”

“Aren’t you going to watch the Cup with me and Dad?”

No answer again. Skandar dressed in the half-light of the morning, disappointment and guilt tightening his throat. He shouldn’t have said it: *If I was riding*. They’d been talking like they used to, before Kenna took the Hatchery exam, before all her dreams came crashing down.

Skandar entered the kitchen to the sound of sizzling eggs and blaring early Cup coverage. Dad was humming, leaning over the pan. When he saw Skandar, he gave him an enormous grin. Skandar couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen him smile.

Dad’s face fell a little. “No Kenna yet?”

“Still sleeping,” Skandar lied, not wanting to spoil his good mood.

“She’ll find this year hard, I expect. The first race since . . .”

Skandar didn’t need him to finish the sentence. This was the first Chaos Cup since Kenna had failed the Hatchery exam last year and lost all chance of becoming a unicorn rider.

The trouble was, Dad had never acted like it was rare to pass the Hatchery exam. He loved unicorns so much, he was desperate for one of his children to become a rider. He said it would fix everything—their money problems, their future, their happiness, even the days he couldn’t get out of bed. Unicorns were magic, after all.

So for Kenna's whole life he'd insisted that she'd pass the exam and go on to open the Hatchery door on the Island. That she was destined for a unicorn egg locked inside. That she'd make their mum proud. And it hadn't helped that Kenna had always been top of her Hatchery class at Christchurch Secondary. If anyone was going to get to the Island, her teachers said, it was Kenna Smith. Then she'd failed.

And for months now Skandar's dad had been telling him the same. That it was possible, probable, even inevitable, that he'd become a rider. And despite knowing how unusual it was—despite seeing Kenna so disappointed last year—Skandar wanted more than *anything* for it to be true.

"Your turn this year, though, eh?" Dad ruffled Skandar's hair with a greasy hand. "Now, the best way to make fried bread . . ." As Dad gave him instructions, Skandar nodded in all the right places, pretending he didn't already know how. Other children might have found this annoying, but Skandar was just pleased when Dad gave him a high five for getting the bread the perfect amount of crispy.

Kenna didn't come out for breakfast, though Dad didn't seem to mind too much as he and Skandar munched on sausages, bacon, eggs, beans, and fried bread. Skandar stopped himself from asking where the money for this extra food had come from. It was race day. Dad clearly wanted to forget about all that, and Skandar did too. Just for today. So he grabbed the brand-new bottle of mayonnaise and squeezed it over everything, grinning as it made a satisfying squelch.

“Aspen McGrath and New-Age Frost still favorites for you, then?” Dad asked through a mouthful. “I forgot to say, if you want to invite any friends over for the race that’s fine with me. Lots of kids do that, don’t they? Don’t want you to miss out.”

Skandar stared down at his plate. How could he even begin to explain that he didn’t have any friends to invite? And, worse, that it was sort of Dad’s fault?

The trouble was that looking after Dad when he wasn’t well—not so happy—meant that Skandar missed out on a lot of the “normal” stuff you were supposed to do to make friends. He could never stay after school to mess about in the park; he didn’t have pocket money to go to the amusement arcade or sneak off for fish and chips on Margate beach. Skandar hadn’t realized to begin with, but those were the times people actually made friends, not in English class or over a stale custard cream at morning break. And looking after Dad meant that Skandar sometimes didn’t have clean clothes or hadn’t had time to brush his teeth. And people noticed. They always noticed—and remembered.

Somehow for Kenna it hadn’t been as bad. Skandar thought it helped that she was more confident than him. Whenever Skandar tried to think of something clever or funny to say, his brain jammed. It’d come to him a few minutes later, but face-to-face with a classmate, there’d just be a weird buzzing in his head, a blankness. Kenna didn’t have that problem; he’d once heard her confront a group of

girls whispering about how weird Dad was. “My dad, my business,” she’d said very calmly. “Stay out of it or you’ll be sorry.”

“They’re busy with their own families, Dad,” Skandar mumbled eventually, feeling himself blush, which always happened when he didn’t tell the whole truth. Dad didn’t notice, though—he’d started stacking the plates, which was such a rare sight that Skandar blinked twice to make sure it was real.

“What about Owen? He’s a good mate of yours, isn’t he?”

Owen was the worst. Dad thought he was a friend because he’d once seen hundreds of notifications from him on Skandar’s phone. Skandar hadn’t mentioned that the messages were far from friendly.

“Oh yeah, he loves the Chaos Cup.” Skandar got up to help. “He’s watching it with his grandparents, though, and they live miles away.” Skandar wasn’t even making this up; he’d overheard Owen complaining to his crew about it. Right before he’d torn three pages out of Skandar’s Math textbook, screwed them up, and thrown them in his face.

“KENNA!” Dad shouted suddenly. “It’s starting any minute!” When there was no answer, he disappeared into their bedroom and Skandar sat down on the sofa, the TV coverage in full swing.

A reporter was interviewing a past Chaos Cup rider in the main arena, just in front of the starting bar. Skandar turned up the volume.

“—and do you think we’ll see some fierce elemental battles today?” The reporter’s face was flushed with excitement.

“For sure,” the rider replied, nodding confidently. “There’s a real mix of abilities among the competitors, Tim. People are fixating on the fire strength of Federico Jones and Sunset’s Blood, but what about Ema Templeton and Mountain’s Fear? They might be air-allied, but they’re multitalented. People forget that the best Chaos Cup riders excel in all four elements—not just the one they’re allied to.”

The four elements. They were the core of the Hatchery exam. Skandar had spent hours learning which famous unicorns and riders were allied to fire, water, earth, or air; which attacks and defenses they would favor in sky battles. Nerves swooped into Skandar’s stomach; he couldn’t believe the exam was the day after tomorrow.

Dad returned, a troubled look on his face. “She’ll be out in a bit,” he said, sitting next to Skandar on the battered old sofa.

“It’s hard for you kids to understand, really.” He sighed, staring at the screen. “Thirteen years ago, when my generation first watched the Chaos Cup, it was enough just knowing the Island existed. I was far too old to be a rider. But the race, the unicorns, the elements . . . it was magic for us—for me, for your mum.”

Skandar stayed very still, not daring to turn his head away from the screen as the unicorns entered the arena.

Dad only talked about Skandar and Kenna's mum on Chaos Cup day. By his seventh birthday, Skandar had given up asking about her at any other time—learning it made Dad angry and upset, learning it made him disappear into his room for days.

“Never seen your mum so full of emotion as she was on the day of the first Chaos Cup,” Dad continued. “She sat right where you are now, smiling and crying, and holding you in her arms. Only a couple of months old, you were.”

Skandar had heard this before, but he didn’t mind one bit. He and Kenna were always desperate to hear about their mum. Grandma—Dad’s mum—used to tell them about her, but they liked it best when the stories came from Dad, who’d loved her most. And sometimes, when he repeated them, there were new details, like how Rosemary Smith always called him Bertie, never Robert. Or the way she had liked to sing in the bath, or her favorite type of flower—pansies—or the element she’d liked watching best—water—in the first and last Chaos Cup she’d ever seen.

“I’ll always remember,” Dad continued, looking straight at Skandar, “when that first Chaos Cup finished, your mum took your tiny hand, traced a pattern on your palm, and whispered, quiet as a prayer, ‘I promise you a unicorn, little one.’”

Skandar swallowed hard. Dad had never told him that story before. Maybe he’d saved it until the year of his Hatchery exam. Maybe it wasn’t even true. Skandar would never know whether Rosemary Smith had really promised him

a unicorn, because—without warning, three days after the Mainland had watched unicorns race for the first time—Skandar's mum had died.

Skandar would never have said it to Dad, or even Kenna, but part of the reason he liked the Chaos Cup so much was because it made him feel close to his mum. He imagined her watching the unicorns, the excitement building in her chest—just like it was in his—and it was as though she was there with him.

Kenna stomped into the room with a bowl of cereal balanced on her palm.

“Really, Skar? Mayonnaise at breakfast?” She pointed at Skandar’s smeared plate on top of the stack. “I keep telling you: it’s not an acceptable favorite food, little bro.”

Skandar shrugged, and Kenna laughed as she squeezed onto the sofa next to him.

“Look at you both taking up so much room. I’ll be on the floor next year!” Dad said, laughing.

Skandar’s heart clenched. If his exam went well, he wouldn’t be here next year. He’d be watching the Chaos Cup in person, on the Island, and he’d have his very own unicorn.

“Kenna, cards on the table! Favorite?” Dad asked her, leaning round Skandar.

She stared at the television, munching moodily.

“Earlier she said Aspen and New-Age Frost *won’t* win,” Skandar piped up, looking for a reaction.

It worked. “Maybe another year Aspen will do it, but this isn’t a good race for a water wielder.” Kenna tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear, a gesture so familiar to Skandar that it made him feel safe. Like Kenna was going to be okay, even if Skandar did leave her alone with Dad on the sofa next year.

Skandar shook his head. “I told you, Aspen isn’t just going to rely on the water element. She’s cleverer than that—she’ll use air, fire, and earth attacks too, for sure.”

“A rider is always best at their allied element, though, Skar. That’s why it’s called *allied*—duh! Say Aspen did use a fire attack; it’s not going to compare with anything an *actual* fire wielder can do, is it?”

“All right then, who do *you* think’s going to win?” Skandar sat up as Dad turned the volume higher, the commentary reaching fever pitch as the armored competitors jostled for positions behind the starting bar.

“Ema Templeton and Mountain’s Fear,” Kenna said very quietly. “Tenth last year, air wielder, high stamina, brave, intelligent. She’s the kind of rider I would’ve been.”

It was the first time Skandar had heard Kenna acknowledge that she wouldn’t ever be a rider. He wanted to say something, but he didn’t know what, and then it was too late. So he listened to the commentator trying to fill the seconds before the race began.

“For any first-timers just joining us, we’re live from Fourpoint, the Island’s capital. And in a few moments these

unicorns will fly out of this famous arena and begin the aerial racecourse—a grueling sixteen-kilometer test of stamina and sky-battle ability. Riders must stay outside the floating markers on their way round or risk being eliminated—not easy when twenty-four other competitors are trying to hit you with elemental magic and slow you down at every turn—Oh, that's the countdown. Five, four, three, two . . .

“And they’re off!”

Skandar watched twenty-five unicorns, each twice the size of a horse, explode forward as the starting bar rose above their horns. The riders’ armored legs banged against the competitors on either side as they urged their unicorns on to get an early lead, crouching low in their saddles, gathering speed. And then it was Skandar’s favorite part. The unicorns began to stretch out their great feathered wings and take off, leaving the sand of the arena far below. The microphones picked up the riders as they whooped through their helmets. And it also picked up something else—a sound that still sent shivers down Skandar’s spine, though he’d heard it on race day every year of his life. Guttural bellows from deep within the unicorns’ chests—more terrifying than a lion’s roar, more ancient and primal than anything he’d heard on the Mainland. The sort of sound that made you want to run.

The unicorns barged each other in midair to get the best positions, metal armor clanking and scraping. The tips of their horns glinted in the sunlight as they tried to gore

their rivals. Foam built up around their gnashing teeth, and their nostrils flared red. Now that they were airborne, the elemental magic lit up the sky: fireballs, dust storms, flashes of lightning, walls of water. The sky battles raged against a backdrop of fluffy white clouds. Riders' right palms glowed with elemental power as they desperately tried to fight their way along the racecourse.

And it wasn't pretty. The unicorns kicked out at each other, tore flesh from each other's flanks with their teeth, and blasted their competitors at close range. Three minutes in, the camera caught a unicorn and rider—hair on fire, one arm hanging uselessly—spiraling toward the ground and crash-landing, smoke billowing from the unicorn's wing and the rider's blond head.

The commentator groaned. "That's Hilary Winters and Sharp-Edged Lily *out* of the Chaos Cup this year. Looks like a broken arm, some nasty burns, and an injury to Lily's wing."

The camera moved back to the leading group. Federico Jones and Sunset's Blood were locked in a sky battle with Aspen McGrath and New-Age Frost. Aspen had summoned a bow of ice and was firing arrow after arrow at Federico's armored back, trying to slow him. Federico had a flaming shield to melt the arrows, but Aspen's aim was good and New-Age Frost was catching up. Federico wasn't done, though. As Aspen flew Frost closer, flames exploded into the sky above Aspen's head.

“That’s a wildfire attack from Federico.” The commentator sounded impressed. “Tricky at that height and speed. But— Oh! Would you look at that!”

Ice crystals were knitting in a web round New-Age Frost, round Aspen, until they were sealed in a frozen cocoon so thick the wildfire couldn’t touch them. Skandar saw Federico shouting in disappointment as he and Sunset’s Blood fell back with the effort of their fire attack, and Aspen burst through her ice shell to overtake.

“It’s Tom Nazari on Devil’s Own Tears in the lead, followed by Ema Templeton on Mountain’s Fear. Third is Alodie Birch on River-Reed Prince, and after that incredible air-and-water combo, New-Age Frost and Aspen McGrath are now in fourth with— But it looks like Aspen is making another move.” The commentator interrupted himself, his voice rising. “She’s picking up speed.”

Aspen’s red hair flew out behind her, New-Age Frost putting on an unbelievable burst of speed, wings blurring, barging past River-Reed Prince, swerving as a lightning bolt missed Aspen by inches. Then Frost’s great gray wings soared past Kenna’s favorite, Mountain’s Fear, then Tom Nazari’s black unicorn, Devil’s Own Tears. And Aspen took the lead.

“Yeah!” Skandar punched the air. It was a very un-Skandar thing to do, but this was incredible—unbelievable.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” the commentator shouted. “Look how far ahead she is!”

Kenna gasped, her eyes fixed on the unicorns as they approached the finish. “I don’t believe it!”

“She’s going to win by a hundred meters,” another commentator squealed.

Skandar watched, mouth open, as New-Age Frost’s hooves touched down in the arena’s sand. Aspen pushed him forward, fierce determination in her eyes as she passed under the finishing arch.

Skandar jumped up, shouting with excitement. “They won! They won! See, Kenna, I told you! I called it, I called it!”

Kenna was laughing, eyes shining, and that made the victory even better. “All right, Skar. They were really something, I’ll give you that. Those ice crystals, what a move! I’ve never seen—”

“Wait.” Dad was standing close to the screen. “Something’s wrong.”

Skandar approached him on one side, Kenna on the other. Skandar could hear the crowd screaming, but it wasn’t excitement anymore; it was fear. Unicorns were no longer coming through the arch to finish the race. The commentators were silent, the footage still—there was just a single shot of the arena, as though the camera operators had abandoned their posts.

A unicorn landed in the center of the arena. It didn’t look like any of the others—not Sunset’s Blood or New-Age Frost or Mountain’s Fear—whose victory parade it had

interrupted. This unicorn's wings were almost featherless—bat-like—and it was skeletal, half-starved. Its eyes were red haunted slits. Blood was caked around its jaws, its teeth bared at the racers, as though daring them to attack.

It wasn't until Skandar noticed the unicorn's transparent horn that he realized.

"That's a wild unicorn," he breathed. "Like the ones in that old video the Island showed the Mainland. The one that convinced the Mainland that unicorns were real all those years ago. The one where they attacked the village—"

"Something's wrong," Dad said again.

"It can't be a wild unicorn," Kenna whispered. "It has a rider."

Skandar hadn't noticed the person—at least he thought it was a person—on its back. The rider wore a billowing black shroud that flapped in the breeze, the bottom tattered and torn. A wide white-painted stripe obscured the rider's face from the base of the throat to the very top of the head, leading into short dark hair.

The unicorn reared up—pawing the air with its hooves—belching thick black smoke. Its phantom rider let out a triumphant howl, the unicorn screeched, and smoke filled the arena. Skandar watched the unicorn advance toward the Chaos Cup competitors, sparks dancing around its hooves, a jet of white from the rider's palm lighting up the screen. In the moment before the picture disappeared completely in black smoke, the rider turned and—slowly

and deliberately—raised one long bony finger to point directly into the camera.

Then there was only sound. Explosions of elemental magic; unicorns screeching. More screaming from the crowd, and the unmistakable thundering of feet as Islanders attempted to escape from their seats. As they crashed past the camera, their panicked voices jumbling together, Skandar noticed two words repeated over and over.

The Weaver.

Skandar had never heard of the Weaver, but the more the name was whispered, shouted, screamed by the crowd, the more it began to scare him.

He turned to Dad, who was still staring in disbelief at the swirling black smoke on the TV screen. Kenna beat Skandar to the question. “Dad,” she said quietly, “who’s the Weaver?”

“Shhh.” He waved a hand. “Something’s happening.”

The view became clearer, the smoke lifting. Half sobbing, half shouting was coming from a figure on her knees in the sand. She was still in her armor, *McGrath* painted in blue across her back, surrounded by the other riders.

“Please,” Aspen wailed across the arena, “please, bring him back!”

Federico Jones—the fierceness of the race forgotten—managed to get Aspen to her feet, but she was still howling. “The Weaver took him. He’s gone. We won and the Weaver—” Aspen choked on the last word, tears running down her dirt-streaked face.

A stern voice cracked like a whip. “Get these cameras off! Now! The Mainland can’t see this. Get them off, now!”

The unicorns began to screech and bellow, the sound deafening. Their riders jumped into their saddles, trying to calm them as they reared and frothed at the mouth, looking more monstrous than Skandar had ever seen them.

Only one of the twenty-five riders was left standing on the sand—the winning water wielder, Aspen McGrath. But her unicorn, New-Age Frost, was nowhere to be seen.

“Who’s the Weaver?” Kenna asked again, her voice insistent.

But nobody answered her.



CHAPTER TWO

Locked Out

“MISS BUNTRESS, CAN YOU TELL US WHO THE Weaver is?”

“Why did the Weaver take New-Age Frost?”

“How was the Weaver riding a wild unicorn?”

“Can the Weaver get to the Mainland?”

“SILENCE!” Miss Buntress yelled, her hand kneading her forehead.

The class quieted; Skandar hadn’t heard Miss Buntress shout before.

“You’re my fourth Hatchery class of the day,” she said, leaning on her elbow against the whiteboard. “And I’ll tell you what I told the others. I do *not* know who the Weaver is. I do *not* know how the Weaver was riding a wild unicorn.

And, unsurprisingly, I have *no* idea where New-Age Frost is.”

The Chaos Cup had been all anyone could talk about all day. That wasn’t unusual—it was the biggest event of the year. But this year was different: people were worried, especially children Skandar’s age all across the country, who had their Hatchery exams the next day.

“Miss Buntress”—Maria put up her hand—“my parents don’t want me to take the exam. They’re worried the Island’s not safe.”

A few others nodded.

Miss Buntress straightened up and peered at them from under her sandy bangs. “Apart from the fact that it’s the law to take the exam, who can tell me what would happen if Maria was destined for a unicorn in the Hatchery and she didn’t answer the call?”

Every single one of them could have answered, but Sami got there first. “Without Maria to hatch it, her unicorn wouldn’t bond with its destined rider. It would hatch wild.”

“Exactly,” said Miss Buntress. “And it would resemble that dreadful creature you saw at the Chaos Cup.”

“I didn’t say I agreed with my mum and dad!” Maria protested. “I’m still going to—”

Miss Buntress ignored her. “Fifteen years ago, the Island asked for our help with their rider shortage. I understand that you’re all upset about what happened—so am I. But I’m not having any students of mine shirking their responsibilities. And now, with this—this *Weaver*—on the loose, it’s more

important than ever that if you have a destined unicorn, you hatch it. You only get one chance. And this is your year.”

“Well, *I* think the whole thing’s a big hoax,” Owen drawled from the back of the class. “If you ask me, that wasn’t a wild unicorn at all—just someone pretending. That’s what I read online, and—”

“Yes, thank you, Owen.” Miss Buntress cut him off. “That’s a possibility. Let’s all get on with some revision questions now, shall we?”

Skandar frowned and looked down at his Hatchery textbook. That couldn’t be true. If it’d been someone playing a joke, why had all the Islanders been so scared? How had the black-shrouded rider taken on an entire race-load of the most powerful unicorns on the Island and stolen New-Age Frost? And who—or what—was the Weaver?

Skandar wished he had a friend he could whisper with at the back of lessons. Then he could’ve asked them what they thought. Instead, he sketched the mysterious wild unicorn in the margin of his exercise book. Drawing was the only thing Skandar really enjoyed other than unicorns. It was a way to imagine himself on the Island. His sketchbook was full of drawings of battling unicorns or hatching eggs, though sometimes he drew seascapes or silly cartoons of Kenna or—very occasionally—his mum, copied from an old photograph.

Not for the first time, he wondered what she’d make of all this.

* * *

At the end of the day, Skandar waited for Kenna at the school gates alone—like always—flicking through his Hatchery revision notes. Then he heard a sound he'd recognize anywhere: Owen's laugh. Owen always made it really low-pitched, trying to sound older—more like a man. Though Skandar thought it made him sound more like a constipated cow with a bad cough.

“I only just got them!” a higher-pitched voice cried. “And I’m supposed to be sharing them with my little brother. Please don’t take—”

“Grab ‘em, Roy,” Owen barked.

Roy was one of Owen’s usual cronies.

Owen and Roy had cornered a small Year Seven boy by a low wall in the playground. He had pale freckled skin and bright red hair that reminded Skandar of Aspen McGrath.

“Oi!” Skandar jogged over. He already knew he was going to regret this—possibly even pay for it with a punch in the face—but he couldn’t just leave the boy to deal with Owen on his own. Besides, Owen had hit Skandar a bunch of times in the past. He was sort of used to it.

As he reached them, Skandar realized that Roy had taken a fistful of Chaos Cards from the boy.

“WHAT did you say to me?” Owen stepped toward Skandar.

Skandar motioned quickly to the red-haired boy to hide. The boy’s head disappeared behind the wall.

“I was, er, just wondering whether you wanted to borrow

my notes?” Skandar said, the bravery quickly leaving him. You didn’t say “Oi” to Owen and get away with it. What had he been thinking?

Owen scoffed and grabbed the Hatchery notes from Skandar’s clutches, passing them to Roy. With his hands free, Owen bashed Skandar’s shoulder with his fist for good measure.

“Hatchery stuff,” Roy mumbled, leafing through.

“Brilliant. I’ll just be going then.” Skandar moved sideways, but Owen grabbed a fistful of his white shirt. Skandar could smell the hair gel that Owen used to make his dark hair look messier.

“You don’t actually think you’re going to pass the Hatchery exam, do you?” Owen said in mock surprise. “Oh, you do! Oh, that’s *adorable*!”

Roy nodded stupidly. “He does. These are revision notes.”

“How many times have I told you?” Owen was right up in Skandar’s face. “People like *you* don’t become riders. You’re too weak, too puny, too pathetic. You couldn’t control something as dangerous as a unicorn; you’re more suited to a poodle. Yes, Skandar, get yourself a *poodle* and ride around on that. That’d give us all a laugh!”

Owen was just swinging his fist back for a parting punch, when someone grabbed it from behind and yanked hard.

Gravity obviously liked Owen even less than Skandar did. He was falling, falling—*WHAM*—right onto the ground.

Kenna stood over Owen. “Get out of my sight, or you’ll

have more than a sore bum to cry about.” Her brown eyes flashed dangerously, and Skandar felt a swell of pride. His sister was the absolute best.

Owen scrambled to his feet, turned, and ran. Roy was close on his heels, still clutching the revision notes. Kenna noticed—“Hey! Is that Skandar’s writing? Come here!”—and chased after them toward the school gates.

Skandar peered over the wall, heart beating fast. “You can come out now.”

The red-haired boy came to sit next to Skandar, looking fearful.

“What’s your name?” Skandar asked gently.

“George Norris,” the boy said with a sniff, wiping away a tear. “I wish he hadn’t taken my cards.” He swung his feet so they hit the wall in two disappointed bumps.

“Well, George Norris, today is your lucky day, because”—Skandar reached into his backpack and pulled out his own set of unicorn and rider trading cards—“I’m willing to let you choose *five* for the astonishing bargain price of . . . nothing.”

George’s face lit up.

Skandar fanned out the cards in front of him. “Come on, take your pick.” The shiny edge of a unicorn wing flashed in the sunlight.

George took a long time choosing. Skandar tried not to wince as some of his prized collection disappeared into the younger boy’s pocket.

“Oh, and next time Owen threatens you”—Skandar

stood up—"tell him that you know my sister, Kenna Smith."

"Was that who pulled him over?" George asked, wide-eyed. "She was pretty scary."

"Terrifying!" Kenna roared, coming up behind Skandar on the wall.

"Arghwhywouldyoudothat?!" Skandar clutched at his chest.

George waved happily. "Bye, Skandar!"

Kenna handed Skandar his revision notes. "Is Owen coming after you again? You have to tell me if things are getting bad. Is he making you do his homework? Is that why he had your notes?"

Unlike Dad, Kenna knew that Owen had bullied Skandar for years. But he tried not to bother her too much with it nowadays. It upset her and she was already sad a lot.

"I'm not doing anyone else's homework, don't worry."

"It's just, well, there's a lot to do at home. You know Dad's been really off since the Chaos Cup. He keeps saying the Weaver stole his one happy day of the year. He's always bad after it anyway, but this time it's—"

"Worse," Skandar finished for her. "Yeah, I know, Kenn." Dad had been watching the footage of the Chaos Cup over and over, rewinding and pausing and obsessing. Then he'd go up to bed without food or a word to either of them.

"And I know you have your"—she took a breath before she said it—"Hatchery exam tomorrow, but everything can't stop because of that, you know? Because—"

“I know.” Skandar sighed. He couldn’t deal with Kenna telling him how unlikely it was he’d actually make it onto the Island. He just couldn’t, not after Owen and Roy. The hope of things changing, of a life away from here, was what made it all bearable. Unicorns were everything. Kenna had lost them, but Skandar didn’t want to let go of the dream, not yet. Not until—

“You okay, Skar?” Kenna was looking at him. He’d stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, and a little boy with a unicorn T-shirt had to toddle round him.

Skandar started to walk, but Kenna didn’t let up. “Is it because people are saying the Island’s not safe right now?”

“That’s not going to stop me trying the Hatchery door,” Skandar said stubbornly.

Kenna poked him. “Ooh, look who’s getting all warrior-like now. Weren’t so brave when you found that daddy-long-legs in your bed.”

“If I hatch a unicorn, I’ll make sure it snacks on all the creepy-crawlies I hate,” Skandar joked.

But Kenna’s face fell like it always did when they got too far into unicorn territory.

He still couldn’t believe she hadn’t passed. They’d planned to do it all together; Kenna first, and then he’d have joined her on the Island a year later. Dad would have received the money all Mainlander families got as compensation for their child going to live on the Island, and they’d have made Dad proud. They’d have made Dad *better*.

“I’ll do the dinner tonight, if you want?” Skandar said, feeling guilty as Kenna punched in the code for their building. They climbed the stairs. The elevator had been broken for months, but no one had come to fix it, even though Kenna had complained at least twelve times.

The tenth floor smelled like stale smoke and vinegar, like always, and one of the strip lights was buzzing outside number 207. Kenna put her key in the door, but it wouldn’t open. “Dad’s bolted it again!”

Kenna called Dad’s phone. And again. Nothing.

She knocked—and knocked some more. Skandar shouted for Dad through the crack under the door, the side of his cheek scraping the corridor’s puddle-gray carpet. No answer.

“It’s no use.” Kenna slid her back down against the door until she reached the floor. “We’ll have to wait until he wakes up and realizes we’re not home. He’ll figure it out. It’s not like this hasn’t happened before.”

Skandar propped himself up against the door next to her.

“Revision?” Kenna suggested. “I’ll test you.”

Skandar frowned. “Are you sure you want . . . ?”

Kenna tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear, repeating the movement to make sure it was truly fixed, and turned to face Skandar. She let out a sigh. “Look, I know I’ve been rubbish since I didn’t get called to the Island.”

“You haven’t b—” Skandar started.

“I have,” Kenna insisted. “I’ve been a stinking rubbish

bin, a pile of dung, worse than the steamiest poo in the sewage pipe.”

Skandar started to laugh.

Kenna was grinning now. “And it’s not fair; it really isn’t. Because if it was the other way round, I know you would have helped me with my homework, kept talking to me about unicorns. Dad said once that Mum had a big heart—and if that’s true, you’re much more like her than I am. You’re a better person than me, Skar.”

“That’s not true!”

“Mine’s made of poo. Hey! That rhymes! Now, do you want my help or not?” She snatched his bag and rummaged for his Hatchery textbook with its four elemental symbols on the cover. She flicked to a random page. “Let’s start with some quick-fire easy ones. Why did the Island reveal to the Mainland that unicorns were real?”

“Kenn . . . come on! Be serious!”

“I *am* serious, Skar. You think you know everything, but it’ll be an easy question you get wrong, I bet you.” The strip light above them buzzed loudly. Skandar wasn’t used to Kenna being in such a good mood, especially about the Island, so he played along.

“Okay, okay. Not enough thirteen-year-old Islanders were destined to hatch unicorns, meaning they weren’t able to open the Hatchery door. Which meant unicorns were hatching wild—unbonded—and the Island was at

risk of being overrun. They needed Mainlander children to try the door too.”

“What was the main obstacle the Island faced when telling the Mainland?” Kenna asked, skimming through more pages.

“The prime minister and his advisers thought it was a joke because the Mainland had this idea that unicorns were mythical, harmless, fluffy—”

“And?” Kenna prompted.

“And they had rainbow-colored poo.” Skandar and Kenna grinned at each other.

They, like all Mainlander children, had heard the stories of the days when unicorns were believed to be mythical. Miss Buntress had told them they’d have been laughed out the door if they’d gone around saying unicorns were real. She’d passed around examples of unicorn artifacts in their first Hatchery class: a pink unicorn soft toy with curly eyelashes and a smiley face, a sparkly headband with a silver horn, and a glittery birthday card that said **ALWAYS BE YOURSELF—UNLESS YOU CAN BE A UNICORN. THEN ALWAYS BE A UNICORN.**

Then, fifteen years ago, everything had changed. As soon as the footage of bloodthirsty wild unicorns had rolled across the Mainlanders’ screens, everything unicorn-related had disappeared from the shops. Dad said they’d all been terrified by the idea that the wild beasts might fly in a shadowy swarm to the Mainland and kill anything in their path—

with teeth or hooves or horn. In their fear, people had purged their homes of unicorns—picture books, soft toys, key rings, party decorations—and piled them onto towering bonfires that raged in public parks.

Unsurprisingly, parents hadn't been too happy about the idea of sending their children to a place where these creatures were roaming free. Skandar had seen old newspaper articles about protests in London and debates in Parliament. But the answer to all the complaints had been the same: if we don't help, more wild unicorns will be born and kill us all. People demanded that the Mainland go to war with the Island and kill all the unicorns, but the prime minister replied that no unicorn—bonded or wild—could be killed with a gun.

He'd been keen to emphasize that if the Mainland agreed to help, it was a win-win situation for everyone. "Bonded unicorns are different," he'd tried to reassure the doubters. "Think of the glory. Don't you want your children to be heroes?"

Dad had said that people calmed down about the whole thing after a while. Mainlander families missed each other, but children weren't dying, and nobody was attacked by wild unicorns. Parents of Mainlander riders visited the Island once a year to spend a day with their children; no rider ever asked to come home. Riders ranked in the Chaos Cup were worshipped by people old and young; they were more famous than royalty. Becoming a rider was what most children wished for when they blew out their birthday candles. Slowly but

surely, unicorns became part of daily life, and hardly anyone mentioned *wild* unicorns at all.

Until now. Until the Weaver.

“Do you think there’ll be anything about the Weaver in the exam?” Skandar asked Kenna, who was now pacing back and forth. “Do you think the Weaver was actually bonded to that wild unicorn? That’s impossible, right? I mean, the whole definition of a wild unicorn is that it missed its chance to bond with its destined rider and hatched alone. . . .”

Kenna stopped pacing, so Skandar was staring at her gray socks. “Stop worrying. You’re going to be fine.”

“You really think I could be a rider?” Skandar asked, his voice barely above a whisper. Kenna didn’t have control over whether he passed, let alone whether he could open the Hatchery door once he got to the Island, but it still mattered to him that she believed he could do it.

“Of course!” She smiled at him, but he felt tears burning behind his eyes, threatening to fall. He didn’t believe her.

Skandar looked down at his lap. “I get it. I’m not special. I don’t even *look* like any of the riders on TV. They’re all glossy and interesting-looking. But I’m, well—my hair isn’t even a particular color!”

“Don’t be ridiculous—it’s brown, like mine.”

“Is it?” Skandar sighed hopelessly. “Or is it just sort of mud-colored? And my eyes, they’re murky; they can’t even decide if they’re blue or green or brown. And I *am* scared of daddy-long-legs, and wasps, and also sometimes the dark—

only the kind when you can't see your own hand, but still. What unicorn would ever want to bond with me?"

"Skandar." Kenna kneeled down beside him, like she used to do when they were little and he was upset. They were only a year apart, but Kenna had always seemed much older, right up until last year when she'd failed the exam. He'd had to be strong then, as she'd shrunk and cried herself to sleep for months. He could still hear her some nights. It was a sound scarier to him than the bellows of a thousand bloodthirsty unicorns.

"Skandar," she said again, "anyone could become a rider! That's what's so incredible about hatching a unicorn. It doesn't matter where you're from or how rubbish your parents are, or how many friends you have or what you're scared of. If the Island calls, you get to answer. You hatch a new chance. A new life."

"You sound like Miss Buntress," Skandar murmured, smiling back at her.

But as they watched the sun go down together through the window at the end of the corridor, Skandar couldn't help thinking that by this time tomorrow his Hatchery exam would be over, his future decided.



CHAPTER THREE

The Hatchery Exam

SKANDAR WAS AWOKEN BY THE SOUND OF rummaging. He opened one eye and saw Kenna cross-legged on her bed, balancing an old shoebox on her knees. It was no ordinary box; it was filled with objects that had belonged to their mum: a brown hair clip, a miniature unicorn, a photograph of their parents dressed up to watch the Chaos Cup, a birthday card addressed to Kenna, a mother-of-pearl bracelet with a missing clasp, a black scarf with white stripes at each end, a garden-center key ring, a bookmark from the local bookshop. Kenna liked looking through the box much more than Skandar did—especially when she was worried about something. She said the objects helped her feel like she could remember

their mum—her smile, her smell, her laugh.

But Skandar didn't have any memories of their mum. He tried not to show that it made him sad. The thing was, most of the time Dad's sadness was so big that it seemed to take up all the space in the flat, in the town, in the whole world. And sometimes Kenna was upset too, and there wasn't any room for Skandar to miss his mum at all. Sometimes it was easier to leave his feelings in the box with her things and try to forget. But occasionally, when Kenna was sleeping, he'd take the objects out, just like Kenna was doing now. And he'd make a little space for himself to be sad. To miss her. And to wish that his mum could be here to give him a hug before the most important day of his life.

“Kenn?” Skandar whispered, trying not to make her jump.

Kenna's cheeks flamed as she rushed to put the lid back on the box and hide it under her bed. “What?”

“It's today, isn't it?”

Kenna laughed, though her eyes seemed a little sad. “Yes, Skar.” She cupped her hands over her mouth to make a trumpet sound. “Hatchery exam day for Skandar Smith!”

“KENNA! Help me make a surprise breakfast for Skandar!” Dad's voice thundered through the walls of the flat.

Kenna grinned. “I can't believe he's remembered!”

“I can’t believe he’s up.” Dad had eventually let them in last night, but he’d barely been able to focus on their faces.

Kenna dressed at top speed. “Act surprised, okay?” Her eyes were alight with the kind of fire that came with Dad having an unexpectedly good day.

Skandar smiled, feeling a little more like the Hatchery exam might actually go his way. “You know I will.”

An hour later, after some hard-boiled eggs and burnt toast that Skandar insisted were the most delicious he’d ever tasted, Dad walked them from the tenth floor all the way to the bottom of the stairs. Skandar couldn’t remember another time Dad had done this—not even on the morning of Kenna’s exam. But then Dad had been acting oddly all morning. Happy, excited . . . but sort of agitated, too. He’d dropped three eggs on the floor and spilt half a pint of milk across the kitchen table. On the way downstairs, Dad had tripped over the last step and almost ended up flat on his face.

“Are you all right, Dad?” Kenna put a hand on his arm.

“A bit clumsy this morning, aren’t I?” Dad attempted a chuckle, wiping sweat from his forehead. He pulled Skandar into a hug. “You can do this, Skandar,” Dad murmured into the hair above his ear. “And if anyone tries to stop you from taking the exam—”

Skandar jerked his head back. “Why would anyone try to stop me?”

“Just—just in case they do. You’ve got to sit the exam, Skandar. For your mum, that’s what she’d want, no matter what. It was her dream for you to become a rider.” Skandar could feel Dad’s hand shaking against his shoulder.

“I know.” Skandar stared at Dad’s face, looking for a clue. “Of course I’ll sit the exam, Dad. Where’s this coming from? You’re so jittery—you’re making me even more nervous!”

“Good luck, son.” His dad sounded unlike himself as he waved them off. “I know we’ll have the Rider Liaison Office knocking at midnight.”

Spooked, Skandar looked back over his shoulder as Dad gave him a final thumbs-up. He tried to focus on Dad’s words. Midnight tonight was when potential riders would be collected so they could get to the Hatchery door for sunrise on the summer solstice.

In the late-June sunshine they walked toward the school entrance together. Kenna began to wish Skandar good luck, but he suddenly felt panicked. He hadn’t yet asked her the one question he’d been wanting to for days.

“Kenna”—Skandar grabbed her arm—“you won’t hate me, will you? You won’t hate me if I become a rider?”

Before he could even look into his sister’s face, she pulled him into a one-armed hug, her bag swinging and almost overbalancing her. “I could never hate you, Skar. You’re my brother.” She ruffled his hair. “I had my chance, and it didn’t work out. I want it all for you, little bro.