

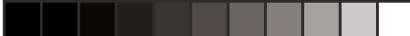


SKANDAR AND THE UNICORN THIEF



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'Yeah?' Skandar felt himself getting defensive, even though he didn't have a leg to stand on. Not even a toe. Not even a wart on the bottom of a toe. 'Are you spying on me?'

Bobby shrugged. 'Thought it wouldn't hurt to size up the competition.' Skandar noticed that her fists were clenched, purple nail varnish visible on her thumbs. 'But that's beside the point. You weren't in that helicopter.'

'I was.' Skandar could feel his neck getting sweaty under the scarf; he adjusted his rucksack nervously.

'You weren't,' Bobby said coolly. 'Because I was, and I didn't see you anywhere. And I would have remembered a name like Skandar.'

'I told you—'

Bobby held a palm up so it almost touched Skandar's nose. 'Please don't embarrass yourself by saying you "blend in with the crowd" again. My memory is practically photographic, and there were only four of us. Also, you're blushing.'

The white-hot panic that was sweeping through Skandar must have been obvious because Bobby put her hand back into her pocket. 'I don't care which helicopter you came in.' She shrugged. 'I just want to know why you're lying.'

'I—' Skandar began to say, but at that very moment there was a glint in the corner of his eye. The sky glowed pink as the sun rose over the Mirror Cliffs.

'It's starting,' Bobby murmured, and she turned away as a great cheer went up from the line – the round Hatchery door was swinging back to admit the first new rider of the year.



CHAPTER FIVE

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Skandar and Bobby moved closer to the Hatchery door inch by inch. To Skandar's relief they didn't speak. He couldn't believe that the first person he'd had a proper conversation with on the Island already knew he was lying. Okay, so she thought he was just lying about the fact that he'd come in *her* helicopter, but it was only a matter of time, wasn't it? Until she raised the alarm?

Skandar forced himself to take a deep breath, like he did at school when Owen and his friends were being particularly terrible. Who cared if one person knew? Why would she bother herself with him? And maybe she wouldn't even be able to open the Hatchery door – or maybe *he* wouldn't and this would all be for nothing.

Skandar was still too far back to see what was happening outside the Hatchery, but every so often he heard a cheer, which meant someone had opened the door. Whenever there was a



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long silence, Skandar felt his stomach lurch at the thought of being turned away.

'Stop stressing,' Bobby hissed in his ear, when he forgot to step forward. 'They're mostly Islanders at the front. They basically all try out, remember? More of them get rejected, because more try out. Didn't they teach you anything at your school?'

Skandar didn't say anything, not wanting to prompt questions about the Hatchery exam he definitely hadn't taken.

As the line moved forward, Mainlanders who'd failed to open the door started being sent back towards the helicopters. Some were crying, some looked angry, and others kept their heads bent in disappointment as they trudged the length of the line.

Skandar tried to make himself look away, focusing instead on the top of the Hatchery. Now he was nearer he could see that there were unicorns with riders on top of the mound. And they had silver masks – just like the riders who'd attacked Agatha!

'What are they doing up there?' Skandar blurted.

Bobby tutted. 'You're not the sharpest lemon in the tree, are you?'

'That's not even a saying, and I wasn't talking to you,' Skandar snapped. His nerves were getting worse; he could almost count the number of people ahead of him. Would those masked riders arrest him if they found out he'd never passed the exam? Was that what they were there for?

'So you were talking to yourself?'

'No, I was just . . . noticing.'

Bobby snorted and Skandar faced her, wondering if she was going to mention the helicopter again. But she didn't. Instead,

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Bobby pointed at the unicorns. 'They're armoured guards. I was eavesdropping –' she dropped her voice to a whisper – 'and apparently they're here to protect us.'

Skandar gulped. 'From what?'

'Oh, I don't know, maybe that *Weaver* thing everyone's been talking about?' She rolled her eyes.

Now he was almost at the Hatchery, Skandar could see a stern-looking man with a clipboard to the right of the door, calling out names.

'Presenting Aaron Brent,' the man shouted. The long-legged boy in front of Skandar stepped forward, flicking his thick dark hair out of his eyes. Skandar felt a pang of jealousy; Aaron definitely looked more like a rider than he did. He could imagine the tall boy staring out from a Chaos Card. Aaron sauntered to the granite door and pushed his palm against it. Nothing. When that didn't work, he tried to pull at the round edge. Still nothing. He began kicking at the door in desperation.

After a few painful moments, the clipboard man put a forceful arm round Aaron's shoulders and moved him away. Skandar watched Aaron disappear back towards the cliffs.

'Approach.' Skandar heard the call and didn't move. His head was still spinning with the awfulness of Aaron being sent home, just like that. He shouldn't have come with Agatha; he felt like the lies were written all over his face. His legs started to shake.

'Approach,' came the voice again.

Bobby kicked his ankle. 'Go on!'

Skandar walked unsteadily towards the man. He was older than he'd looked from a distance. His black hair was peppered



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with grey, and he was so thin that his cheekbones dominated his sallow face. 'Name?'

'Skandar Smith,' Skandar said, his voice cracking.

'Could you repeat that? Quickly – we haven't got all day.' His voice was clipped and harsh.

'Skandar Smith.'

The man's wiry eyebrows knitted together in a frown. Skandar held his breath while the man looked for his name on the clipboard. What if there was something Agatha hadn't thought of? Maybe they knew, maybe they'd checked whether he'd sat the exam and—

'Presenting Skandar Smith!' the man boomed.

Skandar thought he might be sick.

Skandar moved towards the Hatchery door, his legs like lead. He had a mad impulse to run back to the helicopters. That way he'd never know. He could always dream that he'd been destined for a unicorn because he'd never even tried the door. But he could feel the riders' eyes burning into him from above, and he had no choice but to reach out and place his palm on the cold granite of the Hatchery door.

For one heart-stopping moment, nothing happened. There was a roaring in Skandar's ears that had nothing to do with the sea thrashing against the Mirror Cliffs. He stared at the door, the disappointment so heavy his knees buckled, his shoulders slumped, and he started to step back and withdraw his palm. But as he did there was a grinding of stone and a great creaking of ancient hinges.

Slowly but surely, the Hatchery door was opening.

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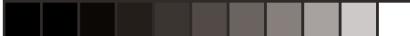
Excitement exploded right from Skandar's toes to the tips of his fingers, and he wasn't taking any chances. As soon as there was enough of a gap, he squeezed through the round entrance and into the darkness beyond. He didn't look back.

The great door swung shut behind him. He was in! He'd done it! He was a rider. It didn't matter how he'd got to the Hatchery; all that mattered was that there was a unicorn in here somewhere, a unicorn that'd been waiting thirteen years for him, just like *he'd* been waiting. He hardly dared to believe it. Hardly even dared to think the word *rider* again in case it was suddenly taken away. Skandar collapsed on to the cold stone, put his head in his hands and let the tears – of relief, of tiredness, of happiness – fall.

Then he remembered that if Bobby opened the door, she would step right on top of his head. And although he'd only known her a very short time, he was pretty sure she'd trample straight over him.

Skandar scrambled to his feet, his eyes adjusting to the gloom. He was at the end of a long tunnel lined with flaming torches. He couldn't help but feel nervous. His textbooks hadn't said anything about the inside of the Hatchery; he'd assumed it would all be straightforward. Open the door, get an egg, hatch his destined unicorn – and boom! They'd be bonded for life, ready to start training. He hadn't expected a creepy tunnel. He hadn't expected to be alone. He wished Kenna was with him. Even though she hated small spaces, she'd have shouted silly things that echoed off the tunnel walls to make them laugh.

But there was no turning back now. Skandar started to make



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his way along the tunnel, fiddling with the ends of his mum's scarf. The only sounds were his breathing and the shuffle of his trainers. After a few steps, he noticed that the walls of the tunnel were roughened by markings cut into the stone. He leaned in for a closer look. There were words carved into the tunnel – but, no, not words . . .

'Names,' Skandar breathed, his whisper impossibly loud. Names were crammed into every visible space: the walls, the floor and even the ceiling. He wondered why they were there, who they belonged to. Skandar walked a few more steps and was surprised to read a name he recognised: Ema Templeton – Kenna's favourite from the Cup this year. They were rider names! He looked eagerly for more he knew, but it was impossible – there were so many. Countless names swam in front of his eyes:

FREDERICK ONUZO, TESSA MACFARLANE, TAM LANGTON.

Skandar almost jumped out of his skin at a scraping up ahead. It sounded like nails across a blackboard, the kind of noise that makes your teeth go numb and sends shivers down your spine. Bloodthirsty unicorns he was okay with. Ghosts? Not so much. Skandar squinted in the direction of the sound, but there was nobody ahead of him. He took a few more steps towards it, feeling like he should be doing the exact opposite.

At the source of the noise Skandar still couldn't see anything or anyone up ahead. There were just more names everywhere: ROSIE HISSINGTON, ERIKA EVERHART, ALIZEH MCDONALD and . . .

The grinding noise suddenly made sense. Tiny pieces of rock fell to the tunnel floor, as Skandar saw the final 'h' carve itself: SKANDAR SMITH. Skandar's name had joined the other riders' in

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the tunnel. Excitement bloomed in his chest. It was real; he was a rider; he had a unicorn to hatch!

He walked with more purpose now, and at last a door came into view at the end of the line of torches. It was an exact match in shape to the one outside, but this time – thankfully – it had a big round handle. Skandar strained as he pulled back the heavy stone, and he heard people – talking, laughing, giving instructions – and climbed out of the tunnel towards his new life.

Skandar noticed the heat first. The cool stone of the tunnel was gone, replaced by a cavernous space lit by hundreds of torches blazing in their brackets and a fire roaring in a deep pit in the rock floor. As Skandar's eyes adjusted to the brightness, he realised it was less like a room and more like a very wide corridor stretching to the left and right of the fire, where the other new riders were gathered. Hundreds of stalactites with ends like daggers hung above Skandar's head. Glittering white drawings of unicorns shone out at him from the walls, like cave paintings – though in the flickering light of the torches they looked almost alive.

Skandar stood a little distance away from the other riders, feeling nervous. He suddenly felt like everyone had made friends already and left him out, just like they did at school. Bobby hadn't come through behind him yet – Skandar didn't even know if she'd been able to open the Hatchery door. She was the only person he'd spoken to so far and he felt bad hoping that he'd never see her again, but then maybe his secret would be safe. Skandar took another step towards the other riders, telling

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himself not to worry. This was a new start.

He hovered on the edge of a conversation between some Islanders. It wasn't difficult to work out who came from where: the Mainlanders were furthest from the fire pit, looking tired and anxious, dressed mostly in jeans like Skandar and clutching hastily packed bags; the Islanders were closest to the fire: laughing, slapping each other on the back and wearing loose-fitting clothes all in black.

'The Tunnel of the Living was *super* underwhelming, if you ask me. The decoration was completely basic, and I really think we should be able to choose exactly where our names go.' The girl speaking had dark chestnut hair, freckles on her light pink cheeks and a slightly upturned nose, as though it was protecting itself from bad smells.

The Islanders around her looked fascinated by what she had to say. They kept nodding and saying things like 'You're so right, Amber'.

'What do you think you're looking at?'

It took Skandar a moment to realise Amber was speaking to him.

'I—' Skandar felt like he was back at Christchurch Secondary and his usual nerves blocked his throat; he could feel his mind going blank with worry as he fiddled with the end of his mum's scarf.

Amber fixed him with a patronising smile. 'And why are you wearing that ragged old scarf? Is it some odd Mainland tradition? I'd get rid of it if I were you. I'm sure it's *super* important to you to fit in with all of us Islanders. Top tip – we don't usually wear scarves

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indoors.' She smiled wider, but it was more like seeing a shark's teeth before it eats you. The Islanders around her sniggered.

'The thing about Skandar's scarf,' said a voice from behind him, 'is that he can take it off. Shame you can't do the same with your personality.'

There was a stunned silence, during which Amber's face turned the colour of a tomato.

Then Bobby simply marched off, giving Skandar little choice but to rush after her.

'Why did you do that?' Skandar groaned once they were out of earshot. 'They'll hate you now. And me probably! That Amber girl seemed really popular.'

Bobby shrugged, examining one of her purple nails in the light of the fire. 'I don't like popular people. They're overrated.'

Skandar certainly agreed with that. Owen had always been 'popular' and that hadn't meant he was kind or nice, or anything else you'd want in a friend.

'Thanks, though, for—' Skandar started, but he didn't have time to finish, because the man from the Hatchery door – clipboard under his arm – was standing opposite the fire, clapping his hands for silence. A round man and a woman with curly grey hair stood on either side of him, their faces lined and serious.

'For those of you who don't know,' said the clipboard man, his voice echoing off the cave walls, 'I am Dorian Manning, president of the Hatchery and head of the Silver Circle.'

'What's the Silver Circle?' Bobby whispered loudly to the Islander on her other side, but he shushed her.



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'As Hatchery president, my main job is to oversee the proper execution of the Hatchery exam, the presentation of candidates to the Hatchery door and the hatching itself – along with these esteemed members of my team.' He gestured to the people standing on his left and right.

'I also oversee Hatchery security at all other times of the year. And, of course, there is the noble and perilous endeavour of delivering unhatched eggs to the Wilderness before they hatch into wild unicorns at sunset.' He sniffed loudly and puffed out his skinny chest, looking very pleased with himself. Skandar was liking him less by the second.

'But enough introductions. Congratulations are almost certainly in order. You are now officially riders of the Island, protectors of this land and the land across the sea. Somewhere in this chamber there is an egg for each one of you, an egg that appeared in this world when you did. A unicorn that's been waiting thirteen years for you to arrive.' A few people cheered, but they were quickly silenced by a stern look from the president, his tightening cheeks looking almost hollow in the torchlight.

'Without riders – without *you* –' he pointed dramatically at them all – 'your unicorns would be bondless – wild – a danger to us all. And racing them is how we, and our ancestors for thousands of years, have channelled their . . . energy into something good. But –' he held up a finger, eyes glinting in the torchlight – 'a word of warning. And I mean all of you, not just the Mainlanders. Unicorns, even when bonded, are fundamentally bloodthirsty creatures with a preference for violence and destruction. They are ancient noble beasts, and you must earn their respect, even

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as their destined rider. Now –' the president clapped his hands pompously – 'to business.'

The president and his two colleagues moved through the crowd, tapping new riders on the shoulder – seemingly at random – and asking them to follow. Bobby was tapped by the round nervous-looking man, while Skandar was tapped on the shoulder by Dorian Manning himself. He followed the president behind another boy who had straight black hair and brown glasses a shade lighter than his tawny skin. Every few steps the boy looked anxiously behind him, and pushed his glasses up his nose where they'd slipped down.

The president stopped in front of a row of bronze stands that reminded Skandar of giant test-tube holders. The eggs were clasped in thick claws at about his chest height and they were enormous; he'd once seen an ostrich egg on a school trip to the zoo, and these had to be at least four times the size. Skandar wanted to pinch himself; he was actually here in the Hatchery, about to meet his destined unicorn.

'Don't dally, don't dally! Gather round me,' the president said quietly, as though if he spoke any louder, the eggs might hatch all in one go. 'This is the first batch of twelve eggs due to be hatched this year. They've been expertly cared for by my team since they appeared in the bowels of the Hatchery. Every year, for thirteen years, the eggs have been moved up one level, closer to the surface, the baby unicorns growing inside them slowly but surely. And finally, in a moment, you will each take a place in front of one.' The president paused for breath.

Skandar's eyes widened in amazement. How deep *was* the



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Hatchery if there were that many floors underneath where he was standing?

Dorian Manning continued giving instructions. ‘You must place your right palm on top of the egg. If nothing happens after ten seconds, step away and swap to the next egg on your right.’

Skandar wished he could get his sketchbook out and write this down – he didn’t have the best memory for details – and he really wanted to ask what the president meant by ‘if nothing happens’. What was supposed to happen? What if he missed it? But there didn’t seem to be time; he was already talking again.

‘And remember, when you feel the unicorn horn puncture your palm—’

Skandar gasped, and he wasn’t the only one. It hadn’t said this anywhere in his books; he’d just thought hatching meant . . . well . . . the unicorn would do it on its own once Skandar arrived.

‘—that egg is going to start hatching immediately. Grab the egg as quickly as you can and then shut yourself in a hatching cell behind you.’

The new riders turned round to look. Along the wall opposite the egg stands, there were caves with half-open doors. Doors made from metal bars.

Skandar swallowed. He noticed that the other Mainlanders in his group looked just as worried; a Mainlander girl with long dark hair was muttering under her breath.

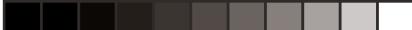
‘Do *not* open those doors mid-hatching or before you’ve got a head collar and lead rope on your unicorn,’ the president whispered, the flare of a burning torch making his green eyes flash wildly. ‘Those eggs might not look that big, but, mark my

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words, the unicorns will start growing as soon as they’re out. What we absolutely don’t want is any escaped baby unicorns today – not on my watch! The havoc they could cause . . . It doesn’t bear thinking about.’

Skandar was beginning to panic, and the president’s dire warnings weren’t helping. He wanted to ask a thousand questions. For starters, what was a head collar and where could he get one? But there was barely time to take a few deep breaths before the president was saying, ‘Ready? Lower your palms when I tell you.’

So Skandar stepped into place and stared at the giant egg in front of him.



CHAPTER SIX

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The president's instructions swirled around Skandar's mind. *Ten seconds. Grab the egg. Puncture.* Would there be blood? Would it hurt? He felt very, very sick.

'Palms . . . down!' the president hissed.

The new riders lowered their hands on to the tops of the white eggs in front of them. The shell was warmer than Skandar had expected, and very smooth. He had to fight the urge to shut his eyes so that he wouldn't actually see the unicorn horn stab his palm. Excitement and fear were galloping through him side by side; he could feel his pulse beating in his neck. He waited. And waited. The egg didn't move.

'Stand back,' said the president. 'Nobody on the first try? Not unusual, not unusual. You must find the egg meant for you after all. There are only forty-three of you in here this year, and over fifty eggs ready to be hatched.' The president sighed. 'It may well take until the last egg to find your unicorn. Patience, patience

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is needed.' Skandar didn't think the president sounded very patient as they all moved along one egg.

'Palms . . . down!' Now Dorian Manning had made it clear that finding an egg was down to fate, Skandar felt calmer. Three seconds in, there was a yelp from someone two eggs along. A few new riders, including Skandar, turned to stare. He recognised the boy as Zac; Skandar had seen him open the door.

'Keep your palms on those eggs no matter what,' President Manning warned. 'If you miss your egg, you'll have to go round again and we'll be here until next year's hatching! I certainly do not have time for that!'

Skandar tried to watch Zac without turning his head. Out of the corner of his eye he saw him lift the egg from its clasp and into his arms, sweat just visible on his deep brown forehead. Skandar could already hear the cracking of the shell as the unicorn began to fight its way out of the egg. Then Zac was stumbling under the egg's weight, and Skandar lost sight of him as the barred door of the hatching cell clanged shut.

'One down,' the president muttered.

They switched again, and again. Two more riders found their eggs in the first batch. They moved further along the chamber to the second batch. Skandar was standing right next to a Mainlander girl with long dark hair – he thought her name was Sarika – when the horn pierced her egg's shell. She didn't cry out, but he saw blood dripping from her palm as she carried the egg into one of the cells.

By the third batch there were four riders left, including Skandar and the boy with the black hair and glasses. Skandar



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had become so frustrated he was no longer afraid. Now each time he rested his hand on the hard surface of a shell, there was nothing he wanted more than to feel a sharp stab of pain.

'This doesn't seem like a particularly efficient way to find our unicorns,' the black-haired boy murmured a few eggs down.

Skandar stepped forward to the second egg in the line of twelve. The third and fourth had already gone from their bronze clasps. 'Palms . . . down!' cried the president from behind him.

Three heartbeats later, there was a loud crack under Skandar's hand and blinding pain surged through his right palm. Then, as though on autopilot – blood dripping from the centre of his hand – he lifted the egg up out of its bronze claw. It was heavier than he'd expected. Leaning the weight of the egg against his chest, Skandar staggered towards the hatching cell behind him. He could already see cracks spreading across the egg's surface, like ice breaking over a frozen lake. A piece of shell dropped to the floor just as he pulled the barred door shut.

The hatching cell was lit by one flaming wall torch. A rickety iron chair stood alone in the flickering light, a rope hanging over its back. Skandar suddenly felt completely out of his depth. He couldn't be responsible for hatching his own unicorn! What if he did it wrong?

Skandar's egg was quaking in his arms and his palm was bleeding all over the white shell. He needed to put the egg down, but it felt wrong to let it roll around on the cold stone floor. The trouble was there wasn't anything soft in sight except . . . He looked down at himself. His hoodie.

Skandar carefully kneeled down. Grateful that the sharp

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horn was nowhere to be seen, he sat cross-legged, balancing the egg in his lap. He slipped his rucksack off and pulled his hoodie over his head. Steadying the egg with one hand, he spread the hoodie out on the floor and bunched it into a sort of nest. As an added barrier, he unwound his mum's scarf from his neck and placed it round the edge. He couldn't help grinning at how proud she'd be. *I promise you a unicorn, little one.* She'd whispered that to him as a baby – so Dad had said – and now here he was, about to hatch one!

It was a relief to put the egg down. Adrenaline had made it seem lighter than it actually was, but now Skandar could feel his arms aching.

Skandar watched the egg eagerly. It felt like his whole body was fizzing with excitement, from his toes to his fingertips. He couldn't believe it. He was finally here. In only a few moments he'd be face to face with his destined . . . But the egg had stopped moving. *No need to panic,* he thought, panicking. Skandar tried to distract himself by investigating the contraption dangling from the back of the chair. It had to be the head collar and lead rope the president had mentioned, attached together with a metal clasp.

Skandar cast another worried glance at the egg. It was quivering but only very slightly. Occasionally a piece of shell would fall on to the hoodie or make Skandar jump by skittering across the hard floor. He could hear the odd noise from cells nearby but nothing recognisable, and certainly nobody shouting helpful step-by-step instructions. Skandar went to fiddle with the clasp of the rope, but immediately hissed in pain as the cold metal touched his punctured palm.



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Skandar looked at his hand for the first time since he'd entered the cell. It wasn't bleeding any more, but the round puncture had turned a nasty dark red. Alarmed, Skandar moved closer to the torch burning in its bracket. Five lines glowed in the torchlight, growing out of the wound itself in the middle of his palm, creeping up towards the base of each of his fingers.

Skandar had always thought that riders had special tattoos on their palms. In fact, he was sure he'd read about it somewhere. It was how he'd recognised Agatha as a rider back in Margate. But it wasn't a tattoo at all; it was a wound. And it hurt – a lot.

The egg was still and silent now. Skandar wondered a little desperately if there was something he should be doing to help. He thought about chicks hatching. Did hens do anything to speed up the process? Other than sitting on their eggs, he didn't think so, and that didn't seem very sensible given the sharp horn. Anyway, unicorns weren't chickens, they were – well – unicorns.

He sighed and kneeled by the egg. 'Don't you want to come out?' he asked quietly. 'I wish you would, because it's pretty horrible and dark out here, and I'm all alone, so . . .' He tailed off, feeling ridiculous talking to an egg. It was a bit like talking to your breakfast.

There was a small shriek. Skandar looked around wildly. Then it happened again – and he realised it was coming from inside the egg itself. He kneeled closer. Unbelievably, the talking seemed to be working.

Skandar took a deep breath. 'Look, I want to meet you. I really do. We're going to be partners, you and me. I might need you to look out for me a bit because, well . . . I'm from the Mainland but

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you're from here so—' The egg shrieked again and a large piece of shell flew past his left ear.

'But I think that might be the least of our problems.' Skandar knew he was babbling, but the shell was breaking apart in front of his eyes. 'I didn't even take the Hatchery exam – don't tell anyone, will you? – but someone helped me get here and I'm worried I'll get found out. This girl – Bobby – she suspects. And also, there's this Weaver on the rampage, but maybe I should wait until you're a bit older before I tell you about that. Anyway, so I think I'm going to need you, and you're going to need me.'

The shrieking was constant now: somewhere between a horse's whinny, an eagle's cry and a human scream. The unicorn's horn broke clean through the egg for a second time: onyx-black, shining and – as Skandar already knew – very sharp. It moved from side to side, breaking away more of the shell. Then there was a loud crack and the whole top came off. Skandar grabbed the larger pieces of shell – slimy in his hands – and threw them across the room. He kneeled up, but just as his face loomed over the egg, the remaining shell cracked into two and fell apart.

The unicorn lay on its belly, four legs splayed out on the floor of the hatching cell, its ribs moving quickly up and down, the fine black hair on its body shining with sweat and slime. An ebony mane crowned its neck, the strands of hair tangled from the effort of freeing itself. It still had its eyes closed, but as Skandar stared at the creature in wonder something strange started to happen. Its puny black-feathered wings crackled with electricity, the floor of the cell quaked, a white light flashed, a strange mist rose around its body, obscuring it from view, and—



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'Argh!' Skandar jumped backwards, the pure joy of seeing his unicorn for the first time quickly turning to alarm. The unicorn's hooves were on fire; all four of them had just burst into flame. Skandar moved towards the unicorn to try to get the hoodie from underneath it, in the vain hope that he might be able to put out the fires. Was this supposed to happen? Or was he the only one with a spontaneously combusting unicorn? But as he started to pull on the corner of the hoodie, the unicorn opened its eyes.

Two things happened simultaneously as Skandar looked into those two dark eyes. He felt a balloon of happiness swell in his chest and a searing pain in his right hand. Breaking the unicorn's gaze, he raised his hand to his face in the dim light and saw that his wound was healing. But as it healed, the lines were lengthening, reaching the tip of each of his five fingers. At the same time, a thick white stripe was forming down the middle of the unicorn's black head. Their eyes stayed locked until the stripe had finished forming, and Skandar's hand had healed.

'Thanks?' Skandar said uncertainly, and the electricity, the quaking, the light, the mist and the fire all disappeared as though someone had flicked a switch. Boy and unicorn stared at each other. Skandar had read about the invisible bond between a rider and their unicorn, but he hadn't thought he'd be able to feel it: a tight pull in his chest, as though his heart strings were now connected elsewhere, outside himself. He was pretty sure that if you followed them, you'd find this little black unicorn's heart at the other end.

Then the unicorn broke the spell, letting out a tiny roar, but somehow Skandar wasn't afraid. Their bond made him feel safer

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than he'd felt in his life, like he'd opened the door to the cosiest room in the world and he could keep everyone else out and sit by the fire for as long as he wanted. He wanted to shout. To dance around the cell. To sing even. He wanted to roar like his unicorn, as it wobbled to its feet.

Skandar backed away in alarm. 'Are you sure you're ready for—' But the unicorn, *his* unicorn, was up and stumbling towards him. Skandar could have sworn it was already bigger; it almost reached his waist. He supposed the unicorns would grow a lot faster now they weren't cooped up inside their shells – they'd waited thirteen years after all. The unicorn wobbled to a halt right in front of Skandar and gave a cry, its horn pointing directly at his hip. 'I don't know what you—' Skandar started to say, but then his gaze came to rest on his rucksack.

Keeping his eyes on the unicorn, Skandar unzipped the front pocket. Back home he'd grabbed a packet of Jelly Babies from Kenna's secret stash in her bedside table, just in case he got hungry on the journey. He fumbled with the packet, his newly healed wound still tender. The unicorn stepped closer and gave another shriek.

'All right, here you go,' Skandar breathed, taking out a red Jelly Baby and holding it flat on his good left palm. The unicorn sniffed, its nostrils expanding, and snatched the sweet out of his hand. The noise it made when it ate was a little unsettling. Like it was eating *someone* rather than *something*. It gave out growls of contentment as it chewed, so Skandar emptied a few more on to the floor and sat down on the chair to study his unicorn.

Its coat was completely black, except for the thick stripe of



SKANDAR AND THE UNICORN THIEF

white starting below its horn, running between its eyes all the way down to its nose. Skandar knew for a fact – because he had once spent an entire week obsessing over a library book about unicorn colourings – that he had never seen a unicorn with a white blaze. Yet something about the mark seemed familiar.

Finished with its small supply of Jelly Babies, the unicorn headed straight for him again, its walking improving with every step. The president's words floated across his mind: *Unicorns, even when bonded, are fundamentally bloodthirsty creatures, with a preference for violence and destruction.* Maybe Mainland Skandar would have overthought his next move, asked his sister what to do, even tried to look it up in a book. But he was a rider now, and he felt proud of himself for maybe the first time in his life. And wasn't being a rider all about being brave?

So Skandar stretched out a hand and stroked his unicorn's neck, and as his skin came into contact with the unicorn, the strangest thing happened. Skandar found he knew his unicorn was male, and he knew his name. Scoundrel's Luck. Skandar loved it at once; it suited the little unicorn, but it also sounded like the unicorn names at the Chaos Cup. Like a name that could win one day.

Skandar continued to stroke the unicorn, who nickered softly, sounding a bit more like a horse. 'Nice to meet you, Scoundrel's Luck.' Skandar chuckled. 'How about Scoundrel for short?' The unicorn made a rumbling sound in its chest. Cautiously Skandar fed the unicorn another Jelly Baby from his hand, as he lifted the head collar over his horn and clicked the lead rope into place.

An ear-splitting human scream erupted nearby. At the noise,

SCOUNDREL'S LUCK

Scoundrel's Luck screeched right into Skandar's ear, which didn't help matters, and started skittering all over the cell.

Another scream. Mind made up, Skandar pulled gently on Scoundrel's lead rope and urged him to walk towards the Hatchery cell door. He pushed against the bars and the door swung open for the boy and unicorn.

A third scream. Skandar followed the sound to a cell two doors down from his. 'Hello?' he said, his voice shaking a little. 'Are you hurt? Do you need help?'

There were three other children and three other unicorns already inside the hatching cell. The black-haired boy with glasses was holding tightly on to a blood-coloured unicorn. Skandar recognised Bobby too, with a light grey unicorn. The third rider was a girl with a cloud-like black afro, and she was backed into a corner by a shining silver unicorn. She had her head in her hands, sobbing between screams.

'Do you need help?' Skandar repeated more loudly, since nobody had looked away from the silver unicorn.

The boy with the glasses finally turned. He stared, open-mouthed, at Scoundrel's Luck. 'I think we do now,' he said, just as the girl in the corner looked up, pointed at Skandar's unicorn – and screamed even louder.