SKANDAR AND THE SPIRIT WAR

A.F. STEADMAN

SIMON & SCHUSTER
London New York Amsterdam/Antwerp Sydney/Melbourne Toronto New Delhi

First published in Great Britain in 2025 by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd

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The authorised representative in the EEA is Simon & Schuster Netherlands BV, Herculesplein 96, 3584 AA Utrecht, Netherlands. info@simonandschuster.nl

Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney
Simon & Schuster India, New Delhi

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

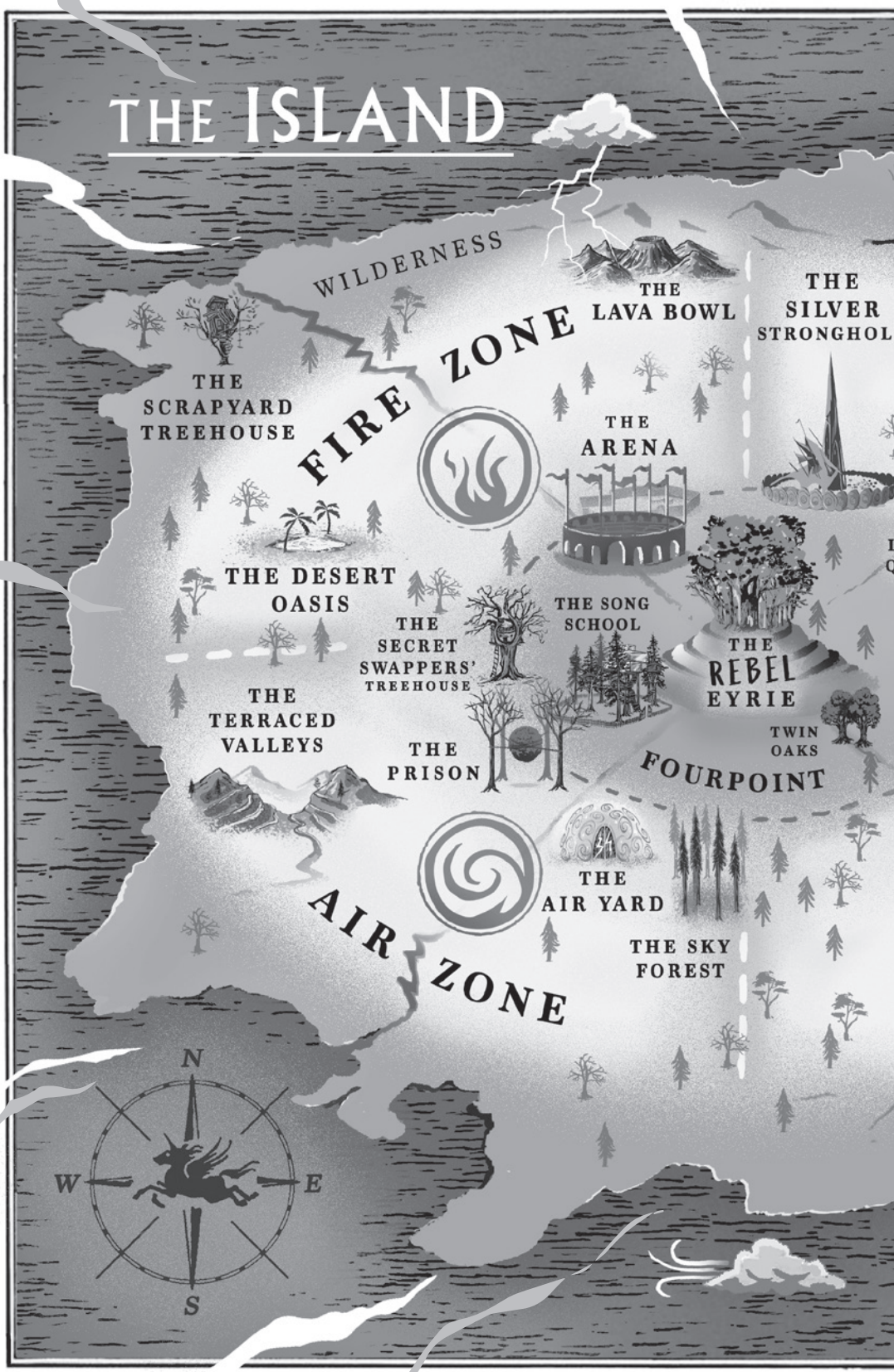
HB ISBN 978-1-3985-2474-3
eBook ISBN 978-1-3985-2476-7
eAudio ISBN 978-1-3985-2475-0

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Typeset in the UK by Sorrel Packham

Printed and Bound in the UK using
100% Renewable Electricity at CPI Group (UK) Ltd

For my readers –
who give me hope for a future
forged with kindness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The White Unicorn at Uffington

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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.

Flaming breath, silvery sweat, the stench of imminent death.

The cameraman felt the unicorns before he saw them too.

Somewhere deep in his bones their metallic 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 glide across Margate beach.

Eight of them. Silver giants galloping across the sand, shining wings unfurling, taking flight.

Like the eye of a blinding storm, sun-bright smoke swirled around them, thunder rumbled in their wake and bolts of lightning hit the streets far below their fearsome feet.

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

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

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

It snorted sparks and pawed the ground, havoc and mayhem in every chilling 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 smouldering eyes met the cameraman's and he saw in them only destruction.

There was no hope for Margate now. No hope for him.

But then he'd been warned they'd never survive a silver unicorn stampede.

He just hoped the footage would prepare the Mainland.

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

Robert Smith lowered his camera, hoping that his job was done.

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

Chapter One

ESCAPE

Skandar Smith felt the explosion thundering through the prison. In the blaze of white light from Kenna's spirit stone, the bars of his cell were blown clean off – along with a chunk of the outer wall. Two of the elemental chains that held the prison aloft clanked as they came loose from the trees that anchored them, and the hanging rock tilted violently towards the ground. Sunlight streamed in and debris filled the air as Skandar crawled out of his cell, desperately searching for his sister and his aunt.

There weren't any sentinels in sight; perhaps they were already rushing for backup. Instead, escaped prisoners filled the space – the blast had blown out their cell doors and walls. Skandar scanned every passing face as people pushed towards the exit ladder that had become dislodged by Kenna's explosion. The rungs now led all the way to the ground, and freedom.

Then, finally – there she was.

'Well, that was a bit dramatic,' Kenna Smith said, reaching out a hand for her brother.

Skandar didn't take it. Still unsure of her, unsure of . . . everything.

'A bit?' He raised an eyebrow at the utter chaos surrounding them.

There was a tug on his bond with Scoundrel's Luck – a flare of an emotion that they hadn't felt since Skandar's Chaos Cup win had been declared void. Since Rex had told the Island that Skandar was the Weaver's son. Since Flo had betrayed him. Suddenly, the bond was filled with unmistakable, undeniable hope.

'Do you know where Scoundrel is?' Skandar asked his sister breathlessly.

'What do you think we're waiting up here for?' Kenna folded her arms, the molten lava and spiked vines of her mutations entwining. She stepped up to the hole she had blown in the side of the rock, her brown eyes fixed on three unicorns flying rapidly towards the prison.

One palomino. One black. And one dapple-grey.

Even in its fractured splinters, Skandar's heart burst with joy at seeing Scoundrel, and the relief in their bond told him that the black unicorn had spotted his rider too.

'Scoundrel was being held at the stables in Council Square,' Kenna explained. 'Goshawk must have caused enough havoc to break him out.' She sounded proud. 'That was the plan, anyway.'

Skandar was hit with memories from the arena – Kenna backing down from killing Scoundrel; Goshawk's Fury and the dapple-grey arriving together; Skandar's friends galloping to save him on their cursed wild unicorns. Where were Bobby and Mitchell now?

'Thoughtful of you to organise my getaway ride.'

Skandar whirled towards the familiar voice. Before his

eyes could even focus, he was pulled into the arms of Agatha Everhart.

'Hello, little spirit wielder,' she murmured, and then jerked backwards, checking him for injuries. Skandar did the same. They hadn't seen each other since her arrest at the Air Festival. His aunt looked worryingly thin, and she was covered in black streaks from the explosion. But she was alive. And free – almost.

Agatha did not acknowledge Kenna's presence, though her eyes flicked towards the girl who'd killed her unicorn, perhaps assessing whether to push her from their great height.

'Are you okay?' Skandar asked, voice gravelly.

Agatha's gaze snapped back to him. 'You won the Chaos Cup. You're the Commodore of Chaos. The *Commodore*!' There was joy in her face.

'I'm not,' Skandar said, choking out the words. 'Rex—' He didn't know how much she'd heard in the prison. Perhaps she'd managed to listen to his win over the tannoy but missed what came afterwards.

Agatha shook her head. 'No. Absolutely not. Do not say that silver worm's name. *You*, Skandar, are the rightful Commodore.'

'You heard what happened?' He swallowed. 'And Flo . . .'

Pain flashed across Agatha's face, and Skandar realised it was the sorrow she felt for him, for what he had lost down in the arena.

'The Island saw you win the Chaos Cup,' she growled, gripping Skandar's shoulder. 'Rex has seized power from you. He has stolen it, Skandar. You *are* Commodore.'

'Even if that's true,' Skandar mumbled. 'I'm not sure it'll make a difference.'

Agatha's eyes were defiant. 'We shall see.'

The three unicorns were now only fifty metres away. Scoundrel shrieked with happiness as he soared towards his

rider. Reunited with his unicorn, Skandar thought he might finally be able to feel something other than the awful numb shock that had settled over him these last few hours.

I'm here, boy, he thought, pouring his emotions into the bond. *I'm here.*

Then there were shouts from below, the pounding of hoofbeats.

The sentinels were coming. Still, Skandar was relieved that there were no silver unicorns in sight yet – no Silver Sorceress, no Silver Blade. Perhaps the Silver Circle were too busy celebrating. Perhaps *Flo* was . . . The thought made him sick.

'Go! Go!' Kenna was shouting, already launching herself from the crumbling edge of the prison towards Goshawk's skeletal spine. Skandar and Agatha both moved in the same direction, towards a hovering Scoundrel.

'Agatha, ride the dapple-grey – she'll let you!' Kenna shouted over her shoulder. 'Scoundrel will be too slow with both of you!'

The sentinels were pointing at their most important prisoners, their silver-armoured unicorns galloping for take-off.

'She's wild – you can't be serious?' Skandar yelled at Kenna, but Goshawk was already starting to turn, wings beating furiously.

Agatha just muttered, 'She's probably right about the speed.' And then she launched herself at the dapple-grey's rotting back, leaving Skandar no choice but to mount Scoundrel. His aunt swore as the wild unicorn shrieked and tossed her transparent horn unhappily.

Kenna and Goshawk soared away from the now-airborne sentinels into the afternoon sunlight. Scoundrel and the dapple-grey followed close behind as they flew directly over Fourpoint. Panic clawed at Skandar's chest. People were shouting and screaming in the colourful streets, pointing at them from

treehouse platforms, calling for sentinels. If it had been up to him, Skandar would have headed for the outer reaches of the elemental zones. He would not have flown back over the capital; he would have tried to hide—

But Kenna was not hiding. The spirit element glowed brightly in her palm, and swept over Goshawk's Fury – the white light winding through the unicorn's ribcage, around the bones in her legs, across her sinewy wings. With Agatha astride, the dapple-grey blasted the fifth element too. And Skandar's aunt was actually laughing – a sound he'd feared he would never hear again.

Skandar realised that Kenna and Agatha were sending a message to the false Commodore Rex Manning – and to the Silver Circle.

This is our Island too. Spirit's light will not be dimmed.

So Skandar summoned his own element into the bond, and Scoundrel roared with joy, the sound echoing off the treehouse roofs. And as the three shining riders flew like shooting stars over the capital and towards Kenna's Eyrie, Skandar hoped he was sending another message too. To his friends. To the Scoundrels' Resistance. To the Mainlanders fearing for their home. To the Islanders who opposed Rex. His battle cry for anyone who dreamed of a better future. *Fight with me. Fight back.*

Skandar didn't even think about Kenna's shield around the Eyrie until the sentinels chasing them collided with it. The screams of the closest guards pierced the air as the wild magic ravaged their bodies, their unicorns crash-landing onto the hill. Shouts went up, warning those further behind to stay away from the highest plateau and the entrance tree.

Kenna didn't seem to notice, opening the trunk in a flash of white light.

'Why didn't it hurt us?' Skandar asked once they were safely inside.

'My shield is woven with spirit magic,' Kenna explained. 'It responds to an intruder's intentions. I modelled it on some of the illusions I read about back when I had *The Book of Spirit*. If you don't mean any harm, then the shield will let you through. If you do, then . . .' The groaning guards were still audible. 'We'll be safe for now.'

Skandar remembered how the shield had melted his boot the last time he'd attempted to get in here, and wondered what that meant for him and Kenna.

Agatha's face was flickering between her hatred for Kenna and admiration for the clever spirit magic as she dismounted from the dapple-grey. The wild unicorn's bare ribs were heaving. She was unused to flying – let alone carrying a rider.

When Agatha finally spoke, her voice was flat. 'After our display over Fourpoint, it's possible that more people may wish to come here. Friends, allies and others wanting to support Commodore Smith.'

Skandar grimaced at the title. It didn't feel real. Nothing had felt real since Scoundrel had passed under the finishing arch. He wasn't ready. He could barely think straight himself, let alone lead anyone else against a vengeful silver rider who had the ability to create *Mythical*-level predators.

'If new arrivals are on our side, they'll be able to pass through unharmed,' Kenna said, matching Agatha's business-like tone. 'Like my Originals.'

As though the words had summoned her followers, three riders – Albert, Adela and Mateo – came riding between the armoured trunks of the pine forest. Skandar noticed immediately that their unicorns – Eagle's Dawn, Smoke-Eyed Saviour and Hell's Diamond – were no longer wild. The Skeleton Curse really

was over, just as Skandar had hoped for when Kenna failed to complete the cycle by killing Scoundrel. But his relief was mixed with worry as he thought of Falcon and Red. Even though they were no longer wild, were they safe?

The three riders dismounted, glancing warily between Kenna and Skandar, assessing whether their leader needed protecting. Scoundrel pawed at the ground in warning, moving sideways to shield Skandar as sparks ignited at his hooves. Last time he'd faced these unicorns, they'd attacked.

Finally Adela spoke to Kenna, the smoking coils of her hair moving in the breeze. 'You got yourself arrested on purpose, didn't you?'

'What in the name of the First Rider is Skandar Smith doing here?' Mateo demanded.

Albert said nothing, looking unsurprised at Skandar and Agatha's arrival. The fire wielder simply cracked his smouldering knuckles, his blue eyes scanning Kenna's face.

Kenna held up a hand, silencing Adela and Mateo. 'Things have changed.' She took a deep breath. 'Let the others know I'll hold a meeting with all the Originals. Some of them – of you – may want to leave now that there's no possibility of being allied to all five elements.' Her eyes flicked to Skandar. 'Though I think there's still a lot we can fight for together.'

Adela and Mateo led their unicorns away, speaking in low, unhappy voices. Scoundrel let out a hiss, as though warning them not to return.

Albert closed the distance between him and Kenna, and pulled her into a hug. Eagle made a high-pitched shriek towards Goshawk – which the wild unicorn ignored.

'Holy hailstones,' Albert cursed. 'Don't ever do that again.'

'Thank you for getting Scoundrel out,' Kenna breathed into his shoulder.

'That was you?' Skandar asked the fire wielder.

'Your sister – dramatic pain that she is – left the Eyrie telling me to *look after Goshawk* for her. Turns out that meant chasing Gos all the way to Council Square, where she teamed up with Kenna's dapple-grey and busted Scoundrel out of jail.' Albert gave Kenna an exasperated glance. 'Some more detail on that plan might have been nice, you know?'

Kenna chuckled. 'Sorry, Al. There wasn't exactly a lot of time.'

'Hmm,' Albert said, though his eyes twinkled at her. Then their light dulled as he said, 'Rex has been busy.'

'What do you mean?' Agatha asked sharply.

Dread filled Skandar. He rested a hand on Scoundrel's neck for support, and the unicorn made a low rumbling sound.

'The *Hatchery Herald* printed two articles about you this morning.' Albert pulled a copy of the Island newspaper from the inside of his jacket. Skandar read the headline:

COMMODORE CAPTURES CHILDREN OF THE WEAVER

Yesterday, a Mainland plot was uncovered by Commodore Rex Manning that has been years in the making. Skandar Smith and Kenna Everhart – the Mainlander children of the Weaver – were moments away from achieving their goal of taking control of the Island. Skandar attempted to steal Chaos Cup glory with the help of the Weaver's sister Agatha Everhart, while Kenna had already captured the Eyrie earlier this year . . .

'So Rex really is declaring himself the rightful Commodore,' Agatha said furiously.

'Well, that's nothing new.' Skandar felt relieved it wasn't

anything worse. 'This is exactly what he said in the arena yesterday. After Flo . . .' He couldn't finish the sentence. Agatha put a hand on his shoulder.

'He's not just coming after you two, though,' said Albert grimly. 'Look.'

Skandar scanned the second article.

THE COMMODORE NEEDS YOUR HELP!

Have you seen these people? The following list of suspects are accused of assisting the Smith/Everhart siblings – Spirit Wielder Skandar and Wild Rider Kenna – with their attempted plot against the Island on behalf of the Mainland. They are highly dangerous and will be arrested on sight. If you have any information on their whereabouts, please inform a sentinel at once.

'Rex is blaming you two and the Mainland for everything that's happened over the last few years.' Albert fiddled nervously with the end of his blond ponytail. He was a Mainlander like the Smith siblings.

'No Mainlanders were allowed to take the Hatchery exam this year,' Kenna added. 'The guards outside my cell were gossiping about it. Rex has torn up the Treaty.'

But Skandar was staring at the grainy photographs below the *Herald* headline. Ice-cold fear filled his veins. The list included most members of the Scoundrels' Resistance – Jamie the blacksmith, Craig the bookseller, Ruth the Keeper of the Vaults, Fiona the healer, Talia the battlesong bard, and Elora, Pathfinder of the Wanderers. The only ones who weren't mentioned were Olu and Sara Shekoni, and Skandar found himself wondering

whether it was their daughter who had betrayed the others to Rex.

Then, worst of all, Bobby and Mitchell stared back at Skandar. A fully armoured Bobby was posing in a photo that must have been taken after the Qualifiers, whereas the picture of Mitchell looked much younger, perhaps the age he'd entered the Hatchery.

Skandar started to panic. 'You said this newspaper was from this morning, right? Have any of these people been arrested since—'

Albert shook his head. 'I'm sorry, Skandar. I don't know.'

'Then I need to go. I need to warn them!' He lurched towards Scoundrel.

Agatha grabbed Skandar's spirit-mutated arm. 'Don't be ridiculous. You two just blew up the prison. Every single sentinel will be searching for you!'

'I can't stay here and do nothing!' Skandar exploded. 'Rex killed Nina Kazama. He tried to kill *me* during the Chaos Cup! What if he's already hurting our friends? What if he's locked them in the Stronghold . . . or worse?'

'I'll send some of my Originals to Fourpoint tonight,' Kenna offered. 'I've been doing that for months – using spies, scouts – to get information. The Silver Circle don't know most of their identities. My riders can ask around.' Her face clouded over. 'That's if any of them want to keep fighting for me . . .'

'Thank you,' Skandar breathed. 'That would be . . . be good.' His voice felt formal, like he'd forgotten how to talk to her. There was so much that they hadn't said to each other. Skandar had found it in his heart to forgive Kenna, but he could not forget all the terrible things she'd done. And he didn't know whether she had forgiven him for how he'd abandoned her to her pain. The space between them felt like a black void – its darkness full of horrors they weren't yet strong enough to face.

'I'll extend my shield,' Kenna was telling Agatha, 'to the bottom of the Eyrie's hill. That way it'll be easier for people to outrun the sentinels and get to us. The larger shield will protect them all the way up to the entrance tree.'

'Are you sure you want to do that?' Albert asked worriedly. 'Won't it sap your strength too much? It's already covering such a large area, Kenn.'

'It's fine,' Kenna snapped. 'I'll do it now.' She closed her eyes.

'People will still *think* they'll be harmed by your wild magic,' Agatha said icily. Skandar wondered if she was thinking of when Kenna had broken her bond, of the moment Arctic Swansong had fallen to the ground.

'Then we put word out about the shield, too,' Albert said, half turning to Eagle's Dawn. 'I'll gather a team of riders now. Once rumours start spreading that Skandar is here, and safe, the Eyrie will seem like a haven. A sanctuary for those who want to fight against Rex.'

'As long as people don't think too hard about the *Wild Rider* living here too,' Agatha said sharply. 'Do you really think riders are simply going to forget that Kenna turned all their unicorns wild, boy?'

Skandar heard the words his aunt didn't say, too. *Do you really think I'm going to forget she killed my unicorn?*

Wisps of hair escaped Agatha's messy bun. 'You must play down Kenna's presence here at the Eyrie. Only mention Skandar when you go into Fourpoint.'

Albert shifted awkwardly.

Kenna sighed. 'Let's hope the Island has a short memory.'

Agatha snorted, but Kenna's gaze lingered on Skandar as she left to speak to her Originals. In another world he might have hugged her, or wished her luck, or even told her that he loved her. But they had been apart – had been enemies – for months.

He had no idea how to do any of that any more. No idea who they were to each other.

Instead, Skandar stood next to Agatha under the colourful leaves of the entrance tree, watching Eagle, Goshawk and the dapple-grey follow Albert and Kenna towards the stables.

Skandar felt so tired, so hopeless. He hadn't slept at all in the prison, but he couldn't rest knowing that Rex was going after the people who'd helped him when it had mattered most. Did they regret that, now they knew he was the son of the Weaver? Maybe they believed that Skandar had been the enemy of the Island all along. Maybe everyone would side with Rex, the way Flo had. Maybe even Bobby and Mitchell wished they hadn't hidden his secret, now that it meant they were being hunted too.

He voiced his fear to Agatha. 'What if nobody comes?' The question was as quiet as the leaves whispering above them. Scoundrel half extended a feathery wing, as though attempting to shield Skandar from the feeling of dread.

'Because of Kenna?'

Skandar shook his head. 'Because of me. The whole Island knows that I'm the Weaver's son now. I don't exactly look like the good guy in all of this.'

'You are the Commodore, Skandar,' Agatha said fiercely. 'You won the Chaos Cup; it shouldn't matter what it looks like to—'

'Stop.' Skandar held up his hand. 'Please stop saying I'm the Commodore. I don't care about that. I just want . . .' But he couldn't finish the sentence because the one thing he wanted was impossible. He wanted to turn back time, to finish the Chaos Cup again and never hear Flo say those words: *Skandar Smith, you're under arrest*. He wanted his friends to be safe. Would any of them *ever* be safe again, now that—

Sounds of a small battle interrupted his spiralling thoughts. The splash of a water shield, the crack of a lightning bolt, the

roar of a fire weapon. Agatha turned towards the trunk at the Eyrie's entrance. Skandar guessed the fight was happening at the bottom of the hill – the edge of Kenna's extended shield. He instinctively reached for Scoundrel, who was listening carefully, his black ears pricked, onyx horn catching the sunlight.

'You can't go out there,' Agatha reminded him sharply. 'You don't know who—'

The battle sounds were replaced by thundering hooves and a pair of raised voices on the other side of the Eyrie's wall. Scoundrel shrieked excitedly.

'Told you Skandar wouldn't let us get fried by Kenna's magic. You worry wayyy too much.'

'I stand by it. That was a completely untested theory. We could have been killed!'

'You know what actually almost killed us? The number of books you insisted we bring.'

'I didn't anticipate a battle. And they're very important books!'

'You think *all* books are important – so honestly that's not a very convincing argument. Now shut up while I open the entrance. Get ready in case the Original Idiots have Skandar hostage and are waiting to obliterate us on the other side.'

The trunk opened with a crackle of electricity.

Skandar and Scoundrel both hurtled towards the entrance as it revealed Bobby Bruna and Falcon's Wrath, with Mitchell Henderson and Red Night's Delight close behind. They had elemental debris in their hair and manes, and sweat streaked across faces and flanks – presumably from the skirmish they'd just had at the edge of the Eyrie's shield. Both riders were carrying loaded rucksacks. Scoundrel shrieked with pure delight as he set eyes on his fiery best friend.

For a moment Skandar thought he might have been imagining

the whole scene. Bobby and Mitchell back inside the Eyrie, safe and grinning at him. Slate-grey Falcon and scarlet-winged Red no longer skeletal but fully recovered from the curse. It was too wonderful – it couldn't be real.

But then Bobby and Mitchell threw themselves from their unicorns' backs and sprinted towards him. The hug was fierce and long and full of relief. And with their arms round him Skandar felt like he could breathe again.

Like all was not lost. Not yet.