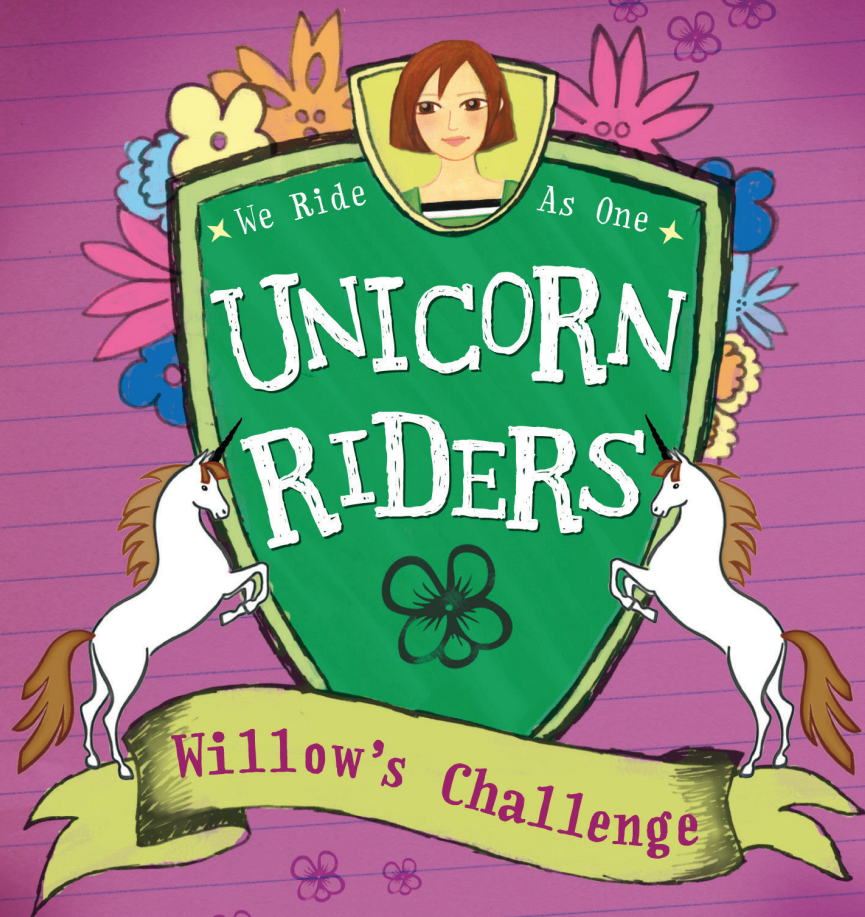


Aleesah
Darlison



Illustrations by
Jill Brailsford



NB. This is an **ADVANCED UNCORRECTED CHAPTER SAMPLE**. Please note contents and publishing information are subject to change. When quoting from this book, please check publishing details and refer to the final printed book for editorial accuracy.



♦ CHAPTER 1 ♦

WITH A CLICK OF HER tongue and a nudge of her knees, Willow set her unicorn into a trot. Bending low over Obecky's sleek neck, Willow gave a sharper nudge. Obecky cantered faster.

The wind rushed over Willow's face and through her honey-brown hair, the smells of the late spring afternoon – buttercups, daisies and crushed grass – rushing to greet her. But Willow didn't have time to savour them. Not now.

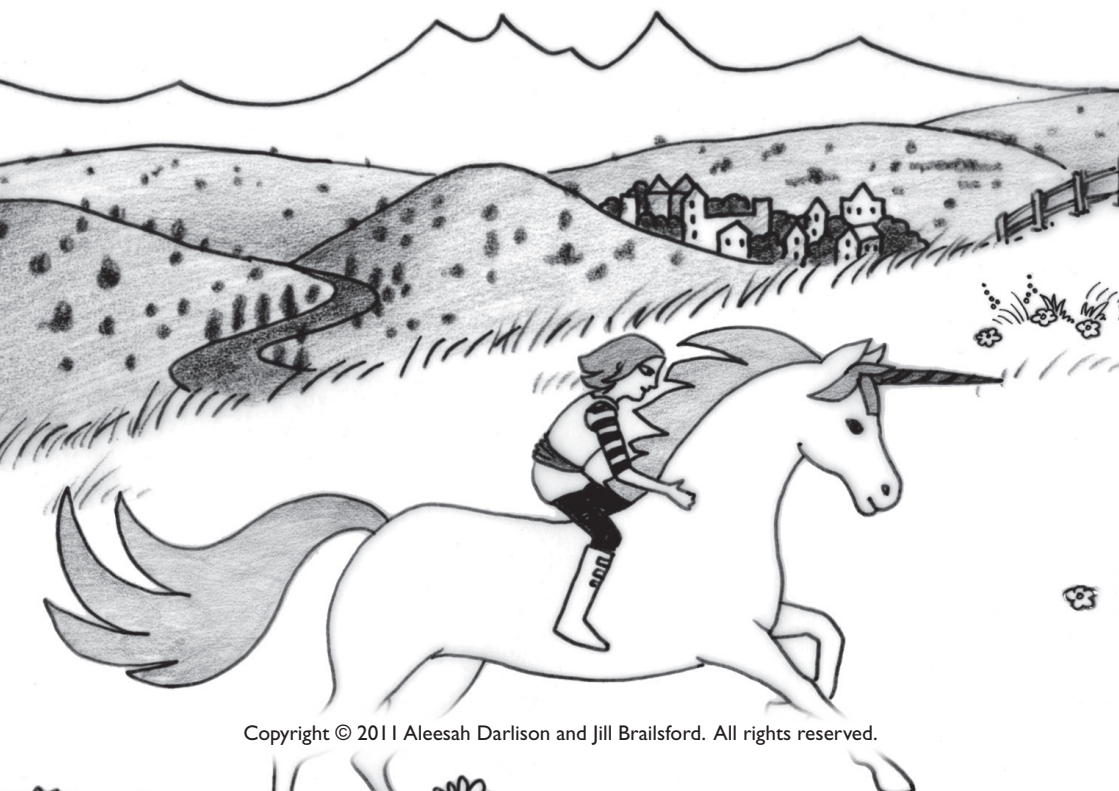
“Faster, Obecky, faster.” She urged the unicorn into a gallop. “I'm Head Rider. I have to set the pace for the others.”

Obecky sped up, enjoying the race as much as her Rider. Willow didn't use a bridle or a saddle. Unicorns couldn't stand the touch of either and

it was against the Riders' code to use them.

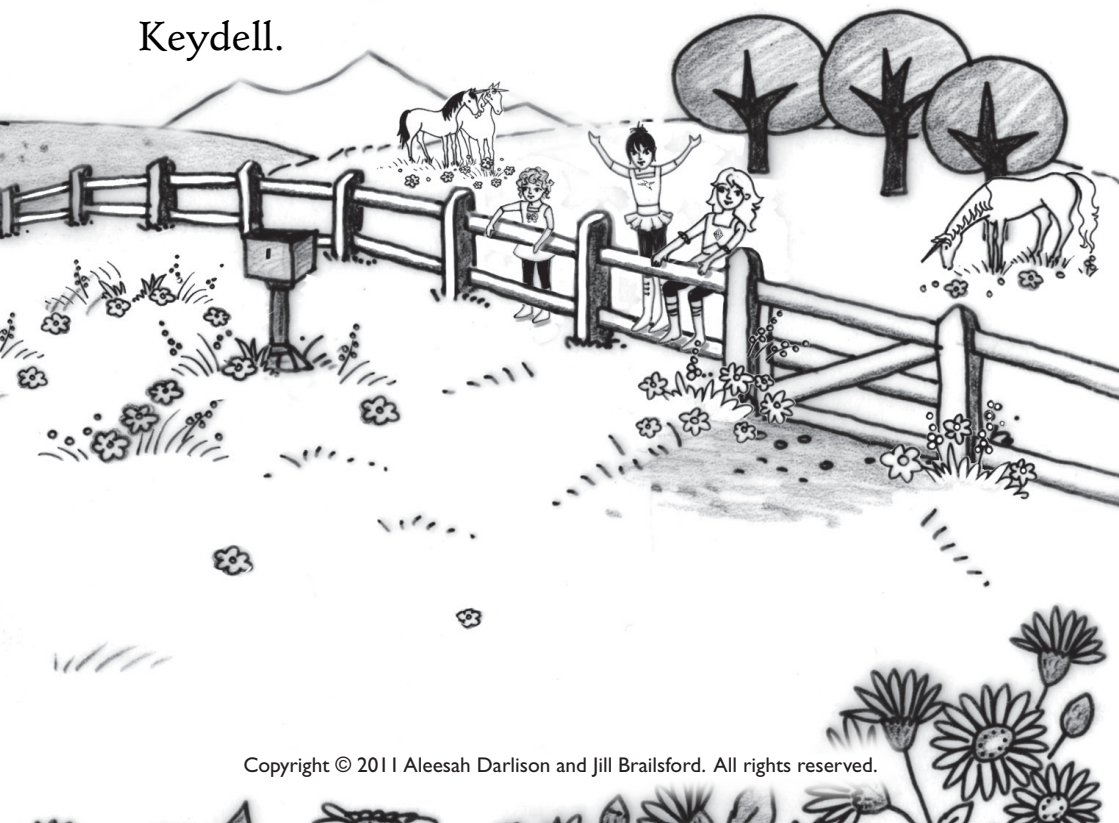
Willow felt the gold token digging into the palm of her hand. She had to make it to the box, had to slip the token in before time ran out.

They splashed through the bubbling creek, then up and over the last rise towards the finish line. Willow spotted the other Riders. Krystal, Ellabeth and tiny Quinn were hanging over the fence railings, cheering her on while their unicorns grazed nearby.



The Riders were dressed in their uniforms as usual. Krystal's uniform was purple, her symbol a sparkling diamond. Quinn's uniform was pale blue with the symbol of a butterfly embroidered on the front, while Ellabeth was dressed in red, her symbol a hummingbird.

Willow glanced down at her green uniform with its violet emblem. Her violet stood for watchfulness and faith. Like all Riders' symbols, it had been chosen for her by Jala, the Unicorn Riders' Leader, when Willow had arrived at Keydell.



Focusing once more on the task at hand, Willow smiled determinedly. This obstacle course, which Jala set for the Riders every week, was part of their training. Rickety bridges. Deep, muddy gullies. All of the obstacles in the course were designed to test both the girls and the unicorns, and prepare them for greater dangers on their missions to protect the kingdom of Avamay. Together, Rider and unicorn had to be quick enough to beat the clock, yet steady enough to handle the distractions of the course.

Obecky was always calm and confident during training and they were making good time. Willow was certain they would beat Ellabeth and Fayza. Fayza was the fastest unicorn in the stable and was always hard to beat.

But not today.

“Come on, girl,” Willow whispered in Obecky’s ear. “I think we’ve got ‘em.”

As Willow reached out to drop the token in the box, Obecky squealed and reared on



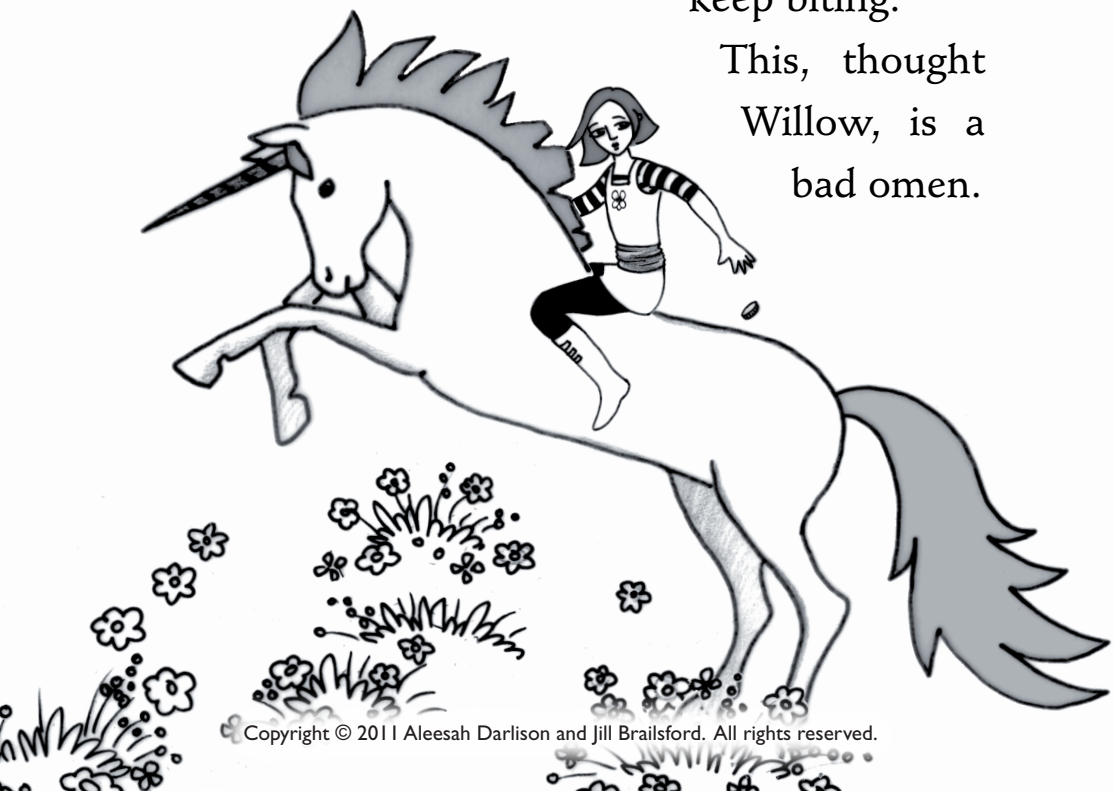
her hind legs. It took all of Willow's strength to stay on her mount.

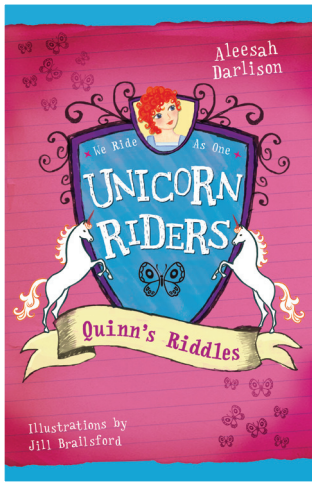
"Easy, girl!" Willow cried, accidentally dropping the token as she clutched at Obecky's long mane. Spinning over and over, the coin fell into the long grass.

Then Willow saw it: a greasly. Slithering and hissing in the grass right at Obecky's feet. No wonder she was panicking.

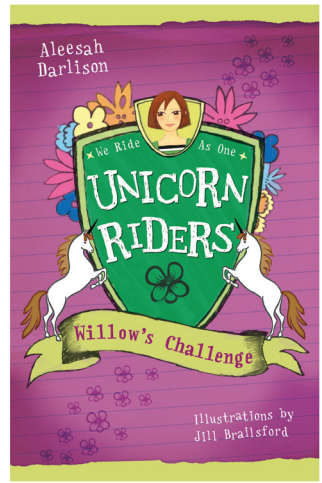
While a snake might slither away to save its skin, a greasly's first instinct was to bite. Then keep biting.

This, thought Willow, is a bad omen.

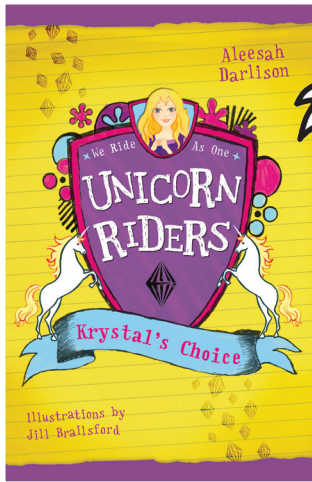




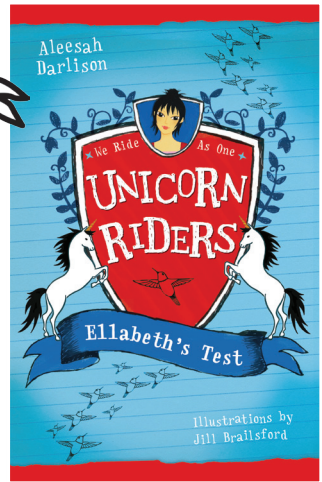
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