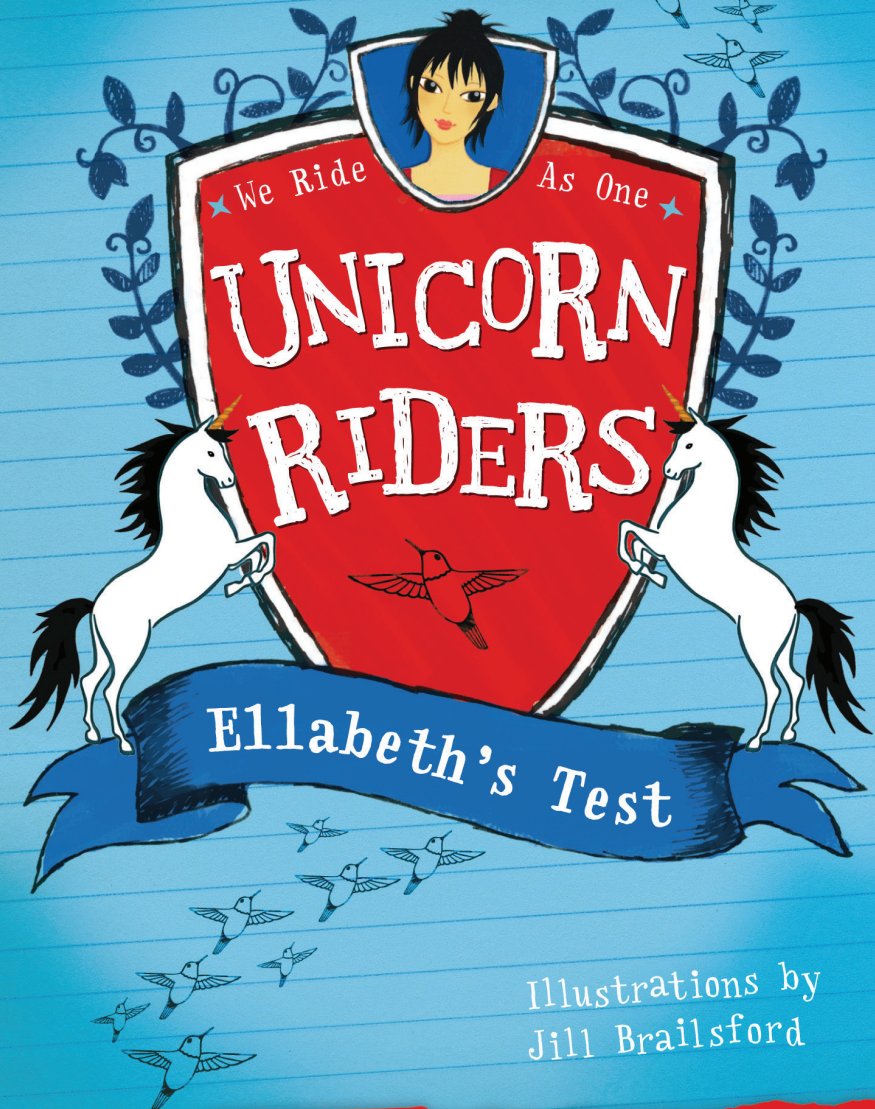


Aleesah
Darlison



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 •

ELLABETH STOOD IN THE CENTRE of the pavilion whirling her fighting stick high above her head. With lightning speed she brought it down to strike the training mannequin.

“Kee-ha!” she cried, striking the mannequin another blow.

Ellabeth loved her self-defence classes. It had taken years of discipline and training to learn these special skills. She had worked hard to perfect her moves.

Before becoming a Unicorn Rider and moving to Keydell, Ellabeth had lived in Cardamon, amongst banana groves, mango trees, watermelon patches and cornfields. Her father was a farmer; her family lived in a squat wooden



house on stilts. They didn't have much, but one thing her father had taught her was martial arts. Along with her mother and five younger sisters, he had always encouraged Ellabeth and taken her to compete at local tournaments where she had excelled.

“Well done, Ellabeth,” Jala, the Unicorn Riders' Leader, said. “Precise and controlled as always. Now, let's see your hand-to-hand moves.”



Ellabeth stowed her stick away then stepped onto the padded floor of the training ring. She faced Jala with her body held firm in the warrior stance, her knees slightly bent, her hands raised flat and straight in front of her.



Find a gap in your opponent's defence. Her father's voice spoke in her mind.

Ellabeth advanced. She struck at Jala with her hands and her feet, trying to make contact with each movement.

Jala was a master of martial arts, but Ellabeth hoped that if she focused her mind and controlled her movements, she might defeat Jala. Just this once.

The other Unicorn Riders, Willow, Quinn and Krystal, sat cross-legged outside the training ring, watching Jala and Ellabeth. They had already had their turn against Jala and failed. It was up to Ellabeth now.

Ellabeth wasn't as tall or as strong as Jala, but she was agile and had quick reflexes. Now, as she advanced on Jala, she did as her father had taught her. She watched her opponent's eyes, reading for a sign of what she would do next.

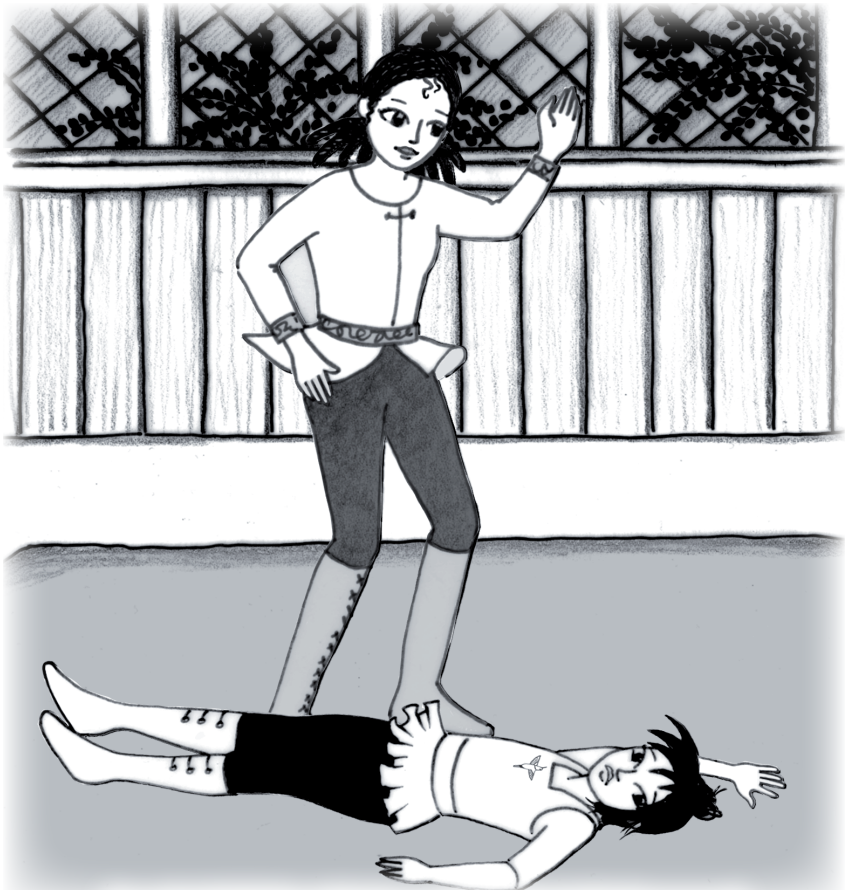
For a tiny second, Jala hesitated. Ellabeth saw her opening. She rushed in to strike, but made a costly error by leaving herself unprotected. Jala

took full advantage, knocking Ellabeth skilfully to the mat.

Ellabeth lay on the pavilion floor staring at the ceiling.

“Almost had me.” Jala grinned as she leaned over Ellabeth.

“Almost isn’t good enough.” Ellabeth groaned with disappointment. “I really wanted to win this time.”



“That’s what you always say.” Jala hauled Ellabeth to her feet. “Perhaps next time.”

Ellabeth straightened her uniform. She plucked a stray thread from the hummingbird symbol embroidered on the front. Every Unicorn Rider had their own unique symbol that represented their personality. Like the hummingbird, Ellabeth was bursting with energy. She rarely sat still. “Can’t I try again? Please?”

Jala squeezed Ellabeth’s shoulder. “Enough for now. You push yourself too hard.”

“Hey, you were great.” Willow, the Head Rider, patted Ellabeth on the back. “Terrific moves.”

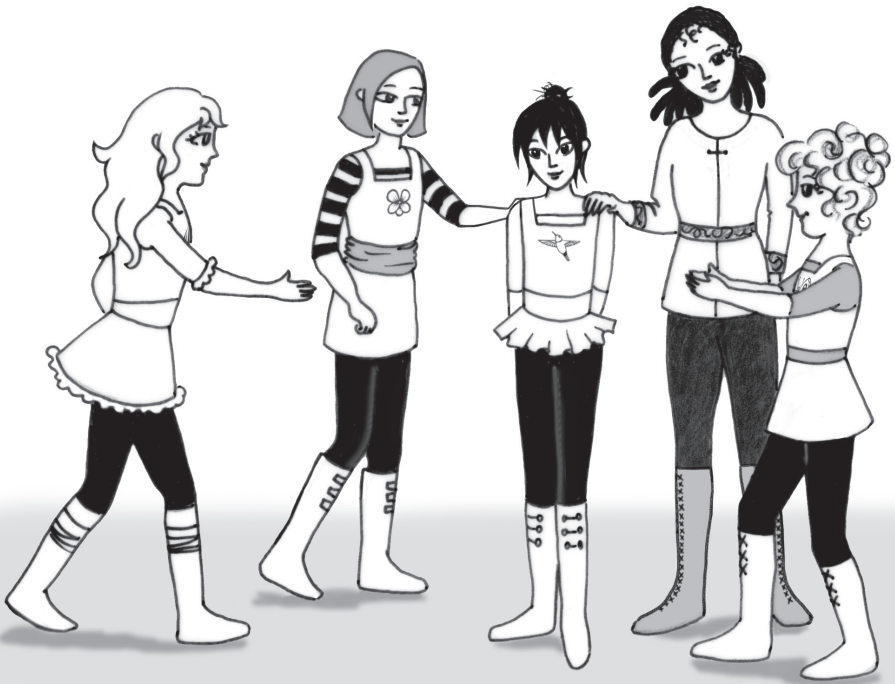
“Very impressive,” Quinn agreed. “Jala’s impossible to beat!”

“You did way better than us,” Krystal added.

Ellabeth blushed at her friends’ praise, secretly delighting in it. Their praise helped her forget her frustration.

I’m so lucky to be a Unicorn Rider and to call





these girls my friends, she thought.

Ellabeth still remembered how hard it had been leaving her family to become a Unicorn Rider. Having the other girls around had made it much easier. She had quickly fitted in and although she still missed her family sometimes, she truly loved being a Unicorn Rider.

Back to her old self, Ellabeth grinned cheekily. “Well, I did better than you at least, hey, Krystal?”

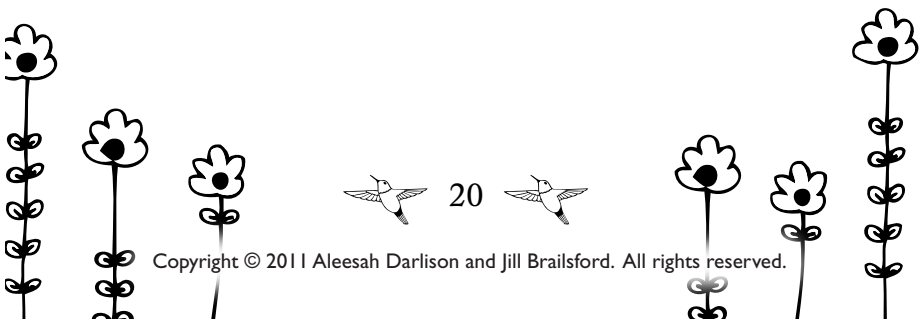
“Honestly.” Krystal shook her head, pretending to be offended. “I don’t know why I bother sometimes.”

“Ha! You just can’t handle the truth,” Ellabeth teased.

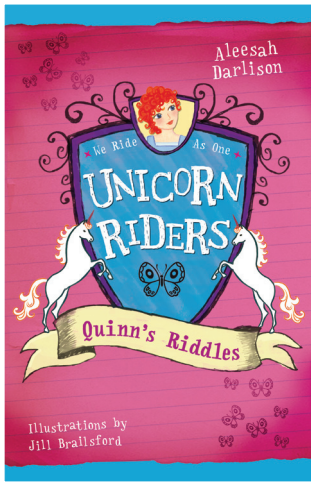
The two girls were well known for their friendly banter. Everyone laughed, Jala included.

As the other Riders bustled her out of the pavilion, Ellabeth promised Jala, “One day I’ll surprise you, Jala. Just wait and see.”

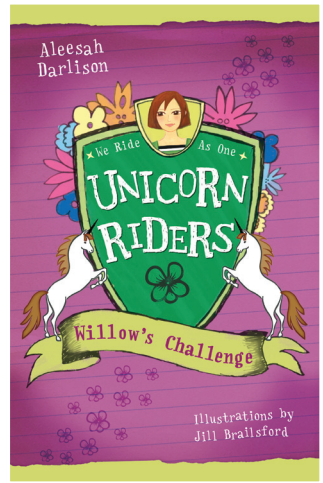
Jala smiled. “Ellabeth, you surprise me every day!”



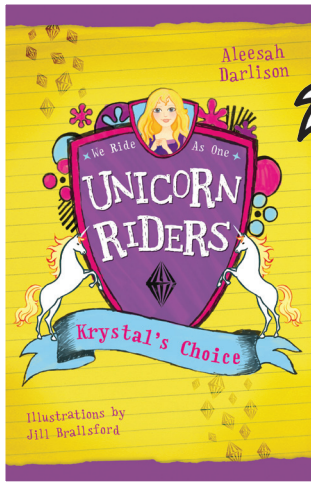




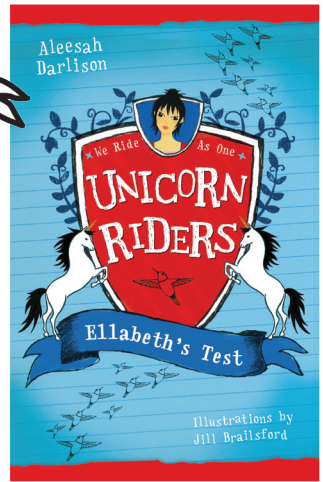
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