



MAX BOUCHERAT

Here's some of what Max has gotten his younger siblings to believe at one point or another:

- Cobblestones are actually troll eggs.
- Dad used to make him sweep chimneys, and the soot is why his hair is dark.
- He is a hundred and fifty years young.

Frankly, Max probably needs to brush up on his brother skills.

In the meantime, he puts his imagination to good use by writing fantasy adventures for ages ten plus. Unfortunately it doesn't make up for the fib he told about slime monsters turning children into slime monster babies. Yuck.

About *The Thief of Dreams*

After their mother's death, Mia and her older brother, Zach, move to a place south of friendship and in the heart of loneliness. Mia doesn't know if she has the courage to make new friends. Zach's the only one who understands her.

Then Zach is kidnapped by Astrid, a unicorn who runs a Dream House deep in the Spirit Realm: a palace where gods and monsters come to experience the finest hand-crafted dreams, and where Astrid's rule is absolute.

Mia refuses to leave Zach to his fate. But it's going to take all her courage, and help from a mysterious bird-girl, to stand any hope of rescuing her brother ...

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THE THIEF OF DREAMS

Chapter One

There was a girl named Mia, who dreamed of horses and of becoming a horse. She would dream of a one-roomed hut in a boundless meadow, where star flowers glowed under the watching moon, and where horses gathered around her doorstep.

Not that she realised she was dreaming. Not that she *ever* realised.

As always, the horses started to leave.

‘Wait,’ Mia said. ‘You’re not going, are you?’

‘But of course,’ replied a nearby stallion as he turned to look at her. ‘It is time for the nightly gallop. Will you join us, Mia Hartman?’

Mia beamed, for this was her favourite part of the dream: riding on horseback as the herd galloped through endless night-time. The wind was always fresh against her skin. Occasionally, magic would grasp hold of her – wilderness magic – and she would even, for a while, transform into a horse herself! She would grow a mane and tail and hooves, and those were the most cherished dreams of all.

‘Give me a moment,’ Mia said. ‘I just need to fetch something.’

The horse gave her a knowing nod. She rushed inside and shut the door, and for a moment basked in the warmth of her meadow hut. There was a wooden floor and wooden walls and a wooden ceiling, and dozens of candles, which rested amongst the rafters. The place smelled of dirt and grass – the smell of her old riding school – and it contained everything she needed. She had her privacy. No one ever bothered her, here, in her secret hideaway in the deep of her dreams.

Reaching under her bed, Mia pulled out a tattered saddle: her mum’s

saddle, back from when Mum had been a young girl who had also dreamed of hooves and horses. She sat on the floor with her hand on the leather and Mum's love in her heart. She sat in star-silence.

Then there was a

whack

bang

bash

upon the door.

Suddenly, the room wasn't warm, but it was shadow flooded, for half the candles flickered out, and those that remained turned navy blue. Mia shot up. The saddle lay forgotten on the floor.

'Zach?' she said, but from the chill in her bones she knew it wasn't her older brother. Neither was it the horses. A glance through the window showed her that the herd had fled.

There was another bang, another bash.

'Who's there?' Mia cried.

A draught blew out the remaining candles, all but one of them, so that the room was blue-cold and dark.

'H-hello?'

Mia gasped as a pair of eyes appeared in the window, wide and open, and bright purple. In a shock of wonder, she realised they were the eyes of another girl.

It was hard to be sure, but there was something peculiar about her. Her skin was sea-green-blue – a trick of the gloom, perhaps? More troublingly, something like twin shadows sprouted from her back. The more Mia stared at the girl, the less sense she could make of her.

'Who *are* you?' Mia asked, stepping closer to the window. 'Are you lost? Do you want to come in?'

The girl jabbed a finger at the door. Mia's instinct was to help her. She wanted to let her inside and into the warmth. But for a chill-struck moment, part of her hesitated – just a small part, a dust-mote part. *Who was* this girl? To find the hut, she must have wandered her lonesome way across the length of the Meadow of the Wild Horses, even though the meadow was larger than the largest countries.

Again, the girl pointed at the door. Her eyes were wet with pleas and pity.

Mia couldn't stand to see a girl so scared. So, she flung the door wide open, and the girl rushed in and bolted it shut.

(The dust-mote part of Mia wondered: why the urgency, and why the bolt? What was coming for them? What was *out* there?)

The girl held a finger to her lips. Now she was inside, Mia saw her sea-green skin was no trick of the light, nor a lie of the dark. She had pale, blond hair, nearly white, that reached past her shoulders. She looked around the same age as herself, Mia thought, perhaps eleven or twelve: a girl with feathers that covered almost the whole of her body. Only her feet, hands and face remained featherless. Her rags were adventure worn, little more than muddy tatters. From her back, she unfurled a pair of wings, which from tip to tip were wider than Mia was tall. Suddenly, Mia understood what the twin shadows had been.

All of her feathers were cut clean in half.

'Oh goodness,' Mia said, rushing to the girl's side. 'Are you OK? Do you need help?'

The bird-girl shook her head. Terror hung about her like a sticky mist; above them, the last candle dimmed and died. Then Mia gasped as the tip of the girl's right index finger began to glow, and long shadows crept over the bedroom.

The girl *wrote* with her finger.

She moved it through the air, leaving a trail of yellow light in its wake. When she was finished, a single word hung in the dark.

Hush.

Mia gaped at the floating word. It was sunshine bright, yet its message was as stark as the moon.

'How did you do that?' she asked the girl in a voice halfway between a breath and a whisper.

The bird-girl gave a quavering smile as the writing faded into nothing. She replaced it with a new message, the two most startling words Mia had ever seen.

You're dreaming.

The letters were knives, and Mia knew at once they told the truth. Of *course* this was a dream. It had to be, because she was *happy* here, in her hut in the meadow. She was wildly, impossibly happy; and these days, happiness

was something reserved only for the deepest sleeps, the most vivid and tangible dreams: that breed of dream where you can taste magic in the air, and feel the warmth of your own skin as though the warmth is real.

Mia's breath came in heavy gulps. The bird-girl wrote a new message.

Hide me.

Although Mia's belly lurched, although a thousand worried questions swarmed in her mind, she found there was no question at all that she should help the bird-girl hide.

But where?

Outside, the meadow stretched into the far reaches of forever. Maybe she could hide the girl amongst the grass and star flowers? Instinct, however, warned Mia that it was safer indoors than out, and that trying to hide her in the open was as good as giving up.

She clicked her fingers. 'What if I wake up?' she asked. 'Then no one could find you here, because I wouldn't even be dreaming it!'

The girl's eyes widened. She shook her head, shook her hands, and pointed again and again at the bewildering words – *Hide me*. Mia knew that, for whatever reason, waking up would do more harm than good.

'But why?' she asked. 'Who's chasing you? Couldn't we try and stop them instead of hiding?'

The bird-girl scrawled another message in the air.

Help!

The dust-mote part of Mia longed to wake up: the part of her that lived for hot chocolate on winter evenings, and for snuggling beneath blankets as rain smacked, whacked and beat, beat, beat against her bedroom window. It was *desperate* to wake up, for this was the worst dream she had ever had, the most vile-foul nightmare. Yet, over the past year, her brother had taught her that, sometimes, the only way forward was to shine light in the darkness.

The bird-girl needed help. That meant, whatever was coming for her, Mia wouldn't let it lay a hand, finger or dreadful claw upon one feather of her new friend's body.

Mia gulped.

She glanced out of the window. There was nothing but meadow and moonlight and softly glinting stars.

‘What if I dreamed we were in a fort instead of a hut?’ she asked.

The bird-girl’s answer was written in her eyes. *No good*, Mia imagined her scribbling. *No use*. But then she raised a glowing finger, and what she actually wrote was:

She’s almost here

‘*Who’s* almost here? What do they want?’

The bird-girl didn’t answer.

Mia sighed. ‘Maybe I won’t dream the hut into a fort, then. But I have to change *something*. There’s nowhere to hide you in here.’

Mia looked at the bed. It was small, and piled thick with sheets and pillows and blankets: a poor hiding place. So, she closed her eyes, and in her fingertips, she felt the thrum of her heartbeat. In her head, she pictured the biggest beds she could imagine, beds built for kings and queens.

Something *happened*.

She felt a crackle in her fingers, and an electric thrill passed through her skin. The feeling was enormous, as though something vast and ancient brushed against the edge of her heart and lent her its power. When she opened her eyes again, it was to find that the candles had all relit themselves, and flickered orange once more instead of navy.

And the bed had changed. It was giant sized. Half the room was now a marvel of sheets and mattress, and a dozen blankets hung over the sides and spilled over the floor, concealing the space beneath.

Amazement drummed in Mia’s chest, but there wasn’t time to admire her dream-work, not with a girl’s life at stake.

‘Quick!’ she said, giving the bird-girl a push towards the bed.

The bird-girl threw her arms around Mia and squeezed the breath from her. Mia held up the sheets, and the girl knelt on her hands and knees and crawled beneath the mattress. She had trouble at first. Somehow, there were dozens of boxes Mia hadn’t meant to conjure into existence. Where had they come from? What was in them?

There was no time to wonder. Mia helped the bird-girl move the boxes out of the way, and then lowered the sheets again, so that both girl and boxes were hidden.

It wasn’t a moment too soon.

Knock, knock, went the door.

This time, Mia didn't flinch, but breathed deeply and thought of Zach, and then of Mum, and then of her new friend crammed under the bed.

Please, she thought. Let it be enough. Please, please let it be enough.

There was another knock upon the door. Mia heard the muffled voice of a woman.

'I know you are in there, child,' the woman said. Mia was put in mind of glamorous ladies waltzing down red carpets, turning their noses up at their adoring public. Whoever this woman was, she was stupendously important. Yet it was a royal brand of importance: cold, distant, imposing. 'You are harbouring a fugitive. Hand her over, and we can pretend none of this ever happened. We can carry on with our lives and I will let you continue your dream in peace. Does that sound fair to you?'

From the way the woman spoke, Mia suspected that, regardless of her answer, she had little choice in the matter.

She took a deep breath of imaginary air: the air of a dream.

She opened the door, and in marched a unicorn.

Chapter Two

At once, Mia understood the bird-girl's terror. By the standards of most horses, the unicorn wasn't tall. Even so, she had to duck to fit through the door, for her horn was longer than the blade of a sword and as sharp as flint. (Mia felt she might cut herself just by looking at that horn, or just by thinking of it.) Her mane and tail were golden. Her coat wasn't snowy like the unicorns in Mia's adventure books, but half brown and half white, and covered in brown and white splotches. Three scars, like claw marks, ran down the side of her belly.

She nodded at Mia, fixed her with a royal gaze, and said, 'Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Lady Astrid Andromeda Starhooves – although, should you wish to, you may call me Astrid. Do not attempt to wake up. I have locked this dream, and so awaking is impossible. I have reason to believe you are hiding someone from me. A girl, to be exact.'

Mia tried to ignore the words 'I have locked this dream'. She tried even harder not to glance at the bed. Both were impossible.

Keep the bird-girl safe, she thought. Don't let Astrid find her.