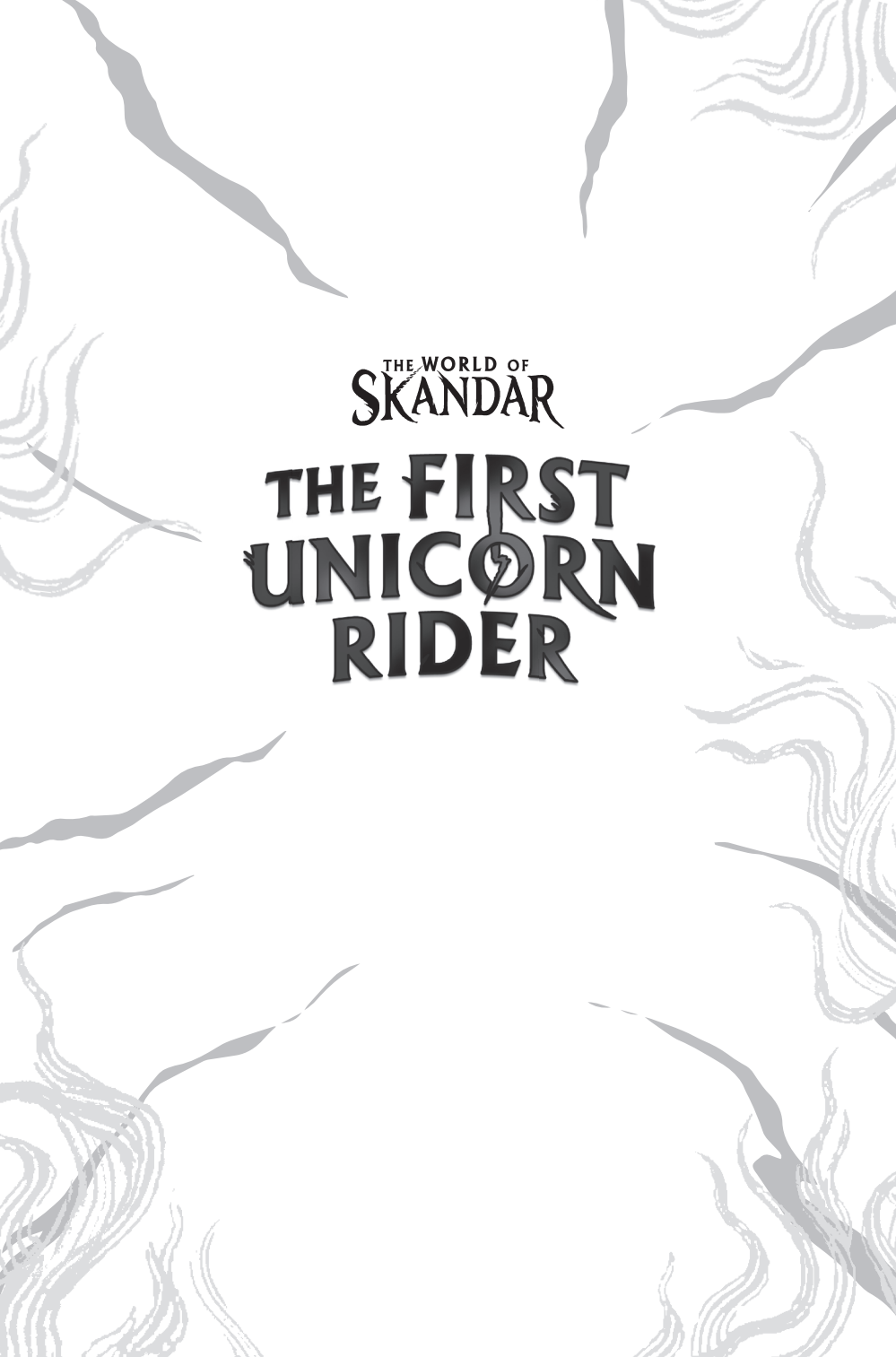




THE WORLD OF
SKANDAR

**THE FIRST
UNICORN
RIDER**



BOOKS BY A.F. STEADMAN

Skandar Series

Skandar and the Unicorn Thief

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Skandar and the Chaos Trials

Skandar and the Skeleton Curse

Skandar and the Spirit War

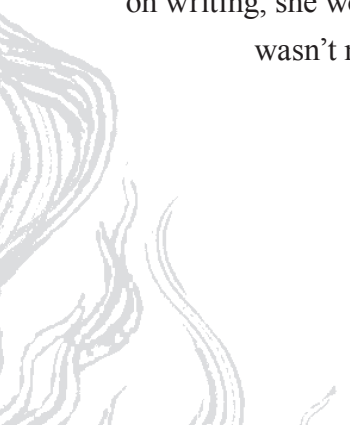
Skandar and the Secret Element

World of Skandar

The First Unicorn Rider

A.F. STEADMAN

grew up in the Kent countryside, getting lost in fantasy worlds and scribbling stories in notebooks. Before focusing on writing, she worked in law, until she realised that there wasn't nearly enough magic involved.



THE WORLD OF
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**THE FIRST
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A.F. STEADMAN

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Manuel Sumnerac

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*For my editor, Ali –
who has always believed in bloodthirsty unicorns*

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This is a tale of heroic deeds and magnificent adventures.

*Of horrors on the high seas, and battles
with bloodthirsty unicorns.*

It is a tale of bravery, and courage, and kindness.

*Of magic, and laughter, and pirates.
Of friendship, and loyalty, and dragons.*

But most importantly of all, it is a tale of a boy.

An ordinary boy called George.

*Because there is a secret nobody will tell you,
that all extraordinary people start off ordinary—
until they find the right adventure.*



PROLOGUE

The young unicorn stood on a clifftop as the light drained from the world.

She watched the storm rage over the angry sea that surrounded her island home—

But she was not afraid.

For she was a warrior foal who had won her place in the ruling herd.

The young unicorn stretched out her white wings, catching the rain as it fell.

She smelled the waves crashing against the ancient cliffs that protected her island home—

But she was not afraid.

For she had already fought battles, the fresh scars tattooed across her snowy back.

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The young unicorn pricked her rotting ears as the elementals sang their songs.

She listened to the screams of the sylph winds that swept across her island home—

But she was not afraid.

For the elements had gifted her their power to wield as her own.

But even over the sound of the tempest, the young unicorn heard that roar of fury.

Her skeletal knees shook, her immortal heart rattled in its shining ribcage—

And she was afraid.

For she was the only unicorn who truly understood the danger that was coming.

So the warrior foal waited, and watched, and hoped.

Waited for the one she believed would be able to save her—

Save them all.



CHAPTER ONE

THE STORM

George Penhaligon was having a very bad day. It wasn't unusual for George to have bad days, but so far this one had been exceptionally terrible, and it had barely even started.

'Get out of the boat, George.'

George pretended not to hear his oldest brother and stayed very still in his hiding place beneath the tangled fishing nets. Once *he* became an official member of the Penhaligon crew, the nets would never get so tangled.

In the half-light of the early morning, Locryn's head of black curls appeared over the side of the small red

fishing boat that belonged to their family. Ma said all four of her sons looked like her eldest – hair as black as night, curls as wild as the Cornish sea, eyes as green as an emerald wood. What she really meant was that they all looked like Da. But Ma didn't like talking about Da – not since the sea had taken him.

'Stop messing around, George. We need to get going.' That was Jago, the second oldest. He was always worrying about how many fish he caught and what they would fetch at the market. He also liked rules, way too much. And currently George was breaking the biggest one.

'Your thirteenth birthday is *tomorrow*.' Piran's face appeared over the side of the boat too. He was closest in age to George, and the one who annoyed him the most.

George untangled himself from the nets and sat up, spoiling for a fight. Okay, so he was not supposed to be in the boat – not yet. The older Penhaligon brothers had insisted for as long as George could remember that a person could not become a *fisherman* if he was still a *fisherboy*. And this miraculous change – which George absolutely did not believe in – happened at the age of thirteen.

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He crossed his arms. 'How does one day even matter?'

'It matters to Ma,' Locryn said severely. 'And that's the end of it. Tomorrow you'll be old enough to come out fishing with us. Today you aren't.'

George wanted to argue, but he had become a little wiser in the last few years. He'd begun to suspect that the rule that kept him away from the sea had, in fact, been invented by Ma. He supposed he could wait one more day for her. Just one.

'You can go and fish off the rocks like a good little fisherboy.' Piran sniggered, his green eyes cruel.

Defeated, George did indeed spend most of the day fishing off the rocks and trying not to stare out to sea too much. It wasn't easy watching his older brothers getting to have all these adventures without him – especially when George was the one who was always dreaming of what lay beyond the horizon. Ma often said he was her 'restless child', which sounded like a bad thing, but George thought he understood what she meant. Sometimes he felt like the wind was churning waves inside his chest. Even though he tried to convince himself every day that

becoming a fisherman would change everything, he was beginning to suspect it wasn't the fishing he really wanted. And he worried that his brothers would never let him sail as far as his heart wanted to take him.

Even so, tomorrow *something* would change. George was so sick of every day being a more boring version of the last. Tomorrow would be different.

Cheered by this thought, George began plotting exactly how he was going to transport the crabs he'd caught that day right into Piran's underpants. He knew there wouldn't be presents for his birthday tomorrow – which was okay – but by dinnertime he'd decided that he would be happy with two things: catching his first fish from the Penhaligon boat *and* Piran waking up with a crab-pinched bum.

Then dinner happened, and the day got even worse. He had been hoping Ma might tell them another one of her tales about Cornish magical beasts – George loved to hear the stories that had been passed down through their family. But instead, to his horror, the Penhaligons started a conversation about the weather. It was a topic

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George found so boring that he had – more than once – fallen asleep right into his stew and burned the end of his nose. He'd never been embarrassed by this. It was always worth it, just to make the conversations about fog, mist, wind direction and *seasonally low temperatures* stop. And then this dinnertime, on the eve of his birthday no less—

‘Old Mrs Trewithen up at the dairy says there’s a storm coming in,’ Ma said ominously. ‘She’s rarely wrong.’

George crossed his arms, worried about where this was going. ‘You can’t listen to her, Ma. Last week when I went to collect the milk, she confused me for *you*.’

Locryn swallowed his mouthful of fish stew. ‘Mrs Trewithen *does* have an eye for the weather.’ George began to argue back, but Locryn was insistent. ‘It’s true. And she’s right. All us fishermen could feel it brewing when we brought in our catches today.’

George winced at the words ‘all us fishermen’ as though his brother had shouted.

‘Even Uther isn’t taking his trawler out in the morning,’ Jago said, his spoon midway to his mouth. He looked up at the ceiling, as though already imagining the rain

pouring through the old, leaky roof.

‘Well, that’s settled then.’ Relief threaded through Ma’s words. ‘Tomorrow morning, all you boys will stay here until this storm passes.’

‘Won’t that be cosy, Georgie boy?’ Piran ruffled George’s hair roughly. ‘All of us in the cottage for your birthday.’

And that was the moment George snapped. He was so furious that those waves he tried to keep calm inside himself thrashed against his chest. He couldn’t stay at the table a second longer – or even in this cottage with its boring conversations about the weather and each tedious day no different from the last. He pretended to go to bed in the small room he shared with all his brothers, but then, as quietly as he could in his sturdy boots, he snuck out of the back door while his family were still eating. He knew they would be up late tonight, making the most of not having an early start in the boat tomorrow.

All the way to the sea, George shouted rude things about each of his brothers, though not his ma – *nobody* was rude about Elowen Penhaligon.

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Finally, he reached the floating jetty where all the boats of the local fishermen were moored. The water was inky and still. George continued shouting as he walked along the planks, telling the sea that he didn't believe for one minute that there was a storm coming – that it was just Locryn, Jago and Piran trying to stop him from joining the crew on his birthday. To stop him joining them on their adventures.

'Well, you can't stop me for ever!' he yelled at the darkening sky.



Hours later, George was still lying in the red boat tied to the jetty – Da had named her *Penny* – with his head resting on his brothers' bag of dry clothes. But an idea was brewing. Those restless waves inside his chest began to churn like the sea in the imaginary storm that was supposedly on its way. The sky was so dark now that George was sure it had to be past midnight. And that meant it actually *was* his birthday. Technically, he was thirteen, and therefore old enough to set sail in the family boat just like any of his brothers.

The idea began to shimmer in front of him like a firefly. He could go out to sea tonight and be back before anyone noticed. That way, he wouldn't care if his brothers insisted that they all stay in the cottage the next morning *to wait out the storm*. He would declare at breakfast that he'd already taken *Penny* out and caught fish for them to eat – nobody would be going hungry on *his* birthday. Except Piran – George wouldn't let him have one bite!

Penny had a black symbol of a willow tree on her big sail. George had watched Locryn, Jago and Piran rig up the mast and tie the ropes enough times that it was only ten minutes later that he was ready to set off. The last task was to light the lantern hanging from the boat's stern – something Jago usually did with flint and steel. George felt his heart thundering with nerves and excitement as he welcomed the warmth and light of the flame. There were only a few stars, the moon hidden almost entirely behind clouds.

From his position on the floating jetty, George managed to untie Locryn's expert knot – even more elaborate than usual *because of the storm* – and grasp the

THE STORM

rope in his hand. Then he scrambled on to *Penny's* hull and cast off from the shore, all in one smooth movement.

As George gathered up the wooden oar to paddle out from Polkerris Beach, he felt very pleased with himself. He was pretty sure none of his brothers had ever sailed *Penny* out to sea alone. This would show them that even as the youngest, he would be a valuable member of the Penhaligon crew. Ma was sure to be impressed – particularly if he managed to bring her some fresh mackerel for breakfast.

So George rowed on, the splash of the oar the only sound over the dark water. The wood was heavy in his hands, but he wouldn't have to use it for long. *Penny* was fast approaching the very edge of St Austell Bay, and would soon be leaving its shelter so her sails could be filled by the wind.

Looking over his shoulder one last time, George could no longer see the fishermen's cottages that lined the path down to Polkerris Beach. He wondered whether Ma or any of his brothers had discovered that he was missing. It was well past midnight now, but he'd seen no

lanterns bobbing around, heard no worried shouts from the Penhaligon cottage. Perhaps Ma was singing one of George's favourite sea shanties to herself, thinking of his birthday. He felt guilt clawing at his chest but shoved it downwards. If his brothers were still awake, they were probably all joking about the stupid non-existent storm.

Suddenly the waves in George's chest crashed over and over again, the restlessness almost unbearable. Without even really making a conscious decision, George plunged his oar deeper into the water, and *Penny* swung starboard and into the rougher sea.

George struggled with *Penny's* mainsail at first. Out on the open water it was hard to secure the mast and manage the ropes on his own, and strong gusts were already battering his ears. After some failed attempts – which he would *not* be reporting to his brothers – the sail was finally up and filling quickly with the wind it needed to propel the boat further out to sea. Narrowly avoiding the boom as it suddenly swung in the direction of his head, George crawled on his knees to the back of the boat and grabbed the rudder.

THE STORM

With the wooden steering mechanism firmly in his grip, the sail flying ahead of him, and *Penny* cutting through the waves, George finally allowed himself a cry of triumph. This was what he'd dreamed of for so long. The sea had always called to him, but in this moment it was clearer to him than ever before that it had never been about the fishing. It was about the unseen sights just over the horizon. It was about the unexplored reaches of the sea.

For George, it had always been about adventure.



Just then, *Penny's* sail caught a strong crosswind, and he was forced to duck under the swinging boom again.

'Don't you worry about me, *Penn*. I've got you,' George said, his words snatched by the slap of the waves against her hull, as he wrestled with the rudder to hold her course. But what direction should he take tonight? He probably should at least *try* to catch a fish. Maybe he would head round the coast towards Mevagissey where his brothers always said they found schools of mackerel in the mornings.

George glanced upwards, looking for the North Star to navigate by, but . . . he couldn't see any stars now. He frowned, sure they'd been there only moments before. The wind suddenly swirled past *Penny's* sail again, and George had been so busy looking up that the boom caught his shoulder as he ducked. Then a wave crashed hard against *Penny's* side, the salt spray hitting George in the face.

'Now, don't panic. Nobody panic,' George told *Penny*. But unfortunately, he was the only sailor here, and she was – after all – just a boat. She couldn't give him advice

THE STORM

or guidance or get him safely back to shore. George looked desperately over his shoulder for the bay, for a way back, but they were so far out now that it was pitch black on the water. Sweat began to prickle down his back, despite the howling of the wind. Terror made his heart race, his breathing becoming shallow as he watched the waves grow wilder around the boat. *Penny* was hurled this way and that in their relentless game, and it was as though the whole world was moving.

The mainsail was so full now that it looked like an angry ghost up there on the mast, desperate to break free of its tether. *Penny* tipped starboard as she was tossed by another wave, and George was forced to cling to a rope to keep himself aboard. As she righted, he saw a rope snap from the mast, and then . . . the lantern went out, extinguished by another wave crashing *into* the boat itself, sealing George in the darkness of the night. There was no point in thinking about steering any longer, no point even in shouting out in fear for help – he just had to stop himself from being thrown overboard.

Abandoning the rudder, he crawled forward and

THE FIRST UNICORN RIDER

started tying himself to *Penny's* mast with a rope. Rain started to fall, heavy and freezing cold. Somehow, with shaking hands, George managed to finish the knot round his waist. He was just leaning out to reach for another rope for his chest when—

BANG! Penny's boom hit him right across the head.

Just before he lost consciousness – the wind thundering past his ears, the rain falling in sheets so strong they stung his cheeks, the forked lightning striking in the distance – George had one last thought.

Well, I suppose Mrs Trewithen was right about the storm.