

THE DARK STAR

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Reformation
Lightning



CHAPTER 1


Zaphreth stood alone under the stars, their light caught in his hair like dust. Under his feet, the desert sand still held the day's heat, and a warm southern wind eddied the surface like water.

Behind Zaphreth lay the city of Sarreia, the air heavy with the sighs of sleeping people and animals. Before him lay the desert, mile upon mile of ochre sand speckled with tufts of wiry, black grass, and spiky shrubs that offered no sustenance to man or beast. Beyond that lay the northern lands, and the border with Callenlas, Zaphreth's destination.

They had stories there, in Callenlas, that the stars had taken on human form. Father always ridiculed them.


"Children's fables," he said. "A load of old nonsense."

Zaphreth had believed him. Now, though, with a fearful mission awaiting him, his childhood happiness




in dust around his feet, Zaphreth's throat ached at the thought that someone might be able to see him, someone powerful and wise, and that they might even care about him. He raised his eyes to the stars winking in their bed of velvet.

Sarreia was almost entirely dark now, only a few lamps left shining bravely against the night. The night sky arced overhead in impossible vastness, the stars vivid and clear. Zaphreth could see hints of violet, amber and blue in their distant light. The beauty overhead was stunning, and for a moment he forgot his misery and apprehension, and the dangerous journey ahead of him.




He was fourteen, small for his age but with a wiry strength, and a shock of dark hair hanging into his eyes. To anyone looking on, he appeared to be just another blacksmith's apprentice, his tunic smudged from hours bent over a forge. But his eyes were a bright and startling blue, had anyone bothered to take a second look into a poor apprentice's face.



“Would you help me?” he murmured into the night, careful to keep the sound small, so the night watchmen on the walls would not hear him. “Would you help me if I asked you?”



The stars flickered remotely, unconcerned at his plight, and Zaphreth felt suddenly foolish.

“Children's stories,” he muttered to himself bitterly. The




stars were just lights. No one knew where he was. No one cared. He was alone in the universe with no one to rely on but himself.

Lowering his head back to the dust, he shifted the pack on his back and scoured the bushes in frustration, trying to shake off his sense of desolation. Where was his guide? He had been assured that someone would meet him here to lead him to the northern border, and to one of the few places where he could cross safely into Callenlas. There was no moon, so it was harder to judge the passing of time, but half of the sea serpent constellation had dipped below the western horizon while he waited. Zaphreth pressed his lips together and wondered about using Mind Powers to light his palm and search the bushes, or to signal to the guide. In this vast expanse of darkness, it would be so easy to miss each other. But any light would alert the watchmen to his presence, and the mission was supposed to be top secret.



For a moment, the thought that the guide might not turn up and the whole thing might be called off made his heart clench with hope. Zaphreth was afraid of venturing over the border into enemy territory. The terror of what King Elior would do to him if he was caught lurked in the corners of his mind.

Zaphreth refused to look at it. If he let himself notice the fear fully, he would never find the courage to go. He




squashed the hope firmly. If the guide did not show, he would find a way himself. Lord Lur did not accept failure.


“This is ridiculous,” he muttered to himself. He would have to set out alone and hope the guide would be able to catch him up and find him on the road.

Zaphreth eased himself up, ready to walk eastward, when something glittered in the bush ten paces to his right. Zaphreth froze. Was it a guard? An animal?

He took a slow, nervous step out of his own clump of grass. The other bush moved too, though there was no breeze. Then out stepped a small, stocky figure, barely a hand’s breadth taller than Zaphreth himself.




Zaphreth opened his mouth to greet the stranger, but the hooded head shook slowly, *no*. A dark hand gestured for Zaphreth to be silent, then beckoned, and began striding north-east towards the road.



The stranger moved swiftly and silently, apparently able to glide over the sand (which Zaphreth floundered gracelessly over), and to see in the dark (which Zaphreth stumbled repeatedly in). Once on the hard surface of the road, the stranger walked even faster, and Zaphreth was hard-pressed even to talk, had his companion permitted conversation.

Only once they were well away from the dark walls of Sarreia did the stranger pull back his hood a little and fix a pair of black, beady eyes on Zaphreth.






“Wirrat,” he said, extending his hand to Zaphreth for their palms to meet in the gesture of peace.

“Zaphreth,” he replied, with a gulp of air, for the pace continued as brisk as ever.


“You’re small,” the man said, narrowing those eyes to scan Zaphreth up and down, taking in his wiry body, the ill-fitting tunic, and the shaggy black hair that hung into his blue eyes. “Young.”

“Lord Lur chose me,” Zaphreth asserted, holding out his hand near Wirrat’s face so that he could see the thin, pale scar that crossed his palm.

Wirrat raised his eyebrows but nodded, turning back to watch the road.



“We’ll head east on the road for a few days, then turn north-east until we reach Hirath’s Rift. The desert gives way to farmland there and the people are less bothered by war, less watchful. We should be able to slip over the border quite easily.”



Zaphreth nodded. He wondered how a man with such short legs could keep up such a pace without losing his breath. Hoisting his pack higher, Zaphreth gritted his teeth and walked on over the desert.




CHAPTER 2

By craning her neck, Runa could see all the way down from the library window into the dragon enclosure. A bright green valley dragon was being separated from her year-old baby so that it could be trained. Her pointed tail flicked, a sure sign of anxiety, and her head was raised on her long throat. Runa could imagine the conflict of emotions coursing through the dragon, muscles flinching between her desire to obey her rider and her desire to protect her baby.

It seemed cruel, but the dragon's training had to begin young so that it could build a close relationship with its rider. If it was left any longer, the baby would be beyond taming. In the wild it would already be beginning to learn how to hunt, pulling away from the mother naturally.

"Princess Runa?" Master Greigon, Runa's tutor, had his lips pressed together tightly, and was rapping on his




desk with his ruler. Runa jumped guiltily and tried to look as though she had been concentrating.

“The second largest river of Feldemoore?”

Runa glanced down at her paper where she had begun writing the answers to her test on her country’s geography. So far, she had scrawled ‘Peison’, ‘Taralai’, and a few illegible letters which might have been the beginning of *Lorandia* but because she could not remember the question, she could not be sure. How many questions had she missed?

Master Greigon was pacing towards her from his desk, looking over her shoulder at the paper. The Day-Star’s light poured in through the tall windows of Lorandia’s library, falling on the stacks of scrolls lying on their shelves, as high as the ceiling. The carpets and exposed boards in between lay in rectangles of light and shade. The fine day made Runa itch to feel the light of the Day-Star on her arms and the wind in her hair.


Runa snatched at the moment to glance down into the dragon enclosure once again. The mother had been coaxed out by her rider, and now the gate was down, the baby was alone, his pale wings flapping with anxiety. Runa could see his selected rider, the newly elected Erandel, inching towards him with a piece of meat in his extended hand. Men had lost hands and arms trying to approach a newly weaned infant. Runa strained her neck ...




Snap! Master Greigon drew the blind down, blocking Runa's view.

Runa sank back into her chair, disappointed.

It was not fair, she thought to herself. Her brothers had had each other to make lessons interesting. They had studied interesting subjects like history, battle tactics and Elicor's law. Runa was stuck with letter writing, basic geography and music. She also had dancing twice a week, which she was terrible at, and etiquette, which was even worse.




Runa's first love was dragons. As soon as she could hold a crayon, she had scrawled dragons on paper in her nursery, watching them circle the turrets of the castle from the window. Aged three she had escaped her nurses and scurried all the way down to the dragon caves. She was found hours later, still transfixed by the beautiful animals, when the castle was in uproar as night was falling and the princess was still missing. Oblivious to the chaos she had caused, Runa had lain awake long into the night, dreaming of the day she would be old enough to ride a dragon of her very own.




"Princess Runa." Master Greigon's patience was wearing thin. "I have been charged with your education and betterment. You do me a great disservice with your inattention. Worse, you dishonour your father and your people by your unwillingness to learn ..."






Runa sighed inwardly and began to dream of what it would be like to ride her dragon. Her favourite had changed over the years. As a small child she had always imagined riding the rare but vivid red fire dragons, the ones that spouted flames and whose scales were as bright as the setting Day-Star. Then she had admired the large blacks, with their steely scales and gleaming spines. Lately, she favoured the blue mountain dragons, their scales hued like clouds before rain, winding through the air like spirals of smoke. They were smaller, but quicker and lither than the larger variations of their species.


“I give up,” Master Greigon sighed, before walking out of the library, leaving the door swinging on its hinges.



Runa’s mouth twisted to one side as she considered the guilt that tugged at her insides. She never intended to be rude, or to ignore her tutors, but they managed to make the lessons so dull, and dragons were so very interesting. If they would only set her essays on the habits of dragons, or the history of their taming, or their care and uses in war. But all they wanted was for her to write boring invitations to imaginary courtiers, or remember the correct ways to address a Master, a princess and an ambassador. Hardly stuff to thrill her soul.

Leaving her desk, Runa checked the Day-Star’s position outside the window. Master Greigon had left her half-way through the lesson; she would have time






to run down to the dragon enclosure before her dancing lesson.

She left the library in haste, thumped down the stairs and continued through the palace to the kitchens, picking up a green apple from a basket on her way.

“Oi!” the cook scolded. But then she chuckled and sent the spit boy after Runa with a piece of fresh gingerbread, oozing stickiness. Runa grinned and ate it on her way through the kitchen gardens, licking her lips and fingers.

She stepped through the arched gateway that led to the dragon enclosure.

“Ow!” she cried as her ear was caught between a pinching finger and thumb.



“Just where do you think you are going?” Master Greigon demanded, his face purple with rage.

“I was just ...”

“Do you have so little regard for my word that you trip off to see the dragons as soon as I leave?”

“I ...” Runa writhed against the pain in her ear.

“I have reached the end! Come with me!”

Runa had little choice. He let go of her ear but caught her wrist in the same movement, dragging her back into the palace and up, up to King Mabrigas’s rooms.

Runa’s stomach tightened.

“No, please,” she begged. “I’ll study, I’ll work hard ... please don’t tell Father.”