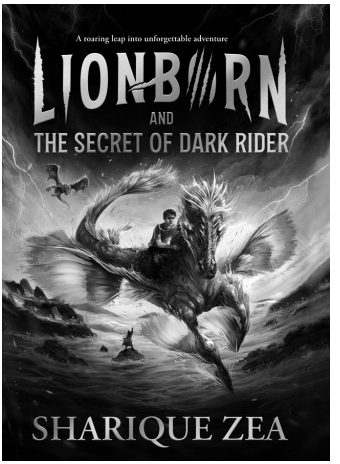
LIONBORN

Sharique Zea

Books in the Lionborn series





Praise for *LIONBORN*

'Fascinating fantasy adventure' – *School Reading List*

'A great next read for middle-grade fantasy lovers who have enjoyed Harry Potter, Percy Jackson, and The Inheritance Cycle' – *The Children's Book Review*

'Great for young fantasy readers' – *LoveReading4Kids*

'A roaringly fantastic start to a spellbinding new fantasy adventure' – *Book Craic*

'This fantasy tale delivers fresh magic and emotional depth' – *Kirkus Review*

'A heartwarming story of self-discovery' – *Armadillo*

'Beautifully written; it is guaranteed to grip readers and leave them wanting more' – *Bonkers About Books*

'In one night I discovered a book that will stay with me for a long time' – *BookBound*

'Weaves together the human world and the fantasy world with its enchanted forests, labyrinths and menacing beasts immersing readers in an environment where boundaries are highly permeable' – *Red Reading Hub*

Copyright © Sharique Zea 2025

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

Cover design by Mecob
Illustration by Manuel Šumberac / The Bright Agency

ISBN: 978-1-0682018-1-3

For
Akhtari
Kaifi & Belal

Contents

Prologue 1
Chapter 1: *Into the Unknown* 4
Chapter 2: *The Monster Boy* 9
Chapter 3: *Troublemakers* 18
Chapter 4: *The Punishment* 26
Chapter 5: *The Lionborn* 31
Chapter 6: *Emberis* 38
Chapter 7: *A Wraith* 48
Chapter 8: *The World of Arborea* 54
Chapter 9: *The Vision* 59
Chapter 10: *The Grand Library* 66
Chapter 11: *Forest Speculo* 75
Chapter 12: *Love, or a Lie?* 87
Chapter 13: *Recognition Day* 96
Chapter 14: *The Man and the Manticore* 108
Chapter 15: *The Medallion* 119
Chapter 16: *The School Documentary* 132
Chapter 17: *The Rescue* 138
Chapter 18: *The Entrance* 150
Chapter 19: *The Maze and the Dragon* 158
Chapter 20: *The Bridge of Death* 171
Chapter 21: *Eleanor Elvina* 181
Chapter 22: *Into the Abyss* 188
Chapter 23: *The Banishment* 195

Prologue

A CRACK of lightning split the night sky, followed by a deep rumble of thunder that echoed through the quiet streets of London. Outside the Hurleys' house, a fierce wind tore through the trees, bending branches and scattering leaves across the pavement.

Inside, everything was still.

In the small nursery, a baby lay asleep in a cocoon of blankets, surrounded by plush toys.

The room shimmered. A soft blue light filled the air, swirling before collapsing into a glowing orb. The orb hovered for a moment, then sank into the baby's chest.

Calen appeared in a flash—a two-foot figure cloaked in green robes, his singed hair falling over his anxious eyes. He watched the baby's tiny chest rising and falling in peaceful sleep, his heart beating hard. His gaze softened for a brief second, until the air shifted again.

He darted behind a cupboard, just as two figures emerged from the darkness.

The first was tall, cloaked in black. The second was a monstrous, hulking beast with twisted horns and jagged teeth.

The baby stirred, kicking against its blankets.

The black-cloaked figure, Abigor, sneered down at the child.

'Baka, do you sense it? The light is inside this one.'

The beast's voice rumbled, deep and distorted. 'Really? This little human? A Lionborn?'

'The light led us here. It cannot be wrong,' replied Abigor, raising an eyebrow. 'So, can you extract its blood?'

'Seriously, Abigor? You ask Baka, chief of the Beast world, if he can perform an extraction?' Baka leaned closer to the baby, his enormous claw hovering above the child's chest. 'There's no extraction I can't perform.'

He paused, his eyes narrowing. 'But it will kill the human.'

The baby gurgled, tiny hands grasping at the air.

Abigor recoiled in disgust. 'And why is that a problem?'

'Never a problem. Letting you know,' Baka shrugged his hairy, matted shoulders.

A jolt like lightning ran through Baka as he touched the baby. He retracted his claws.

'We cannot perform the extraction,' Baka announced.

'What in the abyss do you mean? We must have Lionborn's blood,' snarled Abigor.

Baka grumbled, pulling his claws back. 'The light is shielding this human.'

'What?' Abigor's face twisted in fury. 'How could that happen? Check again.'

'By the blackest horns!' Baka growled. 'You dare doubt me, when *you* let the light slip inside the Lionborn. Weren't you supposed to prevent that from happening?'

Abigor cursed under his breath, fists clenched. 'Kill the Lionborn, and extract the blood.'

Baka's shoulders sagged with irritation. 'If you kill it now, its blood will serve no purpose. You'd lose it for good.'

'Blasted night!' Abigor scowled, his gaze hardening on the baby.

Silence hung heavy between them. Abigor's eyes flickered with uncertainty, then with hard resolve.

'Fine. We'll wait,' he muttered, placing his index finger on the baby's forehead. 'Let it lull itself into a false sense of safety. Once the shield breaks, we'll be ready.'

Baka gave a guttural growl but said nothing. The two figures exchanged one last look before Abigor summoned a portal and vanished into it. Baka lumbered after him, leaving the room in sudden, eerie quiet.

From behind the cupboard, Calen crept out, his heart still racing. His eyes fell on a small pillow beside the baby's crib, embroidered with the name *Fionn Hurley*.

This child was at the centre of a deadly game. And Calen knew it had only just begun.

CHAPTER 1
Into the Unknown

FIONN lay shivering beneath the duvet, his body twisting restlessly as the nightmare gripped him. His fists clenched the blanket, knuckles turning white, as beads of sweat soaked his forehead. His face was scrunched in fear, lips mumbling fragmented pleas.

'No... go away.'

In the dream, a massive, hulking figure emerged from the shadows. Its bull-like face was twisted with malice, long obsidian horns gleaming in the dark. Clawed fingers stretched toward Fionn, intent on grabbing him.

'I said, leave me alone!' Fionn's voice cracked in desperation.

He jolted upright, eyes snapping open in terror. But instead of finding himself in his bedroom, his hands slapped against cold, muddy ground. His breath came in ragged gasps as he glanced around, bewildered. Nothing was familiar.

Darkness swallowed the landscape, thick and oppressive. It pressed against his senses, and though his heartbeat thudded loudly in his ears, no other sounds penetrated the silence. Fionn's eyes darted about, searching for something—anything—that might offer an explanation.

Gradually, his vision adjusted to the dim light, revealing an uneven path beneath his feet, slick with wet earth. Ancient trees

loomed on either side of him, their twisted branches like skeletal arms reaching toward the sky. Serpent-like roots writhed across the ground, winding over each other in tangled knots. The twelve-year-old shivered as the cold night air clung to him, seeping through his clothes.

His voice, barely a whisper, trembled. 'Where am I?'

Silence. The only response was his own breath, shallow and quick, as dread gnawed at his insides. He hugged himself, trying to calm the rising tide of fear. Every step through the mud seemed to drag him deeper into the unknown.

His legs sank deeper into the thick, soggy ground, and suddenly, the mud beneath him turned to water. From the murky depths, slimy tentacles shot out, curling around his ankles and pulling him down with brutal force.

Fionn screamed, struggling to stay upright as the tentacles wrapped tighter. His heart pounded in terror, his mind racing. He flailed wildly, grabbing at the roots for support, but they were slick with moisture. His fingers slipped, tearing his sleeve. The tentacles dragged him closer, threatening to pull him beneath the surface.

Then, with a sickening lurch, he was yanked underwater. Darkness swallowed him whole, drowning his scream in thick, viscous liquid. He kicked and thrashed, desperate to break free, but the tentacles' grip tightened. His lungs burned, and he knew he was running out of air.

Just when it seemed hopeless, a searing heat flared in his pocket. Fionn's hand instinctively slapped against the burning sensation, finding something hard and hot—a stick of some kind. Desperately, he yanked it out. As he pulled, the stick transformed, lengthening into a short sword in his grip.

With newfound determination, Fionn swung the sword wildly through the muck, slashing at the tentacles. Each strike cut through the slimy limbs, and they recoiled with a jolt. His lungs burning, he hacked again and again, until they finally released him.

He burst through the surface, gasping and spluttering as he dragged himself back to the shore. For a moment, he lay panting, too exhausted to move. His hands were scratched and raw, blood trickling from the wounds where the tentacles had gripped him. Slowly, he sat up, eyes wide as he stared at the sword still clutched in his hand. It shimmered for a moment, then shrank back into the slim stick it had been before.

Fionn ran a trembling hand over the ornate carvings on its surface, tracing the intricate runes and the snake emblem that twisted along the side. The object was oddly heavy for something so small, its weight grounding him in this bizarre, terrifying dreamscape.

As Fionn caught his breath, a sudden shift in the air jolted him. The world around him shimmered, then flickered, plunging into a fiery red glow. A deep, rumbling sound vibrated through the ground, causing the earth beneath him to crack.

He turned sharply, eyes wide with panic. The ground split into jagged lines, forming a chaotic web of cracks that spread beneath his feet. The rumbling intensified, shaking the landscape. Fiery lava bubbled up through the widening gaps.

Fionn's gaze locked onto a narrow bridge in the distance, the only refuge from the growing river of molten rock. Fear clutched his chest, but there was no time to hesitate. He sprinted toward the bridge as the lava closed in behind him, swallowing the earth in its wake. His feet pounded against the ground, his lungs burning with every desperate breath.

When he reached the bridge, it was already half engulfed in flames. The wooden railings crackled and hissed as the fire licked its edges. But, with no other choice, Fionn stepped onto the bridge, his legs trembling beneath him.

To his shock, the flames didn't burn him. They flickered and danced around his skin, but no heat seared his flesh. Fionn blinked in disbelief, momentarily emboldened by the discovery. He took a

few more cautious steps, but the smoke from the surrounding lava stung his eyes, blurring his vision.

Suddenly, a sharp *crack* echoed through the air. The wooden plank beneath him splintered, and his foot slipped through a hole in the bridge. Fionn flailed, grabbing desperately for the railing, but his balance gave way. His body lurched forward, and he fell.

A guttural roar ripped through the air, and Fionn's heart nearly stopped as he saw the source—a massive, scaly creature rising from the molten lava below. Its reptilian body was covered in thick, armour plates, glowing magma dripping from its skin. Its jaws opened wide, and rows of razor-sharp teeth gleamed in the fiery light.

Fionn scrambled, pulling his leg free from the hole in the bridge, just as the creature lunged at him. He tumbled back over the railing, barely avoiding the beast's snapping jaws as it retreated into the lava with a furious hiss.

Breathing heavily, Fionn staggered to his feet, only to feel a sudden, sharp pain in his palm. The railing he had grabbed for balance had sprouted metal spikes, piercing his skin. He cried out, clutching his bleeding hand. Dizzy with pain, Fionn wavered, his vision spinning as he teetered dangerously close to the edge of the bridge once more.

The plank beneath him gave way, and Fionn plummeted toward the fiery abyss below. His scream tore through the air as the world tilted and spun, the lava rushing up to meet him.

In the next instant, everything vanished.

Fionn jerked awake, his heart hammering, hands clenching the damp bedsheets. For a moment, he lay there, gasping for breath, his body trembling from the vivid nightmare. The familiar sight of his bedroom slowly came into focus, but the fear clung to him, refusing to let go.

His pulse raced, and the strange heat in his palm lingered as if the spikes had really been there.

Still shaking, Fionn sat up, wiping the sweat from his forehead. His eyes flickered to the corner of the room, where a shadow danced for just a second.

But when he blinked, it was gone.