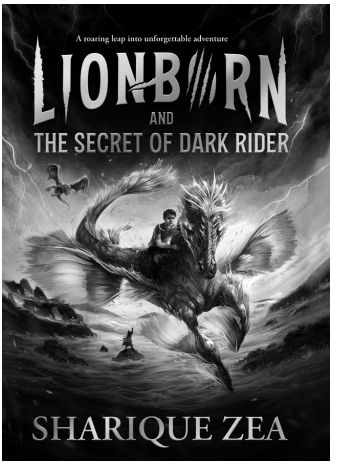
LIONBORN
and the
SECRET
of
DARK RIDER

Sharique Zea

Books in the Lionborn series





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For
Akhtari
Kaifi & Belal

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Prologue

A STORM of rage, revenge, and fire brewed in the north of Arborea while the villagers of Aseria slept peacefully. The night was thick, pierced by a cluster of stars—standing witness to the threat lurking in the shadows, watching over the resting livestock.

Something rustled, interrupting the song of the crickets, and disturbing the birds resting in their nests. From the tangle of dense bushes, two crimson eyes stood out like warning beacons. An impatient snort cut through the stillness, and savage teeth gleamed in a hard-set jaw. Then the creature stepped into the open—a grey wolf, dark in the darkness—the bushes rustling around its massive form. And on its back, rising like a figure from a nightmare, rode Marrok.

Marrok had once been part of this world, an Arborean. But loyalty to Abigor had frozen his heart and turned him away from his people and their values. Marrok hadn't changed much since the last time he had been seen in Arborea. His long hair curled at his temples, black as his eyes, and he appeared focused, like a man of purpose.

His dark cape flowed out behind him. Beneath it, his wolf's bushy tail twitched with restless energy, ears alert to a squeak in the far distance. Marrok knew this world; he looked furtively around and, finding no hindrance, rode the beast onward until he

reached a cave. He dismounted and watched the giant creature walk away—only to return at his call—into the deep woods. Perhaps in search of prey.

The weeds, bushes, and stranglers had run wild in the time Marrok had been away. He'd been busy pledging loyalty to Abigor Silverblade, whose failed quest to acquire both Lionborn's blood and Emberis had got him banished from Arborea.

Marrok knew these paths like the back of his hand and could have returned sooner, but he was cleverer than that. He had a new plan, and to execute it, he would need something special. Something he would only find in Aseria.

Now he walked the path to Aseria's store of magical potions. He shoved the swollen wooden door and with a dull click it opened. Marrok entered the store and took off his gloves—revealing his ravaged hands, probably a consequence of his attempts at taming the wolf—and set them over the dusty stone slab. His predatory gaze swept the room and locked on to one of the shelves that lined a slanted stone wall. There stood a row of odd glass bottles—each sprinkled with dust and draped with spiderwebs.

Marrok swept all the bottles off the shelf and reached behind to the wall, where a hidden crack indicated an opening. He recited something under his breath in a lulling rhythm, and the crack widened under his skilled fingers. From inside, he plucked a glass vial of shining green viscous liquid just as a shrill sound cut through the silence.

Marrok froze in his examination of the vial. Had he triggered an alarm?

CHAPTER 1
Aseria

A SHUDDER ripped through the sky, the air flashing with a sudden shimmer, pulling Fionn and Uks from the human world into Aseria. Fionn hit the ground hard, the impact sending him rolling down the slope. His body jerked as he collapsed against a tree, breaking his fall.

'Ow!' Fionn groaned, rubbing his arms as he stood in his shorts, glaring at the lion beside him. 'Uks! For the love of sanity, stop teleporting me without giving me a heads-up!'

Not long ago, Fionn had uncovered the truth that he was a Lionborn—one who could unleash scorching rays from his eyes and glimpse rare visions—bonded to Uks, his shadow beast, a lion invisible to others and gifted with the power to cross between worlds.

'We seriously need to work on our communication,' the twelve-year-old grumbled, hugging himself as the cold air slapped his T-shirt. 'What if I'd been in the shower?'

Uks shot him a look of pure disbelief, accompanied by a grumpy snort.

'What? I *could* have been. I'll have you know I shower every day… anyway, where have you hauled me now?'

Fionn gazed upward. In contrast to London's daytime, the inky night sky lay covered in a heavy blanket of dark clouds. He

narrowed his eyes at silhouettes of rolling hills and forests that stretched endlessly before him.

A sharp noise burst behind him. Fionn spun around to find a village of small huts, their chimneys glowing.

A disorganised mob of people crowded around a man in a black cape.

'What's going on?' Fionn looked at Uks nervously. 'Why are we here?'

Moments like this made Fionn wish Uks could just talk—but no, of course not. Instead, Uks yanked Fionn into whatever chaos he fancied, just to keep Fionn on the same page.

Villagers rushed out of their houses, livestock startled awake, the night blazing with torches as they chanted obscenities at their target.

'Marrok! How dare you sully our village with your darkened presence, traitor? You will answer for all the injustices you have wrought!' the man at the front of the crowd bellowed sternly but calmly, and the villagers followed with chants of their own. Cries of the word 'justice' roared in the night.

The villagers' passion could make any onlooker believe no one would escape that mob unharmed, but Marrok only chuckled at their anger. The crowd pressed forward until only a short distance remained between the villagers and him.

'Capture him!' ordered a man with a commanding voice. But before they could follow through with the order, Marrok brandished several polished wolf toys and tossed them into the distance.

The toys hit the ground transformed—from small figures to full-grown red wolves, their teeth bared, hackles raised—growling with a ferocity that made the mob back away step by step as one. The wolves bit the air and snarled at the front row of the villagers—clearly restrained by Marrok's will.

Fionn watched in horror. Who was this man?

'Attack!' whispered Marrok, and the wolves lunged, one second in the air and the next taking down their prey, mangling necks and

faces with their merciless jaws. The crowd erupted in a stampede, but the wolves did not pause. Clearing Marrok's path, they chased behind their prey as Marrok used the perfectly timed distraction to slip past the village's fury—but it seemed he wasn't done with the village yet.

'Feel the heat of my wrath and burn, knowing who brought it over you,' he yelled over the jumble of thuds and scrapes filling the air.

The night sky saw globes of fire flaring from his hands and shooting into the void, aimed at the villagers' houses in the distance, along with their fields and the livestock.

The fire caught in just a few minutes, and the air became dense with curling black smoke and panicked cries. The night quickly turned red with flames and fear, the sound of agony amidst the stampede echoing through the atmosphere before fading into an eerie silence. Bleating livestock charged aimlessly, wild with fear, many tripping over hooves in their panic.

There was no rescue for the village. While the hellfire raged on and warmed the clouds in the skies to hissing steam, it appeared that Marrok had vanished from the clearing.

Fionn tore toward the village, pushing his legs to their limit. In this wild commotion, no one spared a second glance at him—a human boy in Aseria—as he helped them escape. At least, the ones he still could.

A sharp cry cut through the smoke, snapping Fionn's attention toward a house half hidden by flames. A family was trapped inside, their front door blocked by a burning tree that had crashed down in the chaos. Heart pounding, Fionn sprinted around the house, searching desperately for another way to rescue them. The far wall of the house groaned under the heat, ready to give way.

Fionn's eyes caught a glint of metal—a crowbar lying among a cluster of farming tools.

'Hold on!' he shouted, unsure if his voice could reach them through the roar of the fire. 'Stand back!'

He drove the crowbar into the weakened wall, striking again and again until the wood splintered open. Through the widening gap, he spotted the family huddled in a corner, smoke curling around them. He forced the opening wider, just enough for them to escape.

'Come on! This way!'

An elderly man and woman stumbled out, coughing and murmuring their thanks, their voices lost beneath the crackle of the flames.

Fire licked at Fionn's T-shirt as he helped another family out of their half-ablaze house. In a heartbeat, Uks shoved him down, blanketing him with his body to snuff out the flames.

'Thanks, buddy,' Fionn panted, his face smeared with mud.

The fire spread fast, swallowing up everything in its path. Dawn had broken over Aseria, but the sky was grey, everything blackened with soot.

'Alain! Alain! Get out of there!' a girl called from a distance as she ran away from the flames.

A cloud of ash parted, and as Fionn turned, two large black eyes, red and swollen with tears, and a face streaked with mud peeked from inside a heavy wooden closet inlaid with iron.

A boy—Fionn guessed he was Alain—climbed out of the closet, face covered in scratches.

He was wiry, not too young, same age as him perhaps, Fionn thought.

The boy stumbled, knocking into a half-burnt tree that wobbled dangerously. It groaned and toppled, about to crush Alain. Fionn darted forward and yanked him out of the way. They slammed into each other just as the tree crashed to the ground behind them.

Alain yelped, shaking. His eyes met Fionn's for a heartbeat before he muttered a shaky thanks. He stepped aside and leaned against the broken wall, slowly sliding to the ground. His gaze lingered on the half-torn, half-burnt blanket lying nearby, and he picked it up before wrapping himself in it.

A quiet pull tugged in Fionn's chest, a wordless feeling rising like tidal waves from somewhere deep. Where was Alain's family? Was he an orphan just like him? Fionn's eyes drifted to the ruin behind the boy, the house sagging and melting as if heartbreak itself had scorched it. It stood like a monument to everything lost.

Though Fionn had the Hurleys—his adoptive parents, who loved him and cared for him—he knew too well what it meant to yearn for a place to belong.

The air above him exploded with a deafening crack, snapping his focus. He jerked his head up and staggered back at the sight, his heartbeat thundering with fear.

'What?! No, no, no… not him.' Fionn's lips trembled.

Sketched in the fiery display above was a face Fionn had hoped would remain buried in the past. After all, he had gone through hell to drive that evil far from himself and his friends—had convinced himself the man was nothing more than a bad dream. Then how come…

'Abigor,' Fionn choked out.

He'd cast Abigor out of Arborea. Driven him from the human world too. But now… Was he back?

And if this was true… whatever Marrok did, was it under his instructions?

Uks pressed gently against Fionn's side, a soft nudge that spoke louder than words. In that still moment, Fionn understood why Uks had led him here. The message was unmistakable—it was a warning of the danger rushing toward them. A danger that was far from over.