

JACK STAPLES
AND THE
CITY OF SHADOWS

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and
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transforming lives together

JACK STAPLES AND THE CITY OF SHADOWS

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Chapter 1

THE LIGHTNING DANCER



“It would be far easier to train an elephant to fly than to teach the heart,” Mrs. Dumphry said, chuckling. “Can you imagine that?” She let out a great guffaw. “An elephant, flying! What a magnificent sight that would be. I wonder if any elephants have ever—” Mrs. Dumphry stopped. “What was I saying? Ah, that’s right, you cannot instruct the heart. It must be awakened through experience. Just because you are one of the Awakened does not mean you are living fully awake ...”

Jack Staples wasn’t really listening to his ancient teacher; his eyes were glued to the sheer drop behind her. Mrs. Dumphry paced along

the edge of a cliff without noticing when a toe or heel hovered over empty space.

Alexia Dreager was standing beside him, and he could tell she was furious. Jack hoped she wasn't going to start yelling at Mrs. Dumphry again; it never ended well when she did.

Arthur Greaves stood next to Alexia and was obviously afraid; he'd turned at least four shades of green in the last thirty seconds. Arthur was Jack's closest friend, and Jack knew Arthur wasn't afraid of heights. It was the water far below that captured his imagination. Arthur could barely swim a stroke.

Jack was getting a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. The past month had been filled with all sorts of crazy experiences. Mrs. Dumphry kept them busy doing some of the most ridiculous things Jack could have imagined.

They'd spent every day in "School for the Awakened," as Mrs. Dumphry called it. However, very little of what they did was like any school Jack had heard of. Mrs. Dumphry had them eating strange foods, reading poetry, singing songs, and learning language and dance. They'd spent a day climbing, another learning to juggle, and another cooking. They spent hours every day training with weapons and musical instruments.

Jack mostly trained with his black sword, Ashandar. Elion had told Jack it wasn't just a sword. It was also a teacher. The Sephari said it once belonged to the greatest Blades Master on earth, and if he could learn to surrender to it, Jack might also become great. Back in Ballylesson he'd felt Ashandar's power when he fought Oriax and killed a Shadule. The blade had been alive in his hands. Yet no matter how often he practiced with the thing, he'd never been able to repeat what happened.

Jack felt his chest tighten. That had been the day his mother died. He'd tried to save her and instead had gotten her killed. Jack shuddered. He could picture her lying in a sea of green grass. The Assassin had killed his mother, and Jack had been too weak to stop him.

Jack enjoyed learning the sword because he knew he would need it if he were going to kill the Assassin. But the rest of it was infuriating. Every time he asked why they were learning ridiculous things such as juggling or dance, Mrs. Dumphry would say something like, "Your imagination is a far more powerful weapon than a sword could ever be. If you learn the sword but have no imagination, your answer to every problem will be the sword."

Normally, Jack would have thought the whole thing a grand adventure. But his mother was dead and the city of Agarthia had been destroyed. No matter what anyone said, he knew these things were at least partly his fault. To make matters worse, Jack's father and brother were missing, and he had no idea how to find them. Instead of searching for them or going back to bury his mother, or going anywhere at all for that matter, Jack and the others had been forced to wait in a small cottage somewhere outside of London. They'd arrived by boat a month earlier and had been waiting there ever since.

Mrs. Dumphry would tell them only that they were waiting word from Elion that it was safe to leave Great Britain. When they asked where they were going, she claimed not to know. Jack hated doing nothing. He was sure the Assassin wasn't sitting around playing childish games.

I could time travel . . . He immediately dismissed the thought. *No. I won't do it again. Not if I can help it.* Jack had walked through time,

though he wasn't sure he'd be able to do it again, even if he wanted to. He'd gone back to save his mother's life. But not only had he been unable to save her, he'd hurt many others in the process.

Jack snapped back to attention. Mrs. Dumphry was standing with her back to the cliff, both heels hovering over empty space. A spattering of snow covered much of the ground, but Jack's shiver had nothing to do with the cold.

"What?" Arthur said with a moan.

"I said, I am going to count to three, then we will all jump together," Mrs. Dumphry repeated.

Jack struggled to catch his breath as his stomach churned, and looked over the edge. The cliff was impossibly high!

"I ... I can't do it," Arthur stammered. "I'm not ... I can't ... the thing is, I'm not a good swimmer!" His eyes were wide. "I don't think I—"

"One!" Mrs. Dumphry's voice was a whip crack.

Arthur began talking faster. "It's just that I've never lived near water so I've only swum a couple of times, and I ..."

"Mrs. Dumphry, I really don't think this is safe!" Jack added.

"Two!"

Arthur's hand shot to his mouth as he turned and promptly vomited his breakfast on a nearby rock.

"Isn't the water going to be freezing? I think Arthur is right. It's probably best that we come back another time," Jack said hastily.

"Three!"

Without another word, Mrs. Dumphry leaped from the edge and folded her body into a cannonball position. When she hit the water far below, the splash shot high into the air.

Alexia grimaced at Jack, then rolled her eyes at Arthur. "You really need to stop doing that. You're worse than a little girl." Without so much as glancing down, she dove from the edge, keeping her body perfectly straight with toes pointed. When she entered the water, there was almost no splash at all.

Far below, Mrs. Dumphry surfaced, cackling loudly. A moment later she looked up in confusion. "A rabbit with the heart of a lion is far more powerful than a wolf that believes itself a mouse." Beside her, Alexia bobbed up, looking pleased.

Jack thought he was going to hyperventilate. He knew they had to jump; Mrs. Dumphry would stay down there all day, if she had to. He glanced at Arthur and whispered, "It's going to be okay. She won't let you drown. Besides, if we wait, it will only make it worse, right?"

Jack closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. Screaming like a wild man, he ran off the top of the cliff. The fall lasted six and a half seconds, and as he surfaced, he gasped at the intensely cold water. Even still, he couldn't suppress a laugh. The fall had been exhilarating.

"Young Mr. Greaves," Mrs. Dumphry called, "my patience is wearing thin. You will jump now or I will throw you off."

"Come on, Arthur," Jack yelled. "It's really fun!"

Arthur took a step back, disappearing from view. "I can't do it!" he shouted.

Mrs. Dumphry *tsked* irritably, and a moment later, Jack heard a squeal from the top of the cliff. As he looked up, Arthur appeared. He was floating in midair and was screaming hysterically as he hovered over the edge. Mrs. Dumphry watched with a look of concentration.

Arthur kicked his legs frantically, flailing against something unseen as he dropped like a stone. A split second before he hit the water, twenty bolts of lightning streaked the sky.

Terror formed in the pit of Jack's stomach. Rock and earth rained down as he tried to look in every direction at the same time. Mrs. Dumphry offered Jack an amused smile, then turned back to Arthur.

Ten, twenty, thirty bolts lit up the sky, striking the lake or the nearby land. With each bolt that struck the lake, Jack felt as if he'd been kicked in the ribs. "We're under attack!" he yelled. "The Assassin is here!"

A short distance away, Arthur surfaced, thrashing wildly. "Help me!" he screamed.

"Arthur Reginald Greaves"—Mrs. Dumphry's voice was both commanding and reassuring—"you are safe! Face your fear, child. I will not let you drown."

Lightning struck just above Mrs. Dumphry's head, yet the bolt didn't hit her. Instead, it slammed against a shield of blue light.

"Help!" Arthur wailed.

"Fear is not real, boy." Mrs. Dumphry treaded water calmly. "It is a locked door. Face it and you will find the key."

Arthur barely kept his head above water as lightning rained down.

"We need to run!" Jack screamed. "The Assassin has come!"

"Arthur, you can do this!" Mrs. Dumphry's voice held a note of authority that cut through the chaos. "Look at me." Arthur locked eyes with her. "Child, you are courageous, you are strong, and you are able. And it is you who controls the lightning. Now, swim!"

A look of shock flashed across Arthur's face. He relaxed and began to dog-paddle as the lightning slowed and finally stopped.

Mrs. Dumphry grabbed his hand and raised him a little higher. “Arthur Greaves, I want you to strike that rock with lightning.” She pointed to a large rock near the shoreline.

“What?” Arthur gasped. “It’s not me! I can’t ...”

“Only a fool chooses blindness over sight,” Mrs. Dumphry snapped. “Embrace what you know and become who you are meant to be. Besides, I would very much appreciate it if you would stop trying to hit me with your lightning and strike the rock instead.”

Arthur stared at the rock as both fear and determination entered his eyes.

“You can do this. The lightning is part of you; it is as natural as breathing. You must—”

Crack! A bolt exploded into the rock. Arthur offered Mrs. Dumphry an incredulous look, then promptly fainted, slipping beneath the surface again. Mrs. Dumphry chuckled as she pulled him up and began swimming toward shore.

As she swam, she called back to Jack and Alexia. “Only when we face our fears will our greatest gifts be uncovered. We are not meant to control fear, but to defeat it.”

Jack glanced at Alexia, who treaded water beside him. They shared an unbelieving look before swimming toward shore.

As he swam, Jack remembered the first time he’d seen lightning streak a cloudless night sky. A Shadule had been chasing him, when suddenly hundreds of bolts exploded throughout the forest, shattering trees and sending earth and stone flying.

Had the lightning come from Arthur?

When they reached shore, Jack was glad to see a fire already burning. Arthur sat nearby. He was shivering and staring wide-eyed

at the shattered rock. Jack stayed silent and huddled close to the fire. Somehow Mrs. Dumphry's clothes and hair were completely dry. Her back was to the children, and she was staring into the forest. When Alexia arrived, Mrs. Dumphry turned.

"The Author has given each of you gifts that are specific to you. The reason we call the gift a Soulprint is because it is not something that can be learned; it is something that must be discovered. It was written on your soul the day of your birth." Mrs. Dumphry sat down next to the fire and warmed her hands. "Arthur's lightning is just one of his many gifts. Young Jack's ability to walk through time and Alexia's remarkable balance are merely the first Soulprints you have discovered."

"You keep talking about this Author," Alexia said irritably. "You and the rest of the Awakened claim to follow him, but why? Who is he? Have you even met him?"

"Yes, child. I have met him. More years ago than you could possibly imagine. But the Author is not from our world. He is from Siyyon, a world far from ours."

Jack searched his mind. Why did that name sound familiar? He was sure he'd heard it before.

"It was in Siyyon that the Assassin first attacked the Author," Mrs. Dumphry continued. "The war that followed was unlike any before. Millions died and much of Siyyon was destroyed."

Jack shivered.

"In the end, the Author and his followers defeated the Assassin and banished him. Many thousands of years later, the Assassin arrived here, in our world. Because Siyyon was forever lost to him, he decided to make earth his new home." Mrs. Dumphry smiled sadly. "Before long he took the form of a human and became the adviser to an evil

queen. Together, the Assassin and the queen conquered much of the known world. And when the Author looked toward earth and saw what was happening, he was grieved. He ...” Mrs. Dumphry stopped and turned to the forest. She tilted her head as if listening for something.

“Children, gather your things and do not dally.” Her voice was tight. “Unless I miss my guess, the Assassin’s servants have entered these woods, and ...” She trailed off.

“What is it?” Jack asked.

“Be quiet, boy!”

For a long moment, no one moved. Jack strained his ears, listening for anything out of the ordinary, but there was nothing. Still, the longer they waited, the more the hairs on the back of his neck began to rise.

“It’s a song,” Arthur whispered.

The moment Arthur said it, Jack realized his friend was right. Jack did hear a song. It was faint but growing louder, as if a thousand songbirds were singing in harmony.

“It’s so beautiful,” Alexia whispered.

Mrs. Dumphry stood, a look of horror in her eyes. “Run, children! Run for your lives. No matter what happens, stay together and don’t look back! Do you hear me? You must not look back! I will catch up as soon as I can.”

Mrs. Dumphry grabbed Alexia and Arthur by the shoulders and shoved them forward. Jack watched both his friends disappear into the woods. *It’s so beautiful!*

Jack blinked, realizing Mrs. Dumphry was standing in front of him. She was yelling, but he couldn’t make out the words. He could barely make himself think of anything but the song.

Slap! Mrs. Dumphry smacked him hard across the face, then grabbed him by the shoulders. “Run, boy! Go now before you kill us all!”

As Jack turned to run, his wonder disintegrated into stark fear.