

THE WAYFARER'S SCEPTER

AN ADVENTURE IN MAGNETISM



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CHAPTER 1



Once upon a time, on a small planet about the size of our moon, there lived a brave adventurer. Unfortunately, she had no time for adventures.

Zara was the Wayfarer, keeper of the scepter, and last in a long line of those who could traverse the dangerous, ever shifting, dragon-filled lands at the equator and carry messages between the small kingdoms of the north and south poles.

The scepter was cold iron in her hand as she left the gates of the south pole, beginning yet again the trek through the wastelands to the north. Behind her, the southern lights bloomed and shifted in the sky, like flows of glowing algae. In the cold pinpricks of the stars behind them, Zara could feel the eyes of her mother, and her grandmother, and her great grandmother before that. Each of them had spent their lives moving first north and then south, ping-pong between the two nations, carrying gifts and threats between them.

Zara bounded off a cliff, sailing through the air and drifting slowly towards the rocky ground below. Gravity on Zara's planet was much less than that on ours. Her wool cloak billowed around her. She wore a silver circlet in her black hair, so that she would be recognized as the Wayfarer wherever she went.

At the bottom, she crouched behind a boulder as a dragon roared past in a gust of heat and teeth. It was better not to be seen than to have to fight, Zara had learned.

A red silk cord was looped around her wrist, the other end affixed to the center of her staff. When the dragon had passed, she lifted the cord, suspending the staff from its middle. Idly, she watched it twist and turn, until at last it settled, pointing due north.

No one knew how the scepter worked. It was the only tool they had for navigating the planet's surface, and she had the only one.

She set off, determined to cover at least a hundred miles that day. With bounding leaps, she flew across the ground, soaring from one rocky outcrop to the next. The ground beneath her shook with constant earthquakes. The land between the two kingdoms was always rearranging itself, another reason the journey between them was so hazardous. No maps could be made. And the stars themselves shifted, as the planet tumbled in an irregular orbit.

Despite the vast distances she covered, the journey would take her several months. Several months of hiding from dragons, of watching for flows of lava, of wishing she had someone to talk to besides the stars.

In her long run over the next few days, her thoughts turned to the notes in the leather satchel she carried. She remembered her mother describing the gifts she'd carried between the two kingdoms, but in Zara's lifetime it had only been letters. She wasn't supposed to read them, but she did.

They grew angrier and angrier, filled with recrimination. It seemed to Zara they only wanted someone to blame for every problem. The letters grew more and more scathing every year.

CHAPTER 2



One night, as Zara lay tucked between two boulders, feeling the heat rising from the stones below her, watching the stars flickering overhead and hearing the distant roars and glimmers of dragon fire on the horizon, her thoughts turned again to that secret dream of hers. The one the stars could never know about.

She wanted to explore. Every year she traversed the planet, straight from pole to pole, as quickly as she could, carrying those messages. But sometimes in the wastelands she saw things. Strange rock formations. Caves. What looked like ancient paths. Sometimes she even thought her scepter wanted her to go somewhere other than where her duty called her. Its rough iron point tilted slightly, or dipped, as if something wavered, or something other than the poles was drawing her.

But Zara did her duty. She did her duty as her mother had, as her grandmother had, and she sailed across the land, running as fast as she could, carrying the messages that grew more and more hateful.

Months passed, and the northern aurora bloomed before her in the night sky. A few weeks later, she arrived finally at the great silver gates of the northern kingdom.

She found a great crowd awaiting her, the festival of the wayfarer, with thousands gathered to hear the news.

As always, Zara cringed from the noise, the press of crowds, the vast surging energy of so many people. But this time, there was a feverish quality, a rage. People shouted strange questions at her, like whether anyone from the southern kingdom had tried to steal her scepter from her. Zara pulled away, afraid that if she answered their questions truthfully, they would think she'd sided with the other kingdom. It was better not to be seen than have to fight, Zara thought again to herself.

The guards escorted her straight to the High Council of the North.

Here, the nine heads of state loomed down at her from a glittering table as she stood in the center of the hall to give her report and pass along the letters.

"What am I doing?" she thought, watching their faces redden with anger as they read the messages.

She stood silently as they discussed above her what threats, which insults, they might send. But something shifted, something inside her turned to iron as hard as her scepter as she listened. "I won't pass on their messages," she thought. "But they'll think I've sided with the others," came her next thought, and the iron went frosty. What would they do to her?

She saw their faces as dragons, spewing hateful breath, and wished she were alone staring up at the sky.

They began collecting their messages.

"I won't," she thought. But what if they took her scepter?

They paused to argue over the wording of their insults.

"I won't," she thought more firmly. But what if they used the scepter themselves? They could do real damage to the other kingdom that way.

"Do you have the gift?" one of the council members asked another.

Zara was brought back to the present. They had a gift for the other kingdom? Maybe despite everything, there was hope.

"Yes," the other said solemnly. She lifted a sealed package. "This carries the sickness."

Zara's stomach swirled, she felt lightheaded. She had to speak up.

"You're sending a weapon?" she asked.

"They have been a threat to us long enough," said one.

"We have to defend ourselves," said another.

"It's only a matter of time before they do the same," said a third.

"No," said Zara. The single word rang through the hall, silence descending in its wake.

All nine members of the council stared at her.

"I won't send a weapon, from either of you," Zara said.

"She's joined them," a council member whispered.

The others looked down at the messages she'd brought, backing away from them and wiping their hands.

"What weapon did they send?" another member asked.

"They didn't send any weapon!" Zara shouted. "They're just like you! Afraid, and angry at your insults!"

"They started it. We are defending ourselves."

"No one knows who started it," Zara said, her voice ringing out, loud and sure now. "But you're both perpetuating it. And I won't help you any longer."

She turned to go. "I will be back next year. If you have something nice to say, I will carry your messages then."

But the doors slammed shut before she could take a step. At a gesture from the council, the guards closed in around her.

Zara looked down at the red silk encircling her wrist. They would take the scepter. They would send their weapons to the south. Both kingdoms would be destroyed in the ensuing war.

Something roared up inside her, hotter than dragon flame, like starlight, like burning suns, like a shifting aurora burning across the sky. She gripped her scepter, raised it over her head, and smashed it onto the floor.

The scepter was iron. She had used it to battle dragons, to pry boulders off their perches. It was incredibly strong, but some other force filled her, and the scepter shattered into a thousand tiny fragments.

The sharp bits of iron scattered across the floor, the guards and

council members cringing backwards. Strangely, they all aligned, pointing away from Zara like sharp little flower petals.

The guards withdrew from Zara, no one was brave enough to approach the girl who had just shattered an iron bar.

She swept the shards into her cloak and left, flying over the heads of the crowds and fleeing the city.

“What have I done?” she thought that night, sitting alone again, with the broken shards of the staff her mother had entrusted her.

She cried, letting the shards run through her fingers. But then she noticed something. Each little fragment aligned with the next. They all pointed from south to north, just like her scepter had. In fact, each one was like a tiny scepter itself.

It hit her like a burst of dragon fire. “I don’t have to be the only one anymore.”

She scrubbed the tears from her cheeks, took off her circlet, and made her way back to the town. Hiding her identity, she began to spend time with people. She spoke to innkeepers, to dressmakers, to school teachers and bakers. She found that most people were not as angry as they’d seemed, and to those who seemed kind, and seemed inclined to explore, she gave a fragment of her scepter.

Over the next few years, she travelled back and forth between the kingdoms, finding kind and brave adventurers to gift the iron shards to. Slowly, these people began to traverse the planet themselves.

As more and more people talked, the anger and distrust dissipated. Soon there was trade and friendship between the two nations.

For a while, Zara helped them traverse the planet, but soon she set off on her own explorations. She found, with her own tiny shard, that there were more deposits of iron throughout the world, and that many of them had this same magnetic property. If she found iron that didn’t have this property, too, and she found that her own shard could change the iron she found so that it worked the way the scepter had. Soon everyone was able to traverse the planet, flying and taming dragons and discovering new lands, guided by the magnetic field of the planet, to which her little iron magnets aligned.

Eventually, electricity was invented, and someone discovered that electricity could make magnets as well.

And as for Zara, she no longer had to traverse the wastes alone, hiding from dragons and keeping silent, ricocheting between enemies. She explored the world, making many friends and seeing many wonders. And everyone lived happily ever after.

MAKE YOUR OWN COMPASS

Materials

- Piece of Foam
- Needle
- Magnet
- Glass of Water
- Sense of Adventure

Instructions

1. Slide magnet across the needle several times to magnetize it (like you're sharpening a knife, only go one way and not back and forth.)

2. Spear the needle through the piece of foam.

3. Place the needle in the water. It should float on top. (The foam is like a little floaty for the needle.)

4. The needle should now point North-South, like a compass.

5. Try bringing the magnet near the glass and watch how the needle moves.

6. If it doesn't work, try magnetizing the needle again.

