

# *Spark*

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Ash realized too late that he was being murdered. He felt her hands on his shirt, his throat, his face. Felt her hot breath on his cheek as he fought to surface from sleep. He became aware of a thudding sound. She hadn't brought a knife – he knew that now with sickening certainty. She had come unarmed, planning to use something from inside the house. Something heavy and blunt and crushing. She shouted, and her voice cut through the murk, loud and breathless and . . .

*Panicky?*

Ash's eyelids flew open. An eye, bloodshot and swollen and glossy purple, looked down from above. Ash sat up, throwing Bronwyn's hands from his shirt. He looked around.

Brilliant sunlight poured in through the deep, unglazed windows on either side of the door, and an energized hum drifted through on the hot breeze.

‘What is it?’ he asked.

‘They’re here,’ she said, flinching as a hand hammered on the door.

‘Who?’

‘All of them.’

Ash scrambled to his feet just as the Priestess swept into the room.

‘Go into the back room and close the door,’ she said. ‘Get Bronwyn to the church. Do not let anyone see you.’

Ash opened his mouth but nothing came out. It was like waking into a nightmare.

‘Now,’ the Priestess said.

It was Bronwyn who pulled Ash into the back room and shut the door.

‘Why are they here?’ he asked. He suddenly became aware of Bronwyn’s hand around his wrist and snatched it away. ‘What did you do?’

‘Nothing.’

The raised voices outside fell silent as soon as the Priestess spoke. ‘People of Last Village, welcome. I know why you have gathered here, and I understand—’

‘Come on,’ Ash said. He crossed the room and went through the back door. Before him, the ground dipped down to the pool at the end of the village, and a derelict

church stood on the hilltop opposite. The sun, still low in the sky, was already hot enough to burn and bright enough to blind. Ash covered his eyes and peered into the empty valley. ‘This way,’ he said.

They hurried down the steep slope, their feet trampling clumps of brittle grass. A loud voice shouted somewhere above them, and a cheer went up, but they kept moving. Ash knew the Ancestors would not allow the Priestess to come to any harm, but he still feared for her safety, and dreaded to think what the villagers might do when they realized the girl was gone – and that he had helped her to escape.

Sweat trickled across his scalp as the hill began to level off. His breath came in short, painful bursts, but he knew they couldn’t stop running until they had reached the safety of the church.

And then he saw something that made him stop dead. And he knew, in an instant, why the villagers had congregated at the House on the Hill.

He saw what Bronwyn had done.

The stream that ran through the village and fed the pool was dry. Dark pebbles that had only ever known the cool kiss of water were pale and dusty. The pool was already being lost to the air, stolen by the sun.

Ash turned to Bronwyn, ready to drag her back to the house and deliver her to the mob, but hesitated. She was staring at the dry streambed in horror, a hand over her mouth.

‘The stream,’ she whispered.

‘Put it back,’ Ash said, wiping the sweat from his forehead. ‘Make it right again. Go on!’

‘What?’ Bronwyn stared at him in shock. ‘You think I did this? You think I stopped all that water from flowing?’

Ash stared at her, trying to find some telltale sign of her power, but all he could focus on was the bruising around her eye, the fresh cut in her top lip. She was small and wounded and – seemingly – far from the sorceress she would have to be to cause a drought. This was high magic – the stuff of the Four Fathers.

Another ugly, hungry cheer went up above them.

‘We have to go,’ Bronwyn said. ‘If they think I did this . . .’

Ash looked up at the House on the Hill and said a silent prayer to the Ancestors. Then he began the gruelling climb to the church. The heat seemed to intensify the higher they got, and the air felt thick enough to chew. Every step was harder than the last. Their hearts pounded, their lungs burned, and their

mouths filled with the taste of blood.

Finally, they reached the summit, and Ash staggered over a tumbledown wall that circled the graveyard. Most of the tombstones had been toppled by storms, but a couple of smooth slabs still stood at jaunty angles. There was a statue, too, although its wings and arms had long since turned to rubble at its feet.

Ash led Bronwyn through a doorless archway and slumped against a wall. The sun had not yet risen high enough to pour in through the broken roof; the stones against which they rested were shady and cool. The floor was dotted with thousands of dark droppings, and yellow tufts of wool clung to broken pieces of masonry. The pews had been broken up and burnt in the village long ago – the books too – but there were still shards of wood and scraps of paper amongst the dust and dung.

‘Are we safe here?’ Bronwyn asked, as soon as she had enough breath to speak.

‘For now,’ Ash said. ‘But if they find out we’re not at the house, there are only so many places to hide in the village. And with everyone searching . . .’

Bronwyn swallowed, but her throat was scratchy and dry. The effort made her cough. ‘Will that woman – the priestess – tell them where we went?’

‘No. She will tell them to go home and pray.’

‘And will they listen to her?’

‘Of course. She speaks for the Ancestors.’ A bead of sweat rolled into Ash’s left eye, and he blinked hard to clear his vision. ‘If they do come here, I can’t protect you. Do you understand that? It will be the will of the Ancestors, and I won’t – can’t – stand in their way.’

Bronwyn looked at Ash as though he had become one of the statutes that lined the walls: a particularly shoddy and weatherworn statue. She looked away. ‘I don’t expect you to protect me.’

‘Good,’ Ash said, although he felt far from it.

Bronwyn sat down with her back to the wall. She drew her knees up to her chest and hugged them. ‘You can go now. I don’t like the thought of your priestess facing that mob alone.’

Ash wanted to leave but couldn’t. He felt guilty, conflicted. A small voice in his head told him that he was just like his father, abandoning the person who needed him most. But this was different. This girl was not from here. She had been caught sneaking in and had brought nothing but ill-luck and another mouth to feed. If protecting Last Village was everything, then surely protecting an outsider was the treacherous thing to do?

He did not know what to do for the best, but he knew that the Priestess might need him, and leaving for that reason made him feel slightly less wretched. ‘Tristan keeps the sheep in here overnight,’ he said. ‘You’d be best to hide when he brings them up. There’s a small room at the end there, where the holy men used to live.’

Bronwyn nodded, although she didn’t move her gaze from the opposite wall.

‘I’ll bring over something to eat and drink when I can.’ The words were out before Ash could stop them, and he felt a sudden, ugly need to ruin them. ‘It might not be till tonight.’

Bronwyn nodded. ‘Thank you.’

Ash stood in the doorway, knowing that there was something he should be doing or saying to make the situation less unbearable, but completely at a loss as to what that might be. ‘Well, goodbye.’ He stepped through the archway before he had a chance to witness the effect of his words.

The heat hit him like a punch, and it was a blow he felt he deserved.

He hurried away from the church without a backward glance. The pool seemed even lower now, and he could see from his vantage point that the village was deserted.

As he ascended the slope to the House on the Hill, sweat dripping from his nose and chin, he heard the murmuring crowd, and the Priestess's voice carrying over the hubbub.

'Do not squander our suffering!' she called, just as Ash made his way around the side of the house. Everyone was too enrapt to notice him. 'The girl, the drought, and the coming darkness are the final tests, but we must expect another. Each of the Four Fathers will set a trial.'

'What will it be, Priestess?' Mildred, the slaughterman's wife, called. Her smock was brown and stiff with blood.

'That is not for us to know. Perhaps the final test is uncertainty itself. Whatever it is, do not despair. We cannot afford to fail.'

'What if we moved the girl beyond the boundary?' Quinn, the watcher, asked. He was lean and spoke with a deep voice. 'The stream only ran dry after she turned up.'

Dain had taken up a position near the house, apart from the crowd. He shook his head vigorously. 'That wouldn't be enough. That girl was sent as a test, make no mistake, but the test is whether we will sacrifice her in the Ancestors' honour. If her blood has not been spilled by the time the sun disappears, *our* lives will be forfeit.'

‘Hold your tongue, Dain!’ the Priestess said.

‘I will not.’ Dain crossed his arms over his powerful chest. ‘I am an Elder of Last Village, and I will not stand by while you let my people perish!’

The Priestess arched an eyebrow. ‘You would defy the Ancestors?’

Dain drew in a deep breath through his nostrils. ‘No,’ he said, after a long pause. ‘But I would defy *you*.’

There was a collective gasp from the crowd, and muttering, and it only stopped when Dain made a guttural noise in his throat, leaned forward, and spat on the step below the Priestess. A deathly silence fell.

Dain turned to the villagers. He had their undivided attention. ‘For many years, this woman has served as our priestess – communing with the Four Fathers, imparting her wisdom, prophesising. She is a noble lady, and I do not say that she is without power.’ He looked at her from the corners of his eyes, like some sly creature that has administered a slow poison. ‘She has plenty of that, I’d say. A great deal. And power has an ugly knack of changing people.’

*Speak for yourself*, Ash thought. His eyes flitted to his mistress, who stood very still, looking down at Dain without blinking. *Why doesn’t she stop him?*

*Why don't the Four Fathers strike him down?*

'So I ask you now,' Dain said, turning back to the villagers, 'are you happy with her governance? She pleads with the Four Fathers every day for an end to your suffering – has done for years, decades. And is your suffering ended? Or has it, over time, grown worse? Is the sun not hotter than in the time of your childhood? Is the land not more sickly? And your bodies – are they not skinnier than they have ever been?' Dain stared hard at the people, and the people stared hard at themselves. 'You are like a walking boneyard, and that is how your priestess likes it. The thinner and weaker you are, the less strength you have to wield against her. The worse your situation, the better hers becomes. She claims to want to end your misery. Well. There are two ways to end someone's suffering.'

He turned to address the Priestess directly. 'But you eat well enough, I dare say. Why, last night I turned up unannounced – having just caught the outsider – and there was a full cauldron of mutton stew just coming to the boil. I doubt any of you have ever seen such a feast – and all for her and the traitor's son, that *boy* she keeps as her pet.'

The crowd tittered and exchanged glances. Someone

near the back spat on the ground.

Ash's fingers curled into fists. The clenched muscles of his jaw began to ache. *Why doesn't she say she knew he was coming? Why doesn't she tell them the stew would have fed us for days?*

But the Priestess held her tongue.

'And that is not the worst of it,' Dain said, wagging a stubby finger. 'She gave the girl a bowl too!' The tittering turned to uproar, and Dain watched with smiling eyes. 'I see you're all beginning to see things the way I see them – as they really are. Surely you've noticed your priestess bathing in the pool every day, while the rest of us must stay away, sweating and toiling and grovelling for every sip of water?'

*Stream-dreaming*, Ash thought. *Everyone knows she's stream-dreaming*. And yet he saw several people nodding their agreement. Loxley, the weaver, whispered in Kelly's ear. The slaughterman shook his head and fiddled with the cruel club hanging from his waist.

'I am sorry to be the one to lift the wool,' Dain said. 'Truly I am. But the so-called "Priestess" is leading us to our doom. She is harbouring an outsider – a *cursed* outsider – in this very house. Protecting the girl over all of you! Over all of us!'

No, Ash thought. He wanted to shout it, to scream it. But he knew his words were worthless. If he spoke up for the Priestess, he would only condemn her further. All he could do was stand and seethe and feel his hatred for Bronwyn burrow deeper.

*If I give her up, I could become a hero.*

But no sooner had the thought crossed his mind than he saw the Priestess looking directly at him, and he knew the thought would go unspoken. To betray Bronwyn would be to betray the Priestess.

Dain raised his hand, and the crowd fell silent in a way it had only ever done for the holy woman. ‘Last night, I argued for the girl to be cast out. I warned that she would bring nothing but misfortune.’ He shook his head. ‘But I was voted down. The Priestess and Tristan united against me. I respect our customs, and so I had no choice but to accept the Council’s verdict. But the decision weighed heavily on my conscience. I barely slept last night, and today I woke to this.’

He held his arms out, as though the whole world was changed.

The crowd turned their scowling faces towards Tristan, who lowered his wiry yellow head.

‘But Elder Tristan voted under a particular condition,’

Dain continued. 'He said that he would change his mind should there be any sign that the girl was cursed. Isn't that so, Tristan?'

Tristan glanced at Dain, cringing against the clot of hate at his back. 'Aye. That's so.'

'And I think it would be fair to say there was a certain amount of coercion in the way you voted. Letting the girl stay didn't seem to sit well with you.'

Tristan looked at Dain more steadily. He glanced around and began to nod, slowly at first but then with more assurance. He understood that he was being offered a path to safety – and he lunged for it. 'The Priestess is a very persuasive woman,' he said, raising his head and setting his shoulders. 'I didn't feel like myself last night.' He glanced at Dain, who nodded encouragingly. 'In fact, I wondered afterwards whether I hadn't been preyed upon by some sort of witchcraft.'

The crowd took a panicky step backwards. Those at the front tried to ease behind their neighbours. Ash saw a child being snatched into the folds of its mother's skirt.

'Do you wish to change your mind?' Dain asked. 'Any vote may be recast if it's the Elders' will – especially if they've since broken free from some kind of hex.'

'I do,' Tristan said, his voice loud and firm.

‘You wish for the girl to be banished?’

‘Aye.’

Ash closed his eyes and shook his head, trying hard to ignore the flood of relief he felt.

‘Very well,’ Dain said. He turned to the Priestess. ‘Will you go inside and fetch the girl?’

The Priestess raised her chin. ‘I will not.’

A hiss of disapproval rippled through the crowd.

‘In which case I shall have to come in and take her.’

Dain stepped towards the door, but the Priestess refused to move.

‘This is a holy house. The Four Fathers dwell here. I will not permit force to be used within its walls.’

Dain hesitated. The mention of the Four Fathers had momentarily unnerved him. He looked up at the small, deep windows, dark even in the fierce morning light. They were like empty eye sockets, and yet they seemed to see all.

‘You intend to disobey the will of the village?’ he said.

‘No. I do not. The will of the village is to survive – more than survive: to live. If you take this girl now, the Ancestors will see that we are duly punished. Our suffering will not end. It will worsen.’ She took a deep breath and looked out over the villagers. ‘In three days’

time, the sun will disappear and our suffering will be over. If that does not come to pass, you may banish me in the girl's place.'

'No!' Ash shouted, but his voice was lost amongst the noise of the crowd.

Dain's eyes lit up with a cruel hunger, but he waited for the hubbub to subside before speaking. 'Banishment won't be enough to appease them, Priestess. What the Ancestors demand is a sacrifice. Blood. Will you take the girl's place then?'

The Priestess looked down at her clasped hands. 'I will.'

There was no response from the villagers. No whispers, no shouts. They stood in a dreary kind of silence, sweating beneath the merciless sun. Ash saw, from the drooping smile on Dain's face, that he had not expected the Priestess to place such faith in the girl, in the gods.

The Priestess raised her head and smiled placidly. 'I said earlier that each of the Four Fathers would devise their own trial. The girl is the first, the drought is the second, the death of the sun will be the third.' She looked at Dain as though he were a mosquito, fat with the blood of others. A mosquito she intended to turn

into a red smear. 'I think we might just have witnessed the Four Fathers' final test: revolt.'

It was Dain's turn to be scrutinized by the villagers. He shot a nervous look at Tristan, who looked to the sky, as though he expected to be crushed by an invisible hand. But there was nothing there but the sun: the flaming eye that watched, and never blinked.

'No harm will come to the girl,' the Priestess declared.

The villagers looked on – scared, confused, thirsty – and for a moment no one moved. From far below came the mournful sound of a sheep bleating. It seemed to rouse the villagers. There were chores to do, children to admonish, hours to grind out till nightfall.

'Four Fathers be praised!' someone called.

The Priestess bowed her head. 'And may they always guide you.'

The villagers began to drift away. The Priestess looked up and studied the sky. 'Take shelter tonight,' she said. 'There's a storm coming.'