

Astrid
Lovell



SPARK
IN THE
DARK

Romantasy

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THE DAWN OF AETHERIA
SPARK IN THE DARK

ASTRID LOVELL

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Chapter 1: Ash and Shadow

Ash—that's what my world breathed. Not the gray dust of a cooled hearth, but the acrid, bitter grit of the Gloom Blight. It devoured Etheria relentlessly, poisoning the flesh of the earth and the waters, draining life from everything it touched. In its wake, the Blight left dead wastes where the wind chased charred scraps, and a soul-chilling whisper haunted the cursed ones—creatures that had once been people, beasts, even blades of grass.

Legends whispered that Craydol, our forgotten settlement nestled at the foot of the Gloom Fangs, had once bloomed with apple orchards. The elders still remembered those days, their tales sounding like fairy stories amid our squat homes of rough stone and blackened timber, rooted deep into the soil. But that was before the shadow fell upon our lands, before magic twisted from blessing to curse, from gift to brand.

My name is Elara. My magic—the Life-Giving Spark, as the old healer Moira had called it in reverent whispers, the only one who knew its secret—was a chain to me, not a gift. The power to coax color back into a wilting flower or ease the sting of a scratch held no value here, in a world that prized cold steel and callused hands. Worse, it drew sidelong glances and cowardly murmurs in my wake. In Etheria, those who wielded magic were feared and loathed no less than the Blight itself. I had learned to hide my Spark, to smother it, to feel shame for it like some infectious blight. Sometimes, it felt like just another face of the same darkness.

Today's drudgery was no different from a hundred others. I gutted fish in the back alley of the Sly Fox tavern—a den reeking of despair and sour ale. Only here did Mother Gretta, the proprietress with ham-like hands and a temper to match, toss me a few coins for the filthiest work. The stench of fish entrails and stagnant water had seeped into my skin, my threadbare tunic. It clung to me like a mark of shame.

“Elara! Stop dawdling like a sleepy slug! Lord Reynard’s expecting his catch for luncheon!” Mother Gretta’s voice rasped from the grease-smearred kitchen window.

“Right away, Mother Gretta!” I called back, forcing my tone to servile brightness, not the hollow exhaustion and gnawing hunger I truly felt. Lord Reynard, our self-proclaimed “ruler,” was a greasy sort with shifty eyes and damp palms that always seemed eager to land on my shoulder. The thought of this fish ending up on his plate turned my stomach.

It was in that moment, as I scraped away the last stubborn scale, that the ground trembled. A faint vibration, as if some colossal beast far in the mountains had sighed in its sleep. The chickens in their coop clucked in panic. I froze, knife hovering in my hand.

And then the sky fell.

As if some unseen hand had draped black velvet over the sun. The world plunged into ominous twilight. An icy chill slithered beneath my tunic, setting my teeth to chattering. Folks in the square stood like statues, their faces upturned to the darkened heavens, twisted in primal terror. Everything fell silent. A deafening hush pressed down on the settlement, heavy as stone.

And in that deathly quiet came the thunder of hooves.

Steady, heavy, inexorable. Each beat pulsed in my chest like an alarm. From the shadows at the north gate rode five

horsemen, woven from darkness itself. Their armor, the color of burnished steel, swallowed the light, and the eyes of their mighty steeds burned with crimson fire. They carried the chill of the grave.

But they weren't what seized my gaze.

At their head, astride a stallion blacker than night, rode he. Lord Kaeden.

A name uttered in whispers across Etheria. Synonymous with the merciless might of Nocturne, the dark citadel at the heart of the Gloom Fangs. The Overlord's right hand, whose legions turned lands to ash. They said his heart was forged of ice, and shadow itself coursed through his veins.

He towered in the saddle, his presence radiating unyielding will—a tangible pressure that weighed on the air. Raven-black strands framed a face sculpted by glaciers: sharp cheekbones, lips set in grim resolve. But his eyes... even from across the square, I felt their frosty power. The hue of storm clouds laced with steel, piercing straight through. At his hip rested a sword in ebony scabbard; its hilt, inlaid with stones the color of congealed blood, drank the light, thickening the gloom around it.

He reined in before the tavern. The silence in the square thickened to the point of cracking. Even Mother Gretta froze on the threshold, her face ashen-gray.

Lord Kaeden slowly swept his gaze over the stunned crowd. His thin lips curved in a cold, predatory smirk. When he spoke, his voice was low and velvety, edged with steel that sent a shiver racing down my spine.

"I'm looking for a girl," he said, each word echoing in the hush. "Her name is Elara."

My heart stuttered, then hammered so fiercely I swore the whole square could hear it. The fish knife slipped from my numb fingers, clattering against the stones. Every eye—fright-

ened, curious, gleeful—snapped to me. I felt stripped bare before an unrelenting fate.

Lord Kaeden lazily followed their stares. His icy, penetrating eyes locked onto mine. And in that instant, I understood with paralyzing clarity: the ash my world had breathed was merely a prelude. The true shadow had just come for me.

Blood drained from my face. Instinct lifted my chin.

“You’ve made a mistake, milord,” my voice came out steadier than I felt, though I trembled inside. “My name is... Lina.”

The lie tumbled out. Foolish. Futile.

The corner of his mouth twitched, like a predator savoring the final, doomed twitch of its prey.

“Lina?” he drawled, a silent laugh sharpening the velvet of his tone, keen as an ice shard. “The one so desperately trying to hide the scent of fish and fear? The one whose fingers tremble so she can scarcely conceal behind her back her...” He paused, tasting the words. “...Life-Giving Spark?”

It hit me like a blow. That name... only Moira knew it. How could he? Icy dread locked my mind.

“There she is, Your Grace! Elara!” Mother Gretta simpered, shoving me forward. “Ungrateful chit! If you want her, take her—we’ve nothing but trouble from the girl!”

Lord Reynard was already scurrying toward Kaeden, bowing low in obsequious fawning. “Lord Kaeden, what an honor! If this wench has caught your eye, we wouldn’t dream of standing in your way!”

Kaeden didn’t spare them a glance. All his attention, heavy as molten lead, pinned me in place. He dismounted with fluid grace, panther-like. He was taller than he’d seemed in the saddle; beneath the black doublet, the muscles of a warrior shifted. He smelled of ozone, cold iron, and something sharp, like thunder over scorched earth.

He took a step toward me. Another. I wanted to flee, but my feet rooted to the ground.

“Elara,” he said my name like he was savoring it. “You’ll come with me.”

It was a command, forged in steel.

“I... won’t go anywhere with you,” I breathed.

One of his warriors menacingly gripped his sword hilt, but Kaeden halted him with a casual flick of his hand, never breaking that terrifying gaze from mine.

“You will,” he repeated, softer now, the quiet laced with more menace than any shout. “Your Spark is needed by my Overlord. And he will have it. Either you come willingly, sparing your life and this... “ He disdainfully surveyed the square. “...godsforsaken village. Or Craydol learns today what true Blight means—the kind that arrives with fire and unspeakable horror, at my word alone.”

Ice gripped my heart. I glanced at the frozen faces of the people I’d known all my life. At the children huddling against their mothers in fear. I knew he wasn’t bluffing. His Overlord. The Dark Sovereign of Nocturne. My Spark... was it truly that vital?

A bitter lump rose in my throat. No choice. My freedom for the lives of dozens.

“Very well,” I whispered, angrily brushing away the hot tears of helplessness. I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. “I’ll go. But you leave Craydol in peace.”

Kaeden tilted his head slightly, appraising my swift surrender. A flicker of cold approval glinted in his eyes.

“Prudent,” he said curtly. Then, to the warrior with the scar slashing across his face: “Cassian, ready a horse for her. And see she causes no... trouble.”

The last word dripped with frost. To him, I was merely an inconvenience.

Cassian, silent as stone, seized my elbow. His grip was iron, brooking no escape. They led me to the horses. I cast a final glance at Craydol. The people averted their eyes. No one spoke. Only little Timmy, the baker's boy whose bruises I'd secretly mended with my Spark, watched me with wide, frightened eyes, clutching his wooden horse.

They hoisted me onto a mare with restless eyes. Lord Kaeden was already mounted, his dark silhouette looming ominously against the sky, which was beginning to lighten. He gave a sharp signal, and the riders moved out in silence toward the north gate, into the Wastes.

I didn't look back.

We rode in silence. Only the thud of hooves and creak of leather broke the hush. The path led north, toward the jagged peaks of the Gloom Fangs, beyond which lay Nocturne—the city of eternal night.

When Craydol vanished behind a hill, I stole a glance over my shoulder. Far in the distance, only a thin wisp of smoke curled from the tavern's chimney. My former home. My old life.

I faced forward again. Lord Kaeden rode just ahead, his back ramrod straight, unyielding. He paid me no mind, as if I were not a person but prized cargo.

Or perhaps he knew already. Knew all my fears, all my pain. And didn't care.

My Life-Giving Spark... what did they want with it? I had no answers. But one thing I knew for certain: I wouldn't break. I'd find a way to survive. The Spark within me wasn't just for fading flowers. Perhaps it could kindle a fire in my soul. And one day, I'd make Lord Kaeden regret the day he came for the girl named Elara.

The sky above us cleared, but the shadow of his towering figure trailed me, draping me in its chill darkness.

In the fractured world of Etheria, the Gloom Blight devours all it touches—twisting vibrant cities into barren wastelands and driving survivors to the brink of madness. Amid this encroaching doom, one fragile light endures: Elara, bearer of the rare Life-Giving Spark.

Prophesied as the Child of Light, Elara alone holds the power to heal the Blight and restore balance to a dying realm. But hope is a double-edged blade—coveted by allies, weaponized by enemies. When she is captured by the Overlord's merciless legions and dragged to the shadowed fortress of Nocturne, her fate falls into the hands of Kaeden, a battle-hardened warrior of the dark. Ruthless and unyielding, he wields his blade with lethal precision and commands the loyalty of thousands. Yet beneath his armored resolve stirs something unforeseen: a dangerous pull toward the captive whose inner fire could redeem Etheria—or unleash its total unraveling.

Torn between chains and conviction, light and shadow, Elara must navigate a treacherous path where every alliance teeters on betrayal. Her pulse races with dread and unwelcome desire, as she grapples with unshakeable faith in goodness and the seductive necessity of bargaining with darkness. In the crucible of their forbidden bond, a war ignites—not just of ancient magics and awakened Hearts, but for salvation of the soul: hers, and the enigmatic captor who might be her undoing.

Spark in the Dark is a gripping Romantasy of profound metamorphosis, where romance blooms not despite suffering, but from its embers. Here, love is a forge of trials, magic a burdensome gift, and every shadowed breath pulses with fragile hope. In a world on the precipice, one woman's choices could mend the frayed tapestry of existence—or tear it asunder forever.

"When your jailer sees the light you hide, and you glimpse the shadows he buries—that's when enemies become the spark that ignites the heart."

For fans of slow-burn enemies-to-lovers, soul-deep emotional journeys, and high-stakes fantasies where choosing love means risking everything—or perishing in the attempt.

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