
A FREE FIRST CHAPTER

THE SPARK AND THE RUIN

Every power has a price.

SEAN McKINLEY

CHAPTER ONE

The Discovery

WELCOME TO MY LIFE in Citriphere, where freedom exists only in Frihet Edelsten, the fabled land of the north. I was cursed to be born in the south, a brutal territory ruled by the Brigadiers and the Mad Queen, who, they say, slit her parents' throats at thirteen. The South isn't governed; it's endured. Violence oozes from every corner: the sour sweat of nomads, the stench of rogue slaves packed into pits, mercenaries with blood still drying on their blades, and the shrill laughter of the Chuckle tribe echoing through the wastes. Here, you learn fast: be cruel, or die.

I knew this better than most. Every day I descended into the Byrndis mines, where the air was thick with rock dust and sweat, coating my tongue in grit. Clink. Clink. Clink. The pickaxes rang like hammer blows inside my skull, never stopping, never softening. The rhythm followed me into my dreams. Mining was safer than the battlefield. Most soldiers rotted before thirty, but my life belonged to the Queen, and the mines were the least painful way to waste it.

Gems ruled everything, currency, power, medicine. Peridot, Onyx, Emerald, Garnet, Citrine. The veins beneath Byrndis glowed like the kingdom's own bloodstream, and we were the scavengers clawing them out. The pay barely fed us. The work broke us. But at least I was still breathing.

The tunnels were a maze, sixty men crammed into an acre, the walls lit by emeralds that bled a sickly green glow. The air reeked of oil, unwashed bodies, and iron filings. Food halls served stale bread and bitter stew. Med tents reeked of vinegar and rot. Even the smithies clanged with a hopeless rhythm, iron on iron, like we were building chains for our own wrists. My mind wandered north to Frihet Edelsten, or west to Gamblers Grotto. Anywhere but here.

“Able, you alive over there?” Claude’s voice pulled me back. He leaned on his pick, sweat streaking the dirt on his face. “You’re staring at that tool like it owes you money. Hear about those steamers? Let the machine do the work, sounds good to me.”

“They’re death traps,” I muttered. My throat was raw from the dust. “One blew in Area Five. Killed everyone.” Claude shrugged, lips cracked, teeth stained from chewing root. “Better to die easy than die poor. Now swing before you starve.”

I gritted my teeth and slammed my pick into the wall. The stone shivered beneath the blow, then something inside it pushed back. The shock jolted up my arms and slammed me to my knees. The head of the axe snapped and buried ~~itself in my shoulder~~. A flash of hot iron shot through me.

Claude cursed and scrambled over. “Damn! You alright?”

“Just, pull it out!” I forced the words through clenched teeth. When he yanked the steel free, pain blinded my vision. Warm blood spilled fast, soaking my shirt. The coppery tang filled my nose, thick and nauseating. I tore at the fabric, wrapping strips tight around the wound as my heartbeat thudded against the cloth.

Then I saw it.

Wedged in the wall, glowing faintly in the dust, was a gem unlike any I’d seen, bluish, the size of a plum, a sapphire light pulsing in its heart. It seemed to breathe. Cold air spilled off it, stinging my skin, sharper than the wound itself.

Claude pried it out, holding it like it might bite. The glow shimmered across his face as he shoved it into his pouch, then dragged me toward the med tent.

Across the cavern, Dallas, the Queen’s engineer and enforcer, adjusted copper tubing on a steamer, a towering, ox-sized machine of gears and steel. The machine hissed and groaned. Brilliant, brutal, obsessed with perfection, he was everything the Queen admired. Dallas

was all sharp lines and cold eyes, his hands blackened with oil but steady as clockwork.

I watched him twist a valve, then seize the Quarry Master. “You drink tea?”

The man blinked. “I, I don’t see, ”

Dallas slammed his face into the piping. Steam hissed, carrying the smell of scorched flesh. “Steamers whistle before they blow. When something’s wrong, you stop the damn machine. Understand?”

The Quarry Master whimpered. Dallas straightened. His gaze cut toward us. “Hope that gem doesn’t explode like the yellow ones,” I muttered under my breath.

Dallas’s head snapped. ~~“Explode?” Dallas~~ turned, eyes narrowing. “What gem?”

Claude fished the stone out of his pouch. “This one, found it in Shaft Five.” The air seemed to thicken as Dallas stared at it. His pupils tightened, his breath hitched.

A moonstone. “Give me the gem,” he said, voice flat as steel. Then to me: “Able, get to the tent. Don’t die on my floor.”

I staggered away, blood dripping hot and sticky down my arm. Behind me, Claude lingered. “You want on a steamer crew?” Dallas asked him. “Yes, sir. I’ll work twice as, ” Dallas waved him off. “You’ve got nothing to offer.” Claude’s voice cracked. “Wait! That gem, we found it together, ” Dallas’s interest returned. “Any more?”

“No, just that one. So... can I start?” Dallas smiled without warmth. “Of course. You’ll get exactly what you deserve.” The hiss of a spring. A flash of steel. Claude clutched his throat, blood bubbling between his fingers. The smell of iron filled the air as he collapsed, choking. Dallas crouched beside him. “You work for what you want. Today, I got everything.”

Claude twitched once, then went still. Dallas flexed his wrist, examining the mechanism on his bracer. Too slow. He’d tune the spring tighter. A fraction of a second could decide a life.

Dallas wasn't driven by politics or loyalty. A former miner from Guillon Hollow, skin gray with dust and lungs black with soot. Now he kept a hidden den carved deep underground, crammed with stolen gems, weapons, and half-born inventions. His true obsession was knowledge, and destruction.

The Queen's orders were clear: if a moonstone was found, it went to her. No explanation was ever given. Moonstones were rare, volatile, and unpredictable. Some whispered they showed the future, others swore they burned out after one use. Not fuel. Not a weapon. Just... possibility.

Dallas didn't care about why. He stowed the stone, climbed into his steamer, and the machine ~~lurched forward with~~ a roar that rattled the cavern walls. Gears screamed. Steam burned the air. He set course for Byrngerd. The Queen would be waiting.

The story is just beginning.

Able has a wound that won't be the last, a moonstone is racing toward the Queen, and three sisters are about to change a world that was only ever trying to survive them.

Continue reading *The Spark and the Ruin*.

Get the full book on Amazon

amazon.com/dp/B0GWWC5J2L