

**Root of the Spark: A Wild Seed Novel**  
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## Chapter One

### *Dell*

I knew I should move; there were bits of broken glass digging into my back and blood under my fingernails. I should be thinking about how I was going to get home, cut up, naked, alone...but I needed a moment. Just to lie back in the aftermath, my eyelids drooping and sliding over my unfocused gaze, to understand and savor this.

I felt no pain, only pleasure, awe, and a deep-rooted satisfaction as I breathed in the musty air of the warehouse. As my head rolled to the side, my hair danced deliciously across my bare breasts.

I cupped my hand between my legs, gentle but firm. The intensity of the Dream energy around my crotch was like a ball of pulsating white-hot fire that radiated up to my ribs and down to my knees. I closed my eyes, and my inner vision could see my whole body glowing, brightest at the groin energy node. This was my power. My creative source. I'd been a long time fighting it, but now I held on, like a soldier gripping his weapon. This was security. Here was where I would reign.

Most people will say that a man's sexuality has power. And most people will say that a woman's sexuality has power. But both of these mean different things on different sides of the border. The funny thing is that both the Motherland and the Fatherland seem to agree that when you mix a man and a woman together, what you get is not power at all. What you get is abomination.

That would be me.

The freak. I was the first true hermaphrodite on my world, carrying a full set of both organs. Everyone wants to know that. I might as well drop my pants as shake hands. *Hi, nice to meet you. Can I see your bits?* You can see people trying to work up to it.

As if there were some polite way to ask those questions of a friend, let alone a complete stranger.

I let my eyes roll back and thought of Marcus. I hadn't let myself think of him in years. Strange that he would come to me now. His smile. His hands touching me. "Quing," he would whisper in my ear as he kissed my neck. His pet name for me always made me laugh and blush, his queen and king all in one. It held the sparkle of wicked teasing. He knew about my mother's mortifying plan that I would one day unite the Motherlanders and Fatherlanders, but more than that, there was the deep glow in his eyes that said I already ruled his heart. I could feel the desire swelling in me, catching in my throat at the thought of him. My spine arched a fraction, the ghost of my ache for him. The first person to awaken me like that. The first to treasure me, and the first to break my heart.

And both were a part of me, of my power. All the shades of lust and love. I let go of my surroundings and saw versions of myself flash before me like a flickering film: adored, adoring, passionate, dominant, submissive, lusty, abandoned...desired and desperado. And loss, so much loss. These were all part of who I had been, and they suddenly were what made me whole, not what made me weak and broken.

Flood quick, my blood flashed through me, from my heart down my arms, and from my belly to my crotch and back. I pressed my naked ass down into the grit and shards. The scratch and prick of it were oddly satisfying. I pulled in a great breath and sighed it out. *Time to move.*

I gave my lovely genitals one last clutch and then slowly tried to roll over and get onto all fours. It took a while. I was starting to feel the pain, and I moaned deep in my chest, the mane of my hair hanging down into the mess. I couldn't rouse the energy to care or to check myself over. I'd won, and I was alive. Those were the main things. Naked, alone, and battered...now that, I could handle.

That morning had been like any other: the overbright sun of the parched, whitewashed city, the lingering smell of burning garbage. The solitude. Well, maybe the

solitude had gotten a bit heavy lately. Maybe that was why I'd gone out walking. I had dressed as a man, with small measures of guilt and irritation. I hadn't dressed with any kind of style or pride in what I was for over a year, and it still rankled a little. Announcing one's sex just to walk down the street shouldn't be necessary, but people were always put off when they discovered I was one thing dressed up to look like another.

They caught me down by the docks. Circled around and worked up the nerve. The usual names: *thing*, *pervert*, *freak*. These young men recognized me. I just stood there and breathed. I could tell my silence spooked them. But their fear just made them angrier. I looked each of them in the eye, but I knew they couldn't back down. Not with the others there to see.

They took me into an empty warehouse and smacked me around a bit. They told me I shouldn't have been walking down there alone. Of course, I had to agree. It was foolish. I had been...looking for something. Maybe it was the ocean. It certainly wasn't this. No, I wasn't that desperate.

And not half an hour later, here I was—alive! And blessedly alone, but oh, I was starting to really feel it. With my hands on the floor of the warehouse, heedless of the glass and blood, I got my feet under me. I stood up and flicked my hair back off my face.

There in the doorway stood a man, motionless, staring at me.

He wasn't one of them. No, those young men wouldn't be coming back.

There was a flicker of movement beside him, and a small child peeked out from behind his legs. Large dark eyes stared into me. The man put a hand down protectively in front of the child and said, "Best get some of Silvie's salve as well, Eda. Meet us back at home."

He watched as she ran away, then turned back to me.

"Eda saw what happened and came to get me. I'm sorry I didn't get here sooner." He touched the satchel slung over his shoulder. "We brought our kit. Thought you might need some help." His gaze slid over my naked body, and he swallowed hard.

My adrenaline ran out right about then, and I staggered. Suddenly he was at my side, holding me up, and the rough pressure on my joints sent a wave of pain through me. I whimpered.

"Sorry. Here, put your arm around me." He half carried me to a crate, took off his coat, laid it down, and sat me on top of it.

I wanted to protest that I'd get it dirty, but the wet feeling of my bare skin against the worn bugskin coating said it was already too late for that. "That's going to need washing, I'm afraid." I smiled at him and gingerly touched my face. The bruises were swelling up.

His eyebrows came down, and he muttered, "The least I could do."

I started to shiver. I wasn't sure if it was the cool shade of the warehouse, or the shock, or the relief of it being over...or maybe just the nearness of a fellow member of the human race.

His hand hovered around my shoulder. "We need to get you out of here," he said. "They could come back."

"They won't."

"But they could."

"No," I held his gaze. "They won't. I'm sure."

He slightly sucked in his lips. "Because they found out who you were?"

I smiled and shook my head. "I scared them."

"Okay... So I can look you over here, and you'll feel safe?"

I laughed. "Safe? I feel victorious!" My voice rose alarmingly, a shade toward hysteria, and I tried to rein myself in a bit, but giggles bubbled up. "I'm sorry." I rubbed

my forehead and covered my eyes. "I guess I'm more giddy than I thought." *He knows who you are, Dell. Try not to be a total mess.*

"Please," he said as he crouched before me. "Don't apologize to me."

"Hey." I rested my hand on his shoulder. "I'm okay, really."

He looked up at me, and the light hit gold flecks in his eyes. I squeezed the thick muscle of his shoulder. "I'm stronger than I look."

This time he returned the smile. "I can see that. I'd like to assess all the damage before I move you, though." I nodded. It sounded like he knew what he was doing.

He was gentle, his movements careful but sure. Still, it hurt like hell. It was the glass in my neck that hurt the most. I've always been a bit of a tenderfoot. I bit my lip and cried out way too much, and there were tears dripping off my chin when he was finished. He laid his hand lightly on my shoulder for a moment and whispered, "That's it. No broken bones that I can tell and nothing that needs stitching."

I nodded, not trusting my voice.

"Where are your clothes?" he asked. I pointed. He crouched down and examined the smoking pile. "They set them on fire?!" I nodded, and he took off his shirt. I could almost taste the smell of him as he wrapped that shirt around me. Salt and heat. It was magnificent, and it hurt like hell. I hunched over as the fabric settled, and my face came dangerously close to a trail of fine, silky hairs across his bare stomach. I clenched my eyes shut.

We argued over shoes and socks. He wanted me to take his shoes, and I was willing to relent and put on his socks, and in the end it was settled because his shoes were too small for me. I felt the ghost of womanly embarrassment and the shrug of manly indifference and then shook them both off huffily, as I usually did. It was hard not to label every feeling, every moment, when I could see people around me struggling to fit me into a category. *Well, he certainly knows what you are now. Quite explicitly.*

Between the warehouses and down narrow alleyways, we made our way, me leaning heavily on him. I was taller, but he was thicker and stronger by a fair margin. I stopped between two closely placed buildings and said, "Give me a minute."

He hunkered down next to me as I crouched and hung my head. I was glad for the length of the shirt.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Oh." I waved a hand. "I'm all right. It wasn't that bad." I looked up into his haunted eyes. "I mean, they didn't rape me or anything." He looked even more upset. "Hey, it could have been worse."

His nostrils flared. "Should I say that to Eda? That when per grows up, per should be glad not to be raped? That it's not that bad to be stripped and beaten?"

There was a silence as I realized what he was saying. "Did you say...per?"

"It's what we are supposed to say, isn't it? What your mother advocates in her books. Hermaphrodites should be called *per*, for *person*, not *he* or *she*...or *it*."

"Eda is not a girl." I couldn't seem to get that into my head. *And he knows my mother's work?*

"No."

"And you are...per father?"

"I am now."

This was strange. People didn't adopt herm children; they abandoned them. "I see," I said softly, trying to think this through.

"You think so?" He looked away, wrapping his arms around his knees, his bare shoulders rising and falling with each quick breath. Heat radiated off him, warming my chilled flesh on that side.

"I..I'm sorry," he said, running his hand over his face. "I don't know why I'm... You bear it...as if it were easy."

I laughed. "It got a bit easier today."

He looked at me warily. "How many were there?"

"Four."

"So how did you..."

His eyes were so warm, so filled with concern. I could feel myself melting a little, wanting to lean into him. I picked up his hand. It was warm and callused. I brought it to my mouth and laid my lips on his palm, then closed my eyes, let that ball of fire burn inside me again, and swirled my tongue across his skin.

I raised my eyes to his and watched him shiver. Was it pleasure or revulsion? Or both?

"I remembered what I am," I said softly, letting the heat show in my eyes. I felt like a wild creature of the flesh, a powerful, sexual force of nature. His eyes were wide, staring at me, his mouth slightly ajar. Could he see that too, or did he see me the way most Fatherlanders did? Maybe I was a big-boned woman with a penis, who was in need of a man's protection. Or a man who'd been cursed by the Father with breasts and feminine weakness for some terrible crime in a past life.

*Maybe it's time to remember who you are to other people.* I stood up slowly. He tried to help me until I hissed in pain. His hands flew off as if I'd shocked him. "I'm all right now. I can make it back home from here. If you give me your address, I will gladly launder and return your clothes."

"Please. You shame me. I have shamed myself. Please."

I felt myself wanting to step back. He seemed suddenly less of a city boy than he'd first appeared. Was this some kind of northern tradition about the honor code of rescuing someone? Some of the northern Fatherland towns had weird orthodox sects of Father worship, and they had rules for everything. I wondered where he was from. He certainly wasn't a temple-goer. Herms weren't welcome there, as a rule.

"You have been more than kind." I gave a polite smile.

"I have not." I could feel his agitation. He reached for my hand and brought my knuckles to his brow, then knelt down on the cobblestones before me. "Can you forgive me?"

I looked around, feeling panicky, but no one was in sight watching this craziness. "Don't do that. Please. Get up." I tried to pull my hand away, but he held on tight.

"Please say that you will come to my home. That you will meet the children." Dramatics aside, his eyes were pleading, burning into me. It was like this whole situation was strangely personal to him. I'd met kind people on both sides of the border, people who would stop and offer help or concern to others. This was different. He was missing that detachment that even the kindest people had.

I was thoroughly embarrassed, but he didn't seem fazed or ready to relent. "What children?" Maybe he was some kind of rare zealot, and as much as I didn't like religion in general, I could feel his earnestness pulling at me. I had no intention of meeting anyone else today.

"My kids. Mostly herms. Mostly strays." He stood in one fluid motion and placed his hand on the small of my back while motioning me forward.

I didn't move. "You have a pack of hermaphrodite children, and you want me to meet them." There was definitely no religious sect from the Fatherland that this man belonged to.

"Well, yes."

I raised my eyebrows. "Dressed in your shirt and socks and bleeding." Sometimes it's easier to just state the obvious when it seems ridiculous. People tend to get less angry if you don't question them directly.

"Oh."

I smiled. "Ahh...I'm seeing some holes in your plan if it features me as some kind of role model." I'd never be a role model, no matter what I was wearing, but he didn't need to know that.

"Oh, but you are! You've lived. You've traveled and made something of yourself. That's what these kids remember when they hear stories about you. Some of them have even seen films of your performances." His eyes twinkled, the city boy mask firmly back in place.

I covered my mouth. "You're kidding!" I blushed to think of children watching any of my performances. I'd danced, sung, stripped, and been a shit disturber on stage for several years before I walked away from everything, but my shows were live only and certainly only for adults. *How had they seen a film?* I stuck with the slightly safer question. "They've heard stories?"

"Of course. You're like a...a saint to them."

"Does it— Wait. What's your name?"

"Zavvy."

"Okay, Zavvy, does it look to you like I'm in any state to give your kids hope today?" I thought about my mother's idea of who I could become. I was meant to be this serious, educated, successful diplomat who could follow in her activist footsteps. I had a dad from the Fatherland and a mum from the Motherland, powerful family members and connections, and every opportunity to learn and become someone who could make a difference in the world. Instead, I'd thrown all of that away and taken the night life as my domain. I'd razzle-dazzled it pretty damn hard, but even that wild energy had left me this past year. I was just me now, no dress-up, family expectations long since dashed. I squared my shoulders and stood a little straighter, though, feeling the fire still inside me. I might just be plain old me, but I still had some juice left in the tank.

He looked me over and stared into my eyes. "Yes," he said. "Yes, it does."

I couldn't help but smile. Maybe a ragtag band would find something heroic in me. I threw my hands into the air and regretted what it did to my shoulder, not to mention that the long shirt lifted alarmingly. "All right, then. Lead on." *What in hellnation am I doing?*

I'll admit that I wanted to see those children very badly just then too. I couldn't remember meeting more than one herm at a time before. It all seemed very ill-conceived, but then, that's what this day had been all about. And I really didn't fancy walking to my apartment in only a shirt. I'd kept out of the newslies for a good long while now. If I could keep it that way, this day might not be a complete disaster.

"They didn't strip me." It seemed important to tell him that somehow, but as soon as the words left my mouth, I realized how disturbing they sounded. "Don't get me wrong—I didn't volunteer for that." I laughed shakily. "I just mean..." What did I mean? Was this something I should be discussing with someone I didn't even know? I thought about those kids. Would I tell them what had happened?

## Chapter Two

### *Ledder*

I woke up on the floor. Can't say it's the first time. But this floor was soft, warm, like lying on someone's belly. Someone enormously fat. My fingers sank in a bit as I pushed myself up. I was alone in a small white room. No doors. No windows. The ceiling glowed, and as I stared up at it, it got a bit brighter. No cracks in the surface. No real corners either, everything coved and smooth.

Dread filled me. I got up and walked around the room, touching the soft squishy walls, then got down on my knees to search for any cracks. There had to be some way for the air to get in, or I'd be dead by now. There had to be some way out of here.

I was down under the city; there was no other explanation. I started to sweat. They said there was something alive down here. Something that kept the cons alive and caged. They called it dragon, wyrm, hellnation's demon. I remembered the riot when they moved all the prisoners down here. A lot of burning buildings and screaming, but it didn't change anything when only the poorest people were shouting about it.

I'd worked with a guy that did time underground. They kept putting off his wife and changing the length of his sentence, no matter how many times she went down to the courthouse to argue with the lordsmen. It went on and on, and when he finally came out, he was different. Came down to the bar with me one night but wouldn't drink. Said it wasn't so bad but wouldn't say much else. I could see in his eyes that there was a whole shitload he wasn't saying. Or couldn't say, maybe. Maybe he was just scared pissless that he'd slip up and have to come back here.

It cost a lot of credit, they said, to keep the worthless plinkers. This way they could do it almost for free and open more schools. You know they never thought about what

it would be like down here because they never for a second thought they'd ever get locked inside. The lordsmen said it was safe, but they sure as hellnation didn't spend much time dropping off prisoners. I'd watched them at the mouth of the tunnel when I walked to work, and it was in and out, and them with white faces, hot-stepping it out of there double quick.

I shook off the creeping fingerbones and set out to search the place properly. There was nothing. Just this soft white stuff that stretched over the floor and the walls and the ceiling. Nothing but me. My heart started racing. I was stuck in here. I was alone. I crouched down at one end of the room and put my head in my hands. Had they knocked me out? Gassed me? My head didn't ache. I remembered the courtroom when they sentenced me. They said that credits would go to Gotta and the boys so they wouldn't starve while I was in the plink, but when I realized I'd be coming down here, to finking hellnation's cavern? I'd stood up too quick and started pointing and losing my plinky plonk all over the place and none too quiet. A big guy gets attention like that. Tends not to be the nice kind. It took four of 'em to pin me, wrenching my arm something nasty before things went fuzzy on me. I rolled my shoulder, but it didn't hurt, which was plain finky.

There was a small noise at the other end of the room, and I whipped my head up. The wall on that end was moving, like when you throw a stone into the sea. It dipped in the middle, and circles rippled out. I stood up quick.

"Hello," said a voice. "I'm glad that you're awake." Someone was standing behind the thick white curtain of the wall. I could see the outline of their face pushing into the room like a mask.

"Who are you?" I asked. My face was sweating now too, and I could smell the fear coming off me. Not good.

"I'm Acorn," it said. "Can I come in?"

"Does it look like I have any bloody choice?" Anger soared in me, and I clutched at it.

It frowned. I can't say how I could see that, with its face shrouded like that, but I did. "Yes," it said. "You can send me away, but I will come back in an hour and ask to see you again." Maybe it was here to feed me. I wasn't that hungry yet. I could hold out.

"And if I tell you to get out?"

"Then I'll come back every hour until you agree to speak with me. I need your consent before we can go any further."

"*Consent?* Did I give my consent to be stuck in here?" I stepped closer and wondered if I could grab the face and pull this Acorn into the room. I couldn't tell if it was a boy or a girl, but it looked like a kid's head. The face was sticking in above the height of my waist, so maybe it was that much shorter than me. Maybe I could rip a hole in the white stuff. Maybe it was a thin layer, like a blanket with a door hidden behind it.

"I know that you are held here against your will, but nothing will be done without your consent." It didn't talk like a kid but also didn't sound very tough. Sure as hellnation wasn't very big. A lump of hope stuck in my throat. Was it my fault the sick plinkers were using kids to do their dirty work? I wouldn't hurt this...Acorn, just get past it. Maybe a corridor...

"All right, I give you my consent to let me out of this bloody padded cell." I walked right up to it and looked along the edges of the face. No cracks. The white stuff was thinner than I'd thought. It was lying over the kid's skin like a very stretchy sheet.

The face looked sad. "I'm sorry, Ledder. I can't let you out yet."

"But you will." I tried to speak with harsh authority.

"That depends on you."

"On me what?" The white sheet must have been pressed right over Acorn's eyeballs, which didn't make any sense, but I could see the detail of where the white eyes met the white eyelids. It must be able to see through the layer.

"On your choices."

"Oh, that's rich. Like I have any bloody choices left."

"There are always choices. No one can take that away from you."

I pointed my finger in its face. "Bullshit. I was put in here. I don't deserve this. I haven't done anything wrong!" The wall on my left lit up, and I swung toward it. There was a picture of me there, a moving picture clearer than any film I'd ever seen. I was in a room, my apartment, and I was standing over my wife as she crouched down on the floor. I was hitting her.

The picture stopped moving, and there I was with this terrible animal look on my face, my arm up in the air, getting ready to hit her again. I backed up and walked right into the wall behind me. The picture faded away, and the white wall was back. I slid down and put my head in my hands again.

"I was drunk," I said. My heart beat faster, and the hairs on my arms stood up. I was stuck in here. Stuck in here with... What was that thing? If it could put pictures like that up on the wall, what else could it do to me?

There was no answer but a small noise like before. I looked up to see its whole head and a shoulder leaning into the room as the kid looked at me. "I'm sorry to show you that on your first day here, but it's better in the long run to let you know early on. The main thing is, I want to help you. I can help you change that." Its arm stretched out to point toward the wall the pictures had been on, and I jumped for it. I caught the arm and pulled as hard as I could.

It felt just like the floor and the walls, soft on the outside but harder on the inside. Like a real arm. Except that it came off in my hand. The arm just broke off the wall. I staggered backward and looked from the wall to the arm and back again. The broken end of the arm was ragged, but there was no blood. I could see that it was white inside as well, like a statue's arm, but light-weight, lighter even than a real arm.

Acorn stood there half inside the wall, with its shoulder all torn-looking, and then it smiled sadly at me. "You can't hurt me, Ledder." A new white arm stretched out from the stump, shook itself, and then waved at me.

"What are you?" I whispered.

It shook its head like it was disappointed. "That's not the right question, but it will do. I'll tell you as much as I can. I may not always answer, but I won't lie to you, Ledder."

Its body stepped forward out of the wall so that I could see its whole shape. I backed up until I was against the wall and held the broken arm out in front of me. Acorn was naked except for something wrapped around its hips. It sat down on the floor, white all over; even the eyes were white. It spooked the hell outta me.

"You know I'm not a human." It didn't ask. I could feel sweat trickling down all over my body. There were stories about the cons living down in the tunnels, but some of them said the tunnels themselves were alive—and that's where I couldn't think about it anymore. All I could think of was that story about being swallowed by a whale, with its rib bones like jail bars and its stomach acid eating the shoes off your feet.

This wasn't a servant, then. This was the real thing. I'd known that, hadn't I?

"But it's also important that you understand that I'm not male or female. I don't want you to feel that I've tricked you when you figure that out."

I swallowed, but my throat was bone dry. "I didn't think you were. A boy or a girl, I mean."

It cocked its head. "Hmm. I'm impressed. Most people see what they want to see. I'm also not a child. At least not by your count. I've been on this planet as long as people have."

"You made the air okay to breathe. That's the story."

It shrugged. "I had an army of helpers. Algae, bacteria, plants. We all worked together to alter this place for you."

"And for yourself. You did it for yourself too."

"Not in the way you mean. I can live anywhere, Ledder. But in some ways it was for me. Humans were my main work, my purpose."

"What about now? You used to leave us alone, and now we're a fun hobby again?"

It slumped a little and sighed. How did it sigh? Did its mouth even let air in? A shiver ran over me. "It's a fair question," it said, "but a long story. Perhaps too much to tell just now." It stood up.

"Well, that's convenient." Why was I mouthing off? It had me trapped here. I gripped the broken arm, and the fleshiness of it made me want to gag. *What are you going to do? Beat it up with its own fake arm?* But I couldn't bring myself to toss the thing. It felt good to have something in my hand.

Acorn folded its hands in front of its crotch. "I'll give you some time to think things over." And it turned and started to sink back into the wall. This time there were no ripples. Its flesh just absorbed in, like thick cream pouring into a jug. I swallowed hard.

"What *things*?" I shouted. As much as Acorn creeped me, I didn't want to be alone again.

It stopped halfway into the wall and looked back at me. One arm, one leg still in the room. "Your questions. Your choices will come from those."

"*Questions*? That's rich. Is this a game to you? Holding people's lives in your hands?"

It quirked its head at me and blinked its white fake eyeballs. "No, Ledder. It is not a game to me, but perhaps it might comfort you to think that way. Try to outwit me if

you must. Having thought of the question, you are more likely ready to hear the answer. Those are the rules that I will play by. Think of what is most important for you to know, and I will respond when I return."

In a blink it was gone, the wall flat and smooth again.

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