

## Dark Spark

It came from out of the metal, first and foremost, and then from out of the wood. The impulse that fed the strange fascination that lay dominant and hidden deep inside James. The first event seemed innocuous and it is likely that those present were completely unaware of the significance of that small speck of time.

It is winter and James is a small child, no more than 3. His mother, in her haste, has forgotten to put his mittens on him and as they walk through town he has one hand stuffed deep in his pocket while the other is firmly held in his mother's warm grasp. She stops to chat to a strange man and James's gaze wanders. Then he sees it. The cold, black circle hanging invitingly at the top of the stone steps. He slips his hand free, climbs the steps and stretching as high as he can grasps the metal ring. It is so cold it feels like a burn in his palms, but James holds on. The pain isn't something to run from and as it fades to an ache he swings from the ring. As he does, the double doors begin to open and his mother is there, snatching him up and away. His hands tingle pleasantly from the icy iron. It has begun.

It is summer and James has grown a little. The family wander through the gardens, enjoying the warm sunlight and peace. James races along chasing the ducks and giggling. Soon they come to the fountain. James has never seen it before, and inside him something stirs. He runs up to it and pushes his face against the bars of the painted iron fence. Even on this hot day they hold something of a winter chill inside them and the pleasant tingling James felt once before spreads up and down his cheeks where the metal meets skin. Then he sees the metal fish at the base of the fountain. Their hard, cold scales twisting up their bodies, their fins sharp and menacing, their lips curled up. James is drawn to these beautiful, sinister creatures and stretches his hand towards them. The ducks in the fountain race over expecting to be feed. One reaches up and bites greedily at James's outstretched hand. James doesn't cry out, but looks at his hand. It is slightly red where the duck beak clamped down, but even that is fading. Inside him things move. The cold metal, the sinister fountain fish, sharp shock of the duck bite whirl together and feed it, transform it. James's father praises him for his braveness.

It is another Sunday and James is older. His parents have brought him to the Cathedral. There is something about their boy that makes them a little uncomfortable sometimes. As he has grown he has developed a fascination with animals and he has a strange way with them. They don't recall the

duck incident, but they have noticed the scratches and bites on James hands and arms. They are worried, but they have faith. So the young family sit in the hard wooden pews and pray. With heads bowed and eyes closed they ask God to watch over their son, he is a good boy. They don't notice a bored James slip away. He crawls through the forest of ankles and then he is out of the row. He wanders about the vast space, and finds himself in the Nave. The choir begins a hymn, their voices soaring in praise. James looks up and there is the Eagle. There is no tingling this time, just an explosion of light inside his mind. As the talon's, so sharp and strong, grip its perch, the eagle looks ready to spring into flight. James reaches up to stroke the warm wood and is rewarded with a silky sensation that melds in his mind with the sweet crescendo of voices. James feels at peace and then he spots the thin tail flash past, over the crest of the great wing. The mouse darts down the front of the eagle and onto the back of James's hand. The mouse is warm and soft and the light inside James grows. Slowly he turns his hand over and the mouse sits in his palm. He brings it to his face and rubs it softly against his cheek, breathing in its wild smell. Its tiny black eyes look into James's and inside him, in the midst of the light, that secret thing twists again, into something new. No more need for bites and scratches.

It is the end of term and it is late autumn. James has been at this school for over a year. He has discovered many of its secret places and has befriended many of its secret inhabitants. To his contemporaries he is unremarkable and he fits in well enough. His parents have forgotten their discontent from years ago, and choose not to remember why it was they first brought James to the church. His devotion makes them proud. James has found that in the light he can see the secret things and places. He longs to share this joy, but hesitates. He worries that he'll lose something if he shares this great pleasure, this heavenly commune, with anyone else. He has made a place, it is warm and wood and secret. The other boys have never found it, which seems strange to James, it is like he's always known it was there. In the vast space of the dining hall, so reminiscent of the space in the Cathedral that first time, there is a special secret space. Behind the wall. One of the panels slides just a little, enough for a skinny boy like James to squeeze into. It goes down, under the floor and there in this tiny dark box James is filled with the light as all his secret companions come to him.

Now it is the last day of term and he will be home and without this sanctuary for weeks. He must visit it one last time. As he sits down to the final lunch and chats to his classmates he plans. The Headmaster gives one of his interminable speeches and then dismisses them. The boys are eager to be free and the room clears quickly. James slips behind the panel in the organised chaos of hundreds

of young men surging out of the hall. He waits until it is still on the other side of the wood and then he begins to wriggle downwards, through that small hole and then he is curled under the floor and his friends come in their hundreds and hundreds.

James slips out soon after full of light and is surprised when one of the younger classmen is there and asks him what is behind the panel. James's mind races, he has been discovered, his secret place, his light. Should he share it? Inside him it twists and he brings the boy to the panel. He explains it is a special place, full of wonder and light. He says it is dark at first and you must squeeze down to reach it. He says you'll be safe. He opens the panel and the young boy eagerly steps in backwards. He feels behind him with his foot and finds the hole and wriggles in. James watches as the young boy descends. His pale face looks up once more, the eyes are wide and now slightly uncertain. James smiles reassurance and the boy wriggles out of sight. James slides the panel shut and walks out of the hall. His skin tingles all over, waves of pleasure. Beneath the floor the young boy panics as the mice and rats come flooding to him. Their warm, soft bodies brush his ankles, his hands, his neck and then his face. They surge over him and he opens his mouth the scream and the warm fur fills him. He tries to thrash free, but the space is so small. The rancid smell of thousands of rodents overwhelms the boy. They don't bite, they just cover him and no matter how he moves they won't leave. More and more come, and his breath is taken away.

James knows his friends have made the new-comer welcome.