ORION CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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Spark

MITCH JOHNSON

Orion

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The children stood at the water's edge, clutching stones they itched to throw. They watched the boy in the water, squinting against sharp flashes of reflected sunlight, squeezing the sweat from their eyes with slow, stinging blinks. Beads cut tracks across the grubby skin of their faces – faces framed by tangles of shaggy, shoulder-length hair – and dripped on to their shapeless woollen smocks.

The boy in the water waded deeper, sending a ripple across the pool. The children edged backwards as it broke on the stony bank. Their fingers tightened around their rocks.

'You're a 'bomination!' one of them shouted.

'Cursed!'

'A disgrace to the Ancestors!'

The boy dived beneath the surface. The heckling became muffled, distant – echoes from a bad dream on

waking – and the fierce heat was soothed by an otherworldly coolness. He opened his eyes but could not see the bottom. It went all the way to the centre of the world, the stories said. It went on for ever.

The boy's lungs soon began to burn. Even here, in the cool gloom of the pool, the sensation was never far away. He reached out for a branch suspended in the water, grabbed it, and kicked for the surface. The heat hit him the moment he broke through; it was like being crushed beneath something vast and immovably heavy. The children's insults filled his ears again, but they dared not throw their stones just yet. Water was holy. They loved the water and they feared it, but above all they knew what happened to those who defiled it: exile.

And exile meant death.

The boy glided to the far bank, and his swimming was like an evil magic to them.

'Witchcraft!'

'Traitor!'

'Four Fathers curse you!'

He climbed out of the far side of the pool and set the branch down on a pile of debris: twigs and wool and strands of sickly yellow grass. He could feel the children watching him – weighing their stones, judging the

distance – but knew they would not risk a rock falling short. He was safe, for the time being at least, but the world was full of rocks and children eager to throw them. And there was only one pool.

The children suddenly fell silent. The boy looked up and saw someone walking down from the House on the Hill. She wore a heavy crimson cloak despite the heat, and her long, red hair shone like a rare and precious metal. Sheep lumbered out of her way, bleating and huddling together on the sun-baked slope.

The boy quickly scanned the surface of the pool for anything he might have missed before pulling on his rough woollen shirt. His long hair was still damp, but his skin was already dry.

The children dropped their stones at the sight of the approaching figure and retreated, back towards the village. One of them stopped by the stream that fed the pool and stared at the boy with eyes made mean by the sun. The boy recognized him. He was Doran, son of Kelly: the village slaughterman. He was six years old – maybe seven. Without seasons, it was difficult to know for sure.

'One day, Ash,' Doran said, 'you won't have that *witch* to protect you.'

He spat, and the blob of thick phlegm landed dangerously close to the pool. There was no greater insult, in a place where people barely had saliva enough to swallow, than to be spat at. *To cry is a crime, to spit is a sin*, as the old saying went. Doran smiled, then turned to follow the others, towards the grey stone buildings further along the valley floor.

Ash breathed deeply, trying to cool his rage, but the air was thick and hot and full of anger. He wanted to shout – to retaliate – but knew it would only make things worse. Years of being the most hated person in Last Village had taught him that. He'd learned long ago that you ran when you could and fought when you couldn't. The rest of the time you kept your head down and your mouth shut and hoped to go unnoticed.

A mosquito whined around his head. It made him think of his mother, dead to the blood sickness, and he couldn't think of his mother without thinking of his father, dead to the village. Dead to everyone except Ash. Every night he prayed to each of the Four Fathers for an answer, for some kind of sign that proved the villagers were wrong. But the Ancestors were cruel. They gave him nothing, and it was hard not to interpret *that* as a sign; perhaps they gave him nothing because he deserved

nothing. Perhaps he was the son of a deserter after all.

'You are thinking of him, aren't you?'

Ash flinched and turned to find the woman in the crimson cloak directly behind him. He dipped his head and clasped his hands. 'Who, Priestess?'

'Your father.'

Ash looked up – failed to stop himself – and saw the thin smile on her lips.

'Don't look so surprised. I can always tell when you're thinking of him.'

'How?'

'You think of little else.' The Priestess lifted her eyes to watch the retreating children. 'You are permitted to think of little else.'

Ash felt the shame of his father's legacy, the shame of being who he was, and returned his gaze to the ground.

'You are not your father, no matter how much you might resemble him.' The Priestess removed her cloak. Ash held out his arms and felt the scratchy weight of it against his skin. 'And even if you were, there are far worse people to be.'

Ash looked up but the Priestess had already stepped past him, towards the pool. She wore a long pale gown, and it darkened as she entered the water. She caressed

the surface with her fingertips. When she reached the point where the slope fell steeply away, she swam towards the head of the pool, where the stream poured in with such a delicious, delicate sound.

The Priestess turned on to her back, closed her eyes, and began to stream-dream.

Until recently, this ritual had taken place every seventh day. But for the past few weeks, the Priestess had taken to communing with the Ancestors almost daily. Ash did not mind – clearing the pool provided a break from the heat, as well as protection from the others – but he knew enough about the Ancestors to know it was not a good omen.

He watched the Priestess float on the surface of the pool, her red hair fanned around her head in a wide circle, wondering what visions and whispers she received from the deep. She looked like something fantastical, like one of the sea creatures in her books from the Olden Days. Ash looked south, over a rocky wasteland that led, supposedly, to the ocean. He had never seen it himself: it was a five-day trek, and nobody trekked for five days and returned to tell tales about it.

That was what his father had done, some people said. Others said he'd gone north, to the Kingdom. That was

a kind way of saying he was dead. The Kingdom was real in the same way that the Ancestors were real: there but not there. Nobody knew if it was the kind of place you could find with a heart still beating in your chest. It didn't really matter. His father had committed the worst crime imaginable: he had left his post and abandoned the village. The shame for Ash was twofold: not only had his father deserted his people, he'd been left behind by the very person supposed to protect him.

Ash felt sharp little claws of heat scurry across his scalp. He did not believe the stories people told about his father, and he did not think that the Priestess believed them either. Why else had she defended Ash at his trial? Why else had she offered to take him in as her servant? Why else did she tell him that he resembled his father, and not mean it as an insult?

Ash looked north, at the little stone houses nestled in the valley, and thought of the people who lived there – people who despised him. People who had called for him to be sent into the wilderness after his father. *The branch doesn't fall far from the tree*, they had said. He knew it would not be long until the men began to throw punches at him as well as insults. He was almost of age, after all.

A gasp and a splash drew his attention back to the pool. The Priestess looked around, as though she had emerged from an underwater labyrinth into a strange and frightening place. She swam quickly to the shallows and walked out, water dripping from her hair and gown. The droplets hit the dry, dusty stones with little hisses. Something about the way her gown clung to her lithe body, or the lankness of her hair, or the troubled expression on her face, suddenly made the Priestess seem frail. Ash realized, for the first time, how old she must be. Forty, at least. Maybe even as old as forty-five. And how many people made it to fifty? Not many.

He held up the heavy cloak, and the Priestess slipped it on. She trudged up the hill, and it seemed much more of a struggle than it ever had before. Ash watched her climb, and as he did so he remembered Doran's threat.

One day, you won't have that witch to protect you.

The Priestess was the only person who stood between him and exile, but some day she would be gone.

And how long will I last then? he thought, setting off after her. *How long will I last then?*