

The Burnt One

In a quiet village surrounded by hills of folded stone, there lived a woman who did not speak. She had not always been silent. As a girl, her laughter spilled over like water. But over time, her voice had folded itself inward, like wings folding after flight. No one knew why. Some said she had once sung to a man who left her. Others claimed she'd glimpsed something too beautiful to name, and it had burned the words out of her. She never confirmed or denied. She simply lived — grinding grain, lighting lamps, tending her garden as the years wore their slow groove through her life. The villagers called her Ashna, though that was not her birth name. Ashna meant burnt one. And she was content, or so it seemed. Until the night the fire came. It was during the dark season, when even the moon kept her distance. Ashna sat by her hearth, the flame guttering low. Outside, the wind moaned across the ridgeline like an old god remembering its name. She felt no fear. Only weariness. Her hands were calloused. Her knees ached. And still, no word had passed her lips in years. She reached for a log to feed the fire — and the room changed. There was no sound. No wind. No breath. And yet, the air pressed against her like a question. Then it came. Not as a blaze, nor a spark, but a presence — a hush so total that it rang like a bell. It did not touch her skin. It touched her being. Her bones. Her breath. And suddenly, she was no longer Ashna the Silent, the Burnt One. She was a vessel filled beyond herself. The fire did not burn. It unfolded. Slowly. Patiently. Like a hand opening inside her chest. It was not heat she felt, but meaning — pure and wordless. It burned away everything untrue. Every defense. Every delay. Every smallness. And with it came the pain. Not physical — but the ache of years spent silent, of beauty seen but never shared, of songs swallowed in the throat. She fell forward onto the floor, palms spread wide, sobbing — but still voiceless. Then she heard the whisper. Not outside her, but through her. "You were not made to be ash." Her breath caught. "You were made to carry flame." Something cracked. Her mouth opened — not of will, but of necessity. And what came out was not language, but sound. A note, low and trembling, rising from the place behind the ribs where longing lives. It echoed through the house, and through it, the fire flared to life — tall, golden, alive. She sang. And as she sang, the house was filled with presence — not just the fire, but the memory of everything she had ever withheld: the lullabies never sung, the affection never spoken, the truth never dared. The villagers saw the flames leap from her chimney and came running, afraid her house had caught fire. But when they arrived, they found her standing in the doorway, radiant. Her eyes were still full of tears, but her face shone. "Come in," she said, her voice rusted with disuse, but steady. They did. And she told them what had happened. Not as a sermon. Not as a lesson. Only as what was. That night, they sat by the fire and listened. To her. To each other. To the silence between words. And when she had finished, she said, "The fire does not come to comfort. It comes to call. It will not burn your skin. But it may burn your excuses. Your small stories. Your hiding places." They asked her, "How will we know if it comes to us?" She smiled. "You will feel it. Like breath before speech. Like trembling before truth. Like a bell that rings in your chest and does not stop. And you will know — you can no longer remain silent." She paused.

"And then you must choose."

— *William Zeitler*
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The Burnt One – 2 of 2
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