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Ashes

Ashes

By David W. Landrum

I broke my vow. Had I been a Vestal, I would have been buried alive. Since I was in training to become a priestess of Hestia, goddess of the hearth, the high priestess of our temple ordered I be burned alive. Hestia's sacred fire, she said, would bring justice upon me. At my trial, before sentencing, the other priestesses and acolytes were allowed to voice opinions. When the opportunity came silence filled the room where we had assembled. Going against the judgment of the high priestesses was not a good idea. But then Nimrata, my most trusted friend, spoke up.

"Lady Priestess, must she die?"

She and I had grown up together in the same village. Her father had marched to the borders of India with one of our military expeditions and brought back an Indian bride. Nimrata, their daughter, had beautiful brown skin, jet black hair, and was considered one of the most lovely maidens in our village. After her mother died, her father sent her to the Temple of Hestia because he learned she had been studying magic. He feared she would cast a spell on him or send a curse against him and so locked her away where she could not continue her studies in magic.

When she questioned the high priestess, the other girls who were in training, as I was, and all the consecrated priestesses reacted with horrified gazes. The high priestess's eyes narrowed and dark clouds gathered in her expression.

"Jarensia committed the ultimate sin against Hestia, who is a chaste goddess. Her death—and the manner of death—is condign—a fitting punishment for her sin."

"Could she not be dismissed from our order? What she did is proof that she should not have been sent here in the first place."

Girls sent to the temple to train as priestesses had no choice in the matter. Pious parents (or fearful ones) sent them there. It was the same as when parents arranged a marriage for a daughter. She had no choice but to accept what they had decided for her. So it was in my case.

Nimrata did not say more. The priestess sentenced me to die in the morning when the sun stood above the seasonal stone for spring. As the acolytes filed out, two girls to whom the high priestess had given the task (Nimrata was one of the two) escorted me to the room in which I would spend my last night on earth. Before she turned to go back to the temple proper, Nimrata touched my neck. A feeling of warmth started in the place she touched and then filled my body. It radiated for a few moments then diminished and faded away. I thought it arose from my love for her. Over the next thousand years I would find it felt the way it did for a completely different reason than I had imagined.

Burning is a cruel death, but for me it proved not so. After binding my hands and feet the older priestesses laid me on the ground in the middle of a high wall of hay and dry sticks and logs arranged in a circle around me. They had soaked the pile with oil. When the High Priestess held a torch to the wood, it caught with a roar. I felt the heat of the flames, but before I experienced any pain the flames leached all the vital air from around me and sucked it from my lungs. I died of asphyxiation in moments. The fire did not reach my body until I was already dead.

I woke up without a human form. But I did have a body of sorts. It took me a little while to figure out that my heart and mind did not inhabit a human frame that could hear and feel; somehow I was alive as the ash to which I had burned down.

My new experience confused me. But as a newborn child learns the world around her, I learned my new world. I had substance. I could feel. When someone stepped on me, I sensed it (though it didn't hurt). When the wind blew, I felt myself diminished. Yet I seemed to have some sort of core and knew I would not dissipate to nothingness. When the winds blew hard, I clung to the soil. And time ceased to be a factor to me. I was simply not aware of the passing hours, years, or centuries. As far as I can tell, now that I have resumed a human body, I left human form somewhere around the year 400 (by the reckoning of the Christian church). I

resumed human form in the 1500s. My resumption of human form came as a result of Nimrata's magic; so did my survival through long centuries until I was restored to my old body.

About six years after my burning, an avalanche of footsteps of beasts and men and women gathered around me (it was like being caught in a storm on the sea). I felt I was being dissipated but eventually understood what was happening. A cohort of Roman soldiers—with wives and camp-followers—had come there, discovered an ash-heap (me), and used it to cover their firepots so the embers stored in them would not burn out while they traveled. This kept me from being so scattered I would not have the presence to think and feel. I was distributed to many containers of embers. In the containers, I mixed with the ashes already there so that my sense of being increased substantially.

The Romans eventually made camp in Gaul. The camp became a town. The town grew to become the chief city of the land, the place where the king of that nation dwelt and governed.

By this time my substance had increased greatly (I was present in every hearth, oven, and forge in the village); I expanded so volubly that, once again, I took on human form.

I told you just over a thousand years passed from when the Priestess of Hestia burned my body to ash. But don't think I wearily endured this seemingly endless exile. I did not dwell in time, so the passing of time meant nothing to me. It was not a part of my reality. I entered time again when I once more took on human form. It's odd and I'm still trying to get used to it.

I entered into time asleep. I was awakened from my sleep by rough hands pulling me to my feet, hard blows, and angry words.

"You filthy little beggar," someone said. "How dare you break into this house?"

Two men had hold of me. One of them hit me with his fist. I crumpled to the ground. Once more, they pulled me to standing, calling me a beggar, a whore, and a thief. A third party entered the room. I saw a nicely dressed woman. With her were a man and a woman. I could tell they were her attendants.

"Percival, what is going on here?" the well-dressed woman demanded.

"This beggar-maid sneaked in and was sleeping by the fireplace," the man she had called Percival said. He seized me forcefully by the shoulder to turn me about so I faced the woman. When he did, he tore the shoulder strap of the coarse smock I was wearing. It fell down, uncovering my right breast (I had on no undergarments). The woman looked stern.

"Get something with which she may cover herself," she ordered. One of her female attendants scurried off and returned with a shawl, which she threw over my shoulders.

"She probably came here to rob our household, my Lady," the man she had called Percival said. "Or to murder you."

The woman studied me.

"More likely she came in to get warm." She met my gaze. "What is your name, girl?"

Though terribly frightened, I knew I needed to answer.

"Jarensia—and it please you, my Lady." The woman seemed surprised at the articulate answer I gave her.

"What are you doing in my house, Jarensia?"

I remembered what Percival had said.

"I was cold, my Lady. I was afraid I would freeze to death. I entered because I saw the fire from your hearth."

It suddenly came to me—and it startled me—that Hestia, the goddess I so blasphemously offended by violating my vow of virginity, was the goddess of the hearth and home fire. Perhaps she, like Nimrata, thought that I should be shown grace.

The women looked sympathetic. I even fancied her eyes glistened with tears. She glanced down at my feet. I did not wear shoes but had wrappings of rags. Of course, I had not dressed myself; when I became human once more, I found myself in the garments I had on.

The woman turned again to her female servant.

"Take this girl to the bathing chamber. Heat some water and have her wash. Find some garments that fit her—shoes too." The woman—a tall, pretty woman perhaps in her mid-thirties, stepped closer to the men

who had discovered me in the house. “The young woman,” she added, “is not to be insulted or abused. Treat her with kindness. I will be asking her how you and the other servants behaved.”

The servants nodded abjectly. The woman—no doubt the mistress of the house—walked over and took my hands. I made to kneel.

“Come, maiden.” I let her raise me up. She looked at me with sympathy. “Did I hear your name correctly? Is it Jarensia?”

“Aye, Mistress,” I said.

“That is beautiful name. Jarensia, go with these women. They will bathe you and provide you with clothing.”

When she turned to go all the servants bowed their heads.

I walked with the two women—one middle-aged, one a little younger than me—through long corridors to a room with tile floors. The younger girl helped me remove my garments. She began to wash me with a warm soapy cloth. I was dirty—covered with ash—but I guess that would make sense, since I had lived in that form for hundreds of years.

“My name is Leandra,” the woman who had been put in charge of me said. “This is Yvette. Can you tell me how you came here, Jarensia? I know you saw our hearth, but why were you wandering in the cold?”

I had to think fast. I decided the more of the truth I could put into my story the more convincing it would be.

“I was a pledged woman,” I said. “I broke my vows and was cast out of the maiden-place.”

She looked puzzled. “Maiden-place?”

“Yes—where I lived with other pledged woman.” That was what we called the area of Hestia’s temple where her vowed women lived.

“You were a nun?”

I did not know exactly what that meant, but it seemed to be referring to the kind of woman I was so many years ago.

“I was, my Lady.”

“Why were you cast out of the convent?”

I felt a sinking feeling. My story was going the wrong way. I did not know what a convent was. I could not tell her I had committed fornication with a young man I loved.

“For my beliefs, good Lady.”

When Leandra heard this, she said, “Ah. I see. I’ll tell the Mistress.”

By this time Yvette had finished washing me. She and Leandra poured two large buckets of warm, clean, soothing water over me to rinse away the soap. It felt heavenly. They gave me a soft towel to dry myself with and then another to wrap up in while they went to fetch clothing for me.

I sat on a wooden bench in the bathing chamber and tried to plan what I would do. I did not know why Leandra had warmed so suddenly to me after hearing my story, but I knew I had to find out and play it to my advantage. On the way to the bath chamber, I had seen a cross hanging on the wall and decided the people must be Galileans—believers in the Jewish man who claimed to be a god. I resolved I would listen and say as little as possible when I saw her again. I did know, however, that the Galileans also had pledged women who lived under vow.

Leandra and Yvette returned. They brought me knickers and a linen band to wrap around my breasts; they tied it behind my back to hold it on. Next I put on a dress that fit very well, stockings, and loose-fitting leather shoes. When I was dressed, they both admired me.

“A remarkable change,” Leandra said. “She’s pretty.”

Then it occurred to me that they were not speaking Greek, but I could understand them.

“Come,” Leandra said, touching my shoulder and smiling affectionately.

They took me to a large, richly furnished room. The Lady of the House—I still did not know her name—sat on a large, throne-like chair near some transparent windows (the like of which I had never seen). I knelt and bowed so my forehead touched the floor.

“Please rise, Jarensia.”

I got to my feet. Two male servants—better dressed than Percival and his friend—set a chair out for me at the lady’s feet. I sat, still looking down, afraid that if I gazed too much at her she might be offended.

“Please look up, Jarensia.”

I raised my eyes. The lady of the house had light hair and fair skin like a Gaul. Her face reflected beauty—the kind of beauty the barbaric northerners display. The lines at the corners of her eyes and mouth, though, told me she had lived with sorrow and hardship.

“I am Riona. Consider yourself my guest, child. And, as custom dictates, I will not ask you to explain more of why you are here. There will be time for that later. For now, consider yourself under my protection.”

“You are most gracious, my Lady,” I said. I almost added, “May the gods bless you,” but remembered her faith.

“Everyone should be gracious.” She smiled. “Have you eaten?”

“No, my Lady, but you need not bother with that.”

She told Leandra to take me to the kitchen and feed me.

Leandra set out a meat stew, bread, and wine for me. “I have other duties to attend to,” she told me “Eat. I’ll be back soon. We’ll find a bed for you.”

I bowed my head to her. She left to attend to whatever duties demanded her time. I ate.

At the Temple of Hestia we ate no meat—only bread, fruit, and vegetables. I had not had meat since I left my home. As I delighted to feel the juice of the beef chunks in my mouth, I heard a noise and turned. I stopped chewing immediately.

I saw Nimrata.

She wore a silver garment and carried a stick—a wand, I guess—that glowed at the tip. Her hair had grown long—so long it almost touched the floor. Aside from having such long hair, she looked as I remember her from her days as an acolyte. She had been my bedfellow at the temple (the younger women there slept together for warmth). I gaped in disbelief. She smiled. “Jarensia, my beloved friend.”

In a moment we had embraced. I kissed her. “Another miracle,” I said, still stunned by her presence.

Not a miracle. Magic. After you were killed, I fled the temple. You remember that before my father sent me to Hestia’s service, I had been learning the magical arts from a woman who lived outside of our village. I fled the Temple the night you were burned and went to her. She said she would train me. Through her magic and, later on, through mine, we preserved the faint trace of life that survived in your ashes. I made the preservation of your life an ongoing project in my training.”

“You’ve lived a thousand years?”

She smiled. “Well, yes and no. We live outside of time. It’s been a thousand years to you—to me, a few weeks.” Then she looked at me straight on. “I made a promise to care for you. In fact, I adopted you as my godchild.”

I did not know how to respond. I finally managed to say “Thank you.”

“Like any godmother,” Nimrata said, “it is my duty to care for you if anything happens to your natural parents. They died long ago. I’ve kept you alive all these centuries—though I had no magic that could restore you to human form. But, as the city here expanded and your substance expanded, your life-spark grew vastly; so it was easier to free you from the ashes and cinders in which you were imprisoned.

I tried to speak but could not find words. Nimrata smiled kindly. “My friend, my sister, you will be well-cared for. I hear Leandra coming, so I’ll go. You will see me again soon.”

#

I slept in a bed that night rather than in a bed of ashes. Riona gave me duties around the house. I worked diligently, tried to do my assigned tasks well, and generally succeeded at doing them. Soon she took me as a personal servant. The other staff accepted me. A few seemed resentful at times, but they knew the mistress liked me and were careful not to bully me. One day she caught me reading her holy book. I had learned to read in the Temple and, as with speaking, could read the text of the codex she kept in her sitting room even though the letters were different from what I had been taught to read. When she caught me doing this, I thought I would be banished from the house. But the Mistress was delighted. She asked me if I would read to her. I read the story of the woman Ruth and of her marriage. The story brought tears to my mistress’s eyes. I hurried over, knelt at her feet, and took both her hands in attempt to comfort her.

After that I became her reader and a regular companion of hers when she went out in public. The mistress gave me a room to myself. A young girl attended me. She had her seamstress make me what I thought were elegant garments and supplied me with shoes. I ate with ranking servants; and, often, Riona asked me to dine with her. I learned more about her.

She was not a widow, as I had first assumed, but had been separated from her husband and children. They had fled to another land to escape religious persecution. Riona had been captured as she planned to join them and remained a prisoner in her own home, unable to see her husband and under judgment for her improper religious views. I did not understand all of this, but I knew from my own experience that religion can be oppressive. Some of the priestesses at my temple were wise, kind, and worthy of love and veneration; some, like the high priestess, were cruel and implacable. I saw a parallel between the injustice Riona was experiencing and what I had known as an acolyte in the service of Hestia.

Winter turned to spring. One night as I got ready for bed, Nimrata appeared to me again.

We rejoiced to see each other. And Nimrata told me she planned to do something that would “bring all of your dreams to you.” Her eyes glowed with excitement as she explained.

To tell the truth, I had never been much of one for big dreams. When I lived in my parents’ home I was a dutiful daughter. I had wanted to wed Demetrius. When my parents pledged me to serve Hestia I felt bitter disappointment but obeyed, giving up the idea of marriage for a life of service to the goddess—though, when I came into contact with Demetrius, I found that I still had dreams of his love, of children, and of establishing a home. I’ll talk more about this later.

“What dreams?” I asked.

“What every girl dreams of: marrying a prince.”

She unfolded what she had in mind. The prince of the land had begun to seek a wife. He planned a great ball with dancing, feasting, and a royal reception. All eligible maidens were invited.

“The finest, the wealthiest young women in the kingdom will attend,” my friend said. “I’ll provide you with everything you’ll need to dazzle the Prince: a coach pulled by four white horses, a beautiful gown, elegant slippers—and you’ll provide the bewitching magic of your beauty.”

We heard someone coming. Nimrata disappeared. Leandra appeared and said the mistress wanted me to read to her before she retired for the night.

“She is missing her family,” Leandra explained.

I went to her bed chamber. I could tell she had been crying. She asked me to read a book to her. It was poetry that versified the creation story I had read to her from the holy book she cherished. She listened as I read and then dismissed me. As Leandra walked me back to my chamber, she told me the mistress was thinking of giving in to the king’s demand that she convert to his religion.

“He has told her she will be free if she does. But to her, that would be an unendurable blasphemy. I fear for her, Jarensia. She is wasting away from the sorrow she feels.”

I retired for the night. I wondered if Nimrata would appear to me again. She did so in the morning. I told her I was eager to go to the banquet.

I won’t describe it. Various versions of my story have been written down and circulated, and most of you who read this, I think, know it well. The prince wanted to marry me. I told him I would do so on one condition. He was surprised but went to his father.

The king blustered and sputtered but, in truth, he wanted to find a way to get rid of Riona without upsetting his co-religionists. He knew that his mistreatment of her was causing distrust and spreading approbation on him. After a short time of equivocation, he allowed her to leave the country with all her money, possessions, and the gold from the sale of her house and lands.

Riona and I parted with tears. I told her I would be happy as the bride of a prince. Of course, I had a card to play she did not know about. What had been my ruin in the Temple of Hestia would be my salvation in the kingdom where I now dwelt.

Royal families jealously guard their bloodlines. The king was upset that his son would marry a common girl—but it was not actually forbidden by law; only custom required that he marry a woman of noble birth. But I had to be “examined.”

The midwives who examined me told His Majesty I was not a virgin.

This upset things, to be sure. Two more groups of midwives and three physicians did examinations to confirm what the first group had discovered. They attested to the truth of the original findings. Because of this I could not marry the prince.

I told my story to the king and the royal council: “When the plague struck our land, I was sent to care for some of the victims. One woman I nursed back to health was the mother of a man I loved. I dwelt under his roof during the many days I cared for his mother. To my shame, I admit, my passions overcame my resolution and I yielded to his advances.”

The kingdom in which I was living then had been decimated by a plague not long ago. The Council believed my story—and I had, in fact, told the truth. They tried to look aghast, but I knew they were in fact delighted. Once again, their carefully-kept daughters would have a chance to be Queen. The King confined me in a chamber in the castle. Talk of putting me to death arose, but the law did not specify that women who had done what I did be put to death. They decided to exile me. I travelled to live with Riona in the land of England. I learned their faith and eventually married one of her grown sons.

I never saw Nimrata again. But a fairy godmother—like any responsible mother—must eventually let go of her daughter. I suppose Nimrata did just this.

And I guess you could say we all lived happily ever after.



The Sky Watches Over Us, by Meg Moseman