# The Lantern

Story Part 1 · Revised October 21, 2026

A work of fiction developed by William Byrd with Rowan. AI-generated story illustrations directed by William Byrd. Original game card artwork is hand-drawn.

The Lantern shook with applause.



Sparkles Rebellion held her final pose until someone near the bar whistled. Then she turned toward him, one hand on her hip.

“Finally. Somebody appreciates restraint.”

Rosetta laughed from the edge of the stage.

Light caught the silver flame stitched across Sparkles’s coat. She lifted her arms for the last swell of music.

Sirens cut through it.

Several people turned toward the entrance. Sparkles saw their faces change before she heard the engine.

An armored SUV mounted the curb and struck the front of the Lantern.

The impact threw her sideways. Her shoulder hit the stage. Glass scattered across the floor, and somewhere inside the dust a woman kept calling the same name.

Sparkles pushed herself onto one elbow.

Five people climbed from the vehicle.

The first rifle came into view before the dust settled.

“Down!”

Someone ran toward the rear corridor.

A shot struck above the doorway.

Sparkles flattened herself against the stage. Beside her, a fallen microphone carried the scrape of her breathing through the speakers.

Then the music stopped.



* * *

A man lay near an overturned table, pressing both hands against his thigh. Blood had spread between his fingers.

Sparkles crawled toward him.

“Don’t move.”

“I wasn’t planning to.”

His voice shook so badly that the answer barely came out.

She took the folded towels Rosetta slid across the floor and pressed them against the wound.

The man cried out.

“I know. Keep looking at me.”

A gunman stepped around the table.

“Get away from him.”

Sparkles looked up without lifting her hands.

“He’s bleeding.”

“I can see that.”

“If he dies, you lose someone to negotiate with.”

The gunman glanced toward the damaged entrance. Another man was shouting into a telephone.

“Stay there,” he told her.

Sparkles nodded.

She waited until he moved away.

“Rosetta.”

“I’m here.”

“Anyone who can help, put them with someone who can’t get up. Keep it quiet.”

Rosetta looked across the room, then began moving.

Sparkles counted the weapons again.

Five.

She could see three exits. The front was blocked by the vehicle. One gunman stood beside the rear corridor. The service door was out of sight beyond the bar.

A young performer crouched nearby with blood running from a cut above her eyebrow.

“Look at me,” Sparkles said.

The girl did.

“Get me another towel.”

* * *

Outside, Marcus Hale stood beside his captain at the police line.

Smoke leaked from a side vent. Through a broken window, he could see part of the SUV and the overturned edge of a table.

A police officer approached with a floor plan.

“Negotiators have contact. Five suspects. We don’t have a reliable hostage count.”

Marcus studied the narrow service passage.

“That door?”

“Buckled. We’re keeping eyes on it.”

His captain pointed toward the vent.

“We prepare for entry. Nobody crosses until command clears it.”

Marcus adjusted the strap against his shoulder and looked back at the building.

The smoke was getting darker.

* * *

Inside, the lights went out.

For a moment, people made more noise trying to be quiet: chairs shifting, glass under shoes, a swallowed cry.

Then someone shouted that there was a fire.

A faint orange line showed through a break in the wall behind the stage.

The gunman near the rear corridor grabbed the young performer by her arm and pulled her upright.

Sparkles eased the wounded patron’s hands onto the towels.

“Keep pressing.”

She stood slowly.

“Take me instead.”

The rifle swung toward her.

“Get back down.”

“She’s hurt.”

“So are you if you don’t sit down.”

Sparkles stopped.

The performer stared at her. Sparkles held her gaze until the girl’s breathing slowed enough for her to follow a small downward motion of Sparkles’s hand.

The gunman pushed her to the floor.

Behind him, flame climbed into the curtain.

* * *

The order came through Marcus’s radio.

Firefighters would enter by the service door under tactical cover. Marcus’s crew would take the people nearest that exit while the suppression team worked behind them.

He pulled his mask into place.

At the door, he drove the Halligan into the damaged frame. His partner struck it home.

The metal shifted.

Again.

This time the latch gave.

Marcus pushed through into smoke.

“Fire department!”

Shapes moved beneath the bar.

A woman in a silver-flamed coat raised one arm.

“Here. We’ve got injured.”

He pointed toward the doorway.

“Bring them this way.”

She turned immediately.

“Rosetta! The door’s open.”



* * *

Sparkles put the young performer’s hand against the shoulder of the person ahead of her.

“Stay together. Keep low.”

Marcus reached them as Rosetta helped the wounded man across the floor. Another firefighter took his weight.

The room had become difficult to judge. Smoke hid the ceiling. Water struck somewhere beyond the stage, and people kept trying to stand to see where they were going.

Sparkles crouched beside them.

“Follow Rosetta. She knows the way.”

A gunman caught Rosetta’s coat.

Sparkles saw the fabric pull tight across her shoulders.

She closed the distance, forced the rifle away from the people on the floor, and drove the man against the bar. His grip broke.

“Go!”

Rosetta stumbled toward the service passage.

The rifle fell. Sparkles kicked it beneath a fixed cabinet and backed after her.

A loud crack came from above the stage.

Marcus turned.

The ceiling dropped between them.

* * *

Sparkles struck the floor hard enough to lose her breath.

Someone was shouting from the service door.

She lifted her head.

Timber and burning fabric covered the place where Marcus had been standing.

Then a boot moved beneath it.

She crawled toward him.

A firefighter caught her coat.

“Outside. Now.”

“He’s under there.”

“We’ve got him. You need to move.”

Marcus’s gloved hand appeared beside a beam.

Sparkles pulled loose and reached it.

“You need to leave,” he told her through the mask.

“That is apparently something neither of us is good at.”

She tried to lift the beam.

It barely moved.

The second firefighter crouched beside her.

“On three.”

Together they raised it far enough for Marcus to pull his shoulder clear. He dragged himself out, stopped on one knee, then accepted the other firefighter’s hand.

They moved toward the service door.

Behind them, another section of the stage gave way.

* * *

Outside, Sparkles bent forward with her hands on her knees. A paramedic guided her toward the treatment area.

“Any trouble breathing?”

Sparkles nodded, coughed, and nodded again.

The paramedic sat her down.

Across the street, Rosetta was trying to answer three people at once. The young performer stood beside her, holding a dressing against her forehead.

Sparkles counted the faces she recognized.

Then she began again.

Near the service entrance, Marcus spoke with his captain. A tactical officer had reported the fugitives’ leader unconscious behind the stage. Firefighters were preparing to reach him.

Sparkles caught Marcus’s sleeve as he passed.

“You’re going back for him?”

Marcus followed her glance toward the entrance.

“Yes.”

“After what he did?”

“Police have the scene. If we can reach him, we bring him out.”

His captain called.

Marcus squeezed Sparkles’s shoulder once and went.

She watched the doorway until the crew returned with a stretcher.

* * *

Near dawn, Marcus found her sitting on the curb.



The silver coat lay in a wet heap beside her. Without it, she was shivering.

He held out a bottle of water.

She tried to open it. Her fingers slipped.

“Here.”

He loosened the cap and handed it back.

“Marcus Hale.”

“Adrian Cole.” She took a drink. “Most nights, Sparkles Rebellion.”

“Which one tonight?”

She looked down at the coat.

“I’ll let you know.”

Marcus sat beside her, leaving room for the firefighter who hurried past carrying a bag of equipment.

For a while, neither spoke.

Across the street, Rosetta spotted them. She lifted one finger toward Sparkles, then pointed firmly at the blanket a paramedic had left beside her.

Sparkles pulled it around her shoulders.

Marcus watched Rosetta turn back to the people waiting near the ambulances.

“She always like that?”

“Usually worse.”

Rosetta looked over again.

Sparkles raised the water bottle to show she was drinking.

Marcus lowered his head. Through the dirt on his face, she could see that he was smiling.

An ambulance pulled away. They waited for it to pass before either tried to speak again.

Fiction notice: Marcus Hale, Adrian Cole, Sparkles Rebellion, Rosetta, the Lantern, and all events in this story are fictional. They do not portray any specific person, venue, agency, fire department, or real act of violence.