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WINTER WINGS

JENNIFER JENSEN

Aideen's eyes glowed with envy as she watched her older sister Fia dance the Burning Dance in the center of the circle. Fia's hair was a drifting mass of golden tendrils, and her thin, graceful limbs writhed in perfect unison with the movements of the flames. The other fairies merrily shouted their approval and beat their wings together to fan the fire. As more and more of them joined Fia in the Dance, Flint and his band of blowers gradually played their flutes faster and more feverishly, until every branch, twig, and leaf in the forest was vibrating with the music of the fire fairies—with the song called "Incendio."

Each year, on the blackest night of winter, the fire fairies gathered together to dance the Burning Dance and bless the dark, cold earth with the light and warmth of fire.

The Burning Dance was a celebration of life in the midst of frozen, brittle death. Every fire fairy looked forward to the Burning Dance—that is, every fire fairy except for Aideen. At twelve years old, Aideen was nearly full-grown, but her wings had not yet so much as sparked. Her sister Fia was only two years older, yet she had already ignited glorious wings of palest gold. They shimmered in the firelight as she danced; and through her veil of tears, Aideen thought they looked like the sparkling remains of her broken heart. It wasn't fair. Why was she the only fire fairy her age that didn't have wings, yet? As the others danced and sang, she sat with the elders and watched, slumping her shoulders and hiding her sullen face behind the silken curtain of her auburn hair.

"Child, what troubles you so?" Grandfather Ashbel asked her, gently brushing the hair away from Aideen's face and tucking it behind her small, pointed ears.

Aideen inhaled to reply, but she felt a lump in her throat catch her breath and had to swallow it down, instead. She simply shook her head and turned her face away from him.

"Little fire, you know better than to ignore your grandfather when he speaks to you." Grandmother Ember reproached her and gingerly knelt down at Aideen's other side, so that she could not turn away from one grandparent without having to look at the other. Grandmother Ember was short and stout, with plump, dimpled arms and round, smiling cheeks. Though a thousand years of age had made her hair and face ashen gray, vitality still emanated from her features in comforting waves of heat.

"I'm sorry, Grandmother," Aideen murmured, turning back towards her grandfather.

While Grandmother Ember's features were all soft and round, Grandfather Ashbel was made up of sharp angles and thin sinews. His long, white, stick-straight hair was pulled back into a severe ponytail, making his deeply etched face look tight and alert. He smiled at her, and with his gentle eyes implored Aideen to answer his question.

"I just... I wanted so much to dance the Burning Dance this year, Grandfather," she answered, her fire voice crackling a little.

"And why don't you?" Grandfather Ashbel asked, though he already knew the answer.

"Because..." Aideen's voice had become no more than a whisper. The treacherous lump in her throat was at it again, stopping her breath and pushing the hot tears from her eyes. She reached over her left shoulder and touched the bare place at her

back where a wing should have been.

"Oh, now, now, little one..." Grandmother Ember cooed, handing her a steaming flask of fire fuel—a favorite drink of the fire fairies.

Aideen held the flask in both hands and took a small sip, savoring the musky taste

of smoke. She closed her bright amber eyes and felt the fuel trickle down her throat and

into her belly, warming her from the inside out. Almost immediately, the tears evaporated from her face, and she was able to speak calmly. "I don't want to dance without my wings... I'd just look silly next to Fia—like an overgrown spark nymph." Aideen looked at the rambunctious group of younger fire fairies who had not grown their wings yet, either. They clumsily jumped about at the edge of the circle, shrieking and tumbling over one another in ungraceful glowing balls of orange and yellow. She had to admit they were cute—adorable, even—but she didn't want to be cute, anymore. She was almost a lady. She wanted to be beautiful—like Fia.

Grandfather Ashbel sighed deeply and gazed thoughtfully into the circle of fire. "Do you know why we wait until the blackest night of winter to dance the Burning Dance?" he asked her.

Aideen sighed just as deeply and gave the answer in a monotone voice: "To bless the dark, cold earth with the light and warmth of fire, and to celebrate life in the midst of death." Any three-year-old spark nymph could have answered the question.

"Yes, very good Aideen, but do you know what that means?"

"Well... Of course. It means it's our job to bring life to the world when it's dead." Aideen tried to feign confidence, but her voice faltered a little.

Grandfather Ashbel nodded, still staring into the circle. "That is part of it, but not all... Let me show you."

"AAAH!" Aideen shrieked so loudly that a few of the dancers stopped to stare at her. Grandfather Ashbel held a handful of hard snow against Aideen's bare back. She whimpered and tried to squirm away from him, but he held her still, forcing her to endure the pain. Fire fairies could not stand the cold. It burned in the Bad Way—the Way that destroyed life. "Grandfather, WHY?!"

"To teach you," Grandfather Ashbel replied in his uniquely stern yet gentle manner. Only after most of the snow had melted did he pull his hand away from Aideen's back. She felt the icy drops of water sliding down her spine and shivered uncontrollably, trying to catch her breath. Then, just as suddenly as he had shocked her with the snow, he stroked her back with his spindly fingers of flame, healing her frozen skin with the gift of fire. The feeling was delicious. All of the tension in her muscles

dissolved into nothing but pure heat. She had never experienced such a sensation in all of her twelve years of life.

“What—what was that?” she asked breathlessly.

“Simply fire, nothing more... It only felt like more because you first endured the cold,” he answered, gesturing with his hand to the snow on the ground. “You see, one only realizes the true value of fire and heat after having experienced the bitterest of winters. Our power is strongest and most beautiful when it is combating the ice. That is why we wait until the blackest night of winter to dance the Burning Dance. You are still young, little one; and you have many more winters ahead of you. Trust me when I say that the longer you wait for your wings, the more beautiful they will be.”

Grandfather Ashbel’s wisdom was undeniable. When he spoke, the truth in his words was almost tangible—like glowing wisps of ash whispering the wisdom passed down through the ages from the ancient fire gods. Aideen looked again at her sister in the center of the circle, and she realized that the envy she had felt only moments ago was

gone. For the first time that night, she listened to the notes of “Incendio” rising from Flint’s flute and felt the urge to run into the flames—to twist and turn her lithe body to the rhythm of fire. Aideen smiled and affectionately squeezed her grandfather’s bony hand, then leaped and bounded toward the dancers, unaware in all of her excitement that

two glittering, bright red wings were beginning to spark at her shoulders on the way.