



The Fire-Dancer

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Magic

When the girl came into the world, the village fell silent.

She was born to a pair of ordinary earth-workers, people who were quiet and plain. They lived in a community full of people who were also quiet and plain, people who were so ordinary and who had been ordinary for so long that it never occurred to anyone that the girl might not be.

The girl was not the couple's first child, and each of her brothers and sisters were as simple as her parents and everyone else in the village. So when she came out of her mother and the midwife saw the shocking mane of coppery red hair, saw the sparks in the little red fingertips, and the flames that danced in the child's eyes, she almost dropped the baby right then and there.

The husband looked at his new daughter and there was shock on his face, but when he turned to his wife for an explanation he saw that her face mirrored his own. There were no fire-dancers in their village, and there hadn't been one for decades. The girl's parents understood that she was theirs, but also that she was not theirs, because there were no fire-dancers in either of their ancestral lines. She was born of fire, and to fire she belonged.

When the child opened her mouth and cried for the first time, the fire in the hearth roared to life, sending sparks all over the grating. The mother looked at her husband and saw that he was thinking the same thought as she—what were they going to do with such a child?

When the girl began to grow, the village watched in earnest.

Few of them had seen a fire-dancer in action, and even fewer understood what it meant to speak to the flames. The girl carried sparks with her everywhere. They were constantly shooting out of her fingertips and the ends of her hair, and she ruined a pair of shoes every few months from stomping out her accidental fires. She didn't

understand the power within her any more than the villagers did. They were all earth-workers, every one, people who specialized in clay and brick and stone. They were calm and unchanging people, unlike the girl. She couldn't sit still for very long and as such she was constantly squirming, running, or dancing. It was impossible to keep her in school because the girl could not sit quietly long enough to learn anything useful. When they tried to force her, she set fire to her desk and skipped out of the schoolroom. The girl was a whirlwind of motion, here one moment and gone the next, with nothing but a faint wisp of smoke to mark her brief presence.

As the girl grew toward adolescence, she noticed that the source of her fire was a marking on the palm of her left hand. It grew as she did, a constant steady glow, reminding her of who and what she was. The bright mark was a natural guide to her in the darkness and a friend to her in the light. This was her spark.

When the girl was old enough, she learned that she had only to whisper and the flames would dance for her. Cupping her hands, she would whisper her command to her spark and her wish would be granted. The girl was careful to keep her fires small, for fear the woods would catch and she would be as unable to tame the flames as the villagers were to tame her. The girl danced, and her flames danced with her. As she pranced, she watched the village, observing the workings of every day.

It was not long before the girl saw the need for fire in people's lives. When the winters came and snow froze the ground, the river, and the very trees so no one could get fresh firewood, the girl twirled her way around the village, keeping to the shadows, but whispering to her spark. Wherever she went, the fire was plentiful, the heat sufficient, and the wood dry.

The more she used her fire, the brighter her spark became. The girl felt the heat in her palm and smiled.

When she was nearly an adult, the village held their breath.

She was now tall and striking, the sheer confidence of the girl enough to make her stand taller and shine brighter. The flames in the girl's eyes burned, and her hair could be seen from the center of town to its edge. While people did not realize all the girl did for them in secret, they were more at ease to request her help. Some even invited her to spend time with them, for no reason other than they felt it would be beneficial to be kind to a fire-dancer.

The village was divided, however. There were many who still feared what they did not understand. They felt the girl was dangerous, and they were right, but no one knew what to do about it. The girl had not done anything wrong, so they couldn't send her away. They only knew they were tired of ash in the air, little piles of soot around the village, and the occasional lick of fire that would start a blaze in someone's roof or barn. None of

these instances hurt anyone, but the village grew annoyed.

Around this time, the girl's sister fell ill. Though she was always in a world separate from the rest of her family, the fire-dancer still loved her brothers and sisters and was closest to this particular sister, who tolerated the girl's fire as best she could. The sister understood that the fire-dancer would always blaze the trail ahead of them all, and there was nothing left to do but stay in the ashes and pale in comparison to the intensity of her sparks. When the fire-dancer's sister fell ill, the fire-dancer made sure the fire was always going and that the soup stayed warm. The sister's chills could not be controlled, though, and it was not long before she died.

Until she first knew sorrow, the fire-dancer did not know the extent of what she was capable of. When the rest of the family gathered for the funeral, the fire-dancer walked in angry circles around the village. She did not see that the faster she walked, the deeper her footprints became, leaving scorch marks in the earth where green grass and flowers should have been. The girl did not notice that she walked deeper and deeper into the woods, and that the branches withered as she passed. She did not feel her spark grow warmer and warmer, until the intensity in her hand was such that the girl cried out and shook it, sending sparks flying in all directions.

This time, the fire could not be tamed. The girl's sorrow turned into a full-scale forest fire, frightening the villagers when they saw the smoke and black plumes that threatened to come their way. By the time the girl realized what she had done and put an end to the flames, a good portion of the forest was charred to cinders. The ash in the air was so thick that people covered their faces with scarves.

Her parents were horrified. When the fire-dancer made her way back home, she was met with faces of revulsion. The village elder, who had been waiting for this day for two decades, declared her a danger. If she does this to the forest, what would she do to the village? She cannot be trusted, he decided. Though no one else said anything, no one needed to, because the girl understood that the elder was right. The fire-dancer took one last look at her sister's grave before turning and going back into the forest, through the darkened earth and into a cold night.

When the girl left, she did not know where she was going. She wandered aimlessly through the night, going in no particular direction, heading for a future she couldn't even see. Eventually her sorrow calmed to a heavy sadness, and the blazing spark in her hand dimmed to a smaller light. After a while, the girl began to ponder her situation.

Surely there must be other fire-dancers, she thought. Surely I am not alone. She set off on a journey to find others like herself. Though she looked far and wide, the girl was met with fear and hesitation nearly everywhere she went. There were no villages full of fire-dancers as she hoped. She met a community of other

earth-workers, and even some air-artists, but no one knew of any other living fire-dancers.

The girl wandered for a long time. She thought of home, but her spark blazed up in anger whenever she remembered the way it felt to be cast out. Frightened that she would hurt someone with her fire, the girl quickly hardened her heart and over time the intense heat in her palm receded. Her anger dimmed to remorse, and eventually the girl thought of home as nothing but a distant memory.

When the girl settled down, it was with a community of water-singers. She was very, very far into the cold of the world by then, and even her spark sometimes could not keep her warm. On the few occasions when the girl thought of home, her spark grew dimmer and dimmer with the shame of who she was. The girl no longer felt like a fire-dancer. She felt alone.

The water-singers welcomed her, recognizing her for who she was, but they were a wise people and elected to wait until the girl could love herself again before telling her what it truly meant to be a fire-dancer. We will leave it to the elder, they decided. He will know when the time is right. For now, she will live with us.

During her time with the water-singers, the girl learned to wear warm clothes and start a fire with kindling and rocks rather than a whisper or a wish. She learned to sit, still and silent, for longer and longer periods of time. The day came when the girl almost felt like a water-singer instead of a fire-dancer. The fire, she thought, was in her past. There was no place for it in her new future.

When the girl left after her sister's funeral, her village grew cold.

They hadn't even noticed it happening, but when the winter came the village realized how spoiled they were to have a fire-dancer. They were grossly underprepared for the cold that swept through the village. The snows came thick and heavy, covering the trees and the buildings with blankets and blankets of ice. There wasn't enough firewood, so families huddled together and remembered the day when the fire-dancer would light their kindling with merely a whisper. They began to realize how frequently she helped them, especially those times she did it without their knowledge. And they began to realize their mistake.

When the fire-dancer had been with the water-singers for some time, she was called to meet their own elder. The water-singer elder was a man of memories, and he used his memories to guide his decisions. When the fire-dancer came to him, he looked at her for a while. The elder observed the way the girl's eyes were dull and lifeless, the way her hair was limp and growing blacker by the day. He asked her to remove her mittens, and he saw that her fingertips were blue.

"Child," he said, "are you happy here?"

“It is not for me to be happy,” she replied, “but here, I am content.”

The elder’s heart broke for the girl before him. “Do you not deserve the same happiness that everyone else does?” he asked her.

“No,” she said back, “because to be happy I must be myself, and to be myself means I hurt others.”

The elder reached out his hand and took the girl’s in his own. He turned her left hand palm up, noting the ugly, twisting scar where her spark had once been.

“Oh, my darling,” he whispered, “you allowed them to dull your spark.”

“It was just a spark,” she said in a voice hardened with ice. “A spark that changed nothing for me.”

“Ah,” he began to smile at her, “but your spark can become a flame, and that can change everything.”

When the girl understood what she had to do, she left the water-singers. She journeyed back the way she went the first time, stopping through each village to ask what services a fire-dancer could perform for the townspeople. If people were afraid, she merely called the fire to her, and showed them how she could hold it in the palm of her hand. Her spark grew brighter. She showed the townspeople how she could whisper to the flame and it would be calm, or how she could encourage it to grow. The townspeople began to understand that she controlled her fire, and then they began to trust her.

The fire-dancer’s spark grew with each step closer to her home. Though sorrow still lived in her heart, it was diminished by the hope she felt with each passing day. Before too long, villages were waiting for her arrival with a list of assistances she could provide. She warmed people’s homes and dried trees to cut for firewood. The girl lit funeral pyres in sparkling shows of dancing flame, allowing the infernos to take the shape of loved ones before disappearing into ash. The girl even helped clear roads, turning the soggy ground to packed earth so wagons could travel easier and burning fallen logs to cinders so there would be no obstacles along their travels. The fire-dancer learned to realize that her spark was a gift, and as she grew more confident, her spark grew bright and strong once more.

When the girl returned, the village elder dropped to his knees.

She came quietly through the night, observing the town and the lack of warmth that permeated each home. That night she lit so many fires that the night shone as sunshine, full of light and warmth and comfort. People awoke the next morning amazed, only to realize that the fire-dancer, their fire-dancer, had finally come home. They found her sleeping on her sister’s grave, a scorched heart burnt on the back of the tombstone. Her parents rushed to her and embraced her, waking her so suddenly that she might once have accidentally set them on fire. The village saw that this did not happen, and they were filled with pride for the fire-dancer, who learned

to live with her spark.

The village elder knelt before her and begged forgiveness, which she granted earnestly. Any villager who had previously been afraid of her came forth and apologized as well. The fire-dancer smiled and forgave them all, and before long they had a full party going, with a great bonfire and loud music for the fire-dancer to leap and pirouette once again.

So many decades later, when the fire-dancer's spark dimmed once more and the flames left her eyes, a new fire-dancer was born, and this time the village was ready.

When he was born, the village rejoiced.

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