

WINTER OF FIRE

Sherryl Jordan



25th

ANNIVERSARY
EDITION

ELSHA'S FIRE

“I HAVE NOT CHANGED ... just because I burned my mining clothes and wear your sacred sign. I am still Elsha. Elsha of the Quelled. How can I ever forget it? It's branded on me, burned into me, stamped into my flesh. But it doesn't touch my soul. And my soul is the same, whether I live in a goatskin tent or a grand house, whether I live with a harsha friend, or a Chosen youth, or you. None of you touch me. You don't make me anything.

I am me. Myself. Elsha. Woman.”

For Jean

who has loved this story from the first elated telling through to this final form, and who, next to Elsha, has been my greatest encouragement

With love

WINTER OF FIRE

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SCHOLASTIC
AUCKLAND SYDNEY NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO
MEXICO CITY NEW DELHI HONG KONG

Tribute to Elsha

Winter of Fire is a special book to me. It was written after I had been told that I had RSI (Repetitive Strain Injury), and would never write again. It was while I faced that, and fought the greatest battle of my life, that I wrote Elsha's story.

Her story had been inspired more than a year before, and Elsha herself had lived in my life as a character for all that time. She was inexorable, charismatic, and a warrior at soul. It was because of her that I refused to accept that my writing days were over – because of her that I picked myself up out of despair and grief, and wrote again. We were warriors together in our battles against the impossible; and this book exists only because of her, and the love and inspiration of God.

S.J.

Foreword to 2019 edition

When I wrote *Winter of Fire*, I had no idea that the story would be so loved, or that it would still be relevant a quarter of a century on. The themes of slavery, oppression, freedom of speech, prejudice, pollution and climate change are still vital issues today. When I wrote the story, the words “climate change” were hardly ever heard; now the effects of climate change are almost daily news. It is part of the great mystery of inspiration that makes a theme timeless, whether it is in art, music, poetry, architecture, or story. I feel very humble and awed that Elsha’s story is enduring.

The book has always been special to me, as Elsha herself is special. I did not invent her or her story; she was given to me in a daydream, as a complete and powerful person, and I saw her story like a movie in my head, over the space of only a few moments. She became a vital force in a difficult time in my life.

I am grateful to my editor, Penny Scown, who has worked long and hard to have this story brought back into print. She edited the book when it was first published, and it is fitting that she plays a part in this new edition. I am also grateful to Scholastic, who still believe in this book.

Above all, I am grateful to all the faithful readers who have loved Elsha over the years, written to tell me how her story has shaped their lives, and told others about it. Some have even named their daughters after Elsha. All this reminds me that characters and stories that are not consciously planned, are gifts, and do not belong to the writer. The writer merely sees the story, and writes it down.

The people who make the story truly live and endure are the readers. For that I thank you.

Sherryl Jordan

March 2019

PART ONE

FIREBRAND

High Dreams

ALWAYS AT THE HEART of my life there has been fire.

Fire heated the brand that marked me with the sign of the Children of the Quelled. And with the Quelled I toiled in the dark mines of Siranjaro for the black fuel we call firestone. Fire it was that gave me heat when all else was wind and ice and killing cold. Fire cooked my food, warmed my frozen clothes, and was my life's light. By fire at night I dreamed my high, heroic dreams.

From when I was a child I had my dreams, though I did not often talk of them. While my parents worked in the mines, the other children and I were looked after by the caretakers, the ones too old or ill to work. We grew vegetables, carried water, wove clothes from goat hair and wool, tended the tiny flocks, and kept out of the way of the Chosen.

The Chosen were our lords, our masters. My earliest memory of the Chosen was of a man with tall boots dyed gold and green, a fur-lined coat, and trousers of blue wool. He carried a short whip. I had been crouching in the garden, singing to my cabbages to make them grow, and a darkness had fallen over me. I looked up and saw the man. He said nothing, for the Chosen had convinced themselves that we Quelled had no intelligence and no speech. He looked across the stony frozen earth, past the hard-won rows of withered vegetables, the wizened beans, and the spindly, precious wheat, and he made a sound like a laugh. Then he put his boot on my cabbages, ground them hard

into the dirt, and turned to go.

Fury overwhelmed me. I picked up a stone the size of my fist, and threw it hard. It landed with a dull thud in the small of his back, and he stopped and slowly turned around. He came back, smiled, and wound my hair around his hand. Then he lifted me by the hair until my feet swung above my crushed cabbages. I was so angry and shocked, I hardly felt the pain. I lashed out with my feet. He gave a yell, and with the whip handle started hitting me.

I don't remember how it ended. I do remember that for a long time afterwards I lay on my sleeping mat by the fire in our black goatskin tent, with a soft darkness all around, and voices that whispered and faded, and whispered again. I heard the quavering voices of the old caretakers, hushed and grave.

"She's not moved for five days. Her nose is broken, and her eyes are swollen shut. She's learned the hard way not to cross the Chosen."

"She'll never learn, that one. Only four years old, and already her spirit is all spit and fire."

"Not anymore. I think he hurt her spine. They won't allow her to live, poor child. They'll break her father's heart."

And I remember my father's voice, distraught and imploring: "Don't give up, little Elsha, joy of my life. Don't give up."

I did not. But to this day my nose has a hard lump high between my eyes, and is slightly bent. My back is fine, else I could never have survived a single day in the mines. And they tell me that my eyes never quite look in exactly the same direction.

I was five when next I saw the Chosen. I knew, that fateful day, that something terrible was going to happen. My mother hugged me close before she went to the mines, and I remember the smell of firestone dust in her grey Quelled clothes, and the heat of her tears on my cold cheek. "Be brave, child," she whispered, and would say no more.

The caretakers did not take us to the garden that day, or out to move the goats to new places in the mountains. They gathered us five-year-olds together, washed our faces carefully, and rubbed ointment