

**Sample**  
**First 6 Chapters**  
**of**  
**Fire Above**

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CNH Publishing

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V04132015

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Book & Cover Design by Derek Murphy at Creative Indie Covers

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## Prologue: Plague

The old slave watched his body open the door, ensuring his eyes never left the floor. The lord waiting on the other side strode past him. Still under the Queen's control, the slave closed the door and stepped back to his place, keeping his true thoughts carefully hidden.

*Four lords and only one slave, a very special meeting.*

The lord dropped to one knee, her blond hair falling forward as she bowed her head. "The plague spreads like wildfire, my Queen."

Lounging on her pile of cushions, the Queen scowled. Fireballs pulsed, hovering in each corner of the room, casting shadows over her face. She glanced at the two other lords, the Queen's Left and Right Hands, standing at her respective sides. The Hands shared a look but said nothing.

The old slave kept his thoughts in control, despite the devastating news on the plague. His body was still puppeted by the Queen; his thoughts were what needed protecting. Even trained and practiced in separating his surface mind from his real thoughts, he knew this meeting would test his well-honed discipline. Earlier, he'd imagined taking his heart, his essence, and putting it in a thick stone box, insulated and safe. He knew his duty and wouldn't let anything jeopardize the gains he and others had sacrificed so much to get.

Finally, the Queen sighed and asked, "Is it really as bad as Earth and Water said?"

She shifted, and the slave felt his body move closer to her to arrange some cushions. He watched his old hands fluff, looking almost like someone else's hands. The

back pain he felt from stooping so far over stabbed him from far, far away. *My body won't take this for much longer*, he thought. *But don't let it fail me quite yet.*

“If not worse.” The kneeling lord licked her lips and raised her eyes for just an instant. “Rumors are starting to fly, my Queen. I heard—”

“Nothing!” The Queen's single word lashed out a moment before she flicked one clawed finger. A whip of fire shot out, smacking the lord across the face, knocking her to the floor. When the lord slowly rose to hands and knees, her blond hair had been burned off on one side, the skin red and blistering near it.

“I just thought you should know what is being said,” she started to explain.

*Fool*, the slave whispered to himself, deep in the shadows of his mind. Another lash of fire sent the lord sprawling, the other way this time. The smell of burned hair reached even to where the old slave hid.

“Do you think I don't know as much as you?” the Queen hissed. “Get out. Get back to your post before I lose my temper.”

The slave felt his body trot clumsily to the door and open it so the lord could crawl out backwards. He felt his body shut the door and, coming back, pick up a tray with slabs of meat from the food table. He watched the meat slide in a bit of bright red blood as he held it out for the Queen to snatch. Her fangs ripped into it, gulping down chunks.

“That settles it,” she snarled. “I thought Water and Earth were just being paranoid.”

Her Right Hand had always been the braver of the two. “What is your plan?”

“Save us from starvation yet again, of course!” The Queen smirked, and then tapped her chin. “The hoof beast plague can only spread if there are beasts to spread it,

right? Thus, I will order the slaughter of all the hoof beasts. And a moratorium on keeping any herds, even a single beast, for a solar cycle while we create a vaccine. Once we have the vaccine, we can find a wild herd or another species and vaccinate them. Problem solved. While we wait for that...”

In the hidden part of his mind, the slave reeled at the possible ramifications. *If the lords don't have beasts to eat anymore...* As the Queen explained her plan, his worse fears crashed into him. He felt his heart crumble in its box, now its coffin.

But all that training and practice paid off. Even after the Queen gave him back control, his body held still and his surface thoughts stayed clear. Deep in his shadows, though, he huddled in a ball, rocking back and forth.

*I must get my sons away from this death place.* But he couldn't think only of himself. His thoughts raced. *If I have my sons carry the warning, I can save them and fulfill my duty to my people.* It was a terrible risk, and he would surely be caught and killed, but there was no choice.

He fought to keep control as guilt wracked him anew. *Oh, my sons, I am so sorry I ever brought you here!*

## Chapter 1: Baby will Fall

As I ran toward the village, I tried to keep my worries away. I'd run this way late last night, checking on my oldest brother's youngest child. Just starting to toddle, he constantly got into things, and I really could help in the raising. Now into my breeding years, I could show real interest in child-rearing without being teased. Not so long before, I could only imagine being chosen for the breeding program. Helping with my nephew, painfully adorable, let me really experience fatherhood, and I loved it.

My oldest brother and his mate lived close enough for me to sneak to their hut on the way to my own each night. That morning, when the lords wanted a runner to carry a package back from our village, I'd stepped up before even checking in with my father. He'd looked terrible after his meeting with the Queen the night before, and it was just a short run. Besides, I had to know what the package was.

As I entered the village, my heart dropped and my feet turned from trusted friends to tripping enemies. The lord was waiting by my brother's hut. *Carry a package.* When they'd said from our village, I'd had a feeling. From my brother's hut, what else could it mean?

I plodded forward, dreading the next moments. It was an honor to be Chosen, right? Father had been Chosen, and look where he was now. Pet slave to the Queen herself.

I watched the lord push open the door and obediently followed her inside. She looked around, wrinkling her nose. It looked like a regular hut to me, with its dirt floor, cooking pit in the center, sleeping mats to one side. Neater than most, in fact. My brother's mate spun as we came in, my nephew on one hip. I saw my niece peep out from the sleeping mats out of the corner of my eye. Behind the lord's back, I winked at her and tipped my head to get her to go back to hiding. She did.

My brother's mate's brown eyes shone black in the dim light. She flicked her eyes at the lord, and then at me, wide-eyed.

The lord peered at her and said, "That child is Called."

My brother's mate's face flashed with fear and went slack. I dove toward her, managing to catch my nephew before his head hit the floor. Luckily, I bumped his stiff mother back into the wall instead of forward, so she shouldn't be too injured. My nephew started screaming, and I couldn't tell if he had an injury or was just scared. I guess it didn't really matter.

Easily after so much practice, I carefully hugged him into my shoulder, and started tapping on his back while bouncing. Within moments, his screams quieted into a big sigh. He looked at his mother, and then glared at the lord. A deeply hidden part of me agreed, but I just turned slightly to hide his face.

Carefully not looking at the lord, I missed the cue that she was about to puppet my body. My nephew grunted as I stopped bouncing and held him a bit too tightly. The lord moved my body to stand right in front of her.

"Take it back to the castle," she growled, then let me go enough to speak.

"I live to serve. I will run there now," I said, and started running.

I ran almost to the forest before I felt the lord give me my body back. I didn't stop running, just changed my stride to one that actually worked, shifting my nephew to a better position. "Om mum mum um om um mum mum," I chanted, working to keep my voice low and rumbling. It cracked once, then settled in. I wasn't completely used to sounding like my father, but it worked like a charm. My nephew leaned back to look at me with bright eyes, then snuggled into my shoulder. The smell of his hair filled my nose.

Despite the extra weight, I didn't even think of taking my secret shortcut through the forest. I could feel the lord hanging at the edges of my mind. She must be flying, keeping pace with me. I ran as fast as I could while keeping my bouncing smooth and even, working hard not to wonder where my nephew would go. He fell asleep in my arms. His trust gave my body strength, but filled my mind with worry.

## Chapter 2: Errand

By the time I reached the castle gates, my arms, back, and legs ached and burned. I wondered who would be there to collect my nephew, and joyously it was *her*. I caught sight of my love even as I approached the castle, our eyes leaping over the distance. A smile bloomed on her face, and I could feel mine match. My steps, plodding and painful, now flew, like running on springy moss, my fatigue vanishing. The other slaves, and even the lord waiting for deliveries, faded until the lord puppeted me, stretching my arms out to hand over my nephew to my love. Despite my trembling arms, I would have held onto my nephew if the lord hadn't puppeted me to give him up, and if the slave hadn't been *her*.

Seeing I was puppeted, my love leaped forward to take my nephew. Her eyes reassured me, daring enough to tell me she would keep him safe, folding him into a cuddle and striding boldly past the lord. The lord scowled but followed. When she let go of my body, I trotted around and in the cook's door, through the maze of hallways toward the throne chamber, to the small room next to it. I knocked and waited.

My father opened the small door and his eyes lit up for a brief second. He must be alone. We were still in the hall, though, so I said, "I live to serve."

"I live to serve," he said, moving aside and ushering me in.

His office always looked the same. Fireballs hovering in the corners cast flickering but bright light around the small room. Baskets of tally sticks lined the room in

an order only he understood, stacks of the thin sheets of metal the lords used to hold language on the one table in the room. No chair or decoration. Looking like a storage closet, this room saw most of the information about the empire.

Inside, my father relaxed a hair. He gave me a half-smile and put one hand on my shoulder. "Where were you?" he said in low tones. "They need a runner to go to the far southeast village."

"The lords wanted to collect a package from oldest brother's house," I said. "They Called his youngest."

"Already?" he said, his eyes falling. *All three of my grandsons*, I heard him think. *I thought I had more time*. He thought about telling me something else, something serious. Once again I considered telling him I could hear his thoughts, so he might as well just talk to me. Once again, I rejected the idea. My ability was close to magic, and everyone knew only lords could use magic. I loved my father, but didn't know how he would react.

He was thinking something about my nephew, about me and my two brothers. My father had taught me how to separate my thoughts, and he was such an expert I couldn't always figure out what he was thinking. Something about how my nephew would be taken away forever?

I clenched my jaw. My other two nephews had been Called earlier this year. Only a cycle apart, both were just starting to look like adults. At least my brother had the one daughter left. At least he'd get to see one of his children grow up. My attempts to echo the common wisdom broke down. *Don't the lords have enough slaves already?* I

banished the thought as soon as it popped in my head. You never knew when a lord might jump into your mind.

As if I had summoned the lords, my father's face slackened. He moved past me just as my own body was puppeted. Our bodies walked out the door and into the throne chamber. It was difficult to look around without moving my eyes, but I practiced. Several slaves stood slack-faced along the walls. After serving in the palace for a while, some slaves always looked like that, puppeted or not. I stuffed the pride of knowing my father was almost the only one still himself. My oldest brother was in the throne room, guarding one of the doors. I moved quickly toward the throne and couldn't see more.

The Queen looked fully like one of us, so she must be in a good mood. My father once told me the lords looked like us to help slaves be less frightened. I wouldn't say it helped much.

Our bodies fell flat on our faces. I would have yelled in pain if I could have. The stone floor was clean, at least. I hoped I wouldn't bleed on it.

"I live to serve," my father and I said in unison. Our bodies rose to kneel.

The Queen looked at her Right. "You insisted on this runner? He looks a bit taller than the others, but not much else."

The Right said quickly, "There was no delay." She shrugged. "Your pet pointed out that this one received training in fighting, which might be necessary."

The Queen peered at me, and I hid my thoughts as deep as I could as she brushed across my mind. "Acceptable," she said as my body rose to standing. "Get him ready and on to village six. Tally all beast herds, ill and well, as well as beast herders. Sample the

herds, the herders, and anyone else involved with the herds. You,” she said, indicating my father as his body stood, “give him what he needs to return swiftly.”

Our bodies turned and left. Two other slaves hit the floor as we left the throne room, but I wasn't paying attention. I noticed *her* standing against the wall. She was beautiful as always, and not slack-faced. But I was. I longed to wave, to say something, anything to catch her attention. Would she look at me, share our secret smile? Knowing it was impossible, I threw my full concentration into imagining my hand waving at her, the smile she would give me in return. I could see it in my mind.

My left hand twitched, and I felt a faint surprise that wasn't my own. My love didn't seem to notice at all, maybe wasn't even looking at me, it was hard to tell. The puppet feeling slammed into me fresh, and I marched out of the throne room and back into my father's office.

Once there, his face perked as he took control of his body. He picked up a blank tally stick, a small metal rod, and a metal sheet. He turned to look at my face and glanced at the doorway, where the lord waited. Did I see a flash of sadness in my father's face? He must have been able to see I was still puppeted, but why would that make him sad? From my hiding place, I was too scared to try to read his mind.

“Your supplies, runner,” he said. He held up the metal rod, thick as his thumb and long as his arm. “To use, you press the sampling rod into the side of the neck, like this,” he said, demonstrating on his own neck. The rod hissed sharply, like a drop of water thrown into a fire. “Hold it until the hissing stops, then remove.” He held up the metal sheet, writing side out, and looked me square in the eye. “This is for the lord only. You

must arrive in two days. You will keep this hidden from any slave that can read with your life.”

I was glad then of the puppeting, so I couldn't move a muscle. I kept my thoughts as deep as I could, everything else calm and empty. My training served me well as I held in my shock. What was he doing? He risked his life by showing me this, knowing I could read it myself.

He held the sheet, hand shaking slightly. I cowered in the hidden place in my mind, expecting the lord to walk in to at least beat him for his sloppiness. Pet or not, he could be killed. Apparently the lord wasn't paying attention. When my father finally lowered the sheet, I kept my mind deeply hidden, not daring a single thought's escape.

My father took a breath and continued. “This tally stick is for the beast herders,” he said. “Return with it, the sampling rod, and whatever the lord gives you when told.” His eyes flickered. It was the look he had when he debated with himself over something. But the only thing he said was, “That is all.”

He had decades of practice hiding his mind, and I was puppeted. But I heard the next thought clearly.

*I love you always, my son.*

I wished I were braver, to try to have him hear my response. But I kept my thoughts behind a wall, not daring to risk the lord overhearing me think, *I love you too, Father*. My body walked out the door and out of the castle, running as soon as it was out. The lord didn't follow, and I got control of my body back. I reached into my bag as I ran, eating the meager provisions. Tucked away was a little greenfruit. My father must have

done something illegal to sneak that in, but that seemed paltry after what he had done in his office.

As I ran, my mind raced faster. Why had my father risked a fire whipping to show me that sheet? He knew I could read, and if the lords found out I'd read the sheet, we would both be killed. What was he trying to tell me? I couldn't wait to get back, pull my father to a place we could talk, and figure out what was going on.

### Chapter 3: Quick Read

When I was old enough, I'd been assigned to clean the castle. My father's position made it easy to keep me assigned to the castle, and I apparently tested high enough to not be sent to the farms. I was quick and quiet, and pretty soon all of the lords and their personal slaves became used to me. I knew better than to linger near the metal sheets but was fascinated by their importance. I almost immediately figured out their purpose and was amazed at the idea. A lord would put her ideas down on the metal in some symbolic form. Then the next lord could read it and know what the first was thinking! It seemed much more limited than talking mind to mind, but the lords didn't—or maybe couldn't—use that all the time. But even more, a slave could learn the symbols! I figured out my father could read, and one night on our way back to our hut I asked him about it.

I'll never forget the look on his face. He grabbed me by the arm and dragged me into the woods, looking up the whole time. His eyes wild, he whispered I was to never speak of it again.

I tried to explain. I hadn't meant to use their language or tools, just wondered why we didn't have our own. His jaw dropped and he sputtered something about a death sentence, so I dropped it. But I didn't forget. In fact, I swore I would learn to read. I guess I was too young to understand death. Now it was too late.

Learning to read wasn't really that hard, with my position. I would go about my duties, and when a lord or slave was reading or talking about something from a metal

sheet, I would linger a bit, take quick peeks at the sheet as I cleaned up. I became good at taking a picture of the whole sheet with my mind, saving the image for playing with later. At first, I would play with their symbols, drawing them in the dirt to try to figure out how many there were, how to recognize one from another. I figured out combinations and soon put together how the symbols matched sounds. I almost got caught one time, lingering too long as a pet slave read an entire sheet to his lord. I said his voice was beautiful music to cover, and had to carefully fend off his advances until just last season. I never did figure out why the lord didn't just read it herself, but that one sheet taught me enough to get me started.

It was like a game, something to keep my mind occupied while I cleaned. I would swing by a metal sheet, glance at it, and then try to figure out what it said before I finished cleaning the room. When I grew up and was picked to be a runner, I could keep a couple of sheets in my mind to work on when I was on a run. I'd thought I was pretty smart. Until last month, when my father caught me. Well, when I gave myself away.

I was doing my usual thing, waiting for my father to give me the sheets to run to the next village. I glanced at the top one. It only took me a moment to figure out what it said, and I couldn't help but make a face. They were lowering the age of Testing! The poor children.

Unfortunately, my father was watching me. His face went from white to red, then back to white. Muscles at his jaw jumped like insects under his skin. He didn't say a thing, and after just a minute he was back to his normal self.

When I came home that night, as late as I dared, he was waiting. "I swear, I'll kill you myself if you lie." He grabbed my arm. "Can you read?"

My heart pounding, I told him the whole story. While I talked, his red face, eyebrows furrowed and lips pinched, fell and faded. By the end, his jaw hung and his face was pale as the moon.

We just stood there, looking at each other for several moments. Finally, he shook his head. “Swear never to tell anyone and never to do it again, your dead mother to haunt you forever if you do.”

Of course I promised. And of course I didn't keep that promise. I couldn't stop myself from reading if I tried. Besides, I would have done anything to see my mother, even if only to haunt me.

With that sheet now heavy as a corpse in my bag as I ran, I wished I had kept my promise.

## Chapter 4: Read Receipt

The image of that page in my father's hand burned into my brain. I couldn't help reading it. If I didn't work to ignore sheets, force myself to not even look at them, I would read them. I really couldn't help it. Just a glance, and the words would be in my head. The sheet my father showed me was like that, but worse. He'd just held it up, letting the writing etch into my mind for what seemed an eternity.

The plague had spread. The sheet started with a reaction to that, a demand for an accounting, and an explanation for the sampling. Something called a vaccine. Then there was some mention of a breeding program, holding all Testing, and an edict eliminating any restrictions on Calling. I knew the Queen Called any slave whenever she chose, but this opened it for any lord. Every child in the empire! At least they were stopping that terrible Testing.

I shook off the horrible memories of my own Test by focusing on my feet, and ended up running well past dark. Huddled in the crook of a large tree, I slept fitfully, nightmares of children being dragged out of my arms.

The next morning it took me forever to wake and get going, and I seemed to be running so slowly. The terror that a lord would find out I'd read the message...I reminded myself again to not even think about it. Though completely alone, I hid my thoughts behind my wall, just in case.

I reached the village well before their evening meal. At least I wasn't late. All of the outer villages were the same, spread out like petals on a flower from the middle of the castle. I had been to all of them, at one time or another, and they were similar. Big house in the middle for the lord, smaller huts around it in a circle for the slaves. Paths wound through the huts, then past them to the farm areas. The farms surrounded the whole area. I slowed to a trot when I saw the lord's house.

A male slave, not much older than me, answered my knock at the slave's door. He glanced at my bag, eyes widening before ushering me in. I had to remind him to give me some water, he was so flustered. After being delivered up the hierarchy of slaves, I finally was brought to the lord. Surprised to not immediately be puppeted, I hesitated a moment before handing over my bag.

Still in control of my body, I looked at her out of the corner of my eye as her pet slave emptied the bag. Tall, skin like milk, blond hair—she was obviously a lord. But I didn't remember her. She must be new to the village.

She read the sheet to herself and looked into the distance for a moment. Had she just been rotated in, or was she really new? She was shorter than all the lords at the castle, no visible horns, a body shape like... A thought dashed across my brain before I could stomp it back down. In some ways she looked more like a slave. I dared to look directly at her, trying to place her face, an odd feeling of familiarity driving me.

My heart lurched as her eyes snapped back, catching me looking at her. I threw walls around my thoughts as our eyes met. I had seen lords with a hint of green in their eyes, but they always had blue eyes. I had never even heard of eyes that were as bright and green as hers. I kept my mind hidden and waited for her to punish me for my

thoughts, but she just looked at me. She must not have read my mind! I felt light-headed. She wasn't going to kill me. Then her words nearly did.

“You will stay here overnight, as I need time to ready my reply,” she said.

“I can return immediately, if the lord wishes,” I replied. It took all my training to hold my face still. What was I thinking? Talking to a lord directly, much less disagreeing! I grabbed my thoughts and dove into the hidden place in my mind. Amazingly, she didn't puppet me. I didn't even feel the faintest brush at my mind.

“No,” she said. From deep in my hidden place, I wondered if I saw a twitch at the corner of her mouth. “I will need time to form a proper reply.” Then she said something, and I almost fainted despite my training. “I will have to note my delay, of course.”

“I live to serve,” I let my mouth reply automatically. I stayed hidden, my thoughts firmly behind my wall. I couldn't slip and let her know I could read. I couldn't reveal I knew the metal sheet said to reply and return immediately. But I also couldn't help trembling inside at what this all meant. Maybe this new lord was unfamiliar with slaves, or did her behavior say something about the outer villages? Even in my hidden place, I didn't dare think anything else.

Something in her eyes flickered, and that odd recognition returned. She felt familiar, but I didn't remember ever seeing her before. Then again, slaves were trained to not look at the lords, and certainly not directly into their eyes, unless puppeted.

The lord looked away, lips pursed, waving the metal sheet slightly. “Hildi, please show this runner to the cooks,” she said, eyes still distant. Her pet nodded and walked to the door.

Even with all my practice, I blinked, stumbling before turning to follow. Her pet had a *name*? Slaves in the outer villages could go days without seeing a lord, but I'd never heard of any daring to have a secret name. Only lords had names! Pets like my father had special privileges and authority, but a name? This lord's oddness had turned from kind to dangerous, and my throat tightened. I couldn't even speak as her pet pointed out the way and left.

On my way to the cooks' quarters I let go of my control, and my mind raced. The Queen had killed messengers in the past for messages they carried. I couldn't imagine what she would do to the messenger that disobeyed an order, note from a lord or not. My heart hammering like I had been sprinting, I paused to catch my breath. Round and round my thoughts ran, but I couldn't do anything until the lord replied. She hadn't read my thoughts to find out I knew how to read the sheet, but had she doomed me anyway by her delay in responding?

## Chapter 5: Bandit

I stepped into the food area. The woman working took one look at me, eyes widening. “Wait, please,” she said, scurrying off. Returning, she handed me a small loaf of bread. “Baked special for you,” she said, an odd look on her face. The smell drove my mouth to water so much my jaw ached. Flour being so scarce at the castle, we ate bread only on very special occasions, and treasured it. But bread held pain for me too.

My father once brought a loaf home to share, carefully ripping it into equal parts, one for me and each of my two brothers. His eyes had filled with happiness and tears as he said my mother used to bake bread almost daily, and my two older brothers would eat it all, entire loaves in a bite, as soon as it left the oven. So my mother would bake a special, small loaf just for me, which she would hide until she could hand it to me herself.

I took the bread slowly and searched the woman's face, but even under the wrinkles, she sparked no recollection. Was my father trying to send me a message? I didn't dare ask, and just thanked her. She shrugged and went back to get me a spicy dish of beans, limed corn, and squash. I dug in.

She must have been lonely. As I ate she found work nearby, chatting about this and that, asking me questions about the castle. Extremely uncomfortable, I looked around for lords but none appeared. She finally got around to asking about slaves who had been Called.

“Half of my old village was Called,” she said. “My uncles, aunts, sisters, brothers, all Called to the castle this moon. I was sent to this village, as they needed a slave who

knew how to cook, most of their cook slaves Called to the castle too.” Her eyes, brown as bread and just as soft, met mine with hope whenever I dared lift them from my bowl.

“Have you seen them?” She started to describe her sister but I cut her off.

“I haven't.”

“But you work at the castle, right?”

“Yes,” I said, looking around for lords and dropping my voice even quieter. “But some of the castle slaves were Called to the outer villages, and we certainly have not gotten replacements. My father is pet slave to the Queen herself, and manages the slaves for the whole castle. I know for certain we haven't received any at all, much less a group.”

The slave's eyes grew wide and liquid. She said in a whisper, “My nephew was Called the day I left for here. He is two years old.” I dropped my eyes into my beans, thinking of my own nephew.

“It is a great honor to be Called,” I said after recovering. “The Called receive special training, special treatment, raised to be the best servants of the lords.”

She looked at me, but thankfully didn't ask the question I couldn't answer and didn't even want to think about. Why so many, right now? It fit with the message I'd just delivered, but I shoved that thought down. I hurriedly finished my food, thanked the poor woman, and asked where I might find a place to sleep.

Another luxury came as she showed me to a room with one bed. The room was just that, a pallet without room for much else, but it had a cushion and I wouldn't have to listen to snores or moaning nightmares. I flopped onto the springy cushion that smelled like dried grass and was as soft as if it had never been slept on. Despite my worry, I

relaxed. I couldn't remember the last time I had been so full. I fell asleep quickly and dreamed of my mother. I had no memory of what she looked like, only vague feelings of warm softness and the smell of freshly baked bread. To make up for my lack of memory, in my dreams she would often have the face of one of the older female slaves, whoever had been nice to me that day.

As impossible as only could be in a dream, I ran home from the castle with both my brothers during the day. When we crested the last hillock, I smelled the baking bread and laughed in joy. The door opened as we approached, a figure standing in the doorway just a shadow in the dim interior. Sprinting ahead of my stronger but slower brothers, I reached the door first, almost running into my mother, holding three fresh loaves of bread. For the first time, I was first to the bread! I took the loaf, looking up at her with a smile to thank her. Bright blue eyes smiled down me, and I started awake, breathing hard.

I tossed and turned the rest of the night and was up before false dawn to be ready. Each moment I repeated that if I ran hard, I could still get back in time. The sun rose, and still no reply. I shivered in my anxiety to leave, keeping my thoughts hidden. A note might just mean she wanted another pet, and not really to help me at all. It was my life, nothing to her, and lords acted however they wanted. I ate more of the beans and limed corn while I waited, as much as I thought I could handle without being sick. Finally receiving the lord's reply from her pet, I thanked him and raced toward the castle as quick as I could.

I had no choice now. As soon as I was away from the village, I cut through the woods for a shortcut. The forest path was harder and dangerous, but much quicker. Other runners avoided the forest, declaring reasonable concerns about getting lost and facing

punishment. Other slaves whispered rumors of bandits and monsters. Although I had never heard of a slave actually seeing a bandit, the outer village slaves told stories of monsters as big as several huts, all scales and fangs, eating hoof beasts whole. My father explained those stories away. Besides, a monster that big wouldn't be much threat in the tight spaces of the forest.

I kept the idea to myself that the lords started the stories to keep us runner slaves from getting lost, and from running as quickly as we could. Before the rumors started, the lords tried giving us extra food for beating a previous record time, but the records dropped quickly, so fast now they were impossible to beat. On a really hungry day, I considered using a forest shortcut but realized it would look odd to break an impossible record. Today, despite the risks, I had to try. It was the only way I might be able to make it back in time.

Despite needing focus to run through the woods, I struggled not to think about the old woman's questions about all those Called, especially the young ones. I couldn't remember the last time young children had been Called, it'd been cycles ago. Being Called should be a great honor. I thought of my nephew and let my worry for him speed my feet.

Despite the food from the outer village, by late day I was ravenous from running so hard. I knew I would lose more time by not eating than taking time to forage. I slowed to a jog, broke off a tree branch into a poking stick, and started scanning as I jogged through the forest. I hadn't gone far before I spotted a giant rotted log. I carefully set my bag down, mouth watering.

I ripped off the bark, ready to pounce. Nothing but a dark pattern like veins. I stabbed my stick into the rotting wood. Levering off a hunk, I dropped my stick and crouched next to the log, peering in the dim light. Movement! My hands flew from the log to my mouth, snatching before the tiny beasts could scurry down a hole. Pinching hard and fast, I ate as much wood as food. Too hurried, I didn't care. Besides, the wood filled me up, too. The log consumed my focus.

The sound of a branch breaking to my left shocked me back to awareness. I grabbed my stick and whirled, expecting anything.

Across the narrow clearing stood a man who looked the same age as my father. He didn't look like a slave—could he be a bandit? He held a small stick in his hands, splintered in the middle. He dropped the stick and just leaned against the tree with a sad but amused expression on his face. I had seen pity before, but never with humor. We eyed each other for a moment.

“You come with me, I give you food,” he said as he dropped the sticks. He had an odd accent, nothing I had ever heard before.

“I must refuse,” I said, waiting. I reached out to try to read his mind. I had never tried it with anyone other than my father before, so I didn't know if it would work. Getting nothing, a horrible thought hit me. With his deep black hair around a more oval face, he didn't look like a lord. But it had been so long since I'd seen a male lord at the castle, and that from out of the corner of my eye, I wasn't sure I'd even recognize one.

His commanding tone, the oddness of the message, and the village lord's actions scrambled in my mind. My whole body tensed, ready for anything. After a moment, I still

kept control of my body. Not a lord, then. Just a bandit, and I knew what to do for that. I shifted my weight and stick to a fighting stance.

He nodded appreciatively. “I see you trained to fight. But you do not need to be hurt. Your father asked me to get you.” His eyes didn't shift when my jaw fell.

He didn't get to tell any more lies because I threw my stick at him like a spear. Another reason I hadn't hesitated cutting through the woods this time was I'd had some fighter training. My oldest brother was a fighter slave, now a guard at the castle. I'd trained to be like him, even thought I would be a guard, before that runner slave died. This old bandit didn't have a chance.

But I missed. I never missed. I had been trained and continued to practice every time I ran. I'd taken greenfruit off branches before. The old man barely even moved, and so smoothly it looked like he'd just adjusted his position for comfort. Fine. I'd admit he was spry for an old man, but I knew I was stronger. I'd get in close and end this quickly.

I glanced over at my bag. The old man's eyebrows raised, but then he just shook his head as I moved to keep the bag behind me. He didn't budge as I took a step closer to him and feinted a kick.

“Kick pretty good,” he said calmly. “Back foot little sloppy.”

I growled. Mostly because he was right, but my legs were tired. I feinted again, and then attacked.

My first kick hit only air, and my second also missed completely. I threw punch and kick combinations without a single landing. I didn't think about that, though. All I really needed was one good hit. I punched quickly, ready to throw the knockout as soon

as I broke through his defenses. I didn't touch him. He didn't block, just pushed my fists away like they were already going to miss and he was just helping them along.

Impatient to be going, I wound up and threw a knockout punch anyway. He turned as my fist flew past, pulling my arm over his shoulder, sending me flying. I flew into a tree and hit my head so hard I saw stars. When my vision cleared, I stumbled to my feet and saw him shaking his head.

He was between me and my bag now. Why didn't he just grab it and run? My daze wore off, and his chance was gone. I wiped my forehead, glancing at the blood on my hand. In a flash of memory, the bright red reminded me of the last time a runner dropped his bag. I realized how much trouble I was in. I just wanted to be back at the castle, hand off my bag, and see my love again.

Tingling in fear, I came up with a new plan. I attacked again, more carefully this time. I closed the distance with two stutter steps, shifting stances and jabbing feints. He didn't do more than shift his stance, but I could see his eyes following my moves. I rushed him again, and he was ready again. My kick and punch combination didn't land, of course, and he shoved me and my tackle past him. This time I kept going, grabbing my bag as I stumbled past. Regaining my feet, I cut left, sprinting. He barked something in a language I didn't understand. I turned the corner past him, running full speed.

“Get him!” he yelled. Afraid I was going to get a spear in my back, I dodged left and right, then leaped and swung from a low branch as I went past a cluster of trees.

That wild leap kept me from being captured. A man leaped out to tackle me, hit my swinging legs instead of my waist, and fell to the ground. A second man dove out but stumbled over the first, missing entirely. Heart pounding, I dodged behind another tree

and somehow found the energy to speed up. I threw a look over my shoulder and caught the glimpse of two other men just standing there, hopelessly out of reach.

The old man's voice yelled after me, "Your father sent me!" I didn't slow down for his lies. I kept up the sprinting and leaping, crashing noisily through the forest for as long as I could. Faced with death, the fear that threw me faster than any other was I might never see my love again. Bloody sweat trickled down, burning my eyes. When I finally slowed to my usual pace, I heard no sign of pursuit.

My thoughts a jumble, I ran well into the night, long after the moon slid down. Stumbling tired as I was, a little sleep would get me back quicker than none. I climbed a large tree, much higher than usual. I slept terribly, cold and starting awake every time I shifted position. As soon as the sky showed enough light to run, I was off. Despite my pounding head and screaming muscles, I made it to the castle before midday. It was as though I had not slept at the outer village at all, a new record. But I could tell no one and would receive no extra rations. In fact, I had to risk my life by lying instead.

## Chapter 6: Lying Cheat

As I ran that morning, I touched the bruised lump on my forehead. My hair was just long enough to cover it, but a sharp eye would see it immediately. If asked, I should report the attack immediately, just as it'd happened. Lying to a lord risked death. But I didn't have a choice. Getting attacked and running away could be a problem. Setting my bag down for any reason, especially bashing my head when away from it, definitely was. Doing anything but giving my bag to a lord risked severe punishment.

The memory that had stopped me in the forest flashed back to me, the face of the runner crisp in my mind. Another runner had been waiting for the Queen's Right when I came into the room to deliver my package that day. I guess I startled her pet, as he knocked over a pile of tally sticks. The Queen's Right smacked the pet, sending him sprawling, his leg twisting under him. She must have puppeted him, as the pet tried to stand, slack-faced, but he just fell down again.

The Right looked at the runner next to me. "Take him to the carers," she said. I cringed as the runner dropped his bag on the floor and turned to the pet. The Queen's Right growled. Horns leaped from her forehead and fangs jutted over her lips. She slapped the runner across the face and must have had her claws out. Bloody rips covered half the runner's face, one eyelid mostly ripped off. My father told me later the runner had become sick, lost the eye, and had been lucky to survive.

Lying to a lord was punishable by death. But if I told the truth, the lords would question me about my attackers, tromping around in my head for memories of what they looked like. Rumors held that no one returned alive or sane from being questioned by lords. Even if I did, they would find out I could read and kill me anyway. My trusty feet carried me along without effort, freeing my mind to work on the problem. I examined every path and finally figured the only way out: I hadn't been attacked.

I put the true memory of what had happened behind my walls. Then, for the rest of the run, I imagined running on the path, then tripping and falling. The memory didn't have to make sense, just seem real. The lords didn't know anything about running and even less about falling. Again and again, running that fake memory through until it was as real as anything that had actually happened to me. By the time I reached the palace, I could see the log on the ground, the thick branch rushing toward my head, hitting me just so.

I tried to convince myself the lords wouldn't even notice, ask, or care. I would arrive on time, delivery successful. No need for questions. But I kept going over the memory, just in case. Was it real enough? As I forced myself to walk at a regular pace through the castle to my father's closet, my face calm, I tried to slow my pounding heart.

I knocked on his door. "I am returned," I stated. A crash and mutter from inside greeted me before the door flew open. "I live to serve," I said hesitantly, my father's face distracting me. Surprise, fear, anger, and sadness flashed over his face, there and gone so quickly I must have been mistaken. Besides, when was the last time my father had ever been frightened? I couldn't remember.

“I live to serve,” he said, his eyes lingering on my forehead. I hoped he would ask for a report before taking me to a lord so I would get a chance to practice my lie. I waited for him to invite me in. It would be good to speak the lie, sink it further in my memory. I never got the chance.

“The Queen's Right ordered you to her as soon as you arrived,” he stated. He marched out of the office and walked past the throne room. I reinforced the walls around my deeper thoughts and tried to slow my pounding heart. At least it wasn't the Queen summoning me. So smart and powerful, the Queen could smell a lie before I even told it.

We marched into the Right's office and stopped. She finished her orders to one of the cook slaves and dismissed her. Her blue eyes flicked from my father to me, her forehead furrowing as she puppeted my body and stepped it forward to give her my bag. She took the bag and then her freezing eyes, skittering across me, hit my forehead.

“How did you acquire that injury to your head?” she asked. Her eyes grabbed mine and, puppeted, I couldn't move. She clenched her jaw and narrowed her eyes, blue, slitted irises widening for a moment. My mouth loosened enough to talk.

“I hit my head on a branch while running, lord,” I said without thinking. So practiced was my story, I could see the branch lying on the ground next to me. “I am sorry.”

She looked at me intensely for a moment, clumsily rolling through my surface thoughts. “You didn't run into any trouble? We have had reports of bandits in the area.”

“No trouble, lord. Just running too fast.” I held the walls around my deeper mind firmly like my father did, as I had practiced over and over. I couldn't help my stomach

clenching. From my hidden place, I kept the images I'd created running through my surface mind. I tripped, the branch of the log rushing at my face, a sharp pain. Again.

My father cuffed me in the back of the head, breaking eye contact. "Clumsy, you are, but you made good time," he said. The hit made me bow and flip my hair forward, further covering the wound. I held tightly to my gratitude, keeping it hidden. "I think the Queen wanted speed for a specific reason?" He motioned to my bag as I peered up through my hair, watching with a dry mouth. His eyes calculated, flicking to the lord quickly, and then away. "Do I need to report anything to the Queen, lord?" he asked.

The Right quickly opened my bag and took out the sheet. I felt my body release, but didn't move a muscle. She threw the bag on her desk, eyes not leaving the metal page. After a minute she looked up, as if remembering we were still there. "Leave," she said, waving her hand as her eyes jumped back to the sheet.

I turned, leaving with my father following. I made it a short way down the hall before the shakes hit me. Trembling so much I couldn't move and didn't know what to do. My father grabbed me, dragging me quickly to his office. His grip hurt, but it seemed to help. As I shook, breathing too quickly, trying to get control of my body before anyone caught us, I noticed my father's hands shook too. I considered telling my father what had actually happened, but if they searched his memories, his life would be at risk too.

As soon as we were inside, I shakily said, "Any other work? I live to serve."

My father looked up sharply, seeming about to say something, but shook his head. Our eyes locked and an understanding passed between us. His jaw clenched. I didn't have the energy or will to read his thoughts, and didn't need to do anything other than to look

at his face to read his emotions. He didn't dare ask, and I didn't dare tell. With a deep breath, something settled inside me.

He nodded, turned, and shuffled tally sticks on his desk. "You are to serve at the lords' meal tomorrow," he said. "Right after that, I have another message for the outer villages." I looked around for a metal sheet, instructions of some kind, or to be puppeted. None of that happened. My father didn't look me in the eye, either. He just kept fiddling with the tally sticks. What was going on?

"I live to serve," I said.

My father looked at me once, intensely. "Yes, I live to serve," he said slowly. "Go, get some food." He blinked once, jaw muscles clenching.

I turned and left, trotting down the hall, my feet faster than my thoughts. I slowed, noticing I was heading away from the cooks. Then my pace quickened as I realized where my feet were taking me. Despite being ravenous like always, I didn't want to risk stopping for food.

I had cheated death. Now I wanted to see my love.

End of Sample

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

To young C. H. MacLean, books were everything: mind-food, friends, and fun. They gave the shy middle child's life color and energy. Amazingly, not everyone saw them that way. Seeing a laundry hamper full of books approach her, the librarian scolded C. H. for trying to check them all out. "You'll never read that many before they expire!" C. H. was surprised, having shown great restraint only by keeping a list of books to check out next time. Thoroughly abashed, C. H. waited three whole days after finishing that lot before going back for more.

With an internal world more vivid than the real one, C. H. was chastised for reading in the library instead of going to class. "Neurotic, needs medical help," the teacher diagnosed. C. H.'s father, a psychologist, just laughed when he heard. "She's just upset because those books are more challenging than her class." C. H. realized making up stories was just as fun as reading, and harder to get caught doing. So for a while, C. H. built stories and characters out of wisps and trinkets, with every toy growing an elaborate personality.

But toys were not mature, and stories weren't respectable for a family of doctors. So C. H. grew up, and learned to read serious books and study hard, shelving foolish fantasies for serious work.

Years passed in a black and white blur. Then, unpredictably falling in love all the way to a magical marriage rattled C. H.'s orderly world. A crazy idea slipped in a resulting crack and wouldn't leave. "Write the book you want to read," it said. "Write? As in, a fantasy novel? But I'm not creative," C. H. protested. The idea, and C. H.'s spouse, rolled their eyes.

So one day, C. H. started writing. Just to try it, not that it would go anywhere. Big mistake. Decades of pent-up passion started pouring out, making a mess of an orderly life. It only got worse. Soon, stories popped up everywhere-in dreams, while exercising, or out of spite, in the middle of a work meeting. "But it's not important work," C. H. pleaded weakly. "They are not food, or friends, or..." But it was too late. C. H. had re-discovered that like books, life should be fun too. Now, writing is a compulsion, and a calling.

C. H. lives in a Pacific Northwest forest with five pets, two kids, one spouse, and absolutely no dragons or elves, faeries or demons... that are willing to be named, at least.

*Overcome Reality. Invigorate Dreams.*