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."

WINTER OF FIRE

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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.

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PART ONE

FIREBRAND

1
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 made from herbs on our foreheads. The others thought it was a new game, and laughed. But I knew evil hung in the air, colder than the wind.

That morning we were allowed only a little water. About halfway through the morning, a cart came for us, drawn by four Quelled youths. The other children clapped, delighted, and climbed up by themselves, but me, they had to force.

Five Chosen marched alongside our cart, roaring with laughter at something one of them had said. Their heads were thrown back, their teeth gleamed in the pale grey light, and their fine-spun gold and scarlet cloaks swung radiantly as they walked.

The four Quelled youths pulling our cart were harnessed to it with leather halters and chains. Their clothes, like ours, were of dull grey and brown, though theirs were blackened and torn while ours were clean. They moved in that restrained, solitary way of all the Quelled, silently and without vigour.

I remember one of them clearly. He must have moved when he was being branded, because his mark, instead of being a perfect circle in the centre of his forehead, was a wavering oval across his right brow and down across his cheek. The eyelids were puckered, the eye itself dried up. There was no flame symbol within the circle of his brand – only that terrible sightless hole. He would have had a striking face, without that withered eye. In spite of his bowed head and the demeaned way he walked, there was something sensitive and strong about him, as if a secret inner life burned in him of which the Chosen knew nothing. I felt akin to him.

We came in our little wooden cart to a lonely hut in a barren, stony place high above the mine. The hut was low and long, and built of mountain rock. A small fire blazed outside and a man stooped over it, turning something in the flames.

I should have known – we all should have known – what was to come. We all had seen the brands on the foreheads of other Quelled, all seen our older brethren go away unmarked one day, and come back Quelled. But it was never spoken of, and no one warned us. It never occurred to us that our turn would come. So we submitted when the Chosen blindfolded us, though I was stricken with terror. And we waited while, one at a time, we were taken to the man by the fire.

I have never forgotten that agony: the shock and outrage and blinding pain. And I remember well the long walk home. I refused to be thrown on the cart. Some mad, unyielding pride made me walk. The Chosen thought it was a joke, though one of them swore at me.

I walked beside the youth with the blinded eye. His presence comforted me. Even through the throbbing haze of pain I could tell he kept his good eye on me, and several times he caught my anguished gaze, and smiled. He was strong under the chains and leather straps that bound him with the others to the cart, and there was a steadiness about him that gave me strength.

We dared not speak, not with the Chosen so close. The Chosen forbade us to speak in their presence, perhaps

because they believed that by stopping our tongues they stopped our minds. But when they had gone on far ahead, the Quelled youth smiled again and said, "What name do they call you by, young lionheart?"

I tried to smile, and winced with pain. "My name is Elsha," I said. "What name do you have?"

"Lesharo," he replied. He walked in silence for a while, and then he said very softly, "They cannot put their stamp upon your soul, Elsha."

We did not speak again until I was twelve years old, and we became friends; but those few words from him had more influence on my life than anything else I ever heard.

Time diminished a little the anguish of that day. There were days when I even forgot the scar, since I never clearly saw my face. But sometimes when I was lying by the fire at night I lifted my hand, pushed back my heavy yellow hair, and traced the pattern of the brand.

It seemed an inoffensive thing. I even liked the feel of the perfect circle and the shape of the flame within. But it bewildered me. I did not understand then why such a mark was necessary; there were Chosen, and there were Quelled. The Chosen owned the mines, and the Quelled laboured for firestones in the mines – and we all were kept alive by the fires we made. It was only later, when I understood injustice and the shame of slavery, that I knew why they branded us.

Out of all the Chosen, there was only one I loved. We called him our Firelord. He was our great firestone diviner,

by whose sacred sight fire and warmth were kept alive in our world. My father told me stories of him, and visions of him illuminated my life. I used to snuggle close to my father on the dirt floor by our firepit at night, and look into the flames and listen.

"Once, long ago, when my father was a boy, the firestones in this place were hidden deep in the mountain," my father told me. "The people did not know where they were. There was no mine, and there were no firestones for fuel, and everyone was in danger of dying from the cold. In all our land, there was only one man who could help; one who had the power to look upon the mountains and see the firestones deep inside, and tell the people where to mine. He is the Firelord. He alone has the gift of inner sight, the great divining power."

I remember how my heart used to beat like a wild thing at the thought of that power, and I asked eagerly, "How did he see the stones, Father? *How?*"

My father used to laugh and stroke my hair. I loved the sound of his laugh. "No one knows how he sees them, child," he said. "But he came to this place, and he saw the stones, and he told my father's people where to dig their mine. He still divines for firestones and tells people where to mine. He is an old man now, though some say he is very strong, and still looks young. His soul is full of firestone power, and has all the strength and light of flame. And in the time of the great Fire Festival, he goes back to the sacred flame and renews the fires there."

"The Firelord can touch fire, and not be burned?"

"I don't know, child. He is a man apart. No one knows him very well, except the highest-born woman of the Chosen, who is his handmaid."

"I'll see the Firelord one day," I said.

My father's voice became husky then, and full of sorrow. "No, Elsha. You will work in the mine this year and next year and all your years until you die. Because that is the fate of the Quelled. And the Firelord won't be coming here again. Our mine will last a hundred years."

"I will see him," I said. "I love the Firelord. And I love his sacred flame. I love the way it burns high on a mountaintop and never goes out."

"How can you know such things?" he asked.

"I've seen them, Father. I've seen them in my dreams."

My father gathered me up in his arms then, and kissed my hair and face. "You are strange, my little love," he said, laughing. "The strangest Quelled child ever born."

2
Dark Realities

THE SIRANJARO MINE was one of the largest in our mountains. Seven hundred Quelled worked there, besides the old women and men who were the caretakers in our camp. For us there was no other life but mining. We were branded and easily identified, so there was no escape.

The mine was a single shaft straight down into the mountain, and we descended into its utter dark by a series of long wooden ladders. I worked the fifteenth seam down, one of the narrowest and wettest. It was also warm there, deep as it was in the bowels of the earth. I worked wearing only my skirt, lying on my back in the water on the tunnel floor, picking at the firestones in the roof directly above my head. My shoulders and elbows suffered in the confined space, and the fine, black firestone dust filled my eyes and throat. I carried no candle, but worked by touch in the total

dark. I had heard explosions caused by candle-flame in the tunnels that seeped gas, and I had seen the people carried out.

One day stands out beyond all other days for me. It was the day I turned sixteen years old. In celebration of my birth, and because an inexplicable joy had taken hold on me, I worked slowly and rested often. It was partly in defiance of the Chosen – a small defiance, true – but sweet just the same. And so I worked hard for a while, lying on my back in the narrow place; then, when my arms ached, I rested, placing the pick across my chest. I felt the dank water seeping through my skirt, and slapping softly against my bare arms and sides. It filtered through the rags I had bound about my long hair, and felt warm and gentle on my scalp.

I listened to the sounds of the other Quelled at work, muffled and faint in the far passages. I heard the dull thudding of their picks on the firestone face, and heard people groan as they hoisted their full baskets onto their backs. Somewhere a child hurt itself and wailed, and I heard the soft voice of a man comforting it.

"Hush, little love," he said. "There – I'll tear my shirt for a bandage and stop the blood. You sit here awhile. I'll fill your basket with stones from mine, and the overseer will never know."

I heard a woman weeping quietly as she laboured, heavy-laden with her basket of stones, up the long, creaking ladders to the surface.

Sometimes I heard conversations echoing weirdly in the blackness; sometimes I heard tender whisperings and sounds of agony, or joy. And sometimes – some blessed, awesome times – there was a brief space where no sound was. Then I'd hear the soft breathing of the darkness, the throb and hum of the deep earth itself, the power of the firestones all around. Sometimes then it seemed as if my heart beat with the firestone heart, and I felt a oneness with the rock. And then, far in the darkness, a pick would start up again, and the flow of power would be broken. But those silent times, those times when I was one with the mountains, earth, and the black stones that held fire – those times were the strength and joy of my life.

I didn't understand it then, and when I told my mother how I felt she said I was half crazed. "Keep it to yourself, Elsha," she said, smiling but earnest. "You father is troubled enough by your mad ideas." Only one other did I tell: my one true friend, Lesharo.

I thought of him often on that strange, slow day, while I lay enfolded in darkness and enigmatic joy. Perhaps that was the day I first knew I loved him, and the wonder of it took my breath away, left me dazed, dreaming in the velvet dark. Perhaps destiny was watching me, and made my limbs lazy and my mind dream. I did not know it then, but our history changed because I was slow that day.

At last I heard the gong that signalled evening and the time for the return home. I groped blindly in the water for the last few firestones I had chipped out, and placed them in

my basket. I crawled backwards down my narrow tunnel, dragging the basket after me. I came to the end of my seam, stood upright, and felt for my heavy outer clothes near the foot of the ladder. I stripped off my soaking skirt, dragged on my thick grey goat-hair overdress, tied my belt, pulled on my sheepskin boots, and hauled the basket onto my back. Staggering under the weight, I felt for the ladder and put my foot on the lowest rung.

The air grew colder as I neared the surface. The pitch-blackness glimmered sooty black, then frosty grey as I came up into the evening light. A freezing wind slashed across my face, and my wet hands and feet turned blue. My heart sank when I saw the long line of us waiting for our last baskets to be weighed.

I struggled down the stony track to where the overseer checked our loads, and stood at the end of the line. We did not all have our loads weighed. Most of us the Chosen trusted, and left to work without supervision or inspection. But there were some of us whose every load was weighed, every day's work recorded, assessed, and answered for. We were the troublesome ones, the offenders. It was ever a grief to my father that I was one of them.

About fifty of us waited: fifty silent, grimy souls, our burdens at our feet, our backs and heads bent from cold and fatigue. We were all grey, our icy garments tossing stiffly in the bleak wind, our faces and hands wrapped in rags for warmth. Our flesh was black with firestone dust; our eyes were haunted. Remembering now how we looked,

I realise the horror and hopelessness of our poverty. And I marvel that I was the only one who questioned it.

We did not talk while we waited; we had no strength to talk. A few others came up and took their places behind me. Hundreds more, the trusted workers, stumbled past us, dumped their final loads into the carts that waited to haul the fuel to the homes of the Chosen and to our tents, and went on home. Looking back towards our camp, I noticed that already some of the fires were lit, and the smoke hung in a gritty haze over the black tops of the tents. By morning the smog would be so thick the tents would be totally obscured.

Opposite our camp, across a deep valley and scattered high across the rocky mountain slope, were the mansions of the Chosen. Built out of rock they were: huge rambling structures that seemed to climb out of the mountainside itself, their ancient walls and buttresses and towers the same dull brown of the earth they sprang from. Today was special to the Chosen, and they had hung splendid banners over their balconies, and crimson flags from their uppermost windows.

The line shuffled forward again and I picked up my basket and dragged it over the stones. The wind had dropped now, and our breath made mists in the dusky air. Our hands and faces ached and became numb. Slowly we moved forward, and after a time I saw the fire of the overseer's torch, a tawny flag against the smoky sky.

At last it was my turn. I hoisted my basket onto the weighing-hook and stood respectfully aside while the

overseer read the scale. I showed him my family sign on the board, and he made a charcoal mark beside it. I took down the basket, heaved it onto my back, and started to walk over to the carts.

"Harsha!"

The overseer called me back, using the Quelled word for female slave. We had no names, with them. I turned and slowly lowered my basket to the ground, and waited with my head bent.

"Harsha, yesterday you brought up seven-and-twenty full baskets. Today, twenty."

I dared not look at him. That was forbidden. I looked at the gold embroidery on the shoulder of his emerald coat, and arranged my face into a look I hoped resembled contrition. I knew he looked at the air over my head, for no Chosen ever looked into the face of a Quelled. We were not worthy.

"Those seven loads will be made up," he said. "They will be made up before you begin tomorrow's work, and will be counted separately. Altogether there will be four-and-thirty loads. Do you understand?"

My mind whirled. Four-and-thirty loads! That was not asked even of the strongest men. It was a sentence of brokenness – or death. For an instant, shocked and questioning, my eyes met his. He strode over to me, and raised the small whip he carried. I did not move. I looked at a point beyond his left shoulder, at a far calm mountain peak, and the lash burned a line on my face.

"There is defiance in you, harsha," he said, his voice shaking and low. "You, I have watched."

The mountain peak was wreathed in mist, and the shadows were purple below. In my soul I flew to them for calm.

"Do you understand?" he spat.

I fought the urge to answer him. I nodded, and bent my head low.

"Be here in the hour before the dawn," he said loudly. "You will work at the pace I decree, and not stop until I have weighed four-and-thirty loads. If you fall, you will be forced to your feet. If you refuse, you know the penalty. Next."

Dismissed, I picked up my load and took it over to the carts. It took all my strength to lift it over the wooden side and pour the firestones out. I left my basket on the piles of other empty ones waiting for tomorrow, and started walking home.

I crouched over the bowl of lukewarm water on the stones outside our tent, and splashed the greying liquid over my face and arms. My swollen cheek stung where the whip had cut. I pretended not to notice. The steam from the bowl rose in silver drops into the chill evening air, rose too in a mist from my hands and arms. I leaned over the bowl and peered at my reflection, wondering whether on this day I looked suddenly older, more mature. The murky ghost of my image stared back, shadowed, with its dull halo of hair.

I had never truly seen my face. If Lesharo had not told me, I would not have known that my eyes were blue and grey like smoke, and that my hair, when I had washed it, was the lighter shade of flame. He had told me, too, that I had a solemn look and did not laugh enough; but when I smiled, he said, my face was all light, and beautiful. He lied, I think, because he was my friend. I did not know my face; always the reflections in the water were too dark to see.

The sky was thick with the smoky shadows of the night. I did not know then what the stars were, or the moon. I had never seen them. Always in our world there was cloud, a dark wintry haze of smoke and floating ash from tens of thousands of fires. Our skies during the day were vaporous and grey; at night they were as black as the inside of the mine.

I stood leaning over the bowl, staring hard at my reflection, disappointed. Then Mishal, my youngest brother, jostled me aside. He was seven, and had worked in the mine only two years.

"Mother calls you," he said in high, imperious tones, plunging his hands into the sooty water. "The water's filthy! You're supposed to wait till after me."

I dried myself on the frosty towel already used by my other four brothers and my parents, and draped it around Mishal's blackened neck. "First here gets the clean water," I said, lightly.

He kicked backwards with his foot, and missed. "Men before harsha," he said. "That's the law."

I made a rude gesture with my hand, not to him but to the mansions of the Chosen, high on the opposite mountain slope, and to all the men who made the laws. Then I turned and went into our tent.

Mother was squatting by the fire making wheat cakes on a flat buttered stone in the embers. The smoke rose in ragged circles, tossed by the night breeze that came in through the joins in the black goatskin walls. We were luckier than most; our tent was erected against a low stone wall, and was protected from the icy northern gales. But tonight's breeze was from the south, and brought with it the smells and smoke from the whole camp. It brought too snatches of song, music from flutes and pipes, and the occasional throb of drums. Those I loved. We Quelled rejoiced in our music, and all the oppression of the Chosen could not beat it out of us.

My father and brothers were sitting on a mat of bullock hide against the stone wall, talking. There was no furniture in our tent. We rested, ate, and slept on the dirt floor. Little Mishal sat with them, pretending to be a man. He mimicked my father, slapping his right hand on his knee and frowning.

My father was a handsome man. He had golden-red hair and a long beard, and his hair shone in the dark shadows. He wiped his hands over his face often, and sometimes I saw in him a haunted, sorrowing look that tore my heart. He did not share my strange love for the firestones we mined, but he told us grand Quelled myths of a glorious past when all the world was filled with warmth and there was no need

for fire or mines, Quelled or Chosen. My brothers smiled at the stories, and my mother shook her head. Sometimes our singers sang the myths and we danced to their music, laughing and clapping our hands. But mostly we were too tired to dance.

My father looked up at me as I came in, and a look that was half anger, half sorrow crossed his face. "I heard talk of you, Elsha," he said, in that deep, quiet voice of his. "And I see your face. They say that tomorrow you must bring out four-and-thirty loads. Is this so?"

I shot him a dismal grin, and nodded.

"It will kill you, child," he said, with heavy quietness.

I crouched by my mother near the fire, and warmed my hands near the flames. My fingers trembled, and I clenched my fists to make them still.

My father sighed. "Five sons I have," he murmured, "and from them not a shadow of a bother. But you, Elsha – you bedevil me with your fiery soul. Why did you work so slow today?"

"Because today I am sixteen," I said.

"So?"

I looked through the flames at him, and tried to find the right words. "The Chosen don't own all of me," I said. "I kept some of me today, for resting in the dark, and for joy."

"God, Elsha—" he said, "*joy?*"

He covered his face with his hand, and I thought he laughed … or wept. But he took his hand down and said in a low and tender voice, "Help your mother, child."

I took the turning-fork from her hand, and she gave me a fleeting, weary smile. She was not yet forty years old, yet her face, once vibrant and beautiful, was deeply lined and ingrained with firestone dust. Her hair was totally grey. Her hands shook all the time, and she sobbed sometimes when she straightened her back. She was old by Quelled standards. Soon, I hoped, she would be permitted to stay at camp as a caretaker.

She noticed me looking at her, and smiled. "No matter what happens tomorrow," she whispered, "they can never take away today."

I finished cooking the wheat cakes, then made a salad out of kohlrabi, onions and other vegetables the caretakers had grown. I served the meal to my father and brothers, then sat with my mother a little distance apart and waited while they ate. We never dreamed of eating with our men; it would have been a sign of greatest disrespect.

Our men were our lords. They slept on the softest sleeping mats in the choicest places near the fire; the finest goat hair and wool went into coats and trousers for them; and they had first choice of all our food. Our men, though Quelled, were still called men, but we, being both Quelled *and* female, were not called women. We were called harsha, a name made up from the old Quelled words for oppression and earth. Only females of the Chosen were called women, and it was a term of respect. I dreamed sometimes that a man, faceless and tall and with a tender voice, did call me woman. It was my finest, maddest dream.

After the men had eaten, my mother and I ate what was left. My father always left the choicest bits for my mother, but my brothers were not so kind to me. I think they were jealous of me because I was my father's only daughter and, though I grieved and worried him, he favoured me. My brothers all were older than I, except Mishal.

After the meal I collected some water from the trough outside, heated it over the fire, and washed our bowls. My brothers spread their sleeping mats on the earthen floor and started playing a game with bone dice. Mishal played with them, though he did not fully understand the rules and howled when he lost.

I finished washing the bowls, then pulled on my heavy hooded cloak. "I will go and see Lesharo for a while," I said.

"Don't be long," said my mother, with a gentle look. "You'll need a good sleep tonight, Elsha, and all the energy you have for tomorrow."