Helping your children choose books they will love

I ♥ reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

opening extract from

Pain Merchants

written by

Janice Hardy

published by

Harpercollins Publishers

All text is copyright © Author / Illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

ONE

Stealing eggs is a lot harder than stealing the whole chicken. With chickens, you just grab a hen, stuff her in a sack and make your escape. But for eggs, you have to stick your hand under a sleeping chicken. Chickens don't like this. They wake all spooked and start pecking holes in your arm, or your face, if it's close. And they squawk something terrible.

The trick is to wake the chicken *first*, then go for the eggs. I'm embarrassed to say how long it took me to figure this out.

"Good morning little hen," I sang softly. The chicken blinked awake and cocked her head at me. She didn't get to squawking, just flapped her wings a bit as I lifted her off the nest, and she'd settle down once I tucked her under my arm. I'd overheard *that* trick from a couple of boys I'd unloaded fish with last week.

A voice came from beside me. "Don't move."

Two words I didn't want to hear with someone else's chicken under my arm.

I froze. The chicken didn't. Her scaly feet flailed toward the eggs that should have been my breakfast. I looked up at a cute night guard not much older than me, perhaps sixteen. The night was more humid than usual, but a slight breeze blew his sand-pale hair.

A soldier's cut, but a month or two grown out.

Stay calm, stay alert. As Grannyma used to say, if you're caught with the cake, you might as well offer them a piece. Not sure how that applied to chickens though.

"Join me for breakfast when your shift ends?" I asked. Sunrise was two hours away.

He smiled, but aimed his rapier at my chest anyway. Was nice to have a handsome boy smile at me in the moonlight, but his was a sad, sorry-only-doing-my-job smile. I'd learned to tell the difference between smiles a lot faster than I'd figured out the egg thing.

"So, Heclar," he said over his shoulder, "you *do* have a thief. Guess I was wrong."

Rancher Heclar strutted into view, bearing an uncanny resemblance to the chicken trying to peck me—ruffled, sharp beaked, and beady eyed. He harrumphed and set his fists against his hips. "I told you crocodiles weren't getting them."

"I'm no chicken thief," I said quickly.

"Then what's that?" The night guard flicked his rapier tip toward the chicken and smiled again. Friendlier this time, but his deep brown eyes had twitched when he bent his wrist.

"A chicken." I blew a stray feather off my chin and peered

closer. His knuckles were white from too tight a grip on so light a weapon. That had to mean joint pain, maybe even knuckleburn, though he was far too young for it. The painful joint infection usually hit older dockworkers. I guess that's why he had a crummy job guarding chickens instead of aristocrats. My luck hadn't been too great either.

"Look," I said, "I wasn't going to steal her. She was blocking the eggs."

The night guard nodded like he understood and turned to Heclar. "She's just hungry. Maybe you could let her go with a warning?"

"Arrest her you idiot! She'll get fed in Dorsta."

Dorsta? I gulped. "Listen, two eggs for breakfast is hardly worth prison—"

"Thieves belong in prison!"

I jerked back and my foot squished into chicken crap. Lots of it. It dripped out from every coop in the row. There had to be at least sixty filthy coops along the lakeside half of the isle alone. "I'll work off the eggs. What about two eggs for every row of coops I clean?"

"You'll only steal three."

"Not if he watched me." I tipped my head at the night guard. I could handle the smell if I had cute company while I worked. He

might even get extra pay out of it, which could earn me some goodwill if we ever bumped into each other in the early morning moonlight again. “How about one egg per row?”

The night guard pursed his lips and nodded. “Pretty good deal there.”

“Arrest her already!”

I heaved the chicken. She squawked, flapping and scratching in a panic. The night guard yelped and dropped the rapier. I ran like hell.

“Stop! Thief!”

Self-righteous ranchers I could outrun, even on their own property, but the night guard? His hands might be bad, but his feet—and reflexes—worked just fine.

I rounded a stack of broken coops an arm-swipe faster than he did. Without slowing, I dodged left, cutting up a corn-littered row of coops running parallel to Farm-Market Canal. It gained me a few paces but he had the reach on my short legs. No chance of outrunning him on a straightaway.

Swerving right, I yanked an empty market crate off one of the coops. It clattered to the ground between me and the night guard.

“Aah!” A thud and a crack, followed by impressive swearing.

I risked a glance behind. Broken crate pieces lay scattered

across the row. The night guard limped a little, but it hadn't slowed him much. I'd gained only another few paces.

The row split ahead, cutting through the waist-high coops like the canals that crisscrossed Geveg. I veered left toward Farm-Market Bridge, my side throbbing hard. Forget making it off the isle. I wasn't going to make it off the *ranch*.

More market crates blocked the row a dozen paces from the bridge. The crates were knee high and a pace wide, with tendrils of loose, twisted wire sticking up like lakeweed. Didn't Heclar ever clean his property? I cleared the crates a step before the night guard. His fingers raked the back of my shirt and snagged the hem. I stumbled, arms flailing, reaching for anything to stop my fall.

The ground did it for me.

I sucked back the breath I'd lost and inhaled a lungful of dust and feathers. The night guard crashed over the crates a choking gasp later and hit the ground beside me. Dried corn flew out of the crate and speckled the ground.

I hacked up grime while he swore and grabbed his leg. He'd left a pretty good chunk of his shin on one of the crates, and his bent ankle looked sprained for sure, maybe broken.

He glanced at me and chuckled wryly. "Just go."

I dragged myself upright, but didn't run. He'd lose his job over

me, and I'd guess he didn't have many options left if he was working for a cheap like Heclar. I knelt and grabbed his hands, my thumbs tight against his knuckles, and *drew*.

For an instant, our hands flared tingly hot from the healing. He gasped, I groaned, then his pain was in my hands. I left the bad leg. It was a good excuse for letting me go, and Saints willing, he'd keep his job. If he didn't, then at least I'd healed his hands. It was hard enough for native Gevegians to find work these days, and bad hands sure wouldn't help.

Knuckles aching, I turned away before he realized what I'd done. One look of gratitude on that handsome face and I'd do something else stupid.

I took a step forward but something large blocked my escape. Heclar! He swung at my head and I ducked, but not fast enough.

Pain bit into my temple and I thudded back to the ground. Heclar floated in the silver flecks dancing around my eyes, a blue-black pynvium club in his hand.

That cleared me straight. I was lucky he was so cheap he only hit me with it instead of flashing it at me. The weapon was too black to be pure pynvium, but blue enough to hold a lot of pain. I didn't want it flashed in my direction any more than I wanted to go to prison.

He scoffed and pointed the club at me. “Bunch of thieves, both of ya.”

I grabbed the night guard’s shin and *drew*, knitting bone and yanking every hurt, every sting, every wince from his ankle. His pain ran down my arm, seared my leg, and chewed around my own ankle. Yep. Definitely broken. My stomach rolled, but there was nothing in it to toss up.

I seized Heclar’s leg with my free hand and *pushed*. The agony the night guard hadn’t revealed raced up my other side and poured out my tingling fingers into Heclar. I almost gave him the knuckleburn too, but that would make his hands clench, and a hard, sudden grip on the pynvium club might be the enchantment’s trigger. Be just my luck to accidentally set it off.

Heclar screamed loud enough to wake the Saints. To be truthful, it was worse than he deserved, but sending me to prison for eggs I hadn’t yet stolen was worse than I deserved too. The Saints are funny that way.

I left both men lying in chicken feed and feathers and sprinted for safety. Just five paces to the exit, then another five to Farm-Market Bridge. Once I crossed the bridge, I’d be off the isle and in the market district on Geveg’s main island where it was easier to hide. If I didn’t pass out first.

At the foot of the bridge, two boys in Healer's League green were staring at me in wonder. I skidded to a stop and glanced over my shoulder. I had a clear view of the night guard and the blubbering rancher. The boys had seen me shift for sure.

"How did you *do* that?" one boy asked. Tall and skinny, but with hard eyes for a boy so young. Too young to be an apprentice. A ward, then. The war had left Geveg with plenty of us orphans about.

"I didn't . . . do anything." Breathing took more effort than I had. I held my side as I edged past them, checking for mentors or the cloying escorts that stuck to wards like reed sap. If either had seen me shift pain—I shuddered.

"Yes, you did!" The other boy nodded his head and his red hair fell into his eyes. He shoved it back with a freckled hand. "You shifted pain. We saw you!"

"No I didn't . . . I stabbed him in the foot . . . with a nail." I leaned forward, hands on my knees. The silver flecks were back at the edge of my vision, sneaking up on me from the sides. "If you look close . . . you can still see the blood."

"Elder Len said shifting pain was just a myth, but you really did it, didn't you?"

I wasn't sure which Saint covered luck, but I must've snubbed

her big at some point in my fifteen years. “You boys better get back to the League . . . before the Luminary finds out you sneaked free to go wandering.”

Both paled when I mentioned the Luminary. We got a new one every year, like some rite of passage the Duke’s Healers had to go through to prove their worth. The new Luminary was Baseeri of course, and like all Baseeri who held positions that *should* have been held by Gevegians, no one liked him. He’d only been here a few months, but already everyone feared him. He ran the League without compassion, and if you crossed him, you didn’t stand a chance at getting healed if you needed it. You *or* your family.

“You don’t want to get into trouble, do you?”

“No!”

I placed a finger to my lips and shushed. “I won’t tell if you don’t.”

They nodded hard enough to bounce their eyeballs out of their heads, but boys that age couldn’t keep a secret. By morning, the whole League would know about this.

Tali was going to kill me.

“Oh, Nya, how could you?”

Tali used Mama’s disappointed face. Chin tucked in, her wide

brown eyes all puppylike, lips pursed and frowning at the same time. Mama had done it better.

“Would you rather I’d gone to prison?”

“Of course not.”

“Then sink it. What’s done is done and—”

“—I can’t change it none,” she finished for me.

I had three years on her, which usually gave me implied authority, but since she joined the League she’d been forgetting who the big sister was. Hard to do with only the two of us left, but she managed.

“Be grateful I got away.” I flopped backward into green floor pillows. Tali sat on the edge of her bed dressed in her Healer’s apprentice uniform, her white underdress neatly pressed and her short green vest buttoned. A sunbeam from the small window above poured over her, making the braided silver loop on her shoulder sparkle.

The door to Tali’s dorm room was shut, but not sound-tight. Shuffling feet and excited giggles drifted in as the other apprentices readied for class. Morning rounds were about to start and I had work to find if I wanted to eat today. Tali sneaked some food out for me when she could, but the League rationed it and they watched the wards and apprentices real careful at

mealtimes—especially if they were Gevegian. Hungry or not, I wasn't about to let her risk her apprenticeship for me any more than I had to, and I needed a bigger favor than breakfast.

"Are you on this morning?" I asked, wiggling my toes in the sunbeam.

Tali nodded, but didn't look at me. I think stealing the heals scared her more than stealing food, though getting caught in the dining hall was a lot more likely.

"Could you?" I lifted my aching hands. The pain from the night guard's knuckleburn made me useless for all but hauling, and I couldn't carry enough on my back to be worth the money.

"Sure, come here."

I scooted over and she took my hands. Heat blossomed and the ache vanished, tucked safely in Tali's knuckles. She'd keep it there until some aristocrat paid the League to get rid of their own pain, then dump both into the Slab. It was risky sneaking the pain past the League Seniors, but I couldn't dump my pain into the Slab even if I could get to it.

The Slab wasn't its real name, but that's what all the apprentices and low cords called it. Its real name was something like Healing Quality High-Enchanted Pynvium, which didn't have the same flair at all. I'd never actually seen it, not even when

Mama was alive, but Tali said it was pure pynvium, ocean blue and the size of a bale of hay. A whole trunk! I could eat for the rest of my life with what the Luminary must've paid the enchanters for it.

Tali flexed her fingers and winced. "You could have sold that to the pain merchants, you know."

I scoffed. The pain merchants weren't quite thieves, but they paid so little for pain it was practically stealing it. Before I was born, they used to charge folks for healing just like the League did, but they'd discovered they got more pain if they offered to pay for it. They made their money now from using that pain to enchant their trinkets and weapons, which they then sold to Baseeri aristocrats for a *lot* more than they'd gotten by healing folks.

Of course, there were drawbacks to this.

Since they didn't hire trained healers anymore, you could never be sure you'd actually *get* healed if you went to them. Some of their Takers just took your pain and left what was wrong if they didn't know how to heal it. Only folks with no other choice went to them now, and I'd seen my share of "mysterious deaths" among the poor and desperate. You saw just as many limps and crippled limbs from bad merchant healing as you did war wounds.

I was almost desperate to go to them, but I had other reasons to keep my distance. "Too risky. What if they'd sensed I was a Taker

and wondered why I didn't dump it myself?"

"Not that many can sense. You're one of the few I know who isn't an Elder."

That talent still didn't buy me breakfast. I'd trade it fast as fright to sense pynvium like she could; to feel the "call and draw of the metal," as Tali had pounded into my head over the summer, trying to get my skill to work right. She'd just turned twelve and we'd thought to join the League together. Turn us both from untrained Takers into real Healers and live a good life. The League was one of the few Baseeri-run places that accepted Gevegians. Both sides had lost so many healers in the war, and there just weren't enough trained ones to go around these days.

But no matter how hard we tried, I couldn't sense pynvium, couldn't dump pain into it. I'd made Tali go alone, and they'd accepted her as fast as they would've turned me away. I hated her the first week for it, then felt guilty the second I realized it was easier worrying about just me. But it sure would have been nice to have a soft bed and regular meals like she did.

I rose. "I'd better go. I might find work cutting bait or washing down the docks if I hurry."

"Maybe we could risk you applying to the League now?" she whispered. "Several apprentices are missing so we're

shorthanded. The Luminary's been awful worried about it too."

"What do you mean *missing*?" I dropped back into the pillows. The war had ended five years ago, but I still remembered how it started. Healers disappearing in the night, stolen from their homes to heal in the Duke of Baseer's war. We didn't know what war. We barely knew who the Duke was back then. That changed pretty fast when his troops invaded though, occupying Geveg and stealing our pynvium when our Takers started hiding.

"Not like *that*," she said, eyes wide. "At least I don't think so. The Elders said they left because the training was too hard. People even heard the Luminary complaining about it."

"Do you believe them?"

She shrugged. "It happens, but people usually say good-bye when they go."

Unless they didn't leave on their own. I shook the concern away. I was worrying over nothing. Tali was safe at the League. Three meals a day, a soft bed, training from the best Healers in Geveg. All the things I couldn't get for myself, let alone give her.

"Anyway," she continued, "I thought maybe we could convince them to let you heal, and when your shift ended I could do the transfer for you."

My heart flipped like a beached fish. "You didn't tell them about

me, did you?"

"Of course not! But you can heal. We'd work as a team is all."

Pointless—and dangerous—to even ask. "No, Tali, you know what they'd do to me if they found out I could shift."

Death, prison, maybe even experiments. A few years ago, the Duke starting claiming that abnormal Takers were abominations and were to be brought to the League if discovered. He'd put up posters all over Geveg, covered every block on the island, even the smaller farming isles.

She shrugged. "I heard they might lower the entrance requirements for apprenticeship down to those just strong enough to heal minor cuts and bruises, so I thought maybe the Luminary wouldn't care. You can heal a lot higher than *that*."

But it wasn't *real* healing, not like what Tali did. "He would care. Besides, it would wear you out, and the League wouldn't risk your health. They need you." Even if they didn't ship me off to Baseer, I was useless to them. I'd keep drawing pain until I was so twisted up in agony I couldn't move.

"Well," Tali said after a brutally long silence, "if you don't want to work here, then next time steal a whole chicken. That way you'd have eggs every morning."

I grinned, even though I *did* want to work for the League and be

a real Healer. I just knew it would never happen. “A chicken loose at the boardinghouse? Millie would love that.”

“So steal a coop as well. And some corn. Maybe a little bit of reed straw for a nest.”

I tried to keep a straight face, but the idea of a coop in my room was too much. The giggles came on fast. Tali and I rocked back and forth like children, clutching our sides, tears in our eyes, until the rounds bell rang.

Tali stood, her shoulders quaking. She pushed a blond braid of her Healer’s ponytail off her shoulder, jingling the tiny jade and gold beads woven through it. Her hair looked pretty all smooth and straight like that. I couldn’t afford the irons to flatten my curls. Neither could Tali really, but League apprentices had to look smart, and they got to share luxuries like hair irons and face powders. Aristocrats didn’t want healing from a bunch of scruffy children, and after the war, those were the only Takers Geveg had left. They had to bring in Elders and teachers from Baseer just to train us, and the first crop of Gevegian fourth cords were training now. Next year, they’d be full Healers, allowed to go out and seek their fortunes, though most would probably stay at the League.

“Will you be all right?” she asked. “When did you eat last? I might be able to sneak some food from lunch.”

“I’ll be fine.” My stomach rumbled and she sucked in her bottom lip, once again the worried little sister.

She nodded quickly, then threw her arms around my neck. “You be careful.”

“You too. Don’t go anywhere alone, okay?” I hugged her back. She smelled like lake violets and white ginger.

“Promise.”

“Go forth and heal the sick, young one.” It earned me a giggle.

“Go forth and mutilate fish.” She smiled, but still looked worried. Maybe she was thinking about the missing apprentices, or maybe it was the knuckleburn she’d taken from me.

We left her room. Tali went left, toward the hospital wing, while I hurried right toward the exit on the other side on the main entrance hall. It was the closest exit to the docks, and the north gate League guards always let me pass. I was pretty sure the skinny one was sweet on me, but I’d sooner kiss a croc than a Baseeri.

I crossed into the front antechamber and wove through the dozen or so people waiting for heals. Bits of green, white, and silver flashed as apprentices late for class took the shortcut up the back staircase.

“That’s her!”

I jerked around before my wits could stop me. Two wards were

pointing at me, as wide-eyed and amazed as they'd been last night. Saints and sinners! I couldn't find good luck in an empty pail.

"She's the one who shifted pain," the ward said loud enough to turn heads. More than a few folks stopped and stared. "She drew it right out of one man and pushed in into another. We saw it, didn't we, Sinnote?"

My empty stomach tightened. Standing between the wards was a League Elder in full gold cords. The eight braids coiled on his shoulders like vipers, the ends dangling down to the edge of his vest-robe. Thick arms strained his crisp sleeves, and his beaded black hair was tied rope-thick at the nape of his neck. A husky man, Mama would have said.

He hooked a finger toward me and pointed at a tile in front of him. "Come here."

Running would make me look suspicious. Disobeying would make me equally suspicious. I'd never make it past the guards anyway, no matter how much that fellow liked me.

"Now, girl."

Nothing good ever followed just two words.

I stepped forward, wondering what time they served lunch in Dorsta Prison.