

She passed the back of her hand over her eyes, hoping no one saw the moisture that leaked out after Langston kept yelling her name. Cleo tried to focus on the words she remembered so clearly from earlier in the day.

*The next time you hear a Gentle Hand talking about serving others, ask yourself whether he has ever served you.* The answer was no. None of them had looked after her needs. That made all their talk about service a lie. It made Lang's words to her last night a lie.

All she really knew about Archons was what she'd learned in history classes half a lifetime ago. They had tried to eradicate free will from the non-telepathic portion of the human race. They thought everything in the world existed so they could have what they wanted. They didn't necessarily hate other people; they just wanted what they wanted. People could either be out of their way, help them get it, or be mind-controlled.

Cleo couldn't imagine herself mind-controlling someone who wouldn't give her what she wanted. Maybe, though, people whose whole creed was about taking what they wanted would not treat her like an outcast just because one single time in her life she took what she wanted when it was freely offered.

They had just launched a civil war inside Servants' Yard. They had just battled their fellow Gentle Hands and won. They had killed people.

People like that at least had to tolerate having had a lover once.

They ran together in surprisingly orderly fashion. Cleo found herself toward the front of the column since she'd been following Yule Acre when she had joined up. Around her, she heard the boisterous laughter and boasting of people who had just won a fight. Something about the human brain loved to engage in physical violence and win. Cleo felt it, too, a kind of hot, bubbling elation in her chest. It masked the very real truth about what had just happened.

Tanna Gage-Rankin was either dead or badly beaten. The same with Denning Paulsen.

They had acted horribly toward her. They had heaped their own rejection on top of her children's and her old partner's and everyone else's.

But did they deserve death?

The animal instinct to celebrate having faced death and won dominated her thoughts at that moment, but Cleo knew it wouldn't last forever. Someday, she would have to face the question of her own guilt.

She thought about going back. Her thoughts went to her children, pulled like gravity. Maybe it would have been different if she hadn't been drinking, but she had been, and her thoughts filled up to the brim with the memory of Hal telling her, "Maybe you should go." She couldn't get Lena shouting at her out of her head.

Maybe her kids would be better off without her.

"New convert from the fight?"

The voice came from a curly-haired man to her right, and Cleo looked over at him. He had picked up a nasty cut on his cheek just under his eye, and the blood covered half his face. He wore the tan uniform just like she did, but she had never met him before. Obviously, he, too, noted the fact of their unacquaintance.

"Guess so," Cleo said.

It was almost instantaneous. There was none of the formality or pretend permission-seeking that passed between Gentle Hands before mind reading. All of a sudden, she felt the greasy, queasy sensation of having her entanglements tugged and caught a flash of the reciprocal image that always came with it—the same man.

Like a guillotine, she slammed her own telepathy down and broke the contact hard.

Still jogging side by side, the man turned to stare at her, caught off guard by the vehemence of her reaction.

"I have a past," Cleo said. "It's mine. Only mine." Only hers. Not Langston's.

"I was just checking you out. We've spent so much time pretending to be loyal to the Gentle Hand. Got to make sure they're not trying to pull the same trick on us. Name's Olson Caste. We met once, if you remember. You made the right choice."

The name sounded familiar somehow, but she ignored him, preferring to let her mind begin to process the consequences of her choice. She almost turned back.

Hal and Lena were back there.

But the words reverberated between her ears: “Maybe you should just go.” Her children. Her kids. The only thing she thought of more than Langston while she was exiled. They hated her. She looked over her shoulder one last time and could make out the Tower of Children behind her. She could still turn back. She could go get Hal and Lena.

No. That wasn’t what they wanted. They wanted her to go. OK. Fine.

The column of Archons arrived at the airfield at the center of Servants’ Yard where many hypersons waited on the runway. Apparently, their transportation had been pre-planned just like the fight in the dining hall.

At the front of the column, Cleo just let those to either side of her guide her to the last one on the runway. She followed her new companions into the hyperson and strapped in.