

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. 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.

"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. Mention of her past brought her thoughts immediately to her children. She almost turned back. She couldn’t leave Hal and Lena behind, no matter how their last conversation had gone.

Just before Cleo peeled away from the group, the column of Archons arrived at the airfield at the center of Servants’ Yard. Yule Acre called out, “Who has family in the Tower of Children?”

Cleo’s hand went straight up.

Acre counted. “Looks like we’re going to need two HSTs for all of you plus kids. Go now. Get them. Don’t waste time, though. Two transports will wait for you, but they won’t wait long. Go!”

Cleo and a few other Hands—Archons, now—arrived at the tower and boarded an elevator. Most rode up in silence. They’d visited their children often enough to know in which room to look for them. Not Cleo. She had to ask the Intelligence to remind her what floor Hal was on. The reply was that both of her children were actually in Lena’s room.

She got off the elevator and charged to the room. She paused there to take a deep breath. The last time she’d let them anger her. She’d lost control. This time needed to be different. It had to be. She stretched out into the quantum entanglements, seeking some sense of them, but then realized the futility of it. They would sense her touch. Better to just go inside. She told the Intelligence to open the door.

Hal sat cross-legged on the floor, a habit he had no doubt picked up from her. She used to do it when she wanted to focus on the web. Lena stood in front of him. Her eyes sparked the moment Cleo entered.

”Kids, I’m sorry about how things got started the last time I came here.”

Hal rose to his feet, but neither of them said anything. They simply eyed her warily.

Cleo stood there speechless for a second. How to answer their questions from last time? How to make children understand that sometimes an adult simply made a bad decision.

One of the Hands/Archons ran past in the hall behind her, his teenage child already in tow. “Hurry,” the man called to her. “The HSTs won’t wait long.”

Cleo barely waved a hand back in acknowledgement. His words, unlike hers, got a response from Lena.

”What does he mean about HSTs? What’s going on? Why were all the adults ordered to the timing hall? Why aren’t you there with everyone else, Mother?”

Cleo heard the accusation in her daughter’s voice: Lena simply saw Cleo disobeying again.

“I’m leaving, kids. I want you to come with me.”

At once Lena blurted out, “What? Leaving? Why?”

Hal’s words tumbled over his sister’s. “Have you got orders to go somewhere else? I thought everyone was ordered here for the defense of Earth?”

Cleo’s voice cracked. “I can’t explain yet. Just come. Please come with me. Lena, you and Hal, you’re the only things here that matter to me. The only things anywhere—”

She cut off halfway through that statement. It wasn’t quite true. Lena picked up on that at once, reading it exactly the wrong way.

”We’re the only things that matter but him you mean. Running off with Wheeler? You can forget that. I’m not coming. I do my duty, unlike you.”

The dining hall. The way he’d called after her. I lost you, Cleo. To me, that was everything.

”No, Lena. I’m not running off with Langston.” Her voice did break then, and a stupid tear escaped from her eye. Stupid, Cleo. Stupid. “You’re what matters to me. You and Hal. Noth—” She wanted to say “Nothing else,” but decades as a Gentle Hand wouldn’t let her lie. Not to her own children. “Not Langston,” she said instead.

Her daughter barked out a profanity. “Forget it, Mom. You can shirk your duty. You have before. Not me. Just go. Run wherever you’re going to run. Run with Wheeler or whoever else. Leave.”

Cleo reached for her daughter.

She never meant to pull her. She only meant to put a hand on her shoulder to counsel her, to let her feel maternal love in a strong grip. She never meant to drag.

Lena didn't know that though.

It happened so fast, neither of them truly understood.

Cleo reached for her daughter's shoulder.

A hard, fast outward block slammed into the older woman's forearm so hard it hurt. And suddenly, there in front of Cleo was Lena in a deep fighting stance, so tight she practically quivered, one hand back to cover her face, the other forward where the outward block had left it.

Instinct. Training. That's all it was. Not intent. Never violent intent, not toward Lena. But when she got hit, Cleo's right leg slipped back. Her knees bent. She covered her face with her fists.

The girl and the woman faced each other at guard, in a world only one knew was collapsing. Cleo's face showed surprise. Lena's started that way but quickly settled into grim determination. She tightened her fists, clearly planning to resist if Cleo tried to force her to go.

Shocked, Hal cried out "Whoa whoa whoa! Wait just a minute here!"

Behind her, Cleo heard another Archon, female this time, speeding by in the hallway. "Hurry, Sable! The transports are ready to leave!"

Lena balanced there, fierce, scowling, ready to fight her own mother. In a different time, in a different world, Cleo might have felt pride in the girl's lightning reflexes and perfect stance. They didn't live in that world, though. Cleo instead had to face the horrifying truth.

There was only one way left to take her children with her, and Cleo couldn't do it. She wasn't willing to sink that far. Archon or not, she would not fight her daughter.

She spun on her heel and sprinted away, desperate to get out of earshot before she cried.