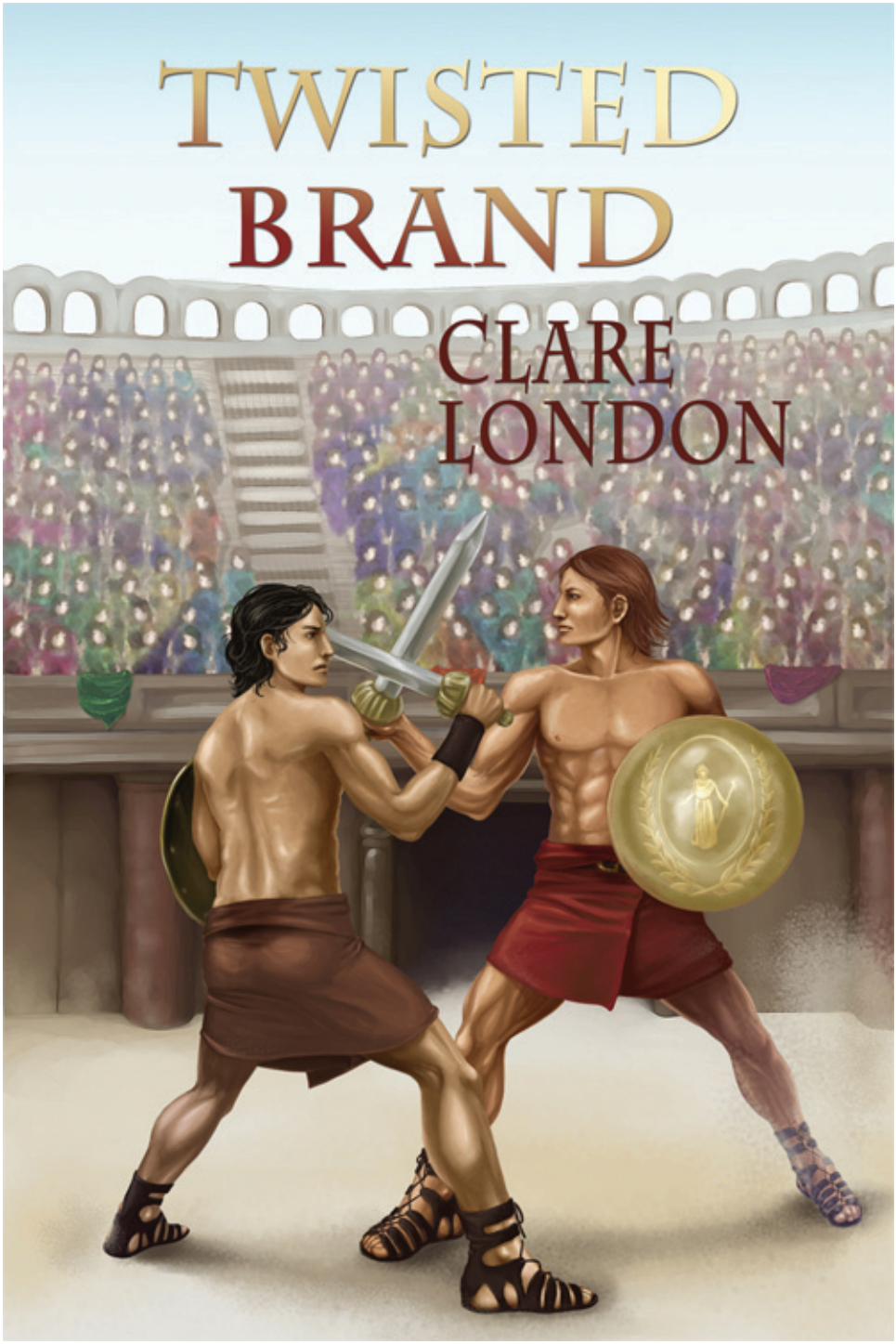
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~with many, many thanks to my gorgeous,
loyal and ever patient support team of
friends, listeners and sounding boards,
Jessica, Stephanie, Julie, Kathy,
Pauline and Leanne~

CHAPTER 1

THE sword came down with a heavy thud on my breastplate, just as I turned. I heard its whistle through the air, the hiss of its tempered metal, and saw the glint of its thick blade from the corner of my eye. My avoidance was purely instinctive, for there were distractions all around me – the noise of men shouting; loud grunts of both pain and anger; the clang of sword upon sword; the rip of cloth and the hiss of hot blood on the sanded floor of the platform. And rising above all that, the undulating roar of the crowd down in the Arena, provoking and protesting in rhythm with the ebb and flow of their favorite Guard's progress up the Battle Horse.

The sudden turn threw me a little off balance and I dropped to one knee, wincing. The Silver Captain behind me was one I didn't know personally, but I could see immediately that he lacked experience of battle. The sudden gleam of triumph in his eyes was barely hidden under the brim of his ceremonial helmet, and I knew that he was a fool. A soldier at his feet – especially one who had been a Gold Warrior – was no measure of his victory. I lowered my shoulders as if in weariness and waited for him to lean over me. He thought he would place his sword on my Mistress's badge – the glinting triangle of polished metal at the shoulder clasp of my body armor – and that would signify his win. His thoughts were full of pride and excitement at the chance of bringing down a soldier of the Queen-Elect's own attacking force. Like I said, he was a fool.

I twisted under his body's shadow, startling him. His instinctive reaction was to follow my movement, turning sharply to the side away from his sword hand. The move was ill-considered and very regrettable – for him, that was. His back bore the full brunt of the hot sun's heat, even at this late time of day, and his gaze was temporarily

blinded by its reflection off my armor. To the far side of me, I heard the angry groan of another soldier taking or giving a final blow from his weapon, and I gave my own cry in tandem. I straightened up swiftly from my crouching position, concentrating my weight on my attacking side and bringing my sword up from the ground across my torso. It sang softly, catching the sunlight's low rays despite the dust and stains along its length, slicing in an arc that swung from the lower point of my opponent's hip and up through the exposed stretch of his sword arm. He cried out with shock and tried to lean back but he was impeded by another of his Guard, a man falling to the ground, flailing legs tangling with his. The Silver hadn't been aware of the activity around him – another ill-considered move. My sword tore at his clothing and cut easily through the edge of his leather breast plate, although I assumed from the lack of resistance to the end of its victory swing that the wound wasn't too deep into his flesh. He fell heavily, back down over the other fallen man, and I needed only a couple of steps forward to land the side of my blade on to his badge and cry for my win.

There was no time to relax, but for a second he stared up at me, his eyes full of both anger and fear. He glanced towards my bare ear where a Gold Warrior would normally wear the gold earring of his rank, then his eyes narrowed and his attention darted away again. We were both panting, our bodies still heaving from the heat of the battle, but our minds were clear. Although I had never seen him before, I knew that he recognized me – or recognized my reputation.

"Leave the Arena," I hissed. "You are defeated and must withdraw from the Battle. Deliver yourself to the Cage." That was the tradition, and all soldiers knew it. Defeated members of the Guard – any Guard – must quit the Arena as swiftly as possible and place themselves in the Cage of their victor's camp. They would receive medical treatment there if necessary, but their badges would be stripped from them and their names entered on to the list of the final victor's spoils.

Something flickered in his eyes that was far from fear. They were dark grey like the smoke of a night fire, shadowed by the turmoil of the battle around us and full of his exhaustion. Locks of his black hair stuck to his cheeks, escaping from under his helmet. He was a

handsome young man, I saw that, though that had no bearing on his military skills. His badge was that of Mistress Flora, the only other one of my Mistress's sisters who might have claimed the title of Queen-Elect. She and my Mistress Seleste were the two eldest daughters of the current Queen, and both her favorites. I had never met Flora formally, though I had seen her in the Royal Household many times. Rumor told me that she was as high-spirited and determined as my own Mistress. All this went through my mind in a matter of seconds.

A jolt to my body brought my attention back to the current battle, as one of my own Silvers staggered against me. He was fighting sword to sword with two others of Flora's men. The soldier I had defeated eased himself to his feet, clutching at his torso. The blood seeped through his fingers, proving that I had wounded him, but he could still move unaided and didn't need to be removed from the field. I turned away from him, knowing that both the rules of the Battle and his own personal honor would not allow him to take any further part, and I lent my sword to my Silver's struggle. We stepped forward together, gathering around the two opponents and trapping them between us with swift, co-coordinated swordplay. I had practiced this move many times, and trained all my Guard in its execution. Despite my weariness, I felt a burst of new strength and determination, and Edrius, my Silver Captain, began to show more confidence alongside me. Together we forced the other men off balance and to their knees. At the same time, we brought our swords down flat upon their badges and they yielded.

I looked across at Edrius and he grinned back. His eyes were alight with excitement. This was the first Battle he had ever seen, let alone taken part in. He was some years younger than I was, but a very promising soldier. His youthful enthusiasm made him careless sometimes, but he was fiercely loyal and I'd found him a responsive and intelligent young man to train. It was critical that he remained concentrated on the combat, for there were still many enemy soldiers fighting with us on this last level, but I wouldn't deny him his triumph this time.

"A fine maneuver," I said.

He grinned more broadly. "There's only Flora left, sir," he gasped.

"Mistress Flora," I reminded him, sharply. The Mistresses, though we fought against their personal Guards today, must always be given our full respect.

Edrius flushed. "Of course, Mistress Flora, forgive me, sir. But Mistress Chloe and Mistress Nerisa have already surrendered. Their men are in the Cage." His eyes shone with his zeal, and maybe also with his anticipation of our Mistress's spoils at the end of the conflict. The victorious Household would gain weapons and treasures and servants, and also the first choice of all the best and most virile soldiers. One thing I knew about Edrius personally was that he was sexually enthusiastic – he enjoyed coupling as often as he could. He was Called frequently by several of the Ladies in the Household, but when they had other distractions, he sought the company of his fellow soldiers, as was the accepted custom, and as many as would indulge him. He was a popular man in the barracks for that, as much as for his lively, friendly nature.

I glanced around at the fighting that still raged. It was late in the afternoon by now and many of the fiercest skirmishes had ended. I myself had been drawn into a particularly ferocious fight in the early hours of the day, when the Guard had been fresh and the loyal fervor was high on all sides. The crowd had enjoyed the sight of over fifty soldiers in a pitched conflict for our platform on the first level. It was a magnificent sight, though I was in the thick of the fighting and struggling to protect myself and the life and security of my Guard. But I knew how the men would look to the crowd in the stands of the Arena – the strength and glory of armored men in full battle dress; the glint of their helmets and badges; the hungry shine of swords that many City dwellers only ever saw during tame ceremonies, and certainly never drawn against them or their enemies. We took our platform swiftly, defeating several challengers, but many others did not. It was always the first level that was the hardest, when all Guards were at their most aggressive and hadn't lost any men so far. At that stage, most of the sisters either withdrew their challenge through lack of support, or were defeated easily and persuaded to surrender.

There had been nine sisters at the start of the Battle, vying for the position of new Queen – all sisters of adult and near-adult age were required to take part, so long as they had some soldiers who could fight for them, even if they were very young. I had personally known a sister of the current Queen who had been only twelve years old but forced to take part, the last time the City had seen this Battle. Not surprisingly, she had been defeated in the very early stages and had taken flight from the City to avoid being murdered by her victorious sister. I'd not shared this knowledge with anyone, let alone my Mistress, who had always promised mercy and tender protection to any and all of *her* defeated siblings. Maybe it had been harshness on her Mother's part alone, and the retribution would not be repeated; or maybe after today's Battle, the sisters would settle peacefully to serve their conqueror, and would not pose any kind of a threat. Whatever the result, I didn't have time to spend on such thoughts now. After our first round, only four major Guards had shown themselves to be fit to fight for the final victory of their Mistress. The Battle had continued amongst these men.

At this time of day, however, there were few participants with the energy and appetite left to fight on at that early pace. I was therefore very proud to see most of my Guard still intact and active. Their faces were smeared with dirt and sweat and some blood, too, but it was never the prime intention of this event to kill, only to win. It was a ceremonial occasion, though no less fierce for that – it wasn't uncommon for men to die, on both the winning and losing side. I hadn't lost any soldiers to death today, though I'd lost a few of my Silvers to the Cage, some through their own inexperience or mistakes, and some through the bad luck of those who fought around them. But when we won the Battle, they would be released and returned to my Mistress.

When we won … I knew I'd never considered any other outcome from this day; from the Battle for Queenship. My Mistress Seleste would win the Battle and be crowned Queen, and the old Queen – her Mother – would retire swiftly and peacefully to a retreat in the Household of Devotions. Seleste's defeated sisters would enter her service as Ladies, with whatever official duties or position she might grant them, and the whole of the Royal Household would become hers

to command. That had been Seleste's objective since she grew into puberty; since she tasted the power of being titled Queen-Elect; since she took me from my previous Household and Mistress, and demanded that I train her Guard to win this Battle at all costs. Seleste was single-minded and aggressive to the point of matching her own Guard: she was beautiful and terrible and arrogant and disgracefully selfish. She was a true Mistress, and she was *my* Mistress.

A couple of my men ran across in front of me, looking for orders, and I directed them towards the top of the Battle Horse. It was no Horse in reality, of course – the Arena was filled solely with men and weaponry – but that was its common name. It was a tall, sturdy structure, built of wood on a metal frame, and the size of a small dwelling; it had taken the servants from the House of Construction many weeks to build. The Arena was large enough to take its size, although the fighting often spilled over on the floor and the stands, if the number of combatants was high in that year. It had four sides built up in steps, each level consisting of a wide platform all around its diameter, these platforms reducing in area as they climbed in height, like a four-sided cone. There was a flat dais at its peak. My Guard had started at the base of the structure at daybreak, aiming their attack at the north side, fighting men from all the other Guards with similar aspirations. At the same time, our defensive force took up position on the west face, and sought to hold back attacks on that side of the Horse. With this combined approach, the idea was to divide and conquer. This had worked well in previous Battles, for I had studied the strategy, and it worked well again for us today. My force broke through the other soldiers and moved up to the next level, and the other half of our Guard followed. At once, we had an advantage, leaving the others behind us. Our defense held back the attacks from the stronger Guards, and my attack cut through the weaker defenders. We worked together – the attacking and the defending force – and moved together, gradually, climbing up each of the platforms to the top. It was a complex strategy, but one we'd been well trained in. The critical thing was to move in tandem, as the number of challengers reduced each time. It would take hours – it *had* taken hours – but eventually there would be just one remaining Guard. When they reached the top, they would be declared the winners and their Mistress crowned as the new Queen.

Edrius had confirmed that the other remaining sisters had left the Battle, leaving only Flora. I tried to assess the number of enemy soldiers still in the Battle, for Flora's Guard and our own had been well matched at the start, but it seemed she had suffered more casualties. The fighting still continued around me, but everyone knew we were in the final stages. I glanced at the stands of the Arena, taking a moment's break from my attention to duty. The stone steps were filled with rows of people, a sea of white faces with nothing but blurred red spots for features. There was wave upon wave of pale, ceremonial clothing from the City dwellers, dyed with clumsy decoration or draped with garlands that they'd made from waste cloth and animal fur. All of this was broken up with the brighter garments of the Ladies and their assistants. Occasionally a row of spectators would rise up and cheer, their flags fluttering in the sparse breeze of the hot day, but overall they were quieter than before. This was partly because of the heat and the weariness of the long day – many of the spectators had arrived long before daybreak, to find the best seats – but also because of the atmosphere of increasing tension. The Battle was drawing to its close, but we all knew that some of the fiercest fighting might burst out again in the dying moments.

I looked up towards the top of the Battle Horse – we were on the last platform before the dais. I saw Zander with his back to the last flight of steps leading to the top, in charge of our defense. His helmet bore a favor from the Queen-Elect herself, Seleste's own scarf that fluttered raggedly but brightly in the sunshine. He was her best and favorite Gold Warrior, and he knew it. He fought so very fiercely, and in so tightly controlled a manner that it had concerned me in the past. He was very skilled and very aggressive, but I had been afraid that his lack of imagination would compromise him if he faced anything unfamiliar. I'd once reported it to my Mistress. Seleste had smiled at my concern and thanked me for it, and so I knew that she had no intention of doing anything about it. She liked Zander as he was, and would keep him so. He was often in her bed, and very proud of it.

I was often there, too, but less proud.

There was a cry to my left and a group of men passed me, knocking me further back against the metal struts of the wall. The final stages of the Battle meant that both attacking and defending forces met

on this higher platform and there was a renewed energy to their conflict. I saw Edrius pushing forward with Linar and Raneld, other men I admired, cleaving through a cluster of Flora's men. I saw the glint of sunlight on badges, the purple enameling of my Mistress's Household and the dark green of her sister Flora's. I heard cries of fury and grunts of pain. The hot air shimmered with the dust and the song of swords. I had many good Silvers in the battle, moving with confidence and purpose, and my heart swelled at the sight of them forging ahead. There was an unusual ferocity in their combat today, a strength and a wildness that had startled even me, who knew their capacity well. They fought as if possessed. But there was also a firm discipline to their attacks; they would win, I knew that without a doubt. For a moment, I remembered the pride I'd felt as a newly promoted Gold Warrior in the Household of the Exchequer, when I'd been given my very first group of Silvers to train and lead. And Bronzemen too, the new, raw recruits who needed so much attention yet showed so much promise at the beginning of their lives of service. Each year, they arrived in the Household just out of their boyhood, scared and flushed with devotion to the Household, full of eagerness and strength and fierce naivete…

"Maen!" It was Zander's voice, loud and urgent, ringing out over the sounds of battle. I didn't need his warning, though it was well judged. A soldier from Flora's Guard had broken away from the throng and approached me from behind. I don't know how I heard him over the clamor but the hairs rose on the back of my neck and I knew he was there, even before he'd had time to swing his sword. I spun around and struck, my aim blind but true. The soldier was a Gold Warrior and one whom I recognized – maybe I had seen him at a domestic tournament, or on the Royal Household training ground where Mistress Flora would prepare her Guard for traveling elsewhere in the City. Wherever and whenever it was, I knew enough of his style to anticipate his defense. I thrust straight through it, the force of my strike spinning his body back and the glinting edge of my blade slicing smoothly through the flesh of his upper arm. He cried out; blood welled suddenly and richly from the wound, and his sword fell to the ground. Edrius and Raneld were on him immediately, one with a sword to his throat, the other forcing him down to his knees, blade to his badge.

I did nothing more than nod to them, pleased with the result. I started to turn around to find out where I was needed next.

The sudden sound from the crowd startled me, because it was extraordinary: people rose from their seats in blocks and their voices seemed to swell tenfold. It was a cry of relief and delight and magnificent *triumph*. For a moment, I was confused, and then I realized that they could see the whole Horse, whereas I had been restricted to the north face alone. There were a few of Flora's soldiers still standing, but now they dropped to their knees and bowed their heads, acknowledging our victory. Zander leapt up to the top of the Horse and raised his sword high: the Guard around him followed with a loud cheer.

"Seleste!" came the cry, and I heard it reverberate around the Arena. "Hail to the Queen! Hail to Mistress Seleste!"

Edrius turned to face me, his face pale and sweat-streaked but glowing with delight. "Flora's finished! She's surrendered, too. We've won!"

"The Mistress has won," I answered, but there was no anger to my automatic rebuke, I was smiling along with him. "Let's get our men back down to the ground."

CHAPTER 2

THERE was a confusion of soldiers and chattering servants at the mouth of the Arena as I tried to get my Guard back into some semblance of order. We were all crammed into the holding area, an enclosure for the combatants alone, where we had prepared ourselves before the Battle and now tried, afterwards, to recover ourselves. It was enclosed by high wooden walls and a roof, and relatively dark after the bright vibrancy of the Arena, but it was cool, too. The fighting had exhausted most of us, but I was hoping for only a few serious injuries. There were medical servants all around, others to take our arms and helmets, some to bring food or water if needed. Also, many people from the crowd had left their seats at the end of the Battle and rushed down, although it was frowned upon for them to mix with the Guard here. But none of us had much energy to fight off the enthusiastic greetings of support and praise; I reasoned that the men deserved the attention, too. And of course, none of us would dream of refusing access to any of the Ladies, who would come to the edge of the railings and blush and call down into the holding area, to those they thought had fought particularly well.

I pushed my way through the mass of my soldiers, giving and accepting slaps on the back; tired smiles; nods of acknowledgement. Then something moved suddenly and brightly at the corner of my vision.

I whirled around, barely believing what I'd seen. In amongst the clatter of armor and the dull-colored, sweaty, bloodstained remnants of men's clothes, there'd been the sudden blaze of color from a gaudy silk gown – the sweet scent of perfume that I knew was the sole favorite of the Royal Ladies themselves…

"Mistress!" Zander pushed past me, his angry gaze in the same direction. I had no time to argue with his disrespectful behavior because I saw the problem as clearly as he did. There were women in the soldiers' enclosure, a totally forbidden event. Not just women, but Ladies, and Royal Mistresses at that!

The soldiers peeled apart, crying out, allowing me a clearer view. In their midst was their own Mistress, Seleste, her arm around the throat of another woman whom I recognized as her sister Flora. Flora had drawn a dagger – its short blade was like a cruel jewel, sparkling in the rays of light seeping in from the exit back out to the Arena. The noises around us suddenly stilled, the atmosphere snapping tight with shock. The only movements were the dusty, stumbling steps of the two struggling women.

Then Zander darted forward and I was on his heels, but we were both too slow. Flora's thin, white arm pushed Seleste's grip away and she thrust down swiftly with her weapon. I saw her expression most clearly – it wasn't murderous, but it was grim. Her dark hair was in disarray around her ceremonial head band; her pupils appeared unnaturally dilated. Seleste cried out, sounding more furious than hurt, but I could see that the dagger had cut through the silk at her hip and must have struck her flesh. She stepped back, startled, fully releasing her hold on Flora. I lifted a hand in warning, but the soldiers around the women were still in shock and too in awe of a Royal Lady to think of taking hold of her. Flora looked over, just once, towards the Cage where the wide-eyed scribes had temporarily abandoned their cataloguing of the surrendered soldiers. Then with a few, quick steps, she darted back through the crowd of soldiers into the Arena again and passed from our sight. Seleste coughed, once, and her face was very pale. Slowly, as we watched in horror, she sank to her knees on the sanded floor.

The noise suddenly rose around me again, a horrified, angry swell.

"Mistress?" I moved quickly to kneel beside her, amazed and infuriated both from fear for her safety and astonishment at her foolhardiness. If the new Queen had been injured in a serious way, I had no idea what might have become of the City!

"The woman is mad," she gasped. "I tried to hold her here, for her own safety. To keep her by me in the Household…"

Zander appeared and pushed me aside. He fell heavily to the ground beside her. His eyes were fixed on her face and they were hot with his terror and devotion. "I have called your Ladies, Mistress," he said, hoarsely. "You must not move. The carriage will be here in a moment to take you to the House of Physic, to see to your wound – "

Seleste's eyes narrowed with displeasure at the fuss, but he didn't see it. "The Mistress will be fine," I said to him. "Luckily the cut didn't go deep. I'll send the Guard after Mistress Flora to bring her to the Royal Quarters – "

"You will not," he hissed back, his eyes now on me. I was startled by the hostility I saw there. "They're not yours to command."

I was speechless for a moment. I had just taken them to victory in the Arena; I had fought alongside them. Edrius was one of the younger Captains clustered around us, protectively; I saw his dark eyes staring at me in shock and surprise. I stood up, slowly. "I understand that," I began.

Zander was on his feet, too, in seconds. We were a match for height and size. "You are no longer a Gold Warrior," he interrupted. He kept his voice steady but with an effort, it seemed. "Not now, and not before you came to this Household. The Mistress has only tolerated you for the purposes of preparing for this Battle."

"As *you* have?" I snapped back. His men had benefited from my experience and my tactics – we both knew that.

Zander drew in a sharp breath. He'd thrown off his helmet, exposing his blond hair darkened with sweat and dirt from the battle. His face was flushed, and his handsome, arrogant features were twisted with strong emotion; his hand was balanced on the hilt of his sheathed sword. "As I have, you're right. But that's over now, isn't it? You're nothing, Maen – no position, no credibility, and no soldiers' loyalty. Your own deeds robbed you of them all, and you know it."

Behind him, Edrius made a soft noise of protest like an exhalation of breath, but Zander was his commanding Gold Warrior, and he would not argue with him. I'd not expect him to. I breathed in

deeply. "I have never been found guilty of anything," I said to Zander, slowly and clearly. I knew that the others were all listening. "I have served my Mistress as required, and she is the only one who can command or chastise me; not you. I don't have to take any orders from you, whoever you are, whatever you think you should be. I don't have to take *anything* from you – "

He moved quickly, but not so quickly that I wasn't prepared for his strike. His sword slid from its sheath with a glint and a sound barely above a hum, but I was still ready to meet it with mine, parrying it to the side. Some of the soldiers cried out. They shuffled back, clearing a new space around us. There were calls from the Cage where the procured soldiers were milling about, startled by this shocking behavior from their new Guard. We fought almost silently apart from our panting breath, careless of anyone else around us, our eyes locked and our remaining strength carrying us through each thrust. I knew his style and it seemed he knew mine, too, despite his protestations of having barely tolerated me on the training ground. At one point I stumbled on a patch of fresh blood and felt his sword cutting through the side of my belt: then I struck back at him, catching him distracted by a medical officer's call from the other side of the enclosure. I took a slice of hair from his head, my sword nicking the tip of his ear lobe on my downward strike. It wasn't the ear with his gold earring in place.

We staggered on through the crowd of soldiers, all eyes on us. He pressed me back against the wall of the corridor from the Arena into the enclosure, where only we could pass. His sword was braced against mine, our faces close and straining with the effort to break the other's grip. I tried to knock his feet out from under him, but he stood firm. He leant to one side to push me off balance but I was ready for it, and leant with him. We were well matched in this, too.

Suddenly, Seleste's voice cut through our madness like a sword itself, high and clear and furious. "Cease this at once!" Soldiers dropped to their knees in a body around her; she stood tall and straight, despite the ache of pain in her eyes and the trickle of bloodstains on her gown. I didn't even glance at Zander – I wrenched away from him and dropped to the ground myself. Seconds later, he did the same beside me. Seleste stepped towards us, a couple of her Ladies having now appeared from the Arena, hovering in panic and worry around her.

"This is ludicrous," she hissed. "Such stupid lusts, such pathetic argument when you are all my servants, none better than the next!" She looked around at her soldiers, all of them awaiting her wrath. "You are both fools and I should have you executed for such irresponsible behavior." There was a ripple of movement from the Guard, tired and breathless men, nerves still thrumming from the day's combat, yet now shifting with nervousness and horror.

"Mistress," I murmured, knowing my words would make little difference to whatever she wanted to do. "Forgive me."

Zander looked up at her, his eyes angry and pained. She glanced at me, then back to him. "I will speak to the men," she said, sharply. "After that, you will call the carriage and I will go back to the Household; I can be attended just as well there. Then Zander, consider yourself confined to barracks until I call for you. And Maen…" I felt Zander tense up beside me. "Maen," she continued, her voice hoarse, her gaze now directed at me. "You will come to me in two hours' time, bathed and without arms or uniform of any kind."

I LAY in bed with Seleste, the new Queen, both of us naked and with my torso pressed up against her slim back. Our skin was slick with sweat, though it was drying now. The sheets were in a crumpled heap on the floor and there was a pile of discarded plates covered with crumbs and fruit peelings. We'd eaten well, and coupled enthusiastically – the two very often went together for Seleste. Only a couple of hours after the conclusion of the Battle, she had still been excited and passionate. I had come to her as ordered, but she'd not required either apology or explanation from me about the fight with Zander. Instead, her robe had slipped to the floor at a touch and her soft, nude skin, flushed with desire, had pressed against me, making me dizzy after the exercise of the day. She'd demanded to be taken, fiercely, no holding back the strength of my arms around her or my legs against her. We'd tumbled over a table and several ornaments in the room, then spilled most of the contents of a wine flask over the rug. Seleste was a strong, greedy lover and a match for my stamina most of the time. She'd clung to me, crying alongside my own groans, exhorting me, provoking me to be fiercer until she'd climaxed

underneath me. Then she also allowed me my own satisfaction, laughing softly as my climax spilled out of me with hot, desperate relief. And now we lay quietly, gathering fresh breath, the scent of our bodies' exercise still lingering in my nostrils and her skin sticky against my own.

"Your speech was inspiring," I murmured, tiredly. Seleste had spoken for nearly an hour to the men after the Battle, praising their fighting, re-living the spectacle of the tournament and imprinting it in their memories. She'd stood in the dusty, filthy Arena as spectators still gazed down on her from the stands and her men had clustered around the entrance to the enclosure, all of them with eyes only for their beautiful, magnificent new Queen. I couldn't remember her mother having done as much, although I had been very young at the time of that Battle. "They worshiped you."

She sighed beneath me. "I have had months to refine the words," she said, wryly. "Two scribes have worked on it day and night, sworn to secrecy on my thought processes and struggles, and yet still terrified to this day as to whether I will have them executed for their confidential knowledge."

I laughed with her, though I decided to spend some time in the Royal Library tomorrow finding those scribes to thank them myself, and also some way of releasing them from their dread. Seleste could be magnanimous, occasionally, to her servants. As a typical example, in the barracks this night, the soldiers of her Guard were enjoying fresh food and plentiful drink, supplied by her without restraint.

"The men are celebrating their victory tonight, I believe," she said, as if she'd somehow heard my thoughts. When I was younger, I believed that the Mistresses had magical powers, and could do just that. I had been young in many ways, then, not just in years.

"You've been very generous to them," I said, for it was true. I stroked at the top of her thigh, just under her hip, my fingers touching gently around the place where she'd been stabbed. The medics had been almost hysterical when they'd seen her blood, but I was right in that it had been little more than a flesh wound, though on such pale, privileged flesh as the Queen's, it was still a very significant matter. But they had sewn the sides together with their washed thread and the

skin was already knitting itself back together, the bruises fading from the initial purple to a paler yellow hue. There would be a pale scar, maybe, in the shape of a curved knife cut, but nothing more. The House of Physic had strong ointments for battle wounds; I knew that from my own experience. I pressed my lips against her shoulder. "They have more ale and food than they need, and time to enjoy it."

"And each other," she whispered back. "Am I right, to know all of my soldiers' lusts?" She pushed my hand away as if she disliked me touching the cut, but there was mischief in her voice. She arched against me, enjoying the press of my half-erect cock against her back, or maybe she was stimulated by her own thoughts. "There are many new recruits in the barracks, the best of my sisters' finest soldiers, mixed with an excess of male excitement and the aftermath of battle and bloodiness. They won't be gentle with each other tonight, will they, Maen?"

I didn't think she required an answer. It was the accepted way, that the passions of men after battle would be high and greedy. The Ladies had Called many of them to their beds, but for those left behind, there'd be their companions in the barracks to satisfy their sexual needs. And Seleste was right – they'd not be gentle. When she nudged back against me, I stroked myself to full hardness, parted her legs and slid back into her. Her flesh was hot; her skin shuddered underneath my fingertips. I knew that Seleste didn't want to be gentle tonight, either.

"You and Zander…," she muttered. She was a little breathless, but her anger could still be reawakened. "Fighting in front of the men and your Queen, so soon after victory against all others. Appalling behavior."

I frowned. "It won't happen again. I don't know what madness came over us."

She wasn't listening to my apology. I moved inside her, cupping my hands under her smooth buttocks, seeking to rouse her again. She gasped with pleasure. "Do you wish you were with them, Maen? In the barracks with your men?"

"I'm honored you Called me," I replied, as my duty demanded. "I'm pleased to be here. And they are not – "

"Your men," she interrupted. "No, indeed, as Zander so thoughtfully pointed out to you."

I tensed briefly, and she hissed. I pulled out of her a little way and pushed back in with more enthusiasm. She moaned softly.

"But I meant as something other than as their Gold Warrior, Maen. I wondered if you wanted to be with them as a man. To couple with them…." She moaned again as I rocked inside her, increasing the pace of my thrusts.

"I'm honored to be here, Mistress," I hissed into her ear. "I am here to serve you, first and foremost." I knew the best way to bring her completion, and I knew it wouldn't be long in coming again tonight. The Battle had excited her beyond anything, and victory – though always her expectation – was a trophy she carried with pride. I slipped one hand around her waist and reached up with the other one to tangle into her dark, silken hair. I tightened my grip, pulling her head back against my shoulder, baring her throat until she gave a grunt of excitement. Then I let my hand at her waist slip down between her legs to caress her. It was no hardship to couple with Seleste, for she had always been the most arousing of women. And it was my training, after all, to pleasure my Mistress whoever she may be.

I owed Seleste a great deal, of course, not just my duty as a servile man. She had given me a place in her Household, comfortable quarters and some purpose over the last year. And, before that, she had given me something much more precious – my life. I never forgot that, though my feelings towards her generosity were not always those of gratitude. Now she twisted in my grasp, straining, and I felt her body shudder as she climaxed again. I held her tight, my lips touching the edge of her jaw, as her body gently slowed its shivering. Sometimes there were words that her mouth formed as she came, but she never spoke them aloud. It was often like this in our coupling.

She relaxed at last, though still cradled in my arms. "Tell me how it is," she gasped, gathering her breath again. Her neck was flushed and her heart beat fast. Her hips still ground gently back against mine. "Tell me what it's like to take a man. How different is it from this, Maen? Or are you taken – do you prefer that, in the dark of night, in the barracks where men like you sleep and complain and laugh

and weep and thrust into each other's bodies for release when their sexual desires cannot be kept in check anymore?"

It was something I had been asked before by a Mistress. I never answered it, for I couldn't have put it into words, nor did I think it a rewarding subject, for either Mistress or me. "This is good for men like me," I whispered into the pale skin of her neck. Strands of her dark hair tickled my cheek and her perfume was heavy, an intoxicating scent. "There is nothing like this, Mistress. No one like you."

But she knew that was only the flattery I had learned over the years, and she was suddenly angry again; I knew the signs in her body language. She twisted underneath me, pushing me out of her and rolling me over on to my back on the bed. Then she slipped to the side of the mattress and reached for her robe. I lay there, taking deep breaths, my swollen cock lying heavy and glistening on my belly. She knew I hadn't had my own satisfaction this time, but that was her right to control, as well. I knew I could bring my body's reactions back under my command in a minute or so. I often needed to.

"I'm your servant, Mistress." My voice sounded hoarse. "You know that."

She shook her head, just once, as if to clear her thoughts. There were small drops of sweat still at her throat. "Do I? I wanted more from you, Maen. I *want* more."

I swallowed carefully. "If you feel – "

It was the wrong thing to say to her. "Am I now meant to tell you how I feel?" she hissed back. "Has that now become a matter of concern for mere soldiers, a gossip in the barracks?"

"No, Mistress. Forgive me."

She frowned. "That slides too smoothly from your lips, Maen. Everything does, nowadays. I don't hear the man I used to know – the man I chose to be beside me. The man I saved from a death sentence for treason."

"Alleged treason," I said, before I could stop myself. The defense was not on my behalf alone.

She stared at me. "That was all in the past, Maen." Her eyes looked slightly unfocussed. "We have all moved on. Haven't I changed things in the City already, even before becoming Queen? Haven't I made life better for so many of its citizens?"

She had indeed made changes, and kept me beside her as she did, as if I was the one she wanted to witness those changes and to praise them. Over the last year, although she still awaited the Battle to claim her position as Queen, her role as Queen-Elect had allowed her significant influence. Her mother, the Queen, had passed on a great deal of her responsibilities, conscious perhaps that her days of rule were coming to an end. To the outside world, it seemed that any changes were made by the Queen herself, even if they'd been initiated by Seleste – but that smoothed the way for Seleste's own schemes. There had been major domestic improvements, such as the conditions in the barracks for her soldiers, and the refurbishment of many of the Household public rooms. She took more interest in the research and development of products inside the House of Physic; she insisted on seeing the plans for any large projects from the House of Construction. She had begun to change things politically, too – she now allowed Gold Warriors to attend any meetings that related to military matters, and she had extended their powers of discipline and punishment for their own soldiers, rather than bringing all such matters to the Mistress.

And she had touched on the lives of the Remainders, too, the men and women who never achieved a position in the Household except as servants, but who were essential to keep the City's utilities and services running. She had initiated more training schemes and insisted on more equitable education. Maybe she'd always known that the Central School operated a divided system, with its main focus on children of Household blood rather than those who were pure Remainder. But whether she really knew, or had listened to my occasional comments, she had taken notice of the situation. The word in the City was that the Remainders were deeply grateful to the Queen's bountiful attention, although I knew few enough of them in a context where I could ask for honest confirmation of that. I knew that her own Household had benefited from better educated, better skilled servants, so her intentions may have been purely selfish.

But then maybe I was one of the most obvious and anachronistic examples of her changing attitude; a mere man who had no formal position in her Household, yet stood beside her at official events and who was Called to her bed more often than many of her younger, more virile soldiers. A man who, as she'd said, had been under a sentence of death only a year ago, accused of one of the worst crimes imaginable. A man who was – and probably always would be – viewed with suspicion and contempt by most of her other servants.

"Brooding on the past, Maen?"

I stared back and shook my head, slowly; I didn't point out that she herself had taken our conversation there. And I knew she had no interest in the reality of my daily life. My heartbeat was steadier now, and my voice stronger. "You have shown me leniency, Mistress. You've always shown me fairness. You've shown me favor."

She stared at me. I couldn't identify the look in her eyes, but it was dark. "And you've shown me…." She paused, and frowned. "You have shown me obedience. You have shown me duty and commitment and good work, wherever I've commanded it."

I sat up on the bed, the muscles tightening in my belly. "I can't show you any more than that. A Mistress isn't supposed to require more than that – "

The fire in her eyes flared at me and her voice rose in volume. "How dare you tell me what a Mistress does or doesn't require!"

I shifted quickly to the side of the bed, reaching for my trousers to pull them back on. "Forgive me, Mistress. I didn't mean offence. There's a strange discord in me tonight. Maybe it's due to the excitement of the battle; I've been rash. Too easily baited by Zander; insolent to you, personally." I had other apologies ready on my tongue, but I was also speaking the truth. I felt unusually unsettled and my emotions felt disturbed. My heart beat erratically as if I were still in the heat of battle.

Then something about Seleste's silence alerted me. I had been waiting for her punishment for my loose tongue but it never came. I looked up into her eyes and saw … fascination.

My heart skipped a beat.

"The Battle for Queenship…" I began, carefully. Her eyes flickered, her expression wary. "I have heard tales of your mother's battle before you – the Queen's accession, only ten years ago."

"I am now the Queen," she said, sharply, but she didn't demand that I stop talking.

I nodded my apology, but continued. "There were tales that she used Magic to help her win – to make her soldiers fight more fiercely; more viciously."

"Nonsense." Seleste's voice was low and soft. "Magic would not be used for such things, nor would it be needed if the Guard were well prepared. Where did you hear such tales?"

I couldn't tell her, for the same reasons that I kept the whereabouts of one of her mother's exiled sisters secret. "You say that the Guard should be well prepared. I helped you do that this time, with training and swordsmanship and Battle strategy. I'd thought that was enough for you." Maybe I should have been more cautious, but my thoughts were racing. "Are there – were there – other means?"

Seleste raised her eyebrows. She tugged gently at the edge of her robe as if nervous, though I knew that Seleste was rarely anything of the kind. "My mother … obviously she used everything at her disposal. She was determined to win. As indeed, was I."

"Maybe not Magic, then," I said. I felt as if I trod on ground that was suddenly turning from solid earth to sand beneath my feet. "Maybe something more familiar to us all. The Devotions that your men take daily, as loyal citizens … they affect a man's behavior in many ways. Their dosage might easily be influenced by someone in charge of a Household." Seleste's eyes widened and I knew I had struck the truth of it. I frowned. "But I haven't taken them for a long time, since I came to this Household. And yet I fought as fiercely as any of the other men."

She didn't speak, but her eyes darted down to the mess of crockery and cups on the floor of the bedroom. She often provided refreshments when I was Called to her room. We enjoyed fruit and breads that were never available to her other men, and rich wine that had a special, tart flavor that I associated with Seleste's pantry alone.

"So that's what you did," I said. She had manipulated me, and maybe all of us. She had not relied solely on the loyalty and skill of her soldiers. We had, indeed, fought as if possessed.

"What I do is always necessary," she said, sharply now. "It's no business of yours; you cannot question me."

"I would not dream of it," I said, very quietly. The subject was closed for now.

She stepped over to stand in front of me, grasping my chin and pulling my head up so that our eyes met again. "Always my brightest soldier; my most challenging lover. Yet you're holding back from me, Maen. I know it. Your information; your support; your passion."

"That's not true." I met her gaze steadily.

"Men like you," she said, sounding bitter. "That's how I described you before. But there *are* no men like you, Maen, are there? That's why I have you here, beside me. Because I desire it – and because I dare not let you stray."

I was silent. I had nothing to say to her.

"You cannot still think of him," she said, suddenly; abruptly. She dropped her hold of me. "*The boy*. I will not believe it! He's long gone, you know that – in exile; likely dead. It's been over a year, Maen."

I dipped my head, hiding my face from her again. "Has it?"

Seleste made a noise of impatience. "No man can yearn for that long. No man has that capacity. You live only for your duty and your position, am I not right? For your soldiers; for better, richer comforts; for your Queen. Men like you are servants of the City from birth to death, and devoted ones, too."

"Men like me…" I murmured.

There was a sudden silence between us, tight with tension. *There are no men like you, Maen*, she had said, and maybe she was remembering that, too.

"Leave me now," she said. Her tone was sharper still. She tugged her robe around her again and looked away, as if pretending to

be distracted by the papers on the table beside her bed. "Send in my women, I have preparations to make for tomorrow's first Council meeting. I will be leading the agenda, unlike before."

I nodded, standing up and gathering the rest of my clothing. I pulled my boots on and my tunic over my head, then gave the appropriate open-palmed salute against my breast. "Because you are now the Queen," I said, echoing her earlier statement. As I stepped backwards to the door, Seleste swung around, startling me.

"And you should remember that well," she hissed back. "You live to serve your Queen. From birth to death, Maen."

I didn't answer, and I doubt that she expected me to. I left the room in silence.

CHAPTER 3

I HAD been waiting in Seleste's outer office for an hour or more, but the latest Council meeting had apparently gone on far longer than expected. For maybe the first time in my life, I was glad I was no longer a soldier of rank, for I didn't have to wait at attention for that time. I was wearing my tunic and trousers, but inside Seleste's Household I was allowed no armor nor arms. That was a condition of my tenure, unless I had duties on the training field, but I had to admit that it also made for a more comfortable time off duty. Her Secretary brought me water, but no one saw fit to explain either why I was there or to suggest how long the meeting would last. Maybe I should have said, yet *another* Council meeting; my Mistress had been absent for most of the last month on one official duty or another, ever since her accession as Queen. As much duty as the life of a soldier, I might have said, if I were looking to amuse her. Instead, I sat alone and restless, and I brooded on many things.

There was a discreet tap at the door and a soldier entered, a Silver Captain. Not one of Seleste's own Guard, so I assumed he had been part of the spoils from the Battle. The City still hummed with news and tales of that day – of the courage and drama of the fighting; of the fate of the other sisters, notably the last few who had surrendered; of the hero status of the Gold Warriors, Zander the best of them all. Despite his chastisement on the day of the Battle, he was back in favor and as arrogant as ever. There was the threat of severe punishment for anyone spreading the tale of Flora's attack on Seleste, but luckily there had been plenty of other, more positive tales to keep people's tongues occupied. There had also been a stream of visitors to the Royal Household every day since the Battle, either on official business for the new Queen or on some rather less official – but maybe more interesting – business, to see and bid for the captured soldiers

who were not to be kept on. Seleste had made her preliminary choice of the soldiers who would join her own Royal Guard, making that decision with Zander at her side.

Whereas I had no hero status; no praise in the common ale-bar songs. Instead, I sat in her office as a civilian of sorts, waiting to know what she had in store for me.

The soldier glanced at me and his eyes widened. I wasn't unused to the effect, but it still made me weary. "The Queen's Secretary is through the east door," I said. Was he here with a message, or for disciplinary reasons? There were no other soldiers with him. "You may leave your message with her."

He didn't move away. He was also unarmed, though he wore the daily breastplate to show that he was a serving soldier. He was black-haired and slim, and his eyes were an unusually deep shade of grey. They stayed fixed on me, and he showed no signs of leaving the office. "I'm here to meet with the Queen and her Gold Warrior, sir," he said. His voice was slow and had a thick sensuality; he sounded respectful but there was a hint of calculation underlying it. He was still staring at me. "Are you…?"

"Please," I said, frowning slightly. "You're not here to see me. I'm not the Queen's Gold Warrior. Not even one of them."

He took a step towards me. "You have the bearing, though. I took you for a Gold Warrior, sir," he said, more boldly. He was a couple of inches shorter than I was and a few years younger. His face was suddenly more familiar.

"I saw you in the Battle," I said. "You are – were – one of Mistress Flora's men."

"You brought me down," he answered, nodding. "Although I am – *was* – one of her best, as she herself would tell you." And then he smiled. I was startled, both at his boast and his apparent cheerfulness after having been defeated. "I'll have a scar on my belly to show for it, but that's a matter of pride for me. Such fine fighting is what I'd have expected from your reputation. You are Maen from the Exchequer, aren't you?"

I nodded. "I was. Now I'm in the Royal Household." I couldn't tell him what position I held, I suddenly realized, for I had nothing official now that the Battle had been fought and won. I saw he'd moved even closer, now within a foot of me and still gazing steadily up at me. "Stand back, soldier," I said. "The Queen is not here at the moment to see you, so you should return to your barracks and await another call. Unless you have a preferential position in the Royal Guard…?"

His face fell, and he took a step back, though not far enough to satisfy me. "I will have that soon, Maen. That's why the Queen needs to see me."

"Needs?" I murmured, almost amused by his arrogance.

He flushed. "Her sister may have fled the City, but I am a prize worth having in her personal Guard."

"What do you know about your previous Mistress?" I asked sharply. No one had found Flora's whereabouts yet, as far as I knew.

His eyes narrowed, as if he suspected he'd just been indiscreet. "There are rumors that she's fled the City, Maen. Nothing more; I'm just repeating gossip. But if there was anyone she'd contact in the City, I'm sure it'd be…." He paused. He tilted his head to one side, as if to share a rueful joke with me. "Well, her Queen of course, that's what I was going to say. And so, Maen, when I'm in the Guard, will I be close to *you*?"

There was something about his unnecessary, repeated use of my name that unnerved me. He'd dropped the deferential 'Sir' completely. "No," I replied. "I have no duties in the Guard at present. You would be under the command of one of the Queen's Gold Warriors."

"Are they all good men?" he asked. "Will I enjoy being under one of them?" His eyes looked clear of mischief, but I couldn't believe a trained soldier would ask such a ridiculous – and provocative – question of me.

"Of course they are." I took his enquiry at face value, but I wondered how much longer Seleste and her Ladies would be. "What's your name, soldier?"

He smiled again, as if I'd given him a personal compliment. There was the slightest blush on his face. If I hadn't seen him fight well in the Battle – though immaturely – I would have thought him a very new recruit. "Darius. I was one of Mistress Flora's finest Silver Captains. Had she won, I would have been promoted to Gold, there's no doubt about it."

"She didn't," I said, brusquely. "You're a prisoner of this Household now, and of my Mistress's whim. You can take up the matter of your promotion with her, if you dare."

His flush was from embarrassment now, and his look was angry. His eyes were astonishingly expressive, although I didn't recognize everything I saw there. "You're very harsh, Maen, when I only hoped to show you respect and admiration."

I frowned. I didn't know what to say to him that he might take notice of.

"After all, you can ill afford it." His voice was suddenly sharper. As I stared back at him, he smiled, though it looked malicious this time. "You're used to respect, I imagine, like our civilians are used to the air they breathe. It can't be easy, falling from the highest position a man can have, to being a kept animal." I was astounded, and my face must have shown it for he flushed more deeply, though he didn't back away. "Maybe you are a pet, Maen, rather than something more wild. But then, I wonder what else the Queen might make of someone with a reputation such as yours. And we both know I'm not talking about the military reputation now." He lifted a hand to his mouth, lazily wiping a drop of saliva from its corner. He sucked it slowly from his finger tip.

"You offend me," I said, as calmly as I could.

He shrugged, as if pleased with that effect. "I would like to be under *your* command, Maen," he murmured, his voice low but clear to my ears. "Under *you*." He breathed more heavily than before, and as he'd just said, we both knew that he no longer spoke of military matters. "You make me hard, just to hear your voice. I promise I wouldn't disappoint you – I've never had any complaints, from man or woman." His eyes glinted as if filled with tears, though his mouth was set firmly. His gaze raked down my body as if he were measuring me.

"A man of your experience; of your looks … I have never allowed any man to bring me down like you did in battle – unless I liked it. Did you like it, too, having me lie at your feet? Defeated? Bleeding?"

I stared back at him, coldly. He was attractive, as I'd noted on the battlefield, but I was in no mood for his insinuations. I'd known men like him – of course I had – but as I'd thought in the battle, he was a fool. "You may leave now, soldier. I have no business with you."

"What's the matter?" He looked at me, puzzled. "The Mistress cannot possibly give you everything you need. You're a man of passion, Maen, I can see that. You need it; I'll make it good for you. It doesn't matter who commands me on the field, I can satisfy a cock in any barracks – "

"That's enough!" Darius's arrogance was offensive in an entirely different manner than the disrespect from a fellow soldier such as Zander. I could smell the sweat from Darius's body and I was disconcerted to find that it was arousing. My physical instincts betrayed me too often, although I fought to control them. It was much harder without the Devotions to rely on. I had touched very few lovers apart from my Mistress over the last year, and I preferred it that way, although it wasn't an easy path. Darius didn't look the kind of man to exercise a similar self-restraint; I suspected he traded on his sexual appeal far more than his other skills. "I will be leaving now, myself, so you can wait here for your orders for as long as you wish."

"What is it?" He looked agitated. "For Devotions' sake, why are you refusing me? Look how strangely you're acting!" His eyes glanced down over my groin and his voice dropped to a low, sultry hiss. "I want you, Maen, I have since the day of the Battle, what's wrong with that? It's natural; commonplace, surely. Tell me where I can find you after my meeting with the Queen. I'm all yours then, cock and ass, discipline me then if you like, use me so fast and so hard that I scream your name when you come inside me. You're a fool to pass up an offer like – "

I had him pinned against the wall in two seconds. My hand was tight around his windpipe and his eyes bulged with shock. "Maen – " he croaked, clawing at my fingers.

"Maen!" The call at the door was a different voice, and an angry one – the voice of my Mistress. "In the name of the City, what are you doing to that Silver Captain?"

I continued to stare at Darius with disgust, and he stared back, his full lips turning a little blue. His hands dropped down to his sides and he stopped struggling. He showed no fear this time, only a strange, gruesome kind of excitement. It was more distasteful than his resistance. I loosened my hold and let him sink down to the floor, his legs crumpling, his returning breath rattling in his throat.

I knelt, my gaze dropping to the floor. My own breath was tight and angry, and I didn't want Seleste to see that reaction in my eyes. "Forgive me," I muttered. "This soldier's message is not for me."

Seleste made a small sound of impatience. She loosened her cloak and let it fall back into the hands of one of her Ladies. Four of them accompanied her at all times during the working day, sometimes more. She snapped her fingers for refreshment and another of the women rushed over to the table to fetch wine. We made a strange tableau there, Seleste running her hand through her long, dark tresses, shaking them free of her hood; Darius trying to scramble shakily to his feet, his face red and mottled; and me on my knees at the feet of my Queen.

"It's becoming a tiresome habit," she murmured. "This brawling with my men. You need proper occupation, Maen."

"I'm here at your wish, Mistress." I glanced up at her to find her gazing back at me. "I'm hoping you'll have a suitable job for me."

She smiled, but she looked pale and weary. "We'll discuss that shortly." She looked over at Darius, who now also knelt in front of her. His hand was on his breast in salute and his head bowed, but his eyes darted up curiously to catch sight of her. Many soldiers never got to be so close to their Queen. He was fascinated by her, as so many of them were.

"You're Darius, I believe? Rumor has it that Flora found you amusing. Can you fight as well as you amuse, soldier?" She didn't wait for his answer but turned to me, instead. "What do you think of his talents, Maen?"

I frowned. "I have little knowledge of them, Mistress."

She raised an eyebrow. "Enough to know *you* find little amusement in him."

Darius made some small noise of protest, but neither of us looked at him.

"Zander will help you make your decisions about the Guard, Mistress," I persisted. "I no longer have a valuable opinion."

Her eyes softened as she gazed at me. "I doubt that," she said, and I was startled to see sympathy in her eyes. "But you should trust me to know what's best for you. Get up off the floor now, I expect you to wait patiently for me until I'm ready to see you, not to leave at the first signs of boredom." Then she turned back to Darius. He dropped his head again in respectful obeisance but not until he'd caught her eyes and held the look for a few seconds. There was the hint of a hopeful smile on his face; he moistened his dry lips. His hair was tousled from when I'd grabbed him, but I didn't think that'd concern Seleste.

"You have asked for this meeting ever since you came here, I believe?" She sighed. "Your determination is commendable and you're built well. I'll consider you for the Royal Guard." He gasped and started to thank her but she waved him to silence and beckoned for one of her staff to come over and make the necessary note.

I was standing by now. Seleste glanced from me to the kneeling Silver Captain, then back to me. She looked thoughtful and I wondered how much of our exchange she'd heard before she entered the room. "You should consider him too, Maen," she murmured. She was smiling gently; mischievously. "I said that you needed proper occupation. I'd add amusement to that list, too, and definitely of the type he can offer…."

I bent my head to her, remaining silent, conscious of the other ladies standing in the background and watching us. I knew that Seleste spoke to none of her staff in the way that she spoke to me – and also that it wasn't always a privilege. If we'd been alone, I would have answered her provocation differently.

She sighed and turned again, restless from what must have been a difficult meeting, or maybe looking towards the next. "Leave now,"

she said to Darius. He got to his feet, his eyes shining. "You can report to Zander at first light tomorrow. And tonight…." She paused, her eyes settling briefly on the red marks that my grip had left at his throat and the dark curls of his hair clinging to the sweat there. "Come to me after my supper, my Secretary will tell you when. Let's find out what in Devotions' name Flora saw in a young, persistent soldier like you." She didn't look my way, but she knew I was watching her. "I will need some distraction at the end of this day. Some *occupation* of my own."

Darius backed out of the room respectfully. As he turned to go down the corridor and back to the barracks, he glanced my way. For a second, he looked confused. Then he shrugged, smiled with the same insouciance as before, and left.

"I WILL have a History written about me," Seleste announced, a self-satisfied smile on her beautiful face. "That's the way of it, I believe. The Royal Library is full of huge volumes that are of no use except to stop the doors open, all the dry, sad old tales of past Queens and Ladies of historical note. I cannot understand my sister Nerisa's tolerance of such a boring place, though making her Mistress of it has kept her out of my way. She was never one of my more interesting siblings. But it's time to have a History written about today's citizens and Aza City as I have made it. A History about *me*. A tale of my glorious Battle and the golden promise of my reign ahead."

She had dismissed her Ladies and settled herself at her desk. She was on her second glass of wine and the color had returned to her cheeks. As far as I knew, Seleste had never stepped foot inside the Royal Library – a particularly dull and dusty building – but I could tell when she was warming to an idea. "You will arrange that for me, Maen. Find someone suitably qualified to copy my words into print."

Or the words she would wish to have penned, I thought wryly. I doubted that Seleste would make time to sit with one of the scribes while they carefully scratched out the shapes of words that they had learnt by rote from previous historical publications. Maybe I could find one who had the intelligence to be able to read and write by his own efforts.

"I'm to be herald, now?" I grimaced. "The one who unfurls the scroll and announces the illustrious Royal lineage and the news of this week's Royal itinerary?"

"No, not that. Just my facilitator, a job that you do far better." She smiled more warmly, and it was good to see. For many months now, there had been little time between us for laughter. I'd blamed it on the all-consuming preparation for the Battle, although there were other things that brought tension. After all, how could there ever be true relaxation between us – we were Queen and soldier; Mistress and servant. We also had history between us that hung in the air like the heavy incense from the Household of Devotion's mid-night service. It was there, every day of our lives together, wherever they might overlap.

"It's an important role for you, Maen." I realized Seleste was talking again, but for a moment, the content had escaped me. "Facilitator is an apt name for it, perhaps. You will, of course, be both grateful and enthusiastic to serve your Queen in whatever way she chooses." Her announcement was very obviously an order, not discussion.

She looked up and must have caught my startled expression. "Have you been listening to me?" she said, frowning. "I'm not talking about the History, that's just a chore that I wish you to arrange for me. My real need for you is as my agent. An infiltrator … an emissary. Whatever you wish to call it, for I cannot offer you a badge for it, or one of those scrolls you mentioned. The terms of the job remain between the two of us, and *only* the two of us."

I was astonished. Did I understand her say that I would be a spy? "I don't think I …." I paused, trying to find the appropriately respectful words. I was glad we were alone, glad that I didn't have the usual background of uncomfortable, disapproving Ladies, shifting awkwardly in their soft, silken gowns. They weren't used to men answering back to their Mistress, let alone their Queen, and let alone a….

A man like me.

"It's not something I know, Mistress," I finished. "I don't think I would satisfy you in that role. I know nothing of espionage or what

you require from the Household in the matter of … information. I would be better suited to serve you as a soldier, even the lowest rank, I can tolerate that."

"How charmingly naïve," she said, dryly. "That I should be interested in what *you* can tolerate." When I flushed, she laughed softly. "Maen, you will satisfy me in whatever role I choose for you. You are too modest, and ingenuously so. You have skills and sense that extend far beyond soldiering, and you have knowledge of the Household that no one else does. You can go where no other man can; you can pass among people who would hide if you were an official soldier of my Guard."

"They despise me," I interrupted. I wasn't looking for her pity, nor anyone's, but she should know how I was treated.

Seleste raised her eyebrows. "Exactly. And so they will not fear your authority. You can listen to them; hear their worries and their woes, and maybe … their plots."

I frowned.

She looked at me, her gaze suddenly piercing, her dark brown eyes stern. "Your Queen needs protection and reassurance. I have enemies, Maen, I am not so foolish as to ignore the fact that people might wish me harm. But I need to know whether they are a serious threat – and where the hostility might breed. Inside the City, or from outside."

"You mean the Exiles…" I said, slowly. They had to be mentioned, although she was often reluctant to talk about them with me. They were men and women who lived outside of the City and its laws; they were outcasts from the City, degenerates and traitors – but also people who had chosen to join that band, seeking another way of life. It seemed much longer than a year ago that I'd been captured by a group of them and had found my life irreversibly changed as a result. I had ceased my Devotions at that time; I had learned of a society where men were not merely soldiers or submissive lovers; I had found emotions and behavior inside myself that had been both shocking and thrilling. And, ultimately, devastating.

"They remain one of our most serious threats," said Seleste. She was watching me carefully. "There's always been the rumor that the Exiles have spies within the City."

"Their attacks are more confident now." I had sought news of these skirmishes with eagerness, ever since I came to her Household. What had been a band of ill-assorted, disgruntled misfits was becoming a far more cohesive, well-organized community of guerrilla fighters. "They seek supplies and support, living outside the City. They seek recognition – "

"What they *seek* is to corrupt everything that we do," she hissed, silencing my words. "They seek to undermine and threaten and destroy the order that we have in the City. They are jealous of the good life that they themselves scorned – that they cut themselves off from."

I was silent. Maybe she saw that as a challenge, for she became angrier.

"Maen, they are no part of Aza City, nor will they ever be. Your job is to find out what I need to keep them out, to return the trouble to them that they bring to *me*."

I met her eyes, dark and cold, with my own gaze.

She moistened her lips and ignored my silence. "I have no compassion for those who ally themselves with the City's enemies. Find out who they might be and report to me alone. I expect you to understand the importance of that. To know where your duty lies."

I knew that already, I thought, as I bowed and saluted. Far too well.

CHAPTER 4

I'D been to the Library before, for all soldiers were offered a minimum level of education during their training as Bronzemen, but I didn't think I'd ever appreciated the size of it. It was a building on its own on the west side of the Household, with a small office area at its entrance and then rack upon rack of papers and bound books, stacked and bundled together over four chaotic floors. It wasn't used solely for books, but also for any documents and all the paraphernalia that accompanied the administration of the City. There were boxes of ceremonial ribbons and cups and discarded gifts from other Households; there were bottles and urns, some empty, some half-filled with dried matter or stagnant, unidentifiable potions; there were seals and official stamps and even some trunks of clothing, full to the brim with the long, pale grey tunics that the scribes wore, and other servants' outfits.

Nerisa, one of Seleste's defeated sisters, was in charge of the facility. She was so unlike Seleste that the barracks had often made crude jokes about who exactly had given his seed for her. She appeared to have none of the nobility or bearing that a Royal daughter was expected to have. She was dowdy, plain, and very introverted, characteristics that had left her with a poor Household staff and few decent soldiers. I heard she had never outbid any Mistress at the Choosing for the best of the new Bronzemen, so she'd only ever bought the runts of the military litter. Those who had worked in her Household also led me to believe that she showed poor judgment in her choice of staff, so that her Ladies were either shrewish or disloyal, and other Households found it distasteful to do business with her. She was overlooked within the City, as a result. Her sister had given her a Royal position after the Battle, though one that still meant she was far from public duties. When I'd arrived to look around the Library, she'd

avoided my gaze as much as possible – including my salute to her as a Mistress – and passed me to the care of one of her Secretaries. She'd then hurried back to her quarters, accompanied by a Silver Captain as her guard. I'd heard that the Lady Nerisa enjoyed little more in her evenings than the pages of her own Library's books. Like other soldiers before me, I thought that maybe this was by far the best place for her.

I had been wandering through the Library for an hour now, but none of the scribes had so far impressed me as being up to the task of coping with Seleste's grand History. The ground floor of the Library held desks for them to work at, and the Royal Household had a reasonable staff of them, but they were a quiet, dull-looking bunch. I'd questioned a few of them, just engaging them in some general conversation about what they had worked on in the past, and they had stared back at me like shocked, fearful hares. Their replies had been monosyllabic; barely whispered. I don't know what I had expected. Most of them had obviously been drawn from the Remainder population, for none of them looked fit enough to have sought a military position, nor confident enough to have had responsibility elsewhere in the Household. They sat and transcribed the old Histories time and again, with the occasional break to pen current documents and occasional light-hearted picture books for the Ladies' entertainment.

I stood in the middle of the desks, ignoring the all-pervasive dust that tickled at the end of my nose, and gazed up at a sealed, square-shaped trapdoor in the ceiling.

"What's on the upper levels?" I asked one of the more likely looking scribes, though the only thing really in his favor was that he looked awake. They had no reason to defer to me – even had I been a soldier – but their timid nature made it easy to persuade them. They obviously assumed that I had their Mistress's full permission to be there and to command them.

"The older Histories," the scribe replied. His speech was clipped, and I think he was resisting adding an automatic 'sir'. "No one bothers to go up there much, unless we need additional research for a current volume, or we need to refer to some of the older illumination

styles. We send the junior boy up there occasionally with a list of all we need."

I glanced around at the pale, bent heads of the scribes. There didn't seem to be anyone who fit that description here at the moment. "I want to go up there," I said, though I wasn't quite sure why. "Where's the ladder?"

There was a moment of confusion while they looked for it, but then they rolled it over for me, a tall, steep arrangement of rungs that they obviously used to reach the higher shelves on their own floor. It just reached to the bottom of the trapdoor and I climbed it carefully, concerned that my much more muscular weight would break through the thin wood. A couple of them watched me with open-mouthed curiosity, then a discreet cough from elsewhere in the room had them scurrying back to their posts. I wondered what joy there might be in working in such a place, but it wasn't my place to question. I had to push a couple of times at the door to get it to move and a shower of cobwebs fell on my head as I did, but then it was easy enough to slide it along the floor of the upper room and pull myself up after it.

I was met with more of the same. More high shelves; more books; more pale parchments and soft, musky dust. The white sheen of it was over everything. I reckoned it even colored the skins of those who worked amongst it. I resisted the urge to cough. It definitely wasn't my choice for a place of leisure, but I supposed that it held interest for some people….

Something moved at the corner of my sight. My head snapped around but I couldn't see anything specific. Was that why I'd wanted to come up? Had I heard or seen something that had caught my interest? I saw scattered rats' droppings in the corner of the room and wondered briefly about my *interest*. Rats and mice didn't worry me, but it concerned me that they might be destructive up here. Maybe I ought to report it to the Mistress.

Then something moved again, and this time I heard a soft, grunted expletive, and a pile of papers came tumbling down from one of the far shelving towers. I tensed, but then smiled to myself. The curse had been a Remainder one – a mild and childish one, compared to the rich, rude imagination of the barracks. I didn't think I was at risk

from a soldier's attack up here. "Come out," I called, firmly. "I've seen you, so there's no longer any point in hiding."

There was another scuffle and a young man came out on his hands and knees from behind the shelving, inching his way out from beneath a pile of spilled books. He looked up at me and glared. Maybe I'd been expecting something more timid; something apologetic, but it didn't look like I was going to get it. It was almost as if *I* were the trespasser here. He looked much younger than the scribes below, though older than a Bronzeman would be when he first joined the Household; someplace between a youth and a young man, and a thin, wiry one at that. His eyes were a sharp, glinting blue, his hair the color of dull, harvested grain, heavy locks of it falling forward over his forehead as he scrambled out.

He moved into a cleared space in front of me and sat back on his heels. He was wearing one of the grey scribe robes, though it looked very grubby and was so over-large on him that he had it clenched in at his waist with some string. "So," he said, looking me up and down. He had a very clear voice, and it sounded surprisingly belligerent. He shook his head, covering us both with a fine mist and I realized a lot of the straw hair coloring was just dust. "Whose soldier are you?" He drew in a deep breath and his thin chest rose up alarmingly. "You're not one of Mistress Nerisa's, not that she's got many left now, just that dour, silent, no-jokes-on-pain-of-bloody-death Captain Tabot, and all he does is watch her to make sure she doesn't fly the City and plot against the Queen, or whatever it is they think he needs to be so close to her for, the man's on her heels most days, closer than her sandals." He drew another breath, but I interrupted before he could continue.

"Who are you? What are you doing up here?"

He stared at me as if I were a madman. "I live here; I work here. What are *you* doing?"

I started to laugh, then bit it off. "I don't have to answer to you, boy. Are you the junior scribe who works here, fetching stuff? Why are you hiding up here…?"

For the first time, he looked abashed. "Look, he's gone, he ran off if you must know, right after the Battle when things were in chaos

and nobody kept watch. It's typical, they probably haven't even noticed it yet down there, they live in some strange world of their own, and I wouldn't be surprised if the ink hasn't addled their brains, or maybe it's this dust, gets into places in your skin where you didn't even know you had creases. So yes, I fetch them stuff sometimes, but they never look me in the face and I think they find me interchangeable with him; it's been a fair trade for me, because I need the place to sleep. So if you want something, just let me know, I can find you anything here, I know my way around better than any of them…"

"Stop," I said. His rapid talk was astonishing, and his brashness startling in such a youth. "You sleep up here? What does your Mistress say about that?"

He stared at me again. Now he flushed. "Mistress Nerisa doesn't know I'm here. I mean, she's not my Mistress. Mistress Flora was my Mistress, I was one of her office clerks, but when the Battle ended and the whole of her Household was either being disbanded or sold off to the others, I…." He paused, voluntarily.

"You ran off as well," I said.

He nodded. "They'd have sent me back to the Remainder School, and probably some job down the sewers or in the grain silos." He glanced down at himself, ruefully. "I have the build. I'm too skinny for soldiering, too old for the looms, but just the right build to go up and down steps, cleaning inside tunnels and pipes – "

"But now you're here," I broke in again. My voice sounded harsh and his eyes widened.

"If you're coming to take me away, just get on with it," he gasped. Did he think I didn't see that his gabbling speech was a cover for his fear? "A couple of months in the Detention Quarters, I know that's to come, and maybe I won't do so badly down there, I mean a cell floor is as good a place to sleep as any and I can hide well when I have to, I can keep my head down. Or maybe someone'll take a shine to me and protect me from the worst of those creatures from the House of Armament who run the place, what with the beatings and the things they do to the new boys just to keep themselves amused, I've heard plenty about it since the Battle, there was everyone in the Mistress's old Household in such a panic, and the new Queen such a mortal terror,

like they all say." For few seconds, he shivered and his pupils dilated. His next breath was considerably shallower. "And then maybe the things I've learned here might help me get a better position when I get out, but maybe not, I know I'll be way down the list of anyone's choices and I'll just have to take what's given to me, I can only hope my new Mistress will be merciful, will it be your Mistress, too? And I know you have your duty, this isn't personal – "

"Tell me your name," I growled. I didn't know if my threatening headache was from the thick atmosphere up here or his terrified chatter.

"Kiel," he said. "Sir." I was right: it was a sharp-sounding, Remainder name.

"I'm not a soldier, Kiel," I said. "I was once but now I'm … now I'm not. I'm not here to take you away and, to be honest, you may be of more use to me here than in the Detention Quarters." I had some sympathy with him; Flora's Household had been ripped apart since her disappearance, and her staff and possessions had been at the mercy of any other Households who were assertive enough to take them.

Kiel's eyes got even wider. He still bore hints of the pale immaturity of childhood, but he had a very lively, inquisitive air to him that was appealing, and his manner of speech – though wearing – showed he was intelligent. "You're not…? You mean I can stay here?" He frowned, then shook his head. "No, you're an important man, I can see. Maybe you're just playing around with me. That's not particularly fair, is it? And just because I'm young and physically small – though to be honest, I think that most people would be, compared to you – I'd still appreciate you treating me with some respect."

I tried not to smile. This whole meeting was increasingly bizarre. "I'm sorry, Kiel, but maybe you have a higher opinion of me than the City does. I'm a servant, the same as you. But that's a fair enough point about treating you with respect. And if *I'm* honest, I may need some help in the Library, so let's pretend I never saw you today, all right?"

He peered at me, then stuck out his hand. I shook it, firmly. "What's *your* name?" he asked. "And who's your Mistress?" It was the traditional greeting between City dwellers.

"My name is Maen," I said. There was no flicker of recognition in his face. "My Mistress is Seleste." I held my arm out so that he could see the brands there – the basic mark of my birth mother's Household, then the formal coin symbols of the Exchequer where I'd started out and Trained as a soldier. The further mark beside them was a plain oval with a raw, sketched figure in its center, the servant's brand of the Royal Household. It was based loosely on the formal, more exotic design that had been created by Seleste's tattooists and was only for the Ladies themselves, a pattern of entwined vines and ribbons around a silhouetted figure – a representation of the original Queens who had Colonized the planet and created the world we now lived in.

"The Queen…" Kiel breathed. "You're in the Queen's own Household. After what I said about her – " His eyes got even wider, if that were possible, and his mouth formed the same curse I'd heard before.

I smiled openly then. It wasn't as if I hadn't heard similar things said about Seleste before, and I reckoned Kiel was too refreshing – and unusual – a companion to be punished for it. I swung my legs back over the opening. "Don't worry about it. Goodbye for now, but I hope to see you again. Don't get caught too soon up here."

He peered at me, then grinned. "They live in their own pages, sir – Maen. I'm a shadow up here, just a creak in the floorboards; a shifting of the dust. And each night I cover the trapdoor with fresh cobwebs so it looks undisturbed." He tilted his head to one side as I started to lower myself back out on to the ladder. "Maen … but I know your name from somewhere."

I tensed up, waiting perhaps for a reworking of the kitchen tales; his scorn of my reputation.

"You helped the scribes who worked on the Queen's speech," he said, his voice just a whisper now in case anyone heard him from the floor below. "They got a mark of honor last week on your recommendation, and a promise of good tenure for as long as they're part of the Household. They'd been really scared – I know the men

concerned, like rabbits really, but they were scared that being so close to the Queen and her private business would be dangerous. But now they can get back to their scribbles in peace, because you intervened on their behalf." He stared at me, his eyes still bright and assessing me as he sidled back into the dusty dim light. "That was kind of you. You're more of an important man than you think, Maen."

I let myself down the ladder, pulling the door closed above my head. There was a sudden scrape of chairs below me, and for a second I thought my conversation with Kiel had been overheard and the young man would be discovered. When I reached the floor and turned around I saw that the Scribes were on their feet and bowing to their Mistress Nerisa. She had her head down as usual and her hands twisting nervously against her chain of office. Beside her were soldiers – a solid, plain-looking Silver Captain whom I assumed was Tabot, Mistress Nerisa's guard as Kiel had described, and the other was Zander. Zander exuded confidence and charisma, and he was obviously enjoying his reputation around the Household as a hero of the Battle. He had the rapt attention of almost all the scribes in the room as well as both of Mistress Nerisa's attending young Ladies. In his ear there was a second gold earring, a new gift from his Mistress.

"Maen," he said, coldly. "The Mistress wants to see you. Now."

"MY sisters," Seleste hissed at us. She stood at her desk, her full height only a few inches below my own, and her bearing at its most regal. Her purple robe was clasped at her breast by a badge, with her brand stamped into its highly polished metal. "My sisters are treacherous and disloyal. I have shown them nothing but respect and this is how they repay me!"

The strength of her fury was a shock. I glanced at Zander. He stood at attention beside her, a couple of Silver Captains at his shoulder. "We have had reports of Mistress Flora," he said to me, his voice clipped. "She's fled the City and taken many of the Royal treasures with her."

"Where could she go?"

He frowned back at me, as if irritated at having to tell me his business. "We don't know. I'm sending out men to search the surrounding hills, but I don't see how she can have traveled far without help. There are no settlements near to us that might shelter her."

I looked over at Seleste: she was staring back at me. Her eyes were dark and angry. "Do you know where she might be, Maen?"

I shook my head. "No, Mistress."

"There are Exile settlements beyond the rocks to the East," she persisted. "And you know that. Might she have gone there?"

"I don't know," I said, but she wasn't listening.

"You'll find out," she said, gritting her teeth in an attempt to control her temper. Zander moved forward, but she waved him back, her eyes still on me. "Question every member of her staff, Maen, every cursed one of them. And my sisters, too, the ones still in the City. One of them must have helped her."

There was a shocked gasp from one of the Silver Captains. Zander's eyes narrowed. "Mistress, he can't question them – they are Mistresses themselves. He's…." He didn't look at me, but I could see his disturbance and his confusion. "He's just a servant, not even a soldier. He's a man."

Seleste turned slowly back to face him. I knew his confidence, and I knew his strength, but it seemed as if for a second he was tempted to lean away from her anger. "You'll go with him, Zander, every place he goes, and make sure reports reach me regularly. But I give him my full permission to talk to anyone in this City and to question them, until he finds where Flora is."

"And if she's gone to the Exiles?" My voice sounded calmer than I felt.

Seleste frowned. She looked back over her shoulder at me: I couldn't see her full expression. "You will tell Zander, in that case. You will not follow."

I grimaced. "If there a trail, for Devotions' sake, I must be able to follow it – "

"If there's a trail, Zander's men will follow," she snapped. She turned back and we stepped apart from the others, our faces close. The soldiers were all silent, their collective breath held, their shocked gazes fixed on us.

"You send me to fetch like a dog, then you hold me back on a short leash," I said. I could feel the anger rising in me; it felt as if it had been brewing for a long time. "What exactly is it you want from me? Use me well, or let me free!"

"How dare you?" she hissed. "You'll do as I order you! I'll not give you that kind of freedom – the freedom to leave the City, to seek for *him* – "

"That's nonsense," I growled. Zander took a step forward, but for once, he seemed more stunned by our argument than protective of his Queen.

"No!" Seleste's face was twisted into viciousness by her anger, now. She appeared to take no heed of anyone or anything else in the room. "You think I don't hear you at night, Maen, talking in your sleep, moaning his name? That I don't see the barely veiled look in your eyes when you climax inside me; the emotional pain; the disappointment? How long do you think I will tolerate the way your hand reaches out in your dreams to find a lover, yet flinches back when it touches *me*?"

I stared at her in horror. "I didn't know – "

"You will never see him again," she cried. "You think you'll find him with the Exiles, but I know that you won't!"

"I don't … know anything about that…." My voice was hoarse, my head shaking.

"No, you don't," she said. There was a catch to her voice, but it was still clear and strong. "But that's always been your hope, don't deny it. Despite *my* hope, that you were grateful for the fact that I saved your life and would offer you so much more with *me*."

"So much more?" I gazed at her, marveling at her astonishing, furious beauty. I felt something shudder in my chest, as if a great tension broke inside me, and I felt my voice strengthen and grow in

volume. "I've been nothing – I've *had* nothing – since the day of that so-called salvation! You saved an empty shell, Seleste, a man no longer a man, a man with no heart or spirit worth keeping. What victory is *that*?"

"Mistress – " Zander stepped forward, his sword drawn. He looked from me to his Queen, astonished at the tension and anger between us.

"Keep back!" Seleste cried. I was startled to see tears in her eyes. "I have never told you, Maen, because I thought you had accepted your life here and forgotten such madness."

I felt a strange kind of calm replacing my fury. "What have you never told me?"

There was a twist to her mouth that was her most cruel expression. "Your loyalties are suspect, Maen, and I believe that they always have been. But there's no point any more, because he's dead." She watched my body tense; my limbs stiffen. "There was an Exile attack some months ago, and the reports said it was led by a young man."

"A young man…."

She took a step backwards, though I wasn't conscious of having stepped forward. "The description of your Bronzeman fitted him well. He fought unwisely and he fell under several of our Captains."

"Fell…."

"He's dead," she hissed. "The boy is dead."

My voice didn't sound like my own. It was flat; hard. "The body?"

She shrugged, a flicker of wariness in her eyes. "They dragged it away with them and I allowed it, according to Zander's wishes. But they killed him, Maen. A soldier doesn't mistake that."

I turned slowly to Zander. The look in his eyes was odd, not the hostility that I'd expected to see. But neither was there any fear or indecision. "He was dying, Maen," he said. "I saw him fall. Blond; light-skinned; a Remainder. Scars to his face." He looked at me as if

he tried to tell me things beyond the words. He had been there when Dax and I had returned to the City after torture, all that time ago; he knew what had been done to my Bronzeman's face. I looked into his eyes and I knew that – despite any personal disgust he felt towards me – he spoke the truth.

"Months ago," I said, softly. I wondered how I was still managing to breathe.

Zander was speaking behind me to Seleste. "And when we find Mistress Flora?"

Seleste's voice was ragged, jarring my hearing. "I will not have traitors alive to threaten me and Aza City," she whispered, harshly. "Kill her!"

I knew they were all looking at me, but I wasn't able to speak. I expected at any moment to be struck down by Zander or even by Seleste herself for my insubordination.

"Take him away." Seleste's voice was distant to me. "I don't want to see him again today." A Silver Captain took my arm and I allowed him to move me back towards the door. I thought I could hear Zander's voice, but the words made no sense. I didn't know if I were being taken back to my bunk or to the Detention Quarters. I didn't care.

I wanted to be somewhere else; I wanted to be away from here.

I wanted to be dead, too.

CHAPTER 5

THERE had been no sight of Flora in the City, nor any word of her whereabouts. I'd expected as much but I went through the motions of my role, regardless. I questioned everyone that I could find, all the soldiers, all the Household staff who had been relocated after Flora's defeat and disappearance, then the other sisters. It took me several days, during which time I moved around the City under Zander's guard and insisted – politely, yet firmly – that people talk to me. It was an odd scenario, and I was sure that many people granted me an audience purely out of curiosity. They wanted to see more of the man who was neither soldier nor lowly servant. The man who was the subject of the scandalous rumors; the man who had been accused of treason against the City – and yet lived. And they talked to me, too. Maybe the curiosity loosened the tongues of Household officers who normally had little time to give to spurious enquiries; servants who had no official reason to acknowledge authority from me.

Mistress Nerisa had been startled at my return visit to the Royal Library, and had answered my questions, though with some reluctance. Of course, Zander had been at my back, and the Silver Captain Tabot had been at hers: we looked a strange collection of people, and it wasn't particularly conducive to comfortable conversation. I didn't believe she knew anything about Flora's disappearance, although there was something about her that made me feel awkward. I had trouble imaging how she might take sudden flight or prove to be a dangerous threat to Seleste, but she was still a strange, withdrawn creature, and one who appeared to have no sympathy with being questioned by me on Seleste's behalf. She wanted me gone, and made little secret of the fact, her eyes rarely meeting mine or Zander's, and her quiet tone surprisingly sharp. Tabot never left her presence all the time we talked.

I could see what Kiel had meant about the Silver Captain – he was a quiet, stolid kind of soldier who showed very little expression. He reported to a Gold Warrior other than Zander, so neither of us knew much about him in the Household. Nerisa was obviously used to being shadowed like that, for when we took our leave of her, she waited for Tabot to move back to her side before she returned to her chambers. The scribes who were working in the Library relaxed visibly as their Mistress left, and turned their backs on us, expecting us to follow her out. I took a quick look around first.

"What are you looking for?" Zander followed me behind the ground floor shelving. His voice was sharp, but curious too. "Do you think there may be information about Mistress Flora here?"

I kept my eyes on the racks of books and documents around us, resisting the urge to look up at the trapdoor to the higher levels. I thought I could hear movement up there, and see bright, wary eyes peering through the cracks in the floor, but it was probably just my imagination. "No," I replied. "There's nothing here I can see. I'm just checking."

We made our way out of the building and stopped to breathe in some fresh air. Zander coughed, his throat obviously irritated. "That place is like being down the back of an old cupboard! The stale smell of it, that impossible dust, and everything so quiet, like the morgue, just the scratching of the pens … do you think any of them talk at all, those ghostly, pale old scribes?"

"Maybe some of them." I laughed aloud, and he was startled.

"What's so amusing? The scribes?"

"Nothing," I said. "No one. We need to move on."

"Where to next?" He looked at me suspiciously. "Maen, if you don't keep me informed of what you're doing – "

I walked away from him, leaving him to catch up. "There's only one sister left to meet with – Mistress Chloe."

Now it was Zander's turn to laugh, though it wasn't a particularly hearty sound. "And that'll be the end of your work." He

looked dispirited, maybe worried about Seleste's wrath if we didn't find her wayward sister.

I stared at him. I had never met Mistress Chloe personally, though I knew she was one of the younger sisters, and I wondered what he meant.

He shrugged and looked uncomfortable, thought he can't have been worried that *I* would report *him* for disrespect. "She is young and timid and very sweet, so her soldiers tell me. She has helped many of them with problems in the past. She wouldn't have dared to help an enemy of Seleste – there'll be no information for us there."

"Help with soldiers' problems?" I was confused.

Zander glanced around to check that his soldiers couldn't overhear us. "With medical matters. For Devotions' sake, Maen, be discreet. She was one of the senior Ladies in the House of Physic, and very creative with men's medications, so I've heard."

I smiled, and unexpectedly, he smiled back. "Yes. You understand, I see. Creative is the word, and there've been more than a few soldiers gratefully back to normal after her … help. The tales are that she was a very reluctant contender for Queenship, and that she is glad to be back in her Household now, a happy servant of her sister, the Queen. I never heard any member of her staff complain of her as a Mistress."

"I'll still talk to her," I said. The House of Physic was on the other side of the Royal Quarters, and an easy enough walk. I hadn't sent word ahead that we would be coming to call, but if Mistress Chloe was unavailable, I would wait.

There wasn't anything else I had to do.

Zander was talking as he walked alongside me. Now and then, his sword would nudge between us both, reminding me subtly of his official role in our group. "I know we haven't found Mistress Flora yet, but we've alerted a lot of people of our interest. You've handled these meetings well, Maen." He sounded surprised.

"Did you think they'd be interrogations?" I kept my voice calm. *With torture?*

He grimaced. "Of course not. But people … listen to you. And her staff have spoken well of her, even knowing that it's the Queen, her vanquisher, who asks after her. They seem more confident of doing that in front of you, rather than my soldiers."

"It isn't everything, to have the badge of the Mistress on your armor," I said, surprisingly myself this time. I'd never thought I'd say something like that.

Zander was quiet again for a while, as if he didn't know how to answer that. We passed through the market square where the morning stalls were being cleared away by the same workers from the Household of Construction who had helped build and dismantle the Battle Horse a few weeks ago. Some traders were bundling up the remains of their goods into their small wheeled carts; a couple of Remainders from the House of Utilities were sweeping down the cobbled ground and collecting up any litter. A small band of entertainers was sitting around a jug of ale and some odd ends of bread and dried meat, chatting quietly and cheerfully. We could see a small queue of people in the distance, some citizens gathering at the House of Physic for its public surgery hours.

Zander cleared his throat. "Darius has been appointed by our Mistress as Mistress Chloe's current Silver Captain, to protect and guide her. You know him?"

I nodded. "I do."

I didn't think there was anything unusual in my tone, but Zander's head turned sharply to look at me. "He is very grateful for the position, it seems, and he's been an enthusiastic addition to my Guard."

I wondered why he was giving me the information. "So he should be. He belongs to the Queen now, and must go where she orders."

Zander made a noise of frustration, though nodding in reply. "Of course. But I admit that I thought there might be trouble – there were rumors that he considered himself Mistress Flora's favorite. That he had an expectation of her sponsorship for many years ahead. I was worried that he might not mix into the Royal Guard willingly – "

"That he might be resentful, being passed to a new Mistress without any reference to his own wishes?" I finished, dryly. It sounded like Darius's arrogance. It was not allowed for Mistresses to have specific favorites, or for soldiers to have expectation of it, but there had been instances in the past of relationships that had become closer than the usual, casual sexual coupling. It seemed that nowadays, in some Households, such rules were not so rigidly enforced. That said, I suspected that what went on in Darius's head followed rules of its own making.

"He's a good soldier, though not the best yet," Zander said. He was watching me. "Keen to couple, too. Mistress Seleste enjoyed him, apparently, and he's made it clear he'll be willing in the barracks, too."

Coupling in the barracks had to be consensual at all times; there was no tolerance of anything else. "It's of no interest to me," I said, maybe too sharply. Zander's voice was setting off an unpleasant ache in my head. "Particularly as I am no longer in the barracks."

He paused, briefly, and I took the opportunity to stride ahead of him. He didn't speak again on the journey across the City.

ZANDER had been right about Mistress Chloe – she was a sweet young thing, as unlike Nerisa as anyone could be. She was small and delicately built and looked almost intimidated by my escort of soldiers.

"My sister…." Her voice was sweet, too, even in her orders to her servants, to seat us comfortably in her office and bring us refreshments. "My sister Flora and I were close, of course, but she would not have told me her plans." She blushed and gazed at me, her eyes moist with the onset of tears. "To be honest, for the last few months all she thought of was the Battle, whereas I…."

Zander leaned forward confidentially, though still respectful to a fault. "You have always been a credit to the City here in the Household of Physic, Mistress," he murmured. "You are a very talented and skillful Mistress of your pharmacies."

She smiled at him, her face lit up from the flattery. "All I want is to serve Sele– the Queen," she breathed. For a second, her voice stuttered. "She is so … I know that she has to be fierce, to rule the

City. Like Flora, she has always been…." Her words failed her again. Something nervous flickered in her eyes.

"Mistress," I asked, softly. "Is there any protection that you think you need, that we might offer you?"

Her eyes widened, and beside me, Zander sucked in a sharp breath, considering my question far too bold.

"No. No, of course not," she gasped. "What an overactive imagination you have." She turned away, her eyes clouded, and she went to fuss over a servant getting fresh drinks for us. For a while, we were left to sit on our own, uncertain whether the interview was still proceeding, or whether Mistress Chloe had done her own disappearing act. Then, as we got ready to leave, she appeared again in the hallway and beckoned me over, away from the others.

"Mistress…" I started to apologies for my behavior earlier but she stopped me with a finger to her lips.

"Maen, please." Her tone was soft. I was reminded – albeit unwillingly – of my first Mistress, Luana, and her very gentle treatment of me when I was a mere Bronzeman. "It's good to meet you at last, but things haven't been easy for you, have they?" I must have frowned, because she blushed very becomingly. "Please, in the name of Service to the City, I don't wish to embarrass you, but I have heard about you from Mistress Seleste, and from … other places. I can tell that you don't take the Devotions like the other men do, even if Seleste – Mistress Seleste – had wanted to keep it secret from me. And I would never dare to speak out against anything she demands or allows. But if you should ever need any help of mine, please feel free to ask." Her hand was pale and slim-fingered, and it stroked very lightly at my arm. I felt a strange, unfamiliar comfort steal over me.

"Thank you, Mistress. I appreciate your kindness." I didn't know what else I could say to her, for surely *my* problems were far beyond her potions.

There was a sudden shadow behind her and Darius appeared at her side. He nodded respectfully to Chloe, but his eyes flickered towards me. "Maen," he said in greeting. "This is a pleasure. I'd hoped to see you again soon."

"Darius." It would have been uncivil of me to refuse to greet him, especially in the presence of a Mistress, although Chloe's smile in return to him was warmer than I'd have expected from a Mistress to her soldier. "You appear to have settled well into your new Household," I said, a little curtly.

"A gracious Mistress and the company of the best soldiers," he said with a shrug. "There's not much more that I could ask for." He bowed again to Mistress Chloe. "May I escort Maen back out of the Household, Mistress?" he asked her. His voice had that thick sensuality that I'd heard before: he appeared very confident that she would allow whatever he asked. He walked beside me to the door, while the rest of Zander's group were on the other side of the hallway, paying their own respects to Mistress Chloe and preparing themselves to leave.

"So when shall I come to you?" he asked, under his breath.

I looked down at the hand he laid on my forearm. As I watched, he slid his fingers up along the inside of my upper arm and across my chest, his palm creasing the fabric of my tunic, his pulse hot against my torso. His hand paused just under my left nipple, and he let out a long, slow breath.

"Your heartbeat has increased, Maen. You're an impatient man. That excites me far more than Ladies' pretty words. I knew you would be along soon to see me…."

"This visit has nothing to do with you," I said, steadily. There was a distinctive smell to him, not unpleasant, but full of the sweat and heat of masculine flesh. His full lips were moist, as if he'd just licked them. The dark grey irises of his eyes glittered with the reflection of the lamp over the doorway, and his gaze was locked on me as if to draw me into him. I lifted his hand off me very deliberately; I gripped at his wrist a little longer than I needed to, until I saw him wince. "That's one of your faults, soldier – failing to realize that not everything revolves around you."

Anger flushed his face, though he didn't move away. "And you don't have faults, Maen? Maybe yours are your coldness and your false inhibitions. It's not healthy, to repress your body's needs."

"I don't repress anything," I said.

His eyes flashed with triumph, as if he knew he'd baited me. "Let it go, Maen. *All* of it, not just a moment's gasp and a desperate spurt inside a hand. Enjoy that loss of control to the full. You of all men should know what that thrill and that danger feel like."

You of all men…. I wanted to grip him by the throat again but I knew that the other soldiers were only feet away from us and would have to report it to Seleste. Darius leaned in to me as if he recognized it, too, and knew he was safe from any attack here.

"I can be what you like," he hissed. "Try me." I felt a sudden, sharp touch on my neck: his fingernail, running down the skin to find the seat of my pulse. "I can be a Silver or a slave; a man or a Mistress. Or maybe you want to imagine me as that Bronzeman, in the days when he was alive and his flesh was young and warm and I daresay his cock swelled with need at the mere sound of your voice – "

I pushed him away sharply, knowing I had my back to the others and they wouldn't immediately know what I was doing. He stumbled, his back thudding against the wall and his breath expelled in a shocked gasp. "You will never be *what I like*," I hissed back. "And if you talk like that to me again, you'll find yourself without a voice at all – nor the throat to hold it in."

I didn't see anything beyond his shocked eyes and his blanched face, nor did I hear Zander's call as he approached us – I turned and left the Household grounds as fast as I could walk.

I SAT on the top of the City wall where it was at its widest, with my back to a buttress and my arms crossed over my chest, with no company except the quiet air of the evening. My mind was full of thoughts and wishes and regrets, but if I'd been questioned, I couldn't have told anyone exactly what they were.

"What are you doing here, Maen?" Zander's voice startled away the small flock of ravens that had been sharing my place – and my introspection – on the wall. I was surprised to hear him, but maybe I shouldn't have been.

"Waiting for you to find and report on me," I replied, quite softly. I shifted carefully, because sitting on cold stone was uncomfortable after an hour or so. I had stretched out my legs on the flat top of the battlements, and he stood on the ground below, under the place where my feet rested. The nearest sentry gate was several hundred steps away – at that point, the height of the wall reduced gradually to only a hand's-span taller than a man of his size. I glanced down and I could see his face, half-dark from the shadows cast by the stone. We were both silent for a while.

The air was cool after the heat of the day – our summer weather continued to climb each year in both heat and humidity with no one understanding the reason why. But tonight there was a gentle breeze that stirred the low heather on the hills and brushed through the hair I'd worn loose at my neck. I turned my head back around and stared over the bare hills outside the City walls. The skies were darkening; the grey clouds bleeding into the shadows of the horizon. There was very little to see.

Zander cleared his throat. "You cannot go any further. You are forbidden to leave the City."

I nodded, almost to myself. I didn't move, and I didn't take my gaze away from the far distance.

"Do you have any reason to be here?" He sounded uncertain. "Do you have any information about Mistress Flora?"

"No," I said. "Nor am I on duty, as you are. Leave me be."

He made a sound of annoyance. "Maen…." Despite his impatience, he seemed unusually civil. "If we continue to work closely together like this, I need to talk to you about some important issues. For example, your meeting with Mistress Seleste, the other day…." I didn't answer and he shrugged: my eye caught the natural, athletic movement of his shoulders. "I'd have been ashamed to have you in my Guard, you showed such disrespect for the Queen. I can't believe she didn't punish you at once."

"No," I replied. My voice sounded expressionless. "I can't believe it either." I didn't see how I could explain to him that she already had – and that I had surrendered to it all too eagerly.

I could see he was frowning, but he seemed less outraged. "I don't know all of your history, Maen, though obviously the Mistress has her reasons for dealing with you in that way."

I shifted again on my cold seat. "I have served the Mistress as she's wished for over a year now. My loyalty – "

"You don't need to convince *me*," he interrupted, surprising me again. "Your loyalty has never been suspect to me, although it's sometimes slow in announcing itself. And sometimes, I'd say, more than a little unenthusiastic. But it's genuine."

I swung my legs over and let myself down to the ground, meeting him face to face. His expression was cynical, but he smiled slowly.

I smiled back, an unusual warmth inside me. "Thank you for that respect."

He rubbed thoughtfully at his ear, as if the slight cut I'd given him on the day of the Battle for Queenship was itching. "You're one of the best soldiers I've ever seen," he said, bluntly. "Whatever your history – whatever the truth of what you did – your actions as a soldier remain for me the best measure of a man. When we squabbled that day, in front of the Queen – I have regretted the memory of that, many times. I can only blame the excitement and jealousy of the moment."

"We deserved better," I said. "We still do. In many ways."

Another emotion flickered in his eyes, one that he was less comfortable with. He shifted awkwardly, the sound of his boots creaking gently in the quiet air. "When I told you about the dead Bronzeman … your expression … I've never seen such a look on anyone's face." He caught my gaze and held it, as if challenging me. "Never."

I stared back, trying to keep my gaze steady, but the warmth inside me had gone. "I can't speak of it to you. Don't ask me."

He nodded. "I won't. I just…." He paused, and cleared his throat again. "Maybe you need to talk to *someone* about it. It's eating you up, Maen, from the inside out."

I don't know what I might have answered if we hadn't been interrupted by sudden, strange noises from further along the wall, coming from behind a stunted clump of bushes. There was no response from the sentries at the gate further along, so maybe they didn't hear the scuffle against the wall, or they thought it was nothing but a stray night animal. However, Zander moved swiftly towards the sound, unsheathing his sword silently with cold, practiced speed. I saw him bend to grasp something that wriggled in the shadows. There was a muttered curse that wasn't from him, but that sounded familiar to me. When he straightened up again, he was gripping a masculine figure around its chest, his other hand holding the sword to its long, pale neck.

"A spy," he grunted. "He's just tried to enter the City." His boot kicked at the base of the bushes. "See? Some of the stones are loose in the wall. Only a scrawny little thing like this could get through, but I'm sure the Exiles aren't above using children as their spies."

The slender figure in his grip gave a snort of protest. I stepped further forward and peered more carefully. "It's not a child," I said. "And he's not from the Exiles. He works in the Royal Library, and his name is Kiel."

Zander lowered his sword, but he still held tight to the wriggling body. "What? I just found him worming his way into the compound-"

"I was not!" The young man had found his voice, though he was breathless from Zander's fierce hold. "I was just relieving myself, can't a man piss in the bushes when he needs to, or would you rather I doused your boots with it? I just had to do it, and right then, you can't argue with nature, can you? I just dodged behind the bushes for some kind of privacy, on the Queen's life – " He stopped, gasping, as Zander shook him.

"Don't you dare take the Queen's name in vain," Zander growled. "Do you have any idea who I am?"

Kiel glanced up at his captor's face, seeing the glint of gold earrings and the shine of gritted teeth. "A Gold Warrior," he whispered, fearfully. His eyes darted to me, widened, and then slid away. I was impressed that he tried to keep our acquaintance secret,

even though he was in personal danger. "Look," he started again, his tone more desperate. "I mean, look, *sir*. I'm not doing anything wrong, I just came out for some air, if you had any idea what that Library is like, on still days it's like you've wandered into a mausoleum and the bodies have just crumbled away around you, it's full of dust, dust and then some dust on top of that. But let me go now, sir, and I'll go straight back, I'll work extra hours, whatever you say, you can check up on me or ask anything of me. Look, how about I let you both come and borrow the books that the older scribes keep private in the back of the locked cupboard, the ones with the obscene poems and the graphic illustrations, the ones about the Household of Massage and the secret equipment room in the Detention Quarters – "

"For Devotions' sake, what is he?" Zander shook Kiel again, but he now held him at the end of his reach as if he were some irritating but potentially dangerous lizard.

I smiled. "He's only a junior, he's not up to much." Kiel's eyes glinted in the dim light but I ignored his quick look.

"What do you mean? We have no idea *what* he was up to," growled Zander.

I looked at Kiel and his eyes stared back at me, scared now. I thought I knew exactly what he'd been up to, but I wasn't about to say. "He's harmless. I say we've seen him tuck his cock back in his trousers, so now let's see him back off to his bed."

"I say we slit his throat," said Zander, quite calmly. Kiel went rigid in his arms. "He may still be a spy. He'll have heard everything we said – we can't be too careful at the moment."

Kiel whimpered but had the sense to keep silent for once. I walked up close to the pair of them and put a hand under Kiel's chin. He was struggling to appear brave, though his eyes were now wet with fear. "No," I said. "That would annoy the Mistress even more. He's an important part of the Royal Household staff, you see."

"Him?" Zander looked scornful. "For Devotions' sake, I don't think you can call a Library rat like *this* part of – "

"He's a new scribe," I interrupted. Zander's face was confused; Kiel's was astounded at the sudden promotion. "I may not have told

anyone yet, but he's going to be writing Mistress Seleste's Grand History."

DARIUS came to my quarters near the middle hour of the night. I wasn't officially allowed any personal privacy, although my bunk was in a room on its own, in an annex outside the armory. I had never been allotted any space in the actual barracks, and besides that, the annex was closer to Mistress Seleste's chambers. There were many official reasons for my isolation, but none of them the real one, which was that no one wished to share quarters with me. But if anyone needed me, or I was Called by Seleste, a visitor could just walk through my doorway, pushing the screen to one side and demanding my attention.

Darius didn't exactly do that, although he nudged the screen aside rather clumsily while trying to reach me. He'd been drinking, though he wasn't heavily drunk. His hair was slicked back behind his ears, a single black curl fallen loose on his cheek, and he was wearing a tunic that fastened down the front. He'd left most of the fastenings undone.

"You need company, Maen," he said. He grasped a bottle of ale in one hand and he held out the other as if for me to shake. I didn't make any move towards him, but I stood up from where I'd been sitting on my bunk, barefoot and resting.

"It's been a long day," I said, slowly. "What I need is to sleep."

I glimpsed the shadow of other men in the walkway outside, although they were moving past my room and occupied with their own entertainment. There was the echo of a soft laugh, and then the gentle thump of a heavy body being pushed against the wall of my annex. I knew the laugh was Edrius's, for he laughed a lot around the barracks. The tolerant grunts that answered him sounded as if they came from Zander. He was another soldier who enjoyed coupling, I knew that. He'd been interested in Edrius for a while now, and had often come to watch him when I'd been training the Guard for the Battle. Edrius would of course be flattered by the attention from a Gold Warrior, let alone one as prestigious as Zander, and they were both passionate, attractive men.

Darius knew I was listening to the other voices outside; to the other casual courtships. "Maen, let me talk to you. Let me have my say."

I sighed, which was probably as good as agreement to him. He sounded contrite, and it wasn't what I'd expected of him.

He moved close to me, and then it was there again, the tart, stimulating smell of his skin: my limbs felt suddenly very tired, my eyes heavy. "I was wrong, Maen." He spoke softly and quickly, as if I might send him away before he'd said his piece. "I offended you – I disgusted you, I know. Blame it on my lust. And maybe, like you said, the fact that I think everything should revolve around *me*." He gave a small, strangled laugh. "I'm used to it, I think. But then, so many things have changed since Mistress Flora surrendered and left … me."

I leant back against the wall beside the bunk. There were very few items of furniture in the room, just my bunk and a table and chair. I had a couple of books that I'd borrowed from the Library, and my papers and pen, for I liked to write. I had no one to write *to*, of course, so I had turned to poetry and stories, though I knew they'd never be read. They were immature and nowhere near the quality of some of the work from the Royal Library, but they were only for my personal distraction.

I was looking at the papers left out on my table when Darius slid a hand around the back of my neck and pushed his body against mine. We both leaned back on the wall. "I have less than an hour left before my shift," he whispered. "I want to spend it with you. Don't push me away again. Please, Maen." His lips were hot and damp on my neck and I let him lap softly at the pulse point of my throat. When I couldn't hold back a shiver, he breathed into my ear, and the warmth ran down my spine. "Let me…."

I did let him. He pushed my hair back from my ears and kissed the skin all the way down to my shoulders, nipping at my earlobe, testing his teeth against my jaw. He was both tender and assertive: I hadn't been touched in that way for a long while. He shrugged his tunic off and helped me peel my own off over my head. His bare torso was smooth and warm against mine, and I could feel the muscles tightening across his belly. Then his knee nudged between my legs and

his hand dropped down to feel me beneath my trousers. He gave a soft sound of pleasure.

"Here, against the wall, Maen?" His voice was breathless and I could feel his erection pressing eagerly against my thigh. "Take me … hold me tight," he grunted. "Don't say anything, promise nothing, just do it, *enjoy* it…."

I couldn't answer him. The physical excitement was involuntary, making my throat tighten and my vision blur. There was no sound except for the rush of blood in my ears and Darius's shallow panting. I thought he deserved better than to be forced against the stone wall, and so I turned him around, guiding him back to the bed. He held on to my arm and leant forward, trying to kiss my mouth, but I avoided it. My body ached for touch, for satisfaction – but that intimacy was too much. He sat down on the edge of the bunk and kicked off his boots and trousers, and then when I fumbled with my own trousers, he pushed my hand away and tugged them down for me. Neither of us wore anything underneath - we were both naked, my skin tensing slightly on contact with the cooler air of my room. His hand trailed on the inside of my thigh, his palm cupping under my balls, caressing them; they shifted, responding to him, my cock swelling more thickly and bobbing against my belly. For a moment I stood there and watched the expression in his eyes grow almost feral – then his fingers curled around the base of my cock and he slid his mouth over the head. He licked at it, sucking gently, drawing out the excitement that coiled in my groin, letting the need race through my veins.

I groaned; I tightened my hands into his dark hair. He moved back and forth, my cock sliding in and out of his wet mouth, his own hand busy in his lap with pumping his arousal. He glanced up at me, watching for the change in my expression, to see if I were close to coming – I had the feeling that he was used to controlling these things well. When I gasped and my thighs tensed under his hands, he slipped his mouth off me and lay back on the bed, his chest heaving, his legs falling wide apart. His cock was thick and blood-red with its own need, trailing sticky moisture across the hairs at his groin. He was a very good looking man; he had a very fine body. My head told me these things while my heart just ached.

"Maen. Now." His voice was hoarse. I reached for his shoulder and turned him over, though not harshly. He lay face down on the bunk without complaint and lifted up on to his hands and knees. I knelt up behind him: I slid a finger down between his well-muscled buttocks and then inside his ass, finding him already oiled. I didn't know if that were in preparation for me, or whether he'd already been with someone else this night. Whatever the reason, it made it a swift, reasonably comfortable matter to ease my cock into him. His head dropped forward and he grunted, his dark curls falling over his face so that I couldn't see it any more. He pressed his ass back against me, encouraging me to thrust fiercely. I knew I wouldn't last very long, though I tried to hold back. He moaned softly underneath me, one of his hands pumping his erection again, fast and careless of comfort. In the end he came before I did, his body tensing up as he climaxed, his muscles clenching tightly around me and his seed spitting a hot, white puddle over his hand and on to my single sheet.

I cried out as I climaxed after him, the relief a strange, heady mixture of pleasure and pain. I didn't focus on Darius's body beneath me; I barely heard his gasp as I leant my weight down on to him; I didn't feel anything except the brutal, physical throb in my groin and the wash of heat through my flesh. I don't know where my mind was, but it wasn't in my own spartan room, watching my body coupling with a handsome, over-eager Silver Captain.

After a couple of moments of silence, Darius wriggled and I pulled carefully out of him, my skin slick with sweat and sticking slightly where we came apart. We were both panting, but my heartbeat was gradually slowing down. He rolled out from underneath me, and pulled himself up to sitting. He slid his feet back into his boots and reached for his trousers from the floor, but then sat for a while with them on his lap, not dressing at once. He looked a little disorientated. I had an overwhelming desire to apologize, but I couldn't think what for. He'd been willing, and we hadn't done anything physically to hurt either of us.

"I'm due back at Mistress Chloe's," he said. I nodded, and sat down on the far end of the bunk, my muscles aching. "Maen?" His voice sounded odd. "I'll call on you again."

I didn't nod this time, but I wasn't able to argue, either.

"Maybe next time…" he started to say, hesitantly.

I lifted my head, feeling it heavier than usual, and stared at him.

His eyes searched mine, as if looking for some response from me, some idea of welcome. When I didn't answer him he looked disappointed, a stark contrast to the heated gaze I'd seen there only a short while before. "Maybe there'll be more," he murmured, sounding a little puzzled. The last expression I saw on his face was, surprisingly, one of hurt. He swung his legs slowly over the side of my bunk, pulled his trousers up over his boots, and quietly left the room.

CHAPTER 6

I STOOD for a moment at the door into the main Library, watching the scribes at work before any of them spotted me. They were on duty very early, and it crossed my mind that maybe they never slept at all but were permanent features at their desks. One of them yawned and stretched awkwardly, unconsciously supporting my theory. I tried not to laugh at my own nonsense. I could see Kiel, now liberated from the musty upper floors with a desk to himself at the back of the room. His head was bent over a sheet of thick paper, and his hand moved slowly but steadily as he marked out some text. There was precious space around his desk and specific shelving for his use, though there were still plenty of books piled up beside it. All the scribes had been put on alert because of the Grand History, with Kiel doing the majority of the work and the most important parts of the transcription, but it was obvious from the structure of the room that everyone knew he was on a separate – and important – mission. There had also been more personal changes since I'd appointed him to the project. They'd found him a new – and cleaner – gown, for a start, though it still seemed to swamp him. But when he got out of his seat and moved between the shelves of books to reach for a particular one, I could see that he seemed to have grown in confidence: his bearing was straighter, his movements more assertive. I watched one of the younger scribes come and ask him something, and he quickly pointed out the necessary research area. One of the soldiers on watch also approached him and, under Kiel's direction, moved a couple of piles of documents from one place to another beside the desk. Kiel seemed to be settling into his new role all too well.

He looked across and saw me, and for a second his hand raised as if to wave. Then he wriggled out from behind the piles of books and came over. I had a chance to study him as he made his way across the

Library floor. His shoulders were broad for a young man, although his hips were narrow. His gown stopped just under his knees and I could see that his legs and ankles were strong; his step was nimble as he negotiated the various piles of books and work supplies. I looked for all of these things in a soldier, of course, at the annual Choosing of the Bronzemen for the Household – or at least, I used to. Kiel would never make a Bronzeman, for he would always be too slight, but he was an unusual creature, indeed, a mixture of youth and unexpected maturity.

He stopped just far enough from me to be respectful to a senior soldier, yet he didn't bow his head as he would have done to a Lady. He looked a lot cleaner than before, too. His skin had a slight tan, implying he spent some time out of doors, and his hair was back to a normal, fairly attractive blond color, curling in at the back of his neck.

"Sir," he said, politely, though there was a sparkle of mischief in his eyes. He saw me looking him up and down and he grinned. "You're pleased? I know I look a lot better than before."

I was pleasantly startled – again – at his ease in speaking to me. His company was very refreshing. "You look the part, and they're noticing you for it. You'll be Called before you know it," I teased. There were definite precedents for Remainder men to be Called to a Lady's bed, as well as soldiers. It was less likely because they were of lower profile, but not impossible.

Kiel frowned. "Let's not be ridiculous, sir. I'm still only a scribe, and not a very handsome one at that."

I frowned, too. It was true that he didn't have the classic, well-proportioned features that the Ladies liked in their Guard, for his nose was bent slightly at the tip, and his mouth was wide for his thin face – but he was by no means unattractive. There was an extraordinary brightness in his eyes that I hadn't really seen before in the dim, dusty light of the upper floors, and he moved with an athletic grace that was startling in amongst the slow, shuffling gait of the other scribes. He saw me looking at him afresh and he grimaced. "No Gold Warrior, am I?"

I smiled. "The City needs more than that, Kiel. You're doing well according to your skills. Unless…" I paused. He did, indeed, seem an anachronism in amongst this drab, unworldly community.

"Was I wrong to put this on you? You may have wanted a different job, more lively surroundings."

He peered at me as if I were speaking a language he'd never heard before. "Wrong? As far as I remember it, you were saving my life at the time. And I don't think anyone else has ever worried about *my* surroundings!" He started to laugh but it echoed sharply in the quiet room and he bit it off. Some of the scribes glanced around at us, disapprovingly. "Mistress Nerisa keeps a regular watch on us all here. Can we go somewhere else to talk?"

I nodded, and we made our way back out into the fresh air of the courtyard. Rather than walk back over towards the main Household building, however, he dodged into an alley beside the Library and led us both to some upturned crates. He dropped down on to one with a comfortable grunt. I sat down on another one, a little more carefully, though it seemed to hold my weight. This was obviously a favorite, private area for him.

He grinned at me. "Maen, I meant it. You saved me from having my throat cut, saved me from being executed as a spy. If you hadn't been there, well, I know what would have happened, the Gold Warrior would have let suspicion guide his sword. His name is Zander, I believe, I may have seen him around the Household; he's not exactly hard to miss, not that I make a habit of attracting the wrath of soldiers like … him. He had such a fierce look on his face, a very handsome face of course, but such a very sharp, bright blade, wasn't it, it'd have sliced through me like a spicy ham. And then no one would have heard from me again, except they'd have found a few apple cores and an empty water bottle in amongst the dry old volumes of the Fifth Generation Histories on the second floor and wondered if they had spirit visitors from the Household of Magic."

I smiled through the rambling chatter at the apt description of Kiel as a spicy ham. "Zander is fierce but not unfair. He would have listened to your story in the end."

Kiel raised an eyebrow. "I don't know whether you believe that yourself, Maen. But I thank you again, for stepping in. And for giving me a job. I'm now a real person, rather than a scared refugee."

"Were you scared?" I asked, gently. He flushed. "What did you do in Mistress Flora's Household before the Battle?"

He looked down at his clasped hands, his fingers twisting at the cord belt around his tunic. "I was just a clerk, a messenger, things like that. I carried papers between her offices and her Secretaries, and sometimes took deliveries to and from the Library. That's how I found my way around it, and hid there when she … when she went missing."

I waited, because it felt as if he had more to say, but he was uncharacteristically silent.

"Is this work hard?" I felt a little uneasy and I was starting to wish I hadn't become involved at all. "I never thought to ask whether you had the right training for it."

And then he laughed, a loud, happy sound. "You put a clerk you'd only just met – a runaway, too – in charge of a great work like the History is meant to be, and you never even checked whether I'd be any good at it?" I started to protest, but he interrupted me. "Maen, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to insult you, I'm just very grateful. I was only a clerk for Mistress Flora, you can't have known any different about me, after all, we're not usually offered much more than the basic living quarters and a reason to serve, we're just fodder for the Households, I know that."

He didn't sound resentful, but I found it a startling view. "Is that how it is?"

He frowned again. "Have you ever been to the Remainder areas?"

I flushed. The Remainders had their own living areas within the City, near to the Central School and other common facilities, but I rarely had cause to go there. When we needed Remainder workers, they came to us. We drew on their numbers and their skills, such as they were, but few things were sent back in return as far as I could see.

And another Remainder man had asked me a similar question, a long time ago.

Kiel was watching me, a little flushed. Maybe he thought he'd offended me, or spoken out of his place. His voice seemed a little

slower now, and more careful. "Maen … I'm a Remainder, all my ancestors have been, that's all I know. You're of the Household. I wouldn't expect you to know much about my life. We're different, from the minute we're born."

"But the children mix at the Central School. They're all educated together…."

He shrugged. "Maybe in the first few years. But when it comes to training for jobs and positions in the Household, your brand becomes your ticket. And if it's just a bunch of Remainder scribbles, they're not interested in you." He'd unconsciously pulled his arm in against his side, although I couldn't see the details of his brand under the sleeves of his gown.

"There should be more opportunities," I said, slowly. "There have been Remainders – there must *be* Remainders – who can contribute to the City beyond a pair of ready hands. They should be welcomed into the Households – encouraged to learn more, do more...."

Kiel's voice was low now, as well. "That's not a common – or safe – way to talk, Maen." When I stared at him, he flushed again. "It's disloyalty to the City – disloyalty to the old ways, the way things have always been, the way things were set up by the Queens who originally Colonized the planet. All of the recent Histories say this, again and again. It's the way things are, that's the way they *must* be; the way they're best for the welfare of the City. Or that's what the Remainders are told to believe. The Households run the City, their citizens blessed and superior in all ways: the Remainders are to be grateful for their chance to support that. Ask for anything more and you're accused of being an Exile spy, of plotting to give the Exiles access to the Remainders and all they know about running the City; of supporting them in their unprovoked and traitorous attacks on the Household citizens."

"Is that also what happens?" My voice had dropped in volume, too, matching his. "Do you know of that happening…?"

He interrupted me, his voice suddenly louder and brighter as if someone might be listening to him beyond the alley. "Things aren't so bad for Remainders nowadays, anyway, there have been many new opportunities in the City for us. Better health – we're allowed more

than one surgery a month at the House of Physic, you know. Better transport, for some of us are allowed to travel by horseback now, though obviously only on Household business. Our living quarters are being built with slightly stronger materials because of the unusual earth shuddering we've had this season, and just in the last year, there have been new lessons for us in the Central School, well, that's as long as your current employer reviews you well and there's sponsorship from the Mistress of the Household."

"Mistress Seleste…" I paused. "The Queen has been behind many of these initiatives." I knew she had spoken of them to me. Talking to Kiel today, however, they seemed less like the new world she had boasted of and more like a drop of piss into a full bucket.

Kiel put a hand on my arm and leaned in to speak, more slowly again. "You look distressed, but it's worked well for *me*, Maen. Young men can now train for jobs that they could never have considered before. When they changed some of the rules for apprenticeship, Mistress Flora allowed me to train as a blind scribe." He was watching my look of puzzlement. "Do you know what that is?"

I shook my head, knowing he wasn't blind at all. I leant back against the wall of the alley and sighed. "Tell me about *your* ambitions, Kiel."

He frowned. "It doesn't pay to have them, Maen, unless you're keen on losing several nights' sleep with disappointment and frustration. But it's been a good enough start for me. A blind scribe is a man who copies: documents, books, lists, whatever the Mistress needs. You need a firm hand and a good eye for detail, and maybe a style that's beautiful to look at, but you don't need to read or write on your own behalf. It's a fair enough life, and has benefits – there are some whose work is much sought after, and some who create works of art around the words, all their own work. Maybe I'll be someone like that one day. Most of those scribes inside the Library are blind in that way. They could only create your Grand History if it were drafted out for them in another man's hand, although they could embellish it and draw up a splendid document based on that."

I stared at him. He stared back, boldly, but gradually his cheeks started to go pink.

"I suspect that *you* are no longer blind," I said, slowly.

He bit at his lower lip. His hands were suddenly still in his lap. "Why in Devotions' name would you suspect that?"

I shrugged. "I was looking for someone who could actually transcribe the accounts of the men who were there; of the women who sponsored them; of the Queen who was victorious and is now our ultimate Mistress. Someone who wasn't just a clerk, someone who would bring their own skills to work, rather than being a mere puppet. But maybe I just trusted to luck, to find that."

Kiel glared at me. "Now you're treating me like a fool."

"Am I?" I knew I could stare him out for as long as he chose to defy me, but I would know the truth in the end. I was silent, knowing that sometimes that was a stronger weapon than ranting and raving.

He sighed, softly. His eyes dropped away from mine. "So you know it's true – I might as well admit it to you. I *have* taught myself to read and write, for it isn't hard when you know your way around, when you're determined. No one offered to help me, no one else is to blame, you must understand that. It wasn't really an option for a Remainder, extra lessons for a clerk who'd be just as useful to the Household blind as educated, but my Mistress gave me enough time to find out things for myself…." And then he fell silent again.

"You're not talking so rashly now, either," I said, meaning to relax him with a joke, but his reaction startled me.

"I don't have to!" His eyes were back on me, hot and suddenly dark. "Or do I? Will you punish me for this, Maen? Report me to my new Mistress or the Queen for my disobedience?" His voice was much stronger now, much fiercer. "After all, I'm a willful Remainder boy who has presumed to use the City's time and its resources to gain skills that no one wants me to have, nor needs me to master. *Service to the City is its own Reward*, I know the saying, and I know I have no right to seek my own ambitions. You tricked me into speaking, into confessing!" He looked stricken and angry, restless too, as if he didn't seem to know whether to rise up from the crate or stay sitting. "You're one of the Queen's men at heart, that's *your* only ambition, I can see, to grovel for her favors – "

"Just as I can see you are no longer a nervous, chattering child." I interrupted him, sharply. "Now who's treating who as a fool?"

He stared at me a little longer, but the anger in his eyes was giving way to a flicker of fear.

I shifted on my seat, mainly to put myself in his way so that he couldn't take flight. "Kiel, it seems to me that you are a very different man today than when I met you in that attic place. I don't know what that means, or why that is, but I have no intention of reporting you, or punishing you for it. I want you to do this job, but I want you to feel both safe and confident about it." There'd been something about him from the very first, I now realized, something that had made me take notice of him. Admittedly, I hadn't known about the scribes, and I hadn't known that maybe he couldn't write for himself, but I'd seen the vibrancy in him, and the energy and the wit. It hadn't been solely to save him from Zander cutting his throat that I'd decided to put him in charge of the History. "Don't make me wrong," I said, softly. "Don't run; don't fight me. We are working together on this."

He was quiet for a while, his eyes flickering along the alley, towards the courtyard, then back to me, then down at his own hands and restless feet. "I … want to do it, Maen. I *can* do it. Whatever you want of me – "

"I just want you to produce something that you're proud of," I said. "I want you to be the one who does it. I want you to have an ambition, Kiel – to be someone rather than an afterthought."

He shook his head, slowly. "You're … unusual, Maen." He went quiet again, no longer hiding behind his stream of constant chatter.

"What were you working on when I arrived?" I prompted.

His eyes lit up again, though warily. "The introduction. I want the History to begin with the spectacular closing stages of the Battle; the colors, the noise, the blood, the anger; the Ladies; the heroes."

"You have talked to some of them already?"

He flushed. "Just some of the servants there on the day." He was defensive, as if he thought I'd be angry at his presumption. "Some

of the builders who made the Battle Horse; a man who sold refreshments; one of the grooms who looks after the Ladies' carriages." He looked worried. "Not many. They won't talk much to me…"

I smiled. "They will when I tell them to, for that's exactly what you must do." I was impressed by him, yet again – he'd started the work even without formal instruction, and was bringing his own imagination and enthusiasm to it. I had an appointment with Seleste to ask her how she would like the History to proceed, but I expected her to leave it to others to monitor; maybe even order me to. I let Kiel's barely repressed excitement bubble through my own thoughts and I decided I wouldn't complain if she did.

"Who will I see?" he asked. "I mean, I don't expect to talk to Ladies or the Mistress, nothing like that. But for the Battle tale, I need to speak to the soldiers. Can you arrange that, Maen? Some of the Silver Captains, maybe." His eyes clouded briefly and his cheeks became pinker. "Well, some of the Gold Warriors would be beyond my dreams, but then, it's very important to get a proper account of the day, isn't it?"

"It is," I said, gravely.

He was racing ahead, his speech reverting to his younger voice again. "The heroes will be the ones who live on, in the pages of the History. Like … like Zander, I know he's so very fierce but he was magnificent on the day…."

"You saw the Battle?"

Kiel nodded. "Some of it. Mistress Flora's Household was in uproar as the day went on and it looked like she would be fighting through to the end. No one saw where I went, to be honest. I managed to find a space in the west stand and I could see him…" he paused and coughed, awkwardly. "I saw the soldiers of Mistress Seleste and my own Mistress. You were there as well, of course! It was very exciting."

I smiled again, but this time to myself. "I will ask Zander to give you some time to tell you his version of the day."

Kiel's expression was an odd mixture of delight and terror. "Will he … I don't know … won't that be trouble for him, Maen? I'm only a scribe…."

I shrugged. "It'll be all right. I'll make sure that he helps you." If Zander enjoyed being the hero of the day so much, I thought wryly, he could give some time to those who admired him for it. I didn't doubt that he'd complain, but would agree to it for the sake of his Mistress's glorification in print. I was aware suddenly of the time we must have spent here and the business that was starting to unfold elsewhere in the Household, as the day rolled on its hours. In the distance, I thought I could hear someone calling from the kitchens; there was the rattle of a cart passing over the courtyard, carrying materials to another part of the building. I shifted on the uncomfortable crate, preparing to return to my own quarters.

"He was right," Kiel said, softly. His voice had slipped back again, lower and gentler. "Zander was right, the other night, when he caught me at the wall. I *did* hear everything you both said."

I was quiet, not knowing what to say. It had been a sad, painful evening for me, even before Zander happened on my private place. "That's all right, Kiel. There wasn't anything said that isn't common knowledge."

"You … knew a Remainder man, once," he said, almost to himself. "A Remainder man who was Chosen as a Bronzeman. I've never heard of it happening before in my lifetime, or since. I've spent a little time finding out the tales about you, Maen. You were a Gold Warrior then, but I should have known that, for you've always looked like you carry that authority, even without the earring. You were captured by the Exiles, you and the Bronzeman. And when you came back to the City you bore the marks of torture and…."

"And I was no longer a Gold Warrior," I said. My words sounded hollow. "My Mistress Luana no longer trusted me with that responsibility." I didn't want to hear the rest of the sorry tale in his brave, young voice so I thought it best to tell it myself. "We were both interrogated and imprisoned. I was chosen by Mistress Seleste to transfer to her Household, and the Bronzeman was sentenced to death."

Kiel was staring at me. "But there's something in you … you fight against it all, don't you, Maen? Though the battle is inside you, not plain to everyone. You're one of her citizens yet sometimes you speak outside of it all, as if you question it, as if things appall you that others take for granted." His face was twisted as he struggled to find the right words. "You're … no blind soldier yourself, you don't – "

"Fit in," I interrupted, hoarsely. His stumbling assessment had shocked me.

He drew in a quick, sharp breath. "Maen, I'm sorry, this is so painful for you, I should never have said – "

"No," I stopped his apology. "Someone told me recently that I should talk about it." I'd just never thought that I would find someone I would trust to listen. Nor had I ever imagined it might be a young Remainder man.

"The Bronzeman escaped, Maen?"

I nodded, then I let my head fall forward so that Kiel couldn't see my eyes. "But it was still a death sentence. He just died in a different place; with other people; from a different conflict." I lifted my head again but I couldn't see Kiel's face very clearly through the sting of tears.

"You still think about him?"

I knew it was madness to answer that – it was as dangerous as admitting that there had been more between us than Commander and loyal recruit. But how long was I going to hold all this to myself? What good was it doing me, clinging to a life that made waking every morning a struggle, every word a dead stone in my mouth, every touch of another body a reminder of who they *weren't*? Kiel had been right about the conflict being hidden in me – eating me up from the inside, as even Zander had said, though he had no idea what was really there.

"Yes, I do," I said. "I do think about him. Does that shock you?" It was forbidden for soldiers to have favorites; to build personal relationships beyond their work and casual coupling. That stood for all soldiers of the same rank, but beyond that was the horror – and the treason – of defiling a Bronzeman.

Kiel was very flushed but his gaze was steady. "Maen, we look at things differently as Remainders. We don't have so many … rules. There are not so many things forbidden, so long as we keep it to ourselves. Many people bind together, care for each other, men and women, and it's accepted. We can have these feelings for each other, and we're not penalized for it…."

"And yet I never felt his death – I never felt his passing," I blurted out. How could that be? How could someone who had been so very deep in my thoughts, so much a part of my core, pass away without the tragedy striking me dead alongside him?

"Maybe he's not dead then," whispered Kiel.

"Don't," I said sharply, though I didn't want to be harsh with him. "Don't try to console me, for you don't understand. I have a life in the Household and I'll continue with it, as best I can." There was nothing more for me, until I could find my own escape from this anguish. Nothing more at all. "And so what *were* you doing that night?"

Kiel was startled. "Me? I said, I was just…."

"No you weren't." I stared him out again; his eyes looked wild. "You were there for a reason, Kiel, not just to take the air, not just to piss, not just to listen in to us. Don't treat me as a fool again."

He stood, abruptly, but he didn't run.

"You had been through the break in the wall, I could see that," I continued, relentlessly. "That was maybe not the first time, either. You said you were once a messenger for Mistress Flora." His breathing had speeded up, and he frowned, as if playing things through his mind very quickly. "I don't mean her harm, Kiel, if I can avoid it. It may be that she needs help, and if she's no danger to Mistress Seleste, there's no need to persecute her. Talk to me."

The fear was back in his face, but the excitement was, too. "Maen, you are …Maen, how may I trust you?"

I didn't answer that. He knew as much of me as I knew of him and would have to make the same decisions. Behind me, I could hear

some commotion back by the Library, as if more people had arrived there.

He nodded, once, his eyes fixed on mine, his decision made. "I can show you." His voice was very quiet, very breathless. "I can tell you where I leave the messages. I can show you … where she is."

And at that moment I heard Zander's voice calling from the front of the building, demanding to know where we were.

ZANDER and his men filled most of the space in the doorway and Kiel took his time about pushing back through into the Library. He got as far as the front desk and then Zander's hand gripped at his neck and pulled him to a halt.

The Silver Captains drew back respectfully. I stepped forward.

Zander looked at me, Kiel shaking a little in his hold. "What is it with this little rat, Maen, that we always find him wriggling about where he's not meant to be?"

"I was instructing him on the History," I said, calmly. "We stepped out for a moment, but now he's back to his duty. Or at least he would be, if you'd let him go."

Zander looked between us; his gaze lingered on Kiel. As I watched, I saw Kiel's face turn red and his mouth start to form words. I groaned to myself, but there was no stopping him.

"Why are you abusing me like this?" he muttered. Zander's grip had lifted him almost off his feet and he twisted, kicking back at Zander's boots. "Doesn't a Gold Warrior have more important work than bullying scribes?"

Zander let him go, suddenly. He fell heavily to the floor, and a thin patina of dust flew up all around our feet. One of the Silvers started to laugh, but quickly bit it back.

Zander's voice was cold. "Go back to your job, boy."

Kiel brushed the dust from his sleeve and flushed. "I'm not a boy," he snapped.

The sound of Zander's sword unsheathing was like a rippling slice of fear in the studious quiet of the Library. The hum of the metal's vibration struck sudden silence in us all; the scribes were temporarily paralyzed by the glint of its movement – and Kiel gasped aloud, for it was laid at his own throat.

"You're what I say you are," hissed Zander. "You're far too loose-tongued and I don't know why Maen has any time for you at all. Do you think you deserve to talk like that, either to him or to me, a Gold Warrior, as if you were an equal?"

"No," gasped Kiel. "Sir."

Zander leaned a little closer to him, his blade pressing into the taut skin of Kiel's neck. "Do you want to talk in future with the mark of *this* at your throat?"

Kiel's eyes closed, briefly.

"Actually …" I said aloud, watching how all the heads swiveled around to look at me, including the other scribes who had pretended to be engrossed in their work. "Actually it is *you* who needs to do the talking. The scribe wishes to interview you, Zander, to be able to tell the tale of the heroes of the Battle for Queenship."

Zander stared at me as if I'd gone mad. "To write about me?"

I nodded. "I think the Queen will welcome a tale that is from the mouths of the men who lived it, who fought for her glory – and were victorious."

Some other expression flickered in Zander's eyes, one that intrigued me. His sword moved away from Kiel's neck and the scribe wriggled out quickly from under his grasp. "I don't know what mischief the boy is up to," said Zander, slowly, "but I know it's there." He glared at Kiel who was now pressing back against a desk, trying to blend into the woodwork in some way. "Remember the feel of the blade. If you misbehave, you know what it can do."

Kiel stared back at him, eyes wide. His chest was heaving up and down very quickly. "I know what *you* can do. Sir. The blade is one thing, but the skill is in *your* hands."

Now it was Zander's eyes that widened. He couldn't take his eyes off Kiel. "You are … astonishing. Don't you have any fear of me? What can you know about swords?"

Kiel swallowed hard. "I have plenty fear of you, sir. But I can only speak as myself. And you're right, maybe I know nothing of soldiers and swords, for I've never been shown." His eyes flickered to Zander's sword, now held carefully at the Gold Warrior's side. "But I know mastery when I see it."

I had to hide my own smile under a cough. "Maybe one day Zander will show you how to use a sword," I said, quietly. I glanced at the Gold Warrior who was still amazed and angry at Kiel's effrontery. He was appraising Kiel, though, his eyes running from the young man's face down his slender, wiry limbs. Kiel stared back at him, determination and rash courage in his expression, and Zander caught his gaze more than once. He took longer to dismiss the young body from his interest than I would have expected.

"He moves well, he has good co-ordination," I said to Zander. "And he has strength, although he's not built as a soldier. He would be a good pupil, and maybe some military knowledge would help protect him in his work, in a role that's so important to the Queen."

Zander made a noise of disgust. His soldiers relaxed behind him, seeing his obvious disdain for the Remainder upstart, then he turned his back on Kiel and spoke directly to me. "The Queen wishes to see you, Maen, for an update on your work. I will see to the boy now, and the needs of the History."

"He's not a boy, he's a young man," I said.

"A Remainder," Zander growled back, sharply.

We stared at each other. "Yes," I replied. "A Remainder. But one on Royal business."

Zander gave an impatient sigh. "I am well aware of that. I will try to arrange some time for him, as you ask. You've obviously discussed this with Mistress Nerisa already?"

I felt, rather than saw, Kiel's body tense up as he stood silently behind us. "Obviously," I said.

Zander nodded. "And you, Maen? I need to know what meetings you have planned for today – "

"Nothing," I said, firmly. "And I'll report that to the Queen herself. You presumably find it as tedious as I do, Gold Warrior, being my shadow for every waking hour."

Zander frowned. "Obviously," he said, repeating my word with more than a trace of sarcasm. "So you may leave the Library now."

I inclined my head to him in front of his soldiers, as was expected. I glanced over at Kiel who was shifting nervously from one foot to the other. "I will return at the end of the day, Kiel," I said. "For *your* progress report. Is that clear?"

Realization sparked in his eyes and he nodded, probably a little too eagerly. "Yes, sir. Very clear, sir."

I TURNED back once more to look inside, on my way out from the Library. The soldiers were milling around, the tension of the last meeting now gone, and their business nothing more than attending to Zander when he should call for them. Some of them were peering at the scribes' work, distressing the timid, quiet workers who obviously abhorred an audience. A couple of the Silvers nodded in respect to me, including Edrius – good men who had fought with me in the Battle but had little to do with me otherwise.

My gaze traveled to find Zander, and I saw him talking to Kiel, the pair of them drawn a little way away from the main desks.

It was a surprise, even though I'd asked him to find time for Kiel's work, for I knew that Zander had little time for conversing with Remainder staff, beyond barking an order or a complaint – he had soldiers in his Guard or used other Remainder servants to run his errands for him. He was an arrogant man, though not without justification, for he was at the top of his profession. And handsome, too, with looks that drew attention from everyone. It had been interesting, though, to see how Kiel's boldness had disturbed that self confidence.

I watched as Kiel gazed up at the taller soldier, nodding occasionally, his attention fixed with great concentration on Zander's words. The young man was almost on his toes trying, I suspected, to match Zander's height and size, but still falling half a foot short. He held paper in his hand but he wasn't making any notes, though his fingers moved expressively a few times and his whole body was restless with excitement. Zander looked down at him with an expression that combined both irritation and caution, but his attention was also concentrated totally on the scribe.

I left them talking and went straight to my Mistress.

CHAPTER 7

I passed several Silver Captains in the corridor on my way to Seleste's office, and two at the entrance door, but when I was waved through into the room with her, there was only one Silver beside her. It was Darius. Seleste herself was more casually dressed than usual, without her official jewelry and insignia on her cloak. It was unusual to see her relaxing there, rather than on her way to or from a Council meeting.

I gave the soldier's salute to her, the open palm against my heart, for that had always been my way. She nodded at me and stepped from behind her desk. She turned to Darius. "Leave us now."

He looked between us and frowned slightly. "Mistress, you should have company at all times. Perhaps you need – "

"Nothing!" she snapped, startling him. "Not that *you* can give me, anyway! How dare you presume to tell me what I need? You are pretty and adventurous in bed, and a good enough soldier. You have begged me for a high place in the next games, and I know that you've pushed your way in front of others for that privilege. You are lucky that I admire ambition like yours, but you should learn to be grateful for my patronage. Ask for more than that, and it can all be taken away as quickly."

He had gone pale, and he hurriedly dipped his head. "Mistress, forgive me."

She stared at him, then back over to me. She sighed, the anger leaving her more quickly than Darius's insolence deserved. "Maen, do you know this man? Do you have as much trouble with him as I do?"

I saw Darius stiffen with protest, though he didn't raise his head. "Sometimes, Mistress," I agreed. She knew I had met him – of course she did – but she was playing a game she enjoyed. "I was taught to fall to my knees if I angered my Mistress," I said sternly, looking at his bowed head. "I was taught to beg forgiveness with rather more enthusiasm than you seem to show."

Darius made an angry sound in the back of his throat, but he dropped immediately to his knees before Seleste. Her eyes met mine over his bent body and she smiled. "Maen, you are always the perfect citizen; the perfect servant to your Mistress. Even though you are not his Gold Warrior, he obeys you with more speed than he does his own Queen." She dropped a hand to her side and let her fingers trail casually over Darius's dark curls. "It's a sign of his devotion to you, I believe. A very *personal* devotion."

I breathed carefully. She would know everything about me, one way or another, so there was no reason to deny anything. "If he annoys you, Mistress, send him away."

But she shook her head. "No, it's not that. And I keep him close to me because … you are not."

I frowned at her, confused. She hadn't Called me to her for several nights, but I assumed that had been for her own reasons.

She was watching my reactions. "We'll speak more of that later. But know that he comes to me sometimes with the smell of you still on him – and I like that. It's the best I have at the moment, although I'd seek more if I thought it would be as good as my dreams. To have you both with me at night, together; willing; hungry for me and each other…." She paused, maybe seeing my discomfort. Darius still knelt at her feet but his whole body was now tense. She took a step away from him and laughed softly. "Go, soldier. Maen has no time for you now, and nor do I. I need no company apart from him."

Darius stood up clumsily and backed from the room in haste. I didn't catch his eye. Seleste had been uncannily perceptive, for Darius had, indeed, been back to me other times, offering his body and a strange, unwelcome attentiveness to me. He found me neither unwilling nor enthusiastic: but he still returned.

Seleste moved away from her desk and poured out two cups of wine. "Will you drink with me?"

"Thank you, Mistress," I said. "But I'm not thirsty." *Not for her particular wine*.

She tensed up, maybe because my suspicion had been too obvious, but she didn't pursue it. "You haven't found her," she said, sharply, and turned back to face me. "Flora. You haven't found her yet?"

I bowed my head. "No. No one has knowledge of her, though some saw her just after the Battle. I have some more people to interview – "

She grunted with disapproval. "Where do you think she is?"

I considered carefully before I spoke. Seleste would expect my honesty. "I believe she has left the City. And if she hasn't perished in the wasteland out there, I think that the Exiles are probably sheltering her."

Seleste stared at me, as if she wanted to be angry with me but knew she had no justification. "Maybe. Of all my sisters, Flora would be the only one who would have the courage for a challenge like that. Nerisa would have slipped into a river somewhere and drowned for fear of making too much fuss, and nobody would have even noticed she'd gone. Chloe would have stubbed her pathetic little foot and cried all the way back to the City with the pain and the misery of losing a shoe."

"I would suggest sending out a search party," I said. "Will you tell Zander…?"

Seleste frowned. "There are rumors of more attacks from the Exiles on the western gate, and I can't afford to release good soldiers at the moment."

She didn't say any more, but I knew there was no point in asking her to release me to the search. "Then I will continue to ask around the City. I'll report to you if I find any more news, but I don't see any need for Zander to accompany me." At her sharp glance, I shrugged. "You will need him for the City's defense. He's your best."

She frowned. "No, Maen, *you* are my best and always have been. I had hoped that would be enough for us both to enjoy this new life." She sighed, looking flushed. "Perhaps you are more honest than I, after all. Perhaps I have too much invested in the ways of this City – in its Queenship – to share this life with you more equally; to be something far more dear to you."

"You are my Mistress," I said, quickly. It was a shock, to hear her talk so openly. Hadn't I kept my own thoughts so often hidden? "You cannot be more dear to me than as my Queen." That was what we had all been taught from childhood.

She continued to stare at me. We had such a strange relationship, Seleste and I. I called her Mistress and she ordered me to and from her side, yet when we were alone and intimate, she cried my name in pleasure and allowed me to murmur hers into her ear. We joked about characters in the Household staff and we played chess and we talked through her plans for the City. The decisions were still all hers, but at those times I could see that she was searching for a different kind of companionship, one that had never been sanctioned in the strict hierarchy of the City; one that had never been allowed – nor ever would be allowed – to overshadow her ambition and her dutiful position.

She'd hoped I would be that companion. The atmosphere in the room was a mix of sadness and tension.

"I have disappointed you," I said, softly. "I haven't been what you wanted."

"Oh, but you have," she murmured. She smiled without humor; her expression was weary. "You've given me what you can, but it's been only what you have left after your dreams of the boy – not what you have in full."

"Mistress – "

She held up a hand to silence me. "Maen, that's enough. And if you speak of this to anyone else, I will have you killed. However kindly I think of you."

I nodded; swallowed hard. "I will find Flora for you."

"You must!" Her voice was suddenly harder and the weariness vanished from her eyes. "I will be hosting a conference soon, and there will be visitors from other Cities. There must be no whisper of dissention in my Household. It must all go well!"

I stared at the sudden, fierce light in her eyes. I was astonished. "I've never known anyone from another City visit us here."

She nodded and moved back towards me. "There are concerns about the planet, Maen, that reach beyond Aza City. The climate is too volatile; the earth is becoming too acidic for the crops. There are signs in the stars that tell the Ladies in the Household of Physic that important times are to come." She may have seen my fists clench, but she let it pass. I'd never been one to have time for *signs*. She touched my arm, expressing again her possession of me. "I have to spend some time there, with Chloe. I'll travel tomorrow: be ready to leave in the morning, after I have eaten."

I paused, and caught my breath. There were many reasons I didn't want to go traveling with Seleste tomorrow, though none of which I could tell her. "Mistress, forgive me, but it would be better if I stayed here. The interviews need to be continued without break, or the Household will conveniently start to forget anything it knows of Flora's movements. And of course there's the History being written – that needs attention."

She sighed, irritated by such trivia. "Put someone else to watch on that."

I nodded, as if I agreed with her wisdom. "Of course, I forgot. Your sister, Mistress Nerisa, is there to oversee…."

Seleste didn't even let me finish my sentence. "For Devotions' sake, I will wait a lifetime if she is left in charge!" Her mood was impatient now, her mind anticipating her trip and the forthcoming conference. "You will stay, and you will promise to be on hand, Maen, throughout the whole exercise. You know the importance of this History being finished swiftly and well. It just needs a minute of your time each day, to check on progress. It will be a chore, but I wish you to incorporate that into your schedule as a priority."

I shrugged gently, the picture of the reluctant but obedient servant. "I will do my best for you, Mistress, of course."

AS I left the room, closing the door behind me, Darius stepped to my side. I sighed.

"Maen." His protest at my cool welcome was wry. "I give you trouble, is it true, what you said? Or is it trouble that you secretly enjoy?"

I shook my head and started to walk back towards my Quarters. "I have work to do for the Mistress," I said. "I don't have any time to see you now."

Darius made a soft noise of complaint. He made similar sounds, every time he came to me, slipping quietly into my quarters at night. He was always impatient; always greedy; always shamelessly persistent, whatever my initial response. Sometimes he shocked me, sometimes he fascinated me – and sometimes I didn't send him away at once. He was a good lover, if I were honest, and he could stimulate me physically when no one had for a long time. I disliked his arrogant attitude and his barely suppressed contempt for the other soldiers in his new Guard, but when he was alone with me he could be quite different. He would be more tolerant, almost submissive, and would talk to me about his time with Mistress Flora. He'd been devoted to her, it was obvious, and it had been a shock to him when she disappeared. He was scared of Seleste – as was appropriate for a soldier's behavior towards his Queen – but he was resentful, too, of having to find his position all over again in a new Household. He seemed to seek my sympathy, though I couldn't give him much attention. Sometimes he'd bring ale for us to drink, or he'd arrive already slightly drunk, but he was always very uninhibited and proud of himself. It was his way, naturally.

I couldn't explain it, and I didn't wish to get any closer to him, but he had a way of touching me that I'd found in no one else over the last year. He was amusing and outrageous and ridiculous and yet vulnerable, all in equal measures. He was a handsome man, with a fine body, and he didn't hesitate to invite himself on to my bunk and to assume I'd take as much or as little from him as I wanted. He could relax me, even while I thought I resisted him. The coupling was fierce

and fast, I was always physically satisfied, and he never asked for anything else beyond my participation. It should have been enough of a distraction for me – I had enough nights alone for that to have been welcome – and I didn't tell him that it wasn't. But when he held me, and stripped me, and pressed his mouth to my neck, he must have *known* that it wasn't, at least for me.

He was watching my expression, now. He knew he affected me, though judging by the way his eyes glinted in the mid-night darkness of my bare room, this knowledge often seemed to confuse rather than please him. "The Mistress," he repeated. It sounded mocking in his tone. "She thinks too highly of you, and it disturbs her. She thinks too little of *me*, and that amuses her. Together we provide what she needs, I think."

I frowned, but I was also tempted to smile. He had a sharp and perceptive view of Seleste's tastes. "Maybe so. That's up to her to request."

He smiled, openly. "But not in her bedroom? You weren't pleased by her earlier teasing."

"No." I sighed. If Seleste asked something of us, we had to do it. Years ago, I'd have been pleased and flattered to follow the whim of any Mistress. Now something in my own heart shuddered at the constant, careless servitude.

"Not that I would mind," he said mischievously, though still watching me carefully. "The two of us; with the Queen. You know there's no time or place that I wouldn't want you, Maen. And you also know by now that I'll do whatever's necessary to get what I want, even if it means asking our Mistress to share your body with me." He'd been walking close beside me, though any touch he made was merely a brush against my arm. He was still on duty and shouldn't be wasting official time. But now he halted and I found that I did, too. Still smiling, he stretched his arm out to mine. The way his fingers trailed along the bare skin of my forearm sent a hot, involuntary shiver up my back.

"I am hers to do with what she likes," I said, dully.

His eyes narrowed. "She isn't the only Mistress, Maen," he said, softly. When I glanced across at him, puzzled, he shrugged. "I spend a lot of time with Mistress Chloe at Physic, and she's made no secret of the fact that she has sympathy for you and your position with the Queen. If you need her help, I can approach her for you."

"What kind of help could that possibly be?"

He grimaced: perhaps I'd been too harsh in my reply. "I didn't mean offence. I just thought I would mention it. You're…." I was certain I didn't want him to finish the sentence, but my silence encouraged him. "You're disturbed," he said. He sounded concerned; his head tilted to the side, a stray lock of his hair swinging free.

"I am what I am," I said. When he reached up and placed a hand on my chest, I shivered.

"Tell me if you don't want me to touch you," he murmured.

"Will it make any difference?"

He smiled, his lips curving slowly and sensuously. "You're no virgin, Maen; no timid boy. Don't pretend to be a victim, either. It's your strength that I like, your strange, confused, conflicted strength. Your integrity; your *need*." He turned suddenly, stepping in front of me, making me lean away. He pushed me and together we pressed back against the wall. For a second, his head dipped and his teeth scraped against the skin of my neck where it joined my shoulder. I grunted; he hissed pleasure. Then I pushed him away. As he stumbled slightly, I turned sharply around and set off for my quarters, leaving him standing alone.

I LEFT my room a couple of hours before the middle of the night and made my way out of the main building. The only other people about in the central courtyard were maintenance workers, cleaning the cobbles and drying it with fresh hay. When their work was done, I watched them gather the remnants back up on to their carts and pull them out of the courtyard behind them. The wheels rattled noisily over the stones until they turned the corner to the equipment barns and went to pack away the carts for the night. I walked on. A couple of young men were washing down the roof of the walkway between the Library and the

main Household offices: I had seen them mending some loose boards in it earlier in the day. Their occasional conversation was quiet in the still air of the night, and when they saw me passing through, they slid down from their perch to the ground below and bowed respectfully to me. Remainder boys, both of them; the Household was staffed by so many. I nodded back, for it was easier to do that than to explain I was not a soldier of the Queen as they probably assumed. I watched as they scooped up their bucket and brooms and left to return to the Remainder areas. I often walked the courtyard late at night, if Seleste hadn't Called me – if I had things on my mind that needed quiet and some privacy to digest.

As I neared the Library, I was startled to hear voices from inside. Even though I'd speculated on whether the scribes lived and breathed their jobs, I knew that most of them went to their own bunks at night time. I had expected to find Kiel there, but no one else. There were candles lit inside, for I could see their flickering light through the narrow windows. It was a cold and draughty building, so I wondered who might find it comfortable enough to spend time there in the middle of the night. I wouldn't have chosen to eavesdrop, but I needed to speak to Kiel and wanted no one else to know that. I found a long window against the east wall that looked into the shadowed corner behind the shelves. From that vantage point, I could listen easily, and hopefully see who was there without being seen myself.

"You will never be a soldier." It was Zander's voice, and the words were harsh, but his tone had amusement in it, too.

Someone laughed: Kiel, of course. "You think that I'd want that? To be in the thick of battle, the horror of it, the danger, the pain and sweat and struggle?"

Zander laughed in return, and I was startled to hear such a robust sound from him. "You're a fool to think that, but so many people do. I can tell you, it's the only time that a man finds out how brave he really is. You never know what courage your life holds until you face losing it."

"And so am I in danger of that tonight?" I didn't understand what Kiel meant.

Zander laughed again. "I doubt that, these swords are only practice ones, though it depends just how clumsy you are, scribe. From what I have seen, you fight enthusiastically enough, even if you have no skill at all – and many men discover, faced with the challenge, that they are braver than they think."

Kiel made a soft, grunting noise, and for the first time I heard the clash of a blade on another. I tensed up, and peered further through the window. Now I could see the two men in there, standing in the middle of the open area in front of the main desk. Some of the other desks had been pushed back, clearing a sizeable floor space in amongst the piles of books and documents. I could see the tall, broad Gold Warrior with a sword raised at shoulder height, and opposite him, the darting figure of Kiel, shorter by a head and much slimmer, but moving more nimbly. He also held a sword, but was swinging it around recklessly, and I winced in sympathy as Zander parried a rather awkward strike. I saw Kiel stumble backwards before he regained his balance. I wondered if I needed to intervene, but then I heard him laughing again; panting, too.

"Who could be brave enough, faced with that strength? This sword's too big for me, the effort too much – "

Zander side-stepped him swiftly and brought his sword down, trapping the tip of Kiel's blade against the floor. I could see the glint of the metal against the dark shadows of the furniture and the soft puff of dust that sprang up from the floor. Kiel made a noise of frustration and kicked back against Zander's body, but the soldier didn't move. Instead, he reached his free hand around Kiel's torso and gripped him more tightly against his own chest. Kiel's sword fell to the floor with a clatter and he groaned aloud.

"Too close, fool scribe," Zander muttered. "Too close and too easily distracted. Battle skill isn't just about swordplay."

"It … you're nothing but a bully," grunted Kiel. "You're hurting me."

Zander laughed. "And you are weak as a child. I'm not hurting you, for your bones would crack like a chicken's if I meant them to." But he loosened his hold. Kiel twisted around in his grasp and for a moment his head tilted back so that he stared up into Zander's face. He

was still in Zander's fierce grip, but he'd stopped wriggling. Zander stared back down at him and sucked in a sharp breath. I waited to see what either of them would say next, or when they would move away from each other, but it seemed that they were frozen like that. Maybe it was a trick of the shadows and the flickering candle light, but I thought I saw Kiel's back arch and his body press more closely against Zander's – and then Zander's head dip down slightly as if to nuzzle against Kiel's cheek.

Then suddenly Zander pushed him away and stepped back. "Enough," he said, his voice hoarse. He sheathed his practice sword at his side. "No more playing with swords, you've wasted my time long enough. I thought you wanted me to tell you about the Battle."

Kiel caught a gasping breath that I heard very clearly in the chill of the deserted Library. "Yes. That's … yes. Thank you for your time. If you could write some notes on your part in the Battle – how you trained, what you felt, what you saw – "

"No." Zander spoke tersely, and I saw his body tense up. "I have no time for that. If you want anything from me, you must write it yourself."

Kiel turned quickly back towards his desk at the back of the room, as if worried that Zander would lose patience with him now. "That's no problem, I can do that, I'll be pleased to. I'm honored that a hero like you has any time at all for me."

Zander shifted in the semi-darkness, his movements making the candles flicker even more. "I have no desire for personal flattery, scribe. Service to the City is my only wish."

Kiel pulled out his chair with a scrape and when he sat down I could only see the top half of his body. "Of course. That's what I've written so far…."

Zander turned to watch him open the stiff parchment pages of his note book, a curious look on his face. "What else? Have you written of my Mistress? Of her magnificent justice and love of Aza City? And her care of her men, her mere soldiers whom she protects and guides?"

It was Kiel's turn to shift, for I heard the chair rock on the wooden floor. "Um … of course. I am weaving in some tales from the previous Histories, as is the custom. Following the rich thread of our Queen's ancestry and her fine bloodline, from Colonization up to the current time."

Zander nodded, satisfied with that. "That's how it should be. The Ladies are the life blood of our world, they've given us everything. We don't need the dry pages of the Histories to know that they built the Cities and gave salvation to men's suffering, and have made us stronger every generation."

"Have you read them?" asked Kiel. At Zander's confused silence, he continued. "The old Histories, I mean. They were in the farthest archive – I haven't even found the half of them yet, there are so many. Doesn't anyone read them any more?"

Zander coughed. He shifted again, as if uncomfortable, and yet I'd thought he was standing at ease. "You shouldn't question everything like this, scribe. I'm sure the Ladies would search them if they needed information or entertainment. Are you worried that no one will read your work? You are much too proud if you think that – "

"No, that's not it." Kiel sounded as if he was trying to hide his annoyance. "You don't understand me. I thought that soldiers and Household officials would be using these books on a regular basis, but they've been forced to the back of the upper floors and covered with dust and mouse droppings." He was silent for a moment. I knew he was trying not to admit that he had read some of these Histories himself – because, of course, I could guess that he had. "There are many kinds of tales, I believe. As the Histories go back in time, there are richer, bolder stories, less about the glory of the Mistresses and the loyalty of their men, and more about the times when the Cities were first built – about the ordinary mixture of people who lived and worked then, who struggled to survive, how the Cities were established, the many battles they fought – "

Zander interrupted. "Which battles were they? I have no need to read about battles where I fought myself."

"No, this was a long time ago – before our Queen's mother was Queen, before her mother, too. These weren't raids by the Exiles, or

even Maen's capture, or that scare last year when those renegade soldiers attacked from another City…."

Zander's hand came down forcefully on to the table beside him, startling us both. "How can anything be of interest that's not the tale of our Mistress? More importantly, why do you talk so carelessly of these things?"

Kiel stared back at him, shocked. "It's not careless. It's my City too, and these events are important to me, too. I am devoted to our Mistress, of course I am, but I'm not involved in the City as it is today, not in the same way that you are. I only have these books and the old tales to draw from, and they're of just as much interest to me. And so they should be! See what it says in the frontispiece of this book." He bent over one of the other volumes on his table, lifting the heavy, leather-bound cover with some difficulty. "It says, 'To all those who wish to follow the true patterns of life in Aza City'. It's for all of us, and all about our City. Look what it says!" His finger stabbed at the words, drawing Zander's attention to them, seeking to get the soldier to agree with him.

"I don't need to look." Zander sounded angry. He wasn't looking at the book, but at Kiel. There was some other emotion in his face, too, that was causing him disturbance. "I don't wish to. I don't know who's taught you to copy such things, and your tone is insolent. You don't have the proper respect for the true ways."

"The *old* ways, you mean." Kiel's voice was raised, too, though he sounded more shocked than angry. "Isn't it better that we learn properly about the City? It's not right to accept things without any question at all, surely. There are so many great and powerful things we don't know about, that we haven't seen, that are there to be discovered…."

He never finished the sentence because Zander reached down and slammed the book shut on his fingers.

"Why did you do that?" Kiel sounded more furious at the attack on his precious book than hurt by the attack on his own hand. "Don't you dare touch it!"

I leant through the window, trying to see them better. I was surprised to see how close they were together, Kiel now standing, and pressed against the edge of his desk, with Zander bending over him. Kiel had now gathered the book in question against his chest, as if protecting it. Zander's face was twisted with anger.

"This is nonsense – I cannot do this." He was struggling to find the right words, I knew how he did that sometimes. "I can't help a lunatic like you. You must talk to others."

"But I want *you*, Zander." Kiel's voice was almost a plea. Then he seemed to realize how astonishing that sounded, and his voice rushed on more respectfully. "I would so appreciate your story, Gold Warrior. I admire you, what you are, what you represent. It's what I'd want to be, if I hadn't been born as a Remainder, though of course that would never be a choice given to me, I'd never even hoped to talk to a man like you, let alone work with you, be with you. You can speak from that viewpoint, from that privileged position – that's the best of all for a man. To be strong; to be respected; to be admired. To be the first choice of the Ladies; of the Mistress herself. To be that passionate, that desirable." He looked flushed again, but not with anger this time. His eyes narrowed, a little mischievously. "That's what the Queen will want in the History, surely?"

Zander was staring at him as if he'd grown two heads and he didn't know which one to strike off first. I stepped away from my secret hideout and swiftly made my way to the door.

"Who's there?"

"Maen," I said, accustoming my eyes to the long shadows from the candles. Zander looked surprised to see me, but Kiel's look was a strange mixture of relief and disappointment. He sank back down into his chair and Zander walked over to meet me by the door, hiding my view of Kiel behind him.

"I'm very glad for the interruption, Maen. I can't imagine why you chose this boy to work on the History, he is so odd."

"Clever," I said, gently. Zander seemed overly keen to justify his own confusion to me, to the extent that he didn't think to question why I was passing the Library at that hour. "Unusual, maybe, but

quick of mind. The work he's done so far is of excellent quality, and very vibrant."

Zander shrugged. "And yet he is so very plain as a person, and very weak. And he talks too much, it tires and annoys me."

I looked at the man's strong features; his broad shoulders; his bright, passionate blue eyes. He'd grown his hair longer since the Battle, the thick, blond fall of it hiding the scar on his left ear and showing only the glint of his earrings on the other. He was very striking, and even more so against Kiel's quirky looks. "He's just different," I shrugged. "You need to talk to him as another man, then you'll see his real quality."

"Maen?"

The voice behind me made me stand aside to let another soldier enter. It was Edrius, obviously off duty because he was dressed in casual clothes and boots and looking freshly bathed. He smiled at me. "Is Zander here?"

Zander had moved a few steps back towards the desk, and Edrius went to stand beside him. He was an athletic young man, his movements slower and more graceful without his full armor. "We're spending an hour or so in town, after the late duty," he said to Zander, rather abruptly. His eyes went from the Gold Warrior to Kiel, then across to the books in front of the scribe. He frowned with distaste. All soldiers needed to be able to read, in order to follow written instructions, or to serve the Gold Warrior's orders. Or, indeed, to entertain the Ladies at times. But there were those who liked it less than others; who saw no reason to improve on a basic knowledge, or to spend any more time than the bare minimum. I hadn't taken Edrius for one of those men, but it seemed that he had little time for the Library's books.

Kiel stayed seated, but I saw him close all the books carefully, resting his arm on the top one of the pile and obscuring the title. He looked up through hooded eyes, watching the interaction between the two soldiers.

Edrius stared at Zander, boldly. "Will you be joining us? The tavern by the blacksmith's is opening the doors to its new rooms

tonight." He reached out a hand and rested it lightly on Zander's hip. We all knew what he meant. There were secluded places in some taverns that were exclusive to the soldiers, where they got the best service and the better quality ales, and could make the most of their precious leisure time with their choice of company. These places were used regularly, too, by soldiers who wanted to couple with more privacy, or who had tastes that might disturb their fellow men back at the barracks.

Zander hesitated for a second or two and he glanced over at Kiel.

Edrius made a snort of surprise. "You're finished here, surely? No need to look to some junior slave for permission to leave…."

"Be quiet," Zander growled, and Edrius flushed, confused.

Kiel was back up on his feet, too, though it only served to emphasize his lack of height compared to the two of them. He glared at Edrius. "I'm not a slave, you shouldn't talk about me like that – "

"Silence!" Zander snapped at him, too.

Kiel stared back at him. "There's no need to shout at me. I don't answer to you, Gold Warrior."

Edrius gave a short, shocked laugh.

"He answers to me, actually," I said, softly. "The Queen's orders." I didn't know if Zander had heard me, but I held my breath in case I needed to say – or do – more. Edrius glanced at me, his face a little flushed. He must have seen and recognized the look in my eyes, for he turned away again quickly.

Zander continued to stare at Kiel. "Like I said, you're a fool," he said, his voice cold and clipped. "You walk into trouble as if you welcome it. You don't understand what we do; what we are."

"You mean I don't deserve to know, or I shouldn't be told?" Kiel's tone was high and angry; his chest was heaving. "You mean I'm just a Remainder?"

"I *mean,* you don't understand." Zander's voice was sharp. "That's what I said and you will learn to listen."

"His behavior is disgraceful," murmured Edrius. He seemed to be enjoying the argument between the other two. "Why do you let him talk so freely?"

"I don't know." Zander still glared at Kiel, but now he was talking about him to Edrius. "I've been too lenient. Maen will need to have him disciplined, or I will do it for him. His talk is astonishingly tedious; he's unable to show the proper respect. But then, he's only a scribe. It's an amusement for me, to offer him my company."

Kiel flushed, very deeply. I wanted to step forward to silence him, but he rushed on, answering back regardless. "I don't need your company," he said. I could hear the tremor of fear in his voice and see the spark of anger in his eyes, but I hoped for his sake that I was the only one who could. Zander would only take so much confrontation before he struck back. "You can come and go as you please. Do what you like."

"I will," said Zander. "You can be sure I'll do exactly that." His expression was strangely blank. His shoulder nudged against Edrius's and he lifted his arm, curling his hand around the back of the younger soldier's neck. He kept looking at Kiel, but he twisted Edrius's head around towards him so that they touched. Edrius's face was still flushed, and he licked at his lips, moistening them. His hand tightened on Zander's hip and his eyelids half closed with sudden desire.

Zander continued to stare at Kiel, the color of his eyes darkening to something cold and hard. He looked as if he wanted to hurt the young scribe, but he didn't make any move towards him. Instead, he turned his head to one side and his tongue slid slowly and deliberately across Edrius's cheek, down to Edrius's half-open mouth. Zander's gaze never wavered, still on Kiel; Kiel glared back at him, his eyes widening. Zander caught up the plump skin on Edrius's lower lip and sucked on it: the Silver Captain groaned with raw pleasure. Zander let out a long breath, and smiled, slowly and lasciviously. Kiel continued to stare at him but by now his face was scarlet with embarrassment at Zander's display of intimacy. I could see his hands clenched at his side. Edrius pressed in even closer and touched his lips greedily back to Zander's – his tongue thrust into the other man's

mouth. There was no inhibition or hesitation between them, even in front of watchers. Soldiers were an arrogant, confident and determined breed: it was their very nature.

I was used to such behavior – Kiel maybe not. There was a short, shocked silence.

Then Edrius broke from Zander's kiss, laughing breathlessly, his fingers still gripping hard at Zander's waist. "I'll wait by the armory," he said. "The first drink is mine to buy."

"No need to wait," replied Zander, his voice husky. "I'm coming away from here now."

THERE were several moments of silence after Zander and Edrius left. We listened to the sound of their laughter and their boots striding over the cobbles until all noise died away.

I turned to Kiel. "I'll ask him to come back to talk to you tomorrow."

Kiel shrugged, but he didn't quite carry off the carelessness. "There are others I can talk to. He doesn't like the books, I can see that – he seems almost scared of them. He doesn't like … me." His head dropped a little, his eyes peering at the floor.

"Kiel," I said, softly. "You said that you would tell me about Mistress Flora, that you would tell me how you contact her."

He sighed, and looked back up at me. If he'd been disappointed about the way his meeting with Zander had gone, he was hiding it bravely now. "Thank you, Maen, for standing up for me." He pushed the books to one side, stacking them carefully, though I saw his hands were shaking. "We'll go now, shall we?"

And he walked out of the building in front of me without a backwards glance.

CHAPTER 8

"MAEN, here's the place," Kiel whispered. There was an irregular breeze in the air, and the temperature was becoming much colder. We had walked out of the City in the first hours of the morning but out here on the heathland it was still very dark, with no torches in sight, or reflection from anything but the pale moon. I could hear the calls of an unfamiliar bird in the background and the short grass crunching into the abrasive dirt under my boots.

I crouched now at Kiel's side, breathing a little more heavily than usual. We'd climbed high on the rocks above the walls that encircled the City. It had been easier to slip away than I'd imagined, though that was partly due to Kiel's astonishing knowledge, both of the layout of the Household kitchens and the timing of the Guards at our gates. After we left the Library, he had led me through a side gate, and then under a covered walkway that I'd never even known was there, and then across a deserted courtyard to an opening in the wall, a span of a few hundred steps from where Zander and I had found him that night. The opening was covered by a neglected creeper and might once have been a formal gate, but it had obviously dropped into disuse. Kiel had put a finger to his lips and held me back for a silent moment, then when the Guard was at the furthermost point of its walk, he pushed me through.

The next hour had been a revelation. Kiel made his way across bare scrubland, then over the rocks of our more distant horizon, and all of it with an unerring sense of direction. I followed like a tame pet, amused at first by his confidence, then surprised at his stamina. In the beginning, I had recognized some of the landmarks from my own tortured journey back to the City a year ago, but after half an hour or

so, he struck off in a different direction and I was in unknown territory. We finally came to a stop beside a small clump of trees on the edge of rocky heathland. There was a pile of stones like a cairn on the edge of the rock face. It was obviously some kind of a beacon to Kiel.

It was a strangely shocking experience, to be outside the City again. The City was no small area, of course, each Household consisting of a substantial group of buildings, and there were additional, communal areas, like the Arena, the Royal Gardens, the Public Baths and, of course, the Detention Quarters. The Remainders had a settlement, too, with quarters to live and sleep in, and Training Rooms where many of them were allocated jobs by the House of Utilities, and where most of them would be assessed by the House of Physic several times during their life for what balance of Devotions they needed. I had walked the many streets of the City and crossed its courtyards and gardens, and generally found enough space and variety of scenery to take my exercise when I needed.

But it was nothing like the world outside the walls. The air itself seemed different, with a sharp taste to it when it whipped across my lips. Tonight the wind had dropped, but I knew how cold again it would be at the dawn. The atmosphere was damp as if rain threatened, though that had been rare this season. The ground was hard and the vegetation sparse, stubby and dark-shadowed in the dim moonlight. I knew we were up on the rocks outside the City and so the terrain was particularly unforgiving, but from what I could see on the horizon, there were few changes to it for miles ahead. We were all taught in the City how the Queens had Colonized the best parts of the planet and made the Cities fruitful and commercially successfully, and how the rest of the world outside couldn't sustain any robust life. I didn't know anyone in the Household who had ever sought life outside the City of their own free will, though I doubt I would have been told of it, if there were any. The message was that we were secure and supported by our Queen within Aza City and needed nothing more than that to live a full and useful life of Service to the City. A long time ago – a lifetime, it felt – I had believed that unquestioningly. Now it was chilling.

I knew now that people lived out here, and not just scraping an existence, but building communities and living with groups of people that they cared for and supported. There was a mix of men and women

and … children. We rarely saw those in the City, except on their group outings from the Central School, or during tournaments or entertainments. My Mistress before Seleste – Mistress Luana – had taunted me once with news of children she'd borne that I had personally sired. I knew I'd never see them or take any responsibility for them. When a child was born, they passed immediately to the Central School, unless they were in the Royal Household and a daughter of the Queen, when they were kept close until the time of the next Battle for Queenship. But all others passed into the central use of the City, identifiable only by their brand as to what Household they belonged to, and who their mother had been. There was never any mark for the father, and that was the way things were.

Tonight, the ache inside me was deep and poignant, yet I would have found it difficult to explain exactly what caused the pain. Some of it was the memory of my time with the Exiles, which was startlingly sharp in my mind. Some of it was the thought of my life since then in the City; the men I'd worked with; the preparation and experience of the Battle; my Mistress's company and her ownership of me. Some of it was the disorientation of being outside the City again, for the first time in so long. And some of it was true, unmistakable grief. I'd shared the previous visit with another soldier; shared the pain and the torture and the anger and the escape – shared everything with him. I'd become a different man, then, and a better, sharper, more emotional one. It had been a confused, tormented, anguished time – but I'd not have changed any of it because that had been the way I'd come to realize just how much I wanted him.

And then I lost him.

"Will they discover you're gone?" Kiel kept his voice low, just above a whisper. He was watching me closely, and I thought that his question was just a way of trying to distract me from my thoughts.

I shook my head. I no longer had Zander as a shadow, and I knew that Seleste's preparations for her journey would keep her occupied throughout the night. She would take a brief sleep and then gather her Ladies and Secretaries to her in the morning. She would travel with the minimum of soldiers, as she was only going across the City, and I assumed that she wouldn't Call on me at all. It was

fortuitous that she'd be out of the Household for a few days, as it gave me some small measure of freedom.

"What'll happen if the Queen finds out that you've left the City with me?" Kiel seemed genuinely worried.

"I'll be punished, I expect. Detention Quarters for a while, or Household arrest at the least." I glanced at his thin face, white amongst the pale grey shadows of the early morning. "Whereas you'll be thrashed, have a few fingers or toes sliced off as a lesson to others, or may even be executed."

He swallowed, hard. "That'll be better than a few more years in the sewage works," he said, weakly.

I laughed. It was a stimulating feeling, too, to be out in the night air and to be on this side of the wall. "Don't worry, Kiel, no need for such courage. I'll go back when we're done, and no one will be any the wiser."

He smiled at me now, his eyes sparkling in the dim light.

"Is the camp near here?" I asked. "I'm assuming it's an Exile camp?"

Kiel looked around tentatively. "That's what I believe. But I've never actually seen it – I've only ever come this far. Usually I meet someone from the camp and we just exchange messages."

"How do you know they're from Mistress Flora?"

He smiled again, a mischievous grin on his face. "She signs them in a special way that only she has. It's based on her Royal brand, with codes mixed in. Not everyone can read it, but she taught me so that I'd recognize it."

"You know far more than anyone guesses, Kiel." I looked at the awareness in his young eyes and wondered what else he knew about the City and his Mistress and the way of life of all of us. "Don't you?"

He started to answer, then his eyes suddenly widened and his mouth clamped shut. At the same time I felt the hairs on the back of my neck rise up. I hadn't come fully armed because we'd set off straight from the Library, but I had my dagger in my hand even as the

shadows rose up, surrounding us. It was sudden and eerie, the shapes large and distorted in the half-darkness, gathering around and above us as we crouched on the ground. My senses told me that they were people, not wild animals, but my nerves shuddered at their sudden ambush.

I was shocked at the fear I felt! I had been in various combat situations since I joined Seleste's Household – several times against Exiles or other ragged bands of traveling thieves. And of course I'd fought at the Battle for Queenship. But suddenly the raw smell of this unfamiliar earth was in my nostrils and my memories darted back in time to a year ago. I was assailed by memories of the harsh, rough bodies manhandling me; the leathery smell of the hides that the Exiles fashioned into ill-fitting clothes; the chill of the cold, stone floor where I was thrown. I remembered the uncertainty and the injuries I suffered and the strange changes to my body as I'd ceased my Devotions. The Exiles had sheltered me, but they had feared and tortured me, too. Eventually, they'd planned to kill me. My fear at that time had been fear of the unknown, of a group of people that seemed to belong to a different world altogether. I had been afraid of the way that my emotions were unbalanced, of all the new and unfamiliar reactions that had previously been repressed by the drugs. And fiercer than any other fear was the one I had for my companion, far greater than any I had for myself.

"Stand up slowly," came a man's growl. "Drop your weapons."

I laid my dagger on the ground and we straightened up carefully. Kiel held his hands out to the side to show he had nothing for them to fear. "I've been here before," he said. "One of you must know me – "

The man's hand lashed out and struck Kiel on the side of the head. He groaned and stumbled back. I caught him and held him against me.

"A brave response," I snapped. "A man like you against an unarmed youngster like him. Your leader must be truly proud of you."

"Be quiet!" hissed another voice, a man on the other side of me. My free arm was grabbed and pulled behind my back. Kiel was wrenched out of my hold and his arms pinioned behind his back in the

same way. "Maen," he gasped, but the first man twisted his grip and the young scribe moaned in pain.

"Leave him be!" I shouted. They were both well-built men, and there were the shadows of others behind them, so I knew we were outnumbered. But from their stance and the clumsy way that they restrained me, I knew that they weren't City-trained soldiers. I was more than a match for these two, even unarmed – I only had to tense my limbs and I'd be able to break free from my captor, turn so as to bring him down to the ground, and then reach back over to Kiel's man–

"Maen?" The shocked gasp from the back of the group made me pause. "Stand aside, Brod, Karil! Who have you got there?" The man holding me was distracted, though he didn't let me go, and he stepped to one side. A third figure came into our view, pushing through the other watchers to the front. "For Life's sake," she breathed, for it had been a woman's cry at the sound of my name. "It *is* you. I never dreamed you'd come back."

"Mistress Eila," I acknowledged, gritting my teeth. "Is this how you deal with all your messengers?"

She looked between me and Kiel and her eyes narrowed. She waved a hand. "Let them both go but keep an eye on the soldier. This could still be a trap."

I pulled my arms from her heavy-handed soldier's grasp, and beckoned for Kiel to come and stand by me. His eyes were still large, though with other things besides fear. He glanced between me and the woman, confused.

"So who is the messenger?" she said. "I can't imagine a Gold Warrior has turned traitor to the Queen." Her voice was as firm and deep as I remembered, her features as strong and her hair dark and thick, though she looked much older. It had only been a year, surely, though I had learned before that life outside the City took a harsher toll.

Another young man appeared from the side of the group, gesturing at Kiel. "He's the one, Eila. I've delivered messages to him before now on behalf of your visitor. She sends me up here with her papers, and he's meant to come out and meet me on every third night."

She looked again at Kiel, though she seemed disinterested. "Just a boy. A rat."

His mouth opened wide, ready to snap an indignant reply, but I gripped his arm tightly to dissuade him. "Let him go, then. I'll stay as guarantee, whatever you want. Let him run back into his hole, he's of no interest to you." I pushed Kiel away to the side and tensed, ready for whatever battle there might be, but then I was startled by laughter – Eila's laughter.

"Still the warrior! You bring such a burst of energy and passion with you, Maen, whatever the circumstance."

"I'm no longer a soldier," I said, sharply.

"And I'm no longer looking for conflict with you!" she snapped back. "At least, not tonight." At my startled expression, she smiled again. "Our camp's honorable visitor will want to see you, I'm sure, and alive, not dead. And I suspect you'll want to see *her*."

Kiel stepped forward, though I gestured him back. "Mistress Flora?" he asked, eagerly.

Eila nodded. She cast her eyes back over the group of men around us. "Get back to the camp!" she called to them. "We take our two new visitors with us."

KIEL and I were taken to a cave much like the one I'd been imprisoned in when I first met the Exiles, but this time our reception was very different. This time, we were shown to seats hewn out of the rock and were brought water and fruits while we waited. It had been no more than a few hundred steps away, but we had to scramble further up into the rocks, and the entrance was well hidden from view from the grassland below it. I looked about for other evidence of the camp inhabitants, but their caves or living areas were obviously hidden as well. I had some idea where I was, from my limited knowledge of the terrain outside the walls, and I knew we were quite a distance from the previous camp that they had called the Place. I wondered what had made them move their base to here, whether they had been attacked at the Place, or whether they had finally found it too difficult to work the

poor resources there. The rocks outside the City were an unforgiving environment, even for the most determined.

Several of the men in Eila's party were obviously intrigued by us – and especially me – for they took a long time in seeing to our needs and in preparing the space, presumably for Eila and others to join us. They hovered around at the mouth of the cave, their conversation low but punctuated by regular, suspicious glances in our direction. We sat alone in the cave, waiting for a meeting we were ill prepared for.

Kiel coughed at my side. "Will she have us killed, Maen? The Mistress here? They say that the Exiles are like wild animals, and have no Devotions or anything, full of sickness and mutation and with the roughest speech, and no respect for honor or proper trial before execution…." He paused, gathering a slower breath, obviously trying to calm his fear. "So who is she? It seems you know her already."

I nodded. "She is indeed an Exile, and she ran the camp where I was once captured. She and her … partner, Takk, were in charge."

"Partner?"

I sighed. "Things are different here, Kiel. It's difficult to make a life out here, and their society is less supportive than ours. Their ways are more aggressive; their loyalties more fierce. Women can be in charge, but so can men. They share much of daily life, and the decision making. They make alliances between themselves, and care for each other in a singular way. And they keep with them their – "

"Children!" he interrupted, astonished. Two small figures had run across in the darkness outside the cave, calling to each other. The men there pushed them quickly and roughly to one side, but not before the boy in front had peered into the mouth of the cave. I didn't think it was an accident that they'd run across where the visitors were being kept, but rather a dare to each other for the first to have sight of us. Kiel turned bright, astonished eyes to me. "Their children are among them! How do they live like that? What sort of place is this?"

A shadow loomed suddenly over the mouth of the cave as a group of people entered. I stood up and spun around, gesturing for Kiel to be quiet. He stood as well, hovering a little way behind me, but as

they came forward he dropped to his knees on the ground. "Mistress," he gasped.

Mistress Flora led the group towards us. I could see Eila behind her with a couple of other men whom I recognized from the last time, also the man she'd called Brod who'd captured us. Kiel tugged at my trouser leg and I knew he expected me to kneel down, too.

Flora stopped a couple of feet away from us. The cave had no natural light except that of the moonlight outside, but several Exiles carried torches that lit the walls well enough for us to see each other. "You are Maen," she said, her eyes running down my body. "Were you not taught in the City to kneel to a royal Mistress?"

I thought I saw Eila glance over at me, but I kept my attention on Flora. "We are not in the City now," I said, calmly. "Neither of us."

Kiel made a soft, groaning noise and his hands scrabbled in distress at the rock beneath us. Eila made a sound in her throat like a stifled laugh.

Flora's gaze never wavered but she frowned. She was not as beautiful as her sister Seleste, nor as delicate as Chloe, but she was still a striking woman. She had a long, thin face and straight shoulders; her dark hair was thick and bound back at the nape of her neck in an ornate clip. She was wearing a long, blue silk gown that she had obviously brought with her from the City and it looked strange amongst the utilitarian tunics and trousers of the Exiles. "I have heard of you, soldier," she said. Her eyes were stern.

I drew a deep breath. "And I of you, Mistress. Does that mean we have no need to learn the truth about each other?"

Eila started to laugh aloud: I was surprised to see that Flora didn't chastise her. And then, also to my surprise, Flora smiled as well. "Yes, I heard that about you, too. That you have a fierce stubbornness and a loyalty that would make you a fine soldier in any guard – even an Exile one."

"Are you trying to recruit me?" I asked, dryly. "I am not here for that. I am still under the Queen's rule." I glanced back at Eila who frowned at me.

"No," said Flora. "Please, Maen…." Her face twisted with a moment's sadness. "You are here to find me on Seleste's behalf?"

I nodded. Kiel gave a miserable cough beside me.

Flora looked around at the men and women who surrounded her. "Move away," she said. "I wish to talk to him in private." For a moment, they didn't move, and I wondered what kind of influence she would have out here amongst this alien community. They had no loyalty to the ways or the Royal family of the City – in fact, there was probably outright hostility. I had suffered that myself. My fist clenched at my side in readiness for any conflict. I wished I had my dagger to hand, but they had not returned any arms to me. Then Eila grunted an order to the group and they started to move away. A couple of them glared at us – and at Flora herself – but no one made a move against us. They fixed a couple of the torches into leather brackets hanging on the cave walls in order to give us some light, and after a few moments, only Eila and Brod and the man she'd called Karil were left at the mouth of the cave. The two men stepped just outside of the entrance and took up a sentry position there. And then Mistress Flora sat down on the stone floor in front of us.

Kiel gaped with shock.

She frowned at him. "Shut that mouth, boy, unless you wish to catch the bugs that fly here at night. Maen was right – I'm no more important here than one of the Exiles, and so I must behave like them and hope that he treats me with the same courtesy."

I lowered myself down to sit beside the pair of them. "You are still a Mistress," I said, carefully. "Whereas I owe no courtesy to the other rebels."

"But that's the point!" Her eyes glittered with fervor. "You of all people owe them nothing – in fact, you would be justified in striking out against them, for what they have done to you in the past. But you have come here at your personal risk, and haven't attempted any hostility. Can I hope that means you aren't entirely in Seleste's thrall?" As I hesitated, she sighed. "It's not easy for me, Maen, to talk to you as an equal, but I'll make that effort for the sake of my new life. After all, that's all I have left now, isn't it?"

Kiel turned to me, excitedly. "But you're only here to see where the Mistress is, aren't you, Maen? You said you wanted to secure her safety – " He saw the look on my face and he winced.

"Hush, boy," Flora said to Kiel. I think she was maybe the only person who could have called him 'boy' without provoking a storm of protest from him. "Is that true, Maen? Where is your Guard, where are your spies? Have you really come alone, with just this youngster?"

I leaned back on the cold floor and I sighed. "It's true. I'm here under my own initiative. I'll admit that although I'm charged with finding you for my Mistress, I have a curiosity and opinion of my own." It was true: I had no desire to be Seleste's assassin. I disliked the thought of that even more than I resented being her spy.

"So you have found me," she said, softly. "And I think you deserve to know why I'm here."

Eila stirred at the cave mouth, but it was only to wave in some Exile women bringing food and drink for our group. The early morning was getting colder, too, and men brought blankets for us to sit on and wrap around us. As they handed them over and withdrew respectfully, I glanced up at them, recognizing the look of City soldiers.

Flora saw my look and nodded. "These are some of the men who followed me. I didn't ask them to! It's their choice, although I appreciate their loyalty and the personal risk they run. Like the boy here, who offered to be my contact when I left so quickly after the Battle."

Kiel grunted through a large mouthful of food that smelled, to me, surprisingly good.

"He's a young man," I said, gently. "Far from a boy. And a brave one; a hardworking one; a talented one. He is working as a scribe in the Library now."

Flora nodded. "I've been working with the Remainders for some time, Maen, I know their talents." She saw my look of astonishment. "There's no need for me to hide that any more, is there? I'm in as much danger from leaving the City as I am for my subversive activities over the last few years. I have never understood the intolerance of the Ladies towards their own people, in the same City. I

have done what I can to ease that situation; to offer better opportunities for the Remainders. And for a while, I thought that Seleste might be joining me in that…." She paused for only a moment, re-gathering her thoughts. When she continued, her voice was firm, as if she were both relieved and determined to speak of these things to me. "I think that my ideas swiftly outstripped her own. Whatever the reasons, I learned to be more circumspect. But I believed – and still do! – that the division of our population is detrimental to the health of our race. I know that the dogma of the City tells us the complete opposite, but the planet is changing, and the people are, too. There are troubles in the City, across the other Cities, too. We need some way of monitoring this, of controlling this – of protecting our people. We need to study the terrain, the climate, the geographical and sociological history of our world, and without restriction or fear. If I had become Queen…" she sighed, frowning. "I would have tried to change even more. We need all the resources we can get; all the skills that are available. Even if that means joining forces with the Exiles themselves."

I saw Kiel's eyes widen even further, and for once he was silent. I shrugged. "Opposition to that would not come only from the City. The Exiles will disagree with you, too; I don't believe they want to come back to the City, for various reasons. The two societies have become too diverse."

She nodded, impatiently. "That is so, though some Cities trade with them on normal commercial terms, and have done from self-interest for many years. But we need them – their expertise, if not their numbers." She saw my answering frown and spoke angrily. "Did you think they were like animals here, barely able to forage and survive, like primitives? So the myths of the City tell you – and maybe your experience has made you hate and despise them, too. But they've been here for many generations, developing strength and protection against the harsh life."

"Without the education and organization of the City…."

She frowned back at me again. "See past all that, soldier! They survive, the Exile people, without the assistance of any of our Households, including the Household of Physic. Maybe the men do not grow to be such splendid specimens as yourself, but that will come,

over further generations. And others have joined this community, too, not just fugitives and disgraced soldiers, but those who have brought skills and expertise from all areas – intellectually, scientifically, philosophically. They have come here because they are suffocated or persecuted in the City. You were in a minor Household at Exchequer, Maen, you would never have seen what fine minds exist in the City, nor what opportunities the Royal Household could have offered for them to thrive. But my mother refused to sanction study outside of the City's old ways. I have met and worked with people here who want to think and feel and question and *change* the world, yet have always been held prisoner to the Devotions and the Queen's intransigence."

"Are these people Ladies? Women?" I asked.

Her eyes narrowed. "Not solely. I spoke of men as well. Is that too shocking to you? I won't believe that you've never had thoughts and ideas of your own that weren't directed by your Mistress – that you can't imagine taking that a few steps further, to an independence of your own, like many of the male citizens here."

"It's treason," I said, softly.

She sighed, watching my reaction for a moment more. "You have lived with your caution too long, Maen – it has become a prison for your mind. I have lived my own lie for many years and spent too much time hiding and dissembling. It must stop. *We* must stop. The difficulties ahead must be faced together."

I gazed into her eyes, full now of passion and anger. "Your opinions – and ideas – are too bold for the City."

Surprisingly, she smiled. "I know. I've not been an easy person to have in the Household."

I wanted to smile, too, though with a little sadness. "This would all be astonishing news to the Queen – "

"She knows." Flora interrupted me, her voice tight with repressed emotion. When I stared at her with shock, she continued. "Seleste knows of these people, Maen, though maybe not the details, nor the extent of the community. She knows they are here, and that they are more than criminals and outcasts. But she cannot – will not – accept them back into her plans."

"She believes there are spies in the City who wish us ill – "

"And she sends spies of her own!" snapped Flora. "Hasn't she asked you to find those Exile spies? To investigate in return?" She could see from my expression that she was right. "It is from fear, Maen," she said, more gently. "To be fair, we've all been afraid of what was outside the City walls, all of the Ladies, especially in the Royal Household. I was one myself, remember. And there had always been rumors that past sisters of the Queen had sought refuge here, still an unknown threat to the stability of the City." She realized the irony of her own position, for she smiled at me. "Yes, that is exactly where I find myself, now."

"Where are these scientists? These philosophers?" I had seen only rough soldiers and their leaders in my time here.

Flora bit gently on her lower lip. She must have heard the wary suspicion in my tone. "You know that I won't be telling you that. Whether you consider yourself a spy or a soldier, that knowledge could not be trusted with you. But they exist, and they are at a safe location, and they are working with us."

"Us." I repeated her own word, softly.

Her only reply was a slight nod; a narrowing of her eyes. I had drawn the right conclusion about her new loyalties.

"Can you not speak to Seleste, explain this to her?"

Flora made a noise of disgust. "She will have me killed. That's the truth and you know it as well as I do. I've broken away from the City, I've rebelled against the rules and against the old ways. Seleste is no fool, and we've lived in the same house for all our lives: she has her suspicions of what I've been doing. Her life is based on the traditions of City life; her power is based on the hierarchy she has inherited. She can't give that up without losing everything she treasures. She listens only to what she wants to hear. In her eyes, I'm a traitor, not just to the City but against her personally. I am a threat to the social stability, something she cannot afford to let live."

"You attacked her after the Battle," I reminded her. "Tried to kill her."

Flora shook her head. "I defended myself, Maen. She had conquered my soldiers and I had no protection. She tried to take me, to hold me in her Household, and then she would have found sufficient reason to have me executed, whatever mercy she has shown to our other sisters. I had to escape from her."

I drew a deep breath. "She is strong." I meant that in many more ways than the physical.

Flora reached out for the first time and touched me, placing a hand on my arm. "She is *scared*, Maen. Scared to know what is happening to the planet – to the City. Scared to accept that the City needs more than her and her precious soldiers; to admit the thought of losing power."

"She has fought hard for it. She's a good Queen. Even if she is not extreme enough for your tastes, she has done a lot for the City, even before she won the Battle."

Flora smiled, though there was sadness in her eyes. "Your loyalty is all the more touching when you have no need of watching your tongue here. I scorn it – yet I admire you personally for it."

Kiel coughed beside me: we had both forgotten he was there. "Mistress, the Queen has improved the life of many Remainders, that's true."

I turned to look at him, his thin face strangely shadowed in the flickering light. "Yours?"

But he shook his head and his eyes darted to Flora and back to me. He looked conflicted, not knowing whether to speak up in support of me or his previous Mistress. "Not particularly. My opportunities have come from Mistress Flora alone. I will be grateful forever for that. When I spoke to you of the Remainders, Maen, I meant others. But we are still largely ignored in most City matters."

"She needs them as military fodder," Flora said, sharply. "That's why she offers them better training, better health. The only threat she understands is a military one."

"And the Exiles?" I countered. "Isn't that exactly what they represent? You talk of co-operation, yet you ally yourself with a group that is openly hostile to the City."

Flora's gaze shifted over to the cave mouth where Eila was watching us, or rather, me. Flora looked between us for a moment, as if she were puzzling over something. "They have offered me shelter – to be part of them. For that I'm grateful. And they are as concerned about the future of our world as anyone. Yet sometimes it's necessary to use conflict to force the path of negotiation. You should know that, you have been trained as a soldier for all of your adult years."

I was angry with her for using my life as some kind of accusation against me. "You're planning to confront her? With the Exile force? They're not strong enough. The City Guard will cut them down."

"Not yet, maybe," she snapped. "But it will come, if needs be. In the meantime, their attacks continue but in a different manner – subversive, undercover, stealing the resources of the City and undermining the blind loyalty of its citizens. And they will have success because of that. She won't always be able to counter them with brute force; she can't think like them, anticipate what it is to be like them. If they can't defeat her in battle, they'll do it by other means, and the City will eventually collapse."

"Is that what you want?" I said, my voice stern.

Flora stood up then, though with some difficulty: I suspected it had been a long time since she'd crouched on a floor with mere servants, or moved around in such a harsh environment. "We're moving on, Maen, and she must come with us. All of us must – the planet will demand all our efforts. Seleste will come with us or not: that's her choice."

KIEL scrambled to his feet to bow to his Mistress as she left the cave, and I stood up too, a little more slowly. My knee was much more painful after the climb up to the camp and the old injury was exacerbated by this cold, damp atmosphere. Eila came across to us then, leaving just the two men on guard at the mouth of the cave, their

backs to us. "We have a place you can both sleep, and together if you wish."

Kiel gave a yelp and I smiled, gently. "Thank you, though we'll sleep apart. Kiel has never been a soldier, or known a soldier's ways."

He grunted beside me and when I turned to reassure him, I was startled by the strange, pained look on his face. "Don't speak for me like that, Maen!" He sounded angry and yet embarrassed at the same time. "It's not that I wouldn't want to, I just don't feel that way towards you, though you're not to take offence. You know nothing about the Remainder ways, though, because if there was the right person and they felt the same about me, well, that'd be fine, and it could be a man, of course it could. I've got the same feelings as anyone, I'm healthy, I've had some sexual experience of my own and it's not a pleasure solely for soldiers you know, you're not the only ones who couple, you didn't invent the idea – " He broke off, biting his lip fiercely up under his front teeth.

There was a short silence while I wondered what – or who – had provoked his outburst, and Eila stared at him as if she'd never heard a young man's voice before. Maybe she hadn't, at least, not in such a passionate rush. She put out a hand towards him. "You can have the tent on the east face, I'll show you the way. It's a little further away, but it's sheltered from the wind for tonight, you'll sleep well enough."

Kiel was staring at her arm. "That brand…" he said, slowly. "I have seen something like it before."

I looked across at Eila. She had removed her jerkin, and the sleeves of her vest were so short that, by reaching out, she displayed the tattooed marks on her upper arm. The dominant brand was that of the Royal Household, similar to my own but more elaborate as befitted a Lady from that family. I was startled, and suddenly fearful. I didn't know how many other people knew of her history, that she'd lived in the Royal Household in her youth as one of the previous Queen's daughters. I didn't know if the discovery would compromise her in any way – or us.

"Kiel," I began. "That's enough – "

Eila had already moved, and more swiftly than I'd expected. She had drawn her dagger and pressed Kiel back to the cave wall with the blade against his throat, all before I even finished my sentence. "Your tongue is too loose!" she snarled into his frightened face. "I'll cut it from you!"

I moved swiftly too, catching hold of her arm and holding it back. I could see where the blade was already marking his pale skin. "He doesn't know anything about you," I said, urgently, keeping my voice low. "He's just interested in the brand."

She didn't take her eyes from him but her arm relaxed a little. "What do you mean?"

Kiel's eyes met mine, wide and dark with fear.

"Explain yourself," I said, nodding to him to continue.

He tried to swallow past the obstruction at his throat. "I … I'm writing a History for the Queen and I'm following her family's story through the Brand. The old documents are full of brands, they use them for indexing, for illustration, to head up mere lists of their shopping and the color choices of fabric for their gowns…." He gulped and drew another breath. "There are hundreds of them, most of them based on the same shape and form, it's not easy to track a particular hereditary line without plenty of time, and she – the Queen – has announced there's a distinctly limited amount of that. So my new Mistress – Mistress Nerisa – gave me a template of the Queen's Royal Brand to follow, to make my research easier."

Eila made a noise of dissatisfaction. "So you know what the Royal Family brand looks like. It happens. However, you will forget you saw it on *me*. It's nothing to do with me."

Kiel's eyes closed briefly, then reopened. His voice was hoarse. "I know, of course, my Lady. I'm sorry if I implied anything different. I've already forgotten, whatever it is I am to forget."

She seemed briefly satisfied with his apology for she withdrew the knife, though she still leant in, holding him captive.

I looked more closely at her brand, her arm outstretched and bracing her against the wall. The muscles tensed along her upper arm,

showing a strength that would have been unheard of in a City woman. The Royal Brand was a little faded, but still clear enough – an oval border with ornate vines entwined around it, framing the elegant, regal figure of a Queen. I doubted that Kiel had ever seen it on a human arm. Ladies did not hide their brands as a matter of course, but they dressed modestly in the City and a servant might never have sight of a Lady's lineage. He was probably intrigued to see it in real life. I looked quickly at him but was startled at the fear that was still in his eyes. Eila had removed her blade; his apology had been made. Yet his eyes still darted to and from her arm as if something shocked him to the core. And when I looked at him more carefully, I could see that the light in his eyes carried more than just fear.

I couldn't see what he saw. It wasn't the first time that had happened, though.

"Maen?" Kiel's voice was still shaky.

"You must let him explain," I said, my hand still on Eila's arm but not so tightly now. "I know he speaks a lot of nonsense around the sense – " I glared at him as I spoke, warning him to accept the rebuke without protest. "But he will come to the point in the end, so long as he still has a voice to do it with."

Eila withdrew her arm completely and Kiel sagged back against the wall, gulping in large breaths. "Forgive me, Lady," he croaked, "for offending you. It's only the Brand that I'm interested in, I'd never speak of it to anyone else, if that's what you want."

"You repeat yourself," she said. She looked puzzled.

He shook his head. "Not the Royal brand. I don't mean *that* one."

Eila sucked in a sharp breath, her eyes widening.

"You're mistaken," I said to Kiel, quietly. "I don't know what you think you see."

"That one," he said, blithely. "The *other* brand." We both looked at Eila's arm now as, startled, she kept it outstretched.

Beneath the Royal brand was, indeed, another. I should have realized the unusual circumstances of this, for a woman born into the

Royal Household would not normally have any other brand for the whole of her life. But beneath Eila's birth brand was this other, far less sophisticated one. A single sketched figure was displayed within a plain oval frame, the basis of many brands including my own. It seemed to be holding a stick of some kind, the end of it resting on the ground beside the figure's feet. There were no vines, no beautiful ribbons, no delicate silhouette of a female form. No beauty or glamour. As far as I could see, it could have related to a dozen Households and I wouldn't have been able to tell without a book of my own to guide me.

"Maen, can't you see?" Kiel was forgetting his fear again, consumed with interest now. "It's in the way that the figure stands. I've studied the Royal Brand so closely for weeks now, I know how the lines are drawn just so; the length of the neck beneath the head; how wide the stance is of the Queen's feet. This brand is inspired by the same basic template as the other, though obviously far more simplistic."

I stared at Eila. She was very white. "It's the Exile brand, isn't it?" I said to her, quietly. She didn't answer.

I had the same brand myself – she had given it to me and Dax when we were captured the first time. It wasn't that I had forgotten the savage, twisted mark on my hip, just that I rarely examined it. Any memory of that time had become too painful to me – and not for any physical reason. The last time I'd looked at it, when I was washing my body, I'd seen how it had faded into a dark scar, a pattern of two twisting, interlocked hoops around a central spear of some kind. There had been some lettering around it, but nothing legible. I looked again at Eila's brand and saw for the first time the similarity in design. My mark was an excerpt from hers – the hoops represented the bowed arms of the figure; the central spear was the same as the stick the figure held to attention.

"It's a sword," I murmured. It was a battle sword, much like the ceremonial one I'd taken into the Battle for Queenship. I didn't know if either of the others heard me.

"It's refreshing, really, it's so unlike the patterns I've been tracking in the Histories, the ones that are ambitious and ridiculously difficult to ink, too, though I daren't complain to Mistress Nerisa, of

course not." Kiel was chattering on, lifting a timid hand to Eila's arm. "May I?" When she frowned but nodded, he placed a finger on her arm and traced the brand most reverently. "I have seen this one, too, but not from any guidance of Mistress Nerisa. No, this has appeared only in the books, back in the older Histories. I didn't realize its connection to the current Royal Brand until now, until I saw it on a living person alongside its more modern version."

"There is no connection," Eila said, sharply, but he ignored her, smiling more or less to himself.

"They come alive on an arm, don't they? There's movement and pulse in their lines, and this design shows that better than so many other, poorer ones. Look how it follows the vein in her arm, the tattoo artists have told me that the Royal Brand should always be placed for a Mistress at just that point."

"You've been given access to them, too?" I murmured, wryly.

"Of course not," he answered cheerily enough, missing my sarcasm, his gaze still fixed on Eila's arm. "Not officially, that is, but I've been to most places around the Household, they don't see me if they don't think to look. Of course there are none of the decorations used nowadays on this brand; it appears very unique, I've never seen the figure and stick design in any other. It's more military than utilitarian, don't you think? And I know the Ladies disapprove of such aggressive designs on their men in case they develop an inappropriate pride." He flushed. "Or so the tattoo artists have told me. But I couldn't mistake that style. It's the figure of the Queen that's so striking, so familiar." He laughed, softly, with the excited pleasure of a new discovery. "In this raw form, though, it's something that's neither one nor the other, isn't it?"

I shook my head, staring at him, not understanding what he meant.

"Could be a woman," he said, blithely. "But then again, it could be a man. There's so little detail, it could be anything, couldn't it?"

EILA ordered the men at the cave mouth to take Kiel away and show him somewhere to sleep. We would both have to stay, for neither of us would be able to find our way back to the City quickly, and none of the Exiles appeared willing to let us go tonight. Eila and I were left alone inside the cave.

"Am I in danger again?" I asked. I could hear the soft murmur of voices from the rocks below where there were obviously other caves, other Exile gatherings: I could see the dying glimmers of a night-time fire on another outcrop to the west. They were all well hidden, as I'd discovered when I arrived, but now that I knew they were there, I could see evidence of settlement.

"From me?" She sighed, and chose not to answer me directly. "Who is the youth? Can he really be trusted? He speaks too swiftly, too strangely…."

"Too enthusiastically," I said, "but he can hold his secrets as well as anyone."

She gave a brief laugh. "Yes, he has a lot to say: there's a lot more to him than you'd think. But his comments about my brands…." She crossed her arms against her body, as if protecting against the chill. It had the effect of hiding both of her brands. "I've kept my background secret from most of the people here, although luckily we have much less interest in brands and people's heritage."

"Kiel will keep that secret," I assured her.

She didn't respond to me – her thoughts were elsewhere. "The other one … it was my own design." She didn't meet my eyes and the color was returning to her face. "For a while, I hoped to build a new brand for the camp, for the Exiles themselves. But that was not popular."

"They come here to escape that," I said.

She glanced up at me, surprise in her eyes. "Yes, that's what Takk told me at the time."

"Where did you draw the inspiration?" In my mind, I examined the Exile brand again, seeing the ways that it reflected the Royal Brand – and also, the ways it did not.

Eila was frowning now. "I don't think I had any special example in mind," she replied. She sounded quite genuine in her puzzlement. "Maybe I was unconsciously influenced by the Royal Brand, but my desire was to develop something new, something of our own. The Royal Brand was the only one I had seen, all through my childhood."

She had been only twelve when her older sister's Battle for Queenship had made her an exile, at risk of her life. I nodded, dismissing the subject for fear of antagonizing her. She stood close beside me in the cave, a head shorter but well-built and obviously physically strong. She was leaner than our voluptuous Mistresses, with a rough grace to her movements that was attractive in its own, unfamiliar way. There was a heavy, sensual perfume from her body, a musky smell that was stimulating to a man. I remembered it from my previous visit to her camp. Her vest was of a plain, functional design, though it clung to her shoulders and generous breasts; her dagger was sheathed again at her belt, and she knew to keep it on the far side of me, so that I couldn't easily snatch it. She was intriguing as a woman, but a good soldier, too, of her own kind.

She looked towards the mouth of the cave, out over the rocks, then looked back at me. Her eyes were dark and her expression pained. "You look very little older, Maen. Just as fine, just as strong … though we tried very hard to destroy that, a year ago." Her eyes flickered up and down my body, appraising me.

I bit my lip. "My leg is not good, my moods more volatile. I'm no longer in the Royal Guard and other citizens shun me." *The man I cared about more than anyone is dead*. "Isn't that any compensation for you?"

She grimaced. "I'd still have you now, however you are. You must know that." She touched me on the chest, then, her palm flat against my heart. "*You* still have my brand as well, don't you?"

I nodded. "You marked my flesh. But it has faded over time."

She looked hurt, then angry. Her eyes darkened with passion. When she started to run her hand slowly down towards my belly, I grasped her wrist and lifted it off.

She was shocked that I resisted her. "You didn't refuse me like that before. You obeyed me. You were too well Trained to do otherwise."

"Other things have faded over time, as well," I said.

She blanched. "I'm not ashamed to say it!" she cried, though she didn't attempt to touch me again. "If I were still in the City – still a Royal Mistress – I could just take you!"

I was quiet. I knew I didn't need to remind her of what I'd said to Mistress Flora, that neither of us was in the City any more. "I need to ask you…" I paused, then continued. "Is Varden still with you?" He had been my first mentor at the Household of the Exchequer, a fine soldier that Mistress Luana had exiled due to her jealousy and spite.

Eila's eyes were wary, yet suddenly sympathetic. "He's dead, Maen. He died many months ago."

My breath caught in my throat with grief. "He was killed in one of the raids?"

"No." She bit her lip. "He died of illness, at the end of a shortened life span. He was older than you; he worked hard here, but he struggled with the life outside the City."

"He died?" I tried to think when I had last seen a person die from the end of their life span, rather than from injury or in battle. I couldn't remember seeing it often in the City, where the older Citizens were rested in special homes, or hidden away in their Households. Illness wasn't a danger, for the House of Physic protected us from so much. It was a rarity, and something that our healthy citizens were sheltered from.

Whether they wanted that or not.

"And where is Takk?" I asked. A year ago, he'd been running this Exile camp with Eila. I imagined that if they'd moved their base, they would have moved it together.

She sighed, and there was pain behind the sound. "He is dead too, but he *was* killed in a raid, a few months after you returned to the City. One of your precious Silver Captains ran a sword through him

and others of our men. I helped drag many bodies back to the burial ground that day."

I breathed carefully for a few moments, disturbed by her blunt tales of death and disease. "There must be other ways for your group to survive."

"My group?" She sounded bitter. "Yes, we could surrender to the City; or we could move even further away and die among the rocks from cold and starvation. That's what I'd expect you to prefer."

"No," I said, quietly.

She smiled, but sadly. "You would be like Flora, then, preaching her ideas of merger with the City again? There are times I wish I were still there – and then there are times I remember I have been an Exile for much longer than I was Mistress, and that this is my real home. It's not an easy life … but it *is* life, not a Royal illusion."

I glanced quickly at her. "So now you're in charge here?"

She shrugged. "Partly. I look after the camp and the community – it's much larger now. Our military forces are no longer under my control, but Hann is a good leader. He's brought a lot of expertise to the camp."

"He's your partner?" There was something about the way she spoke the name of this Exile that alerted me.

She smiled in a rather twisted way. "No. He has other liaisons." She looked me full in the face and put a hand to my cheek. "I never thought you'd come back here, Maen."

I was silent, my hands loosely fisted at my sides. Eila lifted her hand tentatively again and ran a finger along the line of my throat. I didn't resist her this time. Then she dropped her arm and moved a step back. She nodded as if I'd spoken. I looked down at her, steadily.

"I will send someone to show you to a spare tent," she said. And then she left the cave, moving along the path outside until she turned a corner of the rock face and passed out of sight.

I STOOD just inside the cave, my back to the entrance, wondering how Kiel was; wondering whether Eila would send someone to me, or would just leave me to fend for myself; wondering whether to settle here for the remainder of the night, using the blankets for bedding. A cool, slight breeze wafted in the cave mouth. The night outside was still.

I didn't hear any loud noise or any other alarm, but suddenly the shadows at the mouth of the cave shifted and reformed, and I knew there was someone else there, behind me.

I never spoke. I knew it wasn't Eila or Flora, returning to question me. I knew it wasn't Kiel, however quietly he may have been able to move around if he chose. I wasn't scared, either: I didn't feel any of the instinctive reaction to fight that I might have felt at an ambush.

Instead, I felt … *shock*.

And something else: something more primitive, responding deep in my heart – in my soul.

I turned around, very slowly, desperate to see my visitor and yet horribly chilled at the thought, the two emotions conflicting inside me. A male figure stood in the cave entrance, the fading moonlight behind him casting his face into shadow. But I knew the shape; the young, strong build. I knew it as well as I knew my own.

I also knew he should be dead, yet I could see him in front of me, standing stock still, his eyes glinting in the darkness with a shine that I knew in full daylight would be sharp and blue.

I saw Dax.

CHAPTER 9

"YOU'RE meant to be dead," I said. The words sounded ridiculous: my voice was harsh and hollow in the cold atmosphere of the cave. I felt disorientated, as if the solid rock had shifted with magic beneath my feet. "They said you'd been killed in a raid against the City."

The figure stepped further inside the cave. The light from the torches had been gradually waning, but it still lit up his face. The shadows shifted around him and revealed the solid shape of a real man. I could see weariness in his expression; shock in his eyes. He moved slowly towards me, and not just from caution.

"It *is* you. I didn't believe Eila." He spoke softly but I was still startled by the deep tone of his voice. Had he grown so much in the year since I'd last seen him? I'd imagined him in my dreams so often, but in them, of course, he had never aged; never changed. Now I was in the face of reality and could see how life had altered him. He was taller and broader, as I might have expected, and was now barely half a head shorter than I. In the rough clothes of an Exile he looked thicker set, but I didn't know how much was due to his muscular development and how much to the harsher lifestyle outside of the City. His hair was still that astonishing white blond, his eyes still the blue of a clear stream, but he looked far older. He'd lost the boyish facial shape that he'd had as a Bronzeman: there were lines across his brow and a set to his mouth that had never featured in my dreams except in memories of when he was troubled. And that led me to look beneath the fall of loose hair, to look more closely at his face.

The marks were still there, a crosshatch of fine lines on his cheek from where the Exiles had once cut his flesh, torturing him to gain information about the City. The wounds had healed but the skin

would always be puckered and raw. We'd both suffered, and his scars were a sharp, painful reminder to me of what we'd been through. I stared at his face and felt my throat tighten up with pain and amazement and….

Need. *Love*. I hadn't used the words for so long that I wasn't sure I knew what they meant any more.

He stopped a couple of feet away from me, breathing heavily. He bent a little awkwardly at the waist, as if his side was troubling him.

"Are you real?" he gasped.

And then I had to smile, for that awed tone was one I remembered particularly well. "I was about to say the same thing."

He smiled back – suddenly, and with genuine pleasure – and for that second it was as if we were still back in the City and I was on the Training ground with him, developing his sword work, or watching him ride under Fremer's tuition, or he was provoking me gently about some Household matter, or it was dark and we were alone together, and we were moaning and touching, and holding, and grasping, and….

And then the illusions passed just as swiftly, and I was standing back in the cold, bare cave, isolated from my peers and in the middle of Exile territory. I shook my head, trying to clear away the sudden grip of pain.

"Sit down," he said, sharply. He looked uncomfortable. "This is… very unexpected."

I sat down on the floor again and waited for him to join me. He knelt carefully and then sat down fully, still keeping the same distance between us.

"You're injured?" I could see the way he was favoring his left side. I thought I could also see the edge of a cloth bandage under his jerkin, wrapped over the top of his torso. "They said you'd been in a raid to the City, some months ago, and a Silver Captain had brought you down." *They said you'd been killed*.

He winced, but straightened his body as if determined to look well and strong. "My own fault. I was tired of staying back here, in case I was seen; in case someone in the City recognized me as a

fugitive. We needed more men, too, we were hit badly from the previous raids, so I thought I'd be useful at the front for a change." He grimaced from the memory rather than from bodily pain. "It was foolish to attack so soon after the previous attempts. We mount offensives often and fiercely, it's a strategy that brings us some success, but not always. This time, we were outnumbered and with ill-trained soldiers. It wasn't only I who was injured, or – "

"Killed." My voice sounded brittle.

His eyes were on my face, and had been since he sat down. It was as if he were searching for something in my expression. "Yes, killed. Many of our men and women have died in the raids over the last year, only adding to our troubles. Your soldiers fight fiercely, but then you know that already. And every single body gets dragged back here, Maen, however mangled or bloodied: we never leave a soldier on the field. They dragged me back that day, and Veli was able to mend my wounds."

Veli? "The girl you knew when we were here before."

He nodded. "She has some special skills in healing. I needed plenty of them." He still stared at me, though his eyelids now drooped, narrowing his gaze. "You need to sleep, the nights are long and cold out here, and there are still several hours until the camp wakes fully. We can talk tomorrow – "

"No sleep," I snapped. For Devotions' sake, did he think I'd miss any minute of his company? Did he think I could find him resurrected from the dead and not want to savor every second of his life? Did he think….

I didn't care?

He laughed, but bitterly. Its echo glanced off the walls, falling away into a numbed silence. "Your voice… it's so good, so strong, Maen. I never thought I'd hear it again. The voice of a Gold Warrior."

"No longer," I said. "I'm a civilian now. I'm less of a soldier than you are."

He frowned at me, his voice a harsh snap. "How could she do that to you?" Then he seemed to regret the words escaping from him,

biting quickly at his lip, but we both knew who he meant. "You were the best. She wanted you in her Guard. She insisted on it." I knew it was more than that, to us, at least. Seleste had taken me for herself, as both soldier and man. She had taken me from *him*.

But I nodded, struggling for calm, fighting back the anguish and the nervousness of talking with him again. "I helped her to win the Battle for Queenship, but now she has her own soldiers."

"And do you share the glory with her?" His voice was as bitter as his laugh had been. "Was it worth it for that?"

"No," I said, softly. "She is still the Queen. The only one." I could feel his anger and resentment as a tangible thing, a sharp bite in the already frosty air. "But it was still worth it," I said firmly, holding his gaze. "It was worth it because you lived."

He stared at me, even more intensely. Something slowly changed in his eyes, hardening them, and he started to shake his head. "You look the same, Maen," he said, wonderingly. "You sound the same. And the words are the same cruel ones you said a year ago, when you pushed me away from you."

The chill that ran through me owed nothing to the cold, bare ground beneath me. "It was all I could do," I said. "They were going to execute you. We couldn't be together."

He was silent: he stood up, slowly. By the time he was upright, I'd scrambled to my own feet and stepped towards him, closing the gap between us. I could see the beads of sweat on his throat; the rapid rise and fall of his chest. "Dax…" I said, lost for the right words. "I'm so glad you're alive. So glad to see you."

He sighed, then. "I wish I could say the same," he said, softly. When I tried to step forward again, he put out a warning hand. Did he feel he had to guard himself from me? "Sleep now," he said, his voice sharp again. "You might as well stay here in the cave, it'll not be used again tonight. But make the most of the time, for when the camp *does* rise, there'll be no peace for you then."

I watched him as he walked past me, leaving the cave. I couldn't think of what to say or do to make him stay, for he so obviously didn't want that. He didn't look back at me, but walked with

pride, hiding his injury: maybe hiding so much more. But however brave his bearing, I could see that there was no peace for him, either.

I DIDN'T sleep for a long while afterwards: how could I? The shock of seeing Dax again had shaken everything within me. Had I really believed in Seleste's tale of his death? Maybe I'd come here so willingly with Kiel because I hoped to learn news of Dax – to catch sight of him, after all. Maybe I'd been less than honest with myself and what had driven me.

I'd had no word of Dax since the day he left the Detention Quarters, after I'd broken him out of his cell and winched him up to freedom, with instructions to take a horse and make his way out of the City. I didn't know then whether he'd make his way back to the Exiles, for they'd treated him badly, too, but all I knew was that he had to keep away from the City and Seleste's wrath. We had been aliens in our own world, shunned because of our extraordinary history – captured by Exiles, yet returning to our City alive – and marked by suspicion of treason. I had thought we'd find security back with our merciful Mistress, but there'd been none. We had both been accused of the appalling crime of coupling, totally forbidden as it was between Gold Warrior and Bronzeman, and we'd both come close to death, largely as a result of what I now saw was my naivety. Dax's only escape had been to leave the City – and mine had been to subject myself to Seleste as my Mistress.

That had been all I could do, just as I had told Dax.

Hadn't it?

It had been in a cave like this that we'd been imprisoned by the Exiles, a year ago. We'd been kept away from the rest of the camp, though we'd been used as laborers along with other criminals and captives. And they'd been less hostile towards Dax, seeing him as more of a fellow outcast because of his Remainder heritage. I knew even then that he could have a future with them, and it seemed that I'd been right. Not only had he found shelter here, but I suspected he'd brought his soldiering skills to the camp. Eila's men had been far from the standard of soldiers in the City, but they had been good enough to

surprise me and Kiel on the mountainside – and strong enough to bring us in.

The camp had indeed retired for the rest of the night, for the background murmur of voices and occasional shouts had ceased. The excitement of capture had passed, and Kiel and I had been confined in the appropriate manner for the moment. There were men outside the cave to watch me, I was sure, but they didn't intrude. The smell of wood ashes had drifted away on the night air and the only sounds were from nocturnal creatures and the occasional creak from the indigenous shrubs outside, their roots clinging precariously to the rock face.

I sat on a blanket with my back against the far wall, drew my knees up to my body, and dropped my head down on to them. It was cold inside without the protection of a thick fabric tent and the lingering warmth of a daily fire, but I'd known worse. My fingers trailed on the coarse fabric of the blanket and I remembered the feel of it, tugged up over my body, covering my naked skin as I lay against him; against Dax. I shut my eyes, all the better to hear his whisper in my head; my laughter; his gasp of shock and fierce delight as I'd entered him for the first time.

I could hear it all, as clearly as it had been a year ago. What a fool I'd been, to think I'd put it all to the back of my mind, treasuring it as just a memory and convincing myself it could be detached from reality! What a fool, thinking I could continue my life, content with just the knowledge that he'd had the chance of life elsewhere. Not just a fool, but a selfish, greedy one – one who longed for that touch again, for my own satisfaction, for my own pleasure.

The ache in my body was a physical one, not just the pain of remembrance. His face tonight had looked so much older, his bearing wearier than such a young man deserved. And yet I knew how fast he could run; how gracefully he could turn to block a sword's strike; how strongly he could pull on a horse's bridle to direct it across the Training ground. Or at least, that's how he had been in those days. My hand slipped slowly down the inside of my thigh, feeling the tightening of muscles in my leg. His hands had teased between my legs like this, cupping me, stroking me. He'd rolled his body underneath me,

wriggling and laughing with the fear of first time nerves, and then arching up with sudden, shocking pleasure.

I could smell his body scent in the cave, although he'd been gone for hours. I could hear the cadence of his voice; see in my mind the glint of his eyes. Tonight, there had been pain in those eyes, and hostility, too. He wasn't the same man – and neither was I. And yet….

My hand rested on my groin, feeling the stirring between my legs. My cock was no respecter of confusion, either mine or Dax's. The sight of him – the nearness of him – had disturbed me more than the presence of anyone else ever could, and I couldn't help the physical response from my body. I kept my eyes shut, sinking into the memories, and slowly I stroked myself through the fabric of my trousers. I slid down so that I lay on my side on the blanket, and the dank cold of the cave floor teased at my nostrils. But I was comforted: I could still smell his warm skin, and I knew how it would feel against mine, and I knew how his muscles would tense and his hands would grip me with surprising strength, and how we would come together as two men at last.

The memories started to shiver apart in my mind as the aching promise of orgasm uncurled in my belly. I gripped myself, pumping harder, the clothing around my cock adding to the friction. I knew the thought of no other lover could ever be this dear to me; could ever give me such poignant pleasure. In my mind, Dax was underneath me, grunting with effort, hissing my name and demanding more from me. He fought within my grasp, trying to press himself against the whole of me, trying to pull me closer, to take more of me – to *feel* more of me. He was with me, there in that cave – or at least, his memory was. He was all I could see. My free hand clutched at the blanket on the ground and my body stiffened as I came, the climax shuddering through me. The thickness of my cock filled my palm, making it sweat with the sudden warmth and activity, and my seed spat out stickily inside my clothes. I gasped his name aloud, but the sound was swallowed by the echoing emptiness of the cave.

And then – somewhat miserably – I slept.

THE morning brought no hint of the night's damp: the dawn burst its way through the cave mouth with a sharp, clear light that made me wince, even in my sleep. When I rolled out from under my blanket, I could smell the thin smoke of fresh wood fires and hear the calls of people out on the rocks. I stood up carefully, my knee protesting from the exercise the day before and the uncomfortable sleep, but it wasn't the first time I'd lain on a stone floor, nor would it be the last, I suspected. Someone had pushed a bowl of water and a bucket inside the entrance and I washed and relieved myself hurriedly. Then I stood just inside the mouth of the cave for a while, keeping myself hidden and watching with some amazement as the Exile camp came to life in front of my eyes.

They were living in a network of caves, set in the rock face. When I'd been brought here the night before I'd suspected this was the case, but I hadn't seen any direct evidence. Now in the daylight I could see that many of the entrances had been camouflaged with screens made from branches of the sparse shrubs, wedged in place by what seemed to be deceptively solid piles of boulders. Now the morning had arrived, the coverings had been pushed away, the stones had been rolled easily aside and there were men and women passing in and out of the caves. The whole side of the mountain climbed upwards in a series of broad steps, each platform adding its own corridor of caves to the whole community. Paths and handholds had been carved out of the rock so that people could move more easily between these levels. It was all very different from the Place, the camp where I had been kept prisoner.

I stretched, awkwardly – and then suddenly Kiel was there, dropping down from the rock platform above to land beside me. "Maen! Isn't it an astonishing place? I've been looking around and although it seems so disconnected and primitive, it's really rather efficient, it's a proper settlement with all the facilities you'd need, though so much poorer and less accessible than in the City, of course. In fact, I think I've seen descriptions in the earlier Histories of similar settlements, though surely that must have been before the Queens created the Cities and moved the people inside the walls. There are so few records left in the Library from those times, they are difficult to find and awkward to read, and of course none of it is on my list of

official research from the Queen herself. But these people, these Exiles weren't around then anyway, were they, and yet they've created their own community in just the same way. I must look through the older volumes when I get back, just for my own interest, I must find the time to compare…. Don't you see that this is why I love the books, for what they tell us about the world and our people, and the patterns of our life? I begin to believe that nothing is really new, nothing should be a surprise, everything can be a learning experience – "

"Kiel."

He stopped and stared at me. He had a new jerkin on that he'd obviously borrowed overnight from a generous Exile. Or maybe one who'd welcomed the prospect of freezing to death rather than listen to Kiel chatter on for a few unadulterated hours.

"You want me to be quiet," he said, and grimaced.

I smiled. "Just while we find out what will happen to us now."

He frowned. "We'll go back to the City, surely? Mistress Flora won't let harm come to us. She says she'll talk to Hann, their leader, he'll understand that we're just messengers and no threat to them."

"We've seen their camp," I said, gently enough. "I'm a servant of the Royal Household. That's a threat in anyone's mind, let alone their leader's."

His eyes widened. "She says he's a good man. He'd honor a messenger, wouldn't he? Who wouldn't? We're not here as soldiers –"

"Kiel," I prompted again, softly.

"She promised, Maen." His voice was low, but determined. "A Royal promise."

I didn't want to scare him, but he had no understanding of these people beyond City legends and maybe a brief investigation of these old Histories that he set such store by. "Mistress Flora's not Royal here. She's not in charge."

"No," came a low voice behind me, as another man turned the corner on to our particular rock shelf. "*I* am."

I turned slowly to face him. "You're Hann," I said, not surprised in the slightest.

Dax nodded to me. In the morning light, his face was a better color, his skin obviously tanned from continued exposure to the sun. The contrast with his piercing blue eyes and pale hair made him even more striking. And unlike last night, he stood well, as if the pain had abated from his wounds. He looked every inch the master of his community. The leader of this Exile band.

Kiel looked between us, confused and scared. "Maen," he hissed. "Is there anyone here you *haven't* met before?"

Dax met my eyes and we looked at each other for a silent moment. "Come with me," he said at last. "We need to talk."

I MADE sure that Kiel was settled with some of the men who still attended Mistress Flora and then Dax led me across one of the wider plateau areas to where there were several tents as well as caves. There was a group of men and women in front of the tents, cooking root vegetables and birds' eggs and joints of a thin, wiry animal whose bare carcass was unfamiliar to me. But the smell of the cooking was very good. When the food was done, they laid it out in the ground beside them on a low base table made of branches and covered with large leaves. Then the younger Exiles brought along baskets of bread and seeds to supplement it.

Dax stopped next to the group and picked up food from the makeshift table, handing some to me. I hadn't realized how hungry I was until the smell of it hit my nostrils and the juices from the meat ran over my fingers. I ate quickly, and when a young boy timidly offered me some more bread, I took it eagerly. He stared at me, though, and kept himself and his basket as far from me as possible. When I'd taken the food, he ran off quickly.

They were *all* staring at me. Dax glanced around the group and grimaced. He ran his hands down his jerkin, wiping the excess grease off, and gestured for me to come away. We walked a further hundred steps, then paused behind a small cluster of empty tents. There was no one there, nor could anyone see us, though we could still hear the

murmuring voices of his people in the background. He sat down on a pile of large, flat stones fashioned into a bench arrangement and, after a brief pause, I followed. There was something about his attitude that made me keep a distance as broad as a man between us.

"It's still the same," I said, quietly. It wasn't a question. "There's still the hostility between Exiles and City."

Dax frowned. "What did you think would change? The Queen continues to exclude us from everything, to treat us as mortal enemies. Her City's resources are kept jealously for her citizens, and only them – and when we try to take what we need, her slaves lock us out and her soldiers attack and kill us."

It sounded as if he had pronounced that speech many times. "You have contacts in the City," I said, steadily. "You're not always locked out." When he looked up at me, startled, I shook my head. "I don't know that for certain, but I've always suspected it. There are things here I've seen in the City – tools and fabrics that you couldn't make out here without the materials, which means that you have suppliers from within the City. And not just within the Remainders. You remember–"

"You accused me of being a spy, once," he interrupted. "Yes, I remember. You thought that *I* was a traitor to the City."

"I didn't understand, then," I said, quietly. "How there can be so many kinds of people, so many differences."

He continued as if I hadn't spoken. "But now I *am* a traitor, aren't I? And yet it was the City itself that made me so. My own Guard turned against me, to torture me: the City rejected me, threatened to execute me." He stared at me. He shook his head and his hair fell back over his ears, exposing the whole of his face. "They saw me as damaged goods, no longer of use to the Mistress. A poor return for her investment in her Guard. Do you remember *that*?"

His resentment was so fierce that his tone seemed to lash out at me physically. I continued to gaze at him, neither afraid nor disgusted to look at the mess of badly healed skin on his face. He looked the same as ever to me. He looked as handsome … as magnificent. My

gut churned inside. I had found him again – but I'd found that particular agony as well.

"Why did you take a different name, Dax?"

He grimaced. "Isn't it obvious? I was a fugitive. The camp took me in – though they didn't want to, at first – and it seemed only fair that I didn't add to their problems. Anyone looking for me by name wouldn't find me." When he saw my rueful smile, he snapped back, "What is it? Is that so wrong?"

"No," I shook my head. "It's very admirable. But I think you're naïve if you think only your name would identify you." Even here amongst his adopted people, in their clothes and with the beginnings of a similarly sunburned skin, he looked different. It wasn't just the bright, pale hair and the vivid eyes, for there were many different types of people seeking to make a life here, and many Remainders from what I could see. But Dax had been well built as a youth, else my Mistress would never have Chosen him as a Bronzeman, and he'd shown tremendous promise in his Training, growing taller and stronger by the day. There was also something about his bearing that marked him out from the crowd: he carried himself with a pride that only a soldier of the City could have had. I knew that there were likely to be other soldiers in exile here, but Dax was one of a kind. His rise to leadership here had only accentuated all that.

"And they have put you in charge." I was proud, despite the context.

He flushed. "Takk was killed shortly after I came here. It was a raid for medical supplies, yet again, for those are things we cannot yet prepare for ourselves. Maybe one day, when we have access…." He caught my eye, and my interest, and he bit off what he'd been about to say. "It was a stupid attempt, he went on his own with only a couple of men, and no one knew why he risked that, not even Eila. We brought them all back, but none of them survived. Eila didn't want to be sole leader and our soldiers were low in number and morale at that time. I offered to help them – to ease my way into the group and also to … keep occupied." His face twisted, as if he fought to hide his emotions. "I suggested we move the camp to here. It was an impossibly hard life,

down by the old river bed, and we were vulnerable to any attack they sent after me."

I was shocked and my hand reached out to take his arm. "You were pursued?"

He stared at me, his eyes narrowed. "You didn't know? Seleste sent several parties out in the first months after I escaped. They were only ever Silver Captains – no Gold Warriors. I didn't merit that, obviously. They never found me, though, and many things changed in the camp, slowly but surely. We learned a lot, both from those attacks and our own raids. *I* learned a lot. This camp is easier to defend, and to withdraw our women and children to safety if we're attacked closer to home. I think other groups have found this location useful in the past, too, for there's evidence of it having already been adapted for human settlement, though it had obviously been abandoned for a long time. We've gathered many new recruits, some of them from other Cities, so that we can share knowledge and experience better than before. We're well placed to gather resources where we can, considering the poor soil out here and the exposure to the worst elements. But since then I've brought in some new training, too…." He broke off sharply. His eyes didn't meet mine.

"You can trust me, Dax," I said. It was astonishingly hurtful to realize that he doubted my loyalty to *him*. "I'm not a spy for the Queen. Not against *you*."

His eyes flickered back up to me. His cheeks were flushed, maybe just from the chill morning, and he continued in a more subdued tone. "I've developed more close quarter sword fighting; better general fitness training; a tighter structure to our grouped attack."

I nodded: they were all good strategies. "I knew you would be a good soldier," I said, but my voice came out barely as a whisper.

"I've had to be. You don't see how things really are, Maen," he said. His voice was a hoarse thread in the quiet air. "You're indoctrinated to think that the City is everything to a man, but the Queen knows more about life out here than she admits. She sends men out more regularly than you realize: we've been attacked near here as well as at the City walls. She knows there's traffic between our communities, and it's likely to increase." He glanced down at my hand

on his arm then back up to my face. "I thought for a long time that she might have sent *you* after me, if only to torment us both." I was struggling to speak and for the first time his eyes softened towards me. "I wouldn't have wanted that, Maen."

"But I thought I had –"

"You thought you'd bought my freedom at the expense of your own?" His voice was harsh, now. "The Queen doesn't bargain like that. I've learned that from my own experience; from Eila's; from Flora's. The Queen wants only what she wants, the rest of us are expendable. She would have killed her own sister, Maen, as easily as she wanted to kill *me*."

"At the Battle? I was there – " I stammered.

"She would kill you, too!" he growled. "Don't you see? If you defied her; if you didn't help her with what she wants and needs. If for a minute she thought you were no longer *hers*!"

It felt as if something snapped inside me. I tightened my hand on him and wrenched him around to face me fully. "Is that how you see it? That I'm *hers*?"

His eyes widened but he didn't pull away. "Yes. You made your choice. It was a hard one, I know, but it was still your choice. You let me go, and you went to *her*." Something flickered in his eyes. "How else can I see it? Veli says…."

"Veli?" I felt my fingers gripping him too tightly but still he sat there, taking it. There was no one within either earshot or sight, but I still spoke in a low, urgent tone. "What does *she* know of it all?"

"I … she is my partner now. She's going … to have a child." He half-smiled, then frowned. Maybe he was confused about it, himself. "You won't understand that idea of family unit, of course."

I stared back. My heart was hammering against my chest. I might have been able to think of Dax with another lover – or many – but the thought of him with a child rocked me. "Try me."

He shook his head: he looked both ashamed and angry. "Maen, it's been hard for me. I am of neither world: they're both wary and scornful of me. But I've made my own place here, regardless." He

stared at me, fiercely. "I was alone, just as I was before I was taken into the Household. Just as I've always been. Whatever I've done, I've done for myself. Alone."

There was silence between us for a second.

"Mistress Flora has ideas to bring the Exiles and the City together again…" I began.

"It will never happen," he said. His voice sounded dull. "We're too different now. And we have nothing important enough to the Queen to bargain with, for representation." He glanced up at me. "Is that what you'd advise, if you were still a Warrior?"

"I don't want your men to be killed," I said, bluntly. "If you continue this pattern of sporadic, vicious raids, that's what will eventually happen. Your only choice is to find some negotiation with the City."

He was watching me closely, as if he expected me to say something more. He didn't answer.

"You called this 'home'," I said. There was such pain in my chest that I felt physically wounded. "You talk about the camp being 'closer to home'. And you have a partner, there'll be a … child. I understand that." I let go of him and stood up, a little stiffly. "Whatever you say, whatever strategy you take with your camp and your men, I understand that I'm no longer part of your world – you no longer need, or wish to listen to me. But I'm glad that you're alive." My heart celebrates it, I wanted to cry aloud. My whole being is amazed by it! "I stayed in the City because I couldn't see any other option, because, you may say, I was a fool. But I never stayed because of Seleste – I never chose her over you, not deliberately. I did what I did, because of you. But I know you think I was wrong. I must give you that much respect." I saw him tense up and I hurried on, "I will leave the camp at once. You can trust me not to tell the City where you are; give me that credit at least."

He stood up as well, standing much closer to me than he'd been sitting. "You know I can't let you leave," he hissed. "A Gold Warrior, who has been to our camp? Who'd be returning to the City to serve in

the Queen's own Household? I'd be gifting the life of my people into Seleste's own hands!"

His vehemence shocked me. "You hate her that much?"

He glared back. "I will kill her one day."

I stared into those bright, cold eyes, my heart contracting painfully. "Would you kill me as well then, Dax?"

His pupils dilated, suddenly. His back straightened, though I don't think he did it consciously.

"Whatever you do to me, let the youngster go," I urged, quickly. My heart was beating very fast. I knew that if Dax tried to kill me here and now, to prevent me leaving the camp, I could defeat him, though maybe not as easily as when he was first a boy under my command. But I was still the stronger, better soldier. Then I looked into his ravaged face and I knew it would never come to that. I would never harm him. How could I even have harbored the thought of it? "Let Kiel go," I repeated, desperate for Dax to agree. "He's just a bystander, an errand boy, he's no threat to you. Mistress Flora will vouch for him, if you have any respect for her."

Dax didn't answer directly. His breathing had become shallower and his gaze flickered from my face to my body. Was he so wary of me? But he knew I was unarmed; he knew he had only to call out to have many of his men rush to help him. "What will you do, Maen, if you leave here?"

I swallowed carefully. "I'll go back to the City, you're right about that. I need to see that Kiel is safe, and I need to make sure we cover our tracks for having left in the first place." I appealed to him. "If I don't do that, they'll come after me. They'll know."

"*She'll* know," he answered, softly. "And this time she'd send Gold Warriors, I'm sure. Are her soldiers good ones, Maen? As good as the ones at the Household of the Exchequer?"

I thought of the fine, arrogant Zander and the keen, talented Edrius and I nodded. "They are better. The Queen has the best."

He nodded back, his eyes still on me. "I know that already."

I felt hot; my mouth was dry. I watched the swell of his throat as he moved his head, restlessly. "Dax, I mean it. I won't tell the Queen about the camp. I wanted to know where Mistress Flora was, but I don't wish her harm from Seleste."

"Seleste will kill her. Flora would never bow to her. Her only choice is to stay here."

I nodded.

"Would *you* do that, Maen?" His voice was clear but still low, so I doubted anyone beyond the tents could hear his urgent words. "Would *you* stay, if we had our time again?"

I stared at him. For a second, the youngster gazed out at me through his more world-weary eyes. I couldn't find the words I needed, and I stammered. "All I know…."

He interrupted me with a sound of disgust. "As I thought. Your choice would always be the same, it would always be for the City, for the Gold Warrior in you, not for – "

I grasped his arm, much more tightly this time. "Let me finish!" I hissed. Startled, his eyes widened again and his head dropped back, baring his neck to me. There was a mist of anger and pain in front of my eyes and it made me speak more harshly than I wanted – and definitely more rashly. "All I know is that I've thought about you every day since we parted; that your spirit has been with me in everything I've done. I've walked with you, Trained with you, fought with you – *slept* with you! You are with me, Dax, all the time, and you always will be. I can't change that. I may not like it – "

"Maen?" He sounded astonished.

I grimaced. "It doesn't make for a restful life, is all I can say. It doesn't make for…." A truly *loyal* one, I wanted to say, but I didn't go that far. "But it's my life and I made it so, and I must live with it."

"Alone," Dax whispered, an unconscious echo of his earlier comment.

"Yes. Alone." I had never spoken it aloud. I sounded hoarse. The nearness of his body was horribly unsettling; my blood was heated

with the tortured memories of my sleep the last night, and my dreams of….

Dax stepped one more foot towards me and suddenly his hand was on my shoulder, a warm palm on my skin through the thin cloth of my tunic. "It's the same," he gasped. His face was pale, his eyes narrowed as if he sought to hold back his emotions. "It's the same for me. Will it stop, Maen? Will it ever stop hurting like this?"

I gazed into his face, inches away. I didn't answer, but I didn't need to, he knew what I'd say. He knew what the truth of it was – we both did. I bent my head at the same time as he lifted his, our hot breath mingling in the chill air around us. Anger sparked in his eyes for a second, then something much deeper and more anguished. But there was a flash of sudden, uncontrollable desire, too, and his mouth touched on mine even more quickly than mine reached for his. My lips were dry, and his were slightly softened by the grease of our breakfast food. Whatever the texture, we met with a rich, warm familiarity, his tongue darting out to meet mine. I groaned, and his hand tugged at me. I grasped him around the waist – too fiercely! – and drew him tightly against me. He felt thinner than I remembered, yet the pure pleasure of feeling his muscles under my touch was so much sharper. It shocked me, the sweet delight that coursed so swiftly through me, the furious, frantic passion that flooded my memory! He gasped into my mouth, nipped at my lower lip, ran his tongue along my teeth. His fingers dug into my shoulder. My tongue thrust into him with a strange, wild greed that seemed to spiral out of my control.

"Maen…" he said. His mouth left mine, though he didn't pull away. His voice was a growl in the back of his throat. "I came back to the cave last night. I heard you. I heard you call out to me in your sleep."

I gripped him more tightly; my head sank down into the crook of his neck, so that I could feel the harsh beating of his pulse. The morning stubble on my chin scraped against his cheek, but I felt as if I couldn't get close enough to him. "You saw me." He nodded in reply, his hair brushing against my face. I didn't bother apologizing or trying to explain. I was still a soldier in spirit, even if I now had no rank. My body's needs were nothing to be ashamed of; rather, they were to be

admired. But if I'd come back into his life and disturbed his peace with my frustrated desires….

"I watched you," he whispered. "Until you slept." His mouth ghosted against my jaw – neither of us seemed able to draw away. "I… it reminded me…." He shook his head, angry again, I didn't know whether at me or himself. I could feel the tension in his arms as he held me. I wanted desperately to kiss him again, I was throbbing with excitement, and a turmoil of emotions, a mixture of remembered pleasure and fresh, piercing joy. I lifted my head again to look into his face.

A sudden noise behind us startled him and he pulled his hands away. I straightened up, my heart hammering, but my body already steadying itself to meet any threat.

"Hann?" A young woman had appeared from behind the tents that sheltered us. Her eyes went naturally to Dax, but flickered to me as well. They darkened with shock.

"Veli," I murmured in greeting, inclining my head. I remembered her and she obviously remembered me. Dax turned his head towards her, his expression clear and his hands at his side, though I could see them shaking very slightly. He couldn't turn fully away from me just yet. He was aroused, his groin swollen noticeably at the front of his tunic, and I was sure that she'd see it, too.

I had years of practice in controlling my body to order, of course. I stepped around him and faced her, shielding him behind me while he composed himself again. Eila appeared from behind the tents, followed by Brod and Karil and others.

"He shouldn't still be here," she said, abruptly. She meant me. "Hann? What do you want us to do with him?"

Veli looked between me and Eila, confused. She was the same delicate young woman that I remembered from a year ago, some distant relative of Eila yet without the older woman's strength and warrior aggression. She had fine, blond hair and pale eyes that would give her the appearance of a girl even when she had matured many more years. She stood now with her hands loosely at her sides and I could see the slight mound of her pregnant belly showing under her tunic. Dax

moved from behind me and went to stand by her, though I noticed that they didn't touch. In fact, she leant away from him as he approached, although the movement was almost imperceptible.

"He's leaving now," he said. There was no tremor to his voice like before.

Brod frowned. He was a short man with thick arms and slightly bowed legs, and a brow that was heavily creased. "That's nonsense. We must execute him."

"He's leaving," Dax repeated, more firmly. "He won't betray the camp."

A spot of color appeared on Eila's cheeks. Beside her, Brod protested to his leader, "There's no way you can be sure of that – "

"Be quiet," Dax said, sharply. "I've said he won't. Do you challenge me?"

Brod shook his head. His eyes were angry, but he stepped back. Dax turned back to me now, his face stern. "Take the youngster and go quickly. It's for your own good. We're not the only enemy you might have outside the City. It's not your territory; not your place."

I stared at him a moment longer, cautious of angering Eila and the other men any more than I already had, yet trying to memories his features in case … my courage failed at the thought of never seeing him again.

"Hann…." His new name sounded odd in my mouth.

"Go," he hissed. Veli glanced at him again, but he grasped her hand as if to reassure her. "You're not welcome here, as Gold Warrior or man." His eyes glared at me, the hostility returned. "You chose to live there – to serve there. Return quickly to your world before I change my mind about allowing it."

I had no other option: I could see Kiel's face peering around from behind them, scared and white. The small group of men parted around me as I walked towards Kiel, and I just kept going.

I didn't look back.

"MAEN?" Kiel had been unusually quiet for a while, for which I was grateful. A scout from the Exiles had accompanied us over the heathland until we found the landmark cairn again, and now we were making our own way back from there to the City. There were some isolated patches of shrubs and low trees and the craggy landscape of the rocks themselves, but it wasn't too difficult a path, even when we had to climb over or around the cover. It was already the early afternoon and the weather was settling fair for the day ahead. The return would be easier than the journey out in the dark, but I was insisting on a fairly fast pace. I had no idea what restrictions there might be on Kiel's time and when or whether he'd be discovered missing – or when Seleste might return and find the same of me.

"I'm very glad they set us free," he continued. "I'm very glad to be alive, of course. Aren't you?"

He didn't understand my brooding. I bit back a sigh. "Yes, it's good that they didn't kill you, Kiel. It's because they know you won't be able to find your way back to the camp at any time, that you'll never remember where their location is…." I glanced down at him. He was flushed and not meeting my eyes. I smiled, ruefully. "Of course you will, I know you better than that, but the Exiles are not to know your resourcefulness. And you must stay away from the camp in future, both for your own safety – "

"And Mistress Flora's?" he whispered back. "They could follow me from the City, couldn't they? Or torture me, to learn where she is. Or…." He shuddered.

I put a hand on his shoulder. "Don't think about it, that's by far the best way."

"I don't think I could withstand torture," he said, rather thoughtfully. "I'd tell them immediately, I'm sure, maybe I can't be trusted, maybe I'd just talk at the first provocation – "

"You'd talk," I agreed, grimacing. "That's most certainly the truth. But it won't come to that, I promise you. I won't let it happen. And besides, you might find you have stronger resources than you think, faced with the important things in your life."

He glanced up at me, curious now, but I kept pacing forward. We had nearly reached the final descent back down to the City. We skirted another particularly dense clump of trees, and clambered over a small outcropping of rocks, back down onto flat scrub. Kiel was behind me and he suddenly stumbled, knocking into the back of my legs. I stopped and helped him right himself.

He stiffened, holding on to my arm although he was upright again. "Maen…" he hissed.

"Keep walking," I said, quietly. "I saw it too." Someone was shadowing us.

"Is it an Exile scout? A soldier of theirs?" Kiel would have made an excellent scout himself, I thought. He'd seen the slightest blur of movement that I myself had only caught out of the corner of my eye. "Are we in danger after all?"

"I don't know," I said, keeping my voice low. If the Exiles had wanted to pick us off somewhere between their camp and the City, they'd had plenty of opportunity. There had been great stretches of the land where we'd been without cover at all. "Keep close to me until we reach the City."

His eyes were wide but he did as he was told, and he stopped chattering, too. We scrambled our way back down to the east gate without any trouble, and without seeing any further sign of anyone outside the City with us.

Maybe my nervousness and distress had caused me to imagine it.

CHAPTER 10

SELESTE stood tall and imposing, her gaze ranging around the Training field. "This will be a momentous event for Aza City," she announced from the shallow platform, her voice carrying easily in the thin air of the early morning. "The City Convocation will soon be hosted here, as I have promised my people – this time of preparation and anticipation will bring its just rewards. It will be an event worthy of our Histories, an event remembered throughout the planet. Aza City will be the City to lead you all to a better life – I will be the Queen to lead you to a life made all the more glorious for Devotion to the City!"

"*Service to the City is our Reward*!" came the response from the many, strong voices. All the soldiers of her Guard stood to attention, facing her. I saw Zander at the side of his men, and all the other Gold Warriors too, for the Queen had more officers than any other Household. They had dressed in their most formal uniform with breastplates that shone in the morning sunlight, and helmets standing proudly on their heads. The Silver Captains were less extravagantly dressed but their armor was polished to its brightest. The metal bore with pride the scars of previous skirmishes, but the surfaces had been hammered back to regular shape by the City blacksmiths, and the buckles of their shoulder straps glinted against the dark leather. Behind them were the Bronzemen, placed ceremonially behind their protective Captains because they were still untried in battle, but also emphasizing their treasured status in the Household. They were slender young men with a mixture of eye and hair color, of different builds. Their muscles were already developing well but they were still at that stage between youthful enthusiasm and the strong confidence of a Trained soldier. They stood both bravely and proudly, but I recognized the amazement in many pairs of eyes at the rare sight of their Queen, and the fearful

aggression in others, determined to be noticed by her. I knew they would be brought to heel over the course of their Training. They would become the best of the City's soldiers. Only if they failed to live up to the potential of their original purchase would they be returned to the Central School and a career of manual labor with the Remainders, to become an equally devoted – and yet completely unacknowledged – servant of the City. It was a powerful motivation for success, for such passionate young men.

It had been a while since Seleste had demanded a full inspection, having allowed a certain amount of relaxation since the Battle for Queenship. She had called this parade at a moment's notice, but the soldiers had been ready on time and showing all the arrogant splendor that she expected of them. It made my own heart beat a little faster to see them, although I stood to one side of her platform, neither allowed nor welcomed into their ranks.

She turned slowly from side to side, encompassing them all in her address. She looked magnificent this morning, her hair dressed formally, high on her head, smooth and silken and entwined with jewels. Her cloak was long and thick, of the best velvet and clasped with a gold medallion at her neck. Her Ladies had obviously spent an hour or more on her face, powdering and painting it to its most striking. In the days when I had been a favorite in her bed, I'd enjoyed seeing her beauty at its most natural, preferring Seleste the woman to Seleste the Queen. She had seen that as a weakness, maybe an unacceptable vulnerability. However, whatever her opinion of me then, I had no influence over her public face nowadays.

"Within the next moon phase I will welcome many other Households to the City," she announced. "Many other Cities, too, and their Mistresses. Each one of you will be required to give every minute of your life and every fragment of your energy to support me." Her voice rose, approaching the end of her exhortation. "I demand it of you – your City demands it of you!"

They moved with a single force, a wave of men dropping to their knees in front of their Queen, without even a prompt from their officers. The armor clattered, the sun's reflection flashed from the

glittering metal, and the combined thud of so many full-grown men falling to the bare ground made the earth shudder around me.

I was slower to my knees than the soldiers, for several reasons, but as I started to bend, a woman's arm caught at mine, halting me. I looked up into the face of Mistress Chloe. "Mistress?"

She brushed a finger across her lips and guided me back a little way behind Seleste's dais, out of her sister's line of sight. There were a couple of young women attending to her today, barely more than children, their faces pale in contrast to their richly colored robes, one with fine dark hair and one with thicker, copper-colored tresses. They bowed respectfully to her before drawing back to give us privacy. "Maen, I just wanted to see you, to assure you of my support." Her voice was low. "I think it a poor decision of my sister's, to exclude you from the Guard. To place you beside her, and yet…."

"Not," I said, wryly.

Mistress Chloe flushed. "I would not challenge her, of course. But Darius has been the most attentive of soldiers to me, and brings me reports of many things that happen in the Household that never reach my ears officially."

I bit my lip, for that wasn't the best of news to me. "Mistress, please don't concern yourself. The Queen has her own ways and we live to serve them."

Chloe stared at me. Her eyes were pale and grey, despite sharing the same dark hair coloring as her sister. Her face was far softer, her features more girlish. Seleste was beauty personified, and magnificent with it – Chloe would only ever be a pretty young woman. "Maen, you are a mystery to me."

I dropped my eyes with respect, but not before I saw her frown.

"You don't lie," she murmured quietly, for the soldiers were settling into position again and the noise of their group movement was quieting. "Yet you do not tell me the truth either. Is that deliberate?"

I kept my eyes lowered. "Mistress, I mean nothing offensive. Darius should not be bothering you."

She was silent for a moment and we watched as Seleste dismissed the Guard to start returning to barracks. The young girls that traveled with Chloe came to stand at her side. She rested a hand aimlessly on the head of the nearest one, stroking her hair. I wondered if any of them were daughters of the Queen – only she would be allowed to keep her children beside her so obviously. It was likely that Chloe had found some occupation for them in the Household of Physic while they trained as Royal Ladies. One of them glanced up at me, shyly. These girls were at a strange time of life, somewhere between child and Lady, and not yet demanding the official respect of a soldier. I bowed my head to her regardless.

"Maen, this conference is an important event, isn't it?"

I turned back to Mistress Chloe and nodded. "I do not know the details, Mistress, but the Queen is concerned for the future of the planet and our civilization. I believe that there will be representatives from all over the planet attending the Convocation."

"All over the planet?" Her tone sounded a little sharp.

"Every other City," I amended, quickly, and saw an answering flash in her eyes. "Those are the only communities that we recognize, of course."

She nodded, too. I saw Darius moving out from behind the throng of soldiers on the parade ground and Chloe turned her head to watch him, distracted for a moment. "Maen," she murmured, her eyes still on the other soldier's approach. "Please trust me. If you had anything to tell … any secrets that were disturbing you…." She didn't finish what could have been either a question or a statement. She turned back to me abruptly, dropping her voice again. "I have access to the Devotions, you know. If you ever needed anything of me…."

"I know, Mistress," I interrupted her, risking her anger. "I know what the Queen can do with them. I know what she has *done*. They are hers to command, but I have no interest in that."

Mistress Chloe's eyes were suddenly much sharper. Had she thought to tempt me somehow with drugs from the House of Physic? To help me or to weaken me? I knew that some soldiers begged extra doses or different combinations. Some Devotions allowed them to

service their Mistress better and for longer than other soldiers – some helped develop a stronger, more compact physique from their Training. I looked more carefully at Mistress Chloe, unsure of her intentions.

Darius came up to us and dropped to one knee in front of her. "Mistress. The Queen wishes to see Maen, her personal aide, when you have finished your interview of course."

Chloe colored. "I suspect that message has been made more diplomatic before delivery, Darius, and for that I thank you. I will go back to the Household now, will you be accompanying me?"

Darius glanced up at her and a look passed between them that I didn't recognize. Chloe then looked between the two of us, her eyes narrowing. "Of course. I understand that the Queen's demands must always take precedence. Attend to me later, Darius, if the Royal duties permit." We both bowed, and she turned and left the training ground.

"IS it finished?" Seleste was sharp with me, her eyes dark and petulant. "The History, Maen! Is it done? How many scribes have you put to the task?"

Darius shifted gently in the background. He was standing inside the door to her office, on guard. Other soldiers had arrived with him, but they were shut outside in the corridor. Her Ladies had been dismissed from the room as well.

"There's just the one, Mistress," I said. "But he is very talented and very industrious. I believe he has developed a new artistic theme to the illustration that enhances the Royal Brand. He has also written up much of the Battle for Queenship already, with some fascinating commentary from your loyal subjects who were there at the time."

She was angry, I could tell, but her words were still carefully enunciated. "It is too slow. You work like Nerisa, like the tortuous drip of sickly, melted sugar. None of you understand the need for this, the importance of this! It must be done for the time of the Convocation. My History must be in place, with illustrations of the inheritance of my family and my rightful succession to the Queenship."

"I will make sure of it…."

"You will indeed!" she snapped. She was unusually agitated today. She had thrown off the formal cloak that she'd worn to speak to the men, and she was dressed in a dark green silk robe that clung to her figure. She was adorned with many ornamental bracelets and although she'd also removed the jewels from her hair, it was still bound with red silk ribbons that mimicked the elegant pattern of the vines in her brand. She walked a few paces, letting the rich fabric of her gown flow around her ankles, then turned sharply and paced back the way she'd come. She was very tense, it was obvious in every tight, drawn stretch of her body. I saw Darius watching her, his eyes following the graceful sway of her hips. But when I looked back at Seleste, her eyes were on *me*.

"Maen, you are in my presence now," she said, her voice low and somehow chilling. "My needs are all you should ever think of."

I stiffened. "Of course, Mistress." For a few seconds, all we did was stare at each other. I knew she wanted to hear something more from me, but I remained silent.

She moistened her lips, her eyes still on me. "Soldier, come here," she called to Darius, beckoning him over. "Tell me what thoughts are in *your* mind."

Darius's eyes darkened. "Your wishes are mine, Mistress," he murmured, his voice husky. "Your pleasure is my task."

Seleste smiled, pleased with his response. When he reached her side, she turned to face him and gripped at his chin, bringing his mouth close to hers. They were of a similar height and I saw Darius's tongue flicker out to wet his lips. I expected her to kiss him for play. So did he.

But she turned her head at the last moment to look back at me. "Maen…" she murmured. There was a dark, bitter light in her pupils. "His lips speak well; his tongue plays better. I have wished for a long time to make you two a pair for my entertainment. And you already know how he tastes, don't you?"

I stared back at her. Darius's gaze flickered between us but he didn't move from her grasp. "Yes, Mistress," I said.

"But not as good as a woman?" She was provoking me again. "Not as good as your Queen?"

I saw Darius tense, as if he were expecting trouble.

"You want me to say no," I said, quietly. "I only know I've been a servant to you both, in different ways. Should a servant make that comparison?"

Her face twisted with shock. I realized that I no longer had any idea if my answers pleased or angered her, only that they were not respectful enough. And maybe I no longer cared. She reached out with her other hand and gripped my wrist, pulling me closer to her.

"This will cease at once!" she hissed. "You are mine, soldier, and you will surrender to that or face punishment. You will choose where your loyalty lies, once and for all!"

Darius frowned, not sure what we were talking about.

I gazed back at Seleste, all three of us so close, my mouth dry with tension. It would have been so easy to lie to her, to offer my unadulterated loyalty to my Queen – to *her*. But I wondered if she'd ever believe me if I did. Too many intimacies had passed between us – yet too much affection had *not*. I had nothing more to give her; nothing more to be taken. I wondered what I owed to her, to offer up the truth instead.

Something broke inside of me, yet I felt no pain, only relief.

"You chose for me once," I replied. My tone was flat and hard. "That will have to be enough for you."

Darius gasped aloud at my insolence. Seleste's face darkened. She let go of both of us and took a step back.

"How dare you," she hissed to me. "You talk to your Queen as an equal!"

"You talk to me as a slave," I hissed back. "Is that any better?"

The air around us crackled as if lightning were overhead. Seleste's eyes darted to Darius and he obviously took that as an order. He gripped my shoulder and twisted my head around to kiss him, pressing his mouth against mine, thrusting his tongue into me. I stiffened in his grasp but couldn't pull away – my Queen was still a

foot away, watching this; sanctioning it. His hand slid down to my crotch and cupped me.

"To his knees," came Seleste's harsh command. Darius pushed down on my shoulder, forcing me to the floor. I knelt at her feet, my head hanging down, my heartbeat racing. She stepped towards me so that my face was on a level with her hips. "You will not look up until I allow it," she hissed from above. Darius's feet also came closer, facing her, and then I heard the jingle of the bracelets on her wrist as she slid her arm around his neck. He moaned with pleasure, a growling sound deep in his throat, and her laughter was muffled as they kissed. Then her other hand reached down and gripped at my hair. With a tug, she pulled my head into the bay of her legs, my mouth pressed against the sumptuous silk of her gown. The front seam split just below her hip into two separate swathes of material, and one of these caught up on my shoulder. The laces that held the garment tightly in to her waist snagged up beneath it, cutting into my cheek. I could smell the perfume of her bare skin, for she was wearing only a short shift underneath.

Darius's hand hung down at his side, the fingers brushing my face.

"Maen. Suck them," she ordered, her voice hoarse. Darius's palm curled up with momentary surprise and then he stretched his fingers out to my mouth, pushing three of them in. I nearly gagged, but not because he was too fierce. He was tense, I could feel it in his body as he stood next to me, but he was stimulated too. I sucked on his fingers, soaking them with saliva, licking into the valleys between them. He'd asked this of me before, during our coupling, and I knew it excited him. Meanwhile, Seleste had taken her hand away from his neck and was tugging at the laces of her gown, releasing them. The robe slipped away from her body, the folds of it clinging to my face and shoulders, then falling away onto the floor. She stood there, exposed, dressed in nothing but her indoor slippers and flimsy shift. It was made of fine, soft cloth and her pale thighs underneath were warm and washed in flower-perfumed water.

I knew her bare skin well enough to know how it would taste on my tongue, that combination of pampered delicacy and musky desire.

Darius slid his hand up underneath the shift, bunching it up around her waist. I saw his wrist, supple and sly, moving between her thighs. His dampened fingers reached up into her and her body shivered against me. When I tried to pull back, her hand tightened in my hair. "Not until I say," she gasped. "I will have your attention, Maen, and you'll see that it will be on my terms."

Darius spoke hoarsely above me. "I deserve it, too."

"You have no right to speak," I hissed to him, but Seleste laughed harshly, as if she indulged him and I was the one being foolish.

"It's you I'm talking to," he hissed back at me, emboldened in front of his Queen. "I should have your full attention too, like I have any other man's when I'm on his bed."

I laughed, softly and bitterly.

Seleste sighed. "Do you think you are different from other men, Maen? That you deserve some special treatment? That your devotion to your Queen should be any the less?"

"No," I whispered, though I don't think she was listening to me. Darius's fingers were caressing her, his thumb twisted around to press on her clitoris, his other arm around her waist to support her as he worked her towards climax. Her body rocked against me, her hips grinding against both of us.

"If you don't have his attention either, soldier," she whispered to Darius, "what *does* he give you?"

Darius grunted. "His seed, Mistress. His body, late at night, in the dark. A hard, desperate coupling. Nothing but that. His real passion is elsewhere."

"Yes," she hissed. "I know. And I will not have that insubordination from one of my men. I have had enough of his disloyalty, whether real or emotional."

I gasped as she pulled painfully at my hair again. Darius must have been suckling at her neck for I felt her back arch and her knee press forward against my cheek. "Share me with him, Maen. You will please me because I demand it." Her voice was strained: she was very tense from both the excitement and her anger. She didn't need to direct

me, for I knew what she wanted. I leant forward, my lips against her naked groin, my hands anchoring myself behind her thighs. My cheek nudged against Darius's hand as it stroked up inside her, playing with the heat outside of her swollen vulva. My face was damp from her sweat and juices and my tongue slid out to lap at her.

She moaned aloud and shuddered, but we both held her by now. Darius grasped her against his torso, kissing her face and neck, his hand slowly bringing her to satisfaction. He was fiercely aroused, his cock erect and swollen inside his trousers, its contour hard against my chin. I knelt at her feet, supporting her legs and licking firmly at her clitoris, knowing the rhythm that she enjoyed the best. When she reached down to grab one of my hands, I didn't resist. She pulled it across her body and rested it on Darius's groin. As she started to gasp in his arms with her climax, I pumped at his cock, using the friction of his trousers against its sensitive flesh.

He jerked, groaning, and he came moments after her.

She let go of my hair shortly after that and I rested back on my heels. Darius collected up her robe and helped her to a chair to recover. His face was flushed and his eyes were hot and angry when they looked at me.

Sitting down, Seleste's gaze was on a level with mine but her eyes were slightly glazed and her emotions unfathomable.

"My wishes are yours," she said, quietly, her voice very cold. I knew she spoke to me alone. "Isn't that true?"

"It's what you demanded," I whispered.

She shuddered. "That's enough, Maen."

I nodded. "Yes, Mistress. Enough by far."

I don't know whether she heard the contempt in my voice, but I knew it was sufficient for her to have had me arrested on the spot.

Instead, she dismissed me without a further word.

KIEL found me in the Library late that afternoon, a long time after I'd arrived there.

"Maen?" Having pulled himself up into the second story, he was startled to find me already sitting in a corner surrounded by open books.

"Kiel, I'm sorry," I said. Maybe there was something amiss in my voice because he peered at me, puzzled. "I didn't mean to alarm you. I came to study some of the books that you mentioned before."

"The old Histories?" He glanced at the selection I had in front of me. His eyes narrowed. "Maen, some of these haven't been opened in years except … well, except by me. They haven't been formally catalogued in my work on the Queen's History, you know, she passed a very strict list of recommended texts to Mistress Nerisa at the start of my work."

"I know," I said.

He stared. "What exactly are you looking for? Are you here on the Queen's business?"

I sighed, softly. "No." He frowned at me, and had my mind been easier, his seriousness would have made me smile. "Will you trust me, Kiel?"

He took surprisingly careful stock of me before answering. "Yes."

I nodded, pleased with both his caution and his bluntness. "When you saw Eila's brand at the Exile camp…."

"Mistress Eila? The fierce woman?"

I smiled. "Yes. Do you remember that you recognized it as a Royal Brand?" When Kiel nodded, I placed my hand carefully on the open book on my lap. "You said you'd seen it here, in these old books."

"The books are full of illustrations," he mumbled. "Brands all over the place. It's their method of marking their own stories from other Households'. I told you and Mistress Eila that at the time, and she told me I was wrong, there was no connection. I was probably mistaken, they all look so similar…."

"No," I said sharply. "You weren't mistaken."

He was silent, which would have been unusual enough to alert me even if I hadn't already browsed through many of the old books myself.

"What have you done with that information, Kiel?"

He tensed. "I haven't told anyone about the Mistress's brand, if that's what you mean – "

"You knew she had been a Royal Mistress?"

"Yes." He was wary, as if trying to gauge how much to say in front of me. "After we met with her, there were some comments made around the camp when they were finding me a tent. Some of the older men suspect she was in the Royal Household, though I don't think many of them care. No one thought I was listening."

"You are always listening," I smiled. "Even when you're talking."

He shrugged, but he grinned. "It's the only way to know what's going on. I can travel through this City with very little notice, yet there's always information to be gathered."

"And what did you *gather* about Eila?"

He flushed, his face darkening in the dim light of the storage room. "That she was one of the Royal Ladies, maybe even related to the Queen herself. She had obviously been exiled like Mistress Flora was, maybe in the same kind of situation after a Battle for Queenship."

I nodded, mainly to myself. "It's true. You continue to impress me."

He smiled again, though his expression was still guarded. "I learned more about other matters too, Maen, for the Exiles talk very loosely. More about the Gold Warrior and his Bronzeman who had once been held at the camp. Who arrived and left as a couple, but how only one returned to the camp…." When I shifted awkwardly, he yelped softly. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend, it'll go no further, I mean, it's not for me to make any comment or judgment on my betters–"

"Hush," I said, and he did. "You know what happened to me, it's no longer a secret to you. I would want to tell you the whole story

even if it were, because I trust you too. And don't talk about your betters when *you* are the one with maturity and sensitivity. But it's from a long time ago." I smiled a little bitterly. "It's an old history in itself, and no longer of relevance."

"But if he's not dead, Maen, as you thought – "

"The story is dead," I said sharply. "The devotion is. The obligation is."

He shook his head vigorously. "No, Maen, surely it's not like that, I don't think he ever saw himself as bearing any kind of obligation _ "

I hushed him again, this time holding up my hand. "I made my choices and they were misguided, and so my life is trapped in its sorry path. I don't wish to talk about it anymore." I shifted again, disturbing a thin layer of dust on the piles around me. "Instead, I've been following your current work back to the texts you used for inspiration for the lineage of the Queen's immediate family, the background and basis for her current History. It's fascinating. And the Royal Brand appears at all times in its current form, a design of beauty, sophistication and complexity."

Kiel's eyebrows rose. "You would make a good scribe, Maen, to have found your way around in such a short time."

I shook my head, amused despite myself. "I'm not built for it, I fear. I've toppled several shelves of books and trodden on more than a few pages in my burrowing. I'm too large and too clumsy for this work, and it's lucky that no one else has been around to discover me."

Kiel grinned. "Then you really *are* lucky. Mistress Nerisa has been at my heels for several days now, I don't know whether the Queen has sent her to check on my progress or whether she just enjoys harassing her scribes as a matter of course."

"She's displeased with your work?"

Kiel shook his head. "No, that seems to be well. She hasn't insisted I work with others, or that she needs to check through each stage of the history, which is what I might have expected. I think she's just inquisitive and troublesome." I laughed and he flushed. "Maen,

you won't tell anyone I said that? Speaking in that way of a Mistress…."

I shook my head, too, reassuring him. From what I had seen of the drab, nervous Mistress Nerisa, I didn't think he was in any trouble. I had seen her a few times around the Library and nodded my respect to her, but she had always drawn away quickly with no conversation, her arms tucked inside her sleeves and her eyes avoiding any further interaction with me. She traveled with a couple of equally nondescript Ladies, and they always had their arms full of dry papers and bottles of ink; Mistress Nerisa had obviously found her calling in her new role. I marveled at the difference between her and her pretty, more forthcoming sister Chloe. "I have seen your work, Kiel," I reassured him, "and it's very fine. I like the script that you have used, and you have chosen a good selection of illustrations to copy, to enhance the Queen's story. You ink the current Royal Brand very well, too." His face was flushed with pleasure, though there was still a glint of something more wary in his eyes. "And yet that's all there is of it."

He tilted his head. "I don't know what you mean. That's all the Queen requests, all I've been charged to do. It will soon be finished, too." He started to rattle out the list of his achievements within the new volume, his voice a little too loud for our hiding place, as if he sought to forestall any response I might make. "I have included her impeccable lineage from the previous three Queens of the City; the history of her rise to greatness and the successful Battle for Queenship; the good works she has done for the citizens and the Remainders; the strong political presence she has shown, especially in the context of the forthcoming Convocation…."

"I don't mean in the future," I interrupted, harshly. "Not even in the present. You followed her back to her mother and the previous Queens for several generations – but surely you went back further than that."

Even in the dim light of the store room I could see his paleness. "No. That's all I needed. You've seen the strict catalogue I've made of my research."

"I've seen the books you have disturbed and read," I continued relentlessly. "They span far more generations than your formalized list.

You've trailed the history of this Royal family – and therefore the whole City – back even further than anyone's living memory. You've trailed the family back to Colonization itself, I suspect, to those records that you protested were so difficult to find and so awkward to read. If anyone would have the tenacity and skill to do that, it would be you."

"I don't know where you've got that idea. It's not feasible. The records are virtually non-existent from those early days." His voice was weak but brave. "There's nothing to find. We have our own modern Histories that refer back, and we know the glories of those past days from tales and myths. There's no need for anything more." His eyes widened. "No one reads them, Maen! No one cares. They have all they need to know already."

"But not you," I said, sternly. "Your curiosity and determination stretches further than that, Kiel. I will not believe that if you opened a tale at its first page, you would not follow it through to its conclusion. Even if that were in the opposite direction, on a journey back in time." I placed my hand carefully on the open page of my lap. "You were excited at the camp to see the simpler brand on Eila's arm, one that you connected immediately with the Royal art style, one that you admitted you'd seen in the Histories but not previously recognized. You even spoke of returning to the Histories, to investigate that brand further."

"No. It was Mistress Eila's own plaything, not a formal brand…."

"My suspicion is that she had also seen it in an old History, at some time in her youth, spent in this very Household. Maybe it was a child's mischief, a trip to the Royal Library without anyone's permission. But the memory had stayed with her. When she came to create something of her own, the patterns were still in her mind, though she didn't recognize them as such."

"I was stupid." Kiel's voice was barely a whisper. "I didn't think anyone listened to my nonsense, as you yourself called it. I meant something different; I lied. I haven't had any time, I've been consumed by the official History and the Queen's demands…."

"You don't lie," I said, softly. "And I hope, if you ever do, you don't lie to me." I reached out a hand and took his arm. "Kiel, trust me. I don't mean to betray or threaten you."

"It's not allowed," he whispered. "The books have been hidden. No one reads them, no one examines them, no one questions them."

"Except you."

He sighed. He looked very troubled. "This isn't something light … Maen, this investigation of mine … and now yours, as well. I don't know what…." He sighed and stopped.

"I know," I said. "Or at least, let me guess so that you don't have to admit it aloud. You have gone further back in time through the books, following the Royal Brand but in that earlier, simpler form, finding new paths, new stories, new reports. And you've found things that are inconsistent – that are troubling? It's not the reading of the books that you feel threatened by, for they're here for anyone to see if they took the trouble."

"They ignore them," he broke in, his voice a mixture of sadness and outrage. "The archives have been pushed away and ignored, for so long. Isn't that scandalous?"

"You're scared by what you've *read*," I pushed at him, gently but firmly. The scandal was not the arrogant carelessness of our Royal Family towards its literary heritage, but something far greater, I suspected. "Aren't you? Things that contradict the stories you have grown up with. Things that relate to the Colonization and glorious development of our City and its citizens."

Kiel's eyes were wide. "Are you some kind of magician?"

I smiled. "No. But I have also been surprised at the neglect that the Royal Household shows to its heritage, and the casual and hurried way that the Queen seeks to rewrite herself to order. I think that the old Histories have been ignored for real reasons – for fear of stirring up a past that may not agree with the present. And I've read the books today – though not as many as you – and I can see things in your face that show me I'm on the right track. But I don't have time to finish examining it for myself – I need to know what you've found."

"I cannot tell this to anyone else, they'll execute me for treason." He trembled as he spoke. "On the spot."

"I've been there," I said, bitterly. "If you have faced that, nothing seems so bad again. Kiel, you have found a link between the stories that we are told about the City nowadays, and what is maybe the *true* tale. All because of your bright mind and your sharp eyes. You must be allowed to share that knowledge in safety. I will protect you, I've promised you that. Tell me what you know. Tell *me*."

KIEL swallowed hard, obviously still trying to hide his fear. "Since we came back from the Exile camp, I've been through the Histories again, looking at them in a very different way. It was such a strange world there, Maen, at the camp, so different from our life here … it made me question things; it reminded me of things I had only skimmed across before. Is curiosity such a bad thing?" He looked angry as well as nervous. I smiled at him, reassuring him that, no, it was not, though our Queen might have it so.

"I've been back to the Fifth and Sixth Generation Histories now," he said, warming to his topic. "I've followed the mark of the Royal brand, the old version I saw on Eila's arm, just like you said. It takes me much further back, to around the time of the Colonization. I found tales of the very first group to arrive here, evidence of their work to settle their race in its new home."

"Original records?"

He nodded. "Many of them, though their condition is very poor. But the tales are very different there, Maen, from the ones that we have all learned at the Central School. The characters in the stories and pictures then were very primitive, their living conditions were like those in the Exile camp. All people lived together in a single settlement, with no mention of Cities or walls. And there are pages and pages of reports on the weather of the planet, as if it were the matter of science that was important, rather than the history of a people. The climate seemed to be more changeable then, and the settlers suffered and died in large numbers, both from disease and from the sudden, fierce earth movements. There were reports of the need to stabilize people's health, of the worry about the viability of life here on this

planet. Can you believe that?" He looked terrified, but excited too. I realized what conflict and fear he'd held inside himself during this work, unable to share it with anyone. "It took many years for them to master the climate in some way or learn to live with it, and then the Cities were built and Colonized with the Citizens that we're familiar with today."

"The world was like the one that the Exiles know, back in the beginning," I mused aloud. "We were all like them, once."

Kiel's eyes widened. "Maen, that's not exactly what I said…."

"And all of us, the same," I said.

"Don't," he said, abruptly, and his eyes dropped away.

"There were no Remainders then, either, were there?" I sighed. "Only the one nation."

He was silent for a moment, and so I knew my assumption was right. "Yes, it seems so," he whispered. "Our Schooling nowadays teaches us that the Queens have always sought to make us a better race – to build a good world on this planet, for all people. That this planet was Colonized in the very beginning as a fine, new start to life – to create us a new world after the corruption and destruction of an old one. To create new, benevolent rulers, as well. But that doesn't seem to be entirely true. Things have … changed over the years. Society has distorted the original mission, the good life has become exclusive, just for the few. The group of original citizens whom we now call Remainders…."

I looked him in the eye. "They have been subjugated and neglected. Don't deny it, Kiel, for you have always been truthful as well as trustworthy. And you're one of them! Your people have been channeled into a secondary role, an inferior life as servants of the City. And it's our Queens who have made this world what it is today. Over the generations, they've chosen its path; manipulated its people, all for their own benefit."

He flushed. "No, you're wrong, that's a shocking thing to say! Maybe sometimes they've been ill-advised; misguided. I grant that the life of the Remainders is not as good as it should be. But they've always cared for us, Maen, there's always been a Queen to guide and

guard us as people. That's what the Histories say, that's what we are taught in School. They would never have deliberately allowed a division of people to happen, it must be the natural way of things, it must have been determined somewhere at Colonization, even though the Histories do not show it." His voice was speeding up with his distress. "It's a dangerous and arrogant mistake to think there was ever any other way! Maybe the stories themselves are warped."

I shrugged, for I could see he was becoming disturbed by our discussion. "The old Histories should never have been ignored like this. We need to know the whole, true story. Our rulers need to know the same, in order to balance our modern life more equally, in order to remember the original aims of Colonization. We must develop as a City in the way that's best for everyone. *That's* what the records should show."

Kiel was staring at me with tears in his eyes. I sighed. My treason was my own and I should know better than to inflict it on a young citizen like him. But when he spoke again, I realized that it wasn't fear of my insubordination that affected him so deeply.

"I have followed the old Histories, Maen. You were right. And you were also right about my own curiosity; maybe my own arrogance. I haven't included anything of this in the *Queen's* history, but…."

I felt a shiver of shock. "You're writing your own work?"

KIEL'S face was a strange mixture of fearful paleness and an embarrassed flush. "Yes. At first it was just for my own amusement, to travel a little further back in time. That wasn't so bad, was it? I thought I'd find some new branches to the Queen's family, not previously recorded, that might please her, that might bring more splendor to her reputation. Also, maybe, to make my own name as a scribe. I've lived a short enough time among the blind scribes of this City, but long enough to know I don't want to be one of them." He blushed even deeper. "The books and documents are in a very poor state, though, even going only as far back as the Fourth Generation. I've found satisfaction in pulling them together and creating a new, consolidated account. Then…." He swallowed hard, again. "That's when I began to discover anomalies, and I was unable to track the

Queen's line back to that of other, past rulers. The sense of rightful succession was … lost. Not certain."

"Not certain?"

He stared at me. "Don't make me say it, Maen. I already know too much, have seen too much."

"What have you seen about the Queen?" And I gripped more fiercely at his arm.

"In the name of the Devotions…" Kiel gasped, weakly. My grip must have been painful, but he didn't try to pull away from me. "Can't you guess it already, like so many other things I've done?"

I frowned angrily, for I couldn't allow him any coyness now. Reality was no longer the solid rock beneath my feet; my perception of the world I had lived in all my life was shifting, and slipping through my fingers like dry sand. I didn't know if I felt fear or triumph or just plain confusion. But I had to *know*.

"It's time we need – time that makes things so much clearer," he whispered. "No one has bothered to make that time; no one has cared for so long. Those pages I told you about, the dry, scientific reports of the planet at Colonization, of the group that first came here? They were written so obviously by the person in charge, the leader of the original Colonization. It's a really exciting find! Even though the accounts are so poor and torn, even though they've barely survived beyond a few disconnected, scribbled sentences here and there, you'd be amazed at the way he speaks about the other people, the way he describes the harmful effects of the planet on the new inhabitants. It was a harsh time, trying to survive in this terrain, the isolation of them all, their need for supplies and to create a community that could support itself – "

"*He*?" My hand opened involuntarily, releasing him.

Kiel nodded. The silence hung around us like the dust on the books.

"A man," I whispered, finally.

Kiel nodded. He was dreadfully white now. "There's no mistake. The original Colonization group was balanced in number

between men and women originally. The women worked mainly in the medical facility and were to bear children – to populate the planet." He gave a soft moan. "But a man was in charge."

"And the brand?"

He shook his head. "I can find no mention of it in the first days. There's the worry about their physical health, and the loss of some children before birth. The records are very patchy, I haven't found any more. What there is, I've copied into my work. But I … I daren't continue it, Maen. I've stopped working on it." He looked up at me, his expression stark. "You understand, don't you?"

I stared at him, and nodded slowly. "What will you do with it now?"

He shivered. "I don't know. It cannot be seen outside of this Library. I meant it only as homage to my Queen, but then I continued it from a stupid, personal pride, I should be ashamed of myself. The tales it tells are too unruly, too confused, too contrary to our beliefs."

"Too subversive," I said.

He peered at me. "Maen, what's happened to you? Do you *want* to bring trouble to our Queen?"

"You must treasure your work, Kiel," I said. "Your pride isn't stupid at all. If it's the truth, it can never be wrong."

"Just treasonous?" he snapped back. "I am not so naïve. I'm *very* proud of it, but if Mistress Nerisa found out that I was pursuing my own project and that it cast doubt on many of the things we hold so secure, including the right of succession from the original Queen of Colonization who apparently never existed, or if she did, was instead a mere man …well, I must burn it!"

I grasped his arm again. "Not yet. Let me see it."

He frowned. And then we heard the sound of a man's footsteps below in the main room, walking boldly through as if looking for attention.

Kiel glanced at me. "Zander," he mouthed.

I knew that, of course, knowing the Gold Warrior's stride and pace. It was just intriguing to me that Kiel recognized it, too.

"I'll go down to him, see what he wants this time," he whispered.

"He's been before?" My eyebrows rose.

Kiel flushed and didn't answer that directly. "Will you stay here?"

I nodded. I watched him wriggle over and drop down on to the lower floor. I should have pushed the hatch back over his departure, but I didn't. Instead, I moved as quietly as possible to sit near the hatchway and to look down into the room below. I heard Kiel greet the soldier respectfully and cheerfully over by the door, and their conversation mumbled quietly on for a while.

I turned my legs to get more comfortable and then I caught sight of another pile of books that I hadn't looked through before. There was a slim volume tucked in beside them, and when I carefully eased it out I recognized the writing at once – it was Kiel's. I had seen enough of his work on the official History to know his elegant script and mischievous use of the colored inks. This must be his personal book, his own History he had told me about. It lay amongst some of the oldest and least cared for of the history books. I could see pages torn out from them, yellowed with age and with spillages on the covers and over the text. The writings were ill-formed; the lettering difficult to make out in many places. In contrast, Kiel's book looked clean and beautiful, very carefully written. I understood what Kiel meant, in explaining how he was working to bring the records together into a complete, legible document. He must have taken great pride in it, even as he started to discover what he was working on.

That he was uncovering secrets our Queens had kept from us.

I moved again, reaching for some of the older books and putting Kiel's carefully at my side. When I glanced down into the lower room now, I could see the men there. They'd moved back to the front desk and were in my line of both sight and hearing. Kiel had sat down at the desk and was trying to tidy some of the papers and books scattered over it. Zander stood at his side, dressed in his casual clothing, obviously

off duty yet spending his free time – rather surprisingly – in the Library. I looked from one to the other – Kiel's serious, fascinated gaze, and Zander's arrogant one. I pulled back from the opening as far as I could so that they didn't catch sight of me in return,

But I don't think either of them realized I was there – or cared.

CHAPTER 11

"WHAT is it about these strange, dusty books?" Zander sounded genuinely bemused. "Most young men want something very different."

"The blood; the glory; the battle; the swords." Kiel's voice was a gentler murmur. "I know. My fellows in the Remainder area were like that. They told tales of Remainder men who'd been put forward to the Choosing of Bronzemen, and they wanted it, too."

"Your sword training…" Zander paused, a smile on his face. "There's no future for you in the Guard, I'm afraid." I watched them from above and wondered how often Zander had been back to visit Kiel on the pretext of instructing him in sword play.

Kiel shrugged, also smiling but more cautiously. "It's lucky I don't seek that, then. There are plenty of us who don't have those skills. As an alternative, my fellows would want a job that would bring them into the Household proper; that would get them seen by those of influence, maybe the Ladies themselves."

Zander laughed softly. He ran a hand over the cover of one of the books, dislodging some residual dust. "Are you hoping for that too, Kiel? That some Lady will take a liking to you and ask you to be more than her scribe?"

I wondered when he'd started to call Kiel by his name rather than 'boy'.

Kiel kept his eyes fixed on the books. "No. I was happy to serve Mistress Flora and she was a good Mistress. And I will also serve the Queen, for as long as she needs me. But I doubt there are any other Ladies who'd be interested in me."

Zander shrugged. There was an unfamiliar, confused expression on his face. "You're not so bad as a man. Too thin, too bookish, too odd-looking to be one of the bedchamber servants or a favorite in the Ladies' private theaters, but not so bad overall…."

"Maybe I'm not interested in *them*," hissed Kiel. He looked very flushed. He was a young man who obviously had trouble in hiding his body's reactions.

Zander stared at him for a second. He smiled, slowly. "Well, that's fine. There's no problem in that, is there? Remainders have a relaxed attitude to coupling, as far as I can tell. You can go with whatever young man you like – "

"Don't!" The word burst out from Kiel like a small explosion of sound. He immediately gasped, as if he wanted to suck it back in. "Don't make a fool of me, don't mock me just because I'm younger than you, because I'm not a soldier, because I can't fight like you, I can't ever look like you, I can't ever *be* like you!"

Zander looked shocked. He lifted his arm, and for a second, I thought he might strike Kiel, angry at him for answering back so insolently. But to my surprise, he dropped his hand gently on to Kiel's shoulder instead. "It's not everything," he said, very slowly. To me, his voice sounded strained. "To be a Gold Warrior. To be like me."

Kiel tensed up and I could see the smallest glint of a tear in the corner of his eye. His lips were pursed, obviously keeping his misery or his temper in check. "I know, sir."

"You mean you can imagine, surely – "

"No," Kiel interrupted. I saw him screw his eyes shut, as if waiting for a blow. "I mean I *know*. I know what it is I can do – and what you *can't*. You've been coming here to the library … you've graciously given me some of your free time. I appreciate that more than you can imagine, though obviously that's not your real reason for the visits, you've been sent to watch over what I'm doing, I'm sure."

Zander looked startled, and I realized he was about to deny that. I wasn't aware of Zander being charged with any official responsibility towards the writing of the Queen's History, although I would have been just as surprised to hear a Gold Warrior admit to visiting a mere scribe

on his own time. It was an intriguing situation. But in the meantime, Kiel hurried on. "That's fine, that's your right, and I watch you in return. I can see how you behave here. But I'd never tell – I'd never mock you to others, to *anyone*. It doesn't matter to me, you see."

It was Zander's turn to tense up. His fingers tightened on Kiel's shoulder. "What are you talking about? Tell me what you think you know."

Kiel grimaced. "The books scare you, sir. Zander. You avoid looking at them – you avoid talking to me about them, you avoid reading my work, or contributing directly to what I write. You can read, I know you can, but not as well as some of the other soldiers. Not as well as Maen, or – or *me*."

Zander was silent for a moment.

Kiel coughed nervously. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say anything–"

"I never had the time," Zander broke in. He sounded defensive. "I was taken for a Bronzeman even younger than they are today. I was only a boy. But it was all I'd ever wanted – to be a soldier – and I had little interest in learning anything else. I knew no other way to live. My first Mistress…." He drew a stronger breath. "Let me say, it wasn't as good a Household as this one. She had little money, few contacts, and a vicious temper. She had no time for her soldiers' well-being, let alone their education. There were so few of us and as the newest recruit, I was the worst slave there, of less standing than one of the serfs in the Royal Household. I was nothing more than … well, I was a servant like you, Kiel."

Kiel's eyes were wide. Like me, he'd never known anything of Zander's background. He made a soft sound of sympathy.

"Don't presume to pity me," Zander snapped. There was a dangerous glint in his eye.

Kiel stuttered. "I didn't mean … but how did you get away from there?"

"The only way that a soldier can. I accompanied her to a Choosing, when I was a new Silver Captain. She got into an argument

with one of the Negotiators over the price of a Bronzeman, though I knew it was really because she had bid above her means and couldn't afford to pay." Kiel was watching him, fascinated. Zander grimaced. "To renege on a purchase at Choosing time is the worst thing a Mistress can do. There were many people there watching her – I doubt she'd have had any reputation left at all, at the end of the day. But one of the people nearby was a lady from the Queen's Household. She was in Mistress Seleste's employ and she approached my Mistress and made an offer for me. It was enough to cover my Mistress's debt and save her humiliation, and so the trade was made. I went back with my new Mistress and joined the Royal Household."

Kiel stared at him for a moment. Zander's cheeks were flushed with pride. "It was what you deserved," the scribe said, quietly. "To be in a Household where you would be treasured and nurtured. You are the best, now, not the worst."

Zander stared back, startled by Kiel's ingenuous words. "You astonish me time and again, scribe, you have such a strange way about you. But you are surprisingly sharp, it seems, finding things that I'd prefer hidden. Maen told me you were, and I should have listened to him." His eyes darkened, and I could see the muscles of his shoulders tighten up. "Did you think to use that knowledge about my reading against me somehow? To earn you either reward or revenge?"

"No!" Kiel looked angry now. He pushed his chair back abruptly and stood up, throwing Zander's hand off. "If I did, I would have said before now, wouldn't I? I would have told Maen, or one of your Guard, to humiliate you. Maybe even the Queen, though I think she doesn't care. Or maybe I would have come to you in the night, bowing and begging but with no more sincerity than one of your poorest kitchen serfs. Maybe I would have offered to *forget* what I know, for the sake of your patronage, or in return for something from you that would mean a lot to me…."

"And what's that?" Zander growled.

Kiel faltered. "Nothing. I want nothing from you."

Zander grasped his arm again, pulling the young man towards him. "Liar! Tell me what you're really thinking, Kiel. Your talk is just a blind, a diversion, because that's something *I've* learned. You

chatter and you let us think you are a foolish boy, and meanwhile your eyes follow me and your smile matches mine. Somehow, without words, without orders, you draw me back to this mausoleum of a place to talk to you, to try to find out what it is that's so different about you, that fascinates me against my will, when I should be with my men, or out drinking, or practicing the things that I know and admire and am a master of…." His voice trailed off, and he looked astounded at his own outburst.

Kiel gazed back up at him. "Nothing," he repeated, but more firmly. "I want nothing that you don't want to give freely. You don't have to worry about me, I don't want to humiliate you or harm you at all. That's the *opposite* of what I want! For Devotions' sake, all I want…." He stopped; he went rigid in Zander's grip.

There was sudden, tense silence between the pair of them.

Zander was pressed very closely against the young man. His free arm was on the far side of Kiel's body and I couldn't see it fully, but I saw him slide his hand down Kiel's side and grip at his buttocks.

Kiel didn't protest. In fact, he arched up against Zander's chest and his head dropped back, baring his neck. I knew what that movement signified between two men. "Freely given," he said again, but now his voice was very quiet.

"You can feel it as *freely* as I can," Zander growled. His hips ground gently against Kiel's and the younger man moaned softly. "You can feel *me*, my cock swollen hard against your thigh. That's what being here with you does to me." Zander sounded both amused and surprised by his reaction. "This isn't what I expected. I still don't know what it is about you, but…."

"You want me to leave you in peace?"

"… but I want to find out," Zander hissed. He bent his head and nipped at Kiel's neck. Kiel sighed gently and turned his face to meet Zander's. There was a short, clumsy moment as he bumped into Zander's nose, gasped a soft, anguished apology, then tilted his head more carefully so as to fit against the soldier's. His cheeks were flushed a very dark pink. When Zander pressed his mouth on to the younger man's, Kiel opened up willingly. Zander leant in even more

closely, his tongue thrusting into Kiel, his grip tightening on Kiel's ass. His other hand snaked around Kiel's neck and tangled into the hair at the nape of the youngster's neck. He tugged Kiel's head back, holding his body fiercely against his chest. When they finally broke from the kiss, both of them were panting. Kiel looked exhilarated.

"I'm not a soldier," he whispered. "I'm … you called me 'boy'. You have your choice of all of them, the men. They're magnificent. I'm…." He swallowed, hard. "Too thin, too bookish, too odd-looking."

Zander laughed, but it didn't sound cruel. "Yes, all of that is still true. I could have the fine body of any Silver Captain, maybe Gold Warriors too, and I could have them on my bed, waiting for me, any night I come back to the barracks…."

"I can't come there!" Kiel looked shocked.

Zander looked down into his face, still holding him as tightly. "I suppose not. You'd be thoroughly laughed at – " When Kiel opened his mouth to protest, Zander put his fingers against it to hush him. It was a surprisingly tender gesture. "*I* would be laughed at, too, Kiel. I don't enjoy that much, it places me with you, not them. And that's not so amusing in my world."

Kiel's face twisted with proud anger. "I know what you're saying, I'm just a servant, soldiers have no time to waste with lowly creatures like me, you think I don't realize that? A servant isn't worth the time or company, maybe good to run errands in the barracks, to wash and shave you, to fetch your clothes, to admire your body and give a quick, convenient service to your cock – "

Zander's grip tightened and he grinned mischievously. "That sounds good, Kiel. Is that what you want to do?"

Kiel wriggled a bit, his face reddening again. I knew how strong Zander was, yet I suspected he wasn't using his full strength and Kiel could have pulled free if he'd wanted to. "You already have youngsters in the barracks for that, those who follow the soldiers shamelessly, squabbling for your favor, who fawn over you and kneel for you, lifting their tunics so you can reach their bare ass easily enough, offering you any relief you want…."

Zander's words were a whisper now into Kiel's ear, but the air was so still that I could hear them clearly. "I don't want *them*. I want *you* to relieve me. I know how ridiculous that is of me, but that's how it seems to be. And I'm not used to holding back from what I want. Are you scared of it? I can be gentle; I can show you – "

This time, Kiel did pull away, if only to the outer extent of Zander's arms. "No," he said, sharply. "Thank you, soldier, but I don't need tuition. I've done it before and I was *not so bad* at it, I believe, even if I didn't much care for it."

Zander sucked in a breath. He seemed unusually agitated. "You should have said. I don't take anyone who's unwilling, although I know there are those soldiers who do."

Kiel made a sound of frustration. "I can't explain myself to you properly. That's what *you* do to *me*, and it's not at all comfortable. But I'm not unwilling. Not with *you*." He shook his head, his face still pink with excitement and embarrassment, and his fair, fine hair brushing against Zander's upper arm. "It was unsatisfying before because … because I had no interest in them, the other men. But I'm not nervous of the physical things, the things that you take for granted – your hands on me, or your cock in my mouth, or…." His voice trailed off. He was very red, but his expression was determined. "It's not that. But I can't explain how I feel about you. What more I want; what I'm afraid of…."

Zander breathed heavily, watching the rapid movement of Kiel's mouth. "You want to know what *I* think? I think there's too much going on in your head. I think that you're slightly mad, despite your sharp mind, and I don't understand a half of what you say or why you feel the need to argue with yourself. And yet I still return to see you." He sounded almost angry with himself, but his eyes were fixed on Kiel with a kind of fascination – and a gentleness that I'd never seen in his expression before. "However, I can see the fear in your eyes and I'm sorry for that. I want you but I won't take you unless you want it, too. It should be something enjoyable, something for entertainment and release." He frowned, although his eyes glinted with desire. He ran a fingertip along the line of Kiel's jaw. "Freely given, you said, remember?"

Kiel smiled, gently. "I remember. You listen to me, Gold Warrior."

"Yes, obviously I do. It seems I'm slightly mad as well, I must have caught that from you." Zander's voice was soft, with an underlying thread of suppressed laughter.

They were silent again for a moment. I was amused to watch two men who were usually so sure of themselves so lost for words in the face of each other.

"Do you *want* more, Kiel?" Zander dipped his head again, brushing his mouth over Kiel's. "Do you want *me*?"

Kiel didn't answer directly, but he tilted his face back up to Zander's and took another kiss. This time their lips were even fiercer and Kiel slid his arms around Zander's waist, pulling them closely together.

Zander gave a deep, growling sigh.

"Let me," Kiel whispered, pulling away again. "Let me show you how much I've *always* wanted you." He crouched down in front of the soldier, his hands trailing down Zander's thighs as he lowered himself, catching on the rough fabric of the uniform trousers. His fingers lingered over the swelling at Zander's groin, his palm instinctively curling into a shape that might cup it. Zander's body tensed up.

"Scribe…?"

"Too much thinking," Kiel muttered. His eyes were bright and he was smiling. "You're right about me. Sometimes it's best just to act." He knelt deliberately on the hard wooden floor of the Library, his head at the level of Zander's hips, and his breath warm between the other man's legs. He slipped his hands to the inside of Zander's thighs and nudged them further apart, making Zander shift his feet to a wider stance.

The Gold Warrior's breath hitched in his throat. "Yes," he murmured. His head went back; his voice was deep and hoarse. "It seems you are definitely *not so bad* at this…."

Kiel smiled more slyly. He reached up and loosened the fastenings of Zander's trousers. With a single, sharp movement, he tugged them down to the older man's upper thighs, letting his cock spring free. It was thick, bobbing up against Zander's belly and shining with damp anticipation but Kiel didn't look intimidated by it in the least. He leant forward and swiped his tongue slowly and greedily along its length. Zander reached blindly behind him to grasp the edge of the table, holding himself upright. He looked down at Kiel, amazement on his face. Kiel gazed back up at him quite boldly, and licked his lips. Zander groaned and reached out a hand to tangle into Kiel's hair. "Don't be scared," he growled. "Don't be timid with me. That's not what I like."

Kiel didn't answer, but he nodded as if he already guessed that. It was unusual to see him so silent, but of course he needed his mouth for other matters. His lips slid carefully but firmly over Zander's cock, his hands anchoring himself against the strong thighs. I saw the muscles of his shoulders clench, and the sudden tension in his own thighs and buttocks. His head moved as slowly as torment might allow, back and forth on the soldier's erection. Zander grunted his pleasure with every stroke. And Kiel made sounds, too, not always a familiar thing for such service, but I wondered with amusement whether that was a reflection of the young man's love of words and expression at all times. He made soft, humming noises in his throat as he sucked and licked, and it sounded as if he were genuinely enjoying himself. I knew of Remainder servants who did, indeed, ingratiate themselves into the barracks and plead for attention from the soldiers, though I had never encouraged any of them for myself. To my knowledge, they were quiet, submissive, and often very passive lovers.

Kiel was none of these. His hand rested confidently up between Zander's legs, caressing his balls, and from the movement of Zander's hand, tangled in Kiel's hair, I could tell that Kiel's mouth was speeding up its work. I couldn't help but imagine the stimulating effect on Zander, whom I knew was boisterous and greedy in his coupling.

They looked good together and were well matched in enthusiasm.

I shifted quietly in the room above. It wasn't unusual for coupling to be in full view of other soldiers – though some liked the exhibitionism more than others – and I felt no shame in having overheard all of their foreplay. But I felt more comfortable moving away. I didn't think it was jealousy, for that wasn't something a soldier should ever feel, and I had no particular desire for either of them for myself. Maybe I had been more disturbed by my last meeting with Seleste than I had imagined. I knew I had become something other than a soldier over the last year, not just because my Devotions had ceased; not just because Seleste had refused me a formal military role in the Guard, the job I had always lived for. The change had come from within me; from the events of a year ago. Only my own will and discipline had kept me an acting servant of the City and the Queen.

But the sexual activity that had always been commonplace to me in the barracks had come to mean something more than physical release. Or something much *less*, without the person of my choice. The feelings twisted inside me, the pain of confusion and loss returning.

I slipped quietly away from the opening, pausing before I pulled the hatchway closed after me. I heard Zander's guttural cry as he came in Kiel's mouth, and then a ripple of laughter, from which man I wasn't sure. Then there was the sound of books thudding carelessly on to the floor, and I suspected that Zander was clearing the desk for use other than reading. Kiel gave a soft, keening moan and I waited for one more moment in case this was something he resisted, and he might need my protection. But there was more stifled laughter, and the heavy sound of a body landing on its back on a wooden surface, and then the voices I could hear as a distant murmur deteriorated to nothing but gasps and panting against a background of rhythmic rocking of the furniture. I hoped that the desk held firm for as long as they needed it to, and then I smiled to myself, wondering if they'd even care if it collapsed beneath them, lost in their passion. I knew Zander wouldn't – and from the look in Kiel's eyes as he'd knelt before him, I suspected that he wouldn't either.

I tugged the hatch into its moorings and closed off the room below to my eyes and ears.

I SAT with Kiel's book on my lap and a pile of the oldest histories beside me. The evening hours had slipped away while I traced his work back as far as he himself had gone. I saw – as Kiel had – the information becoming more sparse, the witness accounts reducing in number and detail, and the characters becoming less and less familiar compared to our own citizens. There were soldiers written about, indeed, and mighty battles, and glorious, Royal Queens. I read about the settlement of Aza City and the building of many of the institutions that were still here today, even if they had been rebuilt or refurbished since. The Central School was described, and the Queen's apartments and the establishment of many of the Households, including my own original home, the Exchequer.

But the stories of the people became rare and less familiar. Tales referred to the 'group' or the 'Council'. Children were mentioned in the same descriptions as adults; several generations were noted as living together and contributing to various settlement projects. A slow, painful disturbance began in the pit of my belly. Women were mentioned, but not designated as Ladies; men were described as part of the group, yet not specifically as soldiers. There was no mention of Remainders or Exiles, only the broad mass of citizens and their struggles and successes in setting up habitation on this planet. It was a very different stage from the one on which we all now performed.

Only the one nation, I had said to Kiel. That was how it all started.

And led by a man, not a woman. Not a Queen.

I tried to follow some of the oldest reports that Kiel had mentioned but the writing was difficult to decipher and I was scared of damaging the thin, worn papers with my broad, clumsy hands. I started to browse back through, working towards the more current records. I followed the Brand as before, the more simplistic form starting to gain embellishment after a generation or two. It was only in the later Histories, though, that it began to be associated solely with the Royal family – in the earlier books, where I could find anything that was both legible and comprehensible, it appeared to be a notation for the whole City rather than any specific family or lineage. It had obviously been

adopted by the Queen at a certain point in history and carried on by her family ever since.

It had become the signature of our shared history.

It was at that point where the Brand was procured by the Royal Family that I discovered mention of the Devotions for the first time, and the 'generous love' of the Queens that had brought such salvation to their male servants. Was this of more interest to me than the path of the Brand because of my own history as a soldier? The Devotions were such a part of my life and upbringing that I had been horribly shocked and scared when I'd first been without them, when I'd been taken captive by the Exiles a year ago. It was part of the very fabric of our lives and our schooling that the Devotions were essential for men to live and thrive on this planet – that our Queens had developed them in the Household of Physic to save us, to nurture us. Kiel had noted the reports from Colonization, where people died and babies could not thrive, and life on the planet was too much of a struggle. Maybe men were dying then in disproportionate numbers, and such a crisis had prompted the need for developing the cure.

Or maybe the history of our need for the Devotions was also – as Kiel had said – warped.

I examined my treacherous attitude and my sudden ability to cast off all Schooling and popular history so casually, and I found myself less shocked than I should have been.

I considered my own health and knew that although I was more volatile and prone to temper, I had not deteriorated significantly since I ceased my Devotions. My behavior towards my Queen had continued to follow a path of outward obedience, and so she'd never suggested I start them up again. The male Exiles lived without them, too, and although they didn't grow to the fine form that the City soldiers did, they also didn't die from its lack. Their aggression was more raw, their passions unfettered. But they showed the same loyalty that a citizen did, the same needs and desires and angers.

But their society was very different.

Women ruled, but alongside them; children joined them in their daily lives. Their commitment to leaders and partners was made by

choice rather than sold in public market, by Household brand. They were less organized, less sheltered, less disciplined than men in the City – but they had chosen that life, knowing the consequences.

The Devotions were the one certain difference between us as men.

Seleste had manipulated the Devotions of her solders during the Battle for Queenship, that fact I knew. She had control and understanding of them – she had the measurement of their power. It was her order as Queen that determined the level and type of Devotions that a man received during his time in the Household. I believed that held true for both soldiers and Remainder servants.

I wondered how often she might have manipulated their use in the past; how any of the previous Queens might have done the same. To have exaggerated a man's military aggression while he was in the Guard; to have controlled a man's strength and leadership skills when he was under a Queen's rule; to have nurtured a man's desire and virility when he was needed for breeding purposes.

I wondered how much of a soldier's life and career through Bronzeman to Silver Captain to Gold Warrior was part of the natural order, and how much might be due to a Queen's personal machinations, to suit her needs at the time.

My mind roamed freely, refusing to be bound by the rules I had known all my life, determined to consider everything afresh. I wondered whether the rules of treason had been developed for the benefit of the City – or for the benefit of its rulers. Were Bronzemen kept sacred for the Ladies because of the law – or because of the Ladies' personal, sexual desire? Had my own arrest for the alleged crime of coupling with a Bronzeman been part of the hereditary need to keep order and discipline in the City – or a ruling created by women who wanted the best young specimens kept for their own kind, and to keep their other men submissive and in fear of reprisal?

I remembered the fearful courage in Dax's eyes when he was locked up in the cells of the Household of the Exchequer; I remembered the cold anger in Mistress Luana's eyes as she demanded my execution for disloyalty. But I also remembered the loyalty I had shown the Mistresses in my life, and the shelter and support they had

offered *me* as a growing man. I knew that the City was strong and wealthy and rich in resources and military might, and I knew the good nature of so many men who thrived there. Things were confused in my mind.

And then I remembered the overwhelming feelings I had for Dax and the need that I had for him, every minute of every day; in every movement of my body; in every thought that passed through my mind.

The emotion spiked through me like the blow from a sword.

Kiel's book toppled sideways off my lap, my fingers no longer holding on to it tightly enough. Its pages fluttered over, opening at an earlier page where he described what he'd found from the first generation after Colonization. I looked again at the birth of the Brand that would one day be associated solely with the Royal family, and the scribble that he had copied from within the margins of the old, disheveled documents. The figure inside the frame … the sign of all that we lived by; of our devoted and despotic Queen; of our imprisonment and enforced loyalty.

A figure that was androgynous in shape and – in this earlier manifestation – holding a sword. My eyes were suddenly far sharper, my assessment far more objective. The slim womanly cipher could easily be taken as a man; Kiel had said the same himself, when he'd seen it in Eila's arm.

Our Brand may be the mark of a historic man, rather than a Queen! The realization shivered through me like a winter chill. But there were pieces missing in this story, like a gap in the wooden puzzles that they used in the Central School for the slower children to grasp their letters. Kiel had read of the struggles at Colonization; I was reading of the new world under the Queens, with their gloriously beautiful Brand and the life-saving Devotions.

What had carried one through to the other?

I picked Kiel's book up again, and in my clumsy excitement I dislodged the final volume in the pile of old Histories. It looked dirty and torn in many places, its pages crumpled and its writing as illegible as many of the other ancient documents. But as I moved it away to the

side, a few sheets of yellowed paper fell out. They were headed with the brand again, or so I thought. When I looked more closely, I saw that it was a different illustration, though so evocative of the Brand that it wasn't surprising I'd mistaken them for the same thing. This drawing was bold and very carefully inked, considering the poor condition of all the other notes. The writing was different, too, far easier to make out. Kiel must have stopped his work before finding this, for the pages were still stuck at the corners to each other. I peeled the old manuscript apart as gently as I could, and tried to make out the faded words.

The text spoke of the hours that had been spent and the resources that had been recklessly consumed, but at last the excitement of a success after many, many failures! The illustration that I'd thought was a brand I now realized was a diagram instead. It accompanied lines of symbols, none of which I understood, but which looked similar to things I had occasionally seen in the Household of Physic – and some of the marks on my own thigh, part of the design of Eila's Exile brand, cut into my own flesh.

I read on, as best I could in the fading light. There was continuing excitement in the tale, obvious even through the pale, clinically penned text, that some of the babies were thriving at last, that the loss of their men folk would be halted within a generation, that they would forever be grateful to the man who had discovered the answer to this and been able to create the drug to alleviate it.

I realized I was reading about the birth of the Devotions, long before they were heralded by the History of the Queens. And yet it wasn't revered in the way that I expected, as if it were truly the savior of our very lives and would continue to be so, over many generations to come. It was described only as a medicine, as a passing remedy. There were men mentioned in the account who were obviously not under the medication, nor were they dying, though they were spoken of quite dismissively. There were many more references to following the development of selected babies, and plenty of positive marks on the records to show that this was progressing well. The success seemed to lie with the physical well-being of the new children.

I found, at the last, what seemed to be a poem. It was signed by a woman who described herself as working in what had obviously

been, at that time, their Household of Physic. It was her account that I'd been reading. There was some kind of notation at the top of the page as if she had marked the day and season, but it bore no relation to the way that we now marked our days and I didn't understand how it worked. But it seemed to have been written some time after the other notes. Their medical facility had saved her child, she wrote, and this poem was in celebration of this. It was also dedicated to the brave man, their founder, who had given his own life to the disease, but leaving enough of his notes to her and her fellow assistants to enable her to carry on his work, developing and distributing the cure where needed. The poem seemed unfinished, probably because some pages were missing; its style was strange and did not follow the traditional, more lyrical couplets of our own poetry, yet it had a poignancy that touched me.

"*It has saved the few*

It has saved the many

The child will carry the seed

And the fruit will flourish."

There were other words that I didn't understand, or couldn't read clearly, but it remained a testimony to her child and its promise for the future. It wasn't an emotion I had ever experienced myself but I recognized an empathy that I'd rarely felt before.

She finished with nothing more than a scribbled note. She would be meeting the group later, to discuss how the community would continue without their founder. There needed to be more children, she noted quite pragmatically, after the recent losses. The health of the men was a priority, so was their total commitment to the scheme.

The mark of the cure would be forever a reminder of his work and sacrifice, she wrote, obviously referring to the scientific signs and symbols shown on this document. It would mark the men who received it; it would mark their commitment to the scheme. Their devotion to the new race.

The disturbance in my gut grew more insistent.

I took the thin, fragile pages and slipped them inside Kiel's book.

I closed it securely.

I WAS still there when night fell and Kiel came to find me. He slid open the hatch way and pushed the candle lamp up ahead of him into the upper room. As he pulled himself up to join me, the flame threw long, looping shadows across the heaped piles of books. I looked up at him, squinting in the poor light. I'd ceased reading a long time ago. There had been too many things to think about, too much conflict in my mind for it to settle into any comfortable place. I sat with my back to one of the walls, surrounded by the silent, musky smell of old paper and leather, and I brooded.

I didn't know whether Kiel had been with Zander all that time – though I suspected he had – but there was a bright spark in his eye that couldn't be hidden even though he kept his voice low and respectful.

"Maen, why are you still here? Zander … the soldiers have been looking for you."

I shrugged. I knew that wasn't purely because of my absence, for no one in the past had been bothered if I went my own way. It seemed that Seleste had meant what she said, when she demanded I choose between total commitment and punishment.

Kiel crouched down beside me. "Are you in trouble?"

I couldn't answer. I was sure that I was, but I didn't yet know the full implications.

He sighed. "I'm scared, Maen, I can't help it. But I'll protect you as best I can, the same as you'd do for me."

I smiled, despite myself. "Thank you," I said, gravely. "I appreciate that. But you won't be drawn into any more danger if I can prevent it."

"Will you leave the City?" he asked, suddenly. "Is that what you're planning?"

I frowned. "I'll find my place, Kiel, you don't need to worry."

"I do!" he snapped fiercely, startling me. "I promised him I'd watch you, to let him know if there was sudden danger, any new threat from the Queen – "

I grasped him by the collar of his tunic, hauling his face up to mine, his knees scrabbling on the floor behind him as he tried to keep his balance. "Maen! What – ?"

"Who are you talking about?" I growled.

His eyes rolled with fright. He had difficulty speaking because of my grip at his throat. "Uhh … Maen, let go…! It was Hann … Hann asked me to be on alert, that's all … I tried to tell you, he hasn't forgotten you – "

I dropped the youngster abruptly and he fell back on his ass, his arms flung out to try to catch his fall. Several of the books behind him fell from their heaps, thudding into the dust. I saw him glance over to where he'd placed the lamp, checking that his precious books and papers were safe from the threat of fire.

"I told you not to seek the camp again!" I growled. "It's too dangerous for us all, not just you. *You* will be the one who puts us in mortal danger, not the Exiles. Do you care nothing for that?"

Kiel flushed. "I have only been once...." He caught my eye. "Twice," he squeaked. "Mistress Flora uses that beacon on the hill, we have a code, and there was a change in the uppermost pile of rocks, so I knew she needed me. Yet when I went there at night, *he* was there instead."

I felt suddenly nauseous. The danger of Dax being that close to the City – of being in contact with a servant of the Queen! How long did he think he might get away with it? And not only that, he had been talking to Kiel, had actively sought him out…. "How dare you," I hissed, turning on Kiel as he cowered on the floor at my feet. "To interfere with something you cannot possibly understand. To act against my express orders!"

He was terrified of me, I could see his body shaking. "I'm sorry, Maen. In Devotions' name, I'm sorry! I thought I might help you, that's all. He wanted to know about you, to know how you were placed in the City. He wanted to know how you *were*…."

I stood up abruptly, my head brushing perilously close to one of the lower ceiling beams. I couldn't breathe properly, full of anger and fear and pain. "He mustn't have anything to do with me. He knows that; he *wished* that! She'll kill him if she knows, if he is found. She'll kill us all."

"He wanted to know about you," Kiel repeated, doggedly. "He said that he needed to know you were safe. I was to tell him, and to alert him if things changed and you were in danger."

"He doesn't need to know about *me*," I growled. I wasn't the important one….

"Yes, *you*," Kiel snapped back, surprisingly brave. "He cares for you, Maen, just like he always did. Yes, he's angry at you and angry at the Queen, or so Mistress Flora has told me when she can so kindly afford some of her time in explanation. But he can't forget you."

"A soldier isn't allowed a personal relationship." I raised my face to the ceiling, my eyes clouding over and the pain in my head suddenly very acute. My voice sounded alien to me, hoarse and bitter. I didn't know whether I was talking about Dax or myself.

Kiel's voice came back much stronger, and now he was angry, too. "You're being a fool, Maen! Such a strong man, yet so weak when it comes to yourself. What does it matter if it's allowed or not, if it still happens? You can't deny it, and if you do, you show him disrespect as well as yourself. It's dishonest to us all. Seems to me you're neither one thing nor the other, Maen, neither soldier nor citizen, neither the Queen's man nor your own!"

Sudden, shocked silence fell in the dusty little room.

I took a step towards Kiel and he flinched, but held his ground. I stopped.

"I'm *his*," I said, wonderingly, speaking more to myself than to Kiel, who looked back at me nervously. "I always have been, and nothing here has ever held me as strongly as that. She was right about my loyalty. About my true choice."

Kiel frowned, maybe at my perceived disrespect to the Queen and my Mistress. But when he looked back up at me, his eyes were bright with tears. "Go and meet him. He'll be there, he told me so, every other night. That's tonight."

I shook my head, but slowly. Kiel scrabbled up on to his knees and I bent down to help him to his feet.

"He gave me this, to give you." Kiel fumbled under his tunic and brought out a small fabric purse. He slid it into my hand and closed my fingers over it. "If there was danger. He said you'd know."

"Know what?"

Kiel shrugged. He watched as I opened the bag and tipped its contents out on to my palm. He peered over, curious as ever, his fear forgotten. In the candle's pale light, it glinted against my skin. "It's an earring. It's *gold*." His tone was awed, for Remainders rarely saw jewelry close up, let alone handled or wore it. "But wasn't he only a Bronzeman? Did he steal it? I thought only Gold Warriors could wear the earring, like Zander has…."

"It's mine," I said, softly.

Kiel made a soft noise beside me, and his hand brushed against mine in sympathy.

"As *he* is," I whispered.

CHAPTER 12

I DIDN'T need Kiel's help to find the Exile camp again because the route was sharply etched in my memory. Everything was sharp; everything was vivid. The smell of the open air, the harsh, rugged rocks beneath my boots, the sound of small animals and birds that never ventured nearer to the City.

Kiel came with me as far as the walls, yet again directing me to the best place to leave the City unnoticed. No one had seen us leave the Library, nor make our way around the back of the central courtyard and out past the stables and grain barn on the outskirts of the City buildings. Kiel explained it was the most reliable route he knew, as the only inhabitants around there were the servants who slept every free moment they had, and had little interest at the best of times in the politics of the Ladies and their soldiers. Even so, I felt clumsy and too obvious as I crept around behind him. Kiel moved swiftly and almost silently, as if he could switch off the vibrancy and energy of his character at will and slip back into a grey, inconspicuous shadow of a man in the darkness of the City night. I knew that if I hadn't met him personally, I would never have noticed him moving around. I wondered how often I'd passed him in the City without realizing it, before I chanced on him that day in the Library.

"Maen?" He tugged gently at my sleeve. I had come straight from the Library so I had no cloak or coat, and unfortunately no weapon either. "You must go when the Guard is at the farthest end of its march. Are you ready?"

I nodded. My gaze was already far out towards the horizon.

"Be careful," he whispered. When I turned one last time to look at him, he looked close to tears.

"What is it?"

"You're leaving the City, aren't you? Like I thought you would. For good. You have a strange look on your face, Maen, and it scares me. Won't they come after you? The Queen will know you've gone, she won't allow anyone to leave without her authorization, and you are very close to her…."

"Don't concern yourself." I tried to sound reassuring, quieting him. "She's busy with many other things. I'll be all right."

"I'm not sure *I* will be," he said, urgently. "I know I can't ask you to come back, I know I'm nothing important to you, and that's how it should be…." He drew a quick, extra breath. "Promise me I'll see you again some time?"

I stared at him, then reached down and drew him against me in a quick, rather clumsy hold. "You *are* important to me, Kiel, and to the City as well. I'll make sure you're safe, and I'll see you again soon. I promise." Then I stepped quickly away from him and through the gap in the ancient brickwork.

I SAW Dax before he saw me.

I clambered up to the cairn of rocks that Kiel and Mistress Flora used as their means of contacting each other. It had been a landmark for my previous journey to the Exile camp, but now I saw it as far more important than just a natural rock fall. The ground here was scrub, like everywhere else in this area, and the wind bit cruelly through the air whenever it lifted. The lengthening shadows of the night colored the ground in multitudinous shades of grey, and the small clusters of trees and tall bushes set around the cairn were distorted into dark, swelling silhouettes. They were the only places that offered temporary shelter and places to hide for the secret messenger and his Mistress.

Or for soldiers, looking to meet outside of their respective worlds.

Dax had obviously drawn back under the cover of the foliage, for protection in case the Exile message system had been discovered or betrayed, but as soon as I came within sight of the tumbled pile of

rocks, I knew his position. Maybe I was attuned to him, as I once had been in my daily life, but maybe it was the strength of my impatience and my gnawing desire to see him that led me there. I made my way to the perimeter of the farthest copse and then stopped, leaning against an overhanging branch and peering in under its shadow until I saw him. He sat against one of the broad, gnarled trunks, but he hadn't moved as I approached. Was he asleep? The hour was very late. I wondered how long he'd sat there today; whether he did, truly, come to wait here every second night, as he'd told Kiel, for news on life in the City, or … for me.

I stared at him, at the shape of his body, at his pale hair silhouetted against the dark shade of the trees. He had grown taller since he left the City, even though I knew the Exiles didn't thrive as well as the soldiers within. He would always be of slimmer build, a lithe and athletic figure, but he had grown bulkier and stronger too, obviously from the harsh life outside. His coarse tunic stretched tightly across his shoulders, and where he'd drawn his legs up to his chest, I could see the tight leather ties that bound his trousers around the muscled calves. His arms were clasped around his knees and his head had fallen forwards, hiding his face from me.

My heart hammered fiercely against my chest; my mouth was dry. I was a little out of breath from the climb but that didn't account for the ache throughout my whole body. I wanted to call out to him but something stuck in my throat. I had never felt fear like this before. Our last meeting had been such a shock to me, such an agony of fierce, reawakened emotion. Yet he'd made it very clear to me that his life had moved on without me, and that he harbored resentment not only against the City but against me as well.

Yet he was here tonight. Waiting.

And then he looked up, straight at me.

It was as if the world fell silent around me in that second. I heard nothing above the thudding of my own heart, not even the sound of a bird or the wind in the creak of the branches above me.

"Maen." His voice was low but it carried clearly in the night air, breaking the tension. "You came."

I stepped towards him, ducking in under one of the lower boughs. "Kiel brought me the message."

"The earring."

I nodded. He stood up slowly, as if stiff from having sat for a long time. I watched the way that his muscles bunched across his thighs, and the broadening of his chest. I took several more steps towards him, my feet suddenly feeling awkward.

"The mark of your rank," he said softly. "The man you were, then."

I stopped. "I'm no longer that man," I said. My voice sounded hoarse.

His eyes shone with the reflected moonlight, his face half shadowed, his skin dappled with the pattern of the bushes around us. "We've both changed," he said, frowning.

I couldn't be clear about his tone, though his voice was steady. "You have found a new life here."

He nodded. This time, he took a step towards me. I could see his face more clearly: his expression was fierce. "And you have your place in the City."

"Dax…."

He held up a hand, making me pause. "We both have a new life, with responsibilities and duties and people who depend on us, who live with us." He looked at me swiftly, perhaps trying to gauge my reaction.

"Yes," I said, fighting to keep my voice still. "And yet none of it has been any good, not for me."

His eyes widened. "None of it can compare, I think."

I nodded. "True. Because none of it is as rewarding, as satisfying. None of it soothes the ache inside me. None of it calms the turmoil of my needs. Of my desire."

"Maen." He walked over now, stopping a foot away from me. He lifted his hand and touched my shoulder. His expression was still set firm, but it looked as if there were tears in his eyes. "When you

came back the other day …I tried to say things then, but it was too difficult. Besides, I persuaded myself I had no right to disturb the paths we'd taken on our own. I'd learned to live with the pain you left me – I had no need for you, no forgiveness within me for your preferred loyalty to the City."

I reached up and grasped his hand, pulling it to my chest. "I have no excuse. You have every right to resent me. I was wrong when I thought you'd be better served away from me."

"So very wrong." His voice was so low that I had to dip my head to hear him. "We both were. When I escaped from the City, I was lost for a long time." His expression twisted, as if he were struggling with painful memories. "Not physically, for I found shelter quickly and easily. But I think I was mad for a while; I'd have been happy for the Exiles to have killed me. Some of them wanted to, at first, but I didn't care. I couldn't think of living any other life – I didn't *want* to. I didn't understand how you could imagine I'd want to live without you."

His breath was on my cheek and it was sharper and fresher than the night air. I'd forgotten the reality of his passion, of his energy, even though it was channeled now into anger against me. "Dax, I was arrogant. I was naïve. I don't know *what* I was, but believe me, I've reconsidered that decision every day since. I thought I would be able to live with the promise of your safety as comfort, that my own life could still continue with purpose and meaning."

"You're a fool," he murmured.

Startled, I stared into his eyes.

"I've had no real peace since I parted from you, so why should you be any different?" There was something deeper in his eyes, not just the sadness, the anguish, the regret. "And then you appeared again, disturbing it all anew, and I find that my whole life with the Exiles has been a sham. That's what it's been, Maen, nothing but a mask, a game that I've played, as if I were satisfied with the people and the power in my new life. I can't maintain that now. I can't pretend that it can compensate."

"It can't!" I said, fiercely, and he nodded in reply.

"We're both fools." He smiled again, and this time I reached forward and captured his mouth with mine. I swallowed his gasp – I tasted the soft dryness of his lips. He bent back his head and I bore down over him. He slipped his arm around my waist and turned me, pushing us both to the nearest tree trunk, my back landing flat against its smooth bark. His strength excited me; he matched me in many ways now. "You were wrong," he whispered. "You are still that man who wore the earring, now as then. In all the ways that matter. The man that I knew and wanted – the one that I always will."

"Dax…."

"Quiet," he hissed. He nipped at my lower lip, thrusting his tongue into my mouth. His knee came between my legs, forcing them further apart, nudging his groin against mine. I had only cloth trousers on and I knew my arousal was straining against the front of them. Suddenly I didn't care about restraining myself any more. All I wanted to do was to hold him and taste and smell him. The wind lifted briefly, hissing through the trees and lifting my hair, wafting the smell of sap and soil up under my nose. I gripped Dax tightly and pressed back into his kiss, rubbing myself against him.

"Your men…?" I gasped.

He shook his head; he was panting heavily. "No one knows I'm here. They know I patrol the camp at night, and it's just been a matter of making my way up here when I'm out of sight of the late fires."

"How often?" I whispered, my mouth close to his ear, tasting the skin of his neck.

He laughed sadly, his chest shaking gently against me. "When I first escaped, I used to sit up here every night, wondering if I'd see you." I pulled back from him, shocked. "No," he shook his head. "Listen to me, I don't need pity; I don't mean to anger or distress you. I knew I wouldn't see you again. I knew I'd lost you. But this was as far as I dared go, out of my exile, yet still to be in contact somehow with the City. With *you*. After a while…." He sighed, and his hands tightened on my waist. "After a while I stopped coming."

"And yet you continued to use this as a contact place?"

He nodded. "I know Flora has been using it to keep in touch with her allies in the City, and with her messenger Kiel. I've tolerated that, so long as there was no danger to the camp He's a resourceful young man, he's managed to move between here and the City without anyone following him."

I tensed slightly, wondering if that were entirely true, but the scent of Dax's skin was in my nostrils and his legs were pushing against my thighs, and I couldn't think clearly. "I thought you were dead." My voice sounded broken, even to my own ears. "They told me they'd killed you in that raid. I had accepted it as truth … when I saw you again, the shock disturbed everything I wanted to say, to do."

He raised his head again and kissed my face, his mouth fierce and hungry on my skin. "You were as good as dead to me, the day I left, and maybe I didn't want to know any different. It was as much a shock to me, to find you still living, still within my reach."

"No more shock," I gasped. "We're far from dead men. Feel it!" My hands found the belt around his tunic and tugged the clasp open. I reached under it, pushing the fabric roughly up under his arms, desperate to touch him. His skin was taut across the muscles of his torso, chilled in the night air but with his pulse warm under my hands. I ran my fingers over his nipple and twisted it. He sucked in a sharp breath.

"I couldn't bear it," Dax hissed. "To see you return … and then to let you go again. When I kissed you…."

"No," I said hoarsely. "No more words." His mouth covered mine and we swallowed whatever sounds we made, sounds of pleasure and sudden, consuming need. He ground up against me, his cock swollen and hard under his trousers, rubbing against mine, the friction causing both agony and joy. I felt the laughter rumbling in his chest, and heard the shortening of his breath. The smell of him was intoxicating; his gasping voice was in my head, making me dizzy.

"It won't be long," I murmured into his ear. "*I* won't be long, in coming." The saliva was gathering in my mouth, the ache of climax starting deep in the pit of my groin. "Dax, wait a moment, this isn't the way I wanted you – "

"Liar," he hissed, but he was smiling and his eyes were bright with excitement. "Any way is good, that's what you're really thinking, that's how *I* want *you*! Take hold of me, Maen. Do what you want with me!"

I laughed at his eagerness and slipped my hand into the loose waist of his trousers, pushing them down to his thighs. My palm slid over the taut skin of his hip and down between his legs, catching hold of his turgid cock, warm and damp against my skin. The hairs at his groin tangled between my fingers and his heavy balls shifted against my wrist. He groaned aloud, gripping at my shoulders to anchor himself, thrusting his hips against me. "*Yes*…."

I pushed my other hand roughly into my own trousers, grasping my own arousal, trying to hold back the excitement at the same time as the briefest touch stimulated it, biting my lip against an impossible task. I was panting loudly, and so was he. I pumped him steadily, the leaking seed from the tip making my fingers slick, the thrill of his hard flesh against my palm making my heart race. He groaned into my neck, his lips tracing words against my skin. "*At last*," he seemed to hiss. I felt his cock throb in rhythm with my own frenzied pulse. Then his head went back and his back arched, sharply. "Harder!" he urged, and as I gripped him more fiercely he leant heavily against me, his limbs shaking with his climax, his seed bursting hot and sticky over my fingers.

I came moments after him, excited beyond belief by the mere sound of his voice, harsh and deep with his need. I couldn't stop my cock from jumping in my fist nor did I try to. It swelled inside my fingers, the seed spitting from the head, my muscles aching with the tension of holding myself upright against his sagging body. My own cry of satisfaction was guttural and fierce, and my legs started to buckle beneath our weight.

We dropped awkwardly to our knees on the ground at the foot of the tree, fallen leaves crackling beneath us, our cries fading as dull echoes in amongst the dense branches. His tunic fell back down over his belly and my arm, the fabric feeling rough on my skin after the hot, soft texture of his flesh. I gazed into his eyes, wide and bright, the pupils dilated. His face was deeply flushed. And then he grinned at

me, the pleasure open and genuine and without any of the misery and tension that I'd seen on his face ever since I found him again.

"I won't be apart from you anymore," I blurted out. "I can't live with it."

He reached a shaking hand to my face, cupping my cheek. "I know. I understand. I won't have it that way."

I smiled back. "That sounds like the Exile leader speaking to his soldier."

He shook his head; his gaze never wavered. "It's merely the Bronzeman speaking to his Gold Warrior. I'm yours. I always have been."

I touched his face in return, my thumb lightly brushing the pattern of old scars on his cheek. Instinctively, he drew back, but then relaxed under my touch. When I kissed him again, our mouths were far more gentle, far more tender.

This was loving.

HE took me to the west edge of the copse, where it started to merge into the foot of the mountains. There were several openings pitted across the rock face, small, shallow caves that his group hadn't found suitable for settlement, but were large enough to shelter a couple of men. It was dark inside the first one he led me to, but he rummaged at the base of the back wall and uncovered a candle lamp. When he lit it with a tinder, it illuminated the area with dark, elongated shadows. He turned back to me, his hands full with blankets, a stoppered flask of ale and a selection of dry biscuits, fruits and oils.

"You stay up here, too?"

He smiled, his face a balance of light and dark against the candle flame. "It's necessary sometimes. And it's always useful to have a network of places for our scouts. We may not be able to match the City forces with our weapons, but they can't compete with us here in the mountains, with our knowledge of the geography and our survival skills."

I took some of the ale gratefully, but I wasn't hungry. Neither was he. We sat together on a blanket, letting our bodies warm up in the enclosed space, watching the reflection of the lamp flickering in each other's eyes. "What will you do now, Maen?"

I frowned, for I thought I'd made it clear how I felt. "I'll be with you, go with you, wherever you want," I said. There was very little space in the small cave, but I could hear the vehemence of my voice echo against the stone walls. "It's for you to say."

He stared at me. "What would you have me say?"

I laughed, rather bitterly. "I know, it's a risk that you may not wish to take on behalf of the camp. Maybe the Queen has relinquished me personally, but a deserting soldier of any rank is an insult to her reputation. She may seek to capture and execute me." I reached for him, pressing my hands to his shoulders then running them down his arms, savoring the tension in his tightening muscles. "If I stay here, any reprisal by her will impact on you and your community."

He shivered beneath my touch, his gaze remaining steady. "You really think she's relinquished you, as you say?"

I shrugged. "Maybe there's no order out for me yet. Maybe there never will be. I left the City easily enough without detection." I couldn't read the strange, tight expression on his face. "I'm not so arrogant to believe myself important to her now she's Queen, and I know she has no care for her other men beyond the role of a servant. She is busy with plans for the Convocation and her new duties, and she has many younger, more attractive soldiers to entertain her in her leisure time." I drew a deep breath. The need to hold him close again was strong and fierce inside me. "I'm willing to take the risk."

"It's no risk at all," snapped Dax, startling me. "It's a certainty! You have no idea how deeply she regards you."

I frowned, not understanding his words.

"Do you think I didn't observe her, see how she was around you? Didn't see the hunger in her eyes? I knew enough of her while I was in the Household of the Exchequer, we were all fascinated by the Queen-Elect, keen to see someone from the Royal Household. And when I was brought before her, tortured under her own orders, and in

front of her own eyes…." He stopped, stumbling over his words, then continued more carefully. "She's wanted you, Maen, since she first saw you, or so I was told by many of the older Silvers."

"She's had enough of me," I said, slowly. "I've been in her Guard this last year…."

He grunted fiercely, and grabbed back at me. "That's not what she wants, not another soldier. Why can't you see it? She wants *you*, the man, and it's because of what you are – who you are."

"What I am, is here with you," I snapped back. "Only for you." The idea of Seleste showing weakness towards me was an uncomfortable thought and a connection to my life in the City I no longer wanted. I didn't want to think of Seleste at all! I pulled Dax in towards me, shifting on my knees so that I could get closer. When we kissed this time it was deeper and richer. His mouth was warm and had already tasted me several times; his lips parted more readily, our tongues slipped together more easily. Then he sighed and lay back down on the blanket, pulling me with him. My mouth claimed his, the movements fierce and sweet, and my hands ran over his body, sliding up under his tunic again.

"I want you, too," he whispered. "You, the man."

I lifted up above him, smiling down as he lay beneath me, his face flushed with desire. I never thought I'd have this chance again – never thought I'd see or touch him again like this. "And you have me. What time do we have?"

"Until dawn," he replied. "I'm gathering the group together tomorrow morning, to discuss the next attack on the City."

I tensed up. "Another attack? Another madness."

He growled, the sound deep in the back of his throat. "I'm not your soldier any more, Maen. Don't question my decisions for the camp. We have our own objectives."

"And what are they?" I rolled to the side, no longer leaning over him, no longer touching him as tenderly as I had been. "I've seen your men, and they are no match for the City Guard. You can't tell me you haven't suffered terrible losses from your raids, because I've seen

the injured men in the camp." I'd also heard the reports from the Gold Warriors of the Royal Household during the course of this last year, their victorious celebrations and their contempt for the ill-equipped and badly organized Exile army bands. The Exiles had been a thorn in the City's side for longer than many of us could remember, but they had never been considered a serious military threat. Admittedly, Dax's leadership may have been changing things for the better, but I had seen enough in my previous visit to know that the Exile army was still made up of men and women who had little training and who, despite their commitment to their cause, had never worked together as a fighting unit – had maybe never borne arms before now. That could not be addressed in the space of a few months, not even by the most charismatic and experienced leadership.

Dax's eyes met mine with an expression of both pride and despair. I realized in that moment that he was not a leader of his men in the same way that a Gold Warrior was. Much as I might now abhor the blind loyalty and obedience of a City soldier, I appreciated its contribution to the creation of a strong, cohesive army. It would be many more years before the Exiles could compete with that. It made it all the more brave – and foolhardy – that they sought to attack the City so often.

"I said it before," I said, more gently. "I don't want your men to be killed." This time, I leant across and touched my lips to his neck, adding, "I don't want *you* to be killed."

Dax sighed. "Life is dangerous here and I can't avoid it. Why should I *want* to? We have to be aggressive else we'll falter and die out here." I turned my head and kissed him. His hand slid to my belly, stroking down my tunic, tugging at my own belt to loosen it. "There are things we need from the City, Maen. We are lost without certain medical supplies; some of our tools are old and in need of replacement, yet we don't have the metal. If we have a bad hunting season, we have no dried meats for the winter. All of these things you take for granted in the City, but we have to steal them for ourselves."

"You are committed to these people," I said. It wasn't really a question, but he answered it as such.

"Yes. I have no loyalty left to the City, can you doubt that?"

"No," I said. I shrugged off my belt and peeled my tunic off over my shoulders. The air was cool on my bare torso but not uncomfortably so; the muscles in my belly contracted slightly at the change in temperature. The cave was small enough to retain our heat and the wind blew past the open mouth rather than in around us. Whatever the reason, I didn't feel the cold tonight.

Dax's eyes glowed sharply in the dim shadows. "You said you'd be with me, go with me wherever I wanted. You have to know what that means. You'll be an Exile too, Maen. You'll lose everything you have in the City, and she'll pursue you to your death unless we stop her somehow."

"I don't have anything in the City to lose," I said. I knelt at his side and unlaced the ties of his trousers. He pushed off his boots and I tugged the legs of the garment down over his hips. "The only thing I treasured, I'd already lost. I won't let go of you again."

I rolled his tunic back up and over his head, and he sucked in another sharp breath. Then he relaxed back on to the blanket, kicking his trousers off at his feet. He lay there naked, unashamed, smiling up at me. There were new scars on his legs and hip, obviously from campaigns against the City, though nothing too deep. But the wound that had been the cause of his reported death was a long, jagged scar down the left side of his torso, an angry slash of fresh, shining pink flesh. He saw me looking at it.

"It only gives me trouble in the cold and damp." He shrugged. "The bandage came off several days ago, for it needs exposure to the air now. I lost plenty of blood but Veli sews a wound well and packs it with the right kind of herbs to speed up the healing process. I think the sword cut through the tendons but I'll be able to fight again as soon as the muscles tighten up."

I still stared.

"Maen?"

The pain inside me was too much. I wished I'd taken the blow for him; I wanted to suffer any pain and threat of death instead of him. I'd continue to want that, for all of my remaining life span. I wanted a

lot of things to be different – to have *been* different – for him. For *us*. The sound that came out of my mouth was like a sob.

"Maen." His voice was soft; his hand reached for me and stroked gently down my back, pulling me down against him. "Don't. Don't regret anything. You took so much injury for me; you were tortured by the Exiles here and then outcast by your own people. Yet you never spoke against me; you never gave them evidence against me. I shouldn't have blamed you for letting me go because you were saving me as best you knew how. You didn't abandon me, you saved my life. Forgive me for what I've brought you to."

"No!" It was never like that, I wanted to say. I've never regretted anything to do with *you*. Instead, I slid back down his body and suckled gently at his neck, then his shoulder, running my tongue across his skin, letting my teeth graze against his flesh, feeling his nipples tighten up under my lips. He gasped with pleasure. I licked across his chest and down his ribcage, then further on down, savoring the taste of his belly, its muscles clenching up at my touch. His cock swelled, bobbing heavily against his groin, nudging its warm tip up against my chin. I smiled and lapped at the bead of moisture that leaked out. He groaned aloud.

"Maen … there's been no other man…."

I sighed. Did he think I wouldn't be gentle with him? My desire was fierce but it wasn't cruel. I ran my hand along the inside of his thighs, pushing them apart, stroking gently down underneath his balls. His back arched and he moaned with pleasure. My head dipped over his groin, his cock slipped wetly across my lips and I opened my mouth to take it in.

He gave a sudden, sharp cry, a word I didn't recognize, and pulled himself up onto his elbows, looking down at me as I started to suck him. He laughed, sounding shocked. Then his head fell back and his eyes closed and his whole body started to move in rhythm with me. He slid in and out of my mouth, the flared head catching on my tongue, the taste of his flesh slightly salty on my lips. After a while, the sliding became more like thrusting, and he began to pant heavily. I slid my mouth down further over him until my nose nudged at the dark blond hairs of his groin, and my hand gently squeezed his balls. I wanted this

to last forever – and I also wanted to bring him swift, delicious ecstasy. I wanted it all. He cried out again and one of his hands groped blindly for my head, gripping my hair. His hips thrust up, burying himself deeper in my mouth and at last he came, the seed bursting out on my tongue. He bent his legs up, trying to capture my shoulders between his knees, but his limbs were shaking too much for him to hold the position and he fell back down flat.

I let his spent cock slide out between my lips and I sat back up beside him. He was gasping and his skin still shivered with its pleasure. I ran my fingers along his side, watching the small bumps of sensitivity rise up along their path.

"Take me now," he hissed, breathless. He groped out to the side where he'd pushed the fruit and bottles to one side of the blanket and grasped a bottle of oil. "This will be enough."

I raised my eyebrows, my fingers still trailing on his flesh. "You said there's been no other. It's a long time since we did it." I shook my head, slowly. "It's late and this is a primitive place to enjoy each other. There will be other times…."

He frowned. "And they'll be even better! Are you scared?"

My eyes widened. "Scared? Of course not…."

He pulled himself to sitting, the sweat at the top of his thighs glinting in the sparse light. "I'm not scared of anything you can do to me – I welcome it!" He shifted a little awkwardly, unstoppering the bottle with one hand and tipping some oil out on to his cupped hand. As it warmed against his body heat, he massaged it into the skin of his palms, letting it trickle between his fingers, covering the digits. Then he reached down between his legs, stretching them out even further, letting his knees fall wider apart. I could see the tensed muscles at the top of his legs; I could see the beginning of the dark crease between his buttocks where it ran back behind his balls. With one hand, he prised his buttocks apart, catching up the heavy drop of his cock and balls against his thigh so that they didn't obscure my view. Then I watched, fascinated, as his other hand reached back further and he slid the first knuckle of the middle finger inside his ass. He pumped it gently, slowly; the muscles puckered up and relaxed around his finger. When he slid another in beside the first, I glanced quickly back at his face.

He didn't look in any discomfort; he didn't look nervous. In fact, he grinned at me.

"I don't need you to feel scared for *me*, either," he hissed. "I'm not made of clay, no one has broken me yet; no one's broken *us*!" There was mischief in his eyes as he watched me back. "Are you just a spectator, soldier? That's good for me, but you haven't been satisfied yet, I think…."

I couldn't reply; my throat was too tight, my heart too loud in my chest. Dax laughed at the look on my face. The front of my trousers was wet with leaking seed from my arousal. I pushed them down in a ridiculously impatient rush, wriggling awkwardly to get the cloth off my body, to release my legs.

Dax lay back sighing, his hand busy in his ass, his hips thrusting up shallowly. His bare feet gripped strongly at the blanket beneath us. I knelt carefully between his outstretched legs to allow my knee to adjust to the weight on it, and I put my hands on his knees. He didn't stop pleasuring himself, but he slowed down. When I gazed down at his face, he was still smiling at me but there was something very bright and feral in his eyes. I slid my hands up his thighs and around under his buttocks, then I shifted his hips up to meet my own. My cock was fiercely erect, blood-red with its need. As I pulled him to me, it brushed against his and he hissed aloud.

He took his fingers out of his ass, used that hand to grasp my hip and reached his other hand to my cock. His fingers were still slick with oil, and he smoothed them around me, back and forth. I gasped with the pleasure of his caress, afraid I'd come before I even got inside him; I'd been hard ever since I started to suck him. Then his hands slipped off me and he grabbed his own knees, bending his legs and pulling them back up towards his chest. He jerked his hips up, too, as if prompting me.

I drew a deep breath. With one hand, I ran my fingers down behind his balls, stroking over his exposed entrance, watching his muscles clench involuntarily, then relax again, the pucker flexing its need. His balls tightened against my palm. I held my cock in my other hand and pressed it against him. The tip slipped gently against his

flesh, both of us well oiled by now, but I redirected it and pressed harder until I breached him.

He cried out softly, grunting his pleasure. I pressed more firmly and slid inside of him. His balls were soft and tight, nudging my cock as it sank into him, and his cock jerked up, swelling again. "Maen…" he cried.

I laughed with both pleasure and astonishment at the pure, pure delight of possessing him again. It would have been a dream come true, except that my dreams had never offered even a fraction of the ecstasy of this reality. I could feel his bones and muscle under my hands, smell the sweat of his skin in my nostrils, hear the groans of his efforts in my ears. And it was all real! I started to rock in and out of him, holding my breath, my gaze fixed on his face, watching his expression.

"Dax," I hissed, feeling the tightening in my groin, the tension my just reward for waiting too long, for being too excited by him in my arms.

"*Dax*…" I moaned, and the breath caught in my throat as my fingers gripped his flesh too fiercely, trying to anchor myself, and my cock swelled almost painfully inside him,

"Yes," he murmured, still smiling, still gasping, reaching out to hold me as well, to pull me closer, to arch his body up against me, drawing me in and feeling our skin slip sweatily against each other's.

I had no more words. I came, my body going rigid. My hips slammed tightly up against him, my head fell back and my mouth opened in a silent, heartfelt cry of ecstasy. It seemed to last for a very long time; it seemed like nothing I'd ever felt before. It was shocking pleasure; poignant pain; a wash of emotion that had finally been released from behind a dam, from the confines of a prison's walls – from within *me*.

Dax was laughing as I drew out of him; chuckling as I shuddered and fell clumsily to the blanket beside him; smiling as I took his face in my hands and tried to kiss into him the words I knew I couldn't verbalize.

"Yes," he whispered again. "That's enough."

We pulled another of the blankets over us, rolled against each other even more closely, and we slept.

SEVERAL hours must have passed, for when I woke, the light through the cave opening was much brighter. Dawn was creeping across the mountain side. Dax stirred beside me, stretching out and pressing his naked back against my torso. My cock was hardening again, I could feel the heat of it underneath the blanket, lying thick against my thigh. I felt the ache of desire in my groin, pleased and astonished that I could be eager again, so soon. He turned sleepily, his eyes still closed and his hair a tangled mess, his face nuzzling against mine. Maybe I wasn't so astonished, after all.

"I have to go back to the camp," he murmured, reluctance in every syllable.

I caught at his mouth, thrusting my tongue into him, swallowing his words. When I pulled back again, his breath was harsh and his eyes had sprung open, alight with a fresh fever.

"*We* have to go back," I amended. "But in a while." I rolled him on to his belly and ran my warm fingers down between his ass cheeks. His skin was tight and smooth from sleep, its smell mixed with that of the blanket's coarse fabric and the lingering tartness of the oil. He arched back up, grunting softly, the noise somewhere between a laugh and a sigh, flinging his arms out wide to grab handfuls of the blanket beneath us. I leant over him, held up on my arms, and slid my cock into him with much less difficulty than before. I thrust slowly and sensuously, savoring every slide, watching the way the muscles in his buttocks clenched with every movement, and the way his hands fisted and relaxed on the blanket. Then I relaxed down, dropping on to my side, my cock still inside him. I tugged gently at him, pulling him on to his side as well, so that his back was pressed against my chest and I entered him from behind rather than on top. Threads of his hair stuck in my mouth and I spat them out. He reached a hand back, to grasp my hip and pull me in more tightly against him. His fingers splayed out, covering the faded mark of Eila's brand on my thigh. When I glanced down, I could see the same pale marks on his own hip, for he'd been marked the same way a year ago.

I started to thrust into his ass again, our bodies spooned together. I reached my upper arm over his waist and down to his groin and grasped at his own morning erection.

"In a while, yes," he laughed softly. He pressed back against me, our bodies moving in delicious rhythm. It was as if we'd been made to fit together, as if we moved just as the other wanted and desired. I came first, clutching him to me as my seed pumped out of me, the heat in my body rushing down to my groin, the strength temporarily fleeing my muscles, leaving them limp and exhausted. Then with my softening cock still lodged inside him, it took a few more of my firm, slick strokes to bring him to satisfaction too. I pressed my face into the crook of his neck and kissed him as he came, feeling with my lips the quickening pulse under his skin and listening to the halting, hiccupping groans of his pleasure.

We lay there for a while, but neither of us felt drowsy any more. We rose and wiped ourselves clean with one of the thinner blankets, then dressed again and put the supplies to the back of the cave. Dax blew out the lamp but there was plenty of morning light outside, sharp and almost painfully bright against the mouth of the cave.

We were silent together, but it was a comfortable thing.

I heard the noise first, but maybe he saw the figure at the cave opening slightly before me. Whatever it was, we both swung around, startled but alert. The figure was human and slight and as far as I could see, unarmed. The sunlight lit it up as a dull silhouette so that we couldn't immediately see its features.

Then I moved towards it, and realized that it was Veli who stood outside of the cave, her eyes glimmering in the half light of morning and her expression grim.

CHAPTER 13

DAX stepped forward but I put out a hand and held him back. Veli barely seemed to notice him, her gaze fixed on me.

"Maen," she said, softly. There was a sharp edge under the melodic tone of her voice. "The Gold Warrior. I remembered you, of course, from the last time you were brought to the camp. From when you were our prisoner."

I nodded to her, unsure what to say.

"You were his Commander," she continued. "Hann's. Or should I say, *Dax's* Commander." She held her head high but awkwardly, as if she'd have been happier to let it drop onto a comforting shoulder. "He's not in your Guard any more. He's an Exile now." Her eyes suddenly slipped into a sharper focus, and I recognized the sharp glint of possessiveness. "Hann's mine."

I felt Dax move impatiently behind me, but I still held him back. "I can't help you, Lady," I said. "He doesn't belong to anyone, no one does. He'll make his own decisions where he wants to be."

She stared at me, angrily. "You came from the City, how can you say that? You belong to the Queen, she commands you, she *owns* you. You have no right to come here and take what's mine."

"Neither of us does," I said, slowly. I wanted to be gentle but I didn't know how to deal with her, for she was unlike any woman I had come into contact with in the City. "It's taken me all of my life to look at the world in a different way, and to understand what *feels* right, rather than what's decreed. To admit it, too. And I'm not going back now. Everyone should make their own choices."

"It's not like that here," she said.

"It's like that everywhere," I replied, sharply.

She looked between us, between my stern face and Dax's. His head was now at my shoulder, his arm brushing mine. I could hear his breathing speed up, the sound of it tight and shallow.

"There's no fight here, Veli. You and I are no love match," he said, more compassionately than I'd expected. "We're just partners. It was what Eila wanted, to keep the control of the group within your family. You've been close to Crez, you know that, it's been going on for some time. I've not refused you that, even though it's my child you're carrying."

She frowned, though she didn't deny it. I didn't know the background to their partnership, but I felt painfully relieved that he'd never committed his heart to her. I would have found it torture to leave him again – yet it would have been as bad to know I made him choose over a new love. And then I chastised myself, for wasn't the whole concept of love something I'd never even considered a year ago? It had only ever been something for youngsters to laugh about; a game for the immature Ladies who played with the Bronzemen; a consolation for the Remainders who had never enjoyed the formal, supportive, possessive Training that we knew in the Households. And we had always considered them disadvantaged because of that.

I had learned what a strength love was, not a weakness. It had turned my world around.

"I know it's him you want, not me. It always has been." Veli's voice was strangely calm. "Even when you were first here as a captive, I saw the way you worshiped him, talking about him all the time, even when you came with me to my tent, your words were always about *him*, your expression mimicking his even as you spread my legs and took me. It was an obsession." She snapped out the words as if they burned her tongue. "Not much has changed in a year, except that you keep your mouth shut now. Don't you have any care for the child?"

Dax flinched. "I'll support both of you, there's no question of that. I know that's where my loyalty lies."

"But not your love," she whispered.

He tensed up. When I glanced at him, he was looking back at me. There was no need for any other words.

Veli gave a strangled sound in the back of her throat. "Come with me now, back to the camp. Flora wants to see you both."

WE arrived with Veli at a clearing around the back of the settlement, to find that most of the adults of the camp were already gathered there. Mistress Flora stood among them, her City soldiers beside her. There were plenty of other Exiles milling around, and yet my eye was drawn immediately to her. She was as imperious as before, but with a further softening to her Royal look, as if she became more of an Exile the longer she stayed with them. Dax looked at me and I nodded in understanding – it was his place to be with her, not me, not in this situation. He left my side and went to stand in the center of the clearing. The other Exiles began to settle, sitting on fallen rocks or on the ground itself. I saw Eila and a couple of her followers to one side. I stood behind the rows of men and women, taking up a position where I could look directly at Dax, yet I had some peripheral view of the whole clearing. Military training bred habits that were hard to shake off.

Many of the men there turned to look at me; the women too. Some glared at me and some looked away, embarrassed at their own fascination. I stood very still, shoulders straight and head high, as if at attention. I knew what the looks meant, from Exile soldiers who both feared and despised me, yet hungered to be someone like me. That reaction was familiar to me even in the short time I'd been in the camp. And also the looks from Exile women who desired me, or wondered what it would be like to have me, a man who'd been Trained since adolescence to service women to the highest standard. Eila had looked at me in that way when I'd first been taken by the Exiles, a year ago. I saw the embers of it still in her eyes. And then I looked at Dax and saw the man who desired me and trusted me, and who would be beside me for as long as I needed.

I knew where *my* loyalties lay now.

"We will move on the City in two days' time," Dax announced, many of the men around him nodding in satisfaction. "You know who

you are, the leaders of each group. We will move through the night and infiltrate by the eastern gate. The scouts who have identified the weaknesses in the City walls were brave, strong men and we mourn their deaths." A few heads lowered and a young woman sobbed quietly. I caught Dax's eye, but he turned away and continued. "They have made it possible for us to enter the City this time. Keep to your groups, and if you're challenged by the Guard before you reach the Household of Physic, turn to the formations I've taught you, and face the fight with courage. The longer you can keep the Guard at bay, the longer your fellow soldiers will have to take what we need from the Household. Move in from the outer fences, through to the central workplace where the potions and mixes are kept, as we've seen on the plans."

Eila appeared suddenly at my side, Brod beside her. I turned to her, keeping my voice low so as not to distract from Dax. "What plans do you have? Have you managed to get information out of the City already?" For the first time, I wondered whether their contacts inside the City might be at a higher level than I'd previously suspected. Mistress Chloe was now in charge of the Household of Physic, and she had also shown sympathetic attention to me. Did she retain some loyalty for Flora, perhaps, that had made her take the risk of helping the Exiles?

Eila shrugged, but her eyes flickered to Flora and back again to me. "Why does it concern you, Maen? You're not part of this exercise; you're not one of us. Not yet, at least."

Brod glared at me. "I don't trust him, Eila. He's still one of the City soldiers in my eyes."

I sighed, still half listening to Dax's speech to his men. "We're all soldiers, aren't we? We have all been used and misused, by one side or another. The time should come for us to combine what we know and stop fighting between ourselves."

Eila sucked in a breath beside me. "Where have you got those ideas from? From Flora? Most definitely not from your Queen! I can't believe a member of the Royal Guard – a man of the City – would suggest co-operation between the Exiles and the Citizens. We're different races now, even though we've drawn people away from the

City who support our alternative ways. We're a bastardization, Maen, a strange, ugly mess of people. We can't ever return to the true, pure citizenry."

Maybe I wasn't concentrating enough or in full control of myself, but I snapped back at her. "There's nothing true about it. It's a bastardization of its own making."

Eila frowned. At the corner of my vision, I caught sight of Flora approaching me, too. "Maen, that's nonsense, your behavior is very odd – "

"The soldiers of the City have their behavior controlled by the Devotions," I growled back. "And the Queen has been manipulating that to a greater extent in the last few months. We are not acting naturally. We never have been. If we were, I suspect we would return to the Exile pattern more readily than we imagine."

Flora was now standing at my other side, her eyes narrowed. In the background, I was suddenly aware that Dax had stopped speaking, and now my voice carried quite clearly in the fresh morning air. "You know I hope to bring us back together as one people," she said. Her voice was carefully toneless. "But the more I see of our world, the more I doubt it can happen. The society here is everything that the City despises and denies, its people alien and outcast."

"Its people are real and volatile and strong in a very different way," I said, rashly. "Isn't that what you mean?" I glanced around to find many pairs of eyes on me. "You may have left the City, Mistress, but your upbringing has been City-led. Everything you believe – every ambition you pursue – has always been issued from the central core beliefs of City life. But the Histories tell a different story, back in the original days of Colonization. At that time, we *were* all one people, we struggled as one to make this planet habitable, we lived and died and fought together. That included citizens, Remainders and Exiles – there were no separate factions." A few of the watchers shifted awkwardly; they looked as if they might have been of Remainder stock, escaped from the City in the past.

"The Histories?" Flora frowned. "Where are they? Can you show me this information?"

I stared back at her. "No, they're in the Royal Library. But they exist, right back to the beginning of our race. I've read many of them."

There was a rumble of surprise from the people around me.

"They have no relevance to today…" Flora began to say.

"They have *every* relevance!" I snapped back. "Throughout our history, our leaders have manipulated far more than the drugs that apparently keep City dwellers well and in their prime. I believe they have manipulated their way into power and developed castes of people to service that. They have then suppressed these Histories and ignored the inconvenient past." I stopped keeping my voice low; I was weary of the machinations of the City.

"The Queen would have known about such injustice…" murmured Flora.

"Our successive Queens have overseen it," I growled back. "They have *ordered* it!"

There was a collective gasp of breath from the group before me.

Flora's eyes were angry and she gripped at my arm. "Maen, tell me exactly what you have found in these Histories."

"I can't remember it all," I said. I didn't want to discuss it all with her now, yet I couldn't hide the knowledge I had any more. Instead, I reached for Eila's arm. She pulled back, but was no match for my strength. I wrenched the sleeve up her arm, exposing her brand to Flora and to whomever else could see. "Is this like yours, Mistress? The Royal brand? The *hereditary* brand?" Eila stared at me, shocked. "I've seen it so many times in the Histories," I continued. "It has followed our ancestors since the beginning. But it's not a Royal gift to us – it doesn't belong to any Queen at all. It was developed from a pattern of marks, representing the medication that people needed when they first Colonized the planet."

"You mean the men?" Eila's voice was hoarse. "The Devotions?"

I shook my head, and my tone was harsh. "Everyone needed help to survive here. Women were as one with the men." I could feel

the tension around me, the air tightening as if in a real grip. "The men fell sick, it's true, but someone discovered a cure. It was given to the babies, the new generation, breeding a hardier kind to survive here in the future. But in the meantime, there had been many men lost, and the women apparently survived better, more swiftly, as they bred new children. And so they took control of the group, and the cure and the *brand* – and the surviving men. And, finally, because there was no other opposition to them at that time, they took control of the world around them." I twisted Eila's arm, not harshly, but enough that her other brand was clearly visible, the slender figure in amongst the plain border. "This template has been embellished for the Queen's family over time, but here you can see a more basic version. It's based on some strange medical symbols, but was also originally designed as a memorial to the one who discovered the cure. The women supported him at that time, they worked with him – it's only over time that the balance has become distorted, and the design of this brand in particular has been captured and corrupted by the ruling family, seeking to keep their power by hereditary right." I turned to stare at Flora. "By the Royal family, under the control of a Queen." I turned again, gazing out at the men and women whose shocked eyes met me from behind her. "Examine your own brands, any of you who may have come from the Royal Household!" I cried. "Look at this woman's! At your honorable visitor's! Can you say for certain that they show the figure of a Queen – or a mere man?"

"Maen!" Flora cried out beside me, angrily.

"That's the true meaning of the Devotions," I continued relentlessly. "Devotion to a *cause*, not to a woman."

Eila's eyes were wide and astonished. "This is a child's tale, a myth you have created to confuse us! Maybe you're still a servant of the City, come to cause chaos among us."

"Look at your own men," I hissed. "They survive without Devotions, don't they? And the society you have here is returning to that original place, where men and women share influence and power. The generations have passed and the danger of living on this planet without chemical help has passed. You are living proof of the

alternative society that can – and should – be supported. The Exiles are the ones who live truly in this world, not the Citizens."

There was a sudden, shocked silence.

"If it's true…" Eila's voice was almost a whisper. The other Exiles stirred; their talk started up again, but this time there was a new urgency to its tone. Eila spoke in a harsh, low voice to Flora. "These documents could be used against the Queen, couldn't they? Think of their importance as a weapon! We could use them to obtain better supplies, better conditions. She'd never want anything revealed that might undermine her hereditary position…."

"We need to see these Histories," said Brod. There was a murmur of assent around him. "These could make all the difference to our position here."

"Your Queen has had them in her Library for all your life," I said, bitterly. "Only now does anyone pay them attention."

Flora flushed with anger but she must have known it was the truth. "Time spent with your young scribe friend has changed you, I see. But Brod's right, they'll be of advantage to us, and more than just instruments of blackmail. If we have this evidence we can seek negotiation with Seleste. We may not even need to proceed with our attack."

Suddenly a new voice cut through our discussion; it was Veli who spoke up. There was a young, thin-faced man hovering possessively at her shoulder. Maybe this was the Crez that Dax had spoken of, her preferred lover. The eyes of both of them were full of hostility and suspicion towards me. "He can fetch them for us – the Gold Warrior," she said, her voice carrying clearly across the group. "He knows his way in and out of the City and the way that the Guard works, just what's needed. He's brought up the subject of these documents, yet where are they? Do they exist, or is it some elaborate lie to undermine our attack? Make him fetch them back here. Make him pay for the trouble he's bringing down on us, bringing the Guard in pursuit to the camp."

"No one knows I'm here except for the scribe," I said.

She laughed loudly. "Don't be ridiculous, Maen, they'll find you this time. The Queen won't be humiliated twice. I know what happened to you both, remember, when you returned to the City last time. I've heard the whole story. But if you go back now, you can hold off any attack on us until we've made our own. Maybe you can bring these mysterious documents out to us so that we can really hold her to ransom. I think that many of us don't believe your loyalties have changed, or even that they can. *Prove* it to us."

"No," I said. Almost everyone turned to stare at me now, their bodies shifting on the bare ground as they moved, their faces confrontational. I stared straight at Flora, determined to make my position clear to her. "I won't go back. I have made my choice. I no longer report to any of them – to any of *you*. Kiel can bring the records to you."

Flora shook her head. "The scribe is loyal but he's too inexperienced. And he has no one to ask for help without running the risk of discovery and death. You wouldn't wish that on him, Maen, would you?" Her eyes glinted in the pale morning light.

"You will not blackmail me that way," I replied calmly, though fear for Kiel had spiked suddenly in my gut. "You have soldiers of your own, you can send some of them in to remove the records. I can tell you where they are."

One of the stocky men beside Flora bent to mutter in her ear and she frowned. "They cannot go yet," she said. "I don't have any single man with the right skills or sufficient knowledge of the City defenses. I couldn't guarantee which – if any – of them could get through, let alone approach the Library as well, steal the records out and then return."

"You have a poor opinion of the men here. And yet you plan a full attack on the City itself?" I said, harshly.

For the first time, she was disconcerted. "We have enough men for an armed assault on the House of Physic. That's all. We've been drawing the City's attention to the western gate for a few months, to hide our true purpose. I expect the main defense to be concentrated there, leaving the eastern side less protected. Then we will rely on our stealth, concentrating our attack on the one location. I know we do not have the best weapons, or the trained men that the City breeds. We

expect to lose many soldiers, but they're prepared for that. They always are." She looked at me with narrowed eyes. "They've been readying themselves for this, Maen. We will move on the City in only a few days' time. We need the supplies that are housed there, we need to take control of that Household, if only for a limited time. We don't have the resources to release part of the force for another mission, not now."

"We?" My voice was cold. To me, the strategic issues were clear. "Are you now the leader of this camp? What choice is it, between an intelligence mission that might bring you priceless information, and a foolhardy attack on a part of the City that is most important to its Queen, and is likely to be far better protected than you expect?"

And then Flora laughed aloud, so enthusiastically that everyone turned to look at her instead of me. "I know what my sister sees in you, soldier! Look at the way you rise to the occasion, look at your strength and confidence – the way you dare to criticize me! You are wasted as her consort, even if she had persuaded you to submit to her." She shook her head, wonderingly. "I never thought she'd show any weakness for a partner, sexual or otherwise, for she was always the least tolerant of our sisterhood and the most determined in her quest for Queenship and power. No one has ever got in the way of that. Until she saw and wanted *you*."

The Exiles were looking around, their expressions confused; wary; angry; nervous. There was a mass of faces, rows of them all around me, and I was aware of them all. Brod scowling at me, still unsure whether to believe me; Veli's gaze cast down, still piqued at my refusal to go back to the City on their ludicrous errand; her companion Crez with hate and jealousy in his eyes; Eila looking between me and Flora with wariness and a sudden surprise in her expression –

I felt a shocking, icy wash of fear swamp over me.

"Where is he?" I said, my voice so loud that it cut across their idle chatter and silenced them all.

"Maen…" Flora lifted a hand as if to mollify me.

"Where is Dax?" I repeated. He was no longer standing in the middle of the clearing, no longer exhorting his men. I suddenly realized I hadn't heard his voice for some time, I'd been so engrossed in my argument with Flora.

Veli laughed, a short, ugly sound from such a pretty, fragile-looking woman. Her head snapped back up, her eyes glinting, no trace of modesty on her face at all. "He's doing his duty, Gold Warrior. You should know all about that. His duty to his people and the camp and the future of this cursed planet."

It took only two strides to reach her. I grasped her arm, trying very hard not to surrender to the urge to hurt her. Her eyes were wild, and I wondered suddenly if she were either ill or insane. Crez reached out to throw off my hand, and a couple of the other men around her stepped forward as if to restrain me.

"Hold!" snapped Flora. Crez looked furious, but fell back, and the other men stepped back into the crowd.

"Tell me!" I growled at Veli.

"He's gone where you didn't dare," she hissed back at me. "You told us about those records, about those ancient books and what they might mean to us. You sent him there!"

I stared at her, my limbs starting to shake with both anger and terror.

"I knew you couldn't be trusted to be truly committed to us," she hissed. "To *him*. He's a better man than any of you! He's the leader of this camp, not the disgraced Royal Mistress, not any fugitive soldier from the City itself. Hann understands us – he's given his life to this camp now, not to a dream, not to passion, not to *you*!" She glanced quickly around, moistening her lips. "He heard everything you told us. So while you were weaving your sick tales, he was realizing for himself that if the books were real, possessing them could prevent the raid – could save the lives of our soldiers. But they obviously had to be recovered and brought here, and by someone who knew the City, who knew the Guard." She sucked in a breath as if triumphant. "Hann had already decided that there was only one person suitable to go."

"He's gone back to the City?" I didn't need to ask, but the words slipped out unbidden.

She glared back at me. "It took him no time at all to decide what to do. He's already gone. He's always been that way, he's…."

"Impetuous," I hissed.

"Decisive!" she snapped back. "And he'll be successful, too. How can you match that, you who have been such a mighty warrior but who refused to help him out by getting them yourself? I heard the way you talked to Flora, and you talk that way to Hann, too. You'll take his body when you like, but you won't offer to do his work – "

I think I would have struck the stupid, misguided woman then, but Flora moved into my line of sight. "He's done the right thing, Maen. He's a fine soldier, an intelligent man, it won't take him long, I'm sure. And this could mean all the difference to us. Such evidence would be such a valuable weapon against the Queen. As both I and Veli have said, an opportunity for negotiation between us rather than battle."

"Or for blackmail, as Eila suggested?" I challenged, my words hissed through gritted teeth. I was already assessing the paths out of the camp, judging where he might have gone, how long ago…. "You would hold her to ransom, indeed. You'd be no better than her, yourself. You want the City for your own, admit it!" I swung around, releasing Veli and turning on Flora. "You would have taken the Queenship willingly yourself, and would you have been any better a regent?"

Flora was pale and several of her former soldiers were moving threateningly towards me. "Maen, I won't deny I wanted to be Queen. But if what you tell me is true – no woman could continue to rule without challenge." Her breathing was shallow but her gaze was steady. "I welcome this, soldier, you have to believe me. I welcome the chance to change this world, but I need the leverage. Else she will kill me the minute I step foot in that City again."

"That's your problem alone," I said, cold as stone.

"No, Maen." She shook her head, sadly. "You are not so naïve. If you want the chance to live in peace with Dax, it's your problem,

too." She glanced around at the faces watching us, all of them shocked and confused. "We *all* need this. We need to be involved; we need to be *heard*. And Seleste will never hear us unless we can bring some threat to bear against her. For that matter, she will never release *you* – never allow you any other life. You know that's true, and so does Hann. When he brings the records back, we can study them, hold back any military attack until I've had a chance to talk to Seleste. They're the key to bringing the Exiles back into the City, and the people of this planet back to a single representation. Isn't that what you were preaching a moment ago?"

"No!" I cried out, suddenly frightened and angry at the words we were speaking that were all useless, that were irrelevant – that were holding me back. "I can't live in peace with a man whose life you have thrown away! However good he is, he'll be recognized in the City – he can't blend in either as a soldier or as a servant. He's in terrible danger, and if he's taken, he'll endanger you all. He's never been a servant of the Royal Household, never been in the position to have learned its geography or its ways. You need an agent who knows exactly what is needed, exactly how the City and its people act. Who knows the relevant Histories; who can find his way around; who has the measure of the Royal Household – and who is known with a degree of influence."

She gazed back at me, her eyes dark. For a strange, suspended moment, we stood staring at each other, our spectators shocked into silence alongside us.

"Your determination is a worthy match to your sister's," I hissed, finally. "I will go back with him."

"Of course you will," she said, softly. Her voice wasn't without pity. "This is your chance, Maen, to change the City in the only way that'll allow the pair of you to be together."

"I will go back," I said. My tone was firm enough to halt all of their talk. "I'll fetch the records and bring them to you here. Give me weapons and a scout to take me back to the cairn, and do it *now*. I'll make sure that Dax is safe and returns as your leader." I turned sharply, scattering the men who had gathered around me, curious and

fascinated by the ghastly scene. "But that will be the last soldiering I do for either the Exiles or the City that isn't at my own wish."

My heart beat painfully fast and my anger was too close to the surface for me to think as clearly as I would have liked. I needed to get moving, to catch him up – to save him.

"I swear that to you all!" I called, aloud. "With the oath of a Gold Warrior!"

CHAPTER 14

I REACHED sight of the City walls faster than I ever had before. I passed the cairn and took little notice of the Exile scout running back like a scared rabbit in the direction of the camp, before he could be noticed by anyone from the City. I moved onwards, desperate to find Dax's trail. He could travel this terrain so much better than I. He'd been injured recently, it was true, but he was younger and faster than I was, and he might already have reached the walls. He might be inside the City; he might be in custody.

He might be dead.

I stopped, crouching down to minimize my outline on the bare mountain slope, breathing too heavily and conscious that I was losing control of myself. I would get us both killed if I couldn't contain my panic. But to have found Dax again after losing him – and after believing he was dead – was both the best and the worst thing in my life. The best thing because I had truly come alive again, but the worst thing because now I couldn't face the thought of him stepping back into mortal danger, alone. If he died….

So would I, this time.

I searched around and found an overhang that would offer some cover until I could establish which path he'd taken down to the City. I crawled sideways underneath it and took some water from the small bottle the Exile scout had given me. While it was unlikely that anyone would spot Dax on the rocks at this distance, if he had taken the direct route back down to the walls – the one that our assumed rescuers had taken us a year ago – he would walk right into the Guard. I knew other ways through, thanks to Kiel and his devious communications with

Mistress Flora, but I had no idea whether either of them had ever shared that information with the Exiles.

And then something alerted me, some tingle of nerves down the back of my neck. I turned to face back out over the scrubland, still crouching but with my hand on the sword I'd been lent.

"Maen, what are you doing here?"

It was Dax, climbing his way down from the cairn.

"THIS is madness." Maybe I hadn't chosen the best way to greet him, but the words spat out of me of their own volition. I was a clumsy, anguished mixture of relief and anger. "Where were you hiding? There's nowhere here that is secure in daylight, you will be too easily seen."

He sighed, frowning. "Go back to the camp. You're the one who mustn't be seen here, or face execution. I didn't ask you to follow me."

"Nor did you tell me you were thinking of walking straight back into the City that condemned you to death a year ago – "

"Maen, please!" He stared at me for a moment, his face a mixture of annoyance and distress. Then when I started to move out from under the overhanging rock, he held out a hand to restrain me and came across himself. He'd armed himself since we left the cave this morning, with a good quality sword at his back and a short dagger in the side of his belt, but nothing too heavy. He meant this mission to be a short one, to travel light so that he could bring back the Histories.

"How did you think you were going to do this?" I couldn't keep the fury out of my voice. "You left on a whim – on *Veli's* whim, as I saw it. To my knowledge, you have never been to the Library, nor have you any idea whether you'll be retrieving a slim volume or a pallet full of paper. You don't know what Guard is placed around the building, whether the scribes are armed or alert to invasion in any way, you have no way to contact us if there's any change of plan or unforeseen trouble – "

He held up a hand again, halting me. "Maen, you insult me, whether you mean to or not. Yes, I moved out from the camp swiftly, but that was because I didn't want to disturb the attack plans any more than necessary. I knew I could be into the City and back again before we were to move on the House of Physic – if, indeed, it were still necessary."

"Or into the City and dead," I snapped.

He laughed softly and rather bitterly. "Or that, yes. But it's not in my plans to run blindly into trouble. I didn't allow Flora to continue messages with the City until she'd told me the code of it. So I just stopped at the beacon to leave a message for Kiel to meet me at the east gate. That was always their fall back plan if she needed to return to the City for any purpose. We'll use that access for our attack, too."

"But not Kiel's assistance!" My voice was urgent.

"No." Dax shook his head. "We wouldn't involve him in that way. This time it's just to meet. If anything goes wrong for me, he'll know to send a message back in the same way; apparently there's an abandoned grain tower at the back of the kitchens that he uses as a beacon in return, I don't know the details but Flora does. And when we meet, I'll ask him to direct me to the Histories and which ones are important. I assume that he knows as much as you do?"

"More," I answered. "It's his brave work that has uncovered all this." I grabbed his arm. "He's loyal and very bright, Dax, but not a soldier."

Dax looked at me for a moment, then nodded. "I won't endanger him in this, I promise you. I'll bring him back out with me, if you want."

"What are you talking about?" I was angry again; it seemed that everything he said made me bristle with fury and frustration. "You're talking as if everything is now in your hands alone. I will be beside you whether you attack the City or not, just as I am beside you now in this reckless mission."

"No," said Dax. "Today, just one man is needed."

"No," I countered. "One man, maybe, but not you. No History is worth this."

He startled me, then, turning so that his face was very close to mine and I could see the flare of anger in his eyes. "Don't dare tell me what's important to my life, or to my people! You're the one who wants to save lives; the one who wants this inequality to end. Or did I misunderstand you? Is this all about Maen, and Maen's safety and Maen's desire for a quiet life?"

I stared at him, shocked. "It's nothing like that, how dare you accuse me of that!"

He wrenched his arm away. "This has to be done. You've offered us a chance to find out more about our history, and to make more of our future. No one's ever done that before. You must see how important this is! And if it's the only way to reach Seleste, to get her to see reason…."

We both fell silent. I didn't know what he was thinking, but *my* thoughts covered a variety of ways of disabling him and returning him – reluctant or otherwise – to the camp.

Then he let out a breath and placed his hand back on my arm. "I'm not seeking death, Maen. I've no desire to be a hero, dead or otherwise. But I repeat, this has to be done."

I hurt inside, listening to his courage and his determination speaking, even while I cursed how misguided he was. "You really believe that the Histories can be used constructively against Seleste?"

He stared at me. "Yes, I do."

"Yet you've told me you would kill her if you had the chance."

For a second, his eyes darkened fiercely. "I would. But there are other things to think about. There are men and women who wouldn't welcome, or survive an outright battle with the City. There are longer term demands that we could negotiate with her if she were still Queen, if we had a decent bargaining tool. There's the matter of *you*…."

"Me?" I was startled.

He sighed and his hand slid up my arm to grip my shoulder. "She will never let you go voluntarily, Maen. Seleste will either demand your return or have you killed. Those are the only options for her pride to be satisfied. I admit that this mission has a selfish motive for me. If she can surrender rights to us as a group, she can surrender rights to you as an individual. I would insist on that."

"Seleste…" I hissed. I hadn't asked to be desired by her; I had never asked to be singled out by her. But I would not shirk from the responsibility of handling the repercussions. I straightened myself out from under the rock and stood up. "We must go, then. I know the pattern of the Guard along by the Eastern gate and we'll approach during their duty change. Then Kiel will meet us at his own gate, a rather less formal entrance I'm afraid, but it's safely hidden from public view."

Dax scrambled out after me. He grabbed at my arm as I started to pick my way back down the rocks. "I said only one man. I won't risk your life as well."

"You'll never find Kiel without me," I said, firmly. "You'll have to bring him out of hiding and I won't have him compromised as well."

Dax was shaking his head angrily; for a second, I thought he might strike me. It was an interesting thought, but a distraction that we couldn't afford. I stopped and turned and caught his face between my hands. I kissed him fiercely, my tongue pushing hard for entrance until he opened his mouth and let me in to taste him properly. His hands fisted against my arms, but he didn't put enough strength behind pushing me away. When I felt his body finally start to relax against me, I pulled away as gently as I dared.

"We go together," I said. "Do you hear me? This has to be done. But together."

He stared at me, his eyes confused. He licked his lips, involuntarily. My body shuddered at the memory of those lips on my body; I wanted so much more of him! I didn't resist when he reached forward and kissed me back, his hand tangling into the hair at the nape of my neck and his groin nudging against mine. But this was neither the place nor time to take it further, and we both knew it.

"I hear you," he whispered. "Lead the way."

I WOULD have preferred to wait for nightfall but Dax insisted we continue. We climbed the rocks, moving from hiding place to hiding place, taking our time about covering the open land. It was long after the midday when we reached the City walls, but I was in no hurry to arrive. Dax traveled the last stretch of ground almost silently, reminiscent of the way that Kiel moved about the City. Not for the first time, I marveled at the way my Bronzeman had matured with the Exiles, and wondered at the military skills he'd developed in their company. Kiel had told me previously the pattern of the Guard's duty, and so we were able to move forward when the main gate was almost unmanned. Even so, I would have missed an extra change-over if Dax hadn't been alert to the sound of additional soldiers' armor and the quiet greetings that I had not heard. He seemed to know when to hold still and when to move, blending his footsteps with the echoes of the men on the walls and the distant wave of activity within the City itself. It was a very different kind of military ability from the Training he'd been subject to as a Bronzeman.

I stayed by his side, but we weren't challenged at any time. Then when we drew near to the main gate, I diverted us quickly away to another, neglected part of the wall and pulled him in with me against its shadow. The stones were cold against my back although the day's sun was bright and already warming up the air. Dax frowned at me, not understanding what was happening, but he knew not to speak aloud. Then there was a gentle creak from some of the stones beside him and a huff of dusty breath, and several of them shifted and fell away, back on to the ground inside the City.

Kiel's head appeared in the gap, peering out. His eyes widened when he saw me and a smile creased his face. "Maen!" he whispered and winked at me. "I'm so glad you made it here safely, but come through quickly now, they're increasing the Guard today, I'm not sure why." I pushed Dax through the gap and struggled through behind him. Kiel had to tug away another few stones to make the space wider for me and by the time I stood inside the City, facing him, he was panting gently from his efforts.

"Maen," he whispered again, his eyes shining. "You promised to see me again."

I smiled back. "I know. Though I hadn't planned on it being in these circumstances."

He tilted his head. "Is there an attack coming? I've always managed to keep out of the way in the past…."

I shook my head. "No, it's something more – yet maybe less. I need to borrow your book, Kiel."

"My book?" He tensed up, peering from me to Dax, warily. "No, that doesn't exist."

"What book are you talking about?" Dax was confused. He stared back at Kiel. "We need to take the Histories away with us, scribe. There's information in there that's vitally important for us."

Kiel's gaze flickered between us. His eyes darkened. "I know that, of course I do. But you won't be taking the Histories away with you today unless you have a couple of carts and horses, there are floors full of them. And that's assuming I'd let you take them, for they're too precious to survive life in your camp, and also far too dear to me to let them out of my sight."

Dax stepped forward menacingly. "I had hoped you'd help us in this, but even if you won't, at least keep out of our way. I don't want you to be hurt, but I demand we have that information – "

I swiftly stepped between them, interrupting Dax. "Be quiet! There are still soldiers about. We don't need to take all the other Histories away. I've asked Kiel for his own book because he has all the relevant history copied in there." I leant forward to take Kiel's arm. "I know how much it means to you – what risk you've taken, to create it. But its purpose is clear to me now. It's much needed." Dax moved at my side, anxious to be gone, but I stood in front of him, shielding Kiel for the moment.

"You'll use it against the Queen?" Kiel looked troubled.

"I'll use it *for* the Exiles," I said, softly. "And for the Remainders."

Kiel looked at me alone. I didn't think he was as certain of Dax's motivation as he was of mine. "And for yourself, Maen? Will it help *you*? I know that Hann is the same man as Dax to you." His head tilted again as if acknowledging Dax, but he didn't want to meet his eyes. His cheeks were flushed with nervousness. "The Exile soldier is your Bronzeman, I always knew it. Will it help you be reconciled with him?"

I smiled. Dax stood at my side and I could feel his impatient breath on my neck. "We're already reconciled. But I hope that it will make my life safer, yes – and life for all of us."

Kiel nodded. "You may take it. I'm on my way to the House of Physic – all the scribes have been called over in the last few days, to be re-assessed for our Devotions. So I can't take you back to the Library just yet…."

I saw Dax's eyes widen with eagerness at the mention of the House of Physic. He was anticipating an opportunity to steal supplies for the camp. I also knew his wound would benefit from some more accelerated medicines to help knit the flesh and muscles. "I know my own way to the Library," I said. I turned to Dax. "Go with Kiel, take what you can from the Household so long as you're not seen. Kiel will help you in that, I think. I will get the book and meet you both here again."

"It will be guarded," Dax said, reluctantly. "I should wait for the organized attack. We mustn't take additional risks."

"Mistress Chloe is in charge now," I said. "She's one of Seleste's sisters but I believe she's sympathetic to the Exiles in some way. Maybe she's the one who's helped in the past. You said you had plans of the Household, and that supplies had been smuggled out before?"

Dax nodded. "But I don't know who was the contact in the City for that. All that was dealt with by Eila and now Flora."

"Mistress Chloe has been very encouraging to me," Kiel said quickly. "She has shown far more interest in the scribes than any other Mistress."

I smiled at his eagerness, knowing what a charming young woman Chloe was. "Kiel, you must show Dax the best way to approach the Household in secret. Be careful, though, she still has a Royal Guard." Darius had been in Chloe's Guard and I knew better than to underestimate him. But I believed he had transferred to Seleste's personal Guard, particularly since I had been out of favor. "And Dax, look after Kiel." He nodded and the two of them moved swiftly away around the back of the nearest building, Kiel leading the way.

IT didn't take me long to make my way to the Library. It was one of the eastern block buildings, but I also found that part of the City surprisingly quiet for the time of day. I kept hidden as best I could, but I actually saw very few soldiers. Maybe what Flora had said was true, that the preliminary attacks by the Exiles on the western walls had persuaded Seleste to move most of her Guard to that area. In recent weeks, she hadn't shared information with me about her military decisions. There were Remainder servants going about their usual daily business, however, and when I got near to the Library, I saw many of the scribes leaving the building in small groups and scurrying across the courtyard towards the House of Physic. Obviously they had been called for assessment as well, as Kiel had been. I wondered how often this happened, and who attended the Library when they were away; it didn't seem as if there would be many left in the building at the rate they were exiting.

I had decided to check the Library from the window that I'd used before, from which vantage point I could see the front desk and most of the lower floor. Then when the entrance was clear, I'd let myself in and up to the upper rooms as quietly and swiftly as possible. It was as I suspected – when I peered in through that window, I saw the room was empty of scribes. It seemed I could be in and out of the storage room in minutes, if I were careful. I turned to slip along the side of the building and enter through the front.

That was when I first saw the other soldier. I had no excuse for my distraction, except that I was concentrating on my mission and unused to my role as spy. But I should have heard the approaching

sound of his boots, and the soft creak of leather from the straps of his breastplate. In a battle situation, I would have been far more alert. Instead, my heart stumbled with the shock, and for that second, I wished I'd had more time to learn some of Dax's intelligence skills. But maybe there would never be the time for that, for I'd also missed hearing the icy hiss of the soldier's sword being drawn from its sheath. It was now extended in front of him in a firm line with my throat, bringing me to an immediate halt.

It was Darius.

"MAEN." He recognized me, of course, so I assumed he spoke my name only in contempt.

"Darius," I nodded, keeping my voice as calm as I could. "Lower your weapon, soldier. I haven't drawn against you."

He smiled. "Indeed. But I have no intention of allowing that to happen. You are here under suspicion of treason, and I'm arresting you in the name of the Queen. Drop your weapons at your feet and step back."

I put my hand to my belt but didn't draw my sword. Nor did I release it to the ground. "You're talking nonsense. I'm just a civilian in his rest hours, looking to amuse himself in the Royal Library. I'm not aware there's anything treasonous in that."

He was still smiling, but his eyes were cold and dark. His handsome features were twisted with spite. "Don't play the fool with me any longer, Maen. That's all you've ever done, played a game with us all. You've been the mournful whipping boy in front of the Queen; the confused, reluctant lover in front of me. Who knows the real Maen, I wonder?"

I was silent. My hand flexed gently over the hilt of my sword though I doubted I could draw it before Darius ran me through. I had another, shorter dagger strapped to my back, which I could grasp and throw with a single movement, if I had the chance. The two blades were strapped across me on the same belt, for ease of armoring. My eyes flickered quickly to either side of the courtyard, but it was deserted apart from us.

He saw me assessing my situation, and he laughed softly. "There's no one to help you now, Maen. No misguided scribe, no fugitive Royal Mistress, and certainly no Bronzeman from your past, inglorious career, back from the dead." My eyes narrowed involuntarily, and a look of triumph lit up his face. "Wondering how I know so much about your movements? I've been watching you for a long time now. Listening and watching and learning what you really do with your *rest hours*."

"You've been spying on me?" I made my voice sound bored. "A tiresome job, Darius, for a man who looks for the excitement and sensual self-satisfaction that you do."

He shifted slightly, getting a better grip on his sword, though its aim remained true. "Another of your tricks, Gold Warrior. I've found far more amusement in your activities than I ever imagined I would. And plenty of exercise, too. The route to the camp of your friends, the Exiles, is a tortuous one, but one I'm familiar with now after several trips. I can approach it from many directions, too – most notably from here, the Library." I tried to hide my reactions, but his eyes were sharp to the slightest change in my expression. "Let's not pretend any more. I know you have betrayed us to the Exiles, that you've met with their leader, that you've been coupling with him as if you were both nothing more than Remainder slaves. And I knew you were returning to the City today, so I've been waiting to … *welcome* you."

"I don't need your welcome," I hissed. "I don't need anything from you." I wasn't sure how long he'd been following me, but I had to assume it had been ever since I'd first left the City with Kiel to come searching for Mistress Flora.

He laughed again. "Your defense is poor, and your responses unimaginative. Is that what you've learned from rutting with your immature boy? What possible satisfaction can he give you, after the novelty of his boyish fumbles has worn away? He never finished his Training, I believe. Never learned the real skills of being a companion." His smile twisted with something that wasn't amusement. "He could have learned far more from under his fellow Silver Captains. Spread *wide* under."

I breathed as calmly as I could. "Yet a far better companion than a loathsome spy, I think."

He frowned and flushed deeply. "It doesn't matter any more. I doubt you'll have the luxury of choice now, for no one else will meet up with you in the Detention Cells. You may be thankful for my company in the last hours before execution, assuming the Queen will allow you the usual final request. I've no qualms about coupling anywhere you like – in fact, I confess to a certain thrill at the thought of gripping those cold bars as you thrust your cock into me from behind."

"It's a thrill you can savor alone." I shifted almost imperceptibly, balancing my weight on to my leading side. "I've no wish to feature in any of your future sexual adventures. My experience of them in the past was tedium enough."

Vain anger flashed in his eyes, as I knew it would. For a moment, his sword wavered at my throat, his guard distracted. But as I reached simultaneously for the sword at my hip and the dagger at my back, he recovered more quickly than I'd hoped. He stepped to the same side, sliced down fiercely with his sword and cut through my belt before I could grip the hilt. Leather, buckle and weapons fell to the ground, clattering clumsily on the cobble stones. I fell back, avoiding the residual path of the blade, and he pushed past me, spinning me around in his wake and kicking my sword out of reach over to the Library wall. His own sword swung back up to cover me, its blade glinting in the daylight.

"You dare to insult me!" he hissed back. He was furious, but enough of a good soldier to stay a sensible distance away from me, even if I had been rash enough to attack him now I was disarmed. "You were grateful enough for me when everyone else despised you. They all were! But then, like you, they show no gratitude or loyalty in return."

My whole body was tense, waiting either to lunge at him or to defend a strike against me. Any attempt to reach the dagger at my feet would provoke him, and I wasn't sure how volatile his behavior was. "Mistress Flora thought you a good soldier," I said. "That's all you should strive for."

He grimaced. "That's why you are a condemned man and I will wear the gold earring of a Gold Warrior! You're a fool and a weak one, Maen. Mistress Flora betrayed the Queen and the City – and me! I was her favorite – her special Silver Captain. She owed me for that, for my devotion. Yet she abandoned me in the face of her own cowardice. I have found better Mistresses since and ones who can offer me the attention and rewards I deserve."

"The Queen cares for no single man," I said, scornfully. "You're just one of her Guard. Did you think it could be something different?"

"The Queen?" He glared at me. "No, I can't be anything more with her, I know. You're the proof of that, for you seem to be the only one she would favor, yet you continue to disrespect her. That's another example of your stupidity, for you have also refused the one thing that could have made you more of a man again, could have made you a better servant to the Queen, could have brought you back some pride and honor in place of all that you threw away a year ago with that naïve and seditious Bronzeman."

"You're referring to the Devotions?" It was the first time I questioned the bright light in his eyes and the surprisingly forceful grip he held on his sword. Maybe he hadn't been referring to the Queen as his Mistress but someone else, someone who had been offering him supplements of the Devotions, an enhancement of his natural characteristics which he had not only accepted willingly – but had craved.

"They're for our greatness," he hissed. "To make us better men! Since you brought me down in the Battle for Queenship I've sought to be as good as you – *better* than you! And so here we are, Maen, as living proof of that reversal of fortune."

"They're not for greatness, you fool!" I countered, angrily. I was moving slowly back towards the Library wall but I had no idea in which direction he might move first. He stood between me and my discarded sword and I couldn't get any closer to it. "They're to control us, to use us for another's desire. You can't see that, blinded by your own self-regard. What vile pressure have you brought to bear on Mistress Chloe to supply you with them – ?"

I never finished. There were the sounds of armor behind him, a sharp cry from a Commanding officer, and a group of soldiers running around from behind the Library. They were fully armed and led by Zander.

"DARIUS, stand down!" Zander's gaze flickered quickly from Darius to me and his eyes narrowed with shock. Edrius stood to one side of him and on the other side were two Silver Captains that I didn't know well.

Darius's sword remained on a line with my throat. "I do not answer to you, Gold Warrior. I am not part of your Guard. I have arrested this man myself and claim the credit for that."

Zander's expression darkened with anger. "You answer to any Gold Warrior who calls, soldier! Stand down or be arrested yourself!"

"He came here armed," hissed Darius. "He knows that breaches the terms of his service in the Household. He's nothing but a traitor!" He and I stared at each other.

Zander barely moved but he had obviously given an order because Edrius stepped swiftly forward, bringing his dagger sharply up against Darius's throat. Zander reached over and wrestled Darius's sword from his hand, forcing it back into its sheath at the Silver Captain's side. "You'll answer for this," he growled at him. "For disobeying a direct order from a senior officer."

Before he could finish with Darius, or I could straighten up from my position against the Library wall, there were more arrivals. To my astonishment, Mistress Chloe herself came across the courtyard, followed by another group of her own Guard.

"Release my Captain!" she cried out. She pointed at Darius and two of her other Silver Captains came to stand beside him, their presence a direct challenge to Zander. Edrius dropped his dagger and fell back, with a confused look towards Zander.

"Mistress, forgive me," Zander said. There was a slight frown on his forehead. "It was reported there was trouble at the Library and I was investigating what had happened."

Chloe didn't answer him. She looked from me to Darius, her pretty eyes wide and startled.

"Mistress," I began. "Whatever there is between me and your Silver Captain, if there's anything or anyone who has intimidated you or abused your position in the House of Physic, you should tell the Queen."

And then she turned fully to face me and her eyes suddenly narrowed. "I have no interest in discussing my Household matters with a traitor," she said clearly and very coldly. I nearly gasped aloud. Her voice had a harsh tone that I'd never heard before from her, and her expression was so fierce that for a moment I barely recognized the gentle, simple soul that I thought I'd met in my previous encounters. She looked less like herself and more like … Seleste.

"Darius? Report!" Her sharp order brought a flush to his face.

"Mistress, I left the camp before Maen this morning, knowing he was on his way back here. I was able to take position here at the Library before he arrived, and then arrest him."

I stared between them. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Zander watching the scene with almost as much astonishment as mine.

"*You* have been manipulating the Devotions in the same way as the Queen," I said to Chloe, slowly. "Deliberately. And maybe not only for Darius."

Zander frowned at me. "The Devotions? What do you mean? I don't understand."

Chloe ignored him completely. "Darius told me you were a fool," she replied to me, her delicate voice now smooth and sly. I couldn't believe she was the same woman. "Yet you are the only one seeing sense at last, when the others are merely following blindly. But we didn't act independently, Seleste and I. Who do you think created the mix of Devotions for her, for the Battle? I had no ambitions myself to be Queen, yet there were other sisters I would not have wanted to bow to. It made sense for me to join Seleste's campaign and to aid her. And if we have a tool to enhance our men's performance, why not use it? It makes their lives that little more tolerable, and our rule of the City considerably more secure. It's been like that from the beginning

of our time here – as you and your scrawny book burrower know only too well, Maen."

My heart beat quickened. "It seems your spy has had something more to report than chasing around after a man who merits so little interest…."

She laughed then, her voice lilting back to that of the charming young woman I'd thought she was. "Such modesty! You merit a *considerable* amount of interest, though you continue to deny it. Unlike my sister, I don't lust after you, for Darius brings me plenty of his own entertainment in the bedroom. But it's a pleasure for me to find a man who has actually scorned the Devotions and all the benefits we tell you it brings, and yet has grown smarter and stronger because of it." She glanced over at Zander and his men. "How many of them would have made the same connections you have, Maen? How many of them would have had the intelligence, the tenacity and – let's face the truth – the *appetite* to pursue some dusty old books back into our own, shocking past? Many of them can barely make their own name mark, let alone stomach the hours of study you must have done." She turned back to look at me, but meanwhile I had seen the flush rise on Zander's face at her insult.

"You knew all along? About the true history of the planet?"

She shrugged. "I suspected. I don't need to immerse myself in cobwebs like Nerisa does, to be able to confirm it, for I have servants who will do that for me. Or obtain the information from others who do know." I made a move as if to approach her but she held out a hand to stop me and her Captains came swiftly to stand beside her. "You showed a touching if misguided concern about my wellbeing, soldier. But if you want to know who has been *abusing* my position at the House of Physic – who has been infiltrating and stealing his way in there – I believe I have a more worthy culprit. Right here." She snapped her fingers and two more Silver Captains approached from behind the building opposite the Library, dragging a figure between them.

The bowed head of the captive figure was white blond, the clothing rough and not City-made.

And behind the three figures walked Seleste, the Queen.

CHAPTER 15

EVERY loyal soldier fell to his knees. Dax was already held down on his knees by the soldiers, with his arms bound. He didn't struggle, and it appeared that he had been seriously winded in resisting his capture.

I stayed standing.

Seleste had a small group of her own Guard with her, as would be expected, including another Gold Warrior, but I saw that she nodded down to Zander as she took up position beside Chloe. The two sisters looked at each other, then Chloe inclined her head as a mark of respect for the Queen. It was only slightly mocking.

"You may stand," Seleste said to her men. There was a clatter of leather and metal as they all stood back up to attention.

I couldn't take my eyes off Dax. I couldn't tell if he'd been seriously hurt, though I didn't see any blood. My fear for him manifested itself as a physical nausea – my horror at my own part in bringing him back into the City was even more galling. I had sent him to the House of Physic because I thought he would have an ally there, when in fact I'd sent him directly into the arms of an enemy!

"Maen!" Seleste was approaching me, much to the consternation of her men. She allowed four of them to flank her but I could see her angry impatience with them. She had never lacked courage, though maybe her boldness today was because she had no fear of me as a threat to her personal safety. I watched Chloe draw back with Darius at her side; the soldier inclined his head into her neck as if whispering to her, and Chloe flushed a little, her cheeks pink with a girlish look to them that I now found obscene. I didn't see Kiel

anywhere – that was one thing I was grateful for, if it meant that he'd escaped the ambush somehow.

And then Dax raised his head to look at me.

There was a cut on his forehead and his tunic was torn at the neck but his eyes were sharp enough to suggest his pain wasn't too severe. I glanced over to the Library then back to him and he gave the slightest nod. I hoped that meant that he'd helped Kiel to escape the soldiers somehow. I tried to express so much more than that in my face, I even started to move towards him but Seleste stepped in front of me.

"Kneel, soldier," snapped one of the Gold Warriors beside her. His sword was drawn and pointed at me. I recognized him now, he was called Lyril and Darius reported to him. Zander stood at her other side, staring at me.

I ignored both of the soldiers and spoke only to Seleste. "Let him go. You've tortured him enough in the past and gained nothing. I'll do whatever you want."

She laughed, her voice low, examining me with obvious distaste. "As if that might be of interest to me now, Maen. I have tolerated your empty devotion for too long. Now I find that in return for my patronage and favor you have betrayed me to the Exiles, and continue to do so with no remorse at all." She glanced over at Chloe. "I thought my sister a paranoid fool, suggesting that we clear the eastern block this morning – assuring me that we could expect traitors to step recklessly into our midst; that we should allow no obstruction in capturing them." She stared back at me, her eyes blazing. "That you would be sufficiently blinded by lust to come back with *him* into my Household – into *my* City! But she was proved right, I see."

Chloe smiled gently; I could see her gloating face.

Seleste lifted a hand in the direction of Dax's kneeling body. "The boy was always your weakness, Maen. Luana was right – you are flawed. I have wasted too much time on you already. You can watch his execution and then attend your own." She turned first to Lyril, but she hesitated. Then she turned the other way, to look at Zander. She

put a hand to his shoulder and smiled. "Zander, you have always been a perfect example of a loyal Warrior. You will perform the execution."

Zander looked perturbed but he nodded. "Of course, Mistress. I will take the Exile soldier to the Cells and complete the necessary sanctions – "

"You will do it here and now," she interrupted. "He kneels before you. Behead him! The longer he lives, the more irritated I become."

"No!" I cried, in fury and shock. Lyril's sword darted nearer to me, its blade whispering against my skin. If I moved to stop this, I would die alongside Dax.

At that moment, I didn't care.

Zander paled and something fierce flared suddenly in his eyes. He stared at his Queen in wary astonishment. "He's a City soldier, Mistress, or was once. A soldier is entitled to the forms and rights that we all have, following sentence of death – "

"He is entitled to *nothing*!" she snapped. The soldiers in Zander's group exchanged startled, furtive glances. Lyril was frowning; his gaze slipped over to Zander, then back to me, as if unsure how to proceed. None of this followed the usual military procedure – the strict rules that they all lived by.

"He is already under sentence of death and escaped me once before from Mistress Luana's Household," Seleste continued. "This is the equivalent of a battle threat, and I am ultimate Commander of the Guard. Who dares to challenge that? This traitor has been caught trying to steal the precious resources of this City from its Citizens and so he merits no trial, no representation, no honor in his death! He has disgraced the City and his Guard, and has plotted with desperate fugitives to overthrow the authority and admiration of your Queen."

"*You* are the one who has disgraced the City!" Dax snarled, startling us all. He stretched himself up, straining against the ropes on his arms, his face angry and streaked with sweat, a trail of blood from the cut on his face marking a jagged path down his cheek. The soldiers on either side of him grasped at his shoulders, trying to pull him back. "I've no loyalty left for someone who hoards those resources when

others are dying for need of them, someone whose authority was nothing but stolen goods in the first place!"

"What does he mean?" Zander frowned, asking his question of no one in particular.

Lyril stepped forward and cuffed Dax viciously on the side of the head. He choked and slumped further down on his knees. Lyril then proved himself even more of a coward by kicking Dax again when he was down. I growled in protest and tried to move in front of Dax's body to protect him, but two more of Seleste's Captains reached me first, holding me back. Dax groaned once, then fell silent. It looked as if Lyril had knocked him unconscious.

"Mistress, let me carry out the sentence," he cried, his eyes shining with an unhealthy pleasure in his work. "Then for the disgraced Gold Warrior, too."

"Maen, too?" Zander looked shocked. "There's no evidence of treason proven against him." His eyes darted to me then back to his Queen. "Mistress, I have been with him over the last few months and he has always been a loyal citizen."

Darius spoke up behind Chloe, his tone respectful but his words far from it. "Your watch has been only cursory it seems, Gold Warrior. Mine has been far more … *intimate*. He's been to the Exile camp and returned unharmed; he's been with the Exile leader – the same man as the disgraced Bronzeman, kneeling here. For all we know, they've been plotting against the City ever since the Bronzeman escaped from custody a year ago."

"Difficult when the Bronzeman was reported dead months ago," Zander hissed back, turning on the other soldier with spirit. "What mischief are you creating here? I myself was at that conflict and saw him fall. Maen had nothing to do with the Guard in battle at that time." He turned back to me, puzzled. "How can any of this be true?"

I spoke quickly, just to him. "Some of it, I won't deny. I've met with Dax and the Exiles. But we came back to the City to expose the true story of this planet, as shown in the early Histories. It's not as we were told, Zander."

"The Histories?" Zander seemed to have forgotten he was in the presence of his Mistress and that I was her prisoner. "Those old books that Kiel works on?"

Chloe had come to stand at Seleste's side and she touched her sister's arm, urgently. "I believe Kiel is the name of the scribe who was with the Exile traitor at the House of Physic just now. Unfortunately we weren't able to catch him as well, but we will. He is as much a conspirator as the others, of course."

"Kiel…?" Zander said, his voice barely above a whisper. His eyes narrowed as he stared at Seleste and Chloe together. Neither of the Mistresses was listening to him.

"And then he will be executed, too," said Seleste. She whirled around to glare at Zander. "Don't tell me you want a *Remainder* to have access to sanctions and honor, the same as a City soldier?" She laughed, carelessly. "You are stupid as well as confused, soldier!"

Chloe laughed too, but her eyes were dark and angry, assessing us all. "The principals must be killed, *now*. No one must question your decisions as Queen. The rest of these soldiers are but witnesses, they can be treated at my Household and I can guarantee there will be no further unrest."

Zander did not laugh at all. He dragged his gaze from Seleste, a darkening fury in his eyes that he struggled in vain to hide. He stared at me, aghast. "This is not right," he said, grimly. "What's happening here? What treatment is being proposed for us all?"

"She will deal you a special concoction of drugs, I suspect," I said, my voice low and urgent. "To pacify you all. She controls the Devotions."

"For our health…."

"Not anymore," I said, shaking my head. "We are healthy anyway, and I am proof of it, so is Dax. The control is solely to make us what the Mistresses want; what they need. Haven't you felt it, the difference in you at the time of the Battle; the restlessness in you when your Mistress has little time for you; the volatile feelings towards those you have been told you shouldn't have personal respect and care for? All of that fluctuates according to the dosage they impose on you."

Lyril took one step away from Dax's prone body and struck me across the head with the flat of his sword. It was a vicious, unrestrained blow. The soldiers released my arms and I stumbled down to my knees. Seleste turned on me.

"Be silent, Maen," she hissed. "Or I'll cut the boy apart, limb by limb! Do you think I don't know that will kill you as well? But it will spare me the swordplay of dispatching you both!"

Chloe spoke from beside her, a flicker of panic in her pale eyes as she glared at me. "The Devotions are what make our men great, you can't deny that. With them, you are fitter, more virile, with a longer, healthier life span. Our men crave that!"

"Many do," I admitted, my voice hoarse. I spat phlegm from my mouth; my head ached and I had cut the skin on my hands as I broke my fall. "But most would like the choice. When did you last ask them?"

"Treason!" roared Lyril and raised his sword above my head.

My life crystallized in that second as I reverted to pure fighting instinct. I crouched as best I could, ready for a leap, ignoring the pain in my leg. I wondered how many I could take down as I reached for my fallen dagger, risking being cut down by Lyril or Zander's much longer reach. I knew Dax lay on the ground behind me, and some instinct in me sought to draw the fight away from his body; my fists tensed and I shook my head sharply, trying to clear the fog of pain. Everything was blurred around me.

Then as the sword began to fall, Zander suddenly leapt forward and pushed Lyril aside. The other Gold Warrior cried out and stumbled in surprise – his sword whistled past my head, no more than a knuckle's distance away, but striking the ground without injury to me. Swiftly turning, Zander kicked out at Dax's body, pushing him to the side. Dax rolled over and kept rolling until he hit up against the Library wall and fell limp, out of the range of any soldier's weapon for the moment. Zander turned back to face Lyril, his eyes hooded and grim, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

The Silver Captains pulled Seleste away from us, protecting her from what appeared to be a potentially dangerous skirmish; Chloe

grabbed out for Darius's arm. He had already drawn his sword and his eyes were on no one but me. Soldiers were shouting in the background; the Silvers of the Royal Guard were trying to group themselves in order to cover both the prisoners and the astonishing behavior of their own Gold Warriors, brawling in the middle of the yard amongst themselves.

Then Kiel came running around the corner of the courtyard and, with a loud cry, skidded to a stop at the sight of us all there.

And so did the hundreds of people behind him.

THERE was a sudden, stunned silence. Lyril and Zander paused, facing off against each other, but temporarily halted by the astonishing sight. Seleste's Silver Captains turned slowly, along with all the rest of the Guard, to face the approaching crowd. It was obvious from their expressions that they were deeply confused, perceiving danger to the Queen on several sides, yet no longer sure who posed the worst threat.

I got slowly and painfully to my feet. Zander stood nearest, but he didn't draw his sword against me. "Remainders," he muttered, staring across the courtyard. "Hundreds of them. What in Devotions' name does this mean?" Edrius was on his other side, his eyes wide open with astonishment. When Zander moved towards the new group, Edrius shadowed him protectively.

Kiel's face was pink with excitement and fear and I could tell he wanted to drop to his knees in front of his Queen. But he didn't. He inclined his head instead. His eyes darted to me and then to Zander and his cheeks got even redder.

The people behind him were, indeed, Remainders. They were characters that I recognized from their work within the City; cooks, gardeners, tailors, metalworkers, grooms, carpenters, cleaners. It was obviously only a fraction of all the servants that worked there, but in enough of a mass, the numbers were still impressive. They spilled from the alleyways between the houses, and emerged from the doorways of the utility buildings all around the yard. Behind every group there was another, stretching back along the walkways until there was nothing but the top of their heads to be seen. As they stopped,

haltingly, behind Kiel, the murmur of their voices trickled away. There were men and women, and of a variety of ages and figures that you didn't often see in the Citizens. Some of them gasped; some moaned. A couple fell back, scared now they were faced with the Queen and her soldiers. Many of them carried their tools but not in a threatening way; it wasn't as if they carried weapons, just that they'd come straight from their labors. Their clothes were of reasonable quality – the Remainders were serviced by a large facility for clothing and utilities – but they couldn't help but look drab against the bright, vibrant cloth of the Ladies' gowns and the shining armor of the Royal soldiers.

"What's the meaning of this?" announced Seleste, her voice rising over the remaining murmurs of their arrival. "Kneel at once to your Queen!"

Many of them dropped to their knees, and Kiel's eyes rolled briefly up into his head. But then he straightened his back and took a step forward. At my side, Zander also moved several steps, instinctively taking a path towards Kiel.

"Mistress," said Kiel. His voice was hoarse; he cleared his throat and started again more clearly. "We beg an audience with you. And Maen."

"Maen?" Chloe protested beside her sister. "They ally themselves with the traitor! They have no rights to speak directly to the Queen like this. And they certainly can't interfere with your disciplinary matters, they're just slaves! Let me send the Guard to disperse them."

"Mistress," I said. I had struggled to my feet and held my hands out to my side, showing I had no intention of attacking anyone. "Let them speak."

I could see Seleste was furious but at the same time she appreciated the large numbers of people milling in the courtyard and beyond. Even if the soldiers moved to clear them away, it would take time, and smaller conflicts could break out. I also knew she saw the wide, frightened, fascinated eyes that followed her every movement; many of the Remainders never got to see their Queen, not even at a distance. Whatever the circumstances, she enjoyed the attention and the chance to impress her subjects, however lowly.

Another soldier ran into the courtyard and for a second everyone tensed. But after an open palm salute to the Queen, he turned immediately to Lyril, whispering urgently into his ear. Lyril's face twisted in a grimace. He turned from the soldier, marched quickly to Seleste and dropped to one knee in front of her. "A warning of an Exile attack, Mistress," he announced rather pompously. Several of his Guard stiffened to attention. "They are ranged up on the mountains, in quite some force. I suggest we send men against them at once."

I glanced around at Dax but he still wasn't moving. "In full view?" I said, sharply. "Is that their usual approach? They know they're outnumbered by the Guard."

Zander glanced at me, then back to the Queen. "Maen's right. It appears a very rash move on their part. We should investigate first before committing our forces to conflict – "

"We should attack *now*, while they are so vulnerable," Lyril snapped in response. "Your instincts are seriously misled, Warrior!"

Kiel stepped forward again, his expression very earnest. His clear, bold voice sounded very young but it carried easily over the courtyard. "Maen, but that's what we want to talk about, what we *must* talk about! It's not an Exile attack, not really, it's the same gathering as is happening here, all the fellows with me here." He paused for a second, gulping another breath. "I had very little time to gather people together but I've done what I can, what I thought would be useful. And I sent the message out, the message I know Hann would have wanted, and this is what we all managed to do in the short time allowed us. We're just gathering, we just want to be seen, to be *heard*. It's a show of the people of this City. *All* of us, Citizens, Remainders and Exiles. We want to show the Queen; to tell the Queen."

"To tell her what?" I tried to step forward but Lyril had me covered again with his sword.

"We want to see the book!" called a deep voice from the back of the Remainder crowd. A couple of other voices called the same. Kiel flushed.

"They want to see the book; to see the truth of the Histories," he said. He looked towards the Queen with a strange mixture of fear and

sadness. "That's all. I've told them some things about it after all, because I couldn't bear the secrets by myself, because I thought it was information for us all. Isn't it?" Briefly, his eyes looked very fierce. "These people have protected me so far but now they think they deserve to see it."

"What Histories? What book is he talking about?" Zander sounded angry now.

"There is an old History," I said. "A History that describes this world at Colonization. As it really was." Seleste whirled around immediately, her eyes wide and shocked, her gaze on me. I saw anger and amazement in that look – and fear of something that perhaps she already suspected. In that instant, I amended slightly what I had been going to say. "All the people were as one, then – there were no Remainders, no Exiles."

"All the same!" someone shouted again from the crowd. There was a swell of cries in agreement.

Seleste was pale but she had recovered herself. She spoke imperiously as always. "There are no books in the Royal Library like that, and certainly none that can be shared with base servants such as this, or rebels from the wastelands. Kill the Exile, then the scribe, at once! Then punish any others who are still in this courtyard after the sword strikes the cobbles!"

Kiel turned as white as the papers he so loved to illustrate and dropped limply to his knees on the stones beneath.

"No!" cried Zander.

Seleste turned to him again, her expression astounded. "Have you gone mad, soldier? Are you directly disobeying me? You'll join them in execution, if you are! These men are traitors and dangerous enemies of the City; the City that protects and nurtures you. They wish to spread lies and to undermine the glorious histories of your Queen!"

I moved then, pushing Lyril's sword aside, not caring if it cut me, stumbling a little towards Zander's side. "Let them speak about it," I urged Seleste. "Let us *all* speak about it! Mistress, the tales in the old Histories are true, and the evidence is there for everyone to see. That's what these people are asking for – to be seen, to be counted."

"It's a rebellion," hissed Chloe, at Seleste's shoulder.

I ignored her and spoke directly to Seleste, my voice urgent. "They are still your subjects – still loyal to you. But for the first time in generations they see a chance to be recognized, that they may be more important than anyone has ever given them credit for – that they may be represented in the City's future. No one's ever done that for them before!" I realized I was echoing the words that Dax had said to me, just before we returned to the City.

Seleste stared at me. There was something very strange in her expression. "Maen, you speak with the passion I used to know in you. The passion I thought you had for your Queen and your duty."

"I did," I said, truthfully. "And I can still feel that passion; that loyalty."

"But for a man," she hissed, viciously. "The *boy* you crave and his ridiculous attempts to destabilize the City. His people are misfits and thieves and of no use to any of us, we are well rid of them all – "

"No," I interrupted, sharply. I saw Edrius's face over Zander's shoulder, pale and shocked at my disobedience, the same reaction as for most of the Guard. Several of them stood to attention around Seleste, their swords drawn and ready to move against me, although there was still confusion in their faces. There had never been such a scene between Royal Mistresses and their men, and in full view of common slaves. I knew my heart was beating too quickly, making the words catch in my throat. I knew I had to go to Dax's help – and Kiel's, too. I knew I would also probably die here today, for Seleste would never forgive me for such defiance and I could never stand against all of her Guard. But I knew I had to speak what was in my heart, aloud at last.

"Yes, I feel that passion for him, and that is the most abiding love I will ever have – that I will ever want. Whether you kill him now or not, that will always be the case. If you kill him, you are right, you know me well – I'll die too, or at least my very spirit will. But I'll never offer that passion to you instead, nor to your City, nor to your rules."

Seleste was pale, too, but with spots of color high on her beautiful cheeks. "If you had never refused the Devotions … if I had been less tolerant of you…."

I shook my head. "I am the man I should be. I'm the man I ought to be, the man I want to be. Your Devotions would have kept me submissive for longer, but you only ever had half the man." I felt a strange, confused pain as I looked at her, for she had been part of my adult life for many years, and my Mistress for some of them. She had tormented and abused me and prevented me from pursuing the people and the life that I at last felt I deserved; but she had also been my savior and my succor in many, more complex ways.

"What is it you want?" She lowered her voice so that only I could hear it clearly. "That the slaves have representation in a meeting of the Central Council? It's madness. They are *slaves*, Maen, the idea is abhorrent. And the Exile renegades, too? It would be political suicide for me!"

"It's the future!" I hissed back, my argument now for the woman, not the Queen. "And *you* will have to make it work." However shocking the stories in Kiel's book might be, I wasn't fool enough to think that the City would – *could* – change overnight into a different, more equitable society. It would be highly dangerous to us all to attempt such a thing, either by rebellion from within or attack from outside. I did not seek to destroy everything that still stood, despite what Seleste might have thought of me. How could I ensure her support of this?

"It need not be the downfall of the City. It need not threaten *you*." My tone was harsh; I tried to sound persuasive, though I had never believed I had true influence with her. But I knew that neither Exiles nor Remainders would ever thrive unless Seleste allowed them her attention. All I could hope for was an appeal to her vanity, to her need to be a significant figure in the City's current events. "You are hosting this prestigious, planet-wide Convocation over the next few months. Here is a chance for you to bring these matters forward to the other Queens; to the Central Council itself. You will be the only one to offer the support of all of your people, of *all* the citizens, in and out of the City. Their skills; their experience; their loyalty to you. Let this be

your chance to change the world, indeed, and to make it as strong as possible to face the challenges ahead."

Her face was set; she bit gently at her lower lip. Behind her, the Guard looked cautiously from the group of Remainders to the intense discussion between their Queen and one of her servants.

"Execute him!" snapped Chloe. She couldn't hear our words, but she saw the hesitation in Seleste's body language. She was straining forward, trying to discover what was going on between us. Seleste's eyes met mine. She began to shake her head, slowly.

In that instant, I took another, maybe more dangerous decision. "You will make this work," I repeated, but my tone was firmer. "Otherwise, I think you know there are other tales from the past, not yet known publicly, but which would be far less palatable to your people – ones that would not leave you your crown, or your power. Not as a Queen; not as a Mistress; not as a *woman*."

Her eyes widened, and I knew I was right – that she had some awareness of the true nature of the first settlements and the role of men in Colonization. "Maen, this is blackmail." Her voice cut through me like a cold blade. "And you're a fool to show your hand like this. I will cut you down before you can speak a word of this to anyone."

"Then someone else will say it after me!" I snapped back, rashly. "I'm not important. Others know – and there'll be more of them in time. You can't stop it happening – only work with it."

She looked stunned. "Is all this for your own desires? Do you want my power for *yourself*? Somehow to subjugate me to *you*?"

I sighed, bone-weary of it all, angry with her arrogance, and sick with worry and pain. "I will not be judged by your own standards. There is nothing of yours that I want, Seleste." I looked her in the eyes, sinking into the dark, beautiful depths of her, seeking the truth of her. "Nothing of *you*."

The sound that escaped from her was even less than a moan, but I heard it. For a second, we were silent, staring at each other.

When she spoke again, she drew herself to her full height and her eyes were hard again. "And what of the boy? The Exile leader?"

I swallowed hard. "You will need him, and his people. You must release him."

She raised her eyebrows. Her pupils were dilated, her look wild. "I think not. Whatever I do with these other people, I cannot spare *him*. He was a failure in my Guard and is today an enemy of everything I stand for. The City needs me to protect them; to lead them. *All* of them, as you so passionately say. I cannot disappoint them by matching dissention with weakness." Her eyes clouded over for a second. "I *will not* spare him, Maen. Not for you to place him above me."

The panic clenched at my gut. "Seleste – "

I never finished the sentence. Behind Seleste, there was a sudden jumble of noise and activity and the soldiers scattered around us. The pain in my head had returned and I was distracted, unable to keep track of it all. Chloe had stepped suddenly into view beside her sister, grabbing at Seleste's arm. Darius moved forward from behind her, his sword aimed at my heart. He was panting slightly as if he'd just run back to her side.

"You will not be tricked into weakness, Seleste!" Chloe screamed, her sweet voice twisted and ugly with venom. She had heard enough, it seemed, to know her world of privilege was threatened. "We will rule in the way we wish, we will not be blackmailed into sharing our power with the inferior and the scum!"

At the same time, Lyril called for a charge against the Remainders. The Guard stood to attention, drawing their swords as one, a magnificent rattle and hiss of sound. They were overcome in numbers but far superior in skill and weapons. I saw the white blur of Kiel's face and heard the rumble of fear and anger from the Remainders. There would be bloodshed in the courtyard in moments! I looked around wildly, seeking a weapon, seeking to escape Darius's guard.

And then there was an even more astonishing sound behind us all, from the direction of the Library – a burst of angry, howling noise, a sweeping rush of the air in the courtyard. I staggered back slightly, dirt and dust sticking to my skin from the wind that lifted around me. A huge wave of heat hit me, making my lips go dry and my eyes sting.

"The Library!" I don't know who called out, but the cry was taken up by many others. "The Library's on fire!"

THE chaos around me was incredible, the courtyard suddenly so full of bodies that I didn't know the difference between friend and foe. I was pushed to one side as soldiers rushed towards the Library, calling out to each other. By some fortuitous twist of fate, my foot stumbled on my discarded dagger – I bent quickly and retrieved it. But something alerted me at the last minute to the whine of a sword behind me, and I twisted aside just as Darius brought it down past my shoulder. He missed me by a hair's breadth – the second time I had barely escaped injury from one of the Royal Guard.

"You will be executed today," he snarled. His eyes were wild. "And I claim the right to do it!"

"You set fire to the Library!" I thrust out my dagger and parried his next blow, forcing away its path to my belly. I had no doubt that this was his work. "Why did you do that?"

He leant back, laughing. He was better armed than I was, and his anger gave him a fierce, maniacal strength. "There's no book – the scribe himself said that, I heard him in the shadows of the wall when he smuggled you back in. And I've just made sure of that! There's nothing there now to disturb my Queen or my Mistress, nothing to challenge their power, nothing to prevent them caring for us and guiding us for generations to come." He turned, his limbs lithe and his movements instinctive, and my stab at his sword arm passed with barely a tear of his tunic. "I will be this soldier for as long as I wish! As strong and as fine as I wish. I will not be threatened by slaves and men who have been found wanting, exiled from a City they should beg and grovel to return to. The Mistresses will desire me and praise me and find me invaluable in their service."

I swore under my breath, needing most of my energy to avoid his thrusts. He wasn't open to reason, I knew that by now. I spun as he darted forward, catching his arm as he came in closer to me, gripping as hard as I could and pulling short the arc of his sword. Around me, all I could hear were shouts and cries of panic and horror. There had been few fires in the City in all the time I'd lived there, and at the Library it

was even more shocking. I caught sight of the grey robes of some of the scribes, returning from their distraction at the House of Physic to find their work and livelihood in flames. They were openly weeping.

I struggled to see the extent of the fire, peering over Darius's shoulder as we grappled with each other. It had been started in the main entrance hall and crept swiftly throughout the building. The first explosion of tinder had obviously swept up to the highest beam of the ceiling, and then the narrow corridors between the shelving would have created tunnels through which the wind from outside could take the flames. The bright, fearsome heat raced through the wooden beams of the structure inside. I could see its path through the window frames that were rapidly charring and peeling away, the crackling blaze of red and orange flames licking greedily along the corridors. The dusty rooms and their precious paper and cloth volumes were ripe for burning.

My gut churned with fear – Dax had been thrown to the foot of the Library wall! If he were still unconscious and unable to help himself, he would be in danger from the fire. I strained my eyes, trying to see past Darius to where Dax had been, but I couldn't see any glimpse of him past the running, panicking people. Some of the Remainders were calling to each other in stronger voices, exhorting their fellows to fetch water. I could hear the rattle of wooden buckets and feet running in opposite directions towards the water butts, as people began organizing themselves to fight the fire. Blankets were being thrown down from windows above the courtyard, soaked in water to protect the brave souls. I didn't see how the Library could be saved now, but maybe they could prevent the fire from spreading. Some of our buildings were constructed of stone, but many were built on wooden frames, including most of the Remainder quarters.

I wasn't allowed the luxury of looking for Dax amongst the fire fighters for very long; I was in a dangerous fight of my own. Darius bore down fiercely, trying to shake off my grip. I wrestled with him, but my hands were painful from my earlier fall – the palms were also slippery with the sweat from our fighting and from the heat of the nearby fire. An unlucky twist of my wrist, and he struck my dagger out of my hand.

And then a figure raced past me, his thin, wiry legs speeding over the ground as fast as I'd ever seen a young man run. It was Kiel, his blond hair splayed out behind him, his face still white as parchment but with the reflected gleam from the fire in his wide eyes. Darius's sword arm pushed down on me until my shoulders bent and my knee started to weaken beneath me, and meanwhile I watched with mounting shock as Kiel darted through the front door of the Library, into the very heart of the flames.

And behind him, with an anguished cry of anger and horror, raced Zander.

CHAPTER 16

I KICKED away from Darius just as he pushed me to the very limit of my knee's strength, and I rolled to one side on the ground. He swung his sword again but my movement had distracted his aim and it caught only the edge of my calf. We both cried out in fury. Zander had just reached the Library doorway and paused at the familiar sound of soldiers head-on in battle. He half turned, enough so that I could see the shock in his expression and his confusion as he tried to decide what to do.

"Save Kiel!" I shouted. "Save the scribe – forget the book, forget the Queen, forget us!"

The look on Zander's face was astonishing – I had never seen such naked, painful emotion on his face, as if he suddenly realized what was really important to him. He paused only one more moment, grabbing a wet blanket from a passing Remainder and quickly unbuckling his belt. He caught it deftly as it slipped from his waist, then unsheathed the sword and threw it to me. Startled, I grasped it by the hilt and turned to catch the downward swing of another of Darius's blows. It would have split my head open if I hadn't had a weapon to defend myself.

By then, there were other soldiers appearing around us, maybe drawn by Zander. The attack on the group of Remainders had been suspended when the fire started, and now I saw some of the Guard alongside the City servants, ferrying water to and from the Library, dousing the flames at the base of the building as best they could. I struggled back up to my feet, slicing through Darius's defenses in a similar move to the one I'd used at the Battle for Queenship all that time ago, the sword sweeping up and through his own outward stretch, striking at the centre of his torso. He recovered better this time,

though, grunting and stumbling backwards, astonished and furious that Zander had come to my aid.

I pressed on after him, and wrestled him down to the ground. He fell heavily, a leg twisting awkwardly underneath his body, and there was a sickening crack as his head hit the stones. I leant over him, not allowing him to get up, pinning his arm back with my own. I prised his hand from his sword and thrust it away from him across the ground, its blade clattering across the cobbles. Blood trickled down from a cut in his temple and he looked dazed. We were both panting heavily.

"Stand down, soldier," I hissed. "Surrender to me!"

He smiled then, a strange, unnerving smile that was surely ridiculous for a man brought to defeat on the battle field, albeit a courtyard in the City grounds. His free hand hovered briefly near his empty sword belt, then he slid it deliberately down his chest and laid his palm down low on his belly. "Never," he said, softly, looking up at me from under angry, hooded eyes. "Unless that's how you want to play with me."

I pulled back despite myself, full of loathing for him. I glanced around but it was difficult to make out individuals among the chaos. I couldn't see any sight of Seleste or Chloe, and I assumed the Guard had taken them to safety. Nor could I see Dax. His body was no longer in a heap at the edge of the Library wall, for which I was profoundly glad, at the same time panicking as to where he might be and whether he'd been harmed in the commotion.

There was a sudden shout from the Library and some of the soldiers ran over to help Zander, who was stumbling his way out. The blanket he'd taken in was black with soot and burned at one of the edges. His own hair was dark with dirt and his face was streaked with sweat. In his arms he held a slim body. When one of the Silver Captains tried to take it from him, he pulled back angrily, resisting any help. He staggered a few more yards away from the building and dropped to his knees on the stones, just within my reach. He laid the blanket down, then placed the body on top of it. He didn't move again, just knelt there, looking down at his burden. The Silver Captain ran back towards the Library, where the men were finally bringing the fire under control. Large clouds of foul smelling black smoke billowed out

from the rooms, and the air around us all was full of paper-thin, flaky ash.

I stepped away from Darius who still lay disorientated and panting on the ground. I turned to the Gold Warrior on his knees. "Zander? Is Kiel alive?"

"The book," Zander said, softly. I had to strain to hear him properly. "He kept saying he had to save the book. He wouldn't listen to me, he wouldn't come to me. So I went and got him." He looked up at me and I was shocked to see his grief-stricken expression. "He was burning. What's so important to a man that he lets himself burn?"

I knelt down beside the blanket. "It was his work and his pride. It was the history of this planet and his people – and ours, too." I laid Zander's sword back down beside him and reached to touch Kiel's neck. Zander made a noise of protest but he didn't try to stop me. Kiel's body was filthy, and there were hideous burns on his left side, all the way up his legs and down from his shoulder to his hand, broken flesh glinting red and angry amongst the blackened surface of his flesh. I felt sick with horror, but I forced myself to lean over him and listen for any breath. A pulse throbbed gently at his neck; I thought I could feel something stir in his blood.

"I don't think he's dead, we can save him. *You* can save him. We'll take him to the House of Physic as soon as the fire has died down, we'll use this blanket to carry him."

Smoke was still belching out of the Library but the flames had reduced and the heat around us was less fierce now, though it still hung as tangible as a shroud in the air around us. Edrius and another Silver Captain were looking for Zander and started over towards us. I looked around to call some others of the Guard to help us.

It was an unwise move. I was distracted by my concern for Kiel and my continuing fear for Dax. The only warning I got of danger was a movement at the edge of my vision – suddenly Darius bore down on me again. He was wheezing, there was blood all down the side of his face, and his steps were clumsy. But he had recovered his sword and I had no weapon of my own, having returned Zander's to him. He reared up over me and lifted his blade, two-handed above his head, to bring it

down on me. I had offered him the most vulnerable target, kneeling here before him.

Zander turned even as I lifted an arm to try to protect myself. He grasped his sword and swung it up to meet Darius's strike. His grip was awkward because he was still on his knees and he'd grabbed the sword from where it lay on the ground. Despite that, he stopped the downward slice, but he rocked back on his heels and Darius knocked the sword from his hand. Darius snarled and, in a blind, injured rage, turned his attack on to Zander.

"*No*!"

There was a furious cry from behind us both and Edrius dashed forward, reaching over Zander's kneeling body, his sword drawn and glinting amongst the dark ash still floating all around us.

"Hold!" cried Zander, but Edrius ignored him, moving swiftly to protect his idolized Gold Warrior. He was in better physical shape than Darius, but Darius fought with a mad fury that made him both stronger and more unpredictable. Edrius stumbled slightly, trying to avoid Zander and Kiel on the blanket below, and in that second, taking advantage of the other soldier's loss of balance, Darius lunged and ran his sword through the young Captain's body, sliding up and under the breastplate into his belly.

Edrius gave a gasp of shock. He dropped his sword and fell limply to his knees. His eyes rolled up into his head and he collapsed in front of us.

I cried out in anger, impotent without a weapon but wanting to attack Darius with my bare hands. I struggled to get swiftly back up on my feet. Zander was white with similar shock and horror for his fallen soldier. But we were both already on the ground, disadvantaged before Darius, both of us unarmed; it was as if time had slowed down for us. There wouldn't be enough of it – not enough precious time to gather our wits and avenge Edrius. Darius was already dragging his sword out of the younger soldier's fatally wounded body, Edrius's blood bubbling out onto the cobbles beside us. Then Darius swung around, his arms back above his head and the blood still glistening on his blade, the arc

of it whistling down towards us both. My last thought was to wonder where Dax was and how he would escape again from the City.

The sword fell.

I ROLLED, instinctively, the only maneuver I could make from that position. I was conscious of Zander's angry shout as my body fell heavily against his. But then there was the flash of another blade and the metallic sound of two swords meeting with force. I watched Darius stagger backwards, crying out with shock, and the other sword followed him, sweeping cleanly and strongly against him, striking down at his shaky defense, pushing him further and further back, away from us.

I looked up. The swordsman was Dax, his right arm hugged close to his chest but his left arm gripping my sword as confidently if it were his own. Darius had knocked my sword away to the Library wall when he'd first ambushed me, but Zander had pushed Dax that way as well. I realized with surprise and gratitude that he had done that deliberately, so that Dax might retrieve the weapon. I stared at Dax, savoring the sight of him, my heart leaping with joy that he was alive.

Darius fought with a manic desperation but Dax matched him in grim determination. With fierce pride, I watched Dax take control of the confrontation, and it took only a few more strokes before he knocked the sword from Darius's weakening grip. The hilt was slick with Edrius's blood, but even without that, Darius's whole body was now trembling with shock and pain from his earlier fall. He dropped to his knees before Dax, his mouth opening in probably the last expression of his hatred and contempt.

Dax struck him down before he could speak, watching him fall to the cobbles. Then, as Darius hissed wordlessly up at him, Dax ran his sword quite deliberately through Darius's body.

"Stand down, soldier," he hissed. "A Gold Warrior told you so!"

Darius rolled once then crumpled at Dax's feet, face down and deathly still. Slowly, a trail of blood started to seep from under his

belly, a dark, spreading pool, staining the ground and mingling with that from Edrius's body.

I COULDN'T see if it was a mortal wound or whether Dax had sought only to disable him. I didn't care. From the look on the faces of the Silver Captains who rushed from behind Dax to restrain Darius with ropes and to take him into custody, I didn't think they cared either. They were fierce fighters and followed orders readily – but Darius had threatened a Gold Warrior, and then killed Edrius, a fellow Silver Captain, with an attack that had been vicious and indefensible. It had offended every soldier of honor who was there to see it.

I stumbled to my feet and ran to Dax. "You're not hurt?"

He turned and grinned at me, his face weary and filthy with sweat and dried blood, but his pale blue eyes alight with passion. "No. A little winded. There's pain in my arm, but it's from the old wound."

"And the Exiles? They're on the mountains outside the City…."

Dax nodded. "I heard – Kiel had called them to the City, though apparently they're waiting for my orders." Pride for his men shone in his eyes. "I will send one of the Remainders out with a message, there's no need to be secretive now."

"Will you attack?"

He must have heard something in my voice because he peered at me. "You want to question my authority again, soldier? After I've just saved your life?"

I smiled. I lifted a hand and touched his cheek, then let my hand fall back to my side. "No. They are your men – your army. It's your life."

"It can be yours, too," he said, quietly, though there was an underlying urgency in his tone. "Anything you want from me. Any place you want. I know you said you would come to me, but it doesn't matter where I am…."

"Your life," I repeated, firmly. "And that's the most precious thing to me of all. That's where I go; that's what I follow. That's the only authority for me now."

He flushed. "I'll give the order. Will you be here when I return?"

"Of course," I said. "But…?"

"They'll stand down," he said. "Today will not be the day that the City and the Exiles meet in forced battle."

I STOOD in the courtyard, my sword in my hand and soldiers all around me. In the background, the burnt, broken timbers of the ruined Royal Library hissed and shifted as they cooled down. Occasional clouds of steam lifted from the wreckage and dissipated in the slight breeze.

The rest of the Guard were aimless, obviously confused as to what to do next. The Queen and Mistress Chloe had left the area, and their Gold Warriors were seriously distracted from their duty. I looked for Lyril and found him, lying on the stones by a drained water butt, his arm hugged tightly to his chest as if broken. His face was white and he seemed to be passing in and out of consciousness. I didn't know if he'd suffered the injury in the aborted fight with the Remainders or in the panic caused by the fire, but it looked severe. I called a couple of Silver Captains over and told them to fetch a cloth stretcher to carry him to the Household of Physic. There were Remainders around, but most of them had withdrawn after helping to stop the fire, many of them blackened and exhausted after their work. It had been astonishing to see them working voluntarily alongside the Guard, but now I suspected they'd returned to their quarters, as quickly and as inconspicuously as possible, hoping not to suffer any consequences from following Kiel's rallying cry. The ones that were left were acting more purposefully, starting to clear up the wreckage of the Library and to move to the aid of the soldiers. There were still scribes clustered together a few feet from the Library entrance, unable to tear their shocked, frightened selves away from the disaster site.

The other Gold Warrior, Zander, was on his knees beside a sorely injured body that few other people would have recognized. He appeared to have no time or attention to give his Guard their commands. One of the Silver Captains was standing a short distance away, a cloth stretcher in his hand, but Zander didn't even raise his head. The soldier turned in confusion and addressed me, instead. "Shall we move this body to the House of Physic too, sir?" he asked. I was startled to be addressed in the respectful way I'd enjoyed when I was also a Gold Warrior, and I hesitated to reply. I could see a couple of others behind him, awaiting orders. Some of them scowled at me, but none of them had made a move to arrest either me or Dax in the aftermath of this disaster. Now they needed the authority of a senior soldier of the City.

"Zander will direct you where to take him," I said. "But give him a moment first."

I realized that Kiel had regained some consciousness. His pain must have been tremendous, but he was trying to speak. Zander was leant over his body, soothing him with gentle words.

"I tried to keep you out of trouble," he was murmuring as I approached quietly. "Stupid scribe. Too much in your head, that's what I said. It's only paper and words."

"Everything," gasped Kiel. "Gone. Never…."

My shadow fell over him and his eyes flickered towards me; he couldn't move his head. "Sorry," he whispered. "Sorry … lost. No book. No history. Lost…."

"No," I said, as firmly as I dared. There was a fierce look on Zander's face as he stared at Kiel, as if he fought back unfamiliar tears. "That's not important. We'll approach the Queen in another way. We know the records were there, even if we can't prove it now. We all know the story, and maybe that'll be enough to force change through her."

"Don't fool yourself, Maen," said Zander, softly. "She'll have us all arrested and killed for today's events. Her sisters are as bad, it seems. And I have been as rebellious as you; as subversive as you. I don't know whether to thank you for opening my eyes, or curse you for

ripping my whole life into pieces. I have nothing left now, nothing I can trust, nothing I can rely on."

Kiel made a sickening, wheezing sound. "Me. Always."

Zander's face flushed and he reached tentatively for Kiel's uninjured hand. I was startled to see him give a public show of affection to a servant, but then this day had been astounding for many reasons. "If there's no evidence," he said, still talking to me though his eyes were fixed on Kiel, "no sign of this History that you spoke of – well, she'll be able to deny it all. She has everything invested in keeping the equilibrium, in keeping her men and the City exactly as they always have been. There's no need to give credence to the tales of rebels."

"You will not be arrested," said a voice behind me. "You will not be killed. I will speak to the Queen myself, and she will listen to *me*."

I'd heard gentle steps approaching me but there'd been nothing to alert me in the way of danger. Even so, when they stopped behind me, I took a firmer grip of my sword and turned. To my astonishment, it was Mistress Nerisa, clutching her familiar pile of papers. Behind her was her constant companion, the Silver Captain Tabot. He made no move against me and I put down my sword.

"Mistress," I bowed my head.

"Soldier," she replied, her voice surprisingly clear.

"I'm not – " I began.

She shook her head, silencing my protest. "Today you are a soldier, and you fought for the people of this City, whoever they may be. Today you are one of ours."

I heard another set of footsteps and Dax came running, to stand by my side. "I've sent the message," he said to me, hurriedly. "The Exiles are returning to the camp. But there's still tension there, and the expectation of an attack. I need to bring them better news than the burning of a Library and a brief gathering of Remainder slaves." Then he looked down at Kiel lying on the ground and grimaced. His eyes flickered over Zander, and his hand suddenly reached out and touched

my arm. It was as if, like me, he had somehow recognized the secret bond between lovers in Zander and Kiel as well. He wished to communicate that to me the best way he could. I wanted to draw him to me that very instant, to hold him and to give thanks for his bravery and his survival and for everything else he'd come to mean to me. Only the awareness of the carnage and tragedy around us stopped me from doing it.

Nerisa looked from my face into Dax's defiant eyes and nodded. "Both of you are soldiers today. You will have amnesty for that, whatever the City offers you in the future."

Dax frowned at her but inclined his head with some respect. "Mistress." He didn't understand who she was or why she thought she could say such things. He had never met her, and she must have presented a strange, small, incongruous figure in amongst the filth and angry passion of the last hour.

She turned back to me, shifting the papers more securely under her arm. She wore a dull colored cloak as always, her hair pulled back into a severe style and unadorned. But the face that I had always thought plain and uninteresting looked different today. Her eyes were sharp; her mouth determined.

"Maen, I know who you are and what you have done, both good and bad. I know what you and Kiel have been talking about, too, and the discoveries he's made in the Library." At the look of shock on my face, she laughed. It was a soft sound, but robust. "You think I am a shadow, a blank page, a strange misfit in the glorious, charismatic Royal family. A nobody. Don't you?"

"Mistress," I gasped. "I never meant to offend…."

"No, you misunderstand me." She smiled at me, genuine amusement in her face. "I'm glad of that! It's enabled me to go my own way without interference. To make a better life for my scribes and their Remainder brethren; to work with Flora even when it would have been seen as treason against my sister, the Queen."

"You helped her escape the City?" I said.

Nerisa nodded. "I have worked with her both in and outside of these walls, for many years. We believe in the same thing – the unity of the City, once again."

Dax gasped beside me. "You're the one who has been helping the Exiles?"

She nodded again. "It hasn't been much, I know, but I have sent news and documents and maps when I can. Occasionally my sister Chloe allows me into her Household and I can take supplies and recipes for you from there. Sometimes I've been able to bring some more private documents to the young scribe's attention, without him realizing where they came from, of course." Her eyes rested on Kiel's restless body and her face paled, though her voice continued as calmly. "He's been able to discover old entrances and exits in the City walls, and hidden routes through the many buildings."

"And old Histories?" I asked, my voice low.

She looked at me again. "Yes, Maen, you are as alert to all this as he is. I knew of them a long time ago, as did Chloe. She chose to ignore them, to manipulate the secrets that we found to glorify her position beside Seleste. I chose…."

"To expose them. To use them," interrupted Dax.

Nerisa nodded again. "It has been more effective to work through Kiel, to allow him his very intelligent head in these matters, and merely to point him in the directions I recommend. When I discovered he was investigating far more than I ever hoped for, and also creating his own record of those forgotten years … I confess I was excited. I have tried to protect him from discovery by Seleste all this time."

"You have followed him around, yet not for complaint or discipline."

"No," she said, sadly. "There was none of that for Kiel, for he's been a superb servant to me and our objectives. My surveillance was purely for his own protection."

"You talk as if he's dead," said Zander, dully, his voice breaking into our talk. "He still lives."

Nerisa's face twisted for the first time with sympathy. "Yes, and I will make sure he's nursed back to the best health we can manage, I will insist on the best care for him."

"At the Household of Physic?" I asked, warily.

Understanding flickered in her eyes. "He'll be safe there – he will not be punished. I'll see to that. Mistress Chloe will help him to recover with all her skills and potions, and she will not be allowed to speak beyond that role. And I will also speak to Seleste so that her soldiers are not punished for their behavior today." She gave a deep sigh as if she'd found the speech exhausting. "It has been a day that we will all remember."

I stepped forward. "And just how will you do all this?"

"Maen!" Dax was startled at my boldness.

I persisted. "Mistress, what influence do you have with the Queen? Her own sister works with her to continue this lie that they live; this power that their ancestors have usurped; the twisting of their men and their desires. The City is strong and well established and the Exiles weak." Dax started to protest, but I held up a hand to stop him. "It's true! You cannot deny it. You can't launch a full attack on the City, you would be destroyed. But meanwhile, you can only live half a life outside the walls, surviving on stolen goods and illicit, charitable help. It needs more than the threat of your sporadic raids for leverage against the Queen."

"Don't concern yourself with that, Maen." Nerisa's voice had grown sharper. "The knowledge of the Histories and the fact that the truth has now been made public to several people will persuade her to review her position. The fact that it may still be made public to many, *many* more will make her open her rule to representation from the other factions on this planet. It will be the only way she can hold on to her power for as long as is possible."

"But no one will listen to us!" Dax burst in. "Only Maen and Kiel have seen the books; only the few of us know that they existed. They're gone now, nothing but ashes."

"No," said Nerisa, quietly. We stared at her. Zander lifted his head to look at us again, and I thought I saw Kiel's body tense up a little more.

"What do you mean?"

Nerisa shifted awkwardly, making a small noise of frustration. "Help me with these papers, soldier. Tabot's hands are kind and protective on *me*, but quite useless with delicate objects like these. I should have brought one of my Ladies to help me, if I could have trusted any of them not to go whimpering to Seleste when they saw what they carried." I reached to help her, catching some of the documents as they spilled out from the pile. There were a few slim pages bound together and I recognized the handwriting, or at least the style. My heart started to beat more quickly. I frowned.

"This is…."

"Kiel's work," she said. "Yes. Or at least, my copies of it." She laughed again, with some amusement. "I confess that my hands are not as talented as his, my brushwork a little clumsier. But I have tried to keep the beauty of it intact as well as the factual content. There's been little enough time, with Seleste constantly on my heels about her own History. But I have followed Kiel's progress as quickly and as well as I could, making copies while he slept, and while he was on his adventures with you, Maen."

"Copies?" Kiel's voice was a rasping whisper. "Mistress…." He sounded amazed.

Nerisa smiled down at him for the first time, a gentle, benevolent gesture. "Did you think I'd trust it to just one copy – to the threat of flood and fire and all kinds of other human-made mischief?" She looked across at Zander. "Don't delay any more, soldier. Take this scribe to the House of Physic, I've sent ahead with a message to Mistress Chloe. He needs to have his pain soothed and his wounds treated and then in a few days' time we will see about moving him back to his place at the Library. There are plenty there who will care for him, and with a very special attention because of what he's done for us."

Kiel grunted, and I could have sworn it was a sound of protest, as if he wanted to stay and hear more about the most astonishing recovery of his book.

"You'll go, scribe," growled Zander, but there was a light in his eyes now that showed the return of some spirit in him, too. "You'll rest and recover and obey the orders you should have obeyed in the first place. You owe me, anyway." When Kiel gave a small cough of puzzlement, Zander leaned over him and whispered gently into his ear. None of us could hear what he said, but Kiel gave another, softer cough. "And he promised us, Maen, didn't he?" said Zander, more loudly. "He promised to show us the secret books – the *other* secret books – the ones about the Household of Massage and the secret equipment room in the Detention Quarters! Remember?"

I smiled too, amazed I could find humor in amongst all this. "Yes, I remember. Anything to save his hide, and that's just the sort of thing to keep soldiers happy, of course it is. We need him around for that alone." A group of Remainders had arrived to pick up the blanket and Zander moved away, albeit reluctantly. He scrambled to his feet, pushing back his dirty hair, trying to settle his armor back in order.

Nerisa watched Zander as Kiel was carefully carried away, then she glanced back at Tabot. They shared a look that was shockingly familiar to me; it was unmistakably the look of lovers. Not just as the soldier and his Mistress, but a more equal commitment such as I shared with Dax. I stepped forward, maybe to question her on this, but Tabot saw the movement and turned to face me. I stopped in my tracks. It wasn't a threatening gesture but I began to wonder how long he had been close to her; how long they'd built this secret bond between them. I imagined his hands being kind and protective on his Mistress in public, but then moving with private devotion much deeper than that. I imagined that he would be strong and unmoving in the face of the person he loved.

I understood that, and I nodded gently to him.

"Zander," Nerisa said to the Gold Warrior, her voice firm. "Return to your duties. Your men need guidance. Take them back to barracks and await the Queen's orders. I will go and see her now."

Zander stared at her, but he seemed to be recovering his wits. He gave her the salute of his palm against his heart and bowed his head in obedience. Nerisa shifted the papers under her arm again, securing them, and then she walked slowly away towards the Royal Quarters where Seleste would have retired. Tabot turned on his heel and followed her, silently as always.

Just before Zander turned to collect the remainder of the Guard together, he held his hand out to me. "Maen?"

I took his hand and we smiled at each other. "I don't know," I replied to the question he hadn't known how to phrase. "I will see you again, though not in the barracks with you and your Guard. But hopefully not on the battle field either." He nodded, pulled himself to his full height and walked away to take command of his men again.

DAX touched my arm. "You'll stay here?" He was frowning and he was obviously trying to keep his voice steady.

"What do you mean?" I asked. The courtyard was almost deserted now, apart from a few Remainders shoveling the debris into wheeled carts.

He looked at me, his eyes steady but pained. "You still have loyalty to the City, to the Queen. It's been your life. With Mistress Nerisa's support, you may be accepted back into the Guard. You will be able to keep your position."

"What position would that be?" I murmured. I put a hand to his shoulder, letting my fingers caress his neck, so carefully that no one else would see, and so gently that only he would feel the love I invested in the touch. "What good would any position be, if it's not with you?"

"I'll return to the Exiles. I'll not presume on the Queen's tolerance any longer, even if Nerisa can persuade her otherwise. She will never accept me in the City." He grimaced again. "She will kill me if she has the chance. I don't want to give her that satisfaction."

"I know that," I replied. His eyes were bright, his face set in determination. He was being brave – he *was* brave! "So we'll stay away for the time being. We'll see how Nerisa manages to negotiate

with Seleste. We'll see what changes are forthcoming – what promises are made." I reached for his face again, running my hand along the line of his jaw. "Nothing is certain, except that we're still free for the moment and we're together." I laughed, wondering how I was able to speak such nonsense and for it to sound so right.

Dax smiled back at me, unable to hold back his delight. "You'll truly leave the City? Leave it all behind?"

I shrugged. I leant my head against his, my mouth shaping words at his ear. The smell of him filled my nostrils, the taste of his skin was a memory I didn't think I'd ever tire of revisiting. "I'm not leaving anything of value behind. I'm going with *you*. That's the most valuable thing I could ever have. Nothing else is important."

Dax laughed. He turned his head to rest his cheek against me. "Didn't I say you were a fool? You'd rather take exile and discomfort and possible death than keep a privileged place in the Queen's Household."

"Stupid soldier," I murmured, my lips against his neck and my words echoing Zander's to Kiel. "Of course I would. Take us out of here, now."

He turned, our bodies brushing against each other yet held tantalizingly apart, still anticipating the first chance to be alone and to hold each other properly.

He grinned at me and his eyes shone with something other than the reflection of the waning sunlight.

"Is that an order, Gold Warrior?" he said.

CLARE LONDON

Clare took the pen name London from the city where she lives, loves, and writes. She juggles fiction with a frantic family life and waits for the far distant day when she can afford to give up her day job as an accountant. She's written in many genres and across many settings, with short stories published both online and in print anthologies. Most of her work features male/male romance and drama, with a healthy serving of erotica, as she enjoys both reading and writing about strong, sympathetic and sexy characters.

Clare currently has a fantasy novel in the process of publication, two more nearing the submission stage and plenty of other projects in mind . . . she just has to find out where she left them in amongst the frantic family life.

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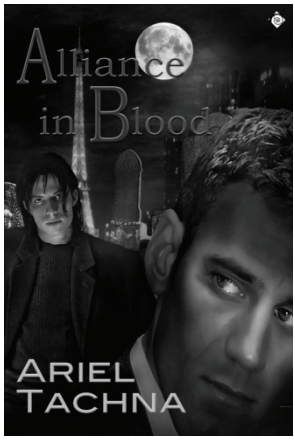

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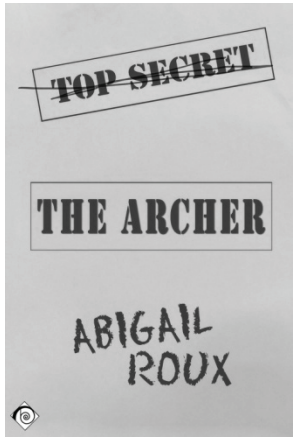

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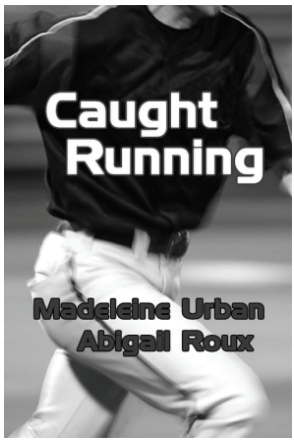

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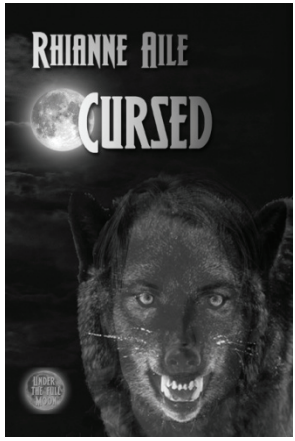

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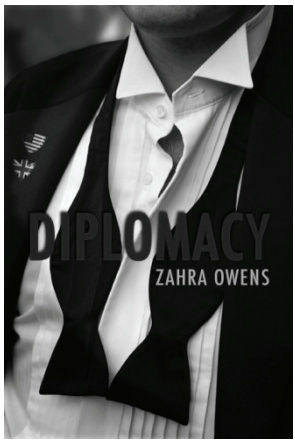

Jack Christensen has everything he ever wanted. He's a rising star in US Diplomacy, the youngest man to have been appointed as an Ambassador of the United States. A career diplomat who's just been sent to a politically interesting Embassy in Europe, he has the perfect wife, speaks five languages and has all the right credentials, yet there's something missing and he doesn't quite know what.

Then Lucas Carlton walks into an Embassy reception and introduces himself and his American fiancée. From the first handshake, the young Englishman makes an impression on Jack that leaves him confused and uncharacteristically insecure. Lucas' position as the British liaison to the American Embassy means they are forced to work together closely and they have a hard time denying the attraction between them, despite their current relationships.

Diplomatic circles are notoriously conservative though, and they each know that the right woman by their side makes a very significant contribution to their success. Will they be able to make the right choices in their professional and personal lives? Or will they need to sacrifice one for the other?

Gold Warrior by Clare London
Paperback $11.99
ISBN: 978-0-9815084-4-3

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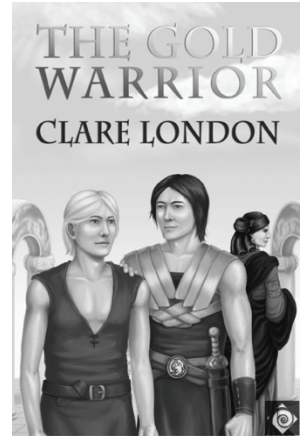
Maen is a Gold Warrior, a defender of Aza City, a world controlled by the Queen and her womankind where the best of men are maintained for the military and the women's pleasure. A favorite of his imperious Mistress and a leader among his men, Maen is too cautious to seek casual sexual satisfaction and so stays alone, taking his comfort in ensuring a stable and controlled world. That world is thrown into disarray by Dax, a bold and challenging new Bronze soldier who excites Maen with his fierce hero worship and leads them to a forbidden affair. They find themselves thrown together in a dangerous and hostile environment without the support of the City and far away from their loyalties, and Maen finds himself risking everything for Dax – his position; his loyalties; and eventually, his life.



Love Ahead by Urban & Roux 308 pages
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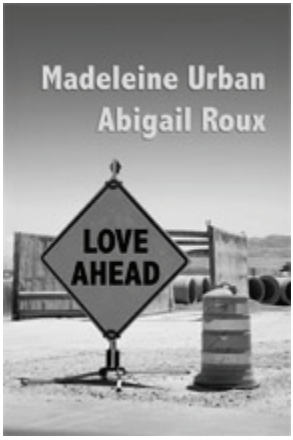


A pair of working man novellas.

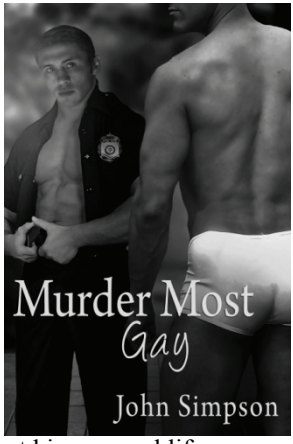
Under Contract

Site foreman Ted Lucas moved to Birmingham, leaving a full life behind, only to discover something - someone - to look forward to. Assistant Nick Cooper catches his eye, and even more incredibly, Lucas's heart, all without a word. When Lucas finds out Cooper's asked to be transferred, he bites the bullet and admits his feelings. Intrigued, Cooper offers Lucas one night to figure out if that love could possibly be real.

Over the Road

Truck driver Elliot Cochran meets 'McLean' while talking on the CB and strikes up an unusual friendship. One evening, McLean tells Elliot he needs to go find some companionship, and so Elliot meets Jimmy Vaughan - and has one of the best nights in his life. Before long Elliot faces a decision about sharing his life: Does he choose McLean, the best friend he's never met, or Jimmy, the man who thrills him beyond belief.

Murder Most Gay by John Simpson 220 pages
Paperback $11.99 **eBook** $5.99
ISBN: 978-0-9817372-2-5 **ISBN**: 978-0-9817372-3-2

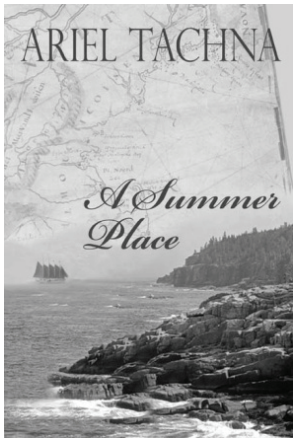


A serial killer is targeting gay men, preying on them in popular bars and parks. Assigned to the case, rookie cop Pat St. James feels all too close to the victims. He's gay and firmly in the closet at work. The fact that he's sent undercover as a gay man is a stroke of irony.

Pat and his fellow cop, Hank, are hanging out in bars, trying to get a lead on the killer. At the same time, Pat's looking for Mr. Right – juggling three men, hoping he'll find the perfect match for himself. He picked up Bill at a bar, Dean's a longtime friend … and in yet another ironic twist, his partner, Hank, is also gay and on the list of possible beaus.

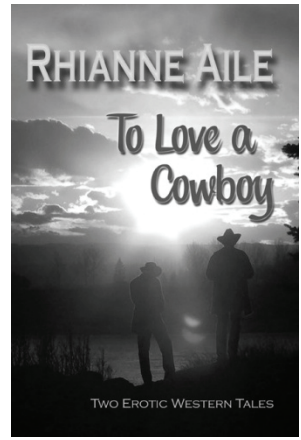
As the killer continues to rampage, strangling and raping his victims, Pat has to focus on his work and hope that his personal life survives the stress. But when his hopes and dreams for happiness overlap with the investigation, Pat may be headed for big trouble.

A Summer Place by Ariel Tachna 248 pages
Paperback $11.99 **eBook** $5.99
ISBN: 978-0-9795048-4-6 **ISBN**: 978-0-9795048-5-3



Overseer Nicolas Wells had been coming to Mount Desert Island for ten summers to help build cottages for the rich and powerful. Despite his secrets, he had grown comfortable in the peaceful little island town, getting to know its inhabitants and even to consider some of them friends. The eleventh year, however, he arrived to startling news: the island's peace had been shattered by a murder. At the request of the sheriff, Shawn Parnell, Nicolas agreed to hire Philip Hall, the local blacksmith and the probable next victim, in the hope that the secure construction site would be safer than his house in the village. He never expected the decision to lead to danger. Or to love.

To Love a Cowboy by Rhianne Aile 228 pages
Paperback $11.99 **eBook** $5.99
ISBN: 978-0-9795048-8-4 **ISBN**: 978-0-9795048-9-1



Seven years ago, Roan Bucklin left the family ranch for college, leaving foreman Patrick Lassiter with a mix of sweltering emotions: relief, regret, and nearly overwhelming desire. Afraid that Roan would regret giving himself to an older man, Patrick let him go without a word about his true feelings. But Roan took Patrick's heart with him.

Roan had harbored a crush on Patrick from the time he'd turned fourteen. He thought he'd gotten over it, grown up, moved on, but now he's back and home to stay. After one look, he knows he has something to prove to Patrick – that he wants to be claimed by the cowboy who has always possessed his heart.