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The Healers I Keep

VICTORIA HANLEY

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Part One

Sliviia

Chapter One

Maeve sank onto a narrow bench in the back room of Lord Indol's bathhouse. The hard boards did little to comfort her aching body, but she would be off her feet for a few short moments. She sat quietly, watching the steam rise from fifty enormous kettles on a great iron range nearby.

Burly Orlo came through the door, yelling for more hot water. But when did Orlo not yell? It was one of the sounds Maeve had grown used to, like splashing water and hissing kettles. Orlo wasn't cruel; he even looked the other way when Maeve stole moments in the ornamental courtyard; in a sunny corner behind tall potted plants, out of sight of Lord Indol's guests. The guests might admire the fountain – carved stone fish spraying water into a clean pool of pink and red tile – but Maeve thought the golden sunshine more beautiful. Her mother had told her that without sunshine she would grow up stunted like so many of the other bathhouse slaves. Perhaps there *was* magic in the sun's rays; though she wasn't very tall, Maeve's proportions were what they should be – as men told

her every day. She tried to avoid their eyes, hiding under drab shifts and ragged scarves, but still they noticed her.

‘Maeve!’ Orlo called. ‘High Lord waiting in the corner compartment.’

Maeve drooped. She tugged at her damp shift. A *lord*. Ladies were easier; they were often kind, complimenting her indulgently as she rubbed scented oils over their backs. Lords made rough remarks, telling her it was a pity they couldn’t meet her among the sentesans.

Adjusting the ugly scarf that never quite hid all her hair, Maeve let her bare feet guide her into the guest area. Here, underground fires kept the granite floor warm – Lord Indol’s visitors must never feel a chill. Colourful tile-work lined the walls, matching the great tubs where people bathed. At the far end of the guest area, beyond the baths, were the compartments where lords and ladies could receive massage if they wished. Maeve wondered if the lord waiting there would be someone she knew.

The light of the single lantern showed a stranger, wearing the customary silk loincloth of the bathhouse. The way the man lounged on the padded table reminded Maeve of the lizards that sometimes crawled over the wall into the courtyard. The lizards would lie so still they seemed to be part of the wall; when they moved they were quicker than the bugs they caught. She suspected that when this man moved, he’d be fast too.

Maeve’s stomach tightened. ‘Good evening, sir,’ she said. ‘I am Maeve, here to serve you.’

The lord propped himself on an elbow. ‘Maeve.’ He stared at her with eyes the colour of steel. ‘And what is an unmarked girl doing in a bathhouse?’

Born into slavery, Maeve didn’t know why her face was still unscarred when custom decreed she be cut by the time she was five. For years she’d dreaded being called in to the presence of her master, Lord Indol, afraid her day of marking had come, as it had for every other child in the bathhouse. Afraid of Lord Indol’s *patrier*, the razor-sharp, double-edged knife of the privileged man. Every common slave in Sliviia received a slash mark on each cheek and one in the middle of the forehead. Crescents at the temples were Lord Indol’s individual mark. Scars that named skills were put close to the ears or down the neck: a three-pronged mark for a cook; criss-crossing lines for a weaver; five slashes for a bathhouse masseuse.

Lord Indol had summoned her twice a year ever since she could remember but he had never cut her. Instead, he had asked her in his reedy voice whether she knew the name of her father, and watched her closely when she told him no. Maeve’s mother – once known as Lila the Fair – had been born a high lady; but was condemned to slavery by her own father, Lord Hering. Why? He had promised his daughter to a noble Sliviite captain, but Lila had loved a different man instead, a man whose name she refused to tell.

Normally, only the nobility and the lowborn free kept the smooth faces they were born with. But slave girls who gave promise of future beauty were also

allowed to pass their fifth birthdays without being cut. If that beauty bore out, they received sentesan scars the day they turned fifteen: two lines circling each wrist, permanent bracelets condemning them to unspeakable lives. Because Maeve's owner, Lord Indol, had never cut her, Maeve feared he intended to make her a sentesan.

I'm seventeen, and still unscarred. Lord Indol had never tested her abilities, never sent her to train in the kitchens or gardens or in the sewing rooms where her mother worked, never told her what he planned for her. When she asked Orlo, the slave who had risen to be master of the bathhouse, why she wasn't marked, he said he didn't know. Maeve was glad she served under Orlo instead of under the house matrons who resented her smooth skin – they would cut her themselves, except that only lords could wield patriers.

And now a man whose name she didn't know was looking at her as though she half-belonged to him. Wishing she could tell him to close his mouth and shut his eyes, Maeve said, 'Lord Indol considers me fit to serve here.'

'What a lovely voice you have. Do you sing?'

'No, sir.' Maeve hoped he couldn't tell she was lying.

The man looked from her to his patrier, which lay on a shelf close to the table. The patrier was the only weapon allowed in a bathhouse, an emblem of privilege the lords never relinquished. Maeve's face grew hot. A patrier was not to be used in a bathhouse. Why was he looking at her in that way?

She ought to say something, any of the hundred soothing things Orlo had taught her. Instead she waited silently, while the lord's smile faded. 'You were sent here to rub my back,' he said. 'Proceed.' He stretched out on the table, his broad back waiting for her touch.

Maeve dipped her hands in patchouli-scented oil and laid them on his back. As soon as she touched him, she felt as if she had fallen into a cold, grey bog.

Her hands often told her things about the people she touched. A tingle would begin in her palms, and she would *know*. She *knew* that Lady Loren's smiling face concealed great fear, *knew* Lord Meche was lying when he pretended to be a generous patron of the arts. The first time her hands had led her into someone else's mind it had startled and worried her. But she'd come to accept this *knowing*; it helped her to stay out of trouble. And if Lady Loren covered her fear with a smile, or Lord Meche was really a miser, what of it?

But this man chilled and frightened her. Nausea roiled through her; she drew her hands away.

His head came up. His fingers grabbed her wrist, pulling hard. 'What's the matter with you?'

'I'm sorry, sir. Perhaps another masseuse. There are many far better than me.'

He twisted her wrist. His eyes impaled her, sharp as a patrier and very nearly the same colour. His nostrils flared. 'I never thought to find one such as you in a private bathhouse,' he said.

‘Such as me?’

‘Others may have missed it, girl. I see better than most.’

Maeve wanted to ask what he meant, but her tongue felt numb. She tried to avoid his scrutiny but found she couldn’t turn her head, couldn’t even close her eyes, which seemed to obey his will instead of her own. She descended into the darkness of his pupils, down, down, into shivering blankness, a place of grey shadows.

Abruptly, he let go of her wrist. ‘I don’t want others,’ he said. ‘Proceed.’

What choice did she have? A high lord, here at her master’s invitation – Lord Indol, his host, would have promised him a luxurious bath and massage. The lords were very exacting in their code, and if this one complained, what would be the price of Lord Indol’s honour? God knew it was never the wealthy who paid it.

Though tendrils of steam surrounded her, Maeve shivered. She coated her hands in oil once more.

A boy, perhaps eight years old, darted behind the curtain where Maeve worked. He carried fresh towels, pleasantly scented with roses. Devin, the new child. His lowborn free parents had died, and heaven help the orphan in Sliviia. Losing both mother and father was a misfortune that often ended in slavery if the orphan’s relatives could not afford to feed him.

In keeping with his free birth, Devin was still unmarked around the face and neck. Lord Indol kept a strict schedule for markings, setting aside only

one morning in the month for it. Other lords ran their households differently, Maeve knew, adding scars at whim until the necks of their slaves no longer looked human, the skin full of patchy whorls. Lord Indol did not seem to relish cutting. Even so, Devin's sad day would soon come.

When Devin put the towels down on a ledge beside the table, the scent of roses calmed Maeve's churning stomach. *Roses . . . that's wrong . . . gentlemen prefer patchouli or cedarwood, even the scent of bergamot . . .* Maeve tried to signal Devin with her eyes. *Get away. Not safe.* He only smiled, shaking his head at the curtain as if she played a game.

The man on the table got to his feet in one sudden motion. Without a word he grabbed his patrier. He snatched Devin by the smock. As he jerked the boy forward, Maeve saw their eyes lock; Devin's gaze wide and helpless before the lord's penetrating stare. The patrier sliced Devin's face, deep enough to scar him for life.

Marking him.

Maeve fled, crying for Orlo.

Orlo moved fast, but very carefully. He knew his place. Lord Morlen had gone too far, marking another lord's slave in a private bathhouse. Nevertheless, it was dangerous to approach any lord holding a patrier, and Lord Morlen was not just any lord.

Curse him for disrupting the peace here, Orlo thought. Most lords would not dare to flout the law so openly, but Morlen would never be found at fault. No-one

would gainsay this man, who was said to be richer than Emperor Dolen himself.

Pulling aside the compartment's curtain, Orlo saw Lord Morlen's knife poised over Devin's forehead. The child wailed, blood pouring from his cheeks.

'My lord!' Orlo tried to bring the proper note of humility while still making himself heard.

Morlen looked up. 'What is it?'

'My lord, I'm sorry you were offended, but that is Lord Indol's new slave you are cutting.'

'I hope your place is worth a great deal to you,' Lord Morlen said. He released Devin, flinging him carelessly to the floor. 'The boy needs better training.'

Orlo's heart thudded so hard he knew it could be seen through the walls of his chest. 'Apologies, Lord.' He hoped Morlen would leave without causing more trouble.

Devin sat groping at his face, whimpering. Maeve knelt beside him, cradling him while Orlo staunched his wounds. A curious slave or two peered in, and then scattered when they caught sight of Lord Morlen wiping his patier.

Maeve huddled on the warm floor, holding Devin.

'Is the girl new also?' she heard.

'Maeve was born into Lord Indol's household, Lord Morlen,' Orlo answered.

Lord Morlen! Maeve tightened her hold on the boy. Orlo might have warned her. The slaves told stories of Lord Morlen's riches and of his cruelty. It was said

he could drive his enemies to madness without ever laying a hand on them. Maeve wanted to jump up, run away, go anywhere at all, so long as it was far from Lord Morlen. But he was between her and the curtain now.

‘Why isn’t she marked?’ Morlen asked.

‘I don’t know, sir. I was never told,’ Orlo said.

‘I will make a formal application to buy her. The boy, too.’

Buy her! *No, no, Lord Indol will never sell me*, Maeve told herself, silencing the scream that wanted to erupt from her insides and tear across the bathhouse.

‘Lord Indol has received many offers for her,’ Orlo answered.

‘Indeed? You talk as if I had asked your opinion, oaf. Now give me a robe.’

Orlo helped the lord into a silk robe and handed him his patier. He strode away.

Maeve shuddered as she tried to console Devin, murmuring comfort she didn’t feel. She looked at the pattern of red and pink tile in the wall, then at Orlo’s jowly face, white under black stubble. She stroked Devin’s hair, remembering Lord Morlen’s gaze; the way her eyes had stayed open when she wanted them closed; the clammy grey sickness when she touched his skin. ‘Orlo, you said Lord Indol has had other offers for me?’ He nodded; she saw his chest jumping as his heart beat. ‘But what if Lord Morlen offers him more than the others?’

Orlo’s head shook back and forth. ‘If Lord Indol had made you a sentesan, the income to his