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Opening extract from

The Elites

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Published by

Hot Key Books

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First published in Great Britain in 2013 by Hot Key Books
Northburgh House, 10 Northburgh Street, London EC1V 0AT

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-4714-0152-7

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Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
This book is set in 11pt Berling LT Std

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc



Hot Key Books supports the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the leading international forest certification organisation, and is committed to printing only on Greenpeace-approved FSC-certified paper.

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The Banquet

Silver was standing outside her own bedroom, one ear pressed against the door. She couldn't hear anything apart from the thudding of her heartbeat, which hadn't calmed since finishing that afternoon's training session. Her whole body ached – even her hair seemed to hurt – and she wanted more than anything to take a nap before the banquet that night, but she couldn't bear facing Ember, her Elite senior. She pressed her ear harder against the cool metal of the door, listening for sounds that suggested Ember was inside.

As soon as they began the training programme, all juniors were paired with an older Elite to be their mentor. Silver had moved into the bedroom she shared with Ember when she was thirteen years old. She was fifteen now. Two years of living with her Elite senior had taught Silver enough to know that if she found Ember waiting in their bedroom now, she'd end up feeling even worse than she did already.

Silver pulled away from the door. She hadn't heard a thing. Sending a quick prayer to the gods that Ember was elsewhere – and ignoring the thought of what her parents would say if they knew she'd asked the gods for

help with such a trivial matter – she unlocked the door by touching her hand to the panel at its side. Then, carefully, she pushed it open.

The room was empty.

'Thank you, gods!' Silver smiled, stepping inside.

The room was just as she'd left it that morning. To the right, the shutters of her and Ember's bedpods were open, and at the far end of the room the blinds for the plastiglass outer wall were pulled up, letting in a wave of pale light from the setting sun.

Silver shut the door behind her and dropped to the floor. She lay spread-eagled on her back, grinning widely. It felt so good not to be on her feet. Training had been intense that afternoon; five hours of stamina, stealth and fighting sessions. She could already feel the bruises forming on her body where the blows of her trainer had landed. Now, lying on the floor in the warmth of the sunshine, she felt her muscles relaxing, her limbs softening. Fighting had never been Silver's strong point. She was quick and agile, which suited her to the covert assignments Elites were given by the Council, but even after years of training her combat skills were poor.

'I'm not moving *all* night,' she announced out loud to herself. 'I'll just have to miss the banquet. No one will care.' She snorted. 'And Ember will be thankful that she won't have to sit next to me, pretending to be nice –'

'Oh, is that right?'

Silver scrambled up so quickly she banged her forehead into the door.

'Careful now,' said the voice behind her. 'We don't want you injured for your big day tomorrow.'

'I'm fine,' muttered Silver, getting to her feet.

Ember was leaning in the bathroom doorway. She had changed out of her uniform and was wearing a silk kimono tied loosely at her waist, slipping off one shoulder to reveal a curve of white skin. Her flame-red hair was wet and dark from the shower. Even without make-up she was beautiful, and Silver felt the familiar pang of jealousy as she took in Ember's womanly figure, her large green eyes bright and sharp as jade stones.

'It doesn't look like you're fine.' Ember crossed her arms, the corners of her lips curled in a sneer. 'After that pathetic performance at training today, I'm amazed Senior Surrey didn't remove you from the Elite programme right away.'

Silver ignored this. She went to move towards her bedpod.

Ember stepped in her way. 'But then,' she said, leaning her face down to Silver's, 'maybe he's finally realised how irrelevant you are to the Council.' The orange blossom fragrance of her perfume was sickly sweet, clogging in Silver's throat.

'Look, Ember –'

'Perhaps he's working out who to replace you with tomorrow.'

Swallowing down an angry retort, Silver tried to push past her, but Ember grabbed her shoulders, leaning her face so close to Silver's their noses almost touched.

'You know,' Ember whispered coldly, 'I always ask him

how it came to be that a *Red* would have the exceptional DNA needed to be streamed into the Elite programme –'

'Don't *call* me that!'

It came out louder than Silver had expected. For a few breathless seconds they stared at each other. Ember's wide eyes were unreadable. Then, slowly, her mouth tightening, Ember straightened.

'I will call you a Red, Silver,' she said, 'because that is what you are.'

Silver hung her head, her cheeks burning. She didn't look back up until she had heard Ember move away, slamming the bedroom door as she left.

Every year, a banquet was held the night before the parade. It took place in the Ebora Building, the main offices of the Council and home to the Elites. It was nicknamed the Stacks due to its hollow centre criss-crossed with walkways and jutting prayer gantries. The preparations for the banquet had been underway all day. Enticing aromas wafted up from the east-wing kitchens as the city's best chefs created an elaborate menu featuring dishes from every kind of cultural cuisine, while geisha maids in pretty kimonos ritualised the banquet space.

By the time Silver arrived, the hall was filled with the buzz of voices. Hundreds of Council members milled around, sipping sake and commenting on the performance of the musicians playing on a stage at the far end of the hall. Some Council members had their heads bowed deep in conversation, perhaps discussing the parade

taking place the next day. Would the president stumble in his speech? Would there be a repeat of last year's minor disturbance? Protestors were common at these events. There were low sniggers as many imagined the punishments awaiting troublemakers.

Silver hovered near the doorway. She tugged at the neck of her cheongsam, a traditional dress of the Chinese cultures of the Red Nations. She hadn't meant to wear it, but after Ember's comment earlier about her nationality – Reds was the derogatory term for the Chinese ethnicities of the Red Nations – she'd put it on in a little act of defiance. Silver was now starting to feel like it was a bad idea. The bright red colour of the dress and the slit hem which exposed the olive skin of her thigh was drawing looks from some of the male Council members, and she regretted wearing her long black hair loose. It made her look older than her age.

A Council member nearby caught her eye, smiling. As he started towards her, Silver rushed off into the crowd. *Your fault for wearing a dress like this!* she thought angrily to herself. She was just turning to check whether the man had followed her when she walked straight into someone, her head thumping against their chest.

'I'm so sorry!' Silver gushed, stepping back, but she broke into a smile when she saw who it was. 'Butterfly!'

Though he looked smart in a fitted silk shirt and slim black trousers, Butterfly's messy brown hair still fell into his blue eyes as it always did, and he was holding himself a little stiffly, as if he was uncomfortable in his clothes too. He was tall for his sixteen years. Unlike

Silver, who was as slim as she'd always been, years of Elite training had defined the muscles in Butterfly's body. She caught a couple of pretty female Council members nearby watching him hopefully, their eyes trailing over his broad shoulders, his defined cheekbones and freshly shaved jaw.

Silver's grin widened.

Butterfly raised an eyebrow. 'What?'

'Nothing,' she said quickly, stifling a giggle. She gestured at his clothes. 'You just look nice, that's all.'

Butterfly smiled; only a second and then it was gone. Having been best friends with Butterfly since she'd joined the Elites training programme a year after him, Silver was used to that. He didn't smile very much, and when he did it was a fleeting thing, gone as soon as it had come. She remembered a time when Butterfly had smiled easily, but that was before the explosion.

'Have you seen any of the others?' Silver asked, changing the subject. She and Butterfly were close friends with some of the other Elites.

'Not yet.'

She glanced round the crowd to see whether she could spot any of their friends. 'I can't wait for this to be over,' she murmured. 'Three hours stuck with Ember isn't going to be fun.'

Butterfly nodded. 'And this shirt is so uncomfortable. It's really irritating my wings.'

Silver knew that if she reached a hand round his back, she'd feel two raised wing discs and the folds of his wings beneath his shirt. The Council had implanted the

discs in Butterfly when he was a year into his Elites training to assess the practicalities of developing aerial surveillance. His wings were a secret kept within the Elites and their associated Council members, and Silver was one of the only people who had ever seen him in the air. Flying was still a contested subject after the Red Nations made the planes come down all those hundreds of years ago.

'It's a shame you still can't fly on assignments,' Silver said. 'Where are they stationing you tomorrow?'

'I'll be on the stage with Ember,' Butterfly replied. 'And you?'

'Hemmingway House rooftop. Right across from the stage.' She hesitated. 'I'm . . . I'm the only one that's going to be there.'

Surprise registered on Butterfly's face for a split second before he composed himself, flashing another quick smile. 'That's great! Senior Surrey must really be starting to trust you.'

Silver scrunched up her nose and looked away. 'I doubt it. We all know I'm the worst Elite. Gods know why he's given me such a big responsibility.' Ever since she'd found out about the assignment, she'd wondered whether it was a challenge from Senior Surrey and the Council to see whether she really had the skills and confidence to be an Elite. She swallowed nervously. She didn't like to think what would happen if she *didn't* prove herself to them tomorrow.

'Hey,' said Butterfly, touching her shoulder. 'Don't doubt yourself. He's given you the responsibility for a

reason. And just think – after tomorrow, you won't ever have to take Ember's abuse again. She might even be *proud* of you.'

Silver let out a bark of laughter. She was about to say exactly what she thought about *that* when a gong sounded.

The clamour of the hall hushed immediately. On the stage, the musicians put down their instruments as a man in a brilliant blue tunic and slim metallic trousers stepped out in front of them. A man Silver had only ever seen from afar at events such as this; the city's president, Tanaka.

Tanaka gave a deep bow. He was a kindly faced Japanean man, with greying hair and small, almond-shaped eyes similar to Silver's own. Though there was nothing particularly striking about his appearance, there was something about him that gave the impression of a calm assuredness, and despite his slender frame and average height, he commanded attention.

'Council members!' Tanaka beamed. 'I am delighted to be President of Neo-Babel for yet another year, and to celebrate our Council's leadership with you all one more time. But tonight is not the time for speeches. You will all have to sit through one tomorrow, and I don't want you to fall asleep before having the chance to sample the fine food our chefs have prepared for us tonight!' There were twitters among the crowd. 'Now,' he continued, gesturing at the tables spaced round the hall. 'Let us take our places, and enjoy the finest food and company Neo-Babel has to offer!'

'Good luck,' said Butterfly, brushing Silver's arm as the room burst once again into noise and activity.

'For what?' She gave him a grim smile. 'The parade tomorrow or three hours with Ember tonight? I'm not really sure which I'm dreading more.'

He didn't return her smile. 'Don't worry about it,' he said, turning to leave. 'You'll be great tomorrow. Tanaka's in safe hands with you.'

It didn't take Silver long to find her seat in the busy hall; Ember's shock of fiery red hair was easy to spot. As she sat down, Ember's eyes travelled slowly over her, taking in her loose hair and cheongsam.

'Well, don't you look nice,' Ember said acidly before turning back to the Council member on her other side.

Ember stayed in that position for the entirety of the banquet, for which Silver was thankful. With no one else to talk to, she was left alone with her thoughts. Her mind wandered to the gift she'd bought for her father's birthday in a few weeks' time, an antique musical instrument from before the Great Fall. It had cost her the best part of her yearly salary, but with little else to spend the money on, she hadn't minded. Silver was close to her parents, spending much of her free time outside of her Elites schedule with them. She smiled, imagining how delighted her father would be with her gift. Hopefully, he'd not try and play it though; she doubted the strange string instrument sounded much better than the ear-splitting Chinese opera her mother and father were so fond of.

But as nerves at the next day's assignment settled in,

Silver could soon think of nothing else, and she picked listlessly at course after course, drinking far too much sake than she ought to to ease her anxieties. *Less than twenty-four hours to go*, she kept thinking. *Just one more sleep, and then I'll be up on that roof, responsible for keeping Tanaka and the others safe from danger.* She was so caught up in going over every little detail from her training sessions and briefings that the banquet passed in a whirl. Before she knew it, it was past midnight and she was standing to leave.

Ember grabbed her arm. 'Not so fast,' she hissed. 'No late-night trip to boyfriend Butterfly tonight, I'm afraid.'

Silver felt her cheeks redden. 'He's *not* my –'

'I don't care. You need all the rest you can get if you're not to screw everything up tomorrow.'

Ember steered her roughly across the banquet hall towards the line of senior Council members waiting by the door. Having grown up in the Stacks, Silver was used to the customs of the Council, whose members were mainly Japanean like Tanaka, or of Mainland ethnicities, as Butterfly and Ember were. At the door, she bowed deeply to each member in turn. Just as she turned to leave, the person at the end of the line spoke.

'Silver. A word, if I may?'

She spun round to see Tanaka smiling at her. Immediately, her throat went dry.

He pulled her gently aside so they were out of earshot of the Council members still milling around. 'You are one of our junior Elites, am I correct?' he asked.

Tanaka's kindly expression did nothing to settle Silver's surprise at finding herself talking to Neo-Babel's president. 'Y-yes, sir.' She nodded. 'My senior is Ember, sir.'

He smiled. 'Ah, yes. Ember is one of Senior Surrey's favourites. Well, I just wanted to tell you personally how pleased I am at having you on assignment tomorrow. I understand it is your first time working the parade?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Enough with the sir!' he laughed. 'Tanaka, please. Now, I must see our other guests out, but let me say once again how much I appreciate the hard work you – and all the Elites – put in to protecting and serving the Council. Your input is vital to making our city the success it continues to be. I hope you remember that, Silver, as I give my speech tomorrow.'

'I will, sir,' she said, bowing as Tanaka left.

Later that night, lying awake in her bedpod, still warm with a glow from Tanaka's words, Silver made a promise to herself that tomorrow she would be the best Elite out there, smiling at the thought of how pleased Tanaka would be, and the look on Ember's face as he told her how well Silver had performed.