

Mariard
Volume 1
The Gifting

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Mariard Volume 1 The Gifting is book 1 of 10 Volumes.
Nothing is what it seems, take nothing for granted.

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Dedicated to my father and brother.
Watch over me until we meet again in Paradise.

PROLOGUE

The full moons' glare penetrated the glass panes of the balcony doors. Flickering flames burned strongly in the grey stone hearth, casting shadows throughout the castle's largest bedchamber. White ceilings with decorative cornices were partially discoloured from smoke, where the walls in deep burgundy hid the build up. Thick candles set on cast-iron stands dripped wax on the mantelpiece and were merely a personal preference to solar powered lighting.

Lace drapes adorned the four-poster double bed in carved oak where the young Queen lay in labour, her cries shattering the silence. Wet with sweat, Sestina's petite figure briefly relaxed between contractions. A cool cloth felt soothing on her ivory complexion, administered by the priestess, who sat on the edge of the bed beside her. Artemis' slender fingers brushed strands of damp copper hair, having come free from the Queen's lengthy braids.

A woman of authority, Artemis expressed compassion in serene features, which cleverly masked a cold self-controlled nature. Though appearing youthful, like the woman she nursed, the priestess' hands revealed otherwise. Befitting an eminent status, the priestess' white attire hid her tall shapely figure. The long apron, draping a simple lined lengthy garment, bore large silver embroidered symbols down the right-hand side. Housing a centred blue gem, a chrome headband secured the wimple and none but her personal aide knew the colour and length of her hair.

The imperial history book had a number of chapters dedicated to Artemis with the woman being an authoritative figure within the royal household. It was written that she had placed Kings on thrones, delivered their heirs and retained, without question, the position of personal adviser to the King and his council. The religious system of this vast kingdom was based on an unseen higher consciousness, which Artemis claimed to receive instruction from. Revered as the sacred voice of the Mariard, no one doubted the priestess' integrity.

"Artemis!" Sestina grasped the cuff of the priestess' sleeve, leaving a damp impression on the fine cotton.

"Hush my child," Artemis replied with clear diction. "Your husband has been called. Rest now. Your time draws near." Taking the Queen's dainty hand in hers, Artemis looked steadily into Sestina's glaring eyes as her patient again cried out in pain.

The opening of the chamber door diverted the priestess' attention. On seeing the young man, Artemis stood, watching King Tayo Maroda drop his lengthy, earthen toned cloak to the polished floorboards. Being a perfectionist, she noticed his dark, lengthy curls loosely strung back in a ponytail and the sweat stains on his frilled shirt, evidence of his haste. She would excuse his sloppiness, considering the circumstances. Breathlessly, Tayo positioned himself at Sestina's side.

With the King expressing his love for his wife, Artemis contemplated the man's character. The priestess thought him a King worthy to lead the Mariard regime in a new direction, which would see her own plans fulfilled. Aware Tayo was about to feel the pain of loss, she was also aware of the many emotions he and those of the kingdom had yet to experience.

Insight into the new era had Artemis mentally reeling off a verse from her own prophetic writings, foretelling this event.

A great evil will be born to the royal household. Woe be to the mind, body and essence, as this evil will spread to pollute all flesh.

Despite her inward celebration, Artemis' expression did not change. The birth of the

King's heirs would set her on a path to obtain a greater power, but she would have to be patient.

Tayo ran a hand through his hair, drawing it away from striking, boyish features. Evident was the pain in his radiant blue eyes, as he suffered the pangs of frustration and helplessness. With the priestess gesturing the time had come, Tayo silently stood. Retaining his wife's hand in his, Sestina cried out, heightening his emotional conflict. He knew where this was leading and spoke up.

"Is there nothing we can do?" Tayo begged, the tears welling in his eyes. Her silence, he somewhat expected. The priestess was not one to repeat instruction or what she had already informed; the royal seed was corrupt and had been for many generations. Though Tayo did not doubt her word, it grieved him that his heir and this generation would see the prophecy fulfilled. The tranquil world they knew and lived in was about to change.

Having urged the King aside, Artemis' flesh radiated a glistening blue aura. The phenomenon steadily intensified, as she began chanting in a language known only to the priestess. Perceiving to have seen and heard this before, Tayo expressed no fear. Although having shielded his tired eyes from the glare, the sudden silence sent Tayo numb and looking to his wife. Sestina was not breathing.

As easily as submerging her hands into a bowl of water, the priestess penetrated his wife's swollen stomach. Disturbed by the sight, Tayo buried his face into the bed drapes. Wailing drew back his attention.

Wrapping the babe in a cloth, Artemis analysed the tiny facial features. Her smile hid her true thoughts.

"You have a daughter, King Tayo Maroda." Artemis placed the babe in the man's arms and watched his expression. The father was in awe, but this would soon change, for her work was not yet finished.

Briefly closing his eyes, Tayo gave thanks to the Mariard and laid his daughter in the prepared crib. Having never experienced the feeling of grief, he found it overwhelming, leaving him speechless and confused. Reminding himself of a foretold future stopped him from breaking down in the presence of company. The uncertain times would call for sacrifices to be made for the good of all and as King, he must endure his share.

Again, the priestess submerged her hands into the body of his wife. Tayo tried to centre his attention on his daughter, yet the wailing drew him to shift his sights to Artemis. Additional emotions surfaced in him, triggering recollections of conversations with the woman, who held his son; the one she prophesised as a great evil. He recalled suggesting that they have the monster disposed of at birth; Artemis assured him this was not the answer. It would transfer the boy's very essence to his sister, creating a greater evil than already predicted. His confidence in Artemis prompted faith of a future victory for the Mariard and its people. Her adequately raising the boy inspired hope that her influence would see the child have a less destructive impact on the kingdom.

Tayo could barely contain his pain with Sestina's body radiating a bright, blue aura. Reaching out to his wife's fading form, Artemis grasped his wrist to prevent him.

"Do not touch her. She is being called. One returns to the Mariard in their purest form." Artemis released her grip.

The strain reflected in Tayo's features with his beloved Sestina diminishing with the light. On the ruffled damp bedding, a small blue, glass bead caught his eye. Before he could reach for it, the priestess had it in her hand. Unnerved that the bead was visible to Tayo, Artemis awkwardly smiled. Assuming this would not be a common occurrence, she handed it to him.

"Consider it a very special gift from the Mariard." Artemis gestured through expression that this was a privilege.

Tayo held the bead tightly. He would always keep it on his person, a reminder of his wife and their sacrifice.

Artemis knew they had to talk, having sensed the man's discomfort and confusion. Her

touch sent the newborns to sleep in their cribs beside the bed. She watched the King cross the floor to the balcony doors where he looked up at the huge white Mariard moon. It appeared brighter than earlier that evening, which now lit up the mist creeping over the elegant castle gardens.

Tayo could see the outline of the gazebo where he had sat hand in hand that day with his wife, sipping tea. Closing his eyes, he felt something encroaching on his pain, something he could not define.

“Already you feel it stirring.” Artemis positioned herself at the King's side.

“Like my essence wants to leave me and go elsewhere.” The moon again captured Tayo's focus.

“Not only your essence, but your entire being.” Artemis glanced at the King, but his gaze did not leave the moon. “Tayo, tomorrow you and your daughter will embark on a great journey. You will build a new Mariard kingdom unlike anything ever known to this world. The Mariard has already paved the way ahead, but for a time, I will not be with you. Draw on the knowledge already given you, work diligently and rule wisely.”

The priestess led Tayo by the arm across the chamber to his daughter's crib. Again, she sensed for his emotional state, feeling the turmoil within him. Though expressing warmth as a new father, tears welled in the man's eyes. He did not look at her as she addressed him.

“You are a King and a father, behold your daughter, she will bring you great joy. Teach her faith, obedience and the ways of the Mariard.”

“What of my son?” Tayo glanced at the crib, unable to bring himself to look fully on the child.

“He is dead to you. It is written; a seed is planted, a tree will grow to bear bad fruit. It will be cut down by one who will plant seeds of terror.” Artemis noted in his eyes that these words were familiar to him. With the King's silence, she approached the door to summon those waiting out in the hallway.

The King's aides wore lengthy, light-blue jackets and trousers with white shirts buttoned to collarless necklines. They were instructed to renew the bed linen and set out the King's sleeping attire. Artemis then addressed Tayo.

“You are tired, rest now. You have a big day ahead of you tomorrow.” Looking towards the open door, she gestured with a nod to her awaiting personal aides, who would remove the cribs from the King's chamber.

The crystal droplets of the chandelier reflected the flames within the hearth, casting speckles of light over the walls. To the King, the bedchamber felt silent and lonely as he sat in one of two armchairs facing the blaze. He remained fully dressed with his boots lying disorderly at his feet. Again, Tayo glanced at the bed. He would find no rest where he was, yet could not bring himself to sleep in it. On this, his last night in the castle, he studied his surroundings, fixing to memory all that was part of his life. Large paintings in elaborate, gold frames covered the majority of wall space. These were portraits of past Kings, his mentors, so he thought.

Tayo's sights shifted, taking in furnishings; the desk with its drawers of personal property and the curvatures of the stool. An intricately carved wardrobe, the clothes within, he would never wear again. Tears welled on eyeing items, having belonged to his wife, on the dressing table. Nothing he could take with him, not even a small memento. Reaching into his vest pocket, Tayo drew out the glass bead. The thought of what lay ahead stirred feelings of anxiousness and kept him from sleep.

It was not yet light outside when Cainen stifled a yawn and pulled the hood of his cloak back to reveal straight blonde hair. The King's companion and dearest friend stood edgy in the lounge area, one of many in the transportation complex. Antiquated charm was in the décor and people's attire within the modern facilities, operating on advanced solar technologies. Cainen's tall muscular physique reflected in the large windowpanes running the length of a wall. From this height, it enabled him to look out across a massive area of steel and concrete. Landing pads set at

different levels had attached open boarding stations. People went about their business using walkways, open caged lifts and four wheeled buggies, some towing small trailers. Hover shuttle buses, like lengthy, slender, white coaches, lifted off for their rounds of the municipalities. Stationed at ground level, wheel-based transports serviced the local city sectors. Hauler transports, similar to the buses yet bulkier, were being loaded with goods for their long journeys to the rural areas.

Cainen knew it was imperative that no one saw him or other selected members of the royal household in the complex. Deceit was in motion and soon the kingdom would grieve the deaths of a monarch, an heir and entourage. Lying was against everything he believed in, yet Cainen saw this act and his part in it, as a means to the kingdom's survival. He could have left hours earlier with others of the royal household, but Cainen elected to personally escort the King to an unknown destination. Reflecting on what he and his family were leaving behind, raised uncomfortable emotions. With only the clothes on their backs, he contemplated an uncertain journey ahead. His thoughts were interrupted when an unshaven Tayo entered.

Those involved in this venture had been instructed by the priestess to dress in civilian clothing. The King's disguise could not hide the man's pain. Tayo's hair hung loose around his shoulders, grief and lack of sleep showed in his features. Remaining silent, Cainen's expression of compassion was all he could offer. Seeing his friend stripped of all royal ornamentation left him feeling awkward enough; he did not know what to say considering the man's loss.

"Is everything ready?" Tayo forced a smile with Cainen nodding. "Good man." He patted his friend on the back, before taking the grey, woollen cloak held out to him. Both men pulled hoods up to cover their hair and somewhat shroud their faces. With his hand, Tayo gestured to lead the way and the two men left the lounge area.

The Mariard kingdom was made up of districts. Each district covered four immense states, comprising of a main city and many smaller municipalities that featured more Gothic architecture than modern. Buildings stood fifteen stories or less, lengthy or block structures rich in crafted decoration. Dividing each district, a collective of rural towns saw earlier period architecture, a country charm of stone, timber and shingled roofs. In all, there were sixteen districts and each city had a name, but was usually referred to by its number. The Maroda kingdom covered a third of the surface. On opposite sides of the poles were ice fields and desert regions, which were thought unexplored and uninhabited wastelands.

Flying over the states of the First district, little conversation had passed between the two men during the long hours of travel. Tayo battled to keep his son from his thoughts. There was a sense of betraying not only the child, but also the mother who bore him. At Artemis' request, the prophecy was never revealed to his deceased wife for what he believed good reasons. He kept justifying it; this was for the good of all, not just a few. From the shuttle window, Tayo noted they were leaving the city municipalities behind and entering a rural sector. It saddened him to abandon his entire kingdom; his only consolation, it was in the hands of the priestess and his high council.

The name Mariard derived and honoured the great-unseen power that was in everything from creation to overseeing their peace, prosperity and good health. Original writings, pertaining to their culture and beliefs, were held in the castle. Accessible to the populace, copies of the great book not only contained history, but also revealed in detail, the works of their ancestors. This wealth of knowledge expressed itself in both the city and rural areas. It appeared in architecture, carpentry, the arts, wind and solar technologies. Most conscious of their environment, citizens farmed with horse and plough, providing organic foods and dairy produce. None were aware of a great upheaval to come, which would shatter the foundations and see a great darkness take the throne.

Ushered from shuttle to shuttle, the days of travel left Tayo and his companion exhausted. Though the King napped along the way, his dreams made him restless in sleep. He perceived them visions of events yet to come. On hearing of his own death and that of others, it

was evident to Tayo that he was truly loved by his people. The entire kingdom was in mourning. He had seen it in a shuttle pilot's tears and on the faces of those at different transport docks. His name was on everyone's lips, as was his daughter's. Each time he heard names mentioned, it raised guilt for the pain caused and lies told.

It was late afternoon when the horse drawn cart came to a halt in an open field on the outskirts of the Third district. A trusted friend of the royal household, having sworn to secrecy, owned the picturesque rural setting surrounded by rolling hills and rich pastures. Standing in the warmth of the sun, a small group greeted the two men.

Patina's lengthy, brown hair fluttered a little with the breeze. Her eyes expressed delight in seeing her husband. She expected Cainen to be clean-shaven, the days of growth made him appear older. Having greeted him with an embrace, their son came out from behind her brown skirt covering a thick frilled white petticoat. She smiled with her husband messing the boy's blonde hair in fun. Picking Simon up, she nursed the four-year-old on her hip. Simon began fidgeting with the ribbons on her bodice, though his green eyes were fixed on his father's features.

A short distance away, the middle-aged couple, dressed as farm hands, stood outside the shuttle. Being trusted servants of the royal household, the King assumed the priestess would soon join them. Before continuing on their journey, Tayo hoped to bathe and get some decent rest. A strange sound drew his attention to the skies.

Never had the group seen anything so advanced, appearing like a great black and white bird soaring towards them. The strange craft was extremely loud, stealing their attention away from the priestess, having left the shuttle. Cainen took Simon from his wife and they all stood well back. The boy's hair annoyed him with the craft hovering and stirring the air, forcing locks across his face. Tayo remained captivated as it descended to land on the grass.

This sleek, black transport with lengthy swept-back wings had a long tubular neck and a white oval section that observers assumed housed the pilots. A sliding door opened in the side of the bulk, drawing everyone's attention.

Awestruck, the group watched a metal ramp extend to the ground. Appearing in the opening, a machine in the image of a man, stepped forward. The bronze and chrome unit stood tall with fixed, moulded, shoulder length hair and facial features void of expression. Its body gave the impression of restricted mobility, however looks were deceiving as it approached Artemis, who set everyone at ease.

"Be not afraid of that which is here to assist you. Milacon is a living being. The armour protects the Milonight occupant within." Artemis raised a brow with Simon stretching out his hand and touching the gleaming cold tunic.

Small fingerprints now showed below the engraved name on the left-hand side of the Milonight's chest plate. Cainen said Simon's name aloud, telling his son not to do it again.

A dislike for children had Artemis annoyed at the boy, though a controlled stance and tone concealed the truth of her temperament.

"Numerous Milonights inhabit the ice region; they await their King's arrival." Her words saw Tayo's eyes widen in awe of the concept. Before the King could speak his thoughts, the boy spoke out.

"Can I play with it?" Simon looked to his father. Cainen did not know how to answer. The Milonight's head turned to acknowledge the boy.

"I would be delighted to play with you young Simon." Its lips had not moved, yet they heard the pleasant male voice.

Fascinated, Simon tried to reach out and touch the Milonight's face. Cainen felt embarrassed with his son's behaviour and lowered the boy to the ground where he held him back with a firm hand. Forcing a smile at the man, Artemis continued.

"Milonights are small beings. The armour ensures their survival, keeping their body temperature at fifteen degrees below zero." Noting stunned expressions, Artemis knew she had

indicated a destination. “Do not let the thought of their true size deceive you. These beings are not only your finest assets, but their life expectancy of two hundred years or more, will see them fighting for your kingdom, long after you are gone Tayo.” She fixed her sights on the man himself. “You will find out their true value when you arrive at your destination. May the Mariard watch over you.” With a hand, she gestured for all to board.

The King followed Artemis’ sights towards the shuttle. A female aide was on approach, carrying a protective capsule containing his daughter. Milacon bowed his head to greet the young woman, who handed over the precious cargo for him to take onboard. Obviously nervous, the aide straightened her shawl, walking closely behind the Milonight.

Tayo could not leave without a last word to Artemis and did not follow up the ramp.

“I must ask you...” Tayo said, but the priestess answered before he could finish.

“Your son’s name is Marcale; it is all I will tell you. Have a safe journey.” Artemis walked off, not giving him a second look whilst heading towards the awaiting shuttle.

Pondering his role, Tayo felt somewhat alone. He knew he would not see Artemis or this land again until an appointed time. Twenty-one years seemed so long and without her to council him, it crossed his mind that if he failed, all would be lost. The thought of Milonights made him nervous yet curious to what was hidden under the armour and to know the creature’s environment. Suddenly hearing Simon, loudly chuckling, prompted him to walk up the ramp.

On entering, Tayo was a little disappointed. Though a large interior, it was nothing more than a cargo carrier with web seats lining the inner frame. His sights drifted, taking in familiar faces, assuming to know their thoughts. Artemis had indicated their destination. The concept of building the new Mariard kingdom in the ice fields had him nervous.

“When you are ready, Sir,” Milacon said, awaiting further instructions.

CHAPTER 1

With little having changed over the years, people prospered just as they had when Tayo Maroda ruled. The castle gardens were a blend of towering trees, beds of flowers, ponds with ornamental statues and a large white gazebo clearly seen from the back entrance. A glass of fermented juice sat on the round cast-iron table. Another glass lay on its side, the contents having filtered through the metal lacework to be absorbed by the neatly trimmed lawn below. The sun appeared so small in comparison to the Mariard moon, but it shone directly above and its warmth made it a delight to be outside in the garden this time of year.

A couple positioned themselves on the grass under the draping canopy of a tree. Marcale and Tangelica gave no thought for discretion, caring not that they may be seen from the castle. Their behaviour made them the topic of conversation at high council meetings, which Marcale rarely attended. They saw the man's conduct not befitting an heir to the throne. Consumption of the new fermented juice made Marcale argumentative when intoxicated and he denied being sexually active.

The council doubted Marcale's integrity and commitment to his fiancée with the man's flirtatious nature. Whether aide or high society, Marcale's charm lured women to his bed, though none would confess to such behaviour. The council had stressed upon the heir the rituals of purity and the consequences of not fulfilling them. Marcale thought their fears amusing, believing the priestess a liar and power hungry; all the same, he led the council into a false sense of security.

Tangelica's flawless complexion and high cheekbones touched by a hint of red blush tantalised her fiancé. Her jealousy developed quickly, having been unaware of his flirtatious nature prior to their courtship. She perceived Artemis despised her due to her father's status. Although he held position in the community, she assumed the priestess wanted Marcale to marry the daughter of a high councillor.

Lipstick smudged with him pressing hard on her lips. Shoving Marcale aside, Tangelica scolded him for being so rough. He chuckled before replying.

"Would you deny your King pleasure?" Marcale leant back on his elbows with a lusty grin on his strong features.

Tangelica rolled onto her stomach and with a hand, flicked loose blonde hair from her shoulder.

"You are not the King yet." Tangelica sulked. "And since when have I denied you?" She raised a brow, awaiting an answer.

Sitting forward, Marcale rested his arm on his knee and ran a hand through his copper locks, drawing it away from his face. He thought for a moment then shook his head in amusement.

"What is so funny?" Tangelica shifted onto her side and straightened the layers of petticoats to make herself comfortable.

"My dear Tangelica, you have the body of a seductress, but the mentality of a child. I am hoping you will mature once we are married."

"Liar, you enjoy our little games too much." Tangelica ran her fingers up and down his leg, teasing him. "This is what you love about me, I stir your imagination." Rising to her knees, she pushed herself between his legs and guided his face into her cleavage. As he began to ease the lace straps from her shoulders, she whispered her thoughts. Her fiancé suddenly pushed her aside.

“Why do you always do that?” Marcale snapped.

“Sorry.” Tangelica forced a pout. “I meant it to amuse not offend.”

“I know too well what you meant! You think I fear her; well I do not. Tomorrow I will be crowned King...”

“And with me at your side...” Tangelica enticed him to go on.

“I will rid this kingdom of the old witch and her books, this I promise you.” With freedom in his thoughts, Marcale guided his fiancée down onto the grass where he kissed her hard on the lips.

The heir's entire childhood was without affection, having been battered mentally and physically. Not only did the priestess keep Marcale from interacting with others, but had also denied him service from aides. Kept ignorant to Mariard teachings, he spent most of his life hidden away, alone and bowing to the will of Artemis. His seclusion was made easier, as the priestess convinced the council that the heir was mentally retarded.

At the age of thirteen, Marcale found the courage to ask Artemis why she disliked him so. Her answer he did not understand and he knew not what the word evil meant. Before his eighteenth birthday, his yearning for company led him to sneak about the castle. From aides to council members, he intently studied people that triggered change in him. Though men highly respected women, they held authority, spoke their minds and did not cower as he did to Artemis. Learning he was heir to the throne and that the priestess had lied to both he and the council, Marcale put Artemis in her place.

A newfound confidence led the heir to take up his position within the castle. With free reign, Marcale's ventures included delving into Artemis' private collection of literature. He found pages he believed stolen from the great history book, romantic poetry, maps of unfamiliar territories and recipes for fermented juices.

The attention showered upon Marcale, taught him to use flattery as a means of control. His charm and generosity towards women got him what he wanted. In addition, Artemis' position bound her to confidentiality and unable to tell anyone the truth of his sexual activities. Marcale was determined to prove Artemis and her doctrine lies by surviving the purification ceremony. Until such time, he would keep the council on side, claiming himself pure of body.

It was the council that insisted the heir select a wife; the marriage would coincide with the coronation. Out of spite for Artemis, Marcale refused invitations from those she suggested were eligible. Not ignorant to what Marcale was doing, unbeknown to him, the priestess cleverly manipulated the man into choosing Tangelica to be his bride.

Just one more day, Tangelica thought, I will be Queen and the priestess will fall. I will strip her of position and make a necklace out of her gem. Amused by her intentions, she mischievously grinned and groaned for Marcale's pleasure.

Artemis had dramatically aged since having held Marcale as a babe in arms; this was not due to the twenty-one years that had past. The accumulated knowledge and the powers of the Mariard within took its toll on the body. Standing behind the flowering vines covering the latticework, the priestess did not have to see the couple to know what they were doing. Though having overheard the entire conversation, she thought this the least of her concerns. The two were no threat and she knew there was tension between them. She scoffed at Marcale's confidence whilst playing by her own rules. Her insight and cunningness were leading Marcale and Tangelica to their deaths. Knowing their time was short, Artemis had only but to wait for it to come about.

Startled by the crackle of dry leaves, Artemis slowly turned to look upon a young woman in male attire. The natural beauty with dark, wavy hair, strung back into a ponytail, lowered piercing blue eyes in greeting.

“My father sends salutations Artemis.” The woman's tone conveyed respect, but the priestess felt the presence of a strong character and something else cautioning her.

“Vianne my dear child. You have returned.” Artemis loosely embraced the tall slender

woman.

“Yes, as ordered. I wish it were under different circumstances.” Vianne’s eyes were on Artemis. She had heard so much about the woman, yet felt a little uneasy and assumed it just her nerves considering the woman’s status.

“I understand. Now let me look at you. You are so much your mother, but she had better dress sense.” The priestess eyed over the frilled shirt, vest and long boots, the clothes of a citizen not royalty.

“My clothing is unimportant. They are suitable for the conditions we live under. You will see this for yourself on returning home.” Vianne saw the doubt in the priestess's expression and asked if anything was wrong.

“Not at all,” Artemis replied. “As you said, I wish it were under different circumstances.” She felt Vianne emitting energy consistent with her own. The sensation made her realise that the young woman was empowered with more than what she expected. “Come child. I will transform you into a great beauty, befitting your true status.”

“My father taught me etiquette, but I must say, it lacks practicality and does not impress me. Painting one’s face and wearing garments of frills adorned with lace must be extremely uncomfortable.” Vianne spoke with confidence and maturity, impressing the priestess. Artemis thought the young woman more than adequate for the position she would soon impose on her.

“My dear child, it is not whether it is comfortable but how it makes one feel. Beauty is a gift and you certainly have that.” Artemis forced a smile, watching Vianne approach a large gap in the latticework.

“Beauty is only skin deep; there is your proof over there.” Vianne raised a brow and awaited Artemis’ response.

“How long have you been here?” The priestess suspected the young woman had spied on her.

“As long as I needed to be.” Vianne looked towards the couple, disappointed that they carelessly flaunted their deeds. “I presume that is my brother and his bride to be?”

“Yes. They have disgraced the house of Maroda.” Artemis gestured for Vianne to follow her.

Via a secret passage, the two women entered the castle. Artemis led Vianne through areas avoiding aides and other workers. Her father's detailed description of the interior gave Vianne the feeling she had been here before. The rooms she glimpsed through open doors were rendered stone painted in dark tones with large white decorative cornices and ceiling roses. Mental images suggested that the antiquated furnishings had changed little in twenty-one years. Her sights skimmed over large paintings from scenery to portraits, crystal and ornaments befitting royalty. None of it impressed the young woman, who was eager for tomorrow to come about so she could return to what she called home.

The second floor of the wing contained many bedchambers and accommodated not only the priestess, but also that of the heir and Tangelica. Artemis had chosen an adjoining bedchamber for her guest. The priestess wanted Vianne close to her, as she feared for the young woman’s safety. Considering Vianne’s beauty, Marcale’s lust for women could cause problems. She more feared what he would do if he learnt the truth of her guest's identity, as she had plans for the man's sister. Vianne was not crucial to the outcome, yet it was in the priestess’ own personal interest to keep the young woman safe.

Artemis introduced Vianne to the elderly aide as a wedding guest from the Third City. The niece of a trusted councillor, who would support Artemis’ claim if need be. A long, white apron covered the front of the blue, full-skirted, long sleeved dress of the female aide’s uniform. Though Vianne arrived unsuitably clothed, the aide would not question or speak of what she saw, but would do as instructed.

Much to Vianne's dislike, she underwent a transformation from citizen to royalty. Expecting a change of heart, Artemis insisted that her guest look at herself in the full-length

mirror. Vieanne sighed, feeling most uncomfortable. The lace corset irritated her skin where frills and lace over petticoats obstructed her walk whilst acquainting herself with royal etiquette.

Another entered the bedchamber. Artemis introduced the young woman that would be accompanying them tomorrow. The daughter of the priestess' retiring personal aide was only a few months older than Vieanne. Malisa lowered her blue eyes in greeting, only to have the guest correct her, for where she came from, no one was above another. Forcing an awkward smile, Malisa asked if Vieanne required any further services. Disgruntled, the guest shook her head. Vieanne silently wished for her own clothing back and a washbasin to rid herself of the muck on her face.

With the aide having left the chamber, Vieanne eyed the priestess. Maintaining a civil tone, she spoke her mind.

"There is no reason for me to see him." Having spent twenty-one years without contact with her brother, Vieanne saw no point in meeting him now. He was nothing more than a stranger to her. Artemis pushed her guest down onto the stool at the dressing table.

"You need to know the fullness of the times, for a glimpse of what is to come."

"I have a fair idea." Vieanne sighed, agitated.

"Do you really, I think not."

"How can you say that?" Defensively, Vieanne rose off the stool. "I live in temperatures well below zero. It took hard work and determination to build a kingdom in the heart of a mountain range. You stand here before me in all your finery, whilst we continue to forge weapons and get our hands dirty for what is to come."

"I know so much about you." Artemis sought to calm the tension. "According to my informant, your father is a proud man. You defend that which you believe in with all your heart, this is why you have been chosen."

"For what?" Vieanne felt a strange sensation coming over her, which she tried to ignore.

"Your new position, but this you will learn about soon enough." Artemis pleasantly smiled.

"We have not yet been called for dinner, speak now, you have my full attention." Vieanne was under the impression she was merely there to escort Artemis back to the Mariard mountains. No one had spoken of a new position.

"Later, there is still much to discuss before you dine with your brother." Artemis asked her to sit and with reluctance, the young woman complied.

The priestess instructed Vieanne to say little in the presence of Marcale and Tangelica. She would introduce her as Rachael from the house of Tahoma. Vieanne enquired if Marcale was aware he had a sister. Artemis nodded.

The citizens of the kingdom, the royal household and council had many years ago been deceived. All had grieved the loss of a young King, his daughter and entourage tragically killed in a shuttle accident. The priestess recalled the day they all left for the new kingdom and in particular an annoying young boy who showed no fear of a Milonight.

"Simon, son of Cainen," Artemis said. The name saw Vieanne gleam a smile and her eyes light up.

"He is on the council and will make a fine warrior. We have pledged our love for one another. When I return, we are to be married." Vieanne questioned Artemis' expression.

The news had not brought joy but dread. Artemis noted Vieanne's curiosity and unbeknown to her guest, the young woman was seeking answers within her mind.

"Stop it Vieanne," Artemis said through clenched teeth and their eyes met.

"Stop what? Are you all right?" Concerned, Vieanne stood, offering the priestess her seat.

"Forgive me..." Artemis raised her hand not to fuss. "I am just tired."

Evidently, Vieanne was unaware of her gifting. This only reassured Artemis that the Mariard had indeed given power to Maroda's daughter at some stage and saw this to her benefit.

Nonetheless, a new hurdle, namely Simon had presented itself. This was unexpected, which could see Vianne refuse the position she would offer.

In the grand dining hall, Artemis introduced her guest. Marcale kissed Vianne's hand before pulling out a chair for the beauty to sit beside him at the elaborately laid, lengthy table. Seated across from her fiancé, Tangelica was already feeling the pangs of jealousy.

Never had such beauty graced his table, was Marcale's words to Vianne. The compliment provoked his fiancée's sarcastic retaliation. Having not wanted to cause a scene in front of his guest, Marcale talked over Tangelica. As his fiancé's embarrassing behaviour continued, he resorted to interrupting and changing lines of conversation.

Marcale focused his attention on Vianne throughout the meal. She in turn contributed little to the conversation, not wanting to encourage his suggestive behaviour. Having never known such rudeness, Vianne forged pleasantries so as not to appear disgusted or overwhelmed by the tension between the couple. Taking none of it personally, she found herself pitying Tangelica, seeing her brother as living up to his sordid reputation.

Retiring to a drawing room, regal furnishings of couches and matching armchairs surrounded a low glass top marble table. The scent of fresh flowers in large vases filled the warm atmosphere. A mature, male aide placed a tray of drinks on the table, before positioning himself near the door. With a glass of fermented juice in hand, Marcale stood to one side of the stone fireplace, resting his elbow on the mahogany mantelpiece. The decline of a drink prompted Marcale to recall that their guest had done the same at dinner.

"If the wine is not to your liking Rachael, I will have them bring you tea perhaps?" Marcale presumed this more to her taste and looked towards the male aide.

"No thank you." Vianne expressed pleasantries. "I actually prefer ice water." A discreet nudge from the priestess, implied she had said something wrong. Artemis was quick to rectify the mistake.

"I am afraid our dear Rachael is allergic to grapes, especially fermented ones."

"What a shame." Tangelica's remark drew a stern gaze from Marcale, yet she continued. "Since my fiancé introduced the beverage, it has become a trade mark of royalty and high society. Obviously you have not mingled in the right circles to acquire the taste."

"The First City has much to offer." Marcale changed the subject. "Perhaps you will stay with us after the coronation tomorrow?" He was hopeful, having contemplated making Rachael his mistress.

"I must return home. My family..." Vianne avoided eye contact with Marcale interrupting.

"We could move your family here. Give you a position in the court." Marcale smiled and would have pushed the point if his fiancée had not spoken up.

"You could be my personal aide." Tangelica smirked; however, frowned with the priestess leaning towards her.

"Your claws are showing. It is unbecoming a woman of your status." Artemis forced a smile. Her comments gained the desired affect and Tangelica stood in a huff.

"I am going to bed. I have much to do in the morning. I bid you goodnight. Are you coming Marcale?"

"I cannot leave my guests." His eyes revealed a hint of resentment. After a moment of the couple staring tense at one another, Marcale watched his disgruntled fiancée storm off towards the door that the aide opened for Tangelica. "You must excuse her, I believe she has much on her mind, considering the day ahead of us tomorrow."

"I do believe Tangelica is right." Artemis rose from her seat. "We all have a long day ahead of us tomorrow. It is best we retire also."

"So soon." Marcale hid his irritation. "It is early, but if you are tired Artemis then you should retire. I am sure I am adequate company for Rachael."

"Of course you are." Vianne stood. "But I am also tired after such a long journey." She

thanked him for his hospitality and bid him goodnight.

Now alone, Marcale slugged down the last of his wine. Driven by resentment and anger, he pitched the glass into the fireplace then cleared the mantelpiece of ornaments with one swipe of his hand. Having met such a beauty as Rachael, his bride to be had him immensely disappointed. How he wished he had met the woman before committing to his fiancée. Slumping into an armchair without poise or grace, he rested his boots on the tabletop. Tomorrow I will be King, he thought, who engages in formality when one can order obedience. She will be unable to refuse me and Artemis will not be around to interfere. Having poured another drink, Marcale sat back, contemplating Rachael's move to the castle.

Tossing the gown on the double bed, Vianne sought assistance to remove the corset. Thoughts distracted her and she remained silent for a time. Once freed from the garment, Vianne's stern expression led the priestess to question.

"So tell me, what have I done to deserve such silence?" Artemis sat Vianne down on the stool and began to undo the braids in the young woman's hair.

"You deliberately antagonised Tangelica." Vianne cringed with Artemis roughly removing pins and dropping them onto the dressing table. She watched the priestess in the mirror, who eyed her in the same manner.

"She is wretched, just ask her aides. Whilst at it, ask to see the marks she has left due to fits of jealousy."

"She loves him." Though Vianne disliked what she was hearing, she still thought Tangelica a victim of her brother's lust.

"She loves his status and what it will bring her. She is no better than he." Artemis took the brush from the dressing table. The two women watched each other in the mirror, until the priestess had finished.

Having put on a satin robe over a cotton nightgown, Vianne strolled to Artemis. She positioned herself at the feet of the priestess, who sat in an armchair, one of two facing the fireplace.

"You lack understanding Vianne." Artemis gazed into the fire.

"Then make me understand. Why was he chosen? I was first born." This question had plagued Vianne over the last few months.

Prior to dinner, Artemis had expected such questions and instructed her aide to bring certain literature to the chamber. Reaching down beside the armchair, she brought forth a thick book bound in faded, black leather with symbolic silver etchings on the cover. The writing on the parchment was foreign to her guest, but as the priestess understood the language, translated the text in her own words.

"For centuries our seeds have been impure. With each passing generation, the impurities spread until the Mariard could no longer hide it. A strong seed divided; one became decay, the other a seed of light." Artemis paused, seeing doubt in Vianne's eyes. With her guest remaining silent, she continued. "Decay has eaten through the roots, its life ends with this generation. Do not despair child, a new seed has already divided."

"Tangelica is with child." Vianne gasped, considering the implications. "As his sister I must warn him, try to salvage something from all this." She rose to her feet. Artemis grasped her wrist tightly, pulling her towards a face expressing animosity.

"Your brother is the decay, you are the light. Where there is one seed, there is another." Artemis released her grip. Stumbling back a step or two, Vianne clutched her stomach.

"It is impossible. I have been with no man." Vianne's eyes pleaded for it not to be true.

"Anything is possible with the Mariard. You should know this by now."

"No, it must be another! Search your book." Vianne dropped to her knees and in dread, flipped through the pages.

Artemis clutched Vianne's shoulders and whilst shaking the woman, demanded she calm herself. Vianne rose to her feet with fear and resentment having gripped her. She slapped

the book from Artemis' lap.

"My brother will die tomorrow! His woman carries a hideous seed and the Mariard now wants me to take his place! I will not wear the crown!" Vieanne turned away in the direction of the fire, folding her arms across her chest in defiance.

Unbeknown to the two women, Tangelica was hiding in the shadows. Horrified by what she had overheard, she left the bedchamber unnoticed, through the door left ajar.

Rising from the chair, Artemis stepped towards her distressed guest. She addressed the young woman in a calmer tone.

"No one is asking you to Vieanne. The seed you are carrying is not of the old but the new." The priestess straightened with her angry guest turning to face her.

"Is this why we prepare for war? For our children to kill each other! If what you say is true, then I will have no part in this." Vieanne stared into the woman's eyes. Artemis momentarily looked down before responding.

"It is written, a seed is planted, yet it will wither and die. One will come to plant his own seed in its place." Artemis suddenly felt an intrusion within her mind.

Having connected with the priestess, Vieanne was tapping into recollections Artemis could not contain to herself. Feeling light headed, she reached out for the chair to steady herself. On closing her eyes, information began to transfer from one woman to another.

Breaking into a sweat, Artemis tried to block out the intruder and clear her mind. Although earlier, she recognised that Vieanne was gifted, the depths of such consciousness had not revealed itself. Her confidence dwindled, having assumed she had beaten the Mariard at its own game. Clearly, this great power had taken steps to see another path set in motion. The thought of what Vieanne could already do without knowledge of the gifting stirred anxiousness and wanting to take full possession of all that was Mariard. Radiating an aura, Artemis drew on the power within her.

Abruptly, Vieanne opened her eyes, having been startled by the image within her mind of a bright glistening ball of light coming towards her. The priestess slumped back in the chair. Trembling and confused, Vieanne stared.

Tangelica had wanted to speak to the woman alone, the reason behind her having gone to the bedchamber. Thinking Vieanne merely a guest, her intentions were to intimidate the woman into leaving the castle first thing in the morning. She heard the voices, before the two women entered. The fear of being caught and scolded by Artemis compelled her to hide behind the dressing screen in the corner near the door. Panicked by what she overheard, Tangelica sought her fiancé and disclosed the information to him.

Fury drove Marcale's stride, yet this was not aimed at his sister, but one he loathed and wanted dead. His fiancée sprinted to keep up whilst following him down the hallway. Previous talks between the couple ran through Tangelica's mind and she would do anything, even murder, to secure her position.

Bursting into the bedchamber, Marcale's wrathful eyes fixed on his sister. The large knife in his hand was evidence of the heir's intentions. His sights shifted to Artemis, putting the fear of death into her. Tangelica wanted nothing more than to see the two women cut down. In anticipation, she stayed close to her fiancé, tightening her grip on the letter opener in her hand.

"You witch!" Marcale's fist sent the priestess to the ground. Grasping her arm to haul Artemis to her feet, his sister went to intervene. "Stay back!" The knife in his hand held her at bay. "I will deal with you once I have rid my house of her stench!"

"Please Marcale, do not do this," Vieanne pleaded, but was ignored.

With hatred as his strength, Marcale raised the knife to slay the priestess cowering on the floor. Hearing a gasp, his attention snapped to his sister. Although the woman remained standing, Vieanne was wide-eyed and clutching the handle of a letter opener protruding from her abdomen. Marcale caught his sister as she collapsed. Whilst lowering her gently to the floor, he glanced with fury at the woman, who had struck his sister down.

Tangelica slowly backed away with nerves on edge. The shock of having actually followed through was still sinking in. Shaken by her fiancé's reaction, she justified the deed to herself. Hastily leaving the room, she brushed past Malisa, who having heard the commotion, stood waiting for instruction in the doorway.

Cradling Vianne's shoulders with one arm, Marcale paused before drawing the blade. He glanced at the priestess, kneeling at his sister's side. Artemis placed her hand down on the wound and called for the aide to fetch water and clean cloths. Keeping a level head, Malisa acted on the order. Artemis stiffened with Marcale's abruptness.

"Heal her witch and I will let you live!" His threatening gaze unnerved the priestess. Artemis could not trust his word, but would do all she could to save the woman and if not, at least the seeds.

"Why heal someone you want dead?" Artemis did not look at him whilst tearing the nightgown to get to the wound. Marcale snarled through clenched teeth.

"I want you dead, not her."

"Why? Are you not afraid she is here to take your crown?" Their eyes met.

"I would see her dead first. I am not convinced she is here to take my throne. But you on the other hand, have wished me dead since birth and you will regret taking me from my mother, this I promise you."

Looking at the bloody wound, Artemis tensed. Marcale responded to her hesitation.

"What is it woman?" He readied to strike her. Artemis remained silent for a moment with apprehension in her drawn features. Her thoughts escaped her.

"She heals herself." Silently, Artemis sought explanation.

The priestess ruled out Mariard intervention and only she knew why. With Vianne unaware of her gifting, for the woman to be tapping into its healing properties was inconceivable. Though the seeds were thought not mature enough to emit their own energy, it did appear the only explanation. Artemis concluded that Vianne was indeed the one who the Mariard had planned as her replacement. Now all she had to do was survive long enough to secure her hold on it all.

Scooping his sister up, Marcale moved to the bed where he lay Vianne down. Studying her features, he maintained his stance on her beauty, but his feelings towards her had changed. Slowly opening her eyes, Vianne recognised the voice of her brother, yet remained positioned.

"Have the aides bring her a fresh gown." Marcale returned his sights to his sister, assuming she was aware of his presence. "What will I do with you?" His anger had subsided to relief.

Marcale did not wish his sister harmed, his complaint was against Artemis. Evidently, the priestess lied to him and he was now convinced that the woman had instigated the separation between him and his sister. Questions ran through his mind, he wanted to know why the deception? Why she was taken? Where had she been all this time and was his father alive?

Though feeling a little giddy, Vianne wanted to sit up. She gestured with her hand to let her be. The priestess conveyed she should rest, but Vianne had much to say and time was not on their side. With Artemis insisting, Marcale told the woman to be silent and called out to those in the hallway.

The priestess protested as his personal aides escorted her from the bedchamber. Marcale gave his word to Vianne that no harm would come to Artemis. Once alone, he assisted his sister to the armchair, before positioning himself against the mantelpiece. Folding his arms across his chest, Marcale noted her eyes were studying him.

"I know you have not come to take the crown. If this were the case, I would have been the one taken away or murdered at birth."

"No, I have not come to take the throne. I am to escort Artemis and her aides away from here after the coronation." Vianne rested her head back into the chair and looked into the fire within the hearth. "Your day of glory will be shattered and the keys to your kingdom will be

handed to another.”

“So says the great book, which no one can read.” Agitated, Marcale shifted his weight to the other foot. “From personal experience, I know the witch to be a liar.” He wanted his sister to look at him, but she remained gazing into the fire, as though captivated by it.

“Have you seen the book of Kings?” Vieanne asked.

“Of course I have. It is nothing more than pictures of old men.” Marcale watched his sister shift in the chair. His eyes followed her hand to the books on the floor.

“Take it.” Vieanne held it out to him. Heaving a sigh, Marcale reluctantly complied whilst mumbling that it should have stayed in the library where it belonged, gathering dust.

The book was heavy and bound in thick leather. Marcale placed it down on top of another book sitting on the low, brass table between the armchairs. Flipping through the pages, the coloured portraits were finely hand painted with borders of gold leaf and as he remembered, a book of old men.

“Turn to the last King.” Vieanne watched with her brother comply. He read aloud the inscription under the picture.

“Tayo Maroda, the man who abandoned me at birth.” Marcale studied the features of the portrait. “I trust he is in good health.”

Vianne leant forward in the chair, now pitying him. What she had obtained from Artemis’ mind changed her perspective on her brother. Sensing a bond forming between them stirred the need to save him.

“Tell me what you see.” Vieanne fixed her eyes on him, noting he showed signs of awkwardness. She assumed he also felt the bond forming.

“I see a man, nothing more.” Marcale indeed felt uncomfortable.

“You see a young man. He never did renounce his crown. Turn the page and tell me what you see.” Vieanne sat back in the chair, knowing what he would find.

“There is nothing.” Marcale could not understand why and mumbled his words. “The page is empty.” Anxiousness rose and he sought explanation. He had sat for a portrait, having personally seen the pencilled draft.

Two doors down from Vieanne’s room, Tangelica nervously paced in front of the open fire within her bedchamber. Her hands trembled whilst still pondering on what she had done. Considering Marcale’s earlier threats to kill the priestess, his wrath drove thoughts of him following through. In addition, she perceived he would also take the life of his sister. When Vieanne went to intervene, the threat prompted her to react. Though shocked by her own actions, her first thought was that she had proven her loyalty to her fiancé. Marcale’s response to her deed so frightened her, she was now somewhat relieved she had not been successful. The thought made her shudder and the anticipation of a severe reprimand only heightened her anxiety.

Within her chamber, the priestess sat tense in the armchair, fearing Marcale would hurt Vieanne once he learned the truth. What did he have to lose, Artemis thought, why not take his sister with him just to spite her and all that was of the Mariard. The knock on the door distracted the priestess. Artemis rose from her chair with Malisa entering, holding an empty jug in hand. Guiding the aide into the light of the fire, she questioned Malisa, aware that the aide had taken a jug of wine into the guest chamber.

“I saw Marcale seated in an armchair with his faced buried in one hand, as though distraught and lost.”

“What of Vieanne?” Artemis looked on the young woman’s petite features, hopeful of good news.

“Vianne comforted him. She has such a warm heart.” Malisa thought Vieanne so brave considering the woman’s ordeal. The aide showed respect and took leave. Artemis sighed frustrated; it was imperative she see Vieanne before morning.

Marcale followed his sister out onto the balcony. Heavy dew blanketed the gardens and

glistened with the glare from the moon shining brightly overhead. Vieanne pointed beyond the moon. He could now see it, a circular outline the size of the Mariard moon itself and darker than the night sky.

“It is another moon.” Marcale aired his thoughts and felt the stirring within. “I can feel it.” His features expressed anxiousness and he looked to Vieanne for more answers.

“It has been with you since...” She found it difficult to say the words. Marcale uttered them for her.

“I became impure.” The ramifications of his deeds were sinking in, Marcale feared for his life like never before. “I beg you to ask Artemis to intervene on my behalf.” His lips quivered and his jaw tightened.

“I cannot.” Vieanne placed a sympathetic hand on her brother’s shoulder. “Nothing will stop it. Tomorrow it will consume you.”

“I can leave the city, forsake the crown and marriage.” Marcale thought he had found a way to cheat death. His sister slowly shaking her head dashed his hopes.

“You can run like a field mouse to be trampled under foot or die honourably, as a repented King. The choice is yours.” Vieanne placed her hand on top of his, resting on the balcony rail.

Sensing that her brother deeply regretted his actions made this harder. Vieanne struggled to hold back tears, wishing she had not met him. The painful realisation of his plight brought a wave of compassion, yet there was nothing she could do to stop the inevitable. From what she could gather, Artemis was not the mentor that she and others, believed her to be. Silently, she defended her brother, placing blame elsewhere.

Marcale stared out across the mist creeping in over the fields in the distance. How does one choose their death, he thought? Why did they not leave me ignorant? Is my essence so tainted they punish me with fear? Can I redeem myself with mere repentance? Slowly, Marcale walked away with his head a muddle of questions and his shoulders weighed down by adversity.

CHAPTER 2

Standing just inside Vieanne's door, Artemis peeked beyond. With the hallway clear, she now felt confident to make her move.

"We have no time left." Artemis grasped Vieanne by the hand, gesturing to be silent, before leading her into the hallway. Unaware to what was happening, the young woman sensed urgency with the pace of the priestess. Having lost confidence in Artemis, Vieanne retained unanswered questions. She assumed more would be revealed, prior to their return to the mountains.

Vianne took in only glimpses of her surroundings whilst running across the tiled floor of the silent front entrance of the castle. Ready for the ceremonies, floral decorations sat on pedestals against the walls. The large, thick columns cast shadows in the dim light and she stumbled on a marble step of the staircase.

In the grand hall, impressive baskets of flowering shrubs hung by chains at different heights from the ceiling. Statues and water fountains were notable ornaments at ground level. On the walls, wooden placards displayed names of past and present high counsellors, decorative shields depicted their regions.

Artemis guided Vieanne up one of the side staircases, leading to the lengthy balcony that would see introductions and speeches made after the ceremonies. There was no pausing to take in its grandeur or stopping for breath. Artemis slid her hand along the polished, wooden railing, eager to get to the purification chamber.

Central on the balcony and set into an arch, the wooden doors on cast iron hinges had no handles or keyholes. The priestess' fingers glided over a small security panel on the wall that saw the doors open.

A dark corridor led to a large circular chamber. Once inside, Vieanne knew exactly where she was, heightening her already nervous disposition. Rendered walls coated in a phosphorus-based paint gave a soft lighting to the area. With caution, Vieanne moved around the outskirts of the extensive, bronze and chrome ringed disk imbedded and taking up the majority of the chamber floor. Though ignorant to the meaning of the large symbols engraved in the outer ring, they did appear similar to those seen on a disk within the mountain ranges. Looking to Artemis, she eyed over the symbols in silver embroidery running down the side of the priestess' long apron.

A noise from above drew Vieanne to look up. The metal coverings receded to reveal a glass dome, through which the glare of the Mariard moon flooded the chamber. Artemis said her name, prompting her to look at the woman.

"We have little time, so listen to me carefully. I have brought you here to take my place, as the representative of the Mariard."

"A priestess!" Vieanne glared and shook her head. "No, I will not do it." She intended to leave the chamber immediately, yet Artemis dug her fingers into her shoulders, holding her to the spot.

"Listen to me. You have the gift stronger than I ever did. The new age is upon us. You were chosen to carry the seeds and take my position as high priestess."

"None of this was told to me. I was only instructed to come here and take you back." Vieanne pulled free. "You have already done enough. I will not do it, and you cannot force me."

"True, I cannot force you." Artemis turned away with an expression of disappointment. Walking across the rings to the inner circle, the glare of the moon made her scarcely visible.

“Know this...” Her voice echoed. “My time here has ended. A kingdom will be left without a priestess and the knowledge she holds.” With Vianne just staring at her, she assumed the woman was deep in thought.

The priestess’ words had Vianne confused and on edge. If this was so important, why had they not raised her for the position and told her before hand? She had an entire different life back at the mountains, one she was not prepared to give up. Vianne tensed with Artemis taking a few steps forward.

“Before I depart, I will warn you of what is to come.” Artemis wanted nothing more than to drag the woman into the centre of the disk, as what she held within, fought to be released. Agitation showed in her raised brow and tone. “He will move over the land with his armies, leaving a path of desolation. His seeds will rise above him and with machines, never before seen, will seek out the new Mariard kingdom. When they find it, they will laugh in victory at a King who fought with sticks and stones.” Artemis saw resentment in the young woman’s expression. Her words did what she intended, emotional blackmail.

“You have to stay,” Vianne demanded, knowing the importance of the woman.

“I cannot, and if you do not take my place, all will perish. You will lose him either way.” Artemis radiated a blue aura, aware she was putting the fear of death into the young woman.

Vianne assumed the priestess would leave them helpless. Already unnerved, she suddenly felt the connection between minds, a sensation of joining mentally and physically with Artemis. Fearing the sensation, she shuddered on hearing the woman’s voice, especially as her lips had not moved.

Conveying sincerity, Artemis informed Vianne that once she stood in the centre of the disk and accepted the position, she would receive the full knowledge of the Mariard. Pressuring the young woman further, she sighed before stating she was dying. Though having lived for generations, a priestess was mortal.

Fighting mixed emotions, Vianne intensely stared at Artemis, not knowing what to believe. A sudden calm came over her, as though another was present, other than the priestess. The sensation gave her a sense of a greater purpose in the scheme of things. Her thoughts were interrupted with Artemis speaking her name. Vianne read the uneasiness in the woman's eyes.

The abrupt disconnection between minds made Artemis nervous. Watching Vianne, fumbling with the first button on her nightgown, she assumed something other than her words had changed the woman's mind.

The ritual itself was no secret. Perceiving she had no choice, Vianne tore the cotton gown open and let it drop to the floor. In her nakedness, she hesitated; the thought of Simon held her back. Though she loved him with all her heart, she now knew she would not only lose him, but everyone else she loved if she did not do this. Taking a couple of deep breaths, resentful, she crossed the rings to join Artemis in the centre.

Vianne wanted to keep the priestess in her sights, yet could not compete against the glare and shielded her eyes with a trembling hand. A pleasant tingling sensation consumed her being. On daring to open her eyes, she found herself engulfed in a strange swirl of sparkling light. Reaching out to touch it, on contact, she became one with it.

Joined with the light, Vianne's essence amassed insight and knowledge into the wonders of the Mariard. Revealed to her was the Necropolin. Its secrets could not be hidden from her, yet she would be bound not to speak of them. This second great power was equal to that of the Mariard; however, it gave off such a negative and poisoning sensation, its presence stirred dread.

Suddenly thrust into darkness, the sensation was that of floating in an endless black void. In the distance, strange land formations began to appear before her. Where some slowly dissolved in an array of burning light, others transformed into spheres to become new worlds. Different life forms evolved or ceased to exist in the blink of an eye, leading Vianne to see the truth of their own history. As much as there was vast knowledge and wonderment, she collected secrets so dark, she wanted to scream them aloud for all to hear. Nonetheless, both the

Necropolin and Mariard powers had seen to it that even a priestess could not release such information.

Vianne saw the purity of the seed, having divided within her. An immediate bond stirred a love greater than she had ever known. The sensation directed her towards the light, which was so blue, mesmerising and beckoning; she had to be part of it. Two small children with iridescent blue eyes materialised. With them floating in front of her, she could not pass. The girl had lengthy dark curls and the likeness between sister and brother made it clear they were twins. A vision of her son and daughter, Vianne could not deny the family resemblance. Holding the headband with the blue gem out to her, his beautiful, innocent eyes beckoned her to take it. Realising there was no going back; she took it from him and lost herself in the blueness of the gem.

Opening her eyes to familiar surroundings, Vianne lifted her head from the armrest of the chair. Remaining seated, she glanced about Artemis' chamber. It was no surprise to her that the transformation had taken place, yet she expected to feel different. Though having all this new knowledge, she had not lost who she was or her memories.

Standing in front of the full-length mirror, Vianne's attire was that of a priestess, but something appeared different. All the embroidered symbols were now bronze thread. The knock at the door distracted her; she called to enter.

Malisa placed the tray on the sideboard, before opening the thick drapes. She folded her hands nervously in front of her and stood rigid behind Vianne, who was a little taller than she. The new mistress appeared distant with an air of animosity towards her position. Uneasy, Malisa spoke up and asked if the mistress would like breakfast brought to the chamber.

"I am not hungry." Vianne shook her head, forcing a smile. She knew Malisa's eyes were on her, as she approached the sideboard and poured herself a glass of water. "Are you packed?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Do not call me ma'am." Vianne had made the aide uncomfortable. She could literally feel the woman's intimidation.

"What would you have me call you?" Malisa's sights remained on the priestess, who came towards her.

"Vianne." She took the woman's hand in hers. "I do not need an aide, I need a friend." Vianne felt that what lay ahead, would see her very much alone.

"Surely you have many friends, back in the mountains ma'am, I mean Vianne."

"Yes I do." Vianne walked towards the balcony doors. "But when they see me like this, I suspect I will not be very popular." She felt Malisa at her side.

"Why would this be? You hold a position of honour, deserving of respect. Forgive me. I speak out of line." Malisa's eyes became downcast, only to be drawn back to the woman, who seemed to have found her words amusing.

"I like you already Malisa. I am going to enjoy teaching you freedom." Vianne's remark was not intended for the aide alone.

Restrictions placed on Vianne, regarding dark secrets, incited bitter resentment. Even if she spoke these secrets aloud, no one other than herself understood the language. Seeing everything from a different perspective, she thought this not the time to work out solutions. A new day had begun that would lead to a new world order, a time of darkness, which was almost on their doorstep.

Tangelica woke. On recalling her attack on Vianne, she abruptly sat up. Having not spoken on the issue with Marcale, she dreaded the consequences. Leaving her bed, she felt a draft, prompting her to notice the balcony doors were open.

Marcale sat on the railing; his focus was on the small balconies adjoining each bedchamber. He knew his fiancée was standing there, but ignored her and took another sip of juice. Tangelica thought he looked dreadful, unshaven, hair a mess and presumed his red eyes

were from lack of sleep and too much wine.

“Say something,” Tangelica sheepishly uttered, “anything, just get it over and done with.” The long bout of silence was unlike him, making her extremely uncomfortable. “Talk to me,” she blurted.

“What would you have me say?” Marcale sighed disheartened, drained of emotion as he looked out over the grounds.

“Whatever is on your mind.” Swallowing with nervous tension, Tangelica watched as unmoved, he took another sip of juice. “What is wrong with you?” She slapped the glass out of his hand in frustration. “Did the witch cast a spell on you?” Glaring, her sights followed him as he moved off the railing and walked straight past her. Dumbfounded, she pursued him.

Within the bedchamber, Tangelica hollered for him to stop, demanding that he talk to her. Marcale hesitated at the door, turned and with empty eyes, approached her.

“We are in no position to demand anything.” Marcale walked out.

Opening the doors to the balcony, Vieanne’s sights remained on the blood red moon in the blue skies. Never had it been visible, giving her a sense that the Necropolin was flaunting the inevitable. Within hours, the two moons would appear as one and day would become night, the beginning of the new era.

Having received insight into her brother’s past, Vieanne concluded that Marcale was a victim and not responsible for what was about to take place. The old priestess had not brought him up as promised or in the manner befitting royalty. Artemis knew Marcale’s fear and loneliness that the woman nurtured, creating a life of misery for her brother. She now understood what Marcale yearned for, a warm touch and to be loved. Her heart ached for his suffering and yet it was not over for him.

Marcale knocked, but the priestess did not answer. As he wished to make peace, he let himself in. Spotting the woman with her back towards him out on the balcony, his eyes remained on her white garments. Nervously, he took a deep breath and thought to himself, what does a dead man have to lose? If repentance would see his very essence freed, then he would bow before the woman he loathed to find peace.

Standing behind her, Marcale momentarily closed his eyes, looking for strength to open his mouth. In a humble tone, he addressed her.

“Excuse the intrusion Artemis, but I must speak with you.” With the woman turning to face him, Marcale’s eyes opened widely. He suddenly felt sick to his stomach. “So this is how it will be.” His voice broke up, shattered by what he perceived this meant. “I die at the hands of my own sister.” Crushed in spirit, his head slumped forward.

“No.” Vieanne expressed compassion. Moving slowly towards him, she knew there was nothing she could do to save him. Fighting back tears, she embraced her brother tightly. “It will not be by my hands, but know this; it was not your fault.” She paused, taking a moment to collect herself. “I promise you, I will make this known to our father. I know he will mourn the loss of his son.” Vieanne released him and their eyes met.

“I am not a bad man.” Tears welled in Marcale’s eyes. “She lied, deceived...”

“I know,” Vieanne interrupted him. “Like you, I had to make a choice. I truly believe we are both doing the right thing.”

“Promise me you will set things right, not only with father, but also with the child.” His sister's hesitation to answer had Marcale doubting his decision to face death as a repented King. It again crossed his mind to run, assuming evil would take the kingdom no matter what he did.

“I promise you this,” Vieanne said, “I will do everything in my power to not only clear your name, but to fulfil your dream.”

“Artemis was right, I was wrong.” Marcale expressed confusion. “You must do what you can to save the ways of the Mariard.”

“Oh I intend to, but Artemis was not right. I am sorry, I cannot go into it further, but know this; you were not to blame, you were just a pawn in her game.” She turned and began to

walk towards the door.

“Vianne,” Marcale blurted. “Tell me you will be there.” His eyes pleaded, yet obviously she could not bring herself to turn and face him.

“I will be there.” Vianne walked through the doors.

Having entered the adjoining chamber, Vianne drew a deep breath, wiping the tears from her cheek. She picked up the book of Kings from the table between the armchairs. Opening it to her father’s portrait, without hesitation, she ripped the page out. Tossing the book into the hearth, she watched it catch alight on the red coals. Artemis’ personal writings, a book of prophecies, joined the other amongst the flames. There were two books missing, the history of their world and the true writings of the Mariard. One she wanted, the other would burn and she knew exactly where to find them.

CHAPTER 3

In the council chamber, those gathered did not sit at the long, polished table with seating for twenty-five, but stood nervously grouped. Marcale demanded a private wedding ceremony, having left guests waiting in the great hall. His fiancée protested, yet Marcale had the final word and reluctantly she consented. The heir's trembling hands, lack of enthusiasm and refusal to explain himself had the heads of council on edge. Fears escalated with Marcale ordering that the priestess not be disturbed until the coronation and elected another to conduct the wedding ceremony. Although the council perceived the worst, none were going to raise the issue pertaining to purity and prayed that it was merely nerves distorting Marcale's judgment.

Guests and officials filled their glasses. The roar of chatter began to fade with the announcement that the royal couple was on route to the gallery. The doors to the purification chamber opened; the priestess became the central focus as she stood on the balcony overlooking the area. Silence began to fill with whispers. Vianne glanced over the crowd; obviously, they had expected Artemis.

The hood of Marcale's lengthy, white cloak shrouded his fear. Bare footed, he appeared from a side entrance, situated near the bottom of the staircase. The silent crowd watched a disgruntled bride emerge from the opposite side of the hall. Synchronised, the couple slowly moved up the staircases.

Identical to her husband's garment and draping the steps, Tangelica's cloak hid her nudity. On making eye contact with Vianne, she stumbled. The priestess' reserved expression turned nerves to fear. Having not been informed of the transition, she assumed Vianne would make this difficult for her and further ruin her day.

The priestess silently led the couple into the chamber. Tangelica brushed past Vianne and in awe of the dome and disk, pranced about excitedly. Shortly we will expose Artemis as a liar, Tangelica thought, remaining confident the ritual was the work of the priestess' imagination. Ending Artemis' stronghold on the kingdom would see them in the history book and give them freedom to rule the Mariard, their way. Unbeknown to her, what was about to take place, would see her widowed and disgraced.

Remaining close to his sister, Marcale feared distancing himself from her until he had to. His stomach churned with nerves and his hands trembled whilst holding the sides of the cloak together. Marcale's tone clearly expressed apprehension.

"What happens now?" He asked with eyes of dread.

"We wait." Vianne retained a solemn expression.

Tangelica thought she was only moments away from having it all. She would personally see to it that both Artemis and Vianne were banished from the kingdom. With only the three of them present, she sought answers from the priestess.

"Why is Artemis not here? How dare she send her apprentice to conduct a coronation." Tangelica took offence with Marcale raising his voice at her.

"Hold your tongue woman; show some respect!" Marcale looked to his sister, who lifted her hand, gesturing to let Tangelica speak. Having come forward, Tangelica left little space between them, hoping her new status would intimidate the priestess.

"What have you done to make my husband cower so?"

"He saw the light." Vianne passed her to stand on the outer ring. Tangelica was not impressed that her husband quickly followed suit.

The light in the chamber was slowly diminishing. Vianne asked Tangelica to remove the

cloak and position herself on the twelfth ring from the centre. Begrudgingly, the new bride complied. Marcale did not have to be asked; hiding his manhood with his hands, he sheepishly presented himself in the centre as the head of the royal household. He looked up. The foretold eclipse was taking place and three heavenly spheres were aligning. The whiteness of the Mariard moon was being replaced by the fiery glow of the second moon. Day was indeed becoming night, which saw the chamber bathed in red.

Having come to the centre of the disk, Vieanne stared into her brother's eyes. They exchanged no words, but Marcale forced a smile over quivering lips and straightened. He wanted his sister to know he would meet his end, as a repented man.

The priestess returned to the outer ring. Vieanne paused, momentarily looking at her brother before radiating a strong blue aura. Raising her hands, Vieanne's chanting made the couple most anxious. The light reflecting off the walls began to rotate and intensify in brightness. Tangelica squealed in fright, a strange mist slid around her bare legs. Fear spurred temptation to move to the centre with her husband, who stood trembling with eyes fixed on his sister.

Retaining an aura, Vieanne ceased chanting. On lowering her hands to her sides, she took the stance of a dignitary. Now restricted to the outer ring, the priestess could do nothing but watch. Though this was tearing Vieanne up inside, she remained most alert to everything going on within the chamber.

A dark, shapeless form grew amidst the light to tower over her brother. Marcale held back from cowering in its presence, yet Vieanne could feel his terror. From the corner of her eye, she glimpsed Tangelica dropping to the floor, having fainted out of fear.

The light faded to a luminous haze. Death itself stood in the inner circle, cloaked in black with a hood shadowing his features. Marcale's impurity had shown itself and the light of the Mariard could not shine through. This opened the door for the Necropolis representative to enter, whose very name honoured that which created him and he would now serve.

The sensation emanating from Necropolis' red aura sent Marcale to the floor. Barely alive, the man lay incoherent at the new monarch's feet. Necropolis sensed the priestess' animosity. Looking to her, he fixed to memory every detail of his opponent. In turn, Vieanne was also securing a mental picture of her enemy. Sandals strapped to thick legs, a cloak partially hid a long sleeveless tunic covering a robust, muscular physique. His face remained shrouded in shadow, yet Vieanne suspected the epitome of evil.

"What do you wait for priestess?" His deep raspy voice echoed throughout the chamber. "Your work here is done." Necropolis was eager to take his position.

Vieanne knew her presence locked up the outer ring and her opponent could not leave the inner circle until she left the chamber. She addressed him with authority.

"Necropolis, it is not finished. I make claim to the body when you are done." Vieanne felt him trying to get into her mind, but she was the stronger of the two and quickly blocked him out.

Not wanting to waste time or energy on this ritual, Necropolis probed Marcale's mind instead. What he obtained, he would delight in using to see the woman squirm.

"My heart bleeds for you priestess." His sarcasm and confidence he sensed annoyed her. "You shall have the body of your dear brother. Think of it as a parting gift, a reminder of what is to come." The changed tone aired his loathing. "Believe me, I am going to come, and next time we meet, there will be no rings to protect you." His cloak flared to cover Marcale's body.

Vieanne looked down at the floor, assuming Necropolis would now make her brother suffer, just to spite her. Startled, her sights followed the body sliding across the rings to her feet. Though gripped with rage, she maintained a cold calm. She had not expected Necropolis to char the body beyond recognition, which reduced to mere ash within seconds.

"A reminder of what is to come, priestess." Necropolis lowered the hood of his cloak, revealing his lengthy, red, straight hair. His facial features provoked the priestess to form tight fists at her sides.

“You may have stolen my brother’s identity, but you do not have his essence.” Lowering to rest on one knee, Vieanne’s hand trembled as she took the blue, glass bead from the white ash. Aware of the true nature of the token, she held it tightly in the palm of her hand. Already contemplating her next moves, she rose to her feet.

Necropolis watched the woman calmly walk towards the exit. Before entering the corridor, she hesitated, turned and stared at him for a moment. Unexpected, the priestess rushed a chant, which alarmed him into action.

The powerful surge of energy rippled the air. Necropolis heard the impact whilst running across the rings. He snatched up Tangelica and leapt to safety. Anger filled his expression, yet he did not look back with the disk showering the area with sparks. With the woman hanging like a rag doll over his arm, Necropolis loudly cursed the priestess. He had no intentions of chasing after his opponent; the priestess was no fool and would have well planned her escape from a castle he was unfamiliar with.

Though having Marcale’s face, the rest of Necropolis made it blatantly clear this was not her husband. Tangelica screamed with him towering over her nakedness. On all fours, she scrambled across the white marble floor towards her cloak. Fear clouded her thoughts, as she reached out to grasp it. The large foot came down in the centre of the fabric, which had Tangelica glaring at it.

“The Queen cowers at my feet.” Necropolis laughed, but his tone abruptly soured. “Get up off the floor! The mother of my children will not act like a dog.” By the arm, he hauled the woman to her feet, snatched the cloak from the floor and wrapped it around her shoulders. Tangelica could not look at him and now trembling uncontrollably, clutched the cloak together from within.

“It is time to greet our guests.” Necropolis guided her to move with him.

Gasps were heard from the crowd with the man presenting himself, evidently, Marcale’s impurity had shown itself. The sound of doors slamming shut heightened fears. Service attendants voiced they were locked in, inciting guests to distance themselves from the staircases. With the great hall silent, they nervously awaited the man on the balcony to speak; however, he radiated a red aura and just stood there.

Necropolis eyed over a dozen or more high council members at the front of the crowd. Their women folk suddenly began screaming, setting off panic. The selected males became ghostly pale, their eyes turned bloodshot and they now just stared ahead, void of expression. In synchronisation, the men moved a few steps forward, before coming to attention. Miraculously their attire changed into dull, grey-black armour concealing their bodies and helmets hid faces. Spiked clubs and swords appeared in their hands, making the transformation complete. A nod from Necropolis saw them turn and with weapons at the ready, faced the crowd.

What this one man demonstrated in seconds was not only beyond comprehension, but had men fearing to confront such power with the women folk present.

Resting glowing hands on the railing of the balcony, Necropolis was bored with gloating over terrified faces. It was time to give his speech.

“The Mariard is no more,” Necropolis hollered, drawing all eyes to him. “I Necropolis now lord over your cities, your industries and the ground you walk on, but most of all, I lord over you!” He paused briefly, taking in the sensation of utter terror. “From this day forward, any man, woman or child who disobeys the new order, will be put to death!” He looked back, Tangelica was at hands reach.

Aware that his emanating energy could quite see the woman dead, Necropolis took precautions to ensure his touch would not harm Tangelica. After all, she was to be the mother of his children. Pulling her forward for all to see, the woman stared vaguely at nothing in particular. Onlookers assumed their new Queen was traumatised. Again, their attention shifted to Necropolis.

“This is the woman who betrayed you, as did her husband, but he has paid for his crimes

in full!” Necropolis grasped Tangelica around the waist, pulling her hard against him. He anticipated gasps from amongst the guests, who had not expected him to kiss their Queen hard on the lips. Unseen, his hand slipped under her cloak to rest on her stomach. Within moments, Tangelica went limp, yet he maintained a firm grip on her.

Straightening, Necropolis grinned. Tangelica was so white in the features one would have thought her dead. Necropolis sensed the player had done the deed. He did not have to see the blood trickling down her leg to know the Mariard seed was dead and another planted in its place. Thriving on his accomplishment and the fear emitted within the great hall, Necropolis again addressed the crowd.

“Your Queen bears the fruit of a new age! The bloodline of Maroda is dead. The Necropolin lineage begins. Let the celebrations continue!” Necropolis raised a brow of content, knowing what was to come.

Attentions shifted to the huge wall of windows. In the large courtyard beyond, castle staff, amongst others, could be seen fleeing for their lives. What appeared as balls of fire were plummeting from the skies; their impact gouged lawn, crushed shrubs and some even tore through branches of trees. Amongst the haze, tall, copper toned, armoured figures emerged with long red plumes protruding from the top of their helmets. Collecting in threes, they began moving off, to take up positions around the castle.

Necropolis smirked, the airdrop had been successful. Though it would take time to transport the creatures in from the desert region, he was confident he would soon have an elite army. He could foresee them crushing, not only those who would appose the new regime, but his Mariard opponent before his seeds became of age. The power he now held, he would do everything to keep. His thoughts of lording over all motivated him into action.

Again, silence befell the great hall. Carrying their Queen’s limp body in arms, Necropolis moved down the staircase. The newly acquired high council came to attention, before following their new master out of the hall.

CHAPTER 4

Vieanne looked forward to seeing her father and friends. During their days of flight, she spoke highly of them to Malisa, who was a comfort to the priestess. The aide had never seen ice fields. What she was seeing through the windshield of the transport captivated her. The whiteness sparkled from the light of two moons. With the Necropolin to the front, Mariard somewhat further back, evil cast a pale red glow over the landscape.

Malisa's eyes were trying to follow and identify that which moved on the ice below. Brushing a length of brown hair back from her shoulder, she remembered what Vieanne had said and concluded they were Milonights. There appeared to be hundreds of them shimmering whilst forming circles on the ice, as though knowing they were being watched and wanted to give a special greeting. The display had Malisa in awe, until her attention shifted on feeling the craft descending.

The co-pilot gave up his seat to Malisa. Having waited several minutes, she could no longer see anything due to the snow covering the large windshield of the transport.

“What are we waiting for?” Malisa got up the nerve to ask Vieanne, standing between the two seats.

“I am looking for a friend. He said he would meet me here.” The priestess expressed her concern in anticipation of his response to her new position.

“Are you talking about the Milonight you spoke of?” Malisa's girlish features lit up with Vieanne nodding. According to the priestess, Milonights were intelligent, mated for life and had litters of twelve pups. Malisa felt a little under dressed for the occasion, considering she was not used to male attire.

Several minutes on, Malisa leant forward, resting her elbows on the console in hope they would not have to wait much longer for the wondrous creature. She suddenly jerked back into the seat, startled as something attached itself to the windshield of the cockpit.

“What kept you?” Vieanne spoke into the headset communications, transmitting her voice outside the craft. The creature's curved nails scrapped the build up of snow off the glass. Malisa could now see the rounded joints on the long, narrow fingers.

“It is so beautiful,” Malisa whispered, as it stared at her with radiant blue eyes, taking up most of its face. She thought the rounded head appeared a little big for the stocky body, as did its big feet and long slender arms. The fine scales with pigmentation resembling mother of pearl covered the entire body. In all, the creature was less than three feet in length.

Standing behind the seat, the co-pilot handed Malisa a headset to converse with the Milonight.

“Hello, I am Malisa.” She spoke into the small-attached mouthpiece. The tiny slit for the mouth curved upward, expressing its acceptance of her. “It likes me.” Malisa smiled, as the Milonight repositioned itself on the windshield.

Having scrapped snow away, the creature's smile diminished into a frown on seeing Vieanne's attire.

“I had no choice Milacon.” Vieanne aired disappointed, assuming this not a good sign. If this was his reaction, she could expect even worse from others. “Please, say nothing. I really need your support in this.” She sighed with Milacon slamming his hand down on the windshield. His disapproval was evident with him slipping off the craft and swiftly sliding away on his belly.

Unable to hide her disappointment, Vieanne only glanced at Malisa, who attempted to make her feel better.

“He is your friend. Give him a little time to get used to the idea. You will see; everything will be all right.” Malisa placed her hand on top of the priestess's. Vieanne forced a smile, thinking it was not going to be that easy. Her thoughts again focused on what she was going to say to Simon. No matter which way she put it, it just did not feel right and her heart sank even more.

Bright lights guided the craft onto the white platform, one of many surrounded by rugged terrain. Once landed, it descended beneath the ice to a huge transport bay cut out of black rock and well lit from lighting, supported on chains. Protruding from a wall and overlooking the area, the large, glass panes enabled one to see the lights and movement within the control centre. Most of the arched openings led to tunnels, where others to storage areas, lockers and briefing rooms.

A tinted shielding enabled those in the craft to look out, but none on the outside to see in. Extremely nervous, Vieanne pointed Simon out to Malisa. The aide thought him very handsome, yet kept this to herself. Clean-shaven, the man stood tall with broad shoulders and blonde hair drawn back in a ponytail. Vieanne smiled with Simon picking up his little brother Malcom and placing the boy on his shoulders. The three-year-old was more like his mother, with brown wavy hair and large green eyes. Though he was but a youngster, Malcom idolised his big brother.

“There are so many here to greet you.” Malisa felt a little awkward. Earlier, Vieanne explained that no one was expecting her to return as a priestess. Considering this would devastate Simon, Malisa offered to break the news if it would help the situation. Having declined the kind gesture, Vieanne felt it was something she had to do herself.

A little back from the exit, the priestess remained seated, needing time to collect her thoughts. The pilot hesitated before opening the side door. He felt sorry for the woman, who was not only popular with the people, but it was also common knowledge that Vieanne and Simon were to wed.

Standing beside the pilot, Malisa glanced at him then looked out the doorway at the smiling faces of those gathered at the bottom of the walkway. She watched the two Milonights, in identical protective armour, walk up the ramp. One bowed its head in greeting and entered the craft. The other stopped in front of Malisa, to whom she introduced herself.

“We have already met,” Milacon said, noting her glance at his nameplate on his chest. “I’m the one who smiled at you.”

“Vieanne’s friend. She has told me so much about you.” Malisa hoped he would be more supportive this time. The Milonight holding Malisa’s bags, asked her to follow him. Malisa now felt more nervous than ever.

The air was surprisingly warm with a smell of aviation fuel and another she could not define. At the bottom of the ramp, Tayo Maroda, dressed in attire befitting that of a Mariard citizen, introduced himself. Simon followed suit, as did several others. Malisa saw Simon glancing up at the exit; evidently, he was eager to see Vieanne. With the King looking at her, she lowered her eyes, hoping she had not revealed anything in her expression.

Standing beside a seated Vieanne, Milacon apologised for his behaviour. In his opinion, he was totally selfish in his handling of the situation and would she give him the honour of escorting her from the craft.

“Thank you Milacon, but this is something I have to do myself.” Vieanne forced an awkward smile, accepting his hand to assist her out of the seat. Leaving the woman to straighten her attire, Milacon hoped she would not be much longer.

The Milonight met the man halfway down the ramp. Simon wanted to offer his assistance, presuming Artemis was the cause of the hold up. Milacon said she was coming and directed him back down. Growing impatient, Simon knew the significance of the purification ritual and assumed his fiancée would need his loving attention. Considering it involved her brother, he thought the trip would not have been pleasant for Vieanne.

Simon had no real thoughts of his own on Artemis. He had heard much about her from Tayo, who every so often, reminded him about a moment that saw his poor father embarrassed, but he did not remember her. He wanted so much to hold Vieanne in his arms, tell her he was sorry for being annoyed with her. Simon did not want his fiancée to go in the first place, having spoken his mind prior to her leaving.

Vieanne stepped into the doorway with her head held high. The cheering crowd's warm welcome was short lived with them soon realising it was not Artemis. Simon stood wide-eyed and went numb, unable to comprehend what was going on. He eyed Malisa and with her appearing uncomfortable and looking away, his heart pounded faster in his chest. Shifting his sights, he saw a Milonight leave the craft with baggage and another signal the ramp to be retracted.

Having greeted her father, Vieanne eyed Simon. He just stared for a moment, before turning his back on her and hastily moving off through the crowd. Forcing a smile, Tayo hid his disappointment and kissed Vieanne on the cheek. He now regretted sending his daughter, wishing he had listened to Simon. Nonetheless, Artemis had been specific; Vieanne was to return before the coronation. The King was not going to let his emotions cloud his judgment of Artemis, least not until he knew why a priestess had come home to him instead of a daughter.

To lighten the tension, Milacon clapped, encouraging others to do the same. Vieanne expressed her gratitude, but was eager to talk to her father. She asked him if he would personally see her and Malisa to their quarters. With the crowd dispersing, a Milonight pulled up in a white, four-wheeled, open buggy, a light transport used throughout the mountain ranges. Milacon got into the driver's seat whilst others loaded the baggage onto the small trailer.

Cruising through wide well lit tunnels, the two women, sitting in the back, held hands. One was in awe of her new environment, the other, concealed her hurt with a brave face. They came out onto a ridge, Milacon pulled over to allow Malisa to take in the grandeur of a cavern.

From this position, Malisa felt like an insect within a mound. She was able to see up and down the many levels, connected by steel mesh walkways and caged lifts running on pulleys. The multitude of arched crevices to doorways and other tunnels were cut into the shiny, black walls. Though many Milonights went about their business, she was most surprised at the number of men, women and children dressed no differently than those back in the districts.

Milacon informed that during the day, it was no different from a city with the amount of Milonights and people going about their duties, but night saw it much quieter. This had Malisa reassessing her ideals of the new Mariard kingdom, having vastly underestimated the population. Staring upward, the immense height ended with a huge dome. Triangular panes were covered in ice and although evening, the moonlight penetrated and flooded in. Dotted the walls, additional embedded lighting gave a starry surrealism.

Malisa noticed that the lower they descended, the warmer it became. Milacon anticipated her questions before she asked them. Hot and cold springs ran throughout the mountains providing heat, hydropower and a plentiful water supply. Food was grown in domed hothouses on the surface, yet these structures blended in with the environment and were unseen from the air. Throughout the Mariard districts, secret networks, having been established many years ago, continued to contribute and support them.

The aide glared as they slowed and passed the dozen or more massive crevices. Her curiosity received a chuckle from Milacon.

"It's our personal locker room, grand, isn't it?"

Assuming Malisa would not understand the creature's sense of humour, Tayo explained it was the Milonight armour depot. Each crevice was ten levels in height and stored Milonight armour. Like dots protruding from the walls, amongst the protective wear were numerous round metal rings. These rings were accesses to the outside ice fields and those vacant, indicated the armour was in use. Though Milonights were free to come and go as they pleased, their commitment and loyalty to Tayo and the Mariard was unquestionable. Considering the

multitude, Malisa concluded that an immense army was at the King's disposal. Tayo smiled fondly, he held the Milonights in high regard.

On entering her new quarters, Vianne soured, considering the room had previously been set up for Artemis. If she had known what was to be, she would not have helped in the preparations. Her only consolation was that Malisa had the room next door and her father granted her request to have Milacon and his mate, Lemma, assigned to her.

The room was no bigger than her old quarters, cut out of black, shiny rock. A bright bulbous light protruded from the low ceiling. Humble furnishings consisted of greyish blankets on a single box bed against one wall and to the other, an unadorned, yet large wooden desk and spindly chair. The door at the back of the room was not there prior to her journey to the castle. Vianne's new insight had her now aware of where it led and what she would find. In addition, implanted thoughts would have her father believing it had always been there. It was nothing but an inbuilt wardrobe to him with a door to protect her unique clothing, rather than the usual bland curtain on a rail.

Though the two were alone, her father remained silent, wanting to show her the same respect as he would have for Artemis. If his daughter had something to say then she would do so, if not, dismiss him. The warm embrace made Tayo relax a little. He was more than happy to have his daughter home and now felt confident her new position had not separated them.

Taking a deep breath, Vianne gestured for her father to sit at the desk. In turn, she sat on the bed across from him. She felt it not important to go into detail regarding her transition to the motherhood, but more so to clear up a misconception.

"Father, there is so much I wish I could tell you, but you know as well as I do that I am bound by my..." She paused with resentment. It angered her that she could not share what she believed all should know, concerning the Mariard. Even if she spoke them aloud, the words from her mouth would sound foreign to him and the written word would be as illegible as the symbols on her tunic.

Rising to her feet, Vianne took the steps to stand in front of her father. Looking into uncertain and tired eyes, she knew her words would hurt him.

"First of all, there is something you need to know. Marcale was not evil. Your son was just a pawn, used to set free that which lay in wait. He died a repented King. His essence was set free father. I am sorry; this is all I can disclose to you." Vianne saw the disbelief in his expression. Though he wished he could know all, Tayo knew she was bound by her position.

"Thank you for telling me this." The words slipped out of his mouth without emotion, yet in thought, the revelation repeated, Marcale was not evil.

All these years, Tayo had not even allowed himself to think of his son's name, let alone say it aloud. He was now confused. Artemis prophesied his son's death, even foretold of events that had come to pass. As he still did not know the full story, he tried not to judge the old priestess too harshly. Guilt stirred within him for leaving his son behind, perceiving things may have been different if he had raised the boy himself. He refrained from asking anything about Marcale, assuming his daughter was tired and needed rest after her long journey.

Vianne sensed it, saw it in her father's expression and heard it in his tone. Indeed this was a shock to him. He fumbled over words whilst asking of Artemis. The mere mention of the woman's name brought a cold look in her eyes. She would not go into detail pertaining to events back at the castle, but did say that Artemis had not acted according to the wishes of the Mariard.

Tayo profoundly apologised for instructing her to go in the first place. He could only imagine how heartbroken she must be over Simon, yet did not expect such a response.

"Father, many changes are taking place within me." Vianne appeared reserved and again positioned herself on her bed. "I will apologise now for any pain I may cause you in the future. I say this, as already I can no longer remember my early childhood." She observed his reaction.

Tayo expressed anguish, fearing the price she would pay to be the representative of the Mariard.

“What has she done to you?” Tayo slowly rose, assuming this pained his daughter, more so than she was letting on.

“Believe me; the kingdom needs a priestess more than you need a daughter. I am so sorry, there was no other choice.” Fighting back tears, Vianne's eyes followed her father, who knelt on one knee, expressing his love for her.

“I am so proud of you.” Tayo took her hand in his. “What you have done is beyond the call of duty. You are most deserving of honour and respect. I will support you in blood and position.” His eyes stressed he meant his words, as did those looking back at him.

“Father, do not forget the bond we share, no matter what happens from here on.” Vianne rested her head on his shoulder. Tayo embraced his daughter, but had an awful feeling she was trying to tell him something.

Malisa thought the room and its humble furnishings practical and warm. If she were not so tired, she would have been more excited. This was a new venture, having taken her away from what she saw as a mundane lifestyle. Whilst Milacon chatted and helped put away personal items issued to her, she thought the Milonight had a dialect all of his own. He abbreviated many words, which Milacon conveyed was a lazy use of men's language. Though Malisa smiled pleasantly, Simon and Vianne occupied her thoughts.

The sacrifice Vianne had made for the kingdom was most honourable in her eyes, yet personally, Malisa believed she could not have done it, especially after seeing Simon. What Vianne informed, regarding the man, only emphasised the overwhelming compassion she already held for the couple. To see such love destroyed was unjust in her opinion. The old priestess' cold nature brought a judgment on Artemis that she would not dare speak aloud. Her official position was still that of an aide to the priestess, but so far, Vianne had treated her as a trusted friend and confidante. Having seen and heard more than she was supposed to back at the castle, Malisa had promised Vianne she would not speak of it to anyone.

Milacón returned to Malisa's room with some clothes Vianne wanted her to have; the priestess no longer had use for them. Though Vianne was taller, the two women both had the same shapely figures. The Milonight's thoughts were occupied whilst helping Malisa put the clothing away within the shelved and railed wardrobe. He could not get Simon's expression out of his mind, especially that moment when he turned and pushed his way through the crowd. Milacón could only imagine how Simon was feeling, he silently prayed that time would heal the man's broken heart. Although he was at a loss to comprehend the reason behind Vianne's decision, knowing the woman as he did, knew she would not have accepted the position lightly. His attention snapped with the knock on the door.

The invitation to enter had Simon poke his head round. His expression was not promising.

“I need to see you Milacón.” Simon only acknowledged Malisa with a nod and held the door open for the Milonight.

Out in the narrow passage, Milacón did not expect Simon to shove him hard against the wall in anger. This was a side of the man the Milonight had never seen before or in any other for that matter.

“Why did you not tell me?” Simon kept his voice down, yet his tone aired fury.

“I only found out shortly before you did. I was just as surprised as you, in fact so much so, I was unduly rude to the poor woman.” With Milacón stepping away from the wall, Simon leaned up against it.

“I cannot believe any of this! She was trained to be a warrior, not a priestess! What was she thinking to accept such a position?” Simon ran his fingers through his loose hair in frustration.

“I can't begin to imagine how you must be feeling, but I do believe you should speak to Vianne personally. Better you get her side of the story, before you judge her too harshly.”

“She made her decision when she...” Simon abruptly went silent with Malisa opening the

door.

“I think it would be more appropriate if you continued your discussion in here.” Malisa gestured for them to enter her quarters. Milacon pushed a reluctant Simon through the door.

Malisa asked him to sit, but Simon preferred to stand. The man had only entered out of courtesy.

“Listen to me Simon...” Malisa raised her hand with him about to interrupt. “Please, just hear me out. All I can tell you is that Vieanne had no choice in the matter. What she did was for the good of all, not just the one.”

“We all have choices, she made hers quite clear.” Simon sighed. In his state of mind, he wanted to leave.

“You have no idea what she went through, and if you knew, then perhaps you would see this differently.”

“Enlighten me.” Defensively, Simon folded his arms across his chest. Malisa wished she could tell him, but this was not up to her and she shook her head.

“As the priestess’ aide I am not in a position to discuss such matters, but it is no secret of the ritual that took place. Put yourself in her position. How would you feel if you personally witnessed the death of your brother?”

“He was evil! She did not even know him.” Simon’s outburst prompted Malisa to divert disappointing eyes. She had seen for herself Marcale’s hours of suffering and knew Vieanne’s thoughts on the subject.

“A lot can happen in twenty-four hours,” Malisa uttered, awkwardly.

“Yes it can.” Simon aired a little sarcasm. “Not only did evil meet its end, but so did our relationship.” He unfolded his arms and went to leave.

“You selfish, arrogant man!” Malisa slapped her fingertips over her mouth, having startled herself that she had been so candid.

Remaining silent, Milacon tilted his head a little. He had never seen such behaviour and suddenly felt guilty, as he too, agreed with her. Though appearing confident, Malisa was nervous and continued to speak her mind.

“Have you no heart?” Malisa saw Simon raise a brow. “If this is an indication of your love, then Vieanne is better off without it.” She folded her arms across her chest, anticipating a response.

Feeling insulted, Simon stormed from the room in a worse mood than when he first entered. Milacon placed a hand of friendship on Malisa’s shoulder.

“I do believe you struck a nerve. He needed to hear it and to be honest, so did I.” Through his gloved hand, Milacon could feel the vibration of her trembling.

“I cannot believe I just spoke to him like that.” Malisa presumed this is what Vieanne meant by speaking one’s mind. “I do not know what came over me.” She looked on the fixed features of the Milonight.

“Well, whatever it is, you caught it from Simon. He too was most outspoken. I do hope we don’t have an epidemic on our hands.”

Having gone straight to his room, Simon lay on the single bed gazing up at the ceiling. Unable to recognise a bruised ego, his angry expression reflected his thoughts. He totally disagreed with what Malisa said, seeing himself the only injured party in all this. It pained him to think that Vieanne had chosen to take up the position over him. His lack of understanding only furthered his fury. Nothing was going to convince him that she did not have a choice in the matter. Vieanne had made her decision; he could not see himself ever forgiving her for what she had done. His anger eventually subsided and giving into tears, he cried himself to sleep.

CHAPTER 5

The early hour of the morning had passageways lit by small night-lights embedded in the rock walls at ankle height. They gave off a soft glow whilst most remained asleep. Milacon lightly tapped on Malisa's door and listened intently. The technology built into his armour enabled sounds to be amplified. Within a few moments, he knew the woman had stirred. Whilst waiting, Milacon assumed that Vieanne had also informed Malisa of the early rising. He suspected that like he, the aide would be anxious to know what Vieanne wanted to show them. His lack of sleep was not due to secrecy or pondering what they would find, but due to his concerns for Vieanne.

Prior to retiring for the night, the woman's visit made it clear to Milacon that Vieanne was indeed struggling with her newfound status. Whilst having silently nursed an emotional friend, he concluded there was more to being a priestess than she could reveal or any were aware of.

Dressed in a long sleeved, white shirt, brown vest and tie belt pants, Malisa emerged from her room. She smiled a greeting, yet her eyes exposed her anxious state. Milacon glanced down, gesturing the untied lace on the thick lined, ankle boots. Apologising for making him wait, Malisa hastily did it up. The two silently continued to the next room.

Wearing the garb of her position, the priestess stood to the back of her quarters. Vieanne did not appear eager to enter the door, slightly ajar. Tired eyes implied to Malisa that the woman had had little or no sleep. She only glanced at the Milonight with him breaking the silence.

"I feel rather sneaky meeting like this." His attention stayed with Vieanne, who responded in a tone airing agitation.

"I agree, but as I said to both of you last night, it is most important that no one knows what is happening or what the gift from the Mariard is until the appointed time."

"Do you know?" Malisa stifled a yawn. Vieanne nodded, revealing the darkness beyond the door.

With the priestess leading the way, a section of transparent square tiles, embedded in dry grey dirt, lit up. The tiles not only highlighted a path, but also cast a soft glow on the rough black wall to one side, revealing a steep drop to the other. Sections of the path continued to light up on approach, making it evident of a winding descending trail. With its ceiling hidden in darkness, the monstrous cavern had huge boulders jutting upward, marking corners of the path. Smaller formations were seen grouped on earthen terraces. Though the air was warm, there was a stale smell about it. Malisa assumed that as no one had ever been here before, it was just musty air.

Milacon was nervous, not even the King himself knew of this area within the mountains. He thought it rather unfair that he was escorting Vieanne and not Tayo considering the man's status and what he had done over the years in the name of the Mariard. A strange feeling came over him, like he had been in the cavern before, yet knew this not to be true. The sensation quickly faded, as his attention diverted with another section of tiles lighting up.

The path had levelled out a few times. Limited lighting saw only glimpses of large rock formations. Again they found themselves descending.

"How far do you think it is?" Milacon asked.

"Not much further," Vieanne replied, before slowing her pace. Looking down the slope, the path crossed a flat area. Additional tiles surrounded an opening, lighting up a large keyhole cavity in a wall.

Having radiated a bright aura, Vieanne guided her companions into the darkness. Malisa and Milacon assumed a smaller cavern in comparison to the first; however, the priestess knew

the enormity of it. From an immense height above, a spotlight suddenly exposed a dust covered disk embedded in the ground. Excluding the centre, the disk consisted of sixteen bronze and chrome rings, each eight-inch wide. With Vianne walking across it, the disk radiated a visible energy, much like the priestess's aura.

Malisa had glimpsed a similar object within the purification chamber at the castle. Whilst waiting for Vianne, she had peered out of the secret passage in the corridor and seen things she should not have. The reminder made her uneasy and she was not about to follow Vianne onto the disk. She called out to the woman.

“Can he get to us through this?”

“No!” Vianne anticipated their fears and curiosity. “Watch!”

Maintaining her aura and standing in the centre of the disk, Vianne intently looked at the outer ring. It began to rotate in the dry dirt, giving off a grinding noise. With the ring picking up speed, dust stirred. The sound of whirling made Malisa frightened. Feeling uneasy himself, Milacon took her hand in his, before shifting well back from the object.

All the rings were now rotating in opposite directions, except for the inner circle, remaining stationary and grounded. The two onlookers were captivated, as the disk lifted out of the dirt. Vianne was not surprised to see an additional disk, a short distance away, having also lifted.

At fifteen feet off the ground, the five inch thick outer rings separated. Other rings followed suit, before climbing upward and outward. The combination of the two formed a trident arrangement. Although the largest rings were set into position first, they were disorderly sized from then on. Not one ring touched another; some remained horizontal where others turned vertically. All span at a frightening momentum, yet emitted little sound.

“Training area,” Vianne called out from the grounded centre. She had seen all this in her mind, but now it took on a whole new dimension. Aware of how it worked and what it was for, sparked fears for her unborn and resentment for that which was to come. With her aura diminishing, it took only a few moments for the rings to recollect and return to the ground.

The tunnel appeared to have been drilled out of solid rock. Steps within led upward and to a wooden door that saw the three in another undisclosed area of the ranges. Though a little larger, the rooms they encountered were not much different than those familiar to them above. Throughout were rough black walls and smooth shiny floors. The lounge area was lit by two bulbous light fittings on a ten-foot high ceiling. Simple furnishings consisted of a woven, grey fabric couch, two matching armchairs and a lengthy slab of black rock mounted on two stones for a low centred table. On the same wall as the tunnel entrance, four additional doors, two either side, led to sleeping quarters. Also off the lounge, an archway revealed a kitchen and through to a bathroom facility.

Within a bedroom, Malisa went through the white curtain at the side of the single bed. What she saw within the small area, prompted her to call out to her companions. She only glimpsed a chest of drawers, as two wooden cribs, placed side by side, held her attention. Seeing the items himself, Milacon asked who was with child.

“I am,” Vianne replied. Her companions glanced at one another. A confused Malisa aired her thoughts.

Having been trained to become Artemis' personal aide, Malisa was to take the place of her mother. According to the old priestess, her mother was too old to serve or accompany them to the ice fields. Her mother once said that a priestess could not have children; the mystical powers bestowed on them would destroy anything foreign within the priestess' body.

Vianne knew this to be somewhat true; however, the seed was from the Mariard and not of the flesh, so her body would not destroy it. Silently reflecting, she recalled Artemis telling her that she would receive all knowledge pertaining to the Mariard. Though answers came to her with mere thought, she had a nagging feeling something was not right. She assumed that something greater was being hidden, even from her.

Milacon watched Vieanne glide her hand along the edge of one of the cribs. Considering her royal status, it dawned on him that she would follow tradition and give birth to twins, as had her mother. Suspecting Vieanne was thinking this also, he drew her attention to another matter. He reminded his friend that she had a meeting to attend with the high council and they still had much to see.

The polished floor of the living quarters ended at another wooden door at the far end of the lounge.

Brightly lit, the cavern divided the accommodation area from an extensive storage facility, incorporating three laneways leading into darkness. The many open levels housed technology, weapons of war, far beyond Malisa's and Milacon's understanding. Though they could not see to the end of the centre laneway, it gave an overwhelming sense to the magnitude of military stock, stored here. Vieanne informed they were on the same level as another great cavern, housing the Milonight armoury and the community meeting area. A massive wall was all that divided the old and new sections and concealed their secret. What Artemis had said was indeed the truth. They would have fought their opponents with sticks and stones if she had not taken up the position of priestess.

The purpose for the layout came to Vieanne, as though having always known it. Spanning the different levels, the arsenal had everything from guns to flying machines. Each level represented advancements in technology, a war schedule, as she saw it. The Mariard nurtured its creation, was the influence behind morals, honour, prosperity and a peaceful disposition. However, the powers of the Necropolin would try to put an end to this. His representative, Necropolis, would not only lead the Necropolin armies, but also introduce these weapons first, which would signal the use of the new advancements. Vieanne heaved a troubled sigh, as going by this, war was not only imminent, but would go on for many, many years.

Images and information suddenly flooded the priestess's thoughts. She appeared vague, until the moment of awakening had passed. Her expression soured. Vieanne now knew the names, capabilities and selection of weapons for the battles ahead of them.

From where they were standing, Milacon could see stacked wooden crates and a steel rack to the front, containing strange items. Pointing them out, he questioned and Vieanne answered him.

"They are muskets. These weapons will replace swords and spears at a designated time." Something similar, but with more bulk, could be seen on the second level, which Malisa drew Milacon's attention to.

Vieanne was not in the least impressed with the technology, considering her insight into their capabilities. She informed they were machine guns and pointed out, on the opposite side of the laneway, tanks.

"Each level is a new era in warfare, from rifles to missiles, tanks to interceptors." The priestess looked up, as did her companions, at what appeared to be the top level, obscured by protruding walkways and adjoining platforms. They could not see the entire craft, but the wingspan extended well over each side of the platform. Although most curious, Malisa thought it a frightening concept and did not like the idea of standing under such technology, no matter how secure Vieanne said they were.

"Are they the same as the craft we came here in?" Malisa asked.

"No," Vieanne replied, "we came in on a transport. That up there is an ITP. Interceptor is the correct name. They look very similar, but are smaller, faster and deadly." She paused a moment, before eyeing Milacon. "It is going to be a long bloody war my friend." Vieanne was no longer interested in her surroundings, but that which lay in the middle of the cavern, a short distance away.

"It's another one," Milacon uttered, spotting the dusty bronze. Glancing about, he assumed there might be another close by.

The light covering of dirt blew off, as though by a gentle breeze with Vieanne taking a

step onto the outer ring, making the magnitude of the disk visible. Milacon eyed the symbols on a ring.

“This is different to the others.” He looked to Vianne for answers. Again, the information suddenly came to her mind, as though drawing them from a subconscious library of knowledge.

“It is for transporting weapons from this side, to the main cavern on the other side of the wall.” Vianne shifted her sights to Malisa.

“Would it not be easier to remove the wall?”

“No.” Vianne became agitated, yet it was not brought on by her companion’s questions. “It is imperative this area remain a secret, at least until the allotted time when all will be revealed.” She eyed over the levels whilst continuing. “Before that day comes, many of these weapons will be put in use. So many will die, having not known the truth.” Vianne’s expression changed to one most disheartened.

“Are you all right?” Malisa asked.

“To be honest, no.” Troubled by the concept, Vianne could no longer remember the later years of her childhood.

Unsure, as to how much of her memory would eventually be lost, Vianne perceived other inner changes were yet to come. Trusting what she wished to divulge would be held in the strictest of confidence, she aired her concerns to Malisa and Milacon. It was becoming painfully clear to her that on receiving such miraculous knowledge, she not only lost memories, but felt she was also losing emotional attachments. She admitted that although she still felt much for Simon, it was not the same. In addition, she could foresee her father becoming nothing more to her than a King, who she advised. Vianne felt helpless to stop it, fearing she would eventually become cold-hearted to those she loved the most.

With it nearing dawn, the three made their way back to Vianne’s quarters. Milacon stopped at the priestess’ desk, having suddenly noticed the strange metal and glass object. It had a main stand with thin rods, branching out at different levels, securing round, chequer, glass platforms.

“That belonged to Artemis.” Malisa was most curious. “I swear to you Vianne, I did not bring it here.”

“What is it?” Milacon asked.

“Three dimensional chess.” Vianne had never seen it before, yet the words came to mind. She looked to Malisa for verification.

“Yes, and she played it by herself.” Malisa felt something was missing and before fathoming what it was, Milacon spoke his mind.

“I’ve played chess many times, but I’ve never seen anything like it. Where are the chess pieces?”

“That is what is missing.” Malisa turned to Vianne. “The blue and red glass beads.”

“No, they are not missing,” Vianne replied, annoyed, “they have just not been put into play yet.”

CHAPTER 6

Dramatically, Simon's character had changed over the months since Vieanne's return from the castle. His animosity continued to show in conversations at council meetings and with friends. He more so took out his bitterness on those he trained.

The large area contained bundles of imitation weaponry made from wood; the real items were in racks for lecture purposes only. Straw and sand filled bags hung from steel rails, used as targets for archery or to practice one's thrust. To the young trainees, the old world armour was heavy and awkward, but Simon made it look easy with a shield in one hand and a sword in the other. Again, he demonstrated, ordering all to follow his actions. Simon's temper flared when a young lad caught a strike across the face, leaving a nasty red mark from the wood. He blamed them all for not paying attention and again demonstrated.

At a distance, and out of the way of equipment and trainees, Malcom hid under the lengthy tiered, steel and wood slat benches. Malcom loved to watch his big brother teach a class and though a young boy, he already wanted to be a warrior like Simon.

Sitting on the corner of the bench, observing the lesson, Malisa heard a noise, prompting her to look under the seat. Spotting Malcom, she thought him cute with his attention so focused. She had become very fond of the boy. Not only was he most affectionate, but was also known for his adventurous curiosity. Letting him be, Malisa sat straight and continued to watch the training session.

In the last nine months, Malisa had barely left the secret location. When she did so, it was usually to give a message to Tayo from Vieanne. This is where she would also take time to check up on Malcom. It was the first training session she had watched and thought Simon's behaviour rude and impatient. Considering the man's attitude, she pondered whether Simon was such a good role model for Malcom.

On seeing the young lad forced to the ground, Malisa stood, expressing concern. With Simon continuing to exert his strength, she hastily crossed the floor.

"Enough Simon! Let him go, you are hurting him." Malisa assisted the lad to his feet. All the trainees had stepped back. "I suggest you call it a day." Their eyes met, but Malisa refused to let Simon intimidate her.

"Dismissed," Simon angrily blurted.

His eyes shifted between those leaving hastily and a frowning Malisa, who stood with folded arms across her chest. Simon waited until the two were alone, before continuing through clenched teeth.

"You had no right interfering with my class." He thrust his shield to the ground.

"And you have no right taking your bitterness out on those who look up to you!" Malisa defensively placed her hands on her hips. Simon retaliated and Vieanne became the topic of the argument.

Both neglected to consider the presence of the young boy, who unseen, scooted across the floor. Simon felt the kick on the back of his leg and spun round, accidentally bowling Malcom over. Quickly getting up, the boy again attempted to attack his big brother. With a hand firmly placed on top of Malcom's head, the boy had no hope of getting any closer.

"Stop it!" Simon scooped Malcom up with one arm and headed towards the bench.

Malisa followed closely behind, concerned Simon would take his wrath out on Malcom. She watched uneasy with the man forcing the boy to sit.

"What is wrong with you?" Simon snapped. Malcom remained silent, having defiantly

folded his arms.

Pushing in front of Simon, Malisa knelt on one knee with the intention of speaking to the boy. However, Malcom grasped her shoulder and leant forward to whisper in her ear. The boy's words prompted compassion for the youngster and her toned aired this.

"No Malcom..." Malisa glanced at Simon beside her. "I will not go away, no matter how rude your brother is." She forced a smile, attempting to reassure the boy.

Looking down at his little brother, Simon felt somewhat embarrassed, assuming to know what had been said. Drawing a deep breath, he sat down beside Malcom and approached the issue with a calm tone.

"Listen Malcom, Malisa and I have our disagreements, but I assure you, she is not going anywhere."

"Annie went away!" Malcom's long, brown fringe dangled over fiery green eyes. Malisa responded in the man's defence.

"It had nothing to do with Simon. Vieanne went into seclusion; priestesses have to do this from time to time. She will be back soon, you will see." Malisa ran her hand lovingly over the boy's hair.

The aide had partly told the truth. On the exception of Tayo and Vieanne's close companions, no one else within the mountain ranges knew the real reason behind the priestess' seclusion. Vieanne had only spent three months amongst the people, prior to informing the council that she needed time to meditate and seek guidance from the Mariard. Though told their future depended on her making the correct decisions, the council members were most disappointed. They perceived that as Vieanne had taken Artemis' place, she knew the old priestess's plans.

Vieanne foretold that during her absence, the First City would fall to the enemy. However, Necropolis would not venture on until obtaining full control and built up sufficient forces. Some citizens were already forming underground movements to resist the new regime. The priestess advised the council to make contact and work with such freedom fighters. Rally the people together, make it known that the Mariard was not dead and would rise up against their enemy.

Remaining angry, Malcom would not look at his brother. Though his words were not entirely clear, the boy embarrassed Simon on repeating what he had overheard the man say about Vieanne. Malisa knew Simon's resentment, but these were harsh words and she glared at him, gesturing to take them back for his brother's sake.

Simon remained silent, his love had long turned to hate. He could not forget the bitter argument he had with Vieanne, prior to her going into seclusion. Her last words to him and the coldness of her tone he could still clearly recall. She told him to get over it, as she had done.

Rising to his feet, Malcom ran from the training area, screaming hatred for his big brother. Malisa asked Simon to let the boy be, her words were ignored and he chased after Malcom. Sitting alone and deep in thought, Malisa could not understand how one could hold so much animosity. It had been months and Simon still acted as though it were yesterday that the news was broken to him. She knew many had tried to talk to the man. Those closest to Simon elected not to socialise with him, due to his attitude that even his own father found appalling.

Interrupting his friend's thoughts, Milacon was most flustered, as he had been looking for the aide.

"It's time! Hurry, hurry." Milacon grasped Malisa by the wrist, hauling her off the seat.

"Slow down. You do not want to draw attention." Malisa pulled him into line and the two left the area.

On the exception of a longer tunic, there was little difference between the female and male Milonight armour. Lemma, Milacon's mate and the priestess' midwife, stood at the end of the single bed in the woman's secret quarters. In a pleasant voice, Lemma told Malisa to ready the blanket.

Within the lounge area, Milacon paced around the low table. On again hearing the painful cries from the priestess' room, he diverted his attention by straightening the crochet rug thrown over the couch. Though most excited, he cringed at the thought of what the woman was going through. He saw this day as the dawn of a new era. Having played a part in Vieanne's upbringing, he was not only proud of the woman, but also felt honoured to be there for the birth of her children. Nonetheless, he wished it did not have to be a secret, thinking what a glorious day it would be if the entire kingdom could celebrate the twin's arrival.

Milacon began pondering the work ahead of them. He suspected these special children would endure difficulties with them not interacting with those of the mountains. Vieanne had conveyed to her companions that the children would have gifts and these gifts, once fully developed, were unlike anything ever seen before. He had spent many hours looking at his own children, contemplating the issues he presumed might arise over the next twenty-one years. Though not openly admitting it, he thought it not right that two children should grow up in seclusion with only adult company and the weight of a kingdom's survival resting on their shoulders. The only concession to their imprisonment, as Milacon referred to it, was that of another training ground, other than the cavern of rings. Once the children were old enough, they would regularly visit the ice fields. Though he was eager to acquaint them in the ways of the Milonights, he would abide by the restrictions Vieanne may place on him.

On hearing the wailing of a newborn, Milacon scooted towards the bedroom. Positioning himself at the door, he intently listened, but was startled with it opening. Malisa held a bundle in arms and gestured with her head to come through. He did not look at the woman in labour, whilst following the aide into the nursery.

Placing the bundle into a crib, Malisa shifted her sights. Milacon tilted his head, appearing to be studying the babe's features.

"Isn't she... petite." Milacon was eager to nurse the newborn. Considering his bias for his own kind, he thought her cute, but in an ugly sort of way.

"It is not a she, but a he." Malisa unbundled the babe to clean him.

"What? That's impossible," Milacon whispered. "Tayo said the female would be born first, like it has always been in the royal household." He looked back towards the door. Evidently, another had entered their world.

"Here." Malisa handed him a warm damp cloth. "I trust you will be gentle." She went to aid Lemma.

Whilst wiping the babe's body, Milacon studied the child's tiny features and the fine dark hair on his head. He was uncertain whether it was a blessing or a curse that the boy was born first. The infant looked at him; the babe's large, luminous blue eyes captivated him. He could not help but feel like a new father, considering this is how close his relationship with the child would become. Interrupting his moment of bonding, Lemma took over. She wrapped the baby in clean linen, before taking him to his mother.

Propped up with pillows, Vieanne wished nothing more than to see both her newborn babes. Nursing her daughter, she expressed gratitude to those who stood around the bed. She glanced at her wimple and silver band on the dressing table; the remainder of her garb hung over the spindly chair. In thought, she prayed that what she had passed onto her son, whilst in the womb, would be found and brought to light in the future. Not only could he save his sister from the heartache she had endured, but also see her very own essence released.

Lemma took the baby away to be cleaned. Now nursing her son, a tear trickled down Vieanne's cheek. At this moment, nothing was going to steal her joy, not even the struggle going on within her. She would treasure every moment she could with her children. There was little time left, before all that she was would be lost completely.

Milacon tapped his fingertips together, drawing Vieanne's attention to him. She knew this to be a sign of nerves and believed to know what was on his mind.

"I so trust both of you." Vieanne glanced between Malisa and Milacon whilst continuing

to address them. "I know what I am about to ask, you would do without hesitation. I need you to look after my son and daughter, as though they were your own." The two were already nodding at her. "No matter what I say or do, even if it means going behind my back, you must see this through. Do it knowing these are my heartfelt wishes." She eyed Milacon's fingers, yet he could not stop tapping. "I do not know how much longer I can hold the inevitable back."

Milacon placed his hand on Vieanne's shoulder, knowing her struggle to retain her memories.

"I promise we will see them through, no matter what it takes."

CHAPTER 7

The council met to hear reports. Necropolis had turned the desert Milonights into merciless creatures. Heating elements within their armour sustained them, yet evidence was mounting that these Death Walkers were considered by Necropolis, as disposable items. The First City had fallen; the Necropolin armies were sweeping through surrounding sectors. Refugees were flooding into neighbouring districts with horrendous stories of death and destruction.

Urban fighting proved most difficult. Although Mariard forces fought well, winning minor battles, the number of casualties was staggering. Nothing they did stopped the enemy from advancing. Neither Milonights nor soldiers were shown mercy by Necropolin troops. Captive civilians were taken for slave labour or executed as a warning to those who would stand against the Necropolin regime.

Many had just returned from battle. In armour, Simon dropped his sword and bloodied shield onto the oval raw wood table. Both Tayo and his father were amongst the twenty five seated, giving Simon their full attention with him standing before them. The grime did not hide Simon's expression of anger whilst glancing over the many faces before speaking.

"Members of the council, we are losing the battle. And you, King Maroda, say the priestess will not address us until she is ready. It has been twelve months. How long must we wait? We need to form solid strategies, better our weaponry. If we wait for the priestess, these demons will take all sixteen cities." Simon shifted his sights to his father, who addressed Tayo.

"They cut us down with strange weapons." Cainen expressed disappointment. In thought, he agreed with his son.

"They are called guns." Vianne saw heads snap round to look at her. She approached the table with cold eyes, yet her tone aired a calm disposition. "You shall have them too."

"When?" Simon retained ill feelings towards the woman. Their eyes met. Vianne raised a brow, not intimidated by his animosity towards her.

"We already have them. You will hold one in your hand this very day."

"And I suppose you are going to teach us how to use them?"

The man's tone prompted his father to rise from his seat, feeling embarrassed by his son's blatant disrespect for the priestess. Vianne gestured for Cainen to sit down. Reluctantly, he complied and she continued.

"I do not need to teach you anything Simon. All you need to know is within you; in all of you." Vianne glanced over confused expressions.

"You speak in riddles woman!" Simon began to feel uneasy. The priestess appeared most confident and something in her eyes had him assuming she was amused at his ignorance.

The door to the council chamber burst open. The young soldier apologised for the intrusion, but the council needed to come quick and see what was in the community hall, the cavern adjoining the Milonight armoury. Simon could feel Vianne's eyes on him, as he left with other members.

Alone with her father, Vianne questioned why he had not gone with the others. Tayo asked her to sit, but she declined.

"You forget; I already know what they will find in the cavern." Tayo sighed, resenting what his daughter had become.

The change in Vianne's character, especially over the last three months, grieved him. In his eyes, he had lost his daughter. The woman had become a perfectionist, lacking patience and heart. Her icy hardness ground on him, yet he maintained respect for her position. Her high

expectations, he feared none could live up to. His daughter retained the grace and nobility of a true priestess, a significant characteristic in Artemis. However, he could not remember the old priestess having such a cold-hearted nature.

Little had been divulged to Tayo regarding his son and he continued to grieve and feel the burden of guilt. If Vieanne's acquired character was anything to go by, it only assured him that Artemis had not been the woman he thought her to be. Having kept his convictions and speculations to himself, he held Artemis responsible for leading Marcale to his death and ruining his daughter's life. Unnerving was the uncertainty to where Vieanne would lead them in this time of great upheaval. The priestess' companions maintained their loyalty, having not said a bad word against her. Nonetheless, he perceived to know their thoughts on the matter. Milacon's anxiety showed itself, more so now than ever before.

Tayo kept his eyes on the woman. Vieanne raised a brow and began slowly moving around the table.

"Conveniently timed, do you not think? Before insurrection rose in your ranks."

"I will see to it that Simon apologises for his disrespect." Tayo felt he was talking to a stranger, whilst watching her steadily progress towards him.

"It will not be necessary. He will get the fight out of his system on the battlefield." Vieanne now stood beside him. Tayo turned in his humble seat of wood and leather to look up at her.

"Have I become so little to you that you stand over me?" He lowered his sights with her moving on, holding to the same slow pace around the table.

"You are my father in name only; a King who I have vowed to serve." Vieanne heard the man rise from his chair. She continued around the table toying with her prey.

"I have lost a son and a daughter." With Vieanne not responding, Tayo continued. "I wish to ask something of you."

"Ask."

"Will you keep to your promise, allowing me a relationship with the children?" Their eyes fixed on one another. She stopped a few feet from him.

"If I have made a promise to you, then it shall be kept." Vieanne continued her round.

"You did make such a promise, on the day of their birth." Tayo would not let her pass him this time. "You were never denied love or affection. Secrecy is one thing, the other I will not tolerate, even from you."

"I trust I can rely on you to personally oversee their development in this area." Vieanne forced pleasantries. Evident in his eyes, the man's animosity and silence had her expression return to a cold-calm. "The children are gifted. They need to be strong, mentally and physical for what is to come. I warn you, weaken them with emotions and all that you know will cease to exist." Vieanne brushed past him and left the council chamber.

Tayo remembered the day when his daughter apologised for any hurt she may cause him in the future. Now, he fully understood what this meant. He was her father in name only, a King she had vowed to serve. The words dug deep, she was definitely not the woman she once was and this disturbed him. He swore by the Mariard, if her heartlessness began to reflect in his grandchildren's characters, he would expose the secret and raise them himself.

On the exception of the priestess, no one had realised anything had changed. The staggering amount of guns and ammunition, contained in wooden crates, well and truly hid the ringed disk in the centre of the community hall. Though Milonights retained his or her armour, everyone else was now outfitted differently. Council members wore dressy uniforms, consisting of a red, lengthy, double-breasted jacket, black pants and hats. Rank was seen on the shoulder lapels in gold embroidery, distinguishing council members from others. Males from eighteen onwards, wore less impressive uniforms in dark blue; rank was in the form of white stripes on the upper arm. Women and children's clothing saw different colours, more buttons than ties, full length dresses instead of skirts and bodices. Hair styles had not changed; most men wore their

lengthy hair tied back in ponytails, women's in buns or braids.

The rifles were a blessing. Knowledge pertaining to their use came to them the instant they saw the weapons. Mentally, changes had occurred. Forgotten was the rigorous training with swords and shields; implanted thoughts created the belief that they had learnt their skills on a surface rifle range. As they talked amongst themselves, unbeknown to them, the new area was coming into existence out on the ice field. Those supposedly trained, now knew how to load, fire and even maintain a weapon. No one questioned the miraculous advancements taking place, nor where the weapons, ammunition and uniforms were coming from. What was stacked in front of them, gave them hope of regaining ground.

Standing back from those gathered, Vieanne knew this to be the first of many such advancements in weaponry, clothing and equipment. Though the Necropolin implemented the weaponry schedules, both sides were bound to comply with war regulations. Necropolis had showed his hand, enabling those of the Mariard to utilise their opponent's technology. It would be some time before a similar advancement would be put in place. Such changes would continue to occur until either party won the war.

The priestess watched the councillors examine the weapons. A member ordered the crates to be loaded into transports for further distribution. Simon caught Vieanne's eye, but looked away. Although delighted to have the weapons, the priestess had shown him up in front of the council. His ego was hit hard, only adding to his animosity towards her. A glance in the woman's direction drew his sights back and had him blatantly staring.

Vieanne's hand rested on Malcolm's shoulder. She leant over to speak face to face with the boy. Livid, Simon watched her straighten. The sarcasm in her raised brow implied she wanted to antagonise him. Not wishing to draw attention, Simon decided he would have words with his little brother later.

Tayo came up behind his daughter. Simon's expression suggested the tension had not eased. The man's bitterness towards Vieanne was no secret; Tayo suspected the problems between the two would only escalate now she was again amongst them. Though disappointed in Simon's attitude, he understood and still held the man in high regard.

Vieanne forced a smile as she strode past him. Tayo's fondness of Malcom prompted him to pick up the boy in the same manner as a loving father. Malisa had confided in him of her concerns for Malcom, which he thought warranted. The boy was very attached to Vieanne, stirring fears that her new characteristics could see Malcom hurt. He was not ignorant that Simon wanted to sever the ties between his brother and the priestess. Tayo could only hope that time would heal the rift, as they did not need the added tensions at this time.

CHAPTER 8

In the years that followed, Malcom's father and brother had little time for him. Most of the men spent months on end out in the field, leaving the women and children in the mountain ranges. The war was globally taking its toll. Crippling disabilities took good men permanently out of the battlefields. Whether they returned to the mountains or districts, the veterans were cared for, yet this placed additional burdens on resources and families. Most widows volunteered to work in hospitals or other services outside the mountains, anything to help in the war effort. Milonights left the ice fields in droves to serve their King, who went with them to the frontlines. The dedication of these creatures was truly admirable and the death of a Milonight, indeed touched people's hearts.

Milacon was not only a teacher to Malcom, but also the lad's best friend. On the exception of the priestess' quarters, Malcom followed the Milonight everywhere. Unbeknown to the boy, the woman's room was rarely used, considering Vieanne stayed with the children in the secret area. The lad knew it was off-limits to him and with the relationship between Vieanne and Malcom having broken down, fear of the woman prevailed temptation.

The boy's tenth birthday had him miserable and loitering in the passageway. With the men away, the women were too busy to make a fuss of him. Malcom wanted to talk to Milacon, but assumed he was still with the priestess when he was supposed to be off-duty. He fidgeted with the corner of his dark green vest over a white shirt, buttoned to the collar. Being tall for his age, his black pants were a little short for him, revealing grey socks and lace up shoes.

The boy's attention snapped to Vieanne, who raised a cold brow at Malcom whilst passing and entering the council chamber. Beaming a smile, Malcom assumed Milacon was now free to spend some time with him. He scooted towards the stairwell, which led up a level to the sleeping quarters of the woman and others close to him.

Coming into the lengthy passageway, Malcom saw his friend enter the priestess' room. Now in no hurry, he dragged his feet and ran his hand along the wall. A few minutes past; impatience pressed the lad to edge open the door and enter.

Glancing over the room, Malcom thought it was not much different from his own. He was left confused with Milacon nowhere to be seen. The three-dimensional chess set on Vieanne's desk caught his eye. In awe, he studied it for a moment. The temptation to pick up one of the blue beads on the bottom platform subsided and he quickly withdrew his hand with the thought of the trouble he would be in if caught. Again glancing about, he eyed a door ajar, at the back of the room. Assuming it the only way Milacon had eluded him, he made his way towards it.

The lad's curiosity and eagerness to find Milacon drove his haste, yet with cautious steps. Having taken note of the drop to one side, Malcom kept close to the wall. Each section of the path lighting up, prompted him onward. He gave little thought to being caught, feeling confident that Vieanne would be kept busy for a time. Considering it was his birthday, he assumed Milacon would surely be a little more lenient with him.

The path again levelled out. Malcom glanced about him, taking in the huge black boulders. His ears pricked up and his pace slowed to almost a halt. He intently listened, positive he had heard something.

A few tiles on, Malcom again heard it and realising someone was nearby, stopped to ponder whether to go back. In his hesitation, the sound of a young child giggling, pressed him to act on his curiosity. Directed by the voice, Malcom cautiously moved off the path.

A large boulder concealed the device, yet not the glow of light. Malcom edged his way around its bulky base. The lantern was positioned at the feet of a young child, who sat on a slab of rock. Her greeting startled him; Malcom had intended to suss out the situation, prior to making his presence known. The girl was three or more years his junior, so he estimated. Though having taken in her long, dark, curly hair and flawless ivory complexion, it was her big, radiant, blue eyes which captivated him.

Again, she said hello. Malcom mumbled the greeting back and glanced over her attire. The blue uniform was the same as what his father, brother and other dignitaries wore. He silently questioned as to why she was not dressed like he and other children of the ranges.

“What is your name?” She asked with an air of excitement, whilst studying his charming features.

“Malcom... And yours?” His tone aired nervousness.

“Tegan.” She patted the rock, gesturing for him to sit beside her. After hesitating, Malcom sat. “Are you from above?” As he remained silent, Tegan assumed he had not understood and clarified. “Up in the mountain, where Malisa and Milacon come from.”

“Oh, yes, they are my friends.” Malcom forced a smile, unable to take his eyes off hers.

“Mine too. They can’t play with me at the moment; they’re very busy with my brother. Would you play with me?” Tegan’s eyes pleaded, relaxing with a smile as he nodded.

“What would you like to play?” Malcom asked.

Taking the boy’s hand in hers, Tegan guided Malcom a few steps, before gesturing to sit on the ground opposite her. With her finger, she began drawing in the dirt, telling him to do the same. Malcom flicked strands of wavy hair out of his eyes and complied.

Once finished, the sixteen circles within each other had Malcom thinking a target of sorts. Taken from her jacket pocket, Tegan revealed what appeared to be, two rounded flat-based glass beads. She placed the blue one down on his inner circle and the red on hers. His eyes opened widely with Tegan’s hands radiating a blue aura. Through the glow, he could see the dark contours of her veins. Out of fear of her, he shuffled back a little. The beads began to levitate off the ground. Fascinated and in awe of what he assumed a wondrous trick, Malcom moved back into position.

“Don’t be frightened, it won’t hurt you.” Tegan encouraged him to join in.

The circles drawn in the dirt became solid objects, consisting of chrome and bronze rings. Levitating, the disks separated. Malcom was captivated with the rings forming a trident arrangement in front of him.

“The object of the game is to force the other bead out of the rings.” Tegan smiled.

“How do I do that?” Malcom picked up the bead, presuming he had to toss it at the other.

“With your mind of course.” Tegan took his bead and placed it back on the ground.

Though the lad looked at her dumbfounded, Tegan began to play. The red bead miraculously moved so quickly between the rings, Malcom almost missed it.

“How did you do that?” He wanted her to teach him the wonderful trick.

“I just can, can’t you?” Tegan thought it odd that he had not participated, assuming he disliked the game.

“No I cannot, and I don’t know anyone who can. Please, teach me the trick.” Malcom expressed disappointment with the rings dropping to the dirt and becoming nothing but etchings. Tegan placed the blue bead in front of him and he looked down at it.

“Concentrate on moving the bead.” It was obvious to her that he did not understand. “Picture the bead in your mind and move it.” Tegan watched him intently stare at the bead.

Malcom’s features tensed with concentration. He slowly lowered onto his belly, as though he needed to be closer for it to be affective. After a minute or more, he gave up. Tegan placed the bead in his hand.

“Maybe you just need to practice.” She smiled.

“Yes, practice.” Not pleased with the outcome, Malcom hoped he would soon be able to move the bead like Tegan and play the game. They heard Malisa calling. Malcom knew if he was caught, he would be in trouble and both stood.

“Don't tell them I was here,” Malcom whispered, “or they will not let me come again. It will be our secret.”

“All right, will you come again tomorrow?” Gleaming hopeful, Tegan expressed excitement when he nodded. “Stay close to the rocks, they won't see you.” Turning off the lamp, she radiated a full body aura, which lit him up in a blue glow.

“Same time tomorrow.” Malcom stared into her eyes for a moment. With Tegan skipping away in one direction, he reluctantly scooted off in the other. The young lad was thrilled to have made a new friend. Although a girl, she did wonderful magic, leaving him in awe and wanting to know more about her.

Milacon tucked Malcom into bed, having already profoundly apologised for not spending time with the birthday boy. Malcom did not seem to mind at all and his smile gave the impression he had a good day all the same. For a birthday treat, Milacon told the boy a story and as usual, it was about Milonights.

Whilst listening, Milacon's speech reminded Malcom that Tegan had also abbreviated words, more so than himself. This confirmed they shared a close friendship with the Milonight. His thoughts were elsewhere, recalling moments from their meeting.

Having taken none of the story in, Malcom dreamily uttered goodnight to his friend. Shifting onto his side, he held the bead tightly in his hand. Tegan's face consumed his thoughts, especially her radiant eyes, which went with him into sleep.

The meetings between Malcom and Tegan continued for over six months. Their secret remained safe as another, who although was not always there to watch over the two, devised a scheme to ensure privacy and hide his involvement. In the beginning, Malcom made many excuses to avoid training with the other boys. He immensely enjoyed Tegan's company, especially as she taught him combat skills that far exceeded what was being taught by adults. Malcom had been exceptionally careful not to do or say anything to give himself away. Nonetheless, a teacher pulled him up in front of others pertaining to his speech. In defence of the lad, the King confessed that close relationship with Milonights had even him, occasionally abbreviating words.

Out in the field, Simon spoke with his father and Tayo, regarding Malcom's absence from training sessions. He would rather see his brother focus more on becoming a warrior than a scholar. Tayo conveyed that war was stealing their children's youth, making them men and women well before their time. The lad had plenty of years ahead of him, when the time was right, young Malcom may just put them all to shame.

Tayo was like a second father to the boys and it was common knowledge that the King thought highly of Cainen and his family. With the King's only son dead, some assumed Tayo's fondness for Cainen's sons, especially Malcom, was the result of the man's loss and not having been part of Marcale's life.

Though Malcom had not made the blue bead move with his mind, Tegan was convinced that one day he would do so, which was enough for him to persevere. The lad felt most honoured when Tegan called him her best friend. She mentioned on a number of occasions that apart from him and her brother, she knew no other children. This not only had him feeling sorry for her, but also wanting to fill the gap of loneliness, he perceived she felt. It bothered him immensely that she could not go beyond their meeting place. Clearly, he was not the only one who feared the priestess.

Malcom had seen Tegan do it before; nevertheless, it did not stop him fearing she would fall and hurt herself. Having called the technique free-floating, Tegan radiated an aura and levitated high above him where she hung like a rag doll in mid air. He sighed relieved, once Tegan's feet touched the ground.

“I want to show you something.” Tegan’s tone aired secrecy, yet her expression, excitement. She wanted to share this with someone, other than those she knew on a daily basis.

Having made their way down the tiles, Malcom felt most uneasy, as he had never ventured down this far before. Tegan veered off onto the dirt, so as not to set the remaining tiles alight. Through the key-hole crevice in the wall, Malcom could see into the huge cavern where the lighting of two spotlights, lit up the disks in the dirt. He thought them nothing special, considering they had one in the community hall.

“Watch.” Tegan slipped past him and ran towards the bronze and chrome objects.

Centred on the first disk, Tegan glanced over the rings then fixed her sights on Malcom. The rings commenced rotation and within seconds, began lifting out of the ground. With eyes wide and mouth gaping, Malcom watched the rings separate and move higher. His attention snapped to Tegan, who was levitating upward, to be amongst them. Usually she closed her eyes in a free-floating status, but not this time, instead, she waved and smiled at him.

Frantically, Malcom gestured with his hands to come down. The sight terrified him and he feared for her safety. Seeing Malisa enter the area, he jerked back behind the wall. He could hear the anxiousness in the woman’s tone, whilst yelling to Tegan that she knew better than to raise the disks without supervision. Having waited, the silence made it apparent that Malisa had escorted Tegan away. Malcom ran up the tiles with the images of what she had done, firmly fixed in his mind.

A few days later, several of the council members, including the King, returned to the mountains. Cainen was disappointed; his youngest son was not present to greet them in the transport bay. His wife informed that Malcom was probably in the library reading books, where he supposedly hung out most afternoons. Tayo smiled, as he knew better.

Eager to see his little brother, Simon searched many different areas, yet could not find Malcom. Having spoken with the Librarian, Simon learned that although the lad rarely visited, he did return many books taken out in the King’s name. Disappointed, Simon now suspected Malcom had not only lied to him in the past, but did not trust him enough to confide in him. Considering the horrors of war frightened Malcom, he assumed his little brother may be avoiding training, in hope of eluding recruitment once an adult. Wanting to speak with Malisa and Milacon about this, it crossed his mind that they would be chasing after the priestess at this time. He continued to look for the boy on his own.

Having not seen Tegan left the lad depressed. Though Malcom waited, Vieanne did not come out of her room, so he went to his. Lying on the floor and staring at the blue bead, Malcom was again trying to mindfully move it. His gloomy state had him unable to concentrate and he gave up. Resting his forehead on his arms, he continued to lie there, pondering on what Tegan might be thinking.

The door opening startled the lad. Malcom just stared with Milacon coming forward and collecting up his prize possession.

“Where did you get this?” Milacon did not wish to intimidate the boy, but it most concerned him.

“I found it.” Malcom remained on the floor.

“Don’t lie to me Malcom.” Milacon squatted, hoping the boy would talk to him. “If Vieanne finds out, I dread to think what she’d do. Please Malcom; tell me where you got the bead.” Milacon rose with Malcom, who flumped himself down on the edge of his bed. Recalling the strange object in the priestess’ quarters, Malcom saw this as his means of keeping his secret.

“In Vieanne’s room.”

“I’ll put it back. No one has to know, but you must never go in there again, do you understand me?” Milacon left the moment the boy followed through with a nod. Agitated, Malcom also left his quarters.

Having watched the boy storm into the training area, the instructor kept a close eye on Malcom, who appeared troubled. The group of youths were practicing unarmed combat. With

Malcom joining in, the lad's strange techniques had the instructor fearing someone getting hurt.

Intervening, the man ended up on his back. Nursing a sore arm, the instructor was even more disturbed with Malcom not even acknowledging his actions. The lad stood defensively, as though ready to attack anyone who came near him. With Malcom's expression of defiance and refusal to answer the questions put to him, the instructor sent for the boy's father, yet his brother came instead.

His little brother expressed no enthusiasm at all to see him and had not said a word on returning to the boy's room. Pulling up a chair, Simon sat beside the bed where Malcom laid down and just stared up at the ceiling.

"So what was that all about?" Simon remained calm, hoping his brother would confide in him.

"Nothing." Malcom's tone aired agitation.

"Hey, come on, it's me, your big brother. I know when something is wrong." Simon sighed frustrated with Malcom remaining silent. "I have not seen you in nearly two months and..."

"So what." All Malcom wanted was to get his bead back and be left alone.

"So what? I have been out..."

"Yeah fighting, I know."

His brother's attitude implied that Malcom had a grievance with someone and Simon believed to know who. Annoyed by the thought, he spoke his mind.

"Vianne has been causing you grief, right?" Simon anticipated having words with the woman.

"It has nothing to do with her. I don't want to talk about it." Malcom shifted his position, placing his head under the pillow.

"Come on Malcom, you are acting like..." What came to mind was himself, aggressive and angry. It now dawned on Simon what Malisa had been trying to tell him all this time. He decided it best to leave the boy alone and told Malcom if he wanted to talk, he would be there for him.

Slowly walking down the passageway, Simon pondered on his brother's behaviour. Guilt stirred, seeing a similarity, which he took responsibility for considering he had not been a good mentor. Out in the field, Simon had reflected on his own life, having concluded that he could not continue to dwell on the past. His resentment towards Vianne did not have the sting it once had. The woman was cold to everyone, not just him, so he no longer took it personally. Undoubtedly, there were memories he treasured that would always see Vianne have a special place in his heart. Knowing he needed to move on, he would show respect for her position and be civil.

During his time away, Simon had put effort into rebuilding his relationship with others close to him and the troops he led that held him in high regard. He thought of the nights he spent talking with his father, who immensely missed his wife and son, yet was grateful they were safe in the ranges. They both hoped the war would end before Malcom was old enough to fight. He personally doubted it, as they were losing the fourth state, which would shortly see the Third City fall to the enemy.

Malisa felt herself grabbed, having almost been bowled over by Simon. Though pleased to see his safe return, she presumed he would not give her the time of day and be his usual arrogant self. Most surprising, he smiled and enquired how she was. Having answered him, Simon politely asked if he could have a word with her later. Adding, it did not concern Vianne. She acknowledged him with a nod.

Desperate to see Tegan, Malcom wanted to tell her that they needed to be careful, let her know he was caught with the bead. The thought of waiting until tomorrow frustrated him, assuming Milacon would be more watchful.

There was no knock on the door, the woman just entered. By the look on the priestess'

face, Malcom assumed his friend had betrayed him.

“You have been a bad boy Malcom.” Vieanne moved to the side of the bed. She looked down on the lad, resting on an elbow and glaring in dread. “If you ever enter my quarters again, I will bring you before the council and the King himself.” She straightened and her tone relaxed. “Now, I will make a deal with you. I will remain silent concerning your deeds and you will remain silent about Tegan.” Vieanne knew the mention of the girl’s name would draw a reaction.

“We were only playing!” Malcom pleaded.

“I know you were only playing Malcom, but I forbid you to see her. Tegan is not like you, she is very special. One day you will learn this for yourself and understand why you could not see her.” The priestess cared nothing that she was reducing the boy to tears.

Tegan's gifting was not the only reason behind Vieanne wanting to keep the two separated. She feared their relationship could later develop beyond friendship, this she would prevent at any cost. Complicated emotions were not going to get in the way of her plans.

“Do you understand what I am saying to you Malcom?” His silence provoked Vieanne to snap at him. “Do you?” Though he hesitated, Malcom nodded. With him lowering his eyes, unable to look at her, she assumed the message had got through. “Good, we understand each other then. You will thank me one day for this Malcom.” She grasped his chin, forcing the boy to look up at her. “For your own sake, forget you ever saw her.” Vieanne glanced over his features. Malcom’s fearful expression only shrouded what he truly felt, that of bitterness and resentment towards the woman.

Waiting out of sight, Milacon felt dreadful, having not been aware of the relationship between Tegan and Malcom. It all made sense to him now, suspecting another was involved, who had helped the children to keep their secret. Milacon saw Vieanne leave the boy’s quarters. Once the coast was clear, he entered himself.

Malcom lay on his bed crying. The moment he heard Milacon’s voice, the boy raised his head from the pillow and told him to go away.

“I didn’t tell her Malcom, she found this.” Sitting on the bed next to the lad, Milacon revealed a drawing Tegan had done.

The picture depicted two children holding hands and with Tegan being an exceptional drawer for her age, it was not just the green eyes having given Malcom away. Although it was a little worse for wear, Milacon had managed to salvage the drawing from the bin.

“I’m so sorry Malcom. I take it you didn’t get a chance to see her today.”

“No.” Malcom sniffed.

“She must have left it for you.” Milacon took the lad’s hand and placed the blue bead in his palm, aware it was not from Vieanne’s chess set.

Sitting up straight, Malcom slipped his legs over the side of the bed, wiping his nose on his sleeve.

“She is my best friend Milacon, well, besides you. She is smart and does these great tricks. She was trying to teach me to move the bead and one day I’ll do it, you’ll see.” He rested his head against the Milonight’s chest.

Milacon placed his arm around the boy’s shoulders to comfort him, assuming Tayo would be doing the same for Tegan. He could only hope the man would intervene on the children’s behalf, believing that the King was the one who aided them.

“Malcom, I know you’re hurting over this, but you must understand...” Milacon paused, looking for a way to put it. “Tegan is not like you, she is...”

“I know, Vieanne’s already told me. I hate her!” Malcom’s tears turned to anger. “I’ll show her, I can be special too. One day when I’m big, I will prove it, and she won’t stop me seeing Tegan.”

Milacon felt deep heartache for the boy. Tegan and her brother were gifted and this was something the boy did not understand. Knowing Malcom as he did, he could only foresee disappointment ahead for the boy, as he would strive to achieve that which was impossible.

Remaining silent, Milaon was unable to bring himself to tell this to Malcom, as already, the boy was hurting enough.

CHAPTER 9

So many districts had been lost over the years. Advancements in weaponry and equipment made little difference and many had died in the war that some believed would never end. Prayers not answered saw hopes dashed or fading, nonetheless, they pushed on all the same.

Within the mountains, the transport bay was a bustle of activity. Medical personnel in white military uniforms stood out amongst the crowds. Many shuttles and transports were returning from the battlefields, loaded with the wounded and dead. Refrigeration containers were on the first few transports. These were a priority, as it was imperative to get the injured Milonights out to the ice and with their own kind for healing. Those assisting with dead Milonights could scarcely contain their grief. The beauty of the creatures and their loyalty to the cause deeply touched hearts.

Coming in were the last of the shuttles. The deceased were carried off in black body bags by fellow soldiers to wailing family members, having already been informed of the death of a loved one.

In a khaki officer's uniform, Malcom towered Malisa whilst holding her hand and leading the way through the crowd. His cap covered brown waves, traditionally tied back in a ponytail. Though having strong handsome features, he was more known by his character.

Malisa wanted to look nice for Simon and Cainen's homecoming. Wearing a two-piece skirt suit in blue, her gloved hand held down a dainty hat on her head. She hoped her attire would not get dirty in the shuffle. There were so many wounded and they searched faces, as those able to walk, helped others off shuttles.

Malcom spotted Tayo, weary, unshaven and walking alone alongside the last shuttle. The thought sent him numb, having presumed the worst, as they were still offloading body bags.

The heavy woollen coat hung off the King's shoulder; his combat greens bore the marks of battle and those he had helped. The years were hard on Tayo, his greying hair and lined face made him look much older than he was. Advancements had seen new uniforms, new civilian clothing and more horrifying ways to kill. He was so tired of all this, but so much was at stake and why he continued to push himself as he did. Eager to see his grandchildren, he contemplated a hot bath, wanting to make himself presentable, prior to visiting them.

Acknowledging Malcom and Malisa with a raised hand, Tayo knew what was on their minds and spoke up before they asked. He informed that Simon and Cainen were on a salvage transport, which should arrive at any moment. The manly embrace had the King patting Malcom on the back; the bond between the two men was like father and son. With a smile, the King moved to an awaiting entourage of council members and personal aides.

Simon could see her. Malisa looked so beautiful to him and though he was dirty, with dried blood staining his khaki uniform, nothing was going to stop him hugging his wife with passion. It had been over three months since Malisa had seen her husband. She thought he looked haggard and wanted to get him back to their quarters so she could fuss over him. Simon embraced Malcom; it was good to see him without the sling.

"How is the arm little brother?"

"Good, I'll be on the next transport out." Malcom was enthusiastic to get back to the front line.

"You sure you're up to it?" Simon glanced at his father, now having joined them. Cainen hugged his younger son, who was taller than he.

"You look good boy, and you Malisa, as pretty as ever." Cainen smiled through white

whiskers, happy to be home.

“Malcom thinks he's ready to go back into battle.” Simon disliked the idea, as he thought he had lost him on the last tour of duty. Malcom was not the type to be mothered, especially out in the field.

Not wishing to converse on the subject at this time, Cainen enquired of his wife, eager to see her. His son and Malisa exchanged an uneasy glance. Appearing awkward, Malcom broke the news.

“She volunteered for service at the Morbray medical centre, in the Tenth City.” His father forced a smile, and without further word, moved on through the crowd. Most annoyed, Simon addressed his brother.

“Why didn't you stop her?”

“He couldn't stop her.” Malisa stepped in. “He tried, everyone did, but she wants to do her part. She promised not to put herself in any dangerous situations.” Malisa placed her arm around her husband's waist, guiding him on.

Council members sat around the lengthy table, their ranks stood out on their blue or khaki uniforms. Caps were either on their laps or at their feet. As usual, Vieanne stood a little back, looking over faces as members gave their reports.

It was not good news. The Necropolin regime occupied everything up to and including, three states of the Ninth City. Although they held the enemy at bay with tanks and mortar shells, the casualties were still very high. Some believed it would only be a matter of time before they would have to pull their forces back.

The harshness in Vieanne's expression, Tayo was accustomed to. For over a minute or more the chamber remained silent, awaiting the priestess' comments. Looking at no one in particular, Vieanne addressed the council.

“Three days from now, you will withdraw all tanks, guns and ammunition...” Having not finished, those seated at the table uttered their objections.

“Silence,” Tayo called out. “Go on Vieanne.”

“Tomorrow you will take delivery of new equipment.” She saw their faces light up.

“Will this improve our chances?” Simon asked, his tone airing respect.

“That will be up to you. I cannot promise anything.” The priestess continued to look at him, whilst councillors talked amongst themselves.

Standing to the front of the chamber, Vieanne listened to conversations. She eyed Simon, approaching with his cap secured under his arm.

“I want to thank you for what you did, concerning my mother.” Simon aired sincerity, but it meant nothing to her. Vieanne raised a brow, as though it was no big deal.

“As I could not talk her out of it, assigning her to a safe section was the next best thing.”

“Again, thank you.” Simon felt uncomfortable. “So, we are to get new weapons; looks like we will be leaving sooner than I thought.” He did not think he had made it so obvious, yet her response told him different.

“You are concerned for Malcom.”

“Yes, he has been cleared by medical. He is too eager to get back out on the field and that worries me.”

“It is his choice Simon. He feels it is his duty, just as you feel it is your duty to be on the council and fight for the Mariard.” Vieanne did not share the same concerns as Simon. Although Malcom was a model soldier, his demise would relieve any threat to her plans.

The priestess hoped Malcom had long forgotten Tegan; nonetheless, the man having not married and the bond he shared with Tayo did concern her. Tegan's eagerness for updates on Malcom caused arguments whenever Tayo came home. The King's refusal to comply with her wishes infuriated Vieanne. To her way of thinking, if Malcom did not seek out Tegan, Tegan would seek out him. The war was all that mattered to the priestess and no sacrifice was too great to prove her worth, as an opponent.

With the King's approach, Vieanne left the chamber. Having overheard part of their conversation, Tayo placed his hand on Simon's shoulder.

"Malcom knows how to handle himself, you taught him well." Tayo smiled confidently.

"It's not my only concern." Simon sighed. "He is almost twenty-four and has no interest in taking a wife and starting a family. I know there are many young ladies who are fond of him. When he's not in the field, he trains so hard; he's already proved his worth as an officer. It's like, he is waiting for something and I just can't put my finger on it." Simon looked into Tayo's eyes, expecting words of wisdom, yet the King remained silent. "I better join the others." He walked away, slapping his cap against his leg in frustration.

Tayo recalled the day he comforted his granddaughter. Having lost her best friend, she cried herself to sleep in his arms. An argument occurred, regarding visiting rights for the boy. Vieanne refused and at the time, her views on the subject did make sense to him. Though he regretted backing down, he held no regrets for keeping Tegan's memories and hopes alive. His granddaughter always asked of Malcom and he delighted in sharing, especially as it saw her face light up. He was eager for Tegan's release, eager for the reunion of childhood friends and eager to see the two a married couple.

The King knew why Malcom strived so hard to prove himself. Many years ago, Milacon disclosed to him Vieanne's belittling of the boy that only provoked Malcom to work harder to prove the woman wrong. Rubbing his whiskers, Simon's concerns for his brother only reassured Tayo that Malcom had not forgotten Tegan. The thought prompted a grin.

In the old training area, now a gymnasium, Malcom's wet brow dampened lengthy waves, having come loose from his ponytail. Sweat drenched the man's muscular chest, flexed taut whilst lifting heavy weights. His arm felt strong, as good as ever. Hearing someone enter, Malcom looked up. He smiled with Milacon crossing the floor.

"Finished for the day, have you?" Malcom wrapped the towel around his neck, wiping his face with a corner.

"No, but I wanted to speak with you." Milacon stood in front of his friend.

"Simon's had a word in your ear." Malcom sighed frustrated. "Let me guess. He wants you to talk me out of doing another tour of duty, get married and raise a family." With his friend's nod, he shook his head amused.

"He's only concerned about you."

"Milacon, you of all people know where my heart lies, nothing has changed. I'll wait as long as I have to."

"I know, and before you ask, she is doing well and more beautiful than you remember." As anticipated, his words sparked Malcom's delighted expression. "I better get back. We'll talk some more later." Milacon left the man with his memories.

Plonking himself down on the bench, Malcom recalled the last time he saw Tegan. Although two years, he could not get the event or her face out of his mind. Having gone to Vieanne's quarters to deliver a message, when she did not answer the door, temptation got the better of him. The crevice in the wall hid him from sight, yet he saw Tegan very clearly conversing with Malisa. She had been so close it enabled him to memorise every detail of her features. Her radiant blue eyes again burned into his memory. If she had been alone that day, he would not have hesitated to talk with her, but alas, both women walked off together in the other direction. He turned to leave and was startled when he found himself looking into Milacon's fixed features. The Milonight steered him all the way back to his own room, where they had words.

Within the secluded training area, Milacon maintained his position, having done so for two hours. Looking up at the rings, spinning at different levels, the tall man with an athletic physique went through his paces. Nathaniel's speed was too fast for the Milonight, or any other not gifted, to focus on. The young man excelled mentally and physically at the rings. This captivated his twin sister, who watched from the ground.

Tegan stood beside Milacon in a navy blue coverall, worn for all forms of training. Being gifted enabled her to visually keep up with her brother's movements and study his techniques. Tying her long dark curls back into a loose ponytail, she heaved a disillusioned sigh.

"He moves so fast, I'll never be that good." Tegan glanced at her friend.

"Just give it your best." Milacon wished she would not put herself down as such, knowing she excelled in other areas.

They watched the rings collect and once grounded, Tegan moved out to the centre of the second disk. Nathaniel took a moment to catch his breath. He ran his hands through his dark hair, drawing damp wavy strands away from his face. Though shoulder length, the man rarely tied his hair back, much to his mother's distaste. Nathaniel's boyish features bore a delightful smile and radiant, expressive blue eyes. When he stood beside Tegan, it was obvious they were brother and sister.

"Okay Tegan," Nathaniel called out, "you can do this, just remember to watch your back." He encouraged her.

Radiating blue auras, the two eyed each other. Both disks rose and the separation process began. There was no order to the rings, they moved swiftly into position, as though having a mind of their own.

"You ready?" Nathaniel called. His sister's nod prompted him to levitate.

What appeared in the physical, the gifted also manifested within their minds where the real combat took place. These rings propelled them throughout the levels and a thought could will a change of direction. They attacked each other in the mind with surges of energy, drawn from their very essence and discharged through the hands. Depending on the strength, surges were most painful and only needed several strikes to kill. Those that struck the manifested rings, bounced off making the chase more difficult for opponents, especially if the surge was strategically emitted. That which occurred on a mental level, also reflected on the physical body.

Nathaniel and Tegan trained for the ultimate battle. They were the representatives of the Mariard, as their opponent's offspring were the Necropolin's. Their grandfather saw no sense in it. These powers were at war, so many were dying for what? Four seeds to eventually do battle and the winner take all. Tayo could foresee nothing left by the time this came about. Vianne knew it was more than this, but their ignorance was all part of her plan.

Malisa joined Milacon, who nervously tapped his fingertips together. Unable to see the two in combat, it was more a waiting game for the two observers.

Within her mind, Tegan felt the presence of the translucent ball of energy, rippling the air as it came towards her. Deflecting her brother's surge, she thrust herself to another ring. Nathaniel was most impressed, she remembered to sense those not seen, which usually caught her off-guard and saw her plummet to the ground. His sister's expression reflected the thrill of almost striking him. Conversing through thought, he let her know she was doing well. In Tegan's excitement, she misjudged her footing and was thrust from the rings.

Relieved, Malisa exhaled. Nathaniel caught his sister and placed Tegan on her feet. The aide's hand remained on her chest, as it frightened her whenever Tegan was thrown from the rings. Most times, Nathaniel was there for his sister, much to the priestess's dislike. The energy emitted from their body's cushioned them on impact, preventing the gifted from major injury; nonetheless, it was an unpleasant experience all the same.

Sensing the disappointment in his sister's gifting, Nathaniel told her she had done well, having meant it. He knew it did not help her self-esteem with their mother watching; Vianne was always pushing Tegan to do better. Nathaniel was confident his sister would master the rings in her own time. In turn, Tegan felt time was running out, considering their twenty-first birthday would see them go before a kingdom.

A glance at her mother made Tegan uneasy. Obviously, the woman was again dissatisfied with her performance, further contributing to her self-worth issues.

"Come on," Nathaniel said, not wanting his sister to get a lecture, "have a practice with

the sphere.” Reflecting Tegan's uneasy smile, he watched her approach the centre of the disk.

“Tegan,” Vianne called out and her daughter acknowledged her. “Remember to feel their presence.” Her expression conveyed a cold-calm. Tegan nodded, determined to win this one.

A disk rose out of the dirt. With separation, some rings turned vertically where others became a top and bottom. Once all were positioned, they had formed a sphere like enclosure. The spinning rings slowly moved outward, leaving plenty of room for Tegan to manoeuvre within. Considered a physical level of combat, one had to be much more focused. Whilst the eyes and body directed, the mind delivered surges and deflected them.

From the ground, Nathaniel could see his sister's every move. She was doing exceedingly well, deflecting and dodging the storm of electrical charges within the enclosure.

Clocking fifty minutes, Tegan was still at it. Malisa and Milacon silently cheered her on with her having gone past her usual time. Although edgy, Nathaniel was proud of her and prayed she would find additional strength. If she could just hold out another ten minutes, she would equal his time. This he knew she was striving for.

“Come on,” Nathaniel thought aloud, sensing his sister was weakening. “You can do it, concentrate.” Standing tense, he suddenly heaved a sigh.

The strike to Tegan's body disengaged the sphere. Exhausted, she could feel the sweat running down her back whilst remaining in mid air. Fighting back tears, disappointment gripped her. She ignored her brother's call to come down.

Milacón had fetched Vianne. The priestess sensed Tegan's emotional state and frowned.

“Bring her down Nathaniel.” If Vianne had not been so focused on Tegan, she would have sensed his resentment towards her.

His mother's insensitivity riled Nathaniel up. Tegan held expertise in other areas, which she excelled above him, yet this made no difference to the woman. Constantly, she pointed out Tegan's weaknesses, embarrassing her in front of the others. To openly defend his sister resulted in lectures on the consequences of failure. He had heard enough of those to know his mother's words off by heart.

Nathaniel could always count on his grandfather to make both he and Tegan feel loved and special. He thought the world of his grandfather, seeing the man as a mentor and friend, much to his mother's dislike. Clearly there was tension between father and daughter and although not understanding the reason behind their feuding, he tried to stay out of it.

Having joined his sister in the air, Nathaniel sensed her disheartenment. He wanted to take her in his arms and comfort her, but knowing they were being watched from below, stopped him.

“Jeepers, you had me worried there for a moment.” Nathaniel forced a grin. “I thought you were going to break my record.” With his sister remaining silent, he sighed. “Come on, what is a few minutes. It is not a competition between us.” Again, she remained silent. Assuming their mother would soon intervene, he took a sterner approach. “All right, have it your way. If you want to stay up here feeling all defeated, go right ahead, but I have training to do.”

“Sorry.” Tegan nibbled on her bottom lip, not wanting to cry. “I can't face her.”

“Good, then we can continue training together.” Nathaniel cocked a grin. “Let us take this up in the mind, shall we.”

Levitating higher, Nathaniel and Tegan went into a free-floating state. Their bodies hung limp, heads dropped forward and their eyes closed. The sensation was likened to an out of body experience, where they came together within each other's minds. Materialising a self-image, bathed in the light of their auras, gave the sense of reality within the blackness.

The disks formed overhead; a clear indication that training had resumed. The Milonight nervously tapped, which did not deter Malisa, holding onto his arm.

“She should have taken a break first.” Milacón referred to Tegan.

“I agree.” Malisa glanced at him. “She is so upset.”

From behind, an agitated Vieanne responded.

“She cannot afford to waste any time. Their day is nearing, but unfortunately she has not mastered the rings and I believe she never will.”

“She is doing her best.” Milacon continued to tap; glad the priestess could not see his true expression. He so disapproved of her belittling Tegan, as he loved the young woman like a daughter.

“It is not good enough,” Vieanne replied. “Nathaniel has surpassed my expectations. She on the other hand, is a thorn in his side. If she does not improve her performance, she will be easy game for their future opponents.” The woman walked away.

Although the priestess meant every word, she was quick to relinquish her thoughts on the matter. She was somewhat preoccupied with her heavy schedule and a trip, which would see her out of the ranges.

CHAPTER 10

Rolling hills and woodlands surrounded the large rural town of Nebreema. The main township consisted of stone and timber dwellings. Narrow, asphalt streets ran into dirt roads with housing and industry spread out over a large area. The town hall stood out, constructed on grey stone foundations with weatherboards coated in white. It had the appearance of a large two-story building, although this was not the case. The interior of the hall saw a mixture of plaster and wainscot, high ceilings, exposed beams and was a bustle of activity.

When the Mariard troops first arrived in Nebreema, it was a sure sign to civilians that the enemy was heading their way. Women and children were evacuated from the town by any means possible. Those men, having stayed behind, were a most welcome addition to the cause; however, could only be armed with outdated weaponry.

Having utilised the town hall as a command post, the seriousness of the situation had many Mariard councillors in attendance. Unexpected was the progression of Necropolin troops that were almost upon them. Tayo yelled to Cainen, they had to stop the shuttle from entering the area. The councillor was seen gesturing to the radio operator to hand him the receiver.

The priestess had an ulterior motive for the visit. She misled the council into believing she wanted to give the troops moral support and see their conditions personally. The visit was in fact to make sure there had been no unscheduled advancements by her opponent. Suspicious of the enemy's activities, the relocation of forces to the area indicated a rapid progression through neighbouring towns.

In drizzling rain, the enemy was visible in the distance on the other side of the grassy fields. The hospital, having already felt the strains of casualties, attempted to move the wounded out by any means possible. Tayo could not comprehend how the enemy had come this far without them knowing about it. The last report had the troops holding their positions at Albany. He ordered the radio operator to keep trying; someone had to know what was going on. The sound of tanks coming up the main street prompted Cainen to order a soldier to have them redirected to the edge of the fields. If they got past them there, the town was lost.

Via the shuttle radio, Vianne intently listened to ground communication. Mariard troops had taken up position with tanks, rocket launchers and machine guns. Anticipating the enemy's next move, she thought those in the town, no match for what was coming.

Seated beside the priestess, the young pilot glanced at her. Evidently, the woman understood the communications. Nebreema was under attack, yet not by the Necropolin troops themselves. The bombardment was levelling markets, homes and industries without the enemy having crossed the fields or by use of standard weaponry.

"Take us back," Vianne demanded. "Take us back or they will all die!" She glared at the man. The pilot acted on her words, although the King had ordered him to take the priestess back to the ice fields.

The bombardment stopped; the frontline had fallen. Tanks were ablaze and what was left of the troops retreated, leaving the dead behind. The hospital was in ruins, having claimed staff and those undergoing treatment. Across the road, where a school had stood, the surrounding grounds were being utilised as a pick up point. Transports could not evacuate the wounded fast enough. Though more were on the way, they feared many would be lost in the wait or slaughtered by the enemy. Civilians and those with lesser injuries were doing whatever was necessary to move the severely wounded back to the shuttle points. Some were even attempting to truck and trailer them out to the next town.

Those still physically able to fight were attempting to regroup. The Necropolin forces were only beyond the fields. Fears were high that they would soon cross and cut down those left in the ruins. One group of soldiers, volunteered to stand their ground. They would attempt to hold back the enemy to buy a little more time.

The sight of the dead and wounded was no more than casualties of war to the priestess. Having left the shuttle, Vieanne pushed her way through those trying to get on board. The ground was muddy under her hasty stride, her thoughts centred on her opponent.

The craft had barely lifted off when it exploded in a ball of flame, showering those below with debris and crippling another transport. Looking to the skies, the priestess's gifting enhanced her senses, enabling her to see the incoming missile. Her suspicions were correct. Now furious, she sought a passing soldier, demanding the King's whereabouts. When the injured man did not know, she glanced about the area, before continuing.

The Milonight had come in on an earlier transport to set up overnight accommodation for the priestess. Milacon risked his own life in an attempt to save another within the town hall. Though having sustained damage to his armour, there was no threat to his being. He could not bring himself to leave the dead. With the aid of another fellow Milonight, they retrieved bodies from the rubble. Already they had bagged several, in hope of transporting them to the mountains.

The Milonight looked over the priestess, who took a moment to catch her breath. Vieanne's robes were dirty and damp; evidently, she had fallen in her haste to get to the town hall.

"He has broken the rules! I must find Tayo." Vieanne's eyes followed the turning head of the Milonight, who remained silent.

The black body bags lay side by side on soggy ground. Before the priestess even leant over, her hands were radiating an aura. Like razors, her nails tore open a bag, but it was not the King. Turning to the next, she opened it in the same manner as the first. On seeing Cainen's bloodied features, she paused a moment, then stepped over the deceased to unzip the next bag.

The priestess did not react as Milacon expected. There were no tears or any sign of grief as such. She maintained a look of fury, unlike he had ever seen before.

"Where are Cainen's sons?" Vieanne snarled. Her nails dug into the palms of her hands, drawing blood with the inner battle raging within. The Milonight shook his head, clenching the tags on chains in his hand. Glancing over the remaining bags, Vieanne did not care who the others were, but assumed Simon and Malcom were amongst them. In her eyes, the Mariard's King and his best officers were dead because Necropolis had broken a sacred rule.

"He will pay for this!" Vieanne left in the direction of the fields with fury driving her stride. Milacon handed over the tags to a fellow Milonight, before hastily following the woman.

They could see them in the distance, moving across the pastures; Death Walkers in dull armour with long red plumes adorning their helmets. These soldiers were Milonights, just like the majority of Mariard troops. A great power had turned these desert creatures aggressive. Aware of this, made the battle all the more harder for the Mariard Milonights. It pained them to fight against those they saw as their own kind. In addition to the thousands of troops, they could see weapons unfamiliar to them. The new mobile missile launchers were to the front, as were armoured vehicles, couriering Necropolin officers.

Mariard soldiers lay low behind the fence line. A young man, having broken out in a nervous sweat, aired his thoughts to a Milonight, bearing the damage of battle.

"We have had it." His lips quivered whilst his eyes remained fixed on the enemy.

"Don't give up hope Gilston..." The Milonight's attention snapped to the woman moving out into the field, unarmed and alone. Thinking the priestess crazy, soldiers began speaking amongst themselves.

A frantic Milacon approached the officer, who looked a little worse for wear.

"She has lost her mind!"

“Calm down,” Malcom said, glancing the blood on the torso of his friend’s armour. “Just tell me what’s happening.” He was unsure whether to tell his men to retreat or stand their ground.

“She was ranting and raving about someone breaking the rules and he would pay.”

“Do you have any idea who she’s talking about?”

“I can only assume Necropolis.” Milacon followed Malcom to the wire fence, only a few feet away.

They saw the priestess come to a halt. Feeling uneasy, Malcom’s thoughts escaped him.

“She better not surrender, I’ll be no Necropolin’s prisoner.”

“Whatever she’s doing better be good, our lives depend on it.” Milacon began nervously tapping.

Burning with fury, Vieanne suddenly radiated a bright aura. Directing her luminous hands towards the ground, a split formed in the earth that began to rip across the field. Dirt and rock thrust up and outward whilst heading towards the enemy. The phenomena suddenly divided, ripping out in opposite directions with the intent of surrounding their foe. Death Walkers and mobile units were forced to a stand still.

Mariard soldiers glared, having seen nothing like it. Their assumption that the priestess was bidding them a little more time did not relieve them of the pending threat. They saw the priestess suddenly thrust her hands skyward. With the soggy pastures starting to vibrate, they heard the sound of rumbling.

No longer able to stand, the shaking forced men to the ground. In fear, soldiers prayed that the Mariard was with them. On his belly, Malcom held tightly onto the fence with Milacon lying beside him. What the priestess was doing unnerved him; evidently, she too was special.

The ground their enemy stood on heaved. Exploding ammunitions drowned out the mass screeching of Milonights, tossed and crushed with the elements. Debris shot skyward, only to be buried on returning to the chaos. Flames were extinguished with boulders rising to the surface, tumbling with the ground whilst it continued to swallow and heave. Smoke dispersed, unable to collect with the gusts caused by the phenomenon.

The shaking stopped and with it came an eerie silence. Some were reluctant to move, where others rose to their feet. Malcom undid the strap to his helmet; with the back of his hand, he wiped sweat and dirt from his brow. Looking beyond the field, all that remained was a lengthy, ploughed surface. What had taken place was beyond comprehension and with the immediate threat vanquished, he felt numb.

Suddenly distracted, Malcom dropped his helmet and leapt over the damaged fence. Milacon followed his friend. Hastily, the two made their way to the priestess, who had collapsed from exertion.

Having taken the woman back to the ruins of the town hall, Malcom laid Vieanne down. A soldier’s coat was all that could be offered, considering the circumstances. Those who remained with the officer had their sights elsewhere, which soon drew Malcom’s attention.

Gripped with disbelief, Malcom dropped to his knees beside the open bag containing his father’s body. He just stared for a time, before clearing his throat, fighting to contain his emotions in front of others. His brother came to mind; he asked Milacon if Simon knew.

“I am so sorry Malcom, you have lost much today.”

“Not both of them. Tell me it wasn’t both of them.” With the Milonight’s silence, Malcom’s lips began to quiver and his breathing became shallow bursts. Speechless, he eyed an unzipped bag. “Close it up,” he demanded, out of respect for his King. A soldier complied. With Malcom rising to his feet, it was like Milacon had read his mind. A slight tilt of the Milonight’s head indicated Simon’s position amongst the dead.

Having knelt on one knee beside the body bag, Malcom could not bring himself to open it immediately. Unable to believe that he could lose all three of those close to him in one day, he prayed it was a mistake, wanting it to be someone else lying there not Simon. Nonetheless,

having already seen his father and Tayo, deep down, he was readying himself for another loss. With trembling fingers, Malcom reached for the zip. Already, tears were welling in his eyes, but he had to know for sure and opened the bag.

A large hot and cold-water cylinder took up a corner of the kitchen. The wall of cupboards, a stove and sink made the area cramped. In training attire, Tegan and Nathaniel sat at the wooden table, centred within the room. Empty spindle chairs were a reminder of family members and a friend not within the rangers.

Again, the twins were not hungry. The meals Lemma had prepared for them were getting cold. They knew Nebreema had been hit hard and casualties were high, yet there was still no news of loved ones. Earlier, Lemma refused the offer to wait up in the transport area, having insisted that Malisa go instead.

The priestess had left strict instructions not to leave the twins unsupervised whilst she was away. Considering the circumstances and that Lemma and Malisa fretted for their partners, Nathaniel frowned on this order. He was a man and did not need to be baby-sat. He was not the only one worried about their grandfather's safety. Tegan just stared down at the table, her concern evident in her expression. Deciding to take matters into his own hands, Nathaniel looked up to address Lemma; however, someone caught his eye beyond the Milonight.

The woman stood in the doorway, her attire soiled and bloodied. Vianne's expression implied something was very wrong.

"Good," the priestess grunted, "you are still suited up." She gestured with her head to get up off their chairs. "Go to the training area, I will meet you there shortly. You both have much work to do." Without another word, Vianne strode off towards the storage area.

Shocked, the twins had never seen their mother out of her robes. Dressed in one of Tegan's training suits, she hastily joined them in the centre of the disk. Although the woman had strands of grey hair, the collar length cut gave the priestess a younger appearance. Having never known love or affection from her, the woman appeared more a mother figure to the twins without her attire. Nevertheless, her cold expression dampened the elusion.

Though the two were most eager to hear news, they remained silent and anxious. With their mother gesturing for them to levitate, they exchanged uneasy glances. Radiating an aura, the priestess thrust herself upward. From her floating position, she looked down on the two. Nathaniel and Tegan glared for a moment, before joining her.

Already the disks were separating; Nathaniel asked his mother if everything was all right. He did not get the answer he hoped for.

"Both of you listen to me carefully. I have always taught you loyalty, honour and respect. We played by the rules, but no more. We now play this their way." Vianne sensed utter confusion in their gifting. "Nathaniel, ready yourself for combat. Remember, there are no rules." She shot away, before her son could demand an explanation.

Although Nathaniel felt the burning sensation in his shoulder, he managed to pull himself up, narrowly avoiding a ring. Having not expected his mother to attack him or be his opponent, left him dumfounded. Within his mind, he heard her order him to move it. His sights caught her shifting position. She was coming at him, which indeed sparked a reaction. Increasing his speed, he shot up a level. This was nothing like combating his sister; the sensation his mother emitted had him perceiving she was out to prove a painful point.

Observing from the centre, although Tegan was in awe of her mother's abilities, it also scared her. Convinced she would not stand a chance against the woman in combat, already, she was contemplating a harsh lecture. The sensation in her brother's energy only confirmed her fears. He struggled with the manner in which the rings were being used against him and the surges ricocheting off them. With Nathaniel suddenly plummeting to the ground, her nervous stance escalated.

On his back, her brother laid dazed in the dirt. About to go to him, Tegan's sights shot to her mother, who yelled her name.

“Forget him, concentrate!”

His sister had barely left the ground when the surge caught her in the leg. Forcing himself to sit up, Nathaniel remained seated, trying to catch his breath. He knew Tegan did not stand a chance and he was right. Hitting the ground harder than he had, Nathaniel scurried to his sister’s side.

Having lowered in height, Vianne’s icy expression remained unchanged.

“Do not just lie there, get up! Both of you have a lot of work to do.”

“Mother!” Nathaniel had to speak his mind. “What is this all about?” He remained on one knee beside his seated sister.

“Your grandfather is dead, along with other council members.”

Eyeing each other, Nathaniel went numb in disbelief and Tegan could not contain her grief. With her bursting into a wail, Nathaniel drew his sister into him, comforting her in a tight embrace.

In the past, his grandfather had expressed emotions for those lost in war. Having perceived to know how the King felt, the grief gripping Nathaniel was unlike anything ever experienced before. His grandfather was a blood relation, his friend and mentor. Tears welled in his eyes, his jaw tensed with him struggling to be strong for his sister’s sake. His damp sights shifted to his mother, who again addressed them.

“Necropolis introduced an unscheduled advancement.” Vianne sensed this alarmed Nathaniel. Continuing, she expressed no compassion or commiserations. “We lost many, over half the council is dead, including Simon and his father.”

“Malisa must be devastated.” Nathaniel’s thoughts escaped him, feeling deeply for the aide’s loss. “What of Cainen’s other son and Milacon?” He felt his sister’s arms tightening around him, her body tensing with her face remaining buried in his chest.

“They live. Tomorrow we bury our dead. Those able will return to Nebreema. Necropolis will no doubt renew his front line.” Vianne eyed Tegan with her daughter’s outburst.

“Why do we have to wait? You speak of breaking rules, let Nathaniel and I fight his seeds now!” With cheeks wet with tears, Tegan continued to glare angrily upward.

“That is one rule, which cannot be broken. Necropolis is well aware of this. He will not go before time, not with his seed’s gifting at stake.” As Tegan again took comfort in her brother, she heaved a sigh. “Get up, both of you! Take your grief out in training. The new era is almost upon us, you have to be ready.”