

Mariard Volume 2
Glass Pawns

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Mariard Volume 2 Glass Pawns is book 2 of 10 Volumes.
Nothing is what it seems, take nothing for granted.

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Dedicated to my family and friends.
Without their help, these volumes would not come to light.

CHAPTER 1

Dawn's glare penetrated the open balcony doors of Nathaniel Maroda's old world bedchamber, furnished in antiques befitting the royal occupant. Only embers remained in the stone hearth and the chandelier added more lighting. Nearing his mid-twenties, the King slowly paced without thought. Tired, his radiant, blue eyes continued to read the page of a thick, leather bound book, having miraculously appeared in his chambers over a week ago.

With his mother being the Mariard player, Nathaniel believed she had sent the book to give him insight into what lay ahead of them. This confirmed to him that a new game was imminent; it was now only a matter of time before their perfect reality turned into an uncertain nightmare. As leader of the team on a foreign game board, he wanted them battle ready.

What Nathaniel had already read, implied rules pertaining to the players. These two universal powers created deadly games, which the gifted believed were nothing more than despicable entertainment. Since winning the Mariard game board, the year off had gone quickly. Although the entire planet was theirs and under Nathaniel Maroda's rule, the King felt cheated, seeing himself as only a gifted pawn in a game.

Knowing his position in the scheme of things, Nathaniel decided earlier in the year not to seek a relationship. The high council pressured the King, as the people would expect him to marry and father an heir. His twin sister, Tegan and her husband, Malcom agreed with Nathaniel. In their eyes, they would rather see the man marry out of love than obligation. Nonetheless, his determination to remain single throughout the entirety of the games, they thought irrational. Another royal couple also shared this opinion, the King's cousin, Cathmore, and his wife, Rebecca.

From the last game, experiences shared between the men influenced Nathaniel's decision. Emotions clearly played havoc with the mind that could see problems arising whilst in a game. Assumably, his sacrifice of relationship would allow him to lead his team to victory. Fighting to become entities in their own right, he could foresee a future where they no longer were mere pawns. This belief pressed him to be prepared and get these games over and done quickly.

His sister in the game was concern enough; Nathaniel did not want to be also worrying about a partner. Both his brother-in-law and cousin were already anxious. More so Cathmore, as he feared Rebecca being called into play. His mother promised to negotiate freedom for all Mariard pawns with her opponent. Trusting she had done this, Nathaniel hoped to find some indication within the pages.

Without diverting his eyes from the words, Nathaniel placed the book on the oak dresser. Yawning, he tied back his locks of dark wavy hair into a ponytail. Rubbing a hand over unshaven boyish features, he read the sentence again. *Ten game victories, not required in succession, releases pawns from player possession.* Individual entities, Nathaniel thought. With a sense of admiration for his mother's achievements, he read on.

No matter the duration of a game, surviving pawns lost only the equivalent of one

year of their natural lives. On completion of each game, pawns returned to the player's possession or to a game board having been won. The death of a pawn placed it out of play for good; however, gifted pawns had three lives per game. These additional lives were transferable to others, though limitations applied. Players can create between one to ten gifts per game, yet only six could draw on their energy source at a time. Gifted or otherwise, a player relinquishes all rights to a captured pawn. All pawns have unconditional choice with no reprimands or retaliation from players.

In the last game, Cathmore, born the same day as the King, chose to leave the Necropolin. The thought of his cousin prompted Nathaniel to smile, as the man was a loved and respected member of the Mariard team. His cousin was once an opponent, if events had not turned out the way they did, he would not have hesitated to kill Cathmore. Reflecting on the present, Nathaniel knew Rebecca found the concept of the game and their role in it most frightening.

According to Vianne, the Mariard player, the gifted themselves would always retain such knowledge and more with each venture. This did not apply to Mariard or Necropolin pawns that would remain ignorant to the games and their reason for being. The gifted could only speculate as to why three pawns retained this information. Considering the couple's courtship, having started in the last game, it was only befitting that Rebecca knew the truth. The gifted did not need problems arising from emotional issues and ignorance in or out of play. In regards to Malisa and Milacon, their sacrifices and loyalty to the gifted made them unofficially part of the team.

Nathaniel thought the content read more like a collection of cryptic verses than clear rules and regulations. The thickness of the book made him anxious, fearing he would not get through it before the new game started. Though a fast reader, he kept stopping to scrutinise paragraphs. Family and friends told him to just read it, deliberate later. One of their gifts was of recall. Every word he read was stored subconsciously and could be clearly drawn to mind whenever he needed it.

What the game entailed and who would go was still yet to be revealed. The passage pertaining to the gifted had Nathaniel questioning. There were four Mariard gifted and the book spoke of up to ten. In the last game, their opponents Anndrosa and Hargan used mirror imaging, reflecting self-manifestations during battle. Recalling the technique, Nathaniel wondered whether this passage referred to this. The Mariard team refrained from using the technique, considering the demands on their energy and concentration.

Reflecting on their last opponents, his brother-in-law's views on the subject came to mind. His mother had saved him, Tegan and Cathmore from death itself and chances were that the Necropolin player followed suit. Nathaniel could foresee the enemy utilising the brother and sister team rather than new opponents. The issue infuriated his brother-in-law, considering they won the game. In Malcom's opinion, and others, the revival of the Mariard gifted was just part of the prize.

Drawing an image of Anndrosa to mind, Nathaniel cringed. The woman had flaming red hair, always tightly pulled back in a high ponytail. Leather strapping and armour plating made up her flimsy attire, revealing an athletic figure. Undoubtedly, there was an air of attractiveness about the woman's features, yet Anndrosa's masculinity and brutal nature made her the epitome of evil.

Hargan had been ridiculed by the team. The giant of a man with shaggy dark hair and wild eyes was nothing like his sister. They did not even look like siblings, liable twins. Though strong, Hargan lacked intelligence where his sister was both mentally and physically an opponent not to be underestimated. In the last game, Anndrosa took Nathaniel's life; this

he had not forgotten. Months of extensive training had him confident of being victorious this time.

When the book first appeared, Nathaniel was disappointed. It suggested that his mother would not be visiting them. Undeniably, the book was a wealth of information and a welcome addition, although he would have preferred to see his mother in person. The sacrifice Vianne made for the Mariard was commendable. Whether player, mother or friend, the family loved her dearly and maintained the utmost respect for her. There had been grief with Vianne leaving them to take up her position.

His sister's self-worth issues troubled Nathaniel. Annoying was her brave front to conceal her feelings; it gave a sense of being pushed away and no longer a confidant. Not taking this personally, he was aware that others were also concerned.

Private talks with Cathmore led Nathaniel to perceive that his cousin understood Tegan better than anyone else. During times of training, Cathmore confessed to still struggling with feelings of being a weak link in the team and self-worth issues relating from his past. Although having personally matured in this area, it remained an ongoing challenge to him. He had faith that Tegan would also grow, yet in her own time.

Nathaniel himself held back thoughts and feelings from others. In his heart, he knew no one was more qualified to be the Mariard player than his mother. Nonetheless, he had hoped for more time together before she left for the player's realm. He did not like to dwell on the twenty-one years that he and his sister spent with the old priestess; Artemis may have been his mother in body, but not in mind and essence.

The last game revealed what Nathaniel perceived the truth, which every so often, stirred him to question his identity. He had free will, yet in the blink of an eye, he could be a glass pawn in the player's hand. Among others, he owed his life to his mother, who had used that very method in the last game to save him from eternal death. The feeling of being incomplete and not truly in control of his life was like a thorn in his side. Someone having that much power over him did not seem right, yet he took comfort in knowing his mother had their well-being at heart.

Having knocked and received no answer, Malcom let himself in. As suspected, his brother-in-law was too engrossed in the book to acknowledge him. Again, the room had not been attended. This was not the fault of aides, but the King not wanting to be disturbed. One of Nathaniel's knee-high boots protruded from under the unmade double bed. The man's uniform jacket in blue hung lopsided off the back of an armchair near the fireplace. On the elaborate desk was another untouched meal and a milk drink with a thick film on top. The empty glass jugs were evident of his brother-in-law's consumption of little more than water.

Nathaniel's absence at breakfast implied that the man had again spent all night reading. Discussions amongst the family revealed concerns; Nathaniel's obsession would see him ill if he continued in this manner. In addition, if the team was called to the game, he would not be in peak condition to participate. Malcom had volunteered to speak to Nathaniel on everyone's behalf.

His brother-in-law was wearing the same shirt and pants that he wore yesterday and the day before that. In comparison, Malcom appeared more like royalty than the King himself. They stood around the same tall height, though Malcom was a little broader in build. Thick, brown hair neatly draped his shoulders and clean-shaven features added to an air of freshness. The blue uniform befitted his position of authority within the council.

"You look like death." Malcom's remark drew Nathaniel to look directly at him. "Cathmore is fulfilling your engagements, yet again; so you have no excuse to get some

sleep.”

“I will not argue with you.” Nathaniel yawned and headed towards his bed. He felt lethargic to the point of light-headedness. “We could be called at any time. I am just worried I will not be prepared.” Sitting on the edge of his bed, he watched Malcom go to his drawer and take out his bedclothes.

“So you’ve said a hundred times. Vianne would not have given it to you without plenty of time to read it. Jeepers Nathaniel, it’s two thousand pages or more.”

“I am not prepared to take any chances.”

“Put them on.” Malcom tossed the baggy bed pants and top at his brother-in-law. “You might be King, but I’m older.” He grinned. Malcom was three years the King’s senior. “If I have to tie you to the bed, I will.”

“You would do it too, no doubt.” Nathaniel dropped his creased shirt to the floor, followed by his pants. Folding his arms across his chest, Malcom patiently waited for his brother-in-law to get into bed.

“You know what your problem is? You analysing it all. Do as Cathmore said, work it out when you need it.”

“So many verses don’t make sense.” Nathaniel sighed. “If I misinterpret...” He could now barely think straight.

“Just sleep, all right? Honestly Nathaniel, I wasn’t joking when I said you look like death.” Malcom watched his brother-in-law pull the blankets up over his shoulders and close his eyes.

A large gazebo sat a short distance from the back entrance to the great stone castle. The structure made of wood was recently recoated in white paint. This time of year saw flower buds and fresh leaves on trees. Neatly mowed lawns and vine covered latticework gave the area an enchanting appeal.

Two women sat sipping tea and conversing within the gazebo. A natural beauty, Tegan shared a striking resemblance to her twin brother. She was not one to fuss about her appearance like her friend Rebecca. On the exception of tying her hair back for training, her long, dark curls hung freely and without ornamentation. Though she wore the clothing of a lady, Tegan much preferred the attire of men. Dresses of frills, lace and petticoats, she thought impractical and uncomfortable.

In comparison to Tegan, Rebecca was very feminine. Straight mousy hair was usually fashioned up with fancy clips and she liked an assortment of hats. Others saw Rebecca as a bright and positive influence; complements pertaining to her nature would see her blush. Of late, her husband’s royal duties kept them from spending time together. A complaint shared by her friend, regarding Malcom.

Rebecca resented that the gifted were being forced into a deadly sport just to entertain a dictator. She could not view Vianne in the same light as the Necropolin player. The woman was a mother figure to all, whose loving nature separated her from the evil Necropolin player. What the game ahead entailed was anyone’s guess, but from experience, it would not be as simplistic as archery or croquet.

Those born in the new world were free, untouchable by the players. This did not apply to Rebecca and the majority of the Mariard people whom were classed as reusable pawns. Taking nothing for granted, Cathmore had taught his wife many fighting techniques. Though hard work, it was considered necessary for survival if she were put into play. Having been present during training sessions, Rebecca did feel a sense of insignificance when it came to the gifted.

Malcom’s gifting was superior to any other and having won them the last game,

Tegan was certain that he would win them the next. Due to her husband, both she and Cathmore had immensely improved their combat skills. A facade of confidence only concealed self-worth issues. Though thinking herself the weakest link in the team, she was determined to pull her weight.

During Tegan's upbringing, the old priestess openly spoke of her bitter disappointment. Artemis had drawn attention to Tegan's inabilities whilst having praised Nathaniel for his skill and agility. Accused of acting out of heart instead of using her head spurred Tegan's unconscious battle to prove her worth. None of this she discussed, assuming no one saw through her tough exterior.

Nothing was certain regarding the games. Like others, Tegan also hoped Rebecca would not be put into play. Considering herself a burden, which the men could do without, she prayed diligently that she too would be left behind.

The two women continued to converse. Rebecca being a positive thinker had a knack of giving Tegan what she needed, temporary outside validation. In mid sentence, Tegan stiffened, having sensed something in her gifting. Her sights shot upward, to one of several balconies protruding from the individual bedchambers.

"Nathaniel!" Tegan left her seat and grasping a handful of skirt and petticoats, hastily headed towards the back entrance.

Standing outside his cousin's bedchamber, Cathmore was reluctant to go in. Though Malcom had promised to wake Nathaniel, he thought a few more hours of sleep would do his cousin the world of good. Running his fingers through his blond locks, Cathmore decided not to disturb Nathaniel. He was about to walk away when he suddenly felt it in his gifting. Hearing a noise beyond the door assured him his cousin was not asleep.

Within the bedchamber, Cathmore found his cousin lying on the floor with a familiar book at his side. Dropping to one knee, he yelled out, hoping the aide in the hallway would hear him. Scooping up his cousin, he approached the man's bed to lay Nathaniel down.

A middle-aged man with a duster in hand and wearing an apron over his uniform came to the doorway. Male aides wore lengthy light-blue jackets, matching straight-legged pants and white shirts buttoned to collarless necklines. He was instructed to fetch Malcom and Tegan immediately.

"Mr Turcar went into the city, Sir," the man replied, before glancing behind him. The aide moved aside, allowing the two women entry into the room.

"Did you feel it?" Tegan eyed her cousin whilst approaching the bed. Looking down on her brother's pale features, though concerned, she aired her grievance. "That stupid book! We warned him, but did he listen, no!" She now agreed with what her husband had said earlier, Nathaniel looked dreadful.

"Getting angry with him isn't going to achieve anything." Cathmore remained calm. Sitting himself down on the edge of the bed, he glanced over Nathaniel and continued. "I suggest you connect with Malcom, call him back. I'll connect with him." With Tegan's nod, Cathmore watched her step away from the bed.

Drawing on her gifting, Tegan radiated a blue aura, revealing the outline of her body through the long gown. Levitating a few feet off the floor, she went into a state of free-floating.

Standing uneasy, Rebecca knew a connection of minds was taking place and her husband would soon follow suit. Remaining silent, she felt confident that whatever Nathaniel's problem, the gifted would sort it out. Her husband levitated, the state of free-floating she thought eerie. Both Tegan and Cathmore hung like dead, heads dropped forward, arms dangled at their sides and both had shallow breath. Her sights shifted with

Nathaniel emitting a dim aura. Maintaining a horizontal position, the man was rising off the bed. Again, she glanced between Tegan and her husband. No matter how many times she saw them in this state, it still prompted anxiousness. In addition, it reminded her that she was just a mere pawn in the scheme of things.

Within five minutes, Tegan had rejoined Rebecca. Both stood near the bed, observing a second bright aura consuming Nathaniel. Feeling led to explain, Tegan whispered to her friend.

“Malcom has connected with them. They are both transferring energy to Nathaniel. Mind you, I wouldn’t want to be in his shoes when he gets back. Malcom’s not impressed, Nathaniel’s been using his energy to keep himself awake. Book or no book, it was irresponsible considering his position.” Tegan glanced at Rebecca, who expressed sympathy for the man.

“Nathaniel is worried about the game. He takes leadership seriously, which benefits all.”

“I know, but...”

“It appears they have finished,” Rebecca interrupted, noting the diminishing auras. One man lowered to the bed, the other to the floor.

There appeared no change in Nathaniel, yet Rebecca kept her thoughts to herself. Her husband drew the blankets up to make his cousin comfortable. Heaving a sigh, Cathmore discreetly addressed the women so as not to disturb Nathaniel.

“He’ll be fine, he just needs some rest.” Cathmore looked to Tegan.

“He wasn’t impressed was he?” Having referred to her husband, she anticipated the answer before Cathmore shook his head.

“No he wasn’t. He’ll be back soon; he’s come up with an idea to help Nathaniel with the reading.”

“And what’s that?” Tegan whispered.

“Malcom and I will sight the pages and when Nathaniel sleeps, we connect with him and transfer the information in blocks. He can analyse it all he wants then.”

CHAPTER 2

Within his chamber, Nathaniel sank back in the armchair, positioned in front of the fire. The text planted in his subconscious was open to interpretation, though gave him some insight into what to expect. To his understanding, they would visit four realms of earth, fire, water and ice. Unlike before, he felt an air of mysticism about it. This suggested the mind would play a greater role than combating forces. Perceiving it entailed intellectual thinking, he grinned with the thought of Hargan. The man was all brawn and no brains in his opinion, the Necropolin player would be foolish to allow Hargan to participate in this game. Already, he was ruling Hargan out as an opponent.

There had been no mention of kingdoms or royal status, but the word tribe appeared many times. The word tribe was foreign to him; nonetheless, he took it to mean the same as a collective of people living within an area. This insinuated that pawns would be used in the game in one form or another.

Two teams, both out to kill each other for the prize and a win for their player. This Nathaniel understood, yet little else seemed clear. Several paragraphs mentioned the capture of tribes and opponents. Though interesting, his interpretation made him uneasy. If captured, a player's ownership of a gifted or pawn transferred to their opponent. The reference to turning the tide took on a whole new meaning, as once captured, one would fight for that team. What a frightening concept, Nathaniel thought; a knock on the door distracted him. His personal aide reminded him he had a meeting to attend.

Dedicated to King Tayo Maroda and his officials, the large chamber was more a shrine to those fallen in war than a library. The area contained tall wooden bookcases housing Mariard literature. Spotlights lit up relics from suits of armour on polished bases to modern military uniforms displayed in tall, glass cases. Framed, detailed sketches hung on a section of wall depicting their history of development. Above the fireplace, a collection of old weapons protruded from under a shield.

Centred within the chamber and well lit from a chandelier above, the lengthy, highly polished table was surrounded by a number of high backed chairs. The team preferred to conduct their private meetings in the library, rather than the council chamber or one of the men's offices.

At this stage, only that which Nathaniel thought important had been aired. Hours of deliberation prompted individuals to perceive their own thoughts and fears on the issues.

In Malcolm's opinion, realms of earth, fire, water and ice indicated a battle of wits and surviving the elements. The thought of an endurance test had him smug, considering he was no stranger to roughing it. He could foresee the teams more on a physical plain rather than played out within the mind. Hating the mind games, as he called them, he much preferred a weapon in his hand to rings, free-floating and being amongst other's thoughts. Having trained hard, he believed the men of the team could protect his wife from anything the Necropolin dished out.

Capture terrified Tegan. Insecurities stirred the imagination, seeing herself turning

against those she loved or worse, them turning on her. Fears led prayers to her mother, pleading to be excluded and left behind.

Having sat silently, Rebecca assumed she had no role of importance. Her anxiousness stemmed from notions of being part of a tribe. Though the gifted promised to find her and keep her safe, this did not alleviate her fears. If they were not in a position to make her a priority, she could find herself alone in an unfamiliar culture for some time.

Relentlessly, Cathmore had trained for the game. Revenge played heavily on his mind, determined to pay the Necropolin back for a life of hell. Emotionally, he had detached himself from past horrors to avoid the pain and secrets he kept to himself. Though still struggling with rejection and insecurity, he was looking inwardly to confront such issues. His wife and those close to him were his inspiration, the driving force to meet challenges. They allowed him to express himself as a man without feeling degraded or weak. Whatever was before them would no doubt be a challenge, yet he perceived as a strong team, they could get through it.

The King's confidence lay in strategy and intellect. Silently, Nathaniel was already claiming victory over those he saw as all brawn and no brain opponents. He was now more centred on when the game would begin.

With their thoughts a concoction of imagination, strategies and the unknown, the gifted retired to their rooms.

The royal bedchambers were furnished much the same. The old world elegance was seen in the four-poster bed draped in thick lace where the couple lay snuggled together under blankets whilst conversing. Tegan admitted to being frightened, not of the game itself, but of capture. Conveying scenarios, she bastardised the language more so than usual. This trait, her brother disliked, though was known to do it himself on occasion.

His wife sighed with the gesture for her to be silent. Malcom had not been able to get a word in.

"I promise you, I'd kill to get you back."

"What if you were captured?" Tegan rose up on an elbow, eyeing him.

"If I'm captured, your cousin and brother know what to do. You heard me in the library; no one is to hesitate to kill me. I mean it Tegan, if you don't, the Necropolin will win. Anyway, I'm not intending to let them get that close."

"We have to win ten games in all." Tegan changed the subject, feeling she was appearing weak.

"One down, nine to go." Malcom placed his hand under his wife's chin. "I don't want to talk about this anymore, we're wasting time. Who knows, this might just be our last night of privacy for a while."

Tegan was Malcom's whole world and he would rather die than hurt her. The thought of capture escaped him whilst making love to his wife. He believed nothing, not even the players themselves could ever come between them. What they had for each other, he thought unique and everlasting.

CHAPTER 3

In unfamiliar surroundings, Cathmore, the first to stir from sleep, began quickly rousing those around him. With squinting eyes, he heard his cousin mumble.

“It has begun.” Nathaniel glanced over faces, taking in who was present. All the gifted were accounted for and it did not surprise him that Rebecca was amongst them. Less hats, ties and gloves, they were dressed as though ready for a days work on the Mariard. The only notable difference in the women’s uniforms was that of tailored pants instead of long skirts.

On their feet and silently in awe, each took in his or her surroundings. This was no ordinary forest, gigantic trees with thick contorted trunks, in shades of deep red and browns, gave one the sense of being small in the scheme of things. Limbs entwined with neighbours, roots appeared like claws dug in or spread out over refined grey earth. This left barely room for grass or other vegetation to grow. On looking upward, the dense canopy of colourful leaves filtered rays of daylight. A multitude of vines ran from tree to tree, as though connecting nature together for some purpose. The pleasant woody scent in the warm air was calming, making it hard to imagine that such a beautiful creation was the setting for war.

Having been lost in the woodlands in the last game, Tegan noticed the silence and eerie stillness. Now wary, she glanced down with the intention of slipping her hand into her husband’s yet did not follow through. She drew everyone’s attention to the plain steel wristbands they wore and looked to her brother for explanation.

Recalling to memory, information from the book, Nathaniel spoke his thoughts aloud.

“Say the word. Put on the full armour of the Mariard that you may stand against the powers of darkness and its forces of evil. Say the word. Hold a shield of protection. Say the word. Behold your weapon will guide you to the heart of evil.” His brother-in-law drew his attention.

“Say what word?” Malcom aired a hint of frustration, assuming this would entail mind games. Nathaniel tested his theory.

“Armour.” With the word, a suit of highly polished antiquated armour covered his entire body. The full-faced helmet was of modern design, likened to that worn by ITP pilots. The clear visor enabled Nathaniel to see without obstruction and it all felt comfortable and lightweight. Speaking aloud, it became clear that the others could not hear him. Testing another theory, he thought helmet, which immediately disappeared, leaving the remainder of the suit.

“Incredible.” Nathaniel smiled pleased. “You don’t even have to say it aloud, just think armour and it appears. Think the word again and it disappears.” He gestured for all to try it. On doing so, the suits, identical in design, manifested. They found they could verbally interact with one another whilst wearing the helmets.

The shield appeared as a body-length transparent screen in front of him, its movements guided by Nathaniel’s out stretched fingers. Cathmore had beaten his cousin in

thought. Holding a long sword in hand, Cathmore sliced through the air with enthusiasm and expertise. His attention diverted to his wife, who was also experimenting with weapons. Rebecca expressed an air of delight whilst drawing them one after the other, as though checking her inventory. Curiosity had him sensing for it. Disengaging his helmet, Cathmore drew his cousin's attention.

"Nathanial, the book spoke of six gifted, which could draw on the player's energy, did it not?" He already knew the answer. His cousin, having caught on, glared at Rebecca. The woman forced a smile, ignorant to why they were staring at her.

"What are you all looking at me like that for?" Rebecca's sights again were on her husband. Cathmore expressed awkwardness, concerned to how his wife would take this.

"Rebecca... Ah, you have a gifting."

"I have had it all year. Are you all right?" Though believing this to be the truth, something in her husband's expression told her different. The recollections coming to mind, Rebecca suspected were implanted with the gifting. "I did not train with you, did I?" She became uneasy with her husband shaking his head. "Oh my, I do not feel so confident..." Malcom interrupted her, grinning pleased.

"Don't worry about it Rebecca, you'll do fine. Just remember, we are a team and a team sticks together." Malcom glanced at his wife.

"Just go with what's in your mind." Smiling, Tegan was glad to see another female gifted on the team. A fleeting thought crossed her mind; she was no longer the weakest link.

The Mariard player had implanted the use of metaphysical combat within Rebecca's mind. To Cathmore's way of thinking, his wife held a year of experience within her subconscious. This was a blessing; at least she would have a better chance in the game as one of the gifted. It would also enable him and the others to better protect her. Wanting to make his wife feel one of the team, he changed the subject back to the game.

Outdated weaponry was behind Malcom's expression of disappointment. Already, he had attempted to draw on better armaments, yet to no avail. They could only hope technical advancements would come, as it had in the last game. His brother-in-law thought it best they move on. Having no idea in which direction to lead the team, Nathanial took a step forward. He suddenly glared in amazement. The finer tree roots began receding, forming a pathway for them to follow.

At the rear of the group, Malcom noticed the roots covering their tracks. Some rootlets swept deeper footprints. Bringing this to his brother-in-law's attention, Nathanial saw this as a good sign, assuming nature was on their side. Nonetheless, Cathmore reminded all to take nothing for granted. They continued to walk on, curiously eyeing their surroundings.

Into the third hour of their journey, the team came upon a stream of glistening water. It was so clear, golden silt could be seen at the bottom. Grey rocks, covered in moss, held the sloped embankments. Resting on one knee, Malcom submerged his hand into the water. Snapping it out, he was quick to his feet.

"It's boiling!" Malcom cringed in agony. His wife's eyes widened at the sight of the large blisters forming on his hand. Without further hesitation, she radiated an aura to administer healing energy. Feeling something moving around his ankles, Malcom looked down. Seeing the rootlets, he shoved his wife aside, assuming they would try to take her also. Frantically, he and others attempted to pull them from his legs. Larger roots swiftly moved in on him to wrap around his body.

Sensing an energy signature, similar to theirs, Cathmore perceived Malcom was not in any danger. He persuaded the others to stand back and not interfere.

“Relax Malcom!” Their eyes met. Though unsure, Malcom trusted Cathmore’s instincts and stopped struggling. All the same, he remained very much on edge.

The roots lifted the man off the ground and brought him to rest against the contorted trunk of the tree. Lower branches moved like arms. Small, translucent leaves wiped perspiration from Malcom’s brow, making him feel less anxious. Guided by rootlets, his arm stretched out in front of him. His burnt hand disappeared amongst the fine coloured foliage. Feeling the coolness and the pain subsiding, an expression of relief formed on Malcom’s features.

After only a couple of minutes, the branches slowly moved away. Looking down on his companions, Malcom was lowered in front of those grouped. His wife was quick to embrace him. He answered with a nod, gesturing he was all right. Without word, Malcom examined his hand. Astounded, he was most grateful for the healing. Not even with a combined effort, could they have done it themselves in such a short time.

“Thank you.” Malcom addressed the tree, not expecting a response.

“You are very welcome,” a mature, female voice replied.

“It speaks.” Malcom took a step back. He now felt a little obligated to introduce himself. “I’m Malcom.” He felt somewhat silly talking to a tree.

“We know who you are and have been expecting the children of the Mariard.”

The tree called itself Hareem, the watcher of the forest. She had much to say concerning the journey ahead of them, but would not tell them specific details. Hareem warned, not all was what it appeared. Although the entire forest was alive, in one form or another, only one third sided with the Mariard. The other two thirds consisted of Necropolin sympathisers and undecided, which should not be trusted. She instructed the gifted to find at least one of two gems. The blue gem belonged to the Mariard and the red to the Necropolin. Both activated the large bronze and chrome disks hidden throughout the forest. Finding their gem, before the other team, would enable them to draw their opponents into combat against their will. In addition, their opponents would have no control over the rings whatsoever.

Tegan questioned whether they could draw the rings in their minds. The answer was no, not until they had a gem and for a time, would not be able to prod or connect with their opponent’s minds either. This was a relief to the gifted. They would not have to waste energy blocking their opponents from entering their thoughts. Hareem continued.

“Heed my warning. The forest has the ability to defy logic and men unaware will not see reason.” A gentle breeze blew through the branches. It soon became apparent that Hareem had said all she was going to say. Her branches gracefully lowered towards the hot stream. Larger leaves scooped water and presented the clear fluid to the gifted. Most reluctant to drink, Malcom looked to his brother-in-law. Evidently, Nathaniel trusted Hareem. The cool water was most refreshing and revitalising.

Thick roots made a bridge across the stream whilst others receded on the other side. Again, a path lay ahead of them.

CHAPTER 4

During the hours of walking, the pleasantness of the environment and lack of threat had the gifted relaxed and enjoying each other's company. However, with a variation in scenery and the path no longer being opened to them, their happy disposition changed to uncertainty and caution. The way ahead was thick undergrowth. Prickly, grey-blue bushes laden with white berries left fine scratches on their armour whilst pushing through. They soon learnt to avoid the musky-yellow ferns, which on touch released dusty spores and a sickly sweet scent. The group had to go around clumps of tall, fur topped flexible canes. At times, the earth was soggy under foot, seepage from underground springs.

Hareem had told them to look for Potnas, an edible purple fungus growing throughout the forest. It would not be too palatable, but extremely nutritional. This would sustain them throughout this part of their journey. An unfamiliar tree stood out like a slender child standing alone amongst towering adults. Its shredded white bark hung in strips, revealing reddish undertones and like those mature, leafage thrived from the head. They found the food source growing in abundance on the protruding roots of this particular tree.

Malcom spat out the fungus, but could not get the bitter taste out of his mouth.

"You've got to be joking!" Malcom eyed his brother-in-law, who persisted, though expressed disgust. Cathmore likened it to a dry sponge. Seeing the men's reactions, both women would rather go hungry. Rebecca voiced her thoughts.

"We may have to cook it." She looked at Tegan with her friend agreeing, adding that she would wait until they setup camp.

The piece of fungus dropped from Malcom's hand as he willed his sword and shield. His actions alerted the others, who assumed he had heard something in close proximity. Listening intently, Nathaniel and Cathmore could now distinctly hear it. The alluring sound seemed to come from totally different directions, apparent in the men's stance. Tegan and Rebecca shrugged at one another, gesturing they could not hear anything. Discreetly, Tegan questioned her husband.

"What is it?"

"Be quiet," Malcom snapped, continuing to visually search the area about them. The three men suddenly shot off through the undergrowth in entirely different directions. Before Rebecca could follow her husband, her friend grasped her forearm. Tegan feared they would not be able to keep up with the men, thinking it best for them to stay put. Rebecca acknowledged that she too had heard nothing. Watching the men madly running about the scrub, as though chasing some invisible presence, Tegan began to feel deserted and vulnerable. Disgruntled, she aired to Rebecca that the men showed no consideration for them.

For over twenty minutes, the two women sat at the base of a tree. Spotting the men coming towards them, they both rose to their feet, eager to know what was going on. With her brother about to walk past them, without so much as a word, Tegan grasped Nathaniel's arm, pulling him up.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Tegan aired annoyance.

“Nothing.” Nathaniel frowned. “What’s your problem?”

“I don’t believe this! The three of you ran off and didn’t even give me and Rebecca a second thought. What type of strategy was that? It was you who ordered us to stick together.”

“Excuse me.” Nathaniel was insulted by the remark. “We investigated a threat. Why didn’t both of you follow your husbands?”

“That’s not the issue Nathaniel. None of you men thought twice about us. It could have been a trap for all you knew. Besides, we heard nothing. You didn’t even consult with us.” Tegan’s attention snapped to her husband.

“Jeepers, not even one day into the game and they’re already whining. Whose bright idea was it to bring them along? Come on; let’s move before we’re nagged to death.” Malcom pressed Nathaniel forward. Cathmore addressed Rebecca.

“You got anything to add woman?” With his wife shaking her head, he left her in utter disbelief, to follow up behind the men.

“What was that all about?” Rebecca was not the only one shaken and dumbfounded by the men’s attitudes.

“I don’t know, but I didn’t think I was that out of line by reminding them of our responsibility to one another.” Tegan gestured to move on, yet wanted to keep back a little from those ahead.

“Believe me, you weren’t,” Rebecca replied. “Cathmore has barely let my hand go since we started, and look at him now.” Her husband strutting ahead was not the only issue upsetting her. Not backing Tegan was one thing, but to turn on her and use such a tone was another. With her friend quickening the pace, Rebecca assumed Tegan was not going to remain silent over this and she was right.

Pushing past Cathmore, Tegan grabbed her husband by the arm. Having drawn him to a halt, she loudly spoke her mind.

“You want to ignore and humiliate me, well go ahead! Just don’t expect me to stand back and take it Mister.” Though her husband glared shocked, she continued. “Two can play at this game.” Tegan went to walk on, yet her husband grasped her arm, expressing his concern.

“What’s the matter? What are you talking about?” With his wife pulling free and backing off, his concerns escalated. Malcom could now sense both women’s apprehensiveness in their energy signatures.

The men exchanged confused glances. Wanting answers, Nathaniel calmly addressed his sister.

“Just take it easy and tell us...”

“You have no idea, do you?” With her brother shaking his head, Tegan again glanced awkwardly at Rebecca beside her.

What the women shared was cause for alarm. The men believed they had sat around a tree just quietly resting. It was more probable their wives were under some mystical influence. Recalling what Hareem said, Nathaniel reminded the others.

“The forest has the ability to defy logic and men unaware will not see reason. They could very well be right.” His cousin drew his sights.

“It could also mean, they have the problem and our response to their dilemma might not be reasonable.” Cathmore’s remark prompted each one to consider the possibilities. Malcom broke the silence.

“I’m with you Cathmore. Think about it.” He glanced over faces. “We would never

intentionally hurt our wives, and I certainly don't believe my wife whines." Taking Tegan's hand in his, he awkwardly smiled. With his wife reflecting his expression, he assumed she agreed, yet was mistaken. Tegan was not the only one who thought Nathaniel was on the right track. Rebecca remained tense, fearing this may happen again.

"We need to stay close together and not let this become a dividing issue amongst us." Rebecca felt her husband's arm shift from around her shoulders.

"Best we move on." Cathmore took his wife's hand in his.

The three men had resorted to using swords to cut through thick undergrowth. Their armour protected them against the spiky brush, which would shred clothing. Though the men were tired and sweaty, the women's offer to assist was declined. Both Malcom and Cathmore aired it was their responsibility, which prompted Tegan to suspect they were acting out of guilt.

The subject had not been raised for a few hours; however, Hareem's warning remained very much on all their minds. Daylight was fading quickly, like a dark shadow casting over the canopy. Seen through the trees, light and smoke from a fire had Cathmore and Nathaniel go on ahead to investigate.

Remaining cautious, Malcom led the women into the large clearing. There was no one about, yet someone had positioned the rocks and started the fire within. A stack of wood sat beside the blaze, enough to keep it burning throughout the night. Despite the unpalatable flavour, Tegan offered to look for fungus. Her husband would not have the women leaving the clearing. Both Malcom and Cathmore again manifested suits of armour to go look for Potnas.

With a chill in the night air, the two women stood warming themselves by the fire. Tegan's sights were on her brother. He was dragging a fallen limb out of the undergrowth for them to sit on.

Sensing the tension, Nathaniel could not blame them, considering their ordeal. On approach, he caught the women exchanging uneasy glances. His sister broke the silence; she was starving. The thought of fungus stirred him to grin and make light of the issue, assuming they would get used to it.

Dropping a log on the fire, Nathaniel looked out over the silent, dark area. From the corner of his eye, something caught his attention. Staring at a tree, a short distance away, he thought it may have just been the light reflecting from the fire. Seeing it again, it shot back behind the straight, towering trunk. The glimpse of the luminous figure sparked alertness.

Continuing to look beyond his sister and Rebecca, Nathaniel discreetly gestured to be silent. Unheard by the women, the sound of the creature's alluring song captivated him and he manifested his armour.

"Wait here," Nathaniel demanded.

"What is it?" Tegan rose from the log, as did Rebecca.

"Just do as you're told woman," Nathaniel snapped. Tegan grasped her brother's arm, stopping him from moving away.

"No Nathaniel! You're staying here with..." The impact of his metal glove striking her cheek sent Tegan to the ground. Rebecca jerked stiff, terrified by the man's actions.

Having witnessed this, Malcom dropped the handful of fungus, leaping brush to get to Nathaniel. Infuriated, he thrust a fist, sending his brother-in-law to the dirt. About to strike Nathaniel again, he felt himself grasped. Cathmore pulled him back.

"I'm going to knock his block off!" Malcom glared at his friend.

"Wait! It looks like Tegan and Rebecca were right. It's us, you saw it yourself." Cathmore released Malcom to aid his cousin. On sitting up, Nathaniel wiped blood from his

lip and his harsh expression faded.

In deep remorse for his actions, Nathaniel profoundly apologised to his sister. He had no recollection of striking her. The cut on Tegan's cheek was evidence of his deed and was being healed by her husband.

Sitting around the fire, they were at a loss to know what brought it on. Nathaniel did recall glimpsing something, but was unable to give a clear definition. Whatever it was, Tegan and Rebecca were convinced it caused a change in the men's characters, Nathaniel was proof of this. Undoubtedly, Hareem's warning was for the men, who saw this unknown affliction as a threat to the women.

Embers remained amongst the rocks. Yelling and the sound of clashing steel woke Rebecca, who roused Tegan. Filtering through the canopy, the blue-grey light gave some visibility. Though the men were not present, their voices directed them towards their location.

Having pushed through undergrowth, the two women noticed it was thinning out. Patches of earth were visible amongst the tussocks of coarse knee-high grasses and large clumps of flexible canes. The trees appeared different, slender giants shedding white bark, seedpods and dead wood from branches. Silently, Tegan and Rebecca closed in.

The bushes concealed the women's presence. Penetrating the thinner canopy, the additional light reflected off Malcom and Cathmore's armour. The two men were fiercely fighting each other. Already terrified, Tegan smothered her gasp on spotting her brother rising to his feet. Nathaniel's armour bore the puncture mark of a sword and spilt blood.

"We have to stop them," Rebecca whispered with her heart pounding in her chest. Evidently, their team leader had lost a life. Nathaniel attacked Malcom with renewed strength, which saw two against one.

"Wait." Tegan grabbed her friend's forearm. "Look over there." She pointed beyond the men to the trees. Three glowing apparitions were peering out from behind trunks, observing the fight. "I think we have found the cause of our trouble." Fearing for her husband's life, Tegan was prepared to kill in order to put a stop to this. "They know we're here." She sighed frustrated, as one was looking in their direction.

"You go one way," Rebecca said, "I will go the other."

"No, I have a better idea. We'll pretend to go back to the camp. It might draw them out into the open." Tegan grabbed Rebecca's hand, leading her hastily back in the direction they came. She wanted to give the impression they were fleeing in fear.

Having gone around the outskirts of the undergrowth, the two women were now approaching from opposite directions. Ducking down, they lay on the ground to observe. As hoped, the radiant figures had moved out into the open and were still watching the men. Able to get a better look at the troublemakers, Tegan and Rebecca became totally intimidated.

The beauty of these creatures defied description. In addition, there were more of these beauties than first thought. Counting ten, Tegan suspected others were hiding close by. The word tribe came to mind, prompting discouragement. The apparitions, evidently female, gave the impression they were flirting and inciting the fight. Fury rose within Tegan. Two creatures hovered about her husband, their sensual stroking of his hair seem to make him fight more fiercely.

On all fours, the two women moved silently closer. Manifesting a sword in hand, Tegan looked to her friend. Rebecca shook her head and engaging a bow, gestured for her to do the same. Rising on her knees, Rebecca took aim. With the creature dropping to the ground, the three men immediately stopped fighting. Both women stood to continue and as

one arrow took flight, another appeared in its place, ready for release.

Raising swords and yelling to kill the murderers, the men gave chase. Together, Tegan and Rebecca ran for their lives, heading into unknown territory. The thought of losing a life had Tegan desperate to put distance between them. Both her husband and brother could be heard yelling with an air of distraction in their voices. This, giving their positions away, enabled her to lead Rebecca deeper into the forest. She could only hope that like before, the men would soon come to their senses.

CHAPTER 5

With daylight filtering through the canopy, Tegan and Rebecca rested against a mossy embankment. The silence implied the men had given up the chase. This was of little comfort, separation and fear left the two women feeling vulnerable and not wanting to go back. Whilst collecting their breath, both perceived to know exactly how the other felt. Though they could quite easily shed tears, they tried to be strong for one another.

“What do you propose we do now?” Rebecca broke the silence. Tegan drew a deep breath and their eyes met.

“To be honest, I don’t know. I just can’t believe the men want to kill us. I don’t know what hold those creatures have on them but...” Tegan stiffened with the interruption of a hissing, male voice behind them.

“There are many more where they came from.”

Startled to their feet, the women engaged shields and swords. On the embankment above, a gathering of green-scaled creatures looked down on them. Slender physiques were clothed in sleeveless tunics of finely woven barks. They stood seven feet or more tall with long, whippy tails. Folds of frilled skin on the neck flared, creating a broad rounded expanse of translucent scales. Bright green eyes gave the impression they would light up the dark. Weaponry of lengthy pointed staffs and clubs of rough wood were not held in a threatening manner.

“Fear us not.” The creature hissed, jumping down to land on all fours. Upon standing, he towered the women. “I am Geclend of the Mihoharka tribe. We are here to serve the children of the Mariard.” Geclend bowed his head, showing respect.

Considering their dilemma, Tegan felt they had nothing to lose by trusting them. The two women disengaged swords and shields.

“I am Tegan and this is Rebecca.” She glanced edgy at her friend before continuing. “We have lost our way and the men of our team...” Geclend interrupted her.

“Have been captured by the Angelicas; mystic creatures they are. Lure males with their song to lord over their harems.”

“We killed a few of them,” Rebecca nervously said. “The men...”

“Want revenge. The Angelicas will keep them occupied, but only whilst you remain out of sight and out of mind.”

“Occupied in what way?” Tegan felt she already knew the answer. The thought provoked further animosity towards the mystic creatures.

“Lust is a powerful weapon,” Geclend answered. Rebecca glared at him.

“Is there anyway we can get them back?”

“You must capture the men.”

“Impossible.” Tegan felt discouraged.

“Why do you say that?” Geclend tilted his head confused, having not expected a child of the Mariard to give up so easily.

“The men are the strongest members of our team. Between the three of them,

Rebecca and I don't stand a chance."

"There are not just two of you; we are at your service. I have brought twenty of our strongest warriors. If you feel this is not enough, I will send word for additional support." The women's faces lit up with their confidence restored. Tegan eyed Rebecca, who nodded her approval.

"Let's go get our men," Tegan snarled with thoughts of retribution.

"Do not be hasty," Geclend said. "Wait until night fall."

"We can't." Rebecca stepped in. "The Mariard children have been blessed with three lives. We believe Nathaniel has already used one of them up. If the men start fighting again, we could end up with only one of them left."

"Then we must act quickly," Geclend replied and looked to Tegan. "Get on my back and I will carry you." As he spoke, another warrior landed in front of Rebecca. The creature lowered onto all fours. Both women disengaged their armour and nervously took up the offer. On Geclend's back, Tegan felt his tail secure her to his body. With hands gripping his shoulders, she held on for dear life.

The Mihoharka warriors travelled faster than the women could have on foot and in a manner that Tegan and Rebecca had not expected. With uncanny stamina, these creatures leapt silently from tree to tree, their claws dug deep into the bark giving stability in any position.

At the top of a slender giant, Geclend looked into the face of the other carrier that was positioned above on the same tree. Hissing noises past between the two creatures. The women's gifting enabled them to understand what was being said.

Tegan held on tightly whilst Geclend changed his position. This had her looking straight down at the ground below. Once she overcame the initial shock, she now knew where they were, back at the team's campsite.

At a lower position on the trunk, Geclend dug his claws in for them to observe. They could now clearly see a partially naked Malcom surrounded by Angelicas. Furious with jealousy, Tegan watched her husband lounging on a bed of leaves. Engaged in a passionate kiss, Malcom fondled the creature's dainty breast whilst another stroked his hair. What others were doing to please her husband took little guesswork.

Having seen enough, Tegan nudged Geclend with her elbows, gesturing to go back up. Like a ball of fire in her stomach, the anger she felt kept her from shedding tears. Considering others were present, she put on a brave front.

In a low tone, Tegan informed Rebecca of what she witnessed. Geclend defended the man's position.

"You must understand, he has no knowledge of who he is nor can he control his desires in their presence. Do not take this personally."

"Did you see Cathmore?" Rebecca was anxious for news.

"No." Tegan drew a deep, tense breath. "Malcom's probably abandoned them, left them near dead in the undergrowth."

"Be not alarmed," Geclend said. "I believe they are still alive. The man has but a small harem. This indicates they have separated into more than one group."

"Should we split up?" Rebecca asked.

"No," Geclend replied. "We should take them one by one, starting with him." He glanced towards the ground.

"What of the Angelicas?" Tegan shifted her sights with the creature above answering her.

"Let us worry about them." The warrior's long tongue snapped out of his wide

mouth, before cocking a grin.

“You’re going to eat them?” Tegan expressed revulsion.

“Nothing is wasted in the forest,” Geclend replied, thinking nothing of it. “We must capture the man first, then attack the Angelicas. Is that understood?” He saw Tegan nod and heard Rebecca agree.

High in the trees, the warriors encircled the camp. With a hissing signal, they silently began their descent. Two Mihoharkas dropped directly behind Malcom. Timidly, the Angelicas backed off whilst their luminous eyes searched for escape. Rebecca’s trembling hand clutched the blade at Malcom’s throat. Her sights followed her friend, coming round in full view.

On edge, the tip of Tegan’s sword touched the bare chest of her seated husband.

“I capture you in the name of the Mariard,” Tegan yelled. This was a signal for the warriors to drop from their positions and onto their fleeing victims. Stepping back, Rebecca’s weapon changed to a bow, aimed at Malcom, who squirmed with rage as warriors were devouring his harem.

“I’ll kill you!” Malcom glared at his wife in front of him. Anxiousness gripped Tegan. There was no change in her husband and she feared the capture was unsuccessful.

“Have they finished yet?” Tegan could not bring herself to look at the warriors eating. Glancing in their direction, Rebecca’s expression changed from one of disgust to that of inquisitiveness.

“If I didn’t know better, I would think they were eating a mass of cobwebs. It is not gory at all.” Rebecca had prompted curiosity and Tegan turned her head to look.

Seeing his chance, Malcom engaged his armour and struck out at his wife. Though knocking her to the ground, she was quick to her feet. With sword in hand, Malcom lunged at Tegan. The clashing of blades drew the warriors to gather around the couple. Unable to bring herself to fire on the man, Rebecca voiced for Geclend to do something. He replied that Malcom was also a child of the Mariard. They were warriors; to intervene would dishonour both those in combat. Shifting her aim to only injure Malcom, Geclend’s hand guided Rebecca to disengage the bow. He uttered to have confidence in her friend; they would see neither die.

With ease, Malcom knocked the sword clear out of his wife’s hand. Thinking quickly, Tegan dropped and rolled whilst grasping a handful of dirt. As anticipated, she temporarily blinded him. Lashing out with skilful legwork, she sent him crashing to the ground. Hearing Rebecca yell to run, she did just that and headed into the undergrowth.

Listening intently, Tegan could hear nothing behind her. Stopping to take breath, she stood trembling. Looking back in the direction of the camp, she prayed the others had apprehended him. She was now undecided whether to go back or wait for others to come to her.

Unexpectedly, Tegan was attacked from behind. The force of the strike sent her onto all fours. Before she knew it, her attacker booted her in the side. Flat on her back, she glared up in terror. Standing over her, the look in Malcom’s eyes told her nothing had changed. The man she loved wanted her dead, having the power and determination to do it.

“Say your prayers woman,” Malcom snarled, holding the sword with both hands above his head, ready to plunge the blade into her heart. Hesitating, he suddenly appeared light-headed. Swooning, Malcom managed to drive the sword downward, before staggering back a little and collapsing.

Releasing her breath, Tegan edged away from the sword, having scratched the side of her armour and dug into the ground. Shock kept her seated, thoughts clouded, trembling

and just staring ahead.

What Rebecca witnessed drove her to fear the worst. Shaken, she continued through the knee-high undergrowth with warriors following behind her. Drawing on a bow, she would not hesitate to incapacitate Malcom or anyone else who tried to stop her. Cautiously, she closed in.

Spotting the man, lying on his back, Rebecca cautiously approached. Nudging him with her foot, she disengaged her bow, assuming Malcom no longer a threat. Glad Tegan was safe; she dropped to one knee, looking into wide eyes welling with tears.

“Oh Tegan, are you all right?” Her friend did not answer. Rebecca perceived that whatever rendered Malcom unconscious had saved his wife’s life. Nonetheless, she now feared the repercussions of his actions.

Assisted to her feet, Tegan’s ordeal was sinking in. A sense of urgency came over her to get away from Malcom. After glancing over faces, she ran in the direction of the camp, wanting time alone to collect herself.

Warriors placed Malcom on a bed of leaves, prepared by others in the clearing. At Rebecca’s request, Geclend reluctantly bound the unconscious man. Eager to find her husband, Rebecca wandered across the clearing. Her friend was sitting on a thick protruding root with her back to all. She was not surprised that Tegan tried to hide her emotional state. Sitting down beside the woman, Rebecca drew her friend into a comforting embrace. Again, Tegan gave into tears.

“Everything will be all right, you will see.” Rebecca felt Tegan shift to sit straight. Though still shaken, a tense, angry expression was forming and the tears subsided.

“No it won’t. It will never be the same.” Tegan looked into her friend’s eyes.

“Please, just think about this. He had no idea what he was doing, and when Malcom comes round...”

“He wanted to kill me Rebecca,” Tegan snapped, “and he would have if he hadn’t collapsed.”

“You have to forgive him Tegan. You heard Geclend, they are not responsible. I am prepared to stand by Cathmore, no matter what happens. I will do anything to get him back.”

“It’s not that simple Rebecca.” Tegan shook her head. “Wait until you look him in the eyes, see his hatred for you. Then tell me you feel the same.” Not wanting to talk about this further, she rose and hastily made her way to Geclend.

CHAPTER 6

They had not even been in the camp twenty minutes before leaving it. Three warriors remained behind to watch over Malcom. Both Rebecca and Geclend had tried to convince Tegan to stay behind, yet she would not have it. Unnerved by her friend's attitude, Rebecca was praying that all the gifted would soon be reunited. What went down left her edgy and frightened. She estimated that the time between voicing a capture and Malcom collapsing was approximately fifteen minutes. Not wanting a repeat performance, she would be more cautious and keep her distance from those they were out to free.

Scouts sent ahead of the group, quickly located Nathaniel's harem, not far from the camp itself. They approached the situation in the same manner as before; however, this time, Tegan took no chances and had her brother bound with vines at the base of a tree. As the warriors ate, Nathaniel struggled and spat threats. In front of him, Tegan angrily paced. Her brother's words reminded her of Malcom's actions, which dug like a knife to the bone.

"You're both dead, do you hear me! I'll hunt you down and watch you bleed for this!"

Unable to take any more of her brother's vicious remarks, Tegan retaliated.

"Shut up Nathaniel, just shut up!" She followed through with all her might, backhanding him across the face. A combination of the strike and his head hitting the trunk rendered Nathaniel unconscious.

"What did you do that for?" Dumbfounded, Rebecca dropped to the man's side. The metal glove to his face had left its mark.

"I've just quickened the process." Unrepentant, Tegan stared into her friend's eyes until Rebecca shifted her sights to Nathaniel. Calling out to Geclend, Tegan drew his attention. "Have some of your warriors take my brother back to the camp! We're moving on."

A scout returned, having found Cathmore wandering in the scrub. It appeared that during their hunt for the women, the man had fallen, striking his head against a rock. With the man not quickly regaining consciousness, the Angelicas grew impatient and abandoned him. The other scout was guiding Cathmore back in their direction. Not wanting to wait, Rebecca asked if he would lead them to him.

The reunion saw the couple embrace and passionately kiss. So glad were they to see one another, Cathmore did not care that they had an audience. Eyeing the cut and dark bruising on her husband's forehead, Rebecca cringed. She wanted to apply healing hands immediately. This was something Cathmore would rather do in private, fearing it might scare the locals.

Heading back, Cathmore swore he could not remember anything pertaining to any mystical creatures. The only thing he could recall of last night was Rebecca snuggling up to him in front of the fire. Waking in the scrub with a massive headache, he assumed the team had been attacked.

Between Geclend and Rebecca, they brought the man up to date. Shocked and

speechless for a time, Cathmore's own thoughts disturbed him. Silently disagreeing with his wife, he was not confident in them maintaining unity. Never would he have imagined such a game play. What he suspected lay ahead of them had Cathmore's gut churning and his mind running scenarios.

Walking up front with Geclend, Tegan felt she had good reason to keep her distance from the conversing couple. The struggle to contain her emotions was pressing enough without hearing the painful details again. Though unable to admit it to herself, she was scared of breaking down and appearing weak in front of their new allies.

"You're not going to leave us are you?" Tegan asked Geclend.

"We will see you through the forest. Our work then will be done."

"Tell me about your tribe." Under normal circumstances, Tegan's interest would have been sincere, yet she reluctantly stirred conversation to take her mind off her heartache.

The Mihoharkan had a mate, many children and lived in a nest built high in a tree. Their housing, woven into the fabric of nature, saw them barely visible to those not of their kind. Before Geclend could continue, the man came up alongside Tegan. Pulling his cousin up, Cathmore asked to have a private word. The warriors continued to walk on. Rebecca hurried past to stay with the group whilst heading back to camp.

There was little time to convey his thoughts. Once all together, his cousin would reinforce inner barriers to suppress her pain, this Cathmore knew all too well. Sensing the burning hurt within her, he felt the need to take the bitter sting out of the matter.

Defensively folding her arms across her chest, Tegan's emotional struggle had her unable to look her cousin in the face.

"I don't want to talk about it Cathmore."

"Listen to me..." His hands gripped his cousin's shoulders, holding her to the spot. "I swear to you, we had no idea what we were doing. After what Rebecca said about Malcom..." Cathmore sighed with the thought and continued. "Oh Tegan, he's going to be devastated." His grip relaxed. "You know him. He would rather die than hurt you." Catching her glance, the pain in Tegan's eyes caused him to swallow, concealing his own emotions. What he was sensing in her gifting disturbed him.

"I don't know what to think any more." Tegan spoke through clenched teeth with tears welling. "He wanted me dead Cathmore. I was nothing to him." Desperate to collect herself, she turned her back on him. "I need time. I ah..." She felt her cousin's hands on her shoulders. His fingers gripped, as she went to shrug him off.

"Don't Tegan, don't push us away." Cathmore sympathised. "You can't do this alone. I know this from personal experience. We're not just a team, we're family. One hurts, all hurts." Guiding his cousin into an embrace, he held her tightly, struggling not to cry with her.

The group had barely left the camp when Malcom roused to unfamiliar faces. Though having wanted to go after his wife, he cooperated with the warriors. Much detail was left out of the brief summary of events. Bruising on his brother-in-law's face spurred uneasiness and uncertainty to whether the creatures were telling the truth. Asking how Nathaniel got the injury, the answer left Malcom dumfounded. The warriors would not give reason for his wife's actions. In addition, they told him to wait until the women got back, as they would answer all his questions.

After introductions, Rebecca's expression told the two men something was wrong. Malcom and Nathaniel were eager to know the whereabouts of Tegan and Cathmore. Geclend felt they needed privacy and ordered the warriors to find food and wood for a fire.

"So, they told you what happened then." Rebecca glanced between the two men,

waiting a reply. Malcom spoke first.

“Yes. Sounds like you and our newfound friends here deserve medals.” Though feeling uncomfortable, Malcom slighted a grin of admiration and gratitude. The reaction was not what Rebecca expected. Folding her arms across her chest, she aired disapproval.

“If I may say so, you are taking this very calmly, considering you almost killed your own wife.”

“I did what!” Malcom glared and went numb.

Dawdling towards camp, the slow pace assured Cathmore his cousin was stalling. Disillusioned, he could tell Tegan was not listening to him. Her repetition of Malcom’s actions and loathing in his eyes convinced him she was frightened of her own husband. The conversation centred on the personal attack, little had been said of Malcom’s intimate encounters with the Angelicas. He questioned to what was truly eating at her deep within.

Both heard the man holler Tegan’s name. Ahead, Malcom could be seen forcing his way through the undergrowth to get to his wife. Evidently, he had been informed of his actions. Sympathising, Cathmore placed his hand on his cousin’s shoulder.

“Talk to him Tegan.” Wanting to give the couple privacy, Cathmore went to move on. With his cousin grasping his arm, he could feel Tegan trembling. Her expression reassured him that trouble lay ahead.

“Don’t leave me alone with him.” Tegan’s eyes pleaded. Cathmore heaved a concerned sigh.

“I’ll wait just over there.”

Not acknowledging his friend’s presence, Malcom grasped his wife in a tight embrace. Barely able to catch his breath, he was already profoundly apologising. Telling her what she meant to him, brought tears to his eyes. Lost in the moment, Malcom did not realise that his wife’s arms hung limp at her sides. Tegan had not responded in the manner befitting the reunion.

Hearing footsteps behind him, Cathmore glanced back. Though happy to see his wife and cousin, his thoughts remained on Tegan. The three stood discreetly watching and conversing on the couple. Rebecca could identify with her husband’s concerns. After the incident and even now, it was clear there was no change in Tegan’s attitude. Nathaniel voiced they were worrying over nothing. He was confident they would get through it.

“They love each other too much to let anything come between them.” Nathaniel hoped that he too would one day have such a relationship with another. Cathmore tightened his hold on his wife. Both exchanged a glance, assuming Nathaniel right. The man’s words reflected the feelings they shared for each other. The three headed off, leaving the couple alone.

CHAPTER 7

For ten days, the Mihoharka warriors had led the way through the forest. Tensions escalated between Tegan and the gifted to the point of isolating herself from them. At first, there was understanding, compassion and defending of Tegan's mood swings. Though over compensating, Malcom tried to reconcile for what he could not even remember doing. Tegan's adverse behaviour towards good intentions, made everyone frustrated. His own wife had worn him down with her coldness towards him. Not only did she blatantly distanced herself from Malcom, but would not even let him touch her.

In consideration to feelings and reactions to the incident, Rebecca tried to put herself in Tegan's shoes. Attempts to encourage her friend to talk were to no avail. Though sympathetic for a time, Rebecca's change of heart stemmed from Tegan's attitude, being regarded as disruptive. She began to think Tegan carried this on for the sake of attention. By ignoring it, Rebecca thought she was doing the woman a favour.

Appalled by his sister's unrelenting behaviour, Nathaniel reverted to openly speaking his mind. Arguments between the siblings resulted in accusations. He would tell his sister that her immaturity and wallowing in the past was letting down the team. Tegan saw him as flaunting his masculinity and authority.

In private conversations, Cathmore defended Tegan; nonetheless, the moment tempers flared, his recommendations were not acted on. From experience, he knew the signs and his fears were becoming reality. Shutting herself off from them, Tegan buried the pain instead of dealing with it. A dark side was emerging, giving her a sense of strength. This facade was detrimental to self-worth. Getting angry and defensive was easier than letting others see the hurt. In the past, this had seen Cathmore dead to his own emotions, something he himself was still battling with. Having conveyed this to Tegan, her responses escalated his concerns to where this would lead. She was already heading down a self-destructive path, but he was not prepared to give up on her.

Rejection, insecurities and notions of shattered love were driving Tegan's perspectives. What churned within, she could not even admit to herself, let alone anyone else. Denial was camouflaging her pain and changing her for the worst. Her caring and conscientious disposition towards others became a weight on her shoulders. Being a nice person made her nothing more than a doormat to wipe one's feet on.

Like her cousin, Tegan resented having not fought back over the years and was striving to change this. Refusing help gave a sense of independence. The determination to be heard resulted in arguments during discussions. With her brother constantly making light of the original incident, she resented him the most. She convinced herself that Nathaniel saw her new strengths as a threat to his leadership and was the one trying to turn them all against her.

Having settled in for the night, as usual, warriors scampered to the tops of trees to sleep, leaving one to patrol the camp. Seated around the blazing fire, the majority of gifted found amusement in daily events.

Feeling they were intentionally excluding her, Tegan just listened to the conversation. Seeing the couple snuggling, prompted negative thinking and agitation. It's all right for Rebecca, Tegan thought, she saw nothing and he did nothing to her. If he'd taken a blade to her, she'd be sitting with me instead of him.

Cathmore caught his cousin looking at them from across the fire. Knowing the feeling of rejection and isolation, it bothered him to see Tegan sitting all alone over the other side. If it were not for her, he would never have broken free of it. To see her like this was a reminder of what she had once felt for him and could not help but reach out.

"Tegan, come sit over here with us." Cathmore forced a smile.

"I'm fine where I am thank you." Tegan shifted her sights to gaze into the fire.

With the silence, Tegan assumed her presence was behind the lack of chatter. Deciding to turn in, she rose to her feet, yet did not move off with her brother drawing her attention.

"Lucky we aren't in the desert," Nathaniel scoffed, "the ice queen here would melt." Agitated, he glanced at his sister. Regretting the remark, he awaited retaliation.

Although thinking the comment insulting, Malcom could not bring himself to make his brother-in-law apologise. He perceived his wife would just bite his head off. Expecting a war of words, surprisingly, she walked off with a solemn expression.

Feeling guilty, Nathaniel broke the silence.

"I know I should not have said it, but she just..."

"Drives you insane," Malcom interrupted. "I know the feeling." He heaved a troubled sigh, keeping his sights on Nathaniel.

"Personally, I don't think she is up to continuing the game. I know this will sound harsh, but I think we should ask the warriors if she can stay with them."

"Yeah, just leave her behind." Malcom rolled his eyes, thinking it the most absurd thing he had ever heard Nathaniel say.

Unbeknown to the group, Tegan had not strayed far. Having overheard their comments sent her numb. Perceiving no one wanted her in the team, she silently darted into the darkness with her emotions in tatters.

The talk continued around the fire with none agreeing with Nathaniel, especially Malcom.

"She's my wife and I won't abandon her. I know it's tough on us, but I truly believe we'll work this out. She just needs time." Malcom ran his hand through his hair, trying to convince himself that his wife still loved him.

"You are right," Nathaniel replied. "Forget I even mentioned it. To be honest, I could not imagine the team without her." He eyed his cousin, who looked most serious. Evidently, he had been deep in thought.

"Tegan said we were warned and we didn't act upon it. She was right." Cathmore eyed over confused expressions. "Hareem did warn us. I had a feeling this wasn't just about the men." His focus shifted to Nathaniel.

"So are you saying Tegan could be under..."

"No, not at all," Cathmore interrupted, wanting to make himself clear. "The forest has the ability to defy logic, and a man unaware will not see reason. Just because we've left the Angelicas behind, doesn't mean the warning is no longer relevant. We are missing the true reason behind Tegan's behaviour."

"I understand what you are saying," Rebecca glanced over the men's faces. "I feel so guilty. I should have seen it."

"Seen what?" Malcom was still confused.

“After the attack, she was terrified of you. It was not just fear, there was something else. I put it down to what she witnessed between yourself and the Angelicas. Strangely enough, she has made no mention of it. She just spoke of the look in your eyes.”

“She said it to me too,” Cathmore added. “There was a cold loathing in your eyes. Tegan saw no love for her.”

“We have spoken about this...” Nathaniel sighed frustrated. “I know much stems from the past but...” His cousin interrupted him.

“No...” Cathmore shook his head, now addressing Malcom. “Your love means everything to her. She trusts it, feels safe, confidant in it. What she thought could endure anything, in her eyes, has been crushed.” He sensed his friend’s helplessness to rectify this. “I’m speaking from experience Malcom. When you think love can’t be found, you shut off. You don’t want to get close to anyone, see it all as pain and something to avoid at all cost.” Cathmore felt deeply for the couple’s predicament. His friend began staring into the fire whilst thinking aloud.

“I told her not even the players would come between us.” Malcom’s sights shot to his brother-in-law with the outburst.

“Damn it! It was in the book.” Nathaniel was annoyed with himself for the misinterpretation. “This is a game, not all games are combatant. I thought we would be up against the elements, survival of the fittest...” He heaved a breath. “What a fool I have been.” His brother-in-law caught on.

“Emotions wreak havoc with the mind games.” Malcom’s rising anger aired in his tone. “In fact; we have created our own little war here. Isolating the enemy, mental torture, not to mention put the fear of death into her! We’ve certainly shown her there’s no love to be found here. Jeepers! Who needs the Necropolin with us around?” Malcom stood. “I need to sort this out with her.”

Reflecting her energy signature elsewhere, Tegan hoped that anyone tracking her gifting would be misled into thinking she was heading back towards Hareem. In addition, she used the roots of trees as footings, which although slowed her down a little, left no prints in the dirt to give her away.

Having distanced herself from camp, Tegan continued to flee without consideration to where she was going. Negative and defensive thoughts fuelled her anger. She neither needed nor wanted anything more to do with those close to her. As far as she was concerned, both the team and the Mariard player had lost a gifted member. Defaming individuals spurred the pretence of strength and confidence. Her brother became the arrogant, egotistical know-it-all, who tries to run her life. Rebecca, the ignorant goody-two-shoes, who thinks everything can be fixed with a kiss and cuddle. Cathmore was the only decent one amongst them. During their talks, he expressed nothing but a caring disposition for her plight. His warning that unresolved issues could see her bitter and twisted brought denial of this happening to her.

Tegan’s detrimental state of mind became inflamed with thoughts of Malcom. The conman never loved her. Status was what he sought and being married to the King’s sister had certainly given him that. Reflecting on the last twelve months, she talked herself into seeing things that were not true. He never listened to her, neglected or ignored her feelings. Recollections of Malcom with the Angelicas tortured her. Having barely allowed her husband to touch her since the incident, fury provoked unwarranted attacks on the man. What she had thought, a sexually fulfilling partnership, she now saw as Malcom pleasing himself and keeping up appearances. No wonder he would be happy to leave her behind, it was all a chore to him.

Between rest breaks, Tegan kept a good pace whilst sporadically glancing up into the trees looking for warriors that may be scouting for her. Mid morning, she crawled under a bush, covered herself entirely with leaves and dozed for a couple of hours.

Having crossed hilly ravines, Tegan took to following a waterway. Late afternoon, she found a terrace of pools incorporated in the stream and deep enough to bath in. The embankment to the side appeared like a wall of rock cemented with earth and draped in flowering vines. Sitting at the foot of a tree, the purple fungus in her hand began to look good. Nibbling on the edges, Tegan still found the food substance hard to swallow, though persisted, knowing she had to keep up her strength. Clouded skies reflected in the pools. She prayed it would not rain, as it was going to be hard enough spending the night alone without having the weather against her.

Listening intently, the hissing alerted Tegan to a warrior moving from tree to tree. Running would only show her position. Unexpectedly, a hand slapped over her mouth and she hit the ground with a thud. The sudden darkness further unnerved her, realising it was a covering of some sort. Whoever was responsible smelt awful and was lying on top, pinning her to the ground. An unfamiliar male voice anxiously whispered near her ear.

"I won't hurt you. Stay still." His rapid breathing was due to running. Although in fear of the man, the thought of going back was equally daunting to Tegan. Undecided to what to do, she lay still.

After a few minutes of darkness, the light made Tegan squint. Aided to her feet by a strong hand, the man was of similar height and physique to her husband. Handsome unshaven features were covered in sweat and dirt. Untidy dark hair draped his shoulders; from his temples, earthen tone beads had been woven into several lengthy plaits. The short skirt was made of un-shapely tanned animal hide. Additional furs wrapped his feet and calves, appearing like boots with vine strapping. Placing the sizable animal skin around his broad shoulders, Tegan noted the large knife tied to his muscular leg. He introduced himself.

"I am Lamech from the Woodland tribe." His pleasant voice clearly aired anxiousness. "I hope I didn't hurt you."

"No, but why are you hiding from the Mihoharka?" Tegan saw his brown eyes open widely. Lamech began to back up, his hand slid over the handle of the knife. Assuming the warriors scared him, she attempted to calm the situation. "It's all right, I don't want them finding me either. You did me a favour. I'm Tegan." She forced a smile, which saw him relaxed a little.

"They are killers." Lamech glanced nervously upwards.

"Killers?"

"Yes. They came with the red suits to our tribe. Only a few of us escaped. They came after us. We were separated, I don't know if the others are alive or dead."

"These red suits, can you describe them in more detail?" Although Tegan appeared calm, the thought of the Necropolin team troubled her.

"Faces of men and women, but their bodies were blood red and shiny."

"Please, don't be frightened, but did they look like this?" Engaging her armour, Lamech jerk back, fearfully nodding. Disengaging, she was again wearing her grubby blue uniform with the jacket open revealing her shirt. "The Necropolin attacked your tribe." Tegan heaved an anxious sigh.

"You know these creatures?" With the woman's nod, Lamech's eyes followed Tegan as she sat herself down to rest up against the tree.

Pulling on the strapping around his waist, Lamech shifted a pouch to the front of him. Seating himself beside her, he opened the flap. Whilst taking out, what appeared to be

dried bread, a blue gem landed in the dirt. Snatching it up quickly, Lamech held it tightly in the palm of his hand.

“The blue gem.” Tegan’s thoughts escaped her.

“It is a sacred relic of my tribe. Was a sacred relic.” Lamech expressed disheartenment.

“May I look at it?” Tegan asked. After hesitating, the man opened his fingers to reveal the round flat gem. On taking hold of it, the gem radiated a soft blue energy.

“You are one of the gods!” Lamech scrambled to his knees in front of the woman where he bowed his head.

Taken back by this, Tegan placed her hand on Lamech’s shoulder, drawing his sights to her.

“No, I’m not a player, I mean god.” Annoyed by the thought, she gave the gem back to him and rose to her feet.

“Only a god can bring the sacred relic to life. It belongs to you.” Lamech held it out to her. Clearly, he was not going to take no for an answer.

Again seated together, Lamech began asking questions; however, Tegan gave little information, turning the questions back on him. Answering without hesitation implied he trusted her explicitly and was ignorant of the gifted and their role in the game. Rising to his feet, Lamech addressed her.

“May I have your permission to bathe? I must look an unsightly creature.”

“I’m not a god Lamech. You’re free to do whatever you want.” Tegan watched the man head towards the large pool. What came to mind alarmed her and she shot to her feet.

Warned to test the water first, Lamech squatted and quickly dipped his fingers in. The slow running water was pleasantly warm. Smiling gratitude, he stood, dropping his fur cloak to the ground. Wanting to give the man privacy, Tegan wandered down to the next rock pool.

Sitting alone, Tegan felt a moment of vulnerability and regret, yet this quickly subsided. Lamech had escaped the Necropolin team. According to the man, there was much distance between them, alleviating the threat of coming across her opponents. This reinforced her determination to go her own way, prove she did not need the men or Rebecca.

The blue gem was in her possession. Resentment drove Tegan’s thoughts of their loss her gain. She found it hard to believe that the Mihoharkas had attacked a tribe; nevertheless, she was not prepared to take anything for granted. What did she truly know about Geclend and his warriors? The two tribes might be enemies for all she knew and the Mihoharkas could have been sent to lure the team to the Necropolin. Finding many excuses not to go back, she reminded herself she was not one of the team anymore. They could fight their own battles, as she would now have to. Recalling her husband’s words, to leave her behind, brought on tears. She could not be with a man who did not want or love her. The marriage was over as far as she was concerned.

The sound of footsteps startled Tegan. Wiping tears from her cheeks, she did not wish the man to see her emotional and think her weak. Standing in front of her, she could not help but stare at Lamech’s clean-shaven features. Looking younger and of similar age to herself, he was even more handsome than previously thought.

“Something has upset you.” Lamech expressed concern. Thunder, rumbling in the distance, distracted him and alerted the woman to her feet. “A storm is coming. Wait for me here. I will find us some shelter and come back for you.” Feeling spits of rain on his olive skin, he placed his fur around Tegan’s shoulders and scooted off.

The small cavity in the cliff face led into a darkened cave. Once Lamech lit a fire, the massive area was revealed to them. Curtains of stalactites hung at different levels and above tiered rock pools. Uncertain was the height of the cave, where light from the flames ended, darkness shrouded any ceiling.

Both were drenched from the downpour, continuing to rage outside. Thunder rumbled loudly and lightning lit up the cave entrance. Warming her hands in front of the fire, Tegan felt grateful to the man for finding them shelter. Standing beside Lamech, his movement and words drew her attention to him.

“Remove your clothes.” Lamech was already stripping down. Tegan glared before diverting her eyes from him. Wearing only a flimsy genital pouch, he utilised the smaller of the stalagmites, at ground level, to hang the skins over to dry. What Tegan had already glimpsed, she thought attractive, much like her husband’s physique. Hearing his voice, she almost turned to look at him.

“You will catch the Gunjy if you remain in wet clothes.”

“What’s Gunjy?” Tegan noticeably shivered.

“Sickness, and it’s not pleasant believe me. I have seen many die from the Gunjy, happens a lot in the wet season.”

“Turn around.” Tegan waited a moment, confirming with a glance. Though his back was towards her, she felt embarrassed, having eyed his firm buttocks. Now keeping her sights on the fire, she stripped down to her singlet and panties.

Lamech found the woman’s modesty amusing. She sat with his wet fur snugly around her.

“What’s so funny?” Tegan felt uncomfortable, trying to keep her sights from his body.

“Where you come from, are all the women scared of flesh?”

“I’m a married woman.” Tegan looked away with him seating himself beside her.

“And why you were crying before.” His remark drew eye contact, yet she appeared most uncomfortable, indicating he was correct. “Is he dead, killed by the...”

“No, he’s very much alive.” Tegan shifted her sights to stare into the fire.

“Oh I see. You are trying to find him.” Lamech also began to look into the fire. “He must be very worried about you.”

“I doubt it.”

“If you were my woman, I would not eat or sleep until I found you.” From the corner of his eye, Lamech could see her looking at him. “The forest is dangerous, even more so now with the Mihoharkas doing the bidding of the red gods.” Her silence pressed him to question. “What makes you think he isn’t worried about you?”

“Because he’s not, all right,” Tegan snapped.

“Sorry, I am intruding...” Their eyes met. The woman apologised for her outburst.

Dramatically, Tegan told of their ordeal with the Angelicas. She was careful not to mention anything pertaining to the game or the gem. Repeating Malcom’s words dug like a knife to the bone. Fighting back tears, her glance turned to a shift of focus. The anxiousness in the man’s features prompted her to ask what was troubling him.

“I don’t feel it is my place to say.” Lamech drew a deep uneasy breath. Feeling Tegan’s hand on his forearm, he looked at her.

“Living in the forest, you would know about these things.” Tegan’s eyes beckoned for information.

“The forest is not what it appears. It does things to men... Even those who love their women folk.” Lamech shifted his sights to the fire.

“Go on.”

“Angelicas make a man irrational. You would kill and lie for them.” Their eyes met.

“What are you getting at?” Tegan was already drawing her own conclusion.

“You know exactly what you’re doing and you certainly don’t forget. Please, don’t think badly of him. It is a painful experience. No man should have to go through it.” Lamech returned his sights to the fire.

“So you’re speaking from experience?” Though Tegan concealed her feelings, her stomach was knotting with rage.

“Yes, and though I hate to admit it, I killed a man. He was a dear friend, yet I butchered him to lord over a harem.” Lamech eyed the woman. “When the tribe saved me, their spell was broken. Realising what I did made me sick to my gut. The guilt was so great I could not speak and when I did... I just said, I couldn’t remember.” He glanced away, expressing shame.

“So you weren’t captured?” Tegan aired resentment, yet not for him, but for those she perceived had lied to her.

“No.” Lamech shook his head. “Lured by lust; a captive of my own desires.”

“Thank you for sharing with me.” Tegan stood. Unable to contain her anger any longer, she grabbed her shirt.

“What are you doing?” Lamech quickly rose to his feet.

“Rebecca needs to hear the truth. Least I can say I warned her before I completely distance myself from them and this game of ill repute.”

“Sit down Tegan. I want you to listen to me before you do anything rash.” Lamech held her attention. “Yes, your husband lied, but only because his pain is so great. Not a day goes by without feeling the shame of it. The lies let him cope with what he’s done, be with those he truly loves.” Lamech sighed, clearly struggling with his own emotions. “Forgive me. I only told you because the more you know about the forest and its dangers the more likely you are to survive.”

“Don’t be sorry you told me.” Tegan sighed. “You’re right. The more I know about this environment, the more likely I am to survive it.”

“By the way, what did you mean by a game? This team you speak of; are you and them here to hunt like the Nec...” Lamech gestured for her to help him out.

“Necropolin. It is like a hunt, but we hunt each other; the Mariard against the Necropolin.” Seating herself by the fire, familiar words came to mind, some things are best left unspoken. Ignoring this, her anger towards Malcom, Nathaniel and the game itself drove her to expose the truth.

Having heard her out, Lamech’s features were tense with a look of shock in his eyes. Assuming he believed her, Tegan thought his façade of calm only shrouded resentment and anger.

“I need to clear my head.” Lamech placed the fur around his shoulders.

“You’re going to leave me too.” Disappointed, Tegan sighed, now regretting having told him.

“I’m not going to leave you, I just need some air. I will be right outside.” With her nod, Lamech moved out of the cave and into the darkness.

The rain had eased to a light spray. Tegan could hear the man pacing outside. Feeling betrayed by her husband, brother and cousin, she now wanted to get Rebecca away from them. It crossed her mind that it would be the men’s word against hers. Rebecca would probably side with her husband out of loyalty. The woman had said it herself, she was prepared to forgive Cathmore no matter what. Though Lamech spoke of guilt and shame,

she could find no forgiveness for the men's deception. All of this was only re-enforcing her resentment and strengthening her inner barriers.

Perceiving it all so clear, Tegan's imagination took hold. The men had denied their actions to save face. Cathmore did not want to accept responsibility or the backlash for taking a life from his own cousin. Her brother, the so-called intellectual leader of the team, had a reputation to uphold. Feeling trapped in the marriage, Malcom would see her dead to escape it. Having no love for her made it even easier for him to engage in adulterous behaviour. There was fierce determination in the promise she made to herself, she would lose not one life to a man who was out to rid himself of a wife.

Furious, Tegan's harsh thoughts escaped her. She hated them all. The list extended to include her mother, having deserted her to become a player. In addition, both players were responsible for creating a game board and those on it, which included the Angelicas.

Having fully dressed, Tegan stormed out of the cave. She startled Lamech in more ways than one. Whilst looking up at the darkened skies, her voice stole the silence.

"Mother! I will not be your puppet any more, do you hear me? Let it be known to all, I am no longer part of your Mariard team!" Tegan turned, her fury evident to the man she looked straight in the eyes. "I'm going to play this game my way!"

CHAPTER 8

The team had been unrelenting in their search for Tegan. Malcom's state of mind and health was a major concern. Squatting, Geclend offered some fungus to the man resting against the base of a tree. Malcom shook his head.

"You have to keep your strength up, not lose hope." Geclend expressed sympathy for the man he had befriended. Malcom's tired eyes revealed his exhaustion.

"Fifteen days Geclend, fifteen days and there's been no sign of her." The mere thought depressed him.

"Perhaps you should try connecting with her again."

"I've tried, the block is too strong. She doesn't want to be found. I'm scared Geclend, scared I'm going to lose her." Malcom suddenly stiffened. Both looked towards the warrior, yelling to come quick.

Having heard his wife scream out, Cathmore had bolted from the campsite. Surrounded by thick brush, the markings in the dirt were that of a bronze and chrome disk. Already, the rings had separated. Disorderly positioned, some remained horizontal where others turned vertically; all were rotating at an incredible speed. With his wife free-floating amongst the rings, Cathmore analysed Rebecca's signature. He could sense no threat to her as such. Not prepared to take anything for granted, he levitated into a free-floating position beside his wife.

In Rebecca's mind, Cathmore could not only see the floating manifested image of his wife, but also that of his cousin Tegan. Having manifested a self-image, he knew Tegan could sense and see him within the darkness of his wife's mind.

"Keep your distance cousin. I wish only to speak with Rebecca."

"We were the ones at fault Tegan. Tell her Rebecca." Cathmore could feel his cousin's animosity towards him, prompting uneasiness.

"It is all right Cathmore." Rebecca forced a smile at her husband, discreetly gesturing to let them speak alone. Though hesitant, Cathmore disconnected. The contact alone gave him hope, assuming his wife could clear the air and convince his cousin to come back.

On returning to the ground, Cathmore found the warriors had gathered along with Malcom and Nathaniel. The two men were about to levitate and connect with Rebecca themselves.

"It's Tegan," Cathmore informed. "She drew the rings. Rebecca is talking to her." He watched Malcom rub his whiskers in sheer frustration.

"I have to talk to her."

"No." Cathmore felt awkward, knowing his friend's desperation to be reunited with his wife. "Let them talk. She didn't seek out Rebecca for nothing." His sights shifted to Nathaniel.

"She is probably feeling alone, scared and wants Rebecca to talk to us on her behalf. Give them some time; obviously she doesn't feel comfortable just walking back in after what happened."

Silently, Cathmore thought Nathaniel wrong. Having sensed a strong loathing in his cousin's energy signature, he did not want to dash anyone's hopes by revealing this. Eyeing the rings high in the air, he made comment.

"By the looks of things, Tegan found the gem."

Over twenty minutes had past. Pacing on edge, Malcom was itching to speak to his wife. The sensation prompted him to suddenly look at his friend. Cathmore glared horrified, having also sensed that Rebecca was engaging in combat. About to levitate, with intentions of assisting her, Rebecca plummeted and slid several feet in the dirt. Evidently, she applied safety measures from implanted training, enabling her to cushion the fall with her gifting. Cathmore cradled his wife in arms whilst she regained her senses.

Swallowing his emotions, Malcom watched the rings collect to form the disk and come to rest in the dirt. Hearing his name drew his attention to Rebecca. Having collected her breath, she conveyed what Tegan had said.

The three men profoundly denied any knowledge of what occurred with the Angelicas. Having no doubts regarding the men's sincerity in this matter, Rebecca had voiced this to Tegan, who flared up and called her an ignorant woman. The warning against the warriors, Rebecca also dismissed as nonsense.

Geclend spoke on his tribe's behalf, swearing their allegiance was with the Mariard. Mihoharkans had never attacked any tribe, having not even seen those referred to as the red suits. Both Nathaniel and Cathmore did not doubt their loyalty at all. Rebecca nervously continued.

"She has so changed, never have I seen her like this before. The blue gem, she has it, and has formed a team of her own. She wanted me to side with her, when I declined the offer, she attacked me." Rebecca expressed disheartenment and awkwardness.

"Do you think..." Nathaniel paused, finding it difficult to speak his thoughts aloud. Nonetheless, he had to know one way or the other. "She is a captive of the Necropolin, now part of their team?"

"No," Cathmore answered, "that was the first thing I ascertained when I entered Rebecca's mind. It's still very much Mariard energy, but I can tell you this, it's stronger than I've ever felt it before." Not airing his suspicion, he believed her strength was coming from resentment and bitterness that he felt in Tegan's gifting. There was a sense his wife was keeping something from them. "Anything else we should know?"

Rebecca directed a glance, indicating it concerned Malcom. The man stood tense with his back towards them. It appeared his arms were folded and he was deep in thought. They could only image how this was hurting him.

The moment of silence reassured Malcom that his wife had said more. His stomach knotted and his voice broke a little as he forced out the words.

"Just come out and say it Rebecca." In his mind he added, get it over and done with.

"She said... She is no longer your wife and that..." Tears welled in her eyes. Rebecca did not want to continue, yet her husband nodded for her to go on. "That she has found another. I am so sorry..."

"I'll kill him!" Malcom spun round with rage in his eyes, having not expected this. "I swear if he touches her I'll rip his guts out!" He shifted his sights to address Geclend. "Send out your warriors! Search every inch of this forest! We have to find her, and now!"

"I promise we will find her Malcom." Geclend and his warriors scampered up trees with renewed determination to seek out the woman, wherever she might be.

Malcom addressed Rebecca, his harsh tone she did not take personally, considering the circumstances.

“I want you to think hard Rebecca. Could you sense the distance between...” He felt Cathmore’s hand on his shoulder.

“She’s a fair distance away Malcom and confident enough not to even displace her energy. She has had us running in circles.” Cathmore looked to his cousin.

“I am going to be blunt here.” Nathaniel glanced over faces. “Clearly someone has managed to turn Tegan against us.” He had not anticipated his brother-in-law’s fiery response.

“No! We engineered this! We are responsible! He’s just another pawn thrown into the mind games and a dead one if he’s touched my wife.”

The thought of Tegan with another man gripped Malcom. Storming towards the centre of the disk, already, he was trying to convince himself she had only said it out of anger. Considering Rebecca rejected her offer, Tegan probably did not want to appear alone in her venture. It crossed his mind that she wanted to entice jealousy, just to get back at him for the Angelicas. Regardless of the reasons, no man was taking his place and he would do anything, even kill, to get her back.

Individually eyeing over the rings, Malcom’s expression began to change with the thoughts coming to mind.

“Nathaniel; draw on the knowledge of the book. Tegan has the gem, it belongs to the Mariard.”

“I see what you’re getting at. Hareem said team, not individual.” Nathaniel watched his brother-in-law attempt to engage the disk. After a few moments, there was disappointment with Malcom unable to budge it.

There was hope that a group effort would see the disk rise. Again, it was to no avail and they concluded that Tegan was not bluffing. She had to be a team onto herself to have sole power over the gem. Fearing she may not be bluffing over another issue, Malcom swore he would not rest until he found his wife.

Within the cave, Lamech sat silently beside Tegan, listening to her rant in anger. She just knew Rebecca would side with the men. It was all right for her, Cathmore did not try to kill her, nor was he intimate with the Angelicas. Having sent Rebecca out of the rings gave Tegan a sense of satisfaction. The challenge reassured her that she was no longer the weakest link. With Lamech rising to his feet, Tegan asked to where he was going.

“Get some more wood.” Lamech appeared disheartened.

“Are you all right?” Forgetting her anger, Tegan gestured for him to sit. He complied.

“I’m fine.” Lamech sighed whilst gazing into the fire.

“I can tell something is bothering you.” Their eyes met.

“I don’t think I can stay here any longer.” Lamech looked away, appearing most uncomfortable. The thought of the man leaving had Tegan a little flustered.

“But why? We have food, hot and cold water and a dry place. The others have no idea where we are.”

“None of it is relevant.”

“It’s me, isn’t it? I have been so self absorbed, angry and...”

“You’re only venting. I feel I have become cold-hearted to all this. When I think of my tribe, wiped out to entertain players, I just...” Lamech took a deep breath, obviously to suppress anger.

“So why leave? The Mariard team will defeat the Necropolin. They don’t stand a chance against Malcom and...”

“I have fallen in love with you Tegan.” Lamech eyed her for a moment, before

getting up and leaving the cave.

Dumfounded, Tegan remained seated, trying to take it in. She had thought it nothing more than a close friendship, similar to what she enjoyed with her cousin. Though having boasted to Rebecca of another, she only said it to hurt Malcom. She wanted to prove her independence, let them know she was not alone and had no intentions of crawling back.

Her commitment to Malcom remained strong; nonetheless, it made Tegan feel weak and vulnerable to admit it. Stubbornness and angry defences enabled her to combat her true feelings. Undeniably, Lamech's friendship was important to her, she trusted him, enjoyed his company. He made her feel secure and good about herself. The thought of him leaving prompted dread. She would be alone in the forest to fend for herself. Her mind began to tick over, contemplating what to do.

Grey-blue light filtered through the canopy. The man's silhouette guided Tegan towards the larger of the rock pools. In thought, she reeled over her intentions to tell him the truth; however, on seating herself beside him, she could not find the words. With nerves on edge, she just waited for him to say something, which he did.

"You still love him, don't you?" Lamech aired disappointment whilst watching the ripples his feet made in the warm water.

"Of course not," Tegan blurted without thought. The fear of loneliness and not wanting to appear weak set off her defences.

"Do you mind if I speak candidly?" Lamech's eyes remained on the water.

"I keep telling you, I'm not a god. You are free to do and say whatever you like."

"To me you are a goddess; beautiful, intelligent, but you said it yourself." Lamech sighed. "I am only a pawn in a game."

"I didn't mean it like you were a lower species or something."

"I know you didn't. Nonetheless, I can't help lying awake at nights, just thinking about this barrier between us."

"You don't need to feel inferior around me. I know how it feels, especially with the likes of the Mariard team." Without thought, Tegan rested her hand on top of his. She assumed to know what he was feeling and could sympathise. Their eyes met and she suddenly went rigid with him edging into a kiss. Although it sent her all tingly and she did think him desirable, her conscience triggered withdrawal.

"I can tell you still love your husband." With her silence, Lamech continued. "I think you should go back to him, before it does become too late for both of you."

"Are you out of your mind!" Tegan glared angrily. "After all I've told you about..."

"Tegan, listen to me." Lamech took her hand in his. "You are sweet, honest and caring, not a warrior. You don't want to fight, especially not them. You haven't got the heart for it."

"We were going to see this through together, capture creatures to help us." Her fears were evident, as was her not wanting to be alone.

"Tegan, I can't stay here. Don't you see? To fight them is one thing, to kill is another; I want revenge for my people. This Mariard team you speak of is not my enemy or yours for that matter." Lamech noted her pondering and continued. "I want my freedom, and I will fight to keep it anyway I know how."

"I understand what you're saying. We too are fighting for our freedom but..."

"There you go again. You talk as though you're still with them. I think in the morning you should go back. I will walk you..."

"I'm not going back!" Tegan glared determined. "Let me tell you something, I have already fought a game, not just against the enemy, but also against the player itself. We had

double the work and still won against the Necropolin team.”

“I don’t doubt your strengths for a moment, but we aren’t just talking about the red suits, we are talking about people you love.” Lamech paused a moment. The woman appeared flustered, looking for words to respond. “Tegan, there is also the issue of how I feel about you. I know it can never be; your heart is with him and...” Lamech did not expect her advance. The hard kiss unbalanced him and they fell into the pool. With the water at chest height, once both straightened, Tegan placed her hands on his shoulders.

“You and I are going to win this game together. You will see for yourself what the Mariard team really means to me.”

Though Tegan participated in a passionate kiss, fear was driving her. Tense and uncomfortable, already she was silently chewing herself out over her actions. Lamech’s lips caressing her neck made her more nervous. Though telling herself to stop him, the words would not come out of her mouth. Feeling his hand on her breast scared her.

“Let’s get out of the pool,” Tegan anxiously uttered, uncertain as to how far she was prepared to take this to keep him with her.

Aided out of the water, Tegan’s feet had barely touched the ground when Lamech scooped her up in his arms with intentions of carrying her to the cave. The sound startled the two. Tegan glared at the Mihoharka warrior, having landed several feet away from them.

Lamech placed Tegan down, drawing her quickly behind him. With his knife in hand, the creature would have to get through him first. His stance was ready for combat.

“Come back with me child of the Mariard.” The warrior hissed, pointing his spear at the man. “Take up your position where you rightfully belong.”

Engaging armour over wet clothes, Tegan thought of a small crossbow, which appeared in her hand. She shoved Lamech aside. The creature hissed and squirmed on the ground. Standing over her victim, she watched the warrior take his last breath of life. On edge, she looked back at Lamech, who appeared a little surprised that she had followed through.

“Well done.” He nodded agreeably.

“That was for your tribe.” Tegan found justification for her actions. “I promise you, many more will die before I’m through. We better scout the area, there could be more of them.” Tegan took a deep breath with her conscience playing on her. A sense of overwhelming guilt came on her as she again eyed the dead creature. With Lamech taking her hand, she now believed there was no going back.

CHAPTER 9

The Mariard team and their companions were shocked at what Tegan and another had done. A colony of captured creatures accompanied the two in the attack on the Mihoharka tribe. Not many escaped the slaughter.

Along with the team, warriors moved through the debris of tree houses on the ground. Rebecca eyed over the area, spotting many blue glass beads, scattered about. Cathmore thought it odd seeing his wife place her hand into the body of a victim. Questioning her actions, she opened her hand. Revealing the bead, she told of what she could see, likening the dead to apparitions. These beads were on the ground and directly under the hearts of bodies. Amazed, Cathmore thought it a revelation. Though the flesh was dead, their essence had not been dispersed. He suspected Vianne would collect the beads later. Such information, they wished to share with Nathaniel and Malcom.

On approaching the group, Cathmore and Rebecca went silent; a survivor was telling his story. The Mihoharkan had personally heard Tegan yell the order for the massacre, claiming the victory in the name of Woodlands. Forest dwellers knew the tall creatures as Sticklebacks. Distinctive features included translucent wings, lengthy stick-like bodies, oval heads, large beady eyes and whippy antennas. Having snatched their prey from treetops, the Sticklebacks dropped them to the ground. If this did not kill, victims were then either trampled or gnawed to death. The attack was most disturbing; these creatures were herbivores and peaceful neighbours of the Mihoharkas.

Questioning the injured survivor, Nathaniel asked if he saw the creature accompanying Tegan.

“He was no creature,” the Mihoharkan hissed, “he stood as you, and strong he is.” Nathaniel glanced at his brother-in-law, who had questions of his own.

“Geclend, what tribes have creatures like us?”

“None that we know of.” Geclend’s sights remained on Malcom.

“What of this Woodlands Tegan claimed victory for?”

“I am at a loss to understand why she chose such a name. Woodlands is not a tribe; it is a sacred area where trees go to die.” Geclend studied Malcom’s expression. Clearly, this alarmed the man.

“Oh jeepers.” The words came out with Malcom’s breath, having gone numb with the thought. Turning his back on the group, he rested his hand against a tree trunk, overwhelmed at the concept.

Cathmore and his cousin knew exactly what was going through the man’s mind. Nathaniel believed they owed it to Geclend to explain.

“The man Tegan is with can only be a Necropolin team member, a red suit.”

“So she has been captured then.” The thought made Geclend further disillusioned, knowing what Tegan meant to the team. His sights shifted to Cathmore.

“I don’t believe this to be the case.” Cathmore glanced over faces, addressing no one in particular. “If she had, they would have claimed the victory for the Necropolin.” He

looked to his wife, who spoke her mind.

“Perhaps she managed to turn him. If we can bring Tegan back, we gain a sixth member.”

“I’d kill him first,” Malcom snarled to himself. Having barely slept in days, his pain and fury were dampened by exhaustion. He listened as Cathmore responded.

“He’s no captive or ally. He was part of this, encouraged her to form a new team to hide his true identity.”

“If he’s touched her...” Malcom turned, glancing over faces. “I swear I’ll kill him, and I’ll bury anyone who tries to stop me.” He walked away, wanting to be alone with his thoughts and grief.

The new Woodlands tribe was based at the site where Tegan and Lamech had first met. Grazing and trampling of undergrowth by the colony of captured creatures produced a large clearing that they utilised for gatherings. Nightly routines included Lamech inciting the Sticklebacks to war and paying homage to Tegan. Making the woman the centre of attention, temporarily boosted her confidence and ego. Whilst the majority of creatures slept in the branches of trees, others patrolled the area; their orders, to kill any intruder on sight.

Within the privacy of the cave, flames flickered, casting the couple’s shadows over curtains of stalactites. Seated between Lamech’s legs, Tegan enjoyed a massage. Feeling his hands easing off her shoulders, she suddenly became tense with him drawing her lengthy curls to one side. Tegan knew what he wanted, confirmed by his lips caressing her neck. His hands sensually shifting to fondle her breasts made her so uneasy, she stopped him.

“Please Lamech, I asked you to be patient. I want him dead first. I have to be totally free of him.” Tegan felt Lamech’s hands withdraw and his arms come round to hold her tightly to him.

Resting his chin on the woman’s shoulder, Lamech whispered an apology, before speaking in a normal tone.

“I forget our customs differ. I do understand what it means to you, what it means for us. I so love you Tegan, want every part of you, as I want you to have all of me.”

Acting out of insecurity and fears, Tegan’s participation in a passionate kiss was merely to appease Lamech. Part of her craved intimacy, yet she could not bring herself to go through with it. Desperately, she fought to suppress the pain of separation and her conscience. She shrouded the truth of her heart with reminders of Malcom’s lies and life threatening actions. Those she loved had betrayed her, forced her out and ignored her warnings. She kept telling herself she was better off with Lamech. This man claimed to love her and would protect her with his very life. She could hold Lamech off with excuses, knowing the relationship could go no further until Malcom was out of her life, permanently. Snuggling into him, she pretended to doze off.

Blue-grey light lit up the cave entrance, yet with the fire almost out, the interior remained dark and silent. Not wanting to wake Lamech, Tegan gently lifted his arm from her waist and slipped out from under the furs. Radiating energy, her soft aura enabled her to see the way to a clear area of the cave. Opening her hand, the blue gem glowed brightly in her palm.

“Rebecca first,” Tegan nervously whispered to herself. Having again refused Lamech, she felt pressured, assuming she could not hold him off for much longer. In choosing her future, she perceived Lamech right. She could be a great leader if she just believed in herself. Again, the team’s lies and betrayal came to mind. Anger escalated within, giving her reason to follow through. They were her opponents and she would not only treat them as such, but also make them pay for what they put her through.

Having levitated into a free-floating state, Tegan sensed their energy signatures. She kept in mind that Cathmore would be at his wife's side with the rest of the team nearby. As before, connecting with Rebecca was not a problem. The new technique, thought a subconscious find, enabled her to overcome a block whilst one slept. Much care was taken to physically draw the woman into a free-floating position. Simultaneously, Tegan manifested the rings within her mind.

Realising where she was, Rebecca tensed with Tegan's self-image floating a short distance from her. The disorderly formation of the rings in motion, assured her this was not a social visit. Tegan's uniform, stripped of Mariard insignias, further scaring Rebecca, as it implied the woman retained resentment towards them and what they stood for. Tegan neither addressed her nor gave her a chance to speak.

The burning sensation in Rebecca's shoulder made her respond. Drawing on subconscious implants, she thrust herself towards a ring. Its spin shot her up a level, yet Tegan was right on her heels. Forgetting the power of the gem, she attempted to use her mind to redirect the rotation of the ring ahead. Fears escalated, having not even the control to utilise the rings in deflecting surges.

Coming to a sudden halt, the luminous rings collected to form a disk. Panting, Rebecca dropped down to stand defensively. Edgy, she stared at a confident Tegan lowering in front of her.

"Poor, poor Rebecca." Tegan's sarcastic grin concealed her nervousness. "Not much fun being the weakest link in the team, is it?"

"You have to listen to me..."

"Say another word and I'll kill you right now." Tegan's expression soured. "I take it you still possess three lives."

"No, I don't." Fear revealed in Rebecca's eyes. Tegan tapped her sword on the side of her leg, implying agitation.

"So, what happened, the warriors attack you or something?" Emotionally waving, Tegan reminded herself to be strong; she was no longer part of their team.

"No." Considering the woman's state of mind, Rebecca anticipated that what the team had done could see Tegan furious.

"How did you lose it then?"

"We each transferred a life to restore the tribe, but please Tegan, I beg you to listen..." Rebecca stiffened with the woman pointing her blade.

"Engage a weapon," Tegan snarled. "You're about to lose another life."

Steel clashed. Evidently, Tegan was the stronger and more skilled of the two. Knocked out of Rebecca's hand, the sword hit a ring and disappeared. She felt the blade at her throat. Ordered to disengage her armour, Rebecca hesitated.

"Do it," Tegan yelled, startling an already terrified Rebecca into submission. She slowly moved behind the woman.

"Don't stab me in the back Tegan." Rebecca's lips quivered. "Do it to my face."

"I intend to. I want to watch you squirm like I did. You all pushed me out. I was nothing but a problem you were going to leave behind. Well, I'm no longer a problem; I've become your worst nightmare."

"Tegan!" Cathmore's voice echoed within the connection of minds.

Startled by this, Tegan instantly manifested a dagger. Grasping Rebecca in a firm hold, she pressed the tip of her blade into the woman's back.

"It looks like we have an audience." Tegan was edgy with not only Cathmore's image appearing, but also the sensation that Malcom and Nathaniel were present.

“Let her go Tegan.” Cathmore cautiously floated nearer, his eyes pleading with his cousin.

“Don’t come any closer. I swear I’ll take her life.” Tegan now addressed those she could not see. “I know you’re all here! Don’t try anything, I will do it!” Her stern gaze relaxed a little with her sarcastic remark. “Fancy that, I’m not the weakest link anymore.”

“You never were Tegan, and you know it,” Cathmore replied, his heart pounding in his chest with the tension. He turned on hearing his friend’s voice behind him.

“It was me who hurt you Tegan.” Malcom’s self-image formed beside Cathmore’s. “Please, don’t take it out on the others.”

Her husband’s appearance sent Tegan numb. A combination of dark shading under his tired eyes, pale and unshaven features made him look ill. Pity was weakening her as he continued.

“Come back to us Tegan.” Malcom’s voice broke up with emotion. “Please, you know in your heart we can work this out.” Sensing compassion in his wife’s gifting rose hopes; however, her abrupt change of expression sent him tense.

The sudden shift in her brother’s energy signature heightened tensions; reinforcing Tegan’s belief that they were nothing but deceivers. In anger, she forced the dagger into Rebecca’s back. The angle of the blade pierced the woman’s heart and wide eyed, Rebecca dropped to the disk. Spontaneously, Tegan broke the connection, disappearing from the mind.

A fire burned brightly within the cave. Lamech was waiting, his anxiousness evident as Tegan lowered to the ground. Placing his fur around her shoulders, he led her back to the fire. Seating himself down beside her, Lamech drew Tegan tightly into him. Evidently, she was shaken by her venture.

“You’re trembling. What happened, did they hurt you in anyway?”

“No.” Tegan shook her head, taking a few deep breaths to collect herself before continuing. “I did it. I took a life from Rebecca.” There was silence for a moment.

“I can tell it wasn’t as easy as you thought it would be. I warned you, you’re heart isn’t in it Tegan.” Lamech expressed sympathy with her straightening and breaking the bond.

Struggling to suppress her feelings, Tegan diverted her eyes to the fire. The thought of her actions set her on the verge of tears.

“I can rise above it, I have to. There’s no turning back now.” Tegan only glanced at him. “I did it in front of all of them, including Malcom.”

“Listen to me Tegan...” Lamech placed a hand on her shoulder. “Perhaps we should go after the red suits first, give you time to...”

“No!” Tegan’s sights shot to Lamech. “It has to be the Mariard first. If I can’t take them out, I won’t stand a chance against the Necropolin.” She sighed worried. “I’ll admit; Malcom scares me the most. He’ll now go out of his way to protect them.” Her focus returned to the fire. “He’s so powerful.” Tears welled with her unable to get his pitiful image out of her mind. Malcom indeed was powerful, powerful enough to cause her heart to ache for him.

“I don’t understand, what makes Malcom different from the others?” Lamech expressed ignorance. His question prompted Tegan to quickly wipe tears from her cheeks.

“He acquired his gifting from the original Mariard player. Believe me; it makes him the most powerful of all the gifted. Get him angry, not even the rings can contain him. He won us the last game and I have no doubts he’ll win this one too.” Tegan awkwardly glanced at Lamech. “That’s if we don’t stop him.” With her companion drawing her into a comforting embrace, she pondered on their dilemma. Lamech could sense Tegan’s struggles

within her signature. Stroking her hair, a grin formed on his features.

Within the camp, Rebecca lay on a bed of leaves near the blazing fire. Seated on a protruding root beside his wife, Cathmore remained anxious. Twenty minutes would elapse before life would return to her. Staring at his wife's chest, he was waiting for her to take that first breath. Turmoil thoughts waded between anger and pity. Part of him wanted to kill Tegan for what she did; however, he could also sympathise with her plight. Knowing the feeling of insignificance and weakness, he still battled with self-worth and to be free of pain and hatred. She was only trying to prove herself, just as he had once done when with the Necropolin. Feeling the hand on his shoulder prompted him to look up.

"How's Malcom?" Cathmore asked. With Nathaniel shaking his head, he sighed disheartened.

"It has dashed all his hopes." Nathaniel sat down beside his cousin, feeling the burden of guilt. "I shouldn't have shifted my energy. I just wanted a good shot in case... I never thought she was capable of doing such a thing, least not to one of us."

"You only wanted to help Rebecca. I was thinking the same thing, but I was too close."

"What a game this has turned out to be." Nathaniel sighed, disillusioned. "I am starting to agree with Malcom, give me an ITP and gun any day."

"And this is only the first part of the board." Cathmore felt further discouraged. "The way this is playing out, I can't see us making it through to the second, liable the third and fourth."

"I have been thinking that myself." Tired, Nathaniel ran his fingers over his whiskers.

At dawn, Malcom sat in the shadows alone. His heart bled for what he perceived was lost to him. He could not fathom what was driving Tegan's hatred and her willingness to take lives to hurt them. Evidently, she was no captive; her energy signature reassured them of this. She had to know the man was a Necropolin, who did not have her best interests at heart. What did he have over her to make her do such things?

On hearing the footsteps, Malcom rose to his feet. Seeing Rebecca brought a wave of emotion. Though unable to look her in the eyes, he took comfort in her embrace. Exhaustion and the pain of it all got the better of him and she sunk with him to the ground.

Whilst nursing the man in her arms, Rebecca pondered on the earlier conversation with her husband and Nathaniel. Already the game had worn them down and they had yet to engage in combat with the Necropolin. Nathaniel thought it a testing of their loyalty to one another. With relationships under fire, he appreciated being single. Understandably, Nathaniel was at wits end regarding his sister. However, Rebecca never thought she would hear him swear to knock sense into Tegan, if not worse, if she showed up again. He flatly refused to stand back and watch her take their lives one by one. Cathmore said they were harsh desperate words, yet had agreed with his cousin that Tegan could not be allowed to take another life from any of them.

Having mindfully analysed her ordeal, Rebecca drew her own conclusions. The sting of Tegan's actions had subsided, considering the sensation felt in the woman's gifting. Tegan's perception of the truth made her bitter and wanting them to feel as she did, vulnerable and miserable. She could have easily taken her life on the rings, yet Tegan was stalling, trying to find the courage to follow through. Rebecca could well believe that if the men had not interfered, Tegan would not have taken a life from her. The ordeal had indeed left Rebecca with a better understanding of how Tegan felt on that day when Malcom tried to kill her.

Resting his head against the root of a tree, Malcom felt so tired he could barely think straight. Breaking the silence, Rebecca conveyed she held no animosity towards Tegan and shared her thoughts on the incident. Most sincere, she finished by telling Malcom not to give up on his wife. She herself did not intend to give up on her best friend. Her positive approach had Malcom thanking her. Considering Nathaniel wanted them to take a day of rest, she coached him into getting some much needed sleep. Whilst moving off, Rebecca recalled what her husband and his cousin had said. If they were correct, Tegan was not entirely responsible for what was going down. The Necropolin could be closer than anticipated.

Bathed in blue-grey light, the change of guard had the warrior scramble up a tree. With only a couple of hour until dawn, Geclend stoked the fire in the centre of the campsite. He felt secure knowing his revived tribe had moved to another part of the forest where they would be safe. The feeling of gratitude remained due to the Mariard children having each given a life to restore the tribe. Revealed from verses within Nathaniel's subconscious, they could restore many pawns at one time. However, it had to be a combined effort and could only be done once in a game play. Their decision to each sacrifice a life stemmed from wanting to make amends and uphold the good name of the Mariard. No matter what Tegan had done, she was still associated with the team. Geclend was still hoping that Tegan would not retaliate and attack another tribe just to spite them.

His hearing pricked up. Geclend approached and squatted beside the sleeping man. Nathaniel appeared most restless and he thought to observe him for a time. If anything changed, he would wake the others.

Induced by his sister, Nathaniel's dream turned into a nightmare. Using the same technique as she had on Rebecca, Tegan easily got through his subconscious block. Having not realised that a connection took place, she had rendered him exhausted before attacking him. The rings collected into a disk where the two stood face to face. Heavily panting and staring into loathing eyes, Nathaniel was at a disadvantage with a sword tip at his throat. He could feel the blade had pierced his skin, yet she seemed reluctant to drive it in.

"Go on, do it Tegan; take my last life, I don't care any more. Rather you do it than the Necropolin." Tears welled in Nathaniel's eyes. "No matter what you have done, you're my sister, and I love you as such. Just do what you have to do, hurry up and finish it." Nathaniel began to push himself against the blade.

Yanking the tip back, his sister glared at him. Her expression changed to alarm. Disengaging his armour, Nathaniel suddenly ripped open his shirt, exposing his bare chest heaving with exhaustion.

"Come on Tegan, you can do it." The only thing separating them was the point of her sword.

"Get back Nathaniel!" Tegan spoke through clenched teeth, struggling with wavering emotions. With her brother slowly moving forward and pushing harder against the blade, she edged backwards.

"One embrace, that's all it will take Tegan." Stretching out his arms, Nathaniel's eyes remained fixed on hers. "Do it," he demanded with tears dampening his cheeks. "Don't you see? You have already won. We have exhausted ourselves trying to get you back. We have no fight left in us Tegan. If it is blood you want, then bathe in mine." Nathaniel pressed forward.

The weapon disengaged before it could penetrate his body. Nathaniel's arms went around his sister and for a moment, he held her tightly. The sensation he emitted was a brother's love and fears for his sister. What he felt in return only choked him up further.

There was so much pain, confusion and bitterness it tensed his being. About to beg her to come back and rejoin the team, he stiffened with her breaking the connection and disappearing from his mind.

Opening his eyes, Nathaniel looked up into familiar faces. His cousin and Geclend aided him to sit up. Shifting his sights, he saw Malcom return to the ground and his aura diminish.

“She couldn’t do it.” Nathaniel glared, still somewhat breathless. Rising to his feet, he grasped his brother-in-law by the arm. “Did you see it? She couldn’t do it; she could not do it!” In his excitement, he pulled Malcom into a manly embrace and patted him on the back.

“I saw it.” Malcom found renewed hope that not all was lost. A little distance came between the two men. “What you did took guts. I was ready to...” He could not bring himself to say, attack Tegan to save him. His brother-in-law did not need to hear it, he already knew.

Along with Geclend, the men sat around the fire listening to Nathaniel convey the ordeal. His sister had grown in leaps and bounds; her newfound skills were quite frightening. She managed to penetrate his mind by creating a dream like state. They were in a familiar area within the Mariard Mountains, vigorously training together on the rings. It all felt so innocent with Tegan missing him with surges and expressing disappointment. By the time he realised what was truly going on, it was too late. He was already mentally worn out, yet she had not even started.

Both Malcom and Cathmore added their part in it. Geclend saw Nathaniel rising off the ground and alerted them. They decided Malcom should intervene and so the connection with his brother-in-law was established. What occurred last time, they believed to a degree was their fault. Malcom definitely did not want Tegan feeling threatened and acting out of fear. He shifted the majority of his energy elsewhere, so she would not detect him. The sensations Malcom felt during the connection were similar to what his brother-in-law experienced. Nathaniel had not sensed how much his sister wanted to reach out to him, the reason behind her abrupt departure.

Rapidly pacing in front of the fire, Tegan’s emotions were in turmoil. Resorting to lies, she was unable to admit that she could not bring herself to kill her brother. Lamech told Tegan to calm down. Though not saying it, he had suspected Nathaniel to be too strong for her. She was not to be so hard on herself, he was confident she would find a solution. He encouraged Tegan to rest, reminding her that they had further plans to attack the gifted.

Lamech waited until the woman was in a sound sleep before radiating a soft red aura. Drawing on his gifting, he brought both himself and Tegan into a free-floating state. Having done this on previous occasions, Tegan’s ignorance regarding his gifting made his job easier. Using a technique, he called dream intervention, enabled him to plant ideas into her subconscious.

CHAPTER 10

Having scouted the immediate area, it soon became apparent that Malcom was missing. His friend's mind was opened to Cathmore. After several minutes of communication, he came back to reality and disclosed what Malcom was up to. During the attack on Nathaniel, Malcom had studied the distance between the connections of minds. It was his belief that they were closer to Tegan than they thought. Convinced her grievance was with him, he intended to sort it out, one way or another. Though having gone on ahead, Malcom wanted the group to devise a backup plan. If his attempt to get her away from the Necropolin failed, he feared that what would be exposed could see Tegan hurt or captured.

Nathaniel grumbled, not impressed that his brother-in-law had taken off without speaking to them first. Separating the team like this was irresponsible and dangerous. Cathmore knew this to be a personal vendetta. The thought of Tegan with another man, let alone a Necropolin, raised ill feelings in Malcom.

Although the man had a three-hour start on them, Geclend was confident they could catch up if the remaining gifted rode piggyback; this heard no objections. He would also send warriors to neighbouring tribes for assistance, as they could not take on the Sticklebacks alone.

Taking a rest break, Malcom sat on the embankment, drawing his hair back from sweaty features. He found it easier to stick close to the stream's edge, there was less undergrowth to contend with. Having no plan as such, he hoped by revealing the truth to his wife would see them reunited and her back with the team. The unknown opponent occupied his thoughts. He was glad Nathaniel had not mentioned the Necropolin, which he perceived had saved his brother-in-law's life. Tegan would have thought her brother a liar, making her more defensive. Just thinking about his wife in the arms of another man knotted his stomach.

Whilst Malcom walked on, his rival played on him. He did not know what he would do if the two had been intimate. Convinced the Necropolin was manipulating and using Tegan against them, he perceived he could find forgiveness, not holding her responsible for her actions. His wife meant more to him than anything and he could not see her taking lightly to such deception. With the thought came anger and wanting nothing more than to kill the man with his bare hands.

Stopping again to quench his thirst, Malcom disengaged his armour. Splashing water on his face, a shadow cast over him as he ran wet hands through his hair. Having not even straightened, the creature's claws snatched him up by the shoulders and soared with him towards the canopy. Dragged through branches, one clipped Malcom in the head and all went black.

The blazing fire lit up the cave. Slowly opening his eyes, Malcom roused quickly considering his circumstances. Vines bound his wrists above his head whilst the rest of him slumped against a large stalagmite. Straightening his legs to stand, the tension slackened a little on his arms. Feeling the aches and stiffness in his limbs indicated he had been

unconscious for a good while. Sensing a presence, he turned his head to the side.

Moving round to stand in front of her husband, Tegan held Malcom's wristbands in one hand. A solemn expression hid her true feelings. On edge, her heart pounded in her chest with being this close to him.

"You should have stayed away Malcom," Tegan said, thinking he looked more worn out in real life than his image had portrayed within the mind. Struggling to contain his emotions, Malcom replied in a calm tone.

"I couldn't. I came to give myself up to you."

"You were captured Malcom. Fortunate for you, I still have a Mariard gifting, so I can hold no power over you."

"It only saved me the walk."

"Why would you give yourself up to me?" Tegan grew steadily annoyed, assuming the team was up to something. "It's the most absurd thing I've ever heard you say."

"I can't live without you, simple as that."

"After all I've done to hurt the team." Tegan thought he could not possibly be serious. "Don't patronise me Malcom!"

"We all came to realise how much we meant to one another, how much you meant to us. One suffers, all suffers."

"How sweet, but I'm not buying it." Dropping the wristbands to the side of her, Tegan leant back against another of the large stalagmites. Though putting on a facade of confidence, within, she was weakening.

"Tegan, I didn't realise what happened shattered your expectations of me, of us." Malcom's eyes revealed his heartache. Tegan scoffed, expressing cockiness.

"So, you're finally admitting you knew what you were doing. How you tried to deceive me to cover your actions." With her husband slowly shaking his head, Tegan frowned and straightened her posture.

"I honestly have no memory of it; neither does your brother or cousin. That's why we couldn't see it from your point of view. We acted purely on what we were told."

"Liar!" Stepping forward, Tegan slapped him hard across the face. Undeterred, Malcom maintained a calm yet painful tone.

"Tegan, I have but one life to give you. I could easily apply my gifting and free myself in seconds." Obviously, his wife had overlooked this, as she stared in anticipation of him following through. "I assure you, the only way I'll leave this spot is either dead or untied by your hands. I love you Tegan, and if killing me will alleviate the fear and pain I've caused you then do it. You will get no fight from me." Watching his wife pondering his words, Malcom saw a fearful confusion in her eyes, which she soon diverted. Evidently, he had stirred her emotions and on addressing him, he could hear an air of remorse in her tone.

"I can't go back Malcom. Too much has happened." Tegan folded her arms across her chest, a sign she was struggling.

"I lost you to him, didn't I?" Malcom's heart pounded in his chest, fearing the answer. Slowly shaking her head, Tegan took a deep breath to suppress tears. The pain in her husband's eyes alone began to torture her.

"Something binds us. Something; I'm unable to detach myself from. But that doesn't matter any more. I can't go back, even if I wanted to."

"Why?" His eyes pleaded.

"For a start, I couldn't look the team in the face without feeling guilt, especially after what I did to Rebecca. We see this game in a different light Malcom. You put your trust in creatures that wiped out an entire tribe, who side with the Necropolin." Unbeknown to her,

she had given her husband the break he needed and he carefully deployed it.

“Remember the warning from Hareem, nothing is what it appears?” With his wife’s nod, Malcom continued. “There are no others within the forest that share the same form as the gifted; except those of the Necropolin team.” His wife’s expression was changing. With the truth slowly sinking in, shock was taking hold of her. He pressed the issue further. “Woodland is a graveyard for trees Tegan, not a tribe as you were led to believe. Ask any creature in the forest, they will tell you its sacred ground.”

The impact of the truth sent Tegan numb. Her breathing became shallow and rapid. An entire picture formed of the perfect game strategy. Lamech had deceived her. Overwhelmed by her part in it, she began to feel light-headed and the words slipped out with her breath.

“Oh mother, what have I done?” Tegan stared ahead; her mind flashing events drove feelings of humiliation, guilt and shame. Trying to remain calm, Malcom sensed his wife was on the verge of passing out and knew it imperative to keep her focused.

“Look at me Tegan.” His wife slowly complied. “We restored the Mihoharka tribe; they understand what’s going on and hold no ill feelings. And Rebecca, she loves you as her best friend and wants you back with us. We were the ones at fault Tegan. You only heard part of the conversation. I wanted to set things right with you, but you’d gone before I got the chance.” Tears welled in Malcom’s eyes and his voice broke up in his fight to contain his emotions. “I haven’t stopped looking for you and I meant what I said... I can’t live without you Tegan. Nothing means more to me than you.” Tears had also welled in his wife’s glaring eyes. He knew she was trembling and her silence implied she was lost for words. “I’m right here for you Tegan. You don’t have to be alone in this.” Malcom almost held his breath, praying she would reach out to him.

His wife slipped her arms around his waist and buried her face in his chest. Malcom lowered his cheek to rest on her head; he could have easily sobbed with her yet remained strong. The desire to comfort his wife had him wanting to break the bonds that bound him; however, he refrained from doing so. He would not jeopardise the trust he felt was being restored between them.

The commotion outside the cave startled Tegan into looking up. Sounds of battle implied the camp was under attack. Her focus stayed on her husband.

“It’s your call Tegan, kill or untie...” Malcom was silenced with a hard kiss. Again, the couple looked into each other’s damp eyes. Whimpering, Tegan addressed her husband.

“I do love you Malcom, and I’m sorry; I am so, so sorry.” Rising up on her toes, trembling fingers tried to untie the knot.

The sudden jerk against Malcom alarmed him. Wide-eyed, Tegan tightly gripped his jacket whilst gagging on her own blood. The restraints on his wrists dug in as he heaved on the vines. His gifting made him aware he was losing her. Before he could radiate to freedom, an arm slipped around his wife’s waist. Abruptly, she was pulled from him.

Glaring with loathing, Malcom eyed the man in red armour. Like a rag doll, his wife draped the Necropolin’s arm. Her blood smeared the shiny metal of his torso from the blade’s entry point in her back that he inflicted on her.

“Don’t try to play hero Malcom.” Lamech aired cockiness, raising the blade for the man to see. “Before you even got to me, I could take all her lives. As you are aware, she will be fine in twenty minutes or so.”

“Take me and let her go!” Malcom wanted to rip the heart out of his enemy.

“Oh I intend to take you Malcom.” Now using both arms to hold Tegan, Lamech rested back against a stalagmite with her hanging in front of him. “My venture has not only

been interesting, but most rewarding. I have a wealth of information and your wife. Oh, and don't worry, I'll continue to keep her warm at night." Lamech grinned with Malcom tugging at the vines.

"I'll kill you if you touch her!"

"She didn't tell you, did she?" Lamech pretended to act surprised. "I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I have more than just touched her as you put it. Your loss is my gain." Placing his arm under Tegan's legs, Lamech lifted to cradle the woman against his body. "I capture Tegan in the name of the Necropolin." He kissed her cheek. "One down, four to go. No, I stand corrected, two down, three to go. It's now your turn Malcom. I think you will make the perfect..." The sound of hasty footsteps distracted Lamech. Geclend came forward, ready to thrust his spear. Right before their eyes, Lamech and Tegan suddenly disappeared.

Creatures captured in the name of Woodlands had been set free. Mihoharka warriors patrolled the silent darkness whilst the gifted sat around a fire within the cave. Sticklebacks had supplied valuable information regarding their new opponent. Tense, Malcom was running on pure hatred for his enemy. What the Necropolin did to his wife was a despicable act in itself, but what the man had implied regarding intimacy, tortured him.

Their nightmare was far from over. Cathmore thought if anything, it had gotten worse. Now known to the team as Lamech, the man had used intellect against them instead of brawn. His strategy was so effective it had won their opponents the first round.

Nathanial rubbed his thumb over the smooth surface of the blue gem in his hand. The item was found in Tegan's jacket amongst furs used for bedding. His brother-in-law wanted to draw the rings and engage their opponents. Both Nathanial and Cathmore disagreed on the grounds of their emotional states.

Silently, Rebecca sat beside her husband, unable to get Tegan's capture out of her mind. Now a reality, it was what her friend had feared most. Having fought Tegan, Rebecca knew she stood no chance against the woman. Her friend being a member of the Necropolin team brought dread, especially as she perceived Tegan would target the weaker of the gifted first.

His wife had not said a word. Cathmore assumed to know what was on her mind and placed an arm around Rebecca's shoulders. He asked her to share her thoughts and she complied. Rebecca had sparked a revelation, which Nathanial felt led to air.

"I know why he took Tegan. They have not finished with the mind games." Nathanial now addressed his cousin. "You turned the tide in the last game; he used the same strategy against us."

"We've already gathered that," Malcom grumbled. His brother-in-law continued.

"Yes I know, but don't you see? If he just captured Tegan in the first place, he wouldn't have gained any information. We would have fought this on a totally different level." Nathanial shifted his sights to his cousin, who addressed Malcom.

"He now knows who you are and probably your strengths and weaknesses." Cathmore dreaded where this could lead them. "He wants to make you an emotional cripple, well, all of us for that matter." Cathmore looked at his cousin with Nathanial speaking his thoughts.

"Lamech is fighting on an intellectual level. If he had been intimate with Tegan, he wouldn't have taken her." Nathanial noticed his brother-in-law's tensing features. "I know this is painful for you Malcom, but don't let what he said to you place doubts about Tegan's integrity." He shifted his sights to his cousin.

"I agree. Can you imagine what conflict it would have caused if they had been..."

“I get the point.” Malcom wanted it dropped. “I’m going to kill that conniving lowlife before this game’s through.” He only glanced at his brother-in-law.

“Lamech is indeed clever and very dangerous. It appears the Necropolin player did learn something from the last game.” Nathaniel heard his brother-in-law heave a sigh. Malcom understood what was being said, which did somewhat alleviate doubts. Nonetheless, this was only theory, they had no proof.

Voicing his thoughts on the subject, Cathmore knew better than any what the Necropolin were like. He suspected that Lamech was not working alone. If Anndrosa was resurrected, he feared she would treat Tegan as she had him with loathing and brutality. Considering Lamech’s tactics, he assumed the man would play protector to get Tegan on side.

“What better way to continue the assault on our emotions, make her reliant on him, do his dirty work.” Cathmore’s eyes followed Malcom as his friend rose to his feet.

“He’s a dead man when I get my hands on him!”

“Take it easy Malcom.” Nathaniel knew what was going through his brother-in-law’s mind, as he was thinking it himself. Uneasy, Cathmore continued.

“Malcom, this is exactly what I’m talking about. Lamech is relying on this reaction from you. Better we talk about it, get it out in the open. If it will make you feel any better, I suspect Anndrosa is Lamech’s worst nightmare. She won’t be dictated to by anyone, especially a man.”

“What if he’s in control?” Malcom grunted.

“You don’t know Anndrosa. Believe me; she doesn’t like to be upstaged. She’ll be gunning to take him down if that’s the case.” Cathmore looked to his cousin. Nathaniel thought they were getting nowhere.

“So far, our emotions have worked against us. If we continue along this path we will be defeated.” Nathaniel gestured for Malcom to sit, who reluctantly complied. “Like it or not, we have to set some ground rules regarding Tegan. We have to agree to abide by them no matter what.” His sights shifted to his cousin.

“If it comes to the push, I’ll do the deed.” Cathmore continued though Malcom shook his head. “You would never survive the game or any other if you killed your own wife.” His sights shifted to address his cousin. “That goes for you too Nathaniel. You’re her brother, she couldn’t kill you because of the bond between you, but it won’t be there next time.”

“I feel so guilty.” Nathaniel sighed remorseful. “I cannot let you take on this responsibly.” Rebecca drew his attention with her speaking up.

“No, he is right Nathaniel. Both of you are too close to her. If you don’t mind, I wish to be candid here.” Rebecca paused with all eyes upon her. “Tegan is stronger than I am...” She raised a hand, gesturing for her husband to remain silent. “If in the event she takes my lives, you are not to hold it against her. As the three of you had no control or recollections of your actions, neither will Tegan. We have to learn from our mistakes. What is beyond one’s control, they should not be held accountable for. We have to find understanding, forgiveness and stay united.”

The four gifted continued to debate the issue for some hours before seeking rest. Cathmore found it difficult to sleep with his friend trying to smother his pain. He could only imagine what Malcom was going through and his arm tightened around his wife, lying beside him. The thought of his cousin in the hands of the Necropolin disturbed him. Cruel memories came back to haunt him. Prayers to get through this went with him into sleep.

At first light, the team met with the warriors. The Mihoharkans would see them to

the end of their forest journey. According to Geclend, it would take approximately three weeks to reach the desert region. Cathmore assumed the Necropolin would follow suit before attempting another attack. Nathaniel disagreed.

“Lamech disappeared. He knows of another way to travel. I suspect they are already there.”