

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.

Aware of 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 him marry out of love than obligation. His determination to remain single throughout the entirety of the games, they thought irrational. The King's cousin, Cathmore, and his wife, Rebecca also shared this opinion.

Experiences shared between the men, influenced Nathaniel's decision. 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. Emotions clearly played havoc with the mind that could see problems arising whilst in a game. Assumingly, 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, wanting these games over and done with quickly.

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 Nathaniel and Tegan, chose to renounce the Necropolin. The thought of his cousin prompted Nathaniel to smile, as Cathmore 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 the man.

Reflecting on the present, Nathaniel knew Rebecca found the concept of the game and their role in it most frightening. According to Vieanne, 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 ignorance and emotional issues 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, 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 to him.

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 was thought to lack 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 and paying her back for hurting his family.

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.

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.

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.

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 scarcely touched meal. 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 he 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. Malcom was taller and broader in build to Nathaniel. 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 and royal household.

"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 there." 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 is 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 tossed his creased shirt over a chair, 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, fresh leaves on trees, neatly mowed lawns and vine covered latticework, giving 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 up for training, her long, dark curls hung freely down her back 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 notions of the gifted being forced into a deadly game just to entertain an evil player. She could not view Vieanne in the same manner as the Necropolin with the woman having a loving nature and being a mother figure to all. 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 and she was always present during training sessions. Though hard work, it was considered necessary for survival if she were put into play.

With Malcom’s unique gifting being superior to any other and him having won them the last game, Tegan was certain that he would win them the next. Both she and Cathmore had immensely improved their combat skills due to Malcom’s dedication and candidness whilst training. Determined

to pull her weight, a facade of confidence only concealed Tegan's self-worth issues, thinking herself the weakest link in the team.

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 prayed that Rebecca would not be put into play. Thinking herself a burden, which the men could do without, Tegan also prayed diligently that she too would be left behind. Rebecca being a positive thinker had a knack of giving Tegan what she needed, temporary outside validation.

The two women continued to converse. In mid sentence, Tegan stiffened, having sensed her brother's signature. Her sights shot upwards 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 blonde 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 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 bloody book! We all warned him, but did he listen to us, not the King of the Mariard, he knows better than..."

"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 whilst continuing. "I suggest you connect with Malcom, call him

back. I'll connect with him." His eyes gestured Nathaniel. 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 and maintaining a horizontal position, rose 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 a few 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. He'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.

"He is worried about the game; he takes leadership very seriously, which is surely a benefit to everyone."

"I know, but..."

"It appears they have finished," Rebecca interrupted, noting the diminishing auras. Nathaniel lowered to the bed where Cathmore to the floor.

There appeared to be 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. During earlier talks, it had been suggested that Hargan may have suffered brain damage during the severing of ties between Cathmore and Anndrosa. The Necropolin player would be foolish to allow Hargan to participate in this game. Already, Nathaniel 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 Nathaniel; 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.

Nathaniel understood the concept of two teams out to kill each other for the prize and a win for their player, yet little else seemed clear. Several paragraphs mentioned the capture of tribes and opponents. Captured, a player's ownership of a gifted or pawn unconditionally transfers to their opponent. What a frightening concept, Nathaniel thought, turning the tide took on a whole new meaning, as once captured, one would fight for that team. 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 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 out in the field. 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 her 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 intellect and strategy. Silently, Nathaniel was already claiming victory over opponents he saw as all brawn and no brains. Anndrosa had proved this in the last game, preferring to loudly cut down everything in her path, seeing her own forces as disposable. 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. It was more so due to their association with Milonights, whom constantly abbreviated the Mariard language.

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’re captured?” Tegan rose up on an elbow with fear in her eyes.

“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.” 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, everlasting and part of their very essence.

CHAPTER 3

In unfamiliar surroundings, Cathmore, the first to stir from sleep, began quickly rousing those around him. With hair a little ruffled and 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, picking out a twig from her long hair. Less hats, ties and gloves, they were dressed as though ready for a day’s 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 battle that you may stand against the powers of your foes. Say the word. Hold a shield of protection. Say the word. Behold your weapon will guide you to the heart of your foe.” 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 Nathaniel, its movements guided by his outstretched fingers.

Cathmore had beaten his cousin in thought, holding a long sword in hand, he 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.

“Nathaniel, 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.” 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, Nathaniel 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, Nathaniel 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 their own, 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 Malcom 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 herself 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, they would not be able to prod or connect with their opponent’s minds. 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 taste out of his mouth.

"You've got to be joking!" Malcom eyed his brother-in-law, who persisted, though expressing distaste. Cathmore likened it to a dry dirty 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.

