

Mariard
Volume 4
The Alliance

By Christine Jones

Mariard Volume 4 The Alliance
is book 4 of 10 Volumes.
Nothing is what it seems, take nothing for granted.

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CHAPTER 1

The barracks made up of concrete block walls and flat roofs had lighting embedded within ceiling panels that flickered on automatically in the early hours of the morning. The simple layout, consisting of two rows of single beds with tall metal lockers for personal items, housed thirty trainees. A door at the far end led to the showers and lavatories.

Age, height and physique had no bearing on the mixed group of individuals, whom were dressed in only grey boxer shorts and singlets. Having all been boisterous whilst spurring the two men on, the trainees now stood back, silently watching and intently listening.

In comparison to observers, Malcom and Lamech's physical fitness and display of fighting skills were well above that of normal soldiers. Six service men had struck down the two brawling, having prevented another from starting. Wheeling long barrelled weapons with digital displays, the soldiers wore grey one-piece, long sleeved military attire in a thick rubbery fabric, incorporating boot footwear. Piping outlined muscular padding where armour plates, scratched and dull from tours of duty, protected shoulders, elbows and knees. Rank worn on the upper arms was in the form of thin coloured bands adhered to the uniform. Amongst the trainees, those gifted were yet to work out their position in the new game.

Bewildered, Malcom and Lamech remained seated on the wooden floor. Only moments earlier, there had been a rush by trainees to stand at attention at the ends of their beds. Having not long risen from slumber, the moment the two opponents set eyes on each other, they knew the game was on. Malcom had scampered over three beds and instigated the brawl with Lamech.

Prior to the soldiers bursting into the barracks, Nathaniel, Cathmore and Yothue sensed the energy signatures of three additional gifted males. Remaining inconspicuous, they discreetly sought to identify all their opponents, whilst keeping an eye on another member's predicament.

In his early forties, the giant of a man with short, spiked, red hair and neatly trimmed beard grasped Malcom by the arm, hauling him onto his feet. A gloved fist to the abdomen sent the member doubling over.

Grabbing a wad of the trainee's lengthy, brown waves, Commander Petrovic forced the man's head back to make eye contact.

"Save your fighting for where it's needed Rookie!" Petrovic spun round; his fist struck Lamech's jaw sending the man to the floor. "You don't move until I tell you to!" The trainee's silence and furious expression provoked Petrovic. "What do you say?" His sights remained on Lamech, sitting and glaring at him from the floor.

“You have no idea who you’re dealing with.” Lamech’s arrogance met with a blow from another standing behind him.

“You will show respect soldier!” The man roared in a deep voice.

Refusing to stay down, Lamech struck out with fancy footwork; the soldier hit the floor hard. On his feet, the trainee remained defensive whilst glancing over those pointing weapons at him. Petrovic thought the Rookie both skilled and amusing.

“Looks like this boy is eager to fight.” Without warning, Petrovic applied fancy legwork of his own. Lamech went over a bed, yet it did not stop there. Hauled to his feet and thrown up against a locker, an additional blow saw the trainee over another bed.

The Commander’s strength seemed unnatural for one considered a mere pawn in the game. Although Lamech felt a little worse for wear, he wished to demonstrate the power of one gifted. The sight of a trainee radiating a soft red aura further amused Petrovic, who radiated a purple aura of his own.

“Looks like this boy still has fight in him.” Misinterpreting the trainee’s confusion and defensiveness for insolence, Petrovic struck Lamech again.

Lying on the floor with the wind knocked out of him, Lamech looked up into the Commander’s strong features. Petrovic shifted his sights to address the trainees.

“What is the number one rule here?” Petrovic listened to the trainees simultaneously yell the answer.

“Obey the rules, Sir!”

“Two!” Petrovic prompted.

“Obey the commanding officer, Sir!”

“And who is your commanding officer?” Petrovic glanced over faces.

“You are, Sir!” With the silence, Petrovic again focused on the Rookie at his feet, who no longer radiated energy.

Not only did Lamech presume the Commander gifted but suspected a joint venture between the players. Feeling humiliated, especially in front of his opponents, he sat still whilst Petrovic addressed him in a stern tone.

“Have we learnt our lesson for the day Rookie, or would you like me to go through it again with you?” With Lamech’s reluctant nod, Petrovic raised his voice. “I can’t hear you!”

“Yes!”

“Yes what?”

“Yes Sir,” Lamech snarled.

“Now get up soldier and stand at attention.” Petrovic did not wait to see it for himself. Moving out from between the beds, he yelled the order whilst striding down the aisle. “You now have fifteen minutes! I expect to

see you all out on the grounds fully equipped, dismissed!” Petrovic strode out of the barracks.

Not all trainees scrambled to the showers or their lockers for uniforms, which were identical to the attire worn by the soldiers, having left the barracks. Noticing them first, Nathaniel grasped his cousin’s arm.

Spotting the two men joining Lamech, Cathmore thought his enemy had indeed made an impression on the Necropolin player. The new creations had to be aged twenty-one, a rule the players stipulated for a gifted to be utilised in play. Healthy heads of collar length blonde hair complimented pleasant, boyish features. Their height and muscular physiques equalled that of himself.

Something about one of the men caught Cathmore’s attention. A sense of looking into his own eyes sparked notions of the Necropolin player having created a member in his likeness, due to his failure to get him back. To confirm or disprove his theory, he would further observe the man’s characteristics. Whatever the reason behind such a strategy, he could bet the player was up to no good.

None of the Mariard men would have picked their new opponents as creations of evil, especially as they recalled to memory the faces of the old. On the exception of Lamech, the original gifted looked the part. Having already sussed out most of the trainees, they were yet to spot Hargan.

“Are you all right?” Nathaniel asked his brother-in-law, who nodded.

“Yeah, but he’s dead first chance I get.” Malcom’s expression was evident of him wanting to attack Lamech again. Stealing his attention, the man he loathed conversed with the new additions to his team.

“Calm yourself,” Nathaniel said, unable to draw his brother-in-law’s eyes from their opponents. “By the looks of things, we have no authority here.” Nathaniel had more to say but Yothue said it for him.

“And not the only ones gifted.”

“It is not a gifting as such,” Nathaniel remarked. “All of them have it.” His friend sighed.

“We could be in trouble if they’re all like the Commander.”

“They’re not.” Cathmore had already assessed a difference in the trainees. “I’d say they have to work hard to obtain his level of strength. He obviously keeps himself in peak condition; even those with him weren’t in his league.” Noticing his cousin somewhat side-tracked, he followed Nathaniel’s sights.

They watched a dark-haired man approach Lamech. Already suited up, there was an exchange of words before the individual looked at them with a raised brow and hostility in his expression. More surprised than others, Nathaniel had spotted the opponent earlier, having not recognised him. Hargan was clearly a product of Lamech’s leadership with stylish, short hair

and neatly trimmed beard. Having slimmed down, Hargan appeared more a gentleman than the once stocky brute.

"I suggest we get dressed," Nathaniel uttered, uneasy. "I don't believe I am saying this, but I think we should call a truce until we know what is going on here."

"Well you can call it." Malcom aired agitation. "If I go near him, we'll have the soldiers back in here, and they're not exactly friendly." Running a hand through his hair, he still felt the aches, compliments of the Commander's intervention.

Having hastily suited up, Nathaniel glimpsed trainees, already making their way out of the barracks. Cautiously approaching Lamech, though both groups stood segregated, he felt confident his opponent would see reason.

"Obviously this is not what either of us expected. If you are in agreement, I suggest we call a truce until we learn more."

"You have our co-operation." Perceiving this an opportunity to get his plans back on track, expressing good intentions, Lamech introduced his members. "This is Yurelese and Cranen. You already know Hargan." His men showed respect to their opponent in a bow of heads.

Cathmore noticed the display of etiquette by opponents, more so than those with him. Although an indication of Lamech's influence on a barbaric player, the man's motives for change remained a threat. Thinking this not an appropriate time, he refrained from asking of his daughter, suspecting his enemy would bring it up himself. Catching Yurelese looking at him, his opponent continued to stare whilst Nathaniel addressed Lamech.

"I suggest we converse on the way out; I don't want you and Malcom to be the brunt of another lesson." He gestured with a hand to move on.

With dawn an hour away, external lighting on buildings lit the area. Not wanting the Necropolin team to upstage them in conduct, Nathaniel introduced his members to the new opponents. Considering the tension, he nudged his brother-in-law to respond in a more dignified manner than just ignoring them.

Lamech raised his concerns for those absent, being honest with Nathaniel regarding the women's signatures.

"I can't feel them either." Nathaniel kept his sights ahead of him. "They will be in the game somewhere; mind you, when it comes to the players, I take nothing for granted." He glanced with Yothue speaking his mind.

"This energy the pawns radiate could interfere with our own."

"Possibly," Nathaniel said, somewhat side-tracked by his surroundings.

The buildings implied a military establishment of sorts. Looking back, Nathaniel took in the line of barracks constructed of grey block-bricks. He memorised the stencilled numbers above the door they had exited.

Keeping an eye on trainees, leading the way, the gifted passed what they assumed a mess hall, the pleasant smell prompted appetites. They sighted other smaller, prefabricated dwellings and signs pointing out lecture rooms, military stores and transport depots amongst other facilities. It appeared the base was erected quickly, presumably occupying the same grounds as some other industry they were yet to discover.

Loudly ordered to fall into line, the gifted men felt uneasy; their unit was not the only one gathering in formation, out on the tarmac area. Soldiers yelled to their individual platoons to stand at attention whilst their Commanders stood ready to do inspections. A roll call was under way and with trainees at the front yelling their numbers, Nathaniel discreetly nudged his cousin.

Cathmore glanced at his own number, printed on the right-hand side of his chest padding. The informative gesture was passed on down the line and although a little hesitant, Malcom elbowed a loathed opponent. Having already worked this out for himself, Lamech thought Malcom's deed a promising attitude to be encouraged.

"P323019, Sir," Nathaniel yelled. His team followed suit.

With the rollcall finished, Petrovic eyed the front row and began his speech. Weaponry was the lesson of the day; directly after breakfast, his platoon would watch films and then get hands on experience. Whilst continuing to yell, Petrovic moved into the second row, soon coming to a halt in front of Malcom and Lamech.

"Once you are issued with a weapon, it will become your prize possession! You will aim it in one direction only, at the enemy. Out in the field, your weapon and platoon are crucial to your survival. The man standing next to you may well save your life. I can't stress enough that teamwork is the name of the game. I will not hesitate to shoot any man who doesn't comply with my orders; better one-man die, than thirty. To date, I have not had to resort to this, but there is always a first time!" Petrovic directly eyed Malcom then Lamech. Lowering his tone, he addressed the two men personally. "I hope I have made myself clear." Petrovic moved on.

Malcom's loathing of Lamech had him tense. For the sake of the team, he would adhere to the truce; however, would not hesitate to pounce on his enemy if his opponent put a foot wrong.

Constructed from fibrous sheeting, steel rafters and wooden floors, the lengthy mess hall was a bustle with soldiers. Moving in a disorderly line along the servery, food was slopped onto the men's tin plates. With the addition of cutlery in hand, the gifted strolled towards a long, veneered table, one of many in the mess hall.

Taped to unpainted interior walls, propaganda posters stole Nathaniel's attention, making him lag behind. Black and white drawings

depicted huge, female creatures with wings, sharp teeth and claws, devouring civilian males. Uneasy, Nathaniel stopped a lanky trainee to seek information.

“Excuse my ignorance, but who are we fighting?” Nathaniel received an odd look from the young man, who spoke up in a quirky tone.

“You’ve been recruited from a rural sector, right?” The trainee continued with the man’s awkward nod. “Bloody Femaliens.” He aired disgust. “It’s hard to believe they used to be the home makers, bearing the kids and all.”

“And now?” Nathaniel was worried with his imagination kicking in.

“Bloody hell, you really are green aren’t you.” Running his hand over the dark bristles on his head, the trainee continued after receiving another awkward nod. “Killers, nasty bitches those Femaliens; will suck the life right out of you, before going after your mate for seconds.”

“Is that what they look like, big and...”

“Oh hell no.” The trainee chuckled. “Scare tactics for us young bucks. Saw my own mother change; scary shit I can tell you.” He appeared a little distant.

“Would you mind sitting with me and some, young bucks? You seem very knowledgeable on the subject.” Nathaniel forced a hopeful smile.

“Ah why not; it’s not often you get to talk to country boys. I was born on a farm myself, raised in the city though.”

The trainee rambled on a little whilst following Nathaniel towards the table where the gifted had already seated themselves. Able to see ahead, Nathaniel saw there were several vacant chairs segregating the two teams. Concerned for the gifted women, he thought it in their best interest to get their opponents on side. Whilst passing the Necropolin members, Nathaniel leant in, asking Lamech to join them.

The trainee introduced himself as B168437 then smiled and said Donnelly. Placing his plastic tray down on the table, Donnelly made a remark about them all being country lads. The men nodded, having followed Nathaniel’s lead.

“Donnelly was just telling me about the pictures on the walls. The Femaliens are women, and the enemy.” Nathaniel’s sights shot to Malcom, gagging on his food. Cathmore patted his friend on the back whilst Donnelly responded.

“The bitches are nothing but blood sucking leaches. They’re trying to find a cure, but in the meantime, we got to hunt them down; kill them before they kill us and take over the whole bloody world.”

“What caused this?” Yothue asked, fearing for his wife’s safety. He had to wait for Donnelly to swallow the packed mouth of food; the trainee shovelled down his meal using little manners.

“Don’t know. Some blame science, others, extra-terrestrials.” Donnelly noticed expressions of confusion. “You know; aliens.” He pointed

his fork at no one in particular. "I believe they came here and possessed our women to take over the world." Glances between the men made them appear more ignorant than first thought. Filling his mouth, Donnelly decided not to waste his intellect on those he could foresee not even making it through training.

"Where are these Femaliens?" Malcom asked, now itching to go find the women of their team.

"You know, in the dead zone," Donnelly answered.

"Dead zone," Cathmore questioned.

"Yes, the dead zone." Donnelly expressed frustration. "Hello, it only used to be the largest city in the country before they destroyed it!" He relaxed his tone a little. "Our Sergeant calls it the feeding ground." Donnelly filled his mouth.

"Why feeding ground?" Lamech thought the subject interesting.

"Bloody hell, what have you guys been doing for the last four weeks?" Donnelly was dumfounded at their ignorance. "Have you learnt anything from the course?" Awkward expressions and their silence prompted a warning. "You guys better do some serious revision; we'll be out there soon." Donnelly's sights shifted to a worried Yothue.

"Please, could you just define the term feeding grounds?"

"As I said, blood sucking leaches. If you're male, your food, and believe me, from what I've heard they don't go hungry." Donnelly leaned in to be discreet. "Why do you think they're calling up every man and his dog?" He raised a brow, as though it were some sort of conspiracy. "Don't let them fool you, there's no safety in numbers. Watch the transports come in. Not many of the troops come back." Donnelly straightened in his seat. "Lucky for us the leaches stay in the dead zone or we'd all be dead." He filled his mouth. Those seated about him had lost their appetites.

CHAPTER 2

Dimly lit, the large lecture room had the blinds drawn on the windows for a purpose. Unlike other trainees who had their folders with them, the gifted men found the information on the small desks assigned to them. Whilst waiting for the Commander's arrival, they looked through loose sheets of paper, hoping to gain further insight into the play.

Watched on a screen, the footage taken from a mission within the dead zone disturbed both teams. Where the Mariard men were now anxious, regarding the safety of absent partners, their opponents thought more of their own survival out in the field.

Prior to the war between men and Femaliens, there had been no military. Nathaniel's earlier assessment was correct; the base occupied grounds, having once been a civilian airport. Although this was the only base conducting training, many such establishments occupied free sectors and included research facilities.

Large passenger aircrafts, converted to troop carriers, incorporated armaments and medivac services. Known merely as transports, the wide-bodied, delta winged crafts vertically took off with the ability to hover. Although having Mach-speed, they were nothing in comparison to the technologies of flight that the gifted were accustomed to.

The modern cased weapons were nothing more than high-powered machine guns with digital scopes and tracking devices. Military and civilian communications relied heavily on IT, information technologies and advanced telecommunications systems.

Shown was both past and present footage of the dead zone. Spanning the coastline, the once thriving city of tall buildings, shops, elegant restaurants, residential and business districts were in ruins. Twisted tracks dangled mid-air, where monorail carriages lay at street level amongst buses and cars, having been burnt out or crushed by fallen debris in bombing raids. The city not ravaged of its wares made it evident that Femaliens did not collect goods of any kind.

According to the military, the Femaliens occupied the dead zone. Propaganda posters portrayed fraudulent images of the enemy. Large wings resembling that of the common housefly were the only striking addition to women. All Femaliens wore the exact design and fabric in clothing. Conveyed as a flimsy uniform, a triangular top covered breasts and strips of lengthy cloth made up a skirt, wrapped at the waist. The vibrant, multi coloured material was of unknown origins. Although lacking amenities, the women appeared well groomed and did not appear dangerous at all, quite the opposite.

The eerie sight of a deserted city was nothing to the horror of five platoons flown into specified areas to sweep the city, as these operations were called. It all seemed so quiet, until without warning, the creatures attacked.

Though a Femalien's speed and strength were unnatural, they always hunted in groups of twenty or more, making them a grave force. Snatching up their prey by the shoulders, the enemy either carted a meal away or let the victim plummet, rendering them unconscious for another to take. Femaliens lived on the blood of males, sucking it from any wound found on the body. Not a quick process, it was nothing to see a Femalien share her catch with another or come back to a meal later.

Petrovic informed that in early days, men having survived a Femalien attack had spoken of a sensation. Suspected of being a form of toxin and administered through Femalien saliva, it not only rendered the men paralysed, but also was an experience of pure ecstasy. With researchers perceiving a virus of sorts for turning females into killers, men were prepared to do whatever was necessary to stop it spreading to the male population. As survivors showed evidence of infection within hours of a bite, authorities had issued lethal injections to medivac personnel for victims of attack.

Petrovic pause the film, enabling observers to view the image of a dead Femalien within a research facility. Considered a rare occurrence, the seizing of a body gave scientists the opportunity to study the creatures.

"Over two hundred and fifty men went in." Petrovic addressed the trainees. "The assault took place in three lairs." He did not have to say the Femalien were substantially outnumbered, leaving the trainees to calculate the odds themselves. "Only forty-three soldiers made it back. You have heard me say it many times and I'll go on repeating myself if it saves lives. Your weapon and teammates are your life force out in the field; without them, you're a meal."

The serious nature of the lecture was unnerving to those listening. Most trainees were aware that the Commander was talking from experience. Although Malcom's first encounter with Petrovic left a bad impression of the man, he was starting to see reason. He was not the only gifted changing his perspective with the Commander continuing.

"If you stray from the team, we don't come looking for you. Better to lose one man, than a whole platoon." Petrovic gestured for a trainee to switch the lights on, before resting against the edge of the large, wooden desk to the front of the room. "Over the last four weeks, you have learnt military protocol, communications and first aid, amongst other skills. Now it's time to centre on weapons, physical combat and survival." His sights wandered between trainees, not fixing on any one in particular. "Usually this takes ten weeks; unfortunately, we don't have that much time. Operations have been stepped up, as have the casualties. So, we're going to do it in four." He anticipated the reaction of stunned glances between trainees. "It's going to

be tough, and I'm not a sympathetic man. Believe me, I will make a soldier out of you and I won't accept any excuses."

Walking out of the lecture room, Nathaniel conveyed his thoughts to his team. Having held official positions in past games, he was not the only one thinking their military experience would see them excel in comparison to pawn trainees. Already, Yothue could foresee Malcom drawing attention to himself, more so than any other. Common knowledge, Nathaniel had heavily relied on his brother-in-law's expertise when dealing with troops.

Though having been in the military himself, Yothue's position in intelligence had him more working alone than a combatant. Believing Petrovic would indeed push the trainees hard, he knew it was in Malcom's nature to take stragglers under his wing. Considering his concerns, Yothue expected trouble from both the Commander and their opponents alike.

CHAPTER 3

The fragrance of nature added to the tranquillity of the gifted women's surroundings, which held them in awe at the breathtaking beauty of the Femalien lands. Exposed backs felt the warmth of the sun and bare feet the coolness of the ground. Lengthy, silken grasses brushed their legs, as the strips of long, soft fabric allowed them to walk with ease.

Untouched by civilisation as such, flowers in a variety of species and colours adorned the landscape of trees, shrubs and rolling hills. Cloudless, blue skies glistened slightly, giving the impression of a crystal atmosphere where the sun and moons sparkled like huge prisms. Unfamiliar birds sung sweet tunes, blending with the sounds of cascading waterfalls and streams.

Having woken in the lands, dressed for the culture, the eight gifted were at first uneasy with so many Femalien in flight and on the ground. Mistaken in their assumptions, they neither became prey nor treated as an enemy. By experience, they quickly learnt that malice and aggressive behaviour was unacceptable between females. To calm a volatile situation, the hosts segregated the gifted into two groups.

From the Femalien council, Maureen was the Mariard women's guide. Whilst on a casual walk, greetings of bright smiles and welcoming pleasantries drove assumptions of an ally within the play. Seen were girls, as young as three, dancing to the songs of nature or chasing each other around trees, creating their own entertainment. Groups of all ages mingled and interacted, elderly woman taught younger audiences the art of making headdresses, baskets and other creative wares from flora. Notions of Vienne's influence on the game board held promise yet did not sit well with others.

Having already attempted to communicate with their husband's through the mind, the women suspected that something other than the men themselves were blocking the connection. Feeling safe in their surroundings, they wished to learn more before going in search of their partners.

Passing a seated group, Tegan reflected an elderly woman's smile before discreetly addressing Rebecca.

"Maureen was right; such beauty does give you a sense of peace and security. I feel so relaxed." Her friend nodded in agreement.

"I do too, even with our opponents so close." Rebecca felt confident the Femalien would continue to keep the two groups segregated.

Wearing the cultural attire, Maureen, in her mid-forties walked in front of the new arrivals. A member of the ruling council, Maureen's beauty and graceful manner only substantiated good intentions amongst the four

gifted. Though having intervened and stopped the two groups brawling, she and others continued to conduct themselves in a peaceful manner.

Near a crystal-clear stream, Maureen directed the four women to sit in a circle on a carpet of moss. It was time to talk and convince them to put an end to hostilities with others. Once seated, Maureen drew strands of dark hair from the side of her face, working them back into the neat bun. Glancing over their faces, her pronounced and soft speech expressed warmth and friendship.

“It is nice to see you more relaxed, such beautiful faces should never wear frowns.” Acknowledged with pleasant smiles, Maureen noticed one of the women was not as comfortable as she would like. “I sense you are troubled Rebecca. Please, convey what is on your mind; after all, you are amongst friends.” She smiled encouragingly.

Being the centre of attention made Rebecca uneasy; fearing her honesty regarding their opponents could see Maureen thinking ill of them. The secrecy surrounding the games also presented a problem with her not wanting to give too much away. Glancing at Tegan beside her, the nod from her friend gave Rebecca the confidence to speak up.

“The women we were fighting, they destroy such beauty as this. Their kind thrives on death and inflicting pain on the innocent. They are pure evil and not to be underestimated.” Rebecca’s sights remained on Maureen; whose expression had not changed.

“There is no evil here Rebecca; however, there are those who wish to destroy us. They occupy the lands beyond our harvest grounds, which the enemy refers to as the dead zone.” Maureen shifted her sights to Triligen.

The woman’s white pearl pigmentation and unique physical appearance had already gained Triligen reverence by those having seen the woman in passing, but more so by those on the council. Femaliens desired such perfection, believing evolution would see them eventually take a similar form to the new arrival.

Earlier, Triligen sensed a familiar energy signature, other than themselves and those of the Necropolin. Unable to place it, the sensation escaped her, leaving Triligen concentrating on the matters at hand.

“Who would want to destroy such beauty?” Triligen asked the host.

“The men of this world,” Maureen replied. With her audience expressing shock, she anticipated many questions. Tegan spoke up first.

“That’s why we haven’t seen any men. Where are they?”

“Beyond the harvest grounds. Men’s fears had them take up arms against us; soldiers they now call themselves. They frequent the grounds with orders to kill all Femalien; occasionally they snatch a body for research. We must not allow them to get through or they will destroy all this and us with it.” Maureen’s sights came back to Tegan.

“I suspect that’s where the rest of the team is.”

“Oh my goodness...” Rebecca gasped. “The men could be in trouble if they were forced into service and have to deal with opponents.” Hearing Yamane’s distinct Bedulin accent drew her focus.

“Already I can imagine their reaction.” Yamane now addressed their host. “Are there no women at all living amongst the men?”

“No, only males occupy the cities.” Maureen maintained a serene calm in her tone. “When this all began, they so feared the transformation we were forced out. They killed many Femalien before this land opened up to us. All this was once a vast ocean and to our knowledge, the men still believe it to be so. It is not in our nature to war, but we are forced to fight for self-preservation.”

“This reeks of the Necropolin.” Tegan sighed annoyed. Triligen chose her words carefully whilst addressing Maureen.

“We have friends. Male friends, who I suspect are on the other side of this harvest ground you speak of. I assure you, they are good men, men who would certainly defend the Femalien and their lands if given the chance.”

“No man is good,” Maureen replied. “Already too many have died by their hands. I would take you to the harvest grounds to see for yourselves, but I will not risk your safety.”

“Take us there,” Tegan said. “Believe me, we can handle ourselves.” Frustration rose with Maureen shaking her head.

“You would be killed by the soldiers. It is not only strength, but also our speed of flight that gives us the advantage. Besides, it is quite a distance on foot; flying enables us to get there quickly.”

“What I wouldn’t give for an ITP.” Tegan aired her thoughts.

“What is an ITP?” Maureen asked; the initials were foreign to her.

“An interceptor; a craft with a big set of wings.”

“We can give you those.” Maureen smiled.

“How?” Yamane appeared a little sceptical.

“Become like us.”

The information Maureen conveyed left Yamane concerned and requesting time to deliberate. Tegan was quick to speak up the moment their host was out of earshot.

“I don’t have a problem with it. I feel it’s something mother has incorporated in the play for our benefit.”

“I do too.” Rebecca nodded in agreement. “It appears we are on the Mariard side of the fence and the men are trapped on the Necropolin side.”

“I do understand what you are saying,” Yamane replied, “but I do not think it is that cut and dry. We could be looking at a combined effort in both regions. What do you think Triligen?”

“This is a game, where nothing may be as it seems.” Triligen glanced over their faces. “I do admit, the appearance of a perfect environment and the Femalien welcoming both teams without prejudice, does suggest a

combined effort.” Her focus settled on Tegan, who aired determination in her tone.

“Whichever way, this is a war between men and women. There’s a fight going on in this dead zone and obviously we have a role to play in it.” With a second glance, she noticed Rebecca most distant. “What’s on your mind?”

“Why would the players put us altogether like this and so early in the game? I admit I’m scared, more so for the men than us. I just cannot see them working together with the likes of Lamech; nor us with Anndrosa for that matter.”

“Maybe we can.” Yamane appeared more positive. “If Nathaniel thought it important enough, he would bring the teams together. I believe Lamech is approachable, we saw evidence of this in the last play.” Her sister-in-law responded with an air of disapproval.

“I hope you’re not suggesting...”

“Actually, I am.” Yamane gestured with a raised hand to let her finish. “The Femaliens do not allow conflict on their land and are too many for us to ignore the rules.” Rebecca drew her sights.

“Perhaps we should just walk out of here and try to get to this harvest ground of our own accord.”

“Then what,” Triligen responded. “Maureen made it clear they kill Femaliens on sight.”

“But we are not Femalien,” Rebecca said.

“The fear of infection alone makes us a threat.” Triligen disliked putting a dampener on the situation but wanted to be realistic. “Soldiers ordered to kill would not ignore a group of four women wandering into their territory.”

“So, we’re back to square one.” Tegan sighed impatient. “I just can’t sit here and do nothing. We are still a team and should act as such.” Her sister-in-law responded.

“I agree and they are expecting us to make a decision, but...”

“Then these are our choices...” Tegan raised her fingers whilst numbering them off. “One, we help the Femaliens fight to save their lands. Two, do nothing and hope the men find us or three, do as Rebecca suggested and make our own way to this dead zone.”

Having spent two or more hours debating the pros and cons, the four were yet to decide. They at least agreed on two issues; no matter their choice, they had to be accountable for their actions and Tegan was nominated acting team leader. None challenged her position as the member was the strongest and most skilled gifted amongst them.

Sensing an enemy signature, Tegan rose to her feet to see Anndrosa and their opponent’s guide approach Maureen. Their host conversed with the other member of the council.

“We have company of the worst kind.” Tegan only glanced with her three companions joining her.

“Be civil,” Yamane advised with Maureen’s approach. Already sensing her sister-in-law’s animosity, she hoped Tegan would present herself in a manner befitting a team leader.

“Anndrosa has requested to speak with you.” Maureen eyed over their faces. “She wishes a truce.” Tegan’s expression implied the group would not comply yet a nudge from Yamane prompted a reluctant nod. Maureen gestured for Anndrosa to come forward.

The Femalien attire was not to Anndrosa’s liking; others thought it made her appear more feminine, especially with her red hair hanging loosely around her shoulders. With all eyes on her, she refrained from expressing pleasantries considering Tegan had been the aggressor that morning. Seeing her opponent again had stirred feelings of desire, which she kept well to herself.

Standing a few steps back, Anndrosa singled Tegan out, addressing her opponent in a tone of authority.

“We have decided to take the Femaliens up on their offer.” Her opponent folded her arms across her chest, appearing somewhat disinterested. “Whether we like it or not Tegan, there’s a war going on and evidently none of us has power over this governing body. Our team will fight with the Femaliens in the dead zone, least until we find the others; then we’ll finish this game in a manner we are accustomed.” Anndrosa raised a brow with Tegan airing sarcasm.

“So why are you talking to us if you’ve already made up your minds? Do you want our blessings or something Anndrosa?”

“We’d like you to join the effort. Eight gifted could make a difference in this war and end the game quickly.”

“I suspect you’ll hear about our decision when we make it, so if you don’t mind.”

Having anticipated such a response, Anndrosa would attempt to show the women up in front of the Femalien. She folded her arms across her chest and glanced over faces.

“You surprise me. I thought the great Mariard team would jump at the opportunity to save such a community, after all, their culture symbolises everything you claim to stand for. Has the year off so dampened your spirits?”

“Don’t Tegan,” Rebecca nervously uttered. “She is baiting you.” Rebecca feared her friend would say something she might regret. She herself was now eager to take up the challenge.

“Good to see you too Rebecca.” Anndrosa smirked.

“Don’t even think of it,” Tegan snarled, assuming her opponent would bring up Cathmore’s daughter to inflict hurt on her friend.

“So touchy.” Anndrosa knew full well what Tegan referred to. Her sights shifted to Maureen, who proposed that she return to her companions. Both guides led Anndrosa away.

The Mariard women’s decision to join the Femalien was more so influenced by opponents upstaging them than committing themselves to a worthwhile cause. Most pleased to hear the news, Maureen made the appropriate arrangements for the transformation to take place at first light. In addition, she called for an evening of celebration, in honour of the eight women.

CHAPTER 4

With the blazing dawn, dew glistening and the aroma of blossoms in the air, a massive audience surrounded the eight gifted. Though the two teams exchanged no words, there were exchanges of cold glances amongst opponents. Tegan and Rebecca made their stance clear, especially to Aurora, who was contemplating a play of her own.

Maureen glanced over faces. Though made aware of what to expect, the Mariard women expressed uncertainty, where the other four appeared arrogantly confident.

“If you are ready, we will start.” Maureen smiled with their agreeable responses.

Having each been partnered with a Femalien, the women looked into the eyes of the one standing in front of them. Taking the lead, Anndrosa bared her wrist to her Femalien host; others followed suit.

Gritting her teeth, Tegan hid the discomfort she felt with the initial bite and drawing of blood. Unbeknown to her, the stinging within the wound came from an unseen addition to the Femalien’s tongue, which injected a substance into her body.

A tingling sensation within Tegan’s veins quickly spread throughout her entire being. Euphoria took possession of her and unable to stand, she was gently lowered to the softness of the grass. With her arms placed at her sides, Tegan tried to focus on the colours of the skies, yet felt so light-headed, she was on the verge of losing consciousness.

Kneeling beside Tegan, Maureen noticed the woman’s dilated pupils and paling features. She gestured with her hand for another member of the council to come look.

“Can you hear me Tegan?” The older woman asked. Receiving no response, she looked to Maureen, expressing concern. “Check all of them.”

Night and day, the selected carers had anxiously watched over the eight gifted. Excluding the time for healing, the transformation itself normally took anything up to forty-eight hours. Where there should have been little discomfort, the gifted were in agony.

At first, the women were not coherent enough to feed themselves. Sustenance for Femaliens was a mixture of nectars diluted in mineral water; this food source also contained properties for pain relief. Via the use of leaves, the sweet drink was administered to the newcomers every four hours.

The council remained in dismay, having stated on several occasions to the eight gifted that their suffering was abnormal for the transition. Having sought the healing elements within their energy to no avail, Yamane

perceived their gifting was causing the abnormality; nonetheless, there was no turning back for any of them.

On the eighth day, cries of agony accompanied the new appendages perforating the flesh of the women's backs. Adding to their suffering, instead of it taking two days for the skin to heal around the base of the wings, they were on their sixth and not yet ready for flight.

In the form of scabs, the white, crystallised substance was consistent with Femalien transitions. It was also imperative that the women refrain from spreading their wings until fully healed. Although none had anticipated this and suspicions lingered to their gifting causing problems, four of the women remained confident that the Femaliens were a Mariard creation.

Relieved, the women presumed the worst over. It was now a matter of getting used to the new additions to their bodies. When not in flight, the lengthy wings tucked behind and had a tendency to tickle calves. Surprisingly, they were most flexible when lying or sitting.

The onset of cramping pains in the women's abdomens placed them again on regular serves of nectar. Yamane thought the juice a form of nutrition, having additional elements which could see them fully dependent on the substance. For unknown reasons, she had received no medical insight into the Femalien phenomena, leaving her to rely on guesswork in her attempt to understand their dilemma.

Unanswered questions pertaining to their condition made the gifted awfully anxious. With the pain steadily intensifying, Anndrosa had made a comment that although some thought crude, did spark an awareness of sexual urges. Also unaffected mentally, the eight women were not experiencing the same serene like state as the Femaliens. Yamane put this down to the lack of time spent in the land and their intake of nectar. Knowing this to be a game, all the gifted began banding together. To keep their minds off their discomfort, they discussed strategies in hope of reaching the male members of their teams.

With dusk, Aurora sat alone, rocking in pain. Shadowed, she glanced up at Rebecca, standing in front of her. Obviously suffering herself, Rebecca held out a leaf to her. Surprised by her opponent's kindness, she expressed gratitude.

"Thank you," Aurora uttered, quickly consuming the liquid and licking the residue from the greenery. She expected her opponent to walk away; instead, Rebecca sat down beside her. Though anticipating what was on her opponent's mind, she remained silent; hoping the properties within the nectar would kick in to relieve some of her pain.

"How is Dawn?" Rebecca's uneasiness came through in her tone.

"I wondered when the subject would arise. I began to think you had all forgotten her."

"Not at all. I won't deny it is a touchy subject."

“I understand.”

“Due to the circumstances, we can’t afford to be hostile towards one another.” Clutching her stomach, Rebecca took a moment, knowing it would pass and she would breathe easier until the next cramping pain.

Aurora was not in the least sorry for past actions; she intended to use manipulative tactics to befriend the woman for her own purposes.

“I agree, and if it will make a difference, I am sorry for the hurt I caused you and your husband.” Their eyes met; Aurora continued to air sincerity. “It meant nothing to him Rebecca; he worships the ground you walk on.” Her words brought a faint smile to her opponent’s features.

Having not seen her husband in weeks, Rebecca missed Cathmore immensely. The assumption that the men were working just as hard in a similar joint venture, she tried to be positive in an awkward situation.

“Time heals wounds Aurora. If you are truly sorry, then I accept the effort you are making, especially considering the circumstances.”

“It is the players who make us fight.”

“I do realise this, but you also have a choice and by what you have said, a conscience.”

“What is it between you and Cathmore that stirs such loyalty for one another to the point of death?” Aurora was itching for information.

“Love. Something the Necropolin knows nothing about.”

“As you said, we have a choice and I want to experience this love. Is it something you can teach me?” Aurora thought she may have over acted her facade of ignorance, as Rebecca was taking her time to answer her.

Lamech’s plans were one of many issues discussed by the Mariard team during their year off. Contemplating their situation, Rebecca’s awareness of their player’s love would not put it past Vieanne to incorporate a strategy to warm the hearts of the Necropolin team towards Mariard beliefs. Although a viable theory, she was not ignorant to their opponent’s manipulative tactics. Already feeling forgiveness and unity stirring within, she reminded herself to tread carefully.

“How could I refuse such a request; it is the basis of our beliefs.” Rebecca forced a smile. “But I warn you. Time heals wounds, yet deceit reopens them with a vengeance.” She assumed she had made herself clear with her opponent appearing a little awkward.

Resting on her knees, Yamane glided radiating hands over her sister-in-law’s abdomen. Lying on the grass, Tegan’s profuse sweating and begging for more nectar worried her, as it did those observing.

“I sense it to be a sac of some sort, inside the uterus.” Yamane looked to Maureen for explanation. “What is it for?”

“We believe it to be a form of egg sac. What I am about to say, will undoubtedly disturb you, but it must be done if you wish to live.” Apprehensive glances between the women made Maureen uncomfortable.

“Tomorrow we will take you to the harvest ground where you will stay with others, who will help you through this crucial stage. Feeding on soldiers will...”

“Blood.” Yamane now realised what she and the others were craving. “And if we don’t do it?” She stared angrily, feeling deceived.

“Please, let me finish.” Maureen hoped to reduce tensions with explanation. “Feeding on soldiers will be your nutrition during your time away. Their blood will ease the pain but will not entirely stop it. This can only occur after mating with a male, which fertilises the sac, alleviating all discomfort.”

“You should have told us,” Yamane snapped. “We would have never agreed...”

“Forgive us...” Maureen eyed Anndrosa with the woman interrupting.

“Just take me to the dead zone.” Anndrosa cringed, clutching her stomach with the pain. “I’ll kill the lot of them if I have to. I’m not putting up with this for an entire game.” She anticipated Yamane’s response.

“You might not have a problem with this, but I certainly do!” Yamane shifted her focus to question Maureen. “Tell me what happens if the sacs are not fertilised.”

“They erupt, causing much grief. Another will grow in its place and you will experience this process until the next erupts. A woman’s womb will only take so much before left barren. The sac will then grow in the fallopian tubes, resulting in death.”

“You have left us no choice,” Liona snarled, shifting her sights to address Tegan. “I suggest we all leave this place; least in the dead zone we have a better chance of finding the others.”