

Mariard
Volume 5
Onto Grace

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Mariard Volume 5 Onto Grace is
book 5 of 10 Volumes.
Nothing is what it seems, take nothing for granted.

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PROLOGUE

What Nathaniel had witnessed over the last few days kept him from sleep. The new game had placed them on a board with class distinction, unrelenting law-enforcement and a barbaric legal system. All his team felt guilty for the positions they held, yet until having a better understanding of their role, they would carry out their duties and not cause waves.

Surprisingly, the game board was void of plant life and saw unique architecture, differing between the regions. The upper-class city of Emor contained hundred story buildings with jagged pinnacles. Highly polished structures appeared like mammoth shards of refined gems laid out in city blocks separated by streets lined in jade.

Lights within and reflecting off structures cast a rainbow effect across night skies, leaving the less fortunate in awe and yearning to be of this class to reap the benefits it offered. Advanced technology saw hover taxis, items materialise with the touch of a screen and a well-adorned multi-creatural population, wanting for nothing. None of the gifted had personally been to Emor, having only witnessed its wavering lights in the vast distance and visuals of its magnificence, seen on a terminal monitor within their rooms.

Although similar in architect, the middle-class area of Raseac was formed from rock-based elements, containing shorter, bulkier structures and a populace less refined and in slavery to the rich. A monstrous establishment, known as the House of Justice, resided on the outskirts of Raseac, near the lower-class boundaries. This facility incorporated everything associated with the judicial system from law enforcement administration to the massive prison complex.

Within the grounds, twenty-story, grey rock structures accommodated employees. Humbling was the one-room bed-sits and shared amenities with their smooth surfaces and raw metals in access doors, shelves and benches. Furnishings consisted of a double-boxed bed with drawers underneath and two padded stools in dark green vinyl at the bench. Embedded in a wall, the touch screen enabled one to accept or forward items through the adjacent, shelved, technical closet with a transparent door.

Daily, employees ordered a clean uniform comprising of a tailored navy-blue jacket and matching pants, white shirt, boots and a wide rimmed cap; the issue being standard for both men and women in the law enforcement service. Unflattering underwear, grey tracksuits and sneakers were standard issued clothing, which identified off duty officers, whom held no class distinction. There were benefits pertaining to their positions; although no salary was paid, they did receive food, accommodation, medical and for the many who needed it, basic education.

Six out of the sixteen gifted held positions where they spent most of their shift encased within a nine-foot high, robotic armour called Justice Technical Units, Justech, as they were commonly referred to. Digital displays within and activated by thought process, enabled navigation, radar, speed, flight operations, communications and weaponry. Although there were male and female Justech officers, the unit design was discriminatory, having male orientated, flat facial mouldings, muscular chest plates and overall body type. Propulsion engines located in a back compartment enabled flight, making these machines in metallic bronze and chrome, swift and lethal. Nothing appeared to stop them keeping order or hunting criminals, especially in the lower-class area of Carpe Diem that translated meant, '*enjoy today*', which the peoples of the widespread city would add, 'chances are, dead tomorrow'.

Emor was off limits without an authorised permit. Security was maintained by an elite Justech army, which none of the gifted had been assigned to nor held status to gain positions. The play itself already felt like a nightmare, as the middle and lower classes feared and loathed the law. Understandably, most of the population participated in illegal activities, being a means of survival considering the poverty they endured.

Nathanial was baffled as to why the new play again saw the two teams working together. The sixteen gifted found themselves spread over three sections; law-enforcement, the legal system and the prison facility. Nathanial, Yamane, Malcom and Tegan were Justech officers along with Necropolin members Lamech, Anndrosa and Yurelese.

Though one team wished to reassure those of another that they wanted to retain the alliance, past events continued to be an issue, bringing distrust. In the latter part of their year off, three Mariard men decided not to withhold information regarding Tegan and Lamech's affair during their time in the Femalien lands. At first, there was unspoken judgment; however, the plays outcome lightened opinions. The incident was not spoken of or given much thought until reacquainted with the Necropolin team. Lamech's history had those working with him on their guard and although unwilling to trust him, the Mariard members were being civil.

Amongst others, Rebecca and Triligen held positions as prosecutors for the House of Justice. Law stated one was guilty until proven innocent and from what they had all seen; the law was black and white with set sentences. Dangerous criminals and repeat offenders received no trial, putting Nathanial and his companions in a difficult position, as it required them to be judges and executioners when out in the field. For the defence, which occupied the same building as the prosecution, Hargan and Liona battled to keep clients out of prison or from receiving the death penalty.

The symbol of a red cross identified the RC, an underground movement whose illegal activities sought to provide where the system failed those living in poverty. Risking imprisonment, middle class sympathisers

secretly permitted RC members access to terminals, obtaining food and needed supplies. Although hailed as heroes by the majority of lower and middle-class citizens, the RC was classified under law as a gang and hunted as such.

Unlike the charitable works of the RC, gangs bullied and murdered the innocent to take for themselves. Well established gangs evaded the law, where others drew attention. Frequent clashes with Justech units saw perpetrators outnumbered and shown no leniency; rarely did an office suffer injury in such skirmishes.

Cathmore and Yothue worked as prison officers, along with the Necropolin members Cranen, Aurora and Uropa. The barbaric institution was thought a hellhole by both male and female inmates. Not only did they fight for survival but were also a source of entertainment for the upper class. Emor citizens indulged in the suffering of the imprisoned, betting credits on endurance and brutal fights seen live on private and public terminals.

Nathaniel's thoughts stole his rest. The room being overly warm had the couple in shorts and singlets; the grey sheet and double bedspread lay crumpled at their feet. His wife changing side in her sleep prompted him to look upon her alluring, bronze tone features and lengthy, straight dark hair. Recollections of what they left behind on the Mariard gave him brief comfort.

The year off to recuperate was made wonderful by the new additions to their extended family. Nathaniel's heir, his daughter Celeste, brought him such joy, having inherited her mother's beauty and hopefully his characteristics. Andre was born a week earlier than Celeste to Triligen and Yothue. The boy's remarkable appearance contributed to a combination of pearl skin tones from the mother and dark pigmentation from the father. Where Triligen has a hood of skin, Andre has silver hair with a fine black streak on one side. Nathaniel recalled laughing when Yothue expressed his eagerness for the tiny strands to grow, wanting to set beads within lengthy plaits, like his own. Unlike his mother, Andre has no additional skin draping his arms or covering his chest; instead, the child has large flaps on his back, unknown is their purpose.

The new arrivals incurred the same accelerated growth as both his sister and cousin's children. Nathaniel had seen Celeste crawl and walk prior to entering the play. With such fond memories, he drifted off to sleep where tapping into his subconscious, his dreams would steal a peaceful rest.

CHAPTER 1

The unisex bathroom facility on this floor had earlier caused a moral dilemma with four of the gifted. Against Mariard beliefs, they refused to expose certain parts of their bodies, considered sacred to none other than one's spouse. Contributing to tensions, they shared the floor with Necropolin members. Yurelese solved the issue, gaining him further respect for his consideration.

Getting up an hour earlier had become routine. Three women stood watch in the brightly lit hallway encircling the bathroom facility, centred on the floor. Although many doors lead off into rooms, there was only one door into the bathroom and on their side of the floor. Like previous days, tension hindered conversation, especially between Tegan and Anndrosa.

Considering the woman's personality, Yamane thought Anndrosa's new look suited her. She suspected Lamech enforced the changes, wanting certain women of his team to look more presentable. Shoulder length hair with feathered layers replaced Anndrosa's trademark fiery red ponytail. Her eyebrows had shape and her ivory complexion held a healthy glow.

Friendships made in the last play were being tested, leaving certain Necropolin members making assumptions. Those whom knew the truth played ignorant, letting notions of hypercritical beliefs go uncorrected. Though Malcom was being civil towards Lamech, it was seen as begrudgingly. Tegan steering clear of their team leader was blamed more so on Cathmore's influence than Malcom's insecurities.

Considering they could have a lengthy play ahead of them, Yamane did not like the idea of starting every day with tension. Breaking the silence, she asked Anndrosa how she spent her year off.

"Drinking, debauchery and murdering the innocent." Anndrosa raised a brow, having anticipated the souring expressions. "Obviously you don't appreciate my sense of humour." Straight faced, she folded her arms across her chest.

"I don't find it very funny at all." Tegan's radiant blue eyes remained fixed on the woman.

"Why should it surprise you? Isn't this what you expect to hear from me?" Receiving no response, Anndrosa wished further to embarrass her. "If I'd said played nanny, conducted charitable deeds and taken lessons in etiquette, you'd think me a liar."

Anndrosa secretly admired Tegan. Due to service regulations, the woman's long, curly, black locks were loosely tied back. Tegan's natural beauty turned men's heads, having caused both Malcom and Lamech more so to fight for her attention than winning games. In Anndrosa's opinion, Tegan wasted her best assets, as she could easily use them to her own gains.

With her sister-in-law remaining silent, Yamane felt compelled to respond. Her Bedulin accent conveyed how she felt, uncomfortable.

“So, is that what you did?”

“Actually, it is exactly what I did.” Having partially lied without conscience, Anndrosa felt confident of having put not one, but both women back in their places.

“I am impressed to say the least.” Yamane forced a smile before changing the subject. “What is your opinion on the game this far?”

“Once I would have thrived in it, but now...” Anndrosa sighed disgusted. “Death, poverty and places like this are nothing more than appalling. I’d like to offer a word of advice if I may?”

“Please do,” Yamane replied.

“Doesn’t mean we have to take it,” Tegan grumbled. Anndrosa ignored the remark.

“The women here play hard and fast; showering and dressing with males is the least of their concerns. I suspect our morals have already drawn attention; sooner or later we will be ridiculed and even challenged if we continue to hold steadfast.”

“What do you suggest Anndrosa,” Tegan grunted. “We flaunt our bodies to fit in, become loud mouthed and disrespectful...”

“We would never expect such behaviour from you.” Anndrosa’s tone aired respect, which misinterpreted, riled Tegan.

“So what are you implying? I’m a prude, too pristine to get my hands dirty?”

Thinking Tegan easily provoked, Anndrosa could foresee the woman’s resentment getting her into trouble.

“Actually, it’s not what I was implying at all. You’re a monarch, a role model. I was going to suggest that although we don’t mimic their behaviour, we don’t react to it either.” Again, Anndrosa had successfully put Tegan in her place, perceiving the glances Yamane was giving her sister-in-law, would see words between them when in private. “Perhaps I should go.” She sighed, appearing disappointed. “I feel my presence here makes you uncomfortable and defensive.”

“I’m sorry.” Tegan felt awkward. “I’m still finding this difficult, us working together like this, especially when we were such enemies.”

“I understand your concerns, as indeed we had a past; nonetheless, we all need to get over our differences if we’re to survive these games.” Anndrosa perceived she was playing her hand well and gaining favour with the woman.

“Your intentions are commendable,” Yamane said, forcing a smile. Though not about to lower her guard, she would continue to express pleasantries and work as a team.

Straightening, Tegan looked beyond Anndrosa to Levinski, appearing

half-asleep whilst wandering towards them. In her mid-twenties, the female Justech officer wore nothing more than a singlet and shorts. Her trim, muscular physique matched her personality that saw her treated like one of the boys.

Levinski had strong features of high cheekbones and full lips with deep-set brown eyes. When Tegan first met the natural beauty, she questioned Levinski as to why she had mere bristles of dark hair. Levinski replied, 'beats looking after a mop'. Having not understood that the woman ridiculed her femininity, Tegan was not offended.

Levinski held her boots in hand with her uniform slung over one shoulder, wrapped in clear film. In no mood to chat, she would have ignored the women if not for Tegan uttering good morning.

"What's so good about it?" Levinski yawned, wanting to get into the bathroom.

"You can't go in just yet." Tegan stood in front of the door. Levinski raised a brow, grinning at the thought.

"So what's happening, someone getting laid?"

"I beg your pardon?" Tegan's vagueness provoked tensions.

"Listen up curly; I want to get in before rush hour so get out the way."

"If you don't mind, the men want a little privacy." Tegan remained serious with Levinski's expression of amusement.

"Should have guessed it was the fairy brigade; geezers, scared someone's going to pinch your old man's arse? Get out the bloody way." Levinski went to push Tegan aside; however, the woman stood her ground. "Move it sister or eat knuckles for breakfast."

"Can't you just wait a few minutes? Is that so much to ask?" Tegan was determined not to let the woman enter.

"Yes! In a few minutes I'll be fighting for a shower. Now I won't tell you again to move it." Levinski lost patients, shoving Tegan aside, who in turn, saw red and the brawl was on.

Anndrosa discreetly told Yamane to stay out of it, knowing Levinski stood no chance against a gifted. She suspected that if they intervened, other officers could take offence and all hell would break loose.

Soon an audience of both men and women were cheering on the fight, leaving an edgy Yamane glad she had heeded Anndrosa's warning. Her sister-in-law's swift and unique combat skills saw her opponent disadvantage; nonetheless, Levinski's ego spurred conflict. Highly respected, Levinski wanted to keep her reputation as one not to be messed with.

Having heard the commotion, Malcom and Nathaniel pushed through rowdy onlookers, who ridiculed them for intervening. Malcom received no fight from his wife, who stood behind him, contented to let him deal with the issue. Nathaniel was less fortunate. Having grasped Levinski

from behind, the strong woman struggled to be released.

“Knock it off,” Nathanial demanded.

“Let me at the bitch!” Levinski’s heel came up hard into Nathanial’s groin.

Men cringed, women cheered, and Yamane went to her husband’s aide. Another intervened on Nathanial’s behalf.

“Enough!” Anndrosa grasped Levinski, pinning her hard to the wall, which prompted immediate silence from onlookers.

“Show’s over people,” Malcom said, watching them disperse. He overheard positive chatter with officers wandering into the bathroom. Abruptly, his sights shifted.

“This isn’t over by a long shot,” Levinski snarled at Tegan, snatching her uniform from the floor before storming into the bathroom.

Those in the hallway could hear officers ridiculing Levinski for their own amusement. Feeling no sympathy for the woman, Malcom now wanted answers.

“What was that all about?” Though directed at his wife, Anndrosa answered him.

“Guard duty. We are drawing attention, the moralists of the team.” Anndrosa only glanced at Yurelese and Lamech, exiting the bathroom.

“Are you all right Tegan?” Lamech aired concern. “They said you were in a fight with Levinski.”

“I’m fine.” Tegan flicked him off, ignoring Lamech whilst venting her thoughts. “They think we’re weak because we won’t parade around naked. It’s ridiculous; I can’t believe she fought me over it!” Thinking they were being mocked behind their backs riled Tegan further.

“It’s okay.” Malcom placed his arm around his wife, wishing to pacify her. “We’ll just have to get up a little earlier that’s all.”

“No,” Tegan protested. “Why should we be ridiculed for wanting privacy? Are we so undeserving of respect?” She glanced over faces, avoiding Lamech’s. Her sights shifted back to Yurelese with him speaking up.

“Our integrity is not the issue Tegan. They perceive this normal behaviour for the culture; they may very well think we ridicule them. It’s much the same as what we are experiencing amongst ourselves. We see things differently, but we’ve made much progress by trying to compromise and understand each other.” Yurelese’s sights shifted to Anndrosa.

“It’s what I was trying to tell you earlier. If we’re not careful, our responses will provoke clashes, as you’ve now experienced firsthand.”

“So, you think I should’ve just let her walk in?” Defensive, Tegan assumed the woman blamed her for the fight. Her husband drew her tightly into him.

“For one I’m glad you didn’t. Mind you, I’d hate to see you get hurt over...”

“Oh for goodness sakes,” Tegan grumbled. “You’re worried about me getting hurt? Levinski didn’t stand a chance. Granted she’s strong, but I’m gifted, it wasn’t exactly a fair fight.” Anndrosa responded.

“Not to mention she’ll want to restore her position in the pecking order.”

“Great.” Tegan folded her arms across her chest. “Looks like I’m in the spotlight again.”

During their year off, Tegan’s concerns regarding game plays, she aired with her brother. Convinced she was causing nothing but trouble for their team spurred depression. Having contemplated the issue himself, Nathaniel’s revelation, he talked over with his cousin.

On the subject of personal growth, Cathmore conveyed much sense. Easy was it to be confident, motivated, compassionate and have peace of mind when on their home world, yet not so when challenged beyond their imagination within a play. Nathaniel’s assumption that his sister’s problems stemmed from insecurities and rejection came under scrutiny with further study of the game plays themselves.

Firstly, the Necropolin team had perceived Tegan the weakest link. Underestimating her character cost them Cathmore, who because of her, defected to the Mariard. In the second play, Lamech’s schemes backfired, triggering the man’s obsession with her. Unexpected, Anndrosa befriended Tegan instead of dispersing her; she even used Tegan against her own team members.

Information reluctantly obtained after the third play, Nathaniel still thought frightening. Cathmore believed if the Necropolin player had managed to turn either himself or Triligen, Tegan would have easily defeated all the gifted. Again, this implied that although the plays were so diverse, his sister had been used as a central figure. This was most evident in the last play where Tegan lead the way for all the gifted to become Femalien. She was also chosen to give birth to the third player’s representatives. With the Alphaomega being their father, Nathaniel held no doubts that both he and his sister topped the Necropolin’s dispersal list.

Cathmore stated a truth; Nathaniel had not personally experienced the trials and tribulations of that of his sister. Undoubtedly, Tegan was exposed to more during play than any other, which did affect them all in different ways. His cousin pointed out that not only did it spur growth within the team, but Tegan always rose above it.

Unspoken were Nathaniel and Cathmore’s fears, having only discussed relevant matters with Malcom and Tegan. Though confident they had an ally in the third player, concerns remained as to what lay ahead for Tegan that would see pain before glory.

Being the strongest and most skilled amongst the female gifted gave Tegan no further confidence. Perceived a thorn in a player’s side made her

feel a threat to those she loved, especially with his leading creation so obsessed with her. Not ignorant to Lamech's goals, her brother could foresee the man's demise if he did not change his ways.

Surprisingly, those presently working with Lamech could not fault his behaviour. Considering past events, they suspected he was only buying time, having surely formed a strategy to get what he so desired.

Still feeling the pains of his infliction, Nathaniel placed a hand on his sister's shoulder. Not wanting to give too much away in front of those he distrusted, he hoped his words would spark to memory what they discussed prior to entering the play.

"Don't take it personally; it's all part of growth. The start of any game feels like a thorn in the side, until it becomes clearer." His sister reflecting his smile, implied she understood. Nathaniel gestured for them to move on, as duty called.

CHAPTER 2

Constructed out of solid rock, the Justech bay appeared more like a massive cavern than the traditional hangar for such technology. The bay incorporated raw steel throughout, seen in the huge scaffoldings, stairs and tubular handrails running the lengths of mesh walkways. Sparks from welders showered metal plate flooring. Lift platforms moved between the five open levels. A mixture of lower and middle-class personnel built and maintained the Justech units, their positions recognised by either dark-blue overalls or white coats.

Justech units stood side by side, lining the walls in blocks. Their front casings detached from the back and held apart by hydraulic rods, allowed technical assessments and entry for law enforcement officers. Gel filled orange padding lined the interior of these units, which moulded around the body to hold an occupant snugly in place. A wide tinted visor covered the eyes and ears for digital displays and communications. Positioned in the top section of the torso, the officer's head rested within the reinforced neck of the machine, where arms and legs partially went into the limbs of the unit.

Made of a stretch woven fabric, the white attire worn by Justech officers consisted of a fitted long-sleeved top with low neckline and elastic waist leggings. Round sensor pads, placed on temples, palms, chest and tops of bare feet, enabled these units to operate as extensions of the officer's own bodies. With assistance, the teams were now ready to board their units.

The hydraulic rods hissed with the release of pressure; both the front and back of the units came together where internal clamps locked them in. A network of ceiling rails ran the length of the hangar, which incorporated pronged grips that clutched units by the shoulders and carried them to a drop area outside the building.

A team consisted of twenty-five Justech units that patrolled a sector, one of hundreds throughout the lower-class area. Positioned in city blocks, all buildings in Carpe Diem stood thirty stories. The brown rock columns with un-shapely rooflines had dirty large glass windows framed in rusted steel, as were double doors at ground level. Most buildings sustained damage in some form or another from either gang wars or Justech pursuits.

A mixture of species, the population owned little possessions, living in cramped conditions with up to three families in one room. Although having a plentiful yet silted water supply, one terminal positioned on a street corner provided an entire block with a pasty food supplement. Daily, the machines manifested small clear containers; however, the terminals never issued enough food to go around, leading to fighting and many going hungry.

Limited transportation had gravel roads a bustle of people on foot

and hand pulled carts with synthetic tyres courtering two passengers or goods. Stolen from middle class districts, motor scooters were driven by gang members and heard before seen. Street corners and alleyways were beggar territories with child pickpockets, black marketers pawning stolen goods and females trading sexual favours for wares.

Known as Sunshine, a drug circulated by gangs and easily obtained, saw many addicts amongst the youths. Penalty for users, eighteen months, suppliers, ten years, repeat offenders, execution on the spot.

Working amongst this, the gifted thought it disgusting and a heart-wrenching task when called to perform their duty. They would rather turn a blind eye to the charitable works of the RC than arrest those who either distributed or accepted the goods. It was another matter when dealing with those associated with gangs, who stole and incited fear amongst the poor. Although the wide streets enabled the Justech units to freely walk their beats, they swiftly became deserted when the units were in pursuit of criminals. By law, an officer was not held responsible for anyone getting in the way of justice; some did not care who got hurt, as long as they got their offender or as in most cases, offenders.

The glare of the sun beat down on the Justech, supposedly in pursuit. Deliberately holding back, Nathaniel directed his unit down a side street, having seen the man rip the red band from his arm, implicating him as an RC member. The man in his forties had not discarded the synthetic sack, which he appeared to be hanging onto for dear life. With the man entering a building, Nathaniel initiated scanners. Visuals came up on his visor in the form of x-rays, enabling him to not only identify the man within the structure, but also the food items in the bundle.

“Lost him,” Nathaniel relayed via communications to those of the team, engaged in pursuit.

“Second floor.” Tegan came back.

“Damn RCs. Jeepers they’re bloody quick.” Nathaniel knew his words would see his sister back off and let the man escape.

With the Justech noisily rising off the ground, Tegan scanned the floors. The man was now on the third where he stopped, turned and looked right in the face of her unit as it hovered outside the large grimy window.

Knowing the officer had seen him, the man clutched the bag to his chest, anticipating the announcement or worse still, the unit coming straight through the window and surrounding wall to arrest him. Surprisingly, the unit turned its back on him and although he did not recognise the number on the large helmet casing, was not about to hang around to question.

Tegan went numb, having not expected Levinski’s unit to be right behind her. She knew if the woman was following procedure, already the officer would be scanning, sparking fears of repercussions that could see her imprisoned.

“Lost him ha?” Levinski’s voice aired a civil tone over Tegan’s earpiece.

“Yes,” Tegan nervously replied with her unit descending to the ground. Not wanting to hang around, she manoeuvred the unit in a different direction; however, Levinski followed. On edge, Tegan now assumed the woman wanted to keep a close eye on her.

The officers had given chase to members of a gang, who attempted to elude the Justechs on motorised scooters. Units made a racket as some ran down the street, where others took to flight to cut off criminals. Yurelese landed his unit, dispersing rounds of bullets from attachments on the arms. The scooter slid on its side along the street, its driver and passenger tumbled on the gravel. Another scooter attempted to pass him, only to have its tyres blow like the first.

“We have four down,” Yurelese conveyed.

“We’re on it,” a male officer replied. “Bag the bastards up.”

“Hey, we have movement.” A female officer was heard. Yurelese was one of five units looking down on the criminals wearing scruffy canvas pants, baggy long sleeved tops and wore jackets with the cuffs rolled up.

Every citizen had a small barcode on the back of their neck. Scanned, all relevant details regarding the person was displayed on a unit’s visor. Embedded in the sides of the helmet plates, external speakers amplified an officer’s voice. Yurelese listened whilst another spoke to an injured criminal, lying in the street.

“Leonard Van Merrin, you are charged with theft, dangerous driving, resisting arrest and violating section 179, 212 and 335 of the legal code. You are a repeat offender and hereby sentence to death.” Without hesitation, the unit dispersed rounds of bullets into the condemned. Moving onto the next law-breaker, the voice was again heard.

“Kristara Alexin, you are charged with resisting arrest, associating with criminals and having the substance SS in your blood stream. You do not have the right to a hearing due to being caught in the act by five officers of the justice department. I hereby sentence you to ten years imprisonment.”

The Justech unit produced a large round disk, taken from the chest plate. Held above the fearful woman, the disk transformed into a transparent cylinder, used to encase the convicted. In the arms of another unit, Kristara Alexin began her flight to prison.

About to resume his duties, Yurelese suddenly heard Tegan’s desperate transmission. Being only a block away, he engaged thrusters and continued to listen into communications between Justechs.

Under attack by a gang pelting rocks, other units fired upon the buildings housing the numerous youths. Although in pursuit of criminals himself, Malcom relayed he was going to break from the group to aid his wife. Another officer demanded he leave it to those on the scene. Caring

nothing for repercussions, Malcom was about to engage flight when he heard Lamech's voice, informing he was heading to Tegan's location. Yurelese sternly responded to his team leader.

"Back off Lamech, I'm on it! Tegan, do you read me?" Yurelese relaxed a little with the woman acknowledging him. In the background, he could hear the sound of the attack on her unit whilst she spoke.

"I have systems offline Yurelese! I can't engage flight and have lost leg mobility."

"Prepare for an emergency lift." Yurelese could now see the unit standing stationary in the street. Annoyed, he wanted to blast those who should have instigated the procedure the moment the call was placed.

From behind, the mechanical arms of Yurelese's unit slid under Tegan's and engaging clamps, he took to flight, raising the crippled Justech with him.

"Sit back and enjoy the ride Tegan." Yurelese now relayed a message to her husband. "Everything's under control Malcom; I'll see her safely back to the bay."

"I'm in your debt Yurelese." Though Malcom felt grateful, trust issues had him eager for the end of the shift.

CHAPTER 3

In a white coat, Ferdell, a mature aged technical officer, finished checking over the compartment of the unit. Holding a clipboard in hand, Ferdell addressed Tegan with Yurelese in attendance.

“The right-side padding is not fastened to the shell. I know you were curious about the technical workings but messing about with these things is not only against regulations, but your life depends on it being fully functional.”

“I didn’t mess with it,” Tegan replied. “I still have those specs you gave me, and as you said, there’s more than enough information to satisfy mere curiosity.”

“Well, someone did. Anyway, this is what caused the problem.” With ease, Ferdell drew back a section of the padding from the interior of the front compartment. “If it’s not adhered properly, the sensors in the padding won’t relay the appropriate commands to the unit. You were lucky the life support sensors weren’t detached, or you would have suffocated.” His sights shifted to Yurelese.

“I want a full investigation; an officer could have been killed today.”

“I totally agree,” Ferdell replied. “I’m sorry Tegan, but until this is sorted, you’re grounded, regulations.” The woman expressing disappointment had him sympathising.

“For how long?” Tegan sighed, thinking to herself, ‘here we go again. Can’t I go through one lousy game without getting into trouble?’

In the couple’s room and dressed in uniforms, Yurelese sat on a stool whilst Tegan angrily paced, airing her thoughts as though the man was a trusted friend.

“I know it was Levinski. She said it wasn’t over. Obviously she’s out to get me, one way or another. Why me? Why always me?” Tegan flumped down on a stool beside Yurelese, who appeared awkward.

“I don’t believe it was her Tegan. I shouldn’t be talking to you about this, but some of us are worried...” Yurelese sighed. “That’s an understatement, we’re on edge.”

“Why?”

“Lamech. We want this alliance, but he works to his own agenda, which unfortunately reflects on the rest of us. Just watch yourself, he’s unpredictable and is not one to give up.”

Thinking Yurelese was trying to warn her, Tegan drew on recollections of her ordeal. Though Lamech had been eager to come to her aid, she doubted he would put her life at risk considering the history between them. Nevertheless, she could not afford to rule Lamech out, as

underestimating him had landed her in trouble before.

“I don’t know; it just seems unlikely he would...”

“He’s still obsessed with you Tegan.” Yurelese paused, again appearing awkward. “I didn’t want to bring this up, but I know what happened between you and Lamech. He gave me recollections; instructed me to pass them onto your brother and others of your team if anything happened to him.” Obviously, he was making Tegan uncomfortable, having noticed she found it difficult to look him in the eyes and was remaining silent. “I’m telling you this for all our sakes. As I said, we want this alliance and we’ll do all we can to prevent Lamech from dividing us.”

Surfacing was the bitter resentment that Tegan left behind in the last play. A promise made to herself came to mind, never would she again let Lamech play her for a fool.

“Don’t worry; he’s not going to get away with anything if I can help it.” Tegan felt a renewing of confidence. “I promise you...”

“I need you to listen to me Tegan,” Yurelese interrupted. Their eyes locked, he had her full attention. “For weeks after the play, Lamech was agitated, distant, unapproachable. I knew why. Malcom, Cathmore and your brother humiliated him. As far as I’m concerned, he got what he deserved. Anyway, I just want you to know you have our support and we’ll do everything in our power to keep him from causing you grief.”

“Thank you,” Tegan replied. “But I don’t think anything is going to deter him.” She sighed frustrated. “To be honest, I wish he hated me. Least that way it would be him ignoring me and speaking to me only when he has too.”

“Don’t fool yourself...” Yurelese shook his head. “It’s never going to happen. He truly believes you love him, especially after, well you know.” Having again embarrassed the woman, he placed a sympathetic hand on her shoulder, prompting eye contact. “I speak his words, not mine Tegan. Trust me, Lamech is convinced you fear Malcom and fear your team rejecting you; hell, he even thinks you fear the players.”

“He can think what he likes,” Tegan aired resentment, “and you can tell him from me; I have no feelings whatsoever for him. Once I valued his friendship, but never will I trust him again. There’s nothing he could say or do to change my opinion of him.”

Sensing Tegan was more relaxed in his presence, Yurelese felt confident of fully gaining her trust.

“I’m glad you feel so strongly about this. What I’m about to say to you, I swear is the truth.” Yurelese paused, seeing no doubt to his integrity in her eyes. “We don’t know what Lamech has planned for this play. I suspect his silence is due to the friendships previously formed and our acceptance of Mariard traditions. For example, Lamech was not behind Anndrosa’s change in appearance and attitude, she did it all of her own accord.”

“I will admit, I did think she conformed out of pressure.”

“Trust me, she didn’t, but that’s not important. Lamech’s not going to give up on you. Just before this play began, there was a night where he was so intoxicated, I had to see him to his room. He rambled on; said he would make you his.”

“That arrogant pig.” Folding her arms across her chest, Tegan seethed with the thought.

“I told him he was wasting his time and to leave you alone, it will only cause division. He said, watch and learn from a master.” Yurelese’s tone now implied reluctance to continue. “There’s more.”

“Don’t hold anything back.” Unfolding her arms, Tegan’s hand came to rest on the man’s shoulder. “I know this must feel like you’re betraying him, but you could be saving us all from trouble.” Watching Yurelese take a deep breath, her expression displayed anxiousness.

“He said, by the time he was finished, you would not only come to him of your own free will, but you would beg him to take you back.”

Glaring in shock, Tegan was momentarily lost for words with loathing and fear clouding her thoughts.

“He’s a fool.” Tegan put on a brave front. “Did he tell you how he was going to achieve such a miracle?” Again, she folded her arms across her chest.

“No, that’s why I ask you to trust me. The team sees Lamech’s obsession as dangerous and we don’t want to go down with him.” Yurelese leant forward, his eyes expressing the seriousness of the matter. “Undoubtedly, the Mariard team is the stronger of the two, so battling it out is futile and a waste of lives. Also, these games don’t make sense Tegan; no longer are we pitted against each other. Our only choice is to amalgamate, see this through for whatever purpose. It’s just unfortunate Lamech has lost sight of what is truly important, after all, he did instigate the alliance to begin with.”

“I’ll speak to my husband and brother about this.”

“They already know.” Yurelese saw a hint of surprise in Tegan’s eyes. “That’s why I told Lamech to back off; I knew Malcom would be frantic with worry.”

“Why didn’t they tell me?” The thought of secrecy annoyed Tegan.

“To take the pressure of you, but more so to catch Lamech out and deal with him before someone gets hurt.” Yurelese’s sights followed Tegan with her rising off the stool.

“So, he thinks I’ll beg does he.” The thought of Lamech’s arrogance continued to stir bitter resentment. “We’ll see about that.”

“Don’t do anything to provoke him Tegan.” Yurelese stood, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“I won’t, but I will make it clear I want nothing to do with him.”

"I better get back. I really don't like the idea of leaving you here alone, but duty calls." Yurelese noticed Tegan looking at him strangely.

"Don't worry about me, I'll be fine." Tegan's tone conveyed distraction. "I'll sneak in a shower before anyone gets back."

"Are you all right?"

"Sorry, I ah, never mind." Tegan glanced away, feeling slightly embarrassed.

"I understand trust has to be established..."

"I'm sorry." Tegan forced a smile. "You are so like Cathmore, especially now your hair is longer." She continued to stare. "Even your mannerisms are the same; it's probably why I feel so comfortable around you."

"You're not the first to mention it." Yurelese forced a smile, not realising Tegan could sense in his signature that this troubled him.

"It bothers you, doesn't it?"

Though Yurelese had not wished to discuss such a sensitive issue, he found Tegan's compassion luring him to open up to her.

"I don't feel an individual as such, if that makes sense." Yurelese continued with her gently nodding. "I can only assume the player so regretted losing Cathmore, he created me as a mere..." Yurelese heaved a sigh, uncomfortable revealing such matters. "I better go." A hand placed on his shoulder stopped him from leaving.

"Listen to me." Tegan sympathised. "It doesn't matter what you look like, it's what's inside that counts." She took her hand away. "I think you're a good man Yurelese and an individual in your own right." Tegan smiled with the thought. "Funny, this feels like the time when Cathmore and I..."

"No wonder he turned." Unintentionally, Yurelese thoughts escape him. "I mean, you have a very caring nature."

"Don't look at it as a bad thing Yurelese. Cathmore paved the way, showed it is possible to truly change one's life for the better. You are an individual, not an inferior replica of my cousin. It's what you were going to say, wasn't it?" Though he momentarily remained silent, Tegan received her answer in the man's awkward expression.

"I really have to go." Not wanting to continue the line of conversation, Yurelese backed away with Tegan having the last word.

"You know where I am if you need to talk, and I mean that sincerely." Able to relate to the man's self-worth issues, Tegan watched Yurelese close the door behind him. Memories of events, having led to her cousin's defection from the Necropolin, prompted ideas of nurturing Yurelese to see him overcome his problems.

The sound of running water echoed the bathroom facility, housing rows of tall grey lockers with low metal benches in between. A mirror and trough ran the length of a wall that saw one hazed with steam, the other,

retaining small blocks of pasty soap, discarded along its base. On the opposite wall, a long urinal was followed by many cubicles enclosing toilets. From the doorway, one could look directly down the aisle to the back wall where twenty or more shower roses protruded from smooth rock incorporating press buttons to engage water.

Ceiling exhaust fans fluttered, scarcely breaking the silence within the area. In front of her locker, Tegan wasted no time getting dressed in her uniform. With her mind elsewhere, her jacket slipped from her fingers to land crumpled at her feet. Picking up the garment, she noticed something dangling from the pocket.

The fine gold chain could not be purchased by either lower or middle-class citizens and to be caught with such an item was a punishable offence. Considering Tegan had entered the facility with her hands in her pockets, she held no doubts that another had placed the item whilst she had been showering.

The thud of the door hitting the jamb further set Tegan on edge. Wrenching the towel from her damp hair, bare footed, she ran towards the exit in hope of catching or even glimpsing the culprit out in the hallway.

Though seeing no one in either direction, the long hallway did run the entire outskirts of the bathroom facility where corners would hide the perpetrator from view. In addition, they could have gone into any number of rooms or left via the stairs or lift at the end of the hallway.

Heading back into the bathroom, Tegan was already blaming Lamech, becoming angry with notions of him having watched her shower and dress. Shuddering in disgust, the urge to strike him had her kicking a locker. With the chain in hand, she thought to throw it away; better still, give it back to him in bits. Drawing a deep breath, it dawned on her that the item was evidence, inspiring Tegan to collect her belongings and head back to her room.

Seeing her friend on the monitor brought joy to Rebecca's busy day. Hopeful of a chat, she excused herself for a moment, removing the white wig to reveal her mousy brown hair, drawn back in a bun. Seated, her black robe was evident of her having been in court. Again, looking to the monitor, Tegan's expression told Rebecca this was no social call.

"Sorry to bother you at work," Tegan said, "but I was wondering if you could check something for me."

"Sure, but are you all right?" Rebecca wished she were there in person, not halfway across the facility.

"It's a long story and by the looks of things, you're busy."

"Yes, it never ends. Just case after case and the backlog is ridiculous. I cannot believe they call this justice; it's not justice at all. There was this case, an RC member distributing what they call propaganda leaflets. Five weeks he spent in prison awaiting trial; yesterday, he was found dead. His case was

supposed to be heard this morning.” Rebecca sighed disheartened. “If you ask me, the Necropolin is behind this barbaric system.” Pausing a moment, she realised she had become side-tracked by her own frustrations. “Sorry Tegan, what can I help you with?” Rebecca knew that look. Her story had stirred both compassion and resentment in her friend.

“I need a number traced, a gold chain.” Tegan now read from the stamped code on the small clasp. “6, T, 1, 5 OMS.”

“Is this a stolen item?” Rebecca was already typing in the numbers on another terminal beside her.

“No, catalogue. I want to know who ordered it.”

“This can’t possibly be right.” Rebecca double-checked. “Oh Tegan.” The information on her monitor brought dread. “If this is correct, Lamech ordered it and the chain is pure gold. He has not only ordered it from an upper-class catalogue but changed the codes to appear as an Emor citizen.”

Yurelese’s warning ran through Tegan’s mind, spurring fears of the consequences, especially as the item was in her possession.

“Oh jeepers; if he gets caught...”

“Death penalty, simple as that. Get rid of it Tegan. If you’re caught with such merchandise...”

“Say no more. And please, keep this to yourself. No, tell Cathmore, but no one else. Thanks for your help.”

“Please be careful Tegan.” Now fearing for her friend, Rebecca had all intentions of discussing the matter with her husband and as soon as possible.

CHAPTER 4

With the shift change, the Justech bay was a bustle of activity. Anxiously, Tegan waited on the walkway whilst a crane placed the unit into position. Her sights lowered, having been fixed on the numbers, stamped in black, on the helmet plate. The moment the rods forced the front open, Tegan leant in, before the officer could get out. Although her anger was evident, she spoke discreetly.

“You listen to me Lamech and you listen good.” Grasping his hand, Tegan slapped the chain into his palm. “What you’ve done could see both of rot in prison for the duration of this play. Just keep away from me; I want nothing to do with you.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Annoyed, Lamech came forward, leaving Tegan no option than to step back. “This is not mine, why give it to me?” He held his hand open to her.

“I’m sick of your childish games. I know you watched me in the bathroom and put that in my jacket pocket. I have proof you ordered it from an upper-class catalogue. I suggest you get rid of it. I’m warning you, if it’s trouble you want, then trouble you’ll get.” Turning to walk away, Tegan felt Lamech’s hand grasp her arm.

“Now you can listen to me. I have been on duty all afternoon and I resent being accused of something I didn’t do. I’m insulted you’d think I’d stoop so low to sneak around a bathroom and invade your privacy. If I wanted to give you a gift, I certainly wouldn’t drop it in your pocket, and it would have been gems not flimsy metal. Obviously, you don’t know me as well as you think you do.”

“You’re lying and I can prove it.” Wrenching her arm from his hand, Tegan heard her brother’s voice from behind.

“What is going on here?” Nathaniel disliked the look of this.

“Tell your sister where I’ve been all afternoon.” Defensively, Lamech folded his arms across his chest.

“On duty, why?” Nathaniel knew this to be a fact.

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that. I have proof he ordered a gold chain from an Emor catalogue and while I was showering, he placed it in my jacket pocket.” Tegan shifted her sights to Lamech. “You’ve even changed the codes on your terminal; evidently you intend...” Her brother interrupted.

“I suggest we talk about this in my quarters.” Nathaniel glanced about, hoping they had not drawn attention.

“I agree.” Knowing he was innocent, Lamech wished to clear his name. “I’ll get changed.” Disgruntled, Lamech walked off. Nathaniel addressed his sister.

“You should have come to me first, not approached him on your own.”

“He’s trouble and you know it.”

“Tell me about this proof you have.”

Informed of the evidence, Nathaniel had to get changed into his uniform before investigating Lamech’s terminal. He instructed his sister to go directly to her room and wait for him there.

Whilst walking up the hallway, Levinski called out the woman’s name, prompting her to a halt. Evident in Tegan’s body language, she reluctantly turned to face her.

“I just want to say, sorry for not coming to your aid earlier.” Levinski expressed an awkward sincerity. Pleasantly surprised by the apology, Tegan relaxed.

“Don’t worry about it. You were occupied with the offenders.”

“I heard someone messed with your unit.”

“Yes.” Tegan sighed, frustrated.

“Don’t worry, it won’t happen again. We take care of troublemakers around here.” Levinski aired agitation, seeing it as a serious offence.

“Thanks for your support.” Tegan was unsure what to make of Levinski’s remark.

“I want to talk to you about another matter, but firstly, we need to get one thing straight.” Levinski fixed eyes on the woman. “If you make an issue out of it, it will be your word against mine, and you will definitely come off second best.”

“Say what’s on your mind.” Tegan folded her arm across her chest, anticipating making threats of her own if the woman was out to make trouble for her.

“You intentionally let that man escape.” Levinski sparked uneasiness, seen in Tegan’s eyes. “You know the one I’m talking about.”

“What are you going to do about it? It will be my word against yours.”

“I’m not going to do anything, as long as you don’t say anything if you see me do it.” Levinski raised a brow.

Though remaining cautious, Tegan suspected Levinski of being an RC supporter, which stirred a change of perspective.

“Considering I’m now grounded, perhaps you could suggest something to keep me occupied. I also know a few others who need an outlet other than work.”

Relying on her gut instincts, Levinski silently admitted to herself that she may have misjudged the group, having previously thought them obnoxious prudes and not worth the time befriending.

“I think I can come up with something,” Levinski replied. “It could entail getting your hands dirty.”

“I’m definitely not scared of getting my hands dirty, but how dirty

will depend on how much you're willing to trust me."

"No hard feeling about..."

"No, and I'm sorry if I hurt you." Tegan relaxed, relieved that tensions between them appeared to be easing.

"You're one hell of a fighter, but don't get me wrong; I still think you're as fluffy as a powder puff." Levinski cocked a grin.

"Sorry, I don't understand."

"Feminine, soft; well, not physically, but in other ways."

"Is it so bad I have respect for myself and those around me?"

"It's a luxury the women in the lower classes can't afford." Resentful, implanted memories had Levinski venting. "Try trading your body for food, you soon lose all self-respect. Trust me; the price of survival is your mind, body and soul."

Perceiving Levinski was talking from experience, Tegan's compassion for the woman, and those she referred to, incited the airing of her opinions on the subject.

"I couldn't do it." Tegan shook her head. "I think it's disgusting how they're forced to live. The law stinks. Fancy executing people for stealing food to feed their children and hunt those who try to help. It's, it's barbaric." Tegan's loathing of the system had her forgetting her place. "I hate the way the rich feed off the poor, making laws to keep them in poverty and fear. Jeepers, what were the players thinking to come up with such a cruel game." Disillusioned, she sighed, becoming distant in thought.

Tegan's passionate attitude so touched Levinski, her gut instincts pressed her to take a risk and trust a woman she scarcely knew.

"The RC is made up of people who think like you do." Levinski had drawn Tegan's eyes to her. "They're also willing to make sacrifices no matter what the dangers. It's a tough battle; sometimes I think it's a losing one at that. Luckily, we don't give up, but there are times we run purely on hope, hope that things will change." Allowing herself to be recognised as an RC member had Levinski feeling vulnerable.

"What do they need?" Having forgotten her own problems, Tegan was eager to get involved.

"Access to your terminal codes."

"What else?" Tegan knew the reason behind the request.

"It will be enough for now."

"No, there has to be more we can do." Beyond the woman, Tegan caught sight of Lamech and Nathaniel coming down the hallway. With her brother appearing most agitated, she discreetly added. "You can count on five terminals." Tegan forced an uneasy smile.

"We can talk some more later." Levinski glanced behind her. Although perceiving trouble and leaving her curious, she slowly moved on.

Within Nathaniel's room, three stood tense in front of the monitor,

watching and listening to a concerned friend.

"I'm sorry Tegan," Rebecca said, "but I checked it several times to be certain. According to the data, Lamech's terminal received the item, but you ordered it."

"I'm telling you I did no such thing!" Her friend's silence provoked Tegan to snarl at Lamech. "I see what's going on here; you're setting me up." Her accusation saw Lamech defensive.

"I could say the same thing about you, but let's not jump to conclusions." Knowing himself to be innocent, Tegan's attitude towards him was the least of Lamech's concerns. Having convinced himself that his very existence relied on the teams amalgamating, any threat to this happening was cause for alarm.

Though believing Lamech was the culprit, Nathaniel wanted solid evidence against the man. He directed his words at both parties to appear unbiased.

"We all need to keep a level head about this. For all we know, this may be someone else's doing." Nathaniel placed his hands on the bench, leaning towards the monitor to speak with Rebecca. "It doesn't make sense. The codes have not changed on either terminal."

"There is the possibility that a duplicate access card was used; it is how the RC obtain goods."

"So, this could be the work of the RC?" Nathaniel began to doubt his own judgment in the situation.

"No." Rebecca shook her head. "Different numbers, which distinguishes them from black marketers and cannot be traced. In addition, the RC will not involve non-members in their activities." She was suddenly distracted. "Hold on a moment. Triligen just came in. She wants a word." Rebecca stood to allow Triligen to take her position at the monitor.

"I will have to make this brief Nathaniel; I am due back in court." Her team leader nodded, prompting Triligen to continue. "The case pertaining to Tegan's Justech unit was handed over to internal investigations. The culprit will be charged with fraud, damage to government property, intent of grievous bodily harm." Triligen's concerns were visible in her blue eyes and enchanting features. "They suspect a forged identification card, allowing access to the unit. They have not ruled out Tegan all together due to her curiosity; however, she is not their prime suspect."

"Do they have any idea who did it?"

"They have several suspects, yet only circumstantial evidence at this stage." Triligen hesitated, knowing a certain man was in the room with her friends. "Lamech is on their list for investigation. Apparently, there is racketeering amongst officers, whom deal in forged access cards and stolen property." She saw Nathaniel straighten. Although Triligen wanted to stay, she stood to let Rebecca take her place at the monitor.

"I knew it!" Tegan angrily glared. Rebecca responded before she could have ago at Lamech.

"Don't be too hasty Tegan. Criminals implicate Justech officers all the time, especially when under interrogation." Ignored, Rebecca witnessed her friend sternly address Lamech.

"Evidently the alliance has lost its appeal. What's your plan; see us all in prison for the duration of the play?"

"I swear I didn't tamper with your unit," Lamech protested, "or order anything illegal!" His sights remained fixed on the woman whilst pleading earnestly with her. "You know I care about you, and no matter our differences, I would certainly not want you or any other member thrown into that prison hellhole."

"You're capable of anything Lamech!" Tegan's animosity towards the man saw her cold and insensitive to his feelings. Her brother drew Lamech's sights to him.

"You don't exactly have a good track record, so naturally..."

"You want proof," Lamech blurted, "connect with me! I'll open my mind to you, give you everything to date." Both men intensely stared at one another.

Perceiving rash judgment on his behalf, Nathaniel became uneasy. Not only did he think the invitation an act of desperation to prove innocence, but also could sense such feelings within the man's energy signature.

"Go back to your room Tegan," Nathaniel said. "Malcom will be off duty shortly." Running his hand through dark lengthy waves, he already anticipated his sister's response.

"You're going to connect with him, aren't you?" Sensing her brother's doubts rose feelings of betrayal.

"Yes. I will not judge him guilty according to circumstantial evidence. Remember Tegan, we assume a person innocent until proven guilty. I'm not changing my beliefs for this system."

"I swear to you Tegan..." Lamech's eyes pleaded. "I have done nothing wrong, and I will prove it, one way or another." He sighed frustrated with her storming off.

Within the couple's room, Tegan stood between her husband and Yurelese, whom expressed disapproval over matters regarding Lamech. Angrily, Malcom snarled his thoughts.

"I'll reduce him to a figurine! Your team can then decide what to do with him."

"Don't be too hasty Malcom," Yurelese replied. "I have this bad feeling he was counting on Nathaniel taking him up on his offer."

"What do you mean?" Tegan got in first. "He's guilty, we all know that."

"This may be true, but I suspect another is doing his dirty work."

Offering up his recollection would prove his innocence and stir reluctance to blame him should other problems arise.”

“I hear what you’re saying.” Annoyed, Malcom sighed. “But who else in your team would help him?”

“My guess would be Uropa. She too has an unhealthy obsession.” Yurelese noted Malcom raising a brow of interest. “You have to remember; the team consists of old and new members. I can personally guarantee that Cranen and Aurora would not do anything to jeopardise the alliance.”

“What about Anndrosa?” Tegan disliked the woman, presuming the feeling was mutual.

“No, she definitely wouldn’t help him. If the truth be known, she still holds a grudge against him for taking her position and throwing her in prison. During the year off, I witnessed many arguments between them, which usually ended in her demanding he stay away from you, and stop causing trouble for the rest of us.”

“He’s definitely up to something.” Tegan felt her husband’s arm slip around her shoulders. “And as usual, I’ll end up the one in trouble and then everyone will suffer.” Most disillusioned, her husband attempted to reassure her.

“He’s got to get past me first, and besides, you’re not responsible for what he does.”

“Listen to him Tegan,” Yurelese added. “We band together on this and keep him away from you. We do have one problem though...” He sighed. “You’re grounded. We’ll have to work something out; you can’t be alone while we’re on duty.”

“I’ll just lock myself in the room, find something...” Tegan paused briefly in thought. “I just remembered; Levinski is working with the RC.”

“How do you know that?” Malcom and Yurelese exchanged glances; caution rose in both men considering earlier hostility between the two women.

“Nathanial and I were chasing an RC member. We made it look good, but I didn’t know she was right behind me when I let him escape; she saw everything.” Uneasiness was noticed in her husband’s eyes. “Don’t worry, we talked about it; she basically admitted her involvement. She wants to use our terminals to get items for the poor.”

“What did you say?” Malcom assumed his wife had been a little too trusting for his liking.

“I said yes.”

“Oh Tegan...” Malcom sighed.

“She spoke like she’d personally experienced the hardship and shame of a lower-class citizen. They may only be implanted memories, but it gives her reason to loath this system and fight for a worthy cause.”

Again, Tegan’s passion to help others had her disregarding her own

problems. Not ignorant to the realism of implanted life histories, although Tegan pitied Levinski, she confidently believed she would rather lose all her lives than lower herself to such despicable depths.

“We have to do something,” Tegan glanced at both men before settling her sights on her husband. “It’s obvious we’re here to help the RC, not the rich or their legalistic system.”

“I’d agree with you there,” Malcom replied, though more concerned for his wife and the situation at hand. “But listen; just don’t go jumping into this.” He looked to Yurelese.

“I think it’s best we observe Levinski for a time; for all we know she could be policing us.”

“I didn’t think of that,” Tegan said, yet silently remained confident the woman had spoken the truth.

Conversation ended with Yamane playing messenger for her husband. The moment the two women were alone, Tegan prodded her sister-in-law for information. All Yamane would say was that her husband appeared most disillusioned and Lamech had gone back to his room.

During the connection of minds, Nathaniel had found no evidence to prove Lamech guilty of misconduct or any interaction with other members to do his dirty work. Undoubtedly, Lamech retained deep feelings for his sister, yet again found no indication that the man intended anything other than to regain Tegan’s friendship by civil means.

“How far back did you go?” Yurelese asked Nathaniel, standing centrally between the three men.

“From his entry into play. I’m sorry, but there is no evidence whatsoever to support the accusations against him.” Nathaniel shifted his sights to his annoyed brother-in-law.

“He’s playing us. He had a whole year to plan this.”

“That might be so,” Nathaniel replied, “but personally, I think he is innocent of any wrong doing.”

Appearing uncomfortable, Yurelese added his thoughts.

“I hate to be the one to bring this up, but do you think Tegan might have taken matters into her own hands and...”

“You’ve got to be joking!” Malcom took offence. “She might hate him, but she’s not vindictive.”

“Sorry, I just...”

“Speak your mind Yurelese.” Nathaniel wanted all opinions aired so as not to be accused of being biased in the situation.

“It’s just something Tegan said to me earlier.” Yurelese avoided looking at Malcom. “Considering her ordeal, I felt led to warn her about Lamech.”

“What was her response?” Nathaniel now feared where this was leading.

“I would prefer to give you the memory. Least that way you can draw your own conclusions.” Accepted was the invitation to connect with his mind.

The down light above Lamech’s bed cast little illumination over his room. With his hands tucked behind his head, Lamech lay staring upward, looking at nothing in particular. Accusations against him spurred his analysing of events, wanting to find anything that would not only prove his innocence beyond a doubt, but also find the true culprit.

During the last play, information collected by team members gave Lamech further insight into Tegan’s talents. According to Cranen, Nathaniel had bragged that his sister once disassembled an interceptor and rebuilt it for something to do. Training and education were secondary to perfecting her flight and engineering skills. To avoid reprimands, she concealed her interests and activities from the Priestess, who thought her weak and incompetent.

Considering Tegan as a prime suspect, Lamech recalled having personally witnessed her fascination with Justech units and other technologies within the facility. She not only had the expertise to safely sabotage her unit, but also conceal her involvement. In addition, evidence proved she ordered the chain and suggested she either made or had access to a duplicate card.

Undeterred by hurt feelings, Lamech found himself defending Tegan. Their affair in the last play had him in denial of her dislike of him, assuming Malcom and others were pressuring her to prove her loyalty. In his opinion, Tegan’s attempts to discredit him had failed, having only brought attention to unresolved issues between the teams. With such antics posing a threat to the alliance, he left his room with notions of alleviating tensions.

Investigating the commotion, the three men found Yamane standing in the doorway between Tegan and Lamech, whom were loudly arguing. Preventing a brawl, Nathaniel hauled his angry brother-in-law into the couple’s room where Yurelese escorted his team leader back to the man’s quarters.

“Just calm down,” Nathaniel snarled, his stern sights taking in both his brother-in-law and sister. “That goes for you too.”

“He’s setting me up and you know it,” Tegan snapped back.

“Is he, or have you taken matters into your own hands?” Nathaniel’s volume lowered with his sister glaring speechless at him. “I found no evidence to implicate him Tegan, none whatsoever. On the other hand, Yurelese holds your admission to hating him and threatening to take matters into your own hands. You said if he wants trouble, he’ll get it.”

Feeling betrayed, Tegan would shed tears if not held back by her anger. She spoke through clenched teeth.

“I don’t believe this. My own brother is collecting evidence against me; evidence that could see me imprisoned.” Her tense sights shifted to

address her husband. "Have you sided against me too?"

"No. Not at all." Drawing his wife into a comforting embrace to reassure her, Malcom confronted his brother-in-law. "You listen to me. Lamech is a conniving manipulating slag..."

"There is no need for such language."

"Fine, I'll just rip his head off instead."

"This is not getting us any..." Nathaniel sighed with Malcom speaking over him.

"Unlike you, I'm not going to dismiss what Yurelese said. Uropa has a motive and I refuse to stand back and let either of them frame my wife."

"There is no proof!" Frustration got the better of Nathaniel.

"Are you really that naive? You know the man's obsessed with her. Once again he's playing the victim to gain sympathy and causing us to fight amongst ourselves." Malcom now addressed his wife. "I don't care what anyone says, I'm proud of you for standing up for yourself and especially for not allowing him to take advantage of you."

"Least someone still has faith in me." Defensively, Tegan folded her arms across her chest. Her brother responded.

"I will not be accused of taking sides by you or anyone else. All the evidence will be taken into consideration and I mean all. What if you are wrong? What if someone else is..." Nathaniel briefly paused, before thinking aloud. "Yurelese said Uropa had an obsession of her own." His sights returned to his sister. "Perhaps she is pitting you and Lamech against each other. Whether she is technically capable of sabotaging a unit and..." His brother-in-law interrupted him.

"She's capable all right. She's not exactly keen on the alliance either."

"For goodness sakes." Tegan's sights wandered between both men. "Lamech prides himself on manipulating others. We all know what he's after, and as usual, part of his conniving schemes includes getting me into trouble." She slightly shook her head. "No, Uropa is being used; if anything, she's acting on his instructions. This was all pre-planned and just like he did in the last play, he's not going to let you see anything incriminating."

Retaining a gut feeling that Lamech was innocent, Nathaniel assumed there no point airing his thoughts considering the attitudes of both his sister and brother-in-law. Unable to comprehend the uneasiness within his essence, he shrugged it off as anxiety, having not expected trouble so early in the play.

Irritated by Lamech's pacing, Yurelese told his team leader to sit down. Ignored, he knew Lamech's anger had been brought about by Tegan's refusal to hear the man out. Having listened to his team leader's grievances, Yurelese responded.

"I don't know what to believe any more. I'm sorry to say, but you both look guilty." Yurelese stiffened with Lamech's outburst.

"So now you doubt my integrity! I trusted you and only you with

recollections of my most intimate moments with her. It offends me you even think I would risk her life or see her incarcerated in that hellhole.”

“You have to face it Lamech, Tegan never loved you; she’s also made it blatantly clear she wants nothing to do with you. Don’t you see? Your feelings blind you to the greater power.”

“I’m blind to nothing! If you took the time to study your opponent’s you’d learn what drives them and their weaknesses.” Lamech began to calm his tone. “Without me, Tegan will never come to her full potential; I know her better than she knows herself. Trust me, I see her fear, rejection, lack of confidence and her desire to be nurtured and loved. She is kept bound by the Mariard and that husband of hers.” His expression relaxed whilst describing Tegan with an air of admiration. “You should have seen her when we were together. She found the strength and confidence to stand up to their self-righteousness and judgmental ways.”

“You’re in denial Lamech.” Yurelese saw the tension again rise in his team leader’s eyes with his candidness. “Your time with Tegan was nothing more than you playing on her insecurities, it would not have lasted. Sooner or later, she would have renounced you.” His team leader’s silence prompted Yurelese to risk the man’s favourable regard. “Personally, I think you underestimate her. You perceive her weak; are trying to mould her character to reflect your own. Even if you had succeeded, you would never have what Malcom does. He accepts her for who she is and allows her to grow at her own pace. He knows his wife is not weak and yes, he may guide her, but he does it out of love, not control or manipulation.”

Seriously pondering Yurelese’s words, Lamech slowly sat down on the edge of his bed. After a few moments, he calmly spoke his thoughts.

“I didn’t do what Tegan accused me of. Considering what you’ve said, I now have no doubts she’s behind this.”

“Let’s say for a moment she is. Doesn’t this tell you, her dislike of you is serious enough to see you disgraced, even imprisoned? Believe me Lamech, without solid evidence; it’s not looking good for you.”

Thoughts of his own team turning against him, again, provoked Lamech to anger.

“Why, why would you believe her over me?” Lamech rose to his feet, staring sternly into the member’s eyes.

“Simply because she is...” Yurelese paused, appearing taken back by his own thoughts. “I’m sorry for doubting you. Of course no one would suspect her. We wouldn’t think her capable of such malice, but she is. Her anger towards Malcom drove her into your bed.”

“Exactly.” Lamech felt relieved, perceiving an ally at last.

“She’s stronger than you give her credit for. Who knows how far she’ll go to discredit you?” Yurelese paused, appearing awkward. “She may intend to see you out of the games all together.” His team leader’s expression

implied he had shaken Lamech. “For your own sake, give up any notions of making her yours; you’re only fooling yourself and she could destroy you in your pursuits of this.”

The moment of silence had Lamech contemplating what had been said. He sighed whilst thinking aloud.

“She’s a prize all right.” Lamech again made eye contact with Yurelese. “But destroy me; no.” He slightly shook his head. “Not only do I believe her incapable of such vindictiveness, but I wouldn’t let it happen.”

Not what he wanted to hear, Yurelese’s disappointment aired his agitated response.

“I’m telling you now; stay away from her Lamech, don’t even attempt to resolve this with her. Concentrate on re-establishing trust; least if Tegan persists in this, sooner or later she will expose herself.”

“You might be right.” Lamech continued to seriously ponder Yurelese’s advice.

During their year off, fear and resentment had Yurelese disapproving of Lamech’s obsession to see Malcom dead and have all that belonged to him. A patient man, his team leader intended to regain Tegan’s trust, whilst keeping his distance. Unconvinced, Yurelese began a campaign against the man. Information collected from members and personally scrutinising past plays gave Yurelese a greater understanding into their opponents, more so than Lamech himself. Keeping his theories from other members, the facts inspired him to dig further.

Having successfully incited Lamech to believe Tegan the perpetrator, Yurelese and a select few had counted on his ego to press the issue and seek to clear his name. Naturally, Tegan had to partly appear guilty to spur him on, yet with her newfound courage to stand up to him, the woman was making their task easier.