

Mariard
Volume 6
The Round Table

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Mariard Volume 6 The Round Table
book 6 of 10 Volumes.
Nothing is what it seems, take nothing for granted.

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CHAPTER 1

Soggy from drizzle, the roar and clash of battle sounded ominous over the open fields, bordering Penkawr, the dark Lord Kilhwch's domain. King Branwen had sent his army and finest Knights into the countryside to stop his enemy from taking the Welshaire village. Splattered with blood, the chest plate of Nathaniel's polished armour bore an emblem of three maned and clawed beasts. Until recently, the gifted were ignorant to the bronze design, symbolic of an animal that the pawns of this board called a lion. Also incorporating this insignia was the flag, three golden lions on a white background, which lay near the dead flag bearer's feet. A Knight of Branwen's court snatched it up out of the mud, tossing the pole to another Knight riding past on his dappled-grey horse; the cold winds again saw it fluttering.

The troll stood a good foot taller than Nathaniel's five eleven height. Its greyish green skin hugged gangling limbs whilst its ribcage protruded over a sunken stomach giving the impression the creature suffered malnutrition. Large eyes bulged within hollow sockets, exposing little whites with the size of the black pupils glaring as the sword was pulled from its chest. Dropping to the ground, the troll released its last breath through animalistic teeth.

Nathaniel turned to attack another; however, was pounced on and thrust into the mud. The long, clawed fingers of the troll left scratch marks across the polished metal of his shoulder plate. A dark haired, towering Hargan sliced the creature across the back, before it could bring down the wooden club riddled with metal spikes and take a life from his comrade. The outstretched hand aided Nathaniel onto his feet and back-to-back, the two gifted men fought on amongst Branwen's enemies.

At day's end, the area was a vast field of death. Welshaire horsemen went about the task of silencing groaning trolls, their bodies left to rot, as a reminder to Lord Kilhwch that they were again undefeated. Though the wounded were many, the death toll was minimal considering the number of creatures under Kilhwch's spell, whom used nothing more than battle-axes and clubs. Weaponry used by Branwen's soldiers and commoners alike saw arrows, spears, swords, axes, horses, mangonels, trebuchet and even pitchforks. None of the twenty Knights of King Branwen's Round Table had been lost to him, seven of which were gifted and held in high regard. No one questioned that the seven men did not have strong accents or use the dialect as they did; to their King and fellow countrymen, the gifted were Welshaire to the bone.

Deserted were the rural lands; the war between the two kingdoms had seen shire folk leave their humble dwellings of stone and shingle, having

also forced families to separate. Men took up arms whilst the women and children moved on to find refuge in neighbouring communities. In the valley on the outskirts of the village, the large tents gave shelter from the rain falling from the black night sky, shrouding the white and red glow of the large Mariard and Necropolin moons.

Having been in the new testing for almost a week, the seven gifted men had again come together in the one tent for discussion. All wore knee length tunics in natural fibres, woollen stockings and tanned hide boots. The alloy wristbands enabled the manifesting of medieval armour and weaponry with a mere thought. Although the bands were not new to them, surprisingly, their King and the other Knights of the Round Table also had this ability.

Standing behind his seated brother, Cathmore's blonde locks hung damp around his shoulders. Though cold and hungry, these were the least of his concerns. Retaining the dirt and blood from the day's events, Cathmore's hands radiated a soft blue aura. His energy was healing the gash on Yurelese's shoulder blade; a wound received in battle. Having been a year since the brothers last saw each other, their close relationship drove Cathmore's concerns for his brother's safety in the new testing, which was already proving to be a challenge.

They fought for a King they had not met, a King who under his roof and protection provided for the gifted women. Mindful communication with certain members kept them well informed. Implanted thoughts had the King and his brotherhood believing the gifted men were Knights of the Round Table and nobles with authority.

Being treated very well, Yamane had conveyed they were served by ladies-in-waiting. The King's guards protected not only them, but also family members associated with the Knights, residing in the grand castle fortress. No amount of preparation stopped Malcom and the other men from stressing over their belief that Tegan would again open doors within the testing. Yamane wished to ease their minds by praising her sister-in-law for her conscious effort to work as a team. Unless accompanied by another, Tegan would not even leave her chamber.

Considering the men's position, Yamane withheld her sister-in-law's depression and fears of opening such doors. Yurelese was congratulated for his coaching, having shared his insight into the paths saw Anndrosa and Aurora's attitude and actions most favourable. The two women had become Tegan's personal bodyguards, being constantly on alert for negative energy signatures.

Both puzzled, Yurelese and Cranen were uneasy as to why the Necropolin player had not replaced Lamech. Hargan agreed with Nathaniel, having said it was early days and anything could happen. Yothue thought he and Malcom were examples of this, having acquired their gifting within a testing.

Information conveyed during the second connection with the women had the men nervous and even more eager to return. Whilst on a tour of the community, within the walls of the kingdom, Triligen and Yamane learnt of a strange ailment the locals called soul sickness. A kitchen hand took the two women to her humble dwelling, where they examined her eighteen-year-old son, having fallen victim months earlier.

They knew this to be only a mindfully implanted timeline, as were the rest of the board's history, spanning generations. According to the woman, dense woodlands, once known as Sherbrooke Forest, had supplied the castle fortress with timber, herbs and meat from wild beasts. Renamed Dead Man's Land and believed cursed, the woodlands were now off limits. Visible from the castle, this vast forest area was a twenty-minute horse ride from the massive gates. Though people were quick to give their version of the story, Triligen had sensed the King was hiding something and was reluctant to speak of it. She did not mention to anyone that she also felt the man's deep emotional pain relating to what the King withheld.

According to sources within the castle, Branwen's wife had died a few years earlier from a strange illness. At the time, Avalon, the King's counsellor, was held to blame and fled into the forest fearing Richard Branwen's wrath. Known as a mystic, the powerful sorcerer was perceived by villagers and nobles alike to be immortal, due to his old age. Having not been seen since the Queen's death, Avalon was thought to be the instigator of the soul sickness, emerging thereafter.

When men began disappearing within the forest, fear gripped the people, especially as days later, a loved one would wander out, less their mind and voice. Referred to as the living dead, victims spent their days just silently gazing, having no emotional responses, not even to pain. Once the King realised that the soul sickness hailed from the forest, he sent in soldiers, who to this day had not returned. After doing this several times, in fear of losing more men, Richard declared the forest forbidden lands.

Curiosity drove Yamane to question the white crosses, painted above doorways of dwellings. Her lady-in-waiting conveyed it was to ward off the shadows of death. These black apparitions appeared shortly after Branwen declared the forest off limits; they came every so often to take menfolk. Having a male form, these eerie shadows were perceived to be the tortured souls of those having been taken. Their reverberating groaning had even the most courageous men, quivering in their boots.

Yurelese enquired of Uropa's behaviour, suspecting she still held a grudge against Tegan. His concerns remained, even after lengthy discussions during the year off. Triligen agreed with him, having sensed an underlying animosity. Keeping much to herself, Uropa earned some credibility for at least being civil. The Necropolin member had voiced her disapproval of their

accommodation, due to lack of power and comforts. In Uropa's opinion, the test board and its pawns were primitive.

Having draped a thick woven blanket around his shoulders, Malcom clutched the fabric around his throat to keep warm. Undeterred by the cold night air, he stood in the tents entrance, preoccupied by his thoughts. Being the eldest of the gifted, the physical and emotional strain had him feeling fifty instead of his thirty-five years. Trolls were bloodthirsty, inflicting horrendous injuries with their axes and clubs. Also viewing the board as primitive, his gut churned with their lack of knowledge regarding medicine. He witnessed grotesque amputations, which he believed avoidable and nothing less than barbaric. Seeing such carnage made him grateful that his son was safe on the Mariard. Some of the young men, having fallen in battle, were not much older than Simon. According to others of the Round Table, it was every boy's dream to be a Knight in shining armour and fight for their King.

Malcom's thoughts shifted, recalling the recent information provide by Yamane. The gallery housing the legendary Round Table was off limits to women. A servant's description of the table convinced her that it was a combat disk, matching the size and order of bronze and chrome rings. According to the source, the name of each Knight was engraved in the table's outer ring, designating seating. It was thought odd that only the King and his Knights of the Round Table had wristbands to manifest armour and weapons. Others in Branwen's army wore chain mail with natural fibre garments, similar to their own and used weapons forged by blacksmiths.

To take his mind off war, Malcom pictured his wife. Sighing anxiously, he so missed Tegan, it pained him. Closing his eyes, he imagined stroking her long dark curls whilst looking into radiant blue eyes. He could almost taste her lips the image was so realistic within his thoughts.

Having lost himself in his own imagination, Malcom came back to reality with the rowdy male voices, emanating from surrounding tents. Although the men were invited to join the Knights, he and others did not want to participate in drinking session, which already had many drunk and rambling. His thoughts returned to his wife, but this time, anxiousness crept on him. Assuming another restless night, he would not relax until he was back with her.

From the onset of the testing, Malcom had been eager to return to the castle, be at his wife's side. Tegan would not have him leave the others, pressing upon him that all had a part to play. Pleased she was staying close to family members; he was not ignorant that she was putting on a brave face.

Prior to the testing, Tegan insisted they not single her out and watch over her as though untrustworthy. Cathmore agreed with his cousin, having made comment to Malcom that if they continued to focus on Tegan's path, it could see them fail in their own. Triligen added, as other paths were yet to

be revealed, without the combination of all, it could lead to an extension of the testings, even failing each other and cause disunity.

Malcom's thoughts were interrupted with Cranen coming up alongside him. The Necropolin member was a little shorter, blonde with boyish features.

"Yurelese is one lucky man," Cranen said.

"All fixed then?" Malcom tightened his grasp on the blanket, his green eyes looking out at nothing in particular.

"Yes. Cathmore's giving him a lecture." Cranen smiled with the thought.

"Best if he listens too. Cathmore trained with a sword..."

"Unlike us." Cranen referred to implanted training.

"No disrespect intended."

"None taken. I wouldn't mind a few tips myself; they say you are the best." Cranen followed Malcom's sights with the man not answering.

The two men observed the silhouette of a man on horseback, riding amongst the tents towards theirs. The flickering flames of a fire, one of many around the camp, lit up the King's messenger, who on dismounting, reached into his saddlebag.

CHAPTER 2

Exposed timber beams formed the cathedral ceiling of the large dining hall, which remained somewhat chilly though a fire roared in the huge hearth at the back of the room. Weapons of war adorned the stone wall above the fireplace, tarnished by smoke. Flags hung from sturdy poles wedged into rafters and draping high above wooden trestle tables. Burning torches on the walls lit up, not only the area, but also the armed guards standing watch over the guests.

The Queen's high-backed chair was left vacant beside the King's. Richard Branwen sat centre at the long table, one of several positioned to leave an area clear for entertainment, speeches and dancing. Premature were the grey strands within Richard's trimmed copper beard and lengthy hair, making him appear older than his thirty-six years. His stocky build slouched at the table. Draping off his shoulder, the purple robe revealed a white, mid-calf tunic with simplistic embroidery around the neckline. Victory had prompted the celebration and again his goblet was filled with ale, a beverage he frequently indulged in. Richard relaxed with the assumption that Lord Kilhwch's losses would see him quiet, until such time he had recuperated his forces.

Having taken up arms against him, Kilhwch had once been Branwen's friend and a Knight of the Round Table. Welshaire subjects believed Kilhwch wanted power and Richard's throne for himself, but this was not the case. The dispute was personal and only the King knew the truth. Branwen toasted the victory, but in thought it was not a win over an enemy as such. Both he and Kilhwch were deceived, yet to speak the truth and free the man from a hardened heart, would see both men and the woman they had loved, dishonoured.

Minstrels played music whilst the guests, a collective of the Knight's families and friends, ate and drank. Seated at the King's table, Tegan and Rebecca stared repulsively at the stuffed animal laid out on a platter, especially with other guests pulling chunks from it.

Anndrosa watched the two women, studying other's behaviour. She perceived to know what was going on in their minds and grinned amused. Those already drunk laughed and conversed whilst servants topped up goblets with wine and passed trays of additional foods between guests. Much to Anndrosa's dislike, the headdress of material, held in place by a thick ribbon, covered her shoulder-length red hair. In addition, she felt most uncomfortable in the full-length dress and shoes. She knew both the twins, Uropa and Liona, also disliked the attire. Uropa's refusal to wear a headdress made her a talking point, due to her short, blue, spiked hair. Liona on the

other hand had conformed to fit in with the others and where she usually wore her shabby blue hair loose, Triligen had set it in a braid for her.

Aurora thought the garb simple but appealing, especially as she was catching the attention of men. Eager to see Cathmore's reaction, she had compared herself to the man's wife. Though acknowledging that Rebecca was pretty, she believed she outshone the woman in looks. Both women had long straight hair; Rebecca's mousy brown, Aurora's blonde. Without admitting it, Aurora did tend to compete with Rebecca, attempting to outdo the woman in appearance.

During their year off, Yurelese conversed with Aurora, having made it quite clear that she was to drop any foolish notions of having relations with his brother. Considering Lamech had given him insight into the woman's fantasies, Aurora resorted to lying, trying to convince him she had once been infatuated with the man, yet it was no longer the case. Although Aurora regretted it later, she tried to divert attention away from herself by uttering her concerns for Rebecca; perceiving Cathmore appeared more interested in Tegan's wellbeing and actions than his own wife's.

Yurelese laughed off what Aurora insinuated, telling her that Cathmore's interest was merely due to their cousin's path. Everyone was concerned for Tegan, especially considering the affect it had on all the gifted. He did admit that both he and Cathmore felt protective of Tegan. Not only was she their cousin but had also influenced both of them towards the truth, which had them both feeling indebted to her.

Having taken the matter up with another, it only assured Yurelese and Anndrosa of Aurora's feelings for Cathmore, having attempted to shift the focus off herself. Anndrosa confronted Aurora, warning her to keep her sour views to herself as they did not need division. She was to drop any notions of seducing Cathmore, stating the man was a devoted husband and father. Without realising it, Aurora's insinuations had planted seeds of doubt within both Yurelese and Anndrosa's minds, which stirred again with the onset of the testing.

Yamane's shoulder-length black hair with bronze highlights was covered by off-white material draping around her neck. Her golden-brown eyes and dark olive complexion made her stand out amongst women of ivory skin. Implanted thoughts had guests believing that Sir Nathaniel Maroda married the woman during his travels to the Middle East. In addition, Nathaniel was responsible for bringing back the strapping Knight, known to them as Yothue, along with his wife from the Asianic islands.

Uncomfortable was Triligen's dress, as the excess pearl skin of her arms was hidden in tight sleeves. Flattering comments that Asianic women were very beautiful implied no one would question her species in the testing. Both she and Yamane were deep in conversation with Sir Gwain's mother, who for a time, bragged about her son's loyalty to the King.

Barely five feet tall, Mortice, in her late fifties, appeared frail, yet vocally, sounded full of life. Mortice's youngest son was inflicted with the soul sickness; her eldest, Sir Gwain, sort revenge on Avalon, perceiving the sorcerer the culprit. Though sceptical, Mortice would allow the two women to visit, admiring their interest in the ailment. She asked if Yamane had knowledge of herbal remedies, as not many were learned in the art. Dabbling in it herself, Mortice was proud of her plant collection. Yamane smiled at Triligen, who knew her friend had already tapped into the information within her mind and was now an expert in this field of herbal medicine.

Changing the subject, Mortice questioned Tegan's health, looking to the end of the table at the woman, who remained silent and nervous. Prior to the testing, Triligen sensed Tegan was suffering from depression and anxiety. Seeing right through Tegan's brave front, Triligen knew her friend to be fretting for her husband and growing more anxious by the day. She asked Mortice why she asked, as if it was so noticeable to the woman, it might be noticeable to others.

"She lacks colour in her cheeks and has barely eaten a thing." Mortice studied Tegan's features. "I believe she is with child. Tell her to come see me. I can give her a tea; it will help her with the morning illness and make her sleep better at night." She caught Yamane gesturing to Triligen that this was not the case. "You disagree Yamane? I would be interested in hearing your opinion regarding the woman's ailment."

"Lady Tegan frets whenever her husband is away." Yamane thought this an acceptable explanation.

"If this be the case, she should definitely come see me." Mortice aired concern. "Such stress is not good. I never thought her such a timid and insecure creature."

"Good heavens no," Triligen said, in defence of her friend. Again, Mortice thought her original diagnosis correct.

"Just tell her to come see me. We will sort it out either way." Mortice forced a smile, before her attention shifted to another woman, who diverted the conversation to the Knights homecoming.

Candles and flames in the fireplace lit the spacious chamber of the King's champion. A shield bearing the "Turcar coat of arms" hung above a thick wooden mantelpiece. Having stoked the fire, the young chambermaid bid her mistress goodnight. She curtsied to Yamane, entering the room. The bedchamber, being much the same as her own, had carved timber furnishings and though classed as noble fittings, were humble in comparison to what the gifted were accustomed to on the Mariard.

Shadows and corners of darkness set Tegan's nerves on edge, which again would keep her from sleep. Already dressed for bed in a baggy cotton nightgown, Tegan warmed herself in front of the fire; her superficial smile greeted her sister-in-law, joining her.

“You did not eat much at the banquet.” Yamane was eager to put her doubts to rest, wanting to examine her friend.

“I had some fruit and bread.” Tegan wished not to say outright that the place lacked etiquette.

“Tegan, I don’t want to alarm you, but would you mind if I examined you?” Yamane anticipated the look of dread.

“Oh please, tell me you’re not looking for that soul sickness thing.” The thought had Tegan anticipating opening a door to trouble.

“No, you have nothing to worry about there; besides, it only affects men. Mortice thinks you’re pregnant.” Yamane raised her hand, gesturing to let her finish. “I don’t believe you are, but I just want to be sure.” She looked into her sister-in-law’s anxious eyes, awaiting reassurance.

Her hand radiating an aura, glided over Tegan’s abdomen. Shaking her head, Yamane’s smile was much to her sister-in-law’s relief.

“I didn’t think you were.” Yamane guided Tegan to the couple’s bed, where both sat down. “I’m afraid your anxiety has become noticeable to others.” Her sister-in-law’s downcast eyes had Yamane sympathetic and guiding locks of curls over the woman’s shoulder.

“What do you expect when I’m the doorway to hell?” The thought alone scared Tegan, whose fingers began fidgeting with a draw string on her nightgown.

“We all talked about this. Staying together should give you peace of mind. Besides, the fighting is out there, not in the fortress; you are safe here.”

“Nowhere is safe. I really thought I could do this; until the game, testing, started.” Now flustered, Tegan sighed, sinking deeper into depression. “To be honest, I’m terrified to do anything. And with the men away...”

“You heard Richard; they are on their way back.” Yamane placed her hand on top of her sister-in-law’s, sensing a troubled disposition within Tegan’s energy signature.

“I know, but they are still four days away. I wish I could connect with Cathmore...”

“Don’t you mean Malcom?” Yamane thought this odd.

“How I wish. No, it’s just that Cathmore’s been teaching me this relaxation technique...”

“Oh yes.” Yamane smiled. “I remember, sorry.”

“I just can’t seem to concentrate. It’s easier...”

“With the men present; it makes you feel safer.” Yamane rubbed the back of her sister-in-law’s shoulders. She too would feel better with the men present.

“Nathanial was right.” Tegan stared at the wooden floor. “Ignorance was bliss.”

“You should not hide yourself away. For all we know, even doing nothing might be a door to a challenge.” A glance from her sister-in-law informed Yamane she had made matters worse. “I can only imagine how hard this is for you, but you are not alone, we all support you, even those of the other team.”

“I have to admit, you’re right there.” Tegan almost smiled with the thought. “Anndrosa said I’m more a challenge now than when we were enemies.”

“She wants to grow. You are an example of what can be achieved. Mind you, she is not impressed with us here doing nothing and the men out fighting.”

“I agree with her. I’d rather be at Malcom’s side than...” Tegan paused with the thought, presuming she would just get him into some sort of trouble.

“Don’t do this to yourself; it will drive you insane. When the men get back, we will definitely have to discuss this.” Yamane spoke with good intentions to follow through.

“We could always ask Richard to lock me up in the tower for the duration of the testing.” Tegan glanced, yet with her sister-in-law frowning, her focus remained on Yamane. “I was only joking.”

“No you weren’t.” Yamane sighed, further concerned for her sister-in-law’s state of mind. “And your husband would not allow it.”

“Don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine. I would like to stay in my room as much as possible though.” Tegan merely wanted to alleviate her sister-in-law’s concerns. “As Nathaniel said, in the end we’ll overcome anything put in front of us.”

“And he is right, so you remember this. He also told you, no matter what happens, we will never forsake you.” Yamane smiled. Giving her sister-in-law a hug, she bid Tegan good night.

CHAPTER 3

With dawn a few hours away, the fire was little more than red embers in the hearth. Having slept restlessly, Tegan abruptly awoke due to the commotion out in the passageway. With bare feet on cold floor, she had not even made it to the door before it burst open. In night gowns, Rebecca, Anndrosa and Uropa rushed in with tense expressions.

“What’s happening?” Tegan glared alarmed, noting guards outside the door with swords and shields in hand.

“The castle is under attack.” Anndrosa grasped Tegan’s arm, quickly guiding the woman back towards the fireplace. She was not the only one fearing that Tegan might be a target, Rebecca and Uropa grouped around the woman, ready to defend her if this be the case.

“Lord Kilhwch?” Tegan asked, feeling a sense of terror. Having no idea, Anndrosa just shook her head, prompting Tegan to continue. “We should arm ourselves.”

“Wait.” Rebecca did not want them doing anything rash. “We should not expose our gifting or other skills if we can help it.” Glancing over faces, although there were nods of agreement, Uropa’s expression implied she resented this. Not ignorant of Uropa’s dislike of her friend made Rebecca nervous.

On hearing the eerie sounds, Tegan stiffened. She fought the temptation to draw on her gifting, staring wide eyed as guards frantically waved their swords. Several backed into the room whilst others were forced down the passageway. Numerous black shadows, vaguely resembling male form, flew into the chamber. With them swooping on the guards, Rebecca forced Tegan to the floor. A multitude of unintelligible whispers drowned out the man’s voice, who tried to get another’s attention with the shadows moving above the women.

Snatched up and hurled across the chamber, though the bed broke Rebecca’s fall, she rolled off the other side and onto the floor. Shoving Anndrosa aside, Uropa threw herself on top of Tegan, who suddenly felt the woman’s weight shift off her. Two shadows grasped the woman by the shoulders, hauling a kicking and yelling Uropa upwards. Another swooped on Anndrosa and thrusting her aside, prevented further intervention.

The windows within the stone arch suddenly burst open, cracking the glass within the frames. Some shadows remained whilst others vacated the chamber with Uropa, who was not the only one carted away. Seeing Tegan spring to her feet, Anndrosa yelled the woman’s name with the black apparition passing clear through her. The impact slammed Tegan into the solid wardrobe where she dropped limp to the floor.

With shadows vacating through walls, two guards raced to the windows to watch the black formation heading in the direction of the forest. Unable to see the six men or the woman, they assumed the victims were shrouded by the blackness of the shadows. Additional guards entered the chamber, where more accompanied their King and others, whom were almost upon the room.

Both Anndrosa and Rebecca knelt beside Tegan. The woman lay unconscious on the floor with a nasty bump to her forehead. They thought nothing of the fine black ash covering the woman's nightgown and skin, seen also on themselves and guard's weapons and shields. The attack had left them all shaken. Not openly admitting it, Anndrosa was relieved that Uropa was abducted and not Tegan. With her nod, two men carefully lifted Tegan onto the bed.

Rousing twenty minutes later, Tegan appeared vague; understandable after such a knock to the head. In their nightwear, the gifted women surrounded the bed. Richard Branwen stood with them; his expression most serious on tired features. Rebecca and Triligen aided their friend to sit up.

"Are you alright?" Rebecca asked. After a long pause, Tegan nodded. Yamane wished to examine her sister-in-law, who raised her hand, gesturing not to fuss.

"I'm alright." Tegan aired calm. She did not look at Branwen with him addressing her.

"I am most grateful you were spared permanent injury. We were attacked by the shadows of Avalon. Twenty in all were taken."

"They took Uropa." Anndrosa added, only glancing at Branwen. The King remained dumfounded by the abduction of a female.

"As I said before, never has Avalon taken a woman." Branwen sighed, lost to know what to do about Uropa. Already, he was anticipating Sir Hargan's response to his sister-in-law's abduction.

"Your majesty." Anndrosa drew the man's focus. "Send a dispatch with a message to Yurelese and Nathaniel informing..."

"It will be done immediately. I will also have this mess promptly cleaned up." Branwen glanced uneasy over the women's faces. He left the chamber, stopping out in the passageway to speak with one of the guards.

Again, Yamane asked her sister-in-law if she were alright. Noting Tegan remained distant, she thought this probably due to the woman silently suffering a headache.

"Yes." Tegan's expression remained unchanged.

Triligen believed her friend was already wallowing in guilt and putting on a brave face in front of others.

"You cannot blame yourself for this." Triligen's sights were drawn to Aurora.

"I don't want to cause alarm, but considering her path, you don't think the shadows took the wrong..." Aurora paused, having caught Anndrosa's intense gaze, gesturing to be silent. Although it crossed all the women's minds that this may be the case, they did not want Tegan under any more pressure than she already was.

"I suggest we return to our rooms," Anndrosa said. "Get some sleep. It won't be long till dawn."

"I agree." Rebecca nodded, now addressing Tegan. "You can stay with me until..."

"I'd prefer to stay here; if you don't mind." Tegan's eyes remained downcast. "I'm alright, really I am. Thanks for the offer." She went silent with her sights fixed on the floor.

The women glanced between each other. Unconvinced, they all thought this just a brave front. Rebecca did not like the idea of leaving her friend alone yet would not push the issue and again addressed Tegan.

"If you need anything, I am just next door." Rebecca slowly moved out with the rest of the women, closing the door behind her.

Moving up the passageway a little, an agitated Anndrosa pulled Yamane up. This prompted all the women to gather.

"This is just a façade. She's not alright, far from it."

"I agree with you." Yamane's concerns for her sister-in-law escalated.

"If she does a runner, I swear I'll hunt her down and lock her in the tower." Anndrosa's remark had Rebecca defensive.

"There is no need to talk like that. I am confident Tegan will..."

"I don't care if you think it disrespectful. We all know how she works; she doesn't open doors; she goes straight through them. Once the damage is done, she runs off to..." Triligen interrupted her.

"You have made your point Anndrosa. Both Nathaniel and Malcom had extensive talks with her prior to the testing. No matter what happens, she promised to stay with the team."

"That might be so, but since when has she listened to reason." Anndrosa's sights shifted to Aurora.

"I think you're worrying needlessly; she's more scared than we are. Apparently Cathmore is confident she will think twice before acting on her own, so Yurelese said."

"And he is right." Yamane spoke up. "Tegan learnt much from the last testing, she now fears separation from the team. She will not even leave her room unless one of us is at her side. I believe she will come good once the men return."

"Let's hope you're right." Anndrosa retained her doubts. Disgruntled, Liona drew attention to herself.

"Why are we so concerned about her? They have taken my sister!" Her sights remained on Anndrosa.

“Because once they find out they have the wrong person...” Anndrosa sighed, having revealed her thoughts on the issue. Aurora continued for her.

“They will be back; besides, Tegan is worth more to these testings than Uropa.” She saw Yamane shaking her head in disagreement.

“No one is above another.” Yamane glanced over faces. “Liona is right.” She raised her hand, gesturing to let her finish. “I appreciate your concerns for Tegan, but Uropa’s abduction is a priority.”

“Thank you,” Liona replied, folding her arms across her chest, assuming she an ally. “I know you dislike my sister, but she has been trying.” Her sights shifted to Triligen.

“Which is much appreciated. Branwen will not ignore this Liona. We will do all we can to liberate Uropa.” Triligen placed her hand on the woman’s back, guiding her down the passageway. Yamane addressed Anndrosa.

“I take it you will attempt to connect with her.”

“I didn’t want to say anything in front of Liona, but I can’t feel her energy signature.” Anndrosa anticipated the thought behind Yamane’s expression. “It’s not what you think, I felt no loss of life. I suspect it has something to do with those shadow creatures.” She looked to Aurora.

“Some unknown interference, like what occurred with the Femaliens.” Aurora had also attempted to sense Uropa’s gifting. “I suggest we do nothing until the men return.”

“I agree,” Anndrosa replied, more concerned for Tegan’s safety than Uropa’s, who she would not miss if the member were never found.

CHAPTER 4

For days Tegan had confined herself to the bed chamber. Although none wanted to see the woman shut off as such, it did make it easier on those close to her. They perceived Tegan to be holding to her promise to work as a team and not go off alone in an attempt to rescue Uropa.

Having refused to let her guard down, Anndrosa kept a close eye on both Tegan and the woman's chamber. She was not the only one troubled, as all attempts to connect with the kidnapped member were in vain. It appeared Uropa herself was blocking, using an unknown technique. Surprisingly, Uropa no longer attempted to hide or divert her energy, which had it emanating from the heart of the forest, Avalon's territory.

Both Anndrosa and Aurora had sensed strength in Uropa's energy, leading them to suspect another's influence. Notions of Avalon being Lamech's replacement had them edgy, as he may pose a threat to the alliance. Not wishing to alarm Tegan, they kept this to themselves.

Branwen was delighted to see his Knights. Surprisingly, Sir Yurelese expressed more concern for Uropa's wellbeing than Sir Hargan did. The King had forbidden entry into the forest, having assumed that like others before her, Uropa would walk out once Avalon was finished with her. Though to date, a woman had not been taken, it concerned him that she may return with the soul sickness.

Malcom had been on edge since receiving the dispatch from the castle regarding the abduction. Like all concerned, he too assumed Tegan blamed herself and would feel obligated to rescue Uropa. Having ridden ahead of the others, he met Yamane and Triligen on the castle steps; what he feared, they confirmed. Ignoring the request to meet with Branwen, Malcom went directly to the couple's chamber. Determined to have privacy, he locked the door, wanting to assess for himself his wife's state of mind.

Without feeling was Tegan's embrace. His wife appeared so distant and reserved, Malcom dreaded where this could lead. Attempts to draw out her thoughts and feelings met with shrugs or simplistic answers. Continually staring at the floor, she also did not respond to his touch.

By the end of the afternoon, Malcom was convinced that his wife was on the verge of a breakdown. In addition to the uncertainty of her path causing anxiety, Uropa's abduction would surely be driving terror of her being snatched away from the team. Assuming his wife had been the initial target, he could foresee the return of the shadows.

Snuggled together on their bed, Malcom's hand gently rubbed his wife's shoulder as she lay in his arms. Although tired from the journey and the time spent trying to make sense of all this, he wished to seek a solution.

“I don’t want you taking this the wrong way, but I think you should sit this one out. I’ll be with you. I’ll resign my commission; I’m sure the others will agree. And I don’t want you thinking you’re letting down the team. I promised to protect you and protect you I will. You might open doors, but it doesn’t mean you or any of us have to go through them.”

“I’ll do whatever you ask of me.” Tegan’s tone aired depression. “I’m glad you’re back. I feel so much safer now.”

Unconvinced, Malcom felt his presence made no difference to Tegan’s state of mind. Determined to see her through this had him ready to defy both Branwen and the gifted to protect his wife.

“I’m not going to let anything happen to you that I promise.” Malcom tightened his hold on Tegan.

Noisy was the dining hall with the gathering of family and friends in celebration of the Knights return. Many stood in groups with goblets in hand, the conversation centred around the attack on the castle. The men sought reason to why Avalon had now taken a woman, fearing for the safety of others.

With Aurora at his side, Yurelese stood talking with Sir Gwain. He sought additional information on Avalon, as what Anndrosa informed, regarding her suspicions of a new member had him also concerned. Whilst in conversation, Yurelese noticed Tegan staring. Following her gaze led to his brother, who caught her looking at him. Cathmore pleasantly smiled before turning back to the conversation he was having with Branwen and Nathaniel.

Aurora observed what held Yurelese’s attention. Cathmore again glanced, yet this time, he appeared confused as to why his cousin continued to stare at him. Two men now headed towards the same woman.

“Are you alright?” Cathmore discreetly asked Tegan, his presence having drawn Malcom’s attention.

“I can’t see myself getting used to this, can you?” Malcom referred to the lack of etiquette and indulgence in ale.

“You forget I was brought up with this manner of dining.” Cathmore glanced, noting his cousin looking towards the floor, either deep in thought or terribly bored. Not wanting to draw attention to her, he made eye contact with his brother. Yurelese’s expression implied that he too suspected something was wrong; however, his brother just responded to the conversation at hand.

“Thank goodness it’s not like this anymore. I’m actually surprised Anndrosa and Hargan haven’t joined in. Their behaviour is most commendable.” Yurelese looked to his cousin with her speaking up.

“If you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll retire.” Awkwardly she glanced at Cathmore, before setting her sights on her husband.

"I'll come with you." Malcom aired a little concern, placing his arm around his wife's shoulders. "Just give me a moment and..." His wife interrupted him.

"No. You stay. Richard wouldn't appreciate his..." Tegan hesitated, before continuing. "Champion, leaving early. I'm just tired that's all." Forcing a smile, she pecked her husband on the cheek and walked away.

Yurelese watched his brother and Malcom focus on each other. Both appeared most troubled and Cathmore aired his thoughts.

"I don't like this. She's so withdrawn. She's only been out of the room little over an hour and...." Malcom interrupted him.

"She's locking herself away. I suspect it's her idea of protecting us." Malcom sighed disheartened. "Least she didn't..."

"Run away." Aurora cut him short, which saw Malcom offended.

"I was going to say go after Uropa. Tegan doesn't run away; she does things out of thoughts and feelings for others." Malcom's sights shifted to Cathmore, who also annoyed, addressed Aurora.

"If this is your opinion of Tegan, I suggest you take a long hard look at what she's already endured throughout the testings. It crushes her to see any of us hurt; including you and the others."

"I'm sorry." Aurora expressed embarrassment. "I didn't mean it the way it sounded. It's just; Tegan takes matters into her own hands and considering past events..." She hesitated, now seeking to bring others into it, to draw the heat off herself. "I'm not the only one who fears she will do it again, go it alone I mean. Anndrosa and Liona..." Aurora diverted her eyes with Cathmore's cold tone.

"Surely you're not that blind. Does Tegan look like she's about to go it alone? She's so depressed she's shutting herself away." His brother lent in.

"Take it easy Cathmore." Yurelese did not want them drawing attention, yet his brother bit back.

"I suggest you talk to your team; obviously, they lack confidence in Tegan. This alone is detrimental."

"You listen here Cathmore." Yurelese pointed a stern finger, annoyed by his brother's tone. "There's no need for this attitude. You talk as though we're divided over this. I've spent a bloody year encouraging freedom of expression and being oneself. How do you expect them to trust us if you're jumping down their throats? Don't you want them being open and honest about their feelings in this?" His sights shifted to Malcom, who jumped in before Cathmore could respond.

"You're right Yurelese, there's no need for tension between us. As Yothue said, there really aren't any teams anymore." Malcom now addressed Aurora. "I'm sorry for my defensiveness. Of course, everyone's worried about Tegan, and I do very much appreciate the way you women have looked out for her in our absence." He was about to excuse himself to go be with

his wife when a male servant discreetly drew his attention to Nathaniel, who wished to speak with him.

Cathmore sighed frustrated. Not ready to apologise, though feeling he should, he left the dining hall. Yurelese had a good idea where his brother was going. Aurora spoke her mind.

“Chasing after Tegan again I see. I think Malcom should...”

“You listen here.” Yurelese glared angrily, assuming Aurora was going to imply that the two should not be left alone together. “We have already gone over this. There’s nothing going on between Cathmore and Tegan.” He glanced about, hoping no one had overheard him.

In truth, Aurora was jealous that Tegan was again the centre of attention. If Yurelese had allowed her to finish, he would not be angry with her. She was only going to suggest that Malcom take time out from the King’s service to be with his wife.

“Yurelese.” Aurora grasped his arm, as he went to walk away from her. “I think you have me all wrong.”

“I don’t think so. I’d keep that jealousy under control if I was you, people could get hurt.” Yurelese pulled free. It was no surprise to Aurora that he too left the dining hall.

Standing in a bed-robe by the fire, Tegan had called to enter. With her sights on him, Cathmore unintentionally left the door ajar.

“We need to talk Tegan.” Cathmore approached. “I can’t sit back and watch you do this to yourself.” He paused, feeling uncomfortable with his cousin just staring at him. Her vague expression was troubling, thinking his cousin’s depressive state worse than first thought. “We’re not going to let you lock yourself away in here and....”

“I can’t do this anymore Cathmore.” Tegan’s tone reflected her unchanged expression. She took a step forward to stand toe to toe. “Living a lie, feeling guilty for my own thoughts and feelings.”

“You don’t have to. Let me help you. We can...” Cathmore’s eyes widened with his cousin leaning in and kissing him on the lips. Drawing back, he glared dumbfounded.

“Can you help me with that?”

“I ah...” Lost for word, a shocked Cathmore momentarily diverted his eyes.

“I love you Cathmore, I always have. I believe you feel the same for me.” Tegan slipped her hands around his back, kissing him hard on the lips.

Cathmore grasped his cousin’s arms to force her off him, yet Tegan tightened her hold. Suddenly hearing his brother’s voice sent him numb. Yurelese stood in the doorway, infuriated by the sight.

“I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes. How could you do this to Rebecca and Malcom?” Yurelese closed the door, moving closer in.

"It's not what you think!" Cathmore glared in dread. Tegan moved between the two men, responding in a calm almost listless tone.

"I'm sorry you had to find out like this, but for the sake of the others, you mustn't tell."

"Oh no. I'm not going to say a word, you two are. Both of you will come clean and pray they will forgive you." Yurelese focused on Tegan, intending to see them follow through.

"It is not Cathmore's fault. I love him Yurelese; always have, even before he turned to the Mariard." Tegan's confession had her cousin glaring speechless. "For all our sakes, forget what you have seen here, or you will divide us all."

"You're asking me to lie and deceive those close to us." Yurelese agonised over the situation. "I won't do it." He looked past his cousin to his brother. With his back to them, Cathmore rested his hands on the mantelpiece, his body language implied shame. In Yurelese's opinion, this was a sure sign of guilt, thinking his brother hid his face to conceal the truth of his feelings for Tegan.

Overwhelmed and trying to make sense of it all, Cathmore dreaded Malcom's reaction if he learnt of this. His friend would not only be devastated, but he could see Malcom attacking him in a fit of rage. He could not grasp the concept. Tegan could not have possibly hid it from him or Malcom all this time, guilt surely would have had her slipping up somewhere along the line. Perhaps he did miss the signs and Malcom was just too in love with his wife to even suspect it. He knew his cousin well enough to know that Tegan was not confessing such feeling for the sake of attention or to get back at her husband if they had had a quarrel, which to his knowledge was not the case.

Perceiving the two were having an affair, how long this had been going on, Yurelese dreaded to think. Riled, he knew if he did not leave, he could see himself striking his own brother.

"I'll have no part of this, and I certainly won't lie for you." Storming out of the room, Yurelese walked straight into Aurora. The woman had obviously been listening at the door, which he closed behind him.

"Oh Yurelese," Aurora said discreetly, expressing fear of repercussions. "What are you going to do?" Grasped by the arm, she was hastily led towards her chamber. Yurelese wished to take this up with her in private.

Having slung the brown cloak round her shoulders, Tegan squatted to pull her shoes out from under the bed. Cathmore stood over his cousin with nerves on edge; evidently, she was going to run.

"There's no need for this Tegan, we can sort it out."

"I'm sorry Cathmore, I want to be with you, but I know it's not possible." Tegan slipped her feet into simplistic, animal-hide shoes.

“Listen to me Tegan. I know you don’t mean any of this. The path has you...”

“Being true to myself.” Tegan’s hand slid under his blond locks drawing him into a kiss. For just a moment, Cathmore stayed with it; however, knowing he did not feel the same, quickly pulled away.

“I’m sorry Tegan; I love Rebecca with all my heart. There’s no other for me.” Considering the circumstances, his cousin’s blue eyes appeared so void of emotion, he found himself questioning. It occurred to him that she may not be responsible for her actions, yet felt he needed a second opinion. “Tegan, I want you to stay here until I get back. I’m going to get Triligen. We can talk this out privately before....”

“I’m leaving Cathmore. I can’t stay here; I’ll only cause you pain.” Tegan’s sedate tone reassured her cousin of his suspicions.

“You’re not going anywhere Tegan.” Cathmore grasped her arm, now beginning to panic.

“You know how I feel about you. I can no longer bear to watch you with Rebecca. I’ve already done this for too many years. I’m sorry, but I thought you felt the same for me.” Tegan pulled free and ran towards the door. Cathmore retained his stance, at a loss to know what to do. He assumed that with everyone downstairs, to go get help, would see his cousin get a head start on them.

Sprinting down the passageway, Cathmore turned at the top of the stairs on hearing his brother call out to him.

“She’s running away, isn’t she?” Yurelese dreaded the consequences. His brother’s expression implied he was agonising over the situation. “Don’t do this Cathmore!” He hoped his brother would see sense.

“I’m going after her!” Cathmore continued down the stairs. Yurelese did not give Aurora a glance, though she was right behind him. He felt he had no choice but to bring the team into it.