

Mariard
Volume 1
The Gifting

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Mariard Volume 1 The Gifting is book 1 of 10 Volumes.
Nothing is what it seems, take nothing for granted.

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Dedicated to my father and brother.
Watch over me until we meet again in Paradise.

PROLOGUE

The full moon's glare penetrated the glass panes of the balcony doors to the castle's largest bedchamber. Flickering flames burned strongly in the stone hearth, casting shadows throughout the room. White ceilings with decorative cornices were partially discoloured from smoke, where the walls in sage green hid the build-up. Thick candles set on cast-iron stands dripped wax on the mantelpiece and were merely a personal preference to solar powered lighting.

Lace drapes adorned the four-poster double bed in carved oak where the young queen lay in labour, her cries shattering the silence. Wet with sweat, Sestina's petite figure briefly relaxed between contractions. A cool cloth felt soothing on her ivory complexion, administered by the priestess, who sat on the edge of the bed beside her. Artemis's slender fingers brushed strands of damp copper hair, having come free from the queen's lengthy braids.

Although Artemis appeared as youthful as her patient of twenty-one years, the priestess's hands revealed otherwise. Her serene features expressed compassion, cleverly masking a cold, self-controlled nature. Befitting an eminent status, Artemis's white attire hid her tall, shapely figure. The long apron, draping a simple lined, lengthy garment, bore large, silver, embroidered symbols down the right-hand side. A chrome headband, housing a centred, blue gem, secured the wimple and none but her personal aide knew the colour and length of her hair.

The imperial history book had a number of chapters dedicated to Artemis with the woman being an authoritative figure within the royal household. It was written that she had placed kings on thrones, delivered their heirs and retained without question, the position of personal adviser to the king and his council. The religious system of this vast kingdom was based on an unseen higher consciousness, which Artemis claimed to receive instruction from. Revered as the sacred voice of the Mariard, no one doubted the priestess's integrity.

"Artemis!" Sestina grasped the cuff of the priestess's sleeve, leaving a damp impression on the fine cotton.

"Hush my dear," Artemis replied with clear diction. "Your husband has been called. Rest now, your time draws near." Taking the queen's dainty hand in hers, Artemis looked steadily into Sestina's glaring eyes as her patient again cried out in pain.

The opening of the chamber door diverted the priestess's attention. On seeing the young man, Artemis stood, watching king Tayo Maroda drop

his lengthy, earthen coloured cloak over a chair. Being a perfectionist, she noticed his dark, lengthy curls loosely strung back in a ponytail and the sweat stains on his frilled shirt, evidence of his haste; she would excuse his carelessness considering the circumstances. Anxiously, Tayo positioned himself at Sestina's side.

With the king expressing his love for his wife, Artemis contemplated the man's character. The priestess thought him a king worthy to lead the Mariard regime in a new direction, which would also see her own plans fulfilled. She cared nothing that Tayo would soon feel the pains of loss, aware of the many emotions that he, and those of the kingdom had yet to experience. Insight into the new era had Artemis mentally reeling off a verse from her own prophetic writings, foretelling this event.

A great evil will be born to the royal household. Woe be to the mind, body, and essence, as this evil will spread to pollute all flesh.

Despite her sense of delight, Artemis's expression remained unchanged. The birth of the king's heirs would set her on a path to obtain a greater power, but she would have to be patient. A sensation emanating from the queen prompted her to gesture to the king, it was time.

Tayo ran a hand through his hair, drawing it away from striking, boyish features. His radiant, blue eyes revealed his feelings of frustration and helplessness whilst standing beside the bed. Retaining his wife's hand in his, Sestina cried out, heightening his emotional conflict. He knew where this was leading and spoke up.

"Is there nothing we can do?" Tayo begged, the tears welling in his eyes. Artemis's silence, he somewhat expected, being not one to repeat instructions or her words. According to the priestess, the royal seed was corrupt and had been for many generations. Undoubtedly, he trusted her, grieving him that his heir would see the prophecy fulfilled. The tranquil world they knew and lived in was about to change.

Having urged the king aside, Artemis's flesh radiated a glistening, blue aura. The phenomenon steadily intensified, as she began chanting in a language known only to the priestess. Perceiving to have seen and heard this before, Tayo expressed no fear. Although having shielded his tired eyes from the glare, the sudden silence sent Tayo numb and looking to his wife. Sestina was not breathing.

As easily as submerging her hands into a bowl of water, the priestess penetrated his wife's abdomen. Disturbed by the sight, Tayo buried his face into the bed drapes. Wailing drew back his attention.

Wrapping the babe in a cloth, Artemis analysed the tiny facial features. Her smile hid her true thoughts.

"You have a daughter king Tayo Maroda." Artemis placed the babe in the man's arms and watched his expression. The father was in awe; nonetheless, this would soon change, for her work was not yet finished.

Briefly closing his eyes, Tayo gave thanks to the Mariard and laid his daughter in a prepared crib. Having never experienced the feelings of grief, he found it overwhelming, leaving him speechless and confused. Reminding himself of a foretold future stopped him from breaking down in the presence of company. The uncertain times would call for sacrifices to be made for the good of all and as king, he must endure his share.

Again, the priestess submerged her hands into the body of his wife. Tayo tried to centre his attention on his daughter, yet the wailing drew him to shift his sights to Artemis. Additional emotions surfaced within him, triggering recollections of conversations he had supposedly had with Artemis, who now held his son, the one she prophesied as a great evil. Another recollection came to mind, believing he had suggested that they dispose of the monster at birth; Artemis assured him this was not the answer. It would transfer the boy's very gifting to his sister, creating a greater evil than already predicted. His confidence in Artemis prompted faith of a future victory for the Mariard and its people. Her raising the boy inspired hopes that her influence would see the child have a less destructive impact on the kingdom.

Tayo could barely contain his pain with Sestina's body radiating a bright blue aura. Reaching out to his wife's fading form, Artemis grasped his wrist.

"Do not touch her. She is being called. One returns to the Mariard in their purest form." Artemis released her grip.

The strain reflected in Tayo's features as his beloved Sestina diminished with the light. On the ruffled, damp bedding, a small, blue, glass bead caught his eye. Before he could reach for it, the priestess had it in her hand. Unnerved that the bead was visible to Tayo, Artemis awkwardly smiled. Assuming this would not be a common occurrence, she handed it to him.

"Consider it a very special gift from the Mariard." Artemis's expression implied that this was a privilege. Tayo held the bead tightly; he would always keep it on his person, a reminder of his wife and their sacrifice.

Artemis's touch sent the newborns to sleep within their cribs beside the bed. She sensed Tayo's discomfort and confusion, watching him cross the floor to the balcony doors where he looked up at the huge, white, Mariard moon. It appeared brighter than earlier that evening, which now lit up the mist creeping over the elegant castle gardens.

Tayo thought of his wife, having held her hand whilst sipping tea in the gazebo, where they had sat that very day. Closing his eyes, he felt something encroaching on his pain, something he could not define.

"Already you feel it stirring." Artemis positioned herself at the king's side.

“Like my essence wants to leave me and go elsewhere.” The moon again captured Tayo’s focus.

“Not only your essence, but your entire being.” Artemis glanced at the king, but his gaze did not leave the moon. “Tayo, tomorrow you and your daughter will embark on a journey. You will build a new Mariard kingdom unlike anything ever known to this world. The Mariard has already paved the way ahead, but for a time, I will not be with you. Draw on the knowledge already given you, work diligently and rule wisely.”

The priestess led Tayo by the arm across the chamber to his daughter’s crib. Again, she sensed for his emotional state, feeling the turmoil within him. Though expressing warmth as a new father, tears welled in Tayo’s eyes, pressing him not to look at her as she addressed him.

“You are a king and a father, behold your daughter, she will bring you great joy. Teach her faith, obedience, and the ways of the Mariard.”

“What of my son?” Tayo glanced at the crib, unable to bring himself to fully look on the child.

“He is dead to you. It is written, a seed is planted, a tree will grow to bear bad fruit. It will be cut down by one who will plant seeds of terror.” Artemis noted in Tayo’s eyes that these words were familiar to him. With the king’s silence, she approached the door to summon those waiting out in the hallway.

The king’s aides wore lengthy, light-blue jackets and trousers with white shirts, buttoned to collarless necklines. After instructing the staff to renew the bed linen and set out the king’s sleeping attire, Artemis addressed Tayo.

“Best you get an early night, you have an important day ahead of you tomorrow.” Looking towards the open door, Artemis gestured with a nod to her awaiting personal aides, who would remove the cribs from the king’s chamber.

The crystal droplets of the chandelier reflected the flames within the hearth, casting speckles of light over the walls. To the king, the bedchamber felt silent and lonely as he sat in one of two armchairs facing the blaze. He remained fully dressed, though his boots laid disorderly at his feet. Again, Tayo glanced at the bed; he would find no rest where he was yet could not bring himself to sleep in it. On this, his last night in the castle, he studied his surroundings, fixing to memory all that was part of his life.

Tayo’s sights shifted about the furnishings, the desk with its drawers of personal property and the curvatures of the stool. An ornate wardrobe, the clothes within, he would never wear again. Eyeing items on the dressing table, tears welled with them having belonged to his wife. Nothing he could take with him, not even a small memento. Reaching into his vest pocket, Tayo drew out the glass bead. The thought of what lay ahead stirred feelings of anxiousness and kept him from sleep.

It was not yet light outside when Cainen stifled a yawn and pulled the hood of his cloak back, revealing straight, blonde hair. The king's companion and dearest friend stood edgy in the lounge area, one of many in the transportation complex. Antiquated charm was in the décor and people's attire within the modern facilities, operating on advanced solar technologies. Cainen's tall, muscular physique reflected in the large windowpanes running the length of a wall. From this height, it enabled him to look out across a massive area of steel and concrete. Landing pads set at different levels had attached open boarding stations. People went about their business using walkways, open caged lifts and four wheeled buggies, some towing small trailers. Hover, shuttle buses, like lengthy, slender, white coaches, lifted off for their rounds of the municipalities. Stationed at ground level, wheel-based transports serviced the local city sectors. Hauler transports, similar to the buses yet bulkier were being loaded with goods for their long journeys to the rural areas.

Cainen knew it was imperative that no one saw him or other selected members of the royal household in the complex. Deceit was in motion and soon the kingdom would grieve the deaths of a monarch, an heir and entourage. Lying was against everything Cainen believed in, yet he saw this act, and his part in it, as a means to their future survival. He could have left hours earlier with others of the royal household, but Cainen elected to personally escort the king to an unknown destination. Reflecting on what he and his family were leaving behind, raised uncomfortable emotions to the likes he had never felt before. With only the clothes on their backs, he contemplated an uncertain journey ahead. His thoughts were interrupted when an unshaven Tayo entered.

Those involved in this venture had been instructed by the priestess to dress in civilian clothing. The king's disguise could not hide the man's pain. Tayo's hair hung loose around his shoulders, grief and lack of sleep showed in his features. Remaining silent, Cainen's expression of compassion was all he could offer. Seeing his friend stripped of all royal ornamentation left him feeling awkward enough, he was at a loss to know what to say considering Sestina's death.

"Is everything ready?" Tayo forced a smile with Cainen nodding. "Good man." He patted his friend on the back, before taking the grey, woollen cloak held out to him. Both men pulled hoods up to cover their hair and somewhat shroud their faces. With his hand, Tayo gestured to lead the way and the two men left the lounge area.

The Mariard kingdom was made up of districts. Each district covered four immense states, comprising of a main city and a multitude of smaller municipalities that featured more Gothic architecture than modern. Buildings were fifteen stories or less and crafted in rich decoration. Dividing each district, a collective of rural towns saw earlier period

architecture in country charm of stone, timber, and shingled roofs. In all, there were sixteen districts, and each city had a name, but was usually referred to by its number. The Maroda kingdom covered a third of the surface. On opposite sides of the poles were the ice fields and desert regions, thought to be uninhabited wastelands and unexplored.

Flying over the states of the First district, little conversation had passed between the two men during the long hours of travel. Tayo battled to keep his son from his thoughts. There was a sense of betraying not only the child, but also the mother who bore him. At Artemis's request, all involved had kept his wife ignorant to the truth, regarding the prophecy. He kept justifying it; this was to secure a future, to secure the Mariard way of life and traditions. From the shuttle window, Tayo noted they were leaving the city municipalities behind and entering a rural sector. It saddened him to abandon his entire kingdom; his only consolation, it was in the hands of the priestess and his high council.

The name Mariard derived and honoured the great-unseen power that was in everything from creation to overseeing their peace, prosperity, and good health. Original writings, pertaining to their culture and beliefs were held in the castle. Accessible to the populace, copies of the great book contained history, revealing in detail, the works of their ancestors. This wealth of knowledge expressed itself in both the city and rural areas. It appeared in architecture, carpentry, the arts, wind, and solar technologies. Most conscious of their environment, citizens farmed with horse and plough, providing organic foods and dairy produce, which saw no hunger. None were aware of a great upheaval to come, which would shatter the foundations and see a great darkness take the throne.

Ushered from shuttle to shuttle, the days of travel left Tayo and his companion exhausted. Though the king napped along the way, his dreams made him restless in sleep, perceived visions of events yet to come. On hearing of his own death and that of others, it was evident to Tayo that he was truly loved by his people. The entire kingdom was in mourning. He had seen it in a shuttle pilot's tears and on the faces of those at different transport docks. His name was on everyone's lips, as was his daughter's. Each time he heard names mentioned, it raised a new emotion, that of guilt for the pain caused and lies told.

It was late afternoon when the horse drawn cart came to a halt in an open field on the outskirts of the Third district. A trusted friend of the royal household, having sworn to secrecy, owned the picturesque rural setting surrounded by rolling hills and rich pastures. Standing in the warmth of the sun, a small group greeted the two men.

Patina's lengthy, brown hair fluttered a little with the breeze. Her eyes expressed delight in seeing her husband. She expected Cainen to be clean-shaven, the days of growth made him appear older than his twenty-

five years. Having greeted him with an embrace, their son came out from behind her brown skirt covering a thick, frilled, white petticoat. She smiled with her husband messing the boy's blonde hair in fun. Picking Simon up, she nursed the four-year-old on her hip. Simon began fidgeting with the ribbons on her bodice, though his green eyes were fixed on his father's features.

A short distance away, the middle-aged couple dressed as farm hands, stood outside the shuttle. Being trusted servants of the royal household, the king assumed the priestess would soon join them. Before continuing on their journey, Tayo hoped to bathe and get some rest. A strange sound drew his attention to the skies.

Appearing like a great black and white bird soaring towards them, never had the group seen anything so advanced. The strange craft was extremely loud, stealing their attention away from the priestess, having left the shuttle. Cainen took Simon from his wife to all stand well back. The boy's hair annoyed him with the craft hovering and stirring the air, forcing locks across his face. Tayo remained captivated as it descended to land on the grass.

This sleek, black transport with lengthy swept-back wings had a long, tubular neck and a white oval section that observers assumed housed the pilots. A sliding door opened in the side of the bulk, drawing everyone's attention.

Awestruck, the group watched a metal ramp extend to the ground. Appearing in the opening, a machine, in the image of a man stepped forward. The bronze and chrome unit stood tall with fixed, moulded, shoulder length hair and facial features, void of expression. Its body gave the impression of restricted mobility, however, looks were deceiving as it approached Artemis, who set everyone at ease.

"Be not afraid of that which is here to assist you. Milacon is a living being. The armour protects the Milonight occupant within." Artemis raised a brow with Simon stretching out his hand and touching the shiny, cold tunic.

Small fingerprints now showed below the engraved name on the left-hand side of the Milonight's chest plate. Cainen said Simon's name aloud, telling his son not to do it again.

A dislike for children had Artemis annoyed at the boy, yet she maintained both a controlled stance and tone, concealing the truth of her temperament.

"Numerous Milonights inhabit the ice region of the Northern pole, where they await their king's arrival." Her words saw Tayo's eyes widen in awe of the concept. Before the king could speak his thoughts, the boy spoke out.

"Can I play with it?" Simon looked to his father, who was unsure

how to answer. The Milonight's head turned to acknowledge the boy.

"I would be delighted to play with you young Simon." Its lips had not moved, yet they heard a pleasant, male voice.

Fascinated, Simon tried to reach out and touch the Milonight's face. Cainen felt embarrassed with his son's behaviour and lowered the boy to the ground, where he held him back with a firm hand. Forcing a smile, Artemis continued.

"Milonights are small beings. The armour ensures their survival, keeping their body temperature at minus fifteen degrees." Noting stunned expressions, Artemis knew she had indicated a destination. "Do not let the thought of their true size deceive you. These beings are not only your finest assets, but their life expectancy of two hundred years or more will see them fighting for your kingdom, long after you are gone Tayo." She fixed her sights on the man himself. "You will see their true value when you arrive at your destination. May the Mariard watch over you." With a hand, she gestured for all to board.

The king followed Artemis's sights towards the shuttle. A female aide was on approach, carrying a protective capsule, containing his daughter. Milacon bowed his head to greet the young woman, who handed over the precious cargo for him to take on board. Obviously nervous, the aide straightened her shawl, walking closely behind the Milonight.

Tayo could not leave without a last word to Artemis and refrained from following up the ramp.

"I must ask you..." Tayo said, but the priestess answered before he could finish.

"Your son's name is Marcale; it is all I will tell you. Have a safe journey." Artemis walked away, not giving him a second look whilst heading towards the awaiting shuttle.

Pondering his role, Tayo felt somewhat alone. He knew he would not see Artemis or this land again until an appointed time. Twenty-one years seemed so long and without her to council him, it crossed his mind that if he failed, all would be lost. The thought of Milonights made him nervous yet curious to what was hidden under the armour and to know the creature's environment. Suddenly hearing Simon loudly chuckling, prompted him to walk up the ramp.

On entering, Tayo was a little disappointed. Though a large interior, it was nothing more than a cargo carrier with web seats lining the inner frame. His sights drifted, taking in familiar faces, assuming to know their thoughts. Artemis had indicated their destination, the concept of building the new Mariard kingdom in the ice fields had him anxious.

"When you are ready, Sir," Milacon said, awaiting further instructions.

CHAPTER 1

With little having changed over twenty-one years, people prospered just as they had when Tayo Maroda ruled. The castle gardens were a blend of towering trees, beds of flowers, ponds with ornamental statues and a large, white gazebo, clearly seen from the back entrance and bed chamber balconies. A glass of fermented juice sat on the round, cast-iron table; another glass lay on its side, the contents having filtered through the metal lacework to be absorbed by the neatly trimmed lawn below. Appearing small in comparison to the Mariard moon, the sun shone directly above, its warmth made it a delight to be outside in the garden this time of year.

The couple positioned themselves on the grass, under the draping canopy of a tree. Marcale and Tangelica gave no thought for discretion, caring not that they may be seen from the castle. Their behaviour made them the topic of conversation at high council meetings, which Marcale rarely attended. Consumption of the new fermented juice made Marcale argumentative when intoxicated and he denied being sexually active.

The council doubted Marcale's integrity and commitment to his fiancée with the man's flirtatious nature; his conduct was not befitting an heir to the throne. Whether aide or high society, Marcale's charm, and good looks lured women to his bed, though none would confess to such behaviour. The council had stressed upon the heir the rituals of purity and the consequences of not fulfilling them. Marcale thought their fears amusing, believing the priestess a liar and power hungry; all the same, he led the council into a false sense of security.

Tangelica's flawless complexion and high cheekbones touched by a hint of red blush tantalised her fiancé. Her jealousy developed quickly, having been unaware of his flirtatious nature prior to their courtship. She perceived Artemis despised her due to her father's status. Although he held position in the community, she assumed the priestess wanted Marcale to marry the daughter of a high councillor.

Lipstick smudged with him pressing hard on her lips. Shoving Marcale aside, Tangelica scolded him for being so rough. When in times of private, Marcale gave no thought to his shirt tails half out of his trousers or lengthy hair having come loose from a ponytail. He chuckled before replying.

"Would you deny your king pleasure?" Marcale leant back on his elbows with a lusty grin on his boyish features.

Tangelica rolled onto her stomach and with a hand, flicked loose, blonde hair from her shoulder.

"You are not the king yet." Tangelica sulked. "And since when have I denied you?" She raised a brow, awaiting an answer.

Sitting forward, Marcale rested his arm on his knee and ran a hand through his copper locks, drawing it away from his face. He thought for a moment then shook his head in amusement.

"What is so funny?" Tangelica shifted onto her side and straightened the layers of petticoats to make herself comfortable.

"My dear Tangelica, you have the body of a seductress, but the mentality of a child. I am hoping you will mature once we are married."

"Liar, you enjoy our little games too much." Tangelica ran her fingers up and down his leg, teasing him. "This is what you love about me, I stir your imagination." Rising to her knees, she pushed herself between his legs, guiding his face into her cleavage. As he began to ease the lace straps from her shoulders, she whispered her thoughts. Her fiancé suddenly pushed her aside.

"Why do you always do that?" Marcale snapped.

"Sorry." Tangelica forced a pout. "I meant it to amuse not offend."

"I know too well what you meant! You think I fear her," he scoffed. "Tomorrow I will be crowned king..."

"And with me at your side..." Tangelica enticed him to go on.

"I will rid this kingdom of the old slag and her books; this I promise you." With freedom in his thoughts, Marcale guided his fiancée down onto the grass. Kissing her hard on the lips, he slid a hand under the ruffles of her petticoats.

The heir's entire childhood was without affection, having been battered mentally and physically. Not only had the priestess kept Marcale from interacting with others, but also denied him service from aides. Kept ignorant to Mariard teachings, he spent most of his life hidden away, alone and bowing to the will of Artemis. His seclusion was made easier, as the priestess convinced the council that the heir was mentally retarded.

At the age of thirteen, Marcale found the courage to ask Artemis why she disliked him so. Her answer he did not understand, and he knew not what the word evil meant. Before his eighteenth birthday, his yearning for company led him to sneak about the castle. From aides to council members, he intently studied people that triggered change in him. Though men highly respected women, they held authority, spoke their minds, and did not cower as he did to Artemis. Learning he was heir to the throne and that the priestess had lied to both he and the council, Marcale put Artemis in her place.

A newfound confidence led the heir to take up his position within the castle. With free reign, Marcale's ventures included delving into Artemis's private collection of literature. He found pages he believed stolen from the great history book, romantic poetry, maps of unfamiliar territories

and recipes for fermented juices.

The attention showered upon Marcale taught him to use flattery as a means of control. His charm and generosity towards women enabled him to get what he wanted. In addition, Artemis's position bound her to confidentiality and unable to tell anyone the truth of his sexual activities. Marcale was determined to prove Artemis and her doctrine lies by surviving the purification ceremony. Until such time, he would keep the council on side, claiming himself pure of body.

The council had insisted that the heir select a wife; the marriage would coincide with the coronation when he turned twenty-one. Out of spite for Artemis, Marcale refused invitations from those she suggested were eligible. Not ignorant to what Marcale was doing, unbeknown to him, the priestess cleverly manipulated the man into choosing Tangelica to be his bride.

Just one more day, Tangelica thought, I will be queen and the priestess will fall. I will strip her of position and make a necklace out of her gem. Amused by her intentions, she mischievously grinned and groaned for Marcale's pleasure.

Artemis appeared notably aged since having held Marcale as a babe in arms. This was not due to the twenty-one years having passed, but the stress on her being from a gifting and the Mariard powers within. Standing behind the flowering vines, covering the latticework, the priestess did not have to see the couple to know what they were doing. Though having overheard much of their conversation, she thought this the least of her concerns. The two were no threat and she knew there was tension between them. She scoffed at Marcale's confidence whilst playing by her own rules. Her insight and cunningness were leading Marcale and Tangelica to their deaths. Knowing their time was short, Artemis had only but to wait for it to come about.

Startled by the crackle of dry leaves, Artemis slowly turned to look upon a young woman in male attire. The natural beauty with dark wavy hair, strung back into a ponytail, lowered piercing, blue eyes in greeting.

"My father sends salutations Artemis." The woman's tone conveyed respect, but the priestess felt the presence of a strong character and something else cautioning her.

"Vianne. You have returned." Artemis loosely embraced the tall, slender woman, having not expected Vianne to out in the grounds considering the secrecy surrounding her visit.

"Yes, as requested. I wish it were under different circumstances." Vianne's eyes were on Artemis. She had heard so much about the woman yet felt a little uneasy and assumed it just her nerves considering the woman's status.

"I understand. Now let me look at you. You are so much your

mother, but she had better dress sense.” The priestess eyed over the frilled shirt, vest and long boots, the clothes of a citizen not royalty.

“My clothing is unimportant. They are suitable for the conditions we live under. You will see this for yourself on returning home.” Vianne saw the doubt in the priestess’s expression and asked if anything was wrong.

“Not at all,” Artemis replied. “As you said, I wish it were under different circumstances.” She felt Vianne emitting energy consistent with her own. The sensation made her realise that the young woman was empowered with more than what she expected. “Come child. I will transform you into a great beauty, befitting your true status.”

“My father taught me etiquette, but I must say it lacks practicality and does not impress me. Painting one’s face and wearing garments of frills adorned with lace must be extremely uncomfortable.” Vianne spoke with confidence and maturity, impressing the priestess. Artemis thought the young woman more than adequate for the position she would soon impose on her.

“My dear child, it is not whether it is comfortable but how it makes one feel. Beauty is a gift, and you certainly have that.” Artemis forced a smile, watching Vianne approach a gap in the latticework.

“Beauty is only skin deep; there is your proof over there.” Vianne raised a brow and awaited Artemis’s response.

“How long have you been here?” The priestess suspected the young woman had spied on her.

“As long as I needed to be.” Vianne looked towards the couple, disappointed that they carelessly flaunted their deeds. “I assume that is my brother and his bride-to-be.”

“Yes. They have disgraced the house of Maroda.” Artemis gestured for Vianne to follow her.

Via a secret passage, the two women entered the castle. Artemis led Vianne through areas avoiding aides and other workers. Her father’s detailed description of the interior gave Vianne the feeling she had been here before. The rooms she glimpsed through open doors were rendered stone, painted in dark tones with large white decorative cornices and ceiling roses. Mental images suggested that the antiquated furnishings had changed little in twenty-one years. Her sights skimmed over large paintings from scenery to portraits, crystal and ornaments befitting royalty. None of it impressed the young woman, who was eager for tomorrow to come about so she could return to what she called home.

The second floor of the wing contained many bedchambers and accommodated not only the priestess, but also that of the heir and Tangelica. Artemis had chosen an adjoining bedchamber for her guest, wanting Vianne close to her, fearing for the young woman’s safety.

Considering Vianne's beauty, Marcale's lust for women could cause problems. She more feared what he would do if he learnt the truth of her guest's identity, placing her own life and plans for the man's sister in jeopardy.

Artemis introduced Vianne to her elderly aide as a wedding guest from the Third City, the niece of a trusted councillor, who would support the priestess's claim if required. Female aides wore lengthy, white aprons covering blue, full-skirted, long-sleeved dresses. Though Vianne arrived unsuitably clothed, the aide would not question or speak of what she saw but would do as instructed.

Much to Vianne's dislike, she underwent a transformation from citizen to royalty. Expecting a change of heart, Artemis insisted that her guest look at herself in the full-length mirror. Vianne sighed, feeling most uncomfortable. The lace corset irritated her skin where frills and lace over petticoats obstructed her walk whilst acquainting herself with royal etiquette.

Another entered the bedchamber; the trusted aide had sworn an oath of secrecy. Artemis introduced the young woman that would be accompanying them tomorrow. Malisa, the daughter of her retiring aide was only a few months older than Vianne. Lowering her blue eyes in greeting, the guest corrected Malisa, for where she came from, no one was above another. Forcing an awkward smile, Malisa asked if Vianne required any further services. Disgruntled, the guest shook her head. Vianne silently wished for her own clothing back and a washbasin to rid herself of the muck on her face.

With the aide having left the chamber, Vianne eyed the priestess, maintaining a civil tone whilst speaking her mind.

"There is no reason for me to see him." Having spent twenty-one years without contact with her brother, who was nothing more than a stranger to her, Vianne saw no point in meeting him now. Artemis pushed her guest down onto the stool at the dressing table.

"You need to know the fullness of the times for a glimpse of what is to come."

"I have a fair idea." Vianne sighed, agitated.

"Do you really, I think not."

"How can you say that?" Defensively, Vianne rose off the stool. "I live in freezing temperatures with nothing but a white landscape. It took hard work and determination to build a kingdom in the mountain ranges. You stand here before me in all your finery, whilst we continue to forge weapons and get our hands dirty for what is to come."

"I know so much about you." Artemis sought to calm the tension. "According to my informant, your father is a proud man. You defend that which you believe in with all your heart, this is why you have been chosen."

“For what?” Vianne felt a strange sensation coming over her, which she tried to ignore.

“Your new position, but this you will learn about soon enough.” Artemis pleasantly smiled.

“We have not yet been called for the meal, speak now, you have my full attention.” Vianne was under the impression that she was merely there to escort Artemis back to the Mariard Mountains; no one had spoken of a new position.

“Later, there is still much to discuss before you dine with your brother.” Artemis asked her to sit and with reluctance, the young woman complied.

The priestess instructed Vianne to say little in the presence of Marcale and Tangelica. She would introduce her as Rachael from the house of Tahoma. Vianne enquired if Marcale was aware he had a sister. Artemis nodded.

The citizens of the kingdom, the royal household and council had many years ago been deceived. All had grieved the loss of a young king, his daughter and entourage, tragically killed in a manor fire. The priestess recalled the day they all left for the new kingdom and in particular an annoying young boy who showed no fear of a Milonight.

“Simon, son of Cainen,” Artemis said. The name saw Vianne gleam a smile and her eyes light up.

“He is a fine warrior who does his family proud. We have pledged our love for one another. When I return, we are to be married.” Vianne questioned Artemis’s expression.

The news had not brought joy but dread. Artemis noted Vianne’s curiosity and unbeknown to her guest, the young woman was seeking answers within her mind.

“Stop it Vianne,” Artemis said through clenched teeth; their eyes met.

“Stop what? Are you alright?” Concerned, Vianne stood, offering the priestess her seat.

“Forgive me...” Artemis raised her hand not to fuss. “I am just tired.”

Evidently, Vianne was unaware of her gifting. Artemis was not surprised that the Mariard had hidden such power from both her and Maroda’s daughter, seeing this to her benefit. Nonetheless, a new hurdle, namely Simon had presented itself. This was unexpected, which could see Vianne refuse the position she would offer.

In the grand dining hall, Artemis introduced her guest. Marcale kissed Vianne’s hand before pulling out a chair for the beauty to sit beside him at the elaborately laid, lengthy table. Seated to the other side of her fiancé, Tangelica stared at the woman across from her, already feeling the

pangs of jealousy.

Never had such a beauty graced his table, was Marcale's words to Vianne. The compliment provoked his fiancée's sarcastic retaliation. Not wanting to cause a scene in front of his guest, Marcale resorted to interrupting and changing lines of conversation with Tangelica's embarrassing behaviour.

Marcale focused his attention on Vianne throughout the meal. She in turn contributed little to the conversation, not wanting to encourage his suggestive behaviour. Having never known such rudeness, Vianne forged pleasantries so as not to appear disgusted or overwhelmed by the tension between the couple. Taking none of it personally, she found herself pitying Tangelica, seeing her brother as living up to his sordid reputation.

Retiring to a drawing room, regal furnishings of couches and matching armchairs surrounded a low, marble table. The scent of fresh flowers in large vases filled the warm atmosphere. A mature, male aide placed a tray of drinks on the table, before positioning himself near the door. With a glass of fermented juice in hand, Marcale stood to one side of the stone fireplace, resting his elbow on the mahogany mantelpiece. The decline of a drink prompted Marcale to recall that their guest had done the same at dinner.

"If the wine is not to your liking Rachael, I will have them bring you, tea perhaps?" Marcale presumed this more to her taste and looked towards the male aide.

"No thank you." Vianne expressed pleasantries. "I actually prefer ice water." A discreet nudge from the priestess, implied she had said something wrong. Artemis was quick to rectify this.

"I am afraid our dear Rachael is allergic to grapes, especially fermented ones."

"What a shame." Tangelica's remark drew a stern gaze from Marcale, yet she continued. "Since my fiancé introduced the beverage, it has become a trademark of royalty and high society. Obviously Rachael, you have not mingled in the right circles to acquire the taste."

"The First City has much to offer." Marcale changed the subject. "Perhaps you will stay with us after the coronation tomorrow?" He was hopeful, having contemplated making Rachael his mistress.

"I must return home. My family..." Vianne avoided eye contact with Marcale interrupting.

"We could move your family here. Give you a position in the court." Marcale smiled and would have pushed the point if his fiancée had not spoken up.

"You could be my personal aide." Tangelica smirked; however, frowned with the priestess leaning towards her.

"Your claws are showing. It is unbecoming a woman of your status."

Artemis forced a smile. Her words gained the desired affect and Tangelica stood in a huff.

"I am going to bed. I have much to do in the morning. I bid you goodnight. Are you coming Marcale?"

"I cannot leave my guests." His eyes revealed a hint of resentment. The couple stared tense at one another for a moment, Marcale watched his disgruntled fiancée storm off towards the door, which the aide opened for her. "You must excuse Tangelica, I believe she has much on her mind, considering the day ahead of us tomorrow."

"I do believe Tangelica is right." Artemis rose from her seat. "We all have a long day ahead of us tomorrow, it is best we also retire."

"So soon." Marcale hid his irritation. "It is early, but if you are tired Artemis, then by all means you should retire." He beamed a smile. "I am sure I am adequate company for Rachael."

"Your social skills live up to your reputation." Vianne smiled, having not meant it as a compliment and continued as she stood. "But I am also tired after such a long journey." She thanked him for his hospitality and bid him goodnight.

Now alone, Marcale slugged down the last of his wine. Driven by resentment and anger, he pitched the glass into the fireplace then cleared the mantelpiece of ornaments with one swipe of his hand. Having met such a beauty as Rachael, his bride-to-be had him immensely disappointed. How he wished he had met the woman before committing to his fiancée. Slumping into an armchair without poise or grace, he rested his boots on the tabletop. Tomorrow I will be king, he thought, who engages in formality when one can order obedience. She will be unable to refuse me, and Artemis will not be around to interfere. Having poured another drink, Marcale sat back, contemplating Rachael's move to the castle.

Tossing the gown on the double bed, Vianne sought assistance from Malisa to remove the corset. Thoughts distracted her and she remained silent for a time. Once the guest was freed from the garment, Artemis told the aide to leave, wanting privacy considering matters. Vianne's stern expression led the priestess to question.

"So, tell me, what have I done to deserve such silence?" Artemis sat Vianne down on the stool and began to undo the braids in the young woman's hair.

"You deliberately antagonised Tangelica." Vianne cringed with Artemis roughly removing pins and dropping them onto the dressing table. She watched the priestess in the mirror, who eyed her in the same manner.

"She is wretched, just ask her aides. Whilst at it, ask to see the marks she has left due to fits of jealousy."

"She loves him." Though Vianne disliked what she was hearing, she still thought Tangelica a victim of her brother's lust.

"She loves his status and what it will bring her. She is no better than him." Artemis took the brush from the dressing table. The two women watched each other in the mirror, until the priestess had finished.

Having put on a satin robe over a cotton nightgown, Vianne strolled to Artemis, who sat in an armchair, being one of two facing the fireplace. Vianne positioned herself near the feet of the priestess, enjoying the warmth from the open fire.

"You lack understanding Vianne." Artemis's sights were on the young woman.

"Then make me understand. Why was he chosen? I was first born." This question had plagued Vianne over the last few months.

Prior to the evening meal, Artemis had expected such questions and instructed her aide to bring certain literature to the chamber. The table between the armchairs held thick books, one bound in faded, black leather with symbolic silver etchings on the cover. The writing on the parchment was foreign to her guest, but as the priestess understood the language, translated the text in her own words.

"For centuries the royal seeds have been impure. With each passing generation, impurity devoured more of their essence to which the Mariard can no longer hide. A strong seed divided, one became decay, the other a seed of light." Artemis paused, seeing doubt in Vianne's eyes. With her guest remaining silent, she continued. "Decay has eaten through the roots; its life ends with this generation. Do not despair child, a new seed has already divided." Her guest gasped.

"Tangelica is with child." Vianne was taken aback considering the implications. She turned a little to look up at the priestess. "As his sister I must warn him, try to salvage something from all this." She rose to her feet. Artemis grasped her wrist tightly, pulling her towards a face expressing animosity.

"Your brother is the decay; you are the light. Where there is one seed, there is another." Artemis released her grip. Stumbling back a step or two, Vianne clutched her stomach.

"It is impossible." Vianne shook her head. "I have been with no man." Her eyes pleaded for it not to be true.

"Anything is possible with the Mariard. You should know this by now."

"No, it must be another! Search your books." Vianne dropped to her knees and in dread, flipped through the pages.

Artemis clutched Vianne's shoulders and whilst shaking the woman, demanded she calm herself. Vianne rose to her feet with fear and resentment gripping her; she slapped the book from Artemis's lap.

"My brother will die tomorrow! His woman carries a hideous seed and the Mariard now wants me to take his place! I will not wear the crown!"

Vianne turned away in the direction of the fire, folding her arms across her chest in defiance.

Unbeknown to the two women, Tangelica was hiding in the shadows, behind the dressing screen, situated near the door for easy access to the aides. Horrified by what she had overheard, she left the bedchamber unnoticed, through the door having been left ajar.

Rising from the chair, Artemis stepped towards her distressed guest. She addressed the young woman in a calmer tone.

“No one is asking you to Vianne. The seed you are carrying is not of the old, but the new.” The priestess straightened with her angry guest turning to face her.

“Is this why we prepare for war? For our children to kill each other! If what you say is true, then I will have no part in this.” Vianne stared into the woman’s eyes. Artemis momentarily looked down before responding.

“It is written, a seed is planted, yet it will wither and die. One will come to plant his own seed in its place.” Artemis suddenly felt an intrusion within her mind.

Having connected with the priestess, Vianne was tapping into recollections that Artemis could not contain to herself. Feeling lightheaded, she reached out for the chair to steady herself. On closing her eyes, information began to transfer from one woman to another.

Breaking into a sweat, Artemis tried to block out the intruder and clear her mind. Although earlier, she recognised that Vianne was gifted, the depths of such consciousness had not revealed itself. Her confidence dwindled, having assumed she had beaten the Mariard at its own game. Clearly, this great power had taken steps to see another path set in motion. The thought of what Vianne could already do without knowledge of the gifting stirred anxiousness and wanting to take full possession of all that was Mariard. Radiating an aura, Artemis drew on the power within her.

Abruptly, Vianne opened her eyes, having been startled by the image within her mind of a bright, glistening ball of light coming towards her. As the priestess slumped back in the chair, a trembling Vianne stared dumbfounded.

Tangelica had wanted to speak with Racheal alone, the reason behind her having gone to the bedchamber. Thinking Vianne merely a guest, her intentions were to intimidate the woman into leaving the castle first thing in the morning. She heard the voices, before the two women entered. The fear of being caught and scolded by Artemis compelled her to hide behind the dressing screen in the corner near the door. If Vianne had not undressed herself, she would have been caught out with Malisa moving the screen. Panicked by what she overheard, Tangelica had sought her fiancé and disclosed the information to him.

Fury drove Marcale’s stride, yet this was not aimed at his sister, but

one he loathed and wanted dead. His fiancée sprinted to keep up whilst following him down the hallway. Previous talks between the couple ran through Tangelica's mind and she would do anything, even murder, to secure her position.

Bursting into the bedchamber, Marcale's wrathful eyes fixed on his sister. The large knife in his hand was evidence of the heir's intentions. His sights shifted to Artemis, putting the fear of death into the woman. Tangelica wanted nothing more than to see the two women slain. In anticipation, she stayed close to her fiancé, tightening her grip on the metal, paper knife in her hand.

"You slag!" Marcale's fist sent the priestess to the ground. Grasping her arm to haul Artemis to her feet, his sister went to intervene. "Stay back!" The knife in his hand held her at bay. "I will deal with you once I have rid my house of her stench!"

"Please Marcale, do not do this," Vianne pleaded, but was ignored.

With hatred as his strength, Marcale raised the knife to slay the priestess, cowering on the floor. Hearing a gasp, his attention snapped to his sister. Although the woman remained standing, Vianne was wide-eyed and clutching the handle of a paper knife, protruding from her abdomen. Marcale caught his sister as she collapsed. Whilst lowering her gently to the floor, he glanced with fury at the woman having done this to his sister.

"Get out!"

Tangelica slowly backed away with nerves on edge. The shock of having actually followed through was still sinking in. Shaken by her fiancé's reaction, she justified the deed to herself. Hastily leaving the chamber, she brushed past Malisa, who having heard the commotion, from the wing's utility room, stood waiting for instruction in the doorway.

Cradling Vianne's shoulders with one arm, Marcale paused before drawing the blade. He glanced at the priestess, kneeling at his sister's side. Artemis placed her hand down on the wound and called for the aide to fetch water and clean cloth. Keeping a level head, Malisa acted on the order. Artemis stiffened with Marcale's abruptness.

"Heal her and I will consider letting you live!" His threatening gaze unnerved the priestess. Artemis could not trust his word but would do all she could to save Vianne and if not, at least the seeds.

"Why heal someone you want dead?" Artemis refrained from looking at him whilst tearing the bloodied nightgown to get to the wound. Marcale snarled through clenched teeth.

"I want you dead, not her."

"Why? Are you not afraid she is here to take your crown?" Their eyes met.

"I would see her dead first; I am not convinced she is here for the throne. But you on the other hand, have wished me dead since birth, and

you will regret taking me from my mother, this I promise you.”

Looking at the bloodied wound, Artemis tensed. Marcale responded to her hesitation.

“What is it woman?” He readied to strike her. Artemis remained silent for a moment with apprehension in her drawn features. Her thoughts escaped her.

“She heals herself.” Silently, Artemis sought explanation.

The priestess ruled out Mariard intervention and only she knew why. With Vianne unaware of her gifting, for the woman to be tapping into its healing properties was improbable. Though the seeds were thought not mature enough to emit their own energy, it did appear the only explanation. Artemis concluded that the Mariard had planned Vianne to replace her. Thinking this to her benefit, now all she had to do was survive long enough to secure a better position in the scheme of things.

Scooping his sister up, Marcale moved to the bed where he lay Vianne down. Studying her features, he maintained his stance on her beauty, but his feelings towards her had changed. Slowly opening her eyes, Vianne recognised the voice of her brother, yet remained positioned.

“Have the aide bring her a fresh gown.” Marcale returned his sights to his sister, assuming she was aware of his presence. “What will I do with you?” His anger had subsided to relief.

Marcale did not wish his sister harmed; his complaint was against Artemis. Evidently, the priestess lied to him, and he was now convinced that the woman had instigated the separation between him and his sister. Questions ran through his mind, he wanted to know why the deception? Why was she taken? Where had she been all this time and was his father alive?

Though feeling a little giddy, Vianne wanted to sit up. She gestured with her hand to let her be. The priestess conveyed she should rest, but Vianne had much to say, and time was not on their side. With Artemis insisting, Marcale told the woman to be silent and called out to those in the hallway.

The priestess protested as his personal security escorted her from the bedchamber. Marcale gave his word to Vianne that no harm would come to Artemis. Once alone, he assisted his sister to the armchair, before positioning himself up against the mantelpiece. Folding his arms across his chest, Marcale noted her eyes were studying him.

“I know you have not come to take the throne. If this were the case, I would have been the one taken away or murdered at birth.”

“No, I have not come to take the throne. I am to escort Artemis and her aides away from here after the coronation.” Vianne rested her head back into the chair and looked to the fire within the hearth. “Your day of glory will be shattered and the keys to your kingdom will be handed

to another.”

“So says the great book, which no one can read.” Agitated, Marcale shifted his weight to the other foot. “From personal experience, I know the slag to be a liar.” He wanted his sister to look at him, but she remained gazing into the fire, as though captivated by it.

“Have you seen the book of kings?” Vianne asked.

“Of course. It is nothing more than pictures of old men.” Marcale watched his sister shift in the chair. His eyes followed her hands to the books on the table.

“Take it.” Vianne held it out to him. Heaving a sigh, Marcale reluctantly complied whilst mumbling that it should have stayed in the library where it belonged, gathering dust.

The book was heavy and bound in thick leather. Marcale placed it down on top of another book, sitting on the low, brass table between the armchairs. Flipping through the pages, the coloured portraits were finely hand painted with borders of gold leaf and as he remembered, a book of old men.

“Turn to the last king.” Vianne watched with her brother complying. He read aloud the inscription under the picture.

“Tayo Maroda, the man who abandoned me at birth.” Marcale studied the features of the portrait. “I trust he is in good health.”

Vianne leant forward in the chair, now pitying him. What she had obtained from Artemis’s mind changed her perspective on her brother. Sensing a bond forming between them was pressing the need to save him.

“Tell me what you see.” Vianne fixed her eyes on him, noting he showed signs of unease. She assumed he also felt the bond forming.

“I see a man, nothing more.” Marcale indeed felt uncomfortable.

“You see a young man. He never did renounce the crown. Turn the page and tell me what you see.” Vianne sat back in the chair, knowing what he would find.

“There is nothing.” Marcale could not understand why and mumbled his words. “The page is empty.” Anxiousness rose and he sought explanation. He had sat for a portrait, having personally seen the pencilled draft weeks earlier, which should have seen his portrait ready considering the coronation tomorrow.

Three doors down from Vianne’s room, Tangelica nervously paced in front of the open fire within her bedchamber. Her hands trembled whilst still pondering on what she had done. Considering Marcale’s earlier threats to kill the priestess, his wrath drove thoughts of him following through. In addition, she perceived he would also take the life of his sister. When Vianne went to intervene, the threat prompted her to react. Though shocked by her own actions, her first thought was that she had proved her loyalty to Marcale. Her fiancé’s response to her deed so frightened her, she

was now somewhat relieved she had not been successful. The thought made her shudder, and the anticipation of a severe reprimand only heightened her anxiety.

Within her chamber, the priestess sat tense in the armchair, fearing Marcale would hurt Vianne once he learned the truth. What did he have to lose, Artemis thought, why not take his sister with him just to spite her and the Mariard. The knock on the door distracted the priestess. Artemis rose from her chair with Malisa entering, holding an empty jug in hand. Guiding the aide into the light of the fire, she questioned Malisa, aware that the aide had taken a jug of wine into the guest chamber.

"I saw prince Marcale seated in an armchair with his faced buried in one hand, as though distraught and lost."

"What of Vianne?" Artemis looked on the young woman's petite features, hopeful of good news.

"Vianne comforted him. She has such a warm heart." Malisa thought Vianne so brave considering the woman's ordeal. The aide showed respect and took leave. Artemis sighed frustrated; it was imperative she see Vianne before morning.

Marcale followed his sister out onto the balcony. Mist was creeping in over the gardens, revealed by the moon radiating brightly overhead. Vianne pointed beyond the moon. He could now see it, a circular outline the size of the Mariard moon itself and darker than the night sky.

"It is another moon." Marcale aired his thoughts and felt the stirring within. "I can feel it." His features expressed anxiousness and he looked to Vianne for more answers.

"It has been with you since..." She found it difficult to say the words. Marcale uttered them for her.

"I became impure." The ramifications of his deeds were sinking in, Marcale feared for his life like never before. "I beg you to ask Artemis to intervene on my behalf." His lips quivered and his jaw tightened.

"I cannot." Vianne placed a sympathetic hand on her brother's shoulder. "Nothing will stop it. Tomorrow, it will consume you."

"I can leave the city, forsake the crown and marriage." Marcale thought he had found a way to cheat death. His sister slowly shaking her head dashed his hopes.

"You can run like a field mouse only to be trampled underfoot or die honourably, as a repented king. The choice is yours Marcale." Vianne placed her hand on top of his, resting on the balcony rail.

Sensing that her brother deeply regretted his actions made this harder. Vianne struggled to hold back tears, wishing she had not met him. The painful realisation of his plight brought a wave of compassion, yet there was nothing she could do to stop the inevitable. From what she could gather, Artemis was not the mentor that she and others had believed her

to be. Silently, she defended her brother, placing blame elsewhere.

Marcale stared out across the mist, concealing the fields in the distance. How does one choose their death, he thought? Why did they not leave me ignorant? Is my essence so tainted they punish me with fear? Can I redeem myself with mere repentance? Slowly, Marcale walked away with his head a muddle of questions and his shoulders weighed down by adversity.

CHAPTER 2

Standing just inside in the door, Artemis peeked beyond. Sighting no one in the vicinity gave her confidence to make their move. She addressed a nervous Vianne, behind her.

“We have no time left.” Grasping the young woman by the hand, Artemis gestured to be silent, whilst leading her down the hallway.

Although having lost respect for Artemis, Vianne still felt a strong commitment to see the priestess safely back to the mountains. Adding to her unease was the urgency in their pace, yet she had been assured they were not fleeing the castle. Large, thick, ornate columns cast shadows in the dimly lit, silent front entrance adorning floral decorations on pedestals, ready for the ceremonies. Vianne took in only glimpses of her surroundings whilst sprinting across the tiled floor; she stumbled on a marble step of the wide staircase.

In the grand hall, impressive baskets of flowering shrubs hung by chains at different heights from the ceiling. Statues and water fountains were notable ornaments at ground level. On the walls, wooden placards displayed names of past and present high councillors, where decorative shields depicted their regions.

Artemis guided Vianne up one of the side staircases, leading to the lengthy balcony that would see introductions and speeches made after the ceremonies. There was no pausing to take in its grandeur or stopping for breath. Artemis slid her hand along the polished wooden railing, eager to get to the purification chamber.

Central on the balcony and set into an arch, the wooden doors on cast iron hinges had no handles or keyholes. The priestess’s fingers glided over a small security panel on the wall, which saw the doors open.

A dark corridor led to a large, circular chamber where soft lighting came on around the edges of the rendered white walls. Once inside, Vianne knew exactly where she was, heightening her already nervous disposition. With caution, Vianne moved around the outskirts of the extensive bronze and chrome ringed disk imbedded and taking up the majority of the chamber floor. Though ignorant to the meaning of the large symbols engraved in the outer ring, they did appear similar to those seen on a disk within the mountains. Looking to Artemis, she eyed over the symbols in silver embroidery running down the side of the priestess’s long apron.

A noise from above drew Vianne to look up. The metal coverings receded to reveal a glass dome, through which the glare of the Mariard

moon flooded the chamber. Artemis said her name, prompting Vianne to look at the woman.

“We have little time, so listen to me carefully. I have brought you here to take my place, as the representative of the Mariard.”

“A priestess!” Vianne glared and shook her head. “No, I will not do it.” She intended to leave the chamber immediately, yet Artemis dug her fingers into her shoulders, holding her to the spot.

“Listen to me. You have a gifting and one stronger than mine. The new age is upon us. You were chosen to carry the seeds and take my position as high priestess.”

“None of this was told to me. I was only instructed to come here and take you back.” Vianne pulled free. “You have already done enough. I will not do it, and you cannot force me.”

“True, I cannot force you.” Artemis turned away with an expression of frustration. Walking across the rings to the inner circle, the glare of the moon made her scarcely visible. “Know this...” Her voice echoed. “My time here has ended. Without a priestess and the sacred knowledge bestowed upon me, a kingdom will be left vulnerable.”

The priestess’s words brought further tension. Vianne thought that if this was so important, why had they not raised her for the position? Did her father and the council know about this prior to sending her here? Vianne stood her ground with Artemis taking a few steps forward.

“Before I depart, I will tell you of what is to come.” Artemis wanted nothing more than to drag Vianne into the centre of the disk, as what she held within, fought for release. Agitation showed in her raised brow and tone. “He will move over the land with his armies, leaving a path of desolation. His seeds will rise above him and with weapons never seen before, will seek out the new Mariard kingdom. When they find it, they will laugh in victory at a king who fought with sticks and stones.” Artemis not only saw resentment in the young woman’s expression but also sensed her frustration, having encouraged guilt.

“You have to stay,” Vianne demanded.

“I cannot, and if you do not take my place, all will perish. You will lose him either way.” Artemis radiated a blue aura; aware she was stressing the young woman further.

Both fear and anger gripped Vianne; if this was their future, a wrong decision could see all perish. A connection between minds brought a sensation of joining mentally and physically with Artemis. Fearing the sensation, she shuddered on hearing the priestess’s voice, especially as her lips had not moved.

Conveying sincerity, Artemis informed Vianne that once she stood in the centre of the disk and accepted the position, she would receive the full knowledge of the Mariard. Pressuring the young woman further,

she sighed before stating she was dying. Though having lived for generations, a priestess was mortal.

Fighting mixed emotions, Vianne intensely stared at Artemis, not knowing what to do. The sensation coming over her brought calm, as though another was present, other than the priestess. This consciousness gave her a sense of peace, hope, and a greater purpose in the scheme of things. Artemis speaking her name brought her back to reality. Vianne now saw the uneasiness in the priestess's eyes.

The abrupt disconnection between minds made Artemis nervous. Watching Vianne fumbling with the first button on her nightgown, she assumed something other than her words had influenced the young woman into taking the position.

The ritual itself was no secret. Angered with the perception that she had no choice, Vianne tore the cotton gown open and let it drop to the floor. In her nakedness, she hesitated; the thought of Simon held her back. Though she loved him with all her heart, she now knew she would not only lose him, but everyone else she loved if she refused to do this. Taking a couple of deep breaths, resentful, she crossed the rings to join Artemis in the centre.

Vianne wanted to keep the priestess in her sights yet could not compete against the glare and shielded her eyes with a trembling hand. A pleasant tingling sensation consumed her being. On daring to open her eyes, she found herself engulfed in a strange swirl of sparkling light. Reaching out to touch it, on contact, she became one with it.

Joined with the light, Vianne's essence amassed insight and knowledge into the wonders of the Mariard. Revealed to her was the Necropolin. Its secrets could not be hidden from her, yet she would be bound not to speak of them. This second great power was equal to that of the Mariard; however, it gave off such a negative and poisoning sensation, its presence stirred dread.

Suddenly thrust into darkness, the sensation was that of floating in an endless black void. In the distance, strange land formations began to appear. Where some slowly dissolved in an array of burning light, others transformed into spheres to become new worlds. Different life forms evolved or ceased to exist in the blink of an eye, leading Vianne to see the truth of their own history. As much as there was vast knowledge and wonderment, she collected secrets so dark; she wanted to scream them aloud for all to hear. Nonetheless, both the Necropolin and Mariard powers had seen to it that even a priestess could not release such information.

Another sensation directed Vianne towards the light, which was so blue, mesmerising and beckoning; she wanted to be part of it. Unable to go forward, the purity of the seed, having divided within her, stirred a greater love than she felt for her beloved Simon or for her father. A vision

depicting her son and daughter had the realism of them floating right in front of her. Aged around four, the children had iridescent, blue eyes and raven dark curls and although a definite likeness, they were not identical twins. Holding a headband out to her, his beautiful, innocent eyes beckoned her to take it. Realising there was no going back; she took it from him and lost herself in the blueness of the centred gem.

Opening her eyes to familiar surroundings, Vianne lifted her head from the armrest of the chair. Remaining seated, she glanced about Artemis's bed chamber. Surprisingly, the abundance of knowledge had not suppressed her memories and she sighed with the burden of her new position.

Standing in front of the full-length mirror, Vianne's attire was that of a priestess, but something appeared different. All the embroidered symbols were now bronze thread. The knock at the door distracted her; she called to enter.

Malisa placed the tray on the table, before opening the thick drapes. She folded her hands nervously in front of her and stood rigid behind Vianne, who was a little taller than she. The new mistress appeared distant with an air of animosity towards her position. Uneasy, Malisa spoke up and asked if the mistress would like breakfast brought to the chamber.

"I am not hungry." Vianne shook her head, forcing a smile. She knew Malisa's eyes were on her, as she approached the table and poured herself a glass of water. "Are you packed?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Do not call me ma'am." Vianne had made the aide uncomfortable. She could literally feel the woman's intimidation.

"What would you have me call you?" Malisa's sights remained on the priestess, who came towards her.

"Vianne." She took the woman's hand in hers. "I do not need an aide; I need a friend." Vianne felt that what lay ahead, would see her very much alone.

"Surely you have many friends, back in the mountains ma'am, I mean Vianne."

"Yes, I do." Vianne walked towards the balcony doors. "But when they see me like this, I suspect I will not be very popular." She felt Malisa at her side.

"Why would this be? You hold a position of honour, deserving of respect. Forgive me, I speak out of line." Malisa's eyes became downcast, only to be drawn back to the woman, who seemed to have found her words amusing.

"I like you already Malisa. I am going to enjoy teaching you freedom." Vianne's remark was not intended for the aide alone.

Restrictions placed on Vianne, regarding dark secrets, incited

bitter resentment. Even if she spoke these secrets aloud, no one other than herself understood the language. Seeing everything from a different perspective, she thought this not the time to work out solutions. A new day had begun that would lead to a new world order, a time of darkness, which was almost on their doorstep.

Tangelica woke. On recalling her attack on Vieanne, she abruptly sat up. Having not spoken with Marcale since the incident, she dreaded the consequences. Leaving her bed, she felt a draft, prompting her to notice the balcony doors were open.

Marcale sat on the railing; his focus was on the small balconies adjoining each bedchamber. He knew his fiancée was standing there but ignored her and took another sip of fruit juice. Tangelica thought he looked dreadful, unshaven, hair a mess and presumed his red eyes were from lack of sleep and too much wine.

"Say something," Tangelica sheepishly uttered, "anything, just get it over and done with." The long bout of silence was unlike him, making her extremely uncomfortable. "Talk to me," she blurted.

"What would you have me say?" Marcale sighed disheartened, drained of emotion as he looked out over the grounds.

"Whatever is on your mind." Swallowing with nervous tension, Tangelica watched, as unmoved, he took another sip of juice. "What is wrong with you?" She slapped the glass out of his hand in frustration. "Did the slag cast a spell on you?" Glaring, her sights followed him as he moved off the railing and walked straight past her. Dumbfounded, she pursued him.

Within the bedchamber, Tangelica hollered for him to stop, demanding that he talk to her. Marcale hesitated at the door, turned and with empty eyes, approached her.

"We are in no position to demand anything." Marcale walked out.

Opening the doors to the balcony, Vieanne's sights remained on the blood-red moon in blue skies. Never had it been visible, giving her a sense that the Necropolin was flaunting the inevitable. Within hours, the two moons would appear as one and day would become night, the beginning of the new era.

Having received insight into her brother's past, Vieanne concluded that Marcale was a victim and not responsible for what was about to take place. The old priestess had not brought him up as promised or in the manner befitting royalty. Artemis knew Marcale's fear and loneliness that the woman had nurtured, creating a life of misery for her brother. She now understood what Marcale yearned for, a warm touch and to be loved. Her heart ached for his position, able to only imagine what he was feeling.

Marcale knocked, but there was no answer. As he wished to make peace, he let himself in. Spotting the woman with her back towards him, as

he made way to the balcony, his eyes remained on her white garments. Nervously, he took a deep breath and thought to himself, what does a dead man have to lose. If repentance would see his very essence freed, then he would bow before the woman he loathed to find peace.

Standing behind her, Marcale momentarily closed his eyes, looking for strength to open his mouth. In a humble tone, he addressed her.

"Excuse the intrusion Artemis, but I must speak with you." With the woman turning to face him, Marcale's eyes opened widely. He suddenly felt sick to his stomach. "So, this is how it will be." His voice broke up, shattered by what he perceived this meant. "I die at the hands of my own sister." Crushed in spirit, his head slumped forward.

"No." Vianne expressed compassion. Moving slowly towards him, she knew there was nothing she could do to save him. Fighting back tears, she embraced her brother tightly. "It will not be by my hands but know this; it was not your fault." She paused, taking a moment to collect herself. "I promise you; I will tell our father. I know he will mourn the loss of his son." Vianne released him and their eyes met.

"I am not a bad man." Tears welled in Marcale's eyes. "She lied, deceived..."

"I know," Vianne interrupted him. "Like you, I had to make a choice. I truly believe we are both doing the right thing for the future of the Mariard."

"Promise me you will set things right; not only with our father, but also with the child." His sister's hesitation to answer had Marcale doubting his decision to face death as a repented king. It again crossed his mind to run, assuming evil would take the kingdom no matter what he did.

"I promise you this," Vianne said, "I will do everything in my power to not only exonerate you but give your heir a legacy befitting the Maroda name."

"Artemis was right, I was so wrong." Marcale expressed despair. "You must do what you can to save the ways of the Mariard."

"Oh, I intend to, but Artemis was not right. I am sorry, I cannot go into it further, but know this; you were not to blame, you were just a pawn in her game." With still much to oversee, she turned and began to walk towards the door.

"Vianne," Marcale blurted. "Tell me you will be there." His eyes pleaded, yet obviously she could not bring herself to turn and face him.

"I will be there." Vianne walked through the doors.

Having entered the adjoining chamber, Vianne drew a deep breath, wiping a tear having spilled onto her cheek. She picked up the book of kings from the table between the armchairs. Opening it to her father's portrait, without hesitation, she ripped out the page. Tossing the book into the hearth, she watched it catch alight on the red coals. Artemis's personal

writings, a book of prophecies, joined the other amongst the flames. There were two books missing, the history of their world and the true writings of the Mariard. One she wanted, the other would burn, and she knew exactly where to find them.

CHAPTER 3

In the council chamber, three members, out of twenty-five stood beside the long, polished table, fearing themselves right, regarding the couple's impurity. Though Vianne was not present, they fulfilled her instructions and saw the couple privately wed. She had confided her hopes to Marcale of the nuptials giving his unborn a chance of surviving the purification ceremony, being not a bastard but a Maroda. Little had been told to Tangelica, whose protest had her discreetly chastised by Marcale, having brought her into line.

Waiting in the great hall, guests and officials filled their glasses. The roar of chatter began to fade with the announcement that the royal couple were on route. Two large doors to the purification chamber opened. The priestess became the central focus as she came to stand on the balcony, overlooking the area. Silence began to fill with whispers. Vianne glanced over the crowd; obviously, they had expected Artemis.

The hood of Marcale's lengthy, white cloak shrouded his fear. Bare footed, he appeared from a side entrance, situated near the bottom of the staircase. The silent crowd watched a disgruntled bride emerge from the opposite side of the hall. Synchronised, the couple slowly moved up the staircases.

Identical to her husband's garment and draping the steps, Tangelica's cloak hid her nakedness. On making eye contact with Vianne, she stumbled on a step, proceeding after a long pause. The priestess's reserved expression stole her nervousness, replacing her stance with anger. Having not been informed of the transition, she assumed Vianne would make this difficult for her and further ruin her day.

The priestess silently led the couple into the chamber. Tangelica brushed past Vianne and in awe of the dome and huge disk, pranced about excitedly. Shortly we will expose Artemis as a liar, Tangelica thought, remaining confident the ritual was the work of the priestess's imagination. Ending Artemis's stronghold on the kingdom would see them in the history book and give them freedom to rule the Mariard, their way. Unbeknown to her, what was about to take place would see her widowed and disgraced.

Remaining close to his sister, Marcale feared distancing himself from her until he had to. His stomach churned with nerves and his hands trembled whilst holding the sides of the cloak together. Marcale's tone clearly expressed apprehension.

"What happens now?" He asked with eyes of dread, his fears almost over taking him.

“We wait.” Vianne retained a solemn expression.

Tangelica was relishing in thoughts of being only moments away from having it all. She would personally see to it that both Artemis and Vianne were banished from the kingdom. With only the three of them present, she sought answers from the priestess.

“Why is Artemis not here? How dare she send her apprentice to conduct such an important event.” Tangelica took offence with Marcale raising his voice at her.

“Hold your tongue woman; show some respect!” Marcale looked to his sister, who lifted her hand, gesturing to let Tangelica speak. Having come forward, Tangelica left little space between herself and Vianne, hoping her new status would intimidate the priestess.

“What have you done to make my husband cower so?”

“He embraced the truth.” Vianne passed her to stand on the outer ring. If Tangelica was not pregnant, she would not even be here. This was Vianne’s attempt to save the seed as promised. Tangelica sighed in a huff, not impressed that her husband quickly followed his sister.

The light in the chamber was slowly diminishing. Vianne asked Tangelica to remove the cloak and position herself on the twelfth ring from the centre. Begrudgingly, the new bride complied. Marcale did not have to be asked; hiding his manhood with his hands, he sheepishly presented himself in the centre as the head of the royal household. He looked up. The foretold eclipse was taking place and three heavenly spheres were aligning. The fiery glow of the second moon was replacing the whiteness of the Mariard moon; day was indeed becoming night, which saw the chamber bathed in red.

Having come to the centre of the disk, Vianne stared into her brother’s eyes. They exchanged no words, but Marcale forced a smile over quivering lips and straightened. He wanted his sister to know he would meet his end, as a repented man.

The priestess returned to the outer ring. Vianne briefly paused, looking at her brother before radiating a strong, blue aura. Raising her hands, Vianne’s chanting made the couple most anxious. The light reflecting off the walls began to rotate and intensify in brightness. Tangelica squealed in fright, a strange mist slid around her bare legs. Fear spurred temptation to move to the centre with her husband, who stood trembling with eyes fixed on his sister.

Retaining an aura, Vianne ceased chanting. On lowering her hands to her sides, she took the stance of a dignitary. Now restricted to the outer ring, the priestess could do nothing but watch. Though this was tearing Vianne up inside, she remained most alert to everything going on within the chamber.

A dark, shapeless form grew amidst the light to tower over her

brother. Marcale held back from cowering in its presence, yet Vieanne could feel his terror. From the corner of her eye, she glimpsed Tangelica dropping to the floor, having fainted out of fear.

The light faded to a luminous haze. Death itself stood in the inner circle, cloaked in black with a hood shadowing his features. Marcale's impurity had shown itself and the light of the Mariard could not shine through. This opened the door for the Necropolis representative to enter, whose very name honoured that which created him, and he would now serve.

The sensation emanating from Necropolis's red aura sent Marcale to the floor. Barely alive, the man lay incoherent at the new monarch's feet. Necropolis sensed the priestess's animosity. Looking across the ring to her, he fixed to memory every detail of his opponent. In turn, Vieanne was also securing a mental picture of her enemy. Sandals strapped to thick legs, a cloak partially concealing a long, sleeveless tunic covering a robust, muscular physique. His face remained shrouded in shadow, yet Vieanne suspected the epitome of evil.

"What do you wait for priestess?" His deep voice echoed throughout the chamber. "Your work here is done." Necropolis was eager to take his position.

Vieanne knew her presence locked up the outer ring and her opponent could not leave the inner circle until she left the chamber. She addressed him with authority.

"Necropolis, it is not finished. I make claim to the body when you are done." Vieanne felt him trying to get into her mind, but she was the stronger of the two and quickly blocked him out.

Not wanting to waste time or energy on this ritual, Necropolis probed Marcale's mind instead. What he obtained; he would delight in using to see the woman squirm.

"My heart bleeds for you Vieanne." His sarcasm and confidence he sensed annoyed her. "You shall have the body of your dear brother. Think of it as a parting gift, a reminder of what is to come." A change in tone reflected his loathing. "And believe me, I am going to come, and next time we meet, there will be no rings to protect you." His cloak flared to cover Marcale's body.

Vieanne looked down at the floor, assuming Necropolis would now make her brother suffer, just to spite her. Startled, her sights followed the body sliding across the rings to her feet. Though gripped with rage, she maintained a cold-calm expression. She had not expected Necropolis to char the body beyond recognition, which reduced to mere ash within seconds.

"A reminder of what is to come, priestess." Necropolis lowered the hood of his cloak, revealing lengthy, red, straight hair. His facial features

provoked the priestess to form tight fists at her sides.

“You may have stolen my brother’s appearance, but you do not have his essence.” Lowering to rest on one knee, Vieanne’s hand trembled as she took a little of the white ash, wanting him to think it for a burial urn. Hidden in the ash was a blue, glass bead, the true nature of the token would reveal what she wished kept secret from him. Already contemplating her next move, she rose to her feet.

Necropolis watched the woman calmly walk towards the exit. Before entering the corridor, she hesitated, turned, and stared at him for a moment. Unexpected, the priestess rushed a chant, which alarmed him into action.

The powerful, transparent surge of energy rippled the air. Necropolis heard the impact whilst running across the rings. He snatched up Tangelica and leapt to safety. Anger filled his expression, yet he refrained from looking back with the disk showering the area with sparks. With the woman hanging like a rag doll over his arm, Necropolis loudly cursed the priestess. He had no intentions of chasing after his opponent; the priestess was no fool and would have well planned her escape from a castle he was unfamiliar with.

Though having Marcale’s facial features, the rest of Necropolis made it blatantly clear that this was not her husband. Tangelica screamed with him towering over her nakedness. On all fours, she scrambled across the white, marble floor towards her cloak. Fear clouded her thoughts, as she reached out to grasp it. The large foot came down in the centre of the fabric, which had Tangelica glaring at it.

“The queen cowers at my feet.” Necropolis chuckled, before his tone abruptly soured. “Get up off the floor! The mother of my children is a queen, not that you deserve the title.” By the arm, he hauled the woman to her feet and snatching up the cloak from the floor, wrapped it around her shoulders. Tangelica could not look at him and now trembling uncontrollably, clutched the cloak together from within.

“It is time to greet our guests.” Necropolis shoved her in the back, pressing her to move with him.

Gasps were heard from the crowd with the man presenting himself; evidently, Marcale’s impurity had shown itself. The sound of doors slamming shut heightened fears. Service attendants voiced they were locked in, inciting guests to distance themselves from the staircases. With the great hall silent, they nervously awaited the man on the balcony to speak; however, he radiated a red aura and just stood there.

Necropolis eyed over a dozen or more high council members, along with guards, standing defensively at the front of the crowd. Their women folk suddenly began screaming, setting off panic. The selected males became ghostly pale, their eyes turned bloodshot, and they now just

stared ahead, void of expression. In synchronisation, the men moved a few steps forward, before coming to attention. Miraculously, their attire changed into matt-black armour, concealing their bodies, and helmets hid faces. Spiked clubs and swords appeared in their hands, making the transformation complete. A nod from Necropolis saw them turn and with weapons at the ready, face the crowd.

What this one man demonstrated in seconds was not only beyond comprehension but had men fearing to confront such power with the women folk present.

Resting luminous hands on the railing of the balcony, Necropolis was bored with gloating over terrified faces. It was time to give his speech.

"The Mariard is no more," Necropolis hollered, drawing all eyes to him. "I Necropolis now lord over your cities, your industries and the ground you walk on, but most of all, I lord over you!" He paused briefly, taking in the sensation of utter terror. "From this day forward, any man, woman or child who disobeys the new order, will be put to death!" He looked back, Tangelica was at hands reach.

Aware that his emanating energy could kill the woman, Necropolis took precautions to ensure his touch would not harm Tangelica; after all, she was to be the mother of his children. Pulling her forward for all to see, Tangelica stared vaguely at nothing in particular. Onlookers assumed their new queen was traumatised. Again, their attention shifted to Necropolis.

"This is the woman who betrayed you, as did the prince, but he has paid for his crimes in full!" Necropolis grasped Tangelica around the waist, pulling her hard against him. He anticipated gasps from amongst the guests, who had not expected him to kiss their queen hard on the lips. Unseen, his hand slipped under her cloak to rest on her abdomen. Within moments, Tangelica went limp, yet he maintained a firm grip on her.

Straightening, Necropolis grinned. Tangelica was so white in the features, anyone else would have thought her dead. Necropolis sensed the Player had done the deed. He did not have to see the blood trickling down her leg, trusting the Mariard seed was dead, and another planted in its place. Thriving on his accomplishment and the fear emitting within the great hall, Necropolis again addressed the crowd.

"Your queen bears the fruit of a new age! The bloodline of Maroda is dead. The Necropolin lineage begins. Let the celebrations continue!" Necropolis raised a brow of content, knowing what was to come.

Guest's attention shifted to the huge wall of windows. In the large courtyard beyond, castle staff, amongst others could be seen fleeing for their lives. Appearing as balls of fire, plummeting from the skies, their impact gouged lawns, crushed shrubs and some even tore through branches of trees. Amongst the haze, tall, armoured figures emerged with long, red plumes protruding from the top of helmets. Collecting in threes,

these combatants in armour began moving off to take up positions around the castle.

Necropolis smirked; the airdrop had been successful. Though it would take time to transport the creatures in from the desert region, he was confident he would soon have an elite army. He could now foresee them crushing his Mariard opponent, and well before either of their seeds came of age. The power he now possessed; he would do everything to keep. Thoughts of lording over everything Mariard, motivated him into action.

Again, silence befell the great hall. Carrying their queen's limp body in his arms, Necropolis moved down the staircase. The newly acquired high council came to attention, before following their new master out of the hall.