

Mariard
Volume 3
The Players Domain

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Mariard Volume 3 The Players Domain is
book 3 of 10 Volumes.
Nothing is what it seems, take nothing for granted.

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CHAPTER 1

Bare feet pounded on the worn floorboards. Sheer dread of his surroundings pressed Cathmore to run down the hallway of dirty walls and vandalised paintings in antiquated frames. Cathmore had woken to find himself in what appeared to be his bedchamber within the castle. The state of the room, red pyjama pants and a black robe assured him of a time he wished to forget and the realisation a new game had begun.

Without knocking, Cathmore entered the couple's room. It was what he feared; the bedchamber had once been Anndrosa's. Torn drapes allowed light to filter in and the smell only reminded him of drinking and fornication. His eyes darted about, catching glimpses of mistreated antiquated furnishings, floorboards having lost their shine, preserving the remnants of spilt red wine. What he perceived to be his half-sister's personal effects, amongst a male's, sat unorganised on the dressing table. The hearth retained broken glasses, which would soon be attended by a terrified aide, slaves as Anndrosa called them.

On the floor near the double bed, as though dropped carelessly the night before, a skimpy red vest and matching pants were partially covered by a black jacket. The design and gold embroidery on the front panels of the double-breasted garment further swayed Cathmore to think he was in the enemy's lair. For many years, he had personally worn the uniform of the Necropolin regime. Cautiously, Cathmore approached and placed a hand over his sleeping friend's mouth, not wanting to wake the naked woman lying on her stomach beside Malcom.

Half dazed, Malcom straightened. On top of the rude awakening, the sight of a brown haired woman in his bed made him glare.

"What's going on?" Malcom whispered, yet it dawned on him before his tense friend answered.

"New game and one that already has me worried. This is exactly what the castle was like when I left the Necropolin. They're Anndrosa's." Cathmore's eyes gestured the items on the dressing table.

"Hold on; one thing at a time." Not wanting their voices to wake another and concerned for his wife, Malcom slipped from the bed, drawing the sheet with him to cover his nakedness. "Who is she and where is..."

"Slave, aide." Cathmore corrected himself; the thought alone annoyed him. "Believe me, there are no morals here and if this is what I think it is, both Tegan and Rebecca are in the lounge." Cathmore had also woken to a stranger beside him; however, the woman in his bed had been strangled.

"The lounge?" This made no sense to Malcom.

“A night on the juice.” Personal experiences prompted a hint of embarrassment in Cathmore’s expression. “It won’t be a pretty sight I can assure you.”

“We have to find them.” Malcom took the black robe his friend grasped from the floor. Tying the belt, he snapped to attention with the bang on the door, which opened without invitation.

Wearing a red uniform, the tall man was accompanied by two Death Walkers. These Death Walkers wore full body armour in rustic shades, their occupants being possessed Milonights from the desert region. Though the two guards held their rifles in an unthreatening manner, the familiar face of the man had Cathmore mumbled under his breath.

“We’re dead.”

“My Lords,” the bald man in his mid-thirties addressed Cathmore then Malcom with a bow. He glanced at the bed before gesturing with a nod for the guards to take the female from the chamber.

“General Heinrich.” Cathmore did not mean it to be a greeting, having only spoken his thoughts aloud. Well aware of the man’s ruthlessness, he never thought he would lay eyes on the General again. Having been a power onto himself, Heinrich had been immensely feared in the old regime. If the circumstances were clearer, Cathmore would not hesitate to kill the man where he stood, seeing Heinrich as a brutal murderer. The General addressed both men, yet his sights focused on him.

“Your brother has not yet stirred and I do not have time to wait. We extracted vital information from two rebels captured in the fourth dome. I am acting upon this immediately; convey this to him on his rising.” Heinrich bowed his head and turned to leave.

“Wait.” Cathmore drew the General’s attention back to him. Obviously, he had authority over Heinrich and sought to get a clearer picture. “What rebels are you referring to?” His question prompted Heinrich to express a hint of annoyance.

The General perceived that as usual, the men were hung over from a night of drinking and were not coherent enough to understand simple instruction.

“The Necropolin spies were infiltrating as workers within the castle. All staff will be interrogated; I will not see the safety of the royal household compromised.” Heinrich left the room.

Gripped by his own conclusions, Cathmore ran a nervous hand through his untidy, lengthy, blonde locks. Indeed he had formed a clearer picture, already perceiving they would lose this game play. Now able to speak freely, Malcom questioned him.

“What’s going on here? Obviously you know him.” Uneasy, Malcom watched Cathmore approach and open the wardrobe. Whilst hastily selecting clothing, his friend answered him.

“He was Necropolis’ right hand man; a sadistic murderer with absolutely no conscience. Here, put these on.” Cathmore handed his friend a shirt, black uniform pants and a jacket identical to the one on the floor beside the bed. Malcom spoke his thoughts.

“Let’s just find the others and get out of here.”

“And go where? If I’m right, we’re the bad guys and the Necropolin are the...”

“You’ve got to be joking!” Malcom glared; the thought alone unnerving. “That means...”

“A role reversal of some kind.” Cathmore sighed. “What are we supposed to do; help the Necropolin win the game and the board?”

“If we are the enemy, the other team are...”

“The rebels.” Unnerved, Cathmore thought his aunt insane for agreeing to such a game play.

“They’ve captured two of them. Are they pawns or gifted?” Malcom was unprepared for a chilling response.

“They’re already dead.” With his mind racing, Cathmore ran a nervous hand over his unshaven jaw line, his sights looking at nothing in particular.

“How do you know?” Malcom put on the jacket, ignoring that the clothes were a perfect fit and in fact, created for him.

“I know General Heinrich; no one leaves his interrogation unit alive.” Their eyes met. “You wake Nathaniel. I’ll get dressed and meet you both in the lounge. Whatever you do...” Cathmore paused, trying to think of a way to put it. “Just don’t be nice to anyone.” Acknowledged with a nod, he hastily left the room.

Cathmore resented putting on attire he had personally designed when with the Necropolin. Insulting was the Mariard emblems in enemy colours and tempting was it to rip them from the upper sleeves of the jacket. Sitting on the edge of the double bed, he straightened the hem of tailored pants to cover slip on boots. Rising to his feet, the draping, black, ankle-length coat made Cathmore cringe, aware he would stand out as he had before. Noticed was the undesirable female attire within the wardrobe, the skimpy red and black leather garments he assumed were there for Rebecca. Other items in his chamber included bottles of fragrant oils, hair ornamentation, knee-high boots with pointy heels and a brush containing hair consistent with his wife’s mousy brown colouring.

Contemplating General Heinrich’s attitude towards him and Malcom, Cathmore believed they were in no immediate danger; nonetheless, he knew how this evil realm operated. Although the thought disturbed him, he perceived they should act in accordance with their situation, just until they learnt more and could devise their own plans.

His surroundings were a vivid reminder of what he had once been and hated so much that it pained him. The game already had Cathmore infuriated, considering the struggles he had faced to become a Mariard member and overcome his own dark nature, likening his present situation to reliving a nightmare.

The thought of even participating in such a game play had Cathmore clearing the mantelpiece of candleholders and used goblets with a swipe of his hand. He could not do this again; inflict cruelty and pain to survive his circumstances nor drink himself into oblivion to forget who he was. A moment of enlightenment had Cathmore seeing his own growth in specific areas. He had not cowered in the presence of the General. Gone was the fear of the man's influence and authority within the regime and over him personally. With renewed strength and confidence, Cathmore promised himself that before this game was through, the General would not only cower before him, but he would see the man dead.

It was what Cathmore expected to find. The trashed lounge area from the previous night's events saw broken glasses, spilt wine and half-eaten foodstuffs covering a low table and littering the rug-covered floor. High-ranking military personnel were sprawled out over couches or wherever they had fallen in drunken stupors. Both male and female slaves bore the evidence of brutality and the cause of their deaths. Amongst this were his wife, cousin and Yamane; the three women wore similar skimpy red and black leather attire.

Gently moving the man's muscular arm from his wife's waist, Cathmore woke Rebecca in the same manner as he had Malcom. With her eyes glaring at him, he gestured to be silent. Not wanting his wife seeing what disgusted him, fearing it would alarm her, he scooped Rebecca up, forcing her face into his chest.

Out in the hallway, Cathmore kept a low tone, he would explain shortly. He wanted Rebecca to be silent and just wait for him whilst he brought out his cousin and Yamane. The look in his wife's eyes told him she was not only aware they were in a game, but she was already on edge.

Standing together, the three women expressed disapproval of their attire, made entirely of leather strapping, buckles and studs. The amount of exposed flesh had them shivering and feeling embarrassed. Uncomfortable metal clasps held Yamane and Rebecca's hair tightly back in high ponytails. Cathmore hid his uneasiness with Tegan's messy hair. Although knowing better, it gave him the impression of a rowdy time, prompting bad memories of such debauched parties.

"We are in a new game, aren't we?" Rebecca further tensed with her husband's nod and the state of the ground floor hallway. "Where is Ghillian?"

"The children aren't here, thank goodness. You're not going to like this game at all." Cathmore glanced up and down the hall, eager for others of the team to join them.

"Where's Triligen?" Tegan asked with arms folded across her chest to cover what she considered little more than nudity.

"I thought she'd be in the lounge. When Malcom and Nathaniel get here..." Cathmore suddenly noticed the two men hastily coming towards the group. Their black uniforms were exclusive to royal members of the household; Nathaniel's jacket held the most decorations. Cathmore addressed his panting cousin. "We're all here except Triligen."

"She is not in her chambers, we looked." Nathaniel glared at his wife, expressing her awkwardness.

"What is going on?" Yamane's distinct Bedulin accent conveyed she feared the worst. Her husband shrugged and both shifted their sights to Cathmore.

"Perhaps she wasn't put into play." Cathmore hoped this to be the case for Triligen's sake. "Let's go to the library, we can talk privately there." He guided his wife forward.

Moving down the hallway of the ground floor wing, a ragged slave cowered with the group approaching. Nathaniel was about to air concern to who he perceived an elderly woman, but Cathmore grasped him by the sleeve, prompting him onward.

"Don't speak to them unless you have to." Cathmore anticipated being questioned and continued. "You haven't the heart to treat them as the Necropolin do. It's not her age that sent her hair white, its fear."

Many of the bulbs had blown in the chandeliers. Only one amongst the group was not surprised to see the large library area desecrated and none of its historic memorabilia present. Bookcases bore axe marks whilst others had been torn from their wall mounts. Considered irreplaceable works, dusty pages ripped from their bindings littered the entire library. Centred, the polished surface of the large antiquated table had been ruined by spilt wax from the silver candleholders, broken glasses, wine stains and the crude carvings of Malcom and Nathaniel's initials.

"I didn't do this!" Malcom glanced over their faces, overwhelmed it incriminated him.

"Neither did I." Nathaniel aired disappointment. The library was his favourite chamber in the Mariard castle and although the setting was that of his grandfather's time, he reminded himself that all was not what it seemed.

Sitting around the table on chairs with slashed upholstery, the group sought Cathmore's thoughts on the new game. It appeared they were in some form of role reversal, perceiving they represented evil and could only assume the Necropolin were the rebels. The replica of their home was in the exact state prior to his defection, right down to clothing and General Heinrich.

On the subject of the man, the General's loyalty to the regime saw him richly rewarded. Although Heinrich never overstepped his boundaries, Necropolis and Anndrosa gave him power and the freedom to do as he pleased. Anndrosa also paid him in sexual favours to do her dirty work. At the time, Heinrich did not hide the fact that he thought Cathmore a weak-link and a drunk. Although the General showed some respect for his royal status, he not only turned a blind eye to Anndrosa's cruelty towards him, but also encouraged it. The General's influence on Necropolis and his half-sister made Cathmore feel alone, having had no one to turn to. This explained why he feared all of them and had just done what was expected of him.

The thought of the Necropolin player, having reintroduced the epitome of evil back into this game, sparked another recollection to mind. Distraction stopped Cathmore from conveying aloud what made him cringe. With the library door creaking open, Cathmore rose to his feet. He was not the only one who relaxed a little on eyeing a slave letting Triligen in, before closing the door behind her.

A black vest and skirt with a split front showed Triligen's shapely legs. Clearly, she was shaken, reinforcing Cathmore's fears regarding their situation. Nathaniel quickly pulled out a chair for Triligen, who could not bring herself to make eye contact with anyone. She took a moment before speaking up.

"I, ah, presume we are in a new game." Triligen's fear caused shallow breath. "I awoke beside..." She paused, unable to bring herself to speak the name. "Apparently I am the master's concubine."

"Damn it!" Cathmore spat angrily. "Necropolis is here too." The urge to go on a killing rampage was strong. Like the others, Cathmore saw Triligen as a family member, whose heartfelt love and wisdom was a blessing to them. He thought it sacrilege that a woman of her grace, intelligence and purest beauty should be degraded in this manner. Moving to the seated woman, Cathmore took her hand of white pearl pigmentation in his.

"I am so sorry; I should have known. I didn't think to search the other chambers for you." Cathmore's eyes expressed deep remorse. Triligen gently rubbed the back of his hand, sensing incompetence in his gifting, which greatly disturbed him.

"Oh Cathmore, you have nothing to be sorry for; after all, it is a game. I am just a little overwhelmed. When I awoke in his presence, I thought for a moment I had been captured." She glanced nervously at Malcom.

"Perhaps that's what we need to..."

"Capture," Nathaniel interrupted, shaking his head. "We cannot capture what is already Mariard owned. As you know, the book of rules spans many games and what is relevant in one play may not be relevant in another." His sights shifted to Triligen, who though feeling a little more relaxed in the company of her friends, continued to firmly hold Cathmore's hand.

“So what is actually happening here?” Triligen asked, addressing no one in particular. Nathaniel snapped angrily.

“A nightmare, that’s what’s bloody happening!” His wife thought his tone uncalled for.

“She was only asking Nathaniel.” Yamane saw his expression change to one of total embarrassment.

“My sincerest apologies Triligen; I don’t know what came...” His sister cut him short.

“Practice what you preach Nathaniel.” Tegan thought her brother had been rude. “In game play we have to consider our emotions and...”

“I know what I said and thank you for the reminder.” Nathaniel forced a smile. “We all made the policy to support and forgive one another during game play, no matter what the issue.”

“Don’t worry Nathaniel...” Malcom shifted his focus to Tegan. “I’ll keep my temper under check.” He would rather seek an answer to their immediate problem than go over past discussions. Though no team member would be held responsible for actions out of their control, it was the responsibility of each individual to apply lessons learnt.

Again, Cathmore was asked to give any information pertaining to their surroundings and those in it. Clearly too all listening, Cathmore could not stress enough the danger they were in.

The Necropolin team and hierarchy treated slaves as disposable items. Abuse and cold-blooded murder were a way of life for the underprivileged. For everyone’s sake, it was best to avoid using manners or even speaking to a slave unless in the privacy of their bed chambers. Cathmore knew all too well the repercussions of pleasantries and favouritism towards those thought dirt. They should also not react to suggestive behaviour. Hierarchy flirted and conducted unspeakable acts, and not all was done in private.

Earlier, whilst getting dressed in his room, Cathmore had spoken to the elderly gentleman stoking the fire. The aide cowered in fear, as did all staff of the household when in the presence of authority.

“I asked of the children...” Cathmore’s sights shot to Malcom with his friend interrupting.

“What children?” Malcom aired intolerance. All eyes were on him, dismayed at the statement. His son’s name suddenly came to mind and in turn, his expression changed to one shaken. “Simon,” Malcom blurted.

“There are no children here; well, not in the castle.” Cathmore continued to rationally look at Malcom, assuming the shock of their surroundings clouded his friend’s thoughts. “I suspect the aide now thinks we’ll go after their children.” His wife drew his attention.

“I can’t sense Ghillian or Simon’s energy signatures.” This did not make Rebecca feel any better nor did her husband’s response.

"If this is a role reversal, I don't see our opponents playing parents; they have no offspring of their own. Besides, we ourselves could not enter the play until twenty-one." Cathmore's sights shifted to his cousin, whose tone reflected her fears.

"I won't rest until I'm certain." Tegan only glanced with Rebecca responding.

"Neither will I, but how can we make enquiries without drawing suspicion?"

"Rebels," Malcom answered. "We talk to the aides; maybe they can get a message out. Heinrich did say informants were caught in the castle."

"No." Nathaniel leant forward, resting his elbows on the table. "We don't know the full story. These rebels..."

"Us," Cathmore interrupted. "In the first game, the Necropolin referred to you and anyone associated with the Mariard as rebels."

"What do you mean us?" Nathaniel snapped angrily. "You were on the other team and part of the bloody problem." With all at the table silently glaring at him, Nathaniel suddenly went rigid in disbelief. "I... I didn't mean to say... My deepest apologies Cathmore, it was totally the opposite of what I was thinking." His sights shot to his brother-in-law, who became the centre of attention.

"Yeah, sure it was," Malcom scoffed. "You're such a weak bastard Nathaniel. Stop crawling to get..." Slapping his hand over his mouth, his eyes burst wide open in shock.

"Oh crap," Cathmore muttered, his tone becoming louder. "Oh please no." A sensation of numbness ran through him. "We're in trouble." The thought of the team turning into that which he hated the most, totally unnerved him.

"We can handle this." Nathaniel conveyed doubt in his tone. "We have to remain calm and..." He sighed. "I feel so damn irritable." Closing his eyes, he rubbed his forehead with his fingertips.

Leaning towards her husband, Yamane rested a comforting hand on Nathaniel's back. Wanting answers and with concern evident, she looked to Cathmore, who diverted his eyes, drawing a deep breath to calm his nerves before speaking up.

"I'm going to be blatantly honest here." Cathmore glanced over worried faces, all anticipating a full role reversal. "You can't begin to imagine what evil this place churned out. There was no family unit here and Necropolis... Malcom?" He noticed his friend was distant. Having drawn Malcom's attention, the underlying animosity in his tone was cause for alarm.

"I'd watch what you say Cathmore, the walls have ears. Heinrich executed two of the vermin and until he weeds out the rest..." Malcom jerked himself out of the chair. The realisation of what he was saying had him

glaring. Unbefitting his character, the emotional sensations caused a sense of panic and he took deep breaths, trying to calm himself.

"I had no control over it." With his wife at his side, Malcom drew more breaths before continuing. "I had this ah, overwhelming sensation come over me. It's like..."

"Darkness," Cathmore interrupted. Malcom acknowledged with a nod and still shaken, responded.

"Look, I want to apologise now for anything I say or do that hurts anyone." Malcom again eyed Cathmore. "You know what to do if it gets out of hand..." He sighed relieved. "It's subsiding thank goodness." On sitting down, Malcom took his wife's hand in his. He could now sense her terror with his gifting. His brother-in-law drew his attention.

"I felt the same thing." Nathaniel hoped they were the only two affected and shifted his sights to his cousin. "But I also felt this fear of you, like you wanted something from me." He had no idea what it was.

"The crown." Cathmore sighed, shaking his head disillusioned. "Oh jeepers, it will distort our perception of reality. Our insecurities will..."

"I'd watch your back Nathaniel," Rebecca interrupted with a cold look in her eyes. "Why shouldn't he wear the crown? Cathmore is stronger than you, a better man in fact." Rebecca's expression changed with her coming back to reality. Yamane suddenly snarled at her.

"How dare you speak to him like that. Show some respect or I'll beat it into..." Yamane abruptly gasped. Stunned, she was about to apologise yet Rebecca got in first. Both women felt so awful and embarrassed, their experience left them on the verge of tears.

Terrified by her own thoughts, Tegan fought to remain calm. Her capture in the last game was not the issue; the vicious character reference Lamech had implied now churned her gut. Squeezing her husband's hand, she addressed her cousin.

"Cathmore..." Their eyes met. "We should leave here, go to the city. Perhaps it's something in the air, like what happened with Rebecca and I in the dead lands."

Thinking Tegan had made a valid point, Cathmore hastily made his way over the mess to the back of the library. Closed, dusty drapes covered tall, leadlight windows. He wanted to look out over the city, already expecting to see it dismal as in the first game. Drawing the drapes open, Cathmore stood flabbergasted. The others came to join him.

In their eyes, this was a game board unlike anything ever seen before. The castle and its entire grounds were under a colossal dome constructed of what appeared as massive panes of triangular glass framed in raw metal, tubular steel. Patches of white and grey cloud formations implied a poorly projected image of the sky on the panes. The dome itself was elevated, enabling them to see beyond to the tops of additional domes.

Made of the same materials, a great semicircular tunnel protruded from the dome and ran between the structures, enormous in comparison to the one they were in. Equally distanced apart, one row of domes mirrored the other. The domes were connected to a central, elongated, mainframe; unseen were the smaller tunnels linking the structures. Distance prevented the team from seeing what lay beyond the mainframe, yet they suspected another elevated dome accommodating their opponents.

Although containing vast modern cities, those within the first three domes were in ruins and without power or amenities from battles won by the Mariard regime. Medically induced brainwashing turned the majority of captives into combatants where others were utilised as slave labour. Relocation of concentration camps came with the push forward, leaving only pockets of scavengers living in the shadows of rubble. Electric powered trains passed through the domes, carting slaves to and from designated work areas within the castle and its grounds. This left the main tunnel open to ensure safe passage of troops, weapons and even royal or military dignitaries, who were couriered in airborne transportation.

This massive structure was not on a surface but surrounded by blackness. To one side of the dome, the group could just make out the top of a sphere. It appeared to be the Mariard world itself and they presumed Eden was out there also. On opposite sides, the two familiar moons, one blue-grey, the other blood red, cast light on the game board. The sense of being closely watched by the players only furthered tensions with thoughts of the Necropolin having planned a dirty challenge to rob them of a win.

The gifted did not know what to make of it. Nathaniel reminded his team it was a game to be played out with millions of pawns at stake and a game board to be saved. In his opinion, it was no use them running away when they had no idea what the situation was. A combination of the unknown and panicking could see them in a worse position than they were now.

The library door edged open, diverting the team's attention. Trembling, the young male slave announced their breakfast awaited them in the dining room. Looking over nervous faces, Cathmore wanted everyone to follow his lead. This was not going to be easy, considering their morals and beliefs. A wrong reaction could give them away, which he feared happening.

CHAPTER 2

Dreading this moment, Cathmore knew who would be seated at the head of the table. The temptation to engage a weapon and kill the one he once feared and called father, nagged at him. Standing in the doorway to the large dining hall, Cathmore eyed worn drapes, empty discoloured spaces where paintings had adorned walls. Recklessness and vandalism marred the surface of the lengthy table laid out for breakfast. Surprisingly, settings and platters displayed a little dignity in comparison to what Cathmore remembered.

Dressed in black robes, Necropolis sat exactly where Cathmore thought he would, at the head of the table, eating his breakfast. Though still working on self-worth issues, he now looked at this man in a different light. Grey, instead of fiery red hair, hung loosely around the lanky man's shoulders. A frail appearance masked evil and dampened the threat in a facade of weakness. Only their situation and the unknown kept Cathmore on edge; Necropolis himself no longer held him emotionally bound.

The Master looked up from his plate. Although he retained the facial features of Marcale Maroda, Cathmore's true father, Necropolis had notably aged. Perceiving a disgruntled player inflicted the decrepit state on his enemy, Cathmore thought it just, considering his loathing of the man. Necropolis wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before addressing him in a raspy deep voice.

"You just going to stand there and stare at me boy?" His foot forced a high-backed chair out for him to be seated. "It is not often a son of mine graces my table." Noticing others behind Cathmore, Necropolis aired disgruntled sarcasm. "So, what is the occasion? Something must have happened for my sons to drag themselves from their beds." Necropolis awaited an explanation.

Cathmore knew what he wanted to do, yet refrain from striking out at Necropolis, thinking it in the team's best interest to dig for information. The rude jab in the ribs from an elbow and Nathaniel's snarling remark both startled and unnerved him.

"Father is talking to you!" Nathaniel had only taken a couple of steps forward when he suddenly pulled himself up. Subsiding, the sensation of hatred and aggression had been more intense than previously experienced. Shaken, Nathaniel's focus remained on Necropolis, who spoke out to him.

"Your indulgence again sees you poorly. Vomit in my presence and I'll wipe the floor with you." Necropolis was unimpressed. Having moved a little forward within the group, Triligen, now visible, sparked a change of mood. "Triligen my beauty; come, join me."

The mere sight of his concubine brought delight to Necropolis. Unbeknown to him, his recollections and fondness for Triligen were implanted thoughts and feelings. To the Master, several weeks had passed since the spoils of war rewarded him with such a beauty. Out of all those he bedded; the woman had become his favourite. With the group remaining silent and Triligen having not come to him, he became angry.

“What is the matter with you all?” Necropolis slammed his fist on the table. “Either come in or get out! Triligen, come to me!” Cathmore moved in front of his concubine, cutting off his view of her.

Standing defiantly, Cathmore said the first thing that came to mind, perceiving it the only way to protect Triligen.

“I have taken her for my own, find another.” From behind, the strike to his side sent him onto one knee. Grasped by the hair, his head went back, forcing eye contact with an angry Malcom.

“How dare you even consider touching father’s property let alone making claim to it!” Malcom shoved his friend’s head forward; his eyes followed Cathmore to his feet. “What’s the matter with you, not enough women around here to satisfy your hobby?” Malcom shifted his sights to Tegan and though his expression remained unchanged, his tone lowered. “Been depriving him, have you? Looks like I’m not the only one who can’t satisfy you.” Malcom did not expect Cathmore to strike him for what he implied. Before Nathaniel could step in, his brother-in-law retaliated. Having lunged at Cathmore, the force sent both men onto the table displacing crockery and other items.

Amused by the brawl, Necropolis chuckled, assuming Nathaniel was about to get involved. However, the man he believed to be one of three sons, grasped Malcom, stopping him from delivering another blow.

With a bloody nose and reality gripping him, Malcom glared at Cathmore on the floor. Shaken, he did not fight to free himself from his brother-in-law’s hold on him.

“Jeepers...” Malcom panted. “We have to get out of here.” Released, he offered a hand of assistance, which his friend accepted. Rising to his feet, Cathmore wiped blood from a split lip.

The sound of clapping hands drew the three men to look at Necropolis.

“Bravo, my sons would rather entertain than eat with their father. So be it.” His grin slowly faded with the men backing away.

Regrouping, Malcom placed his hand on his friend’s shoulder and was about to apologise when his sights shot to Rebecca, who addressed her husband with contempt.

“And you wonder why I don’t come to our bed.” Eyeing Malcom, Rebecca spoke to him in the same manner. “Try being a man, perhaps then you’ll keep that whore of a wife of yours under control.” Rebecca grasped

Triligen by the wrist. “What the Master wants, the Master gets.” She intended to take Triligen to Necropolis. Both Tegan and Yamane intervened, abruptly hauling Rebecca out into the hallway, leaving the men to decide what to do next.

Although having been shocked by Rebecca’s remarks, the two women understood this to be the talk and actions of a team member under a mysterious influence. On edge and scared, Yamane retained a firm hold on Rebecca’s arms whilst trying to calm her.

“Just try to relax. Clear your mind.” She glanced worried over Rebecca’s shoulder at her sister-in-law standing behind. Tegan wanted to render her friend unconscious, fearing Rebecca a threat to the team if she did not snap out of it.

Furiously, Rebecca addressed Yamane as though Tegan was not even present.

“We have to stop cowering to the slag! She only sleeps with Nathaniel to control him and mine just to spite me.” Rebecca took little notice of the change in Yamane’s expression. In response, the tone Yamane used aired a fear of Tegan and she too, appeared not to acknowledge her sister-in-law’s presence.

“What does it matter, they are nothing but pigs. Better to side with a winner than those she will crush. Whether you like it or not, she has influence and knows what she is doing.”

“I despise her.” Rebecca’s cold expression began to relax.

“You’re not the only one wanting to cut her throat, there are...” Yamane went silent, confused by Rebecca’s quivering lips and fearing eyes welling with tears. The darkness gripping her relinquished its hold; Yamane froze with reality returning. Both women stared at each other for a moment, before looking to Nathaniel, having overheard it all.

Seeing his wife so shaken, Nathaniel slipped his arm around Yamane, drawing her into him.

“It’s all right.” Nathaniel comforted, wishing he could reassure her they would get through this, yet unable to, as he doubted this himself.

Feeling sick to her stomach, Rebecca embraced Tegan. It was all she could do to express her remorse with her unable to find words in her fight to stop herself from shedding a deluge of tears. The dark episode triggered recollections of another time when her friend drove the fear of death into her; a sensation she could not shake.

The chill in the air only contributed to Tegan’s trembling. She wanted out of the castle, but more so out of the game. What Lamech had said about her, now rang true. Yamane and Rebecca portrayed her as a scoundrel, having implied they were not the only ones scared of her. The mention of sexual relations with her own brother knotted her gut. Though aware none of this was true and only implanted thoughts, it alarmed her to think what lay ahead

of her. She would rather distance herself from the team than hurt those she loved. With them all coming together in the hallway, she put on a brave front.

The lack of conscience and implanted thoughts were slowly surfacing. What Nathaniel had already felt and witnessed raised fears of them killing each other if they did not find a prompt solution.

“Take nothing personally Tegan.” Nathaniel’s heart went out to his sister, sensing her inner panic. “They are just using you, like they did in last game. We must hold to our policy of...” Abruptly distracted, Nathaniel looked to Triligen, who Necropolis had yelled for.

Though terrified, Triligen assumed she could talk her way out of breakfast and re-join the group in the library. Cathmore protested, he would rather fight Necropolis to the death than put her at risk. Triligen insisted, hoping to buy them time to work through what she saw crucial to the team’s survival and the outcome of the game. Again, being called, Triligen warmly touched Cathmore’s cheek, having sensed his torment with her gifting. The man’s stableness of mind and knowledge had the team looking to him for guidance in the crisis.

“You must let me go,” Triligen uttered, “for everyone’s sake.” Clearly, she could see the struggle in Cathmore’s eyes and tense features. She did not shift her sights from him with her friend looking to his cousin and Malcom for their input.

“It’s your call.” Malcom had faith in the man, especially considering the situation. Nathaniel also responded.

“You know him better than any. Triligen is right, we need time, but if you think running is a better option...” His cousin interrupted.

“I won’t run from him.” Cathmore would rather kill Necropolis than flee like a coward. His focus returned to Triligen. “If you feel threatened in the slightest...”

“I will leave immediately.”

“We’ll be in the library.” Watching Triligen walk away had Cathmore already regretting his decision; a bad feeling about this made him further tense. He wanted to call her back yet perceived she would not change her mind.

The slave closed the dining room door on the orders of the Master. A new setting had been placed for his concubine. On sitting, Triligen was unable to bring herself to look up at the towering Necropolis, who stood beside her. She hid disgust of him in forced pleasantries though her trembling was felt with him taking her hand in his.

Necropolis delighted in other’s fear of him and under the circumstance assumed Triligen’s a state of anxiousness considering Cathmore’s claim. When in her presence, his cruel and intimidating nature softened due to his fondness of her; nonetheless, he would not relinquish control for anyone.

“So, my son desires you,” Necropolis scoffed. “He is not the only one, though he is the first to say this to my face. The boy has good taste like his father. Your beauty is rare and befitting a queen, my queen.” Intolerance came into his eyes; his hand glided down the back of the soft, hooded skin covering Triligen’s head. Kissing her cheek, he felt the woman cringe, alerting him to his concubine’s behaviour.

Implanted recollections portrayed Triligen as a sensual and loyal partner whose willingness to please him had earned her status and favouritism. Her response was out of character and his tone aired his suspicions.

“You appear nervous, is there something you wish to discuss with me?” Her silence spurred him to continue. “You are more than just property to me Triligen, I will kill anyone who touches you and I mean anyone.” It crossed his mind to have Cathmore dragged back to the dining room and beaten in front of her to show who headed the regime.

Fearing repercussions, Triligen raised her eyes to him and forced a smile. Her intentions were to defuse the situation by playing on his ego. The risk of being outspoken, she would take in her attempt to protect those dear to her. Though defending Cathmore, she came across as one seeking family unity rather than protecting a lover.

“Do not be too hard on Cathmore. There is much tension between him and his... brothers. They fight only for your attention and will say and do anything to get it. You said it yourself; your son has good taste, like his father. Why should they not strive to be like you, their mentor and king?” Necropolis’s grin gave the impression she had won him over; however, her hand rose with his and she began to feel insecure with him wanting her to stand. It crossed her mind that if they left the room together, there was no getting away from him.

Towering Triligen, the master’s arm slipped round her. The woman stiffened with her body held hard-pressed against his. Necropolis’s confident features revealed his lust whilst eyeing over her soft, pearl complexion, tense with uncertainty.

“If my son touches you, I will kill him myself and give his wife over to the General for his pleasure.”

Startled, Triligen felt Necropolis’s hand firmly on the back of her head. He followed through with a hard kiss to her paling lips. Frozen to the spot, she dreaded the consequences of pushing him away, though desperately wanted to. Her friend’s life depended on what she did at this moment. It also crossed her mind that with others of the team changing in character, they too could turn on her.

Considering her morals and who this man was, the master’s mouth caressing her neck felt so vile, Triligen became nauseous. For a moment, she assumed he wished only a show of affection from her. In thought, she was

screaming at herself to just do it, give him an embrace to convince him Cathmore was no threat. Her fingernails could easily gouge into his back instead of tenderly stroking wasting muscles under his garment. His hand slipping under the apron of skin covering her breasts made his intentions clearer. Though fear and disgust gripped her, Triligen bit down hard on her tongue to the point of tasting blood. It took everything within her not to strike out and run. She did not think Necropolis would take this any further than fondling with them not in the privacy of a bedchamber. The survival of the team far outweighed her dignity and many a sacrifice had been made by others in times of trials. Whilst trying to hold to this, what was taking place; she would dare not confess and would endure what she could for the team's sake.

CHAPTER 3

The time already spent in the library was revealing their worst nightmare. The curse, as the team now called it, stressed Cathmore and was leading him to despair. Being the only one unaffected, the team so occupied Cathmore that he had not the chance to seek out the missing member. Earlier, it did cross his mind that Triligen had fallen victim to the curse, which plausibly explained her delay.

Though drifting between realities, those affected spoke candidly of their experience in order to give information that may spark an answer to their plight. From what they had already gathered, the three men were supposedly the sons of Necropolis; power and succession to the throne caused bitter rivalry. The deception of family ties felt like a personal attack to Cathmore. Not only had the Necropolin player lost a valuable gift in the first game, but the man had also won the last for the Mariard. Necropolis was just a puppet for the father of all evil, who wished to flaunt that he was running the show.

The three women were supposedly gifted creations and wives in title only. A relationship between brother and sister was unthinkable and sparked Nathanial to question his cousin. Cathmore denied being intimate with Anndrosa and although concealing many dark secrets, this was not one of them. He reminded them to who they were dealing with and the sordid depths the player would go to in his quest to win.

Specific recollections from the last game still haunted Tegan. The enemy's strategy felt like an ongoing attack from Lamech. Portrayed as a sexual deviate cut to the bone and she now had the added worry of unnatural relations with her own brother. Repeated reminders, not to take things personally, wore thin. Tormented by her own thoughts, the enemy using her to hurt the team spurred fierce resentment. Humiliation gave into anger, enabling her to maintain a brave front. Unbeknown to her, Tegan's own hatred for their opponents was prolonging the inevitable.

Confessions of intimidation and fear only added to Cathmore's painful recollections and alarm. Surfacing was a threat far crueller and controlling than Anndrosa herself. At this point, he would not add to the tension by airing his concerns regarding Tegan as an opponent.

According to Malcom, he had felt a sense of deep hatred and hostility towards all, including the one he called father. A captive to his lust contributed to the love hate relationship with his wife. The inability to control Tegan divided the couple and challenged his ego. He resented the influence she had on others, but more so, her ability to humiliate him. Inciting Nathanial and Cathmore against each other, Malcom thought a cowardly

trait, yet one his alternate character thrived on. He knew something was eating at him but could not put his finger on it at this time.

Uncertain to what the group was retaining during irrational exchange, Cathmore felt more compelled to hold back that which he thought detrimental if exposed. Nothing had been mentioned regarding subconscious knowledge, individual talents and Malcom's unique gifting. If correct, their ignorance would give him the advantage.

Becoming clearer was Malcom's conceit to see himself the favoured son. Nathaniel agreed with this, adding it caused jealousy within his own dark character. He felt he was experiencing a deep-rooted fear, struggling in his attempt to be recognised by Necropolis. This he assumed stemmed from self-worth issues pertaining to leadership, which he thought he had overcome. Nathaniel wanted to be blatantly honest, as he could see a pattern emerging amongst them. His alternated state conjured thoughts and feelings of inferiority, fear of Malcom, but more so of Cathmore for some unknown reason.

Holding his wife's hand, Nathaniel told Yamane he loved her dearly before openly admitting that during the episodes, he wanted to be free of her. Although appalled and embarrassed, he felt duty-bound to continue. He wanted all the wives to lust after him to humiliate Malcom and Cathmore, whom made him feel weak, especially in the presence of Necropolis. The interest Tegan expressed in him encouraged a dependency built on fantasy. Considering his morals, such feelings towards his own sister during these episodes were purely despicable.

His wife could relate to a loveless relationship. Yamane only tolerated Nathaniel to retain her position. There were no recollections to why any of them married in the first place. Perceiving this not important, she conveyed her loathing of Tegan and Rebecca; however, at the same time felt a bond with them. The three fought the same struggles regarding male dominance within the regime.

During intervals of reality, Rebecca gave into tears. Her bitter alternate character saw her husband weak in ambition and nature. She intends to manipulate Cathmore into killing his so-called brothers for the throne. Put mildly, she too disliked Tegan and Yamane, agreeing a bond existed, as though they needed to stick together for their own safety. Unable to speak her feelings aloud, Rebecca whispered them to her husband.

Well aware of such behaviour, Cathmore dreaded responses, foreseeing participation once they fully turned. Shocking as it maybe, he presented the issue and others came clean. Yamane admitted to bisexual tendencies, making her feel sick to the stomach. Her sister-in-law reluctantly nodded.

Struggling to keep it together, Tegan thought her dark character a monster. She detested the men with a vengeance, manipulating Rebecca and

Yamane with fear tactics to keep them on side. A strong bond with another spurred confidence, yet the person's name escaped her. Regarding Nathaniel, he was the weakest and the easiest to manipulate out of the 'brothers. Using him to voice her ideals to Necropolis, she would in time expose him to gain favour with the Master. As Tegan's dark side was not unfolding as quickly as others, there was less to tell. This did not stop her imagination playing havoc and feeling a menace and threat to the team.

The sound of knocking prompted Cathmore to answer the door. Considering events, Triligen had escaped his thoughts. The relief in his features subsided with Triligen's cold expression and the sensation of animosity in her energy signature as she passed him. Assuming that she had succumbed to the curse shattered the concept of support. Disheartened, he watched for a moment before closing the door and following behind her.

Disruption drew Cathmore's sights to those seated. Approaching the table, Triligen glared at Rebecca whose snarling comment was aimed at her. Cathmore discreetly addressed Triligen.

"Don't take it personally, they aren't of sound mind." Their eyes met. "Are you all right?" His tone aired uncertainty whilst guiding her to sit. He noticed her trembling and with her not answering, assumed the worst.

In the privacy of her own bedchamber, Triligen had cleaned away evidence of her ordeal, having taken some time to collect herself. Necropolis had forcibly taken her virginity in the dining room, the shame of the act she could not bring herself to voice. Now with the team, she again struggled to suppress her emotions. Evidently, the situation had deteriorated in her absence and she sensed her silence contributed to Cathmore's anxiousness and despair. With the man at her side and still leaning in, she addressed him.

"I managed to get some information." Triligen's sights shot to Rebecca, sitting across the table.

"You wouldn't be a rebel sympathiser by any chance? General Heinrich gets much pleasure from interrogating women." Rebecca's attention shifted to Tegan, whose raised brow gave a hint of satisfaction in a relaxed expression and posture.

"Don't insult the master's whore; at least not until he tires of her."

"You're right." Rebecca smirked. "Her squeals should be of pleasure, not gossip."

"Speaking of pleasure..." Tegan wished to stir a response from a silent husband. "I must see Heinrich; our little parties have become boring. Apparently, captives are more appealing than slaves; begging for one's life makes them eager to please."

"Stop it," Malcom loudly blurted. What she insinuated sickened and pained him to heartache. It was unbearable to see his wife so cold, callous and crude. With Rebecca chuckling, he looked to his friend, who was having a discreet word with Triligen.

Cathmore had asked if she felt any change. Triligen subtly shook her head.

"It has not affected me at all. Perhaps this is due to being created and not born into the games." Triligen sensed his relief.

"I'm not affected either and as I was born into the games; I think we can rule out the creation theory." Cathmore sighed tense, suspecting it would not be long before one or more would leave the room. Straightening, he addressed the group. "Can I have everyone's attention!" He drew all eyes to him. "Your struggle is evident and steadily getting worse. So far, Triligen and I are unaffected. I feel its best that..." Pausing, he could foresee some reacting unfavourably and chose his words carefully. "Both Triligen and I will continue to seek solution, as any more said may lead to information being exchanged with the wrong people."

"I knew it!" Nathaniel shot up from his seat to stand aggressively. "First you take the master's whore then his throne." His attention snapped to his sister. With her feet up on the table, Tegan appeared amused.

"Sit down Nathaniel." Her sights remained on Cathmore. "There is not one amongst you fit to fill the old man's shoes; besides, your father still breathes, you have plenty of time to eliminate threats." Tegan's remarks provoked a war of words amongst those affected.

Seeing his chance, Malcom gestured for a private talk with Cathmore. Again, breaking out in a sweat, Malcom's struggle to fight the sensation was evident in his tone and expression.

"This is not a game, it's a bloody nightmare. What happened to freewill, choice?" His friend guided him another few steps away from the table.

Having already asked himself the same question, Cathmore's theories on their predicament were being whittled down. Feeling his friend would soon relapse, he gave Malcom his strongest view on the Necropolin strategy.

"Clearly, he's out to emotionally cripple us; attacking our relationships, family values, morals..." Cathmore sighed, frustrated. "I'll do all I can to find a solution." He could only silently sympathise, seeing the defeat in his friend's eyes.

"Our reality is falling away Cathmore. I'll admit I'm scared; I feel like we've lost the game before it's even started." Malcom felt the hand, caringly pat him on the shoulder.

"Just don't think about it. Concentrate on keeping it together." Cathmore felt helpless to advise his friend further.

"If we become a threat to you or this board, don't hesitate to do whatever's necessary to survive, and you know what I mean." His friend's reluctant nodding prompted his persistence. "I mean it Cathmore; you do us all and get through this."

CHAPTER 4

The man's black hair, a multitude of lengthy, beaded braids, complimented his striking, dark features. In his late twenties, Yothue stood six feet tall with an athletic physique. A navy-blue overcoat covered a padded khaki vest, pants laden with utility pockets and a concealed weapon, tucked under his arm. A request to meet with him was from a castle informant; Yothue risked coming to the second dome, trusting the source and that it had to be important. The clacking of wheels on tracks, having sped up after the nearby junction, had him intently listening and ready to vacate his position at any sign of trouble. His breath emphasised the cold and his hazel eyes skimmed over the ravaged ruins. Although the dome was without power, the light through the clear panes from two moons was sufficient to see clearly when out in the open.

The shadow casting over a wall made Yothue relax a little; his friend was right on time.

"Yothue, it is good to see you." The man in his early sixties smiled, a gesture never expressed in the house of horror, as Rommald referred to it. "I haven't got long." Feeling the cold, Rommald pulled the collar of his ragged coat up around his neck.

"It's good to see you too." Yothue thought his friend appeared frailer than when last they met. Not ignorant to the mistreatment of slaves, he blamed those the man served for Rommald's poor health.

Yothue led his friend into the shadows near the remains of an interceptor; its black fuselage left embedded in a wall of a gutted hospital.

"Something is happening at the castle," Rommald said. "The sons of Necropolis are acting most strangely; so are their wives for that matter."

"In what way?" Yothue expressed curiosity.

Starting with Cathmore, Rommald thought the man severely stressed, giving the impression he feared his surroundings and wanted out of the place. He had not talked down to him, quite the opposite, having expressed compassion, manners and gratitude.

"He enquired of children." Rommald anticipated the response.

"Children?" Yothue thought it odd.

"Yes, and he seemed very relieved when I said there were no children in the castle. When I saw him again later, he sat me down and told me not to fear him; even gave me food and drink."

"Sounds like he's setting you up my friend." Though perceiving this the case, Yothue did think it coincided with another problem, but wished to hear his friend out first before conveying the matter.

"I don't think so. He told me to get away from the castle and if anyone tried to stop me, I was to say I was running an errand for him."

"You said they were all acting strangely."

"Most definitely." Rommald continued to inform of the events.

The gifted spent the day locked away in the library and what was heard, another castle informant thought disturbing. Apparently, the women were one-minute crying, the next feuding. Similar behaviour was heard between Nathaniel and Malcom. Exchange of sincere apologies followed brawls and verbal attacks. Prior to leaving the castle, Rommald saw Cathmore; he thought the man an emotional wreck.

"None of us have ever seen them like this." Rommald was eager for advice, yet Yothue had news also.

"A similar situation has occurred at headquarters. I received word from Commander Ethrich; he said they were forced to lock the team up."

"What, but why?" Rommald glared troubled by his own thoughts. The gifted were unique leaders and without them, what hope did they have against the Mariard dictators.

"They too are acting out of character. Apparently, they were offensive and hostile, they won't be released until Ethrich sees fit." Yothue pondered for a moment, now ruling out a Mariard trick as the two incidences were so similar. "Is there anything else I should know before I go?"

"Martice did say a rift has arisen between father and son over the master's new concubine. Oh, and another thing, this..." Rommald paused to recall what he thought an unusual name. "Triligen, that's it. This Triligen is extraordinary in appearance."

"Beautiful I take it; his concubines usually are."

"Yes, but she is not like any woman I have ever seen. You would have to see her to understand. Anyway, she too was most civil and respectful. She also offered Martice her food. Both of us think the concubine is scared out of her wits." His friend thought aloud.

"Necropolin sympathisers amongst their ranks." Yothue now addressed Rommald. "Just hopeful thinking my friend. You watch yourself, one is the son of the Master, the other his concubine; they could be using you. I heard Benzyl and Jarnus were apprehended..."

"Executed." Rommald grieved the loss. "Young lives taken by such an evil man." Disappointed, he shook his head, noting Yothue trying to suppress his anger; evidently, he had not been told.

"I'll be staying in the area for a while, keep me informed. You better go my friend." The two men embraced as though father and son. Yothue slipped into the shadows.

Hastily, Rommald made his way across debris. Soon a train would slow at the junction and fellow slaves would help him aboard. Those at the camp would cover his absence, enabling him to return to the castle with those

on the early shift. There he would kip in the kitchen and resume his position in the morning.

In the castle's accommodation wing, Cathmore leant against the wall in the lengthy hallway. For a time, he had sat on cold timbers listening to Nathaniel and Yamane arguing in their bedchamber. Less frequent was the silence, brief relapses of reality. The two would shortly resume where they left off; Nathaniel was unrelenting in his outspokenness and flaunting of his authority.

From what Cathmore had gathered over the day, power struggles preoccupied the gifted. Out of all affected, Tegan alarmed him the most. Like Anndrosa, he suspected Tegan would use any means to maintain control, whether it be manipulation or cold-blooded murder. Malcom's bragging would see those he bedded killed by his wife. Tegan's facade of jealousy kept Malcom hopeful that an inkling of loyalty still existed between them. General Heinrich was not one to mess with. Cathmore believed him to be secretly collaborating with Tegan, as he had in the past with Anndrosa. If what he feared came about, Malcom, amongst others, could very well end up dispersed.

Hearing footsteps, Cathmore looked up to see Malcom gleaming with mischief and heading his way. Hurrying to keep up with him, the terrified young woman wearing a ragged skirt and blouse carried a decanter of wine and a goblet. With Malcom having been missing for most of the evening, Cathmore now assumed his friend had been prowling the castle in search of a bed-mate from amongst the slaves.

"Are you loitering the hallway for me brother or my wife?" Malcom raised a brow. His breath reeked, having already indulged in wine.

"Tegan's in there." Cathmore referred to the couple's bedchamber. He glanced beyond Malcom to the pretty female with her eyes downcast. Malcom placed his hand on the wall beside Cathmore's head and leant in, airing a little discretion.

"How about you join me, we do them both. You never know, Tegan might put on a show for us."

Cathmore wanted to strike Malcom for even suggesting such an act, yet not wanting to draw suspicion, gave the facade of cockiness to hide his disgust.

"Tell you what Malcom; I'll do you a favour." Cathmore forced a grin. "I'll take her, and you go to your wife." His expression became serious. "If you want to gain Tegan's favour, keep the bed for her only." Clearly, his friend was not impressed.

"When I want your advice, I'll beat it out of you; until then..."

"I warn you Malcom, keep doing this and you'll end up dead. Tegan knows what she's doing. Already she's cut you off; next, she'll make you bleed." Cathmore spoke from personal experience. There was an uneasy look

in Malcom's eyes, as though he was already aware of this. Perceiving to be on the right track, Cathmore pushed the point, giving the impression of siding with his 'brother'. "You can win her over Malcom, get back control, but you better do it before she turns them all against us."

Disgruntled, Malcom snatched the decanter from the slave and pushed her into Cathmore.

"Leave her alive or tomorrow I won't be so cooperative." Malcom stormed to the couple's bedchamber.

The moment the door slammed shut, Cathmore discreetly addressed the trembling woman.

"Go quickly." He expected the slave's expression of astonishment. "Leave the castle immediately and don't come back. If you do, he will have you or his wife will. Believe me, there'll be no second chances." Cathmore nudged her on. Watching the woman scoot down the hallway, his attention suddenly snapped on hearing Tegan cry out.

Unable to get into the couple's bedchamber, Cathmore resorted to pounding on the door. He suddenly jerked back. The antique sword penetrated the wood, missing his face by a mere inch. Malcom's hollering followed, promising to cut his throat if he persisted. Knowing the sword was part of a display above the fireplace and at Malcom's disposal, Cathmore was reluctant to push the issue.

Sliding down the wall into a seated position, Cathmore's tired eyes welled with tears. Obviously, Tegan had slipped back to reality, yet there was nothing he could do but listen to her plead with her husband to stop, as he forced himself upon her. They were not even twenty-four hours into the game and already Cathmore felt he was wasting his time trying to discreetly divert them from doing despicable acts. Although both he and Triligen had not turned, the hours of chasing after the gifted were taking its toll on him. Considering what was at stake, he was being most mindful of what he said and did, especially around his wife, who kept her distance from him. The part he was playing repulsed him and there had been no time to even contemplate a strategy.

Hours ago, Cathmore had seen Triligen retire to her bedchamber, which surprisingly was only a few doors down from his. The extra bedchambers on their floor were created for the play and supposedly accommodated concubines, yet Cathmore had seen no evidence of the women. Necropolis resided on the floor above, having ample space to himself compared to others of authority. Cathmore thought Necropolis flaunted his spoils to motivate those desiring riches for themselves, which was not a Necropolin trait that hungered purely for power.

Like himself, Cathmore perceived Triligen would be unable to find rest in their predicament. The role reversal terrified her, this she made clear in earlier discussions between the two. Both were reluctant to leave, fearing

their absence could see team members dead and others supporting Necropolis to secure a win. In addition, they did not know where to go or who to trust. The risks Triligen was taking terrified him; the woman believed he was crucial to their survival and he was not to take on Necropolis or any other for her sake. She wholeheartedly believed Necropolis would not only discipline, but also execute him if he persisted to keep her from the Master.

Again, Cathmore felt the heavy burden of the game resting on his shoulders. His thoughts were distracted with someone standing over him.

“So this is what it’s come to,” Rebecca snarled. Her sights stayed on Cathmore with him rising to his feet. “I just knew it.”

“Knew what?” Cathmore tried to avoid eye contact, not wanting his wife to see him emotional considering the circumstances.

“First Tegan then Triligen; who’s next, Yamane? You’re so bent on bedding every woman in this place you neglect your duties to me and your father.”

What she implied and the venom in Rebecca’s tone provoked Cathmore to grasp her arm and hastily lead her towards their bedchamber. Though detesting her new character, he reminded himself not to hold his wife or the others responsible for their words and actions. Nevertheless, he wanted to knock some sense into the men and if he could, gag the women. He now wondered how long he could keep this act up before his anger and despair got the better of him.