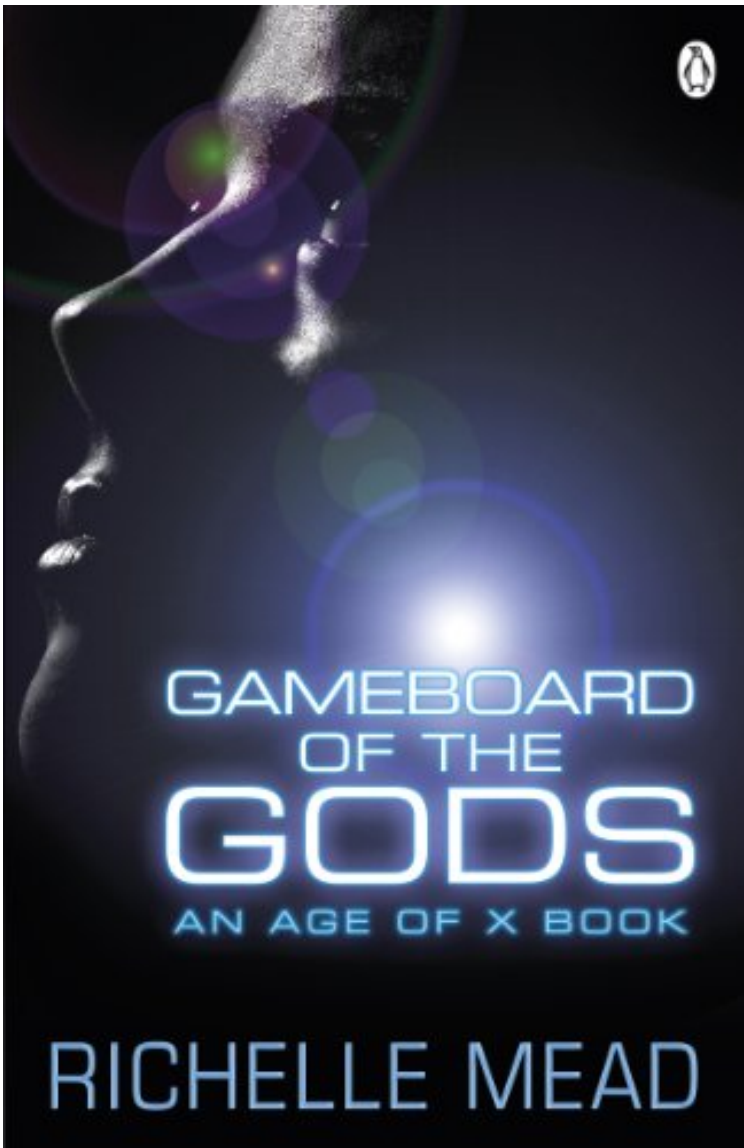


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Gameboard of the Gods: Age of X #1



Par Richelle Mead
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurGameboard of the Gods is the first thrilling instalment in the Age of X series from New York Times bestselling author, Richelle MeadIn a futuristic world nearly destroyed by religious extremists, Justin March lives in exile. But Justin is given a second chance when Mae Koskinen comes to bring him back to the Republic of United North America. Raised in an aristocratic caste, Mae is now a member of the military's most elite and terrifying tier, a soldier with enhanced reflexes and skills.Justin and Mae are assigned to work together to solve a string of ritualistic murders and soon realize that their discoveries have exposed them to terrible danger. As their investigation races forward, unknown enemies and powers greater than they can imagine are gathering in the shadows, ready to reclaim the world in which

humans are merely game pieces on their board. The Age of X is a brand new fantasy series containing all the mythological intrigue and relentless action of the bestselling Vampire Academy and Bloodlines YA series, and is sure to delight fans of Chloe Neill and Jim Butcher. Praise for Richelle Mead: 'The book is fast-paced and suspenseful' Booklist 'An engaging read, with an unusually tangible, believable, living story world, featuring a protagonist of unexpected depth and sympathy' Jim Butcher (on Succubus Blues) Richelle Mead, the New York Times bestselling author of Vampire Academy, lives in Seattle, Washington with her husband and baby. Gameboard of the Gods is the first in the Age of X series and Richelle's first adult

novel. Extrait CHAPTER 1 She Usually Wears Black Mae dealt out death regularly. It really wasn't a problem. Death was clean on the battlefield, and there was no reason to dwell on what it meant. The kills were just mission objectives, and the people weren't really people at all. It was you or them. And when the fight was done, you could just walk away. But today? There was no walking away. Today, she was walking toward death, and that scared the hell out of her. Not much else did these days. With a deep breath, she leaned her cheek against the living room mirror, closing her eyes and taking comfort in the way the glass cooled her skin. She repeated the soldiers' creed over and over in her head, using the familiar words to steady herself: I am a soldier of the Republic. I do not serve my own will but that of my country. I am its tool and will gladly lay down my life to further this nation's glory. I am a soldier of the Republic. I do not serve my own will but that of my country . . . A knock at the door startled her out of her mantra, and she straightened up. Another deep breath calmed the shaking of her hands, and she pushed her emotions into a far compartment in her mind. Locked away, those feelings could not touch her. They were powerless, and she was free. She double-checked her face in the mirror, but it gave nothing away. It was blank. Empty. In control. Dag and Val were at the door, as she'd known they'd be. They greeted her with forced smiles that were a far cry from their usual happy-go-lucky selves. Both wore uniforms identical to hers: a mandarin-collared black jacket over black pants with black boots. Black everywhere. Even the buttons were black. The only color came from a scarlet pip on the collar, standing out like a drop of blood. To the inexperienced eye, these uniforms looked no different from the ones the praetorians usually wore into battle. To Mae, who could see and feel the dressy fabric of their formal attire, the uniform seemed flimsy and brought back her earlier fears of vulnerability. Being weaponless wasn't helping matters. Here to babysit me? she asked. Who said anything about babysitters? Dag was always quick with a smile, though his eyes betrayed him that morning. Were just a bunch of friends going out together. You make it sound like we're going to a bar, Mae said. She walked back to the mirror and examined the braided bun she'd so painstakingly worked on. Grimacing, she pulled out the hairpins and began unraveling it all. Val made herself comfortable on the arm of the couch, lazy and limber as a cat, even under these circumstances. What are you doing? It's messy, Mae said. There wasn't a hair out of place, protested Val. Mae didn't answer. In the mirror, she saw her friends exchange troubled glances behind her. It's worse than I thought, Val seemed to be saying. Dag's expression said he was in agreement but didn't entirely know how to handle it. Snapping a neck, lifting weights, donut eating contests. Those were in his comfort zone. Therapy? Less so. It wasn't part of Val's skill set either. Neither knew quite what to do with Mae, and she certainly wasn't going to help them out because she didn't want them to do anything. She wanted them to treat her in their usual flippant way. And what she wanted most was for this day to be over, so that life could return to normal. How many times have you braided it today? Val's voice was uncharacteristically gentle. It's not right, Mae said, dodging the question. This was actually the eighth time she'd braided her hair. She kept pulling so tightly that her scalp had started to turn red, though the tiny metal implant in her arm dutifully dulled the pain. You wouldn't understand. Neither Val nor Dag ever had hair problems. Dag always kept his dark hair closely shaved, and Val wore hers in a pixie cut that suited her diminutive frame. I should cut mine, Mae thought. She'd considered it a hundred times but could never bring herself to do it. It's okay, you know. Grief is a normal part of the, um, process. Dag had apparently been reading self-help books before coming over. You can even cry. Why would I do that? Mae pulled so hard on a strand of hair that she winced. Because that's what people do when they lose someone they care about, said Val. You're so tightly wound up that you'll explode if you don't relax. And do not undo that. It's fine. Mae had just finished her hair again, neatly wrapping the braid into a perfect knot above the back of her neck. She really was on the verge of pulling it out again when Val grabbed her arm. Enough, Mae. We're going to be late. It was another bad sign, Val using her real name instead of her pet name, Finn. But Mae couldn't deny her friends' point. It was time to go. With one last glance in the mirror, she let them lead her outside to the subway entrance across the street. They took the blue line out to the base, earning a number of startled looks from other passengers. Praetorians weren't that common outside of military and

federal centers. A group of them was especially unusual. The passengers kept their distance and glanced around the train uneasily, wondering if they should expect a terrorist attack. The threesome ended up reaching the base early, but plenty of other praetorians were already entering the ceremonial hall. And here, Mae faltered, stopping just outside the entrance. The spring sunshine was far too bright and cheery for a day like today. Dag touched her arm. You okay? You dont have to go, Val told her. Mae shook her head and continued forward. Everything's fine. Neat rows of chairs filled the hall, which was nearly packed with praetorians. The news had come in less than a week ago, and it would have taken a fair amount of scrambling to pull so many of the guard back in from their scattered assignments. Some wouldnt be here, of course. It was the nature of the job. But, the death of a praetorian was so monumental that their superiors wouldve certainly done whatever they could to ensure a good showing. Although there was no official seating chart, the praetorians were gathering in cohorts. Val waved at someone across the room. The Scarlets had already taken over a middle position and were beckoning them over. Val and Dag started to head in that direction, but Mae stopped again, allowing her eyes to focus on the front of the hall. There'd been no body to recover, but they'd still set out a casket made of a dark, gleaming wood. Praetorian black. A swathe of indigo silk covered it, with the RUNAs flag draped over that. Piles of gardenias sat on either side, their softness contrasting with the clean lines of the casket. Not caring if Val and Dag followed her or not, Mae turned toward the center aisle that led straight to the shrine. A bubble of emotion—sorrow and panic combined—began to rise within her, and she staunchly pushed it down. Throwing back her shoulders, holding her chin high, she began the impossibly long walk toward the front of the room. People stepped aside for her, and those who hadn't noticed her before now stopped to stare. She ignored those looks, along with the whispers that soon followed. She kept her gaze fixed firmly ahead, silently repeating the creed: I am a soldier of the Republic. I do not serve my own will but that of my country. Those words were echoed by her mother's, spoken so many years ago: You can ignore the rest because you're better than them. Empty yourself of all feeling because if they can't see it, then they can't use it against you. Those standing near the front also parted for her, moving away from the casket. Nearby conversation fell silent. There was a golden plate affixed to the dark wood, just under the flag. Porfirio Aldaya, Indigo Cohort. His dates of service were listed below, along with a Latin inscription that probably mentioned honor and duty. Mae ran her finger tips over his name, and suddenly the scent of the gardenias became cloying and oppressive. The world spun, and she closed her eyes. Porfirio is dead. It didn't seem possible that someone so full of life, someone who burned with passion and energy, could truly be gone from this world. She couldn't bring herself to mull over what had happened to him after death. Had his consciousness truly ceased to exist? Or was he in some paradise that religious zealots preached about? You killed him, you know. Mae opened her eyes at the familiar voice and slowly turned around. Drusilla Kavi stood there, hands on her hips, her dark eyes flashing with a mix of grief and rage that mirrored Mae's own feelings. Kavi was half a foot shorter, and Mae had no difficulty keeping her face still and flat in the face of that anger. Other praetorians standing nearby watched intently. You killed him, Kavi repeated. The indigo pip on her collar was an echo of Porfirio's. You might as well have set the bomb yourself, you fucking castal bitch. He wouldn't have gone if it wasn't for you. Mae had been called worse and had learned to ignore that kind of thing long ago. Porfirio made his own choices. No one could make him to do anything. She refused to be baited and tried to step around the other woman. Be calm. Be superior. Excuse me, I need to return to my cohort. Dont walk away from me! yelled Kavi. Her voice rang through the hall, and anyone who hadn't been aware of the unfolding drama now was. Kavi grabbed Mae's arm. Do you even feel anything? Did you even care when he died? How can you be so cold? Mae jerked her arm back and felt the first kindling of anger. Dont touch me again. And dont insult him by making a scene. Mae turned around and saw that Val and Dag were standing nearby, as were a number of other Scarlets. Behind Kavi, several Indigos had also gathered. Backup. All of their faces were tense and hard as they braced to defend their own. The praetorians had a remarkable history of dangerous encounters, but brawling at a funeral probably wasn't in the books. Is that what happens to the men you fuck? You kill them? Kavi caught hold of Mae again and spun her around. I told you not to walk away from me! You killed him! And I told you not to touch me. That was when everything snapped. Kavi hadn't just shattered the tight reins of Mae's discipline; she'd also opened up all those boxes that Mae had used to lock up her feelings. All the grief, all the fury, all the guilt . . . every emotion that Mae had carefully packed and filed away since she'd learned of Porfirio's death came pouring out. The floodgates burst, and Kavi was in their path. Praetorians were fast, their reflexes surpassing those of ordinary soldiers. It was what defined them and was what the implant enhanced. When Mae struck out and punched Kavi in the face, Kavi should have at least seen it

coming. Maybe she wouldn't have had a chance to react fully, but she should've had warning. It was clear from the widening of her eyes as she flew backward into a row of chairs that she'd been completely unprepared for the attack. Once the action started, though, her reflexes kicked in. She jumped up with little delay, but Mae was already on her again. Kavi made a few attempts to land a hit, but Mae dodged each time. A leap to the side, as perfect as anything she'd ever done in the canne combat of her youth, gave Mae the opportunity to shove the other woman backward. Kavi hit the ground, much more ungracefully than any praetorian should have. They were usually like cats, but Kavi had trouble righting herself. Her response was still fast by other people's standards but was a couple seconds too long by theirs. There was no chance for her to defend herself when Mae shot forward and kicked her in the stomach. It was immediately followed by a hit to the knee. Mae heard a crack, and Kavi screamed as she fell to the ground. Battle mode kicked in so automatically that Mae was barely aware of what she did, only that she had to keep fighting and make sure Kavi stayed down. Endorphins and neurotransmitters surged within Mae, making her stronger and faster but there was something else enhancing them today, a strange darkness flooding her senses and urging her to destroy. It overshadowed her like a cloak, an outside power that insidiously crept its way into her, letting her revel in the joy of violence and pain. Panic briefly seized Mae as she recognized the unwelcome sensation: No, not again. But her mental protests were soon swallowed in the haze of battle. Kavi struggled a little, vainly trying to get up, but Mae kept her foe pinned down as she punched again and again. Mae became dimly aware of blood on the other woman's face and the sound of shouts growing louder and louder around them. And all the while, Mae just kept thinking, Porfirio is dead, Porfirio is dead . . . She didn't know how much time passed before strong arms pulled her up and away. Her vision was tinged with red, and adrenaline, urged on by the implant, churned furiously within her. And then slowly, agonizingly, the world came into focus again. That grief-driven rage faded, and more importantly, the dark power that had descended upon her lifted. She saw regular gray and maroon clad soldiers coming into the room, along with military police. None of them touched her, though. Two praetorians restrained her, the only ones who could hold her in full flight-or-fight mode. Easy, Finn. Easy. Mae realized one of her captors was Dag. You won. Its over. That was when Mae finally dared to look down to the ground. Kavi wasn't dead, though her breathing came raggedly, her eyes mere slits. One of her legs was bent at an unnatural angle, and blood covered her swollen face. It looked as though her nose had been broken. Mae stared in horror, unable to believe what she'd done. Praetorians fought among themselves more often than anyone liked to admit. When you had a group of people who were so physical and so chemically driven, it was hard for altercations not to break out. Usually, opponents were evenly matched. Sure, there would be a victor, but the fights were rarely all or nothing. But this? It was nothing. Kavi was nothing. She'd never gotten in a hit. As Mae's implant continued to wind down and metabolize the excess adrenaline, she tried to make sense of what had happened. The praetorians holding her finally deemed her calm enough to release to the MPs hovering nervously nearby. Mae offered no resistance. She allowed them to lead her out, but not before giving Kavi one last, disbelieving look. They left Mae in a cell all day, which gave her a lot of time to analyze what had happened. There was no denying it: she'd cracked. She'd been weak and allowed her emotions to get the better of her. Even acknowledging that point to herself was humiliating. A little jabbing from Kavi, and Mae's armor had crumbled. But more than Kavi's barbs had gotten through. Even now, Mae felt cold and nauseous as she remembered the dark force that had filled her as she fought, a force she was certain had nothing to do with her implant or sorrow. It keeps happening, she thought frantically. Mae's life was focused on being the master of her body, and the idea of something else taking control shattered everything she fought for. It had to be some trick of her mind . . . because what else could it be? I should tell someone. I should see a doctor. But that thought was nearly as frightening. Praetorians who saw psychiatrists usually didn't stay praetorians for long. No one was going to pair mental instability with a performance enhancing implant. One other question burned in Mae's mind as she waited out the day. Why had Kavi been so slow to react? Or had Mae just been that fast? No, the more she thought about it, the more Mae was certain there had been nothing unusual about the way she'd fought. Yes, she'd been more emotional than usual, but that shouldn't have affected anything. Even the rush of that dark power couldn't create that kind of disparity. Why had Kavi been so slow? Mae had no answer by the time the MPs came to take her away again. They escorted her to a conference room, where she found General Gan sitting at the end of a long table. He wore the regular military's uniform now, all gray, save for the jacket's upper half, which was maroon. It was bedecked with the medals of his rank and a black stripe on the collar that showed he'd once been a praetorian. More silver laced his dark hair than when she'd first met him years ago, but the constant intensity and purpose in

his eyes never changed. Mae's stomach sank further. She hoped someone else would be there to chastise her, maybe one of his many underlings. It wasn't his rank she feared, so much as the thought of disappointing him. He gave a small nod to the MPs, and they left, shutting the door behind them. Silence fell in the long room. Sit, said Gan at last. He pointed to a chair about half way down the table. Mae obeyed. So, I hear there was an incident today. Gan was a master of the understatement. Mae stared straight ahead. She had never shirked responsibility and wasn't about to now. I was out of line, sir. I will gladly accept any punishment you see fit to give me. Suspension, she thought bleakly. They'll suspend me for sure, unless they just kick me out altogether. He shrugged. It was a rough day. It's understandable that emotions would run high, especially in the wake of losing a friend. Gan knew perfectly well that Porfirio had been more than a friend, and his sympathy bothered Mae as much as Val and Dags. She would've preferred to be yelled at and told how completely disgraceful and inappropriate her actions were because they had been. She decided to remind him of this because obviously, his fondness was clouding his judgment. What I did was unacceptable, sir. Unforgivable. That brought a small smile to the general's mouth, though it didn't soften the lines of his face. I've seen worse, and half your cohorts been in to tell me about how wronged you were. Valeria Jardin and Linus Dagsson have made particular nuisances of themselves. Yes, they most certainly would. That doesn't mean we can ignore what happened, of course. The incident will be noted in your record, and you'll be suspended from regular duty. Suspended from regular duty. She'd expected it, but it was still tough to swallow. Don't worry. You won't be locked away or confined to a desk. He snorted. I can't imagine giving one of you a desk job. I can't even imagine one of you sitting still for very long. Praetorians are too valuable to waste, and I have a task for you. I'll do anything you require of me, sir. He drummed his fingers against the table, momentarily lost in thought. It's a strange errand, but a necessary one that unexpectedly just came up and may be a good opportunity for you to . . . adjust to recent events. We wouldn't ask it of you if it wasn't important, of course. Of course, sir. His use of task and errand didn't reassure her any, but Mae still hoped she might be sent to some volatile location. It'd be no more than she deserved, and maybe in glorious battle, she'd redeem herself. I need you to go to Panama City. Have you ever been there? It took Mae a few moments to answer. Panama City? There'd be no glorious battle there. The RUNA had no conflict with that region. In fact, she'd heard there were tentative trading negotiations in the works. Panama was still provincial, of course, filled with unchecked religion, a gangster-run government, and old and new aristocracies vying for power. Tame compared to other places. No, sir. I've never been there. Well, you're going there now. I'll have the mission details sent to you, and we can meet again once you've read them over. Of course, sir. She hesitated over her next words. She had no business asking questions in light of what she'd done. Obedience was her only path. Yet, no matter how much she pretended otherwise around others, she knew she was one of Gan's favorites. He'd let her ask. Sir . . . how is Praetorian Kavi? She's fine, well, considering the circumstances, that is. She'll be hospitalized for a while and then be off-duty as she recovers. You did a neat job of breaking her leg. Mae winced, and an image of Kavi's bloody face flashed through her mind. Praetorians were difficult to hurt. And even more difficult to kill, but it happened to Porfirio. I'm sorry, sir. I should visit her and apologize. Gan chuckled. I wouldn't recommend that. I don't think she'll want to see you anytime soon. I'd avoid the Indigo cohort in general, if I were you. He studied Mae carefully, weighing her with those knowing eyes. Go ahead. Ask your next question. Sir . . . She had to look away from that gaze. Kavi was slow. She should've reacted more quickly, but she didn't. Why? Why did she react so badly? What was wrong? Gan's answer took a long time, and Mae dared a look up. Maybe there was nothing wrong with her. Maybe you're just that good. Mae knew she was good, but she was certain there was more to it than that. It nagged at her, but contradicting the general was unacceptable, so she let the matter go. He dismissed her, and as she neared the door, a final question popped into her head. Sir, will I have my implant deactivated as part of my punishment? It had been known to happen, and it scared her almost as much as full suspension or inactivity. Gan actually looked surprised, which didn't happen very often. What? Of course not. I'd hardly send you to the provinces unprotected. And you'll hold your rank and title too. Although . . . Mae froze. She didn't know what was coming, but there was something in the tone of his voice that contradicted his casual demeanor. That, and all of this had been too easy. It's a small thing. You won't be allowed to wear a praetorian uniform until further notice. This mission won't require a uniform at all, really, but if the situation arises for some other reason, you'll have to wear gray. He was right. It was such a small, small thing, but his words hit Mae with the same force as a prison sentence would have. No black. Until that moment, she hadn't realized how big a role the uniform played in defining who she was. The implant and the title were part of it too, but the black lent a power of its own. It separated her from others who were less worthy. She looked down at

what she wore, the dress uniform shed been so contemptuous of earlier. Now, she would give anything to keep it on. How long until I can wear black again? Gan tilted his head and gave her a puzzled look. I assume theres no problem with that? No, sir. Of course not. She swallowed. No black. Im a soldier of the Republic. Revue de presse The book is fast-paced and suspenseful' (Booklist) An engaging read, with an unusually tangible, believable, living story world, featuring a protagonist of unexpected depth and sympathy (Jim Butcher (on Succubus Blues))