

Chapter 7. Bloodstained token of Love

The morning dawned with majestic sluggishness, as if the sun didn't have a worry in the world. Mireille was once a sound sleeper, preferring to get up late... Times change. If you are in a situation like theirs, you can only think of minimizing the dangers.

"Kirika..." she called, "we need to get out of this place before it gets crowded. You can sleep in the train, if you want to."

There was only one bed in their room. She was used to it. The little Japanese girl sleeping uneasily near her was the best thing that happened to her ever since that day, many years ago. Mireille didn't mind staying like this for hours. But time wasn't exactly a luxury they could afford.

"Hmm...What?" Kirika asked drowsily as she heard Mireille's voice from the bathroom. She wasn't used to waking up without the blonde next to her. She drowsily lay in bed for a minute before her eyes snapped open. Of course, the Soldats!

Kirika said hurriedly, "I'm up", got dressed, packed, and swept the room, making sure to leave nothing behind. She was ready in a few minutes and waited impatiently for her partner to come out of the bathroom. She smiled and shook her head. Even at a time like this, Mireille always made sure to freshen up before they left. Kirika always just got up and went.

Finally, after what seemed like eternity, but was probably only a few minutes, Mireille walked out, looking as done up and beautiful as always.

"Ready?" As they left the room--the smaller girl carrying the bags--Kirika asked, "So...where are we going to?"

"To the train station," Mireille replied matter-of-factly. "We must leave town, or the Soldats would be coming after us again." The crows were circling over their heads ever since that night at the Manor. Breffort said they'd leave them alone. He was either dead or switched sides by now. She couldn't really blame him. She and Kirika were mad dogs on the run, tearing the entire Soldats system apart. Killers who refused to kill. It was so ridiculous, she couldn't laugh.

"Let's go." The elevator hummed softly as it took them down to the ground floor. Ding. The hall was empty, the concierge nodding off to sleep, his shift almost over. Mireille placed the keys and a 500 bill on his register. "We checked out last evening." The concierge nodded, his drowsiness gone as if it was never there at the sound of hard cash.

The hard part lied ahead. If the Soldats monitored the hotel, they could attack on the way to the station. Under surveillance of a hundred itchy triggers, Mireille always felt herself like Pheidippides, starting off on her own Marathon. Except no Spartans were waiting on the other side, no matter how she looked at it.

Kirika felt something slam into her as she tried to keep her balance. A small voice spoke apologetically "I'm sorry. I didn't see you. I'm trying to find my mother and I know she's in town." Kirika looked down keeping a hand on her pistol, she saw a small girl about eight years old with green eyes and short brown hair. (Ironically Kirika would meet this girl's mother before the girl ever would.) "I'm sorry to trouble you." The girl said as she ran off and as she ran Kirika heard a ringing sound as something metallic hit the ground.

She looked on the ground and saw a silver ring engraved with Irish Celtic knots and what appeared to be some kind of bird holding a heart with its talons? Mireille always found little kids annoying. Maybe that's because she envied them, growing up in a peaceful country, with not a worry on their mind. Maybe not. She didn't think about it much. Mireille let go of the gun she reflexively grabbed inside her handbag. Mireille picked up the ring and examined it for a bit. Curiosity got the better of her sometimes, but it wasn't really the right time to chase after her. "What do you think, Kirika?"

Mireille handed the ring to Kirika, who inspected it, wearing a confused face. "It looks....old. And...Celtic, maybe? I wish we'd covered Celtic culture in school. What should I do with it?" "Just leave it here, maybe, she'll come back looking for it," Mireille shrugged. "We've got better things to do than play lost and found for her..."

Kirika looked at the ring, then behind her, then at the ring again. She debated to herself whether to keep it or throw it out, after some hesitation, she stuffed it in her jacket pocket. It looked important, like the pocket watch she'd found in her room back in Japan. More importantly, even though she knew now wasn't the time, she'd been meaning to ask Mireille something, and keeping the ring would save her time and the embarrassment of stumbling around jewelry stores, not knowing what to buy Mireille. Mireille didn't notice Kirika's little theft. Her eyes darted across the street, looking for suspicious movements. This early in the morning, the streets were clear as if before a bombing raid. But that was good, less chances of civilians getting caught in the crossfire... They continued moving towards the train station but stopped when they saw an obvious Soldat waiting for them.

"This is bloody ridiculous." Mireille gave an exasperated sigh. "If we cause too much noise, we can forget about leaving this place today... We have to sneak around. How many do you count? Kirika stopped. She knew it was far too quiet for their own good. "Mireille," she whispered, "There are a lot of them. There is probably more hiding. This place is too deserted; they could be anywhere. Let's head for a crowded place. They might not attack if there are witnesses."

Kirika said more loudly, "But Mireille, I didn't get to see downtown yet."

"Oh, hush, you know very well that we can't stay anywhere for long." Mireille sounded annoyed, readily accepting the game Kirika suggested. She then added in low voice: "You're right... we lose either way. Let's go back. We'll try finding a car and getting to the next town..." With that, they started in the direction of the town center.

Meanwhile on the other side of town; Elenore woke up an hour later than she normally would but considering last night's events, didn't think anyone would actually notice (and actually thankful that Margaret liked sleeping late on Saturdays). She was thankful she didn't have a hangover despite almost emptying the bottle. Rising out of the bed Elenore went to the mirror and with blood shot eyes sadly looked into the mirror.

"Is this the price I have to pay? I wish there was a better way to deal. I know I promised Vanessa, but I can't just go to any doctor and tell what I know. They would think I'm mad and lock me in the madhouse. No...this way is better. At least I can sleep without the nightmares haunting me." Elenore thought to herself as she got undressed and went into the shower.

A few minutes later she emerged from the shower and went through her normal routine of getting herself ready for the day. As she left she looked at the picture again. "Once more into the breach and let slip the dogs of chaos." She chuckled at herself knowing her grandfather would both chuckle and correct her for her alteration of that famous line. (It was the little humor outside of subtlety joking with Vanessa she allowed herself.) With that she went out to do her usual routine. When she went out the living room towards the kitchen she saw Laetitia blearily watching anime on the television. "Good Morning, Laetitia. I sincerely apologize, if I had known you were up I would've fixed you breakfast."

Laetitia turned her head and smiled the best she could. "Good Morning Elenore. It's okay, I know last night was unusual and everyone was tired."

"Laetitia, are you okay? You don't look so good." Elenore put her hand on Laetitia's forehead. "You feel a little warm."

"It's okay Elenore; I just have a headache this morning." Laetitia responded silently wishing that Elenore wouldn't talk so loudly.

"You should go lay back down and rest. I'll wake you when breakfast is ready." Elenore said warmly. Laetitia rose and smiled. "Okay, thank you. I'm going to my room. It's nice to see that you're feeling better."

"Thank you. That was very nice of you. I'll go prepare breakfast now." Laetitia smiled, nodded and went to her room and lay down. "Things are going to be very unusual." She said quietly to herself as a part of her reached out...

Across town Carrossea woke with a massive headache like his head was used as a bongo drum.

"What the hell did I drink last night? I don't remember drinking...I don't think I did." He said in low muffled voice as he tried to get comfortable. "I should order some coffee...yeah that would be nice...right after the pounding stops..."

Elenore was cooking breakfast when she heard footsteps behind her. She grabbed a butcher knife and spun quickly to see Vanessa, the knife barely missing her throat by an inch. "What has gotten into you?! That's it. Come Monday you are definitely making that call and hopefully we can get you an appointment as soon as possible." Vanessa said trying to keep calm with some surprise and concern. Elenore bowed her head with a sad look on her face. "I'm really sorry Vanessa, I just get really jumpy when I hear someone behind me and I don't know who it is. I wish I could put it all behind me, but I can't." Elenore said sadly.

Vanessa hugged Elenore. "We'll get you help..."

Vanessa didn't finish her sentence when heard she Limelda say; "I knew you two were together..."

Vanessa let go of Elenore and turned around and pretty much got in Limelda's face. "You have no idea what's going on here. This doesn't have anything to do with the three of us."

"Oh really... From what I just saw..." Limelda snapped but she was interrupted. "Get out! Get out, both of you or I swear to God I'll...make you pay..." Elenore said furiously, her eyes shown with pain, fear and sadness holding the butcher's knife in her hand once again. Limelda and Vanessa put their hands up and slowly backed out of the kitchen.

"All right Elenore, we're leaving. Just calm down..." The pair went down the hall a bit, listening silently till they heard the sounds of Elenore resuming cooking.

"She has it bad, doesn't she?" Limelda asked quietly hoping that Elenore couldn't hear them.

"Yes she does. But I didn't think it was that bad." Vanessa answered still in some shock in Elenore's behavior.

"I've seen that same look in those who fought in the civil war. She really needs to get some help before she does something she'll regret." Limelda said in somewhat less shock.

"I was trying to get her to get some help before you started. Look, our fight is between you, Madlax, and me. You leave her out of this!" Vanessa said angrily but quietly enough so no one else could hear.

Limelda nodded now having some idea what was going on. "I understand..." And the pair went to living room and waited for breakfast.

Elenore calmed down and resumed cooking breakfast with a sad look on her face. "*What has gotten into me? Maybe Vanessa's right and I do need help, but what about Margaret? I can't do anything while all this is happening, she needs me...*" Elenore thought to herself as she glanced at the liquor cabinet.

Soon she finished cooking and putting it on trays and then she put on her happy face and went to wake Margaret and Madlax. She knocked on Madlax's door and announced that breakfast was ready. She heard what she thought was a reply and then she went to Margaret's room.

"Good morning Miss Margaret. Time to get up, breakfast is ready. You don't want it get cold do you?" She said as cheerfully as she watched Margaret stir.

Waking up in the morning was never easy for Margaret. Even after having slept for 10 hours she still felt sleepy. She did hear Elenore's wake up call, somewhere between the weird dream she was having, which she couldn't quite remember anymore the moment she opened her eyes. She was still reluctant to get out of bed though. And she just closed her eyes again and turned the other way pretending not to have heard Elenore at first and hoping to buy some extra sleeping time by doing so.

"Miss Margaret, must I remind you that you have guests this morning? It would be rude to make them wait any longer for you or skip breakfast, wouldn't you agree?" Elenore said in a cheerful tone, knowing that if good sense didn't work she could always resort to wake up method number three to get Margaret out of bed. But to herself she could understand Margaret's reluctance given last night's events and it promised to get worse before it got better. But appearances' must be kept at least...

"Hmm, Elenore is right." Margaret thought, slowly opening her eyes, "I almost forgot Madlax, Vanessa and Limelda were staying over." She slowly sat on her bed, rubbing her eyes, trying to get rid of her sleepy face, before greeting Elenore with a faint good morning.

Margaret was going through her usual morning routine of trying to brush her teeth and get dressed without falling asleep, and as she was adjusting her tie in the mirror she couldn't help but notice the strange artifact around her neck. Suddenly she had a quick flashback sequence of the dream she was having just before waking up, but it was all too quick and confusing to sort out any meaning except for the voices of people arguing as well as gunshots and screams. At least she remembered the pasta. The Torc seemed to glow and she felt it tighter around her neck.

Margaret jumped startled away from the mirror, gasping for air and instinctively bringing her hand around the Torc in a futile attempt to remove it once more. Margaret blinked and looked back at the mirror confused, only to realize everything seemed to be normal again. Although her actions made Elenore seem more than a bit concerned.

"Miss, are you all right?" Elenore asked with great concern pushing aside her own problems.

"I'm fine Elenore. But I can't get this thing off. What are we going to do?" Margaret said reassuringly mixed with worry.

"Let's have breakfast, and then we can figure out on what to do next Miss." Elenore said trying to reassure Margaret.

Margaret smiled. "You're right Elenore. I'm sure between all of us we can do something. I really want to get this off my neck."

"Yes Miss, I'm sure we can. But now let's go have breakfast; I'm sure the others are getting impatient."

Elenore said with a smile trying to forget this morning's confrontation. And the two went to Laetitia's room and woke her up. Then the trio went down to dining room where everyone was seated waiting for Margaret.

At the same time Mireille and Kirika left the hotel, Madlax finally glumly went to bed, even for her it was a long and exhausting day. The darkness of the night lulled her into a dreamy and blank asleep. Suddenly all she can see was a hellish fire enveloping her, the crimson sky singing death upon the ruins and the dead. Madlax walked upon the shattered ruins and saw a fiery haired woman in a long purple robe with an outline of velvet similar to the doll Laetitia bought. All the while she heard a child sing a tune;

Noir name the ancient fate.

Two ladies with blackened hands.

Tied and made by hate.

To protect the peaceful lambs.

Sin within the man,

Sin within the love,

Sin within the sin,

Said the hermit to sinner

and sinner to the saint.

"What is this place?" Madlax asked. The woman just bobbed her head and smiled and raised her arms in the air as the fire raged more savagely. Madlax turned to her left only to see a maniacal masked man laughing in the distance. She ran into this image and noticed the man was Friday Monday although he seemed slightly different. He was calmer than he was before but took even more delight in the burning silhouettes of human suffering. "Friday Monday? Aren't you dead? Is this the past?"

"No, this is the future." Madlax heard. The voice was of a young girl but by the time she turned around, the image faded into the mist. The image of a brown haired little girl smiling with a half mad smile with the two women she met yesterday in the alley. Then everything turned blank.

Madlax fell off the bed bumping onto the wooden floor. She heard a faint sound most likely Elenore's voice. "It must be time to get up." she yawned. Madlax wore her red dress which was the only other piece of clothing she had and headed down to the breakfast table. Vanessa asked "What a lovely outfit, what's the occasion?" Limelda interrupted as Madlax was about to speak "She doesn't need a reason to be pretty".

"Uh, why thank you Limelda and Vanessa" Madlax replied in a slightly embarrassed voice. "We are still waiting for Margaret and Laetitia." Madlax stared into the table, wondering if the little girl in her dream was Laetitia. But such thoughts didn't linger in Madlax too long as she was enticed by the salivating smells of breakfast.

"Good morning, everyone!" Margaret said in a low tone, as she got to her seat at the breakfast table, still struggling a bit with her usual morning sleepiness. "I'm sorry to keep you all waiting, hope I didn't take too long." She excused herself, a bit embarrassed. "Oh, did you all sleep well? I hope you're comfortably installed!" She asked cheerfully, directing the question more at Madlax and Limelda, who were guests at her place for the first time, since Vanessa was pretty much used to staying over frequently already. As they ate breakfast, Margaret curiously asked about everyone's plans for the day. She herself didn't have any, but with such unusually crowded company. It might turn into an interesting day she thought, her concerns about the Torc being completely replaced by that.

Vanessa looked at Margaret. "Well I am planning to get Madlax some clothing suited for this area." She looked at Elenore then she turned back to Margaret. "Oh Margaret, do you mind if I borrow Elenore for a while or do you have need of her?"

"Umm...Ok I guess." Margaret answered.

"Great! While we're out, we'll see what other information we can dig up about the Torc." Vanessa said cheerfully.

"But who's going to guard Miss Margaret?" Elenore asked with some concern.

"Well, I'm sure Limelda wouldn't mind. It should be an easy job for her." Madlax chimed in before Limelda could say anything. Limelda agreed if somewhat reluctantly. Inwardly Vanessa snickered.

After breakfast Elenore cleared the breakfast dishes and Vanessa followed her to the kitchen making sure that to Elenore it was her behind her.

When she was done washing the dishes Elenore turned to Vanessa and bowed her head and said; "I'm sorry for earlier this morning Vanessa." Vanessa put a hand on Elenore's shoulder and replied; "I know, but I didn't help matters by having a full blown argument with Limelda in front of you." Vanessa handed Elenore the card with the info.

"Please promise you'll call this Monday."

Elenore felt some apprehension about bearing her soul to a complete stranger but she knew Vanessa wouldn't let up if she didn't make the effort. "I promise to call Monday morning. Is this all you needed me for Vanessa?"

Vanessa smiled and said; "Well no, I was planning to take you clothes shopping along with Madlax, the both of you could use an expanded wardrobe and we might hit a few other places as well."

"I take it I can't say no, can I?" Elenore asked.

"Well you could say it, but I'll ignore it anyways." Vanessa replied smiling and helped Elenore put some casual clothing on and then they went out.

They got into the car and drove off. Madlax heard Elenore and Vanessa speak but her mind was on the dream and the tune she heard earlier. She pondered on it, air-heading Elenore and Vanessa's question.

"Madlax, are you awake?" Vanessa said trying to joke with her.

Madlax snapped out of it and responded. "Sorry, I was a bit preoccupied."

"With what?" Vanessa asked a bit curious.

"I had this weird dream either this morning or last night. Hard to tell..."

"Was it a nightmare?" Elenore asked sympathically.

"I'm not sure what it was, but it was odd. I thought I heard a little girl sing some weird song."

"Do you remember any of it?" Vanessa asked.

"That's what I was trying to do." Madlax shrugged. "If I remember I'll tell you. By the way what did you ask me before?"

"Elenore wanted to buy some clothes for you as well, if that's okay with you. I know you haven't sat down and discussed payment..."

Madlax smiled. "It's okay. I don't know how much Margaret pays Elenore. No offence, but I don't think maids get paid much. But I appreciate it." Madlax responded first to Vanessa then to Elenore.

"None taken consider this appreciation for last night." Elenore said with a smile.

"Wait a minute Elenore. Don't you set your own salary?" Vanessa asked a bit puzzled.

"Of course, Miss Margaret trusts me to set my salary..."

Madlax chuckled as she heard Vanessa and Elenore go back and forth.

Listening to them her mind went back to the tune.

"Noir name the ancient fate..." "What does it mean? What is Noir? I know of one Noir but I truly hope it isn't that Noir. And who were those women?" Madlax thought to herself as they drove on.

Chapter 8 My buddy Limelda

Margaret saw the three of them leave and went back to the living room, casually joining Laetitia who was watching TV on the couch. Limelda was sitting there as well, ignoring the TV and looking rather frustrated. Margaret wanted to say something but found it rather difficult to approach her. Thankfully, Limelda took the initiative for her after a while.

"So, what do you have in mind for the day, "Miss Margaret"? It's not like we have to stay here waiting for them to return." Limelda asked rather ironically, not trying to hide her boredom.

Laetitia shot Limelda a dirty look as she understood Limelda's meaning.

"Hmm... you can just call me Margaret." she replied, not catching the hint of irony on Limelda's voice, "I was hoping I could call you by your first name as well!" she said with a smile.

"I actually have no plans for the day; I'll probably just stay around and maybe do some homework. Also... you really don't have to stay here with us Limelda. Please feel free to go outside and visit the city if you want!" She said in a kind reassuring tone.

Limelda chuckled at the young girl's carelessness regarding her own security, considering the dangerous people who attacked Madlax last night were there for her reason. "I am not leaving your side. It was Madlax's personal request." She replied.

"Oh you really like Madlax, right? She told me a bit about how you two met, but I could never understand very well... what kind of relationship do you have with her?", Margaret asked interested, if rather casually, hoping to learn more about Limelda and Madlax indirectly.

"Well now, didn't you say you had some homework to do? Maybe you should get that out of your way as soon as possible, so you can enjoy the rest of the weekend with your friends without having to worry about it." Limelda cunningly dodged the subject if a bit obviously though she figured she didn't need much subtlety when dealing with this clueless girl.

"Ah, you're right Limelda!" She agreed, "I do have a problem with procrastination at times." She chuckled embarrassed. "Well, I'll let you be now. Please feel at home if you need anything, and if you want to ask something I'll be in my room. You be good and don't cause Limelda any trouble, okay Laetitia?" The younger girl nodded at her, if a bit embarrassed at the implications of such instructions, and Margaret left upstairs to do her homework. Leaving the two of them in the living room unaware of the verbal cat fight that was about to begin.

After Margaret went to her room, Limelda looked at Laetitia with that look one gives to annoying children. "What do you usually do Laetitia? She asked hoping the kid would go and get out her hair as well.

Laetitia smiled with the look of a satisfied predator knowing her victim wasn't any match. "I rather ask you a few questions Limelda." Limelda was a little shocked if not a little perturbed by the brazenness of this little girl.

"Actually, I'm surprised you didn't go look for Carrossea considering he's in Nafrece as well. But then again your preoccupation with Madlax..." Laetitia shot out not caring if Limelda knew or not that Carrossea was in Nafrece or not.

Limelda was actually shocked. How did this little girl know about Carrossea or her relation to him?

"Wha...Carros...How do you know about Mr. Doone!?" Limelda asked with some irritation mixed with curiosity.

Laetitia smiled enigmatically. "I know quite a lot actually. Some things I wished I didn't know but I know you and him shared some very intimate relations with each other while in Gazth-Sonika. Really unprofessional you know. Do you want me to give you an example...really I don't mind. Actually to be honest with you, I'm quite jealous." Laetitia shot Limelda a very adult look of envy and jealousy.

"Jealous!?! Why or how would this little girl know? Why or what would this child be jealous of?" Limelda thought as she restrained herself from strangling Laetitia.

"How would you know about such things? What business does a child like you know about such things?" Limelda asked greatly unnerved by Laetitia.

"People aren't always what they seem be. Take Madlax for example; oh she's like you in some ways but she's different...you can't truly relate to her no more than Vanessa Rene can. You're both wasting your time and time is beginning to run short..." Laetitia answered cryptically.

Limelda had a hard time keeping herself from wanting to rip out Laetitia's throat or snap her little neck.

"Look you...I'll...I'll think I'll check around the house if anyone asks." Limelda said unnerved, angry and spooked by Laetitia as she went and checked around the house.

Limelda first checked outside and found a hiding spot with some listening equipment made for the outdoors and a couple of anti personnel grenades. She wrecked it and booby trapped the spot with the grenades. "Well that should give whoever's using that spot a nasty surprise." Limelda said with a wicked smile. From what she could see no one was watching the house at the moment or least not from close by. So she went back into the house and checked the central part of the house avoiding the bedroom area. She didn't want to be accused of rifling through people's belongings. Though she did find it odd that both the ways to the east and west wings of the house were locked and the doors were heavy duty and reinforced.

She did however find some listening devices and disabled them. *"Whoever's watching the house did a thorough job. Wonder if it's Enfant or that other group. Doesn't matter, if either of them tries to hurt Madlax again...Madlax...what did that kid mean she's 'different'?"* That look she gave me that wasn't a normal look if anyone's different it's her." Limelda thought to herself as went back towards the living room.

Laetitia saw and tried to watch TV but her mind was preoccupied. Now that she was linked with Elenore both she and Poupee were getting the backlash of Elenore's psychic turmoil and her drinking. She felt herself at a loss on how to bring that up to Margaret without bringing up the link. Plus from what Poupee had told her any lie spoken to the wearer of the Torc would be revealed. She had to think of something and then it hit her; why not bring Elenore to the Sanctuary. With the power of the Torc and Margaret and her "Gifts" perhaps they could bend reality enough that Elenore could cope and heal her spiritually and mentally. Laetitia smiled at her plan but that smile went away as soon she heard Limelda come into the room.

Limelda returned to the living to still find Laetitia watching anime with some disinterest.

"Oh you're back." Laetitia said without even looking at Limelda. "Did you find anything? I gather you did otherwise you've would've been back sooner. They think they're so clever but they're also having their strings pulled just like this false one here." Laetitia held up briefly the doll that Margaret had bought at the doll store for her and put it back at her side.

"What do mean by that? And what do you know?" Limelda said a bit spooked again.

"I could tell you, but you're blinded by the false hope you have. It all will become clear soon..." Laetitia said almost nonchalantly but just as cryptic as before.

Limelda glared at Laetitia, she wouldn't...she couldn't do anything.

"I don't what game your playing little girl. I...ah forget it." Limelda stormed off and did another sweep of the house.

Laetitia smiled as she heard Limelda stomp off. Then she got off the couch and headed to Margaret's room.

Meanwhile Madlax dozed in the back seat as the trio drove to the garment district. Vanessa smiled as she saw Madlax dozing in the back and she saw a smile on Elenore's face. It reminded her of the time they went to the resort and Margaret was sound asleep in the back. *"Perhaps Elenore is thinking the same thing I'm thinking."* She thought to herself.

"Wake up sleepyhead, were here." Vanessa teased Madlax. Madlax rubbed her eyes and said before a big yawn gave her away. "I wasn't sleeping I was just resting my eyes."

Elenore grinned from ear to ear as she muffled a chuckle.

Soon after; the trio wandered from shop to shop first buying shoes and accessories. Then they did some lingerie shopping. Madlax rolled into the shops like a little child in a delightful theme park for the first time. Madlax then walked into a plush and classy shop and instantly took fancy to a black short ruffled mini-skirt with Elenore nearby looking through the racks.

"Oh that's nice." Vanessa said glad Madlax picked out something that wasn't military or a cocktail dress.

"It's a little expensive" Madlax said in disappointment. "Don't worry about it." Vanessa smiled as she picked out a blouse and slacks set. "This one is casual just a shirt and pants, will you like that one?"

Vanessa asked while she helped Elenore get some more casual clothing for herself as well as helping Madlax do the same. Vanessa was having fun getting Elenore to try on stuff and watching Madlax enjoy herself as well.

When were ready to leave Vanessa and Madlax waited for Elenore to come out the dressing room.

Vanessa knocked on the door. "Elenore are you okay?"

"Yes, I'll be right out." Elenore answered and opened the door and came out. She was wearing a paisley white and purple peasant blouse with a cornflower blue ruffled skirt.

"You look great Elenore!" Vanessa exclaimed. "Well, it's quite a change from what I usually see you in."

Madlax added with a smile. Elenore blushed a bit while smiling. "Thanks." She replied and Vanessa waved over the clerk and talked to her a bit and handed her a credit card.

"What was that all about Vanessa?" Elenore asked.

Vanessa smiled. "You're wearing that out of the store and I'm sure Margaret would love to see you in it."

Mentioning Margaret stifled any protest Elenore would've made and she just nodded as the clerk came back with the card plus a receipt and bag and then removed the security tags off the blouse and skirt.

Then after they finished paying for what they had bought they left the store.

"So what was taking you so long in there?" Madlax asked when they outside.

"I took a long good look at my scars, especially the one on my back..." Elenore answered somewhat melancholy.

Both decided not to press the subject. "So where to now?" Madlax asked trying to change the subject.

"I figured we would try and see if the local university would have any information about the Torc and perhaps the other artifacts as well." Vanessa answered.

"Sounds like a plan to me." Madlax agreed.

Back at Burton Manor, Limelda went into the living ready to have another round with the "creepy little brat" but to her delight Laetitia had already gone off. To where, she didn't care at least she was out her hair. Limelda changed the channel and sat down on the couch and watched TV. Though she couldn't quite get what Laetitia said out her mind and the listening devices bothered her as well.

"What have you gotten yourself into Madlax...?" Limelda thought to herself.

Chapter 9 Chains of hubris

An hour later they arrived at the local university and began walking towards the antiquities department. They got a few stares as they made their way. "We're being watched." Madlax said in hushed voice but loud enough so Vanessa and Elenore would hear.

"Really? Where?" Elenore asked with some apprehension. Vanessa looked and saw the pair of collage boys looking at them. She giggled. "Well if you saw three attractive women walking around wouldn't you look?"

"Well...yes...but I find it, well...uncomfortable." Elenore responded.

"No not them. I noticed them when we came in. I'm talking about someone else." "*Wonder why the old timer is here?*" Madlax said as she noticed a woman with brown hair standing near a pillar at a nearby building. "You go on without me, I'll catch up later." Madlax said as she headed toward the woman.

"Madlax wait...!" Vanessa said trying to grab Madlax but she was ahead of her.

"Come on Elenore; let's catch Madlax before a gunfight starts."

Madlax went up to the woman which appeared to be an older version of Elenore wearing glasses and holding a digital camera and a sketch pad.

"Hello old timer, been awhile." Madlax said to the woman.

"Hello to you too Madlax, Yes it has been awhile. What brings you to Nafrece? And here of all places, finally decided to pick up a book?" The woman asked with good natured sarcasm.

"I was going to ask you the same thing. I heard that you retired after your last job. What happened, couldn't take your walker on the job?" Madlax replied in the same sarcastic tone.

"Ha ha...but you heard right. I'm officially retired; almost bought the farm on the last job. I still do equipment procurement for Three Speed now and then. Why, do you need anything?" The woman asked.

"Not at the moment. It's about time you got out of the bodyguard business. Getting up there old lady. So what brings you to Nafrece?" Madlax grinned.

The woman cocked an eyebrow and grinned. "Did anyone tell you to respect your elders? Besides I was born in Nafrece and decided to take up art as hobby and enjoy my retirement."

"Well, I don't usually see any elders and I'm glad you're taking up a hobby..." Madlax joked.

"Hmmph, you didn't answer my question Madlax. Why are you in Nafrece?" The woman asked noticing Elenore and Vanessa with some veiled alarm.

"Just visiting some friends here."

"Is that them?" The woman asked pointing at Elenore and Vanessa who came up behind Madlax.

Madlax turned her head. "Yes, that's them."

"Madlax are you okay?" Vanessa asked while Elenore stared at the woman.

"I'm fine. Duvet these are my friends Vanessa Rene and Elenore Baker. Vanessa, Elenore this old lady is Duvet; one the best bodyguards out there."

Duvet raised an eyebrow. "Old lady huh...if I have any gray hairs it would be from having to trying teach you how to respect your elders." Duvet looked at Elenore. "Is something wrong?"

Elenore stopped staring. "Oh I'm sorry Miss Duvet. You remind me of someone I knew."

Duvet looked in Elenore eyes and nodded. "I see...you mind doing me a favor Elenore?"

"Of course, may I ask what it is?"

"Could you please stand by this pillar here while I take a picture? I think you make an outstanding model and give this drab building here some color."

Elenore thought for a second. "*Why not, she reminds me of mother.*" "Okay." Elenore walked to the pillar and stood in front of it in her usual pose. "How's this?"

Duvet smiled. "That's perfect..." Duvet aimed and took Elenore's picture. "Thank you very much. If you want I can send a copy via e-mail or I can call Madlax here to pass it along to you."

"Sure thanks. Since you know Madlax, you could give it to her." Elenore said with a smile.

"You're welcome. Again thank you very much. I hope I'm not keeping you?" Duvet asked.

"Not at all but we do have to get going." Vanessa said.

"Then by all means don't let me keep you. It was a pleasure meeting the both of you. I'm glad that Madlax has friends outside of her job." Duvet said with an affectionate smile.

"Oh by the way Duvet, if I do need anything can I give you a call?" Madlax asked.

"Sure let me give you my number? Still have your phone or do you have someplace I can reach you." Duvet asked.

"You can contact her at Burton Manor. Do you need the number?" Elenore innocently added.

"N...no, but if Madlax still has her phone I can contact her from there." Duvet responded with a little nervousness.

"I still have my phone old lady. Can you remember the number?" Madlax answered with a smirk.

"Of course, don't you have someplace to go?" Duvet replied in mock grumpy manner.

Madlax chuckled and gave a subtle gesture to Duvet for a hug which Duvet picked up on and gave Madlax a hug. "Anyways it was nice seeing you again Madlax. Anyways give me a call and I'll arrange a pick up point."

"You too Duvet. Thanks Duvet, I appreciate it." Madlax said with a warm smile as she began to walk off.

"Yeah yeah get going." Duvet said looking at her sketch pad as which Madlax got the hint.

"Nice meeting you Duvet." Vanessa said as she began to follow Madlax.

"Same here Vanessa, take care." Duvet replied.

Elenore lingered for a few seconds, smiled and caught up the others.

When they were out of earshot of Duvet, Vanessa spoke up with a gleeful smirk. "See, I told you that outfit looked great on you."

"I'll agree with you there. But there's something about Madlax's friend that seems so familiar. I can't put my finger on it." Elenore replied.

"Actually she reminded me of you, well an older version of you. Perhaps she's a distant relative you didn't know of; after we're done here you could ask her, if she's still there of course." Vanessa said noticing that Elenore was spacing out which was quite unusual for her.

"Hmmm...She might be. I honestly don't know many relatives I actually have outside from my immediate family. All mine are dead, my grandparents, my mother and my father...well scratch that I never knew my father and no one ever talked about him. So I'll take your suggestion and ask her. It wouldn't hurt to ask." Elenore replied somewhat distracted.

"So anyway Madlax, where did you meet Duvet?" Vanessa asked.

"She was a bodyguard I worked with a couple times in the past. She was also like a surrogate mom to me." Madlax answered nonchalantly.

"I thought you were in an orphanage, and then trained by that Three Speed person?" Vanessa said a bit confused.

"That's true, but while Three Speed was training me to be an agent she taught me the things that a girl "needs" to know plus she's the one who taught how to be ladylike after the job was done." Madlax replied with some fondness in her voice.

That explains a lot, you seemed fond of her." Vanessa said.

"Well ya, she's nice for someone of her profession but she only stuck around long enough to teach me and then she had to leave. But during that time she did show me love and affection when I needed it and as said before we've worked a couple times together." Madlax replied nonchalantly as before.

"So it was a working relationship. Did she ever tell you her real name?" Elenore asked hoping Madlax could provide some answers.

"No, I only know her by her code name. Why do you ask?" Madlax asked somewhat surprised Elenore would ask that.

"Vanessa pointed out that she reminded her of me, I did notice some resemblance. I was wondering if she's a relative of mine that no one told me about." Elenore replied.

Madlax shrugged her shoulders and then pondered. "Hmm now that you mention it, she does look like you. Maybe she is. We'll go ask after we leave here and if she's gone I can always give her a call."

"Thanks." Elenore responded as they approached the entrance of the antiquities building.

As soon as Madlax and the others walked off, Duvet looked at the camera and looked at the picture of Elenore. "You've grown so much. Your grandfather would be so proud of you sweetie." She said quietly to herself. "At least now I have an updated picture of you..." Duvet said holding another picture of a six year old girl in a pink ballet outfit complete with a pink tutu. A tear rolled down Duvet's cheek.

Meanwhile back at Burton Manor; Margaret opened her eyes and she was no longer in her room. She was back at that flower field that felt so familiar. It felt very warm and calming. She thought she was alone till she felt a presence standing behind her and turned around.

She could see a woman. Someone she could not recognize at first, but looked at her tenderly as if she knew her. Who could she be? Margaret never entirely regained all her memories from before that incident, but after a while it finally hit her and she could remember this much: this person was her mother.

Margaret wanted to approach her and say something but she couldn't move and the words wouldn't come out. Margaret stood there looking in disbelief but she couldn't say a thing before her mother started talking: "I don't have much time, and I know I shouldn't interfere with this, but I must warn you Margaret! The power that has come to you is more important than you might imagine. And the doors to your past haven't been completely closed yet. You'll encounter hardship once again, soon enough. You must be ready for it. You must be strong! I must go now, but I want you to know I've always been watching you... and I always will." the woman said before fading, as a sudden windstorm hit the place, and the once pleasant flower field turned dark and cold, forcing Margaret to cover her eyes at the unpleasant feeling.

Margaret opened her eyes suddenly, still shocked by the vision in her dream. She was awakened by the knocking on her door apparently. After her initial confusion usually following her waking up moments she concluded she must have fallen asleep while doing homework (nothing too uncommon for her). Before she could rationalize her dream properly she got up and went to open the door, doing her best effort not to look like someone who had just woken up. She opened the door to find Laetitia standing there. "We need to talk Margaret..." Laetitia said as she walked in.

"What do you want to talk about?" Margaret asked hoping the conversation would distract her.

"I have a plan to help Elenore with her nightmares."

Margaret was going to ask how Laetitia knew about Elenore's nightmares but she figured that Laetitia had her strange way of picking up on things that the rest couldn't. "Okay, what's the plan?"

Laetitia was about to tell when there was a knock on the door. Laetitia turned and gave the door a scowl. Margaret went to the door and found Limelda.

"Hi Limelda, can I help you?" Margaret asked a bit surprised to see Limelda at her bedroom door.

"Sorry to disturb you Miss Margaret, but I've found listening devices planted around the house and I need to check your room as well, with your permission of course. I'll ask your maid later to do the same with hers." Limelda said standing in the doorway.

"Really?! Why would they want to do that for? But if you think its necessary go ahead, I'll ask Elenore when she gets home." Margaret replied still trying to act as she was not just waking up.

"I don't know why, but I doubt this is mere retaliation. Nobody goes through all this unless there's another reason behind it." Limelda said as she checked the room and after a few minutes through searching found one under the nightstand table where it wouldn't be spotted.

She yanked it from its hiding spot and showed to Margaret with some concern. "Whichever group is doing this has done a thorough job. I'm betting your maids room is bugged as well as the phones."

"I don't really understand why they are doing this, but I do wish they leave us alone." Margaret said sadly looking at the device in Limelda's hands as she was disabling it.

"We'll find out soon enough I guess. Oh by the way Miss Margaret, your little sister said some very odd things to me." Limelda said trying to pump Margaret for information while giving Laetitia a nasty sideways glance.

"What did she say *this* time?" Margaret asked Limelda.

Limelda repeated what Laetitia had said to her and Margaret was a little confused but answered. "I don't know what she meant by all that, but I've never told her about your relationship with Carrossea in fact this is news to me as well." Limelda sighed knowing that this clueless girl was most likely telling the truth and decided not go any further with this line of questioning.

Margaret then turned to Laetitia and asked. "Did you say those things?"

"It's the truth, she deluding herself if she thinks she truly can have Madlax."

"You better watch what you say or someday might get offended." Limelda shot back.

"Who you? I wouldn't think there would be much that could offend you..." Laetitia fired back.

"Laetitia!" Margaret shouted.

"I'll have to wait for the others get home to finish checking. I'll be in the living room waiting for Madlax."

Limelda said suppressing the urge to strangle Laetitia.

"I'll have a talk with her." Margaret said apologetically.

Limelda shot Laetitia a nasty look as she exited the room. Laetitia closed the door behind her listening for Limelda's footsteps echoing off the hallway, when she sensed that she had gone far enough she looked at Margaret but before she could say anything.

Margaret felt really surprised and upset about the devices Limelda found in her room. If anything, she thought she'd be safe at her own home, but apparently she was not. For how long have those devices been there? And who planted them? How could they just break in unnoticed like that? These thoughts were all very revolting, but she felt relieved that Limelda found out about it and disabled them, at least. It bothered her most when Limelda brought up the name of Carrossea. "What...Limelda and Carrossea? How can that be? He never mentioned anything about it... then again; I guess there are many things he never told me..." Margaret admitted to herself, feeling rather saddened by that fact as well as Limelda's words, yet trying to organize her thoughts and hide her shock. Then she turned to Laetitia.

"I don't know what started that fight but you egging her on is a bit uncalled for plus is it really true? How is Limelda related to Carrossea? Do you know anything I don't know? Do you want to tell me about it?" Margaret asked with anxious curiosity, yet hoping it was all just a lie or one big misunderstanding.

"As I said before, she's fooling herself if she can truly have Madlax." Laetitia then told her of the link between her and Poupee and their conversations including the knowledge of the intimate relationship that Carrossea and Limelda had between them. She told in so many words (leaving out the fact she and Poupee were linked to Elenore) about Elenore's drinking. Plus she told of the visions of ravens and crows flying in a circular holding pattern forming a ring and of an unopened door of truth with an old man standing sadly next to it holding a letter but both of the visions she couldn't really understand what they meant and that frustrated her. After she was done speaking she waited for Margaret to speak, her expression cryptic as usual.

The revelations about Carrossea and Limelda turned out to be truth, and this of course made Margaret feel a bit hurt, disappointed and pensive about the subject, wondering what exactly Carrossea felt about

her. However, such thoughts didn't last too long once Laetitia started mentioning the other subjects. She couldn't understand Laetitia's vision about this door, but she shared her own dream visions she had been having lately ever since she had gotten in contact with the Torc, as well as bringing up the subject of the Torc and explaining it to Laetitia for the first time, hoping this information would contain important clues that could relate to it. Elenore's subject was what was troubling her most though.

"Why do you think is that happening to Elenore Laetitia? And how can I make things better? If I knew what to do, I'd do anything! But I just don't know..." Margaret concluded sadly, lowering her head, still feeling pretty guilty about Elenore's situation.

"Before we were interrupted I was going to tell about my plan."

Margaret brightened at Laetitia's words. "What is it?" She asked curiously.

"We bring Elenore to the sanctuary."

"Don't we need the three books for that and besides Elenore doesn't have the "Gift"."

"Normally yes, but you have the Torc and I feel it can help us. As for Elenore and the "Gift"; with the Torc's help we can bring Elenore's spiritual self to the sanctuary."

"Mmm...I guess we can try. It's better than doing nothing. But wait, shouldn't we ask Elenore first?"

"Really, do you think Elenore is going admit to abusing alcohol?"

"No, I guess not."

Margaret was pensive at first but she felt she had no other choice but she was worried what would happen to Laetitia but she just smiled and said not to worry. With that Margaret got on her knees, opened her shirt to expose the Torc and closed her eyes. Laetitia touched the Torc. At first it tingled as if to ward off but it knew the intent and soon both Margaret and Laetitia were in the shared mindscape. It was the nighttime park that Poupee and her shared with Elenore.

"Hello Margaret..." A voice said behind them.

Margaret and Laetitia turned around to see Poupee standing. Margaret was in shock, it was the first time in years that she had seen him. Tears began to flow down Margaret's cheeks.

"I'm so sorry Poupee. I didn't mean to get you killed please forgive me." Margaret said between the tears.

Poupee silently walked up to Margaret and hugged her. "It's okay Margaret, I know you didn't mean to. I forgive you." He said in a forgiving tone.

"How did you get here Margaret?" Poupee asked once he thought about it?

"Laetitia brought me here but this doesn't look like the sanctuary."

"This isn't the sanctuary." Poupee responded a bit surprised and wondering what Laetitia had in mind.

"This is the shared mindscape Poupee and I use to talk to each other. I'll get Elenore and then all four of us can go to the sanctuary." Laetitia replied.

Margaret felt that Laetitia was hiding something but she wasn't sure what.

They soon found her sitting playing with the doll. While they were approaching her they heard a voice that Margaret recognized as Elenore's but little older than the eight year old they were approaching singing a song that Margaret never heard before.

"Hello Elenore, please don't be frightened this is a friend." Laetitia said reassuringly.

Elenore nodded and smiled. "Hi Laetitia, who's she? She looks familiar." Margaret looked at the eight year old version of Elenore and smiled. "Hi Elenore, I'm Margaret." Elenore looked at her in surprise and then held up the doll. "Really? Her name is Margaret too." Elenore looked around and then turned back to Margaret. "Do you want to know a secret? If you promise not to tell anybody."

"I promise Elenore." Margaret agreed. Elenore smiled and motioned Margaret to bend down to her level. Then she whispered in her ear. "My mommy gave me this doll. But mommy and grandpa say I have to say that grandpa gave to me or the mean lady will take it away from me."

"Who's the mean lady?" Margaret asked wondering.

Elenore looked around for someone and relieved she held her index finger to her lips. "She might hear you, but since you have the same name as my doll I'll tell you. But you have to promise to never tell her I told you or she'll really spank me and she hurts."

"I promise, I'll never tell, even if she spanks me real hard." Margaret agreed wondering why Elenore would ask that.

"The Mistress is and she really really hates my mommy."

Margaret was going to respond when they except Elenore found themselves in a park. It was bright noon and they could see Elenore's grandfather and someone that at first glance to be Elenore but it turned out not to be as they recognized the six year old Elenore sitting next to her. "That must be her mother. I've never met her, but she really looks like Elenore especially at that age." Margaret commented but Laetitia hushed her and told her to listen.

"Thanks father for bringing her here. I know you're taking a risk by being possibly being seen with me." Elenore's mother said with her head slightly bowed.

"You're my daughter and Elenore is yours. The Master doesn't mind me or Elenore seeing you but it's the Mistress. She's bitter still and Elenore is a constant reminder. If she found out she could bar you from seeing her completely." Elenore's grandfather said putting a gentle hand on her mother's shoulder. "It's been six years and she's still bitter? If she doesn't want Elenore around why doesn't she let me take her away, she IS my daughter."

"For generations our family has served the Burton family and Elenore will have to take my place since you have been barred."

"What about Walter?"

Elenore's grandfather frowned. "He is not part of this family. I would like you to remember that..."

Even Margaret understood that veiled threat and she was saddened.

There was a long silence and then Elenore's mother spoke; "I'm sorry for all this except one thing; I never regretted having Elenore. She's the only good thing that came from all this. I'm sorry father for getting you into this mess." Elenore's mother said apologetically mixed with sorrow.

"Yes Meg you made a mistake but out of it you've given me a wonderful grandchild and I forgave you a long time ago." Meg's father said smiling. "Thanks father, I won't keep you both much longer but can I give something to Elenore before you go?" Meg asked and her father nodded consent. Meg called over Elenore.

"Yes mommy?" Elenore asked.

"I have a present for you, but must promise me you will never tell where you got from okay."

Elenore looked a little confused. "Okay mommy, but why?"

"Because sweetie some people might get mad and try to take it away from you. If anyone asks just say that your grandfather gave it to you. Okay sweetie?" Elenore smiled. "Ok mommy, I promise." Elenore's eyes grew wide as her mother gave her a doll with a blue dress, brown yarn hair, black button eyes and red shoes.

As Elenore took the doll the scene changed back to the nighttime version of the park.

"Mommy?" Elenore asked in a panic.

"Mommy?"

"Have you seen my mommy?" She asked Margaret tears starting to fall.

"I'm sorry but I haven't seen your mother. But I can go look around for her if you want; you just stay right here in case she comes back."

"Really?! Ok I'll stay here." Elenore sniffed and then she beamed and replied.

Margaret, Laetitia and Poupee walked along the chain till Margaret thought Elenore couldn't hear.

"Why are we stopping?" Laetitia asked.

“That whole scene saddened and angered me. I’m sure you understood the threat John gave to Meg. Laetitia nodded while Margaret bowed her head. “All I remember of him, that he was kind and loving. What I saw there; disgusted me. I’m getting a bad feeling about this, should we go on Laetitia?”

“We have to, if we have any chance to help Elenore. That scene may’ve shown us the root of the problem. We just have to figure it out.”

“What do you think Poupee?” Margaret asked feeling a little weird.

“If I said let’s turn back, would either of you listen?”

“All right, but if it looks like we’re hurting her, we get out. Understood?”

“Okay.” Laetitia agreed.

Poupee sighed and mumbled to himself. “Like either you would listen to me...”

Laetitia and Margaret continued to travel down the chain. Poupee followed behind still wondering if what they doing was a good idea.

As they continued the nighttime park were replaced of scenes of Elenore committing various acts of suicide; hanging herself in her room, bleeding to death in the bathtub, walking in front of a bus, jumping into a speeding train. And those were between scenes of her beating to death various people; Carrossea Doone, Friday Monday, Maurice Lopez, a few girls Margaret didn’t recognize and Margaret’s own mother (granted Margaret didn’t like it but understood where she was at and guessing what her mother did to Elenore). But the most gruesome acts were saved for a man that they had no idea who he was. Margaret suppressed the urge to scream as she grabbed Laetitia and Poupee and ran further down the chain. Along the way Margaret saw images of Elenore in a coffin, a morgue slab and in the field of flowers. Tears were flowing down her face. All along that song kept repeating itself.

At the field of flowers the ended and there they saw a door that looked like the door of truth. Standing there near the door dressed in a black laced dress was the adult Elenore. As they approached they saw her cradling the same doll her mother gave her. She was singing that song as if it was a lullaby. Margaret slowly approached Elenore.

“Elenore...”

"Elenore?"

"Elenore are you okay?" Vanessa asked an unusually spaced out Elenore as they entered the building.

"Oh sorry Vanessa. I'm okay, maybe I'm tired or something."

"You do look a little out of it. You should lie down when we get home." Vanessa replied concerned.

The trio approached the front desk and asked about whom to talk about Celtic artifacts. They were given directions and they walked to an office. They knocked on the door and they got a response and they opened the door. The room was lined with bookshelves with a small table and sofa and a couple of plush chairs. Sitting on the chairs was an elderly woman dressed in simple blue dress looking at some notes.

"Doctor Tudor?" Vanessa asked the woman and she looked up from her notes and saw that they weren't her assistants.

"Yes I am. How can help you?" She said in a friendly tone.

"We were wondering if could tell us anything about the Torc of Rhiannon." Vanessa replied.

"Ah, I guess you heard the rumors as well. Even though it maybe turns out to be just a rumor it's nice to see people take interest in the past." Dr Tudor said looking over the trio and then nodding to herself.

"Rumors?" Vanessa asked wondering who else knew about the Torc.

"Why, the rumors about the Torc of Rhiannon surfacing in Nafrece of course. Did you know the last known appearance was over five hundred years ago. I do say you three seem to be quite nicer than others who've asked about of late. They all had the stink of greed, death or evil or all three about them, but you three seem well... different." Dr Tudor replied gesturing the three to take a seat while she prepared some tea.

"Thank you Doctor. That's very kind of you say that, we're not looking for the Torc per say. We're curious about the legend behind it and what makes it so special." Madlax said taking a seat.

"We know the legend of Queen Rhiannon herself but we were wondering why she would craft such a thing?" Vanessa asked.

"*Different...indeed...I don't know why?*" Doctor Tudor thought as she made some tea and offered the trio some which they accepted and then she sat back down and spoke.

"The answer is quite simple; she wanted a reminder of her ordeal and to help others going through their own. As for what makes it so special is the stories tell of the Torc being used to settle feuds between families, to see into the hearts of men and know their past and their desires. One story tells of the time it was used to repel an army of invaders by seeing in their hearts and convincing them to make peace among other things. But my guess some Druid was good at negotiating and they attributed it to the Torc."

"Wow, is the Torc that powerful!?" Elenore asked with some surprise.

Doctor Tudor smiled a little gleeful smile when you've impressed someone as expressed by Elenore's demeanor. "Those are just legends young lady. But even in myth and legend there's always a grain of truth behind them. I wrote about the Torc and other legendary artifacts awhile back including the two other artifacts connected with Torc."

"Two others?" Elenore asked.

"Well yes; the Ring of Morrigan and the Bracelet of Brigid." Doctor Tudor replied.

"Would it be possible to buy a copy of your book Doctor Tudor?" Vanessa humbly asked. Doctor Tudor smiled. "Well of course, I have a few copies lying around here somewhere here. Would like to buy one now?" She asked happily as she went to look around the room and came back with a very thick book (dictionary thick). The trio asked for a price and the doctor gave a price which they happily paid and threw in thirty dollars extra.

"That's very generous of you; I'll even sign it for you since you've been very kind and polite. Who should I make this out to?" Doctor Tudor asked.

Vanessa pointed to Elenore and the doctor nodded pulling out a pen. "May I ask your name young lady?" Doctor Tudor asked.

"Of course Doctor Tudor, my name is Elenore Baker." Elenore replied nicely.

"Baker...? You wouldn't happen to be related to a Meg Baker by any chance?" Doctor Tudor asked.

Elenore's eyes almost grew wide as saucers. "I don't know. But that was my mother's name but she died ten years ago. Why do you ask Doctor?"

"There's an older art student who comes by here and looks at the pictures of Celtic artifacts and we chat. In fact she usually lingers around the art building next door. The one with the pillars... Quite a pleasant woman, if a bit quiet, just like you, are you sure you're not related..." Doctor Tudor said hoping that Elenore would get the hint.

"I just saw her outside drawing earlier. Please forgive me Doctor, but I must really go now. Thank you for your time." Elenore said hurriedly but politely as she rushed out the door and down the hall.

"I'm sorry about that Doctor; she's been going through some rough times lately." Vanessa said apologetically.

"I understand she seems to be a very nice young woman." The doctor said signing the book and handing it to Vanessa who was getting up.

"Yes she is, but we must be going ourselves. Thank you again for your time and the book." Vanessa said shaking the doctor's hand and then she and Madlax headed out of the office.

After they had left Doctor Tudor sat down in her chair with a Cheshire cat smile and sipped some tea.

"Well Meg, so that's your Elenore. You knew this would happen sooner or later. I just hope you can give her a good explanation..." She said to herself.

Meanwhile down the hall Madlax and Vanessa were hurriedly walking down the hall trying to catch up with Elenore. "Now we know why *Enfant* and the *Soldats* want it. If it has that kind of power, they'll be unstoppable." Madlax said with grave concern.

Vanessa said with equal concern "True, but right now I'm worried about Elenore."

"Elenore..." Margaret said trying to get her attention. Elenore stopped singing yet the singing continued as she looked up still cradling the doll.

"Hello Margaret. Please lower your voice, she's sleeping."

"Oh sorry, can I ask why you're cradling a doll?" Margaret asked quietly.

Elenore looked at Margaret like she was either crazy or joking. "A doll? Can't you see I'm holding my baby. I named her after you, you know." There in Elenore's arm was a small baby sound asleep.

Margaret tried to hold her shock and then she smiled a little nervously. "Your right, I was being silly."

"That's okay Margaret. You look like you have something to say, what is it?"

"Can't you see the door next to you?"

Elenore looked at the door.

As she ran down the sidewalk she could see Meg still at the pillar drawing.

"*Why mother? Why did grandpa say you were dead? Where were you when I needed you?*" She thought to herself.

Duvel looked up to see Elenore running towards her.

"Elenore..." Duvel said to herself.

"Elenore, how come you haven't opened the door." Margaret asked.

"I don't know. I have my hands full with Margaret I guess."

"I can hold her if you want so you can open the door."

"Thank you Margaret." Elenore gently placed the baby in Margaret's arms. The baby began to cry and Margaret gently rocked. "Shhh...don't worry I'll give you back to your..."

“Mother!” Elenore yelled at Meg.

Meg put down her pad and rose to her feet. “Elenore...”

“Where have you been?” Elenore asked in a clearly hurt tone.

“Elenore please open the door.” Margaret asked.

“Please, Elenore. You don’t know the story.” Meg responded trying calm Elenore down.

“All right Margaret.” Elenore as she touched the door handle. As soon she did Laetitia yelled. “Don’t open the door!”

Across town, Carrossea stopped walking and shouted “Elenore don’t open that door!”

Margaret realized the mistake. “Oh no! Elenore stop!!”

But it was too late Elenore had opened and she screamed.

“Elenore, are you all right?” Meg asked as Elenore stiffened, her eyes widening and her mouth gasping a scream.

The song had ceased but it was replaced by the sound of ripping and child’s voice.

“Noooooooo! Don’t make me go through that again! Please! “

The world flashed around Margaret and the others.

The last thing they heard before they were thrown out was; “Mommy...”

“Mommy...”

Elenore tried reach out to Meg but she began to fall. Meg rushed to catch her and she gently laid her on the ground as Madlax and Vanessa caught up.

“Elenore can you hear me?” Meg shouted.

Vanessa pulled out her cell phone and called nine one one.

“She’s in shock. C’mon stay with us Elenore!” Madlax said.

“Come on sweetie you can yell at me all you want, just stay with us...”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know...”Laetitia sorrowfully talking to no one.

Margaret held in her hands against her face crying. “What have we done?”

Madlax, Meg and Vanessa crouched around an unconscious Elenore as a small crowd was gathering around them.

In the distance sirens blared...

Chapter 10. Remnants' of legends and pink tutus

March 17th 2001 (*Madlax is 10, Meg is 34*)

In a building in Gazth-Sonika, Meg sat in a wicker chair with a low back. She was staring at a picture of a six year old girl in a pink ballet outfit complete with pink tutu and wide smile on her face. Meg smiled warmly.

Madlax came to side of the chair and looked down to see the picture blocking Meg's view in the process.

"I don't see you smile very often with your mask off. So what'cha so happy about?"

Meg moved Madlax out of the way. "Just looking at my daughter."

"Awww...she's cute."

Meg smirked. "She's two years older than you. This was when she was six." Meg's smile faded.

"Do you get to see her?" Madlax asked innocently.

"No...I haven't seen her in years." Meg answered sadly.

"If she's your daughter how come you haven't seen her?"

"There are a few reasons..."

"Your job?"

"That's one of them."

"How come you became an agent Duvie?"

Meg sat back in the chair. "Well it wasn't my first choice. You see I was trained to be a maid and take my parents place when they retired. A few things happened and I wound up unemployed. For awhile I worked as a domestic servant for the elderly. Till one day I saw something I shouldn't have and I was given a choice; either become an agent or get a bullet in the head. Naturally I took the first option but that meant I would see her even less."

"Is all that true?" Madlax asked a bit skeptically.

"Yes it is, but I'm not going to tell you everything."

"Huh, I wouldn't have figured a tuff old lady like you being a house maid..." Madlax joked.

Present day

"Hey old lady...you with us?" Madlax asked Meg they sat in the hospital waiting room.

Meg snapped out of her funk. "Sorry, I'm just...I can understand her being angry with me but I didn't think she would..."

"That whole reaction was strange...at first she seemed normal, angry but normal. If she was to go in shock she would've done it in Doctor Tudor's office. I can't explain it...but I think there's more to this." Vanessa supposed.

"Yeah, but ya have to figure in that she was spacing out before that happened .And even from what I know of her that's really not like her to do that." Madlax added.

"That's true; I assumed that was from seeing Miss Baker here."

"Meg's got a good reason, but there are a few things I would like to know." Madlax said trying to defend Meg.

"Yes, I have a few questions too." Vanessa added in an angry tone.

"I'm sure you both do, but this isn't the time or the place. Plus shouldn't Elenore hear the answers as well?"

Vanessa sighed sadly. "I can wait till Elenore has her crack at you."

Madlax looked at them both dejectedly; granted there were some unanswered questions and emotions were running a bit high. Plus she didn't like the people she cared about fighting each other.

"Look, once Elenore is up and about we'll all sit down and talk it over. But I do have a couple questions for you old lady."

"Do you really have to keep calling me "old lady" but anyways go ahead?" Meg asked a bit annoyed.

"You still have that picture and it is really her?" Madlax asked to a now surprised Meg and leaving Vanessa a bit confused.

"What picture? The one she took this afternoon?" Vanessa asked trying to clear things up.

"No, I'm talking about a picture that Meg has of a little girl in a pink tutu."

"Pink tutu?" Vanessa asked even more confused.

Meg reached into her purse and pulled out a photograph in a protective sleeve. "What do you think?"

Meg said showing the picture to Madlax and then Vanessa.

"Is that Elenore?" Vanessa asked a bit surprised. Meg nodded in agreement. Vanessa smirked and looked toward the ER doors and quietly said. "You better get better soon..."

Seeing that Meg and Vanessa were in a better mood Madlax smiled a bit but she was just as worried about Margaret and wondering how she would take the news.

"Vanessa, I need to borrow your car. I need to go check on Margaret and tell her the news."

Meg grew concerned. "Madlax what do you mean check on Margaret?" While Vanessa pulled out her car keys and handed them to Madlax.

"I guess we all have some explaining to do. But right now I do need to get to Margaret."

"You know she'll want to come here and I don't think an army will stop her." Vanessa said.

Madlax sighed. "I know, I'll bring her here and have Limelda watch Laetitia."

"Vanessa chuckled. "Oh she'll just love that."

"I know..." Madlax said as she left. Meg wanted to ask but she decided to hold off on the questions for now.

Meg looked at the picture once before putting it back in her purse. "I'm going to check on Elenore. Hopefully they can let us see her." Meg said getting up from the chair and Vanessa soon followed. Once they entered the ER, they went up the main desk and asked for the doctor working on Elenore. A woman dressed in ER scrubs approached.

"Doctor, how is she?" Vanessa asked apprehensively.

"For the moment, she's stable but unconscious. The preliminary tests showed that it wasn't a heart attack or aneurism. What caused her collapse is still undetermined but there are a couple of things I need to ask either you or Miss Baker." The Doctor replied and they both gave consent.

"We noticed two scars on her; one on her back and the other on her left arm. How recent are those?" Meg looked at Vanessa. "She was shot eight months ago in Gazth-Sonika."

"Did she express the wounds didn't heal right or anything of that nature?" The Doctor asked.

"Have they fully healed?" Meg asked very alarmed.

"As far we can tell they are which brings to my next question. Her toxicology report found that she has blood alcohol level of .032 but no other substances. Do either you know how long she's drinking or has she done so earlier in the day?"

"To be honest, for as long I've known her I've never seen her pick up a drink. She did say she was having nightmares due to what happened to her." Vanessa answered noticing Meg wasn't too happy.

"So Post Traumatic Syndrome is a factor here but I don't think it caused her shock and collapse."

"One last question before you can see her."

Meg and Vanessa consented bracing themselves for whatever.

"How long ago was she pregnant? She shows all the signs of a previous pregnancy but we can't find it in our records."

"We're just as confused as you are Doctor. How she managed to hide this from everybody, I have no idea."

"We'll keep her overnight for observation, hopefully she'll regain consciousness and you can bring her home tomorrow. You can go see her now." Doctor said at a loss for words.

Meg and Vanessa went into the room where Elenore was. She was still unconscious and hooked up to a monitor.

Meg grabbed Vanessa's arm, not hard but enough to get her attention. "Looks like I'm not the only one having to give an explanation."

Vanessa looked at Meg then at Elenore. "I think Madlax was right about all us having to explain..."

Limelda stood in front of Laetitia's door with a wicked smile. The last fifteen minutes were quite enlightening; oh at first she thought that Madlax was fooling around the maid and that Rene woman. She was relieved that nothing of the sort happened.

The truth was interesting though; first she learned that Duvet considered a legend in some circles was in Nafrece and she was the maid's mother! Then while checking on Margaret she and Madlax were disarmed by that Nakhl woman. Embarrassing as that was she did enjoy seeing the airhead get chewed out by her. Then finding out that the maid was in the hospital and that the airhead and the creepy little brat had a major hand in it. She got loaded with watching the little brat but at least she got a date out of Madlax. It was just her and the brat. Madlax took the airhead and Nakhl with her to the hospital.

Limelda opened the door and saw Laetitia in a corner sulking. Walking slowly and savoring the moment Limelda bent down to Laetitia. "Awww what's wrong princess, somebody pee in your cornflakes?"

Limelda asked in mock sympathy. Laetitia didn't even look up.

"Well, you did it this time princess." Limelda began to say but she smiled wickedly and continued.

"Let me tell you a story; once upon a time before the civil war and Madlax there was this agent.

Her name was Duvet, why she was called that...well I don't know why but I'm sure somebody does.

You see Duvet became known in some circles for taking out gangs, terrorists and other garbage all by herself like Madlax does. One of the strange things about Duvet is she always wore a white featureless mask with only the eyes showing, how she talked out of that thing is beyond me. The other thing was that she loved to torture her prisoners." She took Laetitia's hand and pressed on her fingers. "You see she would start by driving nails into the finger joints and then work her way to the hand." Limelda said as she applied pressure on Laetitia's hand watching the look on Laetitia's face with unmasked glee.

"Then she would drive nails into every joint she could find and slowly flay them alive until they answered her questions. Sometimes she would open them up and set their insides on fire. I can see by the look on your face you don't believe me. Well, it's all true for you see I saw all this." Limelda rose up and turned towards the door. "Wonder why I told that story little princess. You see that little stunt you pulled on the maid that wound her up in the hospital, well it turns out her mother is Duvet. Now imagine if she did that to somebody she didn't know...imagine what she would do to somebody who hurt her only daughter. Something to think about princess..." Limelda turned her head long enough to see the frightened look on Laetitia's face and then she went out the door with a very satisfied look on her face.

Back at the hospital; Elenore had been moved to a private room. Vanessa waited in the waiting room in case Madlax came back most likely with Margaret in tow.

Meg sat next to the bed dejectedly looking at Elenore who was still unconscious.

"I don't know if you can hear me sweetie but I want to say I'm sorry. I know it's a poor excuse but there's a lot...how could I explain? How could I explain that because I caught your uncle in an undercover intelligence operation would wind me up as an operative for Nafrece Intelligence? And then there's your grandfather; who wanted one of us to replace him so he could retire. Well that didn't go as planned; he found out that Walter was gay and he disowned him. As for me...well having an affair with Richard and having you when he was married got me barred from the house and to top it off by defending Walter, Anna had an ally to keep me from seeing you. For a lot of years I was out of the country...I didn't want to be...if I couldn't see you then being far away wouldn't hurt as much. From

seeing your condition; that was a bad idea. I don't know if sorry would ever cut it but I'm sorry for that as well.

The only thing I had to remind me of you was that picture of you in that pink tutu...some days it got me through the worse days. I don't know how I am going tell you when you regain consciousness. "

Meg got up, brushed Elenore's hair out of her eyes and kissed her on the forehead. Then she started walking toward the door.

"I'm...still mad...but I forgive you...mommy..." Elenore said groggily.

Meg smiled and turned to see Elenore trying to open her eyes and she went to her side.

"By... the way..."

"Yes, sweetie?"

"I...heard...every...single...word...you said."

Chapter 11. A destined woman

Though it took most of the morning driving with Ellis and Nadie taking turns they made it to Mexico City. It was mid afternoon when they found a hotel that didn't charge an arm and leg. They checked in without unpacking when they got to the room.

"We're not staying long Nadie?" Ellis asked.

"Just long enough to get what we need done. I don't know how long it would take Blueeyes to get here so we might be here awhile. Have you tried taking off the bracelet again?"

"I tried Nadie, but it won't budge and this voice tells me "Not yet Plentyn Y Blodau.""

"I still have no idea what that means and now that your wearing it, now what do you do with it?"

Ellis thought for a few seconds. "I don't know."

"Too bad we just can't ask it. It's not like we can go and say "Hey Magic Bracelet where do you want us to do with you?"" Nadie said half jokingly.

When Nadie asked the question Ellis felt pressure from the bracelet and then she froze and it began to glow. They could see visions of a far off land across the water, a huge tower in a big city and of a young woman with pigtails wearing some kind of necklace.

Then they heard a gentle voice echoing their minds.

"Go East. Go across the water. Go to Nafrece..."

"Nafrece? Where's that? I've never heard of it." Ellis asked the voice.

"East. Across the water. Hurry." The voice replied.

Then the visions as well as the glowing stopped. Both of them were a bit dumbfounded for a few seconds.

"What the hell?! Not this again." Nadie said with dismay in voice as it reminded her of the Inca Rose.

"Nadie where's Nafrece?" Ellis asked quizzically.

"It's a country far away from here across the ocean. We're both out of our league here maybe Blueeyes can figure something out. I have her number so I'll go make a call. You stay here and don't go anywhere, okay." Nadie said.

"Yes sir." Ellis replied as Nadie left to make the call. Ellis felt tired and decided to go to sleep or least try to but all she did was stared at the bracelet as she lay down.

Across town Jodie stared at the plate of tacos in front of her, having an internal war with herself about whether she should eat them or not. She was taking a break from monitoring her two friends. "*Just this once.*" she thought to herself. Just as Jodie was about to pick one up, her cell phone rang. Oh, thank goodness.

"Blue Eyes," she answered with confidence.

"Ah, Blue Eyes!" a concerned voice said.

"Nadie? What's wrong?"

"It's Ellis! Something's happened! Can you help us?"

"Alright, I'll be right there."

"But wait you don't know—" but Jodie hung up before Nadie could finish.

Fifteen minutes later, Jodie walked up to the hotel room where Nadie and Ellis were staying and knocked on the door. Nadie opened it and was surprised at how fast she arrived. "Oh good you're here. But... how did you know where we were?" Nadie asked, very confused.

Jodie paused for a moment and she dismissed the question with a shake of her head and said as she walked in, "What happened? Where's Ellis?" They walked over toward the bed, where Ellis was sitting.

Nadie and Ellis told Jodie what they had seen and heard. Jodie pondered their tale as they went on. *“Could this be the artifact that the Chairwoman wants? How much power does it have, and what are they going to do with it?”* Jodie thought to her self

“Let me see the bracelet please Ellis.” Jodie asked as Ellis held up her arm. Jodie looked at for a bit.

“It’s definitely Celtic from the artwork alone.”

Nadie shot Jodie a “no kidding” look. “So what does that have to with “the knowledge held by Math” and it saying that we have to go Nafrece?”

“What does Plentyn Y Blodau mean?” Ellis asked.

Jodie thought a bit and then answered. “It means “Child of Flowers”.”

Ellis smiled. “Pretty...”

Then a thought crossed Jodie’s mind and she took a look at the bracelet again and this time more carefully.

“What’s wrong Blueeyes?” Nadie asked noticing Jodie’s behavior.

As she looked closer the knots resembled a DNA chain and then it hit her.

“Hey Blueeyes stop jerking us around.” Nadie said starting to get annoyed.

“It makes sense now...” Jodie said to herself.

“What makes sense?” Ellis asked.

“The art on the bracelet, the mentioning of the knowledge held by Math, this is no ordinary artwork this... is a diagram of a DNA chain...a very complex chain.”

Nadie and Ellis looked very confused.

“Let me fill in the blank here. Math Mathonwy was the “Sorcerer King” of Gwynedd and one of his greatest achievements was Blodeuwedd; a woman made from flowers. Now think of this for a second, what if the flowers used were just symbols.”

“Symbols?” Both Ellis and Nadie asked still confused.

“For coding DNA, Apparently mankind once had the knowledge but somewhere down the line it got lost and out of recorded history only to be passed down through the generations and Iron Age peoples aren’t going to know what a DNA chain is.”

“Somehow I get the feeling they did know...just not the way you would think.” Nadie mumbled to herself. “Get to the point Blueeyes.” Nadie said louder.

Jodie pointed to the bracelet. “All right...Math Mathonwy wasn’t a sorcerer king...he was a genetics engineer and Blodeuwedd was his Project Leviathan.” Jodie said letting the last two words sink in.

Nadie looked stunned as she connected the dots. “That’s...the knowledge of Math...Project Leviathan!?”

Jodie paused as well. *“Is that why they want the artifact? Is this just the record of some ancient version of Project Leviathan? I know it’s a bad idea to betray the Coven...but I have no choice, I can’t let them have this...I can only imagine what they’ll do to Ellis...”* Jodie thought to herself. She couldn’t let the Coven get her or the bracelet and her concern and love of for Ellis overrode any loyalty she had to the Coven. It was a given that she would help them.

“We have no choice...we have to go to Nafrece.”

“How are we going to get to Nafrece? We just can’t drive there you know.” Nadie asked.

“We can’t?” Ellis chimed in.

“No Ellis we can’t.” Nadie replied.

“So are we ready to leave now?” Jodie asked.

“Well, yeah I guess...” Nadie was a little unsure about getting involved in something huge again, but she stared at the bracelet on Ellis’s wrist. The only clue about how to get it off was in Nafrece. She had no choice.

“Alright, let’s go,” she said, her mind set.

Jodie nodded and whipped out her phone, dialing a number very quickly.

“It’s me. Yes, it has been a while. I’m sorry about this, but I need a favor...”

Two minutes later...

"Any particular reason why we're on the roof now?" Nadie asked, confused.

Ellis shrugged.

"We're going to the airport. But it's kind of far from here, you know. So we're taking a helicopter there," Jodie told her, "Oh. There's our ride now."

The helicopter landed and out came Jodie's old assistants. They smiled widely; glad to see their former boss alive and well. She walked up to them and put a hand on each of their shoulders, also happy to see them again. She hadn't spoken to them since she was ordered to kill Nadie. But now wasn't the time for catching up. "I promise to make it up to you after this whole thing is done. Thanks again." They nodded enthusiastically.

After everyone was strapped in, Jodie's assistants took them to the airport.

The magic of the bracelet allowed them to avoid the metal detectors and any other security hassles.

It was nighttime when they finally landed in Nafrece. After finding a hotel to stay in, Jodie sat down on one of the two beds while Nadie and Ellis occupied the other.

"So now what Blueeyes?" Nadie asked barely concealing a yawn.

"I'm tired and I'm sure you two are as well. Let's get some sleep and we'll go from there in the morning." Jodie replied.

"Sounds like a plan to me. What about you Ellis?"

"Ellis...?" Nadie asked as she turned to Ellis

Ellis was all ready fast asleep.

Nadie laid next Ellis and was asleep faster than she realized.

Ellis found her in a large marble dining hall with a lit fire pit in the middle. She saw the woman with the pigtails sitting across from her on the other side of the pit. She heard herself speak but not quite in her voice...

"Greetings Rhiannon. It's been awhile."

"And the same to you Brigid. I see you found a bearer."

"Aye, so did you. So when are you coming?"

"I have all ready crossed the ocean to get to you. The mortal's security was a tad ridiculous."

"Well, when aircraft get deliberately smashed into buildings people do get understandably paranoid."

Brigid nodded. "Oh any word on Morrigan?"

"No but I know she's nearby. She'll make her presence known when finds a bearer knowing her."

"I see. I'll get there as fast I can."

"Brigid, could you hold off coming for one day please."

"Why is that?"

"My bearer and her sister created a crisis and it's being sorted out at the moment."

"I understand but there are forces after my bearer."

"I wouldn't worry unduly; the forces here are trying to cancel each other out."

"Very well, I'm sure my bearer will want to explore the city anyways. So I can hold off coming for a day..."

"I'm terribly sorry for the inconvenience."

"Apology accepted."

"Then I'll be waiting for you in a day's time."

"Oh, one last thing before I go."

"What is it?"

"Just have taco's ready when I come."

"Tacos?!"

"Yes, *Tacos...*"

"Taco Taco Tacosu...." Ellis sang before she drifted into deep slumber.

Across town Douglas was working at his desk when the phone rang. He picked it up.

"Rosenberg here."

"Good Evening Douglas." A familiar answered.

"Good Evening Sir, I was about to call you."

"I take it she's in the country..."

"Yes Sir and I'll proceed as planned."

"Very good..."

"You might find this interesting Sir...it seems that Carrossea Doone is back among the living." Douglas said smiling cleverly thinking he knew something that Friday didn't.

"I was aware of his presence when Vanessa Rene resurfaced in Nafrece."

"*I bet you did.*" Douglas thought to himself.

"What shall we do about Doone?"

"The Soldats are busy chasing him around providing us a perfect distraction. But have him followed in any case."

"Of course Sir."

"One last thing Douglas."

"Yes Sir?"

"Just because I cannot see you it does not mean I don't know what you are thinking..." Friday said and then the line went dead.

Douglas stared at receiver for a few seconds and then hung up.

Then he picked up the photo of Jodie Hayward and smiled...

Chapter 12. Scandals and Bloodlines

"I...heard...every...single...word...you said" Elenore said still groggily but making an effort to gather her wits.

Meg stood and silently stared at Elenore for a few seconds in slight surprise. She tried to say something.

"You heard all that...huh?" Meg finally said.

"I was somewhat unconscious not deaf, mother."

"I know I owe you an explanation, but there are some things I can't talk about."

"I gathered that when you said Nafrece Intelligence. I won't ask about any of that for now. There are some things I do want an answer for."

"You deserve that much. But I don't know really where to start. "

Elenore sat up and thought for a few seconds and then a realization came to her. "You said you had an affair with Master Burton and you had me. Mother please tell me the truth, I really truly need to know this. Is Master Burton my father?"

Meg struggled for an answer. "If they found out I told you."

"They? You mean Master Burton and *her*?"

"Yes."

"Mother...they're both dead."

"What?! When?! The last letter from your grandfather said that Richard had found Anna."

"No mother, they are dead. Let me explain, though I still don't understand this "Gift"." Elenore told Meg of the events from eight months ago. Meg sat in stunned silence till Elenore got to the part where she got shot. Meg sat silently as she took it in, her face partly hidden by her hands.

"If I had known...neither of you would've been in Gazth-Sonika."

"Don't beat yourself up over that. Margaret was obsessive and it's my job to protect her. Speaking of Margaret, though I don't know what your reaction will be."

"Go on..."

"Yesterday, I told Margaret that I was gay and I was in love with her. So I'm asking again; is Margaret's father my father as well?"

Meg looked at Elenore silently which made Elenore nervous with anticipation. Then Meg sighed and then spoke. "I still love you gay, bi or whatever."

"Mother...I understand this is a touchy subject for you but please tell me..."

"You have a right to know, but there's no concrete proof I can show you."

"It's all right as long as I know the truth, so please tell me."

"Margaret is your little sister..."

"Thank you mother. Well it explains why *she* hated me and you so much. Just gives me yet another reason to despise her. Though I do wonder if Margaret knew." Elenore lay back down with a sullen look.

"Then there's grandpa, did he really have to lie to me? But neither of us will know the answer to that one." Then a bolt of realization struck Elenore.

"*The only one I can entrust her to...is you Elenore.*" Elenore remembered her grandfather saying that right before he died. "*Was it because of my mother and Uncle Walter...?*" Elenore asked herself.

"Sweetie, I don't truly understand he did either or why didn't he tell me. I'm sorry. But regardless he is your grandfather and in his own way he did love you...so can you forgive him?"

"I'm still mad and hurt about it...but he's not around to defend himself so I can forgive him...after awhile. Oh, one other thing mother."

"Yes?"

"You said something about a picture of me in a pink tutu."

"Yes I did, it was the only picture you're grandfather managed to give to me." Meg pulled out the picture and showed it to Elenore.

"I remember that, it was when grandfather brought me to my first recital." Elenore's eyes teared as a nostalgic smile crossed her face. "At least I know you were thinking of me."

Elenore and Meg hugged each other warmly for a few moments.

"If you come down to the house, I can give you some more updated pictures..."

Meg frowned sadly. "Sweetie, when I said I was barred from the house I meant it. I can't go within five hundred yards of the house and I have the legal papers to prove it. I get them every year."

"*Gee I wonder who did that, miserable bitch...*" Elenore thought. "I understand, but since father and her are dead you can contest it to have it nullified."

"The only one who could is Margaret and not till she's twenty."

"Well, that's this Saturday. I don't think Margaret would mind..."

"Speaking of Margaret, Madlax said there was a situation, what's going on? Plus there are still a couple of things I want to ask you about."

"Well it's just as strange..."

"Sweetie don't worry I've seen some very weird things in my time. So go ahead."

Elenore retold the events of yesterday that she knew of.

Meg grinned. "The Torc of Rhiannon huh...I know a certain professor who give her eye just to see it."

"Oh you mean Doctor Tudor?" Meg nodded to Elenore's question.

"But what's worrying me is these groups; I know of *Enfant*, we've been trying to bust them for years. But these *Soldats* are a total unknown. I've heard through the grapevine that *Enfant* was fighting with some other group but no one I knew who they were. I'll talk to Madlax and see what we can do."

"Thank you mother."

"You're welcome sweetie. The doctor told us that they found alcohol in your blood, what's going on there? I know you're old enough to drink but your friend Vanessa is concerned."

"Yes it's unusual for me, but I needed something to help me sleep. Ever since I got home from *Gazth-Sonika* I have been having these horrible nightmares every night so I have a drink or two. It makes the nightmares go away."

"Ever considered going to a counselor for the nightmares?"

"Vanessa suggested the same thing, but I'm afraid if I told somebody they would think I was really crazy."

Meg thought for a few moments. "I know of therapist who deals with clients who've had supernatural experiences, I'm not talking seeing a ghost in the house, I mean the sort thing you went through. Maybe your friend Vanessa should see her too. I'll give her the number too. Does Margaret know about your drinking?"

"No, as far as I know she doesn't. I do my drinking at night when she's asleep. I don't know how she would react; even now she must be worried sick."

"Madlax went back to the house and..."

"Oh God, I know she'll come here regardless of the criminals." Elenore slapped her forehead.

"Before she gets here, the doctor said you were pregnant at one time. When did this happen?"

Elenore struggled for an answer but couldn't. "I honestly don't know, I can't remember...was I pregnant? Seriously mother I can't remember."

Meg was about to comment when she was interrupted.

"Elenore!" Margaret's voice rang as she ran into the room ignoring Meg at first. "Oh I'm so glad you're all right." Margaret said ecstatically as she hugged Elenore. When she looked in Elenore's eyes her demeanor saddened and she backed up away from the bed with her head down. Elenore sat up and looked right at Margaret. Elenore guessed from Margaret's behavior that she may have had a hand in her being in the hospital. She didn't want to jump down Margaret's throat though she'll most likely be upset with the answer, besides there was that one question she wanted to ask.

“Margaret I see you have something to tell me, you have that look that you did something that shouldn't have. Before that I do need you to answer me these two questions honestly; did you know I was your sister? If so, for how long?”

Margaret was a bit stunned at first. “Sister? What are you talking about Elenore?”

“Mother, if you please...” Elenore gestured toward Meg.

Margaret turned to see Meg. Margaret was stunned as she pointed. “Y...you...”

“Hello Margaret, you do you know it's impolite to point and stare like that.”

“I'm sorry, but it is true?”

“That Elenore is your sister. Yes it is Margaret...”

Margaret through the Torc knew that she was telling the truth and she hung her head low. “I know you're telling the truth. Until this moment I didn't know that Elenore was my real sister. I mean we grew up together in the same house. There's so much I want to ask you but...” Margaret looked at Elenore. “I owe Elenore an explanation and know she's not going to be happy about.”

“Then tell me please Margaret...” Elenore asked.

Margaret told what Laetitia, Poupee and her saw. When Margaret had finished she wrapped her arms around her knees and her head on top and gave Margaret the thousand yard stare.

“Let me get this straight; Laetitia, Poupee and you marched around in my subconscious without my knowledge or permission, through my id no less and tried to pry open representing something I probably wasn't ready to deal with yet. This resulted; in a part of my soul and those memories connected to it being ripped from me. And now this piece of my soul is now running around somewhere just like Madlax. And to top it all off Carrossea Doone via Poupee has been running around in my mind. No Margaret, I am not just angry with you. I am very hurt, disappointed and feeling very betrayed by the two people I love. What do have to say for yourself?”

“You're right Elenore. You have every right to be angry. I knew I should've stopped this before we even started. We wanted to help you...I know it's a poor excuse when there's no excuse at all. I know saying sorry will not do right now. But I am sorry regardless.”

Elenore stared at Margaret for a long while. The room had a quiet tension.

“I have to do some thinking to do Margaret. But tomorrow when I get home you, Laetitia and I are going to have a very long talk about a few things.”

Margaret inwardly smiled, she understood Elenore was justifiably angry and there would be changes. But she knew Elenore would forgive the both of them.

“Oh there you are Margaret, you ran so fast ahead of us.” Vanessa said as she, Madlax and NakhI walked in. Margaret knew Vanessa was lying, she knew they were not too far from the door listening but giving them some privacy from unwanted ears.

Elenore's eyebrows rose when she saw NakhI come in. “Hello Miss NakhI. I didn't expect to see you here.”

“Greetings Elenore Baker, you would've seen me for it not for Margaret and Laetitia Burton trying access the sanctuary through your mind.”

“Believe me Miss NakhI, it wasn't my idea and I'm not going to ask how you even knew.”

“Be at ease, I know it wasn't your fault. With your permission I would like assess the damage that has been done.”

“As long you don't go prying into my thoughts I guess it's all right.” Elenore agreed as Margaret slightly winced.

NakhI stretched out her hand in front of Elenore's face and closed her eyes. After a few minutes she opened them and put down her arm.

"As I suspected; there is a hole both in your soul and mind. Whatever was behind the door is gone, only that piece of you knows. Fortunately for you it's not life threatening but we do need to get that piece back."

"Well considering what's happened so far, I'll take that as good news."

"We have both Enfant and the Soldats breathing down on us, plus we have to keep the Torc out their hands. We don't even know what she looks like or where to look."

"I can go look for her." Then she looked at Margaret. "Please do refrain from using the Torc until you how to use its power. "

"Wait, even if you do find the piece how can we put it in back in Elenore?" Vanessa asked.

"You already know the answer." NakhI replied which got somewhat of a stunned silence.

"I will contact you if I have made any progress." Then she left without a word.

"She didn't say goodbye or at least wished Elenore well." Vanessa said a tad bewildered.

"That's NakhI for you." Madlax commented.

"She did just not the way Westerners do." Meg added and everyone in the room turned to her.

"We still want an explanation out of you, old lady. So fess up." Madlax said a bit lightly.

"Okay, I'll tell you what I told Elenore, but I want your side of the story as well Madlax. Elenore told me what had happened eight months ago and it explains why you're running around with Richard's call sign."

Meg proceeded to tell what she had told Elenore then Madlax, Margaret, and Vanessa told their sides of the events between interruptions from a well meaning doctor and then a nurse.

After they had finished Meg silently sat thinking.

"This may have sounded bizarre but it's the truth." Vanessa said breaking the silence.

"I believe you. Trust me on this; I've seen and heard of things just as bizarre as you told me."

"So what do we do now?" Margaret asked.

"I'm sure Elenore needs her rest and you have school tomorrow Margaret." Vanessa replied.

"Oh that's right! I do have school but what about the Torc?" Margaret responded.

"Let's worry about that in the morning. Okay Margaret." Vanessa again replied trying to get Margaret to go.

Margaret turned to Elenore. "Good night Elenore...we'll talk tomorrow okay." Margaret wanted to say more but she stopped herself wondering if anything else would upset Elenore.

"Good night Margaret..." Elenore replied not wanting make the situation worse than it already was.

Meg handed Madlax a slip of paper and she put it in her pocket.

"Come on let's go Margaret. Night Elenore." Then she turned to Meg. "Night old lady." Madlax said with a grin while scooting Margaret out the door.

Vanessa stood near the bed with a sad look on her face.

"Let me guess; you're disappointed in me for drinking?"

"No I understand why you did it. I'm just disappointed you didn't tell me. I'm not some stranger, I'm your friend and I do care. You don't have to shoulder the burden alone you know."

"I'm sorry Vanessa. I know you told me this already."

"You keep hiding things from the people who do care about you. Speaking of which; the doctor mentioned that you had a previous pregnancy. I tried to think when and then it hit me; that day you came home beaten up when you were twelve. You said got into a fight with some girls about Margaret. I know you shield things from Margaret but please tell me what *really* happened that day."

Elenore tried to think and then her eyes widened. "I can't remember Vanessa...I try but it just comes up blank. Honestly I can't remember that day or even if I got into a fight. My mother asked me about my pregnancy but I can't remember that either." Elenore replied sadly.

Vanessa and Meg looked at Elenore and then each other in horror. Elenore got confused.

"That piece of your soul that's running around is the memory of that day plus any memories of your child!" Vanessa exclaimed.

"Then we really have to get her back. No offence to Miss Nakhl but I doubt she would know where to look." Elenore replied.

"Well she won't be alone, I'll help as well. I know the places you liked as a kid so I'll start there." Meg interjected.

"Thanks mother, there are other places as well, Vanessa knows where."

"I better get going, I'll see you tomorrow Elenore. Get some rest, okay." Vanessa said as she exchanged hugs with Elenore and headed toward the door.

After Vanessa left Elenore lay back down and Meg got up from the chair. "I guess your friend is mad at me as well."

"She's mad at us both, but more with me than you. Thing is; she's right I do hide things mostly to shield Margaret from them."

"What are you going to about Margaret?"

"I really don't want to talk about this right now. I need to think."

"Okay, sweetie. I'm going to head to the cafeteria to get a coffee and something to eat. Do you want anything while I'm there?"

"That's okay. They're supposed to bring me something to eat. Thanks anyway." Elenore replied a little dejected.

"Don't worry sweetie, unless you don't want me to. I'll stay with you tonight. And yes I have the doctor's permission."

Elenore smiled her eyes tearing slightly. "Of course I want you to stay. I want to talk to you."

"Thank you sweetie, I'll be right back." Meg said as she went out of the room.

Elenore laid there quietly thinking when she heard footsteps coming into the room. She sat smiling thinking it was either a nurse or her mother but when she saw his face her face soured.

"Well, Miss Baker. I come to see how you're doing and you give me that look."

"How long have you been running around in my head?"

"Straight to the point as always. For starters, I haven't been running around in your head and Laetitia's link is with Poupee and well Poupee is in mine. Beside's I don't have that kind of ability. Maybe you should ask Laetitia since it was her idea. In all honesty whether you believe me or not I was against this from the start and before you ask how I knew you were in the hospital. Poupee told me between his nearly nonstop "I told them so but they didn't listen. I also have a bone to pick you Miss Baker."

"Oh really Mr. Doone?" Elenore asked skeptically.

"I would greatly appreciate it if you didn't dump *your* hangover onto me." Carrossea said a tad irritated.

Elenore looked at him surprised and a little embarrassed.

"Get out Mr. Doone before I call for a nurse." Elenore said angrily.

"I will for now, but this isn't over Miss Baker." Carrossea replied as he left.

Elenore lay back down with a miserable look on her face.

"That could've gone better but with him who could tell if he was telling the truth. But did I see some concern on face? I doubt it...jerk." Elenore thought to herself.

Across town near the University, Mireille and Kirika warily headed to a nearby hotel.

"That proved pointless, the Soldats have all the routes out of the city covered." Mireille said with a great deal of irritation and frustration.

"So what does that leave?" Kirika asked.

"Not much, but I'll be damned before we get trapped like rats."

"It does seem a little excessive."

Third Moon Rising

“Yes it does. I would like to think this is connected to their war with Enfant. But I don’t know.”

“I guess we go find out. Kirika?” Mireille said as she noticed Kirika looking down an alley.

Both of them instinctively reached for their guns ready for a fire fight. From the alley a cat came out bounding out towards the street to the alley across from it. They watched and listened down the alley for any other movement. No other noise or movement came from the alley.

“Come on Kirika, before we start jumping at shadows.” Mireille said as she started walking down the street.

Kirika looked down the alley one last time before she caught up with Mireille.

Further down the alley and sitting on a fire escape a little girl watched the pair walk off.

“Kir...rika...I remember a Kirika...” She said quietly to herself.

When Kirika had left, the little girl quietly sang;

“Noir name of the ancient fate...”