

Chapter 16. The moment before the storm

Meg, Nadie and Ellis sat on a bench eating tacos.

“No offence Meg, but your country makes lousy tacos or at least that restaurant does.” Nadie commented between bites.

“None taken, there aren’t many restaurants of Nafrece that specialize in Mexican food. Just so I have this straight; your friend is a witch and the bracelet she’s wearing is the Bracelet of Brigid, right?” Meg replied thinking the “witch” part was just her declaring her beliefs. But the bracelet on the other hand had demonstrated it was the real deal.

“Pretty much.” Nadie replied finishing off her last taco.

“My daughter’s sister has the Torc of Rheeannon.” Meg began before Ellis or rather the bracelet interrupted.

“It’s pronounced Rhiannon dearie.” The bracelet spoke through Ellis.

“Sorry about that.” Meg apologized.

“Quite all right. Please continue.”

“As I said; my daughter’s younger sister has the Torc and they’re looking for the Bracelet and the Ring of Morrigan. I would bring you right to the front door but I have a slight problem.”

“That is?” Nadie asked.

“I can’t go within five hundred yards of the house.”

“Restraining order huh?” Nadie asked with a knowing nod.

“Fifteen hundred feet isn’t very far.” Ellis responded in her voice.

“If anyone gives us trouble we can handle it.” Nadie added.

“You’ve been staring at your phone on and off.” Ellis said to Meg.

“I’m expecting a call from Elenore but she hasn’t called yet.”

“Maybe she forgot.” Nadie replied.

“Maybe, I know she was a bit tired. So I’m guessing she took a nap.”

“Elenore will call you in due time. But we do have a more urgent matter.” The Bracelet spoke again.

“Such as?” Nadie asked a bit concerned that the bracelet was speaking through Ellis more and more.

“Such as, a group, five in total of armed men in suits coming towards us with weapons drawn and one hidden nearby.”

“Where?!” Meg asked pulling her pistol and Nadie doing the same.

“About ten meters and closing from those bushes. They are not government agents but the Soldats. We’re in a somewhat isolated area and very few people will talk.”

“So the Soldats want a fight, let’s give them one.” Meg said calmly calling Walter and informing him about the situation.

“Got any last words, say em...” Nadie said aiming for the Soldats as they began to fire.

Nadie went to the right and Meg to the left to the nearest cover as they returned fire.

Ten seconds later three of the Soldats were down and the rest were wounded.

Ellis scowled and flicked her hand and a Soldat who was hidden nearby exploded in flames.

“I’m sorry to interrupt your fun ladies but we must be going.” The bracelet spoke through Ellis as she walked toward the remaining Soldats.

“ELLIS!” Nadie yelled as she began to move towards Ellis. Nadie hadn’t needed to have been worried for Ellis flicked her wrist again and the remaining Soldats burst into flames. Then she did the same with the corpses and the bullet casings.

“There that takes care of that.” Ellis said with a smile.

Nadie and Meg were shocked. “Ellis how did you do that?” Nadie asked in surprise.

“Wow I guess those artifacts are powerful.” Meg chimed in surprise as well.

Meg’s phone began to ring.

Third Moon Rising

"Your phone is ringing Meg." Ellis said calmly.

"How did you do that?" Nadie asked again.

"What?" Ellis replied.

"That trick with the flames and exploding bad guys."

"Oh I did what the bracelet showed me how to do. Are you going to answer that?" Ellis replied to Nadie then turning to Meg.

Meg snapped out her surprise to answer the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hello mother, sorry I didn't call earlier." Elenore answered on the other end.

"Hi sweetie I'm glad to hear from you, so what happened?"

"Once I got home I had to get everyone ready for school then I took a nap. I guess I overslept. I just got done making lunch." Elenore said in a somewhat hectic tone.

"I understand. I have some good news sweetie that might cheer you up."

"Really?"

"You know that "jewelry set" that Margaret is looking for. I found the matching bracelet."

"Oh that's wonderful mother! How are you going to get it here?"

"I could drop them off just outside the limit and you can bring them to the house."

"Who's them?"

"The bracelet has an owner so to speak and she has an escort. Don't worry I'll introduce you to them. They're quite nice."

"Okay where do you want me to meet you at?"

"We're east of the Mansion, so I'll meet you on the corner of Greensleave and Blanc in ten minutes."

"Sounds good" Meg heard a beep coming from the other end. "Could I put you on hold for a bit? Laetitia's school is calling."

"Okay sweetie." Meg responded but before she was put on hold she could barely hear Elenore grumble.

"What did you do this time Laetitia?"

Meg and the others waited for a couple minutes then Elenore spoke in a frantic tone.

"Mother, I need a ride to Memorial Hospital!"

"What happened?" Meg wondering what had happened.

"Laetitia was beaten nearly to death by some girl! Right now she's in the ER."

"Okay sweetie, we're on our way!" Meg said as she hung up and started towards the car.

"Come on I'll explain on the way..." Meg said motioning Nadie and Ellis to come.

After the class Margaret and Madlax went to the campus library. As they went they had the feeling they were being followed or at least watched.

"Do you think it's them?" Margaret asked in a whisper.

"Not sure, it could be Enfant, the Soldats, or that other group." Madlax replied glancing over shoulder.

"There's the library, let's get in before trouble starts." Margaret said as she hurried to the library's entrance.

As they entered Margaret looked at the map and then started toward a flight of stairs going up.

"So why we here Margaret?" Madlax curiously asked.

"Since Vanessa is studying that book and I don't want to stand on the sidelines while everybody either is working or risking their lives for the Torc. So I'm going to find out as much information about the Torc and Rhiannon I can. Plus I want to find something I can help Elenore..." Margaret stopped halfway up the stairs with a sad look on her face. "I know something very bad happened to Elenore and really want to help her. But I really messed up this time and I want to make up for it. And I don't know if Elenore would forgive me for this?"

Third Moon Rising

"I wouldn't really worry, Elenore loves you. Sure she might still be a bit upset. Look on the bright side I'm sure she'll forgive you. She's forgiven you for worse." Madlax said trying to cheer Margaret up.

A small smile crossed Margaret's face. "That's true." She said as she started up the stairs again.

When they got up to the second floor Margaret asked where the Celtic Mythology section was.

She was guided there by one the assistant librarians. When they got there they saw a woman in her early twenties reading a book in one hand. What struck Margaret and Madlax as odd that the woman was tall as if not taller than Vanessa but she looked like Elenore but with green eyes? The woman turned her head towards them and said cheerfully. "Hello."

"Oh I'm sorry if it seems like I'm staring but you do look like someone I know. I'm Margaret Burton and this is my bodyguard Laetitia Luna." Margaret said holding out a hand.

"It's okay, I get that a lot. I do tend to resemble quite a few people. I'm Elsa Rene, pleasure to meet you Miss Burton." Elsa said shaking Margaret's hand.

Margaret looked at Elsa with her head tilted. "For some reason you so seem familiar, but I can't put my finger on it."

Elsa shrugged her shoulders. "So what brings you to the library?" She asked Margaret.

"I want to find out who is Rhiannon and her Torc, especially the part on how to work it."

Elsa smiled a bit and shook her head. "The thing is that Celtic mythology isn't that straight forward about things like that. But as for Rhiannon I can tell you, she's one of the Goddesses from the Mabinogi."

"Mabeenogee?" Margaret asked mispronouncing the word.

"The Mabinogi; it's the collection of stories of Welsh mythology. As for Rhiannon; she is the Goddess of Horses as well as the comforter of those in distress or undergoing an ordeal."

"I didn't know that, but is there anything in the myths that can tell how the Torc works?" Margaret asked with the feeling she could trust this woman somehow.

Elsa thought for a bit and then answered. "Not directly, but I think there is a way. Since the Torc is connected to emotions and the heart is considered the seat of emotions. What I'm trying to say instead of using your head to use the Torc use your heart instead. If you're looking for magic words; there aren't any, at least none that are written down. The Celts and their Druids didn't leave sticky notes." Elsa said with a grin.

Margaret giggled. "So what do I do? What would you do if you had the Torc?"

"Hmmm... If I had the Torc I would close my eyes at first and relax letting the Torc talk to me. Then I would put my hand as to reach out to who I wanted to comfort, at least that's what I would do."

Margaret thought over Elsa's words carefully and then she smiled as she realized something important. Then she looked at the books and then frowned. "Oh I forgot since it's almost the last day of school. No can be taken out."

Elsa tilted her head to the side in a manner which Margaret picked up on but found curious. "The book store downstairs is still open. Tell you what, I'll help. If want me too."

Even Madlax found it hard to be suspicious of this woman but she had the feeling she knew this woman or at least something familiar about her radiated trust.

The trio went to the bookstore. Elsa helped Margaret pick out a book about the Mabinogi. As Elsa was about to leave Margaret spoke. "Elsa, please wait..."

"Yes?"

"I need your help?"

"With what?"

"It's really hard for me to say...but...I need to find a book on..." Margaret said sadly struggling to say the words she had trouble saying.

"A relative of Miss Burton was assaulted..." Madlax intervened.

"Say no more, I get the gist. It's hard to talk about such things but they really need to be. I know a helpful book, just wait here." Elsa said as she went out to another section of the bookstore.

Third Moon Rising

"Thank you Madlax...I just couldn't..." Margaret said quietly so as only Madlax could hear.

"It's okay, but she does have a point."

"I know..."

Elsa came back with a small book in her hand. "Sorry if I interrupted."

"It's okay. What did you find?" Margaret asked, a tad curiously.

Elsa handed Margaret the book. Margaret looked at the title; "*What do we say? A family guide on how to talk about sexual assault.*" Margaret noticed the words "*sexual assault*" were larger than the rest of the title. It made her a bit uneasy then the encounter with Maurice Lopez flashed across her mind. She remembered Elenore comforting her that night after they got home. Without a word to either Elsa or Madlax; Margaret marched up to the register and paid for the books.

Madlax quickly caught up with Margaret just as she noticed what was going on outside.

"Everybody down!" Madlax shouted as a bullet shattered the store window. She pulled Margaret to floor and pushing her behind the counter. Two young men entered the store; one armed with a pistol and the other a sub machine gun. Madlax recognized them from the classroom.

"Grab the girl, I'll get Madlax!" The young man with sub machine gun said to his companion as he began to fire at her.

Madlax dodged the bullet spray as she took cover behind a shelf. Shredded paper flew everywhere as the bullets struck the books. Madlax tried to get to Margaret before the man with the pistol reached her but she was pinned down by gunfire. Madlax picked up a book ironically about cooking pasta and flung it at the man towards his head. The man tried to dodge the book and fire at the same time. That was all the distraction Madlax needed. She fired her pistol striking the man square in the chest killing him instantly. The other man fired at Madlax as he got closer to Margaret. Margaret knew she was unarmed but she knew she had to do something. So before the man reached her, she threw her bag of books at him giving Madlax an opening which she quickly took as he fell from a bullet to the back.

Meanwhile at Burton Mansion; Limelda and Walter were ducked behind either side of the doorway firing at a small group of armed men who firing at them.

"So what brings Nafrece Intelligence here?" Limelda asked between gun shots.

"Me? I'm just here to see my niece." Walter replied as he fired.

"I didn't know Margaret had any other relatives?" Limelda said as she shot a man who got too close.

"You should know her; you brought her to the hospital in Gaz'."

"So you're the maid's relative...makes sense. Funny you just missed her. She left ten minutes ago before these thugs showed up."

"Mind telling me which way she went?" A concerned Walter asked between reloading his pistol and firing.

"She said was going to the corner of Greensleave and Blanc. Somebody nailed the little Burton so she headed to the hospital." Limelda responded as she squeezed off a few more shots.

"Good Meg will get to her before they do. Come on guys hurry your asses up..." Walter said to himself.

On the corner of Greensleave and Blanc Elenore heard gunfire coming from the direction of the Mansion.

"I hope Miss Jorg is all right." She said as Meg's car skidded to a stop and the passenger's side door flung open.

"Elenore get in!!" Meg yelled impatiently as Elenore got in. Once Elenore was in Meg hit the gas pedal and they sped off.

"What's going on? I heard gun shots...ummm who are these people?" A very concerned and confused Elenore asked as she noticed Nadie and Ellis in the back.

Third Moon Rising

"The Mansion is being attacked; by whom I don't have a clue. Elenore this is Nadie and Ellis. Nadie and Ellis this is Elenore." Meg said quickly as she sped down the streets. Ellis quietly waved.

"How do you know the Mansion is being attacked?" Elenore asked in a graver tone.

"Your uncle filled me in while he was asking if I picked you up."

"Why is Uncle Walter at the Mansion?" Elenore asked, her confusion rising.

"Don't know. It's a surprise to me as well. You're going to have to ask him when you get the chance."

"Meg, we've got company." Nadie said as she drew her pistol and pressed the down button for the window.

"I see them...ballsy bastards. Elenore, Ellis get down!" Meg replied as Elenore ducked as far she could as the first bullets whizzed by them.

"Got any last words, say em..." Nadie said before she stuck her pistol out the window and fired not realizing the bracelet was glowing. As two of the bullets struck the car it exploded in a fiery ball.

Meg turned the corner before the flames reached them.

Elenore sat up and looked behind her. She noticed the bracelet was glowing before it stopped.

"Can somebody fill me in on what's going on?" Elenore asked.

"I will once we get to the hospital parking lot." Meg answered with a lump in her throat.

"Why the parking lot? Why not now?"

"Because you and I really need to talk privately. Umm...no offence..." Meg answered first Elenore then to Nadie and Ellis.

"We understand..." Nadie said as they sped toward the hospital.

At the same time Mireille and Kirika were having a running gunfight with the Soldats in a wooded park. They both noticed this was a much smaller force than they usually sent against them; less than a dozen in fact. Granted they sent three man cells at them at times but usual was throwing as many as they could at them.

"I wonder if their war with Enfant reduced their manpower. It's either that or they have a more important target." Mireille thought as she ducked behind just before she got hit with sub machine gun fire. *"That's new as well...damn!"* Mireille muttered to herself as bark and wood splinters flew right next to her. She couldn't see Kirika anywhere and a part of her dreaded that she might be dead. But that dread dissipated as she heard the familiar sounds of Kirika's pistol.

"Mireille move!" She heard Kirika shout.

She reloaded her pistol and made a break for the nearest large tree. She saw Kirika backing up slowly with a sub machine gun in her hands blasting away at the Soldats.

This gave her the chance she needed and she opened fire on the remaining Soldat. The man was caught in the crossfire of both them. They could see the trail of corpses they left in their wake. In the distance they could hear sirens coming closer.

"Let's move!" Mireille said as she put her pistol back in her handbag.

Kirika nodded and hid the sub machine gun under her jacket. Then she and Mireille fled the wooded area before the police arrived.

Deep in the hospital parking lot Ellis and Nadie sat on a stone bench nearby. They had made sure that the car wouldn't be seen from the street so that gave Elenore and Meg some privacy.

"I wonder what she's telling her." Ellis asked a bit absent minded.

"What do you think...?" Nadie said a bit saddened herself but glad that Ellis wasn't eavesdropping on them.

"I don't want to eavesdrop." Ellis said giving Nadie some comfort.

"Look Ellis, I'm worried about that bracelet. It's talking through you more and more and I'm afraid it may take you over." Nadie said with a troubled tone.

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"It's okay Nadie. I gave the bracelet permission to say what it needs to say. We need to give it to the true bearer and once we do we can be free. Just trust me Nadie." Ellis said in a comforting tone.

Nadie thought for a bit. "All right Ellis I trust you. But whoever's in that bracelet better keep its word as well."

The bracelet spoke through Ellis. "I understand your concern for your loved one. I have every intention of keeping my word. So you need not worry." Then the bracelet paused and Ellis' face became dismayed. "Oh my...poor dears. That was very hard for her to tell her that." The bracelet said looking at Elenore and Meg. Nadie turned her head and saw Elenore hiding her face with her hands and Meg holding her against her crying...

At the bookstore Margaret and Madlax had calmed the understandably frightened cashier. Though the woman was more relieved when she saw Madlax's security pass.

The campus security chief came in with a uniformed officer and plain clothes Inspector. The chief noticed Margaret near the cashier as the officer went around the store.

"Miss Burton, are you all right?" The chief asked looking over the damage.

"Yes, thankfully my bodyguard was able to stop them." Margaret replied in a relieved tone.

"She saved us all. She distracted those thugs as they came in." The cashier replied in an admiring tone.

"Chief..." The detective called.

The chief went to the Inspector who called him over. They were looking over the body of the young who had the sub machine gun.

"What do you got?" The chief asked.

"He's not a student that's for sure. Also he was carrying a wad of money and picture of Miss Burton over there. I'm guessing a kidnapping plot. For her home was also attacked. Fortunately she had the mind to hire a security guard and the anti terrorist squad showed up in time."

"When did you hear that?" The chief asked a bit surprised.

"I have a friend in N.I. who was ironically at Burton Mansion investigating the shootout near there this morning. He was who I was talking to on the phone. Oh that reminds me..." The detective said walking to Margaret who was picking up her books. Nearby the uniformed officer was getting Madlax's statement.

"Miss Burton." The detective said to get Margaret's attention.

"Yes?" Margaret asked wondering if she had done something wrong.

"I'm Inspector Harrison." The Inspector showed his badge.

"I know this must've been frightening for you but could you tell me what you saw here?"

Margaret described the action as she saw it thankfully not mentioning Madlax's name in the process.

"Is that all sir?" Margaret asked eager to leave.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news for you Miss Burton."

Margaret felt a nervous lump in her throat. "Please go on."

"Earlier today your home was attacked by a band of armed men."

Margaret's face lit up in terror. "What happened? Are they all right?!" Margaret asked worried about her friends and family at home.

"Only your security guard was home at the time. The anti terrorist squad responded as soon they heard the shooting. From what I was told she's all right."

Margaret breathed a sigh of relief at least Vanessa or Elenore weren't home but she did wonder where Elenore went. "Thank God..." Margaret muttered though she had the feeling that the inspector had more to tell.

"I have to inform you that your sister..." The inspector looked brief at the small pad he was carrying.

"Laetitia was attacked at school."

"Is she all right? Who would do that?!"

Third Moon Rising

"I don't have the details but I do know she was taken to Memorial Hospital."

"Thank you, can we go now?" Margaret asked in hurry, deeply worried about Laetitia.

"I got yours and your bodyguard's statements. You can go."

"Thank you sir." Margaret headed out the door with Madlax trying to stop her or at least get in front of her.

Once Margaret and Madlax were outside and out of earshot the Security Chief and the uniformed officer approached the inspector.

"Sir I got the statement from the bodyguard but there's something about her that's fishy."

The inspector motioned the chief and the officer closer to him and in a low voice said. "What I'm about say stay between us. That bodyguard isn't your regular bodyguard. She's with Echo."

The chief's and officer's eyes grew larger as saucers. "You mean the elite anti terrorist squad?!" The chief said in surprise. The inspector nodded in confirmation.

"So what do we do?" The chief asked a bit worried.

"Nothing. Just act as if she was just a regular bodyguard. Miss Burton's last class is tomorrow so just tighten security till she goes home after class. For now take her to the hospital that way they're off campus." The chief nodded. "Got it. I'll take them there." He said leaving towards Margaret.

Once the security chief was out of earshot the uniformed officer asked. "Sir was that true what you said?"

"Yes, that friend I have in N.I. is the field commander for Echo..."

The officer was amazed that the inspector he worked under had such connections.

"What about the "bodyguard's" statement?" The officer asked.

"Hand it to me." The inspector asked and the officer gave it to him. Once the inspector had it he torn it in pieces...

Outside Margaret had stopped long enough for Madlax to catch up.

"We have to get to the hospital, Laetitia's and our home has been attacked." Margaret said tears flowing down her cheeks.

"I know but right now let's get to Laetitia. Hopefully Elenore and or Vanessa are there." Madlax said trying to calm Margaret down. But she couldn't help feeling just as worried not just for Laetitia but for Vanessa and Elenore.

"What about home? What about your friend?" Margaret asked next.

"Margaret relax, Limelda is fine. Actually I'm not worried about her for the moment; she can take care of herself. By the way where is the hospital?"

"Ummm...I'm not sure. Let me go ask one of the officers. Oh here comes the security chief. Maybe he knows." Margaret said noticing the security chief coming towards them.

"Hello Sir, would you know where Memorial Hospital is?" Margaret asked as calmly as she could.

"I was about to offer you and your bodyguard here a ride there."

"Would you please take us there?" Margaret asked almost in a pleading tone.

"He just wants us off the campus...bet'cha we made ton of paperwork for him. He seems a bit nervous though." Madlax thought to herself.

"Thank you sir. We would greatly appreciate it." Margaret said gratefully.

"My pleasure Miss Burton." The chief replied though the Torc registered the statement as more sucking up than a genuine statement. But Margaret didn't care; she wanted to get to Laetitia as fast as she could.

The chief led them to the car and they all got in. Soon they were off to the hospital...

Third Moon Rising

Fifteen minutes later the security chief dropped Margaret and Madlax off at the entrance to the ER. Margaret thanked the chief who was mostly staring at Madlax. The feeling Margaret got was a mixture of fear, awe and respect but she wasn't sure why. All Madlax did was her job but then again she saw Madlax differently than other people.

As the chief drove off Madlax gently held Margaret's arm. "Before we go in I need you take a few deep breaths."

Margaret was confused at first but as she relaxed she understood what Madlax was trying to do. But she felt like asking why and she wanted to hear Madlax's reason.

"I took a few deep breaths. So why?"

"I'm just as concerned about Laetitia as you but you need to be calm as much you can. As far as anyone else knows you're still the eldest Burton so..."

"It's okay Madlax I understand. I know shouldn't act like a child..."

"I didn't say that." Madlax said getting a little defensive.

"I know you didn't. I said it for my benefit. Let's go..." Margaret said reassuringly as she went in with Madlax close behind.

"I'll go to the desk and find out where Laetitia is. Could you go and see if Elenore or Vanessa are in the waiting room. And before you start saying it's your job to protect me, I doubt any of them would pull anything in a public hospital, this isn't the movies or TV." Margaret said in a firm tone. Madlax was impressed; this was a big difference from the quiet and (from her point of view) impulsive girl she met eight months ago. The events and revelations of the last few days may have brought out a side of Margaret no one; not even Margaret had seen.

"Okay, but please stay at the desk till I get back."

Margaret went to the desk while Madlax went to the waiting room. Luckily there were few people in the waiting room so she had no problem spotting Elenore. She noticed Meg was with her as well and she was talking to a Hispanic woman with red hair. Elenore looked deep in thought and an uneasy feeling churned in the pit of her stomach or it was just hunger.

As Madlax approached the group Elenore got up in a hurry and approached her. Her movements were a bit slow as if she was trying to rouse herself to action.

"Where's Margaret?!" A concerned Elenore asked and Madlax pointed to the desk where Margaret was standing talking to one of the nurses.

"Are you two all right? The house was attacked, as were we getting here." Elenore said wanting to get to Margaret.

"I'll explain, when we're all together." Madlax replied going over to Margaret who was turning to them.

"Thank you Elenore for filling out the paperwork, I appreciate it."

"You're welcome Miss Margaret. You do know Miss Laetitia is still in the ER and we haven't heard anything yet."

"I know Elenore, we need to talk." Margaret turned to the nurse at the desk. "Is there somewhere my staff and I can talk privately please?"

"I'm sorry we don't have any space available. You can take a seat in the waiting room. It's not so crowded today so I'm sure you can find a corner." The nurse replied.

"Thank you." Margaret said noticing the hectic tone in the nurse's voice.

The trio rejoined Meg and the others.

Margaret held out her hand to Ellis which took and shook. "Hi I'm Margaret Burton. Nice to meet you."

"I'm Ellis Schneider and this is Nadie."

"I'm Nadie Olivera Miss Burton."

Third Moon Rising

"Oh...you two can just call me Margaret. I wish I could have given you a better welcome to Nafrece."

"We understand..." Ellis replied.

"Let's find a quiet corner so we can talk." Madlax said.

Margaret and Ellis smiled. "Just sit down Madlax it will be taken care of."

Madlax was a bit confused as was Elenore but the pair sat down. Margaret sat down to Elenore and once Margaret had sat down the world around them changed.

When the group regained their focus they found themselves in an enormous throne room.

The pillars on either side though made of stone resembled oak, elm and ash trees. Right down to the leaves and the texture of the bark in full detail. On the floor there were tiles with the Celtic designs of horses, cattle, flames, houses and ravens.

Before any of them could speak two familiar voices boomed one with a definite Welsh accent the other an English accent.

"Be at peace. You are safe to speak your hearts here. This place between time. As far as the rest of the world is concerned you are all still sitting in that waiting room." The voice with the English accent spoke first. Nadie, Ellis and Meg recognized it as the voice of the bracelet. Then the voice with Welsh accent spoke second. Elenore and Margaret knew it was the voice of the Torc.

"Be aware though no untruth maybe spoken within this hall. Speak your hearts then we have a few matters to discuss with you all."

The group looked at each other for a few seconds wondering who would go first.

"Elenore what's Laetitia's status?" Madlax asked breaking the silence.

Elenore looked at the floor then she looked up then spoke. "From what I got from the nurses and the officer Laetitia was ambushed from behind by..." Elenore halted.

"By who Elenore?" Margaret asked wondering about Elenore's hesitation.

"By the piece of my soul you and Laetitia ripped out. She inflicted a great deal of head trauma on Laetitia. The doctors say even if she survives she might be in a permanent coma." Elenore replied in shame and sorrow.

Margaret hung her head low; she knew this was her fault. She was worried that Laetitia and she may have ripped a darker piece out. This attack confirmed her fears and she could see the guilt in Elenore's face even though she didn't do it.

"Elenore it's not your fault, it's all mine. I could've stopped it but I didn't. I was so obsessed with helping you I forgot I was doing it without your knowledge or permission. I had no right to go through your memories and it seems that Laetitia may pay the price for my mistake. I don't know if any apology would or even could do. But I am deeply sorry for what I did. I'll understand if you..."

Elenore walked up and hugged Margaret. "I know you are and I accept. But I will tell you that you two did hurt me. I felt betrayed and violated by the two people I trusted and loved. This feeling will go away in time and it will take awhile for me to fully trust you two again. I still love you both and I don't know if I ever could forgive myself if Laetitia died through Alice's actions."

"Thank you Elenore. I don't know if I can forgive myself either if that happened. I love you too. Ummm... by the way Elenore who's Alice?"

"It's what the piece calls herself. Why? I don't know but I have my theories but that will have to wait.

The Mansion was attacked while this was happening. For some reason my uncle was there and he helped Miss Jorg repulse the attack." Elenore answered.

"I know about the attack, Madlax and I were attacked at school."

"What happened?!" Elenore let go of Margaret in shock.

Margaret and Madlax explained what had happened at school. Elenore was shocked but relieved that no harm came to them.

"Oh no I forgot about Elsa! I hope she's okay." Margaret said in concerned tone.

Third Moon Rising

"I'm sure she is I think she ran out the other door with other students." Madlax answered trying to get Margaret to focus.

"We were attacked on our way to the hospital and Ellis, Nadie and my mother were attacked by the Soldats before that. Also I'm worried about Vanessa she's been unaccounted for and I haven't gotten any calls from her."

"We know that she went for food supplies and other than that I can't remember. But I'm just as worried." Madlax replied.

"I remember her saying she was going to talk to her friend Badgis." Margaret added.

"I'm sure she's safe with him if she went to him." Meg interjected.

"Oh you know Mr. Badgis too?" Margaret asked thinking what a coincidence it was.

"He's a friend of my brother and his partner. Funny he never mentioned Vanessa's name before, well at least not to me. But right now we all need to get on same page and figure out what to do next. Nadie and Ellis have information on this "Coven" group and as far as we know they haven't attacked yet. So as they say let's compare notes." Meg answered.

"Our side of the story is bit long." Nadie interjected pretty much getting herself ready to relate the entire tale of Ellis' and her ordeal.

"We have time..." Margaret said with a smile. For seemed like hours the group related to each other what they knew about the Coven, Enfant and the Soldats. Nadie and Ellis told of project Leviathan and their journey to Wiñay Marka plus their encounter with Alice. Then Madlax, Margaret and Elenore told about the events in Gazth-Sonika. Then they talked about the artifacts though they felt a bit nervous talking about them in what seemed to be their home. (Though all that it did produce; was an amused giggle from the Goddesses.)

Meg related what she knew about events that were dismissed by most people as a rise in criminal activity on the surface gave them an idea that at least Enfant and the Soldats were heavily going at each other.

After they finished they looked at each other in admiration and awe for a few moments with the occasional "wow..." escaping their lips.

"I almost forgot. Margaret could you please put a stop to the restraining orders on my mother." Elenore asked humbly.

"Of course, but I have to wait till I'm legally twenty for any stoppage to take effect. I can call the lawyer to at least get the ball rolling."

"Thank you Margaret."

"You're welcome Elenore."

"Well that's settled. So now what do we do? Plus we still don't know about Laetitia?" Madlax asked.

"Hello? Healing powers over here!" Nadie said pointing to Ellis. Ellis just smiled.

"That's right! Ellis could you please use your power on Laetitia?" Margaret asked.

"I can try but I don't know how well it would work. Plus I need to get close to her." Ellis said a bit unsure.

"As long you try your best, it will be good enough." Margaret said in a reassuring tone.

"Do you think it's safe to go back to the Manor?" Elenore asked.

"Good question, we don't know the extent of the damage." Madlax interjected.

Meg thought a bit and then she turned to Elenore. "Elenore do you have your key set on you?"

"I don't know if they're here in this in place but I do have them." Elenore answered then she noticed her purse beside her on the ground and she looked in and saw the key set. She took them out of the purse and showed them to Meg.

"May I see them for a moment please?" Meg asked holding out her hand. Elenore handed her the key set then Meg looked through them till she found two thick keys and held them up.

"Elenore and Margaret have either of you been in the West wing?"

"No I haven't." Margaret said wondering if she had.

“Neither have I. Grandpa told me to never go in there. He said there was “something” but he never told me.”

“Just like him to say that. But anyway, these two keys open up the West wing.”

“What so important about the West wing anyway?” Madlax asked.

“I’m going to tell you all a little known secret. The West wing was the original Burton Mansion. Well more like Burton Keep.”

“Burton Keep?! I thought that fell centuries ago.” Elenore interjected in surprise.

“Not quite sweetie. Though the keep is what’s left of the original castle. The rest of the Mansion was built as more or less as an attachment. The outside is made to resemble the rest of the Mansion but the West wing is a small fortress. And here’s the best part; since it was built to withstand a siege it has its own water supply and there’s an armory on the lower level. Plus there’s a secret escape tunnel that leads to the sewer.”

Both Margaret and Elenore were stunned. Neither of them knew about that part of the house. Though Elenore always wondered why the doors were so thick. Now they knew.

“I take it the plan is to regroup back at the Mansion. Now if we need to we can go in the West wing. Duvie, how well stocked is the armory?” Madlax asked.

“Honestly, I don’t know. The last time I was in it was before Elenore was born. But this key should open it.” Meg said pointing out a copper colored key before handing the set back to Elenore.

“Granted we can’t do much if anything against them but I’m not running from my home. They want it so badly let them try to pry it off my neck...” Margaret said in a tone that reminded both Elenore and Madlax of “Dark Margaret”.

“Ahem. Now that you have spoken your hearts for now step forward so Brigid and I may speak with you.” Rhiannon spoke thus and a red carpet appeared before them. The group walked what seemed for at least a mile till they came before an immense dais. On it were three huge thrones each appearing to be carved by the wind and the rain. Though there were smaller handmade carvings on them. Sitting on the far left throne towering over them was what to appear to be an older version of Margaret dressed in ornate robes of purple and blue. Sitting next to her dressed in ornate robes of green and purple was an older and more robust Ellis. They could all feel the divine aura coming from them both and in respect got on their knees. With a gesture they motioned the group to rise.

Rhiannon spoke with a warm smile on her face. **“Greetings, it has been many ages since any mortal has step foot in this hall. I welcome you. To start off, Margaret despite your previous well intentioned misuse of my Torc you have managed to figure out how to work my Torc and on your own initiative. I am pleased that you have learned from your mistake and endeavored to make amends. For that I am proud of you. The second matter involves your half sister Elenore. A terrible tragedy occurred which led to others. The vast majority of the memories of those tragedies are now running around in human form, but there is another legacy. You see when I came into your home I came upon this young soul.”**

Rhiannon looked to her left and made a gesture. From what appeared to be from the shadows a little girl that seemed to resemble Meg walked up to Elenore and Meg.

“This is what your daughter would’ve looked like if she had not been murdered. Do not fear it was not by your own hand. An evil force stole this young one’s life. I do believe your family and friends have been set on the trail of this killer and you will find out in time when you are ready. In your grief and love you unintentionally bound this child’s soul by placing the ashes inside the very doll your mother gave to you.”

Elenore fell to her knees the tears flowing and small piece of memory flared to life. “I didn’t know. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean any harm...I just wanted you near me. The last thing I can remember now was seeing you behind a window with tubes going into you. Please forgive me Margaret.”

Third Moon Rising

"I forgive you mommy." Margaret said with a happy smile. She was about to hug Elenore but she stopped and looked at Rhiannon. "Please can I your Majesty?" The child asked and Rhiannon smiled and nodded. Elenore opened her arms and her daughter flew into them. Elenore held her child tight letting the tears silently flow. Meg hugged them both tears running down her face.

Meg loosened her hug and she looked at the grandchild she would've never seen.

"Say hi to your grandma." Elenore implored and Margaret stopped hugging Elenore long enough to give Meg a warm hug only a child could give. "Hi Grandma." She said cheerfully.

"Hello sweetie." Meg said hugging her grandchild in return. The tears streamed down her cheeks.

Elenore wrapped her arms around them. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to chain you here and if there is something I can do to break the chain I'll do it.

"I love you too mommy, but I don't know how to break the chain." Margaret replied.

"That I can help with, you just need to take the urn out of the doll and give the urn a proper burial. That should break the chain and eventually your daughter will head toward the light." Rhiannon said with a knowing smile. ***"Though it greatly pains me to do so... but you need to leave soon. Say your farewells..."***

"Thank you your Majesty for allowing me to see her once more." Elenore humbly said trying to wipe the tears from eyes. Then she bent down to her daughter. "I'm...sorry but I have to go soon. I do love you and I miss you and always will. Once I break the chain, head to the light okay? Good bye sweetheart." Elenore gave her a hug then she let her go.

"I know, I love you mommy. Bye mommy! Bye Grandma! Bye Aunt Margaret and Madlax!" Elenore's daughter faded before they could say a word.

Margaret wrapped her arms around Elenore barely holding back the tears. "You named her after me..." Then they buried their heads on the others shoulder and cried. Nadie was holding Ellis who was crying as well. Madlax never saw Meg this vulnerable even when she had her fits of melancholy. She was standing there. Tears were streaming down her face. She looked at Elenore then where her granddaughter stood. She was muttering; "I couldn't protect either of them..."

"Duvie?"

"Mother?"

"Miss Baker?"

"Meg?"

Madlax, Elenore, Margaret and Nadie tried to get Meg's attention. But was little use; Meg was having a genuine nervous breakdown. Rhiannon rose from her throne and walked over to Meg. She placed her right hand on Meg's head. When she did that a flash of light filled the room. The group minus Nadie and Ellis found themselves in a field of flowers dressed in their Sunday best except Elenore who was in her maid's uniform as was Meg but she looked nineteen. Standing in front of Meg was a woman who looked like an older version of Elenore but she was wearing an older version of her maid's uniform. Next to her was Rhiannon.

"Grandma?" Elenore silently asked herself. Elenore wanted to go and talk with them both. But she and the rest of the group found themselves back in the throne room.

They heard Rhiannon's voice boom. ***"I'm sorry that is a private conversation. She will return before you leave."***

Margaret and Madlax looked to Elenore. "Who was that lady with your mother? She looked like you but she had a different uniform on." Margaret asked curiously.

"Duvie looked younger, a lot younger back there." Madlax added.

"I think that was my grandma. She died before I was born. All I really know of her is that I was named after her."

"You guys okay? You guys were gone for hours." Nadie said approaching them.

"Hours? I thought time was irrelevant here?" Elenore asked a bit confused.

Third Moon Rising

"It is, but to our perception of linear time it just seems that it hours had passed when in reality this is an ever present now. The illusion of linear time has been added for our benefit." Ellis answered to the surprise of the group except Elenore.

"That makes sense given the nature of this place. I'm betting this place is running on a quantum level." Elenore said with a thoughtful look.

"That's a very real possibility given the nature of quantum mechanics. But you must keep in mind our hosts do have control of here. So any reality can be set by them as needed or wanted."

Margaret's jaw dropped for a moment as the conversation went over her head. Madlax tried but she stopped. The only one not fazed was Nadie. "She does that once in a while. But getting back to what I was going to say. Please don't take this the wrong way. But once we give the bracelet to the true bearer we have to flee the country."

"But why?" Margaret asked.

"Our friend Blueeyes has Enfant on her tail and she's going to need our help." Nadie answered.

"How do you know all this?" Madlax asked and Elenore glanced at Brigid who was smirking on her throne and gave Madlax that "you have to be kidding, isn't it obvious" look.

"Lady Brigid told us." Ellis answered.

"Well could you at least stay for dinner? You can bring your friend to the Mansion and you three can spend the night and leave at dawn."

"We don't want to burden you. You have your own problems at the moment." Nadie protested.

"I insist." Margaret said putting her foot down in a verbal sense.

"She insisted." Ellis chimed.

Nadie sighed defeat. "Blueeyes might have different ideas."

"Then we'll have to insist her too." Ellis said in an almost deadpan way. That produced a few grins.

Then Meg reappeared, her appearance was back to normal. Elenore rushed to her and wrapped her arms around her.

"Mom are you all right?!" A very concerned and somewhat relieved Elenore asked.

"I like that..." Meg responded with a peaceful smile.

"Like what?"

"That you called me mom instead of mother."

"All right, are you okay? Was that Grandma?" Elenore asked still concerned.

"Yes sweetie I am. And yes it was her. Thanks to your Grandma and Lady Rhiannon I was able to get some things off my chest. Things I couldn't talk to anyone about. We also talked about you and your child and my guilt for not being able to protect either of you."

"About that mom, I thought I made that clear while I was in the hospital. You didn't know and I'm certain you would've done something if you did. I'm not blaming you. We'll talk this about later mom."

"Well I'm glad that's all..." Margaret began to say then the world around them blurred.

"...settled." When the world came back into focus they were sitting right where they had sat down at.

"Was any of that real?" Madlax asked a bit confused.

"Yes." Both Ellis and Margaret said at the same time.

"Ahem. Let's discuss this a little later; right now we have to find out about Laetitia's condition and how we're going to get Ellis near her." Elenore interrupted to bring the group back to focus.

"I talked to Lady Brigid and she said she can delay the effects over time."

"Why do that?" Meg asked.

"Because an instantaneous healing would raise a lot of unwanted questions. Plus on the upside we know where Laetitia is and that she's relatively safe and out of harm's way." Margaret answered then her stomach growled. "Oops, I forgot to have lunch." Margaret sheepishly said.

"That will have to wait. Here comes the doctor." Elenore said getting up and so did Margaret.

Both of them approached him. "Doctor how is my sister? Is she going to be all right?"

Third Moon Rising

"As I explained to your assistant Miss Burton your sister suffered massive head trauma. We had to do an ultrasound scan as well as X-ray. I don't know how I can put this..." The doctor began.

"We understand, please just tell us." Margaret said.

"She's on a respirator and she's stable for the moment. To be frank if she survives the night she might remain in a coma for the rest of her life. I'm sorry."

"It's okay doctor thank you for being honest. But can we see her?"

"She won't be able to respond but you can see her."

"Thank you. Elenore please go get Ellis for me."

"Yes Miss Margaret." Elenore went to Ellis and she soon followed Elenore.

The three of them went into the ER and were led to a curtained off bay. On the hospital bed laid Laetitia; she was hooked to respirator, I.V. drip and various monitoring devices. Elenore hung her head low and Margaret briefly squeezed her hand to bring her back.

"Laetitia, I'm here. Please stay with us." Margaret said when she got close to Laetitia.

The bracelet spoke in a quiet voice. "I hope you've learned an important lesson here young lady.

Because of your actions things have become far more difficult than they should be."

"I know..." Margaret said in a low voice.

"I was talking to Laetitia but it can apply to you as well Margaret. If you excuse us Ellis and I have some work to do." Ellis placed her hands over Laetitia and concentrated. Margaret and Elenore thought they saw a purple aura surround Laetitia. Then she opened her eyes.

"Laetitia! You're awake!" Margaret said joyfully.

"It's a miracle! Elenore added as she bolted to get a doctor or nurse.

Laetitia tried to smile with the tube in her mouth.

The nurses and a doctor scooted Margaret and Ellis out. Then they and Elenore went back to the waiting room. "How did it go?" Nadie asked.

"She'll live and for the moment she's awake and oof..." Ellis said right before Margaret squeezed her.

"Thank you very much Ellis." Margaret said between tears of joy.

Elenore pulled out her cell phone and started dialing...

"Some fireworks huh?" Limelda said to Vanessa as she assessed the damage in the hallway.

"I'm glad no one else was home." Vanessa said not really thinking.

"Your concern for my welfare is overwhelming." Limelda sarcastically replied. Neither of them noticed the phone was ringing. Walter was supervising the repairs on the doors when he heard the phone.

"Could either of you answer that?" He said to Limelda and Vanessa as he walked over.

"Oh sorry." Vanessa said as she went to the phone.

"Hello, Burton residence." Vanessa said.

"Hello Vanessa. Are you all right?!" Elenore replied relieved to hear her voice.

"Elenore! Thank God you're all right! Umm...I'm fine. Where are you at?"

"I'm at the hospital with Margaret and Madlax and a few friends."

"I heard; is she going to be all right?" Vanessa asked with concern.

"I'll give you the details when we get home but for now Laetitia is okay. Margaret is with her."

"Oh good. By the way Elenore. Do you have an uncle named Walter? He seems to know the house real well. From what I've heard I thought he was dead."

"Yes, but that's a long story. Is he still there?"

Vanessa looked down the hall where Walter was chatting with Limelda.

"Yes he is."

"Good, could you put him on for me?"

"Sure, hold please."

Third Moon Rising

Vanessa put the receiver down and went to Walter and Limelda.

"Ahem, Mr. Baker it's for you."

"Oh thanks. You can call me Walter." Walter said as he went to the phone.

Walter was soon chatting away with whom Vanessa thought was Elenore.

"Look Limelda, about my comment. I'm sorry about how it came out. What I meant was I was glad that Margaret, Laetitia or Elenore weren't home. And I think you know why."

"Nice opinion about your friends. But I think the maid would pull herself together long enough to help out."

Vanessa noticed what Limelda was trying to do and she wasn't falling for it.

"I don't doubt it either. I'm sure they'll give you some compensation for guarding the mansion."

"I'll check around and see if any of them are hiding." Limelda said as she did her best not to look as she was storming off.

As soon as Limelda was out of sight Vanessa put her index finger on her lips. Then she licked her finger and drew a one in the air with a satisfied smile on her face.

Across town sitting in a rented car Jodie was trying to wipe the tears away. At first she didn't believe what Douglas had said; that the Coven was effectively destroyed. Granted she had her problems with the Coven but they were still her people. Now they were gone; crushed by two titans in a power struggle. After she had left the café she dialed every number she could think of. She could find two other survivors and they said the same thing; either the Soldats or Enfant had decimated their forces.

The icing on this gloom cake was when the Elder had appeared and handed her a file with a list of bank accounts that weren't broken into yet and a new mission; Find and protect Ellis and flee where either group would have a hard time getting at them.

At the moment she didn't know where Ellis or Nadie were. She had gotten their luggage and then she bought supplies for three people (she knew that Ellis wouldn't go anywhere without Nadie).

As she thought of where they could've gone her cell phone went off. She looked at it dreading that Douglas was on the other end. The number on the caller ID wasn't one she knew as was the name; Elenore Baker. She figured it was a wrong number. At least it was a temporary distraction.

Jodie picked up the phone and answered.

"Hello?"

"Blueeyes?"

Jodie cried tears of relief as she heard Nadie's voice.

"Thank Gods, where's Ellis?"

"She's with me. Blueeyes we need to talk..."