

Prelude 2033

Darkness...

I feel myself floating in darkness...

"I wonder if I died again." I asked myself as floated.

"No. You haven't died, but you came close." A disembodied voice answered.

"That voice...it sounds so familiar."

I try to go to the source of the voice but I find I can't move.

"It's okay; just picture yourself reaching out with your hand."

I try picturing reaching with my hand but all I see is the memory of that day twenty one years ago. I couldn't reach her hand then and it seems I can't now.

A slight giggle echoes in the darkness. "I've should've known. I'm sorry. Here let me reach for yours."

The voice spoke to me and I felt a warm gentle hand touch mine and then...

I found myself sitting on a bench in the park where I used to play as a little girl. It was quite bright out and I looked to the sky and what I saw stunned me for a moment. There in the sky were three moons; a red moon, a green moon and a blue moon. I've heard Laetitia and Margaret talk about it but since I couldn't see them I wondered if they were imagining it all. I briefly stared at the moons till I was given a much larger surprise. There standing in front of me with her red hair being blown by unseen winds and her green eyes reflecting the moonlight and with that cryptic smile of hers was Laetitia. I leapt from where I was sitting and I hugged her and I stared into those eyes and spoke with shock in my voice.

"Laetitia?! Is that really you? Where have you've been all these years?! We've been worried about you and..." Her finger reached out and pressed my lips so I could not speak.

"I'm sorry I worried you, but it is me and for various reasons I can't divulge where I'm at and where I've been. I only came back...to see you. I heard what happened and wanted to see if you were okay. You were caught in a terrible explosion when the building you were working at was attacked by terrorists. As of now you're in some kind of mold. I'm not really familiar with all this new technology but that's what I've heard the doctors say..."

Laetitia removed her finger from my lips and gave what she said some thought and then I answered her.

"I should've known you give an answer like that. As for the mold, well it seems I'm getting a new prosthetic body." I said sadly figuring that my first prosthetic body was more or less a pile of pseudo meat and scrap from what I could I gather that a good portion of it was charred.

"Laetitia, I'm glad you're here and all. But how are we communicating?" I asked a bit confused realizing that Laetitia didn't have any cyber wear in her. She smiled with that cryptic smile and answered. "I think you know that answer to that one. I just happen to catch you while you're still lucid dreaming. In a few moments you'll be in a VSR from what I'm hearing now. There's one thing I need to know Elenore; do you forgive me?"

I was confused by her question and quickly answered. "For what Laetitia?"

"For what happened twenty years ago." Laetitia answered a little impatiently.

"I forgave you a long time ago. I'm sorry if I never told you. I always thought you knew."

Laetitia slowly shook her head. "No I didn't. I wish I could stay longer but I have to go. Thank you and Goodbye Elenore. I love you..."

“LAETITIA WAIT!!” I shouted wanting her to stay a few more moments but I could feel myself waking up in a sense as my conscious went into the Virtual Simulated Reality.

In a virtual field of Helianthus flowers a female anime bunny dressed in a maid uniform stood next to a book that was floating head level with her.

As Elenore’s consciousness logged in the VSR the bunny smiled as she appeared.

I looked at my surroundings and found that this was my own VSR. The big tip off was I was wearing the white cocktail dress with the red heels.

“Good Afternoon Miss Elenore. It is good to see that you are functional.” The bunny said in a cheerful tone.

“Good Afternoon Daisy. Can you tell me how long I’ve been unconscious? And why is my personal VSR being used?” I asked a bit puzzled.

Daisy smiled and answered cheerfully and in the most comforting tone she could muster. “You have been unconscious for eighty hours and forty six minutes prior to your log in to this VSR.

Miss Vanessa brought your VSR from home when she heard you were incapacitated. She felt that you needed something “comforting”.

“You have a pre recorded message from Vanessa. You would like to hear it?” Daisy asked cheerfully.

I nodded and a holographic image of Vanessa sprang up.

“Hi there.” Vanessa said with a wave of her hand.

“I know you can’t respond at the moment. I know it’s been awhile since we last spoke. I made some phone calls and they’ll be here soon when you wake up. What you mean there’s a word limit?! With all this techno....” Vanessa cut off abruptly and I had a good giggle.

“Sorry about that Vanessa. “ I said talking to no one.

I smiled and then pondered on how long I had been unconscious and then I asked Daisy another question. (Well a couple of questions.)

“I must’ve taken quite a lot of damage. Has my cyberbrain taken damage for me to be unconscious for this long? And what day is it?”

“From what I gather Miss Elenore you were buried under some rubble for an estimated time of thirty hours before you were found. You went into autistic mode to save energy, as for damage; no cyberbrain damage has been sustained Miss Elenore. To answer your last question Miss Elenore, It is July 6th 2033. Local time is 3:26 P.M.” Daisy replied cheerfully as always.

I stared at the book floating near Daisy’s head, smiled and nodded to myself.

“I didn’t realize it was close to that time again. It’s been a while since I’ve read that book.”

“Is there new data you wish to add Miss Elenore?” Daisy asked.

“No, how long before I fully wake up and can see visitors?”

“In about three hours and forty two minutes till full conscious will be regained Miss Elenore.”

I stared at the virtual book for a bit and walked over. Then I sat down next to Daisy in the virtual flower field, grabbed and opened the book and started to read. The book resembled Margaret’s picture book.

“What did she call it? That’s right...Secondari.” I mused to myself.

“Well since I have some free time on my hands might as well read...read about those days long past...” I said as I began to read from the virtual book. That book... My book...

End Prelude

Chapter 1.
Calm before the storm

If I had really paid attention to what was going elsewhere in the world. I would've been more prepared for the chaos that came to our doorstep. All this started on July 7th 2012, seven days before Margaret's twentieth birthday.

We all wanted to put Gazth-Sonika behind us. We were happy when the civil war ended in cease fire agreement eight months ago and by some miracle it remained intact. In my case I couldn't leave Gazth-Sonika at least mentally (and that caused a lot of grief to everyone around me.)

Elsewhere as we learned later to our regret; Enfant having failed what that madman was trying to do a rival group known as Les Soldats took it as sign of weakness and began an all out shadow war with Enfant. So, in apparent desperation Enfant started to hunt for three artifacts that would turn the war in their favor. Unfortunately for them (and us), Les Soldats found out and decided to hunt for them as well. In the beginning we just took as an increase of criminal violence, not bothering to care as it didn't affect us. (Another decision I and a few others regret.) That was a year and a day ago it all started. So for my piece of mind, I decided to document what had happened.

Taken from the diary of Elenore Baker; July 8th 2013

Friday Monday peered onto the screens in front of him. Reading the reports from his Gazth-Sonika and European agents, he noticed that the Soldats were on the move again. They were trying to get the artifacts before his agents did. He had one advantage though: they thought he was dead and his organization in chaos. That put him and Enfant on their blind side now. The brainless body double he sent to Gazth-Sonika fooled not only Madlax but both the Soldats and their old rivals, The Justicars, as well.

Monday smirked as he continued reading. On the lowest level of this underground fortress, deep in the Amazon basin, not even a nuclear war was a threat to him. It took him many years to complete it but it was worth it. At the very least there wouldn't be any unexpected setbacks in his plan.

In Nafrece, Elenore awoke two hours before she had to wake Margaret. She cleaned herself up and prepared a clean uniform for the day. She almost forgot to put on the suit of body armor. She looked sadly at it and wished silently to herself that she wouldn't have to wear such a thing. But recent events in her life necessitated her to do so if she wanted to protect Margaret.

She put on the armor and then her uniform and prepared for her morning duties. Before she left her room, she looked at the picture of her as a small child, sitting on her grandfather's lap, and she smiled. "I'm doing the best I can, Grandfather..." she whispered to herself and went about her routine and went to wake up Margaret.

"Miss Margaret, time to get up." She said from behind the door. Getting no response, she opened the door and went into the room.

Margaret was still sleeping in her bedroom when she slowly started becoming aware of a familiar voice attempting to wake her up early in the morning.

She turned over, trying to pretend she didn't hear her voice. "Yeah, it's just a dream... I'll just keep sleeping..." She thought to herself half asleep.

Elenore walked to the bed and said in a strident tone. "Miss Margaret, it's time to wake up.

Margaret just draped the covers over her head still wishing that it was a dream and not a wakeup call.

Elenore silently sighed to herself and smiled. They went through this almost every morning and Elenore was glad that this small piece of normalcy...this daily ritual remained intact.

She smiled as she said those familiar words. "So that's how it's going to be. Must I resort to wake up method number three?"

The third time Elenore speaks; some very specific words trigger an immediate response from Margaret: "wake up method number THREE!" She almost immediately gets up upon hearing those words. She tried her best to keep her eyes open and keep up a convincing wake up state.

"Well good morning Miss Margaret." Elenore cheerfully intoned as Margaret rose finishing the ritual.

"I'm awake!" she tries to assure herself as well as Elenore, by saying it out loud. "Can I go back to sleep now?" she asks with a sleepy voice still not entirely aware of what's going on.

"No Miss Margaret. It's time to get up. You're the one who asked me to wake you early so you could go shopping today. Elenore said responding to Margaret's plea.

"I did? Hmm... Oh right! I don't have to go to university today. Why else would I get up early?" Margaret concluded.

Elenore then prepared Margaret's clothing and made sure that she didn't fall asleep while dressing.

Then she went and woke Laetitia up and got her ready for the day. Though Elenore usually didn't need wake her as she rose early, sometimes before her! Then she went and made breakfast. After her usual morning routine of struggling to stay awake she got all set and went downstairs to join Elenore and Laetitia for breakfast.

Margaret really enjoyed having Laetitia with them. She never experienced having a younger sister, so it was a new experience for her and somewhat of a challenge. Even though it didn't take long for them to familiarize and become strongly attached to each other. It sure put a bit of a pressure on her at times, to improve as a person and be somewhat of a good example for the younger child, but at least she still had Elenore around which surely made things a lot easier for the both of them.

The course of events in Gazth-Sonika some months ago changed her a bit. And that forced her to become a bit more responsible and self aware. But she still felt a bit lost at times, especially when she had the feeling that Laetitia had a deep understanding of most things, which sometimes surpassed her own. She sure wasn't a regular child, but Margaret couldn't let herself fall behind, for she was determined to improve, still feeling slightly guilty for all the trouble she unintentionally caused to a lot of people for a long time.

But the end of the civil war finally put an end to that chapter in her life, so Margaret could finally overcome her past and start focusing on the present and future. Today was yet another bright new day ahead! But she was still feeling sleepy, and could hardly hide it, while reaching the breakfast table and taking a seat. Some things just never change.

After serving Margaret and Laetitia, Elenore sat down and joined them for breakfast.

Elenore couldn't help but look at the newest member of her "family". This small child had been with her at the end her life. And holding her was her last memory before waking in a hospital bed in Gazth-Sonika.

Even during her convalescence she was there alongside Margaret. Her mind wandered back to that time; She remembered waking up to see Margaret sitting there crying and holding her hand.

Though she was a bit groggy, she could hear Margaret's voice clearly. "Elenore you're awake! I'm so sorry for what happened to you. You don't have to say anything. I wanted to apologize for my behavior. I also said some terrible things to you as well. I'm terribly sorry for that as well. Could you ever forgive me? I'll understand if you don't."

She squeezed Margaret's hand and smiled the best she could. "Margaret...you are my family... I...forgive you" She remembered saying, she also remembered drifting back to sleep but not before noticing Laetitia. Elenore smiled the best she could and said; "You..."

"Hello Elenore" Laetitia said to her before she drifted back to sleep.

Elenore....

Elenore....

Elenore snapped back to now to hear Laetitia calling out to her.

"Yes Laetitia?"

"Are you ok?" Laetitia asked with some concern not usually noticed on a child her age.

Elenore smiled and answered. "Yes Laetitia. I'm all right thank you for asking. Is there anything you need Laetitia?"

"No, just asking if you were ok." Laetitia smiled and then looked at Margaret who was half asleep then back at Elenore.

Elenore quietly sighed and smiled. "Miss Margaret please don't fall asleep while eating."

Laetitia giggled at this scene watching Margaret wake up or sleep eating, even she couldn't tell.

Elenore smiled at Margaret. At least some things were back to normal.

On the other side of the world in Gazth-Sonika; Madlax had been staring into the clear night sky out of her run-down Gazth-Sonika apartment for an hour now. She had been waiting for Three-Speed's call for months but the recent cease-fire had really stifled the need for great agents such as her.

Peering back onto the half-eaten hamburger on the table and pondering into the wonderful world of Europe Vanessa described to her. She wondered if she had been ripped off by Three-Speed all these years. "I wonder if Three-Speed is living the good life with a penthouse in the Bahamas right now."

Madlax sighed. "Maybe it's time to take a chance and travel to Europe, yep and some great pasta!" she smiled.

From the new Manor Altena read the reports with some concern. She had figured with Friday Monday eliminated in Gazth-Sonika, Enfant would be easy to crush, but events had proven otherwise. They were interfering with her plans to bring about the Le Grande Retour and THAT was intolerable. She wondered who was leading Enfant now.

Chloe noticed the expression on her face. "Lady Altena what troubles you?" She asked with concern on her face.

"My dear Chloe it appears that those infidels from Enfant are causing some problems." Altena replied with a warm smile.

"Is there anything you wish me to do Lady Altena?" Chloe asked.

Altena smiled "Not at the moment my sweet child. When the time comes I will let you know. But for now I need you to go to Nafrece."

Chloe silently nodded and went to prepare.

Despite Limelda's reservations that she go to Europe for a better life. Madlax took her bags and flew into Nafrece. On arrival she found her combat skills and the money she earned amidst the chaos of Gazth-Sonika counted for nothing in this expensive and serene city.

"*Luciano, why did you want to live in a place like this? Too peaceful. Oh well at least I can go and do some window shopping.*" Madlax thought to herself as the leaves whistled in the background.

Madlax gazed through the shops and sprawling cafes with people idly chatting sprinkled with the smell of fresh coffee. Nothing seemed out of sorts except the exorbitant prices and this rather astonished Madlax.

"Wow 300 Yurs for that dress! With that money I could buy enough dresses for a lifetime of fighting in Gazth-Sonika! Oh but I'm a poor girl here. I wonder where Margaret Burton is." She pondered.

As she was about to turn left onto another street, Madlax took an apple from her jacket and closed her eyes to take a bite. In an unusual case of carelessness she bumped into another blonde girl wearing a black mini-skirt and high heels.

"Are you trying to steal my handbag?" the blonde woman sneered with a cold stare.

"I wouldn't steal that! Besides that looks rather cheap" Madlax with her head tilted high.

"You're the cheap one and rather filthy." the blonde woman said quite angrily.

"Aw I am. But you don't have to be so mean about it" Madlax said, clutching the apple near her chest.

Madlax sensed this blonde woman was certainly no ordinary person; she seemed athletic and always had her right hand close to her pink and white handbag. She must have a gun in there; her senses seemed very deadly, sharp and probing.

Suddenly a little Asian girl with black hair wearing a white jacket said rather hurriedly. "Oh sorry, please excuse us. My friend is having a bad day." and the two girls walked off rather suspiciously to an alley across the other side of the road.

Madlax was no fool, she sensed the two girls were being followed and they knew it. The three men in black suits and the sunglasses she caught on the back of her eye were probably trouble.

"Not as peaceful as I thought" Madlax whispered to herself and continued towards downtown as she could see towards the horizon.

Mireille and Kirika walked down the alley, both pulling their guns out. Then they split in opposite directions as the three men following them started shooting at them.

Mireille ducked behind a dumpster and from there started shooting hitting one of the men and at the same time Kirika ducked into a doorway and fired. She killed both of the remaining quickly. Mireille came from the side of the dumpster towards Kirika.

"You know with their war with Enfant, you figure they wouldn't have time to hunt us down." Mireille said with a sigh. "Perhaps they don't want us joining Enfant, so to eliminate that possibility they decided to get rid of us." Kirika replied.

"That might be true. But in any case we should lay low for awhile." Mireille replied and the two of them walked hurriedly down the alley.

The remotest sound of gunfire had Madlax excited and she ran towards the alley the two women were a few seconds ago. As Madlax suspected the three men lay dead on the cobbled street.

"9mm round, perfectly aimed in the heart and a quick clean escape. Very professional" Madlax thought after observing the bullet wounds.

Madlax stared into the wall and wondered why the men were after two innocuous looking women (at first glance anyway). She scoured through the suits of the dead men for clues, but found nothing extraordinary except the photographs of the women before and a little notebook.

She quickly browsed through the scribbled notes which seemed written in a secret code. But one part was written in a language she could understand, a list of names.

The police sirens were growing louder in the background and Madlax continued in the direction she originally intended. Hmm, Yuumura Kirika, Mireille Bouquet, Douglas Rosenberg and then someone she

knew; Carrosea Doone! And then two secret words in an illegible language but they seemed important as they were circled and written in a far bigger font.

"I wonder what this is about..." Madlax whispered surprised as she turned the next page.

"More secret words and then more names; Jodie Hayward, Vanessa Rene and Margaret Burton!" she exclaimed. "I better find them soon. I don't like the look of this." Madlax said to herself, hoping inside she wasn't too late.

Elenore cleared the dishes from the table and started washing them. Now and then she would turn her head to see if anyone was behind her.

Every time she did and saw no one she breathed a sigh of relief.

Everything was back to normal.

Back to her normal simple way of life;

No madmen hurting those she loved,

No wandering around in jungles,

And no dead friends.

All was normal.

Then she heard footsteps behind her. She grabbed a kitchen knife and quickly spun around only to see Laetitia with not look of shock but a look of genuine concern on her face.

"Are you okay Elenore?" She asked genuinely concerned.

Elenore looked at her and then at the knife dripping with soapy water. She quickly put it in the sink.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you Laetitia. I was just started that's all. Is there anything the matter or need?"

Elenore quickly replied trying to calm herself more than she was Laetitia.

"No, I wanted to see if you were okay and see if you were done. Besides Margaret is getting impatient."

Laetitia said in a calm tone noticing the anxiety on Elenore's face.

Elenore smiled trying to hide the anxiety that was written all over her face. "I'm fine Laetitia, thanks for asking though. This won't take long and we'll be on our way."

Laetitia smiled and cheerfully replied. "Okay." And she walked away. As soon as Elenore's back was turned she glanced at her. The smile faded and was replaced with concern.

"*Her body has healed, but has her mind and spirit?*" She thought to herself and decided to tell Margaret to convince Elenore to seek help.

She walked up to Margaret who was waiting for Elenore. "I'm worried about Elenore. Laetitia said in a concerned tone.

"Hmm... well, she has been acting a little weird lately. On the surface she's the same old Elenore as always. But I too can sense something different about her at times. Ever since we got back from Gazth-Sonika. I just hope it's nothing too serious. I'd like to help somehow. Maybe I should confront her about it..." Margaret replied trying to allay Laetitia.

"You know she'd deny it. She wouldn't want you worrying like that." said Laetitia in a matter of fact tone.

"I guess... It's times like this I wish Vanessa was around. She'd know exactly what to say or do. And I'm sure Elenore would listen to her... we haven't heard from her ever since she left Nafrece for work, two weeks ago, I wonder where did she go and what is she doing..." She thought out loud momentarily forgetting that Laetitia was standing right in front of her.

"Oh. You have something in mind?" Laetitia asked snapping Margaret back to reality.

"Oh it's nothing... Don't worry! I'll try to approach the problem soon, somehow. For now we'll just have to try not causing her any additional stress okay?" Margaret proposed decidedly.

"That's more directed at you than me, I would say..." Laetitia answered playfully.

"Awww, you don't have to put it like that!" Margaret protested in embarrassment as they both broke into giggles.

"Okay, let's just get going at once! You ready now Elenore?" Margaret called cheerfully from the living room.

"Yes Miss Margaret!" Elenore replied carrying Margaret's and Laetitia's jackets in her arms. She had on her shawl over her uniform and handed Margaret her jacket and then helped Laetitia put her jacket on. All the while she had a smile on her face but her eyes told a different story. As they left the house, she locked the door her back towards Margaret. She checked the pocket of her apron for the can of pepper spray, breathing a sigh of relief. She turned with a smile on her face.

"Where to Miss Margaret?" She asked cheerfully as they headed down the street.

Margaret Burton was about to move. No matter how hard Monday stared at his chessboard, she wasn't on it. That crazy witch was just too difficult to handle, like catching a tiger with his bare hands. Take too long and she'll bite your head off. The chess pieces were not aligning well. With only two sides on the board, it wasn't possible to model the real world. He knew so he bent the rules. The white queen had just been reduced back to a pawn. His fool of a son killed by some bounty hunter in the Andes. It took him a month's worth of mana reserves to resurrect him.

Then, he lost the white bishop in Gazth-Sonika. It was a shame. The Bishop had the Gift and he was smart. Batshit insane, alright, but he got the job done. The new Bishop was an optimist and if all worked out well he should keep the Soldats preoccupied while he went for his true objective. He needed a new queen though. And he had the candidate in mind.

Altena stared at the chess board. She was looking at the Queen's Knight Pawn and wondered when she would move and would her knight follow like the last time. This pawn became a Queen then back to a pawn and brought back her knight as well. But she wasn't really interested in the pawn but in the knight. Granted the pawn had her uses. From what she read in the reports from South America and Europe she might become useful soon. She knew the knight might interfere with her plans so she had to think of another way to remove the knight without actually removing it. Then she looked at the letter next to the chessboard. It was a letter addressed to Margaret Burton to be given to her on her twentieth birthday. Altena smiled and looked at the chess board moving a black Bishop.

In downtown Nafrece Chloe opened the envelope that she was given by the Soldat courier. Inside there were was photo of Margaret Burton and Elenore Baker. Another photo was of Elenore standing alone. Also there were instructions from Altena.

My Dear Chloe,

I need you to watch these two women and report their moves to me. Do not be seen nor engage unless absolutely necessary. I know this may tedious but it is important. If any Enfant agents approach them feel free to kill the agents. Additional instructions will arrive as the situation progresses. I am counting on you so please don't disappoint me my dear Chloe.

Chloe read the letter and wondered to herself why Altena didn't assign a regular Soldat to keep a watch. But then she reasoned that Altena must have a good reason for her to do this. She looked at the photos and from what the courier told her that they should be coming to where she was at soon...

"Let's go to that new place downtown. We've never been there before. I think it will be fun." Margaret suggested and they followed. It was a nice day out so they decided to walk there. They were in no hurry after all. It was nice to spend some free time like this, just the three of them.

University wasn't as easy as back in high school. When she could sleep in class and somehow get away with it. She came to realize. So, granted she was no genius, studying had significantly taken up a lot of her free time during the week now just to keep up with classes. Any free time she could spend leisurely together with her family was a lot more precious to Margaret now. Not to mention after the experience of almost losing everyone she loved. She naturally came to cherish everyday with them more than before.

There was one person she had been missing though: Madlax. They haven't met again ever since they said goodbye back in Gazth-Sonika. She obviously shared a special connection with her too and in a way, she was as much like a sister to her as Laetitia or Elenore. She couldn't help but get lost in thought at times; wondering where she could be and what was she doing... She had entertained the idea of having her live with them in Nafrece (Vanessa would probably like having her around too.). But she imagined it would be extremely hard for Madlax to adapt to such a peaceful easy going lifestyle... maybe.

Besides, she did left with that scary person last time they parted. Margaret could never comprehend what kind of relationship they shared. But it was definitely something behind her understanding. Surely, the list of things that were behind Margaret's understanding wasn't all that small, so she didn't gave it much thought and trusted Madlax must know what she's doing.

As they arrived downtown and looked around for a while Margaret started feeling a strangely familiar presence really close to them. Was this just a coincidence or did her earlier reminiscence was a bit too suggestive and got her imagining things? She stopped walking suddenly, leaving Elenore and Laetitia a bit ahead, and turned around to face the blond figure that was now standing before her, looking as surprised to meet among the crowd as she was.

"Madlax? Is that you?"

As she followed Margaret, making sure that Laetitia kept up with them. She tried to relax and relish the free time she had with Margaret now that she was going to university. She wondered if Margaret really understood the meaning of her last words to her. Granted she asked herself this question many times before but with Margaret's free time dwindling due to her studies, the question reappeared. She remembered asking her if she knew what she meant by "my family" and her reply was, "We're like sisters." and part of her wept inside.

When they got back from Gazth-Sonika, Margaret told her the truth about everything including what really happened to her father and her connection to Madlax and Laetitia. She understood why she did what she did and gave her all the love and support she needed.

Due to the answer Margaret gave to her question, she decided not divulge her true feelings for her along with the fact that she fell off an over hundred and fifty foot cliff when she got shot (as not increase Margaret's guilt over her death). The truth was; she was truly in love with Margaret and implications that it implied (she wondered if Margaret had any inkling about that too, considering she told no one.)

Granted she didn't worry as much when Margaret went to university as it had excellent security (she made sure of that!). But going into a public space like this did worry her and her eyes darted back and forth looking for unseen enemies and she tensed up. But then she felt a small hand grasp hers and she felt like she did when she was a small girl; at peace and calm. (Elenore didn't know on a conscious level but Laetitia had linked her psyche to hers but the only part she could reach was when Elenore was eight years old, so when Laetitia grabbed her hand all that Laetitia saw was the child that Elenore was, not the troubled adult that she wanted to help.)

They unknowingly passed Margaret who had suddenly stopped and they didn't notice for a little over a minute that she wasn't with them. Elenore's heart began to beat faster as she let go of Laetitia's hand when she realized Margaret wasn't with them. Images of herself wandering the jungle flashed in Elenore's mind. She tried to keep from panicking at least not in front of Laetitia.

Laetitia saddened as she lost the link. She would have get help if she wanted to make the link stronger and she knew who to ask, but she hadn't seen him in either of his personas. She knew he was alive but she wondered if he felt unworthy to be near Margaret, of course then there was the issue of Elenore having a real (but deserved) dislike for him. But it was worth a shot. She had to do something, Vanessa wasn't around and Margaret would just keeping running into Elenore's great wall of denial. Suddenly she felt a familiar presence, so she turned her head and saw...

Elenore looked to the left and right of her, and then behind her...And there standing in front of Margaret was Madlax. She wondered what she was doing in Nafrece.

"Hopefully she's just here to visit Margaret and Laetitia... (Granted she didn't get a chance to be close to her, but she did admire the woman though her occupation did bother her a little)." She thought to herself as she and Laetitia who was all smiles went towards the pair.

Madlax smiled happily and replied "Of course it is me. Aren't I glad to see you? "

"What are you doing here?" Margaret asked.

"I'm looking for a change of scene. I've never traveled or worked in Europe before. "Madlax said with a tinge of embarrassment.

This was the first time Madlax had met Margaret since the epic day she fused with her and Laetitia. She felt again that same sense of warmness in her heart as if she found a side to her that she thought she never had.

Margaret was like a good little sister and the kind words she spoke to her back in Gazth-Sonika resonated ever since. But at the same time Margaret was rather distant, her world, her manners were perplexing.

Madlax sensed a little tug on her jacket and peered down. "Hello little Laetitia" she said happily and patted her little head. Laetitia said cheerfully "Welcome big Madlax". Madlax turned her left hand on her waist, just privately checking the young one was referring to her height and not about the extra pounds from the lack of work.

She intuitively felt it was most likely the former but she always worried a little about her lovely figure. But the remarked change in Laetitia pleased her the most, the young child she was now contrasted with the sad and troubled soul when she first met her. She was having a proper childhood, something she can only dream of herself.

Elenore walked up alongside Margaret and watched Madlax pat Laetitia on the head.

"Don't I get a pat too?" She said jokingly with a little sarcasm thrown in.

She noticed Madlax was looking her over. Inside she wanted to give her a hug and ask her a few questions. But this was not the time or the place for that. It would be unprofessional to show such casual emotions while on duty and her duty was to watch over Margaret and now Laetitia and THAT came first.

Madlax sensed the discomfort behind the smile of the maid who fought alongside her for Margaret.

"Post war stress? No, that doesn't seem to be it" She thought. *"Still, there's a certain strength about her. And neatness as well her shawl and maid uniform immaculate as usual. Unless she packed on a few extra pounds or she's wearing body armor underneath that uniform."* She also thought noticing Elenore's uniform.

"If you really want one, I can give it to you Elenore." Madlax teased back then she felt a tinge; it felt purple. Like Limelda but much darker. The air seemed a little uneasy; the thought of the two women and the notebook reappeared in her mind, there was an undercurrent of violence in her veins even in such a jovial place. *"It's best to go indoors and escape any eyes peering around. Besides, the shops here are beautifully decorated with gold trim and that long beautiful red silk dress and red shoes out that the antique window of the shop opposite the café is tempting. I can even smell pasta coming from that direction."* Madlax thought as she assessed the situation. "Let's go into the shops Margaret and do some shopping?" She casually suggested hoping that would throw off whoever was watching them.

Laetitia smiled; she was happy to see her again. The three of them reunited again after a fashion. She was going to ask if she had seen Vanessa on her travels but she was interrupted by Elenore's amusingly sarcastic question. Laetitia giggled and then she felt a couple of strong presences nearby. One was dark; just dark she couldn't find out anything else but it did bring a sense of dread, but the other was familiar and it was very close by. *"He's here! Poupee is here!"* Laetitia thought as her heart raced in joy. *"Now only if I could slip away long enough to talk to him."* She added silently to herself. When she heard Madlax's suggestion she smiled.

"Perhaps I'll get my chance after all..."

From a distance Chloe watched them. She studied them until they went into the shops; she didn't know why Lady Altena wanted Margaret Burton or Elenore Baker watched. Margaret seemed like a total air head to her and Elenore seemed to be a little stuck up. But Chloe knew that appearances could be deceiving. But the blond hair girl with them could pose a problem. It could be a lot easier if she could just kill them, but she dared not disobey Lady Altena so she continued to watch; besides it might get interesting she mused to herself.

In the nearby café Nakhl contemplated to herself. *" Impressions - I had always been taught to have impressions; deep feelings which beget instinctive choices. Yet the impression of this city of dark alleyways, dark shadows, dark hearts, was indistinct. Everything seemed so muddy - so many troubled lives, caught in a web of improbabilities. Why was I here? I was here of my own choosing. But why I made that choice, I cannot say."*

Nakhl had forsaken her normal costume for something...less evidently foreign, but she still felt as a stranger. Dressing in a skirt suit just made her more uncomfortable than she already was. She dipped her bread into the oil and vinegar and took it to her mouth. She wasn't hungry, but she had other reasons for being in the dim-lit cafe. But again, she wasn't sure what those reasons were herself.

She glanced about herself. Outside sat Carrossea, his eyes fixed on his coffee with a brooding look. His very existence was a contradiction. Then she heard the footsteps of another whom she knew. One...or perhaps three, that didn't matter. It was three pairs in one, a trinity of sorts - it was the same step. And it was drawing nearer. Her heart rose, for her presence had always given her joy and peace.

But something else was drawing near; something she had not encountered before, yet important...
Darkness...

Nakhl closed her eyes, for her senses would tell her no more.

Darkness...from far away...from another hemisphere, another age. A darkness that blocked the light and enshrouded the world. This, also...it was inconsistent...

Purple...The thought of the color made her reopen her eyes. The brightness struck her, and into view came three pairs of red shoes, walking briskly along the pavement outside. Carrossea continued to focus on his coffee - no, on himself - unnoticing. She wondered how long that would last. The trio seemed to be in joyful conversation. She wondered how long that would last, too. She wondered if she felt what she felt. And wondered how much Margaret Burton's choices had disturbed or accelerated the natural entropy of time and space.

Red shoes under a blue sky, like the bowl of oil and vinegar, mingled but did not mix...that was the proper order of things.

But purple...

Nakhl paid her bill and rose to her feet, instinctively feeling for the dagger behind her back which was not there. So many things were not right...

...And yet, it was good to be back. She thought to herself.

As the four of them went into the store, Laetitia kept her eyes on the door looking for an opportunity to go. It was hard considering Elenore was keeping an eye on her, for one who didn't possess the Gift she was highly perceptive. She had to be considering Margaret kept her in nearly constant practice. All it took was a moment...Margaret and Madlax distracted Elenore (did they know what she intended she wondered) and she was out the door passing a random customer and rushed as fast her small legs could carry her to the cafe across from the store.

She could smell pasta being served as she approached but something else immediately drew her attention. There walking on towards her was a woman she recognized, even though she was dressed differently. It was the apprentice to Quanzitta; she stopped briefly as she passed.

"You're far away from home. I would love to talk with you but I'm in a hurry. We can talk later." She said cheerfully and ran towards the table where Carrossea was sitting.

Carrossea felt a presence, a familiar one and looked to see Laetitia running towards him. In a mindscape his other persona stared in somewhat shock as she came running up to him. She embraced him crying.

"Poupee! I missed you so much! I thought I lost you forever."

Poupee smiled and hugged Laetitia. "I missed you too, Laetitia. But what you're doing is dangerous. There are people after us and I don't want you to get hurt."

For a moment Laetitia was in shock, this was the first time he had ever spoken. With tears in her eyes she looked up to him smiling.

"Oh Poupee, you spoke!" She ecstatically said as she felt the bond between them returning.

In the real world Carrossea was at a loss, here was this small child hugging him crying.

He stroked her hair and looked into her eyes with a look of compassion and concern.

"What he said was true. This is very dangerous; you should be with Margaret or that *maid*."

"I don't care right now, I'm just happy to see you again Poupee."

Carrossea sighed and smiled. "My name is Carrossea in this form, but I'll let it pass.

Inside Carrossea was ecstatic; if she was here so was Margaret and he could see her once again. But that also meant that she would deal with *her* as well, it was a small price to pay to see Margaret but well worth it.

Carrossea pulled a chair out and sat Laetitia in it.

"Let's wait for Margaret, since this place serves pasta I'm sure come right here if not sooner." He said smiling and then he sighed. "No wait *she'll* be here before Margaret and I just imagine her reaction."

Laetitia smiled. "Pou...I mean Mr. Carrossea; I have a favor to ask but you may not like it."

"Of course, what is it?" He replied wondering what Laetitia going to ask.

Laetitia explained the situation with Elenore and the link she had on and off established with her.

Carrossea's initial reaction when he heard her mentioned was total shock mixed with annoyance, but he held no malice towards her he just found her extremely annoying and now Laetitia was asking to help form a link with her. Part of him didn't want to but he couldn't say no to Laetitia and besides helping her would most likely put in him in Margaret's good graces plus the through the link he could keep a eye on Margaret and annoy the maid at the same time.

Carrossea sighed and smiled. "I can't say "no" to you can I?"

Laetitia smiled and cheerfully said. "Thank you Mr. Carrossea."

Back in the mindscape Laetitia hugged Poupee ecstatically. "Thank you Poupee!"

Poupee hugged Laetitia and smiled. "You're Welcome. Now all we have to do wait for her to show up."

Laetitia nodded as she held Poupee tight.

Back in the real world;

"You're welcome Laetitia. But I really think you should get back before she notices you're gone. Just bring them here and I'll help with the rest. Laetitia nodded and ran back to the store and slipped in just as Elenore noticed she wasn't near her. "Oh there you are Laetitia. Please Laetitia, please don't go wandering off."

"I'm sorry Elenore." Laetitia said relieved that she didn't notice she was gone.

"Just please stay with us okay." Elenore said with a smile. But deep inside a part of her panicked...

"Okay, let's go!" Margaret replied happily not even noticing that Laetitia had left and returned. They left the store and the four of them followed down the long crowded avenue of stores and cafes. This was such an unexpected surprise, to think Madlax would travel all the way to Nafrece without letting them know beforehand, but it was also one of those things about Madlax that Margaret could understand and relate to. Sometimes, they just set their mind on something and followed their instinct without much planning or consideration. It might seem a bit strange or reckless to act this way (one of the things about her personality that made Elenore worry about regularly, Margaret assumed), but despite her spacey personality, there were a few times when Margaret could see things clearly and understand them beyond appearances. It was this sort of instinct, which she knew Madlax also had, despite not possessing the Gift.

To meet for chance like this was definitely odd, but Margaret didn't really give it much thought, nor did she seem to find it all that weird. She had always been unsuspecting about coincidences and for now she would rather focus on the moment. Meeting Madlax was just one more reason to enjoy such an already bright day.

It felt very different to meet Madlax under such peaceful circumstances and even be able to spend such a calm casual time just chatting and walking around from store to store. It really contrasted with those dangerous moments they shared back in Gazth-Sonika. Madlax always appeared to keep it cool and sharp back then, under the occupation as agent she was so used to, but she seemed pretty comfortable now too, just enjoying a normal moment of peace. "She might actually like it here." Margaret thought optimistically.

"Hmm... so, where should we go?" Margaret asked undecided, "I actually never been to this part of town before."

"Well, don't look at me, I just got here... Besides, you're the one paying cuz I'm absolutely broke! So I'll go wherever you invite me to." Madlax joked teasingly.

"Heh, sure. What do you think Elenore? Any suggestions?"

"Well, Miss Margaret that's absolutely up to you, but I'm pretty sure you'd like some place that serves pasta." Elenore pointed out knowingly.

"Pasta!" Margaret and Madlax exclaimed simultaneously, barely holding their enthusiasm, before looking at each other and letting out a small chuckle. "What about that place?" said Laetitia pointing to an Italian restaurant with an outdoor cafe, "I'd like to go there!" she eagerly insisted pulling Margaret's hand. "Okay, it's decided then. We'll go there after we go to a couple more stores." Margaret smiled trying to decide which store to go to next.

"I'll reserve us a table Miss Margaret." Elenore added.

"Great! We'll meet you there." Margaret replied and Elenore went to the restaurant.

"Oh by the way, Madlax" she addressed her on their way down the street, "are you staying somewhere yet? It would be great if you could stay at our place! We could go there after lunch and get you settled if you want!"

"I will love to stay. I heard you live in a very big house." Madlax replied ecstatically. Madlax happily tagged along with Margaret as Elenore made reservations at the cafe, the avenue was classy with an old World charm. *"Not something you find in Gazth-Sonika, not even the shopping complex next to the classy five star hotel where I met Carrossea and gagged that hotel maid. Poor girl, luckily I let her go although I had to threaten her not to talk about it."* She thought.

But the negative thoughts and feelings of the civil war especially that masked villain Friday Monday drifted away as Madlax got further immersed into all the cafés with people happily drinking fresh coffee and all the dazzling natural light from shop windows selling handbags, clothes and red shoes! "Buying another pair?" Madlax asked Margaret jokingly.

"No, tearing another dress?" Margaret replied cleverly as she observed Madlax staring at another long dress with considerable affection. Madlax noticed a sudden tug around her waist and turned around. Laetitia was slightly bored with all this shopping for fashion accessories and pointed in the direction of the antique doll shop on the far opposite corner. She smiled happily and said "Margaret, Laetitia wants to do a little shopping of her own". Margaret gladly agreed and started walking leisurely. The mood was rather relaxed and calm but somehow this made Madlax even more alert. Every movement felt in slow motion, she could even sense Nakhl was creeping nearby. But none of this bothered her at all. "What a lovely day to just be casual and relax." Margaret said while she stretched her arms and yawned.

"Welcome young ladies" the old shopkeeper greeted with an air of humility.

The old shopkeeper was an old lady slowly sewing a broken doll with her worn but experienced hands. Madlax peered around the shop there was every antique doll possible, some had rather worn clothes, and others were still pristine with dresses from a bygone era. At the back of the shop, the area was dimly light an old man was playing chess by himself with some antique dolls on an antique wooden board.

"What are you doing? Madlax asked curiously.

"Seeing how the game is played." the old man answered enigmatically.

Laetitia noticed a rather old doll, the color was worn but the doll wore a rather distinctive velvet cloak with purple rags and the hair had a bright orange to it. The more she looked at it the more she sensed it had a part it had yet to play.

"I want to buy this one" Laetitia jumped with joy hoping that would cover up her real intention.

"That's a rather special doll; we put a bit of patchwork on that one. It has a special history its rumored to have been in a couple of warzones." the old woman said rather nostalgically.

Margaret found this intriguing but didn't think much of it and paid the old woman and waved goodbye as she gave the doll to Laetitia.

"Let's get back to the cafe I'm starving" Madlax said casually and as Margaret and Laetitia raced ahead.

Elenore got to the restaurant and she asked for a table. The waiter brought her to a table with four chairs.

At table next to theirs, she saw him...and a part of her seethed. But she kept her calm and tried to ignore him, hopefully he wouldn't recognize her, but...

"Hello Miss Baker, what a pleasant surprise to see you here."

"Let the games begin..." Carrossea thought to himself.

"Hello Mr. Doone. I doubt very much that you're surprised." Elenore said annoyed that he had noticed her.

Carrossea smirked. "Oh but I am. Who would've guessed the first familiar face I would see on my return to Nafrece would be your smiling face."

"BASTARD! He knows I won't make a scene here. I would just love to kick that smug smirk off his face, but what would Miss Margaret think... Elenore thought to herself.

"I doubt that as well Mr. Doone. Every time you show up, trouble manages follow right behind you. Perhaps you should go elsewhere before it finds you."

Carrossea smirked even more and replied in mock surprise. "Why Miss Baker, why would you think that?"

"Hmmm...I would like to tell you but this is a public place and I don't want to make a scene." Elenore retorted.

"I better make this quick before Margaret shows up." Carrossea thought.

"Well I have two words to say to you Miss Baker."

"And what would they be Mr. Doone?" Elenore replied with a crossed look on her face.

Carrossea smiled and said. "Sarks Sark"

With that Elenore froze in place with a shocked look on her face.

Carrossea got up with and touched Elenore on the shoulder as she began to fall. "Miss Baker?" He said in somewhat mock concern.

"Now Laetitia!" Poupee said and they joined hands and the eight year Elenore appeared. Poupee's brow furrowed as she appeared but he noticed a long chain attached to ankle by a shackle.

"What's wrong Poupee?" She asked worriedly. As Poupee pointed, she turned her head and gasped in surprise upon seeing the chain. "Where did that come from? I didn't see that before or that." She pointed to a doll in Elenore's hands.

"I don't know, we could ask her." Poupee replied just as puzzled.

Elenore looked around with a scared look on her face. "Where am I? What is this place? Where did everyone go?"

Laetitia walked up to Elenore with a warm smile and held her. "It's okay Elenore. You're safe here." Elenore nodded and calmed down. "Elenore can I ask where that chain leads to?" she asked.

"What chain? Elenore replied with a puzzled look as she tried to look for the chain Laetitia mentioned.

"She can't see it." Laetitia said sadly. As Poupee walked up to Laetitia, Elenore began to scream.

"NO! YOU STAY AWAY! I WON'T LET YOU TAKE HER AWAY FROM ME! EVER! EVER! EVER! I promised..." Elenore screamed as she held the doll tightly close to her.

"Promised who?" A shocked Laetitia asked as Poupee backed up a little shocked as well. Elenore sniffed.

"I promised mo... Grandpa... I would take care of her." She said as she looked at the doll lovingly.

"Ask her what her doll's name is. If it's what I think it is this may be the root of a much deeper problem." Poupee said concerned.

Laetitia nodded and asked Elenore. "What's your little one's name?"

Elenore smiled as she held the doll in front of Laetitia. "Margaret. Her name is Margaret." She brought the doll closer to her and began to rock it gently in her arms.

"You need to tell the real Margaret about this, she needs help before it's too late."

"It may be already too late, but I'll tell her. Please help keep the link up. I need to keep an eye on her." Laetitia said with tears running down her cheeks.

"Will you stay Poupee?" Laetitia asked a bit nervously.

Poupee smiled and replied warmly. "As long as Carrossea lives and I'm still inside I will stay by your side."

Laetitia hugged him tight. Tears flowing down her cheeks as he hugged her in return. All the while the younger version of Elenore sat there holding her doll oblivious to what was going on around her.

"Miss...?"

"Miss Baker...?"

Elenore found herself sitting in a chair. She turned her head to see a waiter and Carrossea with a look of genuine concern on his face. "How did I get here?" Elenore asked a little shocked.

"You fainted and this gentleman caught you before fell. Are you all right Miss?" A waiter replied.

"I'm fine now, thank you. I'm sorry if I caused any trouble." Elenore replied with her head bowed slightly. She looked at Carrossea. "Thank you Mr. Doone." She said a little embarrassed and a little confused. She noticed the look of honest concern on his face and tried to collect herself before Margaret showed up. Carrossea noticed she was wearing body armor underneath her uniform when he caught her. "*Why would she need to wear body armor, unless they're after Margaret too? I should lay off her for now. You've got some real problems lady...*" Carrossea thought to himself as he saw Margaret, Laetitia and... Madlax (!) walk up as Elenore rose from the chair.

When they finally got to the cafe Margaret noticed Elenore was already sitting at a table... with a man? Only when she got closer did she realize who he actually was. That sure came as a surprise! She hadn't seen him or heard from him since the events in Gazth-Sonika. He just left without saying anything after she returned him back to life. Not like she was expecting him to be thankful or even stay in touch. In fact she could understand perfectly well if he wouldn't want to see her, but this all made her a bit confused about where exactly did he stand in relation to her. But she decided not to think about all those complicated things for now and just let herself be happy at this meeting. She did kinda miss him after all.

"Carrossea? So you're here in Nafrece! You've been here all along? I worried a bit back then, when you left without saying a thing... But what a great coincidence! I just met Madlax and now I find you here! It's becoming quite an interesting day." Margaret said with honest, yet contained enthusiasm. "How have you been?"

Carrossea had to contain his enthusiasm, but he was happy that Margaret was happy to see him. "I just arrived in Nafrece a few days ago and to be honest I didn't know if you wanted to see me again. I do apologize if I made you worry". That got him a somewhat dirty look from Elenore, but he didn't press it considering what he knew. "It was quite fortunate I was nearby when Miss Baker fainted. I hope she's not working herself too hard." Elenore shot him another dirty glance but kept quiet, after all he did catch her, and she felt he deserved some gratitude even if it was dead silence.

"I see Madlax is here as well. What an interesting coincidence. May I ask what brings you to Nafrece?" He asked politely.

"What? Elenore did?" Margaret immediately switched her attention from Carrossea and approached Elenore with concern, leaving him to catch up with Madlax for a while. "Are you feeling sick Elenore? Should we head back home now? I don't mind that you know? I really don't. I couldn't have fun if you weren't well. You should tell me about these things." Margaret somewhat wanted to go deep into the topic, as both her and Laetitia had been noticing these recent changes about Elenore, though now wasn't the right place for it and she thought it would be better to confront her about it at home, in private.

"I'm fine Miss. The weather is bit warm and I didn't compensate for it. I'm sorry if I made you worry Miss. I'm quite all right now Miss." Elenore flashed a reassuring smile. "Thank you Miss Margaret for your concern." She removed her shawl and folded it. "There that should do it. I feel much better. Now we can spend as much time as you like Miss Margaret." Elenore said trying to reassure Margaret that everything was all right. Inside though part of her panicked. She didn't want to burden Margaret with her problems and she didn't want to tell her what was really bothering her. This fainting spell (though she suspected Carrossea may have had a part in it, but she couldn't tell for sure) didn't help matters one bit. She smiled reassuringly and said; "Please Miss Margaret sit, you must be hungry by now and this place serves some excellent pasta from what I've heard."

"Well, ok, if you say so Elenore." Margaret replied as they all got to their seats at the table. "But I get the feeling you don't tell me everything at times. I'd like you to trust me a bit more; I'm not a child anymore you know? If you have something that troubles you I'd like to help somehow, even if you think I might not be of much help. I guess I'm not as reliable as Vanessa at things like this... but I promise you I'll do my best!" she tried to sound reassuring.

"Oh, it just occurred to me!" Margaret said in a lighter tone, before Elenore could say anything else, "Maybe it just really surprised you to meet Carrossea here so unexpectedly?" She asked quite clueless. "I was a bit taken aback with Mr. Doone's unexpected appearance. Thank you for your concern Miss Margaret. But you're right Miss Margaret and I know you'll do your best and I do think a talk is in order. But I don't want it to spoil your day Miss Margaret; it can wait till we get home. Let's order some lunch Miss Margaret." Elenore replied grateful that Margaret didn't press any further. *"But I could've sworn he used those words on me. But it's best I don't mention it. I'll just keep a closer eye on Margaret."* She thought to herself. Elenore bowed her head. *"No, you're not a child anymore. Perhaps it's time you did know. But why is it scaring me? But you do deserve the truth; you gave me that consideration when you told me what had happened."* Elenore thought to herself.

Madlax bluntly replied "I'm looking for work; business is quiet in Gazth-Sonika". "Why did you come here then?" Carrossea asked rather smartly. "Don't you know most of the fighting these days is in South America? Why don't you join me there? I'll provide the brains." He asked rather invitingly. Madlax did find the offer enticing but unlike Margaret she couldn't trust a man who was once the right hand man of Friday Monday. Madlax privately knew she can be a bit clueless but she wasn't stupid and she had this feeling that he wanted her to be his "new Limelda". Suddenly she saw a flash of Vanessa in the jungle in her mind and felt the smell of tacos. "My pasta is ready, another time" as Madlax excused herself after noticing that aromatic smell.

"South America? Is that where you've been till now Carrossea?" Margaret's attention got driven back at him after she finished talking to Elenore and ordered some pasta. "What have you been doing all this time? You're not back to working with criminal organizations, are you?" she asked confused.

"Yes. Margaret I've been in South America." He briefly closed his eyes. "But I'm not working with those people, as far as I know they think I'm dead and I want it to stay that way. As for what I was doing there, I was looking for something." Elenore ignored him and continued eating, but keeping an eye on Carrossea.

He wanted to warn her about the Soldats, but he was afraid that they might involve her if he mentioned them. *"It may be too late..."* He thought to himself.

"I have some business to attend to Margaret, but it was a great pleasure seeing you again."

He briefly held her hand and started to walk off but not before saying.

"Take care Margaret and you as well Miss Baker."

"I bet your neck deep in trouble already Mr. Doone." Elenore thought to herself.

"I'm sorry Margaret, but I do have pressing business that needs my attention."

As soon as Margaret asked him to see her Carrossea smiled trying to hide his glee. "Of course for you Margaret anything. Goodbye Margaret and take care." With that he walked down the street.

Elenore sat eating in silence. She wanted to say something to Carrossea but other thoughts crossed her mind. But she was glad he was gone but with Margaret's invitation it would be most likely he'll show up again.

She knew Margaret liked him, but that man attracted trouble and she hoped that he wouldn't get Margaret involved like the last time. She continued to go over in her head what she would say to Margaret, it wasn't easy but she felt she needed to.

"You're leaving again Poupee?" Laetitia asked with a little sadness in her eyes. "No, only my other self is. Now that we've relinked with one another I will be here by your side." Poupee replied with a warm smile.

"Oh that's wonderful!" Laetitia joyously said with a wide smile on her face, but the smile faded when she turned her head towards Elenore rocking the doll. "What about her? Do you mind that she's here?" Poupee looked at Elenore and then back at Laetitia. "I don't mind, but you really have to tell Margaret about this."

Laetitia nodded and they both sat on the bench and she held Poupee's hand smiling.

Elenore stood there rocking the doll. "I will take care of you because you are my family. You are all I have left in this world..."

Chloe watched the scene at the cafe with interest. There was Carrossea Doone just standing there and she couldn't do anything without revealing her presence. She saw him look towards her direction. Did he see her? She doubted it. She did see him catch the maid and then talk to the blond haired woman. She would have to ask Lady Altena for information about this woman, maybe she would get the chance to kill her. She watched him walk off and she went back to her duty; watching Margaret Burton and the maid. She understood the need to study a target, but this was getting boring, no those two were boring...

After finishing eating lunch the four of them started walking back home. Margaret was looking forward to welcome Madlax at her place and let her settle comfortably, she wondered what it was like to live in the same place with her.

"So Madlax, I heard you mentioning you were looking for a job before. What kind of job are you looking for in Nafrece? I don't think you'd be able to work as an agent here, and I would prefer if you didn't do that." Margaret said in a sad tone, "You could always take some vacation while you're staying with us!" she suggested more enthusiastically, "If we manage to contact Vanessa she might even help you find a job later! What do you say?"

"I am looking to be an agent; assassination, protection, infiltration, spying. I'm not picky though it's a sign of the times. I guess I can try something else Margaret but I doubt I'll be good at it and I won't be used to it. But I am glad to join you on vacation" Madlax told Margaret in a relaxed tone. Although she had been out of work and indeed real practice, this seemed like a real vacation to her. *"I can barely remember having a real vacation in my whole life, why not? It's a free offer. Besides I might meet Vanessa again."* Madlax thought.

Elenore noticed the happy look on Margaret's face when Madlax accepted her offer but she wondered how long that would last.

When they got home, she made tea and prepared the guest bedroom for Madlax. When she was finished she took a deep breath. "Well I did say that we needed to talk, but why am I so scared? I can't turn back now, I just hope..." She walked out to the living room and approached Margaret. "Miss Margart, may I please have a word with you in private?" Margaret nodded ascent and followed her to her another part of the house.

Madlax sipped her tea and watched Elenore and Margaret leave the room. When the pair were out of earshot she turned to Laetitia. "Laetitia what's going on?"

Laetitia looked at Madlax sadly and replied in the same tone. "It's Elenore."

"What about Elenore?" Madlax asked prodding Laetitia to continue.

"Ever since we got home from Gazth-Sonika she's hasn't been herself." Laetitia continued.

"She was dead and then brought back to life. That kind of thing can change you. Did Margaret ask her what was going on?" Madlax enquired.

"Margaret has tried on and off but she keeps running into Elenore's great wall of denial." Laetitia answered though the last part did make Madlax giggle.

"I'm sorry, that last part sounded like a joke."

Laetitia tilted her head and thought and then smiled briefly. "Oh I guess I did make a joke, though I didn't mean to."

"After what happened at the café I guess Margaret and Elenore are going have that talk." Madlax said looking in the direction Margaret and Elenore went.

When they got to another room Elenore waited till Margaret sat down. "Elenore please tell me what is happening to you. You've been acting weird since we got back from Gazth-Sonika and I'm worried about you." Margaret asked with a great deal of concern.

Elenore bowed her head. "You deserve the truth Miss Margaret; after all you gave me that consideration. But there's more than one thing here. I would to apologize for keeping this from you but I didn't want to add to your guilt over my death but I will give you the full details." For the next few minutes Elenore described in full detail her encounter with the soldiers, her fall from the cliff and the march through the jungle to reach the field of flowers.

Margaret looked at Elenore dejectedly. It was bad enough because of her actions Elenore had died. But knowing what she went through and the cause of it made her feel worse. She want to give Elenore a comforting hug but it looked like Elenore had more to say.

"As a result Miss Margaret, I've been having flashbacks and severe doubts on how well of a protector I am to you. I couldn't pull the trigger, not at that soldier nor that man who captured you. But what I'm about to say scares me, I don't know how you'll react to this but I feel you must know this as well. Remember when I asked if you knew what I meant by "you are my family." This is what I meant..."

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes tears beginning to well.

"Miss Margaret...I'm gay and I love you..."

For the next few seconds upon hearing Elenore's confession Margaret didn't really know what to say. This really took her off guard. She just stood there looking at her for a while, trying to make sense of those words. She couldn't stand seeing Elenore crying, and she felt guilty for that too, but she had no clue what to do or say to fix things. Right now, she didn't even know if anything she might say or do would do any good or just make things worse. She decided not to move for a while. Margaret lowered her head and finally broke the silence, "How... long has this been going on, Elenore? Was it since we came back from Gazth-Sonika, or even before that? I feel so dumb now, for not realizing it..." She replied without looking up, obviously trying to hide her embarrassment.

Elenore stood there her heart pounding in her chest. Margaret's reaction confirmed Elenore's fear of a worst case scenario.

"And also...why, Elenore? Why me?" she asked, raising her head and looking Elenore in the eye now, "It doesn't bother me one bit if you prefer girls to boys, but why me of all people? I'm so unsuited for you. I mean, I'm immature, clumsy, absentminded and not very clever, I'm afraid! ... I don't think I could ever actually help you with anything and I only cause you trouble!" At this point Margaret was feeling terrified and could barely keep her tears, this was a lot more than what she could handle and she feared she wasn't quite reacting to it the best way possible, but all she could say was what came to mind.

"It doesn't matter, I still love you flaws and all." That was what Elenore wanted to say. Before she should Margaret continued. "Doesn't it... feel awkward to you? Because we've grown up together in the same house, I always thought of you as a sister. And I thought you felt the same way and that's what you meant by family. And... and... I know this isn't important, but you work for me! This isn't right is it? Even if I felt the same about you, it wouldn't be right would it?"

Margaret asked confused as she got up to try and comfort her somehow. "I'm so sorry Elenore!" she said at last, with teary eyes, yet not daring to approach and hug her just yet. She felt her heart beating rapidly, no not beating but pounding in her chest. She took another deep breath.

"I'm so sorry..." Those words used to bring her some comfort after she came back to life, but now they felt like knives plunging into her soul.

She tried her hardest to keep herself together after seeing Margaret begin to cry. She bowed her head in shame. "You're correct Miss Margaret, I do work for you and I've clearly overstepped my bounds by my statement. I will accept any disciplinary action you wish to take. To answer the Miss' questions; my feelings for you grew out from caring for you and that was before we went to Gazth-Sonika. I apologize for upsetting you and by doing so I've made yet another terrible mistake. If you wish, I will never bring up the subject again."

"My God, that was so cold." She felt disgust at herself. "But what could I do or say, she's right I do work for her and all I've done is made things worse. Grandfather must be turning over in his grave. I'm sorry Grandfather; it seems that even I broke your trust. Question is; what happens now?" Elenore thought standing in front of Margaret with her head deeply bowed.

"What are you saying Elenore?" Margaret was now even more confused at Elenore's excessively professional reply, "Do you really think I could ever punish you for whatever reason? How can you think that? And how could I ever... and after you finally go through the trouble of being honest to me about this! I really appreciate you telling me the truth, so please don't talk like that! It's... not your fault..." she struggled with her own words, noticing how nothing of what she said seemed to change Elenore's attitude, "It's my fault too, I guess... I never meant for you to fall in love with me. I'm sorry. I wish I knew how to deal with this better..." Margaret said in a low sad tone, turning her head away in shame and guilt.

"I need to step out for a while. I'm going alone, but please don't worry. I'll be back soon." Was all Margaret could say before turning away from Elenore and leaving the house in a hurry, leaving Madlax and Laetitia with a slightly perplexed look? Elenore winced as she heard the door shut. She walked to the main bathroom and closed the door and turned on the cold water faucet in the sink. When she thought the sound of the water as loud enough, she sat on the floor buried her face in her apron and began to cry.

After a few minutes of crying; got up and wiped her eyes and blew her nose. She looked at herself in the mirror. Elenore could've sworn the image reflected grew darker... "Well, are you happy now? That was pretty cold of you, but then again showing warmth was never your strong point was it?." The image asked.

"No I'm not." Elenore replied tearfully to the reflection

"Then why the attitude? Poor Margaret was only trying understand why you have those feelings for her and what did you do. You turned into the Ice Bitch and made poor confused Margaret run away."

"You think I wanted to, but she put me in a corner by saying I worked for her. I know that and I knew we couldn't have that close of a relationship because of that, but it didn't matter to me." Elenore said back with tears streaming down her face.

"Then you're lucky she's not around anymore..." The reflection interjected and then added.

"Again why the cold?" The reflection asked coldly.

"What was I supposed to do? I didn't enjoy saying that to her and I'm disgusted with myself for doing so. But part of me is hurt, that part of me that loves her and feels rejected."

"So that part hid behind the Ice Bitch and you let her have it with both barrels. Congratulations, I'm sure she'll stay distant to you now. "The reflection coldly mocked.

Elenore was going to answer when she heard knocking on the door, she wiped her face and eyes, straightened herself, turned off the faucet and opened the door.

Madlax had watched Margaret hurry past her and Laetitia. Then she heard the door to the main bathroom shut. She wondered what had happened and head to the bathroom. Rather perplexed, Madlax walked to the bathroom only to find the door shut and some rather sad crying. "Elenore is that you?" Madlax asked but it was clear she was wallowing, too deep in sorrow to listen.

Elenore opened the door to find Madlax standing outside.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I needed to freshen up. Was there something you needed Madlax?" Elenore asked, her eyes showing that she obviously was crying.

"Is everything alright Elenore? I just saw Margaret rush pass me." Madlax asked with some concern.

"I'm sorry; I'm not at liberty to say at this point at time. Is there anything you need?" Elenore professionally replied.

Third Moon Rising

"And the Ice Bitch strikes again... A voice echoed in Elenore's head.

"I was planning on taking a bath and relaxing before dinner." Madlax replied, a little taken back by Elenore's coldness.

"What's going on with you, this isn't really like you? Is it...? This is where I really wish Vanessa was here, she know how to deal with this." Madlax thought to herself.

"I'll draw your bath and start on cooking dinner." Elenore said.

After she drew Madlax's bath, she checked on a somewhat confused Laetitia.

"Where did Margaret go?" Laetitia asked.

"Miss Margaret needed to go out and she will return in due time. Please don't worry Laetitia. I will prepare dinner soon." Elenore replied with a fake smile. Laetitia could see the spiritual ice form around Elenore in to the shape of a maid's uniform acting as armor. Protecting something she could not see.

"Margaret, what did you do? You were supposed to free her, but the chains are growing tighter." Laetitia thought to herself as Elenore went to the kitchen to cook dinner.

Chapter 2 A flux in time

Mexico 3:00 A.M. (8:00 A.M. Nafrece)

“You have failed to capture her yet again, Jodie.”

Jodie sighed quietly. Those weird triceratops/ninja hybrids found her about an hour ago, knocked her out and brought her to a closed bar. When she came to, she found herself hanging upside down, just above a billiards table while a ninja held a cell phone to her ear. Her coven’s chairperson was scolding her for again failing to get Ellis. It was becoming quite routine actually.

It had been a while since the events at Wiñay Marka, and Jodie decided to leave the Coven and work at Amigo Tacos. But they contacted her about a month ago, informing her about some ancient and powerful artifacts, and Ellis’s possible role with them. Because of what happened, Jodie, Ellis and Nadie had become good friends. She worried for the girl’s safety, and so was forced to come back. Of course, her assignment was to follow Ellis and retrieve her, but she had no intention of doing the latter.

“I hope for your sake you will follow through next time.”

The ninja hung up the phone, signaled for the others to let her down, and left her lying on the table. She dusted herself off quickly, walked out the door and immediately went back to staking the two girls out once again. Neither Jodie nor the ninjas noticed the tall young woman watching nearby (unless either she or they could sense the Gift or temporal fluxes they weren’t going to see her at all.)

“It looks like things have begun to move here. I’ll have to wait till tomorrow for the show to really begin.” The young woman said to no one in particular and giggled slightly at the last part of her statement. She looked at a watch on her wrist and smiled as Jodie got into her car which the ninjas had taken to bring her here and drove off. “We’ll get a chance to speak soon Jodie Hayward. But now I have a show to catch in Nafrece. Ta ta.” The woman pulled out a small device, looked at it and then pressed a couple buttons and then she was gone.

Nafrece 7:15 A.M

Kirika and Mireille emerged from the alleyway as they hurried along trying not to draw attention to themselves. They quickly walked a couple blocks as they heard sirens in the distance. When they thought they had gotten far enough they slowed down. Mireille wasn’t in a good mood and it showed on face. Kirika noticed the look on her face. She was going to ask what the matter was when she noticed a tiny outdoor café. “Mireille let’s rest a bit.” Kirika said gesturing to the café. Mireille was going disagree but the grumbling in stomach and the fact they weren’t being followed changed her mind. “All right, I could use a bite to eat.” Mireille responded and the pair went to the café.

When they got there the only other people were a bored waitress and a tall young woman chatting away to herself till they noticed the Whiteberry in her ear. They sat down at a table that wasn’t noticeable from the street. The waitress took their order with a tired smile and trotted off.

The waitress soon returned with their tea and scones. When she had left Kirika asked. “What’s wrong?” Mireille gave a slight sigh and then she answered. “I’m just a little frustrated. I can’t figure out why the Soldats are after us again after all these years. Something has changed but I don’t know what.”

“Well maybe it has something to do with the last person you pissed off!” The woman said loudly as Mireille turned to the woman who was engrossed with her conversation. Mireille was about say

something but a thought crossed her mind. *"Who did we piss off in the Soldats? Breffort? Breffort said they'd leave them alone. He was either dead or switched sides by now"*. She thought to herself. 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.

"I have a hunch on whom, but following that lead will have to wait." Mireille said turning her attention back to Kirika.

"What do we do?" Kirika asked.

"We lay low till tomorrow and leave by train." Mireille responded.

"Yeah, I wouldn't expect leaving the city anytime soon so you two will have to handle it by yourselves."

This time Kirika turned her head towards the woman on the phone. She wondered if the woman was listening in on their conversation and or be a Soldat. She calmly got up and walked over to the table where the woman was seated. Kirika noticed the woman's green eyes and short brown hair.

"Excuse me." Kirika said putting her hand in her jacket pocket and grabbing the gun within.

"Find out who decided to torch our warehouse!" The woman said apparently ignoring Kirika.

"Excuse me." Kirika said again this putting her finger on the trigger.

"I don't care! It's Roanapur! Bribe someone or suck their dick, I don't care! Just find out who did it!" The woman said loudly. Then she pressed a button to end the call.

"Excuse me." Kirika said in louder tone ready to pull the trigger when she felt Mireille hand on her shoulder.

The woman looked at Kirika and Mireille with a frustrated look. "Yes? Can I help you?"

"Could you please keep it down some of us are trying to have a quiet breakfast here." Mireille replied a tad annoyed.

"Oh, I'm sorry. It's just we've had some unexpected trouble in Roanapur lately and getting on our nerves. I'm sorry to disturb your breakfast. Elsa Rene, Pegasus Imports. Here's my card." The woman said pulling out a business card. Mireille looked it over and handed it back.

"I'm we're not interested but thank you." Mireille replied.

The woman shrugged and picked up the business card. "Again I apologize." The woman said and Mireille silently nodded with a satisfied look. Mireille and Kirika went back to their table as the woman called for the waitress.

"That woman could be a Soldat." Kirika said quietly to Mireille.

"No, she's just a frustrated business woman. Nafrecean companies with holdings in Gazth-Sonika have been attacked recently. But anyone with holdings in Roanapur is just asking for it anyway." Mireille replied as she watched the woman leave and get on a nearby Vespa scooter and ride off.

"Roanapur?" Kirika asked.

"It's a total shit hole in Gazth-Sonika. Rumor has it not even Infant or the Soldats wouldn't touch the place."

Elsa rode off farther away from the pair and when she was far enough she turned down a alleyway. She pressed a button on the scooter and a nearby garage door opened. She went into the garage and parked the scooter and closed the door.

"Hmm...for a few seconds there I really thought Kirika was going to shoot me." Elsa said as she pulled out a device but not before she noticed a sticky note.

Mom needs milk.

You know what kind

3 bottles

10162033

E☺

Elsa smiled as she read the note. She had a habit of leaving sticky notes when she travelled. She wondered if she in her travels actually helped invent sticky notes. She pressed a few buttons and she was gone.

Syracuse Sicily 215 B.C.

"Eureka!" Archimedes shouted as he ran naked from his bath passing an unseen Elsa along the way. "Oops, Wrong time period." She said with a little chuckle and she pressed a couple more buttons and she disappeared.

Nafrece July 7th 2011 (4:30 A.M.)

The phone ringing woke up Douglas Rosenberg from a sound sleep. He looked at the caller ID and pressed speaker.

"Hello Sir." Douglas said trying not to sound like he was still asleep.

"Did you receive the package I sent Douglas?" Friday's voice echoed from the speaker.

"Yes sir, but I highly doubt she's in this country Sir." Douglas replied.

"She'll be there soon. How is the current operation going?"

"We haven't found the goods yet, but we know that the Soldats don't have them either."

"As long you keep the Soldats distracted from our real goal, finding the artifacts is trivial. Oh you might not know this but Altena has sent her errand girl out to your area. I'm curious what she is up to. "

"Yes Sir. I'll get on that immediately. Anything else Sir?"

"Next time don't use Speaker phone." Friday hung up and a dial tone came over the speakers.

"What are you up to Friday? And why her of all people?" Douglas asked himself as he sat in bed.

Unseen Elsa had listened to the entire conversation. She wondered if Friday knew she was there.

"If you only knew Dougie. You'll would wished you've stayed dead." Elsa said knowing that he couldn't hear her.

"Better go get the milk before mom starts worrying...again." Elsa said sighing and she pushed a couple buttons and she was gone.

Chapter 3. Maiden on a pale horse

Chloe followed them home and got into a position where she could hear their conversations. At first the conversations were quite mundane and very boring until Elenore asked Margaret to have a private chat. Chloe smiled as she overheard Elenore's admission to Margaret, then Margaret's bumbled reply and a hurt Elenore's response. She actually felt bad for Elenore. Here was someone who went through hell and died on top of it pouring her soul out to the one she loved. And what did that little twit do, she didn't say "I love you", no she said "you work for me".

She might as well stabbed her in the heart with that response and then overreact when she forced her into a corner by saying that. Chloe fingered one of her knives, wanting to put one into Margaret but Lady Altena orders were no contact, just observe for the moment. She was annoyed with this spying nonsense. She knew her place; she was a killer and she did it well. She sighed and resigned herself to continue watching. Besides this may be a test or part of a training exercise she reasoned to herself. She watched as Margaret ran out the door and into the night. She wondered which one to watch now; Margaret or Elenore? She decided to stay put and watch Madlax. There were no orders regarding her so she grinned evilly as she planned.

Margaret didn't even realize how dark it was outside already till she had walked far enough away from home. She realized it might have been a big mistake to run off by herself like that, without even saying where she was going. But she couldn't have said that anyway, she didn't know where she was going herself. She needed to be alone for a while. She needed time to think what to say to Elenore when she got back home. She had messed things up, this she was sure about. She just wasn't quite sure what exactly upset Elenore the most. She could just apologize for the whole thing altogether, but would that really solve everything? What would she apologize for? For not loving her back? That wasn't the case, for she loved Elenore very much, just not the way Elenore would have wanted it. Maybe she should have just kept silent and not have said anything at all. But Elenore would probably want a reply from her after being confronted with the truth.

"What should I do?" Margaret thought to herself, "I don't want Elenore to stay angry at me. I just want things to be like they were before. How can I make things better? I don't like this. I wanna go home. Where am I?" She suddenly realized she had walked further away than she planned. She figured she would be able to find her way back somehow, but she honestly didn't know where she was right now. "I'm such an idiot... I even managed to get myself lost..." she said to herself in a low tone, not realizing the person approaching her.

"Margaret, is that you? What are you doing here all by yourself at a time like this?" Margaret turned back suddenly, upon hearing the familiar voice calling out to her "Vanessa?"

"It is you Margaret! Why are you out here alone? Where's Elenore?"

Margaret hugged Vanessa crying and Vanessa hugged her back. "Alright Margaret, start at the beginning and tell me why are you out here alone and without Elenore?" Vanessa said warmly. What Margaret couldn't see was the Torc around Vanessa's neck sending out waves of calm and peace. "Vanessa, I think I did something awful." Margaret started explaining between sobs. "Me and Laetitia had been noticing Elenore has been acting weird ever since we got back from Gazth-Sonika. So this afternoon I decided to confront her about it and she explained me everything. But she also told me something I wasn't expecting. She told me that she loved me! And it's not like she loves me like a sister but, you know... and I must have said something wrong that really hurt her feelings because now she's acting weird to me.

And I don't know what to do or say, I'm afraid she'll hate me. I just want things to go back to normal. What should I do Vanessa?"

"Well for starters, let's go to my car and I'll drive you home. While we're doing that just tell me everything you can remember saying to her and what she said to you." Margaret nodded and as they walked she told Vanessa what she said. As soon as she said "you work for me!" Vanessa sighed and patted Margaret on the back. "Okay I think I know what happened here."

"First off, Elenore would never hate you, especially not after a declaration like that. When we get to your home, you'll give Elenore the night off and you'll tell her that you insist and that she comes with me. Part of the problem I think is that she hides behind her uniform and her professionalism. I know she would really like to tell you her feelings but as you said she works for you and that makes it difficult for her to do so. When you said "you work for me" you backed her into corner she couldn't get out of, so she hid behind her uniform so to speak." Margaret smiled wiping her tears as they drove back to her home. "Okay, what else do I do?" "I want you to remain calm and tell her and I'll handle the rest." Vanessa replied. "But what about Madlax she's there as well?" Margaret asked not so sure what to do. Vanessa smiled. "First I'll deal with Elenore and then Madlax, just keep her busy for me will you?" Vanessa said with a wink.

"Okay, I'll do that." Margaret replied, trying to focus on what Vanessa said, "Thank you Vanessa! I wouldn't know what to do now if it wasn't for you..." She admitted embarrassed.

"Now, now, don't worry about it. I'm actually glad I found you at the right place at the right time. I'm sorry I have been away this long without contacting you, but you know I'm always here for you."

When they arrived at the door, Margaret was a bit worried about how Elenore would receive her. But she figured Vanessa's presence would sooth things out somehow. So when she got to the door the first thing Margaret did was hug Elenore tight and apologize. "I'm sorry Elenore. I'm sorry I run off on my own like that. I should have stayed and talked things over with you. I was an idiot. Please forgive me." Elenore was taken by surprise by all this, but before she could reply anything, Vanessa walked in and Margaret continued "Oh also, I really insist you take the night off. Vanessa needs to talk to you, so she thought you could go have dinner out with her. I can take care of things here, so you don't have to worry, we'll be fine! Okay?" she said with a hopeful smile, anxiously waiting for her reply.

"I take it I have no choice in the matter do I?" Elenore asked looking into Margaret's eyes.

"Nope." Margaret replied with a smile and shake of her head.

"Okay I'll go" Elenore said with a warm smile, something inside pushed passed the Ice Bitch and to the real Elenore. As she started to walk to the door Vanessa grabbed her by the arm. "First things first, you're officially off the clock so let get you dressed in some more casual and no, you don't have a choice." And the pair walked straight to Elenore's room.

Once inside Elenore's room Vanessa said pointing a finger at her. "Starting changing young Lady."

"To what? I don't have many "casual clothes" to begin with." Elenore asked with some protest and a bit shocked at Vanessa's pushiness.

Vanessa sighed and opened Elenore's closet, only to find one teal color casual dress out the many maid's uniforms and her school uniform.

"Definitely going to have Margaret take her or tell her to get some outfits for herself." Vanessa sympathetically thought as she looked in the closet and she pulled out the dress and place it on the bed. Elenore had taken off her uniform and was about to reach for the dress when Vanessa stopped her. "Take that off as well, we're going to eat, not to a warzone." Vanessa said slightly taken back when she saw the body armor Elenore was wearing. Elenore took off the armor and put on the dress and put on a pair of black low heeled shoes. She stared at herself in the mirror and for a brief moment wondered who

the woman in the mirror was. Then Vanessa held a tube of lipstick out. Elenore gently grabbed the tube and put some on without protest (knowing that it would be futile anyway).

"I can't remember why or when I bought this dress." Elenore somewhat said to herself. Vanessa looked over the dress on Elenore. The dress beautifully accentuated Elenore's figure and showed just enough cleavage to be daring. Vanessa noticed the look on Elenore's face and gave a reassuring hug and said with a warm smile. "Smile, you look beautiful in that dress." Elenore thought for a few seconds while looking herself over then she tilted her head slightly and smiled as to agree with Vanessa. Vanessa beamed. "See I told you, you look great! You should do this more often. Now let's go eat I'm starving."

Elenore quietly chuckled to herself as they both left the room.

When they got to the living room they found Margaret sitting quietly on the couch and Laetitia sitting in an overstuffed chair reading a children's book with the doll she got earlier today. Margaret got up from the couch when they came into the room.

"Wow Elenore, you look great!" Margaret said amazed. She had never seen Elenore dressed in anything but her maid's uniform. Of course there was that one time she was dressed in her school uniform and when they were children she had seen her in a ballet costume (at least she thought she did but she wasn't too sure about that. She made a mental note to ask later.) But all in all this was a welcome change and she saw a genuine smile on Elenore.

"Thank you Miss Margaret." Elenore replied silently relieved that Margaret's mood had changed for the better.

"We better get going. I'll have her home before midnight." Vanessa jokingly said.

"In case you get hungry Miss Margaret. I prepared your favorite dish. It's in the kitchen; do you want me to serve you before I go?" Elenore said humbly and in an apologetic tone.

Margaret smiled and warmly said. "Thank you Elenore but I can serve myself and the others. This is your night off. Go out and have some fun. I insist." Margaret playfully put her foot down to show that she was serious but not in a way that it seemed a command. She hoped that Vanessa could help Elenore.

"All right Miss Margaret if you insist." Elenore replied.

"I insist." Margaret said firmly but warmly.

Behind her book Laetitia smiled and she put the book down long enough to wish Elenore a good time tonight. Elenore smiled and thanked Laetitia. Vanessa gently guided Elenore out the door before Madlax got out of the main bathroom.

Elenore and Vanessa got into her car and drove off. There was an awkward silence in the car for a few blocks and then Vanessa spoke.

"Talk about déjà vu." Vanessa said with a grin.

Elenore was deep in thought when she was distracted by Vanessa words. "Yes, it seems like it." She said somewhat quietly.

Vanessa's tone became serious but compassionate. "Elenore, you've haven't been the same since we got back from Gazth-Sonika and that's got everyone concerned. I asked Margaret to give you the night off for a reason; to give you a chance to talk freely without being bound by your job. I'm your friend and I'm worried about you. Can you at least tell me please?"

Elenore stared out the window and then looked at Vanessa. "All right, but you have to tell me where you've been? Miss Margaret and I have been worried about you too."

"It's a deal, so what's on your mind?" Vanessa said with a caring smile.

Elenore spoke in detail her encounter with the soldiers and her fall from the cliff. She didn't notice that Vanessa had pulled over and stopped the engine. Elenore then described her trek through the jungle to reach the flower field where she died. She stopped and sadly stared at the dashboard.

"There's more isn't there?" Vanessa asked compassionately.

Elenore nodded and Vanessa gently urged her on and then Elenore continued.

"Ever since we got back I've been having doubts on how well I can protect Miss Margaret. But not the worst of it; I've been having these nightmares."

"What kind of nightmares?" Vanessa asked with growing concern.

"Some nights I dream I'm running through the jungle and off a cliff. Others I see that man who captured Miss Margaret and Mr. Doone mocking me. And..." Elenore began to cry "And...some nights I see myself in a coffin or lying on a slab in a morgue. When I wake up from those dreams I wonder if I'm really alive..."

Vanessa reached over and hugged Elenore tightly. Elenore cried on her shoulder as she did so. She cried for a few minutes and then she let go of Vanessa. Vanessa handed her a couple of tissues. Elenore gave quick thanks and then wiped her eyes and blew her nose.

Vanessa gave Elenore time to compose herself before speaking. With an understanding look and sympathetic tone Vanessa spoke.

"As for the dreams; I've had some those too and woken up wondering if I was alive. As for the rest it sounds like you have a classic case of Post Traumatic Syndrome. You really need to see someone about it. You just can't leave that untreated; it can lead to other illnesses. I'll give you the address and phone number of a women's clinic I went to after I got back, they're very helpful there. Just promise me you'll make an appointment there tomorrow, I don't want to have use Margaret as a club to make you do it. But it's is for your own good, and you shouldn't suffer in silence."

Elenore closed her eyes and thought for a moment and then spoke. "I know you're doing this because you care and I'm sorry I've dragged you into my mess. But if I tell a doctor that I died and came back to life they'll think I was delusional."

"I know you don't like to lie but you might have to bend the truth and say you had a near death experience which led to you having these nightmares." Vanessa replied.

Elenore paused again and then replied. "Well I have the scars to prove it and your explanation seems more plausible. I'll make the appointment tomorrow. Again I'm sorry to drag you into my mess when you have your own issues to deal with."

There's no need to apologize, that's what friends are for. And besides I always look out for my friends." Vanessa said warmly smiling and her stomach growled loudly and Elenore smirked.

"Now let's go eat, I'm really starving here." Vanessa said in a mock pout rubbing her stomach.

"Now, why doesn't that surprise me? But it just so happens I'm hungry as well" Elenore said with a grin on her face.

Vanessa started up the car and they drove off. After a short while Vanessa parked and the pair went into the nearest restaurant.

Elenore noticed the pink triangle when they went in. When they were seated and placed their order Elenore looked at Vanessa and then partly at the table. "You know... don't you..." Elenore said with a little anxiety in her voice.

"She did in her own way. No offence Elenore but I kind of figured that you were when I first met you."

Elenore looked at Vanessa in shock. "Really!? Was I that obvious!?"

"Yes and few years later I saw the bookmarks to a few lesbian sites on your computer and I really doubt that they're Margaret's. Plus your "collection" was a dead giveaway."

Elenore blushed. "Wait a minute, what were you doing on my computer?!"

"Well I needed to use a computer and Margaret was busy on hers so she told me to use yours."
Elenore sighed.

Vanessa noticed and said. "Actually I'm not surprised you would develop feelings of that nature towards her considering you two grew up together. Oh here's our food, we'll talk some more after dinner.
Elenore agreed and they ate.

After dinner Vanessa paid the bill. She led Elenore to the dance floor. Slow dance music was playing while other couples were dancing around them.

"I thought we were going to talk?" Elenore asked a bit confused.

"We will but I thought you could use a little fun and a break." Vanessa replied.

Elenore nodded consent knowing what they had to talk about was best left to them alone. Vanessa held Elenore and they began to dance. While they danced Vanessa held Elenore close to her. She could feel that something else was troubling her friend...something deep. They danced through a couple more songs till Vanessa saw out the corner of her eye a pale white horse. She silently sighed and then she looked at Elenore who looked like she was at peace. "Do you want to get going? I still owe you an explanation and we and finish our talk." Vanessa asked partly wishing she could have a couple more dances with her.

"I don't want to stay out too late and I do want to hear your explanation." Elenore concurred.

Vanessa went and ordered a carafe of tea. A couple minutes later they got the carafe and left.

Vanessa silently breathed a sigh of relief as they drove off; for unbeknownst to Elenore a couple minutes later a carload of agents pulled up to the curb, got out and went into the restaurant.

They drove for awhile till Vanessa found a parking place overlooking the city.

The distant city lights contrasted with the moonless night and the stars could be seen. Elenore looked in awe at the beauty of the contrast.

Vanessa made two cups of tea and handed one to Elenore who was looking at the distant city lights and then the stars.

"Pretty out, I've never seen the city like this before."

"It's a very nice view from here, but I didn't bring you here just for the view, nice as it is."

"Right. From what I gathered Miss Margaret told you she had a hard time dealing with what I said. I understood that there couldn't be any serious relationship. She sees me more as sister than anything and the fact I do work for her. "Tears welled in Elenore's eyes."Vanessa, I feel horrible for saying what I said to her, but she painted me into a corner and a part of me was hurt. I could accept she couldn't love me the way I wished, but I did wish she would've said "I love you" somewhere in the conversation so I..."

"So you hid behind your uniform and put up a professional front, instead of telling her what you wanted to say. Am I right?"

Elenore nodded while Vanessa gave her a hug. "If you want I can talk to Margaret about this and see what we can work out, Okay."

"Thanks, I appreciate that."

"Oh one other thing, you need to get out the house more often. And by that I mean go out and make some more friends and have a good time. Taking care of Margaret and Laetitia is great but you need to take care of "you" as well. Life is too short, as we both well know..."

"I get what you mean and I'll make an effort."Elenore grinned "It at least it will get you off my back."

Vanessa looked at Elenore in mock shock. "Elenore you make me sound like a nag!"She smiled and said "Shall we head back now."

Elenore grabbed her by the arm. "Oh no, you still owe me an explanation and I want to hear it."

Vanessa sighed. "You're right, we made a deal and now it's my turn." She unbuttoned the top buttons on her blouse to reveal a golden Torc with a horse head on each end around her neck.

"What is that?" Elenore asked with concern.

"This is the Torc of Rhiannon. Are you familiar with the legend of Rhiannon?"

"Not off hand, I think I've heard of her in school."

"I'm not surprised so I'll give you the short version. Long ago in the kingdom of Dyfed, Queen Rhiannon gave birth to a son; however, on the night of the birth, the child disappeared while in the care of six of Rhiannon's ladies-in-waiting. They feared that they would be put to death, and to avoid any blame, smeared blood from a puppy on the sleeping Rhiannon, and lay its bones around her bed. Pwyll the King imposed a penance on Rhiannon for her crime, to remain in the court of Arberth for seven years, and to sit every day near a horse-block outside the gate telling her story to all that passed. In addition, she was to carry any willing guest to the court on her back. Well to make a long story short she proved her innocence and in remembrance of her ordeal she crafted the Torc and imbued with the power to help ease suffering."

Elenore looked a little puzzled. "Well that's nice story but what does that have to do with you being gone for so long?"

"Try taking the Torc off from my neck. You'll see why."

Elenore tried to take the Torc off from Vanessa's neck but it wouldn't budge and Elenore was worried that she would injure Vanessa so she stopped.

"That's on tight Vanessa. I was worried I would hurt you." Elenore said with concern and some confusion wondering if this object was the beginning of more troubles for them.

"Yes it is..." Vanessa started to say then she looked down the road and saw the pale white horse coming toward them.

"Elenore get in the car now! I'll explain on the way." Both of them got in and sped off. A little further down the road they noticed the headlights of another car behind them. Vanessa rolled down her window, pulled out a gun and with a trick reminiscent of Madlax shot the front tire of the car behind them.

As the car following them spun, slowed and then hit the railing. As they drove away Vanessa smiled with some satisfaction. "Wow, that trick actually worked!"

"Who were those people following us Vanessa?" Elenore asked with great concern.

"It must be one of the three groups after the Torc." Vanessa replied.

"Well who are these groups?"

"One of them is only known by 'The Coven' I don't know much about them or the reason why other than they want the Torc. The other group is known as Les Soldats and they too want the Torc for their war against another group you should know as well."

"Who?" Elenore asked with some apprehension as she could probably guess.

"Enfant... They're after the Torc to use it against Les Soldats."

Elenore's face saddened. "Now I know why you stayed away. You didn't want us to get involved. But why come back here?"

"Honestly I thought I gave all of them the slip in Peru, but I guess I was mistaken. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I figured they would show up sooner or later. Carrosea Doone made his presence known, saying that he wasn't working for them. I knew that bastard was lying." Elenore said a little angrily.

"Actually, he's telling the truth. He's not working for Enfant; in fact he's the one who helped me get out of Peru."

"Please tell me your joking Vanessa." Elenore said with a little surprise.

"It's no joke. I've said what I can say here and I'll explain later but right now let's get you home. I think we've lost them for now."

Elenore nodded with a worried look on her face as they drove home.

Vanessa and Elenore made it back without further incident. They went up to the front door and before they went in they stopped.

"Before we go in I would to say thank you Vanessa. I really needed that and I hope we can do this again in the future..."

"You're quite welcome Elenore and I'm sorry that you had to see that. I didn't want to get any of you involved. But I fear it may be already too late."

"It's okay; I figured sooner or later those criminals were going to target Miss Margaret for revenge or something." Elenore said sullenly.

"So that's why the body armor, well with Madlax here, she could help you protect Margaret so you don't have to worry about pulling the trigger." Vanessa said putting a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"We better get in before they start worrying." Elenore said as she pulled out the key.

Back at the Burton estate, Madlax, Margaret and Laetitia were finishing dinner, without much being said between the three. Margaret wanted to speak out and clarify things for them. Especially Madlax, since she was their guest and this whole situation must have made her feel rather uncomfortable, not to mention confused about this sudden change of mood. But she didn't really know where to begin.

"Hmm, I guess I own you two an apology as well... for leaving like that... without saying anything..."

Margaret finally started with hesitation, "You must be wondering what happened between me and Elenore. And why was Vanessa here just now and the two of them left right after... well, where should I start?"

Laetitia could easily see Margaret's difficulty on bringing the subject so she decided to speak out and make things easier for her. "If this is about Elenore being in love with you, I already know that."

Margaret was taken by surprise by her words and suddenly felt that embarrassing feeling coming back. "Wait! How... how could you know about that? Was I the only one who hasn't realized it? Don't tell me you knew about this as well Madlax?" she asked a bit shocked.

"Don't be stupid, I already knew that." Madlax replied in a rather confident voice. "I've known for a long time, Vanessa sometimes talked about it when we were alone when it felt like when we were together facing the world alone." Madlax sighed. Suddenly the trio heard a sound from the front door and Margaret ran quickly hoping Elenore had returned.

Margaret got to the front just as Elenore and Vanessa walked in.

"Welcome home you two!" Margaret cheerfully greeted.

"Thank you Miss Margaret." Elenore replied in the same tone.

"Thanks Margaret. Could I have a word with you in private Margaret?"

"Umm...sure Vanessa." Margaret replied wondering what Vanessa had to say and then she guessed it had something to do with Elenore.

"Vanessa?"

"Vanessa!" Madlax exclaimed with tears in her eyes. "Where have you been? What happened?" The young blonde asked. Vanessa knew Madlax was here but she was a bit surprised at the reception she got. "I never thought I would see you here! Why did you come so unexpectedly?" Vanessa replied and hugged Madlax warmly. "Well I've been looking for work here but I took the invitation to stay while I'm looking" Madlax said.

"I'm glad to hear that. I don't want to be rude Madlax but I need to talk to Margaret." Vanessa said with her eyes looking toward Elenore. Madlax picked up on the subtle signal and gave a silent nod that she understood. "No problem, I'll be in the living room." Madlax said.

"Do you want some tea Madlax?" Elenore asked.

"No it's okay. I'm fine." Madlax replied as she went to the living room.

Margaret and Vanessa went to another part the house to have their talk. Elenore followed Madlax to the living room.

"Madlax, I want to apologize for my behavior earlier this evening." Elenore said apologetically.

"I understand. So don't worry about it."

"Thank you Madlax. May I ask you something? Well more like a couple of some things."

"Sure go ahead."

"I apologize in advance if my questions seem blunt but I really would like to know."

"Okay." Madlax agreed with a little apprehension.

"Where were you that day? And what were you doing?" Elenore asked placing one hand over her scar on her back.

Madlax again stared into the floor numbly and remorsefully. "Well, I did manage to clear them early. But when Limelda arrived, I couldn't resist." Madlax spoke quietly in a confessional tone. "I needed her, someone to remember me. I wanted her to remember my dance with guns, my face. I wanted someone to confirm my existence so badly that I forgot you Elenore; I didn't want to be fake, I didn't want to disappear. I'm sorry."

"Please don't think I'm mad at you, I knew the risks when I went with you. I was worried about you and hoped nothing had happened to you. As for what happened to me, there's enough blame to go around including myself..."

"Thank you Madlax for being honest with me and again I'm sorry if my questions seemed blunt, but I needed to know."

She could understand Madlax's need to be remembered and acknowledged as she nodded her head.

"Elenore?"

"Yes Madlax?"

"How did you get shot? When I got to the field and saw you lying there I thought either Friday Monday or Margaret had shot you."

Elenore told Madlax what had happened prior to her arrival at the field of flowers. Madlax felt a bit guilty.

"I'm sorry Elenore. But to be honest; you should've shot those soldiers. No one wouldn't have thought any less of you for protecting yourself."

"I know but no offence I'm..."

Madlax smiled briefly as if trying to act as if she didn't feel guilty anymore than she did. "You're not a killer."

"Please Madlax I don't want to hurt your feelings. If I have I'm sorry. I do want to get to know you better." Elenore gave Madlax a warm hug.

Madlax hugged Elenore warmly, feeling for the first time the person deep beneath Elenore's inner armor.

"Thank You, Elenore I want to know you better too." She spoke softly and then they let go of each other as they heard footsteps.

"We ought to get you out of that uniform more often; you're almost a different person when you are."

Vanessa said jokingly as she, Margaret and Laetitia came into the room.

"Just because I act professionally doesn't mean I'm a different person." Elenore joked back.

Vanessa cocked an eyebrow. "Wait a minute are you calling me unprofessional, what gives you that impression?"

"Do you want a list?" Elenore joked.

Vanessa thought for a few seconds and then she and Elenore laughed.

Laetitia yawned loudly as to get everyone's attention. "I'm starting to feel sleepy already Elenore, could you help me get ready to bed please?" the little one asked with a sleepy voice. Sure she was tired from the long day, and it was past the bedtime for a child her age, though the main reason for Laetitia's plead

was to leave the scene for the night and give the two of them more privacy, as well as buy Margaret some time to get her act together. Elenore might have realized it right away, expecting no less from Laetitia, but still indulged the younger one's request, as it was usual for her to see her to bed every night anyway.

Even though she was officially off the clock, she didn't mind and she guessed what Laetitia was trying to do.

"Oh course, let's get you to bed." Elenore looked at the clock. "It's way pass your bedtime." Laetitia nodded and she let Elenore carry her to her room.

Laetitia could feel the difference between the Elenore of earlier and the one of now. It seemed to her at least she was the Elenore she saw and comforted her in that field of flowers not too long ago. But that chain was still there...

Elenore got Laetitia ready for bed and tucked her in. Before Elenore left Laetitia spoke; "I know there is something...no a few things bothering you. But those doors haven't been opened yet."

If it was anyone else's child that had said that to her, Elenore would've been a more than little creeped out.

But she knew out the three (?) Burton sisters, she seemed a great deal mature even for her age and got the feeling at least she was concerned with her well being. Elenore tried to think of a reply.

Elenore smiled warmly and said reassuringly. "Yes there is, but you shouldn't worry, all right. Now it's time to go to sleep. Good Night Laetitia." She hugged her and started to towards the door.

"Elenore..."

"Yes Laetitia?"

"I love you." Laetitia said in a sisterly way.

"Thank you Laetitia, I love you too." Elenore replied as she turned out the lights.

In the dark, Laetitia stared at the ceiling and at Elenore in the mindscape.

"Please remember that when the darkness comes..."

"Oh, that reminds me, I've wanted to ask about something too Madlax! I mean, I just never understood... who is this Limelda person exactly? How did you meet her? And why was she trying to kill you back then? When we came back to Nafrece and you left with her I thought you two must have become friends. Does she know you're in Nafrece now?" Margaret asked rather innocently.

After the moment of light-heartedness between Vanessa and Elenore, Margaret asked an innocent question about Limelda. But the question provoked some serious thought within Madlax, even though Limelda lived with Madlax since the Era; she was still in many ways an enigma she cannot comprehend.

"Limelda, she knows I'm in Nafrece. I met her couple of times through my missions; I remember meeting her in a tall building. Who she is? Well she is someone I still do not truly understand." Madlax answered in a slightly perplexed manner "But she's an honest person, at least with herself anyway." Madlax sighed.

"She originally wanted to kill me but as we met we felt we wanted to toy with each other more. There were nights where she spoke to me, deep inside all she wanted was to defeat me, subdue me, and make me submit to her in open battle." Madlax spoke clutching her hands to her chest. "I feel Limelda is my friend but sometimes I'm not sure. Whether she hates or loves me; she will always be a scary person."

Vanessa's feelings about Limelda Jorg were mixed; part of her was angry that she shot her (granted she was aiming for Madlax, but still...) and the fact because she wouldn't leave Madlax alone that Madlax left with her instead of herself. But on the other hand she did help get Elenore to the hospital and

provided a copy of the data which proved her parents and her innocence. Plus she didn't come with Madlax to Nafrece so maybe she could cut Limelda some slack.

"Honestly Madlax I think you're far better off not being near her. Hopefully I can help you find a suitable job here in Nafrece." Vanessa said to Madlax. Elenore came back into the living room just when Vanessa had finished talking to Madlax.

"Is that the woman who shot you, Vanessa?" Elenore asked with some concern. Vanessa looked at Elenore, again her feelings were mixed. "Yes she was, but she also helped bring you to the hospital and for that I am grateful. I still have bitter feelings toward her though; I guess I haven't really forgiven her yet."

Elenore hugged Vanessa. "Promise me you won't let it eat at you..." Vanessa felt Elenore's emotional warmth via the Torc and she smiled and hugged her in return. "I promise. But seriously you're more your real self when you're out of uniform." "Are we going to start this again?" Elenore said with an eyebrow raised and her head tilted. Vanessa just shook her head with a smile and Elenore just let it go.

"Hmm... well, if Madlax and Vanessa were able to forgive her I think we should as well Elenore." Margaret suggested rather lightly. "I actually just want to put all those horrible things that happened behind and hope we can all just enjoy what we have now. As long as this Limelda person doesn't come back to torment Madlax and shoot anyone we'll be ok, right?" she concluded optimistically then she remembered she wanted to talk to Elenore.

"Elenore."

"Yes Miss Margaret?"

"Can we talk?" Margaret asked decidedly, yet in an extremely humbled tone. Elenore looked at her for a brief moment, before nodding and following her. They went back to the dining room and sat at the table in front of each other. Margaret made an effort to look Elenore in the eye as she started talking.

"I talked with Vanessa about this... as you must know... and we both agreed that I probably shouldn't have said what I said. I mean the part about you working for me. I'm really sorry I said that! Especially because...it's really not important to me! You've been living with me in this house for as long as I can remember, and this is as much your home as it is mine. You know I trust you, and rely on you, and even indulge a bit and allow myself to be spoiled. That has nothing to do with the fact you are my maid, but because, for a long time, you've been the only family I have ever known. You're very important to me and I love you very much, just not the way you would have wanted me to. And I don't think I can ever apologize enough, if you feel I don't appreciate you the way you deserve, but I want you to know that I do! I know this is awkward for the both of us, and I understand if you'd rather not keep working for me, especially after the hurtful things I said.

But I want you to know that even if that's the case, I'll feel the exact same way about you, and I would like you to stay here, with me and Laetitia, forever. I want you to know that you're irreplaceable and we'd be really sad if you ever left us. So Elenore, if you can forgive me at all, please stay! I just want things to be all right! What do you say?"

Tears welled up in her eyes as she smiled.

"I'm sorry for what I said as well. I would never do anything to intentionally hurt you. You mean so much to me and I would do anything if it would make you happy." The tears slowly rolled down her cheeks. "I remember the first time you said those three words, it had been years since you had spoken but only that one word. It was when my mother died and I was crying in a corner of my room when you walked

up and hugged me and said I love you. That day I felt truly loved. I understand and accept that you can't love me the way I wish, but to know that you love me is good enough for me.

As for working for you I'll repeat something I said to you...; waking you up in the morning, brushing your hair, making your breakfast and seeing you off to school, cleaning the house, doing the shopping and making your dinner. Those are all I need to be happy. Plus to be with you and Laetitia forever is my wish and I will always forgive you no matter what..."

Elenore took a deep breath. "With that being said, I do have some personal issues that do need to be addressed by a professional. I made a promise to a friend I would do it, that and make time for me as well and maybe find that "someone" to share my happiness and wish with." She tilted her head so the bottom of her right ear was showing. "And I have one more thing to say and I mean it the way you answered when I asked you...you are and always will be my family..."

She thought for a few seconds and then asked. "Miss Margaret, I do have one question; I know that Laetitia is your sister but is Madlax?"

"Hmm, that's complicated..." Margaret wondered for a while, feeling far more at ease now, after having cleared things up with Elenore, and having guarantees that there were no hard feelings between them. "I guess you could call it that way; it'd be the best way to describe it in normal terms. You know she's originally a part of me, but she's an entirely different person with an individuality of her own, just like Laetitia.

Since we all come from the same place and share this bond it's not too far off to say we're sisters." Margaret concluded in a pleased tone.

"Should we join Madlax and Vanessa at the living room?" Margaret suggested. Elenore wiped the tears from her eyes and they both went to the living room.

Madlax sat on the main couch with Vanessa, the two women wrapping their arm around each other's shoulder. Privately Madlax reflected on this pleasant day and the painful memories of war escaped her conscious mind.

But creeping beneath the surface, her subconscious mind was brooding. Brooding who might kill her and her friends, brooding where there was new work and brooding whether the jobs will be enough to support her existence. Margaret would've been happy to support Madlax for life, but the thought felt rather uncomfortable.

"Vanessa, thank you for helping me, do you really have jobs out there for me?" Madlax asked. "Yes, but I don't know how good the offer is. After my trip in South America, I heard there was someone who was looking for an agent". Vanessa handed Madlax the note with the phone numbers which Madlax held firmly. Madlax peered sadly onto the floor, looking rather numb. "Madlax, what is it?" Vanessa asked. "I can't stay here too long, I will bring only pain and suffering to my friends" Vanessa stroked Madlax's hair and said softly "No you won't and thank you for keeping my promise when I had failed." Madlax turned around and hugged Vanessa tightly. "I don't want to lose you again Vanessa." Madlax spoke softly into Vanessa's ear just as Elenore and Margaret returned.

"Well... hmm... you three can stay here talking for as long as you want, but I'm feeling really sleepy right now, so I think I'm heading to bed already...", she admitted in a silly tone that revealed her sleepiness. "Oh, I figure you're staying for the night, right Vanessa? We can settle you in!" Margaret added rather hastily.

"I'll help you get ready Miss Margaret." Elenore said cheerfully.

Margaret said good night to Madlax and Vanessa and went up to her room, followed by Elenore. Recently, she had been occasionally trying to assure Elenore that she could get ready to bed on her own, especially when she was trying to act mature in front of Laetitia. But right now she was too tired and sleepy to really care or think about it.

Elenore helped Margaret get undressed and into her nightgown. As Margaret got into bed Elenore stood by the door. "Is there anything I can do for you Miss before you go to sleep?" She asked with a warm smile.

She almost let it slip her mind, but Elenore's question reminded Margaret of one more thing she felt she wanted to tell Elenore before going to sleep "Elenore, could you come sit by my side for a little while?", she asked. Elenore just complied and sit by the side of Margaret's bed, facing her, keeping the same warm smile.

Margaret leaned over towards her and rested her head on Elenore, pulling her closer into a warm hug and just staying that way for a few seconds before saying anything. "You know, Elenore... I really like to see you like this. You haven't been quite yourself for these last few months and I kinda missed your old warm self. It's good to have you back. And I don't know if it's like Vanessa said, about the uniform or not, but I'd like you to stay this way, because I really want you to be happy." Margaret said, before slowly letting go of the hug and looking up at her with a sleepy smile. "Good night Elenore! I love you!" Margaret said at last, before leaning back to her pillow, looking forward to sleep.

Elenore smiled as she got up from the bed. "I love you too and good night Miss and pleasant dreams." She turned off the light as Margaret's head hit the pillow and then quietly exited the room.

Listening to Margaret's admission of her cluelessness to how her maid felt about her and how everyone else knew but her provided some the evening's entertainment. She was going to go when Elenore and Vanessa Rene entered the house. Chloe listened and watched intently even though she thought the conversations were so sugar coated she thought she would get cavities. She looked though the dossier on Madlax and smiled evilly...

Limelda Jorg sneezed; it took her awhile, but she managed to get transport to Nafrece. Limelda Jorg looked at the night sky, the city lights obscured the view plus it was a bit colder than she was used to. She went through customs with no problems (the hefty bribes helped) and retrieved her gear.

"Madlax, you can't run from me. You are Mine now and forever and I WILL find you!" She thought herself.

She didn't know where in Nafrece Madlax was or even if she was still in the country. But she did have one lead; the girl Margaret Burton. Maybe she would know where Madlax might be. All it took was where to find Margaret Burton and that shouldn't take very long. She walked out into the Nafrece night, thinking of Madlax...

Chapter 4. A Celtic woman that picks flowers

On the other side of the Atlantic in Mexico; Nadie and Ellis had been on move keeping one step ahead of the Coven. So far they managed to do so with few problems, but the lifestyle was starting to get to them both. They both wondered why the Coven took an interest in them again after so long. After the events in Wiñay Marka the Coven stopped their pursuit. Now after a year the Coven once again came after them though they came close to capturing them in the last town if it weren't for the unintentional interference of the local drug cartel. Nadie had been driving for nearly ten hours straight and it was beginning to show on her face.

Ellis noticed the look on her friend's face and wondered what she could do. Then she saw in the distance the outskirts of a small town. "Nadie there's a town ahead, let's stop and rest."

Nadie was going to argue but she knew that Ellis had a point and it would be only a matter of time before they got into an accident.

They drove into the town with Ellis looking for a place to safely park or at least keep the car from being easily spotted. They found a public parking lot and parked. Nadie wanted to rest but it was too dangerous to sleep in the car. They got out and went out to the main road.

We can stay here the night, if we can find some place." Nadie said looking over the cluster of buildings that made up the town.

As they walked towards the center of town, the pair passed an old woman selling trinkets on a blanket. Ellis stopped and looked as Nadie continued walking. The old woman was selling native crafts along with the odd piece of silver jewelry. One piece stood out from the rest; It looked like it wasn't made around here, the designs on the bracelet looked like knots intertwining with each other.

"May I look at it?" Ellis asked pointing at the bracelet. The old woman nodded and Ellis picked it up and looked at. She could feel something benign from it but nothing else.

"How much for this?" Ellis asked with a smile.

The old woman squinted at the bracelet and at Ellis. "Oh that thing, I've had that for years and I've never been able sell it. People say it's cursed or something."

"I don't think so, it's very pretty. I like to buy it." Ellis said digging in her pocket for money, but she could pull out was a few coins and she frowned.

The old woman reached out to Ellis' hand and felt the coins in her hand and then took them and smiled.

"This will do child, I'm glad somebody was willing to buy this. May it bring you good fortune child."

Ellis smiled and said "Thank you." She could hear Nadie calling out for her and she ran to her.

Ellis turned to look at the old woman, but she was gone...

When she had caught up to Nadie she noticed she had a tired smile on her face.

"I found a place. Hopefully we can rest awhile before "they" show up." Nadie said pointing down the street.

"I don't see why we can't ask Blueeyes for help?" Ellis asked as they walked down the street.

Nadie barely turned her toward Ellis and answered in a tired voice. "I rather not risk calling Blueeyes unless we really need to. For all we know she could be back working for them."

Ellis frowned but she realized that Nadie had a good point.

"What about Ricardo?"

Nadie sighed. "I really don't think he'll want to get involved. And then there's Lirio to consider, there's a chance they maybe after her as well."

"Oh" Ellis said dejectedly.

The pair walked for five minutes till they got to a small hotel. After checking in the pair went to the room. The room was small but they didn't care. After making sure the door was locked behind them Nadie collapsed on the bed and fell asleep. Ellis yawned and she laid next to Nadie and fell asleep.

Across the Atlantic in Nafrece Altena surveyed the vineyard as twilight fell over the landscape. The report she received brightened her mood. She knew the Ring of Morrigan was in Nafrece and now the Torc of Rhiannon was there as well. With two of the artifacts practically in her backyard and the Bracelet of Brigid soon to come if the law of attraction held true. She didn't want to use such obvious "pagan" artifacts but Enfant's obsessive search for them meant they were worth something and if it meant using them to keep them out of their hands, so be it. Besides the current courier of the Torc of Rhiannon headed straight to where Altena had predicted. Straight to the "key"...straight to the little seed she planted so long ago.

But there were a few snags; the first was Enfant's leader in Europe. He was proving to be a real thorn in her side. The only concrete information about she knew about him was his name; Douglas Rosenberg. But the man connected to that name supposedly died a year ago. There was a chance they were the same person. After all didn't she fake her own death...Altena grinned on that.

The best Altena could do was keep Enfant away from the Torc which lead to the second snag; her agents could force both the courier and "key" to go into hiding. This was easily solved. By having Chloe watching them she could keep track of their movements. Also she could have her agents back off enough to give the illusion of safety. Hopefully the "key" Margaret Burton would find the ring as well and then once the Bracelet showed itself she would collect all three along with their "keys".

Then there was the matter of the two rotten saplings. Eliminating them was turning out to be no small task and now they were in Nafrece produced a potential problem; The Justicars might take notice and take action. For now Altena and the Soldats would have to keep a low profile if they didn't want to alert them. Once she had the three the Le Grand Retour could begin at last. She wrote down orders and passed them to a nun.

While she slept Ellis found herself standing in a moonlit field all alone.

"Nadie!" Ellis cried out to no avail. For some reason she was running from hands that were trying to grab her. Ellis seemed to run forever trying desperately to get away from the grasping hands.

When all hope seemed lost she heard Nadie's voice. "Ellis...Run toward the light."

"Nadie?"

"Run toward the light."

Ellis saw two lights in the distance and she willed herself to run towards them.

As she drew closer the lights turned into bonfires. The closer she got to the bonfires the less the hands tried to grab her.

Ellis ran between the bonfires and suddenly she was in a hut.

The inside of the hut was quite large. In the middle was a fire pit with a warm fire burning brightly.

On the other side of the fire pit Ellis saw a woman sitting on a primitive chair. She tried moving closer but her legs turned leaden.

"Welcome." The woman across from her said in a British accent.

Ellis felt the woman's eyes penetrate her.

"Interesting, I can see why they are interested in you Plentyn y Blodau. Mankind has once again regained the knowledge once held by Math. So tell me Plentyn y Blodau, what do you desire?"

Ellis didn't understand what this woman was talking about. She panicky looked around for Nadie.

An image of Nadie appeared in the fire and Ellis reached out to touch the image but found that she could not move closer to the fire.

“Nadie!” Ellis cried out trying to reach the image. Then the image of her and Nadie traveling appeared. Ellis realized that it wasn’t really Nadie in the fire so she calmed down.

“I see, you wish to be with your friend and to travel free of your enemies. I can help with that.”

“You can?” Ellis asked a bit confused.

“Yes, but you must do a favor for me in return.”

“All I need you to do put on this.” An image of the bracelet appeared in the fire.

“Okay.” Ellis agreed as she reached into the fire not realizing that she could move. Just as she was about to touch the flames she woke up. She rubbed her eyes and looked around the room for Nadie.

“Oh good, you’re up. You should take a shower before we go.” Nadie said coming out of the bathroom.

“Yes sir.” Ellis said with a smile.

Ellis finished her shower and got dressed. Just before she left the bathroom she took the bracelet out her jacket pocket. She gazed at it in curiosity. She put it on and closed her eyes.

She opened one eye to peek but nothing happened and she relaxed.

“Come on hurry up.” She heard Nadie say from behind the door.

Ellis shrugged her shoulders and assumed the woman’s request was just a dream.

“Yes sir.” She said leaving the bathroom.

When they left the hotel the sun hadn’t risen yet. They slowly made their way to the car and just before they reached the parking lot Nadie stopped.

“Nadie?” Ellis asked before Nadie made the Shhh sign.

The lot was quiet, too quiet. Nadie tried to see into the darkness as much as she could. “Do you see anything Ellis?” Nadie asked in whisper knowing that Ellis could pick up on it.

“I can see a couple bodies on the ground, but other than that don’t see anything.”

Nadie pulled out her gun and the pair slowly made their way to car. Halfway there Ellis pulled Nadie out the way before she was shot.

Nadie began to notice the lot had gotten brighter. Then she looked in wonder at Ellis; Ellis was source of the light! Bullets raced toward them with deadly accuracy. Just before they got close Ellis held out her arms and spread her fingers. The light surrounded them both and bullets melted on contact with the light. Nadie noticed one of the bodies on the ground. It was a Caucasian man in a black suit. A broken pair of sunglasses and a revolver was nearby. Nadie’s attention was drawn away by Ellis.

“YOU WILL NOT HARM US! YOU WILL LEAVE US ALONE!!!” Ellis shouted as jets of flames shot from her fingertips and stuck from what she could see now were the ninjas from the Coven. As the jets struck them they were overwhelmed by the flames and were incinerated on the spot.

As the last ninja died the light dimmed and Ellis stared out her hands wondering.

“H...how did I do that?” Ellis said in shock looking at her hands.

Nadie surmised that since Ellis didn’t really know how powerful she was did it by instinct. She gently grabbed Ellis by the arm and said. “We have to get out of here before anyone else shows up. So let’s go” Ellis somewhat still meekly followed and got in the car and once they got out the parking lot sped away. A few minutes and miles later Ellis was still looking at her hands.

“You going to be okay?” Nadie asked worriedly.

“I guess it wasn’t a dream after all...” Ellis said dejectedly.

“What dream? What are you talking about?” Nadie asked with a bit of confusion.

Ellis told Nadie what she could of about the dream.

“Plentyn y Blodau? What does that mean? And what did she mean the knowledge held by Math?”

“I don’t know...I wish I knew...”

Third Moon Rising

“What about that bracelet?” Nadie asked now curious about the bracelet.

“Oh...” Ellis tried to take it off but she found it wouldn’t even come off. “It won’t come off.”

“Okay that tares it, once we get to a big city I’m going to call Blueeyes. She might know something.”

“Why a big city?”

“There’s less chance of the Coven trying to pull something blatant.”

“Do you think Blueeyes will help?”

“I hope so...I really do...” Nadie said as they drove on as the sun began to rise.

Chapter 5. Moonlight Tea Party Madlax style

As she closed the door behind her, she smiled. "Margaret's right, I haven't been myself lately but Vanessa has a good point. When I am out of uniform I'm free to truly be myself, perhaps I should ask Margaret for "time" for myself." She thought to herself. Then a small voice echoed in her mind. "What about your promise to Grandpa?"

Quietly to herself she answered. "Well, Miss Margaret is growing up and become more mature and less dependent on me. But then again there are those criminals and I can't protect her alone. I'm going to need help for all our sakes and I think I know who to ask."

She walked to the living room and up to Madlax. "Madlax, I don't know if Vanessa has explained the situation to you. Please, I would really like your help in protecting Miss Margaret. If need be, I can pay you out my own salary."

Vanessa looked at Elenore and then at Madlax and smiled. "That's good idea Elenore and I'm sure Margaret would agree as well. Well Madlax, your first day in Nafrece and already you have a job offer. What do you say?" Both Elenore and Vanessa looked at Madlax for an answer.

Madlax thought the offer was enticing but had her reservations. "Well, Madlax?" Vanessa asked. "I like to but are you sure? I didn't save either of you last time and barely saved Margaret from Friday Monday." said a little humbly.

"Why don't you try it for a little while? You can leave anytime you want." Vanessa offered.

"Okay, just a little bit" Madlax answered. "Great, you can start in the morning" Elenore answered.

The girls then waved goodnight and Madlax went to the bedroom. She lay on the bed in her nightgown, staring into the beam of moonlight out the window. She tried to sleep but she just couldn't, protecting Margaret was too urgent to hold till tomorrow morning. If Limelda showed up here there will be a gunfight, or worse there might be villains lurking in the shadows, perhaps even one grander than Friday Monday in Gazth-Sonika. Madlax put on her gear, clipped on her trusty SIG P210s and went out into the Burton garden from the window. "This is where I'll sleep tonight". Madlax told herself.

"I'll go prepare a room for you Vanessa. And thanks for what you've done." Elenore said relieved that at least Madlax was willing to help. "You're welcome Elenore, just remember your promise." Vanessa replied.

"I will." Elenore said as she led Vanessa to another guest room.

Chloe smiled. Tonight was very informative and entertaining. She watched Madlax go out of the window and into the garden. She was making it was making it easy for her. Lady Altena didn't say anything about her and since she's out of the house there's little chance she would be seen by Elenore, Margaret or the "Key".

She motioned to the trio of Soldats that were sent to relieve her and they stalked their way towards Madlax with weapons drawn.

On a nearby rooftop, Limelda watched the Burton home through a pair of binoculars, she too watched Madlax go out into the garden.

She smiled. "There you are Madlax. I told you, you'll never hide from me." She noticed movement heading towards Madlax. She spotted at least three men in black suits with guns drawn.

"Damn it must be Enfant. I won't allow it. If anyone is ever going to kill Madlax, it's going to be ME!" She pulled out her sniper rifle and peered through the scope. There she spotted the men and a purple haired boy (?)/girl (?) wearing a green cloak trailing behind them using the men as cover. She saw the one with the cloak pull out a pair of throwing knives and saw it was a girl.

Chloe smiled as she pulled out her knives. This was too easy, perhaps Madlax's reputation was overrated she thought to herself she threw the knives.

In an amazing feat of marksmanship Limelda shot the two knives in mid flight and both clanked to ground alerting Madlax to the danger and then she took aim at one the men and fired. She couldn't get a good shot at the purple haired girl as she was ducking for cover.

Damn Enfant! Chloe cursed to herself as of the men fell to what appeared to be a sniper. She had get out the line of fire and quick. Whoever it was they were a crack shot to be able to shoot her knives in mid flight.

Now she had tend to this and a now alert Madlax. And the night was so wonderful...

Madlax laid herself near a tree behind the bushes and roses sleeping though just half asleep but highly aware method of rest. She felt in the back of her mind people were stalking her looking at her like a piece of prey asking to be consumed. "It'll good to give them a false impression of I'm completely unaware" she thought and pretended to sleep. In that silence she can hear the pistols drawn and the sense Limelda was watching her through her scope. But that tranquility of certainty was broken when she felt these knives thrown at her.

Madlax was surprised she didn't sense this at all until know, "How could this be?" she gasped. She wanted to wait till the last moment to move but then that familiar sound.

The familiar sound of Limelda's PSG-1 rung into her ears, "it's gotta be her" she thought to herself.

Madlax saw the two daggers falling into the ground and there were a couple of people with guns hidden as she turned her head across. Madlax fired quickly taking down one of them and he flew into the oak tree. The rustling sound of the leaves gave away the position of the men and Madlax rushed into them. The black suited men were not much opposition and Madlax spectacularly shot both of them with her eyes closed as she spun in a twirl. But the purple haired girl who started bolting in a cloak was a different matter, she comfortably dodged her bullets and Limelda's and was running towards the dense scrubs to hide in the corner of the Burton complex.

Madlax followed in pursuit and the few extra pounds did make her a little sluggish but she still leapt into the scrubs.

Madlax fell onto Chloe and the two women gave each other rather astounded looks as their bodied huddled together facing each other side by side. But quickly the young girl looked rather cross as she saw the flicker of her blonde hair and chest in the moonlight. "So Enfant agent, now why are you suddenly so angry, do I remind you of someone?" Madlax asked.

Chloe didn't know what she was more angry about; The fact her attack was foiled and was forced to flee and then being crashed into by Madlax, Enfant sticking their nose in (via the sniper), or just the fact that Madlax did remind her of that damn Mireille and she that she called her an agent of Enfant. "I'm not one those losers." She spat out. She threw two more knives which Madlax easily dodged. "This is far from over Madlax." She said as she made a hasty retreat, she dreaded telling Lady Altena but she knew she would forgive her considering Enfant got in the way and greatly underestimated Madlax.

Meanwhile inside the house Elenore and Vanessa heard gunfire. "Miss Margaret! I have to check if she's all right!" Elenore said worriedly.

Both women ran to Margaret's room and burst in only to see Margaret still apparently asleep. Both of them breathed a sigh of relief. "Elenore see if Madlax needs help, I'll stay here with Margaret." Vanessa said to the relieved but still concerned Elenore.

"I'll have to go get my body armor and taser first." Elenore said and Vanessa nodded and Elenore headed to her room leaving Vanessa alone with Margaret.

Vanessa's eyes glowed and she unbuttoned the top buttons on her blouse and removed the previously irremovable Torc from her neck and placed it around Margaret's neck. Then she stepped back far enough from the bed and then collapsed into unconsciousness.

Elenore ran to her room, threw off her dress and put on her body armor and uniform and grabbed her taser and ran towards the garden. She looked out onto the garden and yelled for Madlax. She gasped as she saw at first the two knives on the ground and then the corpses of three men. "I hope she's all right?" She said to herself as she saw movement in the bushes.

Madlax saw an infuriated Chloe flee with considerable disgust. The cloaked girl certainly left an impression on her. "She is certainly part of this unknown organization. They must very powerful to have people like her." She thought. Madlax wanted to chase Chloe but her client came first, the feeling of failing Eric Gillian resonating in her psyche. As she was standing up, a shot whizzed past her. Madlax decided to tease Limelda again prancing around and evading another couple of PSG-1 shots which hit a small Helianthus patch near the back garden. Limelda came into the dim light with her pistols drawn. "Oh Madlax, still so confident you are a bigger and plumper target these days you know". Limelda said quite cheekily.

"Quiet down Limelda, people are sleeping" Madlax whispered. "How about some hand to hand combat then" Limelda asked.

Madlax dropped her pistols without hesitation but as soon as Limelda sensed the gun leaving her hand, she drew a pistol from a hidden holster. "You are mine Madlax, I will kill you". Madlax put her hands in the air and said "You got me Limelda." with her head tilted downward. Limelda smiled with a big smirk but during that small gap in concentration, Madlax slid to the ground and kicked her pistol into Limelda. The pistol hits her arm and Madlax charged, trying to take advantage of the confusion. Although surprised, Limelda pulled a wicked roundhouse which Madlax easily evades and fires her Beretta but the bullet just scrapes the blonde's silky hair. Madlax flawlessly somersaults behind her and braces Limelda's neck with her arm strongly causing her to drop her pistol. "Tsk, Tsk, Sneaky Limelda, sneaky" Madlax whispers in her ear.

"Well what now, Madlax?" Limelda asked. "Let's go inside and have something to eat." Madlax replies. Limelda was rather surprised "They wouldn't mind?" "Only if you are on your best behavior!" Madlax smiles chirpily.

Limelda reluctantly agreed and walked slowly to the main door with her with the moonlight dimly illuminating their path. "What a girl" Limelda thought to herself. "What a girl"

Elenore ran out to the garden, taser in hand. She spotted Madlax with some purple haired woman next to her walking towards her. She ran towards them enough to get in firing range of her taser.

"Is that the maid?" Limelda asked noticing Elenore running towards them.

"Elenore, yeah that's her. She doesn't look too happy. Let me talk to her, okay." Madlax replied.

"Fine." Limelda said stopping herself from reaching for her pistol.

Elenore ran and pointed the taser at Limelda. "Madlax are you all right and who this with you?"

"I'm fine Elenore, we had some visitors but I don't think they were with Enfant. Limelda and I took care of them." Madlax said trying to reassure Elenore.

Limelda smiled looking at the taser Elenore was pointing at her. "Didn't know Heckler and Koch made tasers. By the way you're looking better than the last time I saw you."

Elenore looked a bit confused. "Do I know you?"

"I'm the one who helped Madlax and your employer bring you to the hospital. I'm Limelda Jorg."

"Well I guess I owe you thanks. But wait aren't you the one who shot Vanessa?"

Limelda looked at Elenore calmly. "You're welcome and yes I shot Vanessa Rene, but she wasn't who I was aiming for." Before Elenore could speak Madlax put her hand on Elenore's taser and lowered it. "Let's get inside before anyone else shows up. Oh, Elenore could you please make us some tea and something to eat." Madlax said smiling.

Elenore was a bit flabbergasted at first, but recovered. "Sure. We have some Earl Gray at the moment, will that do?"

"Sure that will be fine." Madlax replied smiling as the trio went into the house and Madlax and Limelda made themselves comfortable in the living room. "I have to go check on Laetitia and Miss Margaret. Then I will return to make tea." Elenore said politely as she left the pair.

Elenore opened the door to Laetitia's room and looked inside. There she saw Laetitia sitting up rubbing her eyes. "What's going on Elenore? I heard gunshots" Laetitia asked groggily.

Elenore breathed a sigh of relief.

"Everything's all right, just stay here and go back to sleep. Okay?" Elenore replied reassuringly.

Laetitia nodded and lay back down and as Elenore left she smiled. "The doors are beginning to open and some will find their door of truth..." She said to herself as could hear Elenore run towards Margaret's room.

As Elenore opened the door to Margaret's room she saw that Vanessa was sprawled on the floor unconscious. She rushed to Vanessa's side. "Vanessa!

Wake up Vanessa! Please be all right!" She loudly said with her eyes tearing as it this reminded her of that terrible day she found Vanessa laying on the ground dead. She didn't notice that Torc was gone or that Margaret was stirring.

Margaret's sleep was suddenly interrupted by the noise of Elenore's voice nearby, as she called Vanessa's name in a loud panicked tone. She opened her eyes and got up on her bed quickly, as if awakening from a nightmare.

She felt this intense emotion of fear taking over, and it didn't take her long to realize why, as she looked to the side and saw Vanessa lying on the floor unconscious, as a worried Elenore attended to her. What she didn't realize right away was the Torc now around her neck, as its power grew stronger, bonding to its true bearer.

"What happened, Elenore?" Margaret asked worried as she approached them hurriedly, "What happened to Vanessa?"

"I don't know Miss. I came back here to check on you two after I checked on Laetitia and I found her on the floor." Elenore said teary eyed.

"Please Vanessa, get up!" Elenore said loudly and Vanessa began to stir.

Vanessa groaned for a little bit and sat up quickly with tears in her eyes.

"They're dead. They were murdered and thrown in a nameless grave. For nothing..." Vanessa said her hands covering her face. Elenore hugged Vanessa and asked worriedly.

"Vanessa, what happened?"

"I was standing here looking at Margaret, when I received these visions of my parents being taken away and then executed and thrown into a pit and that was the last thing I remember before waking up and talking to you."

Vanessa felt around her neck and looked at Elenore in horror. "The Torc! It's gone!"

Elenore noticed that the Torc had disappeared from Vanessa's neck.

"Where could've it gone?" Elenore asked.

The response shocked both Elenore and Vanessa as they heard Margaret's voice but it had an older and with a slight Welsh accent.

"Fear not. The Torc is now on its destined bearer. Thank you Vanessa Rene for bringing me here, though you had no conscious thought of doing so and as a reward, sad and tragic as it may be you were shown the truth about the fate of your parents. I wish I could've granted you something better, but that was the strongest desire in your mind. I hope you find peace..."

With that Margaret blinked and her voice returned to normal.

"Hmm... did I just say something? I can't remember..." Margaret said out loud to herself, confused, but as she noticed Vanessa and Elenore her attention was brought back to the urgency of the situation at hand "What happened Vanessa? Are you all right? I just woke up with the noise and there seems to be some sort of commotion going on... What happened?" she asked both of them, wondering why they were looking at her with such surprised expressions.

"The Torc, it's around Miss Margaret's neck! Why did it choose her? Can we get it off? Why did Miss Margaret's voice sound different just then?"

Elenore asked with equal parts shock, worry and the feeling that any sense of normalcy just went out the window and down the street and heading to the local dive for a few pints and hit on seedy men.

"I don't know but I do know it won't come off unless it wants to. Why it chose her, I don't know either. As for her voice that I do know, it was the spirit of the Torc talking through Margaret. I wish I could give you better answers." Vanessa said wiping the tears from her eyes. "I'm sorry I've dragged you all into this." Vanessa said apologetically.

"What? What are you talking about?" Margaret asked in surprise and fear as she brought her hand to her neck and touched the Torc, trying to remove it immediately. "What is this thing and where did it come from?"

I didn't have it before! What do you mean it choose me? She questioned anxiously as she kept trying to remove it with no success, which only made her increasingly more nervous about it.

"It's okay. The spirit or whatever it is said you didn't do on purpose. It wanted you to come here. But I still would like to know why it chose her, but I get the feeling we're not going to get that answer soon. And besides there was a gunfight outside, but I couldn't see anyone out there." Elenore replied a bit worried if she should mention Limelda.

"Did you mention a gunfight outside? Is Madlax all right?" she asked worried about Madlax.

"Hopefully Madlax took care of it, I would ask you to go back out there but I don't what would happen next if you left." Vanessa sadly spoke.

"She's in the living room at the moment with an unusual guest." Elenore said in a ironic tone.

"Oh, who is it Elenore?" Margaret asked briefly forgetting about the Torc.

Elenore glanced at Vanessa before answering. "A Miss Limelda Jorg is here to see Madlax Miss."

Vanessa sighed and suppressed the urge to swear. Then she sighed again and came to the conclusion that reality decided to skip out and join normalcy at the pub and hit on the same men normalcy was hitting on just to be a total bitch. "Let me explain about the Torc then we'll deal with Limelda." Vanessa said somewhat dejectedly.

"Elenore, would you go and make some tea please." Margaret asked.

"Yes Miss." Elenore replied and left the room but not before she glanced at the pair sympathically.

Vanessa then explained what she knew about the Torc to Margaret who listened intently.

The whole incident made Margaret completely forget about sleep, as unusual as that was for her. All this information about the Torc was too sudden and complicated for her. Adding to the fact she could not remove it from her neck, it made Margaret feel very uneasy. She sure wasn't expecting to get involved on anything of this magnitude ever again since the incident with the books that happened less

than a year ago. Most importantly, she wasn't interested in pursuing whatever purpose this Torc had for her, and would rather just get rid of it or give it to someone else. Not to mention she wasn't willing to sacrifice any of her friends again, because this time they might very well not come back. She decided to get dressed and went downstairs with Vanessa, quietly enough not to wake Laetitia up, to see what exactly was going on.

As they got to the living room they could see Madlax talking with someone. Vanessa seemed to recognize her immediately and she looked rather disturbed by her presence there. Only after a while did Margaret remember who she was. "Oh right, that scary Limelda person! I wonder what she's doing here..." Margaret mentioned to Vanessa, temporarily forgetting about the problematic Torc, as Limelda's presence at her house was an interesting enough occurrence.

She approached them easily and stretched her hand at Limelda, introducing herself. "Hi, I'm Margaret Burton. I've wanted to thank you, for helping Elenore before. I heard you are Madlax's friend! Welcome to my place! Hmm... About the rest... I know we all have done things we regret in the past, but it would be nice if we could all just put that behind us and get along, right?, she said politely with a smile.

Limelda took Margaret's hand and shook it. "I'm Limelda Jorg and your welcome. Thank you. You have a very nice place here and yes I am Madlax's friend." She said with smile glancing at Madlax and then at Vanessa. "That was an unfortunate incident and I don't want to cause a scene in your lovely home." She said at Margaret and indirectly to Vanessa who didn't look too happy to see her.

Vanessa was about to say something unpleasant, but she held her tongue given where she was and Margaret's indirect request. So she sat across from Limelda, both women staring and smiling politely at each other. Margaret sat next to Vanessa and waited for Elenore to come with tea.

The four of them sat in an awkward silence in that what seemed to Vanessa a agonizing long time till she heard Elenore's voice. "I thought I heard you come down Miss." Elenore said emerging from the kitchen with a tray with five cups and saucers, a large tea pot and the condiments and silverware. She placed the tray on the table began to serve tea, first to Margaret and then to the others. Then she poured herself a cup and sat down next to Margaret. She noticed the quiet tension in the air.

"Miss Jorg, earlier you said you were surprised that Heckler and Koch made tasers. How did you know it was made by that company?" Elenore asked hoping to break the tension. Limelda stopped staring at Vanessa to look at Elenore. "That's quite simple; it says it on the barrel. I also noticed it didn't have any wire extension. Is it wireless?"

"Yes, it's the newest wireless model; it can hold about six darts and can incapacitate a large person or animal for a few minutes." Elenore replied.

Limelda nodded. "Impressive, so what's the range?"

"About six meters accurately, but you need to be in three for the capacitor to release its charge."

Elenore said with a raised eyebrow.

"Still that's not bad." Limelda said still impressed.

Vanessa looked at Elenore and Limelda in some disbelief, with that had just happened these two were talking about a taser as if they were at a gun show.

"Ah, I suppose you know a lot about guns, don't you? Margaret asked Limelda curiously, between sipping her tea and getting startled at how hot it was "Oh, it's hot!", she noted out loud, half surprised and half embarrassed at this silly habit of always getting her tongue burnt when drinking freshly made tea. "Is that why you and Madlax get along so well, since you both seem to deal with guns a lot?" She asked casually while blowing at her tea trying to cool it down enough so she could drink it.

"Yes I do. Though I was surprised that a company that makes handguns; would start making tasers." Limelda replied.

"Be careful Miss it's still quite hot." Elenore chimed in after Margaret burnt her tongue on the tea and then turned to Limelda. "Well they started that product line last year to compete with Colt, Steyr, and Mashino. I found that their model was the best for my needs and the excellent service warranty is quite robust with free upgrades."

"That's unusual for that company to offer that, but if they're competing against those three you mentioned it's not surprising. May I take a closer look at it?" Limelda asked.

"Of course." Elenore removed the clip from the taser and handed it to Limelda who looked it over and weighed it in her hands and handing back to Elenore with Vanessa looking in utter shock.

"Thank you. Quite a hefty piece even for a taser. If it was a regular handgun the recoil probably snap your wrist every time you fired it." Limelda said.

"You're welcome. Would you like some more tea?" Elenore asked.

"Yes thank you. Do you have any more of those biscuits?" Limelda asked in return.

"Yes we do. I'll go get some more." Elenore replied noticing that Margaret had a quite few near her. Elenore got up and started to head to the kitchen taking the plate that held the biscuits with her.

"How can everyone be so calm? Next thing you know somebody would ask for the lights to be turned out so we can all drink tea in the moonlight or a white rabbit will show up." Vanessa asked somewhat in shock.

"A white rabbit? What are you talking about?" Madlax queried with a puzzled look on her face.

"I believe Miss Rene here was talking about Alice in Wonderland." Limelda replied looking at Vanessa with some amusement.

"Alice in where?" Madlax asked even more confused.

"Oooh, I like that story. I think Elenore read it to Laetitia last week or was it last night?" Margaret chimed in between taking bites from the pile of biscuits near her.

"Alice in Wonderland is a story about a girl who winds up in a strange place. One of the scenes in the story Alice finds herself in a "mad tea party" where the party goers' do and say crazy things." Vanessa explained so that Madlax could understand while looking right at Limelda. She inwardly smiled at the thought of stuffing Limelda into a teapot.

"So what brings you to Nafrece Miss Jorg?" Vanessa continued as she verbally dueled with Limelda as Elenore returned from the kitchen with a full plate of biscuits.

"Why to see Madlax of course. I figured you've would've been busy with the maid here since you two seemed to be very chummy in the hospital. Besides I think you two would make a very nice couple." Limelda answered politely.

Elenore blushed six shades of red and looked at Limelda and then to Vanessa who was speechless and blushing as well.

The gentle breeze from the window swept across Madlax's hair, all she really wanted to do was enjoy the moment. She felt serene, the biscuits fresh and none of the chatter really interested or bothered her. But the sensation was a little surreal too, having someone who shot and practically killed you have a quiet and civilized chat must be odd for Vanessa. Suddenly Vanessa sarcastically suggested turning off the lights, but it felt right for Madlax. "What a great idea, Vanessa, let's turn out the lights Elenore?" Madlax said totally air-heading out Alice in Wonderland.

"Yeah, I'd like that too." Margaret said softly. "We have large windows and no buildings around, so we can get a pretty clear view of the night sky if we open the curtains." She added. "Would you please do that Elenore?" Margaret tilted her head to the side and asked with a smile, before sipping her tea again "Ah, it's still hot!" she giggled to herself.

"Yes...Miss." Elenore stammered as she rose from the chair. She shut off the lights and then opened the curtains her face still blushing from Limelda's comment.

"Vanessa and me? A couple? The thought has crossed my mind a few times, but she's involved with Madlax and I already had my heart broken once tonight. But still..." She thought to herself as she opened the curtains and she stared at the moon, its light pouring into the room. She turned around, her eyes adjusting to the light.

She looked at Vanessa briefly and then spoke hoping no one noticed that she was still blushing. "There we go, does anyone need more tea?"

"Miss Jorg, do you have any place to stay the night?" Margaret asked innocently enough.

"No, I don't. I arrived in Nafrece just a few hours ago." Limelda politely replied.

"Oh, why don't you stay here for the night? I can have Elenore prepare a room for you." Margaret warmly offered.

Vanessa looked a little uncomfortable just as Elenore did, but thankfully the dim light hid her face. She knew that Margaret was being her usual kind self and meant no malice but it still made her uncomfortable knowing that Limelda was in the same house with Madlax and her.

"I guess I'm going have to confront them both..." She thought to herself. Thinking of faces; she noticed that Elenore's turned six shades of red before she turned out the lights. *"I'll ask her about that later..."* She thought and giggled to herself.

Limelda smiled in the moonlight. "Why thank you Miss Burton for your generous offer. I accept and I do apologize for coming at such a late hour." Limelda again replied politely, internally pleased that she would be near to Madlax.

"Yeah right..." Vanessa thought to herself.

"I'll go prepare a room Miss." Elenore said her face still slightly red but thankfully the lighting in room hid that.

The turning off the lights was a small gesture, but it gave Madlax a great sense of joy. She felt like an angel of moonlight with a similar innocence to the time she met Gwen McNicol. Rather ironic for a harbinger of death such as herself; but this young lady has many contradictions.

Madlax felt a slight stroking sensation on her leg beneath the table and she turned her head towards Vanessa. Vanessa smiled and sipped a part of her hot tea but that did not give a hint of who it was.

"How's the tea, Vanessa?" Madlax asked "Oh its fine Madlax" Vanessa replied in a slightly irritated tone turning her glance towards Limelda.

Madlax tried to smile and avoid the thought of Limelda. She looked at Margaret and regained the aura of innocence that emanated from Margaret.

"You're not burning your tongue anymore?" she asked "Uh, no" Margaret giggled. This eased tension a bit and after a little friendly banter, Margaret had asked Limelda politely about staying.

"Limelda certainly wouldn't refuse but which room will she ask for?" She thought. Luckily Limelda didn't ask for a room next to hers but she felt she had to talk to Vanessa and Elenore who were hiding a thin layer of discomfort about the whole situation.

Elenore went upstairs to prepare a room for Limelda. As she was preparing the room she heard footsteps in the hallway and went to investigate. She saw Vanessa walking towards the main bathroom. "Is there anything you need, Vanessa?" Elenore asked with some concern for her friend.

"No just need to use the bathroom, but thanks anyway Elenore." Vanessa replied as she went to the bathroom. Elenore went back to preparing the room while she was doing so do she thought to herself. *"Why did Margaret invite that woman to stay? She knows how Vanessa feels about her, but then again Margaret is Margaret. I don't think she meant any harm by doing so. But it's going to cause problems that I can be sure of."*

"I'm sorry; I've gotten you two into another of my messes."

Elenore's train of thought was interrupted by a voice behind her and turned and saw Vanessa standing in the doorway.

"It's not your fault. You came here to help me and I doubt that you knew what was going to happen." Elenore said trying to comfort Vanessa.

"It's been a very bizarre night and I have no idea what going to happen next." Vanessa wearily said.

"You're not just upset with Miss Jorg about the shooting are you?" Elenore asked raising an eyebrow.

"No, it's the fact she won't leave her alone and it doesn't help when Madlax bounces between us. I'm really afraid of having to place an ultimatum in front of her." Vanessa replied with some sadness in her voice.

"You really do love Madlax, don't you?" Elenore asked in a understanding tone trying to comfort Vanessa.

"Yes, but I wonder if she really loves me or does she love Limelda?" Vanessa asked out loud to no one in particular.

"Well from what I've seen, those two have a lot in common. But I can see why Madlax would be attracted to you." Elenore answered.

"You can, how?" Vanessa asked wondering what Elenore was getting at.

"You're an intelligent, beautiful and loving woman, who wouldn't be." Elenore said smiling with her head tilted to the right.

"Thank you Elenore." Vanessa said with a smile on her face.

"Oh by the way I saw the look on your face when Limelda said what she said. What were you thinking Elenore?" Vanessa said mischievously.

"Me?! Your face was just as red as mine." Elenore said somewhat defensively.

"Ah ha! You admitted it, now what naughty little thoughts you were thinking there Elenore?" Vanessa asked while gently poking Elenore in the ribs.

Elenore giggled as she tried to get away from Vanessa's finger. "All right I'll tell, just stop poking me."

Vanessa stopped poking Elenore and then Elenore deftly stepped back to the doorway and said with one eyebrow raised, her head tilted and with warm but mischievous smile; "Well, it would be very rude, to tell you what I was really thinking. But I did mean it when I said you're intelligent and beautiful and I do find you very attractive." Elenore looked down the hall. "I had better get back, before something else happens." With that Elenore scooted down the hall and back toward downstairs.

Vanessa stood there in shock for a few seconds and then said to herself with a smile on her face.

"Did she just say what I thought she said? Thank you Elenore, that was very kind of you." Then she went out and raced down the hall hoping to catch Elenore.

"Elenore..." Vanessa said in the hallway hoping to stop Elenore before she went downstairs.

Elenore stopped long enough for Vanessa to catch up. "Yes Vanessa?" Vanessa caught up with Elenore and gave her a warm hug. "That was very sweet what you said back there, thank you. But I didn't know you had feelings for me too."

Elenore tried to keep her face from blushing. "You're welcome. To be honest with you, I didn't know how you felt about me or knew my orientation so I kept it to myself."

Vanessa was about to answer when they both heard footsteps coming up the stairs.

Without Vanessa or Elenore momentarily around, Margaret suddenly felt rather uncomfortable around the two gunslingers' presence. Not like anything about Madlax made her feel uneasy, but Limelda had this very strong intimidating presence to her, scary even.

Also, with Limelda there and the others away she did feel like an outsider who could not understand these two women's world very well. She wasn't sure what to say at the moment, for she felt Limelda didn't want to be disturbed with casual talking and she'd just avoid what she didn't want to talk about.

It might also have been just her imagination but Margaret felt like they actually wanted to be alone for some reason. Conveniently, she was getting quite sleepy now, so she wished them both good night and excused herself, going upstairs to her room.

On her way up she noticed Vanessa and Elenore at the top of the stairs, talking about something she didn't hear clearly. They stopped talking and turned to her when they noticed her. "Oh, so this is where you two were!" Margaret said happily, already showing signs of her sleepiness. "I'm going to sleep now, so good night!" She told them both, closing her eyes as she gave them a smile and passing them into the direction of her room. "Oh, there's one thing... I needed to ask you Vanessa..." She turned back looking at the older woman. "I really hope that you're not upset that I asked Limelda to stay, are you? I just thought it'd be tough for anyone to sleep outside, and since we have enough rooms... Also, she is... Madlax's friend, I guess..." She hesitated. "Hmm... are you angry?" She asked nervously, lowering her head and looking rather apologetic.

Vanessa smiled and shook her head. "No Margaret, I'm not. I know you were just being kind hearted as usual. So don't worry, okay and good night Margaret." She hugged Margaret reassuringly and watched her she went to her room.

"Good night, Miss. Sleep well." Elenore said smiling glad that Margaret interrupted their conversation.

"Good night Elenore." Margaret replied getting even sleepier.

As Margaret went into her room and closed the room behind her, Vanessa turned to Elenore and said.

"Before we were interrupted, I was going to say you're my friend and I love you just the way you are.

Actually I'm quite flattered that you thought of me in that way. I truly do hope you do find someone who loves you for you and wants share your happiness with you." Vanessa looked down the stairs with some sadness and concern. "Now I have to do something about my happiness." She was about to go down the stairs when she could hear Limelda talking to Madlax.

Meanwhile downstairs Margaret had just left leaving the pair alone. Limelda turned to Madlax and said with some anger and sadness in her voice. "Why Madlax? Why must you be with that woman? You and I have so much more in common. What does she have that I don't? What do you see in her Madlax? Tell me, please!"

Madlax felt deeply torn and stretched by the question Limelda posed to her. It was a question she wished she could avoid, for she loved both women in her own way. She wanted to be loved by both but felt she will be loved by neither one. Madlax pulled her eyes out to the night sky, staring into the blue and red moon appearing from the mist and hoping to avoid this as long as possible. "Well, Madlax well?" Limelda asked impatiently. Madlax took a deep breath and blurted her soul "Yes our existences are far more alike, but I like her because she isn't like us Limelda! She has strong ideals, she isn't self-righteous like many Nafrecan people and she's tender and warm."

Limelda was feeling rather indignant and arose from her chair. "Well wasn't I warm, Madlax? The way I held you closely at night? No?" Limelda whispered as she stroked her hand softly on her back. "You can't live in her world can you? It's too different, isn't it?" Limelda asked in a rather rhetorical tone.

"I don't know, I don't know..." Madlax said melancholically. "I like you too Limelda. Please don't make me choose! Please don't make me choose!" Madlax said as she laid her sorrowful head onto the table as teardrops ran across her cheek.

Vanessa's face saddened as she heard the conversation. "Are you all right Vanessa?" Elenore quietly asked with concern. "I'll be fine, thanks Elenore." Vanessa replied.

"I have to go check outside and see how much damage has been done and see if I have to call the police." Elenore said knowing not to push the issue further.

Vanessa looked at Elenore with some concern. "Are you going to be okay out there?" She asked.

"I'll be fine, nothing's happened within the last hour or so. So I assume our "visitors" have left for the night." Elenore said reassuringly.

Vanessa nodded and they both went down the stairs and back to the tea party.

"Miss Jorg, your room is ready. I'll show you after I've checked outside." Elenore said to Limelda and then looking at all three said. "I would like to remind you all you are guests here, please refrain from any violence in here. There's been enough of it tonight. Now if you please excuse me." Elenore then went out to the garden.

Inwardly Vanessa smiled. "*Thanks Elenore...*" She thought to herself and when Elenore went outside she then turned towards Limelda and Madlax. She saw Madlax's head on the table and then turned to Limelda. "Was that really necessary? Why can't you leave her alone?" Vanessa snapped at Limelda.

"Because she's like me and she has no place in your world." Limelda snapped back. "How can you say that? Did you ever consider that she might want something different other than a life of violence?"

Vanessa asked angrily.

"It's what she's good at and you want to make her into something she's not. I understand her, how could you ever understand?" Limelda shot back.

"Please stop arguing, please..." Madlax softly interrupted Limelda and Vanessa. There was an eerie and concerned silence; both women understood this will have to be resolved later. "What is normal? What is normal for me?" She spoke to herself quietly. "Are you alright?" Vanessa asked with Limelda staring in a worried paralysis. "I'll be okay" Madlax said in a quiet but assuring voice, although the tears were still candidly visible and the tone distinctly sad. "I'll go to bed now, goodnight." Madlax spoke as she walked slowly with head drooped low towards her bedroom.

Elenore looked around the garden. She could hear the argument between Limelda and Vanessa. "I hope Vanessa and Madlax are going to be all right." Elenore said to herself as she looked but she could find no sign of the battle other than minor scratches.

"Hmmp... Well at least our "visitors" know how to clean up after themselves." Elenore said to herself as she looked back at the house. If Elenore knew what would happen in the next days, she wouldn't have been so casual with her comment. Then again hindsight was a bigger bitch than normalcy or reality could ever be. It was a total bastard...

Elenore came back into the house. The arguing had stopped and she saw Madlax go upstairs. She waited till Madlax had gone into her room before showing Limelda her room.

"Please Miss Jorg. If you are ready I can show you to your room now." Elenore said politely. Limelda nodded and followed Elenore to her room. After she showed Limelda her room; Elenore then came back down and started clearing the table. She noticed Vanessa sitting at the table with a very sad look on her face.

"Vanessa, are you all right?" Elenore asked with great concern.

"I'll be fine, I just need to sit here for a bit and think. Thank you again Elenore." Vanessa replied.

Elenore looked at Vanessa with concern. "Maybe you should get some sleep. I'm going to be here a while cleaning up."

"You're welcome, but isn't that what friends do for each other?" Elenore answered in return.

Vanessa smiled a little and said. "Yes...Yes they do..." With that Elenore continued to clean up.

After a nearly a half hour later Elenore had finished she saw Vanessa still sitting there thinking.

"I'm done now. Are you ready to go to bed?" Elenore asked Vanessa snapping her out her reflection.

"Oh. So soon... sure...okay." Vanessa said and with that Elenore showed her to her room.

"Now you get some sleep. I'm sure things will work themselves out Vanessa." Elenore warmly said before Vanessa went into her room and Vanessa smiled and gave Elenore a warm hug and said. "Good night Elenore and thanks again."

"You're welcome and good night Vanessa." Elenore said as Vanessa closed the door and Elenore went to her own room.

When she got inside she looked at the picture of her grandfather and said with some melancholy;" Well grandpa, I've gotten myself into another mess and I don't know how to fix it. What would've you've done in this situation?" After a few minutes staring at the picture, she got undressed and got ready for bed and went to sleep wondering what the next day would bring.

Chapter 6. A perchance to dream

In a quiet hotel room Kirika quietly sat on the bed watching the news on the television.

“Earlier today the sentencing of former C.E.O of Bookwald’s Gazth-Sonika division began. His full role in the Gazth-Sonika civil war is still under investigation...” A stolid anchorman with a plastic smile said before Kirika turned off the television.

“They’ll never find the whole truth...” Kirika said to herself.

“But that won’t stop some fool from trying...” Mireille said with a touch of melancholy emerging from the bathroom.

“They’ll end up dead...”

“Enfant’s legacy isn’t our problem...Now let’s get some sleep, long day tomorrow.”

“What about the Soldats?” Kirika asked.

“We’ll leave before dawn and take the train.”

Kirika nodded and placed the remote on the nightstand and got into bed.

Mireille got into bed soon after and turned out the light.

“Night Kirika.”

“Good Night Mireille.”

The pair was soon asleep.

Later that night at Burton Manor, Margaret tossed and turned briefly then she stopped moving.

Margaret found herself in the dining room with the smell of pasta and sauce cooking wafting through the air. She smiled when she smelt the cooking.

“Am I dreaming?” She asked her.

“Oh, I assure you are Margaret Burton.” A voice answered similar to hers, but with a Welsh accent.

“Where are you? I can’t see you.” Margaret cried out.

“Oh, sorry about that.” To Margaret’s surprise, sitting at opposite end of the table was her or at least that’s what she thought, except she was wearing a ruby red dress and motioning her to sit. Margaret sat in the chair opposite of her.

“Who are you? Are you me?” Margaret asked still a bit befuddled.

“I thought that was explained earlier. But I see another introduction is in order. I am Queen Rhiannon or at least part of me that’s being channeled through the Torc.”

“Then why do you look like me?” Margaret asked a little less confused.

Rhiannon thought for a few nanoseconds and then she smiled. “Now that’s for you to figure out.”

Margaret frowned and then replied. “Why me? Why choose me?”

“That I can answer; in your case it’s because of the “Gift”. That drew me to you, granted I had to use your friend Vanessa to get to you. Anything else you’ll just have to figure out.” Rhiannon replied with a warm smile.

“Can I ask for help?” Margaret asked a bit daunted.

“Of course, you can ask your family and friends for help. But ultimately it will be up to you to figure out why.” Rhiannon said reassuringly and a plate of pasta with red sauce appeared before Margaret.

“Rest well Margaret Burton...” Rhiannon said before leaving Margaret to the pasta.

The Torc glowed slightly as Rhiannon stretched out her conscious. She could see the psychic residue all over the house both good and evil. She grinned as she saw Laetitia psychically talking to Poupee. She was going to observe the Alice in Wonderland themed dream that Vanessa was having when she noticed the chain coming from Laetitia. Apparently Laetitia didn’t notice it nor did Poupee. Following to where the chain led, she saw Elenore running through a jungle then on her laying on a morgue slab being dissected or eviscerated in case. Rhiannon was going to intervene but she was delayed by a tug on her

dress. She turned to see a slightly chubby little girl no older than seven or eight years old smiling at her and she smiled back.

Rhiannon bent down to eye level to the child. "Well, you saved me a bit of time little one."

"Really?" The little girl replied a bit surprised.

"Yes really." Rhiannon replied but before she could say more Elenore woke in a cold sweat.

"Why is she so sad? Did I make her sad?" The little girl asked as Elenore got of bed.

"No little one. You didn't, there are other reasons she is sad."

"Did the other people make her sad?" The little girl asked.

"No. She can't see people like us."

"Oh." The little girl replied in surprise.

"Do you want to come with me?" Rhiannon asked and the little girl smiled feeling safe around her.

"Let's go then..." As Rhiannon held out her hand and the little girl placed hers in it. Then the pair left Elenore to herself oblivious to the conversation that just happened right next to her.

Elenore woke in a cold sweat. She tried to close her eyes and go back to sleep but found that she couldn't. So she got of bed and pulled a set of keys from her apron pocket.

Then she went out of the room and down the hall.

A minute later she was in the kitchen. She turned on a small light near the stove and grabbed the timer sitting nearby. Setting the timer she placed on the table and went to the liquor cabinet. Unlocking it, she scanned for a glass and a bottle of Irish whiskey. Sitting down with the glass and bottle, she stared at the empty glass. Feelings of helplessness filled her as she silently wished she didn't have to do this but this was the only thing she knew that made the nightmares go away. The events of earlier this evening didn't help as she poured filling the glass. Then raising it, she stared at it and then she took a drink...

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 Infant 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.

Duvet looked up to see Elenore running towards her.

"Elenore..." Duvet 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 Nakhli 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 Nakhli 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 your 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, beside's 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...”

Chapter 13. When it rains...

Elenore had finished getting dressed after being examined. Waiting for the doctor to make a decision seemed to take an eternity. Her mother was resting her eyes in the chair where she sat talking with her most of the night. Granted neither of them got much sleep but they did get a lot off their mutual chests. Though the nightmares still bothered her she was glad that she could talk about them without hiding. Meg opened her eyes as the doctor came in...

Across town in a hotel near the university Kirika was in the bathroom cleaning herself up. Mireille turned on the TV and flipped on the local news. If the Soldats and Enfant made any overt moves on each other it would be on the news. Granted it wouldn't be spun as that, more likely stores like suspicious fires, and gang violence and unsolved murders. Not the shadow war that was playing out on their streets. Anything to cover up the ugly truth and last night was no exception; while they slept a university student was murdered, a shoot out at a nightclub, a rash of break-ins at local businesses occurred. That and a story of cat that dialed nine one-one to save its owner. "Finally..." Mireille grumbled as Kirika came out and she rushed in...

Nadie looked out from the window to view the city. The view was nice and in the distance she could see Nafrece's copy of the Eifel Tower with the sunrise. Granted they were up to their eyeballs in another problem laden journey but the oldness of the city itself...no this whole continent beckoned her to explore it... Nadie turned to see Ellis waking up and Blueeyes was still in bed. Though Nadie had a nagging feeling but she couldn't guess how much trouble this "magic bracelet" would get them in...

Margaret woke up by herself and unusually early. She couldn't really sleep anyway not after what happened yesterday. She tried pulled the covers over her but that didn't work. Laying there Margaret came to the realization that in one day her universe had changed and she would have to change as well. In one day she learned that some things were best left alone, she learned how unfaithful her father was though she didn't know the full scope, and she learned that even love ones have limits. But on the bright side though she lost a maid she gained a sister. She liked that but she didn't want to get into a fight with Elenore but she knew an understandable confrontation was inevitable. She threw off the covers, got out the bed just as Vanessa came in...

Sitting at an outdoor café Carrossea watched the sun rise. Last night hadn't been the greatest. After he left the hospital following his "confrontation" with Elenore he went to Wangdoodles. All he wanted was some pleasant female company and perhaps get a little information. Neither of those things happened; instead he had to deal with an irate purple haired Soldat and a few of her compatriots. This led to a very messy firefight in the parking lot. He managed to escape but no sooner he thought he was safe; a psychotic little girl with an oversized hatchet (or was a billhook, he wasn't too sure on that) attacked him. Again he managed to escape but the kid was damn persistent until someone else distracted her. He was glad he wasn't that poor slob that she attacked. It took awhile but he managed to get the details from Poupee. From what he told him, he could understand why Elenore was mad and a part of him actually felt sorry for her. He would have to have another talk with Elenore, but he felt there was no need to rush in...

The doctor gave Elenore a clean bill of health but he did tell her to try to relax. Elenore received her discharge papers and soon she left with her mother to her house.

When they arrived they quickly went in.

"I'll get the letter and the restraining order then I'll make some breakfast for us. Sound good sweetie?"

"Sure. Can I please take a shower before we eat?" Elenore asked feeling a little grimy.

"Of course, when you get out, I'll have breakfast ready. Towels are on the rack in the bathroom."

"Thanks." Elenore replied with a smile and Meg showed her to the bathroom.

Twenty minutes later Elenore came out of the bathroom. She could smell sausage as she went to towards the smell. Elenore could hear the sounds of cooking

"I'm still working on the scrambled eggs; they'll be done in a couple minutes. The letter and the orders are on the table." Meg said from the kitchen.

Elenore saw the papers on the table and she went and picked up the letter and read it.

August 5th 2001

Dear Meg

As you well know the Mistress' plane had crashed in Gazth-Sonika two years ago. As soon as the Master found out he sent search parties to look for the plane. It had taken the Master's parties to almost that to find the Mistress. Yes, I'm sure you have heard reports that no one else other than Margaret had returned. But the Master did find the Mistress living with a tribe of natives hiding from the civil war there. At this moment the Mistress is convalescing in a private clinic in Switzerland and may return soon while the Master returns to Gazth-Sonika to supervise our forces there. I am telling you all this, because the Mistress had found out about me sneaking Elenore to see you behind their backs. The Mistress has forbid any further contact with you and I hope I don't have to remind you why.

I know this must be disheartening to you, but I will give Elenore your love and try to give her an explanation.

Signed

John Baker

Elenore stared at the letter in disbelief. It was in her grandfather's writing alright but it was one lie after another and it seemed so cold. She guessed that her mother's defense of her uncle felt like a another betrayal and this letter was more or less telling her that he had washed his hands of her. Then she looked through the pile of restraining orders. They stretched nearly twenty years. Ten of them were filed by Anna Burton herself and then by a lawyer proxy after her death. She wanted to crumple them but she controlled herself. This would be another thing she would discuss with Margaret when she got home. She placed them on a nearby end table as her mother brought out breakfast.

Meg noticed the sad look on Elenore's face as began eating. "I'm sorry I should've shown those after breakfast."

"It's okay. Is it all right if I took a couple to show Margaret? Maybe she can have it cancelled."

"I can make copies of them to take with you."

"Thanks. I appreciate that." Elenore replied and they continued breakfast.

After breakfast Meg made copies of the restraining orders and handed them to Elenore along with a small compact and a tube of lipstick.

"Why did you give me these?" Elenore asked referring to the compact and lipstick.

"You may or may not wear makeup. But these could come in handy. Anyways I'll give you a ride home."

Elenore nodded then responded. "Wouldn't you get in trouble? The order says five hundred yards and I don't want you to get into trouble now that you've come back into my life. Just drop me off at the edge and I can walk home from there."

"Okay, then let's go sweetie." Meg said they went out...

Kirika turned off the TV as Mireille came out of the bathroom and began to dress.

"We're not packing up?" Kirika asked in usual quiet tone.

"Since the Soldats have the routes blocked it would be pointless."

"Any plans?"

"I've got my suspicions but some information wouldn't hurt."

"You're still thinking of Breffort?"

"At the moment he's the only one that we know in the Soldat leadership."

"With this many, you'll think Altena is after us."

Mireille stopped dressing and looked at Kirika in horror.

"If you meant that as joke it's not very funny."

"I didn't mean it as a joke."

"You should let go of ghosts of the past. Altena is dead and so is Chloe, nothing is going to change that. Right now our main concern should be staying alive." Mireille said crossly.

"Have you let go?"

Mireille briefly stared at Kirika.

"Of course, but you may have a point. It could be someone from Altena's faction that wasn't at the Manor that day."

"Revenge?"

"It could be but until we have more information we won't know for sure."

While she was talking with Mireille, Kirika grasped the ring. The tip of her pinky touched the inside of the ring.

For a moment the world flashed; she saw a medical file, Altena standing with her face bloodied, and Chloe walking away.

"Kirika..." A faint voice called to her.

"Kirika!" Mireille yelled and Kirika found herself back in the real world her pinky no longer touching the ring.

"Don't fall asleep on me."

"Oh sorry. You were saying?"

"I said we need more information." Mireille said with some sympathy. Their running around was starting to wear on them.

"So where are we going to get this information?"

"I have an idea, but it means we have to wander around the city for while."

Kirika's stomach grumbled loudly.

"I suppose we can't run around on an empty stomach."

Kirika nodded in agreement.

Mireille grabbed her handbag and they headed out...

"Morning Ellis." Nadie said as Ellis got out of bed and then gave huge yawn.

"Morning Nadie..." Ellis replied.

"Any more dreams or stuff like that?" Nadie asked.

"Nope."

"Well, isn't that great. It tells us to come here and then it falls asleep." Nadie said with some annoyance while looking at the bracelet.

Ellis shook her arm up and down a few times.

"What are you doing?" Nadie asked wondering what Ellis was doing.

"I'm trying to wake it up."

"I don't think it works like that."

"Oh..." Ellis said dejectedly.

They heard Blueeyes chuckling nearby.

"About time you got up." Nadie said.

"Ever think of sleeping in for once?" Blueeyes responded.

"Not without a good reason..." Nadie replied without sarcasm.

Jodie sighed deeply. "Still no response from the bracelet?"

"No and I tried to wake it up." Ellis answered.

"I noticed..." Jodie said with a grin as she rose.

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

"Until the bracelet reacts again nothing much. You could explore the city, maybe it will react with something." Jodie answered.

"Well that's better than sitting around here. You up for some exploring Ellis?" Nadie chimed in glancing toward the window.

Ellis beamed. "Sure."

"I guess it's settled then. Let's get ready then." Nadie said.

"Yes sir." Ellis replied.

Ten minutes later both of them were ready. Jodie had ordered room service and the trio had breakfast then she gave them some spending money.

"Before you head out, just make sure you don't whip out your gun in public. People here don't like that." Jodie said as Nadie opened the door.

"Yeah Yeah I know. We'll be careful." Nadie said after Ellis had exited. Then she closed the door leaving Jodie alone.

Jodie lay back down on the bed and threw the covers over her head. At least she could sleep a little more without being interrupted or that was what she thought.

The phone rang for a little bit all the while Jodie wished it would stop.

She picked up the receiver. "Hello..."

The voice on the other end shocked her.

"Good Morning Miss Hayward..."

"Is this some kind of sick joke?"

"I assure you Miss Hayward this is no joke."

"But how?! I saw you get shot!"

"I believe the phrase "I got better" would suffice."

"So what do you want?"

"You'll have to come and find out won't you. Just be at Café Train D'abeille at twelve..." Then the line went dead. Jodie hung up the receiver with a huge frown. She was curious though.

"I didn't want to but it looks like I'm going out..."

"Oh I was about to wake you Margaret." Vanessa said as she came in and saw that Margaret had gotten up already.

"I couldn't sleep anyways." Margaret replied as she began to get ready.

"All right then I'll get Laetitia up then." Vanessa said as she turned to exit the room.

"Are you angry with me too?" Margaret asking trying ascertain Vanessa's mood.

Vanessa stopped. "No. Granted I'm not happy that you misused the Torc. But I do understand your intent. I'm more hurt than anything. I really thought Elenore could trust me to say what was really on her mind." Vanessa turned to Margaret. "Am I that much of a stranger to her?"

Margaret shook her head. "Nope. She doesn't want to burden the people she loves with her problems, but you already know that. But there is something...when she opened the door just a second before the flash I got a vision of a medical file. I don't how or why but I know it's a medical file and it's important."

"How long ago was she pregnant? She shows all the signs of a previous pregnancy but we can't find it in our records." Vanessa remembered the doctor saying. "If Elenore had a baby, it wasn't at that hospital. The record has to be somewhere...hmmm."

"Etou?" Margaret asked a bit confused.

"If that record still exists it has be stored somewhere either in a computer or as a hard copy. It's going to cost me another dinner but it's worth it." Vanessa said her mood improving.

"You're going ask your friend Mr. Badgis?"

"Yes I'm going to ask for his help on this and the Torc."

I really hate going behind her back but this has to stay between you and me for now. That means telling no one we don't know who else might be listening."

"Right." Margaret agreed. "Umm...Vanessa...? I hate to ask..."

"It's okay Margaret. I figured with Elenore in the hospital I'll help out. What do you need?"

"Could you make breakfast while I get Laetitia up for school?" Margaret asked a bit sheepishly.

"Well the best I can manage in that department is toast and cold cereal."

"Thanks Vanessa." Margaret said with a warm smile as they exited the room.

Margaret went into Laetitia's room and gently woke her up. Laetitia rubbed her eyes and got out of bed with little enthusiasm. She had a sad tired look on her face.

"Worried about Elenore?" Margaret asked and Laetitia gave a silent nod.

Margaret bent down to Laetitia and warmly hugged her. "She's okay and she'll be home later today. I'm sure Elenore has calmed down but she does want to have a talk to you."

"I don't know if she'll forgive me..." Laetitia said as Margaret helped her get dressed

"Don't be silly, of course she'll forgive you. We're family and she does love you..."

Laetitia gave a faint smile as Margaret helped her get ready for school.

After getting Laetitia ready Margaret headed to exit the room. Laetitia stood there with a look of dread on her face.

Margaret stopped and turned her head. "What's wrong?"

"I don't feel so good." Laetitia answered looking at Margaret.

"You're fine, if you're still worried about Elenore. She'll be more likely yelling at me than you if she yells at all. So let's get some breakfast, I hear Vanessa makes some mean toast." Margaret said trying to get Laetitia to smile.

Laetitia couldn't shake the feeling of dread as she went out...

Third Moon Rising

Carrossea read the paper as he drank his coffee. Apparently he wasn't the only one who was busy last night. A number of jewelry and antique stores along with one of the city museums were broken into. Though the authorities found it odd; that nothing was taken even though there were millions of Yurs worth jewelry and antiques for the taking.

"I guess they didn't find what they were looking for." Carrossea thought with a grin.

He scanned the paper till he found an article that reported a suspicious fire last night. Carrossea read the article and gave a muffled snicker when he read the address; that was an Enfant safe house.

"About time somebody burned that dump down."

He put down the paper and continued to drink his coffee.

"Even though watching Enfant and the Soldats play Punch and Judy is fun. Sooner or later either one or both of them are going to target Margaret. I guess I'm making that social call sooner than I thought."

Carrossea thought then he sighed. *"That will also mean my talk with Elenore will happen sooner than I thought."* He dreaded having an argument with Elenore in front of Margaret, especially if last night was any indication. Though he did smile when he remembered seeing her naked breasts; when she leaned too far to yell at him.

He motioned to the waiter and a few moments later he got up.

"I can't sit here all day, time to head out..." He quietly said to himself as headed in the direction of the Burton Manor.

Chapter 14. Blackened hands made by hate

Meg was driving Elenore to the edge of where the restraining order dictated. Ten blocks within that boundary Elenore asked Meg to pull over.

"What's wrong? We're not even close yet." Meg asked wondering if she did anything wrong.

"Nothing's wrong. I need to think of what I'm going to say to Margaret when I get home. I've got time before she goes to school. So I figured I walk the rest of the way. If you're worried, I don't think those thugs would try anything in broad daylight." Elenore said in a reassuring tone.

"I guess I can't convince you otherwise?"

"I'll be fine..."

"Can I at least be worried about you...?"

"Isn't that in the job description?" Elenore said with a grin as she reached for the door handle.

"Wait before you go. I know I should've asked this last night but I want to get your permission before I do anything."

Elenore stopped and looked in Meg's eyes. "Permission for what?"

"Remember you said you didn't remember if you even pregnant and that was where the hole in your memory was?"

Elenore was a bit confused at first but she figured what her mother was getting at.

"Yes, I did..."

"The hospital didn't have any record of it or at least that hospital."

"You want to see if there's any record at another hospital? Am I correct?"

"I know this seems like prying, but if you did have a child and that child is alive...this is my grandchild." Meg said in a fraught tone.

Elenore knew her mother had a good point and with her hands full with Margaret and the Torc she wouldn't have time to go looking. Besides she reasoned her mother might have access to sources of information and other resources that she didn't have and she wondered if there was a child at all.

"Now that you bring it up I'm curious as well. You have my permission to do what you need to do."

"Thank you sweetie. You have my home and cell numbers?"

"Yes mother. I'll talk to you later, I have to get going." Elenore said giving Meg a kiss on the cheek and opening the car door.

"You call me when you get home, okay?" Meg said giving Elenore a kiss on the cheek.

Elenore grinned. "Yes mother..." Elenore said as she got out of the car.

Meg watched Elenore walk down the street for a little bit and then she turned around and drove off.

Elenore walked for three blocks when she heard a sound she dreaded hearing; gunfire. What Elenore didn't know was that Enfant was attacking a Soldat safe house and they were winning. Elenore froze as the shooting got closer. The memory of that day came flooding in and her heart began beating rapidly. What snapped her out it was a stray bullet hitting a trash can. She turned and ran; the memories of Gazth-Sonika came more quickly as she began to panic.

"Oh God please not again...please..." She thought to herself as she began to blindly run not caring where she ran to as long it was away from the shooting.

Elenore ran through the jungle...

Her heart raced as she ran into the street and she froze as an oncoming truck as blaring its horn at her.

Elenore was standing at the edge of the cliff...

She could see the jungle canopy below...

She didn't notice that she was quickly pulled into an alley just before the truck hit her.

"Miss Baker..." A familiar voice seemed to call to her...

"Miss Baker..." The voice called to her again. Carrossea grabbed Elenore by her arms he knew that she was in some sort shock or experiencing a flashback.

She felt the wind rush around her...

Carrossea shook her trying to snap her out of it.

"Damn it Elenore snap...out of it!" Carrossea said he she slapped her face.

She felt the bullet enter her...

She felt herself falling...

Elenore looked around her surroundings rapidly and finding that she was not in danger she pressed her face against Carrossea and began to cry. Normally Elenore wouldn't cry in public never mind crying against Carrossea but this was different. She felt the sting of the slap on face, brushing it with her fingers. She would've been furious if he had done so for any other reason. Realizing that he; the person she had an intense dislike for saved her life. It wouldn't be proper not to show some gratitude, besides she wanted to ask him a couple of questions.

She backed away from slowly trying to wipe her eyes. Carrossea handed her his handkerchief which she took gracefully and wiped her eyes.

"Are you feeling better Miss Baker?" Carrossea asked in a non-confrontational tone.

"I'm all right Mr. Doone. Thank you..." Elenore handed him back the handkerchief which he put back into his pocket.

"I'm glad Miss Baker. I do apologize though."

"Its fine Mr. Doone, I would've done the same. Thank you for saving my life, I do appreciate it." Elenore said in a grateful tone wiping the remains of the tears.

Carrossea smiled. "I'm glad you weren't hurt. But we can't stay here for much longer. Enfant is retaliating against the Soldats and by the sounds of it, its spilled out into the street."

"How do you know this?" Elenore asked a bit skeptically.

"The Soldats set fire to an Enfant safe house last night so Enfant is returning the favor. Though I'm surprised that dump hadn't burned down before that. But anyways let me at least escort you back home. Anyways I need to speak to Margaret about..." Carrossea replied with a smirk.

"I have a good guess what that is as well so I will take your offer. There are a couple questions I would like to ask you."

"Ask me when we're far enough away from the shooting right now we have to move."

"But..." Elenore didn't finish as she was at first pulled and then she began to run following Carrossea. They ran though a few alleys and crossed a few streets but in the direction of Burton Manor.

As they ran up the alley Elenore swore she could hear footsteps.

"Mr. Doone do you hear something?" Elenore asked while still running her speech heavy from the running.

Carrossea thought it to be the echoes of their own footsteps but he didn't stay alive this long by assuming things so he drew his gun from his holster. Just in case of course.

As they continued to run the footsteps grew louder and from the east.

Just as they reached the intersection Elenore could see the street where Burton Manor was on but her attention was drawn to a blond haired woman trying to slow down before she crashed into Carrossea. As she entered the intersection she could see an Asian woman wearing a white windbreaker following her.

For a brief moment it seemed that time stood still and then time moved again as Carrossea and Mireille crashed into each other knocking the other backwards.

Both tried to keep their balance as they tumbled to the ground with their guns pointed at each other.

Kirika drew her pistol at first pointed at Carrossea then she saw Elenore and pointed the gun at her.

Elenore held her hands up. "Please don't shoot! We're just trying to get home." She said loudly hoping that it would at least get somebody to look out the window.

"*Could this day get any better?*" Mireille grumbled to herself as she kept her gun trained on Carrossea.

Kirika looked at Elenore's hands and saw that she wasn't someone who used a gun. What truly kept Kirika from shooting Elenore was something reminded her, was it her voice? Was it her eyes? But there was something... Kirika struggled to remember as a good deal of her past was still a mystery to her.

"Kirika what are you doing!?" Mireille asked still keeping her eyes on Carrossea wondering about Kirika's inaction.

"Do I know you? Have met before?" Kirika asked politely lowering her pistol somewhat.

"No I don't think so but to be honest; I can't remember if we ever did. You see I recently lost a chunk of my memory... Please we're just trying to get home and away from the shooting." Elenore pleaded.

The image of a slain paper boy they passed before they went into the alleys flashed in Kirika's mind.

Kirika lowered her pistol but she kept it out keeping one eye on the Mexican standoff in the middle of the intersection.

Carrossea kept his eye on Mireille, he wasn't worried about Elenore he knew if push came to shove she could take care of herself or at least that's what he hoped.

"Look, I gather you're trying to get away just as we are. So how about this; we all put down the guns, forget we saw each other and go our separate ways. What do you say?"

In the distance they all could hear sirens, from their respective perceptions they saw people looking out onto the alley. Mireille noticed the man hadn't said it too loudly but the woman with him had almost screamed her plea. "Looks like we have no choice unless you like explaining to the police." Mireille said sighing inwardly as she and Carrossea slowly rose and the pair slowly changed directions as both slowly put their guns to the side.

"Let's go!" Carrossea and Mireille said almost in unison.

"Could at least tell me your name please?" Kirika asked Elenore as she put the gun back into her pocket.

"I'm Elenore Baker and I assume your name is Kirika."

Kirika nodded acknowledgement as she tried to remember. "Something about you seems familiar. I too am trying to recover memories."

"I see." Elenore replied as she headed toward Carrossea still staring at her trying to remember if she had met her at all.

Kirika rejoined Mireille and the pair watched Carrossea and Elenore go down the alley before they continued on.

"Either one of them could've shot me or you, I want..." Mireille started.

Kirika turned her head and replied in an unusually angry tone. "Just like that paperboy!? They gunned him down for no reason!"

"What does that have to do with that couple?" Mireille asked a tad surprised at Kirika's tone.

"She was unarmed; I wasn't going to shoot an unarmed person just because they were trying get away!"

"It's that Elenore woman; you know her from somewhere don't you?"

Kirika calmed down. "Part of me knows I've seen her but I don't know where or when I did."

"We'll put that one on the back burner for now; we still have to gather information."

"That's right the Soldats..."

They walked toward a commercial area and all the while they felt someone was following them.

"Do you think it's the Soldats?" Kirika asked not even looking her shoulder.

"Not sure, but we'll have to make some detours and try to shake them."

At the same time; Carrossea and Elenore emerged onto the street leading to Burton Manor.

"Who were those women?" Elenore asked Carrossea wondering.

"Who ever they were one thing was clear; they're pro's. I'm sure if you didn't distract her partner she would've shot me."

Elenore looked up at Carrossea as they continued to walk. "That was weird, the thing is; I don't remember ever meeting her. Makes me wonder how much of my memory is missing."

"I actually can relate to that." Carrossea replied looking back at Elenore.

Elenore slightly quickened her pace and stepped in front of Carrossea, stopped, turned around with pleading look on her face. In a quiet and melancholy tone she asked;

"I apologize for the abrupt stop, but I need to ask. How do you deal with it?"

"Deal with what?" Carrossea asked aware what Elenore was asking.

"Please forgive me if this comes out bluntly. I'll understand if you don't want to answer. You've been dead and revived twice...so how do you deal with it? Do you have nightmares as well? Do you ever think of ending it?" Elenore asked in the same tone as before trying to hold back her tears.

Carrossea was floored...he knew that Elenore didn't like him (granted he gave her enough reasons to) and here she was baring her soul to him. He was tempted to give a snarky answer but he changed his mind he just didn't like seeing her like that and a part of him went out for her.

"I just try to live one day at a time. I know it's not much of an answer but it's the best I can give. To answer your other questions; yes, sometimes I get flashbacks and on a couple occasions I've wanted to end my life. So you see I do understand what you're going through. Do me one favor please..."

Elenore raised an eyebrow. "What would that be?"

"I would ask to promise me but given our usual relations...at least promise Margaret or Miss Rene."

"Promise them what?" Elenore asked a bit puzzled.

"That you won't hurt yourself." Carrossea said with genuine compassion.

Now it was Elenore's turn to be floored. He actually sounded concerned for her well being. She had to admit that his request was touching. Normally she would be skeptical of anything he said, but from what she gathered he was trying to bear his soul as well. Elenore smiled a bit. "Thank you Carrossea for answering my questions and I do appreciate your concern." Elenore said as she walked to the gate of Burton Manor.

Carrossea stopped a few feet from the gate.

"Didn't you want to see Margaret?" Elenore asked.

"I did, but I know she's going to ask about Limelda. And I know how it will most likely turn out; she asks, I tell her the truth, she gets upset, then you and or someone else gets upset, and I get either or get shot or beaten silly."

Elenore tilted her head a bit. She had to agree he had a point. But as she learned she couldn't shield Margaret from everything and as painful Carrossea's truth might be, she thought it would help Margaret in the long run. "I can't protect her from everything and as mean as this sounds I think the truth would actually do her some good. Besides she has to get ready for school and knowing Margaret she's still asleep."

"Bet you she's still mad at Margaret." Poupee chimed.

"Quiet you..." Carrossea responded.

"In that case, I'll stop by later. Anyways I do have some information about the artifacts that might help."

"Then I guess we'll be expecting you later then."

"Yes I suppose so. Have a good day Elenore." Carrossea said walking past the gate.

"You too and thanks again Carrossea." Elenore said as she headed towards the house.

"Wait, did she just call me by my first name?" Carrossea asked himself as he turned his head with a grin, watching Elenore go inside.

"Yes she did, twice actually. Come to think of it she didn't correct you when you said her name." Poupee answered.

"She's been through a lot as you well know." Carrossea replied.

Poupee giggled. "You actually like her."

"Quiet you..." Carrossea said wanting to drop the subject as quickly as possible.

As he walked down the street, he could faintly hear Poupee sing;

Carrossea and Elenore sitting in a tree.

K-I-S-S-ING.

Carrossea just sighed as he walked on.

Vanessa saw Elenore at the gate and she waited till she got in.

"I'm home." She heard Elenore say as she entered. Vanessa went to the front hall.

"Good Morning Elenore." Vanessa greeted glad that Elenore made it back safely.

"Good Morning Vanessa."

"I would've gone and picked you up from the hospital after I got Margaret and Laetitia off to school."

"It's okay, my mother dropped me off as far as she could then I ran into Mr. Doone who escorted me home. It seems those criminals are going at each other, though I would never think they would be so close to the manor."

"I saw the smoke and wondered what was going on. I'm glad you weren't caught up in that."

"Me too." Elenore fibbed.

"Have you had breakfast yet Vanessa? I'll make some after I wake Margaret."

"I was going wake up Margaret, but Margaret actually didn't get much sleep from looks of it. As for breakfast I was going to make cereal and toast but Madlax actually cooked some eggs and sausages."

"Then I have to get Laetitia up then."

"No, Margaret did that actually."

"They're probably waiting for me to drop the hammer so to speak. But right now I'm still tired. Spent most of the night talking to my mother."

"How did it go?"

"We got a lot off our chests. When the doctor cleared me we went to her home." Elenore pulled out the copy of the letter and restraining orders. "She showed me these." She handed them to Vanessa who looked them over. She was stunner at what she read.

"I gather you're going to show these to Margaret?" Vanessa said handing them back to Elenore.

"I will when she gets back from school. Right now I'm going to let Margaret know I'm home."

Elenore and Vanessa walked to the dining room. Margaret jumped up and started to go to Elenore but she stopped. "Elenore...I'm..." She started to say.

"We'll talk about this later." Elenore said without any harshness. Then she turned to Madlax and Limelda.

"Good Morning Madlax, Miss Jorg. Will you be accompanying Miss Margaret to school or will Miss Jorg? I need to ask so I can call campus security so they won't overreact." Elenore asked.

"Is that really necessary?" Margaret interjected, not really feeling up to that much escorting. "I mean, nothing dangerous really happened yesterday, and it's daytime now and the way to school is pretty calm but crowded enough to notice any disturbance. Besides... if I needed an escort to school so would Laetitia, don't you think?"

"Well, Laetitia doesn't have a powerful artifact around her neck and they're not interested in her it seems. We just want to keep them from grabbing you while you're at school Miss." Elenore said with grave concern.

"I have to agree with Elenore on this one Margaret. The artifact and you are too important to not put some extra security around." Vanessa added.

Madlax seemed quite keen on going to school because she never really experienced school life before. Limelda felt far less inclined, "*I don't want to spend more time protecting that spacey girl.*" she thought to herself.

"I will go with Margaret, besides it's my job." Madlax raised her hand enthusiastically.

"You certainly look young enough to be a student." Vanessa smiled.

"Thank you Vanessa." Madlax replied warmly.

"Oh well, if you both say so..." Margaret gave in, agreeing to the idea. "So are you going to classes with me as well, Madlax? I guess...that could be fun. But won't you be bored?" Margaret asked with amusement, trying to forget for a while that her situation was all but amusing.

"I won't get too bored; protecting you will be hard work." Madlax smiled. "Besides I'm not the one who has to pay attention." Madlax giggled.

"I'll call campus security. Madlax I'll help you find more suitable attire so you'll look more like a bodyguard and attract less attention as well. I almost forgot what name you want me to give to security? I think the name "Madlax" would raise a few eyebrows so an alternative name will have to do and I do apologize for the inconvenience." Elenore said relieved that Margaret agreed.

"I think I have something that she could wear." Vanessa added looking over Madlax.

"I'm not sure if I should like more like a bodyguard, maybe less like one. As for the name I could use Laetitia Lune, the same name as the passport" Madlax said.

"That's good, but if someone notices that you and Miss Margaret look related to each other how will you respond?" Elenore asked.

"How about cousin? No wait, how about distant cousin?" Vanessa asked.

"I like it." Margaret smiled and Madlax agreed.

"Okay that will work. I'll call them while you get ready." Elenore said cheerfully and she called up campus security and talked with them for a bit and then hung up.

"Okay, everything's all set. You'll just have to go to the campus security building with Margaret and they'll give you a security pass. That way they won't give you any problems." Elenore said confidently.

"Well, I guess we should get going then. See you all later and have a nice day everyone." Margaret said before leaving, with Madlax following.

A few minutes later Elenore escorted a sullen Laetitia to the bus stop. She noticed a police car nearby with the officer watching them.

Elenore looked at Laetitia who was very quiet. "I'm very disappointed in you. What you did hurt me more than you think. When you get home you and I are going to have a talk young lady."

Laetitia nodded as the bus came and she got on. Then Elenore went back to the house.

"Forgive me if I seem rude Vanessa, but would like to lay down for awhile. I'll make lunch afterword."

"I figured you would. I need to run an errand, if you want I can pick up groceries."

"Thanks Vanessa and I'm sorry."

"For what? I don't mind helping out. You get some rest and we'll talk over lunch. Deal?"

Elenore smiled. "Deal. Let me at least give you money for the groceries. Deal?"

Vanessa grinned. "Deal."

Elenore gave Vanessa money for the groceries and they gave each other a hug. Then Vanessa left leaving just Elenore and Limelda.

Limelda left Elenore alone as she went to her room. Once inside she sadly looked at the picture of her grandfather. She was about to turn it over but decided against it. Then she looked at the doll in the cradle and smiled. Finally she lay down on the bed and went to sleep...

After they shook off any other pursuers Kirika looked around at the hungry, early-bird crowd just starting to trickle in. "Okay," she said, and "seems crowded enough."

After Mireille and Kirika got their breakfasts and sat outside, Kirika studied the scene again. "Hmm," she wondered, "So the Soldats are after us and we don't know why, even though we had an understanding...I wonder what happened. Should we call Breffort first?"

"Do you have a secure connection to him that cannot be back traced?" Mireille sighed. "Back in Paris, I could've arranged for some hacker...wait a second." Suddenly, she looked agitated. "I know a guy. Never met him in person but I hear he's quite good, goes by the name of Badgis. He was somehow involved in the Gazth-Sonikan case but came out clean. We could try contacting him."

Kirika nodded. "Hmm...Badgis. Do you have his contact information?" Kirika sipped on her tea, and then she focused her attention on a nearby tree.

"Hmm...Why do I get the feeling somebody is watching us?" She thought to herself.

"I memorize such stuff by heart. All I need is a laptop and internet access..." Mireille noticed Kirika's eyes movement. She has long admitted to herself that in terms of reflexes and the sixth sense, Kirika was way superior to her, so when she noticed something, it was probably trouble...It was a strange feeling for a lone wolf like her but she felt...protected? "Relax, there's too much collateral damage to make here. And they like to play it subtle."

"You couldn't say same for *Enfant*." Kirika added which Mireille silently nodded.

Chloe smiled. "You know I'm here don't you, Kirika." She didn't understand why or know considering that they were at war with *Enfant* would they even bother with these two. Oh she had her reasons to be involved but there was too much going on to be concerned with them at the moment. But she couldn't help it; there she was just standing there. She imagined holding her in her arms and she smiled. "I'll just watch..."

After Mireille explained in detail about how they'd contact Badgis, and she and Kirika finished their breakfast, they left. Kirika told Mireille loudly, "So, we're going to a cyber cafe?", and then added, much softer, "The library." As they left, Kirika turned around and stared at that tree, certain someone was going to pop out at any minute. She caught up with Mireille and amended, "...the very long way." Chloe watched as they headed off. She wasn't under any orders to follow or do anything with them, this was personal. She noticed they were taking a long route to a cyber cafe as she followed from a distance. She chuckled to herself, they knew she was following them or at least Kirika did.

"Is someone tailing us?" The connection she shared with Kirika was not the wordless understanding like between twins yet but she could almost always feel when she was anxious or happy, as if it were her own emotions. She did now. "I'll try shaking him off, follow me."

The nearest internet cafe was just around the corner, actually. Dragging Kirika through a crowd of IT nerds talking in lingo and bad English, Mireille dashed through the room for the back exit. She was lucky; the back exit was at the end of a small corridor, not visible from the outside. Better yet, the bathrooms were located right there. An idea crossed her mind in a flash and she pushed Kirika inside men's restroom, quickly closing the door behind them.

"Try not to breathe in deeply," she whispered, pulling Kirika tightly to her and concealing them in an empty stall. "And count to sixty."

She noticed them go inside the cyber cafe. She waited a minute before going inside herself. As went inside she was assaulted by the noise of people talking in some language she didn't quite understand. She looked around the room and smiled figuring both of them would stick out like a pair of sore thumbs. She noticed the corridor and the nearby bathrooms; she went into the women's room and checked. She wanted to check the men's but there were IT nerds going in and out and she doubted that they went there without causing a commotion. "*Clever. Trying to shake me. Two can play this game...*" She thought to herself as she headed out of the exit and as the door closed behind her she waited.

"Let's go," Mireille pulled Kirika to the back exit, making sure they were not visible from the front. A male patron of the cafe looked at them in surprise but one cold look sufficed for him to swallow any questions. Examining the surroundings, Mireille exited to the alleyway behind the facility.

Kirika followed Mireille out the back exit of the noisy cafe. It hadn't been easy trying to pretend she and Mireille weren't there, in the men's bathroom. Even though she and Mireille pulled it off--Mireille had squatted on the toilet, using Kirika for support, and Kirika took off her shoes, just in case someone looked--she was certain some man would notice her small, feminine feet, get curious, and bust them. "*Well, Kirika supposed, "Maybe I could've passed as a twelve-year-old boy...but what about Mireille?"*

Kirika heard a *whoosh* behind her and turned around. Her mouth gaped open, and she looked like she'd seen a ghost when she saw who was behind them.

"M...Mireille...Mireille?!" Kirika asked in a strange voice, without looking back. Chloe smiled. "Hello Kirika...miss me?"

Without thinking, Mireille reached for her gun. Last time she saw this face, it heralded impressive acrobatics and she didn't see much reason for it to get any easier.

Chloe noticed Mireille going for her gun. This wasn't her day, first Madlax now Mireille. She kept calm and got into a stance in case Mireille decided start firing the gun instead of her mouth. "You miss me too, Mireille. How thoughtful..."

"You look pretty lively for a dead girl," Mireille retorted, keeping Chloe at the gunpoint and glancing anxiously at Kirika. She knew she was no match for her. "Did the guy downstairs grow bored with you?"

Chloe smiled mischievously. She knew she could easily beat Mireille but this was so much more entertaining and if she played her cards right she might even get them to go after Madlax. "The rumors of my demise are so greatly exaggerated. Not really, he was afraid I would take over." She loosened the photos underneath her cloak so could easily fall. She smirked at Mireille. "You remind me of that other blond I met, a lot prettier and a far better shot than you. Better be careful if she sees Kirika she just might steal her away." Chloe said goading Mireille.

"Like I give a damn," Mireille brushed off Chloe's words. Kirika and her were bound by much more than simple attraction. "Right now, I only care about you tailing us. Didn't we pay our dues to you people already? Why come after us now?"

She'd be surprised if Chloe actually answered that. But there was no crime in asking. Chloe pondered a few seconds and as she was to answer. She was interrupted by a child's singing followed by a hand clap after each line coming down the alley. It wasn't the singer that bothered her; it was WHAT the singer was singing.

*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.*

Mireille listened. Granted there was some difference but there was no mistaking it; it was from the Langonel manuscript but put into a child's rhyme.

The singer stopped both moving and singing a couple feet behind Chloe. She saw a short tween aged girl dressed in what appeared to be right out an illustration from Alice in Wonderland. The only differences were she had brown eyes and hair and spoke with a Nafrecean accent.

Mireille kept her gun trained on Chloe as she defensively turned to where she could see the girl and Chloe.

Kirika stared at the girl; she didn't know why.

"Oh hello." The girl said with her head slightly cocked to the side.

"Who are you and where did learn that song?" Mireille asked.

The girl beamed as she answered. "I'm the child of sin...the daughter of Lust and Wrath."

The girl looked at Kirika and smiled. "I know you...I remember you."

"I'm sorry, I don't think we met." Kirika answered which seemed to annoy the girl.

"That still doesn't answer my question." Mireille said slightly annoyed.

"Don't you mean questions?" The girl replied with her head cocked to the side.

"She does have a point, you did ask two questions."

"I wasn't asking you candy girl!" Mireille growled at Chloe.

Chloe ignored Mireille and asked the girl; "Who taught you that rhyme?"

"Mmm...A nun. I think she was a nun."

Chloe pulled a gun out concealing it from sight of the others.

"I'm sorry, but I can't let you go around singing that rhyme."

No one knew how she knew Chloe was going to shoot. All Kirika and Mireille saw was Chloe going down amid a flurry of well placed kicks.

The girl smiled wickedly as she went through Chloe's pockets. First she pulled out some photos, scowled at one of them and threw aside. Then she found some money but not enough to satisfy her.

She kept one eye on Mireille as she got up and started kicking a still downed Chloe in the stomach only alternating between the crouch and breasts with sadistic glee.

Mireille suppressed a chuckle as she watched the girl.

"STOP IT!" Kirika said loudly as she charged with unusual fury.

Both heard a slight growl come from the girl as she yelled pointing to a downed Chloe.

"You forgot me! I remembered you and her!" Kirika tried to grab the girl but she was too quick and she gracefully skipped backwards away from Kirika who was trying to catch her.

"Never mind her right now." Mireille said as she watched Chloe slowly get up off the ground. Kirika turned and went to Chloe.

"Are you all right?" Kirika asked.

Chloe brushed off Kirika and looked down the alley where the girl went down. "This is far from over..." She growled to herself as she picked up her gun and holstered it.

"We'll talk some other time." She said backing off away from Mireille and when she was far enough away she turned and walked away.

Mireille followed Chloe with her eyes as she left, then breathed deeply to relax her tensed body and tucked the gun away, hoping that nobody saw their exchange in the alley. She didn't want to admit to herself just how scared she was.

"Let me know if she follows us," she asked of Kirika and took a closer look at the pictures that were taken from Chloe and dropped by the girl.

Chloe grimaced as she walked away. She wanted revenge on that kid. The only consolation was that she hoped that Madlax and Mireille would kill each other and then she could have Kirika to herself once again.

The first photo was a young woman standing next a maid. Mireille looked on back of the photo for any writing. She saw written in black ink;

Margaret Burton: total airhead, why even bother...

Elenore Baker: stuck up maid? Have I seen her before?

Mireille recognized the maid as the woman they had "met" earlier. Mireille was getting an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach

The second was of Elenore in dressed in the same blue skirt and a white paisley peasant shirt she was wearing this morning. She saw written on the back of this photo;

Crazy? Martial arts expert.... related to Duvet!?! Why does LA want her watched? Why does she seem familiar?

From what she could gather; the maid was a bodyguard of the woman in the first picture and a possible relative of Duvet. Duvet that name Mireille had heard of; it was the code name of an elite bodyguard.

"Must be nice to be rich to afford people like that." Mireille thought to herself as she looked at the last photo.

The last photo was apparently a file photo taken from somewhere else. The blond haired woman bore some resemblance to the woman in the first one. On the back of this photo Mireille read the obscenities comparing her to herself and the words in red;

Madlax...kill when have a chance...

Mireille looked at the unfamiliar faces at the photos. The girl labeled as Margaret looked a little like Kirika, and this "Madlax" (what kind of name was that?) was obviously trouble. But as long as they didn't stalk them and set up ambushes at the train stations, she didn't care.

"You recognize any of these?" she gave the three pictures to Kirika, just in case.

Kirika concentrated on the pictures. "Mmm.....no, only the woman we met earlier. What was Chloe doing with them? And why is she alive?" She looked up. "I mean I..." her voice faltered, "...killed her." She shook her head. "Let's find this Badgis person."

As she and Mireille walked away, Kirika looked back where Chloe was.

"Chloe, for your sake, please don't return. I don't want to lose you again...or Mireille."

Watching Kirika struggle with her past made Mireille uneasy; back when they first met, she'd probably shrug it off and ignore, but now she just couldn't. Turning around, she drew closer to her and said as softly as she could: "Don't think about it much, Kirika... You haven't killed her, which is a good thing, right? Thinking about such things will only make it worse." Mireille looked down the alley and wondered what connection that woman, the little girl, Chloe and Kirika had in all this...

Chapter 15. Danse de la mort d'Alice

After their encounter with Chloe and the little girl (Mireille joked about her being a psychotic version of Alice from Alice in Wonderland due to her outfit. Kirika didn't quite get the joke due to still not having read said story), Kirika and Mireille for a couple hours wound their way through the city hoping to shake off anyone else following them. When they were by the Nafrece Tower they found a suitable cyber cafe and began to contact Badgis.

"Ookay," looking around to check that nobody's looking, Mireille touched the keyboard, "let's do some magic. Let's see, an anonymizing proxy...damn, they don't even have a Fox here... ah, here it is... let's try this one, whaddya know, I'm lucky today... get a new account, download the key, merge it..." She connected a USB stick to the PC. "...like this... the password, right... and we are set."

She beamed triumphantly at Kirika.

"See, that wasn't so difficult. Now all we gotta do is compose an email and wait for a reply."

While Mireille messed with the Internet, Kirika looked at the pictures again; she paid particular attention to Margaret and Elenore's.

"Hmm...It says she's a total ditz....I bet she doesn't have to worry about anything. I'm kind of envious. Look at her. We could almost be twins...if I were white...and rich...maybe she's what I would've become if not for Altena. Then there's Elenore...is that little girl her sister? They bear a resemblance to each other." Kirika thought to herself.

After Mireille finished, Kirika showed her Margaret's photo. "Mireille, look at this. Don't we look kind of alike? Maybe that could've been me, if I were normal."

"Nah, I don't think so..." Mireille glanced at the picture as she typed.

"And she is not normal, either." She added matter-of-factly. Meanwhile, an email from a dummy account to a dummy message box that eventually landed at Badgis' desktop was done. A request to meet, details of payment, all in code. Encryption was there to sign it, even if someone broke the key, it wouldn't say much. She hit the send button and leaned back. "Now we wait."

"Yes...we wait..." Kirika said. She fondled the ring in her pocket and grew red. She looked down. "Um...Mireille...I know this isn't the right time, but we can't do anything but wait until he replies.Um...what--what do you think about...marriage?" She asked, her heart beating fast, both eagerly awaiting and dreading Mireille's reply at the same time.

"Nani o sore?" Mireille was so astonished, she blundered out Kagami's favorite expression without thinking...Mireille's eyes widened in astonishment. Come think of it, Kirika rarely saw her so surprised. After a couple of seconds, she replied: "What was that? First of all, marriage is for people with known past. And we, frankly, do not exist," she looked away, pouting, and continued quieter: "And if you mean the ceremony, we first need to find a priest who'd agree to... And how the hell are we supposed to marry with all those MIBs on our tail?!"

"Oh." Kirika said. "Never mind, then. Sorry." She looked away and stayed silent, too embarrassed to look at Mireille or talk to her.

"Look, Kirika..." Mireille obviously had trouble finding the right words.

"Marriage is... a formality. And we two are... already bound by much more than... you know. The black thread of fate and all. You care a lot about formalities... of course, you should, just like that ID card that almost got us killed back in the Middle East... but right now, it's better for us to concentrate on staying alive, okay? We shall talk about it when we get out of this mess.

"Promise?"

A message came up that an email was received from Badgis' contact address but she disregarded that, looking expectantly at Kirika.

Kirika felt Mireille's eyes on her and reluctantly turned back around. She averted Mireille's gaze. "Um, yes. I promise. Sorry to trouble you."

A moment later, she looked at the screen and said, as if to break the pregnant pause, "Um...you better answer that."

As soon as Mireille opened the email the following brief email message appeared;

I can help you out.

Meet me at this address at 6:30PM

a map to get there is included

Badgis

"Is this guy really a pro?" Mireille wondered, looking at the map.

"Agreeing to meet us in open like that...Unless it's his liaison, of course."

Mireille quickly deleted everything she could on the PC they were using: cookies, cache, resident files, registry keys, everything. She would have set a timed virus, too, but they were running out of time.

"Let's move out."

At the same time Meg got home. She pulled out her cell phone and dialed a number. It rang a couple before a male voice spoke.

"What's up? Heard you had a busy day yesterday." The voice said a little cheerful.

"I need to talk you about that ASAP, plus I need a favor." Meg replied.

"You don't sound too happy Meggie."

Meg scowled. "I'm not in the mood."

"Okay, your house in an hour."

"Sure, you got the key."

"Just warm up the coffee for me..." Then the line went dead.

"Bet you all ready helped yourself..." Meg mumbled to herself as she hung up and went to the kitchen.

As they both walked to school, Margaret could notice Madlax's excitement.

She couldn't quite understand why. School was interesting at times but not particularly exciting and having someone escort her like this felt excessive. She just felt she was burdening Madlax unnecessarily.

"You ever had been to school, Madlax?" Margaret asked, out of curiosity.

"Other than the orphanage's school and what I've learned from Duvet, Three Speed and others, I never really attended a real school as a student but I've been to some on assignments but they were high schools. I heard we're going to a big university." Madlax replied.

"It's not that special." Margaret said a little sadly that Madlax had missed out on what she thought was a normal life.

"I think it will be fun." Madlax smiled, clapping her hands.

"Is that how a bodyguard acts?" Margaret asked, with a smile on her face.

"Only when she's happy and excited." Madlax answered cheerfully.

Soon, Margaret and Madlax arrived at the school's entrance and had to get through security. Margaret just showed her student card as usual and hoped they were properly informed and wouldn't raise any problem with Madlax.

"Miss Burton a pleasure to see you. Your personal assistant called and informed us that you would have a bodyguard with you. I can understand with all that's been going on in the city of late." The Security chief said to Margaret looking over Madlax.

"I would've thought it would be a man, but I guess a man can't enter the ladies areas. Here's your pass, just do your job quietly and try not to spook the other students okay." The Security chief said in a somewhat flirtatious and impressed tone.

"Thank you very much." Margaret replied happily at the security as she walked inside. "Well, let's go then Mad... Hmm Laetitia." She corrected in a hurry, remembering Madlax was supposed to be using a fake name.

As they moved inside they approached the building and walked directly towards the classroom. Margaret discreetly greeted back some of the students waiting outside with a timid "hi", but didn't really join them, as they were all chatting in small groups, going straight inside the room instead, and picking a seat by the window. Madlax followed and sit next to her as they awaited the class to start.

Madlax's initial joy was no longer apparent; her job was to protect Margaret even if they are bonded far stronger than guard and client. No emotion, no love or hate, a rather familiar routine for an agent of hire.

"Madlax, nobody followed me right?" Margaret asked

"Nobody yet, although those group of three students in the bottom row feel suspicious." Madlax replied professionally.

"Margaret" Madlax said softly

"Yes" Margaret responded quietly

"What class is this for?" Madlax asked with a hint of embarrassment.

"Oh, it's calculus. It involves functions and derivatives and... It's kinda like math, I guess. We'll have the final exam tomorrow. Are you any good at it? Maybe you could help me out..." Margaret replied quietly, showing her notebook to Madlax.

Madlax glanced over the book Margaret was looking at and baulked. She had some schooling from Three Speed but he never taught her much math.

"I rather read the holy books than this." Madlax softly spoke to Margaret.

"What is this snake line? It looks like the page I had." Madlax whispered with a degree of surprise.

"That's an integral sign I think." Margaret giggled.

"I'll stick with shooting people thank you" Madlax joked in a black humor kind of way.

"Who's giggling at the back row?" the professor shouted.

"Uh Oh." Madlax whispered.

"Hmm... I'm sorry professor, it won't happen again." Margaret said hurriedly in a stressed out voice.

"Hope not Burton. There's a final exam tomorrow you know? If you can't stay focused just go back to sleep as you always do." The professor said in a harsh way, as the rest of the class tried to keep from laughing themselves, not to attract further reprehension.

"Yes professor, I'll focus. I'm sorry." Margaret replied in a humbled tone, sitting back and lowering her head in embarrassment.

"My, he sure is mean today. He must be looking forward to summer break as well." Margaret complained to Madlax, as silently as she could.

For the rest of the class they tried to keep quiet and unnoticed.

"Anything yet?" Nadie asked as they wandered around.

"Nope." Ellis replied holding up the bracelet.

"We passed a couple of libraries and museums and it didn't go off. Something has to set it off." Nadie said with a bit of frustration.

"There's a graveyard up ahead. Maybe it will glow there." Ellis replied.

"Graveyard? Where?" A confused Nadie asked as she looked for the graveyard.

"Over there." Ellis pointed to graveyard in the distance. Nadie couldn't see it yet.

Nadie sighed remembering that Ellis had far better senses than her. As they walked Ellis stopped, pricked her ears.

"What's wrong?" Nadie asked wondering what Ellis was doing.

"Somebody is calling for help." Ellis replied as the bracelet gave a faint glow.

"Ellis the bracelet! Look!" Nadie cried out.

Ellis nodded as they ran to the graveyard. Though Ellis could've easily outrun Nadie she kept up a pace where Nadie could keep up.

As they approached they saw an elderly woman trying to exit it as fast she could.

"Are you all right?" Nadie asked with concern.

"I don't think anything's broken, but you have to stop her." The elderly woman replied trying to brush off some dirt off her dress.

"Stop her who?" Nadie asked as Ellis turned her head towards the interior.

"The one who's smashing gravestones" Ellis replied as she bolted inside.

"Don't worry we'll stop whoever doing this." Nadie said in a comforting tone.

"Thank you young lady." The elderly woman said before Nadie followed Ellis.

Nadie caught up with Ellis as they saw a browned haired tween aged girl smashing a gravestone with a sledge hammer.

"HEY! STOP THAT!" Nadie yelled to get the girls attention. The girl stopped and turned her head to the pair.

"Why don't you mind your own fucking business?!" The girl replied a bit miffed that she was interrupted.

"You got a mouth on you." Nadie said as she grabbed the girl by the arm. In quick succession Nadie was punched in the stomach with the handle of the sledge hammer and then she was flung a couple feet. The girl picked up the sledge hammer and was preparing to hit Nadie with it.

Kirika and Mireille were nearing the entrance of the graveyard when the elderly woman accosted them.

"Please help them, there's someone smashing gravestones and I think they need help." The elderly woman pleaded in a confused manner.

"You should call the Police madam. That's their job." Mireille replied.

Then they heard;

"Why don't you mind your own fucking business?!"

"You got a mouth on you."

“Mireille, it’s that girl.” Kirika said before she bolted into the graveyard.

“Kirika!” Mireille yelled and she mumbled something underneath her breath as she followed soon after Kirika.

Kirika and Mireille ran to where the commotion was. There they saw the little girl about ready to hit a red haired Hispanic looking woman on the ground with a sledge hammer. Just as she was swinging a petite woman with short blonde hair caught the hammer in midswing by the handle. They assumed that the elderly lady had sent them as well.

The girl turned her slightly to glance at Mireille and Kirika while struggling to get the sledge hammer out of Ellis’ hand.

“Welcome to this little part of Wonder land Mireille...let go...” The girl said before turning attention back to Ellis who snapped the handle in two.

Nadie scrambled to get up before what was left of the sledge hammer hit her. Mireille wondered if the girl had followed them long enough to hear her comment.

“Wow you’re strong...” The girl said as she skipped backwards before any of them grabbed her.

“You okay Nadie?” Ellis asked Nadie as she looked at Mireille and Kirika then back at the girl.

“I’m fine, she caught me off guard.” Nadie replied. “Talented aren’t you? You have a name?” Nadie asked the girl. Mireille kept her distance considering just a couple hours ago she had beaten Chloe silly. The girl smiled with a wicked looking smile as she hopped on top of a gravestone. “Well since this is Wonderland, then I must be Alice.”

“I need to ask...” Kirika started but Alice interrupted. “I’m not talking to you until you remember who I am.”

“Come on Kirika, let’s go. I’m not putting up her games.” Mireille said in an aggravated tone.

“Ohhh...haven’t got laid in awhile have you blondie?” Alice quipped.

Kirika was going lunge for the girl when Mireille put a hand on her shoulder. “Forget it Kirika, she’s just trying to goad us. We’ll deal with her later.”

“Geez, aren’t you the fucking buzzkill Mireille.” Alice retorted mimicking Kirika.

“You’re right. Let’s go.” Kirika said turning as if to walk away then she quickly spun and tried to grab Alice who leapt onto a nearby grave stone.

“I guess you do want to play after all. Hey strong girl you want to play too?” Alice asked as she hopped onto another gravestone.

Ellis hopped on top of a gravestone. Alice smiled in amusement. “I’ll take that as yes. Hey strong girl you have a name?” Then Alice leapt to another gravestone.

Ellis in return jumped to the gravestone next to the one Alice was standing on. “Ellis...”

Kirika knowing that she couldn’t pull off the leaps that Alice and Ellis were doing followed them keeping one hand in her jacket pocket fingering the pistol within.

As Kirika and Ellis pursued Alice, Nadie and Mireille looked at the remains of the gravestone. “That kid did a number on this. There has to be a reason; if it was just vandalism for kicks she would’ve not done it in broad daylight.” Nadie observed.

“There’s something weird about her.”

“Seems to know you.”

“Yeah, we ran into the brat earlier. Let’s see whose stone this was.” Mireille answered without giving any details.

Nadie noticed the evasion, but decided not to pry as she tried to piece together what was left of the stone.

After a couple minutes they pieced enough to read;

Here <word missing> lie<rest of word smashed>
Jo<smashed>Baker
Born Novem<hammer hole>er 12th 1937
Died February 24th 2002
<Fractured beyond any recognition>Grandfather
<The rest destroyed as well>

“Look no offense, but we’ve got better things to do than to go chase some little brat who’s got issues. As soon I get my friend; we’re leaving. You can deal with the brat and old lady.” Mireille said in an impatient tone.

“*Who are you running from?*” Nadie thought to herself as she noticed Mireille’s attitude.

Meanwhile Kirika was chasing Ellis and Alice as they hopped from tombstone to tombstone. Then after a few minutes she heard a beeping sound. Alice stopped, pulled something from a pocket, looked at it, and then put it back. “Awww, it looks like we have to play another time. I’m late I’m late for a very important date.” Alice said in a somewhat mocking tone.

Then she rapidly jumped a few more tombstones and then over the wall. Ellis was going to chase after her but then she remembered Nadie. Then there were these other people and she didn’t want to leave Nadie or the old woman with these people about.

Kirika stared at Alice as she bounded over the wall and she cursed herself for falling for this stupid ploy. She was just toying with them but seeing what she could do did make her stop and think; *not who but what?*

Then she looked at Ellis who she had seen snap a sledge hammer in two, make leaps even impossible for her to make. All this made her head hurt, besides this kind thing was more of Mireille’s thing than hers. So she headed back to the shattered gravestone and Mireille was heading straight for her.

“She got away.”

“I really don’t care; let’s get out of here before the police or the Soldats show up.”

Kirika nodded ascent and she followed Mireille back out to the street.

An hour earlier as Margaret and Madlax were going to class, before Mireille, Kirika, Ellis, and Nadie’s encounter; Meg was sitting in an overstuffed chair when she heard coming from the kitchen a latch unlock . She grabbed her pistol as she heard the kitchen door open.

“Just me Meggy Peggy.” A voice yelled out as Meg leapt from the chair to see a well dressed man in his early thirties. His most noticeable features were his well combed dark brown hair, his deep blue eyes and his disarming smile.

“I wish you stop doing that Walter.” Meg complained.

“Doing what?” Walter asked.

“Entering before ringing the bell. What if I thought you were an intruder?”

“No you wouldn’t. Who else would call you Meggy Peggy?” Walter asked without being serious knowing from looking in Meg’s eyes she was going to unload on him.

“You, but that’s not important; now I want to know something; how long did you knew that Anna and Richard were dead and don’t give me the “it’s news to me” bullshit and why didn’t you tell me?!” Meg asked in a dead serious tone.

Walter’s smile faded. “Before you jump down my throat, our father before he died used what pull he had left in N.I. to make sure you never knew to the point where my family was indirectly threatened so I wouldn’t talk when I found out after he died. I guess that was his way of punishing you from beyond the grave. It took me awhile to find it was him that did it.” Walter replied in equally serious tone.

Meg sighed. “Heh, he had to get one last dig at me and just because I stuck up for you. Now that Elenore made contact with me, how are *they* going to react?”

"They couldn't care less. You're on the retired list and Elenore is an adult. Besides anyone who would care are either dead or retired and out of the picture. As long you don't spill state secrets you can spend all the time you want with her."

"Then what about the restraining orders I keep getting every Christmas Eve?"

"Wow, I thought Anna was vindictive but I didn't think she was *that* vindictive. Anyway the only one who could put a stop to the orders is Margaret and she has to wait till she's twenty before that happens."

"Hopefully Elenore can convince Margaret to do it. Speaking of Elenore; there's a favor I really need to ask." Meg asked in a pleading and serious tone.

"Sure, if it's something I can do I'll do it."

"I don't know if you know but knowing you, you probably do; but the simple facts are Elenore was pregnant and there's no record of it in St Peter's Hospital. I don't know if the child survived or not."

"So you want me to go looking for it without attracting attention?"

Meg collapsed in the chair. "Pretty much. It all still blows my mind; how could he leave a household to a twelve year old? Did he even suspect that they weren't coming back? Was he so angry with us...for God's sake Walter I couldn't protect my own daughter from..." Meg said as she began to cry.

Walter put a comforting arm around Meg and spoke in a comforting tone. "I really don't know any more than you do. I'll find out, no...we will find out. I know someone who can help."

"Thanks little brother." Meg said wiping the tears from her face.

"Hey that's what family is for. Could you please make me a coffee while a make a call?"

Meg got up. "I'm sorry, I'll go get it. Two creams, one sugar as usual?"

"Yes, thanks." Walter replied as he pulled out his cell phone and made a call.

As Meg brought out the coffee Meg's phone rang. She picked it up hoping it was Elenore.

"Hello..." Meg started with a smile then her smile faded as continued to listen.

"I see...Thank you. I'll be down there right away."

"What's up?" Walter asked before taking a sip of his coffee.

"That was Mrs. Carroll. She called to say some kid smashed father's gravestone. She has people chasing the kid but the stone is a total loss from what she says. You want to come?"

"I don't know why you should care Meg? He pretty much gave us both the heave-ho."

"Despite what he thought of both of us, he is still our father dead or alive."

"I've got things to do, one of them finding that medical record." Walter said then gulping down his coffee.

"I see...call me if you find anything." Meg said as she grabbed her purse.

"Will do..." Walter replied as he set the cup down and left.

Nadie and Ellis approached the elderly woman. "I'm sorry, I couldn't catch her." Ellis said with her head hung low.

"At least you kept her from doing any more damage." The elderly woman replied.

"The stone she did smash is pretty much a total loss. I collected most what could be salvaged."

The elderly woman smiled. "I wouldn't worry much about it. Oh, where are my manners, I'm Clair Carroll. I'm filling in for my son who's ill and grandson who's at a funeral home seminar. You see my family has tended this graveyard for generations. Oh, there I go again. I forgot to ask what your names are."

Ellis smiled as this woman reminded her of the old corn reader she lived with before she met Nadie.

"I'm Nadie Oliveira¹ and this is my friend Ellis Schneider." Nadie replied with a warm smile and Ellis waved her hand in greeting.

Clair cupped Nadie's hands and smiled. "Thank you for your help. I'm sorry I can't give you any reward."

"It's okay; we didn't do it for any reward." Nadie replied as a small car pulled in and came to a stop. The driver a brown haired woman in her late thirties or early forties came out of the driver's side. Nadie

noticed the resemblance to Alice she had. The woman approached them then in a concerned tone asked. "Mrs. Carroll are you all right?"

Claire smiled. "I'm all right thanks to these young ladies here." She said gesturing to Nadie and Ellis. The woman turned to Nadie and Ellis. "Thank you for your assistance." The woman said in a polite tone. "You're welcome." Nadie replied looking over the woman. "*She's handled a gun before.*" Nadie thought to herself noticing the woman was doing the same.

"Miss Oliveira and Miss Schneider this is Miss Baker; daughter of whose tombstone was destroyed." Claire introduced them to each other.

"You can just call me Nadie, makes for friendlier conversation."

Meg nodded in understanding. "I'm Meg by the way." Meg said trying to defuse the unintentional tension in the air.

"I'm Ellis." Ellis said shyly.

"Well Nadie and Ellis, after I see the gravestone, would you give me a description of the girl who did this?"

"Sure no problem." Nadie agreed.

"I can take it from here Mrs. Carroll and thank again for calling me."

"You're welcome child, if you excuse me. I'll get someone to clean the mess." Claire said before walking slowly off towards the grounds keepers shed.

Once Claire had gotten out earshot; "No offence Meg but that kid bears a resemblance or at least a relation to you."

"Really? Let me get my sketch pad and then you two can describe her to me." Meg went to her car and soon came back with a sketch pad on a clipboard. For the next few minutes Nadie and Ellis gave Meg a description of Alice including what she had said.

As Meg drew it became more and more evident that "Alice" was in fact Elenore. "*She's the missing piece of her soul.*" She thought, and then she flipped over the page. "You said two other women had run into Alice earlier. Could you give their descriptions as well?" Meg asked.

Nadie gave the best description of Mireille and Kirika she could.

"Thank you both, now let's see how bad the stone is." Then Nadie and Meg went to the stone. Meg sadly looked at remains. "*Are you that angry with your grandfather...to do something like this?*" Meg silently asked herself. Nadie noticed that Ellis had wandered off but was relieved when she came back, but pushing a wheelbarrow and Claire in tow.

"She was pushing it all by herself." Ellis said in her usual tone. All of them filled the wheel barrow. Ellis asked where to take the remains which Claire in turn pointed out. Ellis wheeled the stone off.

"Thank you again ladies. I'm grateful for your help." Claire said in a grateful tone.

"You're welcome, but you should go home Mrs. Carroll." Meg said in a kindheartedly tone.

"I'm too old to worry about such things...you're beginning to sound like my son. He worries when I'm out here. Keeps talking about rapists running around, the way he talks sometimes you swear he thinks there's one behind every tombstone." Claire noticed Meg's drawing. "Oh is that the little girl? Could you show that picture to my son so he can keep an eye out for her in case she comes back?"

Meg's ears pricked on hearing the word "rapists". "Of course Mrs. Carroll. Why don't we go now?" Meg agreed then she turned to Nadie and Ellis. "Would you like to come? I'll treat you two to lunch afterwards. It's the least I can do for all your help."

Nadie was about to answer when Ellis piped up. "Sure, we'll come."

"Of course thanks." Nadie chimed in as well. "*I bet you know more to this story than you let on Meg.*"

Nadie thought to herself noticing Meg's attitude.

The trio escorted Claire back to her home where an elderly man stood in the doorway.

"Mama, you shouldn't be out in the graveyard alone. Thank you for bringing my mother home."

Claire scowled. "Don't you scold me young man."

"But mama, he could be out there..."

"Enough Louis! He hasn't been back in years; he's probably in jail by now. There was some little girl smashing stones today and Miss Baker and her friends were nice enough to draw a picture of her to show you. Now get inside before I turn you over my knee." Claire said in angry tone.

"Yes yes mama. Please come inside." Louis said sighing under his breath.

After they went and made themselves comfortable Louis asked to see the picture. When he did his face turned pale.

"Louis what's wrong? Tell me now." Claire asked concerned.

"I've seen that face before, but it was years ago. Maybe that girl you saw today was her ghost..."

"Louis what are you talking about you're not making any sense?"

"How long ago Mr. Carroll?" Meg asked.

"Eight or nine years ago. It was nearing sundown, so I went to close the gate as I always do. Then I saw her." Louis pointed to the picture.

"Then what happened?" Meg asked her face grew concerned.

"Her clothes were dirty and torn and had a black eye. She was crying as she ran toward the gate. I wondered what happened...then I saw *him*. He was trying to pull his pants back up as he was trying to chase the little girl. He stopped and ran the other way before I got a good look at his face. I was worried about the little girl but she had disappeared. I called the police after that, but they couldn't find him or the girl. Part of me fears that he found her and silenced her. Every few years another woman gets attacked in that graveyard and always when me or my boy isn't around. That is why I worry when my mama goes out there alone." Louie related he could see Meg trying to hold back the tears. "I'm sorry if it saddens you."

"It's all right Mr. Carroll. Thank you for your time but I must leave now." Meg said as she went to the door.

"It was nice meeting you." Ellis said as they followed Meg out the door.

They followed all the way to her car. She was leaning against the roof and crying.

"Are you okay Meg?" Nadie asked with concern.

"I'm sorry about that, thank you anyways."

"It was nice meeting you Meg." Nadie said as she began to back away.

"Wait, I still owe you two lunch. I'm sorry if I seem vague but there's a lot going on and a good chunk of it is pretty unbelievable."

"Don't sweat it, Ellis and I have had our share of unbelievable stuff."

"You probably have, but I doubt you believe it."

"Oh, on the contrary Miss Baker. My bearer and her companion would find your story quite believable indeed..." Ellis said with her eyes and the bracelet glowing and speaking with a British accent...

Jodie stood outside the café Train D'abeille. She couldn't help feeling some sense of dread. But at the same time she was curious...on how he managed to survive...why did he ask to see her of all people? Was he still working for the C.I.A or someone else?

"I'm not going to get any answers sitting out here." She said to herself as she entered the café. The café was definitely high-class and there were people here, that last part put her mind at ease. "*At least he wouldn't pull something so blatant in here.*" Jodie thought to herself as she approached the maître.

"Do you have a reservation Miss?" The maître asked.

"Hayward." Jodie replied and the maître scanned down the list. "Ah here you are Miss Hayward. Mr. R called that he would be arriving shortly." The maître summoned a waiter to escort Jodie to her table.

For what seemed an eternity she waited until the waiter brought him to the table. Jodie was floored, it was actually him; Douglas Rosenberg!

"Hello Miss Hayward..."

Third Moon Rising

Across town Laetitia sat in her usual spot as she ate her lunch alone as usual. For none of the other children sat nowhere near “Creepy Girl” as they tended to call her.

She still couldn’t shake the feeling of dread she was feeling. As she finished her sandwich she felt a presence coming up from behind her. Laetitia turned her head to see who was behind her; she wasn’t surprised by on who she saw.

The last thing Laetitia heard before being struck unconscious by the first fist was;

“Hello Laetitia...”

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.

"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?"

"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.

"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.

"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 mindedly.

"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.

"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?!"

"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...

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."

"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.

"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."

"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.

"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?"

"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 a 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."

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 way 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 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 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 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..."

Chapter 17. Invitation to Madness

Friday Monday relaxed in his leather covered seat with no little satisfaction. The Soldats had been totally blindsided by his plans. While they were chasing after the artifacts in Nafrece his agents had found what he really wanted. Granted the Nafrece operation had cost him quite a few men and a few resources there but overall the faint was a success.

It did amuse him that Margaret Burton and her family in their efforts became quite the unwitting partners in this operation. Though it did concern him to some degree that Douglas was planning some treachery; it didn't really bother him. He would put his subordinate in line soon enough.

A whistling kettle on a nearby hot plate grabbed his attention. He got up and turned off the hot plate just a flash of light appeared behind him.

"Well my dear, just in time. Then again time is your specialty." Friday said nonchalantly.

"Why thank you Grandfather. I hope you found everything to your satisfaction so far." A young woman's voice responded from behind.

"Quite, the key will be in my possession soon. But you all ready knew that. Care for some tea?" Friday said as he prepared himself a cup of tea.

"No thank you Grandfather, I won't be staying long."

Friday gave a slight amused chuckle.

"Hmmm...?" The woman asked.

"I still find it quite amusing though you are not biologically my granddaughter you still call me "Grandfather" among other things,"

"Even though I showed you proof that my father considered you the closest thing to a father he ever had. And since you created him when you spoke the words of Awakening to Poupee that would make you my Grandfather."

"Point taken. Your father proved a far better son than my own. Though I find his choice in a mate quite amusing for the irony alone." Friday said as he took a sip of tea.

"I'm sure you do Grandfather."

"You're devious as he is; you've made sure that my success hinged on your eventual existence."

"And this bothers you?"

"Quite the opposite actually. I admire that."

"Why thank you Grandfather. But I must be going; we're both going to be busy people in the next couple minutes."

"I see...you're still carrying out your plan?"

"Why yes...yes I am..."

"Very well..."

"Good bye Grandfather." The woman said as she disappeared in a flash of light.

He turned around to find that she was indeed gone. A light flashed on a nearby console. Friday pressed the light and then spoke. "Yes...?"

"Sir, the package has arrived." A male voice emanated from a speaker.

"Bring it down to me immediately."

"Yes Sir." Then the speaker went dead.

A few minutes later, a subordinate brought him a box no larger than the average bread box.

He carefully opened it and reached inside. As he looked upon the object in the box a very satisfied smile crossed his face. He pulled it out and took a closer look at it. Not a traditional key but then again the door it was supposed to unlock was untraditional; It was an odd looking jade statuette; a humanoid rabbit with a devilish smile on its face. Friday could feel the power from it; he reveled in the fact that he

had in his possession something more powerful than the three books or the artifacts as felt the power flow through him.

He bent his will towards the key trying to bend it to his will. Then the world turned white...

Two miles away Elsa was watching with a pair of high tech binoculars Friday's Amazon base with great interest.

"Five..."

"Four..."

"Three..."

"Two..."

"One..."

Elsa closed her eyes as a bright flash of light engulfed the base. When the light subsided the base was gone. Elsa wickedly smiled.

"Bye bye Grandpa. Enjoy your trip into another universe. You were quite right; I am devious but I don't get my deviousness from my father. I get it from my mother...both of them. Did you honestly think I would actually let get your hands on an actual "cosmic key" or that I wouldn't see your attempted "double cross" to eliminate my parents. Too bad none of them were home." Elsa laughed to herself.

"Let's see here; now that Enfant's major hub has been taken out. It would take four hours, fifty six minutes to see that the base no longer exists. And six hours after that all hell will break loose."

Elsa put the binoculars away and pulled out another device after wiping her brow. "A bit warm today, I'm sure the evening won't be better. I better get going I have a couple of security systems to royally sabotage." Elsa cheerfully said to herself as she tilted her head and pressed a couple buttons. Then she disappeared in flash of light.

Chapter 18. Maneuvers

Jodie went to the address that Nadie provided. She parked the car near the gate and intrepidly started walking towards it. As she approached the gate she could see that it had been torn off its hinges. There were small craters on either side of the gate and blood stains on the ground. Chalk outlines marked where corpses had recently laid. From the look of it, she just missed the police. She approached the doors; she could see that they were replaced as there were bullet holes on either side of the doorway. She was honestly a bit nervous, as she worried about her friends' safety as well as her own. She pulled out her ID and passport and kept them at the ready.

She rang the bell wondering if she was at the right place at all. She heard the door open a crack and she heard a woman's voice. "I'm sorry we're not issuing a statement until the police do." Then the door was beginning to close.

"Wait, I was asked to come here!" Jodie said loudly.

The door stopped. "Who are you and who asked you to come?"

Jodie showed her ID and passport at the opening. "My name is Jodie Hayward and I was asked to come here by Margaret Burton and her sister Elenore."

The door opened wider and a hand reached out and grabbed and pulled her inside. "Get inside!"

As she was pulled in the door behind was shut. She saw who pulled her in; an Asian woman just as tall as her with purple hair. The woman let go after she was inside.

"As you can see we had an incident earlier today."

"I see, I was told my friends would be here."

"They're on their way here. How do you think I knew who you were?"

"May I ask who you are?"

"I'm Limelda Jorg, that's all you need to know." Limelda said as she led her to the living room. Standing there was a man she hadn't seen in a long while.

"Nice to see you Jodie. Welcome to Nafrece." Walter greeted Jodie.

"Hello Walter, it's been awhile..." Jodie replied a bit relieved.

A tall woman with green eyes and black hair entered the room. "I'm all set Walter. Oh who is this?" The woman asked.

"Vanessa Rene, this is Jodie Hayward. Jodie, this is Vanessa. Sorry we can't stay to chat but we've got to go."

Walter said, then turning to Vanessa. "Did you leave a note for Elenore and the others?"

Vanessa nodded. "Yes, I left a note for Elenore."

"All righty, let's go. See ya later Jodie." Walter said as he and Vanessa headed out. Vanessa gave a quick wave before she left.

Meanwhile back at the hospital parking lot.

"How are we going to get back to the mansion? Miss Baker can't fit us all in her car and if she gets caught she might go to jail. I don't want that. Taxi's are out of the question with Enfant and the Soldats running around..." Margaret asked with some legitimate concern.

"I know Madlax can drive. Nadie and Ellis can either of you drive?" Elenore interjected.

"Yeah, I see where you're going with this." Nadie replied.

Madlax noticed Meg trying her best to hide a Cheshire Cat grin. "What's up Duvie? You've got that look."

"Well I have the transport problem solved and if he's bringing what I think he's bringing. I can at least drive up to the front gate without getting snagged."

"If you can drive up to the front gate, you can come into the mansion. I'm sure Elenore and Madlax would like that a lot." Margaret chimed in with a smile.

"That's very nice of you Margaret but even if I went in. Somebody is bound to notice my car." Meg replied trying to hide the trace of anxiety in her voice.

"We can park it where it won't be seen from the street. And perhaps Madlax could take a look on the street before you leave..." Elenore countered with Margaret nodding in agreement.

"I'm not going to win here am I?" Meg sighed.

"Surrender is your best option." Elenore said with a grin of her own.

"Nope..." Margaret added.

"Don't think so Duvie." Madlax chimed in.

"Absolutely not." Ellis added with a deadpan style.

"Et tu Ellis?" Meg said in mock indignity. Then she noticed a blue Two thousand and ten Ford Taurus coming towards them.

"About time he showed up." Meg said impatiently.

The Taurus pulled into a nearby space and Meg walked over to it. Meg talked to the driver and then waved the rest of the group over.

Madlax stopped dead in her tracks.

"What's wrong?" Elenore asked wondering why Madlax had stopped.

"Three Speed?!" Madlax quietly said to herself as she began to walk to the car.

"Hello Madlax. I see you made your way to Nafrece." Not noticing that Meg had gotten in the back of the car.

"I haven't heard from you in months. I thought you ran to the Bahamas' or something. What happened?" Madlax asked the pain evident in her voice.

"We can talk about this later Madlax. Right now I believe you're in the middle of an assignment." Three Speed said trying to avoid the subject.

Madlax frowned as she finally noticed Meg getting out of the car. She noticed that she had put on a short dirty blond wig and blue contacts lenses even though she still had her glasses on.

"That's a new look for you Duvie." Madlax commented.

"It's called a "disguise so I won't get busted for trespassing" disguise." Meg commented back.

Three Speed handed Meg a note. "What's this?" She asked.

"Walt wanted me to give that to you." Three Speed replied.

As Elenore and others approached they noticed Madlax and Meg with her disguise talking to a Caucasian man in his forties with angular features and graying brown hair.

Margaret noticed Madlax wasn't too happy but she got the feeling that it was personal by the way she was looking at the man in the car.

"Nice disguise mom, do you think it would work?" Elenore commented.

"It had better. Madlax, you and Margaret go with Three Speed. I'll take everyone else in my car." Meg said starting toward her car.

"Mom, is that wise letting Margaret and Madlax go with that man?" Elenore asked with no little concern.

"They're fine. Madlax is just a little understandably upset with Three Speed. The ass doesn't realize how much of a father figure he is to her. And since from what I understand the Torc can detect lies so at least she can get the truth out of him." Meg replied with a little frustration in her voice.

"Just like you're a mother figure for her..." Elenore said with a little envy.

Meg sadly looked at Elenore.

"I'm sorry mom...I didn't mean to have it come out that way." Meg gently patted Elenore on the shoulder. "It's okay."

"What does the note say?" Elenore asked trying to change the subject.

Meg looked at the note.

M.P.

Meet me at mom's table at 8.

W.

"That's a strange note. Who's M.P.?" Elenore commented curious about the note.

"Your uncle's nickname for me. It's short for Meggy Peggy. And from what I gathered he wants me to meet him at mom's table in the east wing."

"You mean the east wing kitchen? There's a table there with four chairs. I remember Grandpa saying something about one of the chairs." Elenore asked trying to muffle a giggle over her mother's nickname.

"Oh? What did he say?"

"That no one was ever to sit in that chair. I thought it was broken or something. I've dusted it but I've never sat on it but I was tempted to a few times."

Meg smiled. "I know why, because that was your Grandma's chair..." Unlocking the car and getting in.

"Why does Uncle Walter want to meet you there?" Elenore said getting in the same time as Nadie and Ellis.

"It's where we used to talk about things when we both lived at the mansion..." Meg said as she started the car and pulled out following Three Speed...

Mireille and Kirika barely made it in time, just enough to scout the surroundings a bit and find an escape route or two. The street was paved with cobblestones and the street lights hadn't even come on yet, it was still light out, heading to twilight. They saw a green El Dorado sedan parked near a short (compared to Mireille) well dressed man in his thirties sipping from a Styrofoam cup. The whole street appeared to be typical upper middle class/lower upper class. They got the feeling that this area was chosen because that any disturbance would be noticed almost immediately.

"Cover me," saying that to Kirika, Mireille slowly approached the man, keeping her hands where he could see them. "Hello, sir. Could you help me find the Bagpiper Street? I'm a bit lost here..." That was the pass phrase they agreed upon.

The man looked at Mireille calmly and said "Of course ma'am, it's two blocks north of Duvet Street." This was the return pass phrase they agreed on.

"Right," Mireille motioned for Kirika to come closer. "So. You clean? No tails, no snipers on the roof?"

"I'm clean. I was asked to bring you, so I made sure there was nothing of the sort. Can we go? I'd rather not stay out here too long." The man said pointing with his hand to the nearby parked car.

"Alright, let's go," Mireille cast a last look around and moved towards the car.

The man walked over to the car and opened the driver's side and got in. He waited till Mireille and Kirika got in and then started the car and drove around making sure of no tails and then when they got to a squat brick building he stopped the car in front of it.

"Here we are ladies, if you'd follow me please." He said getting out of the car.

He waited for them to get out and he set the alarm and gestured to follow him.

He led them to a side door and pressed the buzzer on the side and spoke;

"Saruman! Saruman come out!"

"Who is it? What do you wish?" They heard from the speaker.

The man pressed the reply button and spoke. "Tell Saruman I, Gandalf the White, wish to speak with him."

Mireille always knew IT guys were geeks; but who was she to talk reading Dostoevsky for a pastime herself?

The door buzzed and the man opened it and motioned to the pair to go inside and then he went in and closed the door.

He led them to a lounge where in leather swivel chair sat a tall woman with black hair and green eyes. She looked at Mireille and Kirika intently. Mireille tried to hide her obvious surprise of Badgis actually being a woman. "*Clever, no one would suspect he was actually a she.*" Mireille thought to herself.

"Are these them?" The woman asked.

"Yes they are. Ladies may I introduce Badgis." The man said gesturing to Badgis.

"Is there a problem?" Badgis asked.

"I wouldn't have figured that you were actually a woman." Mireille replied.

"I have my reasons. But you didn't wish to see me to ask about my gender did you? I didn't quite get your names?" Badgis replied and questioned Mireille.

"No, we came here looking for information." Mireille replied and then she continued. "Bouquet, Mireille Bouquet," She introduced herself. "And this is my partner, Kirika Yuumura." Mireille said gesturing to Kirika.

"May I sit down?" She asked Badgis. "I'm more comfortable with talking on the same eye level..."

"Of course, Miss Bouquet. Now what would you like for me to find for you?" Badgis said gesturing to another swivel leather chair.

Mireille sat down where Badgis pointed and looked questioningly at her and the man.

"I do not mean to intrude, but... is your friend here trustworthy enough? I'm afraid, our business here is not quite... on this side of the law."

"You can trust him; he's here for my benefit." Badgis calmly replied.

"*You mean protection...*" Mireille thought glancing at the man and noticing that he had a budge under his jacket.

"All right, I understand. Shall we get to business? I want to know why the Soldats are after us. No, wait, I know that much and you are better off not looking into it. I just wanna know who gave the order. We already had a run-in with them some time ago, but we called a ceasefire. Now that they are after us again I want to know who's behind it and where we can find him."

"The Soldats...hmmm...you do know they're at war with Enfant. So it will be a little more difficult to pull off but it is doable. But I get the feeling you want more than that, am I correct?" Badgis asked.

"I'm well aware of that but I just need a name and an address." Mireille shrugged. "But even the name should do nicely. How you get them is up to you. Now, about the payment..." Mireille started when Badgis held up her hand.

"As I said before, this will be more difficult. I have to dodge both Enfant and the Soldats. So I'm going to have to ask for a favor as they say."

Mireille sat staring at Badgis. Mireille would've liked to pay in cash; but Badgis did make an excellent point and they needed the information. "All right, name your favor." Mireille said with a little frustration in her voice.

Badgis gestured the man to a small pile of papers on nearby table which he went to and picked up and handed them to her.

"This is the layout for St. Agnes Hospital. As you can see marked on the map there's a route to the secure files room."

"I'm sorry, we're not burglars and how do you expect us to go into a hospital to most likely steal a file or two?"

"I never asked you to break in for you see at nine oh- four tonight the power will go out as will be the security system. All I'm asking is that you go in, grab the file and make it to the predetermined contact point in twenty minutes or less. If you need a lock pick gun I can provide you with one if the file is in a locked drawer."

"What file are we looking for? And that's provided we agree."

"Fair enough, it's a medical file of a woman named Elenore Baker." Kirika's ears pricked when she heard that name.

"I don't know..." Mireille began but she was interrupted by Kirika.

"We'll do it. Just give us the gun and the contact point for exchange for the information."

Mireille swore silently to herself. "Kirika..."

"If you won't do it I will." Kirika said in a totally surprising defying tone.

"If it wasn't bad enough that she's obsessed with Chloe, now she's obsessing over this Elenore woman. But I do have to admit now I'm just as curious about this woman. I think I'll have a look at that file as well." Mireille thought to herself before she replied to Kirika. "I didn't say we wouldn't. Just give the contact point and we'll be on our way." Mireille said to Kirika then to Badgis.

"Excellent. Would you like a hard copy or on flash drive?" Badgis asked.

"A hard copy will do. Now let's discuss this contact point." Mireille replied and for the next five minutes discussed about the meeting spot.

"Kirika, I'm done negotiating." Mireille said getting up and then the man handed her a lock pick gun and the map.

"Then I guess it's settled. Meet you at the rendezvous point." Badgis said as they were leaving.

"I suppose so...Good day." Mireille said hiding the displeasure she felt.

The man escorted them to the door and let them out. After he led Mireille and Kirika out, he returned to Badgis. The pair sat for ten minutes till a light flickered on and off. Badgis had risen from the chair and the man smiled and hugged Badgis.

"You were great Vanessa!" The man said cheerfully.

"Thank you Walter. I have to admit those two give me the creeps." Vanessa replied.

"Don't worry about it." Walter said nonchalantly.

"What if they spot me somewhere else, like the mansion?" Vanessa asked with anxiety filling her voice.

"Just stay away from the windows or anyplace they could see you. Now let's go see how the real Badgis is doing." Walter said with a wink.

Then the pair went down another hall into another room where the real Badgis was looking over data. Nearby was a container of sesame chicken with a fork stuck in it.

"I was about to get you two. I found what you're both looking for..."

"And...?" Walter asked.

"I think you two should take a good look at this..." Badgis said and as Walter and Vanessa looked over the data their eyes widened in shock.

"We really need to get that file as soon as possible." Vanessa said with great urgency.

"Agreed, that's why I have a contingency plan in place in case those two screw it up." Walter replied.

"What will we do about...?"

"Don't worry, I'm heading there now. You stay here in case those two decide to double back. I'll bring back some tacos for the both you." Walter said reassuringly as he began to leave.

After parking Meg's car where it couldn't be seen and to allow her easy escape if she needed it. The group finally made it to the mansion. Madlax went in first.

"Limelda we're home!" Madlax shouted.

"About time, I was wondering what had happened. Walter told me about the shooting at the university. I'm glad you're all right but I knew you make it out okay." Limelda replied glad that Madlax finally came back.

"Thanks. Margaret would like to talk to you for a moment." Madlax said.

"Who are they?" Limelda asked seeing Nadie and Ellis come in.

"Oh, that's Nadie and Ellis. By the way did their friend get here?"

"Blue eyed woman, yeah. She's in the living room."

"Thanks, where is the living room?" Nadie asked noticing the size of the mansion.

"Upstairs to the right, can't miss it. I'll come up and make some tea." Elenore replied as she saw then go upstairs. In the corner of her eye she noticed Margaret talking to Three Speed and her mother.

"Who's Three Speed and Margaret talking to?" Limelda asked Madlax.

"Oh, that's Duvet." Madlax answered and Limelda's eyes widened in surprise.

Limelda looked at Elenore then at Duvet. "Oh yeah she's her kid all right."

Margaret approached Madlax and Limelda as Elenore, Duvet and Three Speed went up the stairs.

"Sorry about that, Miss Jorg. I had to straighten something out. I want to thank you personally for guarding our home and risking your life in doing so. I know full well that you did it for Madlax. That's fine. We can discuss fair compensation another time. I've had a long day and I want dinner and some tea." Margaret said at first a thankful tone then growing more serious that Limelda paid attention.

"Thank you Miss Burton. I'm sure we can work something out." Limelda replied a bit surprised.

"Now if you excuse me, I'm going to find out what other headaches I've come home to." Margaret said in a very firm "don't give me any shit" tone as she went up the stairs leaving Limelda standing there quite speechless.

At the top of the stairs she saw Elenore standing there. Margaret knew that she had been standing there listening and being her usual protective self. She smiled but then it disappeared when Elenore blurred and she was still standing there. Beside her there were a couple of suitcases and tears running down her cheeks. "I'm sorry I don't deserve to be here or even come back. Not after what I've done."

"Is this a vision of the past or the future? I can't do anything about the past but I can change the future. No wait, that doesn't look like Elenore's mother. It's Elenore! Something either will happen or she did something that she remembered." Margaret thought to herself.

"Whatever you did, we can work it out as a family. I don't want to lose you again. It's okay; you can tell me what you did. I still love you and I'll forgive you for whatever."

"What are you talking about Margaret?" Elenore asked as she blurred and the suitcases disappeared.

"The Torc showed me a vision. You were standing right where you are right now and you had your suitcases packed. And you were crying. And you were saying something about something, from your look it must've or will be pretty bad for you to react that way."

"I know it hasn't happened yet but now it's got me wondering what I did. I must've done something terrible or betrayed your trust somehow for me to do that."

"Even if you do something like that, I'll still forgive you. God knows you've forgiven me for everything. I don't want to be a hypocrite and not extend the same to you."

"Thank you Margaret. That means a lot to me." Elenore smiled and tilted her head.

"You're welcome. By the way Elenore, were you waiting for me to come up?" Margaret asked.

"Miss Hayward has some news you might want to hear. They're waiting for you in the living room.

I'll go make dinner and some tea for later."

"Thank you Elenore." Margaret hugged Elenore feeling the conflict within and the hole inside of her as she felt Elenore hug her in return.

Then they let go and they went in separate directions. Margaret went to the living room where Madlax, Nadie, Ellis and their friend were. She barely heard nearby the argument Meg and Three Speed were having over about Madlax down the hall. She knew they both loved her and considered her their daughter on some level. But there were complications and those complications were at the root of it all. As she walked into the living room she saw Jodie and walked over to her in her usual friendly self.

"Hello Miss Hayward. I'm Margaret Burton. I'm sorry I kept you; I had some matters to attend to. Elenore told me that you have some information. Please can you tell me?"

"Thank you Miss Burton for your hospitality even in these circumstances. Nadie told me that you know about the Coven and your concerns. Well...I don't think you need to worry about the Coven. The Soldats and Enfant utterly destroyed them. Other than a couple of survivors the Coven is effectively extinct."

Nadie's jaw dropped in surprise. "Wow...Blueeyes...I know..."

"I'm sorry about your people Miss Hayward." Margaret said in sympathy.

"Thank you." Jodie said trying to wrap her head around the words she had just said.

"Would you like some tea? I know Elenore is making some, so it should be ready soon." Margaret asked.

"Thank you Miss Burton but I don't think tea is going to help."

"So what would you like to drink? I know Elenore keeps the cabinet stocked. I think you could use one."

"A white Russian would be nice thank you."

Margaret smiled. "You're welcome. I'll go ask Elenore if she knows how to make one. Anyone else want a drink?"

"I'll have a whiskey sour please." Nadie chimed in.

"I'll just have the tea please. Thank you." Ellis said first looking at Margaret then Jodie

"Okay, I'll be right back." Margaret said leaving the living room as Limelda was coming up the stairs.

"Oh Limelda, would you like a drink. I'm going to get drinks for everyone."

Limelda was surprised. "A Mai Tai, thanks..." Limelda replied in a bit of a shock as she headed to the living room.

Margaret went down the hall to see Madlax standing outside the door where Three Speed and Meg were arguing.

"I just don't get it Margaret; why are they fighting over me? Of all people?" Madlax said with a sullen look on her face.

"They do care about you. You know at least Meg does."

"Sometimes I get the feeling that I was just a substitute for Elenore. Now that they're reunited..."

Madlax depressingly replied.

"You know that isn't true. If that was the case she wouldn't be having that conversation right this minute. She treats you just like if you were her daughter. I know she's glad that you're out of Gazth-Sonika and before you start on how different you are. She knows and understands, but that doesn't stop her from loving you. Now do you want a drink? I've got three drink orders to fill so far."

Madlax was a bit surprised; Torc or not Margaret had changed. Today's events must've galvanized her into more assertive action from what she figured. "Sure, a pink lady would be nice. Thanks."

"You're welcome. Now go back to the living room and relax. You deserve it and who knows when we might have another chance."

"All right. Just call me when dinner's ready." Madlax said with slight smile.

"Okay." Margaret said cheerfully as she headed to the kitchen.

When she got there she made sure that Elenore knew that she was behind her.

"Smells good Elenore."

"Thanks Margaret, it will be done in a few minutes.

"When you get a chance could you help me make a few drinks? I figured Miss Hayward could use one."

"I can understand, so what does she want."

"A white Russian."

"Oh those are easy to make. What does everyone else want?"

"A Mai Tai, a whiskey sour and a pink lady. To be honest I have no idea what any of them are other than they're types of drinks."

"It's okay Margaret; I've had to learn to make drinks in case we had company that wanted them."

"Vanessa drinks."

"She only drinks wine and I leave her the bottle." Elenore said with a smirk.

Margaret looked at the liquor cabinet and then turned back to Elenore a bit saddened.

"I think you had better have a few yourself. I get the feeling and not just from the Torc but something tells me you're going to need it."

Elenore looked at Margaret with an "I know I'm going to need it" look then she turned back to cooking. "I really don't like drinking in front of you...I..." Elenore began then she cut off.

Margaret was going to reply then Elenore's apron blurred and it was torn and there was a huge blood stain on it. Margaret realized what Elenore was trying to say; that day in the jungle and in that field hung on her like an albatross. Then it blurred back to normal. She could feel that Elenore took some comfort from wearing the apron as Margaret realized that Elenore's universe had changed just as much as hers did...

Ten minutes later as they sat; the mood around the dinner table was a bit somber.

Other than complements the group pretty much kept quiet.

After dinner Madlax and Three Speed excused themselves to have a talk in another room.

Margaret, Nadie and Ellis were talking to Jodie about staying the night which surprisingly got little resistance from her.

When the front bell rang Limelda checked who was at the door. She came back with Walter in tow.

Walter, Meg, Margaret, and Elenore went to the east wing kitchen. Before they got there the Torc dimly glowed. Then they all saw standing in the hall two figures; a young man dressed in a butler's uniform and an older woman dressed in an older version of Elenore's uniform.

Walter froze as he gazed upon the pair then he trembled out one word. "Mother!?"

Meg's eyes widened as she recognized both figures. Then she looked at Walter then back at the pair.

"Margaret, the Torc is glowing!" Elenore quietly exclaimed.

"This must be something important otherwise why would the Torc show us this." Margaret replied a bit confused but figuring it was something very important.

The older woman straightened out young Walter's uniform.

"I'm fine mother..." Young Walter protested.

"I know. But you know how your father is." Young Walter's mother said in an understanding tone.

"Yes, I know. It seems that I can't seem to please him. He doesn't give Meg half the hard time he does me..."

"Well sweetie you're going to be head of the Baker family when your father retires. Our family has served the Burton estate for a thousand years. So your father wants you to do the best job you can so we continue to serve. As for your sister..." Young Walter's started to say but she was interrupted by footsteps. She looked to see a tall red haired young woman walking towards them.

"Walter, go get your father, tell him to call the police and get my gun!!! Move now!!!" Young Walter's mother pushed him down the hall keeping herself between Walter and the young woman. Young Walter ran down the hall past Margaret and the others.

"Hello Elenore, it's a pleasure to finally meet you." The young woman said pointing a gun at the elder Elenore.

"I don't believe I have the pleasure..." Elenore responded.

"Pardon my manners, you can call me Altena."

"Well Altena, I assume the council sent you."

"Quite correct, the council was amazed that you eluded them for so long. But then again that's what one would expect from the woman who was one half of Noir."

Elenore slowly tensed up. "Well, you got me at last. Just leave my family alone; they know nothing..."

Then Elenore sprang into action but before she could get to Altena she was shot six times. As Elenore fell to the floor she had a smile on her face as she looked down the hall.

"MOTHER!!!" Walter shouted as he rushed for his mother but he went right through them both.

Altena could hear footsteps coming quickly and she didn't have time to reload so she ran in the direction she came from till she was out of sight.

"ELENORE!!!" John Baker yelled as he ran to his dying wife.

"MOTHER!!!" A younger Meg and Walter cried as they ran up with Walter carrying a first aid kit.

"Hang on Elenore. Please don't leave me. Please don't die..." John pleaded as he held her hand as the blood was pouring out of her wounds.

"Are...the children... safe?" Elenore gasped.

"Yes the children are safe."

"Good...I...love you J..." Elenore said then she died her hand slipping from John's grasp.

Then all four disappeared and the Torc stopped glowing.

"I understand..." Elenore said sadly.

"Understand what sweetie?" Meg asked before turning to an angry Walter. His hands were shaking in rage and grief.

"Why he wanted me to look after Margaret." Elenore replied.

"You were in his eyes the only connection to his wife. Seeing you had her name and you do look a lot like her." Margaret sadly added.

"Damn her! She killed mother and now the bitch has dug her claws into Elenore!" Walter angrily interrupted without really talking to anyone.

"What are you talking about Walter?" Meg asked trying to calm Walter. The Torc sent unseen calming waves out and Walter began to calm down.

"Earlier a mutual friend needed to hack into a few Soldat databases. He found some disturbing data..." Walter began before Meg cut him off.

"Before you go on, Elenore and Margaret need to know the truth especially if that woman is involved."

Meg said before turning to Elenore and Margaret. "The truth is; our mother was an assassin for the Soldats. She was part of a two woman team known as Noir. Apparently something happened that made our mother run away and go into hiding. As she was on the run she met and fell in love with our father.

All we know about the Soldats is what our mother told us, even though our father didn't want us to know. She told us in case something like we just saw happened. The short version; the Soldats have been around for a thousand years even predating the mafia and other known crime groups. It's whispered that they had a hand in the founding of Nafrece. If your grandfather didn't pull what he pulled I would've told you when you became an adult." Meg said with the last part directed at Elenore.

"Better late than never, but what does this Altena want with Elenore? Didn't she do enough when she shot your mother in cold blood?" Margaret asked sadly looking at Meg then Elenore.

"I'm betting the info Walter got may shed some light on the subject. Elenore are you okay?"

Elenore stood stunned. The revelations and what she witnessed threw her for a major loop. It didn't help that she still had a huge hole in her memory.

"I'm sorry watching grandma die like that reminded me of when grandpa died in front of me. I didn't want him to die or leave me too." Elenore said in a melancholic tone while tears flowed down her cheeks. Margaret held Elenore close. "I miss him too..." Margaret said sadly neither of them noticing that Walter was getting upset.

"Why don't you two go in the kitchen and wait for us. Meg said to Margaret and Elenore. The pair went into the kitchen and then Meg turned to Walter. She got close to Walter within whisper distance.

"Look Walter, seeing that upset me as well. But neither of us can change the past... Despite your opinion of father you have to realize those two girls loved him regardless of what he did. So keep your opinion to yourself for now okay please Wally?" Meg whispered as she hugged Walter.

"You know that's the first time in a long time that you called me that Meggy Peggy. All right I'll tone down the contempt. But you need to see this data before you show it to Elenore and Margaret."

"I know you mentioned Altena. What does she have to do with Elenore?"

Walter showed Meg a piece of paper with certain parts highlighted. What Meg saw stunned her; if this data was correct Altena had Elenore murder seven people, plant listening devices all within a seven year period. Altena's orders stopped in mid two thousand and nine with the reason being listed as "Sanctioned Sapling disruption at the Manor".

"This why I want that medical file as well. That cunt had something done to Elenore and I have a good idea what that is. For the time being keep her away from any phones. You might have to take her with you for Margaret and the others sake." Walter said in angry but concerned tone.

"What do we tell Elenore? Hi sweetie, guess what. You planted spy devices in your home and murdered people by the orders of your grandma's killer. Oh I'm sure that's going to go over well. Does that data say anything about her child? I wouldn't doubt that Altena had a hand in my grandchild's murder."

Walter shook his head in denial. "I wouldn't doubt it either but I didn't see any data regarding her. As for Elenore why don't ask her yourself, she's standing right behind you." Walter said as he saw Elenore walking up behind Meg.

"Is what you and Uncle Walter said true mom?" Elenore asked in sadness and horror.

"I'm afraid so sweetie." Meg replied.

Elenore hung her head down low. "How could I do such things...?" Elenore began before Margaret grabbed her by the arms and shook her.

"Elenore, listen to me. I don't think you did any of those things under your own free will. Remember what Lady Rhiannon said. And remember what Friday Monday did to me. I bet that lady did the same thing to you. As for the devices, it's okay. Limelda and Madlax took care of them. Once we get the file we'll find what she did to you and Margaret. So please for yours and mine sakes don't beat yourself up."

Elenore thought for a bit and then replied. "You're right Margaret but I still feel terrible. I can only imagine what you must think of me now."

"Elenore, you're not the first person in this family with blood on their hands... I don't think any less of you my big sister. And I love you." Margaret responded as she hugged Elenore.

"I love you too Margaret. But Uncle Walter is right. I might have to for the safety everyone here leave the house."

"I understand. Do what you have to. And before you ask I'll have Madlax or Vanessa to go get you when Nakhl finds Alice."

"Okay ladies, I have a file to go pick up. Elenore for the time being just stay away from phones just in case. I'll be back..." Walter said as he began to leave.

"All right, see you soon Uncle Walter..." Elenore said with sympathy for her uncle. Knowing that watching what he just had seen saddened and angered him.

Meg stopped Walter and whispered a few things to Walter. Then Walter turned to Elenore. "The tacos are on the counter, right?" He asked.

"Yes Uncle Walter they're on the counter. Are you bringing Vanessa back with you?" Elenore replied.

"Of course, we may be a little late though..." Walter added as he began to leave again.

Back in the living room; "Nadie...the bracelet is glowing again...oops it stopped." Ellis said to Nadie who was deep in thought.

Nadie's train of thought was interrupted by the front doors opening and closing. Margaret came into the living room soon after.

"I'm sorry we took so long...the Torc glowed and showed us a vision." Margaret said in an apologetic tone.

"The Bracelet glowed too then it stopped. Maybe it was reacting to the Torc." Ellis replied.

"So what did the Torc show you?" Nadie asked innocently.

Margaret hung her head a little low. She didn't want to lie to her new friends but there were things that were better left unsaid.

"The Torc showed us the murder of Elenore's grandma by a Soldat."

Ellis and Nadie were saddened and shocked.

"If Walter saw that...I assume that was him leaving just now."

"Oh, that's right. You know Mr. Baker."

"Yeah, I do. We've met each other at international conferences. He did say one time that his mom was shot." Jodie replied, her voice a little slurred.

Margaret knew it was the alcohol talking. She could feel the pain Jodie was feeling and her heavy drinking was her attempt to numb the pain, just like Elenore...

"Hey Blueeyes, you look a little tired there...maybe you should go to bed." Nadie said trying to defuse a situation before it started. Margaret caught what Nadie was trying to do and asked the Torc to sent waves of slumber to Jodie. But she didn't need to; Jodie had all ready passed out.

"We're sorry about that." Ellis began.

"It's okay...I understand. Let's get her to bed. I'll show you to a room." Margaret said relieved that nothing was said that would be regretted later.

Ellis and Nadie picked up Jodie and followed Margaret to a guest room where they laid her down on the bed. After they made Jodie comfortable they left the room.

"I gather something the vision mentioned something that would've upset Blueeyes?" Nadie asked after they were back in the living room.

"Yes, it did..." Margaret replied with her head hung low.

"Say no more...I understand..." Nadie replied.

"Understand what Nadie?" Ellis asked.

"It's family business. And we should keep our noses out of it." Nadie said trying to explain.

"I don't remember sticking our noses in anything. If we did wouldn't we smell something?" Ellis replied.

Margaret and then Nadie laughed. "I'll explain later Ellis..."

"Yes sir!" Ellis replied.

Across town Nakhl was from the shadows watching Alice sing.

"An interesting song...Canta per me. She sings very beautifully, a pity Elenore Baker doesn't sing. If Alice's ability is any indication...then again I don't believe I've heard her sing. Perhaps I should ask her to sing the next we meet." Nakhl thought to herself.

She waited for Alice to finish and then she stepped from the shadows. "That was very beautiful, but there was sadness in your voice." Nakhl said sincerely.

Alice was taken aback a bit; Nakhl had approached unseen and unheard. Plus there was that feeling that there was something familiar about this woman.

"Thank you, that's my favorite song out all the songs the nun taught me." Alice answered keeping an eye on Nakhl and glancing to the left.

"Well that answers that question. Though she seems relaxed she's ready for action. I must do this carefully..." Nakhl thought to herself.

"What other songs do you know?" Nakhl asked noticing someone approaching from the left.

Alice was about to answer when throwing knives hurled towards them. Alice easily dodged and Nakhl caught the one headed to her.

Nakhl sighed as Chloe lunged from the shadows towards them.

"You again..." Alice spat at Chloe.

"Thank you for the weapon I was feeling a bit naked without one." Nakhl said nonchalantly.

Chloe pulled out more knives and the battle was joined...

Mireille looked at her watch and frowned. They had gotten in easily, as per Badgis' assurances the security system was down and so was the power for most of that part of the hospital. The first complication came when they file two files with the same name. So they took both...Mireille reasoned that Badgis would figure it out.

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The second came when the power came back on as they were heading to where the Soldats couldn't make too much of a fuss. The security system was out of commission and they weren't in any area where they wouldn't trip any alarms.

The third complication was since the security system was out the Soldats sent guards. For the last five minutes it had been a running gunfight.

Thankfully all involved had silencers on their guns. But they were trapped and the only cover they could find was the entrance to the ladies room. Kirika reached into her pocket looking for another clip when she unintentionally slipped on the ring.

When she did that a flood of memories filled her vision. She remembered...she remembered it all. Some of the memories saddened her. Then she looked at the files.

She read both files with inhuman speed. Visions of the past flew past her and she understood.

Mireille wondered what Kirika was doing when they were surrounded by black feathers blocking her vision.

When Mireille could see again they were near their contact point. Kirika handed Mireille the files.

"Mireille before you say anything...listen carefully. I can't explain right now but in five minutes Walter will show up. Give both files to him, you'll find him to be a great ally once he reads them. And whatever you do...don't draw your gun. I finally remember everything Mireille." She pointed at the files. "Elenore was supposed to be the fourth sapling but something happened and Altena lost contact with her. I have some things I must do. I'll return soon...and Mireille...I love you." Kirika said with smile before she disappeared into the darkness. Mireille was left standing confused. First it was that little teleport (?) trick and then Kirika giving what was for her a lengthy speech. Then disappearing not before uttering three words she thought Kirika would never utter "*I love you.*" .

As she walked to the contact point she read the files. There was a lot medical terminology she didn't understand but in both files Altena's name was mentioned and that got her attention.

When she got there she waited when a thought crossed her mind. How did Kirika know who was coming and who was Walter anyway?

Chapter 19. The Downpour begins

Mireille sat in the far corner of the diner away from the windows. She had made it there with a couple of minutes to spare. Her cell phone rang. She answered and recognized the voice as the man from Badgis' place. "*Could this be Walter?*" Mireille thought to herself.

"Listen carefully, the meet has been compromised. See the two men in suits sitting at the counter."

Mireille glanced to see the two men sitting at the counter sipping tea. "Good so here's what you do. So walk out of the diner and turn right. Walk to the end of the street and look for my car. Go now!"

The man hung up. Mireille left the money for her tea and casually walked out the diner. She turned right and began to walk down the street. There was no traffic and no other people. She heard footsteps behind her. She pulled out her compact mirror and used it to see the two men from the diner were following her.

She quickened her pace and the men did the same while drawing their guns. Mireille had to fight against every instinct to draw her gun but she remembered Kirika's warning. "*Whatever you do don't draw your gun.*"

Putting trust in Kirika's words she began to sprint down the sidewalk the men in close pursuit. As they began to aim their pistols, in quick succession they both fell to the ground with a bullet to the head. As Mireille approached the corner a green El Dorado sped up to her with the front passenger side door open. "Get in!" The man shouted and she practically leapt in and they sped off.

"Sorry about this, Enfant caught wind of our operation and they sent those two to intercept you. What happened to your partner?" The man asked. Mireille began to have suspicions about the man.

"Your name wouldn't happen to be Walter by any chance?" Mireille asked in return.

"Yes, my name is Walter. I would like to know how you know that considering neither me nor Badgis gave my name." Walter asked.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you." Mireille replied.

"Trust me, after what I saw tonight I would believe just about anything. So tell the tale if you please." Walter responded.

Mireille told of the black feathers and the silver ring with the bird on Kirika's finger.

"*I guess Meg was right, those artifacts are powerful.*" Walter thought to himself.

"So where is she now?" Walter asked.

"I don't know she disappeared before we supposed to meet with you. I have a feeling you know more than you let on." Mireille replied.

"Let's put it this way, we may have a common enemy Miss Bouquet. Does the name Altena ring a bell? She's the one who put the hit out on you and your partner. If you don't believe me you take a look at the data right there." Walter said pointing to a small pile of papers next to him. Mireille looked at them and was shocked. There in black and white were Altena's orders for the sanctioning of Kirika and herself.

"*She fell in that pit of lava; then again we didn't see her go into the lava. I should've known just by seeing Chloe. Damn! That explains a lot.*" Mireille thought to herself. "So why are you interested in these files?" Mireille asked when they got to a stop light.

"That bitch shot my mother in cold blood. Drugged my niece and killed my grand niece. That file has the medical information I need so I can reverse the conditioning. I see you have two files."

"There were two files with the same name so we took both. The women in these files are related."

"Thanks. Yes one is my mother and other is..."

"Your niece...are you a Soldat?"

"No I'm not. A long time ago my mother was one half of Noir. Something happened to her partner and she ran. It took twenty years for the Soldats to find her. Now they've dug their claws into my niece."

Mireille was stunned yet again. It would explain Altena's interest in Walter's niece and why she had Chloe following them. *"Elenore was supposed to be the fourth sapling..."* Mireille remembered.

"You and I should have a talk."

"Let me find a safe spot and we'll talk."

"You'll find him to be a great ally..." Mireille remember Kirika's words. *"He's bent on going after Altena. If he wants to kill her...fine with me. A win-win for me..."* Mireille thought to herself.

An hour later outside the Burton Mansion Badgis and Vanessa were sitting in his car.

"Thanks Badgis for dropping me off, but couldn't we have waited for Walter?"

Badgis had a concerned look on his face. "Something's happened; Walter should've come back or gave us a call. I hate when he goes silent like this."

"Are you working for Nafrece Intelligence too?" Vanessa asked a bit surprised.

"Officially I'm a computer science professor on retainer for Nafrece Intelligence. Unofficially I'm a member of Echo."

Vanessa was surprised but not entirely. She knew he was part of an "underground resistance" that was fighting against *Enfant*. "Why tell me this?"

Badgis looked Vanessa square in the eye and answered. "Because like it or not Vanessa; you're in deep, not as deep as your friend Elenore but deep enough."

Vanessa had a concerned look on her face. Badgis in an assuring tone said. "Don't worry Walter isn't going to put a bullet in your head or something. Knowing him he'll mostly put you on "retainer" status or have you join Echo outright." Then Badgis grumbled. "But he loves putting on a "show"."

"Was Meg a part of Echo too?"

Badgis was about to answer when his cell phone went off.

Badgis answered. "Hello."

After a few seconds he spoke again. "Where have you been? We're in front of Burton Mansion."

Badgis nodded and gave a few "Uh-huhs." "Do you want me to stick around?"

After a brief silence Badgis spoke before he hung up. "Could you please send someone to check my place out, just in case?"

Badgis smiled as he heard his answer. "Thanks, I'll talk to you later."

Then he turned to Vanessa. "Walter said he'll be back at the mansion in twenty minutes. He's got what he needed."

Briefly looking at the mansion she responded. "Well that's good. I better get in before they start getting worried."

"Okay, you take care and stay safe. Oh, could you tell Elenore I liked her tacos. They're better than the place down the street from my house." Badgis said with a smile as Vanessa was beginning to get out of the car.

"I will and you stay safe as well." Vanessa said as she closed the car door.

As Badgis drove off Vanessa looked forlornly at the mansion. What she now knew saddened her. Walter told her of his mother's murder and her connection to the Soldats. *Enfant* once had its claws in Margaret and now the Soldats had theirs in Elenore. Vanessa wondered if any of them (herself included) would live through this. Vanessa heard movement behind her; she quickly spun around to see Nakhli. But Nakhli was injured and covered with small cuts and a huge gash in her side. She had done her best to stop the bleeding. Vanessa looked at her in shock from what she had heard about Nakhli she was hard to injure. The fact that she was heavily injured said about the fight she was in.

"Hello Vanessa Rene. Pardon my appearance, but I must speak with Elenore Baker." Nakhli said in a pained voice.

"Let's get you inside first and somebody take a look those wounds." Vanessa said as she rapidly approached.

"I will...be fine..." Nakhl began but she began to lose consciousness and Vanessa caught her. The doors to the mansion opened and Madlax came flying out.

"Madlax help me get Nakhl inside!" Vanessa said urgently.

Madlax was surprised to see Nakhl injured, never mind in the condition she was in. The pair brought Nakhl inside.

"Margaret get Ellis now!" Madlax shouted up the stairs, Madlax heard a faint "right..." before she heard footsteps.

"Who's Ellis? We need to call an ambulance." Vanessa said in while trying to make Nakhl comfortable.

"Trust me on this Vanessa." Madlax replied as they heard footstep racing down the stairs.

Ellis and Margaret rushed to them. The Bracelet glowed briefly and then stopped.

"Can you heal her Ellis?" Margaret asked.

Ellis smiled as she laid her hands on Nakhl and her wounds instantly healed.

"That's amazing!" Vanessa said with astonishment.

The Bracelet spoke through Ellis. "Ah about time you showed up." Then Ellis took off the Bracelet and grabbed Vanessa's wrist and placed the Bracelet on her wrist.

Vanessa stood there briefly as flood of information hit her all at once.

"Vanessa, are you alright?" Margaret asked with concern.

"Actually, I'm fine. Thank you Margaret." Vanessa said to Margaret then turning to Ellis. The Bracelet spoke through Vanessa. "Thank you Ellis for bearing the bracelet this far. As I promised, you and your loved ones will be free from your enemies." Vanessa then placed her hand upon Ellis' head and she began to glow. "Safe journey and Bright Blessings Child of Flowers." Ellis smiled as the tears flowed down her cheeks. Margaret hugged her in comforting embrace.

Elenore and Meg were in Elenore's room packing a suitcase.

"Sweetie, you and I are going to have to do some shopping." Meg said as she looked through Elenore's closet and seeing her high school uniform, a teal dress and great many maid's uniforms.

"*Father, were you trying to mold Elenore into mom?*" Meg sadly thought as she saw the number of uniforms.

Elenore was going to reply but she was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Enter." Elenore said and Nadie came in.

"Hi Nadie, what can I do for you."

"I wanted to say goodbye before you left. I'm not really good at these kinds of things...especially with..."

Elenore hugged Nadie warmly. "Thank you Nadie. You two take care and contact me once in a while. " Elenore wrote her email and cell phone number on a piece of paper and handed to Nadie.

"Thanks, it's been nice meeting the both of you." Nadie said trying to hold back the tears. Meg hugged Nadie as well.

Another knock at the door interrupted them. "Enter." Elenore said wondering who it was.

Margaret stuck her head in long enough to say. "Elenore, could you come to the living room. Nakhl has some news."

"Did Miss Nakhl find Alice?" Elenore asked.

"Yes and no. I'll let Nakhl explain it. Oh by the way I loaned her some clothes...hers were well..."

"I'll be right there Margaret." Elenore replied wondering what Margaret meant by that answer.

Elenore, Margaret, Meg and, Nadie all went to the living room.

Nakhl was sitting down sipping her tea when they came in the room. She placed the cup on the saucer and rose from her seat. They all noticed that Nakhl was wearing some of Margaret's clothing.

"Miss Nakhl are you all right?" Elenore asked wondering what had happened.

"I'm sorry Elenore Baker that I don't have any good news to share. I had finally found Alice, but I was interrupted."

"By what?" Madlax asked coming into the room.

Nakhl described Chloe which Limelda and Madlax recognized. Nakhl told in graphic detail the three way battle between Alice, Chloe, and herself.

"At least we know her name now." Margaret said glancing at Elenore who was now deep in thought.

"Apparently I either knew this person or have heard of her. Alice seems to know her, there's a good chance on a subconscious level I knew her. Margaret said you have an idea Miss Nakhl, may I ask what it is?"

Nakhl smiled. "I assume that you know the link between Madlax and Margaret Burton. So I was wondering if you had the same kind of link with Alice."

Elenore thought for a bit and then answered. "Don't I need the "Gift" or something like that?"

"Normally yes, but with the way Alice brought into this world there might be that chance. With your permission I would like to try something."

"Well...if it would help find Alice faster, I'll agree. What do you want me to do?"

"Sing."

"Sing?"

"Yes sing."

Elenore felt a little nervous and it showed. Margaret sent unseen calming waves towards Elenore.

"I'm not used to singing in front of other people."

"If you wish you can close your eyes."

"Okay, is there any song you want me to sing?"

"Please sing *Canta per me*." Nakhl noticed Elenore's eyes light up; at least this was a positive sign.

"Alright I will." Elenore closed her eyes and began to sing. Nakhl held out her palm towards Elenore.

For the next couple of minutes everyone listened to Elenore sing. When she was finished she opened her eyes and saw her mother wipe a tear from her eye, Nakhl smiling and the rest of the group astonished.

"Elenore that was beautiful! How come I've never heard you sing?" Margaret asked wondering what other talents Elenore had hidden from her.

"I sang when I was alone in the house. It helped me when I was cleaning or doing the laundry."

"Even with your memory loss, you remembered that song."

"What do you mean Miss Nakhl?" Elenore asked a bit surprised.

"When I found Alice earlier she was singing that exact same song. It seems some nun taught you that song. The memory of the song remained. I assume that song is your favorite."

"Yes...yes it is. For some reason I remember the words but not by who taught me it." Elenore responded and a slight frustrated frown.

"That song is the link between Alice and yourself Elenore Baker."

"I see, but how does that help us? I don't have the "Gift"."

"I know, but there's a way you can detect Alice."

"Let us go to another room and I'll show you a way to do so."

"Alright, we'll go to the kitchen." Elenore said as she led Nakhl to the kitchen.

When they left Margaret's expression saddened.

"What's wrong Margaret?" Vanessa asked.

"Have you ever heard her sing Vanessa?" Margaret asked.

"No, but I have seen her do ballet a few times. But every time I see her she acts as if she did something wrong."

Margaret didn't want to sound like she was whining. "I wonder why she didn't tell us." Margaret asked wondering what other talents Elenore had. *"Did she hide it in fear of making me feel or look bad? Did my mother do something to make her hide it?"* Margaret sadly thought to herself.

Vanessa sadly looked at Margaret and said nothing.

Nadie stood silently nearby the doorway. She enjoyed Elenore's singing but she got the feeling there was more to this and it was family business. She had enough to worry about. She was deep in thought when Ellis got up and approached her.

"Nadie, the Bracelet is gone." Ellis said with a smile.

"Where did it go?" Nadie asked in surprise not knowing that Vanessa now wore it.

"I have it now Nadie, I'm Vanessa Rene by the way." Vanessa said with a smile.

"Nice to meet you, I've heard a lot about you from Margaret, Madlax, and Elenore." Nadie responded with a grin.

"Oh I can imagine what Elenore said about me." Vanessa said in a mock pout trying to hide a grin.

In the kitchen Elenore turned to NakhI. "Miss NakhI, I really don't think singing a song is going to find Alice." Elenore said in a frustrated tone.

NakhI understood Elenore's frustration at not having the "Gift" and she patiently responded. "I'm quite aware of that, all I need you to do is concentrate on that song. You can sing or hum out loud if you wish as long you focus on it."

"Any particular reason why?" Elenore asked still a bit frustrated.

"Do you want the truth?"

"Yes."

"I do need your assistance. Allow me explain further; by you focusing on the song I can use you as divining rod to find Alice. Plus if Chloe does show up, your presence may throw her off, that and I have faith in your melee skills if it should come to that." NakhI said quite plainly. Elenore had to agree with NakhI on this; she didn't have the "Gift" and NakhI did, plus it was nice to hear NakhI say something about her skills. Also she wanted to know this Chloe as well and ask her a few questions if possible.

"Thank you Miss NakhI for the truth. You do have a good idea and if it finds Alice I'm in. Plus I would like to meet this Chloe as well... We should start tomorrow; perhaps we can ask my mother to help out."

"You're welcome, Elenore Baker. As for your mother I don't see why not. Could you please focus on the song?"

"Oh I see..." Elenore said guessing that NakhI needed to do fine tuning or attuning herself to her.

Elenore focused on the song, quietly humming it with NakhI holding her outstretched palm out.

After a few minutes NakhI stopped. "You can stop for now Elenore Baker."

Elenore stopped humming. "Could you detect Alice?"

"I've sensed her presence but it's a bit faint. My guess she's far from us. I didn't get an idea where she is but it seems she's looking for something or someone."

"Maybe that nun...oh I almost forgot Miss NakhI a package addressed to you came earlier today before we were attacked. It's from Gazth-Sonika."

"Please show me this package."

Elenore took NakhI to where the package was. NakhI looked at it deeply and smiled. She opened it casually and read the letter attached with some concern.

"Is everything alright Miss NakhI?"

"This letter is from Lady Quanzitta. She is informing me that I may not be able to return to Gazth-Sonika for quite some time."

"Why may I ask?" Elenore asked a bit puzzled.

"Lady Quanzitta is moving our people to a safer location, the storm is about to hit Gazth-Sonika."

"Is she worried about a flood?" Elenore asked not getting what NakhI was getting at.

"I have a feeling that it will become clear quite soon." NakhI said then she looked into the box and smiled and quietly said "Thank you Lady Quanzitta.". For with in the box were NakhI's daggers.

She concealed her weapons and folded the note and placed in the shirt pocket.

Elenore and Nakhl heard commotion from the living room. Then they heard Margaret run up.

"Elenore! Nakhl! Come quick!" Margaret said in frightened and saddened tone.

The trio raced to the living room where the television on a news story. India had declared war on Gazth-Sonika and a full scale war was underway.

"The storm has arrived..." Nakhl said and Elenore looked in horror as she got what Quanzitta and Nakhl meant.

"Why would they do that?" Nadie asked a bit confused.

"I can answer that one." Walter said and everybody focused their attention on him.

"Well...Walter..." Meg said in an impatient tone.

"With the data which we discovered; we found out that India is a major Asian stronghold for the Soldats and considering that Enfant is...you do the math." Walter replied.

"So the Soldats are using this war as a cover to get at Enfant in Gazth-Sonika, am I correct?" Limelda asked with a bit of anger in her tone.

"Afraid so and it gets worse..." Walter answered in a serious tone.

"How worse Boss man?" Three-Speed asked.

"There are reports of mob violence breaking out all over Europe and the America's."

"Looks like the Soldats are making all out attack on Enfant. I can imagine the havoc on the net right now." Three-Speed said referring to Badgis.

"Don't worry that's being covered. Three-Speed I need you to hit on your contacts and see what they know. After I wrap up things here I'll join you all in the field."

"Got it Boss man. Madlax we'll talk later. And Madlax..."

"Yes Three-Speed?"

"Be careful..." Three-Speed said then he quickly left.

"What did you find out Uncle Walter?" Elenore asked apprehensively seeing the two files in Walters' hand.

"This file is your grandma's medical file." Walter said placing an older looking folder on the table.

"This is your file Elenore. It confirms my suspicions; you chemically "conditioned" to a sleeper agent or a "sapling" as it says here. Here's the real sad part; the chemicals used on you caused your child to be born prematurely and she was poisoned on top of that. All at the order of that miserable b... I'm sorry...I..."

"It's okay Uncle Walter; I feel the same way right now." Elenore said with a very angry tone and tears running down her cheeks.

"If she's a sleeper agent, then what are the triggers?" Meg asked.

Walter focused his attention on Meg. "Would you believe a song; it's written down right here and there's another component. A tune from this type of pocket watch." Walter pulled a out picture of a silver pocket watch with two women holding swords.

"Oh my God! That's the ..." Meg began.

"I know...Elenore do you have a watch like this in your possession?" Walter asked.

"I'm not sure..." Elenore said not sure if she even had the watch.

Vanessa stretched out her hand and then turned to Margaret. "Margaret, in Elenore's room in the closet on the right side there's a little cubbyhole with a false panel. Open it and you'll find the watch and whatever you do; do not open it. At least until Elenore is safely out of the house and hearing range." Vanessa said.

"Got it." Margaret said as she raced to Elenore's room.

Madlax looked at the song; it was the same one she had heard in her vision!

"Vanessa, I've heard this song before! You know the weird visions I've gotten?"

"Yes, we all thought it was the Torc working through you through Margaret."

"It's the same song the little girl in my vision sang."

"You know, I have a feeling that little girl may be Alice." Vanessa said thoughtfully.

Elenore looked at the song in the file. "You're right Madlax, it is that same song! So what do we do now?"

"I'm sorry Elenore, you've have to leave for yours and our sakes." Margaret sadly said holding the watch tightly.

"It's alright Margaret...I understand...it just makes finding Alice more imperative."

"I'll go get your bag sweetie, and then we can leave." Meg said sadly.

Walter took the pocket watch and followed Meg. Once they were inside Elenore's room. Meg turned to Walter and asked. "Is it really...that watch?"

Both Meg and Walter looked at the watch, with Walter looking at it a lot more carefully. He took the watch and shoved it under a pillow muffling the sound as he opened it. Walter held his ear closely to the pillow as the tune inside the watch played and then stopped.

"Did you hear anything?" Walter asked without looking at Meg.

"No I didn't. Why did you open it?"

Walter carefully took it out from underneath the pillow and did a closer inspection.

"To answer your question, I needed to check something."

"What? Spit it out already."

Walter showed Meg the writing inside the cover. "To my darling Elenore. Yours forever. Love C."

"Is that mom's watch?!" Meg asked in astonishment.

"Yes it is. Mother showed it to me when father wasn't around in case I ever saw another like it."

"How did Elenore, find never mind get mom's watch?!"

"I'm sure this "Alice" knows. You better take Elenore with you now. I'll contact you if I find out anything else."

"Okay, we'll talk about this later. Leave the watch here Walter...you don't want to get caught with that."

Walter sighed and put the watch in a drawer in Elenore's desk. Meg grabbed Elenore's bag and they both headed out the room.

When they came out Elenore was hugging Ellis and then Margaret. It was evident that mood was somber.

"Okay sweetie, let's go." Meg said to Elenore.

"Alright I'm ready." Elenore replied in a distressed tone.

"Don't worry; you'll be back here before you know it, okay." Meg said trying to cheer Elenore up.

Madlax and Limelda went to see if anyone was watching. When they gave the all clear signal Meg and Elenore went to the car and they drove off.

Margaret forlornly watched from the window as they drove off.

Nadie carefully approached Margaret. "Ellis and I are going to bed...good night Margaret."

Margaret quickly turned around knowing that Nadie was trying to excuse them from the room so she could be alone. "Good night Nadie and Ellis."

Nadie and Ellis went to bed leaving Vanessa and Walter who was leaving. She could understand why he didn't want to be here and didn't take it personally. She could sense he was beating himself up for all what happened and she could sympathize with him. Walter silently left as he merely gave a causal wave good bye. Nakhl had left earlier after watching the news story, she couldn't blame her either. As she said *"the storm has arrived."*

"I don't want to talk about it Vanessa, at least now right now." Margaret said to Vanessa.

"Don't stay up too late Margaret. Okay?"

"Sure..." Margaret said as it began to rain outside.

¹ There's no official last name given for Nadie or for Ellis in the series. So for the purpose of this fanfic they've been given the surnames as shown in the text. And Nadie's last name is a more or less a shout out... *wink*