

## 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... *"I guess times change; if you are in a situation like ours, you can only think of minimizing the dangers."* Mireille thought to herself.

"Kirika..." She called. "We need to get out of this place before it gets crowded. You can sleep on 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!" She said quickly rising out of bed.

Kirika said hurriedly. "I'm up." She 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." "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 five hundred yur 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 parts lie 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'm lost. But have you seen my mommy?"

Kirika looked down keeping a hand on her pistol, she saw a small girl about nine years old with green eyes and short brown hair.

"No we haven't seen your mommy. Go ask someone else." Mireille said irritated by the interruption. (Ironically Kirika met the older version of this girl yesterday and was about to shoot her then too.) "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 are 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 a 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 grandpa 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 today. If I can just stop my head from pounding..." She said quietly to herself as a part of her reached out...

Across town Carrosea 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 Miss 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 she heard 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...I'll...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..." Limelda went to the living room and waited for breakfast. Vanessa looked toward the kitchen and gathered what courage she could muster before talking to Elenore again.

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. Vanessa went the entrance and knocked on the doorframe. "Elenore?" She said trying to make Elenore heard her and also let her know it was her behind her.

Elenore looked at Vanessa. "Miss Vanessa, unless you need something I suggest that please wait in the living room. Breakfast will be done shortly." Elenore said still a little irritated.

"I just wanted to see if you're okay. I'll just go and wait..." Vanessa said before going to the living room.

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 ten hours she still felt sleepy. She did hear Elenore's wake up call, somewhere between the weird dreams 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... or that was Elenore was trying to tell herself.

*"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.

A couple hours before 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 on the street. Then everything turned black.

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 guessing it would be good for Elenore to get out.

“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 considering she was hired. 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 Miss 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 number 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 Miss 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 having to deal with nightmares of her own.

“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...”

“And how much do you get paid Elenore?” Vanessa probed Elenore.

“About hundred forty grand a year. Minus taxes and insurance of course.” Elenore said in a straightforward fashion.

“You make more than I did when I was working for Bookwald. That settles it, your treating this time Elenore.” Vanessa said with a mock pout.

“You would've probably would've made more if you worked a few more hours...” Elenore teased back.

"I had a busy schedule...plus there was that resort." Vanessa said a bit defensively.

"Hacking into your own company's computer isn't considered work. Not to mention the breach of trust issue...but I did enjoy going swimming with Miss Margaret."

"Ah ha. I knew you had good time. But I have to know something."

"Yes Miss Vanessa?"

"Where you wearing your bathing suit the entire time we going up there?"

"Of course not. I do go to the bathroom and I changed there."

"Oh okay, I mean you got changed really quickly..."

Madlax chuckled as she heard Vanessa and Elenore continue to go back and forth. In some ways it reminded her of when she was being trained or on a few assignments. She remember the camaraderie fondly, she wondered where Luciano or her mentor Duvet were.

As she was 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? I know the blond is prostitute or something...I guess the Japanese girl is her pimp..."* Madlax thought to herself as they drove on.