

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 after the "incident" and by some miracle it remained intact. In my case I couldn't leave Gazth-Sonika at least mentally (and that caused a lot 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, Grandpa..." 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 quite 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 warmly but with an undertone of cunning. "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."

"Lady Altena we are in Nafrece. Do you mean the capital?" Chloe asked wondering if she meant the country which they were already in the capital city which in her opinion was unimaginatively of the same name.

"The capital of course, my dear Chloe." Altena answered with a smile sharing the same opinion as Chloe. 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! Three hundred 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.

"That and you dress like a cheap hooker." Madlax added that thought unspoken.

"You're the cheap one and rather filthy. What are you, some kind of female bum or something?" 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.

"Wait a second did she call me a bum?!" Madlax asked herself as it dawned on her what Mireille said.

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; Carrossea 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, Elenore Baker, 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.

All was calm.

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. Laetitia said 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. "Well my child, it seems that we will meet again." 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. When she looked at the picture of Elenore she stared at it for awhile trying to remember if she had seen her someplace else, a long time ago.

She looked at the photos again 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 keep 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 warmth 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 a neatness as well, her shawl and maid uniform are 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 twinge; 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 even though there was something about her that was familiar. 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 - unnoticed. 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 very 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, not even during the twelve year he was by her side did he utter a single word. Now he was speaking and she wondered if Carrossea's resurrection also resurrected him in a way. With tears of joy 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*!! 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. But do you think this is a good idea?" Laetitia nodded as she held Poupee tight. Poupee quietly sighed and thought to himself. "*You're not even listening to me are you?*"

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." Elenore said as she looked for Laetitia as saw her by the door.

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

"I know this must be very exciting to you. But 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.

"Can I go with you Elenore?" Laetitia asked with puppy dog eyes.

"I'm sorry but you need to stay with Miss Margaret."

"Don't worry we go there soon. We'll meet you there Elenore." Margaret replied and Elenore went towards 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 would love to stay. I heard that you live in a mansion." 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. "Can we go there?" She asked.

Madlax smiled happily and said. "Margaret, I think 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 Nakhil was creeping nearby. But none of this bothered her at all. Though she did wonder why the Gazth-Sonikan woman was here in Nafrece.

"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 as they entered the shop.

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.

Madlax scratched her head in confusion. This was the sort thing an old comrade used to say when she did something that Madlax couldn't understand.

"What are you looking for?" Madlax asked curious still.

"To see how it all will play out. Will the pawn become the queen again? Will the bishops be taken? Or will the knight take the game?" The old man answered enigmatically yet again.

Madlax looked at the old man in utter confusion as his answer confused her even more. So she backed slowly away from him.

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. But not in this current shadow play, at least that was the feeling she got.

"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 it's 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 wanting to get out of the store as fast she could 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...I don't know what she sees in him..." Elenore thought to herself.

"I highly 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 good care of her." She said as she looked at the doll lovingly.

"Did she almost say mommy? 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. And she's my baby." 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 fearing that Poupee would disappear yet again after she reunited with him.

Poupee smiled and replied warmly. "As long as Carrossea lives and I'm still inside I will always 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? What happened?" 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. What triggered that fainting spell baffled her as she sat there. 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 of a 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 really 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 trying now to show the anxiety she was feeling at the moment. “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 on any further. *"But I could've sworn he used those words on me. But it's best I don't mention it for now. I'll just keep a closer eye on Margaret."* She thought to herself. Elenore bowed her head. *"No you're right; you're not a child anymore. Perhaps it's time you did know. But why is it scaring me so much? Am I afraid of the truth? But you do deserve the truth; you gave me that consideration when you told me what had really 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, maybe 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 hoping that he wasn't in trouble.

"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 just might be too late..."* He thought to himself.

"I'm sorry Margaret; but I have some business to attend to Margaret, but it was a great pleasure seeing you again." He said as he briefly held her hand and started to walk off.

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

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

"If you have time, please stop by the mansion. I would like to see you again." Margaret said cheerfully stopping Carrossea briefly long enough for him to reply, hoping that he would show if she invited him.

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. If Elenore realized what was going happen later in the week she would've been a tad kinder to Carrossea.

"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 and silently sighing knowing that he already gave his assurances of his continued presence.

“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? I don't get why she yelled at you?”

Poupee looked at Elenore and then back at Laetitia. “I honestly don't know. But I don't mind her being here, 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...my baby...”

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 a 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 still so scared? I can't turn back now, I just hope...” She walked out to the living room and approached Margaret. “Miss Margaret, may I please have a word with you in private?”

“Alright Elenore.” 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.

“You have to consider that 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 to 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 wanted to give Elenore a comforting hug but it looked like Elenore had more to say.

“As a result Miss Margaret, I’ve been having horrible 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, for 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 rapidly pounding in her chest. Every beat feeling like a sledgehammer of fear and dread as Margaret’s reaction confirmed Elenore’s fear of a worst case scenario. It took all of mental strength just to keep from shaking.

“And also...why, Elenore? Why me?” she asked, raising her head and looking Elenore in the eye now not noticing the fear and anxiety that was gripping her. “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 as Elenore's, 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 deep into her soul.

She tried her hardest to keep herself together after seeing Margaret begin to cry.

She bowed her head in shame and outright fear. "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's questions; my feelings for you grew out from caring for you and that was before we went to Gazth-Sonika. I do sincerely apologize for upsetting you Miss 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." Elenore felt in utter 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. Grandpa must be turning over in his grave. I'm so sorry Grandpa; it seems that even I broke your trust. Question is; what happens now? Please Margaret just don't hit me..."* An anxiety filled 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. Then Margaret walked pass Elenore not even noticing the tiny unconscious flinching that Elenore was doing.

"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 slam 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; she 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. I still love her."

Elenore said back with tears streaming down her face.

"But what if *she* was still around?"

"I think she would hit me and throw me out of the house."

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

"I know she's no long here. I would've been able to say what I said to Margaret."

"But 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."

"And so that part hid behind the Ice Queen persona you use and you let her have it point blank 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 though the running water muffled it somewhat she could hear some rather sad crying. "Elenore are you alright in there?" Madlax asked but it was clear that Elenore was wallowing deep with 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 and out the door." 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.

"And the Ice Queen 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 having an idea on what just happened, also noticing Elenore's eyes.

"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. She could hear her crying in utter misery inside.

"Margaret, what did you do? You were supposed to free her, but the chain is growing longer." Laetitia

thought to herself as Elenore went to the kitchen to cook dinner. In the shared mindscape the chain around Elenore's ankle grew longer and thicker.

"Laetitia what's going on?" Poupee asked in concern as he noticed the chain's transformation and the crying he was hearing.

"The talk Margaret and her had didn't go very well. Margaret left the house upset and Elenore is crying in sorrow."

"You should've told Margaret before they had their talk. Maybe this could've been avoided." Poupee said wondering if Laetitia was even paying attention.

He sighed as Laetitia just looked at Elenore in sympathetic grief.

Laetitia approached Elenore who was looking upset when she briefly heard a part of a song when she stepped on a link of the chain by accident.

"Noir the ancient fate.

Two ladies with blackened hands.

Tied and made by hate.

To protect the peaceful lambs."

Laetitia backed away in shock as the image of young Elenore with a gun flashed in her mind.

She stared at the chain wondering what that song was and the shocking image she saw.

Then she shifted her consciousness back to the real world and headed towards the kitchen.

"*What are you trying to bind Elenore? What is your truth?*" Laetitia thought as she could see Elenore cooking and the mental image of the jungle that surround her.