

Chapter 3. Maiden on a pale horse

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

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

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

"What should I do?" Margaret thought to herself. *"I don't want Elenore to stay angry at me. I just want things to be like they were before. How can I make things better? I don't like this. I wanna go home. Where am I?"* She suddenly realized she had walked further away than she planned.

She figured she would be able to find her way back somehow, but she honestly didn't know where she was right now. "I'm such an idiot... I even managed to get myself lost..." She said to herself in a low tone, not realizing the person approaching her.

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

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

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

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

“First off, Elenore would never hate you, especially not after a declaration like that. When we get to your home; you'll give Elenore the night off and you'll tell her that you insist in case she refuses. I know she doesn't refuse when you insist. Part of the problem I think is that she hides behind her uniform and her professionalism. I know she would really like to tell you her feelings but as you said she works for you and that makes it difficult for her to do so. When you said “you work for me” you backed her into corner she couldn't get out of, so she hid behind her uniform so to speak.” Margaret smiled wiping her tears as they drove back to her home. “Okay, what else do I do?”

“When we go in just remain calm and tell her then I'll handle the rest.” Vanessa replied.

“But what about Madlax she's there as well?” Margaret asked not so sure what to do. Vanessa smiled. “First I'll deal with Elenore and then Madlax, just keep her busy for me will you?” Vanessa said with a smile and a wink.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I'm definitely going to have Margaret take her or tell her to get some outfits for herself.” Vanessa sympathetically thought as she looked in the closet and she pulled out the dress and placed it on the bed.

Elenore had taken off her uniform and was about to reach for the dress when Vanessa stopped her.

“Take that off as well, we're going to eat, not to a warzone.” Vanessa said slightly taken back when she saw the body armor Elenore was wearing. Elenore took off the armor and put on the dress and put on a pair of black low heeled shoes. She stared at herself in the mirror and for a brief moment wondered who

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I insist." Margaret said firmly but warmly.

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

"Did I hear Vanessa just now?" Madlax asked wondering if she was hearing things.

"She was here. Elenore and her are going out. I'm hoping that Vanessa can help Elenore."

"I hope so too, she seemed a bit odd." Madlax replied looking at Margaret.

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

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

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

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

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

"It's a deal, so what's on your mind?" Vanessa said with a caring smile knowing that Elenore's heart was broken.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No offence Elenore, but I kind of figured that you were when I first met you."

Elenore looked at Vanessa in shock. "Really!? Was I that obvious!? I was twelve at the time."

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

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

“Well I needed to use a computer and Margaret was busy on hers. Since you were at school she told me to use yours.”

Elenore sighed.

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

Elenore agreed and they ate.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Pretty out, I've never seen the city like this before.” Elenore said as looked back at the city.

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

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

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

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

“Thanks, I appreciate that.”

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

“I get what you mean and I'll make an effort. Though I don't know what I would do but I'll try.” Elenore grinned. “And at the very least it will get you off my back.”

Vanessa looked at Elenore in mock shock. "Elenore you make me sound like a nag!" She smiled and said noticing the unintentional joke she had just made. "Shall we head back now?" Elenore grabbed her by the arm. "Oh no. You still owe me an explanation and I want to hear it."

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

"What is that?" Elenore asked with concern noticing the torc around Vanessa's neck.

"This is the Torc of Rhiannon. Are you familiar with the legend of Rhiannon?" Vanessa asked a concerned Elenore.

"Not off hand, I think I've heard of her in school." Elenore replied trying to remember if she had heard of her in school.

"I'm not surprised so I'll give you the short version. Long ago in the kingdom of Dyfed, Queen Rhiannon gave birth to a son; however, on the night of the birth, the child disappeared while in the care of six of Rhiannon's ladies-in-waiting. They feared that they would be put to death, and to avoid any blame, smeared blood from a puppy on the sleeping Rhiannon, and lay its bones around her bed. Pwyll the King imposed a penance on Rhiannon for her crime; to remain in the court of Arberth for seven years, and also to sit every day near a horse-block outside the gate telling her story to all that passed. In addition, she was to carry any willing guest to the court on her back. Well to make a long story short she proved her innocence and in remembrance of her ordeal she crafted the Torc and imbued with the power to help ease suffering. Since her ordeal began because of a lie she made so no one could lie in the presence of the bearer of the Torc. And that's the story of the Torc and Rhiannon in a nutshell." Vanessa said knowing that she abridged the legend of the Torc a lot.

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

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

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

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

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

"Elenore get in the car now! I'll explain on the way!" Both of them got in and sped off. A little further down the road they noticed the headlights of another car behind them. "Get your head down Elenore!" Vanessa said as gunshot echoed behind them. Vanessa pulled a very tight curve causing the car following to crash against the guard rail. But another car resumed the chase.

"Who's shooting at us?" Elenore asked wondering if it was Enfant and wondering why she didn't insist on wearing her armor.

For the next mile and an a half Vanessa did her best to dodge the gunfire.

Vanessa wondering for how long she could keep it up plus there was Elenore's safety to consider. So she rolled down her window, pulled out a gun and with a trick reminiscent of Madlax shot the front tire of the car behind them.

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

"Who where those people chasing us Vanessa?" Elenore asked understandably with great concern.

"It must be one of the three groups after the Torc." Vanessa replied not sure who was following them.

"Well who are these groups?" Elenore asked wanting to know if Enfant was after them and wondering if they attacked the mansion.

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

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

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

Elenore's face saddened as it appeared the worst case scenario was coming true. “Now I know why you stayed away. You didn't want us to get involved. But why come back here?”

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

“It's okay. I figured they would show up sooner or later. Carrossea Doone made his presence known, saying that he wasn't working for them. I knew that bastard was lying.” Elenore said a little angrily and picturing herself kicking Carrossea silly.

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

“Please tell me your joking Vanessa.” Elenore said with a little surprise and masked disappointment that she didn't have an excuse to beat the snot out of Carrossea.

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

“I hope so. I am worried if Enfant attacked while we were out.” Elenore said and nodded with a very worried look on her face as they drove home.

“Madlax is there. I'm sure if anyone attacks she'll get them out safely.” Vanessa said trying to reassure Elenore.

Vanessa and Elenore made it back without further incident. After Vanessa parked her car where it couldn't be seen from the street, they went up to the front door. And before they went in they stopped as Elenore fished for her house keys in her purse after she realized she wasn't wearing her usual uniform.

“Before we go in I would to say thank you Vanessa. I really needed that and I hope we can do this again in the future...minus the car chases and shoot outs.”

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

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

“So that's why the body armor, well with Madlax here, she could help you protect Margaret so you don't have to worry about pulling the trigger.” Vanessa said putting a comforting hand on her shoulder. Then stared at Elenore's hands as they briefly turned black for a moment leaving Vanessa quite confused on what she had just witnessed.

“We better get in before they start worrying.” Elenore said as she pulled out the key from her purse.

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

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

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

Laetitia could easily see Margaret's difficulty on bringing the subject so she decided to speak out and make things easier for her. "If this is about Elenore being in love with you, I already know that." Margaret was taken by surprise by her words and suddenly felt that embarrassing feeling coming back. "Wait! How... how could you know about that? Was I the only one who hasn't realized it? Don't tell me you knew about this as well Madlax?" she asked a bit shocked. "Don't be stupid, I already knew that." Madlax replied in a rather confident voice. "I've known for a long time. Vanessa told me that Elenore was gay, plus her actions in Gazth-Sonika were a dead giveaway." Madlax sighed. Suddenly the trio heard a sound from the front door and Margaret ran quickly to the front hall hoping Elenore had returned.

Margaret got to the front just as Elenore and Vanessa walked in. "Welcome home you two!" Margaret cheerfully greeted them as they walked in the doors. "Thank you Miss Margaret." Elenore replied in the same tone. "Thanks Margaret. Could I have a word with you in private, Margaret?" Vanessa asked Margaret. "Umm...sure Vanessa." Margaret replied wondering what Vanessa had to say and then she guessed it had something to do with Elenore. "Vanessa?" Madlax's voice echoed briefly down the stairs as she came down. "Vanessa!" Madlax exclaimed with tears in her eyes. "Where have you been? What happened?" The young blonde asked. Vanessa knew Madlax was here but she was a bit surprised at the reception she got. "I would've never thought I would see you here! Still I'm glad to see you again. What brings you to Nafrece?" Vanessa replied and hugged Madlax warmly. "Well I've been looking for work here. Margaret offered me a place to stay, so I took the invitation to stay while I'm looking." Madlax said. "I'm glad to hear that. I don't want to be rude Madlax but I need to talk to Margaret." Vanessa said with her eyes looking toward Elenore. Madlax picked up on the subtle signal and gave a silent nod that she understood. "No problem, I'll be in the living room." Madlax said as she went back up the stairs and towards the living room. "Do you want some tea Madlax?" Elenore asked as she went behind Madlax. "No it's okay. I'm fine." Madlax replied as she went to the living room. Margaret and Vanessa went to another part the house to have their talk. Elenore followed Madlax to the living room. "Madlax, I want to apologize for my behavior earlier this evening." Elenore said apologetically. "I understand. So don't worry about it. " "Thank you Madlax. May I ask you something? Well more like a couple of some things." "Sure go ahead." "I apologize in advance if my questions seem blunt but I really would like to know." "Okay." Madlax agreed with a little apprehension. "Where were you that day? And what were you doing?" Elenore asked placing one hand over her scar on her back. Madlax again stared into the floor numbly and remorsefully. "Well, I did manage to clear them early. But when Limelda arrived, I couldn't resist. Though I was sorry I was going to be late." Madlax spoke quietly in a confessional tone. "But I needed her; I needed someone to remember me. I wanted her to remember my dance with my guns, my face. I wanted someone to confirm my existence so badly that I forgot you Elenore; I didn't want to be a fake, I didn't want to disappear. I'm sorry." "Please don't think I'm mad at you, I knew the risks when I went with you. I was worried about you and hoped nothing had happened to you. As for what happened to me, there's enough blame to go around including myself..." "Hate to say it Elenore, but I told you, you would die." Madlax said with no satisfaction.

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

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

"Elenore?"

"Yes Madlax?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Do you want a list?" Elenore joked.

Vanessa thought for a few seconds. "Knowing you, you probably already have one." And then she and Elenore laughed.

Laetitia yawned loudly as to get everyone's attention. "I'm starting to feel sleepy already Elenore, could you help me get ready to bed please?" Laetitia asked with a sleepy voice. Sure she was tired from the long day, and it was past the bedtime for a child her age, though the main reason for Laetitia's plea was to leave the scene for the night and give the two of them more privacy, as well as buy Margaret some time to get her act together. Elenore might have realized it right away, expecting no less from Laetitia. But she still indulged the younger one's request; as it was usual for her to see her to bed every night anyway. Even though she was officially off the clock, she didn't mind and she guessed what Laetitia was trying to do.

"Oh course, let's get you to bed." Elenore looked at the clock. "It's way past your bedtime. You should've been in bed hours ago." Laetitia nodded and she let Elenore carry her to her room.

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

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

If it was anyone else's child that had said what Laetitia had said to her Elenore would've been a more than little creeped out. But she knew out the three (?) Burton sisters, she seemed a great deal mature even for her age and got the feeling at least she was concerned with her well being. Elenore tried to think of a reply.

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

"Elenore..."

"Yes Laetitia?" Elenore asked stopping briefly.

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

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

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

"Please remember that when the darkness comes...but I fear the darkness has always been here..."

"Oh, that reminds me, I've wanted to ask about something too Madlax! I mean, I just never understood... who is this Limelda person exactly? How did you meet her? And why was she trying to kill you back then? When we came back to Nafrece and you left with her I thought you two must have become friends. Does she know you're in Nafrece now?" Margaret asked rather innocently. After the moment of light-heartedness between Vanessa and Elenore, Margaret asked an innocent question about Limelda. But the question provoked some serious thought within Madlax, even though Limelda lived with Madlax since the beginning of the Era; she was still in many ways an enigma she couldn't comprehend. "Limelda, she knows I'm in Nafrece. I met her couple of times through my missions; I remember first meeting her on top of a tall building. Who she is? Well she is someone I still do not truly understand." Madlax answered in a slightly perplexed manner. "But she's an honest person, at least with herself anyway." Madlax sighed.

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

Vanessa's feelings about Limelda Jorg were mixed; part of her was angry that she shot her (granted she was aiming for Madlax, but still...) and the fact because she wouldn't leave Madlax alone that Madlax left with her instead of herself. But on the other hand she did help get Elenore to the hospital and provided a copy of the data which proved her parents, Madlax and her innocence. Plus she didn't come with Madlax to Nafrece so maybe she could cut Limelda some slack.

"Honestly Madlax I think you're far better off not being near her. Hopefully I can help you find a suitable job here in Nafrece." Vanessa said to Madlax.

Elenore came back into the living room just when Vanessa had finished talking to Madlax.

"Is that the woman who shot you, Miss Vanessa?" Elenore asked with some concern catching the tail end of the conversation.

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

Elenore hugged Vanessa. "Promise me you won't let it eat at you..."

Vanessa felt Elenore's emotional warmth via the Torc and she smiled and hugged her in return.

"I promise. But seriously you're more you are your real self when you're out of uniform."

"Are we going to start this again?" Elenore said with an eyebrow raised and her head tilted.

Vanessa just shook her head with a smile and Elenore just let it go.

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

“Elenore.”

“Yes Miss Margaret?”

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

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

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

Tears welled up in Elenore's eyes as she smiled.

“I'm sorry for what I said as well. I would never do anything to intentionally hurt you. You mean so much to me and I would do anything if it would make you happy. - The tears slowly rolled down her cheeks. - I remember the first time you said those three words, it had been years since you had spoken but only that one word. It was when my mother died and I was crying in a corner of my room when you walked up and hugged me and said I love you. That day I felt truly loved. I understand and accept that you can't love me the way I wish, but to know that you love me is good enough for me.

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

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

“Thank you Elenore. I love you too. – Then Margaret noticed the questioning look on Elenore's face. – What's wrong?” She asked wondering if her response wasn't enough.

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

"Hmm, that's complicated..." Margaret wondered for a while, feeling far more at ease now, after having cleared things up with Elenore, and having guarantees that there were no hard feelings between them. "I guess you could call it that way; it'd be the best way to describe it in normal terms. You know she's originally a part of me, but she's an entirely different person with an individuality of her own, just like Laetitia. Since we all come from the same place and share this bond it's not too far off to say we're sisters." Margaret concluded in a pleased tone.

"That makes sense."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Elenore just complied and sit by the side of Margaret's bed, facing her, keeping the same warm smile. Margaret leaned over towards her and rested her head on Elenore, pulling her closer into a warm hug and just staying that way for a few seconds before saying anything. "You know, Elenore... I really like to see you like this. You haven't been quite yourself for these last few months and I kinda missed your old

warm self. It's good to have you back. And I don't know if it's like Vanessa said, about the uniform or not, but I'd like you to stay this way, because I really want you to be happy." Margaret said, before slowly letting go of the hug and looking up at her with a sleepy smile. "Good night Elenore! I love you!" Margaret said before leaning back to her pillow, looking forward to sleep. Elenore smiled as she got up from the bed. "I love you too and good night Miss and pleasant dreams." She turned off the light as Margaret's head hit the pillow and then quietly exited the room.

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

Limelda Jorg sneezed; it took her awhile, but she managed to get transport to Nafrece. Limelda Jorg looked at the night sky, the city lights obscured the view plus it was a bit colder than she was used to. She went through customs with no problems (the hefty bribes helped) and retrieved her gear. "*Madlax, you can't run from me. You are Mine now and forever and I WILL find you!*" She thought to herself.

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