

## Chapter 5. Moonlight Tea Party Madlax style

As she closed the door of Margaret's bedroom behind her, she smiled. "Margaret's right, I haven't been myself lately but Vanessa has a good point. When I am out of uniform I'm free to truly be myself.

Perhaps I should ask Margaret for "time" for myself." She thought to herself. Then a small voice echoed in her mind. "*What about your promise to Grandpa?*"

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

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

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

Madlax thought the offer was enticing but had her reservations. "Well, Madlax?" Vanessa asked expectedly.

"I like to but are you sure? I didn't save either of you last time and barely saved Margaret from Friday Monday." Madlax said a little humbly.

"Why don't you try it for a little while? You can leave anytime you want. Does that sound good to you as well Elenore?" Vanessa offered and then she asked Elenore.

"Sounds good to me. How about you Madlax?" Elenore answered and then she asked Madlax.

"Okay, just a little bit." Madlax answered. "Great, you can start in the morning." Elenore answered happy that Madlax was willing to help. She knew that Margaret would be happy about it as well. Elenore realized something as Madlax was starting to head to her room; she took the job without asking how much it would pay. But Elenore didn't let it bother her, she was sure Margaret was willing to pay Madlax well.

"I'm going to bed for now. I'll see you in the morning." Madlax said with a yawn.

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

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

"I will." Elenore said as she led Vanessa to her usual room.

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

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

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

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

"Damn! It must be Enfant. I won't allow it. If anyone is ever going to kill Madlax, it's going to be ME!"

She pulled out her sniper rifle and peered through the scope. There she spotted the men and a purple haired boy (?)/girl (?) wearing a green cloak trailing behind them using the men as cover. She saw the one with the cloak pull out a pair of throwing knives and saw it was a girl.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The familiar sound of Limelda's PSG-1 rung into her ears. *"It's gotta be her."* She thought to herself.

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

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

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

Chloe didn't know what she was more angry about; The fact her attack was foiled and was forced to flee and then being crashed into by Madlax, Enfant sticking their nose in (via the sniper), or just the fact that Madlax did remind her of that damn Mireille and she that she called her an agent of Enfant. "I'm not one those losers." She spat out. She threw two more knives which Madlax easily dodged. "This is far from

over Madlax.” She said as she made a hasty retreat, she dreaded telling Lady Altena but she knew she would forgive her considering Enfant got in the way and greatly underestimated Madlax.

Meanwhile inside the house Elenore and Vanessa heard gunfire. “Oh no! Miss Margaret! I have to check if she's all right!” Elenore said worriedly as ran to Margaret’s room.

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

“I'll have to go get my body armor and taser first.” Elenore said and Vanessa nodded. “Alright, just be careful out there.” She said as Elenore headed to her room leaving Vanessa alone with Margaret. Vanessa's eyes glowed and she unbuttoned the top buttons on her blouse and removed the previously irremovable Torc from her neck. The Torc glowed and flashed and spoke briefly with Vanessa’s voice with a Welsh accent. “Thank you Vanessa Rene. Your desire is granted; that of your parents bodies are safely buried in Nafrece.”

Vanessa guided by the Torc, placed it around Margaret's neck. Then she stepped back far enough from the bed and then collapsed into unconsciousness.

Elenore ran to her room, threw off her dress and put on her body armor and uniform and grabbed her taser and ran towards the garden. She looked out onto the garden and yelled. “Madlax. Are you alright?!”

She gasped as she saw at first the two knives on the ground and then the corpses of the three men. “I hope she's all right?” She said to herself as she saw movement in the bushes. She pointed her taser towards the bushes.

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

“Quiet down Limelda, people are sleeping.” Madlax whispered. “Oh, and that woman shouting your name didn’t wake anyone up? So how about some hand to hand combat then?” Limelda asked.

Madlax dropped her pistols without hesitation but as soon as Limelda sensed the gun leaving her hand, she drew a pistol from a hidden holster. “Now you are mine Madlax! Now I will kill you!” Madlax put her hands in the air and said with her head tilted downward. “You got me Limelda.”

Limelda smiled with a big smirk but during that small gap in concentration, Madlax slid to the ground and kicked her pistol into Limelda. The pistol hits her arm and Madlax charged, trying to take advantage of the confusion. Although surprised, Limelda pulled a wicked roundhouse which Madlax easily evades and fires her Beretta but the bullet just scrapes the blonde's silky hair. Madlax flawlessly somersaults behind her and braces Limelda's neck with her arm strongly causing her to drop her pistol. “Tsk, Tsk, Sneaky Limelda, sneaky.” Madlax whispered in her ear.

“Well what now, Madlax?” Limelda asked wondering what Madlax had in mind. “Let's go inside and have something to eat.” Madlax replied which threw Limelda off.

Limelda was rather surprised. "Wouldn't they mind?" She said pointing towards the mansion. "Only if you are on your best behavior." Madlax smiled and answered chirpily. Limelda reluctantly agreed and walked slowly to the main door with her with the moonlight dimly illuminating their path. *"What a girl."* Limelda thought to herself. *"What a girl."*

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

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

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

"Fine." Limelda said stopping herself from reaching for her pistol, after she remembered she helped take her to the hospital.

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

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

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

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

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

"Well I guess, I owe you a thank you. But wait, aren't you the one who shot Vanessa?" Elenore asked remembering that name.

Limelda looked at Elenore calmly. "You're welcome and yes I shot Vanessa Rene. But she wasn't who I was aiming for." Before Elenore could speak Madlax put her hand on Elenore's taser and lowered it.

"Let's get inside before anyone else shows up. Oh, Elenore could you please make us some tea and something to eat." Madlax said smiling hoping to defuse the situation before it got worse.

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

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

*"This Miss Jorg might complicate things. Since apparently she shadows Madlax around... Wait! Since she's following Madlax, maybe I can hire her as well, but what about Vanessa? I know she's not fond of her. I'll discuss this with Margaret and see what she thinks."* Elenore thought to herself as she went to Laetitia's room.

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

Elenore breathed a sigh of relief.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What happened, Elenore?” Margaret asked worried as she approached them hurriedly.

“What happened to Vanessa?” Margaret said trying not to scream, as it too reminded Margaret of that day as well.

“I don't know Miss. I came back here to check on you two after I checked on Laetitia and I found her on the floor.” Elenore said teary eyed trying to wake Vanessa up.

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

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

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

“Vanessa, what happened?” Elenore asked still worried but glad that Vanessa was alright.

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

Vanessa felt around her neck and looked at Elenore in horror. “Elenore, the Torc! It's gone!”

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

“Where could've it gone?” Elenore asked.

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

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

With that Margaret blinked and her voice returned to normal.

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

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

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

“I don't know but I do know it won't come off unless it wants to. Why it chose her, I don't know either. As for her voice that I do know, it was the spirit of the Torc talking through Margaret. I wish I could give

you better answers." Vanessa said wiping the tears from her eyes. "I'm sorry I've dragged you all into this." Vanessa said apologetically.

"What? What are you talking about?" Margaret asked in surprise and fear as she brought her hand to her neck and touched the Torc, trying to remove it immediately. "What is this thing and where did it come from? I didn't have it before! What do you mean it choose me?" She questioned anxiously as she kept trying to remove it with no success, which only made her increasingly more nervous about it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vanessa then explained what she knew about the Torc to Margaret who listened intently. Then she explained to Margaret how Elenore had hired Madlax to help her protect her.

The whole incident made Margaret completely forget about sleep, as unusual as that was for her. All this information about the Torc was too sudden and complicated for her. Adding to the fact she could not remove it from her neck, it made Margaret feel very uneasy. She sure wasn't expecting to get involved on anything of this magnitude ever again since the incident with the books that happened less than a year ago. Most importantly, she wasn't interested in pursuing whatever purpose this Torc had for her, and would rather just get rid of it or give it to someone else. Not to mention she wasn't willing to sacrifice any of her friends again, because this time they might very well not come back. She decided to get dressed and went downstairs with Vanessa, quietly enough not to wake Laetitia up, to see what exactly was going on. At least Madlax would be here for the foreseeable future and made her happy. Vanessa wasn't too thrilled about Limelda being here but realized there could be a silver lining here. *"Since she likes following Madlax around. Might as well put her to work as well."* Vanessa ironically thought as Elenore had a similar thought.

"Margaret." Vanessa said to get Margaret's attention.

"Yes Vanessa."

"As much as I'm not happy about Limelda's presence here. She could be of help, perhaps you or Elenore can offer her a job to assist Madlax?" Vanessa said swallowing her pride.

"Okay, I can have Elenore make the arrangements." Margaret agreed hoping that would prevent a conflict.

As they got to the living room they could see Madlax talking with someone. Vanessa seemed to recognize her immediately and she looked rather disturbed by her presence there. Only after a while did Margaret remember who she was. "Oh right, that scary Limelda person! I wonder what she's doing

here..." Margaret mentioned to Vanessa, temporarily forgetting about the problematic Torc, as Limelda's presence at her house was an interesting enough occurrence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"About eight meters accurately, but you need to be within six for the capacitor to able release its charge." Elenore said with a raised eyebrow.

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

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

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

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

"Be careful Miss it's still quite hot." Elenore chimed in after Margaret burnt her tongue on the tea and then turned to Limelda. "Well they started that product line last year to compete with Colt, Steyr, and Mashimo. I found that their model was the best for my needs and the excellent service warranty is quite robust with free upgrades." Elenore said in an matter-of-fact tone as she did some extensive research before buying her taser.

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

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

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

"You're welcome. I noticed that as well. Would you like some more tea?" Elenore asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh that reminds me, I was going to have Elenore ask but I'll ask now."

"About what Margaret?" Vanessa asked helping Margaret ask her proposal.

"Elenore hired Madlax to protect us from those criminals. Since Miss Jorg is a friend of Madlax and she knows about guns. I would like offer Miss Jorg a job helping Madlax. I can provide room and board. – Margaret thought of a number not realizing that the Torc was reading Limelda's mind for what the minimum she would accept as payment. Would a hundred grand do, Miss Jorg?"

Limelda thought it over. "Since I'll be working with Madlax. It's a deal Miss Burton." Limelda said offering her hand which Margaret took.



"Then it's a deal. I'll have Elenore prepare a room for you." Margaret said happy that she actually made an actual business deal. It was kind of fun she thought as she sat back down and munched on another biscuit.

The gentle breeze from the window swept across Madlax's hair, all she really wanted to do was enjoy the moment. She felt serene, the biscuits fresh and none of the chatter really interested or bothered her. But the sensation was a little surreal too, having someone who shot and practically killed you have a quiet and civilized chat must be odd for Vanessa. Suddenly Vanessa sarcastically suggested turning off the lights, but it felt right for Madlax. "What a great idea, Vanessa, let's turn out the lights Elenore?" Madlax said totally air-heading out Alice in Wonderland. Also not even realizing that Margaret just hired Limelda to help her.

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

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

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

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

"Miss Jorg, when did you arrive in Nafrece?" Margaret asked innocently enough.

"I arrived in Nafrece just a few hours ago." Limelda politely replied.

"Oh, then you must be tired. I know it's a long flight from Gazth-Sonika." Margaret warmly said.

Vanessa looked a little uncomfortable just as Elenore did, but thankfully the dim light hid her face. She knew that Margaret was being her usual kind self and meant no malice but it still made her uncomfortable knowing that Limelda was in the same house with Madlax and her. But at least she was willing to help, though she thought the price was a bit high.

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

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

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

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

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

Madlax felt a slight stroking sensation on her leg beneath the table and she turned her head towards Vanessa. Vanessa smiled and sipped a part of her hot tea but that did not give a hint of who it was. "How's the tea, Vanessa?" Madlax asked "Oh, its fine Madlax." Vanessa replied in a slightly irritated tone turning her glance towards Limelda.

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

"You're not burning your tongue anymore?" Madlax asked.

"Uh, no." Margaret giggled. This eased tension a bit and after a little friendly banter she found out that Margaret had asked Limelda politely about staying and helping her out.

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

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

"No just need to use the bathroom, but thanks anyway Elenore." Vanessa replied as she went to the bathroom. Elenore went back to preparing the room while she was doing so do she thought to herself. *"Why did Margaret offer her that much money? I would've offer half of that, but then again Margaret is Margaret. I don't think she meant any harm by doing so and it did get Miss Jorg's cooperation. Hopefully Madlax would be able to keep her on a leash."*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Elenore tried to keep her face from blushing. “You're welcome. To be honest with you, I didn't know how you felt about me or knew my sexual orientation so I kept it to myself.”

Vanessa was about to answer when they both heard footsteps coming up the stairs.

Without Vanessa or Elenore momentarily around, Margaret suddenly felt rather uncomfortable around the two gunslingers' presence. Not like anything about Madlax made her feel uneasy, but Limelda had this very strong intimidating presence to her, scary even.

Also, with Limelda there and the others away she did feel like an outsider who could not understand these two women's world very well. She wasn't sure what to say at the moment, for she felt Limelda didn't want to be disturbed with casual talking and she'd just avoid what she didn't want to talk about. It might also have been just her imagination but Margaret felt like they actually wanted to be alone for some reason. Conveniently, she was getting quite sleepy now, so she wished them both good night and excused herself, going upstairs to her room.

On her way up she noticed Vanessa and Elenore at the top of the stairs, talking about something she didn't hear clearly. They stopped talking and turned to her when they noticed her. “Oh, so this is where you two were!” Margaret said happily, already showing signs of her sleepiness. “I'm going to sleep now, so good night!” She told them both, closing her eyes as she gave them a smile and passing them into the direction of her room. “Oh, there's one thing... I needed to ask you Vanessa...” She turned back looking at the older woman. “I really hope that you're not upset that I offered Limelda a job, are you? I just thought since we have enough rooms... Also, she is... Madlax's friend, I guess...” She hesitated. “Hmm... are you angry?” She asked nervously, lowering her head and looking rather apologetic.

Vanessa smiled and shook her head. “No Margaret, I'm not. I know you were just being kind hearted as usual. So don't worry, okay and good night Margaret. Plus I'm sure Madlax would appreciate the help.” She hugged Margaret reassuringly and watched her she went to her room.

“Good night, Miss. Sleep well.” Elenore said smiling glad that Margaret interrupted their conversation.

“Good night Elenore.” Margaret replied getting even sleepier.

As Margaret went into her room and closed the room behind her, Vanessa turned to Elenore and said.

“Before we were interrupted, I was going to say you're my friend and I love you just the way you are.”

Actually I'm quite flattered that you thought of me in that way. I truly do hope you do find someone who loves you for you and wants share your happiness with you." Vanessa looked down the stairs with some sadness and concern. "*Now I have to do something about my happiness.*" She thought as she was about to go down the stairs when she could hear Limelda talking to Madlax.

Meanwhile downstairs Margaret had just left leaving the pair alone. Limelda turned to Madlax and said with some anger and sadness in her voice. "Why Madlax? Why must you be with that woman? You and I have so much more in common. What does she have that I don't? What do you see in her Madlax? Tell me, please!"

Madlax felt deeply torn and stretched by the question Limelda posed to her. It was a question she wished she could avoid, for she loved both women in her own way. She wanted to be loved by both but felt she will be loved by neither one. Madlax pulled her eyes out to the night sky, staring into the blue and red moon appearing from the mist and hoping to avoid this as long as possible. "Well, Madlax well?" Limelda asked impatiently. Madlax took a deep breath and blurted her soul "Yes our existences are far more alike, but I like her because she isn't like us Limelda! She has strong ideals, she isn't self-righteous like many Nafrecean people and she's tender and warm."

Limelda was feeling rather indignant and arose from her chair. "Well wasn't I warm, Madlax? The way I held you closely at night? No?" Limelda whispered as she stroked her hand softly on her back. "You can't live in her world can you? It's too different, isn't it?" Limelda asked in a rather rhetorical tone.

"I don't know, I don't know..." Madlax said melancholically. "I like you too Limelda. Please don't make me choose! Please don't make me choose!" Madlax said as she laid her sorrowful head onto the table as teardrops ran across her cheek.

Vanessa's face saddened as she heard the conversation. "Are you all right Vanessa?" Elenore quietly asked with concern. "I'll be fine, thanks Elenore." Vanessa replied.

"I have to go check outside and see how much damage has been done and see if I have to call the police." Elenore said knowing not to push the issue further.

Vanessa looked at Elenore with some concern. "Are you going to be okay out there?" She asked.

"I'll be fine, nothing's happened within the last hour or so. So I assume our "visitors" have left for the night." Elenore said reassuringly.

Vanessa nodded and they both went down the stairs and back to the tea party.

"Miss Jorg, your room is ready. I'll show you after I've checked outside." Elenore said to Limelda and then looking at all three said. "I would like to remind you all you are guests here, please refrain from any violence in here. There's been enough of it tonight. Now if you please excuse me." Elenore then went out to the garden.

Inwardly Vanessa smiled. "*Thanks Elenore...*" She thought to herself and when Elenore went outside she then turned towards Limelda and Madlax. She saw Madlax's head on the table and then turned to Limelda. "Was that really necessary? Why can't you leave her alone?" Vanessa snapped at Limelda.

"Because she's like me and she has no place in your world." Limelda snapped back. "How can you say that? Did you ever consider that she might want something different other than a life of violence?" Vanessa asked angrily.

"It's what she's good at and you want to make her into something she's not. I understand her, how could you ever understand?" Limelda shot back.

“Please stop arguing, please...” Madlax softly interrupted Limelda and Vanessa. There was an eerie and concerned silence; both women understood this will have to be resolved later. “What is normal? What is normal for me?” She spoke to herself quietly. “Are you alright?” Vanessa asked with Limelda staring in a worried paralysis. “I’ll be okay.” Madlax said in a quiet but assuring voice, although the tears were still candidly visible and the tone distinctly sad. “I’ll go to bed now, goodnight.” Madlax spoke as she walked slowly with head drooped low towards her bedroom.

Elenore looked around the garden. She could hear the argument between Limelda and Vanessa. “I hope Vanessa and Madlax are going to be all right.” Elenore said to herself as she looked but she could find no sign of the battle other than minor scratches.

“Hmmp... Well at least our “visitors” know how to clean up after themselves.” Elenore said to herself as she looked back at the house. If Elenore knew what would happen in the next days, she wouldn’t have been so casual with her comment. Then again hindsight was a bigger bitch than normalcy or reality could ever be. It was a total rat bastard...

Elenore came back into the house. The arguing had stopped and she saw Madlax go upstairs. She waited till Madlax had gone into her room before showing Limelda her room.

“Please Miss Jorg. If you are ready I can show you to your room now.” Elenore said politely.

Limelda nodded and followed Elenore to her room. After she showed Limelda her room; Elenore then came back down and started clearing the table. She noticed Vanessa sitting at the table with a very sad look on her face.

“Miss Vanessa, are you all right?” Elenore asked with great concern.

“I’ll be fine, I just need to sit here for a bit and think. Thank you again Elenore.” Vanessa replied.

Elenore looked at Vanessa with concern. “You’re welcome, but isn’t that what friends do for each other? Maybe you should get some sleep. I’m going to be here a while cleaning up.” Elenore answered in return.

Vanessa smiled a little and said. “Yes...Yes they do...” With that Elenore continued to clean up.

After a nearly a half hour later Elenore had finished she saw Vanessa still sitting there thinking.

“I’m done now. Are you ready to go to bed?” Elenore asked Vanessa snapping her out her reflection.

“Oh. So soon... sure...okay.” Vanessa said and with that Elenore showed her to her room.

“Now you get some sleep. I’m sure things will work themselves out Miss Vanessa.” Elenore warmly said before Vanessa went into her room and Vanessa smiled and gave Elenore a warm hug and said. “Good night Elenore and thanks again.”

“You’re welcome and good night Miss Vanessa.” Elenore said as Vanessa closed the door and Elenore went to her own room.

When she got inside she looked at the picture of her grandfather and said with some melancholy in her voice; “Well grandpa, I’ve gotten myself into another mess and I don’t know how to fix it. What would’ve you’ve done in this situation?” After a few minutes staring at the picture, she got undressed and got ready for bed and went to sleep wondering what the next day would bring.