

## Chapter 21. Interactions

It was quiet at the breakfast table; they were eating or deep in thought. Margaret rose from the table in hurry everyone turned their head towards her. For a brief moment Margaret stood there, her hands on the table. "I've come to a decision, but I'll wait till Nadie, Ellis and Jodie are safely away before I say anything else."

"Thank you for concern Miss Burton, but we're quite capable." Jodie responded.

"No offence Miss Hayward but it would be better if you, Nadie and Ellis didn't get involved." Margaret responded in a firm tone.

"What are you planning Margaret?" Vanessa queried in a concerned tone.

Margaret sat back down and smiled. "Let's finish breakfast and see our friends off first."

Vanessa and Madlax looked at each other in confusion, both wondering what Margaret had in mind.

Limelda stared at Margaret out of the corner of her eye, she too was wondering what she had in mind. She was beginning to think that Margaret wasn't the "airhead" she thought she was.

Half hour later after they had finished breakfast, cleaned the table, checking Jodie's car for sabotage or tracking devices the group escorted Nadie, Ellis and Jodie to their car.

Margaret, Madlax, and Vanessa hugged Nadie and Ellis while Jodie gave a polite but reserved handshake.

"I guess this is good bye...I hope everything works out okay." Nadie said worried about their friends.

"Bye. Tell Elenore we said bye too." Ellis quietly said.

Margaret smiled. "I will, you all take care too." She said as Nadie and Ellis got in.

"You have our numbers, contact us when you can." Madlax said.

"We will..." Nadie said before she closed the car door.

Margaret waved as they drove off into the sunrise. After they were gone Margaret's expression turned serious.

She pulled out Elenore's key chain and looked for two keys. When she found them she swiftly walked back into the house and to the doors of the west wing. She stuck the keys in and unlocked the doors; with the Torc's help she flung open the doors that were far heavier than they looked.

"Okay Margaret, what's going on? Is there any reason you're going into the keep?" Madlax asked.

"Either you or Vanessa grab the burlap bags underneath the sink in the kitchen, and then get back here."

"Not before you explain what you are planning." Vanessa said in a frustrated tone.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I did say I was going to tell. First off we're going into the armory and pick up what weapons and ammo we can carry. Then we bring it up here and secure it. Afterwards we're going to Meg's to give her mother's journal. Then all of us are going to go hunt for Alice. Vanessa you can go to Dr. Tudor and see what she knows about the Ring of Morrigan." Margaret began then she turned to Limelda. "As for you Miss Jorg, you can join us or I can give you some money and send you on your way. Your choice."

Limelda was at first shocked then she chuckled slightly. "I'll give you this, Torc or not you've grown a set of brass balls. As for staying or going, oh I want to see this to the end and wherever Madlax goes I'm going with her." Limelda answered with Vanessa slightly scowling.

"We'll get the bags." Madlax said giving Limelda a silent signal to follow.

"What's wrong Vanessa?" Margaret asked knowing that Vanessa was upset and concerned.

"My personal life aside, this is a side of you I've never seen before. I know it isn't because the of Torc."

Margaret chuckled a bit. "I know this seems sudden but these last few days have been a real eye opener for me even more than Gazth-Sonika was. Don't worry; I don't plan on confronting the Soldats or Enfant

but I am going to find the ring before they do and go from there. I know I can't sit here and wait, we have to take action."

Vanessa smiled as she got what Margaret was saying. "I agree, sounds like a good plan so far. I'm sure Elenore and Nakhl would appreciate the help."

"Oh thanks for reminding me."

"For what Margaret?" Vanessa asked a tad confused.

"I have to make a call. I remembered I don't have to wait till I'm twenty to get Meg's restraining order rescinded." Margaret said pulling out her cell phone and speed dialing her lawyer.

She walked a bit away from Vanessa and started talking.

"Look, I don't care. My mother and father are dead so that gives me the legal say, so I want the restraining order on Meg Baker rescinded today, before noon. I'll be there to pick a copy and I'll throw in a huge bonus if you're quick enough, please." Vanessa heard Margaret say in a firm tone as she saw Madlax and Limelda return with quite a few burlap bags.

"Who's Margaret talking to?" Madlax asked noticing Margaret on the phone.

"Her family lawyer about the restraining order on Meg."

"Oh cool, I'm sure Duvie would be happy to hear that." Madlax replied as Margaret ended the call.

"Okay, that takes care of that. Let's go." Margaret said as she looked through the key ring again."

The four of them went down to the armory and Margaret unlocked the door. The lights automatically came on as the door was opened. What they saw surprised them; they were expecting some melee weapons and some guns plus ammo. But what they found in the gym sized room were old melee weapons like swords and spears next to modern weapons like pistols, rifles, sub machine guns, recoilless rifles, LAW rocket launchers and quite a selection of grenades. They walked in and looked around.

"Somebody has been using this place as stockpile." Limelda said as she saw an invoice sheet and picked it up.

"What's it say?" Margaret asked walking up Limelda.

"Looks like Walter has been using your house as hidden armory for Echo." Limelda said as she looked over the sheet. "And from the looks of it, he's been here recently. Before all the mess with the artifacts started." Limelda said as she pointed out Walter's signature.

"How is he getting in? I'm sure nobody saw him come to the house."

"He doesn't have to. There's a secret passage to the sewers from here." Madlax said pointing to a nearby freight elevator.

"I guess I'm going to have a talk with Walter as well." Margaret said with a frown.

"Margaret looked over the pistols and picked up two HK thirty eight automatics plus an Uzi. Vanessa grabbed a Berretta automatic.

Madlax took a few of the LAW rocket launchers as she saw Limelda grabbing a recoilless rifle.

Then they started to fill the bags with ammo for their guns and they took a few grenades.

It took them an hour to do the two trips up and down as they stashed the weapons elsewhere in the house.

When they were through they grabbed the journal and the glasses case and piled into Vanessa's car and left.

When they got there they saw Elenore and Meg changing the tires on Meg's car. Three-Speed was there as was Nakhl. They stopped the car and Madlax jumped out. "Three-Speed what's going on!?"

"We had some early morning company. Madlax have you seen Walter?"

Madlax looked over the scene, the windows on the ground floor were boarded up and there were craters' where the bullets made impact on the wall and door frame.

"No we haven't. Who did this?" Vanessa said noticing blood stains and chalk on the sidewalk and steps.

### Third Moon Rising

Margaret rushed to Elenore and Meg. "Elenore, Meg are you two all right?! Are either of you hurt?" Margaret asked worriedly and a bit frightened for Elenore.

"We're fine Margaret. It could've been a different outcome if Miss Nakhl and Mr. Three-Speed hadn't shown up." Elenore replied hugging Margaret and her returning the hug.

"Why would they attack here?" Margaret asked having a dread feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"My guess, they're Soldats. Walter has had us hit their safe houses yesterday."

"It's retaliation...Oh my God! If they hit here...Susan...!" Meg said as the revelation hit her.

"Who's Susan?" Madlax asked.

"My cousin, my uncle's only child. Why are you out here?" Elenore replied wondering why was Margaret was doing there.

"We found something last night that your mother should take a good look at."

"We found something you and Vanessa should take a look at as well." Elenore replied noticing that Three-Speed was talking to her mother.

Elenore walked up to Meg. "What's going on mom?"

"Roy is having someone take a look at Walter's house."

"Roy?" Elenore asked with a puzzled look.

"Roy?!" Madlax asked in utter surprise.

"Yes Madlax, that's my real first name." Three-Speed answered in a somewhat annoyed tone.

"So why did you ask us about Walter?"

"We lost contact with him last night and he hasn't checked in or answered his cell phone." Three-Speed answered with an "I don't want to talk about it" look on his face.

"For now let's get inside. Margaret didn't you say you had something for me to look at?" Meg picked up on it and turned to Margaret.

"Yes I do." Margaret said having retrieved the case and journal from the car.

They went inside and Meg turned on a light. Margaret handed the glasses case to Meg. Meg looked at the case and opened the case to view the glasses. "These are hers all right. This must be her spare pair." Elenore handed Margaret the copy of the journal pages. Margaret handed the journal to Elenore in exchange. As Margaret and Vanessa looked over the pages Meg and Elenore read through the journal noticing where Margaret had placed bookmarks.

"I didn't want to show that to Walter...I really don't think he's himself right now." Margaret said sadly.

"I'm glad you didn't, this would've pushed him over the edge." Meg responded in kind.

They were distracted by Three-Speed's cell phone going off. He answered and a shocked look crossed his face.

"Find her! I'll tell Meg!" He said as he ended the call.

"What happened Roy?!" Meg asked horrified.

"Walter's house got hit. Gary is dead but there's no sign of Susan. From what Val told me it looks like Gary held them off long enough to let Susan escape. She's looking for her now."

"Change of plans, first we find Susan. Meg do you have a current picture of her?" Margaret added.

Meg handed Margaret a picture of a dirty blond haired eight year old girl. Then she showed it to Madlax and the others.

"How are we going to do this?" Limelda asked.

"If we split up into two groups we can look for Susan. Once we find her we regroup here." Madlax replied.

"Good plan, who's going with who?" Margaret confirmed and then asked

"I'll hook up with Val once we find Susan, Val and I have to go look for Walter." Three-Speed began.

"Well Elenore and Nakhl are with me." Meg added.

"I'll go with Meg, Nakhl and Elenore..." Margaret said touching her shirt collar implying that keeping the artifacts separate would be a good idea.

### Third Moon Rising

“That just leaves Vanessa, Limelda and me.” Madlax said and then added. “I have Duvie’s number, if we find her first we’ll call.”

“That’s sounds like a plan to me. Let’s move out.” Meg said as they filed out of the house.

Vanessa followed Meg in her car all of them keeping an eye out for Susan. Vanessa pulled up beside Meg.

“Should we go on foot?” Vanessa asked.

“I don’t think so; unless Susan lucked out and caught the bus she wouldn’t have gotten very far given her size.” Meg said and Vanessa drove on. Meg drove to Walter’s house. Three-Speed had gotten there before them and was talking to a short blond haired woman and the police. They could see the paramedics hauling a body in a body bag out of the house. Meg stopped the car and got out as did Elenore and Margaret.

“Roy have they found Susan yet?!” Meg asked Three-Speed.

“No I have them combing the neighborhood and seeing if she’s with any of the neighbors.”

Meg frowned. “And still no sign of Walter?”

“Nope, he hasn’t shown up. Who’s that with you Meg?” The blond haired woman replied. Both Margaret and Elenore noticed she had blue eyes. Margaret could sense the woman had some sort of mystical power to her and she was trying to keep the miasma away from them.

“Elenore, Margaret this is Valerie Dowland. Val this is my daughter Elenore and her friend Margaret Burton.” Meg said as Margaret picked up on the white lie understanding that it was necessary for the moment.

“Oh so this is your Elenore, oh cool. Hello Miss Burton.” Val said in a friendly but serious tone.

“Hello Miss Dowland.” Margaret began...

“You can just call me Val. I hate to cut this short but Roy’s giving me the eye. So I have to go and look for our boss. Nice meeting you two.” Val said as she joined Three-Speed.

“What an unusual woman...I get the feeling I know her from somewhere...” Elenore said with her head tilted slightly.

Meg sighed. “Knowing Val you probably seen her and not know it. She does tend to wind up in the strangest places. You should ask Madlax about her sometime, they know each other...” Meg said with a slight giggle at the end. Then she went and talked to the Inspector and he led her inside the house. A few minutes later Meg came back out carrying some clothes and a teddy bear.

“I’m going to have Susan stay with me once we find her. This is really alarming; Walter would’ve been here in a heartbeat...” Meg said as they returned to the car. Margaret stood staring at the house.

“Margaret, we’re leaving...” Elenore said trying to get Margaret’s attention.

“I’m sorry Mr. Baker we have to go. We’ll find Susan and Walter...” Margaret was in the field of flowers talking to a tall brunette man in his late thirties.

“Thank you...be careful...I really don’t think Walter is himself right now.”

Margaret smiled and gave a sad yet serious look. “You’re welcome...I noticed that too...”

Margaret snapped out and rejoined the others in the car.

“Are you okay Margaret? You seemed a little out of it.” Elenore asked.

“Yes, I’m okay. I had a talk with Walter’s husband. He’s a very nice man.” Margaret said at in a matter of fact. Meg thought the Torc gave her the power to talk to the dead but Nakhil and Elenore knew better.

“So what did he have to say?” Meg asked as they drove around keeping their eyes peeled for Susan...

Vanessa drove around when Madlax spotted movement in a nearby park. From what she could see it was a little girl trying to duck behind a trash can, while three men in suits with guns drawn were coming closer. Vanessa slammed on the breaks and Limelda and Madlax jumped out with their guns drawn.

### Third Moon Rising

Two of the three men fired on them forcing them to take cover behind some trees. The little girl noticing they weren't shooting at her decided to make a break for it. The third man shot at her and grazed her and she fell. Vanessa jumped out of the car and snapped her fingers and the man burst in flames. The other two men stopped firing at Madlax and Limelda and started shooting at Vanessa. Vanessa with a furious look on her face rapidly snapped her fingers; first the bullets burst into flame and melted before they even came close to her, then the guns exploded into flames and then the two men. Till there was nothing left but ashes.

Limelda and Madlax stood in stunned silence as they witnessed the power of the bracelet.

"Limelda get the first aid kit from the car! Madlax call Meg and tell her we found Susan! Now!" Vanessa yelled as Limelda rushed to the car and Madlax started dialing.

Vanessa rushed to Susan lying on the ground crying.

"It's okay the good guys are here, you're safe. Just stay with us honey."

"It hurts!" Susan cried as Vanessa looked at the gaping wound in her leg.

Limelda came and with a surprisingly comforting smile tried to stanch the blood.

Vanessa looked at the Bracelet; healing wasn't one of its powers and she wished that she had Ellis' healing power. So she called for an ambulance.

"Walter?" Madlax said as she walked up seeing Walter walking towards them. Vanessa and Limelda looked at him and they all saw he had a few blood stains plus his clothes were torn as something sharp cut through the fabric. They also noticed the demented look on his face.

Walter approached the group and surveyed the scene. "Meh, you could've saved me one. Never mind...once I find her I'll get what I want..."

"Walter where have you been? Susan and your husband have been shot." Vanessa asked gravely concerned.

"Daddy?" Susan asked looking toward Walter.

Walter looked at them with a hardhearted look.

"Daddy?" Susan asked again the tears flowing down her face.

"Your kid has been shot. Aren't you at least going say something to her?" Limelda asked a tad angry.

Walter looked down at Susan and started to walk away.

"Daddy where are you going?!" Susan asked trying to get up, but Limelda struggled to keep her down.

Madlax was about to confront him when Vanessa grabbed her arm and shook her head.

"Daddy!?"

"Daddy!?"

Madlax stared at Walter's back and she had a flashback of her father's back.

*"Father...?" A young Madlax asked as bombs rained around her.*

Vanessa stood in front of her worried that Madlax would do something to make the situation worse. She tried to snap Madlax out of it as she shook her. "Snap out of it Madlax!"

"Daddy!?" Susan asked as she began to cry as she saw her father walk away. Limelda noticed and blocked her view.

"Come on kiddo, you have to lie back down till the ambulance comes." Limelda said trying to get Susan to lay back down as she tried to go after her father. In the distance they could hear ambulance sirens coming closer.

"Daddy!" Susan screeched as her wounded leg forced her back down. Limelda didn't want to hurt the kid anymore than she was.

"Madlax I need you to call Duvet!" The name Duvet snapped Madlax out as she looked at Susan in sorrowful sympathy she turned with a livid look to watch Walter walk away into the distance. She called Meg explaining the situation.

### Third Moon Rising

“Mom, why aren’t we going to Vanessa and the others?” Elenore asked as Meg hung up and explained on the way to Walter’s house.

“Madlax and the others are handling it. I really need to have a talk with your uncle.” Meg replied with an angry tone as she handed her cell phone to Elenore. “Elenore I need you to call Roy, he’s listed as Three Speed the one with three S’s. Tell him what I told you and tell him to get his butt to Walter’s house ASAP.”

As Elenore made the call, Nakhil tried to sense if Alice was nearby but getting nothing so she sat quietly and went with the flow.

Margaret was actually concerned and just as angry. She wondered why he treated his daughter like that. What was going through his mind? She dreaded the answers but she geared herself for the worse.

As they drove up they spotted Walter’s green El Dorado parked out front. From what they figured Walter must’ve waited for the police to leave before coming home, except Margaret...she thought he wouldn’t care if they were there or not.

Meg stopped the car and got out followed by Elenore and then Margaret. Nakhil stayed by the car observing. There was a strange feeling in that house; she wasn’t quite sure what it was. She felt a faint trace of Alice nearby and it was coming from the house. They all noticed the police tape had been broken and the front door wide open.

She got her answer as Walter came out and started to walk to his car. There was no doubt, he had a run in with Alice and it showed on his face.

“Walter!” Meg angrily shouted as she approached Walter with Elenore close behind. Margaret stood near Nakhil watching the scene. As she looked into Walter’s heart she began to cry silently.

“Walter!” Meg said again stopping in front of Walter.

“What the hell do you want?” Walter irately asked.

“What is going on? Tell me please!”

Walter saw Elenore behind Meg and he scowled in detestation at her.

“You had to bring your little jenny with you, didn’t you Meg?”

“What?!” Meg asked in shock and anger.

“Geez, kid can you take a damn hint! Nobody wants you around you little home wrecker.” Walter said ignoring Meg and focusing on Elenore.

“So what is *your* problem with me?” Elenore asked trying to keep herself from snapping.

Walter paced maniacally as he spoke. “My problem? My problem? My problem with you; you little jenny is that if you didn’t come along maybe our family would still be together. My mother and father would still be alive. But your fucking dumbass mother just *had* to spread her legs for that parasite just because he ordered her.” Walter said turning briefly to Meg then back to Elenore. “Mother was right about you; you’re too stupid for your own good. That’s why I had to care for you. I had to get you away from her so I told Anna and your stupid ex boyfriend. But Richie fucked that one royally by shooting him. I was hoping he would shoot Richie...hey who knew Richie got in a lucky shot. Anyways Anna did what I predicted she would do; kick your ass out. But not before you gave birth to *that!* –Walter pointed at Elenore. - I didn’t know that Anna would go the extra distance by making sure you looked like an unfit mother and slap restraining orders on you! “Walter laughed bitterly and evilly.

Meg was in shock from what she was hearing from Walter. Elenore was trying to keep from crying and beating the crap out of Walter.

“W...why do you hate me so much?!” Elenore asked.

“Awww you gonna cry you little shit. You know my father valued you above anything else including his own damn family! I would like to just shoot you but seeing you suffer gives me a *whole* lot of satisfaction. I knew when you got beaten up...I knew when you got raped... and I laughed and laughed.”

### Third Moon Rising

“Shut up! SHUT THE HELL UP! YOU CAUSED ALL THIS!? I DON’T WANT YOU NO WHERE NEAR ME OR MY KID OR I’LL KILL YOU!” Meg yelled in fury.

Walter laughed and took Meg’s house key and flung it at her. “You? Kill me? Please don’t make me laugh! You know what Meg, fine ...I’m done playing babysitter...you know what; you can play house with your shit for all I care. I have better things to do..”

Margaret was furious but she knew if she interjected the situation could get far, far worse.

She watched as Walter walked to his car and drive away.

“He’s gone Nakhl...”

Nakhl tried to feign indifference but even she didn’t like what she had seen and heard.

“Yes Margaret Burton, the Walter Baker that he was is gone...”

Meg held Elenore tight to keep her from chasing Walter’s car. Elenore laid her head on her mother’s shoulder and cried.

*“If that’s the way you want to play Walter, two can play that game...but I’m not going to take it out on a child you coward.”* Meg thought as she held Elenore in a caring embrace.