

# Redemption

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## PROLOGUE

The old man struggled the last few feet to the summit, heart pounding until he feared it would burst, the sea's flat horizon dissolving in tear-filled eyes. For a moment, he could do nothing but cling to a twisted fir, buffeted by the winds that were always fierce in this high place. When at last his breathing eased, the man dropped to a crouch. It had been years since last he'd come here, and it took several minutes of hunting before he found the stone.

The isle's harsh winds had buried it beneath the detritus of the years. His bony fingers scraped away the dirt, revealing the two carved dragons locked in eternal combat. For a moment, the old man's hand lingered on the rightmost figure, its wings unfurled, its jaws drawn back in defiance. Then the old man rocked back on his heels and pulled a knife from his belt.

A quick slice and it was done, blood falling in great drops, shockingly red. He sat, closing his slashed fist tightly, and felt a stirring deep in the earth. The presence filled him and the old man cried out. The seascape vanished, replaced by a great, roaring darkness. He saw images, faces.

And, at last, he saw what he desired to see - the face of the Red Dragon. On its right stood the Knight, radiant with power, compassionate and stern.

Hold! The White Worm appeared, eyes lit by hellfire. The Knight came forward and struck a mighty blow, but the lightning of his sword glanced off its opalescent scales. Yellowed fangs raked across the warrior's broad chest. Fiery breath enveloped him.

To champion the White Dragon came Death, wearing no armor, all whipcord grace and arrogance. The evil beast swung its great head to meet his cold, mocking gaze. As if he had no care of the beast, Death looked down at the fallen Knight, then lifted his own sword, a razor edge of fine-honed ice. The hero prepared to parry, although his bloody hands shook. Ice met fire. The vision shattered and the old man fell back with a cry.

Slowly, his strength and wits returned, and when they did, he walked to the edge of the cliff and for a long time, looked out over a gray sea.

Red Dragon. White Dragon.  
The waiting was over.

## CHAPTER ONE

Methos hurried along the rain-slick street, collar pulled tight against a gusty, late-October wind. The sidewalk was garish with neon reflection as theater-goers spilled out onto the wet pavement. Perfume, exhaust, the faint odor of coffee washed over the Immortal, familiar sights and sounds. Among the hundreds of mortal faces, he was sometimes certain he saw someone he knew, a faintly-remembered friend from a century long gone. Illusion, of course.

The cab came at once to his imperious gesture. Methos slid into the warm car. "Sixty-third street. Nine-oh-two."

Pulling smoothly into traffic, the cab began its torturous journey across town. Methos leaned back, closed his eyes. Duncan was an idiot. Never had he met an Immortal who could maintain such a rigid moral code and still survive. The kind of hatred Milius nurtured for the Highlander would never die. Duncan would have to take his head, it was obvious to them both. Only Duncan would find it cause for emotional turmoil.

"You're jaded, Methos." His friend's voice echoed through Methos' head. "That's your problem. You're hardened to the suffering."

"And why not? If you irritate a wound long enough the nerves die." A flippant response, Methos' usual reaction when the Highlander indulged in one of his annoying, introspective moods. This time, however, Duncan had stared at him a long time in silence.

Methos' apartment, plain, inconspicuous, and very expensive, came up on the right. And zipped past.

"Hey! That's nine-oh-two!"

On the other side of the Plexiglas shield, there was no response. Methos banged on it. The driver reached forward and turned up the radio. Blood running cold, the Immortal yanked on the door handle. Locked. He twisted around and tried the other. Furious, close to panic, he smashed his heel into the window. The cab swerved violently, knocking him back into the seat.

Methos struggled upright, bracing himself as the cab turned and turned again. The glittering streets of upper Manhattan gave way to narrower, rougher roads. Soon Methos recognized the docks - warehouses bulky against the sky - the city lights dancing over the rough, oil-slick water. His mobile prison slowed and, after a moment, pulled into a garage. Methos tensed. From the gloom of the cavernous space around him came other men. They were all armed - some with guns, others with truncheons. No swords, thank the gods.

They pulled open the doors and dragged him out, going right for his sword. His heart leapt, but he felt nothing. There were no Immortals within sensing distance.

"What do you want? Who are you working for?" He tried to stay calm, holding out his hands in a quick, placating gesture, but they weren't interested. They moved into a circle around the Immortal. One of them slammed his truncheon against his fist; another laughed, pantomiming a quick slice across his neck. Gods.

Methos spun around, kicking at the man nearest him. Bone cracked, an audible, sickening sound. The man howled and went down, clutching his knee. Methos vaulted over him, bolting for the door.

He almost made it.

The Quickening was lost in the storm. Eldritch lightning blended with natural electricity, dancing from roof to roof, shooting along cables and running wild through puddles and gutters. Glass exploded into the alley as a dozen windows fragmented at once. Storm wind and Quickening tore boards from windows already broken, sent a garbage can rolling along the debris-strewn alley.

The Highlander's long body arched with the arcane energy that roared through it. Milius' dying howl echoed along his veins, images, tableaux of other times and places, emotions not his own. For that eternal moment, Duncan lost track of himself. Then he was kneeling on oily pavement, ears ringing, sword heavy in his aching hand. The alley's single street-lamp was blown; the dark was thick and filled with rain.

Time passed and he could stand, lurching a bit until his equilibrium returned. Shaking wet hair from his eyes, the Highlander found his coat in a sodden heap near a doorway. He put it on, the material clammy against his skin, and slid his sword into the scabbard beneath it. For a moment, he had to lean against the wall, weariness holding him still.

It had been a long time since his last Challenge. Duncan had dared hope the respite might go on for years. God, but he was stupid sometimes. Methos, with his wry, devastating mockery, was not being patronizing. He was imparting wisdom this Scot was too thick-witted to accept.

"Hatred is a narcotic - it eases the pain of fear. Milius has hated you for two hundred years; it's a habit he can't break. There's no treatment program. Your choices, my chivalrous friend, are

to kill him now or later. Getting angry at me won't change that."

The chill of wet clothes eventually galvanized Duncan to push away from the wall and walk slowly back to his car. He fumbled with the keys, started the engine without truly thinking about it, and headed home.

Cassandra sat on the cheap, vinyl couch, and wondered why her heart wasn't pounding. At her feet, the battered form sprawled, unconscious. Even as she watched, his bruises began to fade. A jagged cut across one prominent cheekbone knitted and was gone. Soon only his clothes, torn and bloody, would remain to remind the bastard of his first taste of justice.

"Cassandra?" His voice was a breath. As always, hearing it sent shivers up her spine, equal parts of fear and desire. He realized then that he was chained and she waited as he struggled frantically to his knees, twisting his hands against the confining steel. Her men stepped forward, alarmed when the prisoner leaned toward her. She motioned them back even as Methos realized they were there.

"Go," she ordered. "Wait outside." And, finally, when they were gone: "Good evening - Death."

He settled back on his heels, bound fists pressed against his knees, and looked up at her. Cassandra's hand flew out, cracked across his face with a force that sent him sprawling backwards.

"Do not look me in the eyes!"

After a moment, he rolled over and regained his position. His eyes glittered with anger, but he was no fool and they were quickly veiled by his lashes. "So I'm to die, after all?" The quiet voice was calm, only the hands, white-knuckled, betrayed his dread.

“I gave MacLeod my word that you should live,” she replied, “and so you shall. Although it may reach the point where you wish you did not.”

“Revenge, Cassandra?”

She longed to slap him again, but withheld the pleasure. Suddenly, perversely, she wanted to see his eyes. “I prefer to call it justice, Death. Justice for the murder of my people and countless others, justice for being subjected to your whims.”

“Cassandra, I’m sorry.” The dark head bowed; long fingers opened and lay stiffly against his faded jeans. “If I could undo it all, do you think I would not?”

His voice cracked; she could almost believe the note in it was truly pain. Goddess, his tongue was so facile! Unwelcome, a memory surfaced. Impossible numbers of stars against the inky sky, and the two of them lying outside his tent, covered by furs, laughing as she tried to show him the constellations.

“How easy it is to deny what you were, what you did! Torture, rape, the slaughter of women and children ... CHILDREN, Methos!”

The ancient Immortal’s face hardened, went bleak and cold. It was a look she remembered as vividly as if it were yesterday. “Yes,” he said. “I did those things.”

“And now, finally, you will pay. As one of your victims, Death, I claim right of retribution. No! Do NOT speak!”

“Cassandra - that was thousands of years ago ... ”

Gracefully, Cassandra sank to the floor beside him. Methos tried to get up; she pushed him back to the dirty concrete. This time, he was still, tense as wire. She ran her fingers through his

short, dark hair and remembered when it had fallen across his shoulders and into his eyes. Those amazing eyes, with corners that crinkled as he squinted against the glare of the sun; eyes that could go soft as velvet in lamplight. Her fingers knotted convulsively and he made a small sound when she yanked up his head.

“I am Cassandra,” she said, so softly only he could hear. “And now, Methos, at last, you live to serve me!”

Duncan woke and lay without moving, limbs heavy with sleep, content. Sunlight fell through the tall windows and across his bed. Wednesday. Dinner with Joe and Methos, and then uptown to see a new rock band the latter currently championed. Maybe Methos wouldn’t ask him about Milius. Ha!

In the meantime, Duncan realized suddenly, life was good. A burgeoning economy was taking his investments with it. People were suddenly interested in antiques again. Aside from Milius, no other Immortal had Challenged him in almost a year. His friends were getting along, and that extremely attractive art critic for the New York Times had given him her phone number at Joe’s.

Rolling over, Duncan reached for his wallet. Inside was the scrap of cocktail napkin. It was almost noon - why not? Grinning, he reached for the phone. It rang.

“MacLeod?”

“Hey, Joe.”

“You OK?”

Hearing a strange note in his friend’s voice, Duncan pushed the blankets back and sat up. “Yeah. What’s wrong?”

“Maybe nothing - maybe a lot. Have you heard from Methos lately?”

“Not for a couple days. Why?”

Joe mumbled something.

“JOE!”

“We’ve had a man on Methos since he left the Watchers.”

“What? Oh, he’s going to love that!”

“I was rather hoping you wouldn’t tell him,” was Joe’s dry retort, “although, if it’s any consolation, we’re watching him as Adam Pierson, new Immortal. Anyway, about five days ago, Methos got into a cab. Carlington followed. He thought Methos was going home, but the cab sped up and went right past the apartment. The guy lost the cab down by the docks. Methos hasn’t been back.”

Duncan said nothing, unease crawling up his spine. On one hand, Methos did tend toward unpredictability. On the other — in five thousand years, a man could make a lot of enemies. Knowing now what he did of Methos’ past, the possibility of enemies was very great indeed.

“Maybe he figured out he was being watched?”

“Could’ve.” Joe didn’t sound convinced. “Do you think he went to meet another Immortal?”

“Methos? Walk willingly into a fight? I doubt it.”

“Yeah. Well, I thought it was strange, myself. I thought maybe something was going on with the old bastard and we could get out of seeing that thrash metal band he loves so much.”

Duncan burst out laughing. “Joe, you’re a snob!”

“Oh, yeah. You could hardly wait to see ‘em, right?”

The Highlander chuckled. “Let’s find out if Methos shows tonight. If not, I’m betting there’s a reasonable

explanation for his disappearance.” Duncan paused, then: “Or as reasonable as you can expect from him.”

The plane circled lazily above a scattering of islands. Sunlight glanced off the cold blue water below. Methos shifted uncomfortably. Steel cut into his wrist, binding him to the arm of his seat. There were four mortals in the small plane with him - the pilot and guards who kept their distance and ignored his attempts at conversation.

The plane sank closer to one of the larger islands. He saw a rocky coast, broken cliffs and valley, deep and narrow. Canada? His memories of the flight’s beginning were hazy. Cassandra had given him water, a kindness he should have suspected at once. Not long afterwards, he’d lost consciousness, waking to this.

Banking sharply, the timbre of the engine changed. Methos’ two guards unbuckled themselves and approached him. They stood with legs braced apart as the plane lowered, then slowed. The ocean was alarmingly close. He was unlocked from the seat, hauled bodily to the door. When one of them started to turn the lock, he knew suddenly what they intended.

Methos struck as his captors succeeded in opening the door, a desperate fist connecting to the smaller man’s jaw. The larger of the two, looking annoyed, lifted his gun and fired point blank into Methos’ chest. It was fortunate the Immortal died then, for he surely would have done so - and much less cleanly - when his body smashed onto the rocks below.

Duncan checked his watch, waiting impatiently for the light to change. He was late for the auction and

likely to miss out on the Flemish tapestries. If they were genuine, of course. With Mathering, one could never be sure. The light changed. He hurried forward, swept on by the mass of New Yorkers around him. As he stepped onto the curb, he felt the sudden pull of another Immortal. Head going up, eyes narrowing, he looked through the crowd and saw a familiar sweep of dark hair, the unmistakable, elegant figure. Heart jumping, he shouted: "Cassandra!"

The crowd shifted and hid her from view. Duncan tucked his newspaper under his arm, and slid through the press of hurrying people, trying in vain to find her. Just as he decided he was mistaken, he spotted her again. Dodging around a woman with a stroller, he started after her. Then, unexpectedly, he felt the presence of yet another Immortal. A tall man loitered near a newsstand, watching her as she hurried to hail a cab. Drawing his long raincoat close, the stranger started toward her. Smooth as silk, pretending to be unaware of the other's presence, MacLeod cut him off. Cassandra started and spun around.

"Duncan!"

"You're a hard woman to catch," he lifted her hand to his lips. "Have you forgiven me yet?"

She looked at the cab, then back at him. "About Methos?" Her eyes flashed, but her mouth twitched. "Perhaps. A little."

"Good! How long are you in New York? Why didn't you call me? Can I take you to dinner?"

She touched him, a brief caress along his jaw. He was distracted by her lips, full and petulant. "I was only in town for the day, Duncan, and my flight

leaves in two hours. Come to Paris. We can — talk about old times."

The cabby honked impatiently. She looked past Duncan. The slanted, curiously feline eyes went blank with shock. Duncan looked around and saw the strange Immortal seven feet away. A chill ran down the Highlander's spine. He took a step toward the man and was halted by a crowd of Japanese tourists. When they were past, there was no sign of the stranger.

"Who the hell was that?"

MacLeod turned back to Cassandra, but she too was gone - the cab receding in traffic. More disturbed than he wanted to admit, he continued on to the auction.

There was pain, an absurd amount of it. High voices screamed at Methos from above and every once in a while, his mouth would fill with water. The choking would start broken bones grating against each other, rip torn muscles anew. Then he would lie at the bottom of a well of agony and wait desperately to mend.

After a while, things were clearer. Methos did not hurt quite so much and he could move various parts of himself, albeit slowly and with great effort. Eventually he realized that he lay half in and half out of the sea. The tide was coming in and the screaming came from gulls circling overhead. It was several more minutes, however, before he could summon the strength and coordination to turn over and crawl among the sharp-edged rocks to a higher place.

The sun was near setting, wind changing direction, coming in over the water. Soaked, hurting everywhere, he started to shiver. Methos wrapped his arms around himself and, jaw clamped shut to keep his teeth from chattering,



tried to find a place where the slick, lichen-crusting boulders gave some shelter. Fading light showed him cliffs rearing above a narrow strip of stony beach. Crowning the cliffs were pines, their dark silhouettes adding height to what seemed very much a barrier.

So this was it? Was he banished, sentenced to live alone on a frigid island? Methos had memories of that kind of survival, the basic man-against-nature war that man (and Immortal) too often lost. One thing he did know; he could not stay on the beach. The wind was picking up. Methos tasted rain in it. Further out to sea, where a wall of rocks formed a natural breakwater, the surf was high and wild. Slowly, feeling every minute of his five thousand years, he started along the stony strip, trying to find some easy way up the cliffs. He remembered what he'd seen from the plane - the wooded valley that lay behind them. There was shelter there, and the possibility of game.

The sun set and darkness settled over the sea. Overcast, there would be no moonlight to show him the way. The cold deepened. Lately, his body had been forced to mend too often on too little fuel; Methos found himself shaking, his passage across the rocks all the more perilous. Finally, desperate and not thinking too clearly, the Immortal started to climb.

His universe narrowed to a place of distant pain and the unthinking compulsion to move. One hand above the other, his body was a killing weight that must be hauled from rock to crevice by muscles that cramped with each movement. Dizzy, there were times when he thought he was falling; by some miracle, he did not. Time and again, exhaustion froze him in place, clinging like an insect to the side of the cliff,

distantly aware that the sea crashed far below him and the wind tried ceaselessly to pry him away.

The east was brightening when, at last, the Immortal dragged himself over the last, sharp lip of rock and fell flat on the cliff-top. Something cold and wet hit him in the face. Rain. Methos wanted to stand, to get to the sheltering trees, but he could no longer move. After a time, sleep took him and the downpour ceased to matter.

When he woke again, the rain had stopped, although the day remained gray and windy. He was stronger, but ferociously hungry. Finding his feet, none too steady, he reached the shelter of the woods. At once, the wind fell away to a distant whisper among the higher branches. Underfoot, decades of forest debris cushioned his steps. After a short distance, the ground began to descend. Footing became treacherous, forcing Methos to use rocks, trees and the occasional shrub to stay upright.

Halfway down the slope, exhaustion overcame him and he sat, breathless, against a tree. His stomach cramped. Grimly, he hauled himself up and continued on. Near the bottom, he slipped, grabbing wildly at the nearest branch. Wet, slick, it slipped through his trembling fingers and he went tumbling the rest of the way to the valley floor.

Walk. Rest. Walk. Rest again. Thirst added itself to Methos' growing list of miseries. He suspected that he was stumbling around in circles. All the trees looked the same, each hillock, each tangle of creeper. It was growing late, as well. He faced the prospect of another night without shelter. Desperation lent him strength.

He found a stream at last, bubbling past him from the high cliffs at his back. Kneeling beside it, he drank

until nausea warned him to stop. Then he simply huddled, bent double beside the icy water. His patience was rewarded by a surge of strength that brought him another quarter mile to an unexpected clearing.

Four small, clapboard houses stood around a scrub-covered square. A rusted pick-up was parked next to one of them. Beyond, through a stand of trees was a lake. Methos could see docks stretching into the placid waters. He smelled smoke and roasting meat. This time, hunger cramps sent him to his knees.

There was a rustling at his back. Methos turned as a man pushed aside the thicket. Another stepped from behind a tree on his left. Mortals — he had not sensed them coming. They wore jeans and plaid jackets of heavy wool; one had a shotgun under his arm. Hostility was plain in their faces.

“So, he’s here at last.” One of them stepped forward, a tall, handsome mortal, not yet middle-aged. He looked Methos up and down with twisted lip. “Come on, let’s get him up to the house.”

They were speaking English, but the accent was not Canadian. Methos tried vainly to shake off their hands. “Who are you? What is this place?”

The blow came out of nowhere, knocking him back, filling his mouth with blood.

“Shut up!”

He swore at them through swollen lips and tried again to free himself. Jeering at his weakness, they dragged him roughly to his feet and pushed him into the clearing. Faces peeped from windows. A toddler wandered out onto the wooden stoop of one house and stood, staring with a chubby finger in its mouth. A moment

later, it was snatched inside by a round-faced, frightened girl.

“Dane! Charlie!”

His escort cursed, but quietly, and halted. Methos looked around, saw an old man standing on the steps of the largest house. The party changed direction as the elder vanished back inside. There were long, shallow steps of weathered planking to be climbed on increasingly uncertain legs. A door opened before him and Methos was propelled into a carpeted parlor.

By the fireplace, on comfortable armchairs, sat two more men and a woman. All were old, but not, he reckoned, as old as the first. Methos was flung to the hearthstones at their feet. Dimly grateful for the warmth, he drew himself to his knees and, head spinning, waited. For a moment, there was only silence in the room, broken by the crackle of burning wood.

“He’s not what I expected,” came a voice, dry as autumn leaves.

“True evil is never obvious.” It was one of the men, pompous.

“True evil is whatever suits its purpose, obvious or not,” was the tart response. “This man looks half dead.”

“From what Cassandra has sworn, Lucius,” came a gentle, feminine reminder, “t’is no more than he deserves.”

The worst of the dizziness passed. Methos lifted his head. The woman recoiled; the other man swore. Lucius, a man as faded and brittle as his voice, was unmoved.

“Nevertheless, such vengeance is the Healer’s not ours. What occurs between Immortals is outside our providence.” Lucius ignored the outraged stares and bent toward Methos. “You look hungry.”

“Food would not go ... unappreciated,” the Immortal agreed faintly. These people knew about Immortals?

His words were lost in a storm of angry voices, chief among them, the handsome man. “Her orders said nothing of feeding him!”

In the subsequent exclamations of agreement, the old man lifted a translucent hand and they were silent. “Gwendolyn? Is there any more of that stew?”

“Lucius! This is Methos! One of the Four Horsemen!”

Gods! They knew about that, too? Where the hell was he?

“You are a fool, Dane, but it is your youth, I suppose.” Impatient, the old man sank back into his chair, supremely unmindful of the man’s humiliated scowl. “As for the Healer’s instructions, did she specifically order that we not feed him?”

There was no response, only a tight-lipped glare. The elder cackled and looked away. Silence fell, uncomfortable. Finally, Lucius beckoned imperiously toward the door.

“Come along, my dear! He’s not likely to bite!”

An elderly woman approached, carrying a large bowl that she gave to Lucius while staring, round-eyed, at Methos. The old man handed it down to the Immortal. Murmuring his thanks, the prisoner managed to pick up the spoon and get the first mouthful in without embarrassing himself.

Strength came back slowly and with it, sharpening wits. He began to be curious about them.

“Is what she says of you true?” asked Lucius at last.

Methos took a deep breath, denial on the tip of his tongue. He set

the trencher aside and rose. There was a small, involuntary movement away - all but Dane, who put a hand on his gun and looked a grim promise.

Feeling almost detached - why did he always think of Duncan at moments like this? - Methos again directed his words at the Elder. “Of what, exactly, am I accused?”

This time, the old man elbowed an indignant Dane. “No! This is not the Healer’s house, Jason. Hold your temper or you can await your prisoner outside.”

The man subsided at once, fuming and directing furious looks at Methos. There would be trouble from that quarter.

“She accuses you of murder, of rape and torture on a scale that would be unbelievable should anyone else make the claim.”

“And did she say when all this mayhem occurred?”

“Does it matter?” asked Lucius quietly. “Did you atone? Do you think the price you’ve paid sufficient for what you took?”

“It was three thousand years ago!”

“He admits it!”

The babble rose. Methos thought about making a break for it, but Dane was at his side, gun prodding his ribs. “I know this won’t kill you,” he promised softly, “but it will make it much easier to get you home.”

Lucius finally quieted the others. His eyes were sad. Methos returned the gaze with stony indifference. The man nodded abruptly. “If you have finished eating, it is time for Jason to carry out his orders. Do not return here uninvited; our simple hospitality is not acceptance of your evil.”

“Thank you for the food. It was very good.” Great effort kept Methos’ voice steady. He didn’t resist when Dane took his arm and pulled him from the hearth.

Outside, it was raining again. Methos barely heeded it. On the far side of the clearing, near the lake, a road wound off through the trees. There was a newer truck parked there. Methos’ captors wrestled him into the back of it, ending his struggles by the simple expedient of knocking his head against the steel bed wall. While the Immortal huddled, dazed, they handcuffed him to a bolt in the floor and left him. A few moments later, the engine roared to life and Methos was flung sideways as the vehicle lurched forward.

A narrow road, little more than a pair of muddy ruts, twisted through the forest, eventually leaving the thinning evergreens, descending into open land. Small fields were bordered by low, stone walls, ending abruptly at another wall of trees. But these were not the expected spruce or pine. These trees were oak!

What was this place? From the plane, it had been obvious they were over the bleak, frigid coast of northeastern Canada. Yet none of what he now saw around him confirmed that. Oaks, for instance, did not grow so far north. The fields through which they rolled had been recently harvested. This valley was sheltered, of course, but even so, the days were surely too short, the winters too harsh for farming?

The truck rolled slowly through the grove. Spreading branches latticed overhead, mostly bare now, weaving delicate filigree against a sullen sky. The sound of tires against the frost-hardened earth, the growling of the motor disturbed the pristine silence. When they cleared the grove, there were

more fields and more houses, lights twinkling in the advancing dusk. Once more, the road angled up. Native spruce and pine returned. Beneath the trees, the dusk deepened and the headlights came on.

It was now very cold. Methos wondered dimly if the intent was to freeze him solid. He was shaking when the truck pulled in front of a large, startlingly modern house. The two men gave the Immortal no time to take in his new surroundings. Methos was hustled through the front door and into a spacious, sparsely furnished front room.

Across a floor of gleaming parquetry they hurried, through halls with walls of glass. They came at last to a cellar much older than the house. Age breathed out of the mildewed stones. One of his guards moved ahead and threw open a low door, the hinges protesting.

“You cannot be serious!” Disbelievingly, Methos took in the rough walls and low ceiling. There were rusting chains bolted to the wall, damp patches on the floor. But when they pushed him against the wall and shackled his wrists to it, he realized numbly that they were, indeed, very serious and that he might be in much more trouble than he’d imagined.

“God damn it! Where’s Cassandra?” he said angrily, loudly, no longer caring if they hit him or not. “You’re all INSANE!”

Ignoring him, the men left, shutting and bolting the door. Their footsteps faded and Methos was left in complete darkness.

This was truly crazy. He should have killed the bitch when he had a chance, but MacLeod would never have forgiven him that. For some reason, that realization made him even angrier.

What the hell was he doing even caring what MacLeod or anyone else thought? Survival was self-interest. This was proof if ever he needed it. The hell with them all!

Methos heart gradually slowed. His fury faded, leaving him tired and desperate. The chains holding him might be rusty, but they were strong. No amount of tugging loosened them; he could not even sit, so, for the moment, he stopped struggling and waited.

Much later, he jerked out of a troubled doze. The door rattled; it opened and Methos closed his eyes against the sudden brilliance.

“Methos.”

The Immortal blinked, eyes adjusting. The painful blaze was nothing more than the lightbulb in the hall outside. Two people filled the small space. One was the man he’d already seen. The other was new, a youth who stared at him with horrified fascination.

“I’m Jason Dane, Cassandra’s estate manager. In her absence, you will take your orders from me,” the older man said.

“Go to hell.” Methos regarded him from narrowed eyes. “This is kidnapping and assault.”

“You’re on Elwyn Island. We’ve been here a long time. Under a one-hundred and fifty year old treaty with Canada, we’re autonomous - sovereign.”

“And this isn’t against your laws?” He shook his chains at them.

“Cassandra is the law,” replied the man calmly.

“Fine. I’d like to talk to that bitch.”

The young man growled and reached for the prisoner. Dane touched his arm. “Save it, Tom,” he suggested, and the youth resentfully subsided.

Dane returned his attention to the Immortal. His eyes were very cold.

“You were a powerful once, Methos. You took what you wanted, and killed for pleasure. You raped and tortured and burned. It’s time to pay your debts.”

“I never hurt you,” he said finally, stunned at the violence in the controlled voice. “It was thousands of years ago, and, as for Cassandra ...”

“Do you deny these things?” Dane cut him off.

Methos clamped shut his jaws and said nothing. The man nodded and beckoned to the youth. In spite of himself, seeing what the boy held, the Immortal shrank against the wall.

“How kinky,” he managed. “I didn’t know Cassandra was into that scene.”

This time, the boy got in a blow before Dane could stop him. The older mortal said something sharp under his breath. Then he reached over and pulled the Immortal’s head forward. Metal locked, cold, around Methos’ neck. He shivered a little as Dane stepped away.

“This is an asylum, right?” he gasped, half-laughing. “An island for the stark, raving...”

“Tom. I’ll take it from here.”

“Hey, I have a right ...”

“TOM!”

Glowering, the boy stalked from the room, slamming the door behind him. Jason turned back and pulled something out of his pocket. Methos’ gut knotted, recognizing the thing — a taser. It fired a dart on the end of a long wire — like a fishing line — and poured hundreds of volts of electricity into its target’s body. The taser wouldn’t kill, but it would stop a man cold in his tracks by disrupting his central nervous system.

Helplessly, Methos watched Dane point it and fire.

Lava roared through the Immortal's veins. Another shock drove the breath from his lungs. He hung helplessly in the chains, legs turned to water. He heard Dane's voice in echoes.

"The collar has a signal transmitter — it'll alert us if you leave the estate. For their self-defense, other members of the household will also be carrying one of these." He brandished the taser. "Got it?"

Methos, through swimming eyes, saw Dane's finger hover above the button and nodded earnestly. The finger moved away.

"Where's Cassandra?" Methos tried to keep his voice steady. Dane ignored the question, pulling back the dart.

"You will be assigned jobs while you're here. You'll work and keep your mouth shut. Insolence, disobedience, any show of defiance will be punished." For the first time, Methos saw emotion in the man's face. It was there only a second, but long enough to knot his stomach with the realization that there was nothing he could say to erase the image they had of him - that Cassandra had of him.

He watched Dane turn around and leave the room. The man paused in the doorway a moment, stared stonily back at Methos. Then the door shut and the Immortal was alone.

## CHAPTER TWO

The prisoner was awake when Tom came to get him in the morning. His eyes were smudged with exhaustion and there was no sign of yesterday's bravado. A night spent chained to the wall, no food, no water — that would

take the fight out of a man soon enough. The boy unlocked the shackles and stepped back as Methos promptly slid to the floor, arms hanging uselessly at his sides.

"Get up," Tom said, poking the ragged figure with his boot.

The dark head lifted fiercely. Tom laid his hand on the taser in his pocket. Methos clenched his fists, then got awkwardly to his feet. Without a word, he preceded Tom down the narrow passage and upstairs into the kitchen.

The entire staff was gathered for breakfast, Jason included, and the room fell silent when Methos appeared. Janet and Renee, the two maids, giggled nervously as the Immortal looked them over. Steel collar around his neck, clothes in ribbons, he nevertheless looked anything but cowed. Tom itched to erase the expression of cold disdain.

"Well, well - there's fight left in you yet." Jason lifted his coffee and sipped, watching Methos over the rim.

"Want some breakfast?" Maurice asked.

Startled, the Immortal nodded.

"Too bad!" the cook retorted and everyone laughed.

"Take him out to Fire Point and get him started," Jason said to Tom. "Bring Charlie along, just to be safe."

"I don't need Charlie. I've got that shocker thing." Bending over the table, Tom swiped a rejected bacon strip from Renee's plate. She giggled and slapped at his hand.

"Methos."

The Immortal looked up, sullen. Unperturbed by his hostility, Jason said: "Someone will come get you later and bring you back. Remember, if you try to leave the estate, the collar will alert us.

By all means, however, feel free to test it.”

The lean, stubbled jaw clenched, but the Immortal only nodded. Jason studied him a moment longer. “I’d feel better if you took Charlie,” he told Tom.

“I’ll be fine. You worry too much.”

“Damn straight. Cassandra would be very, very annoyed if anything happened to you.”

“Cassandra worries too much.”

Laughing, Jason returned to his coffee and accounts. Renee peeped up at Tom through her lashes. “You can have the rest of my bacon, if you want.”

“Tom?” Jason bent a forbidding look on Renee.

“Move!” Tom ordered Methos. The Immortal turned and stalked from the house.

It was cold. Tom zipped his jacket up to his neck. There was frost on the ground and by the time they reached the tool shed, he was blowing on his hands and wishing he’d brought gloves. After rummaging about, Tom handed the Immortal a spade, pick and crowbar. Without a word, Methos slung the tools over his shoulder and walked out.

Fire Point lay east of Caerleon, high atop a promontory overlooking both the great house and the valley. It was a picturesque pile, the tumbled stones softened by time and moss, trees setting roots among them.

“You’re supposed to clear away the undergrowth and dirt, clean the stones and set them aside.”

The Immortal gave him an incredulous stare. “They weigh a hundred pounds each - at least.”

“Then you’ve your work cut out for you,” snapped Tom. “And I wouldn’t waste any time. Cassandra

expects to see progress when she returns. It would be stupid to disappoint her.”

“When’s she coming back?”

“Whenever she wants.”

The prisoner turned his back on Tom and walked slowly toward the overgrown ruin. After a moment, he began stripping away vines and moss with swift, angry motions. Mistrustful, the mortal found a sheltered spot higher on the hill. The Immortal ignored him, methodically clearing brush away from the first stone.

Tom remembered the first time he’d seen this place. Lucius, the old Islander priest, said it was a watch tower, one of three built when the Folk first came to the isle. The other two had been perched on the cliffs, one on the east, the second to the west. From those vantage points, a signal could be passed to the villages if the enemy’s ships were seen. But Cassandra had chosen their haven well. The enemy never came and the outer towers gradually vanished, erased by sea and storm.

Tom was no islander. He knew damn well modern enemies wouldn’t even notice stone battlements. Shivering a little, he drew his knees to his chest. Below, Methos stopped, ran a hand through spiky, dark hair. Setting aside the shovel, the Immortal dropped to a crouch. Curious, Tom leaned forward. “What is it?”

“A capstone, I think, but the carving is ... extraordinary.”

“Stand away from it - by the edge of the ridge!”

Methos backed up as Tom slid down. Something in the dirty stone caught a ray of sun and sparkled. His eyes widened. Bending over, he pushed away the mud.

The blow came out of nowhere, knocking Tom into the leaves, shattering

his thoughts. Another blow drove the breath from him and he rolled, narrowly avoiding a third, savage kick. Somehow he got to his feet, mouth pulsing with pain, consumed by equal parts of fear and fury. Ducking wildly to one side, he avoided being impaled by the flying pick. Desperate fingers found the taser in his pocket. He yanked it out and aimed, but Methos was faster. He was on Tom, lean hands closing with frightening strength around the mortal's arm.

A desperate twist extricated Tom; a lucky blow slowed the Immortal's assault. Somehow, he managed to roll out from beneath Methos, slipping and tumbling over the mossy lip of a stone. This time, he fired.

Abruptly, there was no more resistance. The Immortal's body twisted. His eyes were wide and blind. Shaking, Tom lifted his finger away from the control.

The Immortal shuddered and was still. Wiping blood from his swollen lip, Tom fought the urge to let the prisoner have another taste of hell, but contented himself with yanking back the dart. After several long minutes, slowly and without grace, Methos rose to his knees. His ashen face glistened. When Tom took a step toward him, he flinched, coming up against rock. The mortal retrieved the fallen pick and shoved it unceremoniously back at him.

"Get to work," Tom said. Then, heart still hammering, he turned his back on the silent Immortal, and left him alone on the hilltop.

MacLeod leaned forward, his back straight, eyes distant and focused inward. He brought his arm back slowly, felt the strain of muscles before he released the energy in an explosive

punch. Then it was back to shifting his balance, beginning again.

Warning slid along his nerves, prickled over his skin. The Highlander spun, kicked, then bent to snatch up his sword. He heard the street door open - it had been locked - and footsteps on the stair. Moving toward the nearest door, he waited.

A tall man stepped into the room. Well dressed, graying hair clipped and shining, his hard eyes moved over the Highlander.

"Duncan MacLeod?" The accent was faint, from no particular place. Old, very old.

Duncan nodded his head slightly, not relaxing his stance. He recognized the other Immortal as the man on the street following Cassandra. The stranger seemed faintly amused, peeling off his gloves, looking around the long, mirrored room.

"A dance studio once?"

"Have you come for me?"

"Certainly not." The hands under the gloves were square and thick-fingered, at odds with the man's languid elegance. "I am Neilin Vortig. We have a common acquaintance. I was hoping you might help me find her."

MacLeod spun his blade. It blurred back into its scabbard. Vortig did not seem overly impressed. Keeping a wary eye on his visitor, the Highlander grabbed a towel.

"Who would that be?"

"Cassandra. Quite the beautiful enchantress. We're old, old friends."

"I don't know where she is," MacLeod said finally. "And I don't like strangers breaking into my house."

"I won't linger." Vortig continued pleasant, strolling along the exercise bar, his reflection repeating into infinity in the mirrors around them. He



stopped by the window and looked out onto the street. "Are you sure you don't know where she is?"

MacLeod nodded. Shrugging, Vortig moved to the weapons rack and, after a moment, selected a longsword

"You might be lying. Are you willing to defend your words, Duncan MacLeod, of the Clan MacLeod?"

The Highlander's jaw tightened, drawing his blade while the other Immortal shed his coat. Vortig's hands were swift and sure as he tested the longsword's balance. They faced each other in the center of the room, late afternoon sunlight falling across the wood in wide, dusty bars.

The attack came suddenly, a lightning thrust that drove Duncan back a step. He recovered at once, only to find Vortig coming in from below. The other Immortal was good, quicksilver on his feet and tireless. MacLeod, already fatigued from a long workout, could feel the weight of his own limbs and struggled to stay out of reach.

Harsh breathing and the clash of steel echoed through the studio. Slowly, inexorably, Vortig was driving MacLeod toward the end of the room. A feint, a thrust, and there was searing pain along his left arm. MacLeod dodged the next attack, hitting the wall, rolling along it as Vortig's blade took a chunk out of the plaster.

"Where's Cassandra?"

Sides heaving, MacLeod backed away slowly. Vortig was barely winded, almost affable. He waited politely for the Highlander to catch his breath.

"I . . . don't know." MacLeod's sword weighed a thousand pounds. "Wouldn't tell you . . . anyway."

"Do you know?" Vortig lowered his blade. "I believe you, Highlander - on both counts."

"Good." Duncan wanted to sit down. "Close the door on your way out."

Eyes of unusual depth held his. It was a trait of the old ones, MacLeod thought irritably, that those eyes so often held amusement.

"It's very rare to find a reputation that is actually true," Vortig returned the sword to the rack and retrieved his coat. "I'll remember you, Highlander."

"And I you," was the Highlander's grim reply.

"Yes," Vortig said softly. "I suspect you will."

Methos sat, back against the warm clothes dryer, long legs stretched out in front of him. It was late and he was tired. When the washing machine rattled to a stop, he ignored it.

Elwyn Island, under other circumstances, would be a fascinating place. The ruins he was excavating, for instance, were easily tenth century. So were the foundations of Caerleon. Incredible as it seemed, the Folk had been here for centuries before any other Europeans except the Vikings.

Elwyn had a population of six hundred, all members of an obscure pagan cult - the Dragonfolk. Methos had never heard of it before. It had its roots in fifth century Britain. His informant, the flirtatious Janet, knew little about the Dragon, or why it was worthy of deification, but she was not one of the Folk. Like most of Caerleon's inmates, she was Canadian, third-generation in Cassandra's service. Apparently, fraternization with the islanders was not encouraged.

At some point in their history, the Folk had acquired an enemy of fearsome power who hounded them across England to the shores of the

North Sea. Trapped there, they were threatened with slaughter. At this point, Cassandra entered the story and the tale promptly became — in Methos' opinion — a little overwrought.

"Miss Cassandra was a wise woman and very famous in the olden days," Janet confided. "She knew the Norse king. It was for love of her that he sent his finest ships to bring the Folk safely to this island. Isn't that the most romantic thing?"

Romantic, indeed. Far more interesting was how the bitch had wrangled sovereignty for this wretched rock. He had to admit, albeit grudgingly, that was a pretty good trick. The rest of Janet's story he discounted completely.

"Methos?"

He started out of his half doze. Speak of the devil. Little Janet was in her nightgown, dark hair tumbling over her shoulders.

"I can't find my night robe. Have you seen it?"

Warning bells were going off in his mind. Methos got to his feet as she advanced on him. The nightgown was very low-cut. And Janet had an exceptionally nice bosom. He took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry. I haven't." Deftly he turned, pretending to look in the pile of clean clothing stacked on a nearby table. He sincerely doubted he'd find the garment, but at least he put the dryer between them - a momentary respite.

"I'll help you look." Undeterred, she moved in, trapping him between dryer and table. Her arm brushed his. The night turned dangerous.

"I don't think your robe is here."

Gods, her hand was on his arm now - no pretense at accidental touch. Heart hammering, he tried to move

around her and succeeded only in getting stuck. Worse, the soft curves pressed against him were having their predictable effect on his own body.

He tried again, desperate. "This isn't a good idea, Janet. You'll get us both in trouble."

And he'd be the one to suffer for it.

She ignored his resistance, pressing closer and bringing her arms up around his neck. "I don't care what they say," she whispered. "I think you're ever so handsome. Are you really five thousand years old?"

Methos tried gently to extricate himself, but she only tightened her hold on him. He smelled lavender water. Maybe — maybe he could use this to his advantage . . .

"METHOS!"

Janet shrieked. Methos, heart jumping into his throat, dispensed with courtesy and flung her away. Jason Dane stood in the doorway, face white, furious. Janet was stammering—a confused melange of apology and denial. Methos' gaze fixed irresistibly on the taser gripped in Dane's hand.

"Out," snapped Dane and Janet, bursting into tears, fled. Methos braced himself. .

"Nice try," the man purred, "but I think you'll regret it."

"It wasn't my fault . . ."

Dane came into the room and Methos found himself once again backing up to the wall. Before he realized what he was about, Dane put his hand to the Immortal's crotch.

"This says you were enjoying it."

"It says Janet's a sexy little thing," he replied. Dane's hand tightened and his words ended on a gasp.

The mortal stepped away. Methos couldn't win this one, didn't

even try. Keeping a firm hand on his temper, the Immortal dropped his eyes and tried not to think of the ache between his legs. "It won't happen again."

"Cassandra was right," breathed the mortal. "You are dangerous. All soft-voiced and penitent." His lips curled. "I think I understand how she could have thought herself in love."

Caught by surprise, Methos' gaze locked into the man's.

"Jesus, but I hate bastards like you! Selfish and unpitying, taking whatever you want and damn the misery you leave behind!"

Abruptly, he turned away, looking around the room, struggling to control himself. "Finish up," he said finally, harshly. "And you can be sure Cassandra will hear about this." He was gone, footsteps echoing across the kitchen. A door slammed. Methos realized he was trembling and sat down on the spot.

*I think I understand how she could have thought herself in love.*

In those days, he'd been a crude, brutal creature. Cassandra had been the embodiment of a dream. Mysterious, passionate, exquisite of face and form, she'd held him in thrall. She hated him now, of course — probably had for millennia. Of that, Methos had no doubt whatsoever. Still, it was oddly comforting to hear that there might have been a time, however brief, when she had not.

October turned into November and there was still no sign of Methos. A discreet call to his landlord revealed that the ancient was in imminent danger of being evicted for nonpayment of his rent. MacLeod paid it and worried.

Joe asked around, but no Watcher had filed a report of an unidentified kill. MacLeod suspected he was worrying for nothing. Long life had clearly taught Methos tricks no other Immortal possessed, and his history was rife with unexplained disappearances. But in the last few years, Methos had seemed increasingly content to be part of Duncan's circle of friends. The Highlander had watched the prickly, sarcastic, old man turn, however reluctantly, into someone almost likeable. Finally, deciding to risk Methos' ire, he broke into his friend's apartment, a reluctant Joe in tow.

The oldest Immortal lived in a modern building of glass and copper. His door was at the end of a hushed, deeply carpeted corridor. There were no security cameras MacLeod could see. The lock was mechanical; MacLeod had no trouble with it. Inside, there were cathedral ceilings and tall windows that let in the afternoon sunlight. The furniture was spare, colors muted. Joe stopped in front of a metal sculpture, a collection of rough-edged bars twisted into unusual shapes. Shaking his head, he looked up. MacLeod grinned and picked up a newspaper lying open on the couch. Underneath was a leather-bound book, open and face-down on the cushion. The Highlander brandished the paper's front page at Joe. "September fourteen."

Methos' bed was a chaotic jumble of rumpled sheets and blankets. Sweaters and a pair of black jeans lay across the bedspread, and the closet doors were open. The bathroom was empty, a towel tossed over the side of the tub. When MacLeod returned to the front room, Joe was listening to the answering machine. There were two or three hang-up calls, but other than

Duncan's own messages, nothing. Not much of a social life, it seemed.

"I don't like this, Dawson." MacLeod moved to the windows. Buildings reared as far as the eye could see. "Everything's here. His journals — Methos would never leave his journals."

"If he's decided to take a vacation ..."

"He'd take at least his current one." MacLeod bent down and picked the book off the couch. "The last entry is the thirteenth."

Guiltily, MacLeod told himself circumstances warranted the intrusion, and he read the entry. It was nothing but an observation of the weather and some current events. No mention of anything unusual.

"It's possible he lost a fight."

Duncan set the book back down. "Joe, have you heard of an Immortal called Vortig?"

"Neilin Vortig, industrialist, lives in Toronto, has a summer house in the Catskills. That Vortig?"

MacLeod grinned. "What else do you know about him?"

"Nothing. He's not my Immortal. Why?"

"The week Methos vanished, there were two Immortals in town, Vortig and Cassandra. Cassandra swore to me that she would not Challenge Methos, but Vortig has no such restraints. And he's old, Joe, easily as old as Cassandra - maybe older."

"Do you think Methos might be hiding from him?"

"Maybe. Could you get me a copy of Vortig's Watcher file?"

"Sure." Now Joe was worried, too. "What are you going to do?"

"Fly to Paris."

Cassandra was awake to see the dawn, a gradual brightening behind the thick drapes of the hotel room. Her body ached with weariness, but memories crowded too thickly and insistently to allow sleep. She knew from experience that there was nothing to do but let them come. So she lay on the huge mattress, wrapped in luxury, and kept telling herself it was over, had been over for centuries.

Methos standing above her, his shadow long and black on the dusty ground. Methos picking her up and carrying her to the close darkness of his tent. His hands pulling away her gown, heedless of her struggles and protests. The sound of the ripping fabric and his breathing, harsh and urgent. In the silence of her room, Cassandra closed her eyes tightly.

He had laughed when it was over. "A virgin!" he crowed, and licked away the blood from her thighs. Even now, the shame and terror of the moment was enough to make Cassandra curl tightly in the silky sheets.

Goddess! She'd not had a moment's peace since finding him again. In a gesture that was becoming habit, Cassandra fingered the gold chain around her wrist — the chain on which was hung the small, gold key to Methos' collar.

The phone rang. Startling, she reached blindly for it.

"Mme. Raulin?"

It took a moment to remember Mme. Raulin was herself.

"This is your wake-up call. Is there anything else you need?"

"Coffee," she said. "Please."

Room service came promptly, coffee in a silver service with croissants on a china saucer. They were still warm, buttery and fragile on her tongue. For a

while, Cassandra focused on the pleasure of a well-prepared breakfast and the memories receded.

This was foolish. Lingering in Calais was merely prolonging the torment. The past returned with greater frequency the longer she avoided facing him. The business with Janet had reminded her of how dangerous he was in other ways. Cassandra could not blame the foolish child for succumbing. She had done the same and with far, far less reason to do so.

And then, of course, there was Vortig.

Goddess, it didn't rain but it poured! She pushed back the covers. Snatching up her robe, she padded across the rug and threw mullioned windows wide. The morning chill banished the last of the cobwebs. It would be a beautiful day, clear and crisp. She could smell the sea. After several minutes, Cassandra closed the windows.

It was time to go home. If Vortig found her, she would have to fight him or tell him what he wanted to know. If she fought him, she would lose. And there was no question of revealing Elwyn's secret.

It was foolishness, putting off the inevitable. She had her duties, and if, at times, they chafed - - well, she had taken them on with full knowledge of what they entailed. Picking up the phone, she summoned the concierge.

### CHAPTER THREE

Methos hissed in frustration as he tried to pry an ancient cornerstone from the earth. In spite of the bitter cold, the Immortal was covered with sweat, sides heaving with effort as the damn thing finally budged. Unable to go further, he sagged to the ground, back against the

recalcitrant rock, and caught his breath. This job needed several men with more equipment than a spade and crowbar, but his mistress was in no apparent hurry. He looked ruefully at his blistered hands, watched as the lesions healed for the millionth time, then stared out over the valley.

Clouds were piling against the high ridges. There was a nor'easter coming. He felt the wind's bite on his cooling body and wished for more than the shreds of his original clothing. Methos reckoned that soon the rags wouldn't even preserve modesty, let alone hold back the cold. His teeth started to chatter, so he got back to his feet and bent over the crowbar again.

Two hellish months he had been on this island. Methos had yet to see Cassandra, but it hardly mattered. Her rage confronted him every day out of a dozen different faces. His escape attempts had not ended with the attack on Tom. Twice Methos tried to make the beach and twice the collar led them right to him. They'd punished him for each attempt and, after the second failure, Methos postponed that idea.

The stone came free from its bed at last, rolling a few inches toward the precipice. Swearing, Methos dodged out of its way. Icy rain spattered in huge drops around him and, miserably, he swore again. Picking up his crowbar, he happened to glance toward the valley. Lights spread across the fields, moving away from the village at the foot of the hill. Methos watched them scatter over autumn-bare fields, moving toward the Grove.

The rain began in earnest. Turning his back, he began to push the rock onto the sledge. He'd fashioned the thing himself, using a dimly recalled memory to do so. It was clumsily made

and he was forever repairing it. Still, it was better than trying to roll the damn rocks across the ridge to the growing pile by the woods.

As he bent to lift the handles, Methos saw movement at the corner of his eye. He straightened and turned, hoping it wasn't Dane. It wasn't. Clinging to a nearby tree, a child stared back at him. She was a tiny thing, perhaps eight years old, eyes overlarge, her face too thin and white to be healthy. Pale hair hung, dripping, over frail shoulders. She wasn't wearing a coat. Alarmed, Methos dropped the sledge. He took a step forward before remembering who he was to the islanders.

"Hello!" he called, smiling. "Are you lost?"

The reason for the lanterns was now clear. The child did not answer him, but neither did she look afraid. He took another step forward. "Wouldn't you rather be at home in front of a nice fire?"

Her small head tilted. There was still no answer, but the bloodless lips curved into a sudden, answering smile. Encouraged, Methos scrambled up the rocky slope. "How about a ride on my sledge?"

Wind rattled the tree, so cold it stopped Methos' breath. The girl seemed not to notice. "Yes, please," she chirped, barely audible above the rain. The Immortal stared stupidly at the hand held out to him, blind-sided by the trusting gesture. Wordlessly, he took it and his heart jumped to feel how cold were the tiny fingers.

They scrambled down the hillock while the rain pelted around them. She paused at the stone, releasing his hand and, inexplicably, stroked the worn

carvings. Methos lifted her gently, carefully, and set her securely upon it.

"What's your name?"

"Igraine."

"That's a pretty name. Are you comfortable, Igraine?"

She nodded. The compulsion to snatch her up and run to the house was almost irresistible, but Methos was terrified of scaring her. Instead, he pulled the stone a few feet, then stopped. Crouching, his face level with hers, he asked: "I think we should go get out of the rain, don't you?"

Methos was arrested by the look in her huge, sunken eyes. For a moment, he couldn't move. Then she lifted her arms to him, and when he picked her up, she curled tightly against him and buried her face in his shoulder. He ran.

The storm was directly overhead, afternoon giving way to early dusk. There were people around the house when he came over the hill. He saw lights, heard dogs barking. Someone spotted them and shouted.

A woman broke from the knot of onlookers and ran to the child, snatching her up. Villagers closed around them and bore them away. Methos stayed where he was, afraid to move. Dane was coming, swearing and slipping on the wet grass, Tom right behind him. The older man carried his taser. Fear closed the Immortal's throat. He tried to twist away from the barb, but half-frozen, dizzy with exhaustion, he wasn't fast enough. Pain dropped him to his knees on the muddy slope.

"Get up!" Dane's voice shook. "If you've harmed a hair on her head ..."

Methos tried, but half-frozen, muscle control shattered by the taser's disruption, he only slipped and fell again. In the end, they had to lift him

bodily, dragging him up the hill to the house.

The sudden cessation of the rain and wind took Methos' breath away. He was released to fold quietly to the kitchen tiles, dazed by the fragrant warmth. Dane's boot nudged his flank. Hoping to forestall any more trouble, Methos gathered himself up and faced the man. Tom hovered at his back; there was something new in the boy's grey gaze - Methos couldn't read it.

"Clean up and get back to work," said Dane harshly.

For the first time, Methos was aware that there were others in the kitchen. Maurice and Renee were standing at a table, hands covered with flour, staring. He could not bring himself to look at any of them. With reasonable steadiness, the Immortal turned and managed to get to the laundry room. Bracing himself against the edge of the sink, he put his head under the faucet, letting warm water sluice away the mud. Behind closed eyes, he saw the child's face again, the luminous, otherworldly gaze that saw straight into his soul.

And suddenly there was another child looking up at him, her soot-streaked face white with terror. Smoke filled Methos' nostrils; he inhaled it with relish. Screams and the roar of flames rang in his ears. Kronos called it the music of chaos. Sobbing, the child held up her arms to him. Methos lifted his axe, its weight familiar in his hands.

"NO!" He reeled away from the sink, head hitting the shelf above it, crashing into a stack of laundry and coming up hard against the wall. For a long time, he remained there, shaking, stomach turning. "No," he whispered at last. "Not any more. Never, ever again."

The door opened. Tom stared across the room at him Methos sank to a crouch, drew his knees to his chest and lowered his head. The villager could do what he liked. Exhausted, heartsick, Methos was past caring.

But the kick he expected never came, nor the angry blow. After a moment, he heard Tom leave and the door close. Even so, it was a while before he summoned the energy to look up.

Next to him on the floor was a steaming bowl of soup.

Cassandra wasn't in Paris. Duncan arrived at the doorstep of her (very exclusive) apartment building only to be told by a supercilious doorman that Mme. Cassandra was Away. Neither sincere appeals nor wads of folded francs were enough to squeeze one tiny hint from his lips. Disgruntled, MacLeod headed for his best friend in the city, Robert de Valicourt.

The baron was at home, although - to Duncan's disappointment - Gina was not.

"She is on St. James, waiting for me, my friend. Sunlight, rum and my incomparable Gina - and you delay me! See how great is my regard for you?" de Valicourt lifted an inquisitive brow, then laughed and embraced the Scot. "It's wonderful to see you, Duncan. Come to St. James with me. Gina would adore seeing you again!"

"You tempt me," admitted Duncan, returning the grin and the embrace. "Are you staying at the Corazon del Mar?"

"Of course."

"Tempting, indeed." MacLeod shook his head. "But as it happens, I'm looking for Cassandra."

“That witch?” Robert bent a suspicious look on him. “Good lord, Duncan! You live dangerously, oui?”

“Absolutely,” his friend replied. “Know where she is?”

“Non,” de Valicourt paused, “but we do share a solicitor. Jerome Solvay. Most discreet and a very old friend.”

“Would he give out information on a client?”

“Certainly not! However, were I to vouch for you, he might be convinced to communicate with her on your behalf.” There was a very Gallic shrug. Then: “MARCEL! Bring me a phone!”

Armed with his letter of recommendation, Duncan said goodbye to his friend and headed back into the city. Evening approached; Joe’s plane would be landing soon. The Highlander consulted de Valicourt’s near-illegible directions and turned sharply right.

Ahead, the street was blocked off. Flashing red and blue lights danced off the surrounding buildings. Police, ambulances and a growing crowd of gawkers stood between him and the solicitor’s office. A moment later, with a chill, Duncan realized it was the solicitor’s office. He parked and jumped out, moving through the crowd toward the line of police holding them back. Paramedics were running back and forth, carrying equipment inside and the wounded out. Two body bags lay on the sidewalk nearby.

“What happened?” He asked his neighbor. The woman turned wide eyes on him.

“Armed men burst into Monsieur Solvay’s offices. Terrorists, the police say.”

The sense of another Immortal raced across his flesh. He spun around, but saw no one he recognized. “Was Mr. Solvay injured?”

Wordlessly, the woman pointed to one of the bags. Duncan thanked her and returned to his car. Once beyond the crowd, he felt the Immortal again. There was movement in the shadows of a nearby alley. A man smiled, tipped him a lazy salute - and was gone. Vortig.

Duncan swore and went after him. Once beyond sight of the street, he drew his sword, hesitating just a moment to get accustomed to the gloom. The alley was very narrow, shadowed by tall buildings that shut away the sun. It ran straight for some distance, then turned sharply. He saw no one. There were dozens of doors leading onto it. Vortig had likely stepped into one of them. Suddenly, the familiar tingling made him spin about, hand going to sword hidden inside his coat.

“MacLeod.”

Vortig stepped into the alley behind him. For a moment, they stared at each other across the dirty bricks.

“Your work?” Duncan asked finally, gesturing in the direction of the street.

Vortig shrugged. “It occurs to me,” he said, “that you, too, are looking for the lovely Cassandra.”

“What do you want with her?”

“Not to challenge her, if that’s what you fear.” The man crossed arms over his broad chest. He stood like a soldier. “She and I have a mutual friend that I am very anxious to find. All I want is to talk to her. Nothing more.”

“And why,” MacLeod drawled, “should I believe you?”

Vortig shrugged. “I give you my word that it is so.”

The Highlander nodded slowly. “Who is this mutual friend?”

Vortig’s eyes narrowed slightly. “That, Highlander, is none of your business. No one you know.”



“And you know all my friends?”

“You intrigued me in New York. When my interest is engaged, I make it a habit to research the subject. Did you ever find your missing friend?”

“Who would that be?”

Vortig looked away, as if holding onto his patience. “The young Watcher - Pierson. Ah - do you think you’re the only Immortal who has friends inside that esteemed organization?”

“Pierson’s not a Watcher.”

“Yes, I heard he left. Under something of a cloud, I believe. Is it possible, do you think, that Cassandra has something to do with his disappearance?”

“I can’t imagine why.”

“Nor I,” was Vortig’s frank agreement. “But they were in the same building several months ago. Perhaps she fancies him. Who knows? Cassandra is ... shall we say, endowed with many interesting facets. Second guessing that woman has always been chancy.”

“Same building?”

“Yes. The waterfront. One of my agents had her under surveillance. Pierson arrived in a cab. My contact says, unwillingly. No one saw him leave.”

“And Cassandra was there at the same time?”

“I see this information is of interest.”

MacLeod nodded grimly. “I’d like to know where she is, too, Vortig. The man you killed had that information. He might have contacted her for me.”

Vortig shook his head. “He knew nothing. I interrogated him at length.”

A chill ran down Duncan’s spine. “You tortured him?”

“Yes.” the old one smiled dryly at Duncan’s outrage. “I see you’re offended. Modern sensibilities are so - senseless.”

“There’s nothing senseless about compassion or courtesy,” retorted the Highlander. “How far before the age of chivalry were you born, Vortig?”

The Immortal grinned. It was a startlingly boyish expression. Methos smiled like that sometimes.

“Cassandra and I are of an age,” Vortig replied. “Chivalry makes stirring stories, but is — ultimately — impractical. I am a practical man.”

“And a bit full of himself.”

Again the shrug. “Since you have no information, MacLeod, I shall be on my way. Perhaps, as a favor, I will keep my eye out for your young friend, Pierson.”

Men appeared behind Vortig. Duncan’s mouth tightened, but they merely surrounded the other Immortal. The small party vanished down the alley.

Sheathing his blade, troubled, Duncan returned to his car.

“Methos?”

The Immortal looked up from the short-circuited toaster, then laid aside the soldering iron. Tom poked his fair head around the corner.

“There you are!”

“Here I am,” agreed Methos. “Am I in trouble?”

Tom grinned. “Not at the moment. What are you doing?”

The kid was bored. Methos hid a smile, turning back to his task. “Building a bomb.”

“Har har.” The young man sat down on a box near the workbench. Overhead, a single bulb, bare, swung gently back and forth.

“Ever been off this island?”  
Methos asked.

“Sure. I went to school in the States.”

“So I hear. Sigma cum laud. Very impressive. How did you end up on Elwyn in the first place?”

“Cassandra adopted me.”  
Matter-of-fact. “She used to run a free medical clinic in East L.A., back in the seventies. I was born there. My mom was a junkie and she died. Anyway, I’ve also been to Paris, Rome, Milan, Madrid ...”

“Junkie?” Methos repeated faintly. “Sorry.”

The boy’s face tightened a moment, then he shrugged. “Yeah. Sucks, huh?”

“Looks like you made out pretty good, considering.”

“I was damn lucky,” replied the young man frankly. “Cassandra’s done a lot of things like that. Jason, for instance. When he was a kid he was a child prostitute. His pimp used to beat him up all the time. Made him do all kinds of nasty shit.”

“Cassandra’s quite the philanthropist, isn’t she?” The bitter observation escaped before Methos could stop it. Tom opened his mouth, firing up at once, but was interrupted by the approach of hurried footsteps.

“Tom! Methos?” Maurice’s voice.

Methos straightened and Tom jumped off the box. The cook appeared in the doorway, breathless. “There’s been an accident down in the valley! One of the bridges collapsed and Edward Locksea’s four-by-four is in the creek! Jason’s sending Charlie and he wants Methos out there, too!”

“I’m coming!” Tom announced.

Methos touched the collar.

“He’s turned it off - temporarily,” replied Maurice. “And you’re not going, Thomas. It’s too dangerous. Jason was very specific about that. Just Charlie and Methos.”

“Why just them? Damn it, Maurice, I’m not a baby!”

Excitement made the Immortal’s heart leap. If the collar was turned off - if he could get away and out of range ... if, if, if ...

Outside, it poured rain, the afternoon dark. Charlie was waiting in the jeep, windshield wipers beating a futile rhythm against the downpour. He nodded to Methos, taciturn as always, and started the engine.

“Wait! Charlie! WAIT!”

The door banged open and Methos was pushed into the center of the cab. Tom gave them both a look that dared them to object. Charlie shrugged and stepped on the gas.

Wind whipped the evergreens as the truck crawled down the rough road. Methos remembered his trip up this hill. The jeep turned, and turned again, and suddenly they came upon a handful of vehicles, tail - and headlights barely visible in the downpour. Charlie stopped.

Several men, drenched and carrying lanterns, approached the jeep. The ground was treacherous with soft mud and, ahead, he heard rushing water. Clambering out of the truck, Methos and his companions were soaked in seconds. One of the islanders was shouting to Charlie, leading them down a dangerously slick embankment.

“Damn! Tom hunched shoulders against the downpour. “I’ve never seen Barrow Brook so high!”

Methos had seen the stream often from Fire Point, broad, customarily tranquil. Tom talked about ice-skating

on it in deep winter. The unusually heavy rains, however, had turned it into wild flood. Until recently, a bridge had crossed it here. Now there were only stone pilasters standing against the torrent, two of them joined by a fragment of arch. Wedged in the debris beneath it was a half overturned pick-up. Methos could see a figure in the cab, clinging to the door as the water tore past.

He saw the problem at once. The rescuers kept throwing weighted lines to the man, who, utterly terrified, would not let go of the door to grab at them. They needed to get someone in there, and that was suicide.

A sudden shout rose above the roar of the water. The man, Locksea, had nearly lost his grip. Methos pushed forward. He grabbed an armload of rope from a startled islander and, ignoring the man's exclamation, tied the end around the bumper of the heaviest truck. Men ran up to surround him - one was Lucius. The old man was well bundled against the wet and cold.

"I'm going in," Methos told them. "I think I can get above the truck if I move along that part of the bridge. I'll need headlights on it."

"You're crazy!" shouted someone standing behind Lucius.

"No," the old man returned, nodding. "Drowning won't kill him. If he fails, there's no real harm done. Get more rope!"

They moved fast now, for Locksea was exhausted. Methos wrapped several lengths around his chest and scrambled back up the embankment to the road. The broken span above the stream looked sturdy enough. He stepped out onto it, then dropped to hands and knees as the wind threatened to blow him off. Reaching the end, he

stopped and adjusted the rope. Just below, the truck bobbed wildly. It was wedged on several huge chunks of concrete.

Methos jumped, gasping as a bit of concrete broke off under him. He slid toward the water for one heart-stopping moment before the rope under his arms caught on something and brought him up short. Scrambling along the slick, steep surface, he began inching toward the rocking truck.

Locksea saw him coming and hung on grimly. The footing was worse than impossible. Twice, Methos nearly tumbled into the water. Finally, after far too long, he reached the truck. Leaning out, bracing himself against the wind, he untied the rope and making a quick noose, climbed up on the hood.

Rocking wildly, the vehicle nearly came free of its precarious perch. The man shouted, sound lost in the rage of water and storm. Ignoring him, Methos stretched flat along the roof and then, reaching down, grabbed at one of his hands.

Locksea screamed, nearly pulling free in his panic, but somehow, Methos managed to get the noose over the thrashing limb and pull it tight. At the last moment, the man came to his senses, grabbing at the rope with his other hand. From the bank, men shouted and pulled. Locksea vanished into the darkness.

The sudden change in weight distribution tilted the truck wildly. Methos slid backwards as fast as he could, but it wasn't fast enough. The vehicle bucked again and came free, plunging into the drink. Icy water closed over his head, filled his mouth. He fought to get to the surface, only to be struck by something flashing past in the torrent. He must not lose consciousness! He must not drown! Everything

depended on getting out of the stream and away.

In the chaos of the storm, he managed somehow to get a lungful of air, but reaching the bank was impossible. The fury of the current swept him along, smashing him against rocks and the debris that shared the stream with him. For an interminable time, very little made sense. Then his desperate, grasping fingers found purchase on a branch overhanging the stream and he clung to it with all his fading strength.

His muscles cramping in protest, Methos hauled himself up, swung a moment above the foam, then fell onto the bank. It began to slide away beneath him. Scrabbling, he crawled further from the water until he was safe. Exhaustion dimmed his vision.

His heartbeat slowed. The rain continued, relentless. Its chill bit deep. He sat up, hugging himself, teeth chattering, and looked around. Oaks glistened wetly, their branches thrashing overhead. It was almost impossible to see more than a few feet in any direction. Getting shakily to his feet, Methos tried to get oriented, picturing the valley as seen from Fire Point.

There was a pass through the cliffs that led to Elwyn's small bay. If he remembered correctly, the pass lay almost due east from the grove. Methos swayed as weakness threatened to overwhelm him. Grimly, praying for time to reach the cliffs, he started through the trees. When they suddenly thinned, his heart sank.

He was completely turned around. Across the clearing, he saw a pale gleam through the trees. It looked like a building, but he saw no lights and there was no road anywhere in sight. Wiping hair out of his eyes, he decided

that east lay to the right and started in that direction. The ground suddenly gave way beneath him. Methos yelped and fell.

The damp smell of stone and rotting leaves filled Methos' nostrils. His head spun. Overhead was a faint rectangle of light—the way out. A moment later and his eyes became accustomed to the deep gloom. Knowing that each passing second brought him closer to capture, he started forward.

He must have fallen through the roof of a tunnel, for abruptly he came upon steps leading up into a cavernous chamber. A scattering of dried leaves were strewn across the flagged stone. At the chamber's far end, behind towering columns of silver-veined marble, stood an enormous statue. Methos' mouth dropped as he turned slowly around. Overhead was a domed ceiling with a round skylight at its apex. Droplets of rain fell through to pool on the floor.

His footsteps echoed as he crossed the expanse toward the statue. It was huge - a dragon. Methos was conscious of a change in the atmosphere — a feeling of heaviness, not of body but of mind — growing stronger as he approached it

Death ...

The whisper flowed around him, raising the hair on the back of his neck.

Welcome ...

The vision came on him suddenly. Methos was no longer on Elwyn. Fire leapt skyward, roaring through the village. There was Kronos — and Caspian before him — axes cutting a bloody path toward the temple while the priests ran to and fro. They did not try to escape, only to extinguish the flames that leapt from the wooden shingles of one wing to the other.

Kronos cut a priest in half, laughing. He was covered in blood - exultant with the mad joy of murder.

Up the broad steps they went, fanning out along the terrace that surrounded the cluster of wooden buildings. Most of the temple complex was afire now. A group of young boys, acolytes, raced from one of the buildings, screaming, and into Caspian's howling advance. Like wheat before the scythe they fell, small bodies heaping on the planks, fodder for the advancing flames. Methos stalked, unconcerned, through fire and the clash of iron. A villager appeared before him, face blackened by smoke, swinging an old, nicked sword. A swift slice and the sword broke; the peasant leapt back, crying out. Another slash and he fell, blood spreading across the wooden walkway.

On went Methos, eyes glittering behind the face-paint, hair in a filthy tangle across his shoulders, a walking nightmare. Priests tried to stop him, but his sword took them, too, until at last, he was in the center of the temple. Another priest. He slashed the man's throat without even looking at him.

Columns wreathed with golden vines supported the domed ceiling. Methos ignored them, eyes on the prize in the center of the room. In a cage of delicately carved wood - itself a treasure - was the enormous skull of a beast unlike any Methos had ever seen. It was covered in the same hammered gold as the leaves, and in its eye sockets were rubies. Crudely shaped crystals were embedded in its long jaw for teeth. He brought up his sword and swung down, shattering the cage, drawing the blade away swiftly to save the artifact within.

"METHOS!" Silas' jubilant roar filled the chamber. Methos looked

behind - grinned as the big man began stripping leaves from the column. "A fine idea, my brother, to attack the temple! These priests are fat and rich."

"And now we, too, will be fat and rich," agreed Methos, turning back to the skull. He picked it up, tilted it to face him. The crimson eyes flashed balefully. For a moment, something in that crystal gaze held him transfixed. Then, growling, he pulled his dagger and pried the gems from the sockets of the skull.

"Death!"

Air rushed into lungs that had forgotten to fill. The burning temple was gone. Methos spun around, the memory past, and saw a figure standing between the columns. Lucius.

"Lost?" the old man asked, advancing across the floor. Methos watched him, heart pounding, thinking how easy it would be to snap that frail neck. Behind its columns, the statue's eyes glinted, watching him. Imagination, thought the Immortal, but that same frisson of fear and awe ran up his spine.

"The Tomb of the Dragon," Lucius continued, stopping prudently just out of reach. "You've not been here before."

Methos shook his head.

"Come," invited the old priest. "Closer."

Not wanting to, Methos nevertheless obeyed. The idol was easily fifteen feet tall, perhaps thirty feet long - perfect in every detail. Conscious of Lucius' eyes on him, he reached out and touched an exquisitely carved scale. Gasping, he jerked away his hand. It was warm.

"Geothermal heat," he said aloud. Lucius smiled. Tilting back his head, Methos looked up at its great head.

Its eyes were rubies, too, crudely carved. He felt that startling shiver of *deja vu*.

There was shouting from outside. A moment later, Tom and Charlie, followed by several villagers, came into the Tomb. Methos bit his lip and turned away, disappointment tightening his throat. Another glance at Lucius showed the man still smiling. The bastard knew full well what Methos had intended. Hopelessness swamped him.

"You OK?" Tom's face was concerned. Distantly, Methos wondered at it, but he nodded.

"Tired," he said.

"I'll bet." The boy's eyes were filled with admiration - another sharp stab of something that felt ridiculously like shame. "You saved ..."

"Let's get back," Methos interrupted harshly. "Before Dane has another excuse to get in my face."

"No problem," Tom replied cheerfully. "Charlie called him on the cell phone."

Methos gave Lucius a long, bewildered look. The old man's eyes gleamed. High above them, the rubies winked and glittered. Without another word, Methos turned and led them out into the dusk.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Joe arrived, red-nosed from the cold, and blowing on his hands. He gave the hotel lobby a curious look, eyes lighting up as MacLeod rose to greet him.

"So?" Joe asked at once. "Did you find her?"

"No." MacLeod added grimly, "but Vortig's in town."

"Ah. The plot thickens." Joe brandished his briefcase. "A little privacy?"

"Upstairs."

Duncan's suite had a small refrigerator well stocked with beer. Joe accepted one, collapsing onto the edge of the bed. He shoved his briefcase toward the Immortal.

"Vortig's file," he announced. "For what it's worth."

As MacLeod had expected, Vortig was very old. Other than that, there was not much in the way of information. Duncan leafed through the collection of photocopied sheets. Vortig was a military man. He'd held high-ranking positions in various armies over the past century. At the moment, he was a "security advisor," but there was no information on just who he advised.

"There's some discussion," Joe said, "that Vortig is an arms dealer, but so far, nothing to directly link him to the business."

Mention of exploits in the more distant past were even less forthcoming. Entries were terse. 1196 AD. Germany. 448 -Caer-Guricon. When Duncan pointed this out, Joe nodded.

"I know. Those are summaries of old reports kept in vaults beneath the Watcher archives here in Paris. The records are rumored to be very detailed. Unfortunately, they're not accessible to those of us in the rank and file. Anyway - Cassandra."

He opened another envelope and pulled out a folder.

"Thorough," congratulated Duncan. "Thanks, Joe. I appreciate the help."

"You damn well better," growled the Watcher. "If anyone finds out what I did, I'm toast."

Duncan grinned, unimpressed by the frequent lament. After a moment, shaking his head, Joe continued. "Check

out Cassandra's whereabouts in the fifth century."

"Britain." Duncan frowned. Something nagged at him, a sense of missing a piece to the puzzle. "You say the complete files are here, in Paris?"

"The archives," repeated Joe shortly. "Heavily guarded. Very, very, very heavily guarded."

"I'm sure." Setting the files down, Duncan smiled at his friend.

Not being an idiot, Joe glared back. "Mac! Don't do anything stupid!"

"I promise, Joe. Nothing stupid. Now - do you remember that little bar down by the Seine? I understand Robert Cray is doing a couple of sets there tonight."

It was a low blow, and the flash in his friend's eyes told him Joe recognized it. Still - it was Robert Cray.

"All right," he growled. "At least I can keep my eye on you."

The launch pulled into the tiny bay. Cassandra set down her glass and made her way up on deck. It was a rare, clear day for late November, but the pleasant weather was not likely to last. Her pilot made ominous noises about a new front coming up the east coast. That was fine with her. She wanted to be home, away from the world. Peace was what she needed, refuge and healing. The island would give her the first two in abundance; the final obstacle to the last was waiting for her on the other side of the cliff wall, among the dense green of the interior forests.

Tom was on the beach, jeep parked at the end of the pier. The sun continued to shine brightly, but there was a stiff wind building. She scrambled into the vehicle, warmed by the open delight in the boy's smile.

"Cassandra! Welcome home!"

She hugged him and set him back. Goddess, but he was getting tall.

"You're looking well, Tommy. How is everything?"

He turned the jeep and started it along the steep, winding climb through Elwyn's protective wall of cliffs. She settled back, letting Tom rattle on about his studies, the good harvest and other homely matters. Some of the last month's ever-present anxiety drained away. The heater was on, the jeep a bit too warm, but she did not complain. Lulled by his voice, she made small comments where appropriate, enjoying the sweep of towering spruce against the blue sky, the sudden glimpse of ocean as they crested the rim. It was not until they started into the valley that she realized what she was not hearing.

"And my lord Death?"

Tom fell silent and, after a moment, nodded. "He's here, Cass."

"Did he try to deny his crimes?"

The boy shook his head. Her brows arched. "Really? I'm surprised. Has he given you much trouble?"

A shrug and an expert turn of the wheels around a hard corner. For a moment, Cassandra was treated to a breathtaking panorama of cliffs with their feet buried in mist-crowned forest. Another sharp turn and the valley lay out before her. Although it was yet afternoon, the sun was already sliding past the Wall. Shadow stretched across the empty fields. In the easternmost houses, lights were coming on.

"He tried to escape a couple times, but we soon cured him of that." Tom's voice was expressionless. Cassandra frowned and leaned over to lay her hand on his arm.

"Tom ...?"

“No.” The mortal straightened and gave her a quick, sober glance. “I understand that justice must be served.”

“Good.” She settled back and tried to ignore the memories. “Methos is clever. He can be charming when he chooses. He also kills without hesitation or conscience. Never let down your guard, my sweet.”

The house welcomed her, its rambling walls of glass and stone reflecting the last of the afternoon sun. Jason was at the door to take Cassandra’s coat and hug her, Charlie to hoist her bags and follow her along to the west wing where she kept her rooms. A fire had been laid. With admonishments to remember dinner, they left her. Cassandra went to the fireplace and stretched her hands before the blaze. Peace settled around her.

Yet she could not be completely easy. Methos was here, somewhere. By now he would know she had come. She’d received regular reports, but Dane’s dry recitation of events hadn’t given Cassandra the satisfaction she’d expected. She would see for herself, later. Tonight she wanted no part of her vengeance. When Charlie returned to announce dinner, she told him to keep Methos out of her sight. He nodded, unperturbed.

Dinner was wonderful - salmon and cress, with Maurice’s famous hazelnut torte. Cassandra retired soon after and slept straight through the night. When she woke, it was to find her pilot’s prediction fulfilled. White drifts piled up against the glass that was her bedroom’s east wall. She could not see the Japanese maples six feet away, so dense was the falling snow. The wind howled around the low eaves, rattling glass and sending a draft down the

chimney. With a shiver, she was back in bed, pulling the covers up to her chin.

Renee knocked diffidently. Small, dark, with a sprinkling of freckles over her snub nose, Cassandra could remember her mother at a similar task. The girl hurried to build up the fire, replying shyly to Cassandra’s greeting. When she beckoned, the child came to the bedside with downcast eyes.

“Tell Maurice I’m ready for breakfast.” She hesitated, then added: “Have Methos bring it.”

The girl’s eyes got very wide. “Y...yes, ma’am.”

Cassandra lay back among the pillows, heart beating faster. She regretted involving the mortals; Jason had instructions to keep the monster as far from them possible, but she could not do this without their help. Rolling over, the Immortal reached across to the bedside table and rooted through her bag. Her hand closed around the taser - added security.

She threw back the covers and found a robe, deep blue velvet and lined with fleece. Even with the fire and the central heating, there was a decided chill in the air. She was nestling into a chair by the fire when the door opened. Her heart jumped and began beating wildly. Even so, her hands were steady as she arranged the soft folds of a cashmere blanket over her knees.

Methos came into the room, carrying a large, silver tray. She saw at once how thin he was, and when she let her hand move over taser on her lap, the contents of the tray rattled. Neither speaking, nor looking at her, the oldest and most evil of Immortals set the tray down on the table beside her, and began lifting away the silver covers. His hair was longer now. Soon it would be the straight, thick mane she remembered so



vividly. Maybe this would be easier then. He poured coffee and backed away.

“Thank you,” she said. “You may go.”

For a moment, Cassandra thought he would protest. He hesitated, fists clenching at his sides. Then he turned and slipped out. She sagged back into the cushions, pressing her own hands together to keep them from shaking. It was a long time before her pulse slowed.

“Mon deiu.” Robert surveyed the chateau with lively interest. “This is a Watcher building? Did you know it was once an abbey?”

“I’d heard something of it.” MacLeod pulled the black, knit cap down over his ears. Standing by the gate a few feet away, de Valicourt was only deeper shadow in the dark. The Highlander finished covering his face with blacking and grinned cheerfully. There was an answering flash of perfect teeth. “Were you ever inside?”

“Oui. The abbot kept a very respectable cellar. Monseigneur Seinet had the best . . .” For a moment, his friend’s voice was dreamy, then: “And if I remember, there is a tunnel that ran from those cellars to a shed where the brothers made their wine. It was a distance from the abbey. Probably past that wall.”

Over the years, the abbey’s grounds had been parceled off, bit by bit. On the other side of a nearby wall was a mansion from a later time period.

MacLeod’s heart leapt. “I knew there was a reason I let you in on this,” he chuckled softly. “Do you suppose it’s still there?”

“Glad to oblige, although how I will explain this to Gina . . .”

They ran across the chateau grounds, but as they approached the wall, another shadow stepped out to block their path. Robert hissed, sword coming out. The figure moved swiftly into the moonlight.

“Joe!” The Highlander laid a quick hand on Robert’s arm.

“You didn’t think you could leave me out of this, did you?”

“I didn’t feel right asking you to violate your oath . . .”

“... again,” smiled Joe. “I know.”

Next door, they spent precious minutes zigzagging across the lawns while Robert attempted to reconstruct the landscape as it had been two hundred years earlier. The wine-making shed had not survived the centuries. It was Joe who, by tripping over a root in the dark and landing on his face, found the stone floor.

“Here,” said Robert, scraping away moss and weeds. There was an iron ring set in a large, square stone. It was badly rusted. In spite of cleaning away much of the debris, they almost broke it attempting to raise the trap door.

Swearing, sweating, they finally managed it. Duncan flinched at the resounding crash as the stone fell over. They looked nervously toward the house, but the windows remained dark. Joe looked into the pit without enthusiasm.

“A difficult descent, non?” Robert looked at Joe’s artificial limbs and raised his brows. Joe’s face flushed in the flashlight’s narrow beam.

“I can manage.”

Robert looked at Duncan who nodded. The baron turned the beam on the hole. A profusion of cobwebs covered it. One could just barely make out the floor of the passage below.

“As you wish.” Robert dropped into the hole. Joe followed, less gracefully, but without disaster. Duncan, after a final look around, joined them.

“Now,” he muttered, “let’s pray that the roof hasn’t fallen in.”

“More likely - they’ve walled off the door,” Joe said, limping forward and flashing his light up and down. The ground was uneven. Roots had broken through overhead. He swept one aside. A stone was revealed in the wall behind it, embossed with a cross.

Duncan moved past the Watcher and Robert, hand on his sword. The tunnel went on, thankfully dry and secure. No sign of rockfall. It curved gradually west, then, as predicted, ended in a brick wall. Joe pushed the end of his cane against it. The old mortar crumbled. MacLeod dug into his satchel and brought out an awl. He scraped away at mortar until the tool slipped suddenly through. Again into his satchel.

“And I thought Amanda was the professional,” chuckled Joe.

The tiny camera snaked through the opening on its cable. Duncan peered into the eyepiece. He saw shadowy outlines of file cabinets, a table. The light source was out of sight, but the room was clearly empty. “I don’t see any alarms,” he observed, encouraged.

They went to work on the wall, carefully chipping away mortar, removing bricks until they had a narrow opening. Robert went through first, flashing his light around. “The east cellars,” he pronounced. “The 1642 merlots were here.”

Rolling his eyes, Joe headed for a wall of file cabinets. Pawing through a drawer, he quickly pulled out one leather-bound file. Robert muttered

something about burgundies, and disappeared into the next room. Duncan joined Joe at the cabinets and rooted through the “V’s.” He quickly found Vortig’s file. He met the Watcher at the “M” drawer. The two men looked at each other.

“Should we?”

“We shouldn’t.”

“But ...”

“RUN!” Robert burst back into the room. Behind him was shouting.

“Damn!” Joe spun around and started for the tunnel, moving as fast as he could. Duncan was on his heels. They ran, hearing the growing sounds of pursuit. The Highlander hauled himself up through the trap door. Then, with him pulling and Robert pushing, they got the Watcher up and out. They scrambled to replace the stone, succeeding in the nick of time. On the other side of the wall, they saw searchlights and barking dogs.

There were men around Robert’s car. “This way,” Joe said in a low voice, leading them further along the street. Around a corner, and they saw another car parked just out of the street light. It was Joe’s, and they were out of there minutes later.

At Duncan’s hotel, the men gathered in the bar, tucked in a booth far from the door. They opened Cassandra’s file first. As Joe had promised, it was much more complete. Duncan felt slightly guilty as he pulled the papers from the leather packet.

Most of the contents were computer print-outs. There were a few pictures, one of Cassandra in the early nineteen hundreds. He smiled faintly at the prim expression. The spectacles were a nice touch. He shuffled through the papers until he came to a handful that dealt with the early fifth century. It took

only a quick glance along the text before he whistled softly.

“This is good,” he said, pushing the first page over to Joe. Robert shifted around to read over his elbow.

“High priestess of a pagan cult? Not too surprising ...” Joe paused. “Vortigern? She was Vortigern’s lover? The high king of Britain who supposedly dealt with Merlin? That’s legend!”

“Vortigern himself is no legend,” MacLeod replied. “Vortigern. Vortig. Coincidence?”

They scrambled to open Vortig’s file.

“Damn,” whispered Joe finally.

“It doesn’t make sense,” MacLeod muttered. “According to all historical reports, Vortigern was a craven tyrant. I can believe tyranny from Vortig, but cowardice - I think not.”

“History is written by the victors,” Robert reminded them wryly. “And Vortigern, in the end, lost.”

MacLeod returned to Cassandra’s file. Her Watcher reported regular visits between the beautiful priestess and the High King. Their relationship ended abruptly — apparently with the marriage of Vortigern to Severa. The Watcher noted that the breakup appeared cordial.

Over the next decade, Cassandra dwelt quietly in Wales, avoiding the growing political turmoil. Vortigern brought in Saxons to quell the invasions of the Irish and Picts. Christianity tightened its hold on the land, but the local folk had grown used to their beautiful witch and somehow, Cassandra escaped the attentions of the Church. Then, in an entry dated 558 AD, her Watcher wrote in his journal:

“Cassandra has returned. She was accompanied by twelve pagan

priests, bearing a shrouded burden. Near dawn, some of them left. Others are still here. I can smell incense, myrrh. Their chanting has not stopped. I have a feeling most dire.”

Then — nothing for almost a thousand years. When she reappeared in England, according to the text of the printed log, Cassandra came and went with reasonable predictability, haunted certain favorite places and made no effort to hide her activities. There was one notable exception. Every forty years, she vanished. It was not until the early 1900’s that the Watchers learned she withdrew to an island off the northeast coast of Canada. There were no Watcher reports from this place.

“What are these islands? There’s precious little here,” Duncan pointed out, shuffling through the printouts again. “How many people live there? Why are these pictures so fuzzy?”

“I have no idea. There was nothing about it in the U.S. files.” Joe sounded distinctly unhappy about that.

“Shouldn’t be hard to find out.” Duncan tucked the paper back in the packet. “A good atlas should tell us something. You have one, don’t you, Robert?”

“I do - and you’re welcome to it,” the Frenchman agreed, “however, you shall have to report to me in St. James. I must be on my way. Gina is patient, but not that patient!”

“I understand,” grinned the Highlander. “Perhaps, if it looks interesting, you both can join us.”

“In the frozen north? But non, my friend. My blood is not so thick as to brave such cold. I shall be content with a phone call or two.”

It felt like a knife twisting in his gut to see her. Cassandra’s beauty still

took Methos by surprise. There was that inevitable second when he reacted purely on emotion, that unnerving, eternal instant before reality and reason regained control.

The old, near-forgotten memory of her seated before the fire, dark hair pouring over her shoulders, made his pulse race. It was too easy to remember how it felt to return from battle, knowing that she waited for him in his tent.

“DAMN IT!” Methos threw the crowbar across the clearing and swore in a variety of languages, some of them extinct. Collapsing onto a bit of mossy stone, he stared out over the valley. On days like this, when the mists were burned away, one could see the entire place - from the great Grove to the westernmost cliffs and the Dragon’s Tomb. Today, the pale stone of the monument was easily visible through the pines. The sight of it made him nervous and he looked away.

The wind was light and the sun warmed his shoulders. The weekend’s snow had melted quickly. Methos was loathe to move, but move he must. Dane was not happy with the slow progress in excavating the ruin. It was Cassandra, of course. She’d seen the change in her servants since the business with Igraine and Locksea. Gods - people had been almost civil to him before she’d arrived.

Abandoning his comfortable perch, Methos returned to his labors. Dane’s annoyance notwithstanding, a great deal of progress had been made. Over one hundred stone blocks were piled neatly at the edge of the clearing. Forty feet of foundation had been exposed. It led straight into the hill, which meant felling trees, digging away tons of dirt and accumulated forest debris. Methos was not looking forward to it. He pried the stone onto his sledge

and dragged it to the others. Wiping sweat from his eyes, he returned to the excavation and started working on the next.

Methos had seen Cassandra only once since her return. His orders were explicit - stay out of her sight. They were orders he was only too happy to obey. While he was in the house, his nerves were ceaselessly on edge, expecting at any moment to see her and wondering what the hell he would do if he did. On the Point, the likelihood of a chance encounter was thankfully remote. Being out here was as close to peace as he got.

This stone was different from the others, set at an odd angle. Methos caught a glimpse of more carving beneath the caked dirt. He dropped the shovel and went to his knees, rubbing the surface clean with dirty fingers. It was an image of the statue in the Tomb. The carving was done with unusual skill, its detail startling. Each scale was carefully etched into what appeared to be marble. In one of the eye sockets was a chip of red crystal. This dragon held something in its jaws, but the stone was broken just there and Methos could not see what that was.

Voices distracted him, floating up the steep hillside. He jumped to his feet, heart speeding.

There were three children this time - two stalwart young boys and the ethereal Igraine. They struggled up the promontory, huffing and puffing, pulling her along behind them. Simultaneously dismayed and amused, Methos waited as they advanced. The boys were armed with wooden swords and shields of woven grass. Their helmets bore a suspicious resemblance to stock-pots. At least they were warmly dressed. Igraine was wrapped in a heavy wool

coat. Around her pale brow was a wreath of dried oak leaves and acorns. All of them were appropriately muddy. Amusement won out over apprehension.

“Milords,” he greeted them, bowing. “My lady.”

The larger of the boys stepped forward and scowled up at the Immortal. He looked no older than twelve. “Are you really Death?”

“No.” Taken aback, Methos looked at the girl and found her watching him with that peculiar, intense gaze. “People called me that, many, many years ago. They called me that because I did terrible things. I don’t do them anymore. I haven’t for a very long time.”

The boy considered this. “Igraine,” he said finally. “Are you sure?”

“He is Death,” replied the girl serenely. She glided over the rough ground to Methos and smiled sweetly up at him. The Immortal’s heart lurched. “He rides with the Dragon.”

The boy looked very unhappy. He pulled aside his silent comrade and they whispered earnestly to each other. Igraine tugged at Methos. “Come,” she ordered imperiously. He shook his head.

“I can’t, my lady.” He touched the collar and she frowned. Her companions seemed likewise nonplused.

“It is Cassandra who says so?” Igraine asked suddenly.

Methos nodded. The encounter grew more unnerving by the second. Perhaps it was the unusual silvery blue of her eyes that made her regard so compelling.

“You are the servant of the Dragon,” Igraine said calmly, “and when he calls, she cannot hold you.”

Methos shook his head. She paid him no attention. Crouching suddenly at

his feet, the girl ran her hand along the carving. “He sleeps now,” she replied dreamily. “When he awakens, he will summon his knights and his servants. I see them gathered in the holy circle and you will be at his left hand, Death.”

“Igraine, I am not Death.” Methos’ throat was tight. He watched, hypnotized, as her small, frail fingers uncovered more of the carving. He saw an outline of a man astride the beast. The boys hung back, anxious.

“Igraine!” One of the boys called. “Igraine, come away!”

There was a sudden, tell-tale shiver across his skin. Cassandra was coming. Methos’ heart plunged into his shoes. Gods.

“Igraine!”

The boys spun about, faces falling. The little girl jumped up and ran to Cassandra, who bent and hugged her. When the woman straightened and met Methos’ eyes, the smile was wiped from her face. He clenched his jaw on the tumble of explanations trying to get out.

She looked away, smile returning, and to the children, said: “You all know that you’re not to come here without permission. It’s not safe. Your parents are quite worried about you.”

“We were going back,” said the larger boy sullenly. “Igraine made us come here.”

“I came to see Death,” piped Igraine. “To take him to the Dragon.”

Cassandra’s brows drew together. This time, when she looked at Methos, there was something he could not interpret in her face.

“Why do you want to take him to the Dragon, Igraine?”

“He is the Dragon’s, not yours.”

“Igraine ...”

“The Dragon speaks to me. He speaks to Methos. He doesn’t speak to you.”

For a moment there was grief in the lovely face. Then, gently, Cassandra said: “It’s time to go home, Igraine.”

This time, the little girl nodded. “Come,” she said to her muddy escorts. “I’m hungry!”

Cassandra went with them to the path and momentarily disappeared from view. When she returned, her face was white with fury, spots of color on each cheek. “Keep away from those children.”

“Cassandra . . .”

“If you speak to them again, Methos, I swear you will know pain beyond your worst nightmares! If I believe for one minute that they are in danger from you, I will break my oath to MacLeod and take your head!”

Methos shook that endangered part of his anatomy. “I didn’t invite their company, Cassandra. I swear it.”

“Your word is worthless,” she said bitterly. “Go back to your work.”

“Cassandra . . .” Frustrated, Methos stepped toward her. She flinched. That single, small gesture froze him in his tracks. Mutely, he watched her turn and walk away.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Cassandra moved restlessly around the library, listening to the wind. A book lay, open and unread on the sofa beside the lamp. Pushing aside the heavy draperies, she looked into the night. Rags of cloud raced by a full moon. She did not need to see the valley to know that the islanders were snug in their houses. She did not need to see the Dragon to know that he was riding the wind.

Already Methos had wormed his devious way into her household’s affections. From Dane’s reluctant testimony, Tom had been much in Methos’ company lately - and this after Methos had tried to kill him! Even the villagers talked charitably about him although they, being a bit cannier than Tom, were less likely to let down their guard. Even so . . .

If she closed her eyes, she could see him riding into camp with the others, the moonlight glinting off his armor, the wind at his back, rank with the smell of burning. Of the four, Methos had always been the most graceful, the most beautiful. She’d held that image in her mind when he took her, trying not to see the brute he truly was. How young she’d been, how naive. Already two thousand years her senior, he’d had little trouble twisting her innocence, bending her to his will.

Abandoning her attempts at sleep, Cassandra rose and found her robe. The house was silent as she walked through it. In the library, she found her forgotten book. Picking it up, she stopped before a large, framed bit of embroidery. It was very old and the design, Persian, had always appealed to her. Now, suddenly, she realized why. Methos had given her a robe from among the Horsemen’s booty - a beautiful thing, heavy with embroidery very similar to this. The innocent girl Cassandra had been had never seen its like.

Four days later, he had given her to Kronos.

The book fell, unnoticed, to the carpet. Cassandra ran lightly from the room and down the corridors of the sleeping house. She remembered her terror with a clarity that hurt. And she

remembered the pleasure of his touch, his voice smoky with passion.

Pulling open the door to the cellar, she silently descended the steps. The chill of the place bit through her robe and her bare feet quickly numbed on the damp, dirty stones. Standing ajar, the door to the tiny room let in the dim light of a single, overhead bulb. Inside was a bare mattress and Methos dead asleep upon it. The lean form was tightly curled against the cold. Cassandra was frozen in place, heart pounding.

Go back to bed, she told herself, but instead, she came all the way in. He did not stir as she gathered up her robe and crouched beside the mattress. In the half-light from the hall, she could see how gaunt he was, the dirty, ragged clothing revealing more than it hid. Deliberately, she bent over him, found his mouth and kissed him. Dark eyes flew open. He lay utterly still, staring up at her with a wide, sleep-clouded gaze. She leaned away and he sat up, lifting one hand to his mouth.

Cassandra got to her feet. "You have twenty minutes to bathe, shave and present yourself in my room. Do not keep me waiting." She left without giving him a chance to respond.

Now the memories came thick and fast. Her first night in the Horsemen camp - a time of pain, terror and, after Methos' brutal assault on her virginity, deep shame. Later, when his first lust was spent, he had been kinder, almost gentle. Had he expected an experienced maid that night? She would never know, and she told herself fiercely she did not care.

Exactly twenty minutes later, Methos arrived. His hair was still wet. He took one step into the room and no further. She saw his gaze move over her

to the bed, then back. Taking a deep breath, he said: "I'm here, Cassandra. What do you want?"

"I thought I told you to clean up?"

The straight jaw clenched. "I did."

"Your clothes are filthy. Take them off."

He nodded, resigned and weary. His tattered shirt came off first. Working on the tower had given his chest and shoulders a respectable breadth. She held out her hand for the garment and, after hesitating, he gave it to her. She threw it into the fire.

"It . . . that's all I have!"

She ignored his distress. "The rest," she ordered.

Now he balked, looking at the fire, then back at her. "Cassandra." Desperation touched his voice, shook it a bit. She was unmoved. Stepping out of his jeans, he all but threw them at her, anger showing in the white lines etched at the corners of his mouth. Pale, breathing hard, he lifted his chin and pretended indifference to her cool examination.

Cassandra was not prepared for her own reaction. He was as beautiful as she remembered, every part of him perfect. Without quite intending it, she approached him and laid a hand on his bare chest. His heart was pounding in time with her own. Deliberately, she looked down. It seemed he was not immune to her, either. When she raised her eyes, he glanced quickly away. "Get into bed, Methos," she whispered.

He looked like he might speak. Then, mouth thinning, he crossed the room and sat down on the edge of the mattress. "Is there a particular position you'd like me to assume, mistress?"

Cassandra ignored him. Joining him on the edge of the bed, she lifted his bowed head and smoothed damp hair from his eyes. They glittered. Methos made no attempt to pull back, and when she kissed him, he didn't resist, opening his mouth to her. Dark eyes closed when at last she drew away.

Methos had learned much over the centuries, it seemed. His touch was electrifying. He made love with passion and delicacy. The small twinges of fear slowly submerged beneath the exquisite pleasure of his touch.

It was luck alone - or, more likely, some ingrained survival sense - that suddenly brought her back from the brink. Those wonderful hands, so skilled, so sure, slid toward her wrist—and the chain and the key that circled it.

“NO!” Cassandra twisted out from under him, kicking hard. Methos swore and lunged after her. She kicked again, this time catching him in the jaw. All the terror of her slavery came back in a blinding rush and she stumbled from the bed, tripping over the rug in her haste to escape. She fumbled for the drawer where she kept the taser.

“Cassandra ...” Methos reached for her. Beyond reason, she threw herself at him, catching him by surprise, knocking them both down. His hands closed around her wrists, forcing them over her head, holding them still against the floor.

“Cassandra!” he raged at her through clenched teeth. “Listen to me, damn it ... AAAAGH!”

Abruptly his weight was gone, the long body convulsing helplessly next to her. Sobbing for breath, she crawled away and only then looked up to see her room filled with people. Jason, taser in hand—Charlie, in trousers and undershirt, Maurice, frantically knotting

the sash on his dressing gown, hurrying to throw a blanket around her nakedness. Goddess! Had they awakened the whole house?

Maurice saw her tenderly to her bed. Charlie muttered something and pried the taser from Jason's white-knuckled hands. Together, he and the steward dragged Methos away.

“Honestly, Miss Cassandra,” clucked Maurice. “A pretty lady like you doesn't need scum like him!”

She choked on a bitter laugh, taking the glass of water he held her. Where fear had been, rage now thrummed through her veins. The bastard still didn't take her seriously, still didn't appreciate exactly what it meant to be a slave.

That would change. Tonight.

The whip laid fire across his back. Methos clenched his teeth, biting back on a scream. Another blow. Another. Still he held silent, knowing that she watched and refusing her the pleasure. He had lost track of the number. Another blow knocked the breath from him and, for a moment, he didn't know where he was.

“Enough!”

Cassandra's voice was as cold as the steel that held him helpless against the wall. He ran a dry tongue over drier lips. Spasms ran through rigid muscles. He heard Dane breathing hard from the exertion, and the whisper of Cassandra's slippers across the stone floor.

“Leave us, Jason, please.” A moment later, the door closed.

Dizzy and sick, Methos bowed his head against the rough stone. Pain flowed in waves from his back. She set a hand on his raw shoulders and, perversely, after everything they had



done to him, it was that gentle pressure that was too much.

“Gods, Cassandra ... please ...” His voice was barely audible, even speaking unleashed firestorms of agony. Through blurred vision, he saw a slender, white hand unlock the bolt that held one shackle in place. The world tilted wildly and in the rush of pain that followed, he lost consciousness.

When his senses returned, he was face down on his mattress. She was nearby, he could smell her perfume. His heart thudded wildly. Cassandra’s voice seemed to come from far away.

“In my village, my foster father was greatly revered. No one knew more about herbs and palliatives than he. No one was more filled with love. Once, he stayed up three days in a row, fighting for the life of a sick child. When the child died, he wept. He was a man of compassion and great wisdom. He died with Kronos’ sword in his belly.”

Methos closed his eyes, felt hot tears seep out. “I’m sorry.”

“I hate you.”

The pain ebbed, leaving weakness. His eyes burned. He could not look at her. After a moment, she spoke again. She talked about her village, about childhood games, about the people she had loved.

“What would you do,” she asked him at last, “if it was I who had done the things you did?”

“I would kill you,” he breathed.

He heard her rise, heard the familiar sigh of steel drawn from leather. A moment later, her sword rested against the nape of his neck. Methos didn’t move, didn’t breathe, pain forgotten in one moment of primal terror.

“Too easy,” she whispered, lifting the blade away. “Too easy for you, Death.”

## CHAPTER SIX

MacLeod and Dawson’s flight into Labrador was delayed two days as a yet another storm roared up the east coast of North America. When they stepped down onto the windy tarmac of Mary Harbour’s small airport, Joe gasped. “Hell of a place to disappear,” he said, limping with all possible speed toward the tiny terminal. “Why couldn’t Cassandra have chosen the Bahamas?”

The rented car was waiting for them. A rosy-cheeked girl handed over the keys. “Cold one, eh?” she said happily. Joe growled and they were off.

Duncan’s travel agent had found them lodgings at the edge of town and the name of a marina where they might find someone to take them to Elwyn Island. According to the agent, convincing anyone to do so would not be easy, and she recommended taking plenty of cash.

“Elwyn doesn’t like visitors, and most of the folk on the mainland know it.”

It took only a few minutes to find the bed and breakfast. An elderly woman, beaming, ushered them into a parlor where a fire burned in a tiny wood stove. Her name was Wendy MacGeorge and, from her thick Scot’s accents, it appeared she was not native-born. She was delighted to find a fellow expatriate in MacLeod and they were soon chatting up a storm. It never occurred to her to wonder how such a young man knew so much about Scotland in the 1940’s.

The marina, she informed them, was closed at the moment - there being a town meeting. Still, Gabe Severson, the owner, was expecting them in the morning.

They slept soundly in feather beds, the wind sighing around the eaves. In the morning, after a hearty breakfast of smoked fish, eggs, potatoes and coffee strong enough to bend steel bars, they set off up the coast to the marina.

“Seversson,” Duncan read from his notes. “It should be up here about three miles.”

Sure enough, a sign loomed on the left. Joe turned down an unpaved road winding through rocks and stony hillocks. He rounded a curve and stopped. A cluster of unprepossessing, clapboard buildings stood near the shore, their wood weathered gray.

The place appeared to be deserted, a single, battered pick-up truck parked on the gravel lot. Gabe Seversson was found in his office, shuffling through stacks of paper. He was an older man, with the weathered countenance of one who spent most of his time on the sea. Yes, he’d heard from Wendy and, although it went against his better judgment, he’d take them to Elwyn for an exorbitant fee.

“They don’t like visitors,” he informed them unnecessarily, “and this time of year, them currents are treacherous. Just like I told that other fella—you’re better off waitin’ until spring.”

“Other fellow?”

“Yeah. A Brit, I think. He was lookin’ for a coupla boats to charter. Said it was a corporate fishing trip.” Seversson’s eyes gleamed. “Right. This time o’ year? Pfagh! Gave me the creeps, he did. I told him I ain’t got good charts — which ya need if you’re gonna find the right island. He wasn’t real happy. Reckon he’ll head south. There’s a maritime office Carlington.” The man winked. “Course, it ain’t open until Monday.”

Joe and Duncan exchanged looks. “When was he here?” asked the Highlander.

“Yesterday evenin’. Now — how do you want to pay for this? Mastercard or Visa?”

Cassandra looked up and across Igraine’s narrow bed to her mother. Alison, eyes full of fear, bit her lip.

“She needs more help than I can give her,” the Immortal said softly. “I’d like to take her to the mainland.”

The fear blossomed into terror. “No!”

Igraine whimpered, tossing her head from side to side. Cassandra stroked back the fine, pale hair, felt how hot and dry was the skin beneath her fingers. It took effort not to explode into anger. She looked up, past Alison, to Lucius. The high priest sat against the wall of the small bedroom, Agharn and Williams, his acolytes, beside him.

“Will you lose a daughter and a seeress because of ancient, outmoded law?” she burst out. “I can arrange for a small, private hospital - only doctors will ever see her. We can get false papers, manufacture a past for her. No one need ever know!”

“Igraine’s life is in the hands of the Dragon,” Lucius replied, unperturbed. “If it is his will that she come to him, he will send us another.”

“She suffers from a faulty heart valve! These days it’s easily repaired!”

“No,” Lucius shook his head, rising from his chair. He gestured toward the door. Biting back a disgusted retort, Cassandra picked up the tincture and dribbled another few drops through the parted lips. Then, with a final caress of the thin cheek, the Immortal got up and followed the priest into the parlor.

“We cannot risk it,” he told her. “The visions do not lie! The White Dragon is coming. I’ve seen it! She’s seen it! And the part the Horseman will play.”

“Ah - but her vision departs from yours in the matter of Methos, doesn’t it?”

He scowled. “She is a child and can misunderstand ...”

“She is a priestess, Lucius! Age has nothing to do with it and we both know it!”

They glared at each other while the acolytes hovered uneasily in the background.

“The child needs a good cardiologist,” she said quietly, forcefully. “Or do you fear the competition?”

The old man reddened and there were frightened gasps from the boys behind him.

“You’ve had no trouble bringing the outside world here,” she continued ruthlessly. “You drive their tractors and trucks, power your houses with electricity, preserve food with refrigeration. I would suggest bringing the surgeon here, but I know that you will never countenance.”

“You overstep your ...”

“I do what?” She drew herself up straight and Lucius became sourer still. “This is my island, Lucius. You are here because I gave up everything to bring him to safety.”

But Lucius was a stubborn old dog. Once, long ago, they had been lovers. He knew how far to push her and she how far he might be pushed. In his guardianship of the Dragon, there was little room to move.

Whatever heated response Lucius planned was abruptly cut off. The door burst open, admitting Charlie, out of

breath and looking scared. Methos! she thought at once, heart going into her throat.

“Cass ... andra!” the man gasped. “Outsiders ... at the house.”

Her heart took another twist. “Who?”

“He says ... MacLeod. Duncan MacLeod.”

Mute, stunned, she could only look at him. MacLeod? Here?

“Who?” Lucius was frightened and angry. “See what has ...?”

“Be quiet! MacLeod is no enemy.” She drew a long breath. “I’ll finish up here. Where ... where is Methos?”

“On the Point.”

She nodded. “Keep him there. Wait for me in the truck.”

“Who is this MacLeod?” demanded Lucius, following her back into the bedroom. Cassandra halted by the door.

“An old friend and a ... great knight.”

Lucius’ eyes sharpened and at her raised hand, stopped and waited as she quietly gave Alison instructions, tucked a loosened cover around Igraine, and returned to the parlor.

“A knight?” the old man repeated eagerly. “A good man?”

“There is no better,” she said simply.

“Nice place,” Joe said finally. “Real nice.”

Duncan said nothing. He stared through the march of windows into the valley. Purple shadow stretched beneath the western cliffs while overhead, the cerulean afternoon was slowly deepened to indigo.

“Comfortable,” the Watcher continued. “Peaceful.”

An Immortal was coming. Duncan turned as the door to the great room opened and Cassandra was there. She wore jeans and a sheepskin jacket, hair knotted in a careless twist at the nape of her neck.

“Duncan! This is a surprise.”

“Imagine so.” He smiled slowly. “Nice place.”

Joe snorted and, for the first time, Cassandra realized he was there.

“You know Joe,” Duncan said. She nodded and forced a smile. “Joe?”

The Watcher smiled.

“Would you mind letting us alone. a moment, Joe. There’s a bar in the other room. Please feel free to help yourself.

It looked as if Joe would object, but something in Cassandra’s voice made him nod and, after another hesitation, leave. She turned on Duncan, furious: “You brought a Watcher here?”

Duncan ignored that. “Where is he, Cassandra?”

“Who?”

MacLeod lifted his brows. She flushed.

“I promised only that I would not kill the monster!”

“Where is he?”

“Have you come to take him? I warn you, MacLeod - you will have to challenge me for him!”

“Cassandra, this is madness ...”

He broke, sensing a third presence. Cassandra said something angry and French.

The door flew open, cutting him off. It was Methos. Duncan’s heart lifted. Right behind him came a tall, blond man, out of breath. He held something in his fist that he shoved hastily into a pocket at the sight of MacLeod..

“I’m sorry, Cassandra! I tried to stop him, but ...”

“It’s all right. Thank you, Jason. Please. Leave us.”

Methos looked like hell, haggard and undernourished, but the welcoming grin was undaunted.

“Are you my ride home?”

“I mean it,” said Cassandra grimly. “You will have to kill me for him, Duncan.”

Methos’ grin faded. Warily, he looked from one to the other. There was steel around his neck; he touched it absently.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Duncan snapped, looking away, fighting the rage. “What the hell is going on here?”

“He’s paying for his crimes,” she said tightly. “In kind.”

“You’ve enslaved him?”

Her flush deepened, hands opening and clenching spasmodically. “It’s called justice, MacLeod. Usually, you’re in favor of the concept.”

“This isn’t justice, it’s revenge!”

She paused, too angry herself to speak. “You’ve killed others for doing far less. Because Methos deceived you into friendship, is he absolved from mass murder?”

MacLeod could find nothing to say to that. Cassandra was absolutely right. He had taken the heads of evil men without a second thought. Methos - god help him - made all of them seem like philanthropists.

“He helped rid the world of the other three . . .”

“To save his own precious skin,” Cassandra bitterly retorted. “We could argue about this for the next three thousand years, Duncan. I’m not changing my mind. He should be dead. He’s not. Be satisfied with that.”

Methos was staring at him. Duncan averted his eyes and looked across the room. In truth, he didn't know what to do. Vividly, he remembered his reaction when Cassandra had exposed Methos' shameful past, remembered even more clearly how Methos had responded.

"I did it because I liked it!"

Cassandra was right. There had to be a reckoning. "How long," he said finally, heavily, "is this sentence?"

Methos made a strangled sound, Duncan rounded on him, suddenly angry. "Well? Can you look me in the eyes, Methos, and say she isn't right?"

The lean, hawkish face went still. Methos looked from Duncan to Cassandra. Voice barely audible, he said, "I was hoping for forgiveness."

Cassandra gave a startled, breathless laugh. Methos held Duncan's eyes, his own unreadable. For a moment, to the Highlander, he looked utterly alien, the gulf of millennia gaping between them. Then the ancient one shivered slightly, turned and walked out.

MacLeod realized he was shaking. Shoving his hands into his pocket, he repeated: "How long, Cassandra?"

"I will accept no interference from you, Duncan. He will stay here with me until I decide he leaves."

Jaw tight, Duncan nodded shortly. Without another word, he passed her and looked into the next room. Joe was leafing half-heartedly through a book. He looked up immediately.

"We're going," Duncan said shortly. "Come on."

There were doubtless a thousand questions tumbling through the Watcher's mind, but Joe knew Duncan well enough to postpone the asking. He

nodded and hurried after the Immortal, giving Cassandra a curious look as they left the house.

Outside, Duncan didn't pause, striding down the long drive.

"MacLeod!" Joe's roar finally brought him back, made him stop short in the middle of the road. The wind was picking up, clouds gathering. He jammed his fists into the pockets of his jacket.

"She's turned him into a slave, Joe. It's his 'sentence' for the Horsemen. She's even got him in a goddamned collar!"

The Watcher blinked, then nodded grimly. "So how do we get him out?"

"We don't." Duncan forced himself to meet the surprised, then disapproving stare. "She's right. There has to be justice, Joe. If there isn't, what the hell is the point?"

"And mercy? What about mercy? What about forgiveness? Can't they temper justice?" Joe was mad now, too. "And how do you know he hasn't already paid? We don't know squat about huge stretches of his life. There have been five thousand years of it!"

"Methos has my forgiveness - has had it, but it's not my forgiveness he needs, it's Cassandra's."

"But . . ."

"And if we try to take him, she swears she'll Challenge me."

Joe closed his mouth. "Shit," he said sympathetically. "What do we do?"

"I don't know."

For a moment, neither man spoke. Then Joe asked: "Did you tell her about Vortig?"

Duncan shook his head. "She can clean up her own messes. Now - let's figure out how we're going to get off this island."

Tom approached the ruins with some trepidation. Methos stood along a cleared section of floor, his pick resting on it, staring blindly into the valley. He jumped when Tom came up.

“Hi,” the boy said awkwardly.

No answer, only a long, bleak look. Then Methos turned away and, lifting the pick, drove it into the hillside. Great, damp clods of earth came loose and rolled down to the dirty stones.

“I ... I heard about last night.” The words tumbled out, not at all the way he’d wished.

A muscle leapt in the Immortal’s jaw, but still he said nothing.

“It was wrong!”

“I’m a murderer,” replied the Immortal in a flat voice. “What do you care?”

“I don’t believe it!”

Methos turned and looked at the boy with a mocking smile. “Really? Even after I’ve confessed?”

“It was a long time ago.”

“Yes,” replied Methos softly. “It was.”

Tom’s throat was so tight he could barely speak. He remembered how Jason had looked, pale and stricken, shattered by what he’d done to the Immortal — what he’d done for Cassandra. Even now the youth shook from the argument he’d had with his guardian, screaming at each other across the breakfast table while the staff ran and hid. But she was wrong this time, damn it! Maybe Methos had been evil once, but three thousand years was a goddamned long time! It was impossible not to change in all those years! What was the point to such a long life otherwise?

Methos shook his head and turned away. His pick froze in

midswing and, unexpectedly, he whirled around to face the valley. Tom’s mouth dropped as four strangers came up over the ridge. He started to turn, to run back to the house, but Methos reached out and grabbed him, pulling him back. Then Tom saw the guns. His heart began to pound.

One of the man was taller than the rest, broad-shouldered, with well-defined features. His hair was just turning gray, but his movements were those of a young man.

“Adam Pierson, I presume?”

Methos’ head tilted slightly, brows going together.

“And Immortal! Did your Watcher friends know that?”

“You have the advantage,” said Methos finally.

“Neilin Vortig.” He looked Methos up and down. “I can’t say that I think much of Cassandra’s hospitality.”

“Club Med is superior.” Dark eyes continued wary. “Are you a friend of Cassandra’s?”

“We have a — history.” The man walked slowly around Methos, considering him. “*Whatever* did you do to incur her wrath?”

“That’s personal.” Methos released Tom.

“The collar - what does it do?”

“Inconveniences me.”

Tom looked from one Immortal to the other, heart pounding. Vortig gestured to his men. They stepped forward, surrounding Methos. The dark-haired Immortal became very still, body tense as they took hold of him. Vortig drew a knife. The edge glittered as he laid the tip against Methos throat.

“NO!” Tom cried. The blade flashed. Methos shivered. Long fingers touched his newly bare neck.

“Thanks,” he said finally. “How much is this going to cost me?”

“The link’s been broken!”

Cassandra looked up, startled, as Dane appeared breathlessly beside her. Setting the beaker on the table, she brushed chamomile from her fingers. “Then find him.”

“No, you don’t understand! The collar’s off!”

MACLEOD! For a moment she was so angry she could barely breathe. With the anger was a shattering sense of betrayal. Taking a deep breath, she said: “Get everyone out searching for him. Notify the villages and above all - get someone to the pass. They mustn’t get off the island.”

Goddess! She’d thought MacLeod so honorable that even his implied word was good. Methos’ corrupting influence was even stronger than she’d thought.

From the front of the house came a crashing. Cassandra snatched the sword leaning against the chair, pulling it from its scabbard. Out in the corridor, she heard shouting and, for the first time, another explanation occurred to her. The door ahead flew open and two strangers stood there, guns aimed dead at her.

“Please put the sword down, ma’am,” ordered one of the men. “We know you’re Immortal and we won’t hesitate to shoot.”

Wordlessly, thoughts whirling, Cassandra put down the blade and walked forward at the other’s gesture. They gave her room to move, respectful - professional.

Vortig.

He was waiting in her formal parlor, large body arranged neatly, relaxed, on the couch. The pine covered

ridges visible through the window behind reminded her abruptly of the hills above Bath, before his quest to become Britain’s High-King.

“Vortig.” She stood between his soldiers, calm, hands clasped at her waist. “Welcome to my home.”

He smiled appreciatively at the sarcasm and nodded to his men. They stepped back.

“What do you want?”

“A disingenuous question, my dear Cassie. You know who I want.”

“He’s not here. He’s dead, Neilin - has been for almost fifteen hundred years.”

“And this island? Its charming people with their so-interesting cult? Existing by pure coincidence?”

“Have you found him?” she asked. Annoyance flickered across those disciplined features. “Have you torn apart the island? I remember how you work, Vortig.”

“As we speak, my dear. Please ...” he waved toward the place beside him. She remained standing. “My men are currently searching for him. My money is on that monstrosity of marble - the Tomb of the Dragon. Once we locate your priests, it should only be a matter of time. I thought I would offer you a chance to give me the information freely before I began hacking your people apart.”

“They can’t tell you anything,” she replied, still outwardly calm, inwardly panicking. “There is nothing to tell.”

Vortig was on his feet in a single, predatory movement. She took a step backwards in alarm, remembering the sudden rages.

“They brought him to you and you smuggled him north. It was a while, but I did find you. Only, by then, you

had gone north again, whored yourself to that Norse barbarian! Well - you've run out of places to hide, woman! I know he's here! I will find him, and if I must, I will put you to the Question."

She shuddered as his hands closed around her arms and he pulled her close. His heart was pounding, the harsh, handsome face inches from her own. When his mouth came down on hers, it was all Cassandra could do to keep from twisting away. She forced herself to stand, unresponsive, as his tongue ravaged her, as his hands moved possessively over her body. Then he set her away, eyes afire and she remembered, too late, how resistance excited him.

"SMITH!"

One of the men stepped forward.

"Take her to down to the village, then get Samson on the line. I want the rest of the islanders neutralized!" To her, he said softly: "I look forward to an interesting ... discussion of old times, my love. Until later."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Tom twisted his wrists again, ignoring the burning of the ropes against his raw skin, but the knots held true. He was sick with fear and shame that he'd allowed himself to be fooled by Methos. Cassandra had been right about the evil Immortal and he, Tom, had almost betrayed her for him.

Outside Lucius' house, it was now quiet. Tom went frequently from the bed to the window, but there was little to see in the darkness outside. A ruddy glow reflected on the wall of the neighboring house and he smelled smoke. They'd dumped him into the old priest's bedroom after taking him prisoner on Fire Point. That had been

almost four hours ago. Now, forgotten, he could only guess at what was happening. Moving his arms again, the young man tried in vain to ease the ache between his shoulder blades.

The bedroom door opened. It was Methos. Tom felt a rush of fury and clamped shut his jaw on it. After regarding the captive for several moments in silence, the Immortal said: "Stand up."

Tom glared. The Immortal sighed. Leaning over, he grabbed a handful of the boy's hair and pulled him off the edge of the bed. Another quick twist of long fingers and Tom's hands were free.

"Don't touch me!" the boy spat, trying to pull away. Methos released him at once, shrugged.

"Vortig wants you. It seems Cassandra is here." Graceful, indifferent, the Immortal stepped aside. Giving him a look filled with loathing, Tom walked from the room, rubbing his aching wrists. Methos fell in behind him, silent as shadow.

The bastard was right. Cassandra was a prisoner. In Lucius' cramped living room, she sat in the arm-chair by the fireplace. Vortig stood beside her. There was a guard at the door and in front of the picture window. Outside, Mrs. Quinn's cottage was burning. A truck thundered past.

"Tom!" Stricken, Cassandra jumped to her feet. Vortig seized her and pushed her roughly back into the chair. She twisted away from him. "If you've hurt him, Vortig, I'll kill you!"

"I'm OK, Cassandra," Tom said hastily, afraid the bastard would hit her. Vortig only grinned and nodded. Cassandra's anxious eyes moved past Tom and narrowed. Her beautiful mouth twisted in contempt.



“Methos!”

The Immortal winced and met Vortig’s startled stare with a wry grin and a shrug.

“Methos? You?”

“Oh, did I break your cover?”

Cassandra jeered. “So sorry.”

“The world’s oldest Immortal,” breathed Vortig. “I thought you were a legend.”

“In his own mind,” she snapped.

Without even looking in her direction, Vortig backhanded her across the face. Tom, shocked and angry, lunged at him, only to be hauled back by Methos.

“She’s Immortal,” he told the boy harshly. “She’ll get over it.”

Vortig’s grin widened. “Is it true you were one of the Four Horsemen?”

Methos bowed mockingly. Vortig shook his head. “You must tell me all about it,” he said, “after I finish my business here.” He turned his attention back to Cassandra. “Had time to reconsider?”

She pulled away and stared inimically at Methos. Vortig sighed. “Convince her.”

Without another word, Methos walked across the room and held out his hand. “Your knife?”

Eyes glinting, smile hovering at the corners of his mouth, Vortig handed the blade to the other Immortal. Methos took it and then, with startling speed, whirled around, seizing Tom, pulling the boy against him. The edge of the dagger pressed against Tom’s windpipe and Cassandra made a small sound of horror.

“You know I’ll do it,” Methos told her softly. “Now save us all the inconvenience. Tell the man what he wants to know. Spare your people this misery.”

Tom stood perfectly still, raging, as much at himself as at Methos. How could he have been such a fool? Miserably he waited, heart pounding. For a moment, Cassandra said nothing, expression stark.

“You were right about the tomb” she said tonelessly. “Beneath the idol.”

“So, he is there,” Vortig breathed, “how do I get at him, pagan bitch?”

She looked at Tom again, white-faced in Methos’ implacable grip. “You don’t,” she said finally, dully. “I do.”

“They’re leaving.”

Duncan nodded. He could see that much, unaided. Joe swept the binoculars to the left. “And Methos is with them.”

The Highlander heard that without surprise. “A prisoner?” he asked hopefully.

Joe snorted and handed the glasses over. “Sorry, MacLeod — he’s being true to form — throwing his lot in with the strongest.”

“Maybe.”

The Watcher, shaking his head, got awkwardly to his feet. “What are we going to do? It looks like Vortig’s got the entire island under control”

“He does,” sighed Duncan. He watched the group of mercenaries and prisoners climb into the jeep waiting in front of a house. It pulled away. Down the little street, another house burst into flames. “But you’re right. First we need allies.”

“We could get to Cassandra’s house. There has to be a radio or something to let us communicate with the mainland.”

“We don’t have time.” Duncan was up, starting down the hill toward the besieged village. “Wait here.”

Joe ignored him, of course. Together, the friends slipped through the woods, circling around the burning village. At the end of it, near the lake, was a barn. Earlier, they had seen the mercenaries herding the islanders into it.

Most of the mercs were pulling out with Vortig, but a few stayed behind to guard the prisoners. MacLeod took out three of them, Joe a fourth. There was one more inside, but he was too busy bullying a young islander to notice the body dropping on him from the hayloft directly above.

“Duncan MacLeod,” the Highlander introduced himself, stepping over the now-unconscious mercenary. He turned and opened the barn door. Joe limped in, a confiscated rifle over his shoulder. “My friend, Joe Dawson. Would someone tell me what all this is about?”

The young man opened his mouth, but was forestalled by high, clear tones from the crowd at his back.

“I will.”

The crowd parted and Duncan found himself staring, bemused, into the pinched features of a child. A woman hovered anxiously behind her, but made no effort to stop her halting progress across the barn floor. Alarmed, looking around in astonished outrage, Duncan dropped to one knee, holding out his arms to catch her when she tottered the last few steps to him. She weighed frighteningly little in his arms. Fever burned in her.

“This child is sick!” he accused the frightened woman. “Are you her mother?”

“She’s a handmaiden of the Dragon,” said another, older woman. She joined the Highlander in the small circle that gathered around them. “I am Eloise, also a priestess. Speak, Igraine.”

Two high spots of color glowed on the little girl’s thin cheeks, but her voice was steady. “You must go to the Tomb at once! The White Dragon cannot be allowed to kill the Red. You’re the only one who can stop him!”

“What is she talking ab ...” Duncan froze. “Red Dragon? White Dragon -- *King Arthur?*”

The little girl looked blank.

“Ambrosius?” The older woman snorted. “That hairy barbarian? Certainly not! He died at the hands of one his own bastards! It is the king-maker we serve, the Faerie lord himself, the Old Man of the Forest, Emrys Aurelous.” And, when Duncan still looked blank, added impatiently: “You have heard of him as Merlin.”

Apparently, there were problems. Vortig stood several yards away, talking urgently into his cell phone. Methos settled down on the Tomb’s broad front step. Someone had given him a jacket; it was nice to be warm again. Cassandra, struggling helplessly against her steel handcuffs, stood near Vortig. Her hair had come loose from its knot, tumbling around her classic features in a way that Methos found unsettling. He looked away, across the churned earth and the jeeps and trucks that covered it.

Vortig had brought twenty men to the island, supposedly just a small part of his hired army. Another petty warlord with a grudge, thought Methos, and was not impressed. Still, he was careful to keep his disdain hidden. Vortig was his ticket off this rock.

Across the lawns, two more jeeps rolled into view. That should be the last of Vortig’s men. Methos looked up into the cliffs. Still no sign of MacLeod.

The Highlander had to be about somewhere. He’d not had time to get off

the island. Furthermore, Methos knew that if MacLeod encountered Vortig and his thugs, Duncan would almost certainly put on his hero hat. The Highlander's predictability would be the death of him some day and wouldn't that be a damn shame?

Looking around, Methos met Lucius' hostile glare. The old man, bruised and bound, spat and looked away. Methos smiled faintly. He got up, dusted himself off, and sauntered over to Vortig. The mercenary commander shoved his phone into his pocket, flushed with anger.

"Trouble?"

"The men I left to guard the islanders — they're not answering."

"My money's on MacLeod," Methos said.

"Bastard!" Cassandra flew at him, fingers clawed. He laughed, dodging her easily.

"He's here?" Vortig hauled Cassandra back. "You neglected to mention that! Why?"

"It must have slipped my mind," he retorted.

Cassandra, voice dripping contempt, interrupted: "He saved your life and this is how you repay him. Why am I not surprised?"

"You always did know me the best," replied Methos softly. "I really should have fought Kronos for you."

"Yes. You should have. You'd be dead now!"

Methos laughed aloud. Ignoring Vortig's increasingly thunderous face, the oldest Immortal reached over and pulled her to him. He kissed her hard, ignoring her struggles, then flung her away. Shoving his hands into his pockets he turned his back on them both and walked away.

When the sniper fire started from the woods, he ignored it.

MacLeod swung from the rafters, landing on top of the idol's broad, marble brow. He dropped to his haunches, drawing his breath, feeling his heart like a hammer in his chest. He could see through the open door of the tomb. Mercenaries were running toward the woods, drawn there by Joe's shooting — the decoy had worked. Time was what they needed — time for the boy, Tom, to get to Cassandra's radio and find some outside help.

"... matter. They'll find him!"

Vortig's voice — but why couldn't he feel him? Duncan moved cautiously to the edge of the dragon's head and looked down. The mercenary commander came down the steps and into the Tomb, dragging Cassandra with him. Methos followed.

Duncan lay flat against the marble, shaken. What was going on? Why were they invisible to his senses? From the moment he'd set foot in this place, he'd been aware of a strange, muffled sensation. Something was interfering with what he had always taken for granted.

Vortig shoved Cassandra toward the idol. She stumbled and went to her knees. Methos held himself aloof, leaning indolently against a pillar, unmoved by Vortig's brutality. The mercenaries brought an old man, an islander, and threw him down beside Cassandra. Waving them back, their commander drew his sword and placed the tip against the elder's spine. "Open it," he ordered Cassandra.

The Immortal woman's slim shoulders drooped. She bent forward, laid her hands on the marble dais supporting the idol. There was complete

silence, then a loud grinding sound filled the tomb. MacLeod almost gave himself away when the idol beneath him began to move. Ponderously the dais rotated slowly to one side, revealing an broad, shallow pit.

Suddenly, that curious, dampening sensation was gone. MacLeod felt the other three Immortals acutely and—something else—something that roared along his nerves, similar to the buzz, but subtly different and a hundred times more powerful. Methos' straightened abruptly, looking around, eyes narrowed. Vortig seemed unaware of anything other than the widening pit.

It contained a marble altar and upon the altar, a young man. Aquiline features were still, eyes closed. His long hair fanned around his shoulders, dark red, a remarkable color. The ears, barely visible, had a faint point to them. Faerie, the priestess had said.

Duncan saw no evidence of breathing. Most noteworthy was a thin, red line around the sleeper's neck.

"At last!" Vortig cried, taking a step toward the pit.

"Don't do this!" Cassandra pleaded. "Please!"

Snarling, Vortig kicked her away. "He cost me my kingdom and he cost me you. Either reason is, by itself, enough to condemn him!"

"Think again, Vortig!" Duncan swung over a scaled ear, landing on the leaf-strewn floor. Vortig hissed, stepping back and drawing his own sword, while, all around, his men brought up their weapons.

"This is none of your business, MacLeod." Vortig scowled. "I've no quarrel with you. Leave now and you can live to face me later."

Duncan looked down at Cassandra. Her lower lip was caught between her teeth. There was a reckless, desperate look in her blue eyes. He looked around to Methos. "Surviving?" The Highlander could not resist the jibe, pushed by the sharp, cold ache of disappointment.

"Why not? You made your position clear enough." A glittering smile touched those austere features. To Vortig, Methos said: "Shoot him. Don't risk hand to hand. He's very good."

"Yes, I've had the pleasure." Vortig regarded the sleeper, then Duncan. "Why not? I've waited all these centuries for my vengeance. I can wait a few more minutes. Will you take him, Methos?"

"Gods, no," replied Methos, appalled. "He's way too good for me."

"As you wish." The mercenary laughed harshly and attacked.

Vortig had almost taken Duncan that day in New York. The Highlander was well aware of that as he parried the blur of blows coming at him, danced away along the curving edge of the shallow pit. Silence filled the Tomb, broken only by the ringing of the swords and the harsh breathing of the combatants.

Duncan desperately focused on the next thrust, and the next. Vortig seemed untiring, pressing him ceaselessly. Duncan was holding his own, but barely. A rumbling distracted him. The idol was moving back into place! He had a glimpse of Cassandra's anxious face, then paid for his moment of inattention. Pain streaked down his side. Duncan lost his breath and could not draw another one. Reeling back, he just avoided a riposte. Turning, stumbling, he fell under the idol, rolled to the other side. God! Punctured lung.

Blood bubbled into his nose. He tasted copper. Grimly, willing himself to stay alive, he lurched around the idol's tail, scarlet splashing over the painstakingly carved scales. Vortig, laughing hoarsely, lunged at him again. Then, unexpectedly, the mercenary commander stepped back, stopped and wiped his brow. "Methos!"

Duncan staggered, watching in disbelief as Vortig handed his own sword, hilt first to Methos. Methos, mouth dropping, simply stared at him. "Take it," Vortig sneered, "unless you think he's still too dangerous?"

"How generous." Methos looked thoughtfully from Vortig to Emrys Aurelius, then shrugged and moved out onto the floor. "No offense, MacLeod, but I really, really want off this damn island!"

MacLeod tried to draw a breath, choking on his own blood. The pain was less, but he wasn't healing fast enough—not nearly fast enough.

"I promise to make this quick." There was sincere regret in the soft voice.

Even then, Duncan didn't quite believe it. Instinct alone brought his arm up to parry the thrust that came at him. He blinked the mist from his eyes, swung away, avoiding another swing. A third connected, straight through his arm. He grunted, dimly grateful it wasn't his sword arm. He reeled around, coming up against a wall of Vortig's men. They pushed him back, laughing.

Another vicious lunge almost undid him. Duncan feinted to the right, then lurched past his adversary. Methos swung around, cutting him off. Steel flashed. Pain rocked the Highlander. Knees turned to water and he went to the floor, vision flooded by crimson.

"Finish him!" shouted Vortig, impatiently. "Now, damn it!"

Methos' face was a white slash against the encroaching darkness. Duncan's katana clattered from nerveless fingers. He could not draw a breath. Methos lifted his blade, saluted the Highlander sadly --- then spun around, driving the sword deep into the gut of the man standing behind him. Vortig gasped, eyes bugging out in shock as Methos withdrew the blade. The air sang once more with the flight of steel, up and across, severing Vortig's head in one, balletic movement.

There was a moment of shock. Duncan watched the head roll across the flagged stones, coming up against the marble dais. Sightless eyes met his. Vortig's men broke their paralysis and lifted their weapons, aiming them all at the slender figure drooping in the shadow of the idol.

They never had a chance to fire. The Quickening arrived with a spectral wind, racing through the building, tugging at hair and clothing, raising the scattered carpet of paper-dry leaves in dozens of tiny whirlwinds. Then followed the lightning, stitching from one side to the other. Mortals screamed and, throwing down their weapons, ran. Methos' body twisted, sword flying from his hand as the energy seized him, crashed through nerve and sinew. From the idol's ruby eyes came more lightning, fine and red as blood. It wrapped around the ancient Immortal and, for an instant, Duncan saw something else there.

Cassandra tugged at the Highlander, pulling him away. A flash of brilliance obscured everything and for one long, bewildering moment Duncan heard music, strange whispers. Something brushed his arm - cold, but

silky soft. A tingling ran through him. Suddenly he could breathe easily again; the pain drained away. Vision cleared. The Tomb was still, empty except for them and Lucius.

Duncan stood up shakily. Methos knelt beside Vortig's body, head bowed to the floor. The idol was back in place, no hint of the man lying beneath it. Cassandra stared at them both, then went to untie Lucius.

"I --- I can't believe — he handed me the damn sword," Methos gasped, letting Duncan pull him to his feet. "I was wracking my brain for --- for — any excuse to get my hands — on ..."

"Have you ever come up with a plan that didn't depend on pure luck and split-second timing?" the Highlander demanded testily. Methos laughed, shaking his head, trying to catch his breath. Duncan steered him to the dais and sat him down. Cassandra joined them. Her eyes moved to Methos, then slid away.

"Is he really Merlin?" Duncan asked, looking down at curve of marble that again hid the sleeper.

She nodded. "Emrys has powers we don't. Telepathy, telekinesis — maybe others. Although you must take his head to take his life, he's not Immortal, not like us. The Folk claim he's Faerie, that he's roamed the ancient forests as long as time itself. They worshiped and protected him long before he meddled in the politics of men and became notorious."

"Legend claims Merlin was done in by a woman," Methos pointed out.

"Legend claims a great many things, most of which aren't true," she retorted. "It was accurate when it claimed that he brought Arthur to power, but it wasn't Arthur that cornered

Vortigern in Wales, it was Emrys — or Myrrid as they had begun to call him." She shrugged sadly. "He and Vortig met on the battlements, while the castle burned. Emrys was good, but — you know what kind of swordsman Vortig was."

Duncan nodded soberly. "The best I ever faced. If he hadn't handed the sword to Methos, I'd be dead."

"Treachery will overcome skill every time," agreed Methos. "I take it Emrys lost? Why didn't Vortig take his head?"

"No time. Arthur came — finally. Vortig left Emrys, tried to flee — and died in the fire."

"You were there?"

She nodded. "I had my own reasons for wishing Vortig dead. We took Emrys' body north. Eventually, we came here. Someday, the wound that nearly killed him will be healed."

"If you were there, you should have finished Vortig while you had the chance." Methos said sourly.

"There are a great many things in my life I should have done," she retorted. He flinched and looked away. Duncan's heart sank.

There was noise outside — helicopters. Duncan scrambled to his feet. "Damn. Sounds like Vortig's men have regrouped."

Methos was already running toward the door, scooping up an abandoned rifle. He stopped suddenly. Tom ran in, took one look at Methos and, with a roar of rage, launched himself at the startled Immortal. Behind the boy were other men, but not Vortig's mercenaries. Canadian Coast guard! The boy had done what he was told — got help.

Dodging, swearing, Methos avoided being knocked to the ground.

Cassandra caught her ward before he could go after Methos again. “NO! It’s all right, Tom! Things aren’t — what they seem.”

The boy subsided, clearly off balance, and endured Cassandra’s fierce hug. Relieved, Duncan saw Joe walking in with a Guard officer. The Watcher winked and grinned. The officer at his side looked dourly from Cassandra to Duncan’s bloody visage, to the headless corpse lying beside the idol. With a sigh, ignoring Joe’s sparkling eye, Duncan stepped forward, resigned to explaining the unexplainable.

The doctor stepped into the corridor and smiled. “She’s stable, Ms. Roulin, but you’re right. Igraine needs immediate surgery. I’d like to move her — tonight, if possible.”

Cassandra nodded. “As long as you can promise to keep our conditions.”

The man smiled wryly. “Frankly, for what you’re paying us, she can have her own hospital.”

“Can I go in?”

“She’s asleep, but yes, you can.”

Pushing open the door, Cassandra stepped into the sickroom. Igraine was barely a bump under the quilts, pale hair neatly braided, a stuffed animal gripped loosely in one transparent hand. It was Jason’s turn to watch, nodding in the chair beside the bed. He started out of his drowse, hearing her. She saw the quick look of shame that had been there ever since the whipping. Struggling with her own guilt, Cassandra made no attempt to stop him as he mumbled an excuse and slipped from the room.

He’d told her that morning that he was leaving the island. “You’ve given me everything, Cassandra. It’s time I stop taking and starting giving

back. It’s time I --- faced myself.” They were good reasons — and all of them were lies. What could she say? She’d used him as callously as Methos had used her and thereby damaged an already fragile human being. If he never forgave her, it was no more than she deserved.

“Oh, Igraine,” she sighed, tucking the blankets a little closer around the girl. “After thousands of years, I’m no wiser than a mortal.”

Igraine stirred, murmured, and fell back into deep sleep, unconcerned. The Dragon was safe; her world was right again. All else were simply grown-up problems. Smoothing wisps of hair from the child’s brow, Cassandra left the sickroom.

The last of her unresolved business waited for her in the library. It was tempting to postpone it, to force Duncan to track her down, but that would only prolong her own discomfort. She let herself quietly in the room. Through the wall of windows, clouds scudded across the sky, infrequent breaks letting in brief, fine bars of sunlight.

Duncan paced back and forth in front of the window. His Watcher friend, Joe Dawson rose awkwardly from the couch and advanced purposefully on her.

“I guess we’re out of here, Cassandra.” He held out his hand. She took it, smiled faintly at the reassuring squeeze. “Take care of yourself, OK?”

She nodded. Joe threw a troubled look at the Highlander. “I guess I’ll go see what’s holding up the car they promised.”

Duncan was oblivious to the spectacular view. She waited expectantly, watched his jaw tighten.

“I’m taking Methos back with me, Cassandra. I’ll fight you for him, if I must.”

“That won’t be necessary.” It was what she had expected. “He saved Emrys — all of us. Whether it was compassion that motivated him, or self interest, the end was the same. Vortig is gone.” She forced a smile.

“You still can’t forgive Methos, can you?”

She made a helpless gesture. “I don’t know what I feel anymore, Duncan. It doesn’t matter anyway. Take him. That much of his debt I’ll accept as paid.”

MacLeod took an impulsive step toward her. Fighting an urge to run, she let him put his arms around her and pull her gently close. As always, his strength and kindness eased the ache inside her. “Thank you,” he said into her hair. “Where is he?”

“Fire Point, I think.”

He gave her an anxious look. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. Her face ached from holding the smile.

“I’ll see you again, soon?” he asked. She nodded. Kissing her lightly on the nose, he was gone.

Cassandra sat for a long time, watching the yard and the valley below. Jason, loaded down with luggage, crossed the driveway and threw it into the back of Charlie’s pick-up. So — he wouldn’t even say goodbye. The lump in her throat grew. She watched the truck pull away, disappear from sight. It was replaced by Lucius’ van. Islanders swarmed out and into the house. It was time to move Igraine. In a few short months, Tom would be gone, too, off to university and a life of his own.

Shadows lengthened in the valley. The van left and, an hour later,

she saw the medical helicopter rise above the trees and shoot west, toward the mainland. Time to move. Time to get on with the business of living. Cassandra wandered aimlessly through her large, echoing house. Habit drew her to the kitchen. It was empty, a single light burning over the stove. She made a cup of cocoa and sat down. Sipping it, she shook her head, then set down the cup. Tasteless.

She felt the sudden shiver through the room. Across the kitchen, the door opened. A cold wind blew in.

“Hey, Cassandra!”

It was Tom. She raised her head, wondering what Duncan had forgotten, and her thoughts stopped. Behind the boy was Methos. The Immortal avoided her eyes, shrugging out of his coat and throwing it on the hook beside Tom’s.

“We found a trap door in the floor!” Tom continued, oblivious to the sudden tension. “I wanted to open it tonight, but Methos said to wait until tomorrow. But what if we took the generator out there? We could have light then!”

“You’re still here,” she said, looking straight at Methos. Tom fell silent, looked anxiously from one to the other.

“Leave us,” Methos said. Tom nodded and beat a hasty retreat. Methos leaned back against the door. Cassandra’s heart was racing.

“I told MacLeod you could go.”

He nodded. It was hard to see his eyes in the shadows. “Maybe I want to see what the tower looks like once it’s reconstructed.”

Cassandra stared, bereft of words. Then, in a sudden, furious movement, she stood up and started for the door.

“Wait! Cassandra!”



She stopped, fists clenched at her side.

“MacLeod is waiting for me in the harbor. If you really want me to go, I will.”

“Why are you still here? Is it Emrys?”

“Sleeping beauty?” His urchin smile came and went. “No. I wanted to talk to you. Can we talk, Cassandra? Will you listen to me?”

She shrugged angrily.

“Do you remember the night you showed me the stars?”

Whatever she’d been expecting, this wasn’t it. Time’s endless skein broke apart. She smelled dust and horses, watched his tall figure striding through the merciless blaze of the sun, heading toward the dark and cool of the tent. Toward her. The image blurred and it was a modern man that crossed the gleaming, kitchen tiles and reached for her. The hands that took hers were still dirty, but there was no blood on them now.

“After you were gone, I’d leave the camp sometimes, ride alone to a hilltop. I’d lie on my back for hours watching the stars, hearing your voice telling me about them.” His dark eyes were distant, seeing into the past. “You gave me the stars — I gave you death and slavery.”

She looked down at their hands, twined together, and found that she could not gather her thoughts into order.

“Why, then,” she asked finally, “did you give me to Kronos?”

Methos released her abruptly, turning away. “I did not give you — oh, gods.”

Cassandra caught her breath, but curiously, she was not afraid. She watched him regain control, hunch his shoulders in a quick, anxious shrug. “I

couldn’t fight Kronos and win. After he’d killed me, he would have killed you for coming between us.” Methos hesitated, hands thrust into the pocket of his coat, eyes bleak. “I watched you run out of his tent. Later, when he sent us out looking for you, I was the one who found your trail, but never told him.”

“Am I supposed to be grateful?”

“Well — you could be. Just a little bit. It was the first time I’d ever defied Kronos, even in secret.” His mouth twisted bitterly. “In fact, you might say you were the beginning of the end for the Horsemen. The truth was, I resented losing you — resented Kronos for forcing the issue. It was an anger that built until, finally, I left.”

“And then, I suppose,” sneered Cassandra, “you went looking for me.”

“Actually, yes, but I found a mortal woman instead. My first wife. Andromeda finished civilizing me. She looked a lot like you, except her eyes were brown, not that particular shade of greenish blue.”

He remembered his first wife’s name? Her eye color? For some reason, the thought shook her.

“You’re a mass murderer,” she managed finally.

“I was, yes. Now I do everything in my power to avoid picking up a weapon. I am NOT the same man, Cassandra!”

She returned to the table and sat down, finding her cup blindly. Looking up, she saw Methos watching her.

“Do you know what Duncan said to me when we were walking back from the tomb?” She smiled faintly. “He said ‘Hatred is a narcotic that eases the pain of fear.’ He’s very wise for someone so young.”

Methos blinked, then grinned. “He has his moments.”

“It’s true, though. My ‘habit’ has hurt those I love, threatened my friendship with Duncan. It was turning me into what I most despise.” Cassandra shook her head. “No more.”

“Then — can there be peace between us? Or, at least, a start?”

“If it matters.”

He laughed — a ghost of a sound. “It matters.”

She wrapped her hands around the cup, leeching the last of its warmth. “Then I will think about it. In the meantime, go with Duncan.”

“Cassandra ...”

“I need to be alone, to find some understanding.” She made a helpless gesture. “Withdrawal, if you will.”

“Tom will be disappointed.”

Cassandra drew a deep breath. “Then, perhaps, you’ll come back in a month or two — to see him.”

There was tension in the room again, but it was different this time. Methos nodded slowly. After a moment, he pushed away from the wall and started for the door. Once there, he paused. “Can I ask a favor?”

Caught by surprise, Cassandra nodded.

“Don’t let anyone else renovate that tower?”

That startled a laugh out of her. “I’ll think about that, too.”

He nodded, then stepped out into the night and was gone.

Cassandra sat in the gathering silence and drank the last of her chocolate. The oven timer chimed. Soon Maurice would come hustling down to check on his rising bread. There was quiet place in her heart she’d never sensed before — a lightness of the soul that made her smile into the empty kitchen.

And if she closed her eyes, she could see the Wheel spinning, coming around again.

The End