Simple Gifts

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/132801.

Rating: Mature
Archive Warning: Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category: Multi, F/M
Fandom: Highlander: The Series, Highlander: The Raven
Relationship: Amanda Darieux/Nick Wolfe, Duncan MacLeod & Methos
Character: Nick Wolfe, Methos, Joe Dawson, Bert, Jehanne Martin, Eyvindr inn Viðförla
Additional Tags: Alternate Universe - Historical; non-canonical Immortal
Series: Part 3 of Gods, Saints, Sinners, and Furies
Stats: Published: 2010-11-12 Words: 79277

Simple Gifts

by Deborah Laymon (dejla), dejla

Summary

Immortality is never a simple gift—as Methos knows, and Nick Wolfe is about to find out.

One unknown Immortal in Paris is happenstance; two is coincidence. The third is a disaster looking for a place to happen. Amanda is missing. Two Immortals—a tall dark man who calls himself Adam Benoît, and his companion, Jehanne Martin—arrive to run The Sanctuary in Amanda’s place. Without warning, and at Amanda’s request?

Events take a dangerous turn when a third Immortal appears, sword in hand, hunting someone he calls ‘the Austræni.’

If that isn’t enough, Bert Myers wants Nick to find a stolen 13-century Passau sword, which once belonged to André Korda—who lost his head to Amanda.

Can Methos, Joe Dawson, and Jehanne help new Immortal Nick Wolfe find out what’s going on before someone else loses a head?

Simple Gifts

Hangovers did not wake you up.

Nick rolled over, pressing his face into the pillow. Too hot. He dragged the doubled-up lump out from under his skull and flipped it over to the cool side, but the two-by-four banging the inside of his head just shifted into a jackhammer. This was going to be a bad one, right up there with the
hangovers after his dad’s death, after Claudia’s death… He groaned; the sound rang from one side of his skull to the other. If he kept his eyes shut, he might be able to go back to sleep, if the throbbing would only stop…

No, not exactly the pounding of a headache. More of a long pulsating irritation, more than stress, less than pain. It started with a stab of something sharp somewhere under his chin, then split into a thousand bits of jagged glass which swarmed around his lower jaw and into the nape of his neck in a thousand tiny vibrations. It ended with a river of razor points pouring down his spine, hitting his tailbone as if he’d been kicked, bouncing, then shooting back up to his skull.

Aspirin. Aspirin might help.

*Have to get up to get aspirin.*

As he sat up, his legs slid off the bed. Too narrow a bed. No, wrong side of the bed. He blinked; sunlight hit him full-face. But the window should be behind him… Where the hell was he anyway? Not in North Chicago for damn sure.

**Paris.**

He was in Paris, and the hangover meant that he had downed the entire bottle of single-malt, Glen-whichever-it-was. And downing the entire bottle meant…

The light speared his eyes again. He put his hand up to shield them. Meant he was still Nick Wolfe, ex-detective-sergeant…

And ex-mortal. **Immortal.**

So why was his head hammering as if someone had worked him over? Didn’t Immortal mean you didn’t get sick or get hangovers or any of those petty mortal things?

He stumbled across the room, paused at the john—thank god this wasn’t one of those French flush-holes-in-the-floor. Now bathroom and aspirin.

Korda, as a certified *just-because-you’re-paranoid-doesn’t-mean-they’re-not-out-to-get-you* Immortal nut, kept a thousand and one spying channels in his Paris club—the Paris club Amanda enjoyed rechristening *The Sanctuary*. One channel let anyone in the upstairs bathroom hear anything in the foyer on the ground floor—which explained how Korda disappeared when the *gendarmes* showed. Metal scraping against metal announced the unlocking of the double doors leading into the club. The scrape of the door preceded two people, one heavier than the other.


“I told you she’d be gone.” Male, tenor shading into baritone, irritated: not a voice he recognized.

“She might have stepped out. She’s probably left a note.”

Nick gulped aspirin and water. Either the placebo effect was kicking in or he was becoming accustomed to the pain. Concentrating on the voices helped.

“What she left,” the man said, “as always, is someone else holding the baby. In this case, you.”

How she could stand that supercilious voice, Nick could not imagine. He’d have been happy to stuff a sock in the mouth belonging to the voice.
“Adam, that is unkind.” Not a Parisian accent, nor as velvety as Amanda’s… and Amanda had been one of the things he’d gotten drunk in order to keep from thinking about.

“I notice you didn’t say it was inaccurate.”

There was something else beneath the voices, another sound. Panting: a dog. Poodle to go with the soprano.

“I thought you liked Amanda.”

Well, that was a sentiment Nick could agree with. He had thought he liked Amanda… in fact, sometimes he had thought he might… Yeah, and that only proved he needed a shrink as well as aspirin.

“That has nothing to do with it,” said with great dignity and pomposity. Probably some little blond guy, all expensive suit and shoes… “Jeanne, Amanda calls, says she’s in trouble, and you hare off to Paris as if you’re the entire French Infantry rolled into one!”

Why should Amanda have said she was in trouble? Payton was dead—no repercussions, or someone would have hauled both of them to the local gendarmerie, drunk or not—Unless shooting me could be defined as trouble.

“She’s done it for me. I’ve done it for you.”

“And in all those cases, you might have been better off if you’d left us to our own devices.”

Soprano sounded unmoved by his fussy displeasure. “You need not have come. As you say, mi casa es su casa. I’m happy to have you stay at the abbey.” If she were a friend of Amanda’s, probably another Lucy: a middle-aged Frenchwoman with money—enough to own some restored abbey, a conservative wardrobe, and the fancy French poodle to go with it, finding missing romance in Amanda’s exotic life.

Face it, Wolfe, not only are you hung over, you’ve got indigestion.

“I’m not having you drive in Paris.”

Some exasperation finally showed in Jeanne’s voice. “I am a perfectly competent driver. You yourself prefer I drive down from the abbey.”

“Mountains are not Paris; they don’t compare in the least. When did you last drive in Paris?”

“J’oublie[1],” with a shrug Nick could picture. “Nineteen fifty-three, I think.”

“Then I’m not having you drive in Paris. Especially not with your eyes closed.”

She stalked across the room; the echo of her heels suggested footwear more solid than Amanda’s stilettos. “You notice too much.”

His voice moved away as well. “It keeps me alive. If you weren’t so beautiful, I wouldn’t pay so much attention.”

Her annoyance slid back into amusement. “If you didn’t drive like a drunken farmer, I wouldn’t close my eyes, wretch.”

Nick turned on the water, then stuck his head under the faucet. For a second, he couldn’t even
breathe with the cold. The voices sounded as if coming from far down a well. Then the pounding water drummed out leftover sleep and that droning headache.

*Wait a minute. Whoever Jeanne is, she’s driven in Paris in 1953? How old did you have to be in 1953 to drive in France?*

He scrubbed his hair as nearly dry as possible, then ran his hands through it, trying to get some order back into hair and life at the same time. Considering that this place was partially Bert Meyer’s and therefore partially his, he should find out who these two were and why Amanda had called them. He glanced down at his dingy boxers. He’d get more cooperation if he put on some clothes.

The voices became clear again halfway down the stairs. Yet one more microphone set-up

The tenor sounded annoyed. “Yes, I can tell there is an Immortal here. But I have no idea who it is. Do you?”

“It’s not Amanda.”

“That leaves a rather wide field.”

“Sarcasm,” Jeanne said, “is not particularly helpful at the moment.”

“I’m open to suggestions.”

“Ah! Here,” Jeanne said. “An envelope, which means…” Paper crumpled. “A letter. And she addresses me as Jeanne… with the h.”

“That means something?”

“Comme ci, comme ça?”

“Let me see.”

“Stop that! It’s not addressed to you.”

“She didn’t know I was with you.”

“All the more reason for you not to read it. Adam, *please* go away a moment. I’ll tell you anything important.”

“Your definition of important rarely matches mine,” Adam said, in a voice best suited for a martini minus the vermouth.

“Don’t read over my shoulder!”

Nick padded down the last two stairs and swung around into the bar. As if they’d choreographed it, on the same beat, the two intruders came around to face him. Proves once again that jumping to conclusions is—like jumping off a bridge.

The ‘Lucy twin’, instead of casting for the part of Gigi’s mother, fit the Parisian schoolgirl herself—or an illustration of Jo March from one of his sister’s childhood books: a five-foot-four Jo March in her early twenties, wearing a beret, an ankle-length black trench coat, and combat boots. ‘Jo’ glanced at him, then back at her letter.

The ‘short blond guy’ was at least five-ten, anything but stocky, and dark. He had on boots as well, but not combat boots, and a wine-colored shirt beneath his ankle-length black leather coat. As tall-
and-dark swung around, he straightened, adding about two inches to his height. He stared down his Roman nose with an expression begging for a left hook.

Nick bristled. Nothing else existed for him, in that moment, except the narrow dark eyes and the curled, graceful hands.

In the next breath, six-foot-stringy-dark-and-superior relaxed, and stuffed his hands in his coat pockets. Now, oddly enough, he resembled the good-natured chemistry instructor at Holy Trinity who had blown up the lab one winter day then run off with the married History lecturer the next fall. But when he spoke, he spoke in English, and even minus the previous arrogance it struck Nick as condescending. “I don’t believe we’ve met.”

_Fine. Be condescending_. He knew his accent had improved... no less an expert than a French _flic_ had told him so. In his best Parisian patois, he said, “No, I don’t believe we have met. I’m a friend of Amanda’s.”

Adam’s left eyebrow arched. On the other hand, he went back to demotic French. “Friend. Ah. Yes, of course.”

Nick put his hands in his pockets. “Perhaps your definition of friend doesn’t match mine.”

Adam’s other eyebrow matched the first.

A whine startled them. The largest dog Nick had ever seen suddenly shoved its—her—nose into Adam’s crotch. She looked like someone had mated a greyhound and a deerhound, with a borzoi face coming in from somewhere to the left; if standing on her hind legs, she could have put her front paws on Adam’s shoulders.

The man jerked back, but addressed the woman, not the dog. “Jeanne!”

“_Bon_,” she said, all of her attention on the letter. “_Coucher, Sorcha. Assis._” She folded the letter and stuffed it into her coat pocket. Her hand emerged cradling a kitten not much bigger than her hand, its eyes mere slits, not much more than a couple of weeks old. From the left coat pocket came a doll-sized baby bottle. “Here, hold him for me.” She pushed kitten and bottle into those surgeon’s hands.

The kitten mewed. Adam looked helplessly at it for a moment, then applied the latex nipple to the kitten’s mouth. Silence.

Jeanne turned back, holding out a hand. “I am pleased to make your acquaintance. I presume you are _M’sieur_ Wolfe, yes?” Without looking, she said again, “Down, Sorcha. Good girl.” The hound yawned widely before dropping into a huddle at her feet.

He took the hand, on automatic. It was not Lucy’s hand, not creamed or perfumed: small, hard, with her clean unpainted nails short-clipped. “I am, yes. And you are—Jeanne? Jehanne. With an h.”

Her grey eyes—light grey, so light the irises would have been invisible except for the dark grey ring circling them—lit up. The smile transformed her. “Yes, Jehanne with an h. Martin. Amanda mentions you live upstairs and are a friend. We are also —” Her eyes flicked across to her companion, then focused on Nick again. “_Friends_ of Amanda’s.”

“Any friend of Amanda’s can call me Nick.”

A cough interrupted; Adam stepped forward. Nick dropped Jehanne’s hand. The man, still holding the blissfully nursing kitten, looked so harmless that Nick bit back a laugh. _Here you are, Wolfe, having a pissing contest with the absent-minded professor._
Absent-minded, but insistent. Insistent beginning to be annoying, in fact. “Then, as a—friend—of Amanda’s, you know where she is? Possibly what sort of problems she’s having at present?”

Jehanne’s eyes rolled. She lifted a hand, putting fingers and thumb together, indicating her insistent friend should stop talking. “What he meant to say was he is called Adam. Adam Benoît. Both of us are concerned about Amanda, so we hope you can tell us something about where she might have gone.”

“The letter doesn’t say?” He felt somehow as if he should know where she had gone, and why… Well, he suspected why. Damned if I’ll feel guilty about it!

“If it said—” Adam stopped in the middle of a potential explosion. “Jehanne, take Darius, please. I’ll get our gear.”

She tucked the sleeping kitten somewhere inside the coat this time. “Bon. I’ll see if Amanda keeps anything around for coffee. Unless you know that, Nick.”

“Actually, I do.” They shared the kitchen, even though his apartment upstairs had a compact kitchen. He had made coffee for Amanda there more than once. On a few rare occasions, he’d even cooked meals for her. Amanda herself said she did not cook—he’d seen the take-out cartons to prove it. “This way.” He led her from the polished club floor back into the lower apartment and into the equally modernist kitchen.

The hound followed them into the perfect order reigning in Amanda’s kitchen. Amanda might not cook herself, but she kept it spotless: coffee press, canisters, breadbox all aligned on the polished granite counter, no stray dishrag or sponge around the sink. The Aga and the fridge gleamed like black glass. The red tile floor shone like patent leather.

Jehanne took off her black coat, then laid it across the table as if it were spun of glass, not wool. She pulled it open briefly, checking on the kitten. He would have thought one of Amanda’s friends would dress… well, to match that expensively cut ankle-length trench coat. He hadn’t expected a burgundy sweatshirt reaching halfway down her thighs over black denim leggings tucked into the afore-noticed lug-soled black boots. A little less bohemian, at least. Well, but it’s beatnik, to go with driving in Paris in 1953.

“How old is the kitten?”

Her face transformed once more, like watching the sun come out from under a cloud. “Four weeks. I didn’t think I’d be able to pull him through at first, but he’s got more spirit than either Adam or I hoped…”

Nick set up for coffee, nearly tripping over the dog twice. Each time, Jehanne pulled Sorcha away and made her lie down off the path between counter and stove. Each time, the dog waited until she wasn’t paying attention, then skulked back over to loom in his way. The third time, Nick spilled scalding coffee over his hands and swore.

“Sorcha!”

The hound slunk back to hunker at Jehanne’s feet, but made her feelings clear by looking up sorrowfully and shaking her shaggy head.

“Doesn’t trust men?” Nick shook his burned fingers, then blew on them.

“Loves cream.” Jehanne located a sponge and blotted up the liquid. “How is your hand?” She
frowned at the dog. A plumed tail wagged in apology.

“It’s… well, it’s fine.” It was. Not even sore, not even reddened. Some of the things he’d picked up proved accurate.

“D’accord. Sorcha, you do not get cream until the coffee has been poured. You know that. Now sit. Stay!” She glanced up at him. “Adam complains she doesn’t listen to him. She doesn’t listen to me either, so I don’t know what he’s complaining about.” She let him pour the coffee, then took the bottle of cream and poured some in her saucer before setting it down for the dog. Sorcha slurped up the cream, looked at the saucer and licked it again, as if hoping for regeneration. In the same tone, Jehanne added, “So it was less than 72 hours ago for you.”

He stopped, cup halfway to his lips, then continued the motion, sipping the scalding stuff with the care he would have used to examine a set of fingerprints. “That was in the letter?”

“Yes.”

Nick glanced at his watch. “72 hours?”

“You were dans les vignes du Seigneur—wrecked. Even we react to poisons, and liquor is an inefficient poison, but a poison still.”

“Our kind.” React to poisons… well, I suppose so, since I wouldn’t be here otherwise. He mulled that over a second, looking at her: brunette hair braided down her back, no visible grey; unlined face even though no adolescent chubbiness, and those intense white-grey eyes, emphasized by her thick dark lashes. Late teens, maybe. Maybe a couple of years older than that, but hardly more than a college student. “How old are you?”

Jehanne’s eyes crinkled, laughter curling in the corners. “Even among Immortals, it is not de rigeur to ask a lady her age. Or a man, for that matter.”

“You asked mine, didn’t you?”

“I speculated from the information available to me,” she said. “Even someone who’s not an ex-flic can use inductive reasoning.”

“Deductive reasoning. You’re arguing, I suppose, from the theory that first death initiates Immortality, right?”

“C’est vrai. So?”

“Then you’re arguing from the general to the specific—my date of—” He stopped and blinked, because the phrase reverberated with absurdity. “My date of death. Deductive reasoning.”

She accepted that with a brisk nod. Her coat wobbled of its own accord. The kitten, of course. Jehanne took the baby bottle first and poured cream into it, then pulled the kitten out of an inner pocket, tucked it into the crook of her elbow, and got the nipple between the pointed little teeth. “I knew you were young. Not until the letter did I have a guess how young.”

“How did you know?”

Her attention came back completely to him. “When we came in, Adam and I, you didn’t feel it?”

“All I was feeling was a hangover.”
“Probably not.” She wriggled herself more firmly onto the stool, one leg stretched out, boot-shod toes against the floor. “Even for the young, a hangover wouldn’t last that long.”

“What was it, then?”

“It’s different, I think, for each one. Amanda’s and my bourdonnements aren’t at all the same.”

“Buzzes?”

“Signaux. Much the same thing.”

Memories flashed by: Cardoza, Kenworth, Korda; Amanda pausing between one step and the next before deciding to go another way; pausing as if she’d heard something normal ears couldn’t. “We can recognize each other.” That was how Rankov knew we’d broken into his place.

Jehanne nodded. She put the bottle down, still rocking Darius, then got up and took the coffeepot to refill their cups. The short trip from table to stove seemed to relieve some sort of pressure. “It’s the only warning you may get.”

“What else does she say?”

A shrug did not answer, nor did a dismissive, “A little of this, a little of that.”

About as useful as he might have expected. He considered the possibility of a question, but asked anyway. “May I read the letter?”

She choked on a sip, as if she hadn’t expected the question. “Porquoi?”

Stalling? Possibly. “It’s about me, isn’t it?”

The kitten had fallen asleep again. Jehanne tucked it under the sleeve of her coat, which still lay across the table. She set the baby bottle down on one side of the coat, then scowled and moved the bottle to the other side. Still scowling, she picked up the bottle and moved it once more, this time to the counter next to the stove. “Partly.”

“Then surely it’s reasonable for me to want to know what it says.”

Jehanne put more cream down for Sorcha. Delaying tactic completed, decision reached, she said, “It’s reasonable for you to want to know, yes. However, no. You may not read the letter.”

“Why not?” He had expected something a little more equivocal, at least open to negotiation.

“If Amanda had wanted you to read it, it would have been addressed to both of us.”

Nick watched her drink coffee. How absolute a refusal is that? “She might have expected I’d see the letter on the counter and read it.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “I won’t question your knowledge of what Amanda might expect you to do.”

Ouch.

“My understanding of what Amanda would or would not expect me to do, however, is something you will simply have to take on trust.”

And that’s the knockout, there, folks… the contender goes down for the count. Maybe I can get hold of it later. He took his first swallow of coffee black, then added cream. The roast Amanda preferred
came out black enough to dye daylight night. Cream reminded him not only of how much Scotch he’d consumed but that he couldn’t remember the last time he’d eaten. “I don’t know what Amanda has around here for breakfast, but I have stuff upstairs.”

Jehanne smiled. “Adam will be bringing something in.”

“Mmm.” So Adam was not only bringing in their luggage, he was touring the neighborhood. Was Jehanne’s charm supposed to break out whatever secrets Nick might hold? Another mouthful of coffee: he decided that the coffee would keep him awake for the rest of the week as well as polishing off the remnants of his headache. “I suppose I’ll just have to trust your knowledge of what Adam would or would not do.”

Her lips parted. She obviously thought better of whatever she had been about to say. She rubbed her nose. “In this situation, yes.”

**But not in others?**

From outside, in the bar, Adam called, “Any coffee left or do I have to make more?” He backed through the door, a canvas shopping bag bulging between his arms. “We have *brioche*, *pains d’epices*, and *pains au chocolat*. I got coffee, just in case, and I wasn’t sure Amanda would have chocolate, so I found your favorite brand down the street, *chérie*.” As he sat the bag down on the table, avoiding the coat, he leaned over and kissed Jehanne.

“Maxim’s? You shouldn’t spoil me, you know;” she said. She dug into the bag, setting the various rolls out on the granite-topped table. “Of course you made certain to put it at the bottom, *hein*?”

“Me?” Adam pressed a hand against his chest, then flung the hand out in a theatrically Gallic gesture. “I merely go and buy these things—why accuse me? Am I the one who put them in the bag?”

Nick smothered a laugh.

“Very likely you are.” Jehanne tapped him on the chest. “There is plenty of coffee. Do you want coffee or shall I make you chocolate? You are not having beer for breakfast.”

His eyebrows arched. “The Sumerians did. It’s quite an ancient tradition when you don’t trust the water. I mean, do you realize what fish do in water?”

“Do not start with me, Adam.” She reached back into the bag and produced a bottle of beer: *La Bavaisienne*. One eyebrow arched in a silence as loud as a shout. Peering into the bag, she nodded, then pulled out a second bottle of the same; then another. When she stopped, six long-necked bottles stood in a row on the table. “Ah, speak of the devil and his horns appear. I see you’ve sniffed out a source.”

“Beer is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy.” Adam cocked his head. The smile lurking around his eyes and mouth made Nick’s fists itch.

“Benjamin Franklin,” she said. “He was well-loved by Frenchmen.”

“And French **women**.”

She doubled her fist and punched him lightly in the shoulder. “Stop that. ‘When the beer goes in the wits go out.’”

He snorted and shook his head. “Danish. ‘When the bee comes to your house, let her have beer; you may want to visit the bee’s house some day.’”
Jehanne blinked. Her lips parted, and then her brow furrowed. She stared past him a moment, eyes focused elsewhere.

Adam’s lurking smile widened. Nick folded his arms, waiting, trying to determine whether this was a game or something else.

She shook her head. “Ah, bah. I don’t know it.”

“Congolese.”

“I’m French, not Belgian.” But her mouth relaxed. Adam tapped her nose with an index finger.

“And I… am neither.” He kissed her nose where he’d tapped it. “Chocolate, please.”

Nick shifted; they both glanced at him. He rubbed the back of his neck. “Do you two do this naturally, or this is some kind of stand-up routine?”

Jehanne glanced at Adam. Her smile, though, answered them both. “Chocolate.” She gathered up the bottles on her way, and put them in the refrigerator. “Ah. ‘Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian.’ ”

In reflex, Nick said, “Herman Melville,” but heard himself preceded a half-second by Adam’s prompt reply. That made it Nick’s turn to blink.

Adam’s face lit up with the passion of a scholar stumbling on a potential contributor. “I liked Bartleby the Scrivener best.”

“I think Benito Cereno’s the better of the two—well, in the short pieces.”

At that point, Adam sat down on the stone-topped table, tucked left ankle under right knee, and set his clasped hands on the junction of limbs. “Would Billy Budd have been the better novel if he’d had a chance to finish it?”

“You mean better than Moby Dick?”

Only Adam’s hands spoke, a spreading gesture that said, ‘What else?’

This might be worse than his final review at the academy. Nick marshaled his scattered wits, trying distraction to give himself a little time. “Have you had this conversation with a lot of people? Jehanne, has he?”

She glanced over her shoulder, laughter dancing in her eyes. “Don’t ask me about Moby Dick—I haven’t got through the entire thing yet.”

Adam rolled his eyes, but Nick forged ahead. “How long have you been working on it?”

She grimaced, tapped her foot, then said, “About 20 years.”

“Twenty years!”

Adam came close to choking on a bite of brioche. He grabbed Jehanne’s cup and gulped down enough liquid to wash down the choke.

She held up a finger for silence. “Oh, behave! I’ve read Camus,” she protested. “I didn’t learn to read English until 1814. I didn’t read French until 1506!”
Adam’s back was to her; he couldn’t have seen the gesture, but Nick swore to himself that the man knew her physical comment exactly. “You learned Latin before that. Strange priorities.” He winked at Nick.

“You know perfectly well why I did.”

Neither Father Liam nor Amanda had exactly been founts of knowledge regarding Immortals. The bits and pieces of the past he’d glimpsed with them stayed just that: fleeting glances of wandering through history and humanity. “So you read Latin, too?”

“I wanted to read Scripture.” Jehanne dipped her little finger into the pot, nodded, and poured the thick brown liquid into a mug. “So I needed Latin. At least at that time. I didn’t get to learn Greek until—I don’t remember if it was 1601 or 1602. It was somewhere in there.”

“Anything else?”

“Ummm… German. Spanish. Some Italian. Hungarian.” Jehanne put the mug in front of Adam. She frowned and tapped her lower lip with a finger.

He prompted her. “But you read Ancient Greek, even if you speak modern.”

“Yes,” she said, and sounded more confident. “Stop complaining. I haven’t spent much time in Greece. Arabic. Turkish.” Red flooded up her face. “I haven’t been out of France all that much.” That reminded her of something, because she said, “Oh! Vietnamese.”

“And she can’t get through Moby Dick,” Adam muttered.

“You can’t get through L’Etranger.”

“I can.” He sounded injured. “I don’t choose to. Camus broods. I have enough friends who brood; I don’t need to wrap myself in someone else’s words to make it worse. Speaking of worse,” he turned back to Nick, “we were discussing Melville.”

Nick glanced at Jehanne, but she shook her head. “Discuss, messieurs. Amanda’s left the staff phone numbers; I’m going to call the manager and discuss the operation of this club.” She knotted the hem of the sweatshirt into a makeshift pouch, then tucked the kitten into the opening. She paused with a hand on the door. “You’ll be here if I need you?”

“Of course I will, sweetheart. Go on.”

She shut the door; shut it firmly enough that Nick realized her disappearance must have been in response to some unseen prompt from her professorial boyfriend. The suspicion was confirmed by Adam’s next words, which were in idiomatic and comfortable English.

“You mind telling me what happened before Amanda performed her exit stage left?”

Nick refilled his coffee cup. The rolls kept his stomach from revolting. The caffeine sent a buzz up his spine, as if he spun in a world standing still. “I do, actually. It’s nothing to do with you.”

“Amanda is, as Jehanne said, a friend.” Adam clipped off the ends of his words. “If it affects Amanda, it’s liable to affect me.”

“Look, I haven’t seen Amanda’s letter either. She’s taken off any number of times in the past without explaining why. She doesn’t seem to need a reason.” His skull throbbed, anger and pressure blowing his head up like a balloon.
Adam folded his arms. A muscle in his jaw twitched. “What did you do? Step in front of a car? Fall off a building? She drag you all the way here from the States out of guilt?”

“She didn’t drag me anywhere.” Now he was gritting his teeth. He’d had more practice than most men at keeping his temper, but either this man’s insistence or his tone began to poke holes in his armor.

“So you just tagged along?” The tone and a skeptical eyebrow punctuated. “On your side, I understand it. I mean, Amanda is—” He shrugged, smirking, silently finishing the comment. “Amanda’s had decent taste in men—for the most part—**but** she doesn’t usually end up living with one of them.”

Nick set the hot mug down harder than necessary. “We don’t live together. She lives down here, I live upstairs. We’re friends. You need the dictionary definition?”

“Friends.” Adam dropped the word like a gauntlet. “She pick you up after you became one of us? Or did she sucker you along until it happened?”

“Amanda didn’t sucker me.”

“She must have done something to keep you here.”

“She fucking shot me!” His knuckles ached from gripping the mug, but better hang on to the mug than punch the guy in front of him.

That stopped Adam; stopped him dead, because all he did for a moment was blink. “She **shot** you?”

“It’s not like it sounds.” Nick snapped out a summary of the entire Evan Payton encounter. It took half-a-dozen sentences, maybe, to outline the events leading to that last betrayal. By the time he finished, Adam was rubbing his eyes as if they hurt. “What?”

“Well, death by poison **is** violent. I don’t see why she thought…” Then, as if he’d answered his own question, Adam said, “Well, exactly.”

“Exactly what?”

Adam stood. He collected the dishes and opened the dishwasher. Nick didn’t groan aloud, but he groaned to himself. It was half-full already with dirty dishes; not only had Amanda expected Jehanne or someone to turn up on being called; she expected the called-upon to complete her housecleaning. Adam slotted the dishes into the gaps, then started searching the cabinets.

“Try under the sink.” Nick folded his arms. “Exactly what? Something she should have known or something she couldn’t have known?”

Squatting in front of the sink, Adam rummaged through the cabinet until he came up triumphant with the right kind of soap. “Well, it’s not as if there’s an *Immortals for Idiots* book out there.” He added the soap and fumbled with the door until it locked. “At least I never knew of one. Might help get us all on the same page…” As he turned back and leaned against the sink, he winced. “No, I take that back. Being on the same page might not be a particularly good thing.”

Jehanne poked her head through the kitchen door. “The manager is Vincèn. He’ll be here in half-an-hour to go over procedures with me.”

“Us.”
“Us. Adam, it’s not necessary that you stay. I probably won’t need backup and I don’t plan on driving anywhere.”

The injured-little-boy tone spread through his voice. “Are you trying to get rid of me?”

“No, of course not. Ridiculous man! I just know how you feel about work. Participating in it, anyway.” Her head disappeared with precipitous haste—

A brioche thudded into the door exactly where Jehanne’s head had been. Sorcha leaped up and caught the roll as it bounced, then rushed off to the corner farthest from human intervention to eat her prey.

Nick applauded.

Adam grimaced and addressed the dog. “Why can’t you do that with mice?”

The hound loftily ignored him.

Nick weighed the advantage of a sneak attack. Why not? He kept his tone conversational. “Do you ever worry about taking Jehanne’s head?”

The other man’s head jerked up; for a moment, Nick thought he might give himself whiplash. The lazy good humor vanished. “No. Have you thought about taking Amanda’s?”

“Yes.”

Unsympathetic dark eyes narrowed, slicing Nick up into lab slides. “At the moment, I doubt you could, unless you belong to a recreationist group or a fencing team.”

“I never said I wanted to take her head.”

“Then why the question?”

“What about the Game?” Nick gauged it before pushing a little harder. “If you’re involved with another—one of us—then what about ‘there can be only one’?”

“What about ‘Sufficient to the day is the evil thereof’?”

“What about it?”

Adam shoved his hands in his pockets. “Do you have any idea where Amanda might have gone?”

“Tahiti? Antarctica? North Chicago? Well, no, not there, I’d say. Seacouver, maybe? She’s had letters from there.”

The answering look would have withered a redwood. “Do you have any serious ideas where Amanda might have gone?”

Nick chewed on the answer a little, but it was either tell the guy to take a walk or tell the truth. “No. I don’t.”

“As I see it—” Adam paused. Sarcasm matched his expression, “and please don’t hesitate to disagree with me if you have a better solution—there are three things to concern us. Where is Amanda, how is this club, bar, or whatever Amanda calls it, run—and what are you going to do about being Immortal?”
Nick opened his mouth, thought better of a smart-ass reply, and finally settled for, “You have theories on those?”

“The second is fairly straightforward, I suspect. Since I can’t see Amanda tying herself down seven days a week, she must have a manager she can trust to run the place without her.”

That he did know. “This Vincèn guy, yeah. Joe Dawson sent him over when we—she—first decided to keep the place going.”

Adam pursed his lips and folded his arms. “Well, if Dawson sent him over, the guy passed arithmetic, shows up on time, keeps his hands out of the till and off the stock. Anything else is up for grabs.”

_Damning with faint praise?_ “You know Dawson?” People who knew Immortals seemed to pop up in the oddest places without warning. First North Chicago, then Paris—on the other hand, _à bon droit_, as Amanda would have said, he’d run into one single Immortal himself and look where he’d ended up after that.

Adam nodded. “Good man.” He might have said more, except that Jehanne blew back in from the bar, kitten clinging to her sweatshirt-clad shoulder and dog in pursuit.

“Adam, _mon grand chou_, go out front and hold the fort. Vincèn’s not yet arrived and me, I have to take a shower and change my clothes.”

“What’s wrong?”

She blitzed through the bedroom door, but threw two words over her shoulder: “Cat piss.”

Nick laughed. He hadn’t felt like laughing for more than two days. The relief of pure silly laughter worked better than pain pills, clearing up the last shreds of headache.

Adam grinned. “Wolfe, I’m beginning to like you.”

Nick grunted. “I’m flattered.”

“Don’t be. I don’t like you _that_ much.”

“Where’s Darius’ basket?” came from the bedroom. Before Adam answered, two dull thumps and a soprano “Merde!” disrupted the pause, Jehanne said, “Never mind, I found it.” She shut the bedroom door, cutting off notice of any further disasters.

Adam made an elaborate indication of the door. “Shall we? You don’t mind helping hold the fort, do you?”

Nick considered it, then grabbed another cup of coffee and a brioche. “Why not?”

The only light in the club was sunlight leaking in through the curtains. Sprawled and silent, the Sanctuary resembled some hooker woken up at dawn on a Sunday. The tablecloths were rumpled, though clean. It looked as if Amanda had washed them then tossed one onto each table, but left before a final neating. A faint skin of dust soiled the glass counter. He brushed at it, but only smudged the surface. “Did Amanda ask the both of you down?”

Adam made a fast tour of the club area, located switches, and lit up the interior. The artificial light consigned the shadows to the corners, waking the room to a yellow-washed day. “She called Jehanne. She didn’t know I was visiting.”
It didn’t establish whether or not Amanda would have included him in the request. “Long trip?”

His shrug wasn’t Gallic or theatrical, but it shelved the point. “It’s not long if you like driving.” He wrinkled his nose, then qualified the statement. “Usually. Paris traffic is nobody’s paradise. Have you been in Paris long?”

“Since November.” The clean cloths were in a drawer next to the register. Nick began wiping off the glass.

“Sudden impulse to spend winter in Paris?”

He shrugged in turn. “It’s balmy here compared to North Chicago in the winter. I have fond memories of Paris in winter from my high-school days.” He considered that a second, then offered a morsel of extraneous information as bait. “Exchange student.”

Adam nodded. The questions ceased. He wandered around the room, checking out the sound system, looking through the pile of receipts next to the register, poking that long beak into all the corners. He paused to the left of the bar, looking up at the ceiling, then dragged over a stool and climbed up on it, inspecting the ceiling. “Who owned this place before you bought it?”

“Amanda bought it.” Well, not alone…

“In partnership with my—boss, Bert Myers. Previous owner was a man named Korda.” When the name got no reaction, Nick pushed a little. “André Korda. Ring any bells?”

Adam poked at the spot in the ceiling, then turned his head as if to trace something. “Korda? No, not particularly. Was he one of us?”

“Yeah. Amanda knew him.”

The man stepped down off the stool with all the grace of a ballet dancer: another annoying attribute. “Do you know everyone in North Chicago?”

“No. What’s that got to do—”

“The population size is about the same, I suspect. I don’t know every Immortal wandering around out there.” He carried the stool to the front door, climbed up again, and scrutinized the loudspeakers there. “And a lot of the ones I knew are no longer pertinent to the question. I assume that from upstairs you can hear anything going on here at the door?”

“If you’re in the bathroom.”

“Ah. Nervous man, this Korda.”

“Just because you’re paranoid—”

“—Doesn’t mean they’re not out to get you. Right.” He stepped down from the chair, then turned to survey the bar again. “Electronics all through here, huh? Good thing Amanda’s never had a taste for blackmail.”

Nick opened his mouth, thought better of it again, and crossed his arms instead. “I suppose your judgment’s based on longer acquaintance.”

“Now that sounds like sour grapes.” It sounded innocuous, even amused, but the expression in the taller man’s eyes did not match the tone. “You haven’t known Amanda long? How did you meet?”
“I arrested her.” He considered adding that Amanda had threatened him with a sword, but held back—and was relieved he had.

“Arrested her?” Adam burst into laughter. “Now that is one I’ve never heard of before!”

“You can’t tell me she’s never been arrested. If she hadn’t been, she wouldn’t be in the databases.”

The dark eyes still laughed. There were edges of it curling around the baritone, like smoke. “No, just that I’ve never heard of her ending up intimate with any of her particular Javerts.”

“That’s not it at all.” He felt heat flush up into his temples, but couldn’t define whether it was embarrassment or annoyance.

Adam surveyed him another moment, then turned away. “Maybe later we’ll have a drink and you can tell me what she’s been up to lately. It’s been a year since I last ran into her.”

“And a lot happens in a year.” He said it wryly, but with his first real liking for the other Immortal.

Metal rasped against metal. As a unit, they both swung to face the door. Sunlight sprayed in across the floor and the bar, dust dancing in spirals as the breeze spun it into the room. The door squealed, the hinges complaining against weight. The light dazzled him; Nick squinted against the glare, and knew, without looking, that Adam had done the same.

A broad-shouldered blond, who might have hit five-foot-six if he stood on his toes, shambled in: Vincèn, dressed as usual in the latest hip trends but with his hair a little too long and a little too 80s. He blinked in the dim light, but Nick knew well enough that Vincèn was a lot brighter than he pretended to be.

Nick relaxed. Next to him, Adam took a breath as he drew his hand out from under his coat and away from the small of his back. The sense of a wire drawn too tight and vibrating faded.

“Ah, Nick!” Vincèn’s smile was real enough. “I didn’t expect you—the call said that Amanda was away…” His voice faded but the unspoken ‘I thought you’d be with her’ hung under the words.

Adam cleared his throat. “Yes; Amanda’s decided to spend some time away. I’m Adam Benoît. I’ve known Amanda for—a long time.”

And if that didn’t say nothing and everything at the same time. Benoît, so that’s the surname…

Vincèn considered Adam, looking above the expensive trench coat into the pleasantly reticent expression. He seemed to have some doubts. “A lady,” he said, eyebrows drawing down and lips thinning. “I spoke to a lady on the phone.”

The bedroom door burst open. Sorcha charged out, a canine whirlwind and welcome wagon, joyfully sniffing, tongue lolling from between her teeth as she circled the three of them.

Jehanne said, “Sorcha! Sit!” and for the first time there was a certain snap to her voice to which the dog responded. The hound dropped at once into a perfect dog-show-sit.

Nick made a note. So the dog didn’t listen to her, either? Possibly Mademoiselle Jehanne isn’t quite as guileless as she appears? Considering the bedroom and Korda, it was reasonable to speculate that you could hear the bar from the bedroom as well as you could from the upstairs bathroom.

Vincèn still sounded doubtful. “Ah—Mademoiselle?”
“You must be Vincèn,” she said. If the smile on her face matched her voice, Vincèn must have thought he’d died and gone to heaven. “Amanda tells me that you can run the bar blindfolded.”

The bartender grinned, all his reticence melting. “Madame did not say she was going away…”

“Amanda is a little thoughtless on occasion,” Jehanne said. Her fast trip through the shower and whatever suitcases she’d brought had resulted in further beatnik garb: ballerina flats, fresh leggings, navy this time, and a button-front man’s oxford shirt masquerading as a white tunic. The back of the cotton shirt had a wide wet stripe, absorbing the water from her hair: slicked away from her forehead and into a ponytail caught at the nape of her neck. The cotton, wet, revealed that—at least for the moment—Jehanne was not wearing a brassiere. There was absolutely nothing at all wrong with her breasts, brassiere or not, small but perfect, with her nipples standing out against the cotton.

You’re staring, he said to himself. You’re a cop and you’re staring at—jailbait.

Adam walked over to one of the small tables, the one from which he’d pulled the chair. This time he scooped up the tablecloth. He folded it in half, came back, and draped it across her shoulders as a shawl before pulling the ponytail out and letting it drip down the cloth.

That tells us to keep our eyes to ourselves, doesn’t it?

Adam’s dark eyes met Nick’s, directly. The expression hit him like cold water sluicing down his spine.

Hands, too, huh?

*** *** ***

The music rebounded from the walls. Methos thought back to other clubs, other concerts, Woodstock and rock concerts—of the thousands who’d listened to them, he was probably the only one who had retained—or regained—all of his hearing. Some of the heavy metal he enjoyed… there was a sensuality to the guitars and drums that got him nearly as high as an—adequate Quickening.

Which in itself encapsulated the pros and cons of Quickenings. When they were good, they were very very good—but more often, in the last two thousand years or so, they were at best mediocre.

At least music wasn’t addictive; at least not to him.

Nor to MacLeod. MacLeod had catholic tastes in music, although he’d never shown any interest in hip-hop or rap. He certainly had evidenced enjoyment in Joe Dawson’s jazz and blues, and had even sat through various amateur nights in Seacouver with not much more than occasional winces.

Dawson’s Paris club still existed. Nothing in what Wolfe had said suggested that Joe no longer ran it. On the other hand, the Seacouver place was still called Joe’s. Lily had been running it when Joe moved to Paris. She might still be. Or Amy might be. It had, after all, been a year. Perversity kept Methos at the bar a few minutes longer; knowing that he was, in fact, being perverse didn’t decrease the enjoyment even if he wasn’t inflicting it on anyone else.

Damn it, man, you made your mind up this afternoon. Either he’s there or he’s not. Either he’s seen the Highlander or he hasn’t. Either he’ll tell you or he won’t. He swallowed the last of the beer, the ubiquitous Guinness, and worked his way through the crowd to the corner furthest away from the speakers. The table could have held more than one person, but in the shadows it was practically invisible, and that was most likely what Jehanne had in mind when she moved it there. Her shirt, red and silk, faded into the grey shadows. On the same hand as her gold Jhesu-Maria ring, she wore a heavy platinum bracelet which glinted when light struck it. Dressed up and with her hair coiled at the
nape of her neck, she looked older, world-weary, and sophisticated. She looked, in fact, like no Jehanne he had known.

“Not quite to your taste?” He leaned over to kiss her forehead, and felt a smile move up her face.

“I like Johnny Hallyday,” she protested. “And Indochine. And I love Autour de Lucie. But I think this music is either American or British. Whatever happened to The Who?”

“Plebian. You should really try punk some time. Although I’d rather have the Stones, myself.” Methos lifted her wrist and turned her hand back and forth, admiring the hammered metal. “I don’t remember this.”

She shrugged. “I don’t wear a great deal of jewelry, no. I’ve had this put away, and just—thought I’d bring it along.”

“He gave it to you?”

Jehanne’s eyes slanted up at him, narrowed and wary.

It looked like solid platinum, not plated, about three inches wide and a half-inch thick, with a concussed pattern. Not only decorative, but also a nice defensive touch against a knife. Just the sort of jewelry Kronos would buy his student. Just the sort of jewelry that Jehanne would wear if she thought she might walk into trouble. “He always had good taste in jewelry.” He drew back. To his surprise, Jehanne’s strong fingers knotted into the lapel of his coat, pulling him down to her for a longer and less platonic kiss.

“Have you seen if your friend M’sieur Dawson still runs his bar?”

Methos blinked. Jehanne rarely startled him with bits and pieces of knowledge. He had seen many Immortal gifts over the centuries: not even Cassandra’s talent unnerved him as much as Jehanne’s voices did. She seemed to know that; she rarely referred to what they told her. “Not yet. I’m going now.”

She nodded. Her attention returned to the crowd.

“Do you want to come with me?”

That startled her—and he would not have admitted how surprising her pleased him. Then her face relaxed; she rested her hand on his forearm. “No. You needn’t drag me everywhere like a little sister.”

“Believe me, I have never thought of you as my little sister.”

The giggle escaped. Jehanne insisted she did not giggle. “Épais[4]! Oh, I am grateful for that.”

He laughed; he couldn’t help it. No one seemed to hear or notice. “I may be late, chérie.”

“You have the keys?”

“Yes. I’ll try not to wake you.”

“I have never objected to your waking me.”

This time he kissed her nose—and was delighted when she giggled a second time. “I know. Thank you.”
The heavy doors cut the music off, and he took a breath of the night air, relieved at the sudden silence. Paris street noise rose up through that moment when his hearing adjusted, and then the world itself adjusted around him, and he was home. As much as anywhere, Paris felt like home. He could take the car. *Les Bleus* was practically on the other side of the city. He looked around himself, eyed the populace still animate at this evening hour, and started off on foot. No need to get to Joe’s too early… he wouldn’t close before three or four and the chances of quiet conversation were minimal much before closing.

Whenever he felt pangs of nostalgia, a dose of humanity would cure him. *You’re starting to sound like the old man they call you.* There, a woman wearing the sort of dress photographed for Vogue, shrieking at her Armani-enssembled boyfriend—or was it girlfriend? Hair was no more a clue now than in the era of ‘peace and love’. Ah, there, that was better; this pair clearly both male, holding hands and murmuring to one another. Nice to see the occasional happy couple… He passed a more traditionally heterosexual middle-aged couple, respectable, sitting on a bench, discussing their children, who seemed—also traditionally—to drive them to despair.

For a bit, he counted bars and clubs, sorted them by type, and gave it up when he passed 100 on the number and couldn’t figure out how to classify something that seemed to be cowboy punk—or cowboy new wave. He could have counted whores, but that would have been even more depressing than trying to find a term for something that sounded like a blend of ‘let’s get drunk and screw’ and ‘set it to blow’.

The streets glistened under the yellow streetlights, damp from fog. Somewhere in the distance, among the cabs buzzing the streets and the crow-cries of rock and techno, he could just catch the incongruous notes of a single saxophone. Methos stopped for a moment, then turned, slowly, absorbing the night: sounds, sights, smells. The saxophone faded, and a car passing trailed notes of a song a decade old…

‘*No complications, you would not see me for dust… Jane’s getting serious…’*

He drew himself up, then, cocking his head and casting to see if nearby he had felt something a little familiar. *No.* No longer an impecunious grad student nor a Watcher, Methos smiled to himself and put more purpose into his walk, amused to think of himself as one more predatory animal among all the others still abroad on the night streets of Paris. As Kipling had said years before, a cat who walked by himself and to whom all ways were alike.

Damn Duncan MacLeod. The idea of disappearing at his age, as if he were old enough for that kind of despair. *As if you could ever be old enough, Highlander.*

*** *** ***

Half of the tables in *Les Bleus* contained at least one person. The young woman sitting on the platform was covering Edith Piaf, but not particularly well, especially on the higher notes. That might have been why the customers were thinning out.

On the other hand, of course, he opened and closed early on Wednesdays, which were amateur night at *Les Bleus*, as it had been in Seacouver. It was hit or miss, but after two and a half years of amateur nights, the hits tended to beat out the misses. He missed Seacouver sometimes, missed the bookstore, missed Joe’s. He had spent time in Paris before, when he was first assigned to MacLeod, and he’d learned day by day to love the city almost as much as his own St. Louis, as much as New Orleans, and not quite as much as Seacouver. He loved it still, even with MacLeod among the missing, presumed alive; on occasion, Amanda turned up to make him laugh, and Wolfe could be remarkably funny when he visited. And Wolfe visited more in the past month or so than previously; he seemed to want someone to talk to. Someone mortal who knew the score. Someone not Amanda.
The waitress set a tray loaded with used glassware on the bar.

He shifted to get his balance before loading the dishwasher. He did not miss washing glasses by hand, traditional though it might be.

*Amanda.* Now there was a situation to which he would have loved to see the Scotsman’s reaction. Amanda, in Paris, running a club whose upstairs tenant just happened to be the ex-cop who’d arrested her. Arrested her, then some months later rushed off to kill the man who had supposedly killed her. He could imagine Duncan’s face, imagine the disbelief and then the laughter, and Amanda’s haughty dismissal of both.

A burgundy fingernail tapped on the counter. The waitress still hovered there, waiting.

“Problem?”

Simone hesitated, frowning. “I don’t think so. A gentleman, at the back—he wants *Calvados Pays d’Auge,* and said I should tell you he wanted to buy the proprietor one as well—” she paused, then said, in careful English, “Because you only stock ‘Saint Bernardus Abt’ in Seaouver?”

“Because I only…” Joe straightened. His throat tightened; he had to clear it before he spoke. “Where is he sitting?”

She jerked her head towards the back right, to a table close to the back exit. He tracked the gesture, then squinted. He half-expected to see the not-quite-young, impecunious grad student in the worn black coat, and did not. But a dark-haired man slouched in a chair. A long black coat lay across the table—Joe felt his heart falter a second. He took a deep breath to steady himself. He noted that his hand shook a little as he drew the bottle and filled two glasses to the proper depth. “Take these two glasses to the table. Tell him I’ll be with him in a moment.”

“*Oui.*” She hesitated again; the diamond-encrusted hoop dangling from the top curve of her ear glinted in the light as she cocked her head. “Joe,” and she still accented his name after two years, “are you all right?”

It stopped him. Then he realized she meant to ask if she should worry, and he smiled at her: this young blonde woman not much older than Amy, worrying about him. “Everything is fine, Simone. It’s an old friend.”

That cleared the worry. She set the two bell-shaped glasses on the silver tray, nodded, and wove through the crowd. Joe finished loading the washer and flipped it on. He unlatched the door separating the bar from his clientele. In spite of the pain in the left stump, he could still maneuver with one cane. More slowly than Simone, and with more care, he eased his way through the crowd.

The seated man was still seated when Joe reached the table. He slouched against the chair back, one leg stretched to full length, the heel braced against the floor, the other bent and drawn away from the second chair. As he swirled the glass, the brandy lapped in amber waves, drops trickling syrupy-slow down the inside. Without looking up, he said, “How are you?”

“Fine.” Joe balanced himself with the cane. Methos still did not look up, but his free hand shot out and held the chair.

Not until Joe had settled himself as comfortably as possible and picked up his glass did the old man look up.

“Well, Joe.”
“Well, yourself. By the way, who are you at the moment—just so I know what name to use when I curse bad luck?”

Methos clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth and said, sorrowfully, “Les absents ont toujours tort.”

*The absent are always in the wrong.* “Uhn-huh.” He took a sip of the pleasantly dry apple brandy. Something that he’d heard from a French corporal in Vietnam came back to him. “Et le diable sait beaucoup parce qu’il est vieux[5].”

“Ah, indeed.” Methos swallowed a mouthful of Calvados. “Very nice. This old devil,” said with amusement as dry as the brandy, “knows not nearly as much as he would like.”

“I see.” Joe rested both forearms on the table, rolling the glass between his palms. “I can’t cure your lack of knowledge. I haven’t seen so much as a hair of him.” No need between *them* to say who ‘him’ was.

Methos nodded. After a moment, he gestured as if bowing. “Adam. At your service. Still.”

Still? Joe tried to hide his surprise, but figured he’d failed when Methos smiled.

“Benoît. I haven’t fallen as far into feeble-mindedness as you think. I haven’t run across any of our former colleagues.”

That made his gut clench. Joe grimaced. “Former is the right word. I’ve retired.”

Methos sat up and leaned forward. The liquid in his glass sloshed up to the rim. “You?” All that lazy calm vanished, though his voice did not raise a note. His ageless face sharpened, turned vulpine.

“Are you all right, Joe?”

“Nothing wrong with me that being ten years younger wouldn’t cure, old man.” He put emphasis on the last two words and saw laughter flash across the Immortal’s face. “Adam… let’s just say that when MacLeod disappeared this last time… well, I could have accepted another assignment. I suppose I was tired at the time.”

A nod answered.

After a moment, Joe offered something more to the truth. “Or disheartened. I never expected him to—disappear in a puff of smoke. Or however he did it.”

“I suppose I should have.” Methos shrugged. “I’ve done it often enough myself.”

“Yeah.” He had forgotten how innocent Calvados tasted as compared to its effect on the imbiber. His head buzzed, and he felt an unnerving urge to confide in the Immortal. He tamped that down hard.

“If it comes to that, I suppose the both of you are entitled.”

A nod answered.

After a moment, Joe offered something more to the truth. “Or disheartened. I never expected him to—disappear in a puff of smoke. Or however he did it.”

“I suppose I should have.” Methos shrugged. “I’ve done it often enough myself.”

“Yeah.” He had forgotten how innocent Calvados tasted as compared to its effect on the imbiber. His head buzzed, and he felt an unnerving urge to confide in the Immortal. He tamped that down hard.

“If it comes to that, I suppose the both of you are entitled.”

“IT seems not only us.”

Joe lifted an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Amanda’s gone missing.”

“Amanda?” *Shit, has she stolen the Mona Lisa or just the Crown Jewels? “Have the police been around?” How do you know Amanda’s missing?*
“Methos shook his head, but did not restrain a smile. “As far as I know, no police are involved. What’s involved, apparently, is a—relatively young—man. Nick Wolfe.”

“Nick Wolfe? He’s still in Paris, but…” Joe’s tongue tripped over itself. Relatively young sounded as if it meant… and he shut up in order to correlate the bits and pieces. “Good God Almighty. So that’s part of what it was all about.”

“You know him?”

“Well, yes.” Joe thought about the word ‘know’, and amended his statement. “More or less.”

Methos motioned to someone behind Joe.

Simone promptly appeared in view. She watched Methos with an owlish caution that did not match her looks or her clothing.

Methos ordered refills. He waited until the new glasses were set in front of them, then said, “All right, go on.”

“We met in North Chicago.”

Methos took a sip and waited again, with an air of being willing to wait till Hell froze over, if necessary.

“I was following an Immortal named Korda.”

Calculation flashed in Methos’ eyes.

“You know the name?”

“I heard it from our Mr. Wolfe. Aside from that, no. Even I make no claims to omniscience. I don’t know every Immortal alive. Or dead.” He paused, let a sardonic grin escape, and added, “Thank all the gods who might exist.”

“You hadn’t missed out on much. Korda was—one of your Godfather types. He preferred female acolytes, and apparently some years in the past, preferred Amanda. In fact, he was tracking down Amanda, which is why I was tracking him.”

“MacLeod?”

Joe shook his head, and chuckled. “In the end, the lady herself was the tiger.”

“Really? I wouldn’t have thought…” Methos stirred the brandy with his index finger, then sucked the liquid from his finger. “I’ll stop interrupting.”

“First Korda sent his current protégé after Amanda—a mistake on his part. Apparently Amanda learned more than I realized from Duncan. She insisted I tell Wolfe she had lost.” Joe grimaced again, remembering the man’s reaction. “Wolfe got his tutoring in a different school.”

“He didn’t believe you?”

“Oh, he believed me.” Joe recalled Nick striking out with Amanda’s sword and shattering a lamp, then shook his head. “Believed me enough to head off to Paris after Korda.”

Methos choked on the brandy. “Was he—”
“Not then he wasn’t.”

“A mortal went after—” The oldest Immortal stopped, blew out a breath, shook his head, and rolled his eyes. “Swinging a sword at a windmill.”

“It’s not the first time.”

“No.” Methos brooded a few seconds. “Did he know… well, he must have known if he understood about the Game. Have any idea how she came to tell him something like that?”

“Amanda is more discreet than you give her credit for.”

A sharp laugh burst out. “Oh, you wrong me. I give Amanda a great deal of credit. What she does, she does well. One of those actions is forgetting to tell you what you ought to know about a situation until after she’s got you too far in for you to get out without losing your ass.”

“Careful, there. That sounds bitter.”

“Amanda should know better than to get serious. Whenever she gets serious, it’s trouble for everyone around her. Which is probably why Nick knew about the Game before he should have.”

“I don’t know the details: just that it had something to do with Wolfe’s detective partner and a fence being killed.” Joe swallowed more of the fiery liquid and kneaded his aching thigh. “It wasn’t until she’d been in North Chicago some time that she called to let me know her whereabouts. Said she wanted to send me a Christmas card and needed the address. When Korda left Paris, the Council informed me. Asked me to step out and take a look. The Watcher they put on him had been found dead. It’s been a while since an Immortal went after one of us, and—that sort of thing makes people nervous.”

Another nod answered. Methos sat still for a few minutes, with various emotions flickering in his eyes, tallying up the details and the cost. “All right. Amanda showed up here—because you told her Wolfe was going after Korda?”

It still made Joe shake his head and smile—he’d never stopped finding it funny. “Yep. Then they figured out each other wasn’t dead. The next thing I know, Amanda’s removed Korda’s name from the Chronicles and she and Wolfe are sharing Korda’s club as headquarters and home.” There he stopped deliberately and waited for Methos’ groan.

“Joe, you’re killing me. Are they?”

“Nope. Your guess is as good as mine. Maybe Amanda’s feeling maternal.”

Methos choked. “I hope not. Last time she felt maternal we got that brat she still protects. If he’s still around.”

Joe shrugged. “Well, then, we’ll hope not. I think… odd though it might sound… that Wolfe isn’t really a member of the Me Generation. It’s just possible that he never heard of the sexual revolution.”

“Or that the idea of sex with someone who could be his grandmother many times removed wasn’t something he could get past.”

Three or four times in the past year, Nick had shown up for a drink, a chat, and an occasional game of chess. Joe thought it over. “I don’t think so. Somehow I think she happened on a romantic.”

Methos put his face in his hand. “Oh, gods. Worse than maternal. Not another one. Isn’t it enough
we’ve got MacLeod and his white knight complex? She has to go and land us another Galahad?”

“Complain to her, not to me.”

“I would if I could, but I can’t, so I won’t.” He stared down into the amber liquid, stuck the finger back in it, then sucked the liquid off again. “You haven’t seen her? She didn’t give you any warning before she disappeared?”

“No. It didn’t even occur to me until now that—Immortality was one of her reasons for keeping an eye on the boy.”

Methos’ mouth twitched. “Don’t say that where he can hear you.”

“How do you fit into this? She called you?”

“No. She called—” The nonchalant expression disappeared. Dawson observed, with great interest, the sight of the oldest manipulator in the known world having slipped and trying to decide how to recover. Finally, Methos said, “I’ve been staying with a friend. Amanda called her.”

“Amanda met her through you?”

The old man rolled his head back and forth, then said, “No. I met her through Amanda. Jehanne’s a little like the Highlander—and a little like you. A tendency to adopt strays who wander by.”

“She adopted Amanda?” Amanda could surprise anyone: as flexible as her ideas on property seemed, she also offered unexpected generosity and a startling urge to match-make. It would be like Amanda to find someone whom she thought suitable for Methos, or for whom she thought Methos might be a good experience.

That got a jerk of the head that might have been irritation or might have been sarcasm. “Amanda knows exactly on whom to drop her problems. Like I said, Jehanne’s a soft touch.”

Soft touch. Amanda had called Jehanne, but there was no indication of her having asked for Methos’ help. Possibly because she would have known he would have refused. Or… no, there was too much missing here. “All right. Let me get this straight. Amanda runs into Wolfe in North Chicago—”

“Apparently, he arrested her.”

That must have come from Nick. It fit what Amanda had admitted. “Right. Damn. I got to get hold of Research. Okay. Somehow they end up friends. He wasn’t a cop when I met him, he was doing free-lance for a broker in the intelligence field. Korda appears, Amanda fakes her death, Nick heads for Paris. When and how did he end up—?”

“She left Jehanne a note. Wolfe tells me Amanda shot him.”

“Amanda shot—” Joe looked down at his glass. Simone appeared again. He glanced around the room. Marie-Thérèse was shooing the last of the clientele out of the door. “Can you hang around while I lock up?”

“Absolutely.” Methos held on to the chair back as Joe got to his feet. “In fact, I’ll help.”

“That’s not necessary…”

“Would you refuse me the chance to look back on old times?”
“When you and Mac used to drink everyone under the table and then put them to bed?” Dawson laughed. From the corner of his eye, he saw Simone smile. Maybe it had been too long since he’d laughed. “Hell, why not?”

*** *** ***

For all that the Sanctuary had been constructed on Holy Ground, so far Jehanne had only seen mortals. Watching after Amanda’s property—and her pets—should be a fairly straightforward business. It might even be a little dull.

Amanda must have been fairly happy with the club, to have stayed on for nearly a year. Vincen seemed pleased tonight by the number of customers, the amount of liquor poured and glasses washed. Jehanne folded back a red silk cuff, then returned to twisting the heavy platinum cuff around her wrist, using the catch as thumb-twiddling. Three heavy links fastened catch to bracelet, one link dangling below the catch. Both bracelet and links had been hammered into shape, and the hammering created spirals upon spirals upon circles. Fingering it had become a nervous habit.

Amanda would likely have sat at the bar. She sat alone, in a back corner, watching the interplay and studying the clientele. Keeping herself apart in the abbey limited her knowledge—sometimes she thought that a plus. Amanda thought it a detriment… It certainly left her with wide gaps in experience that even the Web and satellite television did not fill. Fidgeting with the cuff did not conquer uneasiness; it only made her aware of fidgeting. Methos would have teased her about it, had he been here.

Not, of course, that she needed company.

Wanted… well, better not to think of that. Methos was very much a cat, coming and going as he pleased. À bon droit, Elek had been much the same.

Nick Wolfe had not approached her, although he was in the bar. She had seen him once speaking to a slender dark-haired man, and then, later, nursing a drink in the corner opposite her. If he knew where she was, he was not interrupting. Jehanne thought he was a little too streetwise not to know where she sat.

Jehanne sipped her pastis, trying to track down why, in spite of the simplicity, she felt uneasy. To begin with, splotches of ink on the letter Amanda left tracked tears. Amanda did not cry. Or, at least, Amanda did not cry easily. Have I in fact ever seen her cry?

Yes.

Long ago, during a visit, the two of them sat up late at night, drinking cider and staring at the fire in her bedroom, huddled under duvets for warmth. Amanda had brought up, amidst other names, one Duncan MacLeod. Other Immortal names such as Cory Raines and Fitzcairn, brought laughter. MacLeod and Rebecca—two Jehanne had never met, nor heard of until Amanda described them—brought tears.

And that Duncan MacLeod is also the Highlander for whom Methos has been searching over the last several months.

So Nick Wolfe meant more than the inside of a bedroom. Jehanne pulled the folded letter from her pocket and read it again. Correction—they had not yet reached as far as a bedroom. Amanda admired Nick: that showed in her phrasings, in the matters she felt important enough to write down. Her handwriting, never meticulous, disintegrated toward the end of the letter, nearly unreadable.
The last time he was like this was after his partner was killed. I can’t reason with him. I can’t get him to open his door—’ Underscoring on the last word had torn the paper. ‘I thought once he became one of us, he would understand. I thought it would be all right.’ Jehanne’s memory flickered: once again, she was a nineteen-year-old climbing, naked, out of a filthy, polluted river. Elek Koronel, the Immortal who had known what she might become, sat cross-legged on the paving stones, waiting—for her. She remembered her first words: Qui suis-je? Quel suis-je? Pourquoi le bon Dieu m’a-t-il abandonné[6]? Hard enough for her to deal with Immortality five hundred years past. In this age of atoms, of physics, of scientific surety, what would it be like for Nick?

‘I hope all he needs is time,’ Amanda’s words spilled onto the page in a big looping scrawl. ‘I don’t think I can help him, not with the way he feels at the moment, that this is just one more betrayal. Take care of him for me, will you, Jehanne? Try to get him to give it a chance before he goes out and gets himself killed.’

She folded the letter and put it back into her pocket. Well, God hadn’t abandoned her, after all, so she couldn’t see how she could abandon Amanda. Or Nick.

Then…

Pain hit. An ice pick punched into her skull above her left eyebrow. A file rasped up her spine, and all the hair on her body bristled. She was on her feet without knowing she stood, scanning the room for a body matching the signature.

She did not recognize it. It was strong, almost as strong as Cassandra or Methos felt to her, and usually that indicated age or number of Quickenings absorbed. It rumbled along her nerves in basso-profundo, making her teeth buzz and her hands clench.

Jehanne set the pastis glass upright, then licked droplets of the milky fluid from her fingers. To her left, Nick’s own signal—that heartbeat pulse, a rhythm she already knew well enough to mark and ignore—fluttered under the stronger.

Nick appeared. He rubbed the back of his neck. “I felt—another Immortal? Right?”

There.

“Yes.” Across the room she met a pair of eyes—male eyes, dark at this distance—someone taller than herself, shorter than Methos, much shorter than Nick. Other patrons blocked her view. She caught a second’s-worth glimpse of chestnut hair, then an impression of a dark blue shirt, with an open throat and a glint of gold.

Nick put a hand on her arm. “Y a-t-il un problème?” He was not asking for reassurance, but offering support. Not afraid. Concerned, wary, but not afraid.

“Je ne sais pas.” The voices in her head watched but remained silent. Nick had said ‘we’—well, Amanda’s faith in him might be justified. Jehanne said to the man beside her. “Allons-y. Let’s see what he wants.”

“Split up or run it together?”

Jehanne considered it, running scenarios in her head. Nick was an unknown quantity, but still an American ex-policeman. Trained. “Split up,” she said.

“Right.” He made a circling motion with a hand to indicate his direction. Another gesture, plus a lift of his eyebrows, suggested her trajectory.
She nodded. Then, too late, she thought to wonder how much he knew: as well as how dangerous he would be with whatever knowledge he had. “Nick!” She grabbed his arm.

He swung back, eyebrows arched in question.

“Remember—you may not take a head on Holy Ground.”

A nod. “Remind me to ask you later why that is.”

“Remind me to tell you.” Jehanne worked her way through the crowd. The stranger’s signature grated on her nerves, a mocking, nagging gibe that brought on an overwhelming urge to get her sword. She found herself, at last, close enough to see that he wore navy trousers with the navy shirt. One hand, bent back on his shoulder, held an ankle-length coat hooked over two fingers.

Adrenaline surged through her. She caught her breath. He’s carrying.

He turned. His eyes met hers again, and this time he smiled. Then he pivoted, slowly, lazily, and sauntered away.

For a moment, she was misled. She took two hurried steps before a warning in her head stopped her—and as her target disappeared behind a knot of chattering BCBG[iii] sophistics. Never assume. She moved in the opposite direction, towards the front doors. Left or right? Left, said the voice in her head, and she heeded it. She felt Nick near her, but the only people in her line of sight were mortals. The intruding signature filled the room, not indicating her quarry’s actual position.

Now—! Saint Michael snapped.

Jehanne spun, pulling her left arm up across her belly. Steel rang on platinum as a dagger point struck. Her back connected with the wall. She was face-to-face with him, the man with the dark-red hair. His eyes were absinthe-green.

“Pas trop mauvais[7], Mademoiselle. Shall we dance?” He was still smiling. It sat oddly on his face, rather crooked. With him so close she smelt Beaujolais on his breath, she recognized another mark easy to recall, along with his eye-color: he had lost a fight and broken the orbit of one eye sometime in his mortal life.

“Holy Ground, m’sieur.”

“But of course it is.” He cocked his head to the left, and there might have been a little contempt added as a prod. “Qui a peur des feuilles, ne va point au bois[8]. Outside, the ground is quite—neutral.”

Jehanne felt rather than saw his move. She twisted her wrist as he shifted, and caught the dagger tip in one of the platinum links. Another turn and jerk, and the dagger flipped upward, yanked from his fingers. She caught the hilt with her other hand. The knife was hers. “Qui mal cherche mal trouve[9], mec.”

The green eyes glinted at her. He laughed. “Not bad at all.” He grabbed her wrist. In a moment, he would try to force the knife from her fingers. “But not wise to be alone.”

A second signature pulsed under his. He appeared oblivious. His fingers bit in, a falcon’s talons.

Nick’s long arm reached around the other, twitched the knife from her fingers, and made it disappear. “No, it wouldn’t be. Avons-nous une difficulté ici?”
Jehanne watched the stranger’s hands. If the coat moved, it meant a sword, Holy Ground or not.

In the next moment, both of Amanda’s bouncers emerged from the crowd. Only mortals, yes; but large, determined mortals.

“No problem,” the stranger said. He glanced from her to Nick, and his smile widened. “Another time, let’s become—properly—acquainted.”

Nick’s fingers tightened into fists. But he looked at her first, and she hoped he could see ‘No’ in her eyes. And that he would abide by her decision.

Apparently so. Nick moved away, giving the intruder a chance to back off, but keeping close watch, until the other actually vanished into the street and his signature faded into invisibility.

Nick looked down at Jehanne. All at once she realized just how much taller than herself he was. “You all right?”

“Yes, fine now, thanks.” She also thanked the bouncers.

The two men hesitated a moment, glancing at each other, then came to unspoken agreement and split up, working their way back through the crowds, watching for possible trouble.

Jehanne jerked her head towards the back table, not wanting to carry on the conversation in front of curious eyes. Nick nodded. His longer legs brought him to the table first, and she felt a minor satisfaction in knowing that yes, he had known where she sat. It warmed like a far-off satisfaction, as if sitting too far from a fire.

Nick’s mouth opened. Nothing emerged at first. He frowned. After another few seconds, he patted her shoulder. “Stay here,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

She nodded, but he had already gone. She laid her hands out flat on the table, studying them, examining each old scar from her childhood. The encounter might have been worse. It might have been better, all the voices scolded at once. Jehanne rubbed her temples, trying to erase the tension. What did you hope to accomplish? She’d had no defined goal, and that was the prime error. What did you accomplish? She knew what he looked like, and his signature, possibly well enough to recognize in future. She knew he was old, possibly as old as the oldest Immortals she’d encountered. As old as Methos himself? Older, even? What else? He didn’t seem to pick up Nick’s presence. Was that Holy Ground or a weakness? Jehanne scowled down at her hands.

Another hand intruded: large, tanned, the wristwatch gleaming silver in the artificial light as he set a glass down in front of her. “Drink this.”

She stared at the glass a second, trying to make some sense out of words that should have made sense.

Nick picked up the glass. He leaned over her and put it to her lips, tilting it so that her head tilted. Cool liquor slid down her throat and exploded into fire.

Spanish sherry. Fino, muy seco, in fact. Jehanne coughed, putting a hand up to push the glass away.

“Come on,” he said. He dragged a chair over, turned it backwards, and straddled it. He pushed the glass at her again. “Drink it.”

She took the glass reflexively, stared at the contents, then drained them in two swallows. The fire dissolved the last remnants of shock. “It’s been a while since I faced down anyone that—dangerous.”
Then, furious at herself, she slapped the table.

Nick jerked. His chair rocked but did not tip.

“Nom du nom du nom! I should have got a name.” It didn’t take a rebuke from Methos or her saints for her to recognize her own stupidity.

“Do you—do our kind go around handing out business cards?”

“No, not exactly. If it’s a challenge, it is considered good manners to introduce yourself before you behead your opponent.”

“But this is Holy Ground.” His voice put capitals on the last two words, as if he knew bone-deep what it meant. “He couldn’t challenge you on Holy Ground. Right?”

Jehanne resisted an irrational impulse to throw the harmless little glass into the wall. Instead, she set it precisely in the middle of the tiny table. “He could challenge me. He couldn’t take my head.”

“Why not? Good manners again?”

She realized that she was fiddling with the bracelet again. Interlacing her fingers, she put her clasped hands on the table where she could keep an eye on them. “The last time I heard of it happening was Krakatau. There are theories that San Francisco was yet another, but no one’s found proof of it.”

“Krakatau—” Nick paused, tapped his fingers on the table, then frowned. “Krakatoa? Like in the movie? East of Java?”

“It’s west, actually. Krakatau was on one of the…” She stopped, scowled at her hands, then laid her hands down flat on the table, examining her fingers. “The theory that I heard is that the Earth’s telluric currents are connected to what some theorists call ley lines.”

“You mean the mythical alignments the New Agers talk about?”

“The alignments aren’t mythical. Whether or not the alignment has anything to do with something more than random chance is what’s controversial. What I’ve been told is that Holy Ground is like a lightning-rod. One that conducts Quickening energy violently. Not only do you get a—a blowback effect, you get a conduction of the energy to its sister site on the earth. So: Holy Ground, a beheading, a Quickening, and the earth moves—literally, unlike M’sieur Hemingway.” She rubbed her temples. “Merde! I wish I knew where Adam was headed when he left.”

“He didn’t say?”

“He was going to see a friend of his. A man named Joe Dawson.”

“Dawson! Well, that’s easy.” Nick unwound himself from the seat. “He has a club across town. I could go and find him…”

Jehanne grabbed his arm for the second time. “No. No, I’d rather let him come back on his own.”

A frown slowly took over his face. “Are you afraid?”

“No more than any other sensible person, idiot.” Jehanne tugged at the arm. “Sit. Nick, sit down!”

He glanced around. Heads had turned towards them. From the tables closest to them, murmuring and muttering suggested they’d become objects of interest. He turned the chair around and dropped into a more conventional pose.
Jehanne picked up the sherry glass and rolled it between her hands. When the heads turned away and the interest died, she continued in a lower voice, “If this club is across town, then the likelihood of our new acquaintance accidentally running into Adam isn’t high.”

Nick nodded.

“If we stay inside, he will not spend the whole night waiting to see if we emerge.”

The frown faded. “But if we leave, he might either challenge you again or follow you—or me—to Dawson’s?”

“Exactly.”

“Okay.” He said that in English, nodded, and said it again. “Okay. So what now?”

Jehanne pursed her lips. “We wait.”

“Wonderful.”

“Patience—”

“Is a virtue. I know. Do us both a favor and don’t give me saintly advice on patience.”

She laughed. She couldn’t hold it back. Heads turned. Jehanne clapped her hand over her mouth since she couldn’t stop.

“It wasn’t that funny,” he protested.

When she could finally breathe without choking, Jehanne patted his arm. “Mon frère, I assure you I have never claimed to be a saint.”

*** *** ***

With the staff gone, Joe turned down the lights, leaving only one burning, and that one the light next to where he and Methos shared the table.

He stopped on the way back to the table, swinging through the bar to pick up a bottle of wine and two glasses. The old man had downed four glasses of the Calvados, along with two bottles of Belgian beer, and anybody less than Immortal would have been well on the way to cross-eyed. Joe set wine bottle and glasses on the table, then eased himself back down into his chair.

Methos examined the bottle, and whistled. “Jadot. Very nice. I’m honored.”

“Consider it a celebration.” He watched Methos pour and taste—and the pleased nod when the vintage turned out to be what had been expected. “Just half a glass for me.”

“Ah, the wise bar tender. Supply but never over-imbibe.”

He snorted. The old man could always be counted on to make an audience laugh, even if it were only an audience of one.

Methos held a mouthful of wine briefly, then swallowed with obvious pleasure. “Yes, very nice indeed. Now, you were telling me about this fight that broke out—they were smacking each other over the head with baguettes? Seriously?”

“Seriously!” Joe laughed and went on to describe how the one elderly lady had turned on the
gendarme and started beating him over the head. “…Crumbs and bits of crust flying all around them, caught in the man’s mustache…” By the time he finished, Methos’ head was on the table, he was laughing so hard tears ran down his face, and he was beating his fist on the wood, saying, “Stop! You’re killing me!!”

Some of the hilarity might have been due to the amount they’d both drunk. But the old man finally sat up, wiped his streaming eyes, and finished his glass of wine. “All right, before you kill me with laughter… How is Amy doing?”

“Well enough. She’s in research at the moment, and decided she did want to manage the bar for me. Says I’ve put too much time into it for it to go to waste.” Joe started to say something further about the Seacouver bar, but a thump at the back door interrupted. He twisted in the chair and stared at it.

Several more thuds rattled the door.

Methos cocked his head and started to get to his feet. “Shall I?”

“No, that’s all right. Give me a minute.” It took a little longer than that. He might not have over-imbibed, but there was enough in his system to make him unsteady. He braced himself against the door and checked the peephole. “Hell!” He stepped back, over-balanced, and then caught himself. “Methos, can I get you to…”

Without any words, Methos moved from chair to door and undid the heavy bolt. He pulled the door inward.

A young man fell through. His hair stood in blond spikes, like a cockatoo’s crest. His eyes stared but saw nothing, and his mouth worked but made no sounds. Beneath a heavy leather jacket, much too heavy for the weather, rust-colored spatters as stiff as his hair spotted his khaki sweater.

Methos caught him. “Joe?”

“Piero Quintavalle. Got about five years in service.” Joe flipped his cane over, hooked a chair leg, and dragged it nearer the door. “Sit him down here.”

Methos handled the muscular body with the ease of a man who had handled similar burdens on many occasions. The boy leaned on him like a marionette with cut strings, not actively uncooperative, but only moving by persuasion. “Blood’s not his. But something’s happened.” He patted the boy’s face. “Piero. Piero, are you hurt? What happened?”

Up close, Joe saw sweat dripping down Piero’s face. He put a hand on one slack wrist; the skin was cool and clammy. He pushed the sleeve back, revealing the Watcher’s tattoo, and counted. “Pulse is racing.”

“Shock,” Methos said. “Hold him up. I’ll be right back.”

In his periphery, Joe saw the lanky figure stride across the floor. Methos vaulted neatly over the bar, crouched behind it, and returned a moment later by the more conventional method of walking around. He had a warm wet cloth in one hand and a glass of reddish liquid which smelt strongly of Angostura bitters and fizzed like soda. “Let me see if I can get some of this down him. You need to start stocking Coca-Cola, Joe.”

“You have any idea how few Cuba Libres I get asked for here?” Joe sat down, one hand on Piero’s shoulder, and took the cloth. “Go easy.” He wiped the sweat from Piero’s face, wiped off his hands. Piero choked on the bitters, but then swallowed some. He coughed, and then looked from Methos to
Joe. He stammered something that must have been Italian.

“French, Piero,” Joe said. “Speak French, remember?”

Another swallow of the bitters concoction and the boy sputtered again. This time, at least, it was French. One more try and he said, “I’d never—I never—he’s dead.”

Methos put the glass in Piero’s hand. Another swallow, and now he looked coherent. He sounded it, as well.

“I’d never seen a Quickening. I never—I knew they were incredible, but I never knew what it was like—they tell you, in training, but it’s not the same.”

Methos crouched at Piero’s eye-level, resting his forearms on his thighs. “No,” he said. “It’s not.”

The young man nodded. He seemed to have an inclination to go on nodding, so Joe interrupted. “Your assignment?”

“Yes.” Piero shuddered.

“Deep breath,” the old man advised. He pushed the kid’s head down between his knees, and kept his hand on the back of the boy’s neck to keep it down. “Joe, any idea who he was assigned to?”

Joe rubbed his thigh, working out the cramps as he tried to recall if he had ever heard the name. He shook his head. “I suspect someone based in Italy, but…”

Muffled words came from the vicinity of Piero’s head. Methos let him up. He repeated the name. “Lorenzo di Bondone.”

“Joe?” Methos glanced up.

Dawson shook his head. “Sorry, not one of the ones I know anything about—” he nearly said, ‘Methos’, but stopped himself before even a syllable emerged. “Adam. Piero, are you up to talking now?”

Most of the waxy, greenish tinge had vanished. Piero nodded.

“When was this? An hour ago? Two hours?”

That required a check of his watch. Then the boy pulled a notebook out of an inner coat pocket and thumbed through the pages. Piero said, with some confidence, “It started an hour and twenty minutes ago. Di Bondone was very good, I was told, but I’ve been watching him sixteen months and he’s never had a challenge.”

“As far as you know?” Methos raised one quizzical eyebrow.

The boy reddened. “Well, yes, as far as I know. As far as I’ve seen. He’s—he was a painter. He’d been doing the Loire Valley and then stopped in Paris. We’ve been here six days. He liked long walks at night. He liked parks. Especially the Parc Georges Brassens.” Piero inhaled, held his breath a second, then exhaled sharply. “That was where we ran into the other one.”

“The other one,” Joe repeated it, testing the words. “Did you make contact with his Watcher?” With all the examples of bad judgment popping up among Watchers over the last several years, he hoped they didn’t have an international incident to defuse.

That stopped the discussion cold. Joe watched thoughts flicker through Piero’s eyes, studied the
body language, tried to determine whether or not the novice felt it necessary to lie, or embroider, or—possibly—apologize.

Piero shook his head. An apology, then? “I didn’t notice anyone. I was pretty close…” He glanced down at his sweater and shuddered, turning faintly green again. “Too close. I didn’t see anyone else watching. It was my first…”

Yes, an apology. The tenor faded off into a mumble, and Joe put a hand on the boy’s skinny shoulder. “First time’s always a shock, even if you are prepared.” It had been a shock to him, even after Vietnam, to watch two men with swords face each other—and the world explode after one died. “Okay, so there might have been another one of us. What about the other one? Anything you can tell me would help identify him.”

“It was… well, it was pretty dark. We—shouldn’t have been in the park. I mean, certainly I didn’t have permission, and he’d gone over the fence. He—Di Bondone, I mean, didn’t pay much attention to gates or hours things were supposed to be open.” He shoved both hands through his hair. “I think… he was taller than Di Bondone. Yes, I’m sure of it. They were on level ground at one point, and I could see the difference. The other Immortal…” Piero’s voice trailed off again.

Possibly the absurdity of the word Immortal, after what he’d seen, had occurred to him. He did take another, deeper breath, and go on with the attempt at description.

“Dark hair, rather thick. Curly. At least, dark for what I could see in partial light. He had a—I think it must have been a Type Seventeen.”

Methos’ eyebrows arched again. In English, he said, “They’re still teaching Oakeshott? I thought he was out of fashion.”

“It depends on who’s doing the training. I still teach it, but I may be out of fashion,” Joe answered in English, and squeezed Piero’s shoulder again before switching back to French. “Seventeen’s a damned long sword. Two-handed. Heavy. What type did your man use?”

“Eleven. I don’t think he ever used any other type. I didn’t see it in his Chronicles, but most of them are still on paper. I’d been scanning them in, I usually had free time…” He stopped again, and now he looked distressed. “Damn. He seemed to be such a—nice guy.” Looking from Joe to Methos, Piero added, hastily, “Listen, I never approached him, never, I know that’s against the rules as well as dangerous. But it was Rome, you know? I mean, among all the tourists and us natives, who notices a young man with a notebook and a tape recorder? The few times I was close enough to really see his interactions with people, I never caught him in a temper. He was just a nice guy. A really nice guy.”

Joe nodded.

“I’ve heard many a worse epitaph,” Methos said gravely. “Joe, I’d better get going. You’re going to want to call this in, right?”

“Yes. Yes, of course.” Joe braced himself against the chair and made it to his feet. “Might as well go out the back… I’ve got a good light there and the door locks behind you.”

The old man nodded. He dropped back into English. “No need to give my regards to anyone.”

Dawson bit back a snort and said, “Adam Pierson died some time back. Don’t worry, I won’t mention you. Be careful out there, my friend.”
Methos waved. As he went out the door, he added, “I’m not in the habit of losing my head.” He shut the door neatly on his epigram.

*** *** ***

It took longer than he wanted, to find a taxi. He could have walked the entire return, but decided not to risk it. The probability of MacLeod capriciously adopting a two-handed long sword in place of his katana was in the low tenths of a percent. That suggested a new Immortal in the mix. Running into an unknown predator high from a Quickening could be disastrous or serendipitous.

Methos was in no mood to test his luck.

For once, the driving skills of a Parisian taxi-driver did not make him close his eyes... as he had razzed Jehanne for doing. He paid the fare and tipped within reason, ignoring the man’s grumbling.

The streetlights showed only the occasional walker. No Immortals were within his range. Nothing lurked in the shadows.

As he unlocked the back door, he felt the veil of Holy Ground just beyond the door. He stepped inside; it parted and reformed around him. Inside, he recognized Jehanne at once, a low vibration like a cat purring, with the scent of pine trees and fresh air. Nick’s signature was weaker, both distance and age, with a harsh file rasping at its base and a brisk top-note like an ocean wind full of salt and hinting at deeper waters.

But both signatures were still intact—and no one else was with them.

He shed his boots in the corridor between the kitchen and the bedroom of the ground-floor apartment, setting them out of way where Jehanne wouldn’t stumble over them if she rose earlier than he did. It was a little after two a.m. She might very well be up first. *Even without the cow to milk.*

Methos held the bedroom door at the right angle to keep it from squeaking, and worked himself around it and into the room. His sight had already adjusted to the darker interior. Jehanne lay curled up on the far side of the bed, with Sorcha a complementary comma at her back. The shaggy head lifted, but the dog made no noise.

Jehanne had laid a pair of his clean shorts on the dresser. He smiled, stripped in the dark, then tossed his clothes across the dresser before he donned the shorts.

Sorcha sighed, rolled to the edge of the bed, and slid off. She padded to the foot of the bed and laid down out of sight, with another weight-of-the-world-sigh to point out how mistreated she was.

A faint squeaking rose as if in reply. Squeaking—? No, mewing. The kitten. His basket would be on Jehanne’s side of the bed, and there would be a baby bottle sitting in a bowl of cool water next to it.

She did not so much as twitch at the mewling. No wonder: feedings every four hours, worry over Amanda—*and worry over you, as well*—and even Jehanne’s resilience flagged.

He stepped over the dog, who heaved yet one more sigh, and fumbled until he got both kitten and baby bottle.

“Sit down,” Jehanne said, her voice so fogged with sleep she sounded as if she had a cold.

He eased down on her side of the bed.
One calloused hand slid under his shirt, and rubbed the small of his back, in just the spot he liked. He leaned back against it.

“You are a nice man,” she murmured.

Careful not to squash Darius, Methos leaned over and kissed the corner of her mouth. “I have never been a nice man.”

Her mouth stretched into a smile. “Nonsense. I have known you for some time now and I say you are a very nice man.”

“Unfortunately, Jeannot, I know you and I’m well aware of your record in defining men as nice.” He heard the bitterness in his voice too late and damned himself for it.

Jehanne propped herself up on an elbow. “Methos? Your visit with your friend—it wasn’t satisfactory?”

“My visit with Joe was pleasant. Unfortunately, he didn’t have the information I hoped he might.” After a moment of silence, Methos rubbed the kitten’s head with his index finger, and added, “He hasn’t seen Amanda, either.”

“Oh.” The strong fingers worked along his spine, picking out the vertebrae. “C’est dommage.”

What a pity indeed. MacLeod was never one to make things easy for you, though. The kitten burped. Methos set the bottle back in the water and Darius back in his basket. He stretched as he stood. The rustle of sheets alerted him; he turned to find that she had shifted to the side he usually slept on, and was holding Amanda’s exquisitely fine bed linens up so that he could slide under them. He did, and rolled onto his back, staring up in the dark at a ceiling he could not see.

Jehanne’s arm settled across his chest. “Go to sleep. It’s late. Or early, depending on your point of view.” She sounded as if she hovered just above the threshold of sleep.

“And in the morning, my point of view may change?” And even half-asleep, she was still trying to soothe him.

“It’s already nearly morning,” she said. “And if your point of view hasn’t changed by then, at least it will be light enough and you’ll be sober enough to do something about it.”

He should tell her about Joe’s, invite her to go there with him. He should mention a possible new combatant… But he could already hear the change of rhythm in her breathing. He shut his eyes and let himself drift into unconsciousness.

*** *** ***

A voice in her head said, Wake up! Jehanne started. One long male arm prevented her from shifting from lying to sitting. She patted the arm, picked it up, and laid it on his side.

Methos grumbled, then rolled over and away from her. Another few seconds and his breathing settled into its normal deep-sleep rhythm.

She sat up. Above, very faint thumps showed that there was someone else also awake. The blinds showed no light; the clock said it was not even five. Too early, in the city, to get up.

The voice nagged at her. Crawling out of bed, she hunted around for clothes of some sort, suitable for whatever the voices considered important. Here were the leggings from last night, and over there
somewhere was a sweatshirt, drying. She put her hand down on a dry sweater. No, not a sweater, just a long-sleeved henley and that the one Methos had been wearing yesterday. Jehanne shoved her hair back from her face, looking around, but did not see her sweatshirt. Maybe Methos moved it last night when he came in. Or she’d not hung it near the radiator, but then where would she have hung it? Bathroom.

She found the sweatshirt, still wet. Pursing her lips, she considered his shirt, still clutched in her hand. Fine, then. His.

The toilet and the bath both had tile floors, nearly as icy before dawn as the stone flagging in the abbey. Jehanne borrowed the pair of socks lying across the dresser. They bulged over her boots, but she got the boots on and tied. If the voices were going to nag her, she needed to be awake, and if she were going to be awake, she needed coffee and if she were going to be making coffee, she needed to get the hair out of her eyes so she could see where she was going and what she was doing.

Except that for whatever reason she was being nagged, she needed to go into the bar first.

Hurrying, since the sense of urgency still gripped her, Jehanne trotted down the hallway that led from the residence to the bar. She had her head bent a little, the better to brush the hair up from the back of her neck.

So, when something large stepped in her path, she ran right into it, staggered back a couple of steps, and tripped over the lintel.

Some one large.

Nick said, “Shit!” in English. He grabbed for her, caught the knit shirt, and nearly pulled it over her head. With the other hand, he made a better effort and got her forearm, hauling her upright.

“Ah, pardon me,” she said. “I am sorry; I was—” she gestured with the brush and then realized that she’d lost the scrunchie. “Ah, ça—”

He bent over and scooped up a bright red twist of cloth. “This yours?”

“Yes, thank you.” She got her recalcitrant hair under control. I meant to go down to town and get this mop cut. But then Methos arrived. I was going to do it, but then Amanda called. “You’re up early, M’sieur Wolfe.”

“We agreed it was Nick.” He put both hands on his hips in anything but a girlish fashion. “I could say the same for you.”

“Ah, oui, bien… this is my usual time anyway.” If he hadn’t been out until three, Methos would have been up as well. Nick hadn’t shaved, and the sweatpants and t-shirt were no cleaner than her garb. In addition, he wore a belt with a zip pouch and a holder in which a bottle of water rested. As Methos says, ‘the little light, she goes on’. Nick was a runner.

Nick eyed her with something like wariness. “Do you run?”

“Do you? May I join you? I haven’t been in Paris recently and I’m likely to end up in a dead end somewhere hopelessly lost.”

“Mmm,” he said, in that way that men seemed to believe made some sort of comment on the world. “I do a five-mile lap. Is that too much for you?”

“If you wear me out, I’ll come back. I can retrace my steps without getting lost. Let me get my—uh
—” and what did Methos call that thing in English? Jehanne gestured, trying to outline the shape of the bag and motioning fastening it around her waist.

“Fanny pack?”

She cocked her head to one side. “I don’t think so. I know that’s rude in English.”

“Fanny’s just—” and then he hesitated. “Okay, wait. Yeah, I think it might be obscene if we were in London. Waist pack.”

She nodded. “Waist pack. Keys and all that.” She held up three fingers. “Three minutes, Nick, just let me find it.”

“All right,” he said. He sounded amused. “I’ll time you.”

Methos stirred when she opened the door, blinking at her and yawning. She found the pack on the dresser and stopped on her way back out to kiss him. “It’s early,” he said. “Too early for Paris.”

“Go back to sleep, mon vieux. I won’t be long.” She shut the door as quietly as possible. Nick was looking at his watch when she came in, and let some of his reserve go in a smile.

“Two and a half minutes,” he said. “Not bad.”

“Not bad for what?”

“The things women have to do before they go out.”

“Ah.” Jehanne mulled that a moment, then shook her head. “No, if I were to milk the cow first, it would take me much longer than three minutes.” She knew he meant something entirely different. She bit back a smile when he blinked and stared at her.

“Milk the cow?”

“Yes, well, she is a milch-cow, and one needs to milk her daily. There’s a young man from my village who will do that for me, along with mucking out the stall and feeding the others.”

“The other what?”

“The other animals. Of course, Sorcha and Darius are with me, but there are the outdoor cats and the goats. Most of the cats are feral, or wild; however, some of them I have been able to tame and spay. Luckily they do not reproduce quite as busily as rabbits, or I would be overrun.” She gave it a beat, then added, “However, there would be no mice at all and that might be a blessing.”

Nick’s expression changed; he eyed her as if measuring her for a straitjacket. “I thought you lived in an abbey?”

“It was an abbey. Then it was a kind of a farm. Now it’s not so much a farm, but I do have some live legacies and a few strays adopted. I’m testing out self-sufficiency.”

The bedroom door rattled on its hinges. Scratching and whining echoed from behind it.

“Ah, bah,” she said. “I’ll have to bring her—she’ll wake Adam. You don’t mind, do you?” Jehanne escaped before Nick could answer the question, which she suspected might have been that yes, he did mind. As soon as she opened the door, Sorcha bounded out. “Hush, you great lout!” She shut the door, and turned to the ecstatic dog. “You’d better be nice to Nick, because he doesn’t have a good opinion of you to begin with and certainly doesn’t think you’d be an asset to a run!”
Sorcha shook herself and pranced down the hall. Jehanne followed, and found her fawning over Nick.

“I never said I didn’t have a good opinion of Sorcha,” he said. He could put a note in his voice as injured as Methos’.

She punched him in the shoulder. “Go on with you. Sorcha irritates almost everyone I run into.”

“I can’t imagine why. Just because she pokes her nose in your balls whenever you see her, trips you when she gets the chance, beats you to death with her tail…” He looked down at the dog, who grinned at him, and ruffled the wealth of doggy hair. “She’s exactly what a dog should be. What else should you expect?” Addressing Sorcha, he said, “Tell your mommy to hurry up and let’s get out into the fresh air. Hmm. Out into the Paris air, anyway.”

“Paris air has never had a great deal to recommend it, in my experience,” she admitted. Jehanne fastened Sorcha’s leash and then gave Nick her most elegant bow. “After you, mon frère.”

Nick held the door. She thought she heard him mutter something about never having had as pretty a sister, but decided to pretend deafness.

She copied his warm-up routine, since her morning duties usually did not include a need to warm up before milking. Then she set herself to keep up with him.

Nick was indeed a runner, more of one than she was. Keeping up would have been much more difficult if she had not spent the last couple of months as Methos’ sparring partner. What she could not do was run, hang on to Sorcha, and talk at the same time.

So she ran. At least Nick showed no inclination to talk while running, unlike Methos, who used chat during sparring as a defense. Or occasionally as an offense.

Dew dampened the air. Only a few people were out at present, and a couple of them might have been up since the previous evening. Running warmed her; in fact, she began to feel a little overheated.

Sorcha halted. Jehanne halted, as well—she couldn’t do much else at that moment. She seized the opportunity to wipe her face and fold up the long sleeves of her borrowed shirt. Methos would have done himself an injury laughing at the sight of her in his shirt.

Nick had not gone on much further. He recognized that his entourage had stopped, and he swung around and came back. “Call of nature?”

She nodded. Sorcha, having relieved herself and checked for other scents, trotted over and sat down, tongue lolling and tented over one pointed white canine. Jehanne leaned forward and dragged in another couple of long breaths. “I’m glad this isn’t a race. I’d still be back at the first marker.”

A red stain crept up his face. “I was pushing. I’m sorry.” He pulled a water bottle out of his pack and swallowed some, giving her further time to catch her breath.

“Just further proof that longer legs make a faster runner.”

“Yeah, but—I was—”

Jehanne undid the scrunchie and put her hair back up. “You were annoyed that I was encroaching on your run. I was. I’m sorry. I—it’s been ten years since I was last in Paris.”
“I thought it was 1953,” he said, then looked away.

*When did he... Oohhh... Interesting acoustics in that building.* “That was when I last *drove* in Paris.” She hesitated, then corrected herself. “It might have been 1956, though—I lose years, sometimes. It’s one of the hazards of being what we are.”

“Losing touch with normal time?”

“Mortal time,” she said, emphasizing *mortal*. “We simply perceive it differently. But that can give you away.” She clucked to Sorcha, and tugged on the leash.

He put a hand on her arm. “Let’s walk a little. Cool down and then warm up again.”

Jehanne smiled. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me so quickly, *Mademoiselle*... I intend to spend this cool-down asking you questions.” His mouth twisted, as if mocking himself.

“Ah! So I shall actually see in action how an American *gendarme* approaches a witness!” She deliberately bounced on her toes, and widened her eyes. “Why, now I’ll know if all those stories Adam and Amanda have told me are true.”

“Uhhh—Probably just stories,” he said, very hastily. “I wouldn’t take anything Amanda says too seriously.”

“What? No rubber truncheons? No bright lights?”

“Sorry.”

“Next, I suppose you’ll tell me you didn’t walk in on her taking a bath.” Jehanne flicked a glance sidelong.

Nick choked on the water. “She didn’t—”

“She just happened to mention it was how you met.”

“Uh-huh. What else did she happen to mention?”

“It wouldn’t be good for your ego,” she said. “Besides, you wanted to ask me some questions, didn’t you?”

Now that nice bourgeois boy’s face turned suspicious. He stared her in the face for longer than sixty seconds before suspicion broke into a grin. “I’m starting to catch on to you. Sneaky. Very, very sneaky.”

“*L’habit fait le moine*,” she said, letting him see *her* grin. Sorcha barked and leapt up on his shoulders, licking as much of his unshaven face as she could reach.

He sputtered and pushed the hound away. “Down, Sorcha! Good dog—Down!” But he was still grinning, as he retorted, “*L’habit ne fait pas le moine!*”[i][ii][iii]

“I’ll have to change my clothes. Where do those stairs lead?” she said, and pointed across the street.

“A dead-end, actually, sort of a courtyard. There are stairs leading up to *Pays de Saint Guiliame*, but the gate at the far end has been chained as long as I’ve been running around here.”
She nodded. “Race you?”

“Oh, now, come on, you were…”

Jehanne tugged at Sorcha’s leash and took off for the stairs.

“Hey!”

After another few seconds, she heard his feet pounding against the ground. Long legs Nick had, but she had a head start. As she hustled down the long flight of steps, she admitted that knowing the ground as he did made up for the head start. On the other hand, Sorcha tugging at the leash added urgency to her stride. A third of the way down, her shoe caught a rough spot in the stone, and she stumbled.

“Careful!” In English, too—it must have him worried.

Less than a quarter of the steps to go, Jehanne tripped a second time. Sorcha yanked the leash from her fingers. Gravity dragged her down. Giving up on catching her balance, she jumped. Toes-first, she crashed into the irregular stone of the courtyard. Momentum kept her flying forward. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Nick, on her left, reaching out to break her fall.

He missed.

One knee smashed into the cracked stone, crushing a weed patch. The heels of both hands scraped across the rough surface. “Merde!”

“You okay?” Still in English. He crouched down next to her.

Her command of the foreign tongue—never the most fluent—deserted her. She understood it but couldn’t think which words to string into speech. Resorting to her native language, she said, “I will be in a minute or two,” gulping air between the words. Her lungs strained, and her throat burned. Her hands stung, abraded and bleeding. That will mend quickly enough. She pushed herself onto her backside, and held her hands away from the ground.

“A tie,” he said.

Jehanne shook her head. “No—” She waved a hand at the dog, who had given up on humans and now sniffed around the corners and the flagging. “Sorcha wins.”

Nick considered it, grunted, then added a nod to confirm his agreement. Rocking back and standing, he reached out a hand.

She wrapped her fingers as far as possible around his wrist. His fingers closed around hers. Not only did he have a long-legged advantage, he had broader hands. As I recollect, Amanda always preferred big men.

Nick pulled her to her feet, then turned her hand over to examine the scrapes. “I have some first aid wipes if you want them.”

“I wouldn’t mind.”

He reached for the waist pack he wore, then winced and put his hand against his temple.

Her lips parted, but before she could ask, the signature hit her. Not Methos; not Amanda. Not any of the fifty or so Immortals she knew well enough to recognize. Just familiar enough to suggest more
Nick scanned the area around them, rooftops, the far side of the court, the stairs behind them. “Damn! It’s him, isn’t it?”

It took another few seconds to translate the English. “You recognize him?”

“It’s just like last night…” Nick stopped. “I take it not everyone does recognize people?”

She nodded. “I will explain that later. Sorcha! Come! Let’s get out of here. Now!” The dog was not paying attention. “Sorcha!” She clapped her hands and the long narrow head lifted. Sorcha sighed, then trotted over. “Is there a church nearby?”

“This is Paris. There are churches all the hell over. The nearest one… Just off of Place du Tertre. St-Pierre. Father Liam’s. It’s not what I’d call close, but…”

“It will do, if we can—”

But of course they couldn’t. They were only halfway up when a long black shadow crossed the stairs. At least there was no sun to blind them. Jehanne halted. She threw out an arm, on automatic, and Nick’s full body weight, at speed, slammed into it. She pitched forward. Before she hit stone, one big arm came around under her breasts. She hit the arm still at full fall. All the breath exploded from her lungs, leaving her gasping and wordless.

The intruder lifted his sword in salute. He waited, at the top, obviously aware they could go no where else but up.

Sorcha growled. She bounded up the stairs, ears back and lips curled away from her canines. Only a wheeze emerged from Jehanne’s throat. But the dog had identified the threat as the unknown Immortal and not Nick, and her long legs carried her up the stairs before Jehanne or Nick could grab her.

A little breath emerged. “Sorcha!”

Too late. The rising sun flickered red along the sword’s blade.

“Arrêt!” Still a rasp.

The bitch leaped.

The blade lifted and swung.

In mid-air, Sorcha twisted, responding to the threat.

The blade connected broadside, not edge-on.

Sorcha yelped. Her body went airborne, one great ungainly mass of fur and legs and tail. She tumbled twenty or thirty feet, over and over in the air. Flesh and fur thudded against the ground. She went limp.

At last, Jehanne’s lungs regained air. “Sorcha!”

Windows banged open. Some voices bellowed for silence; some shouted for police. The swordsman scowled. From farther off, a gendarme’s whistle broke into the cacophony.

The scowl became a snarl. He scooped up a long coat and sheathed the blade in it.
A spike lanced through her skull for a second. Another Immortal. *No, not just another…* She would have known Methos among a horde of Immortals: the scent of old books, phrases from long-unsung melodies, the sting of snow against her skin.

The stranger’s head lifted, and he bared his teeth. Then he leaned forward and said, “Tell the *Austræni* that *Eywíndr inn Viðförla* sends greetings—and that I regret not having been able to arrange a proper meeting between his protégée and myself. But, then, there will always be other times, won’t there?” The sword vanished. The coat went over his shoulders with one quick flip. Then he swung away, moving with the quick fluid grace that marked the oldest of the old Immortals.

Nick released her.

Jehanne scrambled up the steps, slipped on wet grass, but caught herself before she fell. She dropped to her knees and put a hand against the hound’s snout.

Breath puffed out over her fingers. “Thank God, thank God…”

Sorcha whimpered.

“Easy, bébé, shh, shh…”

Nick knelt beside her. “How bad is it?” His bigger hands made quicker work. He’d picked up blood in a few seconds, and traced it to a long shallow cut that ran across the bitch’s ribs.

Jehanne cradled Sorcha, sobbing in relief, “It’s only a scratch, *ma petite*, only a scratch, you’ll be fine, you’ll be fine—God, your breath is terrible—you’ll be fine, bébé, fine…”

Another shadow slipped across her face. She glanced up.

Methos strode across the grass to them, long legs eating up the ground, gun in hand, his face as dark as the angel of death.

*** *** ***

“How is she?” Benoît’s words snapped through the dawn like bullets. His head swung back and forth, scanning the area, his eyes never lowering to the tableau on the cement.

Jehanne glanced up at him. “It’s not deep, and it’s a clean cut.”

“*Bon. Dépêche-toi*[10].”

She started to lift the bitch. Sorcha yelped and thrashed.

Benoît didn’t move. His constant scanning of the area didn’t stop.

Nick gritted his teeth, fighting back the urge to knock the other man down. “Jehanne, she’s too heavy for you. Let me pick her up. Unless you think she’ll bite me.”

“She won’t bite you.”

Benoît snorted.

Nick eyed Sorcha, then crouched down. Sorcha whined when he slid his arms under her, but relaxed as he lifted her. “There you go, baby. You’re gonna be fine. Just hang in there with us until we get you to a vet.”
“Allons!” Benoît jerked his head at the Citroën, about fifty yards distant, its left-side wheels resting on the sidewalk. His eyes flicked back and forth across the jumble of buildings, alleys, stairs. He kept the gun tight at his side, finger on the trigger.

Nick didn’t like Benoît, would still gladly have belted him, but damned if he didn’t mind having the guy as backup.

“I don’t know any veterinarians in Paris,” Jehanne’s voice shook a little. “Not any longer.”

Two words dropped out of the man’s mouth. “I do.” Benoît was—pissed off. Understatement. Fuming. Furious. Incensed, all the muscles in his face taut under the skin, livid in the original sense: white to the lips, but eyes hot enough to boil water.

Still, he ushered them into the Citroën, watching the streets around them. The gun disappeared into his pocket; he took one last look around before he slid behind the wheel. The wagon gave him no trouble at all, even if it had to be at least thirty years old.

The stop at the vet’s involved Benoît banging on a back door and waking up a middle-aged balding guy who embraced and kissed him. Benoît returned the embrace and the kiss before tossing out first names: “Jehanne, Nick, Guy,” then motioned to the lurcher. Sorcha turned her sad brown eyes on the vet.

“Qu’est-ce qui s’est passé?” As the last word left his lips, Guy grimaced.

Adam’s mouth twitched; he shook his head.

Guy rolled his eyes. “Demandez-moi pas de question, je vous dirai pas de mensonges.” That was the last of the small-talk. He cleaned up, sutured, and bandaged the cut. Then he handed over some prescriptions, with careful instructions.

The kiss hadn’t fazed Jehanne; on the other hand, Nick couldn’t tell if she’d even noticed it. He had no doubts about the absent-minded professor’s mood. Jehanne didn’t appear to notice anything except Sorcha.

How the hell can she be so oblivious? Talk about priorities. A dog before her own life… Another face loomed up in his mind. No, Claudia, not now… because a year and a half later made her death no easier. If anyone should have been Immortal, she should have, because he had never asked to be Immortal, never considered being Immortal, never wanted to be Immortal. He shut that off as well.

Jehanne reached for her waist pack, and paused, consternation and embarrassment both on her face.

“Take Sorcha out to the car,” Benoît said, for that moment only gruff and not angry.

“Adam…”

“Vite!” he said, curtly this time, pulling out his wallet at the same moment that he tossed her the keys.

Nick settled Jehanne and Sorcha into the back of the wagon, putting down the middle seats to give them more room. He took the front passenger seat, which let him separate Benoît from Jehanne and gauge any change in the other man’s mood.

From what he could see, the interlude hadn’t improved the mood at all.

Adam’s hand was back in his pocket, presumably on the gun, while handling the back entrance into
the Sanctuary. Nick carried Sorcha again. The bitch had apparently decided that this was an appropriate method with which to transport a heroic animal and lay across his arms like Cleopatra with the asp at her breast.

When they were all inside the entrance, with the door locked behind them, Benoît spoke for the first time. “Jehanne.” Neutral, but clipped off at the end. The hairs on the back of Nick’s neck stood up.

She stopped between one step and the next. The hand resting on Sorcha’s bandaged side did not move, but her head lifted. Like a wet sponge across a surface, something wiped all expression from her face. Her grey eyes fixed on some distant point.

His lungs constricted. When she spoke, Nick realized he hadn’t taken a breath for some time, and gulped in air.

“We’re fine.”

Benoît nodded. He opened doors for them, as they moved through the corridors that filled the ground floor of the building. His face showed no rage now; it showed nothing at all, as blank as Jehanne’s had been for that moment.

Rather see him foaming at the mouth.

Putting Sorcha to bed involved half the spare blankets from the armoire. Jehanne knelt beside her. “Nick, could you refill her water bowl for me? She’s not supposed to have anything to eat yet, but I am going to give her this first dose of antibiotic and the pain medication Guy gave me.”

Benoît was not in the bedroom when Nick turned around. He glanced out the door but saw no sign of tall-dark-and-pissed-off. Good. Let him have time to cool down.

A more sensible part of his mind pointed out that if he left, the man might just reappear to finish the fight he’d never started with Jehanne. He refilled the bowl, set it down for her, watched as Jehanne coaxed Sorcha into swallowing the pills, and looked around again. Still no Benoît.

Nick hovered a few seconds longer, then said, “I really need to take a shower.”

Jehanne nodded without looking at him. She sat cross-legged on the floor, stroking Sorcha’s head.

“You’ll—be okay?”

At that, her head came around. She frowned at him. “Okay?”

He had said it in English. He was about to rephrase it, but her expression had relaxed, although not completely into humor.

“Je serai ‘okay’,” said Jehanne.

Not much to say to that. Nick went upstairs.

*** *** ***

The pain medication sent the hound off to sleep within a minute or so, while Jehanne sat beside her, scratching behind the long silky ears. When Sorcha started to snore, Jehanne got to her feet and stared at herself in the dresser mirror. On the dresser top, the clock showed it at 7:40. Not even three hours passed.

I need a shower as well as Nick. She rubbed her eyes, then finger-combed her hair, and finished the
inept grooming by wrapping it in the scrunchie again. *I could deal with all this much more easily if I took a shower first.* Her palms had healed, but still felt gritty, somehow, as if the gravel had worked its way underneath the skin.

*Since when has the opinion of one man ever mattered to you?*

*Oh, shut up! You’ve already got me into this situation.*

No answer. She muttered to them, as much as to herself, “I didn’t mean that.” She went into the bathroom and washed her hands and face, then considered where *le vieil homme* might have gone.

*There are only three possibilities: the bar, the basement, and somewhere in Paris. If it’s somewhere in Paris, you’ll never find him unless he wants to be found.* The main basement, according to Amanda’s letter, was set up as a gym and practice space—it connected into ante-chambers which let one work their way to the catacombs. Methos was not someone who used exercise to work off a rage. *Or at least not in the time you’ve known him.* And she could only hope he hadn’t decided to walk it off via the catacombs. She chose the bar.

He hadn’t bothered to turn on the lights. Blood-orange dawn bled in through the curtains’ meeting.

Methos sat at the bar, with an open bottle of beer in front of him, and another, unopened, on its side. He spun the unopened bottle with his index finger: three or four clockwise spins, a stop, and then three or four counter-clockwise, then stop again, then repeated. Jehanne watched the performance for a minute or so before she decided that he was not going to admit she stood in the doorway.

She walked behind the bar. Setting up the machine for *café au lait* occupied her hands, if not her head. It put her on an angle, at least, so that she could see him sidelong.

Shadows hid his face. He lifted the bottle, then set it back down on the counter with enough force to startle her. A fine brown veil of ground coffee sprayed out. Jehanne grimaced and wiped up before turning on the machine.

He did not look up. “No chocolate?”

“You’re having beer. I’ll have coffee.” *Ah, bah. That was a trap, and you fell into it just as you always do. The man’s tongue is a keener weapon than his sword.*

A muffled grunt, more of a sneer than a laugh, answered that. “Seems I take your advice about as often as you take mine.”

She clenched her teeth, biting back her first response, watching the machine as coffee dripped through. She added cold milk on top of the steamed milk. His rare rages were even more rarely directed at her. She sipped the coffee. “I have taken your advice.”

“Then what were you doing this morning?” The words sounded innocuous, even pleasant.

“Going for a run.”

“You,” he said, and made it an epithet, “don’t go for runs. *You* don’t have time to go for runs. *You* don’t understand why people want to go running.” Another swallow of beer punctuated. “*You’re* too busy fulfilling your cloistered life of back-to-nature and self-sufficient serenity to do something as modern and *effete* as go running.”

Methos’ sarcasm did not render her completely incapable of an answer. It preempted replies by making all answers sound—superfluous. “It seemed like a good idea at the time.”
The bottle hit the counter a second time. “A good idea? Without a sword, without a gun, without knowing the area, and with a dog to interfere?”

“Her interference was an asset, as I recall—”

“Which damn near got her killed and you beheaded!”

“Merci, mon cher. I had forgotten those little details, naturellement! I went out running with Nick because—” She faltered. Ah, no. Once more the trap, and once more no way out. “Because it—was necessary—”

The bar stool went over backwards. Methos was on his feet, all two meters of bone, sinew, and fury. “I do not want to hear about your voices! Every time you do something designed to have you lose your head, you attribute it to those damn voices. By now, I’d think if they told you to do something, you’d run in the opposite direction!”

Her hands shook; coffee splashed over the rim, scalding her fingers. Jehanne set the cup down. “Methos, don’t.”

“How did Kronos stand these bloody quixotic sacrificial-lamb fits of yours?”

Red flooded her vision. She slammed a fist on the counter. Better than his face. The cup clattered, bounced off the saucer, and shattered into a hundred chiming porcelain pieces around her feet. “Elek Koronel knew when to stop! I did not, never, ask you to come here with me. I told you from the moment you said you’d accompany me I thought it would be a mistake. You were not in favor of my looking after things for Amanda, and—”

He locked his hands on the edge of the bar. His knuckles turned white with strain. He leaned forward, emphasizing his height, looming over her. Shadows from the gallery hid his expression. “Looking after things for Amanda does not include losing your head for a boy she brought over!”

“Nick deserves the same chance to survive as any of us.”

Leaning forward, his face still unreadable in the shadows, he said, “Then Amanda should have thought of that and found him a mentor, if she didn’t want to take it on.”

She clenched her fists a second time, then let out her breath by degrees, deliberately relaxing her fingers. Now was not the time to tell him that Nick had rejected Amanda’s approaches to teaching him.

One ray of light caught his chiseled, sleek face as he glanced away, then swung back. It stripped him of masks, revealed him as ancient, devious, and, under all the fox-like craftiness, owning a streak of pitilessness, like granite under earth. “Don’t tell me you think you’re going to teach him!”

“Mon vieux[15],” she parried, spreading her hands wide, to take in the world according to Methos, “you know it all already; how dare I presume to tell you anything?”

He slapped his hand on the counter, punctuated it with a quick violent gesture. “It’s absurd. C’est des conneries[16]. A mouse teaching a giraffe. Your proportions are completely off; there is no way you can demonstrate how he should handle himself against an equal opponent—assuming he’s even reached the point of considering taking a Challenge.”

“It’s only been one day since we arrived: four since his first death. He needs a little time.”
“Time is a precious commodity these days.” Methos put his hands on his hips. He swung his head back and forth, surveying the room as if answers hid in its corners. “I am not going to just stand here,” and he grabbed the fallen chair, swung it around, and straddled it, with one long leg stretched to just touch the floor, “and watch you lose your head for one of your strays.”

The air stank of dust, thick in the throat and bitter. “Then you should go.”

“Nor am I going to see you,” as if she hadn’t spoken, “face down strange Immortals for a neophyte with a Galahad complex!”

“He wasn’t a complete stranger.”

“What?”

*God and Saint Michael aid me; I didn’t mean to tell him that either.* But he had a talent for prising out the things she never meant to say. “He was here last night.”

“Here?” Methos swept the room with a glance, as if expecting a strange Immortal to spring out of the shadows.

“At the Sanctuary, yes, during opened hours.”

“You spoke to him?”

She found a dustpan and a brush under the bar. The porcelain shards rattled into the dustpan, then clattered into the dustbin, giving a moment’s respite while she made a similar collection of the two encounters, deciding what and how much to tell him. “*Va te faire foutre!* No, I danced with him. Yes, of course I spoke with him. What do you think I did?” Calm down. It never worked to lose her temper with Methos. She folded her arms and met his eyes. “Do you know if Amanda ever used the name *Austræni* during her wanderings?”

“Austræni?” His head cocked; his eyes narrowed and darkened. “That’s Old Norse. It means Eastman, Easterner—it wouldn’t be used by a woman.” Standing up from the chair, he swung it back to the counter, then walked away from her. He fiddled with the lights, illuminating the room, lighting the corners, flicking off those lights, then turning on the spots over the bar before switching them back off and then back on again. “He asked for an Austræni?”

Fidgeting. Methos never fidgeted. Jehanne shook her head. “No. We met. He left. This morning, he spoke before he left. He said, ‘Tell the *Austræni* that *Eyvindr inn Viðförla* sends greetings.’”

He swung around, eyes wide but no more light in them than earlier, and much less humanity. “*Eyvindr inn Viðförla*?”

“Yes.”

“Nothing else?”

“He didn’t linger for an extended conversation.”


“I screamed loud enough to shake tombstones, I suppose.”

His voice dropped several degrees. “That’s not what I meant.”
“You said you didn’t want to hear about my voices.”

Now he put both hands flat on the counter, leant across it, and dripped words like venom. “If it’s pertinent to the discussion, then I’ll suffer through it. Stop stalling and tell me what happened. In detail.”

“I am not—”

One lifted eyebrow stopped her mid-breath.

So perhaps I am stalling. She scowled at him. “Don’t look at me in that tone of voice.”

Both eyebrows commented this time.

Jehanne turned to the coffee maker. She started talking while the coffee brewed, from the moment that the voice woke her, through gate-crashing Nick’s run, to the stand-off at the stairs. “We heard any number of police sirens and people shouting. He said ‘Tell the Austræni that Eyvindr inn Viðförla sends greetings,’ added the usual about meeting again, and made his exit.”

“From him it’s not the usual.” He tapped a finger against his lower lip, his eyes shifting back and forth but not focused on anything. “Did Amanda ever tell you anything about Korda?”

“She mentioned him in her letter as the reason she and Nick both came to Paris, but nothing else.”

“Nothing about where he came from?”

“No. Just a name—André Korda. Nothing else.”

“Damn.” Then he jerked his head down, once, sharply, and headed towards the back apartment. “How long will it take you to pack? I can rig something in the back of the Citroën to keep Sorcha from sliding about.”

“Pack? What are you talking about? Why pack?” Jehanne took one step backward. “Who is he?”

“Eyvindr Inn Viðförla. It’s Old Norse. It means ‘the Far-traveled’.”

“You know him?” She stopped herself then, took a deep breath, and tried to center. Like being in the middle of an earthquake. One trait Methos shared with Elek.

“What makes you think that?”

“Something about the way you’re suddenly changing the subject. What makes you think he would call you the Easterner?”

“You think I came from the West?”

“I never thought about it—” As she had never thought about Elek’s age or origin. “Why did you say pack?”

He halted, halfway across the room, and turned back to her. “Because we’re leaving.”

She cocked her head to one side, listening to the words as well as the things hidden in the urgent tone. “We?”

“Yes, we.” He came back, looking down at her, looming over her in a way he rarely did, and which she hated. “You didn’t think I’d leave you here alone, did you?”
She clenched one hand, resisting an urge to clout that supercilious, self-assured face. “That is **not** your decision to make—*Moi, je ne partant pas.*”

Methos seized her wrist. The fingers bit down, sending shooting flames along her arm. She winced, pulling against the grip. Either he ignored it or never noticed. “Jehanne, this is not a game. Of course you’re going!”

“*Not a game.* **Le Jeu final.** The one we’ve been trapped in for millennia. I’m not running from this fight—” She caught herself, and did not use the wrong name. “—Adam.”

“Only a fool fights in a burning house.”

She laughed. She couldn’t help it. “Mother of God, not Star Trek on top of everything else!”

A smile twitched at his mouth, but his eyes still showed frost. “Wisdom is not only found in ancient tomes.” Frost gilded the frozen river of his voice as well. “What’s the problem? Galahad? If you want, we’ll bring Nick along.”

“I do not think he would approve of being bundled into a car and rushed out of Paris like—” Jehanne stopped, biting back the automatic simile.

“Like thieves in the night? I don’t think a *flic* would approve of the comparison.”

“Probably not,” a voice said from behind them.

Methos swung around.

Jehanne twisted her wrist, up and over, freeing herself.

Nick, shaving cream dividing his face between shaven and unshaven, bare-chested, and with a towel dangling around his neck, stood in the doorway, arms folded across his chest. “I hear my name twice in the same conversation, I figure I have a right to ask in connection with what.”

“Life,” Methos said. “The preservation of it. Which wasn’t on your mind, apparently, when you took Jehanne along on your little excursion this morning.”

She tried short-circuiting the inevitable. “I invited myself.”


Methos slid his hands into his pockets, tilted his head back a fraction, and with slit eyes, his duelist’s gaze, surveyed Nick “Why what?”

“Why did you suddenly show up?”

Jehanne blinked. The world reeled briefly, then shrugged and settled into place, a piece of it she had not even recognized as missing now neatly fitted.

Methos, ice and immutable, stood without moving. Nick never twitched, Methos’ image mirrored in flame and fury. Jehanne clenched both fists again, locked her jaw, and waited.

A crack showed in the glacier. “I had a warning.”

Nick’s shift, from one foot to the other, felt like an earthquake. *He* blinked, and some of the flames banked. “Dawson?”
Methos cocked his head to one side.

“I know who he is,” said Nick. “Or didn’t he tell you that?”

“Ah, the young.” Methos shifted. He rested an elbow on the bar, his avuncular expression completely antithetical to the frigid poison in his voice. “So naïf. So sure that the only matters of any importance are their own problems. Believe it or not, Mr. Wolfe, the question of what you know—or knew—never came up.”

“I’m heartbroken,” was offered, in an equally venomous voice. Then Nick swallowed air, glanced away, and then back. His eyes narrowed; his jaw tightened. “Why should Joe Dawson figure he should warn you? How did he know to warn you?”

Something, some thought, flickered through Methos’ eyes, fleeting as the eye-blink of a snake.

Nick’s face hardened. He leaned forward, encroaching on neutral space. “Maybe, like you ran into our visitor on your way home this morning? He followed you?”

Methos smiled, one of his polite meaningless smiles.

Jehanne knotted her hands again.

“Not me.”

Surely, if it had been his Duncan MacLeod, he would have said something last night… She must have made some movement, some sound, because Methos’ head jerked around to her. He shook his head. “No, not MacLeod. It was one of us, yes. He didn’t survive his encounter with the Traveler.”

The words burst out before she could stop them. “You saw it?” Saw it, and said nothing?

“No.” His attention returned to her, although he would know exactly where and what Nick did. “Someone else. Just a boy, really. Never seen a real Challenge. It’s not something any description can convey. Overwhelming on your—first time.”

A nasty little bite hid in the words, one more fang of icy anger. She heard a stammer in her voice, and dug her nails into her palms. “You never said…”

“You were asleep.” No real apology sounded in the words. “You didn’t mention your run-in either, did you?”

In reflex, she echoed him. “I was asleep.”

Methos rolled his eyes. “Now you’re awake.” He straightened, revealing not the lazy dilettante but the Immortal who had survived longer than any other known. He shoved his hands in his pockets. The material stretched over his fists like a snake beginning to shed scales. “And it’s time to go.” As he headed for the back apartment once again, he tossed words over his shoulder. “Wolfe, you’re welcome to join us, if it suits you.”

“I only run for exercise,” the other man shot back.

“It’s your head,” he said with a shrug. “Jehanne, come on, it’ll take both of us to get Sorcha in the back of the car.”

“Me—” She cut it off and turned it into a hiss, jerking her head away from both men to hide her slip. “Adam. I am not leaving.”
He halted, with one hand on the passage jamb, and for that moment he filled the entire entryway, like a host of shadows unraveling in time. “Jehanne, don’t do this.”

“I have to.”

“You do not.” He did not turn. “You have never been up against someone like this before. You can’t hide in here forever, and you can’t take him.” After a few seconds, he added, beneath his breath, “I don’t know if the Highlander could.”

“It doesn’t matter. This is who I am, Adam. I am not leaving.”

His shoulders expanded with a long indrawn breath, then he shook his head. A muscle in his jaw jumped. “Fine. Remember I tried to talk you out of this.”

“I shall.” When he headed for the front door, she was startled enough to say, “The Citroën?”

“It’s yours, isn’t it? Besides, you’ll need it more than I will. Keys are on the dresser in the bedroom.”

She was the one who had expected to spend more than one night in Paris. She had thought the trip might take more than a day, and had prepared for it. Methos had no baggage. “Take care of yourself.”

“I always do.” He snipped the words short, as if his mind were already on other matters. The door shut, with no excessive force.

Jehanne turned away. She avoided Nick’s eyes. “I need a shower.”

“Yeah.” He motioned toward the stairs. “I’m going to finish up myself.”

She ran the shower as near to scalding as she could bear. With water pounding against her shoulders and skull, she leaned into the shower wall, closed her eyes, and stopped thinking. It took fifteen or twenty minutes before she remembered her responsibilities and shut off the water.

She wrapped herself in towels, then dragged all the pillows and the duvet off the bed onto the floor next to Sorcha. She cradled Darius, and fed him until he burped and fell blissfully asleep. Then she eased them both down next to the dog and curled herself into pillows and comforter, staring at the wall. At some point, the wall dissolved into darkness.

*** *** ***

The boat was exactly where it had been since MacLeod disappeared this time. It rocked slightly in the occasional swell, tied to the dock as Methos had left it, doors locked. The caretaker had swept and scrubbed the decks: he kept the outside free of bird dung, dirt, and dust, but other than that, only watched for possible intruders. The barge rocked only a little more as he stepped aboard. He felt nothing. He straightened, looking around, listening. Nothing but the sound of the river, the smell of damp wood, and the growing light of the rising sun.

He unlocked the door and scanned the inside before walking in and locking the door behind him. It was as empty as the last time he’d seen the Highlander in it, bare of every physical memento: not even the wooden chest remained to disturb the dust. He switched off the alarm system, then dropped his duffel bag by the bar and looked around the place again.

*And willed to me unconditionally. I could burn the fucking thing to the water line if I wanted and the Préfecture wouldn’t object.*
He rubbed a finger along the edge of a dusty shelf. After a moment, he went to the galley, found cleaning supplies, and began the tedious process of converting chaos into order.

Why the hell are you still here? Methos turned: the words rang in his ears so loudly he thought MacLeod was behind him. Just the memory of a voice. The memory of a knight in shining armor… or a kilt.

The voice bounced back in, this time sounding indignant but amused. What do I wear beneath my kilt? What did you wear beneath your toga? He had said, ‘That’s for me to know and you to find out…’ He had said, as well, after the Horseman, at Bordeaux—’You’re a fool to trust Death,’ and MacLeod had said, ‘Well, then, I must be a fool.’

He scrubbed at a mark for a minute before he realized it was a scratch and not a smudge. He sighed, tossed the rag back into the bucket, and sat down on the floor.

Why are you still here, man? Any other time, you’d be on the first express out of France to—anywhere. Tibet. Tahiti. But here you are. Following in Amanda’s footsteps, since she was conveniently absent, having left her nightclub and her neophyte Immortal right in Jehanne’s lap. Of course the fool’s going to stay. He hasn’t got a sense of preservation. Got balls big enough to get himself killed, though. And Jehanne, along with him…

Methos groaned. He bent his head back, rubbed the back of his neck, and stared up at the ceiling, willing some answer to appear like the writing on Nebuchadnezzar’s wall. Through the porthole in the door, a shaft of sunlight poked in, spreading across the wooden deck. The survival of the fittest—not among our kind. Age and cunning win over youth and enthusiasm… Leaning his head forward, he ran his fingers through his hair, gripped his skull, and shook his head back and forth as if it were a ball he could yank off and throw into the wall. He stopped, folded his hands across his nose and mouth, and shut his eyes in order to stare into the past, flashes of memory bursting in fireworks, faces and words and scents. Behind his closed eyes, in the scent of the dust and the taste of salt on his skin, he recalled the roughness of hair, the softness of skin, the distinct and unforgettable taste of mortality on his lips. He shook his head and swore at himself in a language no one but he had heard in four thousand years.

Save our skins, MacLeod, tell us we matter to you, and then you disappear like the wizard in some fairy tale.

He pushed himself to his feet. In the padded side-pocket of the duffel, his laptop rested under lock and key. He set it on the desk, then dug for cables in the pocket below that. What is it Amanda says? L’affection aveugle la raison[18].

MacLeod had, originally, made the barge comfortable for himself. On his return, after Richie’s death, he had stripped it of conventional comfort and turned it into a place suitable for a Hindu ascetic. When Methos took possession this second time, he added things he thought lacking. Among those items was refitting one of the paneled cupboards so that it opened into a desk. What is a desk these days without access to modern information?

Methos plugged in his laptop, connected modem to the satellite line, and switched on the machine with his left hand while digging his mobile out of his pocket with the right. One of the most useful nuisances of modern life. He thumbed a speed-dial combination, then waited. It rang. It continued to ring. He counted the rings, gritting his teeth.

Answer, Dawson. Come on; you called me this morning—I know you’re awake. Come on, man!

A voice cut in. “Give a man a moment to get to the phone, huh? Is everything all right? Anything
else my guys need to do?”

“I thought you were retired.” The modem connected. He waited for the security to accept id and passwords, then hacked his back door into the system. “I’m not going to ask how you knew it was me calling.”

Joe grunted. “Didn’t I tell you I was psychic? And I am retired. It doesn’t mean people forgot me.”

“Joe, how could anyone possibly forget you?” That garnered an unprintable reply. Methos laughed. “I didn’t know your Vietnamese was so—extensive. He was there, all right. How did Piero know?”

A pause which might have indicated a shrug punctuated the conversation, then Joe said, “He decided to keep an eye on this new Immortal.”

“That’s against protocol, isn’t it?”

“Protocol and a couple of francs will get you a cup of espresso and not much else these days.”

“Ah. So Piero’s branching out. Has he informed anyone in the hierarchy?”

“I didn’t ask.”

“Probably a good thing. You might pass along my gratitude to Piero, since I’ve already thanked the other assistant.”

“Other assistant?”

“A very irritating dog. Who apparently must be part-cat, since she’s still alive.” He sighed and ran a hand over his hair, wishing Immortals didn’t get stress headaches. Prior to this, Jehanne never gave me headaches. Never gave me reason to worry. I may kill Amanda when we find her. “Nick Wolfe is still with us.”

“And your friend?”

He grimaced at the phone, uselessly, then said, “She’s fine. Better than she deserves.” All these years he’d stayed alive by avoiding those of his kind with either scruples or an addiction to Quickenings. All those years, and because of one damned Scots Highlander with an overactive conscience, he’d run into a plague of conscience-stricken Immortals. Worse and worse, the plague seemed infectious. Even Amanda’s pragmatic side seemed to be melting like snowfall in the summer Alps. “I have a name for you on Piero’s discovery.”

“Oh, now that’s interesting. How’d you get his name? And is it a matter for concern?”

“Eyvindr inn Viðförla. At least, that’s the name I knew him by. He might be going under the last name Veefled or Veirstad. I don’t know if there’ll be a known first death.”

Dawson repeated the name—flawlessly, which was no surprise. “Old Norse?”

“Viking, yes.” Methos paused, then said, “Well, at least Norway and somewhere before the eighth century BCE.”

“What are you doing while I’m raiding the archives for you?”

“For yourself. After all, you’re the Watcher, right? Researching André Korda.”

“You really don’t know anything about him?” His voice crested in tenor, full of disbelief.
Methos groaned. “Joe, I keep telling you, I’m just a guy. I’m not the fount of all knowledge. You want the fount of all knowledge, you need to go find MacLeod. One of the two of them, anyway.”

“And a cigar is just a cigar.” But this was Joe’s usual sarcastic response to a bad situation: Methos relaxed.

“Even that, sometimes. What did you say the Watchers knew about Korda?”

“I didn’t,” said Joe, dry and amused.

“All right. What can you tell me?”

“He was several hundred years old. We don’t have an exact birth date on him, but he took his first head in Khazaria somewhere around 570 A.D.—the Chronicles are sketchy at that date. What we do have says he always had an eye for women—there are illustrations of him and a harem of female archers and swordswomen in one of the illuminated history manuscripts in the Hermitage—don’t say it, old man.”

“I never make the obvious joke.”

“Wise, too,” was the sour reply. “You going to tell me where you got that name?”

“What name?”

“Methos—Aw, forget it. I’ll call you when I get something.”

“Same here.” Although you’re likely to tell me more than I’ll tell you.

*** *** ***

Nick looked at the clock on the chest of drawers. Five after ten. How had so much happened in so little time? He picked up the clock, then checked the cord to be sure it was still plugged in and pulling juice.

It was.

Sudden warbling startled him; he dropped the clock. The mobile continued its cheerful whistling. He swore at it. It went right on whistling—why had he ever picked Camptown Races as a ring tone?

He put the clock back on the chest before answering the phone. “Wolfe.”

“Get up on the wrong side of the bed, Nick?”

The last coffin-nail in a lousy morning… “You could say that. That question rates a long-distance call?”

“I’m still in town. Rescheduled my flight.”

“Ah. So that’s the reason for the call.”

“Got something for you to take a look at. If you’re free, that is.”

“Where and when?”

“Meet me for lunch. Le Petit St-Benoît.”
Not named after the absent-minded professor—nothing saintly about Adam Benoît. “Something comes up and you had time to make reservations? Or you just have an in with the maître d’?”

Bert sighed. “Just meet me there, okay?”

“Noon?”

“Twelve-thirty.”

Nick shook his head. “That’s you all over, Myers. Always in the middle. Twelve-thirty, then.” He put the phone down and checked the alarm clock. He could sleep for an hour. He changed the alarm time, dropped his head back on the pillow, and went under in the blink of an eye.

*** *** ***

He did stop to listen at the lower apartment door before he left for his meeting. But he heard nothing, from either the bed or the kitchen. Nick hesitated, weighing whether or not to knock.

No, better not. Most women preferred to contemplate their humiliations in private. And, since he’d witnessed Adam’s stomping out in a huff, he wasn’t going to be her favorite visitor at the moment. Even if she is better off without the bastard.

He stopped outside the Sanctuary to put on his sunglasses. The sun felt unusually bright this afternoon. No clouds blocked the light, and he didn’t remember any weather reports suggesting rain in the future, but he thought he smelt a faint warning of rain, somewhere.

Naturally Myers wasn’t there when he stopped outside Le Petit St-Benoît. More than one of the tables were empty, though, so he picked one under an awning, in a secluded corner, then ordered Campari and soda from the disdainful waiter.

He didn’t see Myers appear. But he’d expected Bert would try and slip up on him. So, the slap on the shoulder didn’t surprise him as much as he suspected Myers had hoped it would. “Geez, Myers, you ever going to give up bathing in English Leather?”

“Well, that’s friendly. You get up on the wrong side of the bed this morning?”

“You asked me that already.”

Myers motioned to the waiter and ordered his usual glass of red wine. “You know anything about thirteenth-century sword making?”

“I can look it up. Why?”

“Familiar with the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature?”

The what? Then, on automatic, his brain produced words and directions. “Rue des Archives, 3rd Arrondissement. You take the Métro to Rambuteau, Hôtel-de-Ville, or Arts et Métiers. I didn’t think you were into medieval weaponry, Bert.” Nick finished off his drink. The waiter reappeared.

The waiter sighed when they both ordered the prixe-fixe lunch, but seemed appeased when Nick ordered a second aperitif and Bert a half-bottle of wine. Once the waiter vanished with the orders, Nick took a swallow of his Campari and said, “What’s missing?”

Bert eyed his drink, then cupped it between both hands a few seconds before looking up as he delivered a question. “Doesn’t Amanda have a sword collection?”
“I wouldn’t call it a collection,” Nick said, still on automatic. He leaned back for the waiter to put the plate in front of him.

Bert started on his pâté.

“A sword’s gone missing from this museum, Myers? When?”

“Where is Amanda, anyway? I went by your place this morning and her car’s not there. Just this beat-up Citroën that’s got to be bringing down the market value of the entire arrondissement.”

“Amanda decided to take a vacation.”

“How—typically spontaneous of her.”

Nick ground his teeth but managed to hold back words.

Myers sipped his drink and refolded his napkin. He leaned back in the chair, studying Nick from lowered eyelids. “When did she leave?”

A shrug wouldn’t stop Myers, but Nick shrugged anyway. “A couple of days ago.”

“Monday, maybe?”

“Museum’s not open on Monday.”

“Well, they must have had a special exhibition yesterday then. It was opened. By an unexpected visitor.”

Nick ground his teeth another moment, tamped down his temper—a little sharper than usual, Wolfe, watch yourself—and said, “Amanda and I had a disagreement. She decided to let me cool off.”

“Glad to see she doesn’t repeat herself. One phony death’s plenty for one lifetime. So who’s the pretty brunette? The reason for the disagreement?”

It took more than fifteen seconds to connect ‘pretty brunette’ with Jehanne. My reactions are definitely off. “I wouldn’t call Jehanne just a ‘pretty brunette’. And she’s not the reason. She’s a friend of Amanda’s. Came in to keep an eye on the place while Amanda’s gone.”

Bert considered that one for some time. “She doesn’t exactly look like Amanda’s type. And if you don’t think she’s pretty, you need help.”

‘Pretty’ trivialized Jehanne. “I don’t need help in defining pretty, Myers.” And attractive didn’t say anything at all. Striking, maybe. “Everybody has friends who don’t look like their type. You going to tell me about this missing thirteenth-century sword?”

“It’s a Passau War Sword.” Myers shrugged this time. “Whatever that is. Sounds like something out of Dungeons and Dragons to me. German, apparently, very rare due to its near-perfect condition. A two-hander, weighs 3.2 kilos, ornately-jeweled handle, and a perfect running wolf etched on the blade.”

“Your knowledge of teenage popular culture never ceases to amaze me. What does our European branch and Amanda have to do with a German Passau sword that weighs 7 pounds?”

Bert grinned. It was his ‘I’m-not-amused-but-you’re-still-funny’ grin. “I admire your grasp of weights and measures. This particular near-perfect sword was donated to the museum by one André Korda.”
Now it was his turn to sit, eat, and digest the implications. Myers let him. Nick finished his lunch, decided it was reasonably edible, and leaned back again in his chair. “Amanda wasn’t robbing the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature on Monday.”

“You sure of that?”

He considered retorting, She was shooting me on Monday, but said instead, “No. We were together.”

Myers raised an eyebrow.

Nick rolled his eyes. “God, Bert, give it up. Not ‘together’ together. I was working on something, and she was assisting. Platonically. And legally.”

Bert nodded. “What about this helpful friend of hers?”

“Jehanne?” He couldn’t help snorting. “She’s about as graceful as a four-day-old colt. Your kid sister would be a better thief.”

“My kid sister couldn’t stay sober long enough to steal airline booze,” Myers snapped, then looked away.

Nick picked up his glass, examined it, then took another drink. “You want me to find this sword, huh?”

“French government would be happy, since we own what used to be Korda’s place of business—and residence—to see if we might turn up any clues regarding the missing object d’art.” He picked up the briefcase at his feet, opened it, and pulled out three sealed manila envelopes. “Police reports. History known of the object in question. Possible fences. Right up your alley.”

“You going to be around?”

“I’ve got to fly back this afternoon.” Myers dropped several large-denomination franc notes on the table and clapped him on the shoulder again. “This is what I’ve got you for, right?”

“Right.”

“So the brunette’s name is Jeanne?”

“She’s not your type, Myers.”

A grin and a shrug answered. “She’s pretty, she’s French—”

Nick blew out a breath in exasperation. “She has a dog.”

“So?”

“You’re allergic to dogs.”

“They make something called allergy shots. Ever hear of ‘em?”

Nick gave up. As long as Bert thought he could rattle cages, he’d go on poking. “You still have an apartment here? If your job leaves me in need of a bolt-hole?”

“Yeah.” Bert pulled out a set of keys and handed them across. “Worried about Jehanne?”

“She’s not in our business.”
Bert’s mouth twisted and he glanced down at the sidewalk. “So why’s she here?”

“Amanda wanted a break. She wanted someone to watch her end of the business. The club end of the business. So—”


“He’s not even in the picture at the moment. He’s left town. Quit trying to get a rise out of me, and get out of here so I can get on with my work. Leave Jehanne alone. I’ll tell her about your cut of the receipts, in case Amanda forgot to mention it.” He ordered a third Campari and settled down to flip through the reports. He switched to coffee after that, and went through the scanty information again. The Police Nationale’s computers would show him more, but for those, he needed to go back home.

*Home.* He looked up, staring out at the street, seeing nothing at all for a moment except an unexpectedly beautiful smile beneath liquid dark eyes. When had this become home? *I call it going home,* Lauren had said to him, *because it’s where you are.*

And home had become where Amanda was… And here he was, thinking about Amanda again, something he kept telling himself he wasn’t going to do.

Jagged glass spilled down his spine again. Signal. He swung his head back and forth, searching for a body to match the signal. None. The signal faded, as if its owner had backed away rather than confront him in public.

*Time to go home.*

He took the Métro but got off two stops short. Exercise always cleared his head; walking might help now.

Seen as an exercise on a promotion exam, it sounded simple enough.

1. *Who would steal a sword from a museum?*

2. *Why would the perp steal the sword?*

3. *How did they steal it?*

4. *Where was it now?*

Except that each one of those simple questions carried along its own subset of questions, and the real kicker was the second one. Why steal a seven-hundred-year-old sword?

*What the hell do I know about thirteenth-century swords? I need someone who does. Amanda would, but she’s not here.* Amanda wasn’t, but he did have an Immortal, other than himself, resident on the premises. *Maybe one Immortal is as good as another.*

*** *** ***

He entered the club through the back door, not really in a mood to banter with the bouncers or the
bartender. The long hall eventually crossed the kitchen door. A rhythmic dull thump echoed from the kitchen. As he turned into the kitchen, he saw Jehanne manhandling a sticky lump of dough, turning the mass, then shoving it down and out with the heels of her hands before folding it over again.

“Baking bread?”

She paused, her hands resting on the lump. “Yes.”

“You got a lot of it there, don’t you?”

Jehanne continued kneading the dough. “Not really.” Small hands, she had, smaller than Amanda’s, but not at all delicate. She had taken off the ring she wore on her left index finger, but he didn’t see it on the counter. As those small strong hands worked the dough, the shaggy rough mound changed, becoming a smooth, elastic stuff the color of strong tea.

His mother—my adoptive mother, his brain corrected—had preferred tea, Irish Breakfast, brewed exactly 5 minutes. Lemon, no sugar. The steady rhythm of kneading mesmerized him, as if watching someone do calisthenics.

After just about as long as it had taken to make that cup of tea, Jehanne’s hands relaxed. She looked up at him. “This ought to make three loaves.” She shrugged. “I don’t seem able to make any less than that.”

Nick nodded. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone make bread before.” He considered that, then said, “Well, not that wasn’t in a bakery. I think they used machines to knead it.”

“It’s good exercise,” she said. “Soothing.” She slapped the dough on the board one more time, then broke it into three sections, shaped them, and then set each one into a cloth-covered oval basket before laying more cloth over them. “Would you like coffee? I was going to make a pot once I finished this.”

“I’ll make it.”

“All right.” She nodded towards the sink. “Watch out for Sorcha; she’s on the other side of the counter.”

He edged around the center island.

Sorcha, stretched out on a folded blanket, cast a melting glance at him and wagged her tail. The kitten was curled up under the hound’s chin with its pointed miniature tail wrapped over its nose. He reached down and scratched behind the hound’s ears and the plumed tail thumped faster against the ground.

Once the coffee perked, he took a saucer, poured some cream in it, and put it on the floor. Sorcha tilted her head so that she could slurp the cream. The kitten woke up, fell over Sorcha’s paw, and then stuck his nose into the cream.

Sorcha rolled a plaintive eye at Nick.

“He’s a kitten,” Nick said. “A baby. Not gonna hurt you to share a little cream with him. And a big brave dog like you should be kind to little helpless kittens.”

Sorcha sighed, but shared the treat with Darius without a growl.

Jehanne chuckled. She took the cream pitcher away from him and added it to her coffee as she
settled onto one of the high stools border. “Poor thing. She feels like the kitten gets too much attention. Thank the good Lord she’s not as badly hurt as I thought at first.”

“Dogs are like kids,” he said. He sat down across from her. “All the sympathy they can get, and they’re still not satisfied.”

“The two daughters of the horseleech,” she said.

He heard a stern voice in his head. Before he could stop himself, he quoted the rest of the proverb and its following verse. “There are three things that never are satisfied, and the fourth never saith: It is enough. Hell and the mouth of the womb, and the earth which is not satisfied with water: and the fire never saith: It is enough.”

Her grey eyes widened, but not in surprise, more as if someone had leaned over to whisper something in her ear. Then her attention returned to him, and she said, “A principal at your school?”

“Yeah. Grammar school, actually. Reverend Mother Mary Clarence.”

She leaned forward, resting an elbow on the counter and her head on her hand. Her mouth quirked a little. “Exactly why do you remember this so well?”

He grimaced. “I had to memorize and recite four chapters of Proverbs.” He wasn’t going to say anything further, but her attention remained focused, and he heard himself add, “For fighting during lunch.”

Her eyes widened again. “One fight?”

“Uh—” Nick ran a hand through his hair, then admitted, “I started a food fight in the cafeteria. Ended up in a riot.”

Jehanne’s head dropped. She snickered. “I thought you probably did not grow up an angel.”

“Yes, well…” He cast about for another subject. His brain offered up only the one that had brought him back here in the first place. “You know anything about swords?”

Now her head jerked up. Her jaw dropped, her eyes widened like a cat’s in a dark room, and her forehead furrowed with disbelief. Then she threw back her head and laughed.

“Shit…” He rubbed his hand through his hair and grinned sheepishly. “Didn’t come out the way I meant it to.”

The laugh faded into a snicker. When she looked up at him, the pinched tight look finally had vanished. “I do know something about them. If you want to use one, don’t hold it by the pointy end.”

He gave her the look he’d have given Claudia if she’d said something like that. Claudia would have said something very much like that. “Thank you. Thank you so much. Very helpful.”

“Maybe I could be more helpful if you could be more specific?”

“Thirteenth-century swords.”

She pushed her coffee cup back as she raised an eyebrow. “That,” she mimicked shrinking something, “is more specific? A hundred years is a fairly long period, in mortal years.”

He snorted. “Okay. What’s a Passau sword?”
“One made in Passau.” She paused. “You are looking at me with blank eyes, Nick. Passau, as in Germany.”

“A running wolf etched on the blade means that the sword came from Passau.”

“Yes.” Then she frowned and corrected herself. “Unless it means it came from Solingen. The swords made in Passau were so respected that Solingen started copying the etching.”

“Medieval trademark infringement.” Nick shook his head. “The more things change…”

“Yes, naturallement.”

“Are all Passau swords war swords?” He and Myers had spoken English, of course. Saying it now brought confusion into Jehanne’s face; she repeated the English carefully, as if listening to the words while mouthing them.

“War swords.” After a moment of silence, she said, “Les grand épées de la guerre?”

He had to hesitate now, but said, “Yes, I think so.”

“Well, a war sword would be a large sword, at least a hand-and-a-half, but not all Passau swords were large swords, Nick, no.”

One possibility down. “How would you tell if a sword were made in the thirteenth-century?”

Jehanne blinked. She leaned back, and nearly fell off the stool.

Nick grabbed her arm. She managed to resettle herself.

“I do not like this kind of chair,” she said. “I don’t mind a milking stool, but I keep forgetting this has no back.” She patted his arm.

He let her go.

“Nick, ask me how to bake bread, mend a roof, birth a baby or a calf, or design, cut and sew you a pair of trousers. Ask me to sharpen a sword for you, or a knife—or a pair of scissors, à bon droit.” Jehanne shrugged. “All those I can do, and I know how to teach you to do them. I can tell you whether a sword is a rapier, a hand-and-a-half or a great sword. I’ve seen a katana, but I’ve never held one. All swords have hilts, guards, tangs, and blades. Tell you when one was made? I can tell you if it’s new or old, but not much more. You need someone who’s studied swords.” She spread both hands out helplessly. “I’m neither a blacksmith, a metallurgist, nor a historian.”

Someone who’s studied swords… Maybe someone who’s studied people who use swords? “Would a Watcher know about swords?”

She almost fell off the stool again. “You know about Watchers?”

“I made the acquaintance of one accidentally.”

“Accidentally?” This time she rolled her eyes and made a face at him. “Ah. You mean Joe Dawson. And, as the girl said when the doctor told her she was expecting, ‘I can’t imagine how that happened’.”

Nick took the coffee cup in both hands and looked across it at her. “Don’t most Immortals know about Watchers?”
Her lips pursed, then thinned out. After another few seconds, she said, flatly, “No. It’s better that way.”

“But you know Dawson.”

“No. I know of him. We’ve never met.”

“If your friend Mr. Benoît knows him, I’m surprised he hasn’t introduced you.”

“It never came up.” Before he could ask why, she dove headlong into continuing the conversation. “Well, I would guess that some Watchers would know at least the swords of the people they observed, so yes, that’s a good place to start.”

And here’s your hat, what’s your hurry? Nick gulped the rest of his coffee, then leaned across the island and kissed the top of her head. “You are a doll,” he said, deliberately using English.

“I am a what?”

“Save me some bread, okay? I like fresh-baked bread when I can get it.” He headed for the back door again.

“Nick!”

He stopped at the door, then glanced over his shoulder at her.

She had twisted around on the stool, her eyes narrowed and her lips parted, as if whatever she’d been about to say she now thought better not to. Then her lips closed, just for a second, before she said, also in English, “Keep a cool head on your shoulders.”

*** *** ***

Les Bleus opened at 1500 and closed more or less at four a.m., except on Wednesdays, when Joe Dawson unlocked the doors at eleven a.m. and closed at 2300. It was now 1545 on Thursday, and the café tables scattered across the sidewalk were full. If it had been Monday, then the substitute bartender would have been on duty and Joe unavailable. Nick stepped through the door, took off his sunglasses, and relaxed when he saw Dawson resting his elbows on the bar and doing The Times of London crossword.

He leaned on the bar. “Hey. You have Genévrier today?”

Joe’s head jerked up. A narrow-eyed glare turned into a grin. “You’re in luck. Just got in a shipment.” He turned away, braced himself against the bar, stooped, then came up with a frosted bottle.

Nick took a swallow. He had downed a lot of liquor today, but he still felt steady: the alcohol high still eluded him. “I don’t know why people think you can’t get beer in France. Or think you can only get bad beer.”

“That’s because most French drink it at home, not out in the bars.” Joe folded up the newspaper and tucked it underneath the bar. “But it’s getting more respectable. As well as expensive.”

“The French don’t like to be outdone by anyone in anything,” Nick said.

Joe chuckled. “Reminds me of a few Yankees I know.” He casually pulled a pilsner from the rack overhead, filled it with club soda, and sprinkled in a few drops of bitters to give it color. “I’m
surprised Amanda didn’t come with you.”

Nick shrugged, looked down at the amber liquid in his glass, and then said, “She’s not around at the moment. We had an argument.”

Joe glanced down himself, pursed his lips, then took a sip from the glass. “Sorry to hear that. Amanda losing her temper is like watching a volcano erupt. Seems to go on and on forever and melts everything in its path.”

“Oh, yeah.” Nick rubbed his eyes, then casually looked around himself to see how isolated they were. “At least if she hadn’t disappeared, I could ask her about swords.”

Joe didn’t move. He blinked, once, and then again, “You’re right. I never did show you my workshop. Come on. Simone will watch the bar.” He motioned to the pretty brunette who usually worked Mondays through Thursdays, and they held a rapid conversation in the Provençal dialect. Joe edged around the bar and led the way to the back. He opened a door, revealing the claustrophobic wooden space of a miniscule elevator. “Hope you don’t mind tight spaces.”

“Not if I can get out of them.”

“I feel the same way. We can get out of this one, trust me.”

The lift went down. After about 10 seconds, its front door opened. Joe locked it open, then reached up to the right top corner of the back wall. It slid into the wall, revealing another door. Joe unlocked this one, pushed it open, and vanished into the dark.

Nick’s jaw clenched, in spite of himself, and his hands knotted.

Lights flashed on, chasing the shadows. A line of track lights illuminated the room. Spartan, a little cooler than comfortable—and occupied by three walls of bookshelves and a state-of-the-art computer on a mahogany desk. Joe turned the chair with the end of his cane, then settled into it. “You can pull up that chair, if you like. What about swords? You want an outline or the whole tutorial?”

“I’m interested in thirteenth-century swords.” Nick drew up the chair. The room smelled pleasantly of old paper and leather, with base notes of pine and disinfectant. Some of the shelved books were English, others French—he noted an Italian one, and then, further, a shelf full of what was some Asiatic language. He thought Vietnamese, maybe, or possibly Korean. He knew it wasn’t Chinese or Japanese, but beyond that he had no clue.


“Passau.”

“Ah. Germany.” He rubbed his beard thoughtfully. “Read a thesis once which suggested that the Passau sword masters had found a Silk Route for Southeast Asian steel.”

“Sounds like a long way to go.”

“Not if you were a craftsman.” He raised an eyebrow, then added, dryly, “‘Not as clumsy or as random as a blaster’.”

Nick had to laugh. He pulled the chair over, turned and straddled it, then rested his crossed arms on the back and his chin on his arms. “You mean Vader’s Stormtroopers should’ve used light sabers?”
“Gunny in my platoon used to tell us that if you could hit the bastard with a handgun, he was too damn close to start with.”

“Where was that? Desert Storm?”

“Smart aleck. ‘Nam.” Joe pushed the chair back, looked over his shoulder, then pulled a book from the third shelf of the nearest bookcase. “Oakeshott, if you get time later to come back, sit, and browse. He’s out of fashion, but I think he’s got the most flexible system.”

Nick held out a hand. Joe put the book into his palm. He nearly dropped it. “Damn, that’s one heavy book.”

Joe smiled. “That’s just three of the major ones bound together for me. Well, and a lot of extra photos and illustrations I had added in. They get mainstream reprinted fairly frequently, though. Medieval swords vary a lot, Nick.” He pointed a finger at him. “You might have seen a lot of old movies where it looks like they’re swinging clubs, but a well-made sword is supple, balanced, and extremely dangerous in well-trained hands.”

He thumbed through the pages, pausing at the tipped-in photos. “What about…”

“Getting to it. Thirteenth-century Passau swords. Passau steel was highly respected. Held a keen edge, well-tempered. Compared frequently with Damascene steel.”

“How could you tell if a sword was thirteenth-century?”

“Ah. You want that summary.” Joe booted up the computer, signed on, and spent a few minutes searching. Then he said, “Here. Tenth-century on the left, thirteenth in the middle, fifteenth on the right. Lemme zoom in. You see the differences?”

Nick stabbed a finger at the screen, but stopped himself before he actually smeared the monitor. “Tenth is pointed; fifteenth is blunter and wider.”

“The fifteenth is made to punch through armor. Heavier. A thrusting weapon as opposed to a cutting weapon. Armor didn’t become a problem until the mid-thirteenth-century, and that’s where the major differences are. Now, if you examine the parts…” Joe went from the computer to a sketchpad, and by the time he finished, Nick knew the differences in fuller and point and guard and was satisfied.

“You’ve done this a lot,” he said. “Don’t suppose you collect swords?”

Joe grinned. “Nope. Nor heads. I’ll stick to being a voyeur.” Then, dropped so casually Nick thought he might have slipped and asked the question, Joe added, “Amanda uses a twelfth-century style sword, though, not a thirteenth, and the one I’ve seen is new, not original. Made from Japanese steel.”

“This one is thirteenth-century, original, and missing,” Nick said.

Joe leaned back in the computer chair. He raised an eyebrow. “Doesn’t sound good.”

“The museum would like it back.”

Joe did not blink, and his expression didn’t change. “Wouldn’t be the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature, would it?”

But two could play poker. Nick cocked his head to one side. An image of Jehanne, her head tilted just like a sparrow’s, interrupted him for a fraction of a second. Then he said, “Some reason why it
“Because André Korda donated a very rare thirteenth-century Passau war sword to that museum about ten years ago.”

“André Korda’s dead.”

“Yeah, so they tell me.” Joe rocked back and forth contemplatively. “Run over by a Métro train; cut his head off. Hell of a way to go. Shame it shorted out about ten miles of the Métro track.”

“Umm… yeah.” Nick cleared his throat and decided not to risk further comment. Amanda hadn’t given him all the details of Korda’s demise. “So, this sword. Rare as in worth a lot of money?”

“Well, the gems on the hilt are probably worth fifteen or twenty thousand dollars to a jeweler, but any real worth would be to a collector, I’d think.”

Nick rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. “I don’t suppose you know any sword collectors, do you?”

Joe rocked his head back and forth, then steeped his fingers, resting the index fingers against his lower lip. After another second, he dropped his hands and massaged his left thigh. “In Paris? At the moment? Off the top of my head, no. But I’ll do a little research for you, if you like.”

“Please.”

“No problem. Sure you just don’t want a list of fences?”

“That I’ve got. Where the hell did you pick up a list of fences?”

Dawson grinned. “Hey, every bartender knows a cop or two. And every cop knows a bartender who can keep his mouth shut except for the right people.”

“As an ex-cop, I’ll keep that in mind,” Nick said. “Thanks.”

“C’est ne fait rien.” He shut down the computer, then pushed himself to his feet and grabbed his cane. “Come on, I’ll take you back up to the bar. Need to lock up here.” Joe limped back to the lift.

He stood next to Joe Dawson in the tight space. The other man smelt of soap, not of books, and there was no alcohol on Dawson’s breath. “You know, you never asked what Amanda and I fought about.”

“Nope,” said Joe.

“You’re not interested?”

Joe stepped off first and held the door. As Nick passed him, Joe said, “Ain’t my business. Doesn’t mean I’m not interested.” He motioned to the bar. “You want another beer?”

“Haven’t paid you for the first one yet.”

A massive shrug answered that. “I’ll put it on your tab. I know you’re good for it.”

That gift of friendship had been offered him without any quid pro quo, just out of Joe’s enormous heart. “Thanks.” Nick settled in at the bar for just a few moments of leisure, to mull over the new data. He let Joe put two more beers on his tab. Maybe there was something to being Immortal. He’d had more liquor in the last couple of hours than he’d had since the bender Jehanne and Adam had
woken him from, and he was by no means ‘in the vines of the Lord’, as Jehanne had put it. At that point, he glanced at his watch—

*Trade you a sword for a watch—*

Four p.m. Myers wouldn’t be on the phone yet, nagging for updates, but it was time to think about moving on. Moving on where? His subconscious brought up the logical answer.

*A museum.*

He straightened, and just as smoothly, Joe was there on the other side of the bar. “Taking off, Wolfe?”

“Yes. Thought I’d go do a little art appreciation.”

Joe nodded. “See you around, then?”

“Yes. Hey, if Amanda should stop in—”

Another nod answered that before the words. “I’ll tell her to give you a call. You do the same, okay?”

“You bet.” Nick donned his sunglasses as he stepped out into the street. For a flickering second, he felt something slide over his skin again, a recognition so far away as to be nothing more than a cloud passing. *How far away can I feel another one of— us?* Then it faded completely, and he set off for the Métro.

*** *** ***

The museum was a private one, not well-known. Myers’ card got him in. A severe, expensively-coiffed blonde Frenchwoman in an equally-expensive black suit directed him up the curving marble staircase and into the scene of the crime. She stood by the door, her face as mobile as one of the paintings on the walls, while he examined what remained of the display.

Glass and debris had been swept away, leaving only the stand, the case frame, and its forlorn abandoned exhibit note. Nick estimated the direction, glanced up at the ceiling, and then back at the door. Myers had thoughtfully slipped in a duplicate set of crime scene photos. Nick pulled the envelope out of the inside of his jacket and studied them, comparing them with the room.

On the surface, it looked like a routine smash and grab, aside from the security factors. It relieved him regarding Amanda. She wouldn’t have gone within a hundred miles of a job that clumsy. *In fact, she’d be pretty insulted Bert thought she might have been involved.* He put the photos away and crouched down to examine the stand. *Believe it or not…*

*Old habits die hard.*

He found a latex glove in the bottom of an inside pocket, along with a resealable plastic bag. He fumbled in the pocket next to that one and pulled out the pair of tweezers he still carried in their protective bag. The glass shard had been barely visible, but he was surprised that the police should have missed it. The next step—how to find out who might want the sword? He paused on that, racked his memory for his escort’s name, then switched on his ‘pleasant colleague’ manner.

“*Mademoiselle Duquesne, I’m sure that the Musée has a provenance on this sword, doesn’t it?*”

“Naturally,” she said. Her voice reminded him of icicles falling from the eaves. He might have been
intimidated, if her left eyelid hadn’t started twitching.

“I’d like to see it, if you please.” He kept his language strictly formal and his smile pleasant.

The twitch got worse. “Of course. Come with me, please.” As she turned, he saw her hand creep up to rub her eye.

The provenance turned out to be several pages long, with photocopies of various letters and grants and inventories. Nick used a little leverage, since it was coming up on closing time, and left the museum with a copy of the trail of the Passau sword before Korda, in an accordion file tucked into his coat.

He also left with Mademoiselle’s first name—Marie-Pierre. That would have been a nice feather to wear in front of Amanda, but at present, he couldn’t casually let her know that he’d wrapped a different Frenchwoman around his finger. Nick put that thought back where it might be useful and debated his next step.

Before he went too much further, he needed to do research. He needed to find out more about his new—species. Or whatever a scientist might call Immortals.

*** *** ***

Nick felt Jehanne’s signature as he stepped through the back door. When he opened the door of the downstairs kitchen, he smelled bread. On the island, covered by a towel, three loaves sat, beautiful and brown. An unused bread knife lay on the cutting board. He burnt his fingers on the bread, burnt them again on the hot slice, then burnt his tongue on top of that with his first bite.

But it was worth it. He juggled the slice until it cooled, then finished the piece. He argued with himself, then went ahead and cut another slice—chunk, rather—from the loaf before hiding the damage with the towel. The coffee was still steaming, although down to the last cup, so he fixed himself a cup and leaned back against the counter to drink it as he ate the bread.

If he’d done that two weeks ago, Amanda would have appeared suddenly in the kitchen, rustling as if she were busy, nosing around, offering comments, unasked-for advice and totally unnecessary ideas. All of which seemed to end up in solving whatever problem he faced.

The kitchen surrounded him, empty. Empty of Amanda. He blinked. The coffee turned his stomach, suddenly. A red haze surged up through his head like the front wall of a hurricane.

Damn it!

How could she just—dump Immortality on him, then vanish?

He lifted his fist. He stopped himself just in time, just before he knocked over the cup. Instead of pounding the granite, he put his hand flat on the stone, closed his eyes, and took several deep breaths.

You sent her away, Wolfe. You can blame it on her, but you drove her away just like you drove Lauren. His conscience added bitterly, And it killed Lauren in the end.

A high-pitched chirrup, somewhere from the floor, startled him. He glanced down and saw Jehanne’s grey-striped kitten standing at his foot—standing up on his foot, in fact, with one paw hooked in his jeans. “Hey, don’t do that, you little monster.” He unhooked the claws and scooped up the bundle of wispy fur. “Turn you into a pair of earmuffs.” He considered the kitten’s size, and amended the idle threat. “For a baby. Earmuffs for a baby. Where’s your mama and why are you wandering around the house?”

Darius blinked at him, then attempted to rope-walk his arm. Before his jacket got clawed, or the kitten skidded off sideways, Nick scooped him up with the other hand, rolled him over, and tucked
him in the crook of his elbow, claws up. Darius mewed, considered the position, closed his eyes, and let the mew develop into a warbling purr.

Jehanne’s voice, echoed as if she stood behind him. “Darius? Darius!” The echo meant she was in the basement. Nick thought of Adam’s assessment that Korda had been paranoid and grimaced to himself. More right than Benoît knew.

The door leading down into the main basement area was open. He ducked under the lintel and descended the stairs with the kitten still tucked into his arm. Halfway down the stairs, he stopped. Behind the barrels of wine was an opening in what he’d taken for a solid wall. He stepped through that opening.

Exercise equipment lined one wall. A man-shaped cloth dummy was tethered to the ceiling.

So that’s what Amanda was doing when she went down here.

Diagonally, pocket doors were slid halfway into the walls.

Well, you never did get around to exploring this place like you told yourself you were going to, did you, Wolfe?

The floor-to-ceiling closet disappeared back further under the house, as Korda’s bolt-hole escape had on the other side. Arranged on the walls he saw a plethora of weapons: swords, daggers, guns, and even, incongruously, a steel-ribbed fan. Jehanne, on hands and knees, her front half buried in the shadows, her butt high in the air, rummaged in the depths of the cabinet.

“Lost something?” he said, trying to hold back a laugh.

Jehanne sounded more muffled here than from the spy-microphone in the kitchen, out-of-breath and as harried as a mother with quintuplets. “Yes. My mind. Of everything I have lost recently, I miss it the most. Have you seen Darius?”

He took the last few steps down. “You mean this?”

She backed out of the cabinet, twisted around, and bounced up onto her feet. When she shoved her hair out of her face, she left black streaks. “Ah, there you are, mon diable petit.” She came to him, unembarrassed at being sweaty, disheveled, and surprised, and put a hand on his shoulder. “Thank you, Nick. How did you get up those stairs, monster? Shall I take him?”

“You need to feed him again?”

With her fingertips, she stroked Darius’ white belly. The kitten stretched, paws spread wide, his purring turning deeper and rumbling. “No. No, I’d just fed him before I went downstairs. He’s advanced to six-hour feedings and he took a little solid food from a dish this afternoon. A growing boy, like others I know.” She cocked her head to look sidelong at him, her wiseass grin teasing and unaffected.

No perfume, no makeup. Just—female and nothing else. A sweat-soaked tank top clinging to her skin, and unenticing sweatpants. No high heels, no sheer stockings. Her mouth was no more than inches from his, as she tickled the kitten’s stomach.

First he simply leaned forward, and then he put a hand on her waist. She smelt of musk, as if he’d spent the night in bed with her. Her mouth tasted of chocolate and coffee. Her fingers closed on his sleeve, and then she tugged at him. Her strength surprised him; he rubbed his palm up and down her bare arm, the little hairs on her arm like the nap of velvet against his skin.
Darius squeaked, complaining of being caught between their bodies.

Her fingers clenched; then her hand opened like a starfish, like the kitten’s paws, and she shoved him away. “Ah, God help me! Nick, give me Darius. He’ll stay with Sorcha if I put him there.”

“Jehanne—”

“Merde,” she said, her voice rough as a rusty file. “Do not say to me you’re sorry.”

“I’m not.” He sounded as rough as she did. His words startled them both. He cleared his throat, then repeated it. “I’m not. But I’m not trying to put you in a position where Benoît will—”

Jehanne put a hand up. He stopped. She collected Darius from him and tucked the kitten firmly in the crook of her arm. “Nick, it is not what you think it is. Adam doesn’t get angry with me that often.” She looked away from him and shook her head, but more as if answering herself. “He doesn’t get angry with anyone often. He isn’t abusive.”

“I’d call that encounter in the bar verbal abuse.”

One short, sharp jerk of her head disagreed. “I would call it a fight. So would he. We have fought, verbally, many times. I have won as many as he has.” She frowned and shifted Darius, tucking him under her arm this time. She scratched under the kitten’s chin as she picked her words one by one. “Adam does not willingly choose danger. And he avoids those who walk into danger of their own choosing.”

“He who fights and runs away lives to fight another day?”

Now she cast a glance at the ceiling and shook her head. “Save me from the testosterone. In a pissing contest, someone always gets wet. In a Challenge accepted, someone always dies. I don’t willingly choose danger, either.” A grimace added a comma. “In fact, I live on Holy Ground.” She glanced at the ceiling again. “Well. For the moment.”

“But here you are.”

“I am here because this is where I should be.”

“Just why is that?”

She stroked the kitten as she stood hipshot, with her eyes wide and alien. “I suppose because this is where Saint Michael tells me I should be.”

“And you always listen to Saint Michael?” Immortals are crazier than I ever knew. This one talks to saints along with being a friend of Amanda’s and some male Immortal who lives for one-upmanship. Except that—those wide grey eyes were like a net he’d fallen into, a net a fisherman might use to haul up a stubborn trout once it got into reach.

Her head swung back and forth, as if hunting for the source of a sound. “I have learned that it is better to listen.”

Nick absorbed that. At least she didn’t ask him if he listened to saints, or to God, or even if he believed in God—not that he did, any longer. If she had asked, he wouldn’t have been able to tell her when he had stopped believing. He went backwards in the conversation. “I shouldn’t have kissed you.”

Her eyebrows knotted, but not in a scowl. “I’m not the one you want,” she said, and the tone of her
voice made his eyes sting, as if he were a boy with a broken heart biting back the tears.

He blinked, then blinked a second time, pushing the image of Amanda’s face and the scent of Amanda’s hands away from his brain. “And I’m not the one you want.”

Her eyelids lowered. She shook her head. “This would be too easy for the both of us, and easier to regret afterwards.”

If Benoît had actually been in the room, Nick would have punched him. “Well,” he said, and glanced around the room for inspiration. “Don’t think I’ve ever been down here before.” He nodded at the cabinet. “That’s a hell of a collection.” Wonder if Benoît knew all this was here? Or if the information was in the letter Jehanne won’t let me read? He ran a finger over a brace of silver-chased dueling pistols, flanked by a Sig Sauer, a Uzi, and a Kalanishkov. Korda was one busy man.

She glanced at it, then, thoughtfully, tapped three different swords and a fan ribbed with steel blades. “These, I think, I remember Amanda using. The others—may be ones Korda collected from—wherever.”

He scoffed. “If he ever actually fought himself and didn’t send others out to do the dirty work.”

“Oh, well, he must have done so at some point.” Jehanne stooped and scooped up the sweatshirt lying next to the cabinet. She knotted it around her waist, into a pouch, and tucked Darius into it. “No one escapes Challenges forever. Holy Ground or not.” She reached out and tapped a long broad sword with a leather-wrapped hilt. “This is a claymore. Unless Korda was as large as you, he wouldn’t have used this.”

“No. I had half-a-foot on him.”

She nodded. “Something like this is better-suited to you. Amanda, now, uses the fan as if she’s known how to use it for five hundred years, not ninety. I’ve seen her practice. She is quite good, you know.”

“Yes, I know.” Nick stopped. “I mean, I’ve never seen her use those, but I’ve seen her— Damn. You know, this is more surreal than I imagined.”

“The claymore,” she said, and motioned. “Take it out.”

He hesitated, looked narrowly at her innocent face.

“I,” Jehanne said, “have a kitten to worry about. Take the claymore.”

He lifted it out of the holder. “Shit.” He hefted it. “This thing must weigh ten pounds.”

She shrugged. “Steel, no jewelling… probably not more than three-and-a-half kilos. Probably about the weight of that Passau sword.”

He tested it again, swinging it with both hands.

Jehanne rolled her eyes. “You hold a blade, Nick, not a club. Treat it with respect.”

“Ah.” He hefted it, let it lie at the length of his reach, then swung it.

She stepped back. “Better. Did you fence?”

“In college.”
A nod answered that. The grey eyes stared past him, as if she measured and faced an unpleasant task. “Fencing is not quite the same as dueling. And dueling is not quite the same as a Challenge.”

He stopped, with the sword still in both hands. This was not a one-handed sword. “What’s the difference?”

“Well, someone dies, of course,” with a shrug, said in the same tone in which she’d discussed making bread. “But—some follow the Code Duello. Some are older, and don’t. Some are younger, and try to cheat. Once a Challenge is accepted, no one else is to interfere. Challenges are one-on-one.” She glanced up at the ceiling, again, and shrugged. “Or they are intended to be one-on-one. You can’t take a head on Holy Ground.” Another shrug. “Those are the basics.”

He remembered smoke, fog, and lightening coming out of the sky; remembered Amanda bucking under the assault of lightning. “And if you don’t fight?”

“You lose your head. Unless that’s what you want, you’d better fight.” Darius bit her arm. Jehanne yelped. “Demon! I’m going to put you down for a nap.”

“Now that sounds like a plan to me.”

She didn’t move, though. He stared at the blade in his hands. She still stood there; he could see, in periphery, the small grubby gym shoes below the grey sweatpants. Another few seconds passed. Finally, he glanced up to meet her sober gaze.

“You need to work with the sword, Nick,” she said, in the same soothing voice that had told him ‘I’m not the one you want’. A red tide came up into his vision. The leather wrapping the steel beneath his palms turned hot. I never asked to be Immortal. “No.” He turned to put it back in the cabinet. “This is a pocket door? It pulls closed?”

“There’s a remote,” she said. “On that front shelf. You can put the remote on the table in the far corner when you’ve closed the door. Nick, you’re Immortal now. Things have changed.”

“Not for me. I don’t do swords.” He found the remote, and stared at the collection of deadly blades. Korda. I would have— Korda was different. The bastard who had Lauren killed was different.

“Nick—”

He pressed the button and watched as the door slid back into a solid paneled wall. “I’ll meet you upstairs. There’s no more coffee. Maybe you’ve got time to make coffee in between lecturing me on Challenges?”

Jehanne rapped him on the skull as she passed.

Nick jumped. “Shit!”

“You, mon frère, are much too young to be so impudent,” she said. She sounded so much like Mother Mary Clarence that he laughed.

“It’s from being a detective,” he said. “You get to talk back to anyone in an investigation.” He rubbed the back of his head. “For such small hands, you’ve got hard knuckles.”

She paused on the stairs, turned, and regarded him with a teacher’s lifted eyebrow. “I also have been a nun,” she said. “I taught a number of children who started fights and talked back.”
“I’ll keep that in mind.” He gingerly rubbed his head again. As she went out of the door, he pitched his voice so she could hear. “How many times did you smack a kid?”

“Very rarely. Usually older smart-mouthed boys who thought they hadn’t been overheard.”

He muttered, “Exit, stage left.” By the time he got to the top of the stairs, she had vanished. The smell of coffee dripping perfumed the corridor.

His papers had been neatly stacked on the corner of the kitchen island. He stopped to spread them back out, leaned over, and began to track the timeline again. The provenance seemed to stop where it ought to stop. Korda even had it through the war years—no, there were papers missing.

Jehanne came back into the room. He glanced up at her. She cocked her head to one side, then leaned over him, supporting herself with a hand on his shoulder. After a few seconds, she tapped the papers with her index finger. “What is all this?”

Amanda would have done the same thing. “Myers—my boss—wants me to look into this theft from the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature. Seems like somebody managed to walk off with a thirteenth-century war sword.”

Her voice lifted, taking on light and music. “The Passau war sword?”

“That’s the one.”

“Myers—would that be Bert Myers?”

Nick half-turned. “Amanda mentioned him?”

“Yes. She said when I shook hands with him I should count my fingers afterwards.”

He choked on a bite of his third piece of bread, managed to swallow it without killing himself, and then nodded. “Now that sounds like good advice. Amanda put a lot into that letter, huh?”

Another one of those shrugs that said nothing and everything at the same time answered him before her words. “Comme ci, comme ça. A bit.”

The microwave beeped. The fan whirred a second, then shut off as well. Nick took the cup out, set it down on the counter, and turned to rest his back against the edge. “You ever gonna let me know what she said?”

Jehanne’s eyes pinned him in place. “That is for you to ask Amanda, not me.”

“All right. I’ll give you that—” He left ‘for the moment’ out of the sentence, but put it in the tone.

Her mouth twitched, a Mona Lisa smile, then disappeared into dust.

*Change the subject. Reassure the suspect.* “How is Sorcha?”

“It’s superficial, as you said. A few days and she’ll be fine.”

He nodded, more a tic than any real response. “You said this morning you’d explain some things about—our kind—to me later. It’s later now.”

Jehanne blinked, slowly, like a cat, then said, a plaintive mew, “Coffee?”

“Coffee,” he agreed, and brought her a cup and the cream pitcher.
“We aren’t zoo animals, you know. I’m not certain we’re even a separate species.” She frowned, staring at the trickle of cream muddying her coffee. “Immortals,” she said, as slowly as her blink. “Don’t age. Don’t die, permanently. You’ll be the age you are now forever.”

“Or until someone takes my head.”

An equally slow nod answered that.

“Because there can be only one.”

Jehanne held up a hand again, interrupting, frowning. “I have heard that,” she said, “But only relatively recently. It wasn’t something my teacher ever said to me.”

Nick leaned back in his chair, staring out of the window. A taxi idled by, while a foursome on bicycle weaved around him, and an impatient young woman in orange on a grass-green scooter beeped and sped past the car. “What’s relatively recently?”

“A hundred years or so.”

“You’ve heard it, but you’re suspicious of the source?”

“Ehh…” She rocked her head back and forth, then shrugged.

“So it’s not true.”

“It might very well be true. I don’t know. I’ve been a little isolated from other Immortals.”

“Why is that?” He glanced back in time to catch her second frown.

“I don’t hunt. I’ll accept a Challenge, when the need arises, but I’ve never had a desire to hunt.” She set the cup down, added more cream, and then added in a little more stalling by stirring the mixture with extra care. “Some of us do hunt.”

“Like our new acquaintance Eyvindr?”

“There are more than him, but yes.”

“Why?”

“Why do they hunt?” Jehanne stirred the coffee again, frowning.

He prodded. She was offering him too much information for him to back off now. “Because there can be only one?”

A quick head-shake dismissed that. “Because of the Quickening.” She sipped the coffee, then cradled the cup between her palms. “Forget all the pleasures you ever had, as a mortal, Nick. Forget the little things—a hot bath, a warm bed, a succulent dinner. Forget the bigger things—success in work, success in learning. Forget sex. Forget orgasm. It’s nothing. Compared to a Quickening, those are children’s pleasures. The only thing I’ve found to compare to a Quickening is when I touch God. But it can become an addiction.”

“It’s that good.”

“It’s different, for each of us, like the signaux. I know what it’s like for me. I have an idea what it’s like for others. But I think—we are not all exactly the same. I think our understanding differs, and I am sure our experiences do.” She put the cup down, dribbled a little more cream into it, then stirred
the liquid with her little finger. She sucked the mixture from her finger, her brows still drawn together, still staring past him.

“And what’s the end of it? Why can there only be one? What’s the point?”

Another shrug did not answer. “Some say the Prize.”

“And what’s that?”

Jehanne shook her head. “Je ne sais pas. I’ve heard many theories. One is that the last living Immortal gains mortality.”

“What? All this? Just in order to be able to grow old and die?” Nick leaned back, and the stool rocked before he got his balance. “Jesus, what a hell of a… What a hell, in fact. Go through centuries killing people in order to get what mortals already have? Who thought that twist up?”

“It doesn’t appeal to me, either.” She put her coffee cup down and petted Darius. “As I said, though, I’ve heard other theories.”

“Such as?”

“Such a wide range that I think perhaps no one truly knows. Or that anyone who knows does not want to share the knowledge.” She sipped the coffee, and met his eyes again. “I believe there is a reason. I have no real reason for my faith, except that I find it intolerable to see the universe as meaningless. I believe, in fact, that there is a reason for evolution. But I do not expect to know the reason before I die.”

“That sounds as if you’re planning on dying.” It sounded accusatory, and he looked away. How can they be so matter-of-fact about dying?

“Ah, no. No, I assure you, I plan nothing of the kind.” She shrugged: insouciant, French, dismissive. “But so often life does not proceed quite as one plans, n’est-ce pas?”

“Tell me about it,” he muttered.

“No, tell me about this.” She tapped the file. “This sword—it was given to the museum by Korda?”

“So the records say. I’ve got some provenance that substantiates it.”

“May I see?”

Nick looked at her. “You’re really interested?”

“Yes. I love puzzles.” She paused, then said, “Well, love is not quite the correct word. But I find them fascinating.”

He smiled. “So do I. Here, look at this…”

For provenance, it meant both going backwards and forwards in time. To his surprise, she followed his explanations well enough that she anticipated the punch line before he did.

“Here.” She laid a finger on the page in front of them. “That’s where Korda got the sword originally.”

“This says Andrei Kordoff and that’s the eighteen-hundreds.” Detective Wolfe talking to the rookie, he said to himself, and winced.
“So that was one of the times he changed his name, you see?”

“Are you sure it’s the same man?”

Jehanne frowned. “How can one be sure of the dead? But the name is similar enough. Most of us change our names over the course of years, and it’s always easier to remember a name that is not so different from the one you know best.”

“That gets harder these days.”

“Yes.”

“Would it have to be him?”

Jehanne’s head jerked towards him. “What do you mean?”

“Couldn’t it be a relative? Great-great-something-grandfather.”

“No.”

Nick frowned at her.

Her face was alabaster: a statue frozen in time. “All Immortals are foundlings. All Immortals are barren.”

A spear of ice hit him in the heart. “Oh, shit. I quoted—Jehanne, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sound that cold—”

At that, he got the familiar shake of her head, followed by her hand on his forearm. “Nick, there are worse things than not having children. One of them is watching a child die before you do.”

“Yeah, I’ll give you that.”

“Nick…” It had that long, drawn-out sound of someone about to offer a lecture.

He drew away from her hand, eyeing her with wariness. Her hand hovered a moment, then dropped.

“If I teach you about Immortals, you have to learn more than what we are.”

The cold water chill returned. “Jehanne, I don’t—”

“You have to let me teach you to use a sword.”

“No, I don’t. I don’t have to do anything.” He paused, glanced down at the carefully outlined provenance, and added, “Except find this sword.”

She stabbed a finger into the center of the page. “When you find that sword, it will be in his hand.”

“Eyvindr?”

Jehanne gave him a ‘who-else’ look along with a shrug.

“From what part of the evidence do you get that?”

“This provenance, it shows us that Korda had the sword. He donated it to the museum. Eyvindr turns up looking for Korda and the sword goes missing. What else could it be?”
Nick groaned. “And they used to accuse me of jumping on a hunch. We don’t have any indication that Eyvindr is connected to the sword.”

“Here. They’ve traced the design on the sword to one presented to an Ingvarr Bjarmarson. Now, the sword design matches the sword design on this later known one, owned by a man surnamed di Bondone. He shows up, according to this…”

Nick pushed her hand aside, beginning to warm to her theory in spite of himself. “Yeah. He crosses Southern Sweden in 1658, and a couple of decades later Alexander Kordoff ‘is given’ the sword in Falun by Queen Christina. The sword is passed down through the Kordoff—okay, I’m wrong, in the mid-nineteenth-century, the name changes to Korda, and the sword follows the Korda ‘family’,” he formed air quotes and went back to the paper, “until he donates the sword to the museum in 1985.” He looks up. “Tax break, maybe?”

Jehanne’s eyebrow arched once again. The corner of her mouth lifted. “Is that a rhetorical question or do you really think I know about his taxes?”

“It’s rhetorical.”

She folded her arms. “In other words, now you’re guessing.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “God, you’re as big a smart-ass as Amanda!”

That earned him a gigantic grin. “Why, thank you!”

He glowered at her. Her grin brought up an urge to kiss her again, just to wipe off the smirk, but he held off on it. “That was not a compliment. Seriously, why the hell would you donate a sword to a museum?”

“It had become an impediment instead of a treasured possession.”

“Why an impediment? Immortals always have some excuse for carrying swords around with them, don’t they?”

Jehanne sighed. “Not necessarily. You can’t always get away with ‘It’s All Hallows’ Eve and I’m in costume’, or pretending to be a creationist.”

“A what?”

“You know, those Americans who like to dress up in fifteenth and sixteenth century clothing and bash each other with imitation swords made out of rattan and tape.”

Nick pulled back from her. “You’re putting me on, right?”

“No, I am not. Amanda introduced me to one once. She was a Baroness in her group and was studying the details of tangs in fifteenth-century Flemish swords.”

“Geez. And I thought the Civil War re-enactors were strange.”

“Civil War—?”

“Also known as The War Between The States. I’ll explain later, I promise. Why would he put the sword in a museum?”

“The War Between The States I have familiarity with. Maybe if you knew how to use a sword,” she said, “you’d have a better feel for what someone might think about swords.”
“Well… my teacher, Elek, preferred the feel of bronze to steel, but he was a pragmatic man. Steel
overwhelms bronze, you see. The first sword I ever held was supposed to have belonged to Saint
Catherine. At this point in my life, I wonder, but then I believed.”

“How do you feel about your sword?”

“Well… my teacher, Elek, preferred the feel of bronze to steel, but he was a pragmatic man. Steel
overwhelms bronze, you see. The first sword I ever held was supposed to have belonged to Saint
Catherine. At this point in my life, I wonder, but then I believed.”

“Really? Where did you find a sword belonging to Saint Catherine?”

“In a church,” Jehanne said, as simply as if he’d asked her where she bought groceries. Her eyes
widened. “Oh, Nick, don’t look at me like that. I assure you, the priest gave it to me.”

“Why would a priest give you a saint’s relic?”

She frowned at him. Presumably, he was asking questions she didn’t want to answer, getting too
close to things in her past she didn’t want to discuss. “You’re getting off the subject. What is there
about the Passau war sword that might make a man from a modern period give it to a museum?”

“He’s not from a modern period. He was born—”

Jehanne held up her hand one more time. “Stop. He’s supposed to be from a modern period. No one
knows he’s however many years old. Remember that most people don’t know about Immortals, and
he’d have as solid a cover story as possible.”

“Right.” Nick tapped his finger against the page. “Kordoff’s a Russian name. I wonder when—
and/or if—he actually changed the name.”

“Why?”

“Because one of the reasons to give something to a museum is to try and keep people from figuring
out that it might have been war booty.”

“Oh?” She thought that over. “Like World War II?”

“Yeah.”

“Would that be in there?”

“Hell, no. But I think I know where it might be. I need to get hold of Myers.” He stood up. “No, I
just need his computer. So I need to borrow his pied-à-terre.” He leaned over and kissed her on the
cheek. “You really are a doll, you know?”

“Nick!”

“Later, Jehanne. We’ll talk about it later.”

He grabbed his car keys and headed out the door. If he was lucky, he’d be spending the night at
Bert’s Paris apartment and that would avoid any further suggestions of learning sword-swinging. Or
whatever Jehanne would call it.

*Or Amanda.*

*** *** ***

With Methos somewhere else, Sorcha claimed his spot in the bed. Jehanne moved Darius’ basket to a
spot closer to her but out of the way. She lay awake at first, listening for footfalls that never came.
She couldn’t expect to hear Methos come back. If this went well and she went back to the abbey,
maybe in a year or two, he’d stop by, and say nothing about this.

But she had hoped to hear Nick climbing the stairs: she grew drowsy, the streetlights peeked around the curtains, and still she heard nothing.

Nick did not want to learn the sword.

Amanda had said as much in her letter.

*The only real alternative to not taking up the sword is losing your head.* Unless he, like Darius, chose to spend his life on Holy Ground. Nick Wolfe a monk? She sighed and rolled over onto her back.

Amanda would rather he not lose his head. Jehanne considered that, then agreed, *And though it’s no business of mine, I would rather he keep his head on his shoulders as long as possible. I’ve never had to coax a new Immortal to stay alive. Not until now.* She remembered, suddenly, holding Cassandra, as they lay together in the dark, and trying to soothe her. ‘*But at least in the day one can see things clearly. Unless, of course, it is foggy.*’

*Perhaps it will be clearer in the morning.*

She shifted again, closed her eyes, then resorted to recalling her catechism, one thing guaranteed to cause her to fall asleep. At the last, as she slipped across the barrier into dreams, she said a silent prayer. *St Michael, Saint Margaret, Saint Catherine,* he doesn’t believe in you, but watch over him anyway. She didn’t know whether she meant Methos, Nick, or both of them.

*She stands in a corridor, leading to a threshold, and someone blocks her way. The light is in her eyes, the hellish light of the flames leaping up around her, but these flames never seem to finally consume her.*

*Her sword moves in answer to a flash brighter than the flames. Blade on blade: the clash of metal vibrates into her shoulders.*

*No face intrudes on the light and the blade. She breathes fire; the heat flows into her blood, spreading out through her lungs into her throat, then surging into her arms, her legs, her fingertips and the soles of her feet. She dances on burning ground, dueling with the unseen. Riposte and thrust, the clang of metal against metal, fire bursting along the blade’s edge.*

*One two-handed swing, when her blade catches a second on bone, the blade shuddering as it turns and follows the parting between the vertebrae. The light flickers; a headless thing of flames falls and leaves only darkness where he stood.*

*Heat flashes at her back. The soundless shout of her voices warns her. As she spins, she lifts Saint Catherine’s reforged blade, and is no more than a second too late.*

*Drops of red fire spill down her arm, blue at their apex, and dissolve in blue flames. The cut itself heals within moments while blade against blade deafens her.*

*This opponent is green fire, brilliant and blinding. Her heart thuds into her ribs, leaving burning bruises, as if her heart consumes itself. Then, she swings, and this fire crumples, falls into shadow.*

*In the shadows, forms stir. She sees now, stretching back further than her eyes can see, a line of swords held by bodiless flames, each one waiting to gain a body, in the hope of gaining—something, something she cannot see and cannot imagine.*
And then, her opponent’s sword lifts. It is a narrow blade, not meant to punch through armor, but meant to duel, meant to slash. In an Immortal’s hands, meant to decapitate.

Thirteenth-century, the steel glinting in the flames. Something else glints…

The jewels. The crystal. The carefully-cut center stone on the hilt, which lays just above where the bearer’s palm would fall.

Saint Michael’s voice is stern, Saint Margaret’s instructive, Saint Catherine’s gentle: Remember the stone.

Morning came all too soon. Jehanne’s shoulders and back ached with strain. But Methos says the older you grow Immortal, the less you need dreams to work out problems. Twenty minutes of stretching and a hot shower made some difference.

After feeding Darius and taking Sorcha for a short walk, Jehanne drank much more coffee than necessary while staring at the wall. “Ah, bah,” she said aloud.

Sorcha lifted her head.

“Not you, bébé. You stay here.” She changed from work clothes into practice gear, took her sword, and headed into the basement.

If nothing else, dummy practice would occupy her and let the back of her brain think for itself. Not as useful as sparring with Methos, but the forms were still there. She worked on the forms until her arms and shoulders ached, working with sword in left hand and main gauche in right, then with sword in right hand and main gauche in left. Jehanne moved to the weight machine, forcing herself into a faster and faster pace. Sweat spilled down her face, soaking her shirt. When the effort of breathing became fire in her chest and knives in her ribs, she slowed herself, little by little, and finally sat down cross-legged on the cold stone floor. She shut her eyes, focused, and settled into the slow meditative breathing taught her so many years ago.

Another shower. The cool water gave her back the rest of her breath and most of her energy. Still three subjects under question: Nick’s future, a missing sword, and a strange Immortal who Methos preferred to avoid. I need to talk to someone else who knows Nick. Who might be able to tell me how he’s feeling now. Someone who might have an idea where I should start to get him to consider keeping himself alive.

Another cup of coffee. She needed, as well, to go out and pick up a few groceries, pay the bills that needed to paid, and then stop to order more of what Vincent said they needed for the bar. Nick might come back to the Sanctuary today—better to leave him a note. So he won’t think you’ve disappeared as Methos—

The pen tore through the paper. She blinked at it in astonishment—Was that me?

You might have asked him to stay, St. Catherine said.

I might as well have called a wild hawk to sit on my arm. Maybe have better luck with the hawk. Elek—Kronos hadn’t stayed when she asked him not to go.

And is Methos like Elek?

No. He’s not. Elek wouldn’t avoid a fight. Jehanne washed her face with cold water, then found a new pen and a new piece of paper.
What started out to be a simple two-line scribble turned into something else entirely. She stared at the page, then shrugged and left it as it was. Perhaps it would cause him to think about Amanda’s reasons for bringing him into Immortality. Perhaps it might cause him to reconsider a sword.

_Nick_. How many times had she known a new Immortal to reject the idea of learning the sword?

St. Michael, sardonic, said, _How many times have you known a new Immortal who was a police officer?_ Considering that he had become the patron saint of law enforcement, it seemed unbecoming for him to be sarcastic about police officers turning Immortal.

She read through Amanda’s scribbled pages again: tear-stained and the handwriting deteriorating throughout the missive. A list of names finished off the letter, sources and friends.

_Liam Riley, priest, Saint-Pierre._

Nick had mentioned a priest at Saint-Pierre. Interesting, to find out that Amanda knew others who followed a spiritual path. _More or less, in my case._

This time, St. Catherine answered. _Your best is all that God requires._

“And what I require—” Jehanne tapped her lower lip, then set about to make the animals comfortable until she returned. _I require someone who knows Nick Wolfe._

*** *** ***

_The sword weighs enough his shoulders ache from swinging it, from the impact of steel on steel. His ears ring with the echoes of metal clashing. Breath drags at his lungs like talons clawing to get out of his chest. He swings the blade left. A shadowed head falls right, rolls, comes to rest at his feet._

_White-blond hair stands out like a halo around her skull. Dark eyes stare up at him. Amanda’s expression is not at peace, as Claudia’s was, but faces him in fury, in pain, in fear._

Nick jerked upright. The sheets clung to his skin with sweat. _Third time tonight._ He sat up on the side of the bed, then raked his fingers through his wet hair. A red dawn bled through the gaps in the curtains.

The first head had been Korda’s… the second Jehanne’s. _Now this. What’s the fourth one gonna be? Mine?_

He stood. His head spun; he grabbed the headboard and shut his eyes. Once he could be sure he’d stand upright, he headed for the shower. Five minutes under scalding water helped his head. He clenched his teeth and flipped the water to pure cold, and two minutes of that woke him thoroughly.

In the back of Bert’s closet, he kept trousers and a shirt, along with shorts and an undershirt. He threw his last-night’s clothes and the sweaty sheets into the washer while booting up the computer and pulling up the _Police Nationale_ and the _Préfecture de Police_ websites.

Nothing new on the sword. Nothing about beheaded people being found in parks. He wondered if that was part of what Watchers did—dispose of unusual bodies before questions got asked. Out of curiosity, he browsed the back files and found a set of beheaded bodies from the 1920s that seemed to have never been closed.

Clothes and sheets went into the dryer. He checked out whether or not Bert had anything left in the flat that was edible.
The answer to that was no. A jar of American instant yielded just enough to make two cups of coffee, which he drank black.

He put the clean clothes away and threw the sheets on the bed. Time to find something for breakfast and start deciding on a plan of attack.

The ruddy sky was dissolving into grey fog over the buildings into a May sky that promised rain.

He made his breakfast on *pain au chocolat* and cappuccino from a *patissiere*. In a square of park shadowed by a empty church, he settled on a bench, opened his notebook in order to have a firm surface for marking up Bert’s printed list, and spread out the hard copy. The automatic pencil stopped him for a moment, but only because he remembered Amanda grinning as she watched him open the birthday present. A sterling silver pencil and a flip-cover Moleskine notebook, and he still carried both. *Get your mind on the job, man.* He numbered the fences Bert had listed, using a map as well as “Paris A to Z” while working out an itinerary. If anyone intended to fence the sword, it was a good place to start. Even if the thief planned to keep the sword, the fences would have their ears to the grapevine.

*Hell of a knot of metaphors there, Wolfe.* He stared down at his numbered list.

*Henri le Grosse,* near the *Canal de l’Oureq.* *Ear to the ground.* And the ground was where police work always seemed to end up, him covering cement and asphalt with shoe leather.

He finished with Henri, whose seedy rat-infested place stank of cheap beer, raw tobacco and vomit, and worked his way down through the next three fences on his list: two more men, and one woman who could have been Kate Moss’ stand-in if she were ten years younger.

He managed not to give her his phone number, but suspected he’d need to put his land-line on the answering machine for the next few weeks. He kept a wary eye on the street as he walked; this area needed caution when you walked, because you never knew what you might step in.

Four hours’ worth of talk, and all it had done was let him check off negatives. He needed a positive. One positive, just to give him the illusion he was getting somewhere.

Well, he’d get something if he weren’t careful, since his next step involved a shop near the *Place de Stalingrad.* If no gendarme stopped him and found his gun, he’d be luckier than he deserved, even with a permit to carry tucked into his coat.

*** *** ***

Jehanne shuffled through her wardrobe. She had brought one suit with her, a custom-made Chanel navy silk suit presented to her by Elek twenty years ago, and so rarely worn as to look untouched. However, like any Chanel, it was fashionable by virtue of designer, not by age. Her white lawn blouse, however, was new, a Christmas present from Amanda that had accompanied a scribbled note on being back in Paris from North Chicago. Jehanne tested one of Amanda’s shoes, not expecting much, and found what she expected: borrowing Amanda’s heels was as impossible as borrowing Amanda’s clothes. Since she had remembered stockings, but forgotten dress shoes, the navy flats she wore with her jeans would have to do. She adjusted her beret in the mirror, then set out for church. In spite of her quarrels with church doctrine, she would have sooner walked into a church naked than without a hat.

The Church of Saint-Pierre would not have made any of the guidebooks on Paris. Jehanne felt as if she’d walked back into Domrémy, though, as soon as she came in sight of its pleasant unpretentious façade.
Breathing tore at her ribs. For a moment, Mama and Papa and her brothers and sisters rose up before her eyes, so close she might have reached out and felt the woven wool of her mother’s skirt. The dress she had liked best had been the embroidered blue worn for feast days. She squinted against the sun. It made her eyes water. She blinked against the blurriness as she ascended the worn steps.

She dipped a finger into the font, crossed herself with holy water, and knelt in the back pew while the priest celebrated morning Mass. The signature ahead of her was stronger than that, but not as strong as others she’d felt. It sang in her head, sweet but sorrowful.

Amanda’s Liam was a priest and an Immortal. Saint Catherine’s soft voice told her, ‘He grieves. God forgives him, but he cannot forgive himself.’ She echoed the refrain, paused at the end to bow her head and pray as he passed her—a young man, with old eyes.

The church, morning mass over and this a weekday, held only herself and the other Immortal in his priest’s robe and scapular.

Her shoes echoed only faintly against the stone flags.

The priest turned. He smiled, but the emotion eluded his haunted eyes. “Daughter, let me remind you we stand on Holy Ground.”

“Yes, Father. I am not here to cause you difficulties, I assure you. You are Amanda’s Father Riley?”

Some warmth came into his eyes. “You know Amanda?”

She took Amanda’s letter from her purse and held it out. “She said I should let you read this. I think it will explain everything.”

He went through the first couple of sentences, frowned, and motioned to her. “Come out into the garden. We can talk there more easily.”

The garden was not much bigger than a five-thousand-franc note, but summer roses flooded the air with perfume. The priest clasped his hands behind his back, the folded paper fluttering unread between his fingers. He led the way to a bench sitting against a trellis wreathed with honeysuckle and morning-glories, the purple and gold of the flowers nodding as they spilled scent over the bench. He motioned for her to sit, and sat himself.

He read the letter, all five pages, paused to rub his eyes with fingers and thumb, then read through it again. The paper rustled as he restacked the pages, with the sound of the missing woman’s skirts. He ran a hand through his hair. “Amanda, Amanda.” He squinted at her. “It’s a kind thing you’ve done, ma fille, coming here on such short notice.”

“Amanda is a friend.” Jehanne shrugged. She put the letter carefully into the inside pocket of her jacket. “She would do something of the same for me if I asked.”

Liam glanced up at the bows of the trellis and the faintest suggestion of a dubious shrug twitched at his shoulders. “You have great faith in her, Jehanne.”

“Faith,” she said, with a glance at the listening heavens as well, “seems to be the one thing with which I am blessed in abundance.”

“Well, faith is not such a bad thing to possess.” Liam’s tone matched hers. “How is Nick? Obviously he understands what’s happened. How’s he handling it?”

Jehanne frowned. A wrinkle in her skirt caught her attention: an annoying thing probably from her
packing. She rubbed at it with a fingertip. “That’s what concerns me, Father. I met him only two
days ago. I need to know more about him.”

*** *** ***

Methos scowled. He was barefoot, sitting on the barge’s bar, one knee bent far enough to rest his
heel on the surface and his arm wrapped around that knee, his hair raked up a la early Billy Idol.
“I’ve never heard of any famous thirteenth-century Passau sword,” Methos said. He tapped his
fingers against the bar, in a machine-gun rattle.

“Don’t get your five-thousand-year-old shorts in a knot. How would you know every famous sword
out there?” Joe raised his eyebrows. A wash caught the barge and he caught his balance as the boat
followed the roll.

The riposte only earned a glare.

Joe grinned and continued with the next flourish. “And you’re all through Watcher training.
Nobody’s gonna test you on thirteenth-century swords.”

Methos ignored the bland bait. He rearranged himself into full lotus and stared at Joe. “And what
does a thirteenth-century Passau sword which is on Nick Wolfe’s radar have to do with André
Korda?”

“Korda was the one who donated the sword to the museum in the first place.”

Both eyebrows lifted, then drew down as his eyes narrowed. “You have any idea where Korda
might have got the sword in the first place?”

“I wasn’t the one researching Korda.”

“No, but you found out a connection with a stolen sword. And you researched him in the first place.
Isn’t that how you knew he was hunting Amanda?”

Dawson grimaced. He rubbed a hand over his beard. “Korda somehow ran down a fence Amanda
knew. Got what information he wanted, left him in the shop. Guess he thought he’d killed him. Rafe
lived long enough to talk.”

Methos rested his left arm across his bent knee, bracing himself with his right hand. His fist closed,
and he lowered his chin onto the prop. “And you know this—”

“Rafe had a meeting with a recruit that evening. The recruit found him.”

The old man turned his wrist and looked at the Watcher tattoo still emblazoned there. “So he was one
of us.”

A grimace: Joe’s lips pursed, as if tasting the words. Then he said, “Yeah. One of us.”

“What Watchers are getting a bit careless, aren’t they?”

“Damn it, I knew you were going to say that!” Joe banged a fist on his thigh, winced, and rubbed the
spot. “Just because there have been bad Watchers and Watchers with their own agendas doesn’t
mean the lot of us are incompetent. We had no reason to believe Korda knew anything except that
this fence knew Amanda. I had no reason to go looking for a donation Korda had made of a sword
until Nick showed up asking about it.”
“He must have been looking for her for some time.”

“He hit our radar about three hundred fifty years ago, according to what I pieced together from the Chronicles.” Joe relaxed a little, and leaned against the bar. “The connection with Amanda… That’s a lot later. We lucked into a set of diaries from Hong Kong, found in a box of papers belonging to a Watcher of Korda’s from before World War One. He’d inherited the previous ones from his father, and so on. This particular Watcher was Chinese and worked as a servant in Korda’s—school. That was where Amanda met Korda. And left him.”

“Good trail. Do you know every sword collection in Paris?”

Joe shrugged. “Even a retired Watcher needs a hobby. You complaining?”

*** *** ***

The priest frowned, the frown of all priests weighing the balance of what and what not to say. “I don’t know how much I can tell you which will be of use.”

“Father—” She pressed her lips together a second, then spoke more gently. “Please. At this point, anything is better than the little I have.”

“He’s a policeman.”

“Was.”

He shook his head. “In his heart, he’s still a policeman.”

“What does that mean?”

The letter, still in his hands, bent under his fingers. He looked away from her, frowned, looked down at the paper again. “He was taught to believe in the law. To uphold a code of honor which doesn’t encompass duels. Or Challenges. He is a good man.”

“I can see that he is a good man. He’s—” Jehanne frowned, rubbed the back of her neck, then rotated her stiff shoulders. “He’s troubled Amanda. He’s brought things to the surface—” She scowled down at the grass. “Has she spoken much to you of the time before she came here in search of him?”

He shook his head. “No. I could tell there was something…”

“It only matters in that it prepared the ground.” Jehanne sighed, then ran a hand over her hair. “Nick Wolfe had a partner, a woman named Claudia. She sacrificed herself for Amanda. Not knowing, of course, that death was—” She shrugged.

“And Nick is one of us.”

“Yes.”

He folded the letter, but did not hand it back to her. “He wasn’t ready for immortality.”

“Are any of us?” Jehanne met his eyes this time. “He wasn’t prepared.” Very few Immortals are prepared, but still…

His lips tightened. “He wouldn’t have welcomed it. He had no wish for our fate. You’re going to have to give him time to adjust.”
“Father, I don’t think he has the time for a leisurely decision on his future.”

He paused, closed his eyes, and breathed a prayer as he crossed himself. “God save us. Another Immortal? Already?”

“Yes. And worse. A hunter. He calls himself Eyvindr inn Viðförla, and I think he might know Amanda. I am rather more certain that he knew André Korda.”

He repeated the Norse name, his eyes listening to the sounds his lips made.

She said, trying to be more helpful, “I understand it means Eyvindr the Wanderer. You don’t know the name? Amanda never mentioned him?”

He shook his head. “I cannot help you there.” The Gaelic accent lit his voice with Ireland.

For a moment, the sound of it took her back three hundred years, and she pulled back from him with a shake of her head. No time to be caught into the past.

His eyebrows drew together. “Jehanne? Are you all right?”

“I’m sorry, Father—”

“Liam.”

“Father Liam.”

“Just Liam, Jehanne.”

She tilted her head and rubbed the back of her neck. “Calling a priest by his Christian name. Ah, that’s more difficult than trusting Amanda. Your voice reminded me of someone…”

“Were you in Ireland?”

Jehanne switched into the language that might have landed her in a Spanish prison. “No, Father, I was in Spain, in a cloister, and an Irish priest taught me to read and write English and a few words of Gaelic. As well as to speak it, comme ci, comme ça.”

Now he gave her back the letter. “You speak it very well. An Irish priest in a Spanish convent?”

She folded the paper carefully, then slipped it into her purse. “Our confessor. The other nuns spoke neither French nor English, much less his native tongue, and he was hungry for the sound of them.” She crossed herself, unthinking, and added, “He died of the plague thirteen years later, God rest his soul. He was a good man, kind to a homesick girl.” She shuddered, as the remainder of the memory swept over her.

A warm hand rested on her forearm a moment. “Tell me the rest of it.” Not a compelling voice, but a gentle one, an understanding one. One who didn’t have the memories Methos had, or the dislike of those memories.

“I found that Immortals could die of plague as well,” she said. “When I woke—” A pain pierced her hand; she glanced down to see her nails digging into the back of the other hand, and forced herself to relax her grip. “I have smelled worse things in my life, but not often. I dug graves for two days.”

“Then?”

“Elek came.”
“Elek?”

“Elek Koronel—that was the name I knew him by. He was my teacher.” This breath ached, scraping at her throat. “He became my lover. He was not a good man, Liam. God, I can’t ask for forgiveness for it. I loved him, and he was never a good man, but—I believe he loved me. He acted as if he loved me. He bought my way into the convent in the first place. Somehow he had heard of the outbreak, or felt my death, or something.” She knotted her fingers, smoothed the wrinkle again. “I dreamed of him. I was exhausted, and the disease came on me, and I died, but first—I lay somewhere between death and life, and I dreamed of him. I dreamed I called to him.” She opened her hands. “And he came to me. He helped me bury them, and we went away together.” The gold ring her brothers had given her glinted in the sunlight. She turned it, watching the light play on the gold. The ring Elek had returned to her the morning after she had dragged herself from the muck of the Seine.

“What about him reminds you of Nick?”

Put that badly, didn’t you? Elek’s voice said, mocking her. “No, Father—Liam. Nick reminds me of myself. Elek saved me. I thought God had left me, and Elek kept me from despair. I cannot let Nick simply—” She felt Liam shift before he cleared his throat.

“He has his own path, Jehanne.”

“And no one can choose it for him,” she said, a laugh bubbling from her heart. “I saw Star Wars in English. No. You are right. He has free will. If he wishes to die, he has the right.”

“But you think he wants to live?”

She twisted the ring again, the metal warming under her finger. “I think he needs to live. I don’t know if I can bring him to see that.”

“He is a Catholic.” Liam’s hands spread out. “Suicide is not approved of by the Church.”

Jehanne snorted before she could stop herself. “Forgive me. I—I love God. I have mixed feelings about His institutions.”

He interlinked his fingers, then studied them for a moment, as if seeking to find words in the flesh. “The Church is God’s, but it is run by men, and not one of us is perfect, Jehanne.”

“No. None are. But we—” she stood up, took several quick steps away, then came back to him and sat down once more. “We have chosen to belong to God. We should be better than ordinary men, Liam!”

*** *** ***

Methos flicked a smile towards him. “No. Just marking it down in my lists of things I never knew about you. So what do the logs say about the sword?”

“A fair bit. Korda acquired the sword about two hundred years ago.” Joe leaned back in his chair and rubbed his thigh.

“Acquired how?”

“We haven’t figured that out yet. That’s why all this is here, along with the information on your Eyvindr Immortal.” Joe flipped through the stack of pages on the bar, then pulled out a stapled set of pages: photocopies of handwritten diary pages with translations scribbled on the left. “You know how hard it is to find somebody who can read and translate original Dalmatian?” He paused, looked
up, squinted, and said, “Unless I should just have come straight to you.”

Methos shook his head. “Neither Ragusan nor Vegliot. I used to speak Illyrian, but it’s been a while. And I’m not going to get into discussing Phoenician. It’s not like I can remember every dead language I knew.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.” Joe handed over the stapled sheaf. “I do know you can read Italian.”

He picked up the papers, riffled the stack, and grimaced. “Worse handwriting than some of my students. I thought we were going to computers.”

“The computer geek’s never run across a tablet PC? You know, the kind you can write on?”

An exasperated snarl answered that. Methos held the papers down and out a little, squinting at the handwriting.

“Maybe you need bifocals,” Joe suggested.

Another snarl rewarded him. Then Methos mitigated it by saying, “I have known five blind Immortals, two near-sighted, and one who could shoot a robin off a branch a mile away. But that last might have been beginners’ luck. Though I wouldn’t tell Duncan that last one. He thinks he’s a marksman.”

“I’m going to tell him you said that,” Joe grumbled.

“You’ll have to find him first.” A sharp intake of breath said the old man knew he’d given himself away. He said nothing further for the moment, but read the material as if his latest dissertation depended on it.

“He’s disappeared before,” Joe said.

“How could Lorenzo di Bondone inherit the sword—never mind.” One of the gracile hands flipped the page over; the fingers did not quiver. “I found that.”

“Where did you meet Jehanne?” Duncan wasn’t going to get a reaction. Maybe a poke in another direction would.

A smile flashed and disappeared, a mirror spinning in the sunlight. “I see the di Bondones, father and son, were both foundlings. Interesting. Amanda introduced me to Jehanne.”

“Hmm.” Joe leaned against the bar. “Have you got back to the part where the first di Bondone—who?”

A nod interrupted. “I have now.”

*** *** ***

Liam’s warm hand dropped on Jehanne’s, holding her twisting fingers still. “Don’t you think evil would work hardest to corrupt those who loved him best? Wouldn’t it make more sense to destroy the institution from the inside while making us think that the attack was from the outside?”

“To undermine the fortress, instead of a frontal attack.” Jehanne considered it. “It’s a good argument. Are you saying then that you think I should leave Nick to his own path?”

“Ah.” His head bowed. His hand slipped away from hers. “I have given up the path of violence, Jehanne. I can’t assist you in this.”
“If he doesn’t take up the sword, he will die. Isn’t that either assisting in violence or in suicide?”

Liam coughed. “Are you taking up with the Jesuits, Jehanne?”

“Only a bit. It would be a true miracle for me to turn Jesuit,” she said, deadpan. She twisted the ring again: that nervous habit, one she should give up sooner than coffee. Liam glanced down at the ring a second time. A frown crossed his face, faded, then returned.

“I’m sorry—please don’t mind my asking, but might I see your ring?” he said.

Not until she handed it to him did she consider that he was, after all, a priest and might know more intimate details of French history than the average.

“It’s not new,” he said. He turned it over in his supple fingers, and his brogue sounded stronger than before. “I see it’s been mended. Did it come down to you through your family?”

The lie froze on her tongue. All these years and all these experiences and still it galled her to lie to a priest. “I—no. It was a gift from my brothers.”

“Because they believed in you,” he said, under his breath. “It wasn’t taken from you in prison at Rouen?”

“It was. Elek killed the man who took it. He gave it back to me when I—He had been waiting for me, there by the Seine, and he had my ring.”

“You are,” he said her name in English, “Joan of Arc.”

“I was named Jehanne, yes, and my father’s name was d’Arc.” She frowned. “Many people later called us peasants, but my father owned his own land.”

He said it again, in French this time. “La vierge d’Orléans?”

She bit her lip a moment, then nodded. “I am she they called la Pucelle.” After a second, she added, more softly, “Though I am no longer a maid, and I was of Domrémy, not of Orléans.”

“Christ didn’t condemn a woman for that,” he said, looking up from her much-mended ring. “Neither will I.” Then his hands shook. Sunlight caught on the gold, quivering in his grasp.

She caught her ring as it fell from between his fingers, and slipped it on her forefinger once more.

“The ring had worn, but not her finger. Her mother’s wedding ring had worn a thin line around her third finger. Not this ring, not for her.

“I beg your pardon. I’m a little—shaken,” he said. “I’ve never spoken to a saint before.” He amended that. “Not face-to-face, anyway.”

Jehanne crossed herself, then grimaced. “Liam, before God I swear to you, I am no saint and never will be.”

“But God spoke to you.”

“Through the voices of his saints,” she said. “So I believed.”

“Do you still?”

“Yes.” She inhaled, clenched her hand tightly enough that the ring bit into her palm, and repeated it. “Yes. I do still. And still I listen. And still I follow.”
“And still you carry a sword? Would you advise Nick, after all you’ve seen, to use a sword?”

The roses’ scent hung in the air, sweet and heavy as incense. In how many churches have I prayed over the decades? She rested her elbows on her knees, then leaned forward to rest her chin on her interlaced fingers. “Liam, I have been—” All the lands, all the faces, and so many she could still see when she closed her eyes. “I have been a nun, more than once, in five and a half centuries. Several times. I have been a teacher, a student, a nurse—now I am a doctor. But under it all, under everything I have done, every vow that I have professed, I have always been a warrior. I fight with every weapon I possess. God commanded me to be a warrior, and when he commands me to cease being a warrior, I will.” She held her hands out, palms uppermost, where the pressure of the ring’s edge left a fading imprint on her palm. “I can do nothing else.”

“Then listen to him now,” Liam said. “Give Nick his choice. I have no wish to see him lose his head, no more than you. But it has to be his decision, and you cannot choose for him.” He smiled, just a little, and added, “Even to please Amanda.”

The sense of urgency still chafed her. But she had asked for his opinion. “I—will take your advice, Liam.” She stood, irresolute, trying to decide her next step. Still more questions than answers.

Liam held out a hand to her. It was a working hand, like her own, not someone walled away from the world. “Whenever you need to talk, I’m here.”

“Thank you.” Jehanne took another breath. All in a rush, she said, “I know you may not be an ordinary priest, but—I would like your blessing, Liam.”

“My blessing?”

“Has another one of us never asked you for a blessing?”

He frowned, folded his arms a moment, then said, “No, I don’t believe I’ve ever been asked for a blessing by another Immortal. And I can’t bless the continuance of violence.”

St. Margaret’s voice murmured in the back of her mind. “Then bless me that I may find the right path to follow, whatever it may be.”

His face cleared. “If you weren’t trained by Jesuits, you’ve listened to more than one. Yes, I will give you my blessing that you find God’s will and fulfill it.”

Jehanne knelt, and there in the scent of roses, the Irish-accented Latin rolled over her head and soothed her.

“Come back and visit,” he invited.

“Thank you. I will.”

When she walked down the steps and into the sunshine, she glanced up and guessed from the sun’s position that it was not much past noon. Noon. Food. Her stomach rumbled sympathetically, and she grimaced.

‘Well, there’s nothing dramatic or heroic in getting hungry after I’ve been worrying about you,’ she grumbles to Elek, and he laughs at her.

‘Your body doesn’t have to be heroic. It just has to have common sense. When you worry, Minette, you forget to eat. It reminds you.’
She had bread and cheese and chocolate in the bar… But as she shifted to turn right, St. Michael spoke up, like a prod to a donkey. *Left.*

*You always send me into fights, you know,* she said to him.

*I thought you wanted guidance to the right path.* St. Michael frequently sounded a little smug. *As well as lunch.*

*Lunch. Yes.* Eat before she had to think. Eat because who knew what might happen, and it was always better to have something on your stomach before you had to fight.

*** *** ***

Nick was half-a-mile past the *Place de Stalingrad* before he began to relax. As he turned a corner, a man leaning against a streetlight post straightened and stepped forward.

“*Monsieur Wolfe. Bonjour.*”

“*Inspector!*” Nick shook hands as if meeting a friendly acquaintance. He and Inspector Cerveny had met over Lauren’s death—he still wasn’t sure whether the man was hostile or friendly. He hadn’t caused any problems, which meant nothing at all on either side of the scale. “What a pleasure to meet you on such a glorious day. Just out for your usual morning stroll?”

Teeth flashed in the dark face. Thierry Cerveny’s grip, as always, felt as if he wanted to clap handcuffs on someone. “Naturally. So you are ruining both my morning and yours by visiting the gutters of our city,” was the sardonic reply.

Nick shrugged. “I find it rather refreshing, you know? Getting out of the ivory towers, seeing the city with all its warts…”

Cerveny cut him off. “Mademoiselle Darieux isn’t taking the air with you today?”

Nick stopped. Cerveny stopped as well, waiting.

“No, she’s not. Mademoiselle Darieux usually prefers shopping to wandering around with me. I don’t recall her ever mentioning that the two of you were so close. Hasn’t she called you?” He watched the policeman’s eyes, looking for clues.

“Should she have called me?”

“You’re the one who’s asking about her, Inspector.”

Cerveny lit a cigarette and inhaled, then tapped off the ash. “You’re the one asking about a sword.”

“True enough.” Nick put his hands in his pockets and started walking, unhurriedly. As he expected, Cerveny fell into step beside him. “What does a sword have to do with Amanda?”

Cerveny gestured with the cigarette, pointing at nothing in particular. “That, *mon ami,* is a good question, isn’t it?” He motioned towards the nearest café. “Coffee?”

On automatic, he said, “*You buying?*” before remembering what city he was in.

A dark eyebrow lifted, and the policeman grinned. “Certainly. I assure you that this, at least, is a place which will neither overcharge us nor put arsenic in the drinks.”

“Well, that will be—good. Although with some Parisian coffee, I wonder how you’d tell.” *I wonder*
if poison kills Immortals once you are Immortal? Jehanne’s voice echoed in the back of his head: ‘even we react to poisons’. He supposed that was his answer.

Cerveny paused. “That says it all. It’s the main reason a gendarme has ulcers.”

The bells of the nearest church rang two in the afternoon as they sat down. The coffee was stronger than Amanda’s usual. Wouldn’t matter now that he hadn’t had any sleep… Then he considered it and frowned at the thought. He didn’t really feel like he usually did after an overnight job. I’m—irritable. Claudia would have said ‘cranky’. He had a suspicion that Jehanne and Amanda would have said the same thing. But he was clear-headed even without the coffee. He felt ready to deal with Passau swords and Inspector Cerveny. Just not with Jehanne and Amanda. “Well, Inspector, if you don’t mind my starting first…”

“Not at all. Please.” Cerveny waved his hand, dismissing any claim to the conversation.

*** *** ***

“All right. I agree we’ve got a provenance from Eyvindr to Bjarnarsøn to the di Bondones.”

Joe exhaled and leaned back. “And it only took two hours of argument. That’s a first.”

“Nobody appreciates a smartass, Joe.” One long finger ran down the page. “Ingvarr Bjarnarsøn doesn’t have a first death listed either?”

Dawson delved through the pile of paper, found another stapled section, and handed it over. “Page 23. A couple of passages from a skald’s genealogy. John Selguson believes he might have drowned and been washed ashore on Iceland, which is where he was known to have met Eyvindr. That we’ve got from the old runic records in the Norwegian Museum of Fisheries.”

“Eyvindr served with him on—” Methos looked up from the page. “How many names did they think the fucking ship had?”

“The archaeologists settled on Myhrmannar. The note’s on the back of the page.”

He ran a hand through his hair and rubbed the back of his neck. “Seriously, Joe, whoever TRS is, you have to get him to print, not write.”

“She. Rikke’s printing is worse than her cursive.”

“Wonderful.”

“Hey, she reads Dalmatian, Old Norse, and Basque and can translate them into French, Italian, German, and English. Don’t bitch.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Rikke?” Methos did not look up this time.

“Tekla Rikke Søndergaard. She’s not your type.”

He turned the page. “I’m not looking.”

Joe crossed his arms and nodded. “Ah, right. Jean somebody or other.”

“Jehanne,” Methos said, emphasizing the French pronunciation even though he knew Joe was ribbing him. “She spells it in the medieval fashion.” More pages flipped, and then he shook his head and thumbed back to the beginning. “Finally. The sword was Eyvindr’s, a gift from one of the kings
of Norway, but nobody knows which one.” He held up a hand, and said, “I sit corrected. There’s a lot of debate over which one it was and whether it was a king or a local war leader, but it was awarded to him. Then the blade was reforged in the thirteenth-century and given to Ingvarr Bjarnarsøn when he saved his mentor’s life—or in this case, I suppose head is the more important thing—in battle.” He looked up at Joe. “And?”

“Go to the next translation,” Joe said.

Methos eased his thumbnail between two thin pages, and read in silence. “Oh, that’s interesting. The inscription on the hilt says ‘he who owns this sword by right shall never lose a battle’. That’s an interesting bit of superstition. Immortals aren’t above superstitions, you know.”

“I have noticed.” Joe didn’t add a mention of the Methuselah Stone. The insinuation hung in the room anyway.

The Immortal tracked the translation with a finger, wrinkled his nose, and bitched under his breath at some of the reading. “Okay. I see. The first di Bondone took the sword—from Bjarnarsøn—in exchange for sparing Bjarnarsøn’s life, then took Bjarnarsøn’s head anyway, and disappeared with the sword.”

“It reappears on page 54.”

“When the first di Bondone lost his head to an unknown Immortal.” He held up a hand. “Don’t say it. I see here that he didn’t have the sword at the time. The second di Bondone—Piero’s ex-assignment, had it.”

“Don’t suppose you had anything to do with the first di Bondone’s death.”

The thin face jerked up to him, with that expression of indignant misunderstanding that would have convinced the savviest parish priest in front of a claque of misbehaving choir boys. With one hand on his chest, Methos said, “Me? Am I the only unknown Immortal in the entire history of the Chronicles?”

“No, but you are the sneakest.”

“I can’t be.”

“Why’s that?”

A grin wiped out the innocence. “You know who I am. However, in the fifteenth century, I was nowhere near Norway. From this, Amideo di Bondone would have done better to spend his time in Tibet. Where I was.”

“But Amideo didn’t lose his head in Norway.” Joe leaned forward and put his index finger on the paragraph at the bottom of the page. “Lost it in Denmark.”

“Denmark.” Methos went back through the pages. After a moment, he put them down and claimed the remaining papers. “Are these in any order?”

“Don’t show off your age, old man. Of course they’re in order.”

With a heavy sigh, the old man settled down to read. “You might make some coffee.”

Joe looked around at the space, still as bare as when MacLeod came back after Richie’s death. “Is there any?”
“I bought some yesterday. It’s where MacLeod used to keep it.” Sheering off from the subject, he added, “I’ve read some of Søndergaard’s research. She’s good.”

“Yeah. She is.”

“Not assigned to anyone at present?”

“Strictly research. Had a trainer who got too involved with his subject. We all know what kinds of things happen in those cases.”

A snort was the only answer.

“Jehanne likes the older spelling? She known Amanda long?”

“She’s not as old as Amanda. Known her quite a few years, I understand.” Methos licked his thumb to get a couple of pages to separate. “Thought you were going to make some coffee.”

“Getting bossy, ‘Benoît’.” In the bottom of a cabinet built into the bar, Joe found the coffee-maker, a sleek electric model with innumerable bells and whistles, a twin to the one he used in *Les Bleus.* Figures—since I gave this one to Duncan. He dug out the ceramic canister and was relieved to find it held ground coffee. “You buy it already ground?”

“I’m not the fanatics Jehanne and MacLeod are.” A grimace clearly showed that Joe had managed to pry out another bit of info that Methos hadn’t intended to release.

“Oh, so she does know MacLeod.”

*** *** ***

Jehanne’s walk took her into further populated streets, ones changed since her last time in Paris. But after a moment, looking around herself, she recognized a café, and then knew where she was. To think of a café being on the same spot as the one she remembered from fifty years past…

*I grow too used to how fast mortals age.* She sat down at one of the empty sidewalk tables and blinked in the overhead sun, then rummaged in her handbag for a glasses case. Sunglasses made it more bearable. She glanced up at the approach of the waiter, able to see him clearly now.

She ordered the *petit dejuner,* hesitated a second, then ordered mineral water to go with it. The waiter sniffed and stalked away.

The frisson of another Immortal swept over her skin; it crescendoed, nearing her, turned briefly from irritating to unbearable, then slid down to a low pulsing awareness, like the breeze passing over her skin. **Behind** her.

“They have a reasonably drinkable *Médoc* here, but I can’t say much for the *Borgogne Rouge.*” The voice tasted like an old red wine: full, laced with black pepper and smoke, with flavors of currants and the candied cloves she still chewed on occasion.

“Do sit down, *M’sieur,***” she said, without turning. “It’s a lovely day, isn’t it?”

His feet made little or no sound, a faint brush against the pavement. As the feet came into peripheral view, she marked expensive trainers as the reason. Black, innocuous, but good traction. Above the trainers, the uniform choice of Parisian chic—American jeans, but these also in black.

When he finally faced her, she made an assessment of the blue shirt and the blazer over it—and
topping off the black, aviator sunglasses. Yves St Laurent, if she remembered correctly. He didn’t lack taste or money. Many Immortals didn’t—she herself had never rejected any of the luxuries Elek bestowed on her. *I never questioned where his money came from. I never thought to question. I should have questioned. ‘Forgive me those things I have left undone…’*

The waiter stalked over again. Before he could offer the usual haughty question, her companion ordered in Parisian patois. The bottle of wine chosen won the waiter’s reluctant respect. He was almost civil as he scuttled away.

After a moment, the other took off his sunglasses and folded them before tucking them into the upper pocket of his jacket. Green eyes assessed her. Jehanne sipped her water, allowing the dissection. His face rather reminded her of Darius’ father, an old tomcat with many battle scars. A pointed chin, a broken orbit of the eye, and a barrel chest. The red in his hair always said Norseman to her, whether on an Irishman or a Russian.

He shifted sideways in the chair, draping one arm over the back of it. “You’re much prettier than I remembered,” he said. “I think it must be the sun. Dark clubs don’t suit you.”

“Thank you.” She weighed whether or not to take off her sunglasses. Either way it could show weakness. *Leave them on.*

His upper lip curled, showing a chipped incisor. His canines glimmered with gold caps, emphasizing the points. With that half-smile still hovering, he glanced away, toward the café door. She didn’t look away; she wasn’t caught by surprise when his head swung back and his eyes impaled her. “You needn’t thank me for the truth.”

She cocked her head at him, weighing the words. “Truth—is a matter of perspective.”

“Ah.” He leaned back in the chair, dragged his hand across his chin, his index finger following the lower line of his lip. “And whose perspective are we discussing here?”

The waiter returned with the bottle, showed it to him, uncorked it, and poured. Her uninvited host tasted the wine, approved, and the waiter poured her a glass.

Jehanne took a sip, then set the glass down. Before they had held her down while the surgeon cut the arrow from her thigh, Elek had forced wine down her throat, enough to dull the knife. This wine only sharpened her senses.

Eyvindr’s mouth twitched. “Do you approve?”

“*Très bien.* I drink very little, but even I can tell this is acceptable.”

“A Frenchwoman who doesn’t drink?” His smile revealed the chipped upper tooth, and he squinted into the sun. “Is there such a thing?”

“As surely as there is no one of us who asks questions without an underlying purpose.”

“Oh,” he said, and punctuated his words with another swallow of wine. “And I would have said you were too young to be so wise.”

The waiter brought two of the *prix-fixe* lunches, set them down, and withdrew after glancing at Jehanne’s wine-glass and offering one more audible sniff.

Eyvindr’s mouth twitched. He drank more wine. “I see Parisian waiters don’t dismay you.”
“If you show fear, they pounce,” she said, and let him have a smile.

“Ah.” He glanced away, but his twitch developed into a smile. His head swung back, as a bear would, scenting for prey. “Tell me, Madame, what do you do in Paris, besides managing a bar for André Korda?”

“I don’t manage a bar for André Korda.” Jehanne pursed her lips a moment, then added, “I’m a doctor.”

“A doctor!” He looked her over one more time, his eyes narrowed and his mouth tight. He shook his head. “You don’t look like Korda’s usual choice of companion.”

That had the sound of an explanation that started in one spot and ended up almost anywhere else. “I’ve never met him. I wouldn’t know.”

“Never?”

Jehanne shrugged. “Believe me or not, as you choose.”

He leant across the table; she could smell wine on his breath, the odor of it like to plums and currants. “Then where is he?”

She preferred the smell of good beer to that of tolerable wine. “Dead.” She caught the flicker of his eyelids. Ah, and you knew that, didn’t you?

*** *** ***

Nick measured out his words. “I hope you understand that neither I nor Mr. Myers intend to infringe on the Police National’s precedence in these matters.”

Cerveny smiled. This one was real. Or nearly so… “Nick—Do you mind if I call you Nick?”

“Not at all, Inspector.”

“Thierry.”

“Thierry.”

A sip of coffee put the question off a second; then Cerveny pursed his lips and drummed his fingers on the table. “The museum itself requested that we not interfere. They are afraid that if it becomes a well-publicized theft, the thieves will melt it down and remove the gems for separate sale. So they are offering rewards and hoping that private investigation might bring back their sword.”

“I hope it will as well. Mr. Myers and I are determined to remain under the radar on this.”

“And Mademoiselle Darieux?”

The cup handle felt hot. Nick noticed his knuckles whiten on it. He lifted the cup and took a drink. “She’s not involved in this investigation.”

“Or in this theft?”

Give a dog a bad name… “Do you have any reason to believe that she is?” On the other hand, in Cerveny’s place, he’d have been on Amanda’s doorstep, and finding that doorstep empty only added more suspicion.
“Do you have any reason to believe that she isn’t?”

“I do.” Nick examined the surface of the coffee, then took another drink. “She’s been out of the country since Sunday evening. But you already know that, don’t you?”

“Yes. I do.” Cerveny flicked a bit of ash from his lapel. “But I wondered whether you did.”

If Cerveny suspected Amanda of being involved in the sword’s disappearance, then he would have been talking to anyone near the Sanctuary. There wouldn’t have been much for him to hear; Nick and Amanda kept their occasional fights as quiet as possible. “I went on a binge Sunday,” Nick admitted. “But I knew she’d left before I started the binge.”

“A lovers’ quarrel?”

He could lie to the Inspector. You could tell him the truth. He could just imagine Thierry Cerveny receiving the news of his sudden immersion in the world of Immortality. It would be about the same reaction Bert would have. Get out the straightjackets, guys. “That’s a fairly accurate description.”

“She has quite an explosive reaction to a lover’s quarrel, doesn’t she?”

“You think this is explosive?” Images of glass and lights shattering burst in his head. Nick laughed. “Believe me, this was nothing near as explosive as she can get.”

Cerveny offered an insouciant Parisian shrug. “You, after all, do know her much better than I.”

“I know her record’s clean for the past ten years. Here and in the States.”

“True enough. We only have her listed as a person of interest.” The flic leaned forward. “We are both police officers, still, Nick. It’s not something you give up any more than a true soldier gives up soldiering. You tell me. Do you think this sword was stolen by thieves bent on selling it?”

“Thief.”

“You feel that?”

“I had a look at the site.” No need not to admit that. “The evidence suggests only one person, to me. What do you think?”

“I agree.” Cerveny’s blue eyes narrowed. “Do you think that person took the sword in order to sell it?”

Nick frowned at the dregs of his coffee. He motioned to the waiter, who sauntered out with fresh cups. When the waiter was no longer in earshot, he said, “I can’t see him being able to fence it on the open market. It’s too unusual. He might decide to melt it down, might pull the jewels and sell those separately.”

“Maybe.” The Frenchman leaned back in his chair again. “Do you mind if I smoke? I know you Americans don’t care for cigarettes…”

“That’s just the advertisements. Don’t ever believe them. Americans in general smoke.” Nick shrugged. “I don’t—but I don’t care whether you do or not.”

A grin answered.

*Trying to irritate me, huh?*
Cerveny rolled the cigarette on his tongue, lit it, and inhaled as if it were his first of the day.

_Dying for a nicotine fix._

“I don’t think you’re going to find your treasure among these _saluds_,” said Cerveny, on an exhale of smoke. “The sword is too unusual. You want someone more—high-class.” He pulled a notebook from his breast pocket, thumbed through it, then ripped out a few pages. He slid them across the table. “Check with these people. If they don’t know where the sword is, they’re eager to find out.”

“I appreciate the help and all, but—”

“Why? Simply, Nick, I am a policeman and, although you are not now, you have been an enforcer of laws. The important thing here is that you are no longer a _gendarme_. Moreover, you are American, the companion of a—” He coughed, then said, “—woman of unusual talents, although none of them proven against her, and possibly in league with others who might be interested in the sword.”

“In other words, they won’t talk to you, but they might talk to me.”

“Exactement.”

“That’s a reasonable conclusion. Okay. I’ll keep you informed of anything I find.”

“I appreciate that.” Cerveny offered his hand, formally.

Nick accepted it, just as formally.

The Frenchman insisted on paying the bill, and they went their separate ways.

The addresses on the three sheets were in a much more elegant part of the city. Nick rubbed his chin. _Go back, shave again, and change into a suit and tie._

He paused for a second, in the middle of the street, until a passerby jostled him. He automatically slapped the boy’s hand away. “I don’t keep my wallet there, kid. Scram.”

The first name on the last page was Jade Ling Yan. So Jade was still in Paris. That might be useful. As long as she didn’t start trying to pick him up again. However...

_Okay, a shave. Why the hell doesn’t being an Immortal cure having to shave? _ Then put something solid on his stomach before he started back out to pound the pavement. More food and less coffee, and he’d get rid of this damn headache.

Then he’d tackle Cerveny’s suggestions.

*** *** ***

Silence owned the room until the coffee started to drip and the water bubbled. Methos said, “There’s cream in the refrigerator, if you’ve started taking it.”

“I haven’t.”

“Jehanne does.”

Joe cocked his head to the side, measuring the distance in the old man’s tone. “MacLeod doesn’t, as I recall.”
“No, he doesn’t. And he doesn’t know Jehanne.” Methos ran a hand over his head and a smile twitched at the corner of his mouth. “One of the few Immortals I have known recently who can say that about our ubiquitous Highlander.”

Joe got out the coffee mugs and poured the coffee.

With grace but no warning, Methos slid off the bar, snagged the full mugs, and carried them across to the table. Joe turned to get the papers. Methos wordlessly but firmly removed them, then plopped them on the table.

The cane slipped a little on the newly-polished floor, but Joe caught his balance and worked his way down the shallow steps and across to the table. As he braced himself on the table, he looked sidelong at the other man. “Planning to introduce them at some point?”

That earned him a mocking smile. “Have to find the man first, won’t I?” Methos glanced up and watched until Joe sat down. Then he sat down himself. “I won’t insult you by offering sugar.”

“Thank you. That I’d save for my mama’s coffee.”

“May I ask why?”

“Chicory,” Joe said. “Swore once I got out of the bayou, I’d never touch Cajun coffee again.”

“Chicory.” Methos cocked his head to one side and his eyes drifted with the past. “During World War Two, tea was the greatest lack I remember.”

“Where were you?”

“China at first. Burma later.”

Coffee slopped over Joe’s fingers. He winced and set the mug down. Methos reached out a long arm and grabbed a dust rag from the windowsill to mop it up.

“Yes. That Burma. I’ll tell you later, I promise.”

“Diary entry maybe?”

“You don’t want to read it,” the old man said.

“I was in Vietnam, remember? There ain’t much left to shock me.”

He got the dark eyes directly, no pretense of the slouching grad student. An alley opened in Methos’ eyes, the unlit darkness of someone who carried a mental scale for evil. Methos said, “True enough. This doesn’t top anything you already know about me.”

“Whose side were you on?”

Methos smiled. Ice rattled down Joe’s spine. “My own, Joe. I’m never on any other side.”

He hated that sarcastic nastiness in the old man’s voice. Loathed the attitude, the insistence on being nothing but an opportunist. “Maybe that was true once.”

The smile faded. Methos’ eyes narrowed. His lips thinned a moment. When he spoke, his voice was not at all the voice Joe associated with the old man. Maybe, at last, he was hearing the Methos that lay under all the other masks. “What makes you think it’s different now?”
“Our strange Immortal is here; already had one go at Nick—or Jehanne. Who knows which?” Joe leaned back in the chair. “And you, my friend, are still here. She doesn’t know it, and she doesn’t know your new field of research, but you’re still here.” He shrugged. “So am I. So—” he gestured at the array of papers, “are these. From Watcher archives. Plus you’re not doing a new dissertation, and I’m not training you.”

At that, Methos set down his cup. The harshness in his voice vanished. “Damn it. I shouldn’t be asking you…”

He shook his head. “Don’t even start with me. You’re too old to start having scruples. I did choose sides. I chose sides longer ago than I wanted to admit. The only reason the wrong side doesn’t use our advantages is that they don’t know about them.”

“Yet.” Said with a lifted eyebrow, it reeked of cynical amusement.

“Some things I still pray about.” Joe nodded at the stack of papers.

Methos took another swallow of coffee. “Symmetry. Such an overwhelming delight when nature provides us with it. This symmetry gives us a few possibilities.”

“Like the di Bondonis and Korda?”

“Don’t forget our friend Eyvindr.”

Joe reared back. “What’s with this ‘our’ shit?” He put on a glower. “Listen, I never even met the guy.”

“Lucky you.”

“What do you think Eyvindr inn Viðförla has to do with the sword?”

Methos’ eyes opened as wide as a drag queen’s. “Now, Joe, don’t try innocence with me. I know you too well. I think he stole the sword, of course. Don’t you?”

“Why in the hell would he steal a seven-hundred-year-old sword?”

“Sentiment? Revenge? I don’t know yet, Joe. I’m still working on that on my end.”

“Which is your subtle way of suggesting that I work on it on my end?”

“Only serpents are subtle. I am merely suggestive.” Methos tapped his finger against his nose. “But I’ll bet you we find that Eyvindr killed Lorenzo di Bondone. And Amadeo to boot.”

“Now you’re just guessing.”

“You get Piero to give you a description. Someone in the Watchers has to be able to do a composite. If the picture matches my memory of the man, then we’re one step further.”

*** *** ***

“Perhaps we should start over,” Eyvindr said. He refilled both their glasses, although hers was less than a quarter-emptied. “You have the advantage—I’ve already offered you my name.”

“So you have.” She took another sip of the wine. After a few seconds, she said, “Jehanne.”

“Jeanne.” He drank wine, staring off into the distance. After a moment, he roused himself. “A pretty
name; I’ve known several Jeannes over the years.”

“Yes, a common name.”

“But still pretty.” He let the corner of his mouth lift. “Fitting for its bearer. Better suited to a nightclub, perhaps, than a dark alley.”

She blinked, waiting for something beyond mere words. The silence dangled as they ate.

Eyvindr wiped his mouth, then folded his napkin and laid it next to his plate. “I would be very interested to know the circumstances in which Andrusha Kordoff died.”

“I am sorry, but I am not able to enlighten you.” Amanda had said that she had taken Korda’s head, but not the exact details of the matter. Saint Margaret murmured deep in her skull, like a single wing fluttering. Jehanne ignored it, focusing on the hostile in front of her.

He swirled the wine in his glass, staring into it. “Not one of your successes?” His eyes flicked up on his final breath.

“No.”

“I’d think you’d take some pride in it. He was far older than you, I suspect, and not an easy man to best.”

“There are very few deaths I would take pride in, m’sieur. Perhaps I haven’t the taste for it.”

“Perhaps you haven’t had time, Madame Darieux.”

A twitch hit her shoulders; she blinked. She should have paid more attention to the warning.

A different emotion twitched his mouth. “Not Madame Darieux, who owns the Sanctuary?”

The sun blazed down on them, but behind her sunglasses the cool welcoming darkness gave her a veil. The truth is always a dangerous matter. “No, I am not Amanda Darieux. Does that matter? I stand in her stead at the Sanctuary.”

“But you did not take his head.”

Why the emphasis? “Does that matter?” Saint Catherine added her voice to Saint Margaret’s, but Jehanne pushed the clamor aside, searching for something in the eyes of the man sitting across from her, with the sun at his back.

“Have you taken others?”

She narrowed her eyes. “I’m no novice, no.”

“Madame Darieux’s?”

Now, Saint Michael spoke, at last: Gently, gently, catches the hawk. “No.”

He propped his chin on a fist. “Could you take her?”

“No,” she said, not considering the answer, but giving him the first thing on her tongue. It was possible she could win a Challenge against Amanda, but she would not try.

“So you remain here to stand in her stead and take her risks?”
Here it comes… She couldn’t tell whether the whisper was St. Michael or a memory of Elek’s voice, but it bit into her with a hunter’s edge. “If need be.”

He refilled their glasses once more. “It needn’t be.”

She dropped her eyes to her glass. After a moment, she lifted it and drank. The liquid stank of alcohol and tasted worse. “Things are as they are.” The sun burned hot against her face, but her arms prickled with cold.

“They could be better. You could have the Sanctuary to yourself.”

Jehanne looked at him through her eyelashes. “Is this a fantasy or a prophecy, m’sieur?”

Eyvindr choked on his wine. It seemed more as if she’d jarred him than as if he were amused… “Call it an offer. You can assist me with my problem, and I can assist you with yours.”

Now she met his eyes directly. “And your problem?”

“Tell me where I can find Amanda Darieux. And I’ll remove her from your life.”

Jehanne leaned across the table. “And why would you do that for me?”

Two fingers settle on the back of her hand, scorching as the sun. “Because I believe Andrusha Kordoff lost his head to Amanda Darieux, and therefore, her head belongs to me.”

*** *** ***

He felt nothing when he stepped into the Sanctuary. Not entirely true: a frisson of something slid over his skin, like air pumped out by an air-conditioner, as he stepped through the door. But the sense of Jehanne, the seconds that tasted of cloves and were scented of old forests and fresh wind—that wasn’t to be found. He pushed at that sense, not exactly sure what he did, but it came back to him empty. No other Immortal in the building.

She didn’t say anything about going out this morning, when I left last night… He grimaced. I didn’t stop to let her, did I? He figured the kitchen would hold any clues, and headed there first.

The room smelled of soap. The coffeepot stood upside down on the drain board, and his papers once again sat in neat stacks on the center island.

In the center of the island, a scarlet mug held down a half-sheet of thick white unruled paper.

Jehanne’s writing was neat, without flourishes, clear and precise. Nick, I’ve gone out to run a few errands. Will be back in a few hours. Below that was several lines of—poetry? Yes, poetry. It had no name, but she had written below it: C .S. Lewis is one of the English authors I do know well.

Nick knew The Screwtape Letters. He didn’t know this. He had hated poetry in school, having to dissect each line and each rhythm and interpret the author’s intent and the allusions and the scansion…

All this is flashy rhetoric about loving you.
I never had a selfless thought since I was born.
I am mercenary and self-seeking through and through:
I want God, you, all friends, merely to serve my turn.
Peace, re-assurance, pleasure, are the goals I seek,
I cannot crawl one inch outside my proper skin:
I talk of love—a scholar’s parrot may talk Greek—
But, self-imprisoned, always end where I begin.
Only that now you have taught me (but how late) my lack.
I see the chasm. And everything you are was making
My heart into a bridge by which I might get back
From exile, and grow man. And now the bridge is breaking.
For this I bless you as the ruin falls. The pains
You give me are more precious than all other gains.

[19]

Nick blinked and stared at the wall. It didn’t help. He scrubbed the back of his hand across his eyes, then blinked several more times before his vision cleared. His hand closed on the paper. He threw it, crumpled, into the wastepaper basket and took the stairs up to his apartment.

Waste of time, thinking about Amanda. Thinking about being Immortal. Thinking about someone as straightforward and quiet and gentle as Jehanne—Jehanne, who’d said she’d been a nun!—slicing people’s heads off with swords. He stopped in the bathroom and took out the razor.

Well, where he had been the stubble wouldn’t have raised any notice. Among more rarified company, though… He turned on the faucet.

His best suit was at the cleaners’. He’d settle for the second-best, the shirt Amanda’d given him for Christmas, and shoes instead of boots.

*** *** ***

“All this, simply revenge because she took his head before you could?” Jehanne pulled back from him. “Oh, come now, you can’t expect me to believe a story like that.”

Another smile slid over his mouth and disappeared into his eyes. “Revenge? No, that’s the wrong word. Let’s say—provenance.”

Provenance? Nick had mentioned provenance, but surely that made no sense here— “Providence?” She hazarded a guess.

He shook his head. “Provenance. Your God has nothing to do with this.”

Saint Catherine answered through her lips. “God has to do with everything, m’sieur.”

“Ah, but the Devil is in the details. Isn’t that what they say?”

“Oh, some. Others have said that God is in the details. I think you spin me a fantasy. I am not that young.” Provenance. What would provenance have to do with his killing Amanda? She stood, pulled out her wallet, and thumbed out the necessary francs. The wind from the street ruffled the notes; she set her wineglass on them. “And simply because Amanda is not present does not mean she took this Korda’s head.”

“But you have said you did not,” he said, softly, the words falling like feathers, twisting in the breeze. “Do you say that she did not?”

Jehanne stared him in the eyes; the little hairs bristled on the nape of her neck. “I say she did not.
You, m’sieur, are on a fool’s errand.”

Leaving required walking around him. As she passed him, he twisted in his chair, and caught her wrist, as he had the other night.

Jehanne looked down at him, measuring the violence under his surface against his need to remain unexposed. The sun blazed down against her skull. A sudden stiff breeze dislodged her hat. She grabbed it before it flew too far.

His green eyes widened. “You said fantasy or prophecy. Do you believe in prophecy, mademoiselle?”

Again, a question out of nowhere. “I have known prophets. I have known those who claimed to be prophets. What do you mean?”

“I took a priest’s head once,” he said. He leaned back a little, his eyes narrowed against the daylight’s glare, staring into her face. He seemed, though, not to see her at all. “Before I did, he told me that I would lose my head to a woman clothed in the sun.”

Amanda? Does he mean this priest prophesied that Amanda would kill him? “It is a line from Revelations,” Jehanne drew the words out, tasting them.

“Twelve, verse one, yes. I looked it up,” he said. “And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. What do you think of that, ma cherie Jeanne?”

He wore a diamond in one ear. On his right hand he wore a silver ring carved with ravens. Jehanne felt her saints around her, waiting. She let the corner of her mouth twitch up. “That if their prophecies disturb you, you should abstain from taking priests’ heads, m’sieur Eyvindr.”

He dropped her hand. “Think over my offer. Think it over very carefully—we have all the time in the world, for the present.”

*** *** ***

“Sure you won’t go ahead and spend the night? There is more than one bed.”

Joe stretched. “Thanks, but I’ve already let you drink me under the table one night. It might even wound my ego if I didn’t know you could drink MacLeod and four other Immortals under it at the same time. And I do still have a bar to run. Simone will open for me, but I should be there to suffer through Amateur Night.”

Methos studied the stretch. Joe’s limp seemed a little more pronounced than when he’d come in; sign that the chairs were even less comfortable than he’d thought on first seeing them. Time to buy different chairs, if I’m going to cultivate Dawson’s insight. “All right. When you hear from Piero, don’t forget what I said about getting a description.”

“You think identifying him for sure will get us anywhere?”

Methos threw up both hands. “Hell. At this point, it would give us something more than we’ve got, and that’s nothing to write home about.”

“Right. You got it.”

*** *** ***
Jade lived in the thirteenth arrondissement: in fact, according to Paris A to Z, on the northern edge of it. Nick examined the map, measuring the distances, and at last settled on the Saint-Marcel stop of the fifth line instead of the Gare d’Austerlitz. Better than trying to find a place to park around there where he wouldn’t lose the bike or Amanda’s overpriced Fiat.

The sun was beginning to set, bleeding orange and red over the Paris skyline.

The wine seller wrapped the magnum as if it were a baby, tucked it carefully into a bag, and handed the bag over with reverence. Reasonably so, too—it cost almost as much as Amanda’s last tune-up on the convertible.

Even in his second-best suit, with a bagged bottle of champagne, he got no notice on the Métro. Parisians ran neck-and-neck with New York City where blasé was concerned. He stepped off the train, oriented himself, and started looking at house numbers. Most of these were converted businesses; one, a brick warehouse, appeared to have been converted to apartments.

He felt a frisson of Immortality across his skull, distant enough that he suspected it might be Jade. It would at least mean he was on the right street. I hope.

What he wanted turned out to be the end building of a row of townhouses. One or two of the others looked in need of major renovations, but the stoop on this one was new, brick and stone, with a beautifully scrolled railing. That signal of another Immortal swept over him again. Nick took a breath, then rang the bell. Hope she’s here and alone.

Nothing happened for a minute or two. Nick rang the doorbell a second time, stepped back, and looked down at the magnum of champagne tucked under his arm.

After this ring, he heard heels tapping on some hard surface. He amused himself by trying to guess if it were marble or wood. A sudden heat like a blast of summer air on exiting an air-conditioned room hit his skin. Another Immortal. If not Jade, then someone with her.

You're assuming again.

He braced himself.

A pinpoint of light flashed in the door’s peephole, and then metal rasped on metal: bolts drawing back.

“Nick! What a marvelous surprise! What are you doing out there? Come in here at once—” Jade yanked him through the door, then shut it after him. Her mouth twitched into a smile she kept trying to smooth out. “Is that for me? How thoughtful— When did it happen?”

He took a deep breath. Well, among Immortals, you can’t exactly be incognito, can you? “Ahh… About four days ago.” Her hair was now cut short, and smoothed into a chic helmet. She wore a short-sleeved scarlet cheongsam—slit up to just below her breasts on either side—over wide-legged black slacks, emphasizing her slender build.

“Ooh. So long? Amanda hasn’t even thrown you a party yet?" Nick snorted. He didn’t mean to do anything that undignified, but Jade and Amanda had that effect on him. “It’s not something I’m interested in holding a party for, Jade.”

“Then it’s up to us to do it for you.”

He managed to hold her off long enough to put the bag of swaddled champagne into her arms. That
kept her from putting him into her arms. “No. Really. Believe me, I’m not into celebrations.”

“No what have we here?” She pulled out the magnum, then removed the layers of wrapping. “Laurent-Perrier Grande Siècle. Ooh, very classy.” Jade rested one hand on her hips, her scarlet fingernails stains against the black trousers. “Weren’t expecting this development, were we?”

“What’s all this ‘we’ you’re tossing around? Saying you weren’t expecting this development—or you were?” Did all the damn Immortals in his damn life know that he was in danger of becoming Immortal? Why the hell hadn’t anyone told him before it happened?

Her eyes opened wide. “Easy there, Nick. You are a little touchy this evening, aren’t you?” She glanced at the closed door. “Amanda’s not with you?”

“No, she’s not.”

Jade pursed her lips and rested a hand on her hip. “Have we had a quarrel, then?”

“There’s no ‘we’ in we,” he said. “Unless you want to be editorial or royal.”

Jade lifted her head, assuming the air of an empress from some kung-fu film. “Ah, we are Immortals, and we are royalty by our mere existence.”

Nick rolled his eyes. Then he reconsidered, and offered his best courtly bow.

“Oh, that’s nice. Where did you learn to pull that off with such elegance? I didn’t think they went for such formality in the States.”

“For four years running,” he said, “my high school put on Hamlet, A Connecticut Yankee, Richard III, and Camelot. There’s not much about courtly bows I don’t know.”

“Well, if you should ever be presented to mortal royalty, it should come in handy.”

“God forbid. Is there a reason we’re standing in the hallway?”

“Oh, darling, I’m so sorry. Do come in.” Jade pulled him through an open doorway. He stumbled on two short unexpected steps. She caught him. She was stronger than he’d thought. Was that also one of the benefits of Immortality, or just practice? “Careful. The bigger you are, the harder you fall.”

“That I’ve heard before.” When you’re six-foot-four, you hear it a lot. He checked to make sure there wasn’t another step lurking somewhere in the sunken living room, but there wasn’t. Just acres of polished marble, which seemed designed to result in slips, falls, and cracked skulls. On the other hand, maybe being Immortal meant you stopped worrying about those things.

“Shall I open the bottle, or are you simply here to con information out of me?” Jade set the bottle on the glass-and-steel coffee table before she cocked her head coyly at him.

He sat down and crossed his legs, trying to look relaxed. “Open the bottle if you want—it’s your gift.”

“Only if you’re going to drink it with me.”

He grinned, deliberately, a relaxed nonchalant grin intended to lull a suspect into complacency. “Oh, I’ll drink it with you, but I’ve learned one thing about being Immortal—”

“Ah,” she said. “Learned that the capacity increases, did you?”
“And side-effects diminish.”

“Well,” she said, “in that case…” She handed him the magnum. “Open it while I get glasses.”

The pair she held out to him were Lalique crystal, elaborate Chinese dragons cradling the flutes with their front legs in such a way their spiraled front claws nearly touched the crystal rim. Their coiled bodies formed the stem, their clawed hind feet the foot. Their lion-like faces, exquisitely detailed, displayed human laughter.

“I see business is good.”

“Business,” Jade said, “is always good for me.” She tucked herself into the chaise longue, kicked off her shoes, then curled her bare feet under her. “How is it for you?”

Business was probably not what she meant. Nick shrugged. “How was it for you?”

“Something of a shock.” She shrugged in turn. “But Beijing wasn’t Paris in the twentieth century.”

He continued to sip his champagne and reacted with only the lift of an eyebrow.

Jade leaned forward to refill the glasses. Looking at him from under her lashes—a very seductive and attractive expression—she said, “Not going to ask when that was?”

“I’ve had it explained to me that Immortal etiquette doesn’t permit inquiring after age.”

Her eyes widened. She giggled. “Amanda wouldn’t admit her age even if she weren’t Immortal.”

He eyed the champagne in his glass, then finished it. “Amanda didn’t mention it.”

“No?” Jade looked thoughtful. Thoughtful was probably not a good sign. “Where is Amanda?”

“A friend of Amanda made the comment.”

“Really? Who?”

He shrugged. “Jehanne.”

“Jehanne.” Jade rolled the name on her tongue, and frowned. “I don’t know a Jehanne.”

“You know all of Amanda’s friends?”

Jade pursed her lips, rocked her head back and forth, then admitted, “No.” Immediately dropping the question, she said, “What is she like?”

“Short,” he said.

She rolled her eyes, shaking her head at the same time. “Darling, next to you, Janet Reno would seem short.”

“Well, she’s no Janet Reno. She’s, you know, French. Not Parisian. Middle-class French girl from the country. Brown hair, grey eyes, tough.” He was unsure how Jehanne would react to being called petite-bourgeoise, but it was the best adjective he could think of in the circumstances.

“One of us.”

His lips parted; then he hesitated.
“I’m not in the market for Challenges,” Jade said.

“Yeah. One of us.” _God, how weird that sounds, still._

“It does sound odd at first, I know. But you get used to it.”

“When?” He heard the volume of his shout after it hit his ears. “Damn it!” He set the flute down before he broke the crystal, and got up to pace the room. Finally he rubbed the back of his neck, then turned back to Jade.

She sat, sipping her champagne, watching him with grave cat-like silence.

“Jade, I appreciate the interest.”

A pencil-thin eyebrow lifted. He held up a hand. “No, seriously. I do appreciate it. I didn’t come here to talk about being Immortal. I have to get used to it first.”

“Very well.” She refilled her glass and then his. “So,” she said, as she held out the glass to him, “what else did you have in mind, coming here while Amanda’s gone?”

He took the glass more to hide reaction than because he wanted expensive champagne. “What makes you think that Amanda’s gone?” He kept his expression from reacting, but he knew it was a weak counter.

Jade’s gesture encompassed a great many things. “You’re here by yourself. You’ve got papers tucked inside your jacket - and I hope that’s your second-best suit. You need a dinner jacket. Remind me to give you the name of a very good tailor I know. An Immortal friend of Amanda’s has been telling you about Immortals, but you didn’t mention conversation with Amanda about the same subject. I think you need information, but Amanda’s not available, and whatever else Jehanne might be able to tell you, she can’t help you with your current problem.”

“Right.” He sighed. Unbuttoning the suit coat, he reached into the interior pocket. If he could remember the name of the tailor mentioned in Amanda’s ramblings, he could probably get a dinner jacket with the same number of hidden interior pockets as in her jackets. Amanda was a pain in the ass, but a remarkably practical pain in the ass. _Or I can take Jade up on her offer..._

The papers curled when he spread them out. Jade went back to the cabinet, returned with a handful of uncut diamonds, and scattered them around the margin to hold down the lot. He looked up at her, both eyebrows raised.

“Don’t look at me in that tone of voice,” she said. “They’re quite legitimate. Bought as an investment.”

“You’re using your policeman voice,” she observed, and rapped his knuckles with one of the stones. She turned her attention to the top picture. “Ah! The _Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature_. What’s gone walkabout?”

Nick looked at her again. **Walk** about? When were we last in Australia?”

She shrugged. “Hung around with an Aussie. Gorgeous body, and as smart as he looked. You pick up the slang.”

“Sometimes you pick up more than that,” he said, remembering one summer visit.
“Now that you’re Immortal, the clap’s not as bad a problem as it used to be.”

He choked, and tried to turn it into a cough.

“Nick, really, don’t be prudish about it. Sex is a perfectly natural thing to discuss.”

He shook his head. “I’m not used to discussing it quite as often as you are.” Then he considered what she’d said. “Immortals aren’t immune to disease?”

“Not exactly. And—not all of us.”

That stopped him once more. “What? You might be immune to something and I wouldn’t be?”

She looked up at him sideways, with one finger still holding down the corner of the top picture. “Well, of course. I’ve never had whooping cough. Have you?”

“As a matter of fact, no, I was vaccinated. Aren’t all Immortals the same?”

She rolled her eyes. “If they were, you’d look like me, wouldn’t you?”

Nick ran a hand through his hair. “That’s ridiculous. How can one group of people—” Then he heard himself and cut off in mid-sentence. “Never mind. I can see this isn’t going to be any easier than the Police Academy.”

“How much. A school for training Immortals.” Jade pursed her lips—which, Nick had to admit, were remarkably kissable—and then shook her head. “No, I don’t think it would be at all a good idea.”

“Why not?” For God’s sake, stop thinking about sex. I didn’t think about sex this much when I was married!

She settled back on her knees, resting her hands on her thighs. “Well, because at least half of the Immortal population wants to kill the other half, and all we have to protect ourselves is what we know about Immortality.”

“You’re talking to me.”

She let go of the picture. “You’re young; you’re not a hunter. If you were, we wouldn’t be talking.”

“What’s a hunter like?”

This time she looked past him, her eyes wide and darker with memory. “If you meet one, you’ll understand.”

Nick laid a hand over hers.

Her eyes flicked to his, then away. “Some Immortals are looking for—answers. Power. I’m not sure what exactly, but they hunt other Immortals, take heads to absorb whatever information they have.”

“Not just because of the Quickening?”

She frowned. “There are those who just want the Quickening. There are—there are others who are—” She sighed. “Once, some years ago, I met a hunter. He could have taken my head. He had me. He let me go.” Her lip curled; she glanced at him and looked away, ashamed. “Told me I hadn’t collected enough Quickenings to be useful.”

“A little odd, isn’t it, to be insulted because someone won’t take your head?”
At that, she laughed. “It’s a cross between insult and relief, I should say. Let’s take a look at this thing that went missing.”

He shuffled through the pictures. “Here. Ought to be right up your alley.”

“Oh. Pretty,” she said. “Too long and too heavy for me, though.” She leaned back a little, appraising it, then got up and went to the Louis XIV secretary in the far corner and returned with a jeweler’s loupe and a magnifying glass. “Probably about right for you, though. What’s the weight—two and a half kilos?”

“You’re off. Three and two-tenths.”

“*Merde*,” she said. “I’m out of practice.” She inserted the loupe and scrutinized the picture. She stopped, took out the eyepiece, rubbed her eyes, then repeated the scan. “Wait here a minute.” Jade stood up, swiftly, her face a porcelain mask, and hurried out of the room.

Nick turned around, staring after her.

He heard feet on stairs, wood on wood dragging from somewhere on the floors above the living room floor, and then Jade’s feet coming rapidly back down the stairs. She came in puffing, carrying a wooden box which she could barely see over and which blocked most of her to her knees.

“Oh, I see how it is!” Nick jumped to his feet. “You ever hear of plastic? It’s lighter and you can see through it if you get the clear stuff.” He grabbed for the box, and nearly dropped it out of surprise; it weighed relatively little, considering its size.

“I don’t get this one out much,” she said. “Put it down by the coffee table, will you?”

Nick blew dust off the box’s lid before letting it down onto the carpet. He heard things slide around inside it; solid things, not the rustling of loose paper.

Her silk pants showed dust; she didn’t seem to have noticed. They also had pockets, and he wasn’t sure why it surprised him that they should. She pulled a fist-sized tarnished key from her pants pocket, and pushed it into the lock. The lock creaked, complained, and finally allowed the key to turn.

Opening the lid released a cloud of dust that said ‘hi-yo, Silver’ all by itself. Nick batted at it, sneezing. Jade coughed and held her nose.

“Yeah, I can see you don’t get it out much,” he said.

Jade smacked him on the arm. “Be polite. I don’t have the maid clean in that room. Or open locked boxes.”

“Mm-hmm,” he said.

She clouted him on the arm again. Settling down cross-legged in front of the table, she reached into the box and drew out several books in odd sizes. They went into a pile beside her before she laid the first one on the table and opened it.

Not a book. A journal, hand-written, on thin vellum, in non-Roman characters[^1]. Not quite Chinese, not Japanese, not Korean. The writing looked similar to one of the journals he’d seen on Joe Dawson’s desk in the hidden library. He reached out for it.

Jade’s hand came down on his. “Now, before we do this, you never saw these. Never. Got that?”
Her English was remarkably slangy.

He eyed her. “Not exactly legitimate, huh?”

“Never mind about that. These will tell us something important, but you can’t have seen them. Not ever.”

“I never thought of you as superstitious.” Her intense gravity amused him.

“People have died for these. I got them when an old friend did just that, and I have no intention of losing my head over them.”

To change the subject, since she was starting to creep him out a little, he said, “Is that some Sino-Asiatic language?”

“Tibetan. An old dialect. I learned to read it a few centuries ago.” She hesitated, touched the cover, pulled her hand back, and closed the book a moment, staring at the cover. Then her jaw tightened. She picked it up and handed it to him.

“I admit it. I don’t read Tibetan. Or Chinese. Or Japanese, for that matter.”

Her mouth quirked. “Luckily, I can interpret. This is the seventh book of Huangdi, the Yellow Emperor. It’s entitled Instruments of Power and their Application. This is a translation of a Latin translation of an Arabic translation supposedly translated from a copy which was damaged in an earthquake resulting from the misapplication of the instructions.”

“Resulting from a what?”

“A misapplication of the instructions.” She reached over and rapped him on the skull. “Pay attention, Nick!”

“Ow. Damn it, why do all the female Immortals I know hit me on the head?”

“For the same reason you hit a mule on the head before you tell him forward.” She took the book back, thumbed through the pages, and stopped at one with a drawing of an elongated gem.

In the picture, it had no color—whether that meant it was crystal or diamond or just that the artist only had quill and ink, Nick couldn’t guess. He said, “Well, I was paying attention. What you said didn’t make any sense. What instructions?”

“The instructions for using the stone they called Yu’s stone. “

*** *** ***

He knew the sound of the muffler on Joe’s van; it had a distinct little twitch where a screw was wearing through a support. He felt nothing else, so he had the door open before Joe made it out of the van and onto the gangplank. “Thought you were staying for Amateur Night.”

Joe held out a photo. “Piero’s good. He actually got a picture.”

Methos held the stiff paper in his fingers, feeling a chill sliding down his spine to latch onto his kidneys and claw its way through into his gut. He noticed, afterwards, when he could see through the shock, that it had been taken near noon—probably just after noon. “That’s Eyvindr.” To take the picture full-face, Piero had captured the profile of the woman sitting across from him.
“What’s wrong?”

He would have known that short tip-tilted nose on that profile in much worse light. “That’s Jehanne.”

“Damn. That’s bad.” Joe lowered himself onto one of the chairs and rubbed his chin. “You think he might be going after Jehanne to get you?”

“I don’t know.” Methos frowned. He forced himself to focus on the body language in the picture. The Traveler, cocksure as always. Jehanne—she didn’t show any more fear than an idiot. *What the hell are you doing? I thought Kronos would have taught you something!* Kronos’ memory calmed him, oddly enough. *He would have taught her something. He would have taught her to trap a man with her image.* No fear showed in her body language; something that might have indicated youth or age. *Define youth.* “It could be. Or he could be—How did the encounter go?”

“Your Jehanne. She’s Immortal, isn’t she?”

To get what he needed, he was going to have to tell Joe some of the truth. “Yes, she is.”

“You think he ever saw the two of you together?” Joe’s voice had thickened.

He looked each piece of fear in its ugly little jaws and locked them, one by one, down into the back of his hindbrain, where all the animal instincts resided. He turned, after those few seconds, to the study of the recent past, separating emotion from analysis. “The only other Immortal I recognized in the last four days was Nick Wolfe.”

“So if he was watching the Sanctuary, he wasn’t watching it closely enough you could sense him.” Joe rubbed his thigh, as if the prosthesis chafed a little. “How big a range do you have? Do you know?”

“Good question.” Methos rubbed the back of his neck again. “I’m not certain. I’d guess about a quarter of a mile, if I’m awake. Usually. Once Amanda pounded on my front door and I didn’t sense her until that.”

“Jehanne. Did she seem to notice anything?”

He answered that with a shake of his head. If there had been something to worry about, those damned inexplicable voices of hers would have warned her.

“So—what? Eyvindr thinks she’s Amanda?”

“We haven’t found a connection between Eyvindr and Amanda, except for six degrees of André Korda. Why would he be after Amanda? Is there anything in Amanda’s records that references either of the di Bondones? Or Bjarnsøn?”

Joe ruffled his hair with both hands. “Amanda’s records are longer than Duncan’s and still have huge gaps. Piero described the meeting as casual and innocuous. He couldn’t, naturally, get close enough to hear anything clearly. He did manage to get that shot, and one or two others. At the end, Jehanne put money on the table for lunch and got up to leave. Now that did turn interesting. Eyvindr grabbed her wrist. He said something, she answered, and he let go.”

“Just let go?”

Both big calloused hands spread out. “Just let go. She walked away. He added money to the pile and walked off in the other direction.”
Methos paced back and forth, rubbing his hand over his hair. Then he stopped. He stood still long enough that Joe leaned forward. Just the motion jerked him out of the thought. “Did you say that Korda came from the East?”

“We have records of him in China. Earlier, I think, in Thailand and then up and further West. What are you thinking?”

“That the Austræni the Traveler mentioned wasn’t myself or Amanda, but Korda. He’s looking for Korda.”

Joe’s eyelids flickered. Then he gripped his cane until his knuckles turned white. “But Korda’s dead!”

“He doesn’t know that.”

“She’d tell him.”

“You think he’d believe her?”

Joe wiped a hand down his face. “You asking me? Methos, you’re the one who knows the woman. Would he believe her?”

Something odd flickered across the old man’s face. Joe measured the expression; the only way to describe it was ‘disquieted’. “If Jehanne tells you the truth, you’ll believe her.” Methos shook his head, the disquiet replaced by a roll of his eyes and a curl of his lip. “She’s an unbelievably bad liar.”

“Then she’s safe, right?”

“Unless he decides she’s the one who took his head.”

“Well, she didn’t. Amanda did.”

Methos jerked a chair around and straddled it. “Don’t say that too loud. I know Amanda did. I don’t know if that makes a difference.”

“Jehanne would tell him… Wouldn’t she?”

Methos buried his face in his crossed arms. Muffled, the words still sounded damning. “Jehanne would be torn limb from limb—repeatedly—before she’d admit to him Amanda killed Korda.”

“Then he’s going to hang around the place until he finds Amanda or decides Jehanne lied to him after all. Or he’s going to decide Nick did it, and go after him.”

“Not even the last of that list makes me happy, Joe.”

“Nick’s not a bad sort, you know—”

Methos raised his head. “For all I care, Eyvindr can have the boy’s head tomorrow. What I don’t want happening is Jehanne going after Eyvindr because he had the bad manners to take a novice’s head.” He grimaced like a cat smelling strong perfume, and added, “Because he took Amanda’s novice’s head.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Call Piero.”
Sorcha greeted her as if she’d been away four days instead of eight hours.

Eight hours. Jehanne set her packages down on the counter, and started a pot of coffee. She’d wasted hours wandering around Paris, going from one stop on the Métro to the next, dallying through the Canal de l’Ourcq, buying shoes, buying a skirt and blouse and a scarf for Mass—less formal than the Chanel suit.

It meant, though, taking out the credit card which Elek had sent her, the one that identified her in legal terms as his wife, linked into the Swiss bank account which he had set up for her. One more of his gifts, one more she hadn’t turned down. Such a simple gift it had seemed, like Immortality.

Such a simple gift for Amanda to give Nick.

Saint Catherine’s voice, the gentlest of her saints, murmured to her: “The only simple gift is love given without reason or reciprocation.”

Elek is furious. His hand bites so roughly into her shoulder that she stumbles under the force. “Before I see you lose your head for a swordless beginner, I’ll take the brat’s head myself!”

She cannot raise her voice—shouting, with him, only infuriates him, drives him to shove her protests aside. She must handle this as well as she can… “If you do that, you will have to fight me.”

He laughs, but the amusement is sour, ugly. “Do you think you can take my head?”

“No. Never.” She would gladly give him her head rather than that. “I don’t want your head, Elek.

“Then why are you—”

But he knows. Surely he knows. He has fought under her direction, cut an arrow out of her thigh. “There are things I have to do. There are things in which I have no choice. It’s no different now than it was at Rouen.”

He snarls at her. Never has he struck her in anger—but his fists clench, his hands lift, and the growl of the wolf is in his voice. “Let me fight him then.”

“The Challenge was given to me. I have to do this, Elek.” He releases her shoulder, and she puts her palm against his face, where the stubble rasps against her skin. “If you stop me, it will never be the same between us. You must let me do this.”

“Well enough, Minette. I’ll let you do this.” He wraps his arms around her, belying his words. His voice burns the lobe of her ear, his lips so hot they scorch her heart. “When you win—”

“When?” She knows how dangerous this Challenge is. Too dangerous to let him fight it for her.

He pulls back; his hands fasten on her shoulders and he shakes her. “If you fight him, you will win. Do you understand me? I will not have any other result. If you fight, you will win.” He scowls again. “And once you’ve won, I’ll even take you to that convent you’ve been thinking of—I know you better than you think I do, Minette. You’ve been watching that convent for weeks.”

I never knew what he knew—that killing Abu Hamija would make it necessary for me to find shelter in a convent, find shelter until I could come to terms with what I absorbed… Please God, don’t let me lose myself in defeating Eyvindr.
She poured a cup of coffee, put down cream for Sorcha, and took out a croissant and some Brie for a quick dinner.

Then, with Nick not back, and nothing but her thoughts racing around inside her head like a squirrel in a cage, she changed into slacks and shirt and went to sit in the bar. Watching people would rest her, let her mind relax.

*** *** ***

Joe cocked his head to one side. His thigh ached like hell from the wood-and-metal chair, and he knew it would take pills tonight to kill it. “Call Piero?”

“You trust him.”

“Yeah…” he said, more cautiously.

“And he’s already watching Eyvindr.”

“Yeah, but—”

“No buts. He’s already telling us where Eyvindr goes and what he does. He just has to call us before Eyvindr throws a Challenge at Jehanne.” Methos frowned. “Or her at him.”

“Well, yes, but Piero can’t interfere in a Challenge.” Something connected, as if poking a finger into a short-circuit. “Whoa, wait, hang on there. You can’t interfere in a Challenge either.”

“I have a couple of options.”

Joe shook his head. “Oh, I can’t wait to hear this.”

“First of all, I can claim she’s my student. She won’t shame me by saying I’m a liar. Now, if Piero gets us there in time—once he sees that Eyvindr’s in range of Jehanne—I can shoot him before he issues a Challenge.” He ground his teeth before he added, “And if necessary, I’ll shoot her too.”

“And what the hell are you going to do with a corpse that resurrects itself?”

Methos pointed a finger at him and grinned. “That is where you come in.”

Joe put the heels of his hands against his eyes. “Damn. I just knew you were going to say that. I should have had more to drink tonight.”

*** *** ***

The hammering in the back of his head couldn’t be liquor—he hadn’t had enough champagne to give him more than a mild buzz. Had to be a migraine. Why did all Immortals seem determined to give him migraines?

“You’ll get used to it, Nick,” Jade said.

“I said that aloud?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Damn.” He stood up, stiff from hunching over the ancient book on the coffee table. Dust wafted up from the pages, and he sneezed. “All right. Let me try to make some sense of this. This thing—”
“Yu’s Stone.”

“Right. There are other stones out there that Immortals can use to enhance their powers.” He turned around, caught by a new slant on what he’d just absorbed. “What powers do Immortals have anyway?”

Jade’s mouth opened. After a second, she cleared her throat, then started again. “You heal, of course. For the most part, and it varies from Immortal to Immortal. Wounds around the throat should be avoided, if at all possible. They don’t heal well.”

“That makes sense.”

“About other abilities—” She bit the tip of her finger, staring off past him. “I have known at least one person with clairvoyance. There’s a rumor that the Delphic Oracle was one of us. I did—” Jade chewed on her lower lip, looking for all the world like a teenage driver caught running a red light with an open bottle of beer. “Amanda told me, once, that she had heard from her mentor about an Immortal who could shapeshift.”

“Could what?”

“You know. Shapeshift. Like turn into a lion, or a wolf, or something—”

“Like Cat People?”

Jade’s eyebrows drew together. She scowled at him. “There’s no reason to be sarcastic.”

He opened his mouth, then shut it. He put out a hand. “No, it’s a movie. I’m not being sarcastic. Movie about people turning into cats or lions. Made in black-and-white with Simone Simon, and then remade with Malcolm McDowell.”

“If you say so.”

He rolled his eyes. “Now who’s being sarcastic?”

This time she put both hands up. “No, no. Look, we got off track here. Yu’s Stone.”

“Right. So Yu’s Stone—affects your fighting ability?”

“If it’s in a sword, or somehow incorporated into a weapon, then yes.”

Crouching back down beside the coffee table reminded him that his knees still felt stiff. He settled cross-legged in front of it. Jade slipped into a perfect boneless lotus position.

“Wish I could do that,” he said.

“Practice it for a hundred years and you will, grasshopper.”

Nick snorted. “I can see what TV shows you watched.”

She laughed. She picked up the jewelers’ loupe and peered through it at the manuscript. “Some of this is written in languages I don’t know. I’m extrapolating from what I can read. Yu’s Stone apparently was found somewhere in the Ural Mountains.”

“But I thought the stone was a diamond. What’s a diamond that big doing in the Ural Mountains?”

“It’s not a diamond. It’s phenakite. The original crystal spar was cut several times. This one was
faceted, and it’s as brilliant as a diamond. 42 karats total—bigger than the examples in the British Museum.”

Nick took a breath. Jade held up a hand without looking at him.

“Before you ask, I don’t know where the other pieces are, or if they’re as big. I only know this one, and this is the piece that they call Yu’s Stone. And supposedly if it’s incorporated into a weapon, the wielder of it is unbeatable.” She took a breath. “And so at some point it got set into a sword.”

“Why are you so sure it’s this sword? The stone looks like the one in your book here, but the stolen sword is thirteenth-century. This book has to be older than it.”

“It is, yes, but I know it was set in this sword.”

‘How can you know that?’

“Well—because I stole it.”

He was on his feet before he realized it. “You stole the Passau sword? We went all over this and you’ve got the sword?”

***** ***** *****

“That’s it? We wait?” Joe sighed and took another swallow of coffee. “I’m asking you that. I should know better than to expect Mr. Patience to rush off and warn his girlfriend about a potential hazard.”

Methos looked up from the book in his hand. “Jehanne has run into Eyvindr. She may be a—“ His mouth twitched, and amusement lit up his voice. “A white knight, but she isn’t a novice and she’s not a fool.” He looked back down at the book.

Joe followed the gaze. Methos’ book was sextodecimo, with stiff brown leather boards, its back rattly and scarred. The book was so thick that it just fit into one hand while he turned the crackling pages with the other. The faded gold letters on the back—and he was reading it left to right—were visible above the long fingers, and intelligible if you stared long enough.

 وعلى حسن
ارسطو

On Philosophy? Aristotle? Nah. Couldn’t be. That exists only as a fragment... On the other hand, if anyone had an ancient lost volume of Aristotle, it would be the world’s oldest living Immortal, wouldn’t it?

As if aware of his scrutiny, Methos glanced up from the pages again. He grinned, but didn’t mention if Joe’s mouth hung open. “You might as well go back to Amateur Night. Or doss down on the spare bed. I doubt we’re going to hear anything from Piero tonight.”

“And you don’t need sleep?”

The grin widened. “I don’t need much sleep. And I’ve almost got this section translated. Ancient Arabic isn’t completely comprehensible on the first read.”

Joe sighed, stood up, and stretched. “Okay. I’ll go back and see what else they’re offering to make my ears bleed.”

Methos shook his head. “Ah, the cynicism of the young.”
“Watch it, old man, or I’ll hit you with my cane.”

That only got a chuckle and a wave of his free hand towards the door before Methos returned to Aristotle.

The streetlights glistened in the mist over the Seine. The air smelt like rain coming. Joe rubbed his thigh again and got into his van.

**** **** ****

Jade blinked at him as if he’d started foaming at the mouth. “No, I don’t have the sword! I stole it the last time, not this time!”

“The last time—” Nick shook his head. “Do I want to know how frequently this sword has been stolen?”

She threw up her hands. “Well, if you do, you’ll have to ask someone else. How the hell should I know how many times it’s been stolen?”

He put his head in his hands and laughed.

“Don’t laugh at me!” She smacked him on the back.

The laugh made some of the tension in his chest relax. “Jade, when was last time? And who did you steal it from?”

“200 years ago, give or take 50. I stole it from an Immortal named Lorenzo di Bondone.”

“Then how did Korda get it?”

This expression said she was reconsidering his intelligence. Jade articulated each word with care, giving him a second or two to absorb each sentence before she continued. “I gave it to him. He wanted it. I wanted him.” She tossed her head as if the memory still rankled. “At the time.”

Nick frowned down at the incomprehensible script on the yellowing page. “Do the other books you have mention this stone?”

“No, just this one.”

“So if you didn’t have this book you wouldn’t know what the stone does?”

Jade put her hands on her hips. The act emphasized the fabric stretching across her thighs. Nick fixed his eyes on her face and did not look down. “Nick, there are other books. I don’t have all the ancient tomes covering esoteric magical power devices. For all I would know, it could be in the Necromonicon.”

“That is not a real book.”

She leaned towards him. “So sure of that, are you?”

“And for God’s sake, don’t give me the Yoda imitation.” He thought it over again, scowling. “So whoever stole the sword probably knows what it does?”

“If they stole it for that reason.”

“Why else would you steal a sword you can’t fence?”
Jade groaned. “Nick, you are thinking like a mortal. You were a flic. Now you’re Immortal. Go back to the cop bit for a moment. What makes you think a thief couldn’t fence it? Why did they steal the Mona Lisa? Or The Scream?”

He rocked his head from side to side before he admitted she was right. “Because a collector would be perfectly happy to have it in a secret room where he—or she—could go and stare lovingly at it a few times a day.”

“Right. Or for the right amount in ransom. Other than that, this particular Passau sword has, in addition to the center phenakite gem, three smaller emeralds, four small rubies, and an almost perfect sapphire. Plus a gold-and-silver hilt and the gold-chased runes on the blade. If you pulled the gems and melted down the metals, you’d come out with a decent profit.”

“Mostly because you’d have the Préfecture chasing their tails trying to find you.” After a moment, he said, “Jehanne thinks someone named…” Again he had to stop and think, and he still stumbled over the name. “Eyvindr inn Viðförla stole it.”

“Why?”

It sounded feeble even before he said it. “Because he showed up looking for Korda and the sword disappeared.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Actually, the sword went missing and then Eyvindr turned up looking for Korda.”

“Oh, come on. You couldn’t get a judge to give you a search warrant on those grounds!”

Nick debated it for a moment, then shrugged. “Jehanne says Saint Michael talks to her.”

The almond-shaped eyes widened. “My God, she’s crazier than Amanda!”

“It doesn’t sound crazy when she says it.”

She stared down her nose at him. “A lot of crazy people sound perfectly sane.”

That he had to agree with. He shrugged again. “All right. For the sake of argument, whoever stole the sword—this time—knew about the possibility that it would enhance their Immortal—whatever. So this particular Immortal is invincible now, right?”

Jade did another goldfish mouth-open, mouth-shut. “Possibly.”

“Possibly?”

She grimaced. “It depends. The description here, and the runes on the sword, say that the sword has to be rightfully held. I don’t know if being stolen would constitute rightful possession.”

“So, say someone shot an Immortal holding the sword and then took his head? Would that constitute rightful possession?”

“Oh, you can’t shoot someone and then take their head.” Absolute confidence reeked through those words, like asserting that the sun would set in the west.

“Why not? Will the earth explode?”

Now she just looked—bewildered. “Ne pas être ridicule. You can shoot someone and run. You can run away from a Challenge. But if you shot someone and then took their head—it gets around, somehow. Other Immortals come looking for you.”
“Great. An Immortal Ethical Correctness Enforcement Squad.”

“I wouldn’t put it like that,” Jade protested. “Look, Nick—I’m open to new gambits on almost anything.”

He looked down at her. “Except this.”

“Except this. When you become Immortal—with any luck, you get a good mentor. A good one will give you the basic rules on Challenges. And if you want to be sure you have a chance to live to five hundred or so, then you don’t try new gambits on those rules. Unpleasant things happen to those who do.”

“Sounds like you had a good mentor.”

Her voice dropped into low alto. “I did.” She glanced away; he caught tears glimmering over her eyes as her head turned.

“What happened to her?”

“She lost her head. May, 1680. One of the rules you don’t break is taking a head on Holy Ground. He—whoever he was—forced the fight onto Holy Ground. He took her head, but the Quickening killed them both when it erupted.”

“What happened to it, then?”

Jade said nothing at all for a moment, then admitted, “I was nearby. It hit me so hard I was knocked unconscious. I remember I felt as if the sky rained fire—and then I woke up.” She looked down at her hands. “Ashes. That’s all that was left. Ashes and twisted metal.”

When she said nothing else, he reached over and squeezed her shoulder. He felt her shaking under his fingers.

She nodded, but did not turn back to him.

He stood up, dusted off his trousers, then said, “Listen. This guy is still running around. You be careful, okay?”

Another nod.

“I’m—” he jerked his thumb towards the door, even though she still refused to look at him, “going to go and warn my crazy friend who talks to Saint Michael about this. You’ll call me if you hear anything else about the sword, right?”

“Yes, of course I will.” She did turn then, finally. She managed a smile, but there was no life in it.

Nick paused on the stoop. He stared at the streetlights for a moment. The light prickled through the encroaching fog. It might be going to rain before morning. The air reeked of it. That frisson of presence brushed across his skin again. He looked around himself, saw nothing, heard nothing. “Jade,” he muttered to himself. “Idiot.” He hunched his shoulders against the mist, then headed off to the Métro.

*** *** ***

Watching mortals cavort and gavotte around each other soothed her, let her brain slip into the best mode for thought. Four hours of that, and she needed a rest from mortality. That meant the kitchen,
the kitten, Sorcha, and more coffee.

Jehanne sat at the kitchen island with Darius cradled in her arms. The kitten nursed the bottle nipple with little gulping echoes as the level of formula dropped. Sorcha lay stretched out against the far wall. Once in a while, she opened her ears, lifted her head, and waited.

As Sorcha did so this time, Jehanne once more said, “Good dog,” let go of the bottle long enough to flip a page, and grabbed the bottle before the kitten complained.

Sorcha’s tail thumped against the tile. Her head dropped to the floor. She sighed, then shut her eyes.

“I, too, miss him,” she said. The tail thumped several times, then lay silent. “I know he acted like he didn’t like you, but he did, you know.” One more emphatic tail-thump and another deep sigh answered.

How far could le viel homme have got by now? Germany or Spain, certainly. Africa. Maybe Palestine—no, it would be Jordan, wouldn’t it, these days? She leaned back, cautiously, on the stool and contemplated maps in her head. “Any of the northwest countries, I think,” she said to Darius, who blinked at her and then went back to his dinner.

She flipped another one of Nick’s pages over on its face and went on to the next, matching what she had heard from Eyvindr himself with the information on Korda. “Nick,” she said to Darius, “doesn’t believe me about the sword.”

To be fair to the man, Saint Catherine said, you have no physical proof.

Or a confession from Eyvindr himself, was Saint Margaret’s contribution.

“But why the sword? Why steal the sword in the first place?” she muttered. “If you know so much, why can’t you tell me that?”

To that, of course, there was no answer.

A buzz of presence interrupted. Jehanne stood up, turned, and crouched to tuck Darius and bottle against Sorcha’s chest. “Watch him, Sorcha.”

A bark no louder than a grunt answered.

Wait. Familiar. Nick. Her heart slowed to normal pace. The rush of adrenaline left her dizzy.

Hard-soled shoes, dress shoes instead of boots, clicked against the stone flagging of the corridor. The kitchen door opened.

Nick looked damp, as if he’d been walking some time in the mist of the Paris night. The mist had slicked his hair to his skull, leaving it with the dark sheen of seal fur. His eyes glittered with hunters’ passion.

If he weren’t such an ethical man... She dropped the thought when he spoke.

“How have you ever heard of something called the Methuselah Stone?” he said.

“And good evening to you.” She made no attempt to hide her smile. “Yes, I am familiar with the Methuselah Stone. It was destroyed, however.”

“Oh.” For a second, he looked nonplussed. “Oh, well, that’s not—it was destroyed?”
“When she comes back, ask Amanda about it.”

That seemed to throw him further off his stride. “When—look, let’s not get into Amanda right at the moment, okay? I—” He stopped, blew out a breath, then waved a hand. “Let me start over. I’m not making a lot of sense.”

“Ah, non! C’est incroyable, ça!”

At that, he grabbed her around the waist and held her in the air so that they were nose to nose. “It’s not nice to be so sarcastic. Especially to someone who’s bringing you all kinds of new information.” He paused. “Well, I hope it’s new.”

She smacked the top of his head. “Nick, do not dangle me. Put me down.”

He spun, then set her down on the stool. “Okay. You’ve heard of the Methuselah Stone. Have you heard of Yu’s Stone?”

---

The tears had finally dried on her face. Jade rubbed her eyes, and grimaced when she saw the mascara on her fingers. 

I was not going to cry over her again.

How long had she been sitting here, anyway? She needed to put the safe away, then make sure the door was double-bolted.

Picking up the wooden safe back kicked up as much dust as it had when she first put it down on the coffee table. Jade coughed, sneezed, and sneezed again. Then she felt a stab, like an ice pick through the front of her skull. She turned, still on her haunches, waiting.

The doorbell jangled, and she jumped. After a few seconds, it rang again, with the same force as Nick had used previously. She dropped the box, sneezed again. He must have forgotten something…

The peephole showed little or nothing, just a large shape in the shadows cast by the building.

“Jade?”

“Nick?” She turned the lock.

The door burst in, slamming her into the wall. Breath rushed out of her lungs. The door rebounded.

Tear gas. She carried tear gas and a knife in her pocket, always…

A knife blade stabbed through her palm and into the wood flooring. Jade screamed. Through new tears, she made out the face above her: a pointed, foxy, face with a feral smile.

“There,” he said, and patted her arm, jarring the knife. “Now we’re going to talk about Nick. And about his dear friend Amanda Darieux. Perhaps you know Amanda? Or know André Korda?”

---

“Is that English or French?”

“It’s Tibetan or Chinese. Y-u-apostrophe-s, plus Stone.”

“Ah.” She crossed her legs and leaned both elbows on her knee, watching his eyes sparkle. “No. I have not. It’s important, no?”
“It’s important, yes.” Out of the blue again, he said, “Jade thinks you’re crazy.”

“Whoever Jade is, she is not the first to offer that observation,” Jehanne said, dryly. “And she is—”

“A friend—well, an acquaintance, maybe you’d say, of Amanda’s.”

“A thief?”

“How did you guess?”

“Somehow it seemed the sort of person who might be a somewhat friendly acquaintance of Amanda’s.”

He cocked his head to one side, grimaced, then said, “Yeah, that’s a definite point.”

“Yu’s Stone?”

“It’s a phenakite gem—”

She nodded. “I know phenakite. The Methuselah Stone was garnet, however. Colorless garnet. Garnet shatters when it breaks; phenakite cleaves. You have to be careful cutting garnet. So this is a phenakite gem?”

He nodded. Some of the rush bled out of his face. He smiled, and leaned against the counter. His voice kept its bright, excited note. As he continued, Jehanne felt her head balloon with his excitement.

Once he finished, she tilted her head and scrutinized him. “But she didn’t believe the sword had anything to do with it, and you still seem excited. Doesn’t this put a hole in what I was suggesting?”

He opened his suit coat, pulled out folded newsprint, then spread Le Monde out in front of her. He pointed to the obituaries.

Di Bondone, Lorenzo. Died of myocardial infarction. No flowers; donations to the Church of Saint-Pierre. Jehanne glanced at the date. Wednesday. She looked up at Nick and questioned him with her eyebrows.

“Jade stole the Passau sword from a Lorenzo di Bondone,” Nick said, soft, satisfied, exultant. “She stole the sword for—” He rocked back on his heels, grinning, and lifted one eyebrow in his own question.

“André Korda?”

Nick slapped a hand down on the table. “And give the lady a cigar,” he crowed. “And didn’t your—friend Adam say that one of the Watchers had seen two Immortals fight and one lose? Don’t Watchers take care of dead bodies? It might include obituaries, might it not?”

She didn’t pretend to misunderstand him. Her fingers twitched; her spine tingled. “Eyvindr knows,” she said. “He knows about the sword.”

“We don’t have proof of that yet—”

She reached out and took his face between her hands. “Hush. Wait. Let me tell you. I saw him today.”

“What?”
“Wait, wait.” She almost stammered as she spilled out her information. “He believes Amanda killed Korda, and he’s looking to kill her to cement his claim to the sword because Korda had the sword last.”

“Yes, but Korda didn’t have the sword by right.”

“What?”

“If Jade stole the sword… She gave it to Korda, didn’t she?”

Nick hesitated, then shook his head. “I don’t think that stealing counts as rightful possession.”

“Are you sure it’s not Jade who’s the link?”

He shook his head again. “ Doesn’t matter. He doesn’t know about Jade. And Amanda is out of the picture. And for the moment, I’m glad she is. The only thing that would screw this up now is if she comes back unexpectedly before we can do something about him.”

That made no sense. She put a hand on his arm and squeezed. “Nick, you are riding off on your horse in all directions. What do you think we’re going to do about him?”

Besides take his head before he gets to Amanda.

“We find out where he’s staying. I get Inspector Cerveny—”

She started to interrupt. He waved a hand. “He’s not important right now. I’ll explain him in a minute. Once Cerveny finds the sword in Eyvindr’s possession, the judge sentences him to prison, France locks him up for the next twenty years or so, and by that time he won’t be able to trace Amanda.”

It sounded good. Jehanne had avoided police for the last few hundred years, though. She chewed on a fingernail. “It might work.”

“Don’t worry,” he said. Brash, bold, beautifully and intensely certain: he had some of the traits she’d found most attractive in Elek. Certainty was so—comforting. “It will.” His mobile rang, muffled, from the inside pocket of his coat. “Myers,” he muttered. “Right on time, too.” He pressed a button. “Wolfe.”

*** *** ***

Methos woke as soon as Joe’s mobile rang. He swung his legs off the bed, threw back the covers, and listened.

Joe spoke clearly, but in obscure monosyllables, primarily ‘Yes’, ‘Okay’, and ‘Mm-hmh’. Then he said, “Let us know when he leaves.”

“Joe?” His heart had sped up. Another of his own kind would have heard it hammering.

“Piero’s in the 13th arrondisement. Eyvindr just forced his way into a townhouse.”

“Is Jehanne there?”

“No.”

“What about the boy?”

“Wolfe? Piero didn’t see him. He saw an Asian woman open the door and our Norseman shove it in.
No one else. He did hear something that sounded like a scream as the door shut.” Sounds of sheets rustling were followed by the scrape of one of Joe’s prostheses.

“What are you doing?”

Joe paused. “Don’t you want to go over there?”

“No.”

“Methos?”

_one more chivalrous illusion to shoot to hell._ “Joe, it’s not our business. You’re retired. Piero’s the Watcher. Jehanne’s not there. End of discussion.”

Silence.

Methos distrusted silence; especially with Joe. And with Duncan—the two men were a great deal alike.

The prosthesis scraped against the floor again. He heard Joe grunt.

“Joe?” He turned on the light.

Joe pulled the second prosthesis to him, and strapped it into place. He reached for the trousers draped across the end of the bed. “I can shoot as well as you can, Methos.”

“Joe, this is insane.”

No answer; Joe worked the trousers up, then reached for his shirt and dragged it on. He shrugged as he buttoned his shirt. “Yeah, there’s a lot of it about.”

For a mortal, Joe’s muscular frame was impressive. Methos had wondered why Joe had so few female friends; it certainly wasn’t due to any default in personality or physical attraction. Maybe it was that Joe was so damned stubborn. The only disadvantage he could imagine Joe facing in a fight was balance. Balance might counter a gun. “All right! You have got to be one of the most stubborn and annoying mortals I have ever known!” Methos rolled out of bed. “But if I get suckered into a Challenge over this, I’m going to take it out of you in beer afterwards!”

A low chuckle answered. “Be my pleasure—Adam.”

*** *** ***

Nick’s eyes widened.

Saint Michael prodded her. _Wait. Listen._

“Jade?” He sounded sharp, sounded concerned.

Jehanne slid off the stool. She gripped his free arm. He glanced down at her, then away, as if he remembered she were there but had no mind to do more than acknowledge her presence.

The woman’s voice could just be heard, shaky, the gasps under it signaling someone in physical pain. “Can you—could you come back over for a few minutes? I’ve found something else I think you should see.”

Now his eyes narrowed; he stared at the wall as if it were clear glass. “Are you all right?”
A pause ensued when Jade only breathed; the breaths jerked out of her, short and harsh. “Yes.”

His eyes shut a moment. His jaw tightened. “Okay, it’s not a problem. You stay right there. I’ll be there as fast as I can, Okay?” He added, with more emphasis, “I’ll be right over.”

“Good. Good. I’ll wait.”

He shut off the phone, and dropped it onto the island. Then he shook her off and shucked his jacket.

“Nick? Where are you going?” She grabbed his shirtsleeve and yanked. “Nick! Talk to me! I can’t help you if you don’t talk to me!”

“You can’t help me. Jade’s in trouble. I can hear it in her voice.”

Saint Michael spoke, his voice rebounding from the walls of her brain, deafening her. *He has this woman. The Traveler has her. He will use her to get to Nick…*

Nick sprinted out of the kitchen. He was halfway up the stairs before she caught up with him.

“Nick, Eyvindr’s there.”

His leather jacket lay across the bed. He picked it up and patted the pockets. “Hell, yes, he’s there. Why else would she be in trouble?” He yanked a set of keys from the right pocket, then dropped the jacket again. “Good.”

“Nick, **this is a trap.**”

He looked over her head, shook his head, and then took her by the shoulders. The metal in his right hand bit into her flesh. “Damn it, Jehanne, of course it’s a trap. It can’t be anything else. But I can’t leave her there with him. He may have found her because I was with her. You said yourself he might have been trailing us.” His hands dropped. He spun around to the dresser, dug in a drawer, and came up with a black automatic in a shoulder holster. He shrugged into the holster and settled it across his chest.

“Let me—”

“No! You stay here. I can’t handle him and protect you at the same time.” He grabbed the jacket, pulled it on, and zipped it up.

“Protect me! Nick, what in the—”

“Stay here!” He took the stairs three at a time, straining her as she tried to keep up with him. In another few seconds, they both flew by a startled Sorcha and out the back to where his motorcycle stood locked in a frame.

“Nick, you cannot face down a strange Immortal—”

“I think we’ve already been introduced,” he said. “All I have to do is get a clear shot to get her away from him.”

“Nick!”

“Don’t worry, I know what I’m doing. I just have to shoot him to put him out of commission, then tie him up and call Inspector Cerveny. Simple!”

“Nick, you are not listening to me!”
But he was on the motorcycle, roaring out of the alley, the motor growing fainter as he made a right from the alley and onto the street.

She stood frozen only a second. An image of his suit coat lying across the table jumped to mind; she ran back inside and searching his pockets.

A black notebook with a pebbled cover showed shorthand. “Damn!” She dug in further. Folded paper, bigger sheets, black ink listing names and addresses: there it was. Jade Ling Yan. 13th Arrondissement—

“Where is that from here, where is that—” She had a detailed map in the bedroom.

She opened it out on the bed and stared at it while she pulled off her slacks and shirt. Stripped to brassiere and panties, she traced out a route for the Citroën. Saint Michael nudged her.

*Your armor. And your sword.*

“Yes, yes, of course—” She had carried her leathers. Amanda had said she needed help, so of course Jehanne had carried her motorcycle leathers. The Kevlar in the chest of the jacket wouldn’t stop a direct thrust, but it might turn the edge of a blade. The Gare d’Austerlitz—that was near Jade’s address. What is it about the Gare d’Austerlitz? Methos had said…

Construction. There was a huge construction site at the Gare d’Austerlitz. A huge open space with great barriers, floodlights, which would be deserted at night because one of the ever-present Paris strikes was going on.

*That is it.* Saint Michael spoke with surety, giving her bedrock. *That is where he will force Nick to face him.*

She zipped her trousers and sat on the edge of the bed to tuck the hems into her combat boots and then fasten her boots. She’d sharpened the sword just the other day, and it hung in its sheath from a hook in the wardrobe. She zipped the jacket, slid her sword into its sheath, and slipped the strap over her shoulder. What else? House-keys, a thin wallet with money but no ID. She pulled the little leather purse which held rosary and sacred medals over her head, kissed it, tucked it into the chest pocket of her jacket, and zipped the pocket.

As she rushed back through the kitchen, Sorcha lurched to her feet, unsteady. She whined, took a step forward, and swayed.

“No, stay here. Watch Darius. Good dog.”

Sorcha still tried to push through the door when Jehanne opened it, but a firm hand on her muzzle made her back up. She whined again, and Jehanne said, once more, “No. Good dog, stay. Stay with Darius, Sorcha.”

The sky smelt of rain coming; she could taste the damp air, thick with the scent of Paris, could taste Paris on her tongue. Nick was taller than the Wanderer. She remembered those long legs swallowing ground when he ran. The motorcycle would be even faster.

Paris in her mind’s-eye swallowed all her vision, as if she saw it from above, saw herself in miniature, a mouse running a maze. *But I know the path through the labyrinth …*

When Methos arrived at the abbey a month ago, he had insisted that instead of a tune-up, she replace the van’s engine. It had taken most of that month to do so, with his caustic assistance. *I think I began to love him then…* She shifted the Citroën into third gear and roared through the streets, flicking her
gaze back and forth, from front to the rearview mirror, to the side mirrors. *Keep the gendarmes far from me, Saint Michael. Let me arrive in time...*

*** *** ***

Nick throttled down the Kawasaki and let it coast to the stoop of Jade’s townhouse. That familiar sense of the ice pick through his skull assaulted him; he rubbed his fist against the aching spot. The shudder of recognition buzzed down his spine; his nerves all jerked to life at once. Impossible to tell if it were only Jade, and no one else—except that he knew, with all his instincts, that Eyvindr had to be there.

*Yes.* The door stood slightly ajar; a thin ribbon of artificial light trickled down the steps. A trap, just as Jehanne had said. *I've been in traps before.*

The Glock fit into his fist as if glued there: the right weight, the right grip, the extension of his arm that offered added confidence.

Then, as Nick kicked the door inwards, he remembered he hadn’t stopped to strap a throwaway on his ankle. In the next moment, he saw Jade lying on the floor. A long dagger had been thrust through her palm, pinning her to the floor. Her cheongsam fluttered in the rush of air from the door: the cloth had been sliced to ribbons, and bloody stripes showed on the skin beneath. Blood pooled around her head, dark, almost black. He looked right, to check the space next to the door.

A black shadow blocked the light overhead. Nick looked up.

Eyvindr plummeted down from the stairs, feet first, slamming into him. He fell backwards, unable to breath. They broke apart. Pain stabbed, a knife across his side: broken rib. He’d broken enough ribs to know that particular pain. His right hand held nothing. The black automatic lay next to the stairs.

Steel glinted. Nick rolled away. A two-edged sword blade splintered hardwood where his head had been a moment before. The blade raised for another blow.

He rolled again, through the open door. Tumbling helplessly down the stone stoop, Nick landed on his back, winded once more, the jabbing of his broken rib keeping him out of unconsciousness. All his nerves stood on end, urging him to do one thing he could still do.

He scrambled to his feet. From the corner of his eye, he saw the same glint of steel in the same hand.

Nick ran. He didn’t know where he ran to, but he knew what he ran from.

An alley—

Halfway down, he saw steel glint in the streetlight, held by a black shadow. He spun and went back the other direction. Left or right? A laugh and a shadow decided him; he went right.

He needed to try and work his way back to Jade’s, get the bike, get to ground—*Get to Holy Ground:* Jehanne’s voice echoed in his ears. He doubled back.

His pursuer cut him off again.

Where the hell was all the Paris nightlife? If he came on a gendarme… He froze for a second, in the dark space between one streetlight and its burnt-out brother, thinking. If Eyvindr came upon a gendarme, would he run or would he just kill the man?

*Kill him,* a cold voice in the back of his head answered.
Nick swung away from the streetlight. Head for the river, which should lead him to the Gare d’Austerlitz. Carrying a sword, Eyvindr wouldn’t be able to follow him into the train station: too many witnesses. Ducking through there, he could shake off the other man, then turn back for Jade’s.

*** *** ***

Jehanne got lost once due to an unexpected street closure for construction, and found herself on the wrong side of the Seine. Her stomach knotted. The oldest of her prayers bubbled up: *Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum, Benedicta tu in mulieribus, et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Iesus...*

Crossing the Seine once more, she found herself in a smaller tangle of streets leading to a square she did not know—but it led to a street she recognized. A dirty white cat ran across her path; she braked, forgetting that Methos had also insisted on replacing those, and the Citroën halted with a jerk and a screech. She bumped her head on the windshield and swore.

*Sancta Maria, Mater Dei, ora pro nobis peccatoribus, nunc, et in hora mortis nostrae...*

[vii]

*The Quai d’Austerlitz. Thank you, God, thank you. Next time I come to Paris I will memorize the map first!*

In the area near the train station, she found a spot to leave the car, locked it, and looked around herself while settling her sword in its sheath across her back. *Plena gratia, gratia plena.* Nothing. She felt nothing.

*But this is the place! This has to be the place—*

Then, the buzz ratcheted across her skull, at least two separate strands of recognition striking her: one, then a second later, another. *Pray for us sinners, now and in the hour of our death...*

Saint Michael broke into her thoughts. *Go now. Before the first blow is struck.*

She ran toward the buzz, following sense and Saint Michael.

*** *** ***

His lungs burnt with the effort to breathe. Nick had lost count how many times he’d come to the edge of collapse, then found the pain vanishing and strength returning. He stopped, looking around for a landmark. There, in front of where he stood and some blocks away, he recognized the train station. A train rumbled nearby, close enough to feel under his feet. To his left, he saw a gate, and lights... The gate stood ajar. He wiggled through it, and found himself—

In a construction site. Spotlights illuminated mounds of fresh dirt, all higher than his head, shielding him from view but also walling him in from escape. Trees bordered one side. The wind, blowing towards him, carried the smell of the river.

Recognition stung him like a wasp. Nick swung around. The red-haired Norseman stepped into the makeshift arena and paused. He wasn’t even breathing hard.

Eyvind pulled his long coat back, and drew out a sword. He took one long slow step forward. Inset gems on the “two-handed near-perfect” Passau sword glinted in the spotlights.

“Do you know,” Eyvindr said, as if continuing a conversation, “that men actually did give swords
names once upon a time? The first man who owned this called it Blood-Drinker. He swore no man who owned it could lose a fight.”

Adrenaline pumped up into Nick’s muscles; his arms and legs knotted; his hands clenched, his fingers going cold. His chest tightened. He swallowed to moisten his mouth, checking his periphery, looking for some path out. “I don’t have any quarrel with you, mec.”

Eyvindr’s teeth gleamed in the spotlight glancing across his tanned face and ruddy hair. His canines had, at some point, been replaced or capped with gold. “Ah, but I have one with you. You ask too many questions, M’sieur Wolfe.”

“It’s my business to ask questions.” Trucks blocked that possible way out. On the other hand, they’d serve as cover. The mounds of dirt to his right and his back rose higher than the chain-link fence surrounding them. If he got to the top, he could swing over and climb down the fence. At least barbed wire didn’t cover the top of these fences.

“Not these questions. Very few men know about this—” He tapped the sword hilt. “And very few Immortals should. You, mon ami, should have stopped asking about this sword about five minutes after you started.”

“Others know about the sword—”

“And by tomorrow, they will all be dead.” A shake of the head, mock-sorrowful, and then Eyvindr smiled. “But I need no quarrel with you. Immortals don’t need quarrels. We have the Game. Surely Jehanne or Madame Darieux explained to you that there can be only one.”


Eyvindr paused, lowering his sword a moment. “Why what?”

“Why can there only be one?” Nick edged back. When it went unremarked, he edged back further. The nearest mound of earth was no more than a hundred feet away.

With the perfect logic of a circle, the Norseman said, “Because that is the rule, and this is the Game. En garde, m’sieur. Do you care to give me your name before you die?”

I’d prefer not to die. His heart picked up speed. “I don’t own a sword.” He didn’t—he’d turned down the claymore. He’d given Amanda back her sword. Memory blotted out the moment—he could recall the taste of her mouth, the scent of her skin. How odd, to have the last clear picture of my life be Amanda.

“That, m’sieur, is not my problem.” He started to lift the sword again. “It will make it quicker for you.”

“I’m not accepting your Challenge.” Nick took a step backward, scanning the area around himself now for possible defenses.

The other man laughed. “You have no choice.”

“Arrêt! Renonce à ton défi!”[20] The sharp soprano froze him as if a North Chicago cop had yelled ‘drop your weapon’ on a crowded street.

*** *** ***

Methos braked, slammed the van into Park before it fully stopped, and undid his seatbelt in a
continuation of his right-hand’s movement. The right hand continued to move, reaching backward for the unsheathed sword resting behind the driver’s seat. He shoved the door open and slid out before Joe even got his seatbelt undone.

“Wait. Methos! This isn’t the address Piero gave us!”

Methos drew himself up to full height, no slouch, no mildness. His head turned side to side, the way that Joe had seen a hawk turn to look for prey. “No. But it’s where they are.”

Not a look he was ever glad to see on Methos’ face. “Can you feel them?” he said.

Methos glanced back at him. The shadow cut across and hid his face. “Several—or, three. Three distinct. About two hundred yards—” he pointed with the sword, as if it were nothing more than an extension of his arm. “—There.”

*** *** ***

Eyvindr’s sword point did not touch the ground, but it hovered near there. “Mademoiselle Jehanne, this man and I are engaged. You disappoint me.”

“Do not be so hasty, mon branleur[21]. I claim prior right.” She moved quickly, more lightly than he would have thought such a solid small woman could—with the kind of grace he expected in Amanda, not in his coltish, beatnik Jehanne. In a few fast bounds, she stood between him and Eyvindr.

She wore studded motorcycle leathers, with her hair tucked up in a leather cap, and the trousers tucked into the lug-soles of the familiar combat boots. Over her shoulder was a long case, but her gloved hands were spread and empty.

Oh my god, she came here without a sword? She can’t have been that reckless! “Jehanne, for Christ’s sake—”

Her voice no longer sounded like a post-adolescent girl from somewhere north and east of Paris. “Do not swear on the name of the Lord to me unless you mean it. And step back, Nicola. This is my fight. En garde, Eyvindr.”

Amusement lit up the foreign tenor. Eyvindr no longer sounded French at all. “On what grounds?”

“M’sieur Wolfe is my student.”

Eyvindr’s head turned, looking from her to Nick and back again. “Your student! Who carries no sword? Dra meg baklengs inn i fuglekassa[22]!”

Jehanne laughed. When he’d first met Amanda, and she’d laughed at him like that, Nick had nearly gone blind with fury. She slung the case from her shoulder, flipped open its top as if handling a lighter, and drew a sword, a tapered blade as wide as her arm at its widest, with a hilt longer than her hand’s width. “And a new student, a bon droit. I will teach him not to go unarmed in future when a Norseman sets a trap.”

“I offered you a deal, ma petite. Why should you give up your head for this boy?”

“I, too, know about the sword, Eyvindr. And I carry a sword. And I have accepted your Challenge in place of my student.” She cocked her head to one side. Her tone turned as sweet as cyanide. “Alors, mec, tu débandes[23]?”
Nick winced. *Call him chicken? I have to stop this before she gets…* Amanda’s voice thudded in his ears. *‘You can’t interfere with a Challenge, Nick.’*

The Norseman’s head lowered, like a bull about to charge. “Eyvindr the Far-traveled, at your service, kjer[24]ing.”

“When I was mortal,” Jehanne said, each word now ringing like glass shattering, “men called me *la Pucelle.*” Heat seemed to rise around her, the rain steaming as if in a jungle, as if they stood in the blazing heat of a tropical sun.

*Pucelle. Pucelle…* He’d heard ‘La Pucelle’ somewhere, a long time ago. The first time he’d been in Paris?

In French, her opponent said, “Then you must indeed have been a whore of great ability.”

Not a flicker responded to the insult. Jehanne, instead, chuckled, just as softly as she had spoken, and then said, in what sounded like the language Eyvindr had used, “*Enda en norsk kuksuger, akkurat det vi trenger!*”

The Norseman bared his teeth at her. “Surrender now and we’ll make this quick. I’ll let your idiot of a student hold on to his head this time.”

A soft growl of “*En garde, salaud,*” answered.

*I wouldn’t have thought she knew that kind of language…* What held him back, Nick couldn’t say. But he couldn’t move, couldn’t find the strength of will to try and interrupt the contest. *Amanda—you’ve listened to her and Liam and Dawson too often…* He didn’t even flinch at the first clout of metal on metal.

Eyvindr swung first. Jehanne blocked it. His next swing came from the side.

A dagger slid from her sleeve into her free hand, an odd thing which she held clenched in her fist so that the blade rested above her knuckles. She blocked Eyvindr’s sword with hers, at the same time that she punched into his forearm with the blade. He yelped, jerking his arm back. A spray of blood followed. She launched herself forward, then kicked out, catching him in the knee with her heavy boots.

To Nick’s disbelief, the maneuver threw the man backwards, in spite of his superior height and weight.

In the next breath, she sprang back from him, landing on both feet without a slip in the damp dirt and sand. Eyvindr rocked on his heels, caught himself, then settled his weight, more cautious now.

Jehanne laughed. “Ah, I’m not so easily caught, *m’sieur* Eyvindr. The saints are my shield—Neither they nor I fear you and your stolen sword. *En garde!*”

It was a cliché. He distrusted clichés. The floodlight fell on her face when she took her next step, haloing a face as white and unmoved as marble, focused on her opponent. Nick froze, caught by her face, by her expression, and thought that at last he knew what people meant when they said they’d follow someone into hell. *Cliché or not.*

*** *** ***

Half of the spotlights were on, half off. Trucks, piles of dirt, plastic bags of concrete, and other supplies ringed the construction area.
Methos moved faster than Joe could, but Joe found the cut section of fence first. They worked their way through it, then squeezed between mounded dirt and fence until they found a clear space.

A pile of rebar lay diagonal to the mound. The irregular stack was supported by a platform of dirt, inclined on both sides, with the incline shallow enough to make climbing easy.

They heard the sound of metal clashing against metal before they located the source of the sound.

“Damn it!” Methos peered through rebar. “We’re too late.”

“I could still shoot him,” Joe suggested.

A shake of his head answered before words. “No. She’d know I was behind it, and I’d be fighting her.” He inhaled, then muttered, “And I’m not taking her head yet.”

“So we wait?”

“You have a better idea?” The words bristled with blades.

Joe’s head jerked sideways. “Easy, there. Sorry I spoke.”

Methos shrugged irritably. Then he sighed. “No, I’m sorry. Shouldn’t have taken your head off.”

*** *** ***

Metal rang on metal again. Jehanne ducked under the man’s arm, spun, slid, and skidded across the muddy earth.

He sprang after her and brought down his blade.

At the last second, she rolled. The point of his sword snagged her trousers leg, just above the boot. She swung her leg in a great arc, yanking the sword from his grip.

His sword flew over her head. It stuck point-first in the ground, vibrating. Jehanne rolled to her knees, and punched him in the thigh with her knife. Another yelp; he staggered back from her, slipped in a puddle, and fell. With one knee bent, he pressed his hand against the stab wound. Small blue sparks flickered between his fingers.

Jehanne leaped to her feet, shook strands of hair out of her face, and hefted her sword. Like a stalking cat, she sidled around him, looking for an opening.

He shifted to his knees, both hands clenched. Then he dived, skidding across the muddy ground, too fast for her to catch him. His outstretched fingers clamped onto the hilt of his sword.

She jumped, dug her heels in as she landed, and aimed her blade toward his wrist.

He rolled.

Her blade bit into mud. She pulled it free, and backpedaled.

Eyvind rose with feline grace. The Passau sword glinted in the artificial light.

*** *** ***

“Where the hell is Wolfe?” Methos muttered. His head swung back and forth. “Ah. Got him.”
“Yeah, there by the trucks. He’s trying to stay out of their way, I think…”

Methos growled. “He interferes with this and I damn well will shoot him.”


“It’s older than Florentine, Joe. Yes. That’s Jehanne.”

“Granted, it’s older. Is she?” I notice he didn’t call her my Jehanne… Cassandra was older than the Watchers expected. Who is Jehanne, anyway? Joe shook himself. You’re retired, man. You need to stop thinking like a Watcher.

For the first time, he got a snort, and Methos sounded much more himself. “You want to know her age, you ask her, Joe. Just make sure I’m in earshot.”

Joe grunted, then squinted down at the battle. He dug around in his pocket; he was still carrying a pair of small field glasses. It took a bit to get them focused, and when he did, he wasn’t much clearer than the squint. “What the hell is she using as a main-gauche?”

*** *** ***

Eyvind flung a handful of mud at her face.

She jumped aside to miss it. He launched himself at her, slamming into her knees like a linebacker. They both slid across the ground, coming up against one of the earthen mounds, setting the rebar mound on top rattling.

He lost his sword. She lost both sword and knife.

He scrabbled in the kicked-up earth and came up with her knife. He stabbed at her throat.

She threw up her left arm.

Metal rang on metal: Jehanne’s bracelet took the force of the blow. That twist of the wrist she’d used in the club sent her knife spinning out of the Norseman’s grip. With her free hand, knifeless, she punched him in the throat. The punch forced a shout out of his throat; his knees buckled.

*** *** ***

The rebar stack shuddered, metal grating against metal. Methos jerked Joe back from it. “They do that again, the whole damn thing’s going to end up on top of them. That’ll end this without permanent damage.” He took a breath. “A katar. Indian.”

“I’ve heard of them. Never seen one.”

“I have—but I never saw one used before.” Methos raised himself slightly, craning his long neck to survey more of the area. “You see Piero anywhere?”

Joe shifted, scanning the higher ground. “No. He has field glasses, though. He could be on top of the train station and still have a decent vantage.” He whistled when Jehanne punched Eyvindr and the man fell across her. “She’s damned good.”

“Better than I thought she was,” was the grim answer. And then, much softer, he added, “He taught her everything he knew, I think…”

*** **** ***
Eyvindr fell forward, across her. His weight held her for thirty seconds. She kicked, forcing him onto his back, rolled free, and found her feet again.

Scrambling for her weapons took more precious seconds from Jehanne’s recovery. Those seconds allowed Eyvindr to recoup. He staggered to his feet, breathing hard at first, and then more easily.

Nick rocked on his heels, clenching his hands when a blow missed, hissing between his teeth when Jehanne dived within her long-armed opponent’s reach but managed to leap back out as the blade slid down her leather-clad arm.

Five minutes. Ten minutes. Clash and swing and sparks flying as metal hit metal.

Through slides and twists and occasional flat-out runs, they’d traded positions: Jehanne now had her back to the open wall, and Eyvindr was in the dead end of the arena, a hundred feet from Nick and as untouchable as if he were in the valley of the Loire.

One time, camping with his family—he’d gone to chop firewood and found a wolf spider under a log. It had been big, for a spider—big as his hand. Small, compared to him. It had jumped at him anyway. Even when he kicked at it, it only pulled back a moment before trying again to attack.

The man had four or five inches on Jehanne and probably 10 pounds to each inch of advantage. Roberto Duran versus Jimmy Wilde: welterweight versus flyweight. This was not a knockout he wanted to watch. Nick looked around the square. Somebody had to be hearing this. Sooner or later, the gendarmes had to show up and stop this. *It never happened with Amanda.* He clenched his fists again and told his brain to shut up.

She went down. Her sword skittered across the mud, and his blade slashed downwards—

Nick jumped forward. He hesitated, though, then clenched his fists in frustration.

The blade cut through her jacket as she rolled away once more, leaving a streaming red gash. She dodged a second blow, then scooped up her sword. In the floodlights, white stripes showed skin beneath the slashes in the black leather.

A raindrop hit Nick’s nose. He jumped. *More rain.* Off over the Paris rooftops, a flash of natural lightening broke the sky. The thunder sounded too close.

Rain spattered against the earth. Silver strands of water sheeted across the spotlights.

*** *** ***

Methos put his head against the rebar. “Wonderful. Fucking rain!”

“And the ground’s already damp. Not good.” Joe chewed on his lower lip. He looked down at his watch. “It’s been twenty-five minutes since we got here.”

“I know, damn it. I know.” The old man ground his teeth.

Joe put a hand on his shoulder, and felt a vibration, something like a shudder. “You all right?”

“I can feel them.”

“What?”

Between his teeth, as if the words hurt, Methos said, “It’s like standing in the middle of an electric current. You want to follow it, and you want to get away from it.”
“As old as you are—”

In a softer voice, the old man said, “Five thousand fucking years. All the history and the literature and the knowledge and this—this—is still what it’s all about for us. This.” He stabbed a finger at the duel below. “None of us are old enough to control this!”

Joe glanced down at the fight, but the shout didn’t seem to have been heard.

Lightning blazed across the sky. Three seconds later thunder rolled over the Seine.

*** *** ***

Jehanne wasn’t restricting herself to defense, which would have been the logical thing. She slid forward before he started to swing, coming in under his blade and slashing upwards. When he moved to parry, she sprang back a half-second before he could touch her. It was as if she knew what he meant to do before he did.

A quick close flurry of blade on blade backed her towards the muddy walls again. She had to be tiring, having to keep blocking his strikes with sword and knife. But in the spotlights, Eyvindr’s movements seemed slower as well.

Well, swinging seven-pounds of metal for twenty minutes will wear you down...

The rain fell faster. Rivulets of wet mud trickled down the muddy slopes. Dirty water splashed up over the combatants’ boots and pants. Nick blinked; the falling rain blurred his sight.

Then Jehanne tripped on a stone, and fell face-down in the dirt. The landing jarred the sword out of her grip. Eyvindr’s boot thudded into her side, kicking her over.

He needed one step forward and one sideways to put him in the right position. Eyvindr took the step forward. Jehanne’ fist lifted.

Mud splattered across his face. He swore, swinging down blindly as he scrubbed his sleeve across his eyes.

Jehanne scrambled away, scabbred for her sword. One-handed, she aimed for his sword—and missed.

But Eyvindr howled.

She cried out, “Saint Michael!”

She didn’t miss. She had caught his left hand with the blade, slashing into his fingers. His left hand dropped from the hilt.

Jehanne rocked back onto her heels and up onto her feet. With the flat of her blade, she used his strength against him, forcing his right hand and arm and the edge of his sword towards his left shoulder. His own blade bit into his left arm, and he shouted again, pulling away.

She sprang, a hair’s-breadth from touching his lethal sword’s-edge. She twisted her left hand, and a backhanded blow with the pommel of her sword slammed into his larynx. “Saint Margaret!”

The Norseman staggered backwards. He dropped the sword, clutching at his shattered throat with both hands, blood gushing from his severed fingers, spattering his face with bright red rain.

One last step. As she spoke the last name, the spotlights splashed silver across her swinging blade.
“Saint Catherine, m’aident!”

His headless body toppled sideways.

A rumble as if the earth shuddered shook the air around him. Nick took a hesitant step forward. Mist rose around Eyvindr’s body, fingers of ghostly white swirling around Jehanne’s boots. She stared down at the grey mist, then swung her head up, staring overhead at a brief brilliance of stars.

The arc-light across the site, in a direct line with her, exploded. A jagged finger of light, with the burnt-clean stench of ozone, hit Jehanne in the chest. She staggered back. Sword and knife dropped from her limp fingers. The mist rose up around her knees, coalescing, as if thousands of ghostly spikes jabbed into her flesh.

Another spar of lightening hit her; her head jerked sideways. The bolt rebounded, or ricocheted, and blew a second floodlight. That one sparked a third, and another strike slammed into Jehanne, and this time she went rigid, fists knotted, her spine arched and frozen in reaction to the Quickening.

One of the lights collapsed, pulling down the electric wire with it, and the light nearest Jehanne exploded, sending a jolt into her rigid spine. She dropped to her knees. The pole and its shattered fixture swayed, then toppled, in slow motion, directly for her.

What would a blow to the back of the neck do to an Immortal? Nick ran. He could just make it, if he ran fast enough…

*** *** ***

“Damn it, no, he’s not going to—” Methos shoved his sword at Joe. “Take this!” He sprang around the rebar, jarring it as he ran down the dripping incline.

Joe jumped back. The incline, rocked by rain and Methos’ weight, began to give way under the rebar. The top of the stack tottered, wobbled, and began rolling downhill.

Methos, running sideways down the hill, might not reach Jehanne before Nick did. Before the rebar reached Nick.

*** *** ***

A cacophony of clashing metal broke like rolling thunder into the Quickening lightening. Nick jerked around. Square bars of reinforcing steel tumbled down from a dirt platform. Getting out of the way would put it between himself and Jehanne, but if he still tried to reach her, he’d be flattened and she’d be electrocuted…

Can you electrocute an Immortal? He sprang back, letting the rebar tumble to a stop like so many jackstraws.

A tall figure in a long black cloak came flying across his field of vision. He slammed into Jehanne, flinging them both away from the falling pole. The floodlight crashed into puddles of filthy water, spraying glass and mud and showers of sparks from short-circuited wires.

Benoît. Where the hell did he come from?

Adam, in long black coat, knelt in the mud with Jehanne’s arms around his shoulders and her head buried in his shoulder. His eyes were shut, his mouth drawn into a teeth-bared grimace that might have been agony, or might have been something else entirely.
Nick rounded the rebar, face-on to the absent-minded professor.

Adam’s eyes flicked open.

Nick stopped breathing. He felt for the gun no longer tucked into the back of his waistband. No help here...

Then the murderous fury in Adam’s face vanished. The good-humored mask slid over his skin and locked into place. He looked down at the woman in his arms and spoke into her hair. “Not here. Jeannot, you have to get up. We have to get out of here.”

Nick picked up her sword and her knife. “You want me to carry her?”

“No.” Adam stood, dragging her to her feet. He nodded his head at the ground. “Get her sword. And the Passau sword— that’s what you were out here for in the first place, wasn’t it?”

Nick tightened his grip on the sword’s hilt. Blood and grit rasped under his palm, and he had this urge to whack the other man in the head with the pommel. Guy had all the charm of a strip of sandpaper. “Fine,” he said.

He checked the corpse: Eyvindr had set his sword’s sheath into the back of his coat. Nick gritted his teeth, reached out, and pulled his hand back. “Aw, damn it,” he muttered. He worked the coat off the body before wrapping the swords in it. As he stood, the light caught the dead man’s eyes, locked in an expression of disbelief.

He looked at the gems on the hilt and shook his head. Steal a priceless sword in order to behead another human. Not even a weapon of convenience. Immortals are weirder than mortals. Did he really believe the sword would protect him?

Benoît reached under Jehanne’s knees and lifted her into his arms. He jerked his head. “Car’s that way.”

The only car in sight was a large grey Range Rover. The rear passenger door opened as they came in range. Once Nick could see clearly, he recognized that Joe Dawson was driving.

“Better dump the weaponry in the back. You can ride in front,” Adam said.

Nick scowled at Adam’s back. “I have to see about Jade. What about—” He fumbled for words, then said, “The body?”

Joe said, “It’ll be taken care of.”

“Like Lorenzo di Bondone?”

Joe twisted in the bucket seat. “Where did you hear that name?”

“Jade. She stole the sword from him about two hundred years ago. Gave it to Korda. Eyvind used Jade to get me in a place where he could—take my head.”

“We can give you a ride,” said Dawson.

“No.” Riding anywhere with Dawson and Benoît was the last thing he wanted to at the moment.

“Come on, man, it’ll take you twenty minutes to get back there.”

Jehanne said, “Nick—”
The Immortal-Watcher male tag team he could turn down. He couldn’t turn down Jehanne’s hoarse plea. “All right.” He walked around the van and climbed into the passenger seat.

Behind him, he heard Jehanne croak out, “I can get in by myself.”

Adam said something so soft that it didn’t carry past the back seat, but even the whisper sounded as harsh as a hawk’s screech.

When Nick twisted to see what was going on, Adam was slamming the back door and Jehanne was curled up against him, shivering.

“Hang on,” Adam said.

“She all right?” Dawson’s head lifted, letting him see them from the rear view mirror.

The snap in the other man’s voice reminded Nick of the danger he’d seen in Adam’s face. “He was old, Joe. And a hunter.”

Jehanne interrupted. Was it hoarseness? Or was it, maybe, another voice fighting for control of her vocal chords? “It’s hard—absorbing all those years. All those Quickenings he took.”

Methos looked down at her. “Can you hear?”

Nick thought he’d misheard that. He turned to look again, A smile flickered across Jehanne’s mouth.

“Clear as a bell,” she said. In English.

*** *** ***

The Kawasaki was still next to Jade’s stoop. After a second, Nick realized it wasn’t exactly in the same place, and that someone had chained it to one of the stone balusters.

The van pulled away from the townhouse. Nick looked after it a second, then sighed. At least Jade might be willing to unlock the motorcycle, even if she didn’t want to see him.

He knocked on the door.

Just a voice, this time, a little shaky. “Qui est-il?”

“Nick Wolfe, Jade.” He gave her a second to think about it before he continued. “It really is me, this time. He’s dead.”

The door opened a crack; the chain rattled. She looked over his shoulder, then shut the door. The chain rattled again. This time, she opened the door and stepped back.

“How—”

He broke into the question. “My crazy friend—is a very good swordswoman, or so it seems.”

“This—Jehanne? Was that her name? She took his head?”

“Yeah. Damnedest thing I’d ever seen. I didn’t know she could fight so well, or so—” He shook his head. “Never mind. I’m here to ask about you.”

Physically, everything seemed all right. She’d put on fresh clothing, washed off the blood. A thin dark line showed across her throat.
Before Nick thought about it, he reached out and touched the spot. Her eyes shut; she shuddered.

He jerked his hand back. “Shit. I’m sorry, Jade—”

She waved a hand at him, but still stepped back. “Not you. Just—he threatened to take my head if I didn’t call you. This was a reminder.”

“It hasn’t healed yet?” He took the hand she’d waved. No scar showed where the dagger blade had impaled her palm.

She rubbed her throat. “It is healing. Throat injuries, I told you—they’re tricky.”

*** *** ***

Joe glanced into his rearview mirror. Methos’ head was turned; he was staring out of the window. His arm rested around Jehanne’s shoulders. Her head lolled against his shoulder; her grey eyes were glassy and defocused. She shuddered convulsively, and Methos’ attention jerked back to her. His fingers tightened on her arm. She nodded, but said nothing.

The doors of the Sanctuary stood ajar. Depeche Mode echoed from the entrance. ‘People are people so/Why should it be/You and I should get along so awfully…’

Jehanne grimaced. She struggled to sit up. Methos didn’t assist; he watched her until she got herself braced and finally managed to get fully upright.

“Back door?” Joe said.

“Yes.”

The van turned smoothly; it slid into the back garage just as easily.

Joe risked a question. “Jehanne, where’s your car?”

“Two blocks east of the train station. I can find it tomorrow. Parking was allowed through tomorrow at midnight.”

He nodded. “What is it?”

“A—nineteen-seventy-two Citroën wagon. Blue and gray, more or less.”

“You have the keys on you?”

Jehanne fumbled in her pockets until she found a set of car keys. “Yes.”

“Give them to him,” Methos said. “He’ll get it moved so there’s no connection to us.”

“It’s my responsibility.” She pulled away from Methos, blinking, her eyes focusing on Joe’s face in the mirror. “You don’t have to do that, M’sieur Dawson.”

“It’s an honor,” Joe said gravely. “I’ve never seen anyone use a katar in a Challenge before.”

Dead silence followed the words. Jehanne’s eyes widened, the iris disappearing into the pupil. Then she laughed. “License plate 761 XM 72.” She reached over the seat and gave him the keys. Dried mud crumbled from her palm into the van as she touched his hand. Her grip was firm, assured—friendly. “The brakes are new,” she said. “They tend to grab.”
“I’ll keep it in mind,” Joe said.

Methos opened the car door, turned, and held his hand out to Jehanne.

She slid off the seat; when her feet hit the ground, she staggered. “Feels like my legs should be longer.”

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “It’ll wear off,” he said. “Good night, Joe.”

“Goodnight—Adam.”

*** *** ***

“You want me to go?” Nick said.

Jade shook her head, then winced and put her hand against the open cut again. “No. Come and sit in the salon with me? I’m still jumping at shadows.”

“Sure.” He walked beside her, watching her for any hint that she might be about to collapse.

She eased down onto the sofa. He could see her skin prickling with cold. After a moment, he took off his jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders.

“Thanks.” Jade curled back into the corner of the sofa. “You’re sure he’s dead?”

The dead man’s face lay upwards, glaring into darkness as the rain spilled down over his open eyes, into his open mouth. Steel bracings crushed his body, but the head lay apart, severed neatly, blood running downhill with the rain.

Nick closed his eyes. Not the first time I’ve seen a dead man. Won’t be the last. “You can trust me, Jade. He’s dead.”

One hand touched his shoulder. “The first one after you’re Immortal is the hardest.”

“I didn’t take his head.” I let Jehanne do that. I let Methos pull her away from that falling light while I jumped to save my skin.

“But you felt it.”

“I didn’t—”

“Think about it. Think about what you were feeling while they fought.”

“As if I should stop it—” His whole body denied that. His brain insisted he should have stopped it. Something atavistic, at the back of his head, said the sword should have been in his hands.

Her warm hand rubbed his shoulder, soothingly. “Think again, Nick. You’re a detective; detect yourself.”

He clenched his teeth. “Jade, I didn’t come here to talk over my reactions to Eyvindr.”

“Eyvindr Inn Viðförla,” she said.

He raised his eyebrows and waited.

The corner of her mouth twitched. “He introduced himself before he—began to get specific about the
answers he wanted.”

Nick looked down at his hands. Big hands, Amanda always said. How big had Eyvindr’s hands been? *Don’t need to be big to do damage.* Still staring at his hands, giving Jade as much space as he could, he said, “You want to talk about it, I can listen.” Maybe he could give someone else the peace he couldn’t find.

He felt the shudder ripple through her arm resting against his. Then she gritted her teeth, took a breath, and said, “Can we go upstairs? I don’t feel—safe talking about it here.”

“Sure,” he said. “I can do that.”

*** *** ***

Jehanne pulled away from him as they reached the bedroom. He stepped inside, watching as she crossed to the bed. She bent over to pet Sorcha, to check on Darius.

“What does he need to be fed?” It sounded like a safe question to his ears. From this far across the room, he could feel her heart beating, matching the rhythm of his own. Not as violent as Bordeaux, where he and Duncan both had taken heads; this was Shared, not Double.

*Still bad enough to bring up the need.*

Jehanne glanced down at her watch, then shook her head. “Another three hours.” She unzipped her filthy jacket and worked it off her shoulders. It dangled from her hand; she turned it back and forth, looking at the slashes. Drops of pink fluid fell to the hardwood floor, spattering. She walked across and into the bathroom, out of sight. He heard the thick wet splash of sodden leather against tile.

He inhaled. The room was full of her scent, full of musk and blood and Quickening. He shuddered. Then he followed her.

Sorcha’s head lifted as he passed. She whined. Methos paused. He crouched and rubbed behind the hound’s ears. “Good dog,” he said softly. “Not your fault.” He continued to the door of the lavatory and stood there for a moment, watching Jehanne.

She sat on the closed toilet with her trousers unzipped, one ankle resting on the other knee while she unlaced her boot. She wrenched off the boot and set it next to the sink, then changed ankles and started on the other. Her lower lip was tucked behind her teeth, as if she needed to concentrate with all her ability to be able to unlace her boot.

In spite of the mud, the blood, and the rain, her feet were unsoiled. The small bare foot was beautiful, the toenails clipped close and clean. The small bones of the foot lifted at the arch, a high instep prized among some of the ancients he’d known. She would have made a bad slave, even as Cassandra had: their allegiances had been given to other causes long before he’d known them.

Her head lifted. She studied his face; her eyes narrowed. She let her foot drop to the floor, then stood. She started working the leather trousers down her legs.

Her legs always gave him pleasure to watch: long for her height, well-muscled, beautiful. Flexible, too… He took a lot of satisfaction in her legs. At the moment, it would give him enormous satisfaction to shake her, or do something more violent. But he could master that. He could…

“I could,” Methos said, measuring out words with each step, “have murdered you tonight.”

That brought her chin up. Defiance lit up her face, but her pupils were still great wells, swallowing
both the Quickening and his intrusion in that Quickening. Her lips parted.

He lifted a finger. “Don’t give me another excuse.”

Her jaw tightened. She stooped to push the trousers all the way down, stepped out of them, then added those to the jacket heap. As she shucked out of her panties, she said, between her teeth, “I am not a child to be ordered or threatened, Methos.” She tossed the bit of cotton onto the heap of ruined clothes.

“No. Of course.” He flicked a little disdain into the words and saw her jaw tighten again. “You’re filthy. All over mud and blood. I think we’ll have to ditch the clothes.”

She shrugged. “It won’t be the first time.”

Methos leaned over to flip on the electric heater. Then he grabbed the hem of her long-sleeved t-shirt and dragged it over her head. He leaned in against her clammy skin so that he could reach around to get the hooks on her bra. The Quickening still held her in its grasp; her eyes flickered back and forth, sometimes seeing him, sometimes lost in memories or knowledge not hers.

“Jeannot!”

She shook her head, blinked, then focused on him.

“Stay with me. Don’t get lost.”

“I’m trying,” she said, not irritated, but mournful.

That might be worse. Fighting was better than acceptance. Defeat, in a Quickening, wasn’t about losing your head, but losing yourself.

He stripped out of his duster, and tossed that into the bedroom. It would be fine once it dried and he could clean off the mud. The rest of his clothes, from boots to shirt, he fired after it. Then he turned on the shower, standing with his hand in the water until it ran hot. “Come on,” he said, trying to sound gentle. “Get in.”

He put her into the shower first, even though the feel of her skin against his hands brought him into throbbing erection. She turned to the water’s spray, bending her head into it, possibly unaware of his arousal. The soap and shampoo were Amanda’s. The soap lathered up thick, rich, sweet with perfume, dissolving sweat and dirt from her back and arms. Jehanne coughed in the steam, then turned and mutely held out a hand to him. Blood and dirt caked her broken fingernails. He searched the shower. Surely someone as fastidious as Amanda would have had—The nailbrush was in the corner. He forced himself to take his hands away from hers and get the nailbrush, then he turned her and took her hand in his.

The fields of Quickening interlaced, twined with one another, as if they stood over a heat vent, with the air wavering around them, winding into invisible ribbons, lifting the scent of her body and his as if lifting feathers on a breeze.

He reached out, ran his fingers through her hair and loosened the pins. Not enough. He pulled the pins out one by one, putting them down on the corner of the tub. Then he clenched his fist in the
dark wet mass, putting just a little force into his grip, just whetting the appetite of the thing digging into his control. He stooped to kiss her.

One of her arms went around his shoulders; she felt so hot he might have gone up in flames himself.

_Not yet_—he wasn’t going to let himself loose, not just yet.

He turned her around, poured shampoo on her scalp, and massaged the lather into her hair, soaking the caked mud with water and soap until the water ran clean. He tipped her head back and kissed her forehead.

“Better?”

She sighed. “Mmm. Much.”

*** *** ***

Jade’s bed could have held six people. A black and red silk comforter covered it, and a net canopy dangled from a hook in the ceiling over it, with the canopy’s drapes gathered and tied to the bedposts. She dropped onto the bed, scooted back, then pulled her feet up, with her knees tucked against her chest and her arms wrapped around her knees.

After a moment, Nick cautiously lowered himself onto the mattress beside her. She shifted a little, so that the edge of one foot touched his leg.

He leaned forward a little, staring past his clasped hands at his wet boots, and waited.

“It’s not as if this is the first time,” she said at last.

“What difference does that make?”

She shrugged. “I should expect the methods by now.”

Nick turned his head. “I don’t know, but I’d think expecting it would make it worse.”

Something resembling a chuckle escaped her. “Well, maybe it does.” She closed her eyes. “It’s not the pain, you know, so much.”

“No?”

She shook her head. This time she didn’t wince; maybe the cut was healing. “It’s realizing that no matter what happens, you aren’t going to get out of the pain permanently unless the bastard actually takes your head, you know?”

“The helplessness.”

She nodded. “You can get used to pain. Physical pain. It’s harder—” She rested her forehead on her hands.

Nick interlaced his fingers and stared at them. After a few seconds, he cleared his throat. “It’s the mental shit.”

“Yes.”

His boots were beginning to irritate him. He worked the left one off, then the right one. His socks were wet. Hell, all of him was soaked. And cold—A shiver ran over him. Shock. Shock wearing off.
He shivered in earnest.

Jade straightened. She looked at him, narrowed her eyes, and stood. “You’re completely soaked and you’re freezing! You should have said something. I have a robe you can borrow—don’t worry, it’s not one of mine…”

“Jade—”

“And I have a washer and a dryer which we can use on everything but your jacket. You don’t want to chance a cold.”

“Maybe I’ll be one the lucky Immortals who don’t catch colds.”

*** *** ***

Jehanne said, “I can wash your back, but you’ll have to do your own hair.”

“My hair’s not dirty.”

“That is what you think.”

He ran a hand over it and felt grit. He looked at the hand and found it streaked with black. That baseball slide past the floodlight had spread the mud further than he knew at the time. One of the wonderful things about civilization; hot water and soap.

Jehanne handed him the shampoo. “Turn around. Back first.”

“You sound like you’re integrating rather well.” He turned, his eyes half-closing at the thought of having her hands on his skin. The first touch shocked him with an electric pleasure, as if the hairs on his skin erecting at her touch passed the reaction on to every nerve under his skin.

“I think I am. And then something—something of it bites at me, pulls me in.” Her capable hard hands began working the knots out of his back, working from the back of his neck down his spine, prodding, massaging, touching. Methos sighed. He clenched a hand on the towel rack fastened to the tile wall at shoulder height. At Korda’s shoulder height, probably. Too high for Amanda.

Her hands slowed. Her fingers trembled. Then she laid her hands flat against his ass, and her fingers curled into his flesh, clenching on his muscles. He groaned. The bar in his hand whined, a pitch of metal being bent. He let go, put the hand flat against the wall. Her hands slid up and over his hips, running across his belly.

Swinging around, careless of falling on the slick tile, he pushed her into the wall, holding her there so he could kiss her mouth, her throat, her shoulder. He slid his thigh between hers, bracing them both. No more waiting.

Her hands clenched. She put force against his shoulders, but he knew how to counter that, and did. He took her mouth again, using his tongue to coax her mouth open, to take all of her that he could get with one long kiss.

She gasped for air when he let her go. “What are you doing?”

“ Fucking you,” he said, dropping the words crudely. “You want me to stop?”

It earned him a shudder, and her pupils dilated even further, if possible, but she said nothing. He smiled, and started to lean back. Her hands opened. She dug her short-clipped nails into his skin.
“No,” emerged, hoarse and startled. Jehanne cleared her throat. “No. Don’t stop.”

He bit back a laugh. “Good.”

She drew back, her forehead furrowed, the lines around her mouth deepening.

“I know how to be gentle,” he said, allowing the roughness past his defenses again. “I can put on the mask that pretends it’s all I know. Is that what you want?”

Jehanne put her clenched fists against her temples. “Methos, what do you want from me?”

He pulled her hands away from her face, then took her face between his hands. After all these years, he still could hear Duncan shouting across the water to Cassandra: Duncan’s voice echoing from concrete to concrete like a great bell ringing. “I want you,” he said, “to live.” He wrapped his arms around her shoulders, pulling her into him. With his lips against her ear, he whispered it, “I want you to live.”

She didn’t answer it at once; she considered the question, considered it for a period of some seconds, and then looked him in the eyes for a moment before she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and then wrapped a leg around his waist. “No. No mask.”

He took her face between his hands, looked down at her kiss-swollen mouth, then dragged poetry out of the massive mud-room of his memory. “I do not know what it is about you that closes and opens; only something in me understands the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses—nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands…” He kissed her mouth again, pressed her into the wall again, and found the way into her body. He buried his face in her shoulder, groaning at the feel of her flesh on him. Then he braced himself and began moving.

The Quickening flared back up between them. It had been this way once with Kronos; once, more of love in it than need, with Duncan, and now, love, need, and anger all at the same time with her. I could have lost her forever… “No,” he said, letting the word slip out softly, carrying darkness with it.

“Methos?”

“Shh,” he said. “Hush.” He thrust harder, faster, gasping with each movement. She panted as she moved with him; the bursts of breath on his skin made the world narrow to pinpoint around him.

The Quickening burned and demanded; they danced the oldest dance he knew, with the hot water spilling over them and the heat between their bodies the same fire demanding to be quenched.

*** *** ***

All at once Jade laughed. She jumped up from the bed and ran over to the massive Louis XVI wardrobe. She pulled the doors wide, rifled through the hanging clothes, and pulled out a robe. She tossed it to him. “Go ahead,” she said. “I’ll go in the loo until you tell me it’s all clear.”

The bathroom door closed firmly behind her. Apparently she meant what she said. Although from what he knew of Jade and Amanda, that could change at any moment.

Getting out of the wet clothes would be a relief, Nick admitted. He stripped to the skin. The coverlet was damp where he’d sat, but when he draped it over the footboard to dry, he saw that the blanket and sheets below were still dry.

Whoever the robe had been made for rivaled André the Giant in size. The quilted satin was anything but girly; it wrapped completely around him, leaving no room for embarrassment, and reached his
toes. He folded back the sleeves, then looked for something to drape his wet clothes over. Everything looked remarkably antique—he considered the possibility of ruining something with mud or wet cloth, and stood awkwardly for a second before giving in. “Jade, I’m decent.”

From the bathroom, she said, “Oh, that’s a pity,” and the door opened.

Her clothes had been exchanged for a kimono, which covered as much of her as his robe did of him. Maybe he wasn’t wearing a robe, but a man’s kimono? A very tall man, then.

“Good,” she said. “It fits.” She eyed him critically, and said. “Well, it’s rather too big, but at least you can’t accuse me of scanty clothing for my male friends.”

“Jade.”

Her eyes flicked up to his, then away.

“I am so sorry. If I hadn’t come here, he would never have—”

Two fast steps, and then she put her hand over his mouth. She shook his head. “He’d been hitting up the same fences you had. The minute he recognized me as Immortal, he knew he probably had the right fence. He didn’t—not the way he thought—but he did have the right fence. He would have done the same thing even if you hadn’t already contacted me.”

*** *** ***

Methos slipped down in the tub/shower, his muscles giving way. Jehanne folded with him, until they both knelt, leaning on each other, with the spray on her back and on his bent head. The water began to grow cool; he reached over her shoulder and fumbled with the knob to turn off the shower, and then leaned her back so that he could get the hot and cold faucets.

“Towels,” Jehanne said.

“Towels.” He nodded, looking around the tiled bathroom with its utter lack of closets.

“In the wardrobe. Bedroom.” Jehanne used his shoulders to push herself to her feet. She stumbled getting out of the tub, caught herself, and stumbled once more getting from the bathroom to the bedroom.

He followed, dripping water.

She pulled open the wardrobe, dropped to one knee, and picked towels out of from a wooden basket sitting on the floor of the massive mahogany piece. “Here.” She handed back two towels.

He wrapped one around his waist and tucked it in, then toweled his hair dry. Jehanne wrapped hers up in the towel, tossed a second towel over her shoulder, and shut the wardrobe. She started to scrub her arm dry.

Another step. He took the towel from her, wrapped it around her and held her against him. She turned in his arms, and he pulled her closer, slid his hands down to cup her ass and draw her into him.

Jehanne drew back, studying his face.

She knows. She doesn’t know what it is, but she knows something’s changed.

He relaxed his grip, as much as he could make himself, then tightened his arm to pull her head closer
to his. He kissed her forehead first, and then her eyelids, and then dropped a kiss behind her ear, where the blood throbbed beneath her skin. “I can hear your heart,” he said. “I could hear it from across the room now. I’ll hear it halfway around the world, if I leave. Or if you leave me.”

Her head turned into his mouth. “Methos?”

He pulled back. “This happened between you and Kronos. Didn’t it?”

Jehanne hesitated. He saw her eyes flicker, memory surging, then she nodded once. “Except—”

*Except he never let you see into the darkness.* “Shh. Kiss me.”

She tasted the same, she tasted like Jehanne who drank little wine and much coffee, who got up at five-thirty on a winter morning to milk a cow and spent the last two weeks bottle-feeding a kitten and coaxing him into doing the same.

He wrapped his arms around her shoulders, holding her against him.

“In China,” she said. “He wanted—this mad sixteen-year-old boy, Immortal, claimed emperorship over a province. His head advisor was also Immortal. Elek knew they meant to kill us once we’d won the battle against a Mongol invasion band. I wasn’t supposed to take a head—but in the battle, Elek claimed the emperor’s head. The General saw him. I got to him before he got to Elek. And then—he’d wanted the General’s head himself. He was furious afterwards, after—we got out; we were still under the effects of the Quickenings—”

“A Double Quickening. Yes.”

She kissed him this time.

“Those are stronger,” he said. *Duncan would know.* “It’s what you felt after Bordeaux, when Kronos died. You didn’t know how to interpret it, but you knew.” *No, Kronos wouldn’t explain this to you.* He’d want the advantage, even with you, want you to think it natural, think it as normal as anything Immortal is. Gods, you never even guessed how helpless you were against him.

“Did you think it was only him? You and I, we shared that Quickening tonight, Jehanne.” He heard her intake of breath, and put his fingers against her lips. “Don’t. I chose to push you out of harm’s way.”

Better me than give you to the Boy Scout. Amanda wouldn’t thank you for bonding with her boyfriend.

“Because Nick meant to pull me out of the way of that falling light,” she said. “But Nick doesn’t care about me. Not that way.”

“Yes to the first and it doesn’t matter to the second.” He let go of her hair, in order to get his arm under her thighs and carry her to the bed. “A Quickening’s a greedy thing. It grabs what it wants.”

“A live thing,” she said, more in wonder than in question.

“Yes.” He laid her down on the bed, stripped off his towel, then covered her with his body. “Live and in us.”

*** *** ***

“Lie down with me,” Jade said.

“Jade—” He stopped the word as it escaped. Sex wasn’t in her eyes. “Come on, then.”

The sheets were silk, and cool to his skin. His teeth chattered. All at once he knew how cold he felt,
how cold the rain had been.

“It’s shock,” she said. “It hits me, too—”

“I saw it happen. I’ve seen it before, with Amanda, but—” This was different. Amanda’s diamond-hard shell, the thief’s shell—all that he knew about her made this step into a world where people cut other people’s heads off almost acceptable. Jehanne was pragmatic, relaxed, calm; someone who fed stray kittens and wept when her dog was injured.

Not someone who faced down an opponent and took his head while invoking three saints to help her. Not a woman wearing a cold, pitiless, soldier’s glare.

“It’s savage.” She pulled the covers over the both of them, and snuggled in next to him, with her head on his chest. “It’s the same now as it was a thousand years ago. Each Quickening is different and yet they’re all the same.”

“How do you live with that?”

“The same way you live with anything,” Jade said. “If you want to live, you live. However you can. If you have principles, you try to live by them. If you just want to survive, like me, you do anything you have to. I told him everything he wanted to know, Nick, just hoping that he wouldn’t decide to take my head then and there. That’s why I agreed to call you. I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right, Jade.”

She shifted to look down into his face.

“It is.” He put more force into his words. “There’s nothing to be ashamed of, or sorry for. Everyone wants to live.”

She laid her head down on his chest. Nick slid an arm around her, telling himself that it was more comfortable than letting it lie awkwardly on the mattress.

“Amanda wouldn’t have told him,” Jade muttered.

“I don’t know what she’d do in a situation like yours. Are you sure you do?”

For some time, she didn’t answer. He thought she might have been asleep. Then she sighed. “I don’t know. She has been in bad situations, I know that. Happens to all of us, now and then. I know she usually wiggles her way out.” Jade sighed again. “Better than I am at that.”

“She’s better than most people at that.” Nick couldn’t stop a rueful smile. He looked over Jade’s head, at the wall. “I wish she’d—”

“You don’t.” Jade patted his chest. “You don’t tell someone they could become Immortal.”

*** *** ***

A live thing, Jehanne said to herself, lying with her head on Methos’ chest. The towels, under them, were twisted, almost an irritation. The Quickening is live, like the saints. It has its own purposes, its own plans. And we know almost nothing of them; all we do is react. She didn’t really expect an answer, but she asked anyway. Is that it, Saint Michael? Are you part of that?

Not him, but Saint Margaret, echoed by Saint Catherine. Yes. Everything is a part of that. Some have portions you do not—and none has what you have.
And if I lose my head…

We will remain as we are.

Saint Michael, as usual, spoke more sharply. Be careful to whom you lose your head, if you must lose it.

But what happens in the end? When—if—there are no more Quickenings to be had.

“I don’t know,” Methos said.

She lifted her head to study his face. “I’m sorry. I was thinking—out loud, it appears.” She examined his face, tracing the outline of his brow with her fingers, then of his mouth. “Five thousand years and still you don’t know what this all leads to?”

He shook his head. A rueful smile touched his face. “No great insights. No magic. Just a man who’s lived a very long life.” He reached up, took her hand in his, and kissed her fingertips, one by one. “I haven’t shared a Quickening with a woman in centuries.”

“You’ve shared Quickenings more than once?”

“Yes. The first was Kronos.” He said nothing more for a moment.

Jehanne stroked his forearm, then slid her hand higher. The muscles under the skin were bunched: tight, knotted against memory.

“There was more than one of those between us.” His index finger trailed down her face, curved under her chin, ran across her lower lip. “Then with our other Brethren. Only once with them, but that was enough to bind us.”

“Binding.”

“What you feel now. It’s the only word I’ve ever heard applied to it.”

Jehanne pressed her face against his hand. “And binding does not always carry a positive connotation.”

He cupped her face in his face and leaned down to kiss her forehead. “No. It doesn’t. And no, it’s not always positive.”

“And the woman?”

“Before your time. Closer to Amanda’s. Her family died of the plague, and she was left alone, not more than three or four years old. She survived. But then—” He managed a one-shouldered shrug. “She was one of us, and we’re tougher than most mortals. I found her after one of her clients got jealous and stabbed her. She became a good swordswoman. Probably your caliber. Maybe a little better.”

“What happened?”

His free arm wrapped around her shoulders. Methos rolled onto his back, drawing her with him, and they lay there in silence a moment, with her head resting on his chest.

“I took her head,” he said at last. “She wasn’t my caliber. There’s an old tradition among Immortals. I thought, until then, that I had avoided it.”
She crossed her arms, propping her head on the backs of her hands: the better to see his face in the shadows.

“You take a pupil. The pupil learns from you. Whatever they have of a Quickening in them will be different from what you have, because the Quickening—” He stopped. An odd expression crossed his face, and then a smile edged with harsh memory. “Call it the Force, if you like. Whatever it is, it’s been splintered. Every time you take a head, it gathers more of itself.”

“That’s why they say ‘there can only be One’?”

“Some say that.” He walked his fingers down her spine, feeling out the vertebrae. “But what does ‘one’ mean, anyway?”

“You don’t know?”

“I keep telling people I am not the fount of all Immortal knowledge. Thank God, if there is one.”

“But your pupil develops that portion of the Quickening that is in them?”

“Yes.” He chewed on his lower lip a moment, and frowned. “Then, in many cases, the desire to have all your knowledge grows, and the student Challenges the master.” His head rolled to one side, and a sigh rumbled through his chest. “Sometimes the student wins.”

“Sometimes the master.”

“None of my students have ever beaten me.”

Jehanne puzzled that out. It took a few seconds. “I’m not your student, Methos.”

“No. But you were his. Kronos believed—at least, from what he told me and what I saw him do—he believed that the Quickening required a unity of more than one Immortal, a synthesis. He thought the Quickening was too great to be held by a single man.” He ruffled her hair. “Or woman.”

“But he also believed in a hierarchy. With himself as the top.”

“Yes. Well, that was the template we knew for centuries. And—He needed to control. That was where the Horsemen came from. We all had things he needed.” His hand massaged the small of her back. “Sometimes a master chose a student in order to develop that student’s abilities. Then, when those were honed, he would Challenge the student, take the Quickening, and fatten off the younger’s strength. The Quickening is our real life. We eat and drink like mortals, but it’s the Quickening that nourishes us, makes us stronger.” He smiled at her, the mocking smile he often used on Duncan. “Let’s fight another day, as I told the Highlander.”

“It makes us sound like vampires. Like demons.” Elek had laughed at her when she asked if they were demons.

“Only if a vampire or a demon fed on those of his own kind. Her own kind. We’re not monsters, Jehanne. We’re just a little more than human.”

“You mean you’re not just a guy?”

He lay back and shook with silent laughter. When he stopped, he said, “I have never figured out how to tell someone that, barring swords, I’m going to live forever. And that I’ve already lived five thousand years, give or take a thousand. They think you ought to turn into Yoda over the long haul.”
“I don’t think I’d like having sex with Yoda,” Jehanne said thoughtfully.

This time he shouted. He laughed until he was out of breath, and she rested her head on her arms, crossed on his chest, and grinned at him.

“Damn,” he said, very softly. He ran both of his hands through her hair, stroked her back. “I have missed you, and it’s only been two days…”

Her nails cut into her palms. “Then why did you go?”

*** *** ***

“Why not?” Nick heard her take a breath, and said, “And don’t tell me it’s a tradition. I’ve heard of more screwy traditions in the last four days than I want to hear for the rest of my life!”

Jade sat up and shrugged. “Then there’s nothing I can tell you.”

“Just—it’s always been done that way? That’s the entire reason?”

“Why do policeman wear uniforms?”

“That’s not just tradition. That’s so that people know who we are.”

“But detectives wear plain clothes.”

“But everywhere.”

She sat cross-legged on the coverlet. She clasped her hands in her lap. “Look, the oldest Immortal I ever heard of was about five thousand years old. Maybe older than that. My own teacher—Feiyan-shi— was fifteen hundred years older than I was. She said that many years in the future, there would come a time when the Quickening would need to unify.”

“There can only be one.”

Jade pinched her ear. She chewed on her lower lip a moment. “That’s not exactly what she said. But a lot of what she said was so figurative—stories. I would ask a question, and she would set off on some long parable or anecdote. More than half the time, I’d forget what I’d asked in the first place.”

“But you knew about Holy Ground.”

“Yes. That she said often.” Jade’s mouth twisted. “The man who went up against her didn’t know about Holy Ground.”

“A bad thing not to know.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Doesn’t stepping on Holy Ground warn you somehow?”

She shook her head. “I feel like I’m stepping through—some sort of curtain. Then I know I’m on Holy Ground, but that’s all I know.” One manicured nail tapped his chest. “That is why you need a teacher.”

Jehanne’s voice rang in his ears, clear and cold. Gooseflesh prickled over his bare arms, all the hairs standing up, bristling atavistically. He shrugged. “Jehanne told Eyvindr tonight that I was her student.”
Her almond-shaped eyes narrowed to cat-slits. “She claimed prior right to the Challenge?”

He nodded.

“That was how Feiyan-shī died,” Jade said. “She claimed prior right, but she wasn’t good enough to kill him.” She rested her elbow on her knee, and then her chin on that hand, frowning. “Skīlas. That was what he called himself. He was the first man I’d ever seen with blue eyes and red hair.” She glanced over at him and smiled. “I was very young. I thought at first he was a demon. Then I realized I wasn’t facing a demon, just a swordsman.” Her smile vanished. “Just one of us, and only wanting heads and Quickenings.”

Nick lay back down on the bed. He held out an arm.

She squirmed back under the covers. Her head rested on his arm. After a few moments, she fell asleep.

After a longer time, so did he.

*** *** ***

Methos froze beneath her. His eyes narrowed. She felt the distance rise up between them, an emotional wall. “What?”

“You could have stayed when I did. Why didn’t you?”

He twisted a strand of her hair around his fingers, interlacing it like a ribbon. “You didn’t ask me.”

Silence. Tonight, silence was not her friend. Jehanne choked on a breath. “I was afraid. I asked him to stay—when he left the last time.”

“I remember.”

Of course he would. After she had discovered, and admitted to Cassandra, then to him, that Kronos had been her teacher—and my lover—he could hardly forget. Though this situation had been the first time he’d thrown ‘Elek Koronel’ at her.

“He told me no. He told me everything would be all right.” But I knew it wouldn’t be. Breathing hurt; she took longer, slower breaths until she could speak without pain. “I never saw him again. I was afraid you would tell me no. And you would have, wouldn’t you?”

“I don’t know.” He looked past her, his jaw working as if chewing over the question. He rubbed his eyes. “Jehanne—”

Her skin prickled, sweat pooling on her back and turning icy. No, I don’t want to hear this. She stopped his mouth with hers. She dug her nails into his hips. He jerked under her, and his hands pulled her thighs apart. She shifted, reached down to guide him, then knelt, centering herself on his cock.

“Don’t talk,” she said. “Kiss me. Make love with me. Don’t talk.”

*** *** ***

Nick awoke, sweating, his right arm tingling where the circulation had been momentarily cut off. He heard someone whimpering. Long hair brushed against the pins and needles.

Who did I go to bed with? Lauren—no. Lauren is dead. Amanda—no. Amanda is gone— Desolation
swept over him like the rain falling from last night.

The woman next to him rolled off his arm, curling up with her back to him.

_Get a grip, Wolfe._ He put a hand on her shoulder. She shivered. “Jade,” he said in her ear. “Jade, it’s Nick Wolfe. You’re just dreaming. Wake up.”

She froze. Her voice trembled. “I can’t wake up—”

“There’s nothing to be afraid of. It’s all over.”

“Help me,” she said. “Nick, help me wake up. I don’t want to dream any more…” She rolled him over on his back, kissed him with bruising force, their teeth clicking. He tasted a drop of metal on her lower lip—blood—and then tossed the thought aside.

The robes tangled around them. He got hers out of the way first, throwing it towards the footboard and having no idea where it landed.

*** *** ***

Mewing woke her. Jehanne sat up in bed and looked around. For a moment, someone else looked through her eyes at the disorder—then she blinked and the room resolved into dresser, clothing, wardrobe—Sorcha was vainly trying to lick Darius into comfort, but Darius was a kitten and hungry.

She found the cooler and the bottle of formula, then settled back on the bed to feed the kitten. When he started to knead her arm, she wrapped the sheet around herself, shielding her breasts from kitten-scratches.

_I am still Jehanne d’Arc. I am still myself._ The terror and the temptation of the Quickening had melded with her. She knew more than she had about Quickenings, about Immortals, but Eyvindr himself was no longer fighting her for control.

“Jehanne?” Methos sounded groggy.

She tucked the kitten back into his basket, then lay down next to her lover. “I’m still here,” she said. “Go back to sleep.” Not long after his breaths lengthened into sleep, she dropped off as well.

*** *** ***

Nick woke suddenly, with the sun in his eyes and his gut growling. The sheets felt strange: silky, alien. He rolled over on his back and stared upward at a net canopy set into a ceiling hook. The sky slithered in red between the curtains. It was dawn still.

Jade’s bedroom. He propped himself up on his elbows, staring around the room. It seemed no more familiar in daylight than it had last night.

Last night. Last night he had…

_It’s not cheating if there’s no pre-existing relationship._ A kiss here and a kiss there—followed by a slap—didn’t count as a relationship. He ran his hands through his hair, and sat up in the bed. He didn’t know how to define what existed between Amanda and himself. He didn’t even know if he wanted to define it.

The bedroom door swung open. Jade carried in a silver tray whose cost he didn’t want to guess at. It
was big enough to hold half a sheep—well, not quite.

“Breakfast,” she said cheerfully. “True Paris breakfast; I’m sure you’re used to it by now. Coffee and brioche.”

“You cook?” He let her hear wariness.

She set the tray down on the foot of the bed, and swatted in his direction. “I know very good bakeries. But I make terrific coffee.”

“I can always be bribed with coffee.” He held the tray steady while she settled on the bed.

She had the advantage: she’d donned the kimono she’d worn the night before, but he was covered only by a sheet and blankets. He took a cup of coffee and a croissant. Absolutely idiotic to be embarrassed about being naked in front of a woman you slept with last night.

“Your clothes should be dry in a few minutes,” she said. “I’ve got your boots propped on two hairdryers, and I think we can salvage them.”

“Well, I’ve needed a new pair for a while, and with the expense check Bert’s going to give me, I can afford them.”

“And the museum will have the sword back, so it’s all back to normal.” Jade sipped her coffee, put the cup down, and began to take a croissant apart. “Look, Nick, about last night—”

“Hey, I think I’m supposed to say that.”

She shook her head. “I get to, this time. Not all of it was fun, but—I appreciate you coming back to check on me. And staying with me.” Her head lifted. She turned on a provocative smile and megawatt eyes. “And for being such—incredible company. If Amanda ever kicks you out, let me know, will you?”

Amusement died on a breath. “Amanda’s not here to do any kicking.”

“She will be.” This time, her smile was nostalgic. “I have never known Amanda to give up on anything she really wanted.” She finished a second cup of coffee, then refilled both their cups. After setting the pot back on the tray, Jade reached over and rested her thin cool fingers on his arm. “Just keep in mind that time is very different for you now. It takes some adjustment.”

“It seems to take a lot of adjustment,” Nick said.

“And some people are better at it than others.” Jade drank this cup of coffee more slowly. “One more thing—”

“I won’t tell Amanda you slept with me.”

She threw a croissant at him.

He caught it, laughing all the while.

“I want you to take the book,” she said.

Nick stopped in the middle of the laugh. “What?”

“The Yellow Emperor’s book. I want you to take it. I don’t care what you do with it. I just—” Jade sighed. “I don’t want it in the house. It seems to be bad luck for me.”
“What, and you don’t think the bad luck will run over onto me?” He was joking, though, and managed to coax a smile from her.

“You didn’t steal it.” Jade dug her teeth into her lower lip a second. “It’s always going to remind me of what happened. Take the sword back to the museum and take the book. I’ve learned my lesson. Never steal magical artifacts.”

“Why not—just never steal anything?”

Jade’s eyes widened to silent-movie proportions. “Heavens! And be bored the rest of my Immortal life?”

*** *** ***

Methos opened his eyes when the sunlight teased his face. The sunlight shone warm and bright; no red remained in this dawn to warn superstitious sailors. He glanced across the room at the clock. 8

ack emma. Where did that come from?

Jehanne slept like a child; heavily, one arm above her head, the only thing moving was her chest, in deep breaths, almost hypnotic. He wondered if the sleep depended at all on the Quickening, but when he examined his memories of her sleeping habits, he couldn’t discern a difference. He hovered over her a few seconds, studying her face, then kissed her cheek.

A smile slid across her face, but her breathing stayed the same slumberous rhythm.

He crawled out from under the covers. His clean clothing lay in neat stacks on the dresser. He dug through it for jeans, sweatshirt, and socks.

Many things to consider. Damn, I do sound like some little green wizard. He collected the three swords from the floor and headed out of the bedroom to the basement.

MacLeod liked meditation to clear his head.

In some cases, Methos liked meditation himself. But he had two swords which needed sharpening—one of the best ways to remove blood without bleach—and rote physical action would suffice. And it wouldn’t hurt to make sure of the edge on his longsword, while he thought about it.

Some say the world will end in fire, some say in ice…

Nick Wolfe had come very close to ending the world in ice last night. Methos set the swords on a long table in the basement, then went looking for the grindstone Jehanne had mentioned.

*** *** ***

Nick locked up the Kawasaki and unlocked the back door. A low grinding noise echoed from below his feet. He didn’t recall low grinding noises being any part of Amanda’s reactions after a Quickening…

The scent of fresh coffee pulled him into the kitchen. No cream pitcher; no Sorcha; no Darius. A faint scent of lavender and soap lay as a top note over the coffee. If Jehanne were up, she wasn’t visible; that suggested Adam was, and had made coffee. Nick set the book on the corner of the counter, then adjusted it so he could be sure it wouldn’t fall off. He poured himself a cup of coffee, blew on it, and risked a sip. Scalding. Benoît had made coffee very recently, then. He filled a second mug, weighed what he was about to do, and went down into the basement anyway.
He paused to examine the kegs and bottles stored in the supplies area of the extensive basement, then turned away from them. Vincèn would have those under control. No need for him to interfere.

The grinding noise grew louder as he stepped through the door.

The weapons cabinet stood open. Maybe the grindstone had come from inside that. He’d never seen a man handle a grindstone powered by a foot pedal. The whine of steel against stone vibrated in his back teeth.

Benoît handled the stone and the blade as if he needed no eyes to watch his task. He worked his way down one side of the blade, as if the steel lived, as if it responded to stone and hands like a trained animal eager to show what lay hidden inside the metal. His foot lifted from the pedal. He lifted the blade away from the grindstone, sighted along it, wiped it clean, and swung it, testing the balance. Still with his attention on the sword, he said, “If that cup’s for me, I’ll take it.” He laid the sword on the deal table flanking the cabinet, turned back, and accepted the mug Nick held out.

“Why something so—”

“Medieval?” Benoît’s eyebrows arched. He sipped the coffee, sighed, and rotated his shoulders. Sweat slicked his shoulders, soaked his singlet. “You use a machine to clean your—what is it? A Glock?”

“No, a Sig Sauer.”

A nod. “Rather liked Glocks myself. I’ll have to check out Sig Sauers.”

“I clean my gun—well, no. I don’t use a machine. Just tools.”

“You need to feel the blade’s edge,” Benoît said. He took another swallow, then walked over to the blade and studied it. “Power tools speed it up, but you lose the knowledge of the steel.” In profile, the quirk of his mouth lent a diabolic twist to his face for the few seconds it showed. “Or the bronze.” He turned the sword over and ran his thumb along the blade. “Speaking of swords, have you been able to return the Passau yet?”

“Just woke up myself.” The coffee was drinkable temperature now. After a second mouthful, Nick said, “How’s Jehanne?”

“Sleeping.” Another pause, another swallow, and Adam added, “When she wakes up, the Quickening should have settled in completely.”

The coffee tasted as strong as Amanda’s. At least, it made his stomach rock queasily. *Or something does...* “It never took Amanda this long.”

“Amanda has a year or two on Jehanne.” The words dropped cool and distant, like the water dripping from the grindstone. “I don’t think she’s ever taken a Challenge from someone that advanced.”

“You know how old Eyvindr was?”

Dark eyes assessed him. “Three thousand, maybe. Give or take three hundred years.”

Nick took a step back and found himself against the wall. “Three thousand—that old?”

“What did you think Immortal meant?” He sounded like that damned criminology professor, catching a student out on a subject he hadn’t really studied. “Surely you have some idea how old Amanda is.”
“A gentleman never asks a lady’s age.”

Adam smiled. “I never claimed to be a gentleman.” He waited, his head cocked to the side, daring Nick to say the obvious.

“I know Amanda must be about a thousand years old.”

A brief nod answered. “The older you are, the easier the Quickening.” Benoît pursed his lips a moment, then added, “Relatively speaking. Taking a Quickening from older or more experienced opponents gives you more, but they take as much as they give. You can lose yourself in one.”

A finger of ice ran down his spine. “But she didn’t. You said she was all right.”

“Jehanne—is much stronger than she appears.” Adam set the mug on the table and crossed his arms. “Yes, she’s fine. No thanks to you.”

Nick’s sight blurred. His fingernails cut into his palms. He fought to keep his voice even. “I did not ask her to take that fight.”

“Even as briefly as you’ve known her, you should know you wouldn’t have to.”

God, I’m trying to justify myself to the bastard who walked out on her.

“Even as briefly as you’ve known her, you should know you wouldn’t have to.”

“Jehanne—is much stronger than she appears.” Adam set the mug on the table and crossed his arms. “Yes, she’s fine. No thanks to you.”

Nick’s sight blurred. His fingernails cut into his palms. He fought to keep his voice even. “I did not ask her to take that fight.”

“Even as briefly as you’ve known her, you should know you wouldn’t have to.”

God, I’m trying to justify myself to the bastard who walked out on her.

Adam’s head jerked to the side, and this smile was even sharper than the last one. “You’ll ask yourself that question a thousand times, if you live that long. Of course, you go on hiding behind a woman’s skirts, you just might live that long.”

The heat boiled over him. He had taken two long steps with his fists clenched, and Benoît—hadn’t even moved. Nick stopped. He clenched his jaw until he could speak without his voice shaking. “That’s not what I’d call a politically correct statement, Benoît.”

A silent laugh, and then Benoît shook his head. “Mr. Wolfe, I have as much use for political correctness as I have for chivalry.”

“Is that why you left her?” Nick hit out on instinct, from the gut. “Because you don’t believe in chivalry?”

A muscle twitched in Adam’s jaw. He looked down, sucked in a breath, and then said, “Yeah. I don’t believe in chivalry and I don’t believe in hanging around for an opponent to come to you. Even if you do live on Holy Ground.”

“Am I mistaken, or does Jehanne not live on Holy Ground?”

The sleek pitiless face swung away. After a moment, the words slid out, sharper than the blade of the sword. “Jehanne lives with God. And for God. She promised Amanda she’d take care of things here. If it cost her her head, she’d still have taken that Challenge for you.”

“You blame me for that?”

In a voice deep, soft, and silky, Adam said, “Don’t you, Wolfe?” The thrust went in so easily, so deeply, Nick only felt the cut of the words after several seconds of silence.

A blur of faces spun across in front of his eyes.

“Have any other women died for you?” Benoît pressed the advantage.
He could see a feral streak in the other man’s eyes, although only for a second, and the ground shifted under him. *Not chivalry and not political correctness—how the hell old are you?* “You want to take my head and keep it from happening again?”

The eyebrow gave him a nasty answer, even though the words and the tone stayed smooth and unemotional. “That would not please Jehanne. And I have some interest in her happiness.”

Nick threw up both hands in exasperation. “Well, then, you have some other suggestion? Maybe there’s a directory somewhere of sword fighting schools for new Immortals?”

Adam straightened. “What do you think this is, Wolfe?” His hand curled around the sword’s hilt. He tossed it to Nick, as if he were tossing a stone across a stream.

Nick caught it, by the hilt, to his surprise. Caught it with the wrong hand, his left. It felt—exactly as Joe Dawson had said it felt. Balanced, alive, unused to him, and him unused to it. He shifted it from left hand to right.

“Learn to fight with both hands,” Benoît said. “You lose one, you can still win with the other.”

“You’re—offering to teach me to fight?”

“I’m offering to teach you to win.”

Nick pursed his lips a second. “Against you?”

Another silent laugh rippled through Benoît’s body. “I don’t like you much, Wolfe.”

“I wouldn’t have thought you liked me at all,” he retorted, and grimaced. *High school boys in a shower: ‘my dick’s bigger than yours’*. “I know I damn well don’t like you.”

“You don’t have to. You just have to listen to what I have to teach you.”

“What’s that? Everything about Immortals?”

Now just the feral grin answered. “Nobody knows everything about Immortals, Wolfe. That’s your first lesson.”

“What’s the second?”

A blur dizzied him—stillness becoming motion. Adam wrench the sword out of Nick’s grasp. A cold razor edge of steel rested against Nick’s collarbone. He froze.

“The second?” The air around them smelt of coffee.

Nick stopped breathing.

Benoît stepped away, turned the sword, and offered it to him again, hilt first. “The second,” he said, his face as hard as the grindstone, “is that I will always know more than you do.”

“That’ll depend on how long I live, won’t it?”

Now a real smile warmed the other man’s face. “It will.”

“We start now?”

“Third lesson. Never fight on an empty stomach unless you have to.” Adam jerked his head towards
the stairs. “Breakfast first.”

Plates clattered in the kitchen. Nick stepped in and looked around.

He hadn’t expected to see Joe Dawson. He absolutely had not expected to see Joe Dawson sitting in a chair taken from the dining room while Jehanne collected plates from one cabinet and mugs from another.

“Do you take cream in your coffee, M’sieur Dawson?” she said.

“No, thanks. Please, call me Joe.”

She handed him a mug of coffee and wrinkled her nose. “I’ll try, but my English accent isn’t very good.”

Joe laughed.

Adam said, in the same dry tone, “Your English accent is every bit as good as you want it to be, Jeannot.” He crossed the room, tilted her face up with a finger, and kissed her.

Nick glanced away. When he looked back, the kiss was over and Jehanne was wrinkling her nose again, this time at Adam.

“Ah,” she said, “the smell of testosterone in the morning.” She was wearing the sweatshirt this morning, and the hem had been knotted into a hammock for Darius. She opened the bread bin, then the refrigerator door, and started cutting up things with a large knife.

Sorcha padded in, looked around, then selected a spot next to Joe’s chair.

Dawson reached down and scratched behind the hound’s ears. Sorcha sighed and closed her eyes.

“What’s for breakfast?” Adam dragged one of the stools from the edge of the kitchen island and dropped onto it.

“Croissants, brioche, and cheese. The croissants and brioche are mine, not the bakers, and it’s been a while since I made them, so be patient with me. I was thinking of a cheese soufflé for dinner—unless you feel like meat or we’re going out—in that case, I’ll start a daube for tomorrow.” She plunked a platter of cheese down on the table, then added another one platter of assorted plain and sweet breads. “Joe! What would you like?”

“I ate, mam’selle,” he said.

She put her hands on her hips and tapped her foot. “Jehanne.”

“Jehanne.”

“You should eat something,” she said. “And do you take naproxen or aspirin?”

Dawson choked on his coffee.

Benoît sounded apologetic. “I should have warned you she was a doctor.”

Joe ran a hand through his hair. After a few seconds, he got out of the chair, crossed the room and claimed one of the bar stools. “Naproxen, please.”
“Bon.” Jehanne brought him two tablets and a glass of water. Once she seemed certain they were all settled, she sat down next to Benoît. She watched them as they bit into the bread.

“If this is how you bake when you’re out of practice,” Nick said, “I’ll have to stay away from your baking most of the time. I’ll end up weighing as much as The Thing.”

“The what?” Jehanne said.

Adam groaned. “No. Do not get her into comic books. It’s bad enough she quotes operetta at me.”

Dawson cut into the conversation as if trying to head off an argument. “I think I should get you to bake all my brioche. I could easily keep you busy.”

“Thank you,” Jehanne said. She tore a brioche in half, then tossed one-half to Sorcha. She ate two or three pieces of the remainder before speaking again. “About the Passau sword?”

This time, Nick choked. “That’s got to go back to the museum.”

Adam said, “Of course.” Between ‘of’ and ‘course’, Jehanne said, “C’est vrai.” Dawson came in just after the two of them with an emphatic, “Hell, yes.”

Jehanne looked at the three of them, one by one. “Without Yu’s Stone.”

“Oh, now, wait a minute,” Nick said.

“She’s right.” Benoît got up and refilled the coffee cups.

Return the sword with the stone missing? Nick appealed to the only other person in the room.

“Dawson, surely you’re not going along with this!”

“Me?” Joe Dawson picked up his cup and studied the level of the coffee. “Listen, you’re the one who’s been asked to retrieve the sword, not me.” He swallowed coffee before leveling a glance at Nick. “You take it back without the center stone, you think it’s going to damage your reputation.”

“That’s not it at all!” Nick stood up.

Jehanne raised both eyebrows.

“Damn it!” He turned away from them. Standing with his hands on his hips and staring at the refrigerator did not help. Running his hands through his hair did nothing but remind him he needed a haircut. “Okay.” He turned back around and crossed his arms over his chest. “Maybe some of it is my reputation. I was told to get the sword back. Bert expects all of it back.”

“Bert?” Adam cocked his head.

Nick opened his mouth.

Jehanne forestalled him. “Bert Myers owns half of this place. Amanda owns the bar, Bert owns the upstairs, and Nick runs the European operation of—the business. Amanda didn’t explain very much about Bert’s business.”

“Import-export?” Adam raised an eyebrow.

Adam opened his mouth. Jehanne reached over and stuffed a bite of brioche in it. He rolled his eyes, but chewed, swallowed, and then said, “I’ll be back in a moment.” He headed downstairs.

Dawson said, “What did Jade tell you about this sword?”


A snort answered that. “At least we haven’t seen any dragons yet.”

Benoît’s boots sounded in the hall. He sauntered in, with the Passau sword in his hand, and laid it the length of the island. “What did your friend Jade tell you about this sword?”

“He said the stone in the sword.” Dawson took a sip of coffee.

Benoît looked at the sword. “Which one?” Then he shook his head and tapped the clear phenakite gem. “Has to be this one. I felt something when I touched it.”

Nick nodded at the counter and the book. “It’s all in there. Yu’s Stone.”

The other man twisted, leaned back, and collected the book with one long arm. He opened it, raised an eyebrow, and turned over a few pages. “Joe, you think Rikke reads Shang Dynasty Chinese?”

“I don’t know. She might, but I doubt it. I can read a little of it—at least, I can translate the characters in Pinyin. With a dictionary, I can make some translations into Modern Chinese. You recognize it?”

“I recognize the characters. I’ve got some familiarity with Karlgren and Maspero’s work, but the Chinese Bronze Age wasn’t one I was interested in researching.”

Nick felt a surge of amusement and triumph. “Jade can read quite a bit of that particular book.” He held out a hand.

Benoît’s lips pursed, but after a second, he put the book into Nick’s hand.

Nick flipped through the pages until he found the one he recognized, with its pen-and-ink illustrations of stone and results. “According to Jade, this is the seventh book of Huangdi, the Yellow Emperor, and it’s called Instruments of Power and their Application. This was translated from a Latin translation of an Arabic translation, apparently from a damaged copy found after an earthquake. What caused the earthquake, supposedly, was misapplication of the instructions for using Yu’s Stone.”

Joe frowned. “Something like the Methuselah Stone?”

Benoît interrupted. “Cassandra said that actually reflected the healing ability of the Immortal using it —”

Who’s Cassandra? Nick shoved it aside for later explanation. “That sounds like this.” Excitement prickled up through his skull. “This stone is supposed to insure winning battles. Challenges, I guess —But it has to be held by right.”

Benoît’s eyes narrowed. “What kind of right?”

“Either by winning the fight or having it passed to you by the previous owner.”

Jehanne leaned over to peer at the book. She slipped on the stool, and caught herself. Her left hand came down squarely on the stone. She froze. The color fled her face, leaving it alabaster; her pupils enlarged, immense, swallowing all but a thin grey line of her irises.
Nick grabbed for her hand. The book thudded onto the table.

Jehanne yanked her hand back from the hilt. She gasped like a fish gasping for water, then shook her head hard. She rubbed her left hand over and over, as if burned.

Adam said, softly, a man coaxing a cat, “Jehanne? Jeannot, ma petite, what is it?”

She took a shuddering breath, then looked Nick in the eyes, freezing him. “Did you touch it? Did you feel anything?”

“Did I what? Hell, no—” Wait. He’d picked up the Passau sword after Benoît’s order. Like a rookie in the Academy. “It weighed about 7 pounds, it was sharp, and I don’t know why the jewelry on it didn’t get in the way. Other than that, it was just metal—I didn’t feel anything.”

“Jehanne. What did you feel?” Adam sounded sharper than before, teetering on the edge of anger—and maybe fear.

“I didn’t feel anything. I heard—it was as if it tried to speak to me.” She looked at the three of them again, in turn, before adding, “I didn’t understand it.”

“Why not?” The frown darkened on Adam’s face. “You won it from him.”

She stared at the sword, then said, “The saints protected me.”

Adam muttered, “At least for once they didn’t just dump you into the middle of something.”

Jehanne transferred her stare to him. He just raised an eyebrow. She shook her head. “Did you feel anything, Adam? You carried the sword up here.”

“I don’t know what I was supposed to feel,” he said. The tone sounded mild, but Nick felt something suppressed under the casual demeanor.

She motioned at the sword.

Adam looked at her. His jaw tightened. After a moment, he reached for the sword.

Jehanne held up a finger. “If you pull a fake electrocution or anything else while trying to be funny, I will hit you. In front of both of these nice gentlemen!”

He looked wounded. But he took the sword, his palm covering the phenakite center gem, and lifted it. Turning with it, he avoided the three of them as he moved into a clear position. He swung the sword. A shake of his head said very little; he shifted his stance and tried swinging with both hands, then shook his head once more. The sword went back on the table, and he sat down.

Adam turned his hands over, examining them palms up, palms down. He looked at the sword. “There was something,” he said. “Not anything definite. But something like a buzz. Sensing another Immortal at the farthest edge of my range.”

Nick put his palm down on the stone. Warm, yes, but that could simply have been reflected body heat. “I don’t feel anything.” He drummed his fingers on the table top. “So what exactly are you feeling, Jehanne? I mean, what exactly did the voice sound like? Good? Evil?”

“It’s a stone,” Adam said. “An artifact. I don’t think it can be good or evil. But I think it’s possibly very dangerous.”
“Which,” Jehanne interrupted, “is exactly why it should not remain in the sword.” She spread her hands out. “It is perfectly reasonable that you should find the sword with a gem or two missing. The important thing is that the piece itself is found—"

“Wait!” Nick said. “Hold on a damn minute. A gem or two?”

She grimaced, then sighed. In very careful English, she said, “Merely corroborative detail, intended to give artistic verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative.” Having got through it, she offered him a brilliant smile.

Nick blinked. He squinted at her, but she was still grinning. “To a what?”

“An otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative.” Adam’s long arm reached out. He pulled Jehanne off her stool and onto his lap, without knocking either one of them over. Then he wrapped both arms around her, stared at Nick over her head and added, “To which the proper response is ‘Corroborative fiddlestick!’ I’ve been trying to wean her off Gilbert and Sullivan, but it hasn’t worked so far.”

Nick paced back and forth. He paused. “Dawson, say something!”

“Me?” Joe Dawson shook his head. “I’m not here to interfere. I’m just an observer.”

He hit himself in the forehead with the heel of his hand. “God! What am I going to do with the lot of you?”

Dawson answered this time. “Take their advice.”

“All right.” Nick took another turn across the room. He put one fist on his hip and stared at Jehanne and Adam, who politely stared back. “Suppose I agree to this. What, exactly, do you suggest doing with the stone? Or stones? For that matter, why don’t you just keep the sword, Jehanne, since it seems to have adopted you or something?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “I do not need a sword which wants to talk to me. I have no interest in it. Besides, it’s much too gaudy and distracting, thank you. We will take Yu’s Stone and we will give it to Father Liam, who can bury it somewhere on Holy Ground. The other stones—I think one of the smaller emeralds and one of the rubies would be best—we will drop in the poor box. If Liam wants, he can turn them over to the police. But in any case, the stone will be safe and the police will simply think that the thief panicked or fell out with his cohorts.”

“Why Liam?” Dawson sounded interested.

“Liam,” Jehanne said firmly, “does not approve of violence. And this stone, I think, is mostly conducive to violence.”

Nick sighed, planted both hands on the stone top of the table, and stared down at the sword. “Okay. You win. The stone disappears, we give the sword back to the Museum, and everyone is happy. Right?”

Adam said, “Right.”

Jehanne cocked her head to one side and smiled.

Nick held his hand up. “Never mind, Dawson. I know: you’re just observing.”

“Always.” Dawson swallowed a mouthful of coffee, then grinned.
Aches and bruises healed faster now than they had before he became—what he was. Nick rubbed the shoulder that hurt most and went on talking. “Bert, I had no control over what was done to the sword before I found it. The museum’s happy it’s back, and I know the size of the bonus check they cut for you. So don’t chew off my ear. Everybody else is happy, except for the thief, and you should be happy too.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Fine. Whatever.” Bert sounded like he had indigestion. Bert always sounded like he had indigestion when things hadn’t gone perfectly. When they went perfectly, he only sounded irritated. “The ten percent of the bonus check will be in your account tomorrow.”

“Fifteen, Bert. The stone was not my fault.” You bet it wasn’t. And no way in hell am I going to tell you I retrieved a magical sword.

Bert grumbled, then gave in. “Fifteen. You hear from Amanda yet?”

“Not yet. Jehanne’s sending you every penny you’re supposed to get. I know that too.”

“I still think I ought to meet her.”

Nick snorted. “Her boyfriend’s back in the picture. I wouldn’t do it without an armed guard, if I were you.”

“He writes software.”

“Who?”


Another lesson he’d have to learn: how not to leave tracks. “Bert, not everyone has a record.”

“True enough. Talk to you later.”

Nick hung up the phone and rolled his shoulders to work out the last of the kinks. He took the stairs two at a time on the way back to the basement.

He heard the swords clash before he saw them.

Adam threw Jehanne onto her back and brought his longsword down. She blocked it with the katar, then rolled out of the way—or started to.

He’d moved in that direction, and she did a flip, somersaulting backwards and up onto her feet.

Adam stopped. He nodded. “Not bad.” He bowed, an odd and formal gesture.

She returned the bow before she set her weapons down on the table at the back. “Nick’s turn? Shall I go make coffee?”

Nick grimaced.

Adam grinned. “I think I’ve knocked him on his ass enough for this morning. Your boss still not pleased?”

“He’s—adjusting.” Nick rubbed the back of his neck again. “How many times are you going to dump me on my ass before I can consider myself trained?”
A laugh answered it before words. “When I can’t dump you on your ass, you’re trained.”

Nick grimaced, and rocked his head back and forth to work out the knot that had sprung up after his shoulders relaxed. “I guess I’ll learn to adjust, won’t I?”

Benoît considered that. He looked down, rubbed his hand across his mouth, then said, “I hope you do learn. To adjust, at least.”

*A gift, Amanda had said. Maybe it was. Nick said, “Jehanne! Race you to the kitchen!”*  
Sorcha beat them all there.

---

[1] I forget.

[2] In the vines of the Lord—drunk

[3] *Flic:* Parisian for a police officer


[5] The devil knows many things because he is old.


[10] Good. Hurry up!


[12] What happened?

[13] Ask me no questions, I will tell you no lies.

[14] Quickly!

[15] Old man

[16] It’s bullshit.

[17] Go fuck yourself!

[18] Affection blinds reason.

[19] “As The Ruin Falls”, C. S. Lewis

[20] Withdraw your challenge

[21] A wanker, an insignificant or stupid person.
“Pull me backwards into the bird cage” (i.e. “are you kidding?”)

Are you chicken? (lit. Did you lose your hard-on?)

bitch

Another Norwegian cocksucker, just what we needed!

I like to get up
With my partner in crime
We love to dress up
And have ourselves a good time
We have an understanding
She can never be mine

We get on so well
There is no pressure on us
It's a relationship
Based entirely on trust
No complications
You would not see me for dust

Come around eleven
And it's time to go home
I'm going her way
But I can't leave her alone
But she's looking at me
As If I'm something she owns

Oh

CHORUS
Jane's getting serious (Jane)
Jane's getting serious
Jane's getting serious (Jane)
And I could get serious too

She introduces me
To all her friends around town
She gets approval
I say I can't stick around
The writing's on the wall

So come around eleven
And we're on our way home
I can't leave her here
But I should leave well alone
Cause she is looking at me
Like I am something she owns
Oh

CHORUS

So I'm pretending I'm not
Caught in between
The devil and the deep blue sea
And I cannot believe
That I would ever admit
That I could take Jane seriously

Come around eleven
We're still on our way home
All dressed up
And nowhere to go
But all along
I should have really known
That

CHORUS

"Jane's getting serious" - Jon Astley

[iii] Used to describe something very chic. Acronym for “Bon chic, bon genre”. Originally used to describe high fashion, or the ultimate in good taste. Now often used disparagingly to describe pretentious “yuppies”. See discussion later regarding “monks and their habits”.

[iii] French society keeps a large number of formalities that make the appearance of individuals (in terms of the language they use, the clothes they wear, the company they keep, the attitudes they affect) incredibly important. The proverb “l’habit fait le moine” (you judge the monk by his clothes, i.e. the book by its cover), although it can also be used in the negative (l’habit ne fait pas le moine), has some truth for most people.

[iv] Malaikat al-Maut - the angels of death, in Islamic religion. Also from a children's song, Chad Gayo—malach hamoves, the hovering angel of death.

[v] The Tibetan language is spoken primarily by the Tibetan people who live across a wide area of eastern Central Asia bordering South Asia, as well as by large numbers of Tibetan refugees all over the world. Classical written Tibetan is a major regional literary language, particularly its use in Buddhist literature.

Although Classical Tibetan apparently was not a tonal language, some dialects have developed tones. This is particularly true in the Central and Kham dialects, while the Amdo dialect and some in the west remain without tones. Tibetan morphology can generally be described as agglutinative.

[vil] Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum, Benedicta tu in mulieribus, et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Iesus. Sancta Maria, Mater Dei, ora pro nobis peccatoribus, nunc, et in hora mortis nostrae.

[vii] Somewhere I have never travelled, gladly beyond
any experience, your eyes have their silence:
in your most frail gesture are things which enclose me,
or which i cannot touch because they are too near

your slightest look easily will unclose me
though i have closed myself as fingers,
you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens
(touching skillfully,mysteriously)her first rose

or if your wish be to close me,i and
my life will shut very beautifully,suddenly,
as when the heart of this flower imagines
the snow carefully everywhere descending;

nothing which we are to perceive in this world equals
the power of your intense fragility:whose texture
compels me with the colour of its countries,
rendering death and forever with each breathing

(i do not know what is is about you that closes
and opens; only something in me understands
the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses)
nobody,not even the rain,has such small hands

[e e cummings]

[viii] Fire and Ice - Robert Frost
(From Harper’s Magazine, December 1920.)

SOME say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I’ve tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To know that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!