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### Sirocco

by Gryphonrhi

#### Summary

Faith, loyalty, friendship, honor... and hatred, jealousy, envy, and desire. War and love, torture and healing -- this isn't even the Game, or not just. This is a line war.

#### Notes

**Rated: NC-17** for explicit violence and explicit sex, slash and het both, and threesomes in some cases. This one gets a lot darker than my usual in places: please heed the warnings and tags and be prepared to scroll past, or contact me if you need precise warnings.

This one, by the way, is for me.
New York City, New York -- April 8th

The men involved were, when all was said and done, professionals. They acquired and paced their
target at a conservative distance, sighting passed back and forth between three of them by radio and
earpiece. And when his early morning run was over, they followed the target to his home, a high-
priced brownstone.

The team leader murmured quietly, "This is Lead. Two, take the back alley. Three, watch the
front. Four, report."

"Four here. All quiet at base."

"Store opens in forty-six minutes. Go in; compare it to the blueprints. Take over from Two in the
alley at noon. Five, go in at 10:20 and browse. Take over from Three at noon. Six?"

"Sir?"

"Confirm the travel arrangements. We're at D-Day minus one."

"Yes, sir."

"Two, Three -- get some sleep this afternoon. You'll relieve at 18:00."

They were being paid very well for this, Lead reminded himself, and it was going to go off without
a hitch. One way or another.

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Three and Six had stayed behind to keep the target under surveillance, but the rest of them huddled
around the CAD-generated floor plan during the early evening briefing. "Display cases here, here,
and here. Counter cases here and here." Four indicated the spots with the cap of his pen. "Door to
the back room -- presumably storage -- here. Access to the central area here. Elevator to the upper
floors here. Security cameras with overlapping fields every room."

"Where's the power feed for the cameras?" Two wondered.

"Concealed within in the walls," Five answered. "They definitely have an uninterruptible power
supply somewhere. The UPS might be in the storage area, but I think the basement is more likely."

"We'll have to do this during his morning run, then," Two commented. "We can't hit him in the
store."

The leader nodded. "Agreed. What about the assistant?"

"She'll call it in when he doesn't show, I think. They seem to have a settled routine. They may
have been lovers at one time."

"Oh?" Two asked. "What's your evidence?"

"Their body language with each other," Five replied. "They're either long married, which
surveillance doesn't indicate, or they've been lovers and it was a friendly break-up."
"Irrelevant," Lead decided. "Right. We'll take him tomorrow morning."

"Right on schedule," Two said calmly. "Good. I didn't want to lose that bonus."

"Why the knife, though?" Five asked. "I don't like it when the customers get this strange."

"The cash is good," Four pointed out. "The first half is in the bank."

"Yeah, well, you know the rule. 'Deal with whackos and get whacked,'" Five said grimly. "Why plant a knife through his heart? And why do they want the corpse?"

"We make sure that there's no way to trace the knife back to us, or the job," the team leader told them. "That's all there is to it. I'd rather we disposed of the body, too, but we're being paid extra to change our routine. We'll do it their way this time."

They dropped back that night, keeping an even more discreet distance from the target. An elderly man came by, apparently for a late dinner, but left again around eleven o'clock and the lights went out shortly after that.

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New York City -- early morning, April 9th

In the end, it was ridiculously easy.

From the far side of the street, apparently nursing a hot cup of coffee and waiting for a bus, Three watched the target approach. At his signal, Two simply stepped out of an alley, gun coming up as he moved, and shot three times. Only muffled spits of air passed the silencer, easily lost in the unending noise of Manhattan. To their shock, the target managed to stagger several steps toward a doorway before his knees sagged. It wouldn't have helped; Four had been waiting in the doorway to catch the body, and, as instructed, he buried a knife hilt deep into the target's chest. But it made them nervous anyway.

"Shit," Six muttered into his mouthpiece. "Is this guy Superman?"

"You'd better hope not," Lead replied as he brought the van smoothly around the corner. "We weren't issued kryptonite."

Five opened the door and they loaded the body into the van, settling him onto the waiting drop cloth. Two set to work duct-taping the target's wrists behind his back, wrapping the same silvery stuff around his ankles, and setting an 'X' of it over the dagger to hold it in place. Last, they secured the drop cloth in place with more of the tape, leaving a vaguely person-shaped bundle of plastic and silver adhesive to be covered with a packing blanket.

Their leader drove smoothly through the early morning traffic, obeying the speed limit as he worked his way out of town with their bundle. Behind him he heard magazine pages rustling, and in the rear-view mirror he could see that Six was already drowsing, head propped against the side of the van.

Two settled into the shotgun seat, and kept his question quiet rather than alarm the team. "Was this job a good idea?"

"The money is guaranteed," the team lead replied softly. "Half paid in advance, the bank book for
the remainder handed over when we trade the body. Why?"

"I don't like this," his second told him bluntly, if still sotto voce. "This is a lot of trouble for a hit, and I don't like the delivery conditions."

"And you don't like the fact that he almost made it?"

"Yeah," Two sighed, "that, too. Why the knife?"

"Because we're being paid to. Let it alone, all right? Job's done, we're gonna get paid -- enough." He paused, then said more slowly, "But I don't think we're taking any more jobs this month."

"Good." They drove in silence for the rest of the three-hour trip.

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Somewhere outside Poughkeepsie, New York -- early afternoon, April 9th

They took the last turn-off in silence, but it was the quiet of hunters studying the landscape for a wounded grizzly. All six men were awake, alert, and anxious, although only three of them were in the van. The other three were scouting ahead and reporting back occasionally in soft, terse whispers.

Another vehicle waited for them in the clearing before a deserted farmhouse. Unlike the utilitarian work van they were in, this one showed subtle signs of customizing. The rear windows and the small bubble of glass on the left side had all been tinted so darkly no one could see in, but no pin-striping had been done, nothing terribly obvious. Just the darkened windows.

"This is Lead," he murmured into his collar mike. "Report."

"Six is all clear," Six reported softly.

"Five is all clear," Five agreed.

"Four has a sniper," Four whispered so quietly they barely heard him. "Forty-plus feet northwest from the cabin, sitting in an elm. Stop at least twenty yards from the porch and he'll be blocked by that large oak."

"Got it," Lead confirmed briskly. "Pull back, Four, but keep him in range." He didn't need to issue any further instructions; they all knew how to work this scenario. He parked the van by the indicated tree and stepped out, apparently unconcerned.

A tall, dark-haired man emerged from the shadows of the sagging, abandoned porch. "You're rather lost, I think."

"No one ever really gets lost. It's a small planet," Lead returned easily, recognizing the acknowledgment phrase he'd been given.

"And getting smaller every decade," came the calm reply, but something in the self-absorbed smile made Lead wonder what joke he was missing. "I believe we have something to trade?"

"We do," Lead told him calmly. Behind him, Two and Three lifted the drop cloth out. "Our money?" To his surprise, the customer didn't ask to see the corpse, only nodded once as if very pleased, and tossed a black leather pouch to the ground near the team lead.

"Greater Cayman Bank, as requested," the customer smiled. "Check the balance and date. I think
The customer only nodded, smiling as he looked at the wrapped bundle. The contemplative expression on his face was almost aloof, as if he saw dreams and memories, not reality.

The trip back to the road was surreal, the world around them sharp-edged from adrenaline pumping through veins and attention focused down to an exquisite pitch. None of them could quite believe they were safe. Only after the three scouts had been retrieved did Two say tiredly, "About that month off?"

"As soon as we're out of here," Lead agreed. "And I said the rest of the month off."

"We'll haggle someplace else. Not," he added quietly, "New York."


"Warm and far from here," Two grinned, suddenly relaxing. "No more jobs that weird, hmm? I kept thinking we were in a Steven King novel. What, did they think the target was going to stand back up after we shot him?"

From the middle seat of the van, Four joked, "I vant to suck your blood."

"Nah," Three pointed out, chuckling himself. "Couldn't have been a vampire; he was out in the daylight."

Farrell Jameson's diary - undated entry

I've never understood it, and no one's ever been able to explain it to me. No one I trust, at least.

Trusting Johannes would be like expecting a panther not to have lunch when a deer is drinking at the river. He's a treacherous son of a bitch, but he's a survivor. And with Gwydion dead, Johannes is the only one of us dangerous enough to be a threat to Owain. If they stop working together, I'm going to look for someplace to hide.

Those two have been business partners, off and on, for almost as long as I've known Owain. Not something I'd want to do, but I've never liked the way Owain handles some of his business affairs. I'm in this to make money, but he's bloody ruthless. Cross him and he'll destroy you and yours. He made a fortune -- and a damned nasty reputation -- in Hong Kong while I was still a mortal, and it takes work to impress Hong Kong trading houses.

Owain always tells me that's just how it has to be. I don't think so.

Nothing's ever convinced me that kind of savagery malevolence was really necessary, though.

You know, looking at that, maybe I had the right word to begin with. Screw it, Jameson, leave it. Go back to what you were talking about.

I've got rivals, of course. I'm in business; it just works that way. They'd as soon close a deal under me as eat lunch with me, but it's nothing personal and I'm still invited to dinner at their houses, or to sit on charity committees with them. But I've never had a problem making money without
making bitter enemies, and I don't have the sheer charm Owain does. I've seen people just about eating out of the man's hand. Hell, one smile and respectable matrons start pushing their daughters at him.

I think what confuses me is that, for all the animosity between Owain and Cynthia Torriani -- and God there's plenty -- I liked her. Yeah, she was going a bit off her rocker by the end of the war, but hell, I might have, too, if I'd gone through half of what I think hammered her. And from what I've seen of her students -- well, the ones I've met, anyway -- I doubt she stayed crazy. If necessary they'd have dragged her, kicking, screaming, and in chains, to Sean Burns, or Darius, or hell, to Rebecca for that matter. To someone who could help her. Who am I trying to kid? I might have helped 'em. Crazy or not, I liked Phoebe.

It's funny. I call her Phoebe; Owain calls her Cynthia; Enrique calls her 'that pagan bitch'; hell, I think Gwydion used to call her Shahar. But we're all talking about the same woman. Names shape people, I've learned that in my life. What was hers originally, I wonder? She was using the name Phoebe Syn when I worked with her in World War II, long before I had any clue who she was. God, I remember that like it was yesterday. It shocked the hell out of me to be trying to organize the Japanese radio transmissions for translation and feel that kind of a buzz just roll over the entire room when the new woman from London walked in.

She didn't turn a hair, not where I could see it. Of course, she didn't have much hair to turn. It was barely to her ears, and I was wondering if she'd planned to pass for a man. Her face is pretty damned female, but she wouldn't have had too much trouble disguising the body. She's got wide shoulders and not much of a bust. Strap down the chest, add a hat to shade the face and a loose jacket to hide the hips.... It could have worked.

One evening when we both needed to get drunk, and neither of us wanted to do it with another immortal around and sober, I found out that she hadn't cut her hair. The Nazis had, in one of their damned death camps. She called it what it was. I wish I had believed her then. But, Hell, I wasn't even a century old; I didn't know what people could do to each other, not even working Intelligence in a global war, not even living in the Game. She did. Oldest damned eyes I'd ever seen some nights, even older than Owain's.

When I told her that she couldn't be right, she just changed the subject. Didn't argue with me, didn't try to prove her point, didn't tell me I'd regret the opinion later. Just dropped it, cold, and never discussed it again. We both quit drinking and went to bed soon after that. I don't think I could believe it, really, even working in Intel; none of the rest of us could really wrap our minds around the idea of assembly-line murder.

Yeah, we kept hearing the reports, but we were getting most of it from the Jews in the States, or from Jewish sympathizers in Europe. We could believe the concentration camps, and that people were being... neglected to death is the best way to put it. Somehow, though, no one could really believe the Nazis could create by-the-numbers mass-murder as a policy. We'd try to imagine it and we just couldn't see how people could do it in cold blood, day in and day out. So we didn't believe it.

But I remembered the names when the war ended and the American troops rolled into Germany and those horrible, horrible news reels came out. Buchenwald, she had said, and the bitch-wolf Koch. Testing plagues and influenza, unleashing viruses to see who lived and died and how long it took.... I remembered. So does everyone else -- now.

This is getting off-topic, but hell, this diary's for me. I'll keep what I like in it. And this is definitely important. I need to figure out why these two hate each other so much, before it gets all
of us killed. What is it about them that rubs each other so raw? It's in their history, I'm sure of
that.

One thing that being immortal has taught me: everything is in the history. Sharp words,
unexpected lovers, the lightest touch of hand to face or whip to back -- it all goes back to
something else. I wonder if Methos is real? If he could tell me anything about this? Sometimes a
century seems like eternity, but for questions like that it feels like no time at all.

Owain always kept an eye out for the line of Ramirez, and I always wondered why. Back in 1906,
when we had just lost a helluva lot of money because of the San Francisco earthquake, he told me
that they were pain-in-the-ass, no-good meddlers, trying to keep other immortals from making a
living, much less a profit. Hell, until then I thought the worst I had to worry about from other
immortals was losing my head. That's bad enough, but the idea of being systematically
bankrupted, and left to starve to death, homeless, impoverished, and belittled, just somehow seems
a helluva lot worse.

Dead is dead, and I haven't liked it any time I've died, but lose your head, and it's finished. No
more coming back, and with any luck the fight was at least clean. Sword wounds heal, or you die.
Hunger, though -- starvation is a long, slow death, and a lot of it hurts.

Funny. You'd think I'd know what I'm thinking, what I'm going to say, before I write it down -- but
sometimes the words on the page surprise the hell out of me. I've been keeping diaries for years
now, but first the typewriter and now the word processor have changed things. Typing is so much
faster than writing. With a pen I thought more about what I was saying, changed it more in my
mind so that it was closer to what I wanted it to be, farther from what my gut instinct kicked out
first. There are advantages to word processors; these diaries are a lot more honest now.

Does it matter if they're honest? I mean, I never read back through them. I just... keep them. Day-
timers I throw away, but these go back decades and I've still got them. If anyone else ever read
them.... What the hell? Who'd believe it? But it's easier to write for somebody else to read,
somehow. So screw it. This is for you, whoever you may be, and I hope you enjoy it. And if it's
you snooping around, Enrique? Why don't you look over the entries for 1898 and see what I really
thought of you. Check February.

Damn I've wandered off the topic of this whole damn thing. Again. For something that's supposed
to center my thoughts, I wander as much in a diary as anywhere else, it seems.

Phoebe and Owain, right. I just don't get it. He's arrogant, self-righteous, and very self-centered.
Hell, I knew that within a few months of studying him. But to give him credit, he's damned loyal
to the few he really considers his own, and he's very good at keeping those people healthy, well-
paid, and (the immortals, anyway) with their heads firmly attached. I won my first challenge three
years after I ended up in the Game.

Phoebe, on the other hand, was certain of herself to the point that it was nearly arrogance. She
never set a foot wrong, never dropped something important, never seemed unsure of herself, even
walking in that first day with hair shorter than I'd seen anyone wear it in twenty years and so thin
that a wind should have blown her over. But she's not cocky.

I've met people who deserved to be arrogant and were, and I don't care how good they were, they
were still offensive. She wasn't. Just... sure. Confident in her abilities, her competence. Very
sure, actually, but not rude about it, and she didn't rub people's nerves raw the way Owain does.

Actually, looking back at it, it reminds me of the difference between Eisenhower and MacArthur.
Eisenhower was so good at his job that he made people happy to help him, and you knew he was
good but it didn't bother you. MacArthur was a genius in a lot of ways, but he had his coterie and his followers who adored him. Serious love/hate relationship between him and the States. Everyone wanted him to win the war, smash the Nazis and the Japs, but at the same time you could tell they almost hoped he'd fuck something up because they wanted to see that nose-in-the-air attitude change to nose-rubbed-in-it.

But why? What's the difference between them that led to this much friction? Or is it that they're too similar?

Not where loyalty is concerned, that's for damn sure. Phoebe's pretty damn devoted to her people. Dive into a fight, stand back to back, bribe the executioner loyal. She just moves. Like she did in '43 with Salim. If she'd fucked up, well, they'd have killed her and him both. Running, with no papers, in wartime Australia? God, I wouldn't want to have to do that. She didn't think twice about it, not that I could see. Oh, she looked pissed for a second, but I don't think there was ever a chance that Phoebe wasn't going to bail him out.

Owain, though -- he's helped people, but I always got a feeling that he would remember it. That whoever he'd helped, including me a few times, had just signed an IOU and watched him put it in a bank vault. That one day, he would call it in and you'd better expect to pay it off with interest. Or that you might need help and he could decide you're just not worth the cost. Have to admit, if I need help, I'm not going to him again. Alex, maybe. Or Jarunsuk. Hell, I'd go to Cory Raines, first. That's pretty scary. Cory is such a damned loose cannon.

Now that I think about it, I'm not sure how many people Phoebe considers 'hers', but there might be more than Owain knows about. I met Salim in the winter of '43-44 when she helped him out of that mess. All she'd say was that some obligations weren't up for discussion. But he's not out of the line of Ramirez. I asked him once who taught him, what line he was from, and he just laughed. Said I shouldn't worry about it; he didn't.

So either he's self-taught, which I somehow doubt; or he killed his teacher and doesn't want to admit it, which I don't believe either; or for whatever reason he won't name his teacher, which seems a lot more likely. But I don't think he's old enough to have trained with Ramirez, which means he shouldn't have any reason to think we're enemies. So why not tell me who taught him? Did he really think I'd attack him? And that leaves the question I'm really wondering about: what kind of obligations do he and Phoebe have to each other?

Because Salim wasn't all that surprised when she showed up and bailed him out. Why not? What does she owe him? Why? I mean, if they aren't line-kin, which I think would have been reason enough for her, what made her help him? I don't understand. And yet... if I wasn't one of Owain's people, I think she'd help me, too. She might do it despite the fact that I'm one of Owain's. And I don't understand that, either.

Why are they doing this? What makes them hate each other so much that Owain will use hoarded favors and expensive secrets to pry her loose and kill her? Can't he find anything better to do with the energy? Does he need some kind of revenge that badly? They're both loyal to their own. Maybe that's where the whole problem comes from, although by now, the people this started over have been in their graves for eight hundred some damn years! Couldn't they just get over this and go on to something useful?

Johannes told me part of it late one night. Of course, I think the only reason I got the story is because we were both testing out the new batch of whiskey that the boat had brought in from Edinburgh. The whole thing sounded like a bad plot for a play, something Shakespeare wouldn't have touched. Apparently (and I wonder now how closely the sober story would resemble the
drunk one?) one fine day in the Italian Alps, Owain was heading up some bands of brigands. There wasn't much law to speak of, I don't think. Johannes spoke as if it were before his time, which means it was back before the Renaissance, and from everything I know Europe was damned hazardous to travelers in those days.

Anyway. Cynthia had married into a trading family, the Torriani of Milan, and the lady took care of her own. She was part of the escort for this caravan, and I wonder how she pulled that off in medieval Europe? Phoebe doesn't exactly look like the strapping Valkyrie kind of woman who might have been able to convince them to give her a sword in those days. Or maybe I don't understand the time very well. I don't know.

What I know is that the caravan was coming home from France, Germany, and then Austria, following the old summer trade fairs route, according to Johannes. A bloody rich prize, loaded to the tops of the saddlebags with trade goods and coin according to Johannes. A group they really should have left alone is what I think.

One of Owain's bands tried to stop them. They lost.

No real surprise there -- she'd hired some wandering Celts into the bodyguard, a bunch of Irish and Scots who weren't interested in fighting each other or the English, apparently. Owain told me that once, in the middle of complaining about the difficulty of learning Scots-Gaelic. I don't know what he thinks is so damn rough about Gaelic. Hell, I can pronounce Gaelic, but Welsh??

When they attacked the Torriani, though, Owain lost that entire band of men. Three of them almost made it back to tell him what had happened, but the lady left their bodies for him to find, apparently. He came across them hanging from the trees, signs on their chests in Latin and German that said 'Thieves.' I can't blame her for that; the Torriani and their allies routinely used that route and she wasn't leaving enemies on the road. Owain, though, did blame her. Damn if I know why. Hell, he'd have done the same damn thing, and probably made sure they died worse than a quick hanging! I guess he didn't have any real practice at losing, and wasn't any too damn happy when he got some.

I can understand that. I can even understand him going to the Torriani when he found the standard that one of his men had managed to steal. He knew who the Torriani of Milano were.

Odd. Even when he's speaking English, Owain calls it Milano; is he being pretentious or rigid? Huh. I need to come back to that, someday. I'm not a complete fool, no matter what Johannes may think. I know the day may come when Owain and I cross each other. I mean to survive it if it happens, but he's going to have to start it.

Back to that mess, though. Owain wanted to let the Torriani know that if they paid him, he'd let their caravans pass. What the hell, in those days, bandits were normal. He was an ambitious bandit, but there were always plenty of those. They told him to go to hell, too. Probably figured their mercenaries had taken him once, they could do it again. And he says he left after that, but I don't think he could resist telling Phoebe to her face that the next time they would pay, one way or the other.

Damn if I was going to piss off Phoebe by asking her directly, but I asked Darius about it once when I was in Paris. He thinks, and he was never a fool, that she thought Owain would just challenge her. So the next time the Torriani/Pallavicini trading alliance sent a caravan over the mountains, she went with them. And she killed more of Owain's men. Only this time, he was watching from the hills to see what tactics she used. And, just knowing Owain, when he realized that he'd been bested by a female -- an immortal female, and one older than he was, but a female -- well, he got a wild hair up his ass. He hates losing. He really hates losing to women.
So when their fighters won again, Owain went to Milano to warn her husband what his second wife was going to cost him if she kept this up. What he and Johannes told me was that he threatened the Torriani vineyards. What Darius told me was that Owain came to Milan and when he left, plague had struck the city -- and the first two victims were Rufio Torriani's two children by his first wife.

I don't know which version of the story is true. Maybe they both are; it's not like they're mutually exclusive. All I know is that ever since that day, Cynthia Torriani and Owain Rhys-Tewdor have hated each other's guts.

They've never challenged, not in the nearly nine hundred years since. Not directly, anyway. But our lines tangle in and through each other like blood-stained lace. Owain killed Pyotr Rodenko, one of Ramirez' students, a few months after he found me. First quickening I ever saw. Phoebe killed Gwydion ap Ydris back in 1909 while I was still traveling with Owain. Gwydion was a cold-blooded son of a bitch, but he was one of the fastest fencers I'd seen. Phoebe took his head in Southampton, and did it so quickly that the police never had time to investigate the lightning.

I've always thought that Gwydion killed Diego de Grenada to have a shot at Phoebe. One of the few things Gwydion ever told me was to always pick my ground, and where I could, my enemy's mood, and Diego and Phoebe were friends. I know my brother hated Spain, so I can't think of any reason he'd have been there during a revolution unless he was deliberately head-hunting. I do think he meant to fight Phoebe, just not when he did. Maybe he was expecting her in the 1820s and she just never showed. Maybe he just wasn't ready for her when he did run into her in England at the end. But I've always suspected that Gwydion wanted Owain to owe him for killing Cynthia at long last, and it just didn't work.

For that matter, I've been half-expecting that Connor MacLeod would come after Owain for killing Pyotr. Of course, the Highlander had to worry about the Kurgan until recently, and he was enough to demand anyone's complete attention. But it's not like that line to leave one of their own unavenged. Not from what I've seen.

What is it about that line? They do seem to be... friends, lovers, trusted. They call each other brother or sister, and mean it. Ever since I helped Ishtvan bail Damien out of that Turkish hellhole in 1914, I've wondered what it's like to have line-sibs you enjoy spending time with. The truth of the matter is that I wouldn't give the time of day to half of my line kin, and that includes Owain some days. I'd help him -- there's no question on that. I owe him. But I've always gotten along better with the Valicourts, or those two laughing madmen from Athens, Alex and Xan. I get along better with Phoebe and some of her students, Damien and Ish in particular, than I do with my own brothers and sisters.

But Owain took me in before anyone could realize that I hadn't stayed dead after the polio. Then or now, there aren't enough people in New Zealand to hide something like that for long. So I owe him. He's never had to say a word; I know it, and that's enough. I can't leave the line of Rhys-Tewdor, despite the fact that I think Phoebe wanted to adopt me all those years ago, and damn if it wasn't tempting. Maybe it

Screw it. I'll write more on all this later. Right now, it's just pissing me off.

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Daytona Beach, Florida -- early evening, April 9th

Numbness struck him, an explosive non-sensation that radiated from his stomach through his arms and made him wonder, remotely, if immortals could have heart attacks. And still Rachel
Ellenstein's voice spoke on: low, hesitant, and tense. "Duncan? It's Rachel. Call me, please. There may be a problem. I'll be at the store." The voice mail message concluded by informing him that the message had been left at 3:21 PM. The Scot barely registered the mechanical voice as he forced himself through a series of slow, deep breaths before calling Connor's assistant.

She picked up immediately, answering, "Nash Antiques, this is Rachel."

One olive-toned hand, already clenching into a fist, beat a slow, steady drum against his thigh as he asked, "It's Duncan. What's wrong, Rachel?" The outward calm of his voice masked his newborn, internal terrors.

"I hope I'm wrong, but... I think Connor's disappeared."

Duncan MacLeod had half-dreaded such words for years, had gotten this same call about other friends before -- but hearing them from Rachel, spoken about his clansman, they sank into his bones and heart like icy spikes. He forced himself to ask carefully, "Tell me what happened, Rachel. When did you last see him?"

"Last night. I closed up the store because he was cooking dinner for Sol. I haven't seen him since. He never showed up this morning."

Duncan nodded once, distracted enough by the news to forget she wouldn't see it. Rachel, unflappable Rachel, was trying not to panic. Oh, Lord.

"All right. Did he say anything over the last few days...."

"No," she admitted softly. "And I can usually tell when he's hunting another immortal, Duncan. He starts getting -- very intent, very focused on something that I can't see. Almost snappish, if you want the truth. He wasn't doing any of that this time. He hasn't updated the will and power of attorney since he went hunting a year and a half ago, either. If someone was in town Connor would have warned me, or tried to get me to take a vacation."

Her voice had steadied, but Rachel still sounded shaken. "Duncan -- I can't think. What should I do?"

"Easy, Rachel. Take a deep breath. Check the apartment and see what you can find: a note, a message on the answering machine, his appointment book, anything. After that, call Sol. He may know something." He inhaled slowly, then said more slowly, "And when you've finished all of that, call me back. I'll start packing now, but I doubt I can get a flight out before tomorrow morning."

"You don't have to -- "

Duncan overrode her feeble, clearly pro forma protests. "Yes, Rachel, I do. I'll be there tomorrow afternoon at the latest." Resolve slowly solidified around his fears, locking his emotions into a unified foundation which would support him until this was over, one way or the other. "One other thing."

"Yes?"

"Start watching the news." He had to stop for a moment before he could go on, but he held his voice steady for her sake. "If Connor lost his head, the explosion probably rivaled the earthquake in California last year."

"And the news services will be carrying it." Rachel drew strength from his calm; he could hear it
in her voice. "I'll call you, Duncan."

"I'll be here," he promised, then he heard only the dial tone as she disconnected without even the usual courtesies. Duncan began packing his gear, planning the entire time. *Stay off the line until Rachel calls back. That won't be long. Find out everything she knows and call in any favors I can.... Ask Damien to hunt out any reports of a quickening; he's the computer and Internet specialist out of us, and I seem to remember he's silent partner in two or three of Connor's ventures. Kyra's in Washington; hopefully she'll be available to go to New York on no notice and look for him. For that matter, I can call Matthew McCormick if either of us thinks it looks that bad. Call Joe; call Methos; call Aidan.*

A part of his mind pointed out coldly that the older Highlander might have gone to ground, or been killed in an inconclusive battle and still be recovering. "Kinsman," he muttered to the unoffending jeans he was hastily and roughly folding into his duffel, "if you had a hot date with a new lover and just lost track of time... I may kill you myself."

"MacLeod."

"There's nothing." Rachel sounded calmer now, and Duncan suspected that she had reverted to the competent persona that she'd spent thirty and some years perfecting. "The only message on the machine is from Fahizah Sarisvati; she was calling to confirm that he was still going to meet her in Portland next week. Connor's supposed to attend an antiques auction in Seattle this weekend and another in Vancouver the next. He's been making plans to catch up with her before going to stay with Aidan. He wanted to meet Marc."

"I know; it's mutual," Duncan muttered. "And Sol?"

"He didn't know about... this," came the soft reply. "I forgot we were supposed to have tea this afternoon; when he arrived, I asked him. He looked -- He doesn't know either, Duncan."

"And the news?" he asked, although one of the first things he'd done was turn on CNN, grateful that the hotel he was in had cable.

"Nothing. No explosions, no unusual weather, nothing." She took a deep breath. "Do you think he's dead?" Rachel hastened to add, "Permanently, I mean."

"I don't know, Rachel. Not yet, I don't think. If this happened last night...."

"Wait -- Duncan, he was here last night."

The unexpected news jolted him, and more harshly than he'd intended, Duncan asked, "How do you know?"

"His new running shoes are gone. I'm sorry, I meant to tell you that first thing. Does it make that much difference?"

"It means that whoever it was took him in daylight. And any explosion would have been noticed; more people would be awake." *It means someone's gone to the trouble to capture an immortal... and he may yet die tonight, or as soon as they can get him somewhere that no one will notice his death. God, Connor, who did you piss off this time?*

It changed everything, and nothing. "Rachel, you remember Kyra, don't you?"
"Of course, Duncan. The lovely blonde that gave Walter Graham such a terrible time at the party this year."

He had to smile for a moment at that description, a quick flash of memory-sparked humor that flared over him and was gone again, taking the smile with it. "I'm going to see if she can get to New York tonight. The odds are good that he's still alive, but I don't know for how long. The sooner we get some idea what happened to him, the better. If anyone calls...."

"I'll call you," she promised.

"What's the weather doing up there?"

Now she sounded puzzled. "Clear, Duncan. Clear and cold for the next several days."

"Good. That isn't weather they can use to cover up a kill with a storm," he said bluntly. "Rachel, I've got to start making phone calls. As soon as I know who'll be coming to New York, I'll call you back. And I'll be there tomorrow."

"I know," Rachel told him, her voice firm. "You promised you would be. What do you want me to do?"

"You've got a pad?"

"Of course."

"Good. You dealt with Damien for the computer set-up at the shop. Call him, tell him what's going on, and ask for any help. I know Kyra better; I'll contact her and ask her to come up there tonight."

"Damien's guest at the party was a private investigator," Rachel said grimly. "I believe I'll call Ms. Storm, too. He said she knows about the Game."

"Stormy?" Duncan asked in disbelief, trying to picture the diminutive blonde investigating anything more dangerous than a lost kitten. Then he remembered her fearless arguments with Damien, an immortal a foot taller and a hundred pounds heavier than she was. "Call her, Rachel. Anyone who can help us find Connor is welcome."

"Make your call to Kyra and get some sleep tonight if you can, Duncan," she told him firmly. "Don't bother calling me back; I'll recognize her if she comes, and there's no need to call me if she can't. I can handle everything for a little while. I know who Connor trusts."

"Rachel...."

"We'll find him, or we'll find out what happened. Thank you, Duncan." The dial tone in his ear drew a faint smile. *So much like me and Connor. When she's upset, she doesn't say good-bye, either.*

He flipped through his address book and dialed the number for Kyra's pager. Six interminable minutes later, his phone rang again and he picked it up. "MacLeod."

"And here I thought this was a wrong number," was Kyra's calm greeting. "What's wrong, Duncan?"

"I think Connor's been kidnapped."
He could hear cars going past in the background, and what sounded like an argument over gas money. Kyra must have pulled over to a convenience store to call him, he realized, and he could almost see the Spartan woman standing by a pay phone, eyes narrowed while she thought. She asked abruptly, "Any ransom notes?"

"No," and Duncan quickly ran through what little they knew, all too aware it wasn't much.

"I'd have to agree," she told him, a thread of anger beginning to seep through her professional appraisal of the situation. "He's been kidnapped by an immortal, or on orders from one. But targeting Connor takes either stupidity or arrogance; it's probably arrogance."

"It would take someone who knows about us to keep Connor this long," Duncan agreed quietly. A new possibility speared through his mind. He'd been assuming this was related to the other problems his line had been having. Now, though, he thought of an organized group that knew about immortals and how to capture them. If the Hunters are back.... They captured Fitz, after all. I'll have to ask Joe to look into this, too. God.

Kyra agreed with his spoken worry. "Yes, it would. From that area code you're in Florida. I take it you're heading north tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"And you were hoping I'd go look for him tonight since I'm so much closer. Of course I will, Duncan. I can be up there in four hours or so." She chuckled, a wicked sound as she contemplated some havoc or mischief. "Will you tell Rachel to expect me? I'll need to talk to her."

"She's hoping you'll show up. She's calling Damien now, to see if he has any suggestions."

"I'll be calling Charleston myself," she commented. "Mandisa was down there a month ago, and I couldn't ask for a better hunting partner."

"Kyra -- thank you." Duncan stood motionless, eyes closed as he tried to keep his voice level.

"Duncan, if it were Edana who'd been stolen, I'd be raving," the blond NSA agent told him bluntly. "I'll look for him, and I'll see you tomorrow. Use the pager number again when you hit town. And don't worry -- when we find out who did this, I'll guard the door while you kill them."

"Now," she continued in the same practical tone of voice, "get off the line with me, MacLeod, and make your other calls. Give Edana my pager number when you talk to her if she doesn't have it; I'm going to call a few people myself. I'll see you tomorrow."

Before he could thank her again the dial tone told him she was gone; he smiled wryly at her characteristic impatience. This must be my night to have blondes hang up on me. Then he cleared the line to begin the other necessary phone calls.

Aidan's answering machine picked up, and he realized that it was three in the afternoon there, which meant she was probably at the dojo working with Marc and covering some of his afternoon classes while he was in Daytona.

"-- so leave a name and number and I'll call you back."

"Aidan, it's Duncan. Call me when you get this, no matter what time it is here." He hesitated, looking for something else to say, then hung up instead. The Scot had no words for her that wouldn't make it worse. She would know simply by the fact that he had called in the middle of the day that it was an emergency, and the rest of it was nothing he wanted to leave on an answering
machine.

The next call went to New Orleans, and Duncan had to double-check the number Methos had left with him. A sleepy-sounding Southern voice answered the phone. "Devereaux House."

"Mr. Adams' room, please."

"He's gone out, sir." The slow, easy voice should have been bottled and sold as a muscle relaxant; just listening to the rhythmic cadence had Duncan breathing more calmly as tension seeped from his body. "May I take a message and have him call you back?"

"Certainly," the immortal answered, his own voice less tight now. "Would you please ask him to call Duncan MacLeod? He has the number."

"Will that be all, sir?" The receptionist sounded a bit surprised by the brevity of the message.

"I think so," Duncan told her. "Thank you. Could you see that he gets that as soon as he comes in?"

"Certainly, Mr. MacLeod. Was there anything else I can do for you?"

"No, I -- wait. When has Mr. Adams been getting back in the evenings?"

"Around six or so, sir, or not until midnight."

"I see." Duncan thought about it, then said quietly, "Would you please add that if he can't reach me this evening, he's to call me tomorrow afternoon at Connor's." The clerk murmured the message back as she wrote, and Duncan thanked her again before hanging up and calling Joe. He knew perfectly well that the Watcher had taken his mobile phone with him to the race track. The odds were good that Joe and Rich were both still there, so that Rich could evaluate his upcoming competition and Joe could soak up the last of the warm sunlight. Warmer than Seacouver, anyway.

"Dawson."

"Joe, it's Duncan."

"Buddy, you don't sound good. What's up?"

"I'm heading to New York tomorrow morning as soon as I can catch a flight out. Connor's vanished."

Dead silence, then Joe asked grimly, "Vanished?"

"Vanished; no reports of any unexplained storms or explosions. Rachel says Sol doesn't know either."

"Right." After a second, Joe asked more quietly, "What do you want me to tell Rich?"

"He's not there?"

"He's talking to some of the other riders. Look, we'll be back at the hotel in forty-five minutes, an hour, max. Stay put; we'll get some dinner and figure out who's doing what. Connor's a tough son of a bitch, you know. Don't give up on him yet."

That drew a rueful smile. "I won't. And you're right; we need to eat. Tomorrow's going to be rough. Joe...."
The silence on the other end of the line told Duncan that Joe had seen the possibility too. At last the Watcher said grimly, "Yeah, Mac, I know. This could be Hunters. Of course, after what you told me in Manhattan, it could be part of the trouble Aidan's in, too. All right, buddy, I'll start askin' some quiet questions here and there. What do you want me to tell Rich, though?"

Duncan shrugged, mouth twisted around the unpleasant taste of this set of problems. "Tell Rich the truth, Joe, or I will when you get here."

"Including the Hunters?"

"No, Joe. We don't know what brought this on; we'll wait and see. Just tell him Connor's vanished and I've got the details. I'll see you both in an hour."

"Yeah, now go on. Start packing and stay calm, buddy."

And in fact he was calm as he called the airline and made arrangements for a plane ticket to New York the next morning. Unfortunately, that only took five minutes; in some ways he'd have been happier if it took longer.

Duncan looked around one last time as he hung up. His bags were packed, the papers for his sword on the desk, and his address book on the bedside table next to the phone in case he thought of someone else to call. There was no point in checking out of the hotel until he found out if Rich needed the room still. The races were in two days and the younger man had qualified for the semi-finals. Maybe Rich should stay; he's doing damn well in the qualifying heats....

Then he had to smile at the thought of Rich Ryan's undoubtedly volatile reaction to such a suggestion. No, that wouldn't go over very well. All right. We'll see what happens.

Now Duncan only had to wait until Aidan or Methos called, or Joe and Rich got there, or Kyra called him with news. Wait, plan... and pray.

Daytona Beach -- late morning, April 10th

"Ryan." Rich kept his voice carefully cheerful, what he referred to as his 'underpaid receptionist' voice when he was answering phones at the dojo.

"I was calling for Duncan MacLeod," came the answer in a voice so deep that it should have been male; the speaker sounded female nonetheless. In addition to the range, the accent was unfamiliar to Rich, too. Broad voweled and gently rhythmic in a way he hadn't heard before -- Rich knew he'd recognize this person's voice any time he heard it again.

"He's not here, I'm afraid. Can I ask who's calling?"

"Just a moment, please." On the other end of the line he heard a swift spate of words between the original caller and another woman's quicker, higher voice. The conversation sounded vaguely like some of what he'd heard in Algiers, and Rich suspected they were using Arabic. Unfortunately, the only thing he understood was his own name.

"Ah. Would you be Richard Ryan?"

The careful emphasis on his first name pulled a quick smile to Rich's face; he was sure he or she had meant it only as clarification, but it sounded almost flirtatious.
"Yeah, that's me. Who's this, please?"

"My name is Mandisa. I studied with Shahar; I believe you know her as Aidan?" The husky chuckle on the other end of the line sounded fairly relieved. "Shall I put Kyra on to vouch for me?"

"Nothing personal, but I think you'd better. I just don't feel like taking that many risks lately."


"As I remember," Kyra's voice came over with no preambles, "the last time I saw you, Rich Ryan, you were wearing a white tuxedo with a black shirt and helping Claudia get away from that interminable bore, Walter. Satisfied?"

"Yeah, and you were wearing three inch heels and some kind of electric blue number. You left beads across half the dance floor when one of the drunks stumbled into you and tore 'em loose." Rich grinned at the memory. "Think you've got the right person?"

"I was pretty sure of it," she told him dryly. "Where's Duncan?"

"On his way up there. He should be coming into LaGuardia in another half-hour or so. He left me here to answer phones if you or Adam called. What's up?"

"Unfortunately, nothing. Connor hasn't shown up; I don't have any solid leads yet; and I came back by the shop to get Mandisa and call in. True to my luck today, by the time Duncan gets here Mandisa and I will probably have been out again for an hour and a half, at least. Wonderful. All right, I'll leave a note with Rachel for him. Now, I have a question for you, Rich. How busy are you in Florida? We need a favor."

Rich nodded once, unaware of just how grim he looked. "Right. What is it?"

"Mandisa is here with me in New York, and Stormy -- you do remember Stormy, don't you?"

"Tiny little blonde with the accent, right?"

"That's her," Kyra agreed in a satisfied tone. "Damien finally found a good one. Took him long enough. In any case, she isn't one of us."

"Not that I noticed, no. And?"

"Damien loses track of time when he's hacking, unfortunately. He also forgets things like eating, drinking, and occasionally where he left a sword. That's why he usually stores a weapon in every room."

"And he's looking for anything about Connor," Rich concluded immediately. "So you need another immortal up there to play watchdog, 'cause he's not going to be paying enough attention to his own back."

"Connor's already missing," Kyra said bluntly. "I don't want to lose one of my brothers, too. You're the closest relative I can get hold of at the moment. Will you do it?"

Rich mentally kissed his admission fee goodbye with only a little regret. **Connor or a race? No contest.** He glanced quickly around the room to see what was left to pack and came to the conclusion he could be gone in ten minutes. **Add fifteen to finish checking out....**

"Damien's still in Charleston, right? I'll need to get Mandisa to give me directions to the house, but
I can leave in 30 minutes, max. Just leave Mac word about where I went, but Adam was supposed to call up there this afternoon if he didn't get anyone here, so that's cool."

Kyra sighed, obviously relieved. "How long will it take you to get there, do you think? We'll call and warn him to expect you."

"It's about 350 miles -- call it five hours or so. I'll get food on the way, but I'll make the best time I can. Give me his phone number, too, just in case."

"All right, I'll put Mandisa on. Thank you, Rich."

"Hey, just part of the family business, Kyra. No problem. Just... find Connor, huh?"

"I'm working on it," she said grimly. "I'm working on it. We'll get him back -- with his shield or on it."

The images that brought to mind startled Rich into asking, "Kyra? How old are you?"

She laughed softly. "Old enough, kinsman. Why?"

"Cause you sounded pretty serious about that."

"I am quite serious about it. We're going to find him, dead or alive, and we're going to kill whomever did this."

"Y'know, he could have just, I don't know, gone hunting? Gotten mugged?"

"It's been a day and half," she pointed out quietly. "No, for whatever reason, he can't contact us, Rich, and that means violence. We may not be able to rescue him, you realize. If not, then we'll do whatever we have to do to make it clear that the costs of attacking our line are more than the quickenings are worth."

Rich nodded as he finished checking the drawers of the nightstand; his voice was as merciless as hers had been. "We don't pay kidnappers, we don't let hijackers go, and we kill terrorists."

"That sums it up perfectly," Kyra agreed. "A fair fight is one thing in the Game. Terrorizing or torture is another."

"Put Mandisa on, Kyra. I need the directions and then you need to head back out yourself." He glanced across flat surfaces as he talked, though, eager to finish giving the room the once-over and be out of there and on the road.

"Watch his back, Rich, and watch your own head."

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Near Seacouver, Washington -- sometime, April 10th

"Recant, my son, and this can end."

The pain didn't burn any longer. It corroded, acid-etching the lines of his nerves into his skin so that Connor would never again forget where they ran. It sizzled in the unending shock and tingle of wounds healing, of static and lightning dancing across exposed muscle and peeled-back skin. It screamed against the despairing knowledge of the exact words his tormentor wanted to hear, and the choking need to fight them down, swallowing them until his dry, hoarse throat choked on them -- because Connor knew that even if he said them, it wouldn't stop the outer pain. And his heart
would always know he'd betrayed his own, if only for what little time these bastards let him keep his head.

"Ah, well. You're young. You'll learn the true faith yet. We have time." The deep, rough-toned voice sounded disappointed but not surprised.

Precious liquid was traced along his lips, and Connor had licked it off before he could stop himself. Slightly salty, cool, tasting faintly of lemon, he wanted more so badly he had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from asking.

"More?" the throaty voice asked him almost gently, tracing wetness across his lips again. Connor forced himself to be more cautious, tasting it with the tip of his tongue before lapping this off too. Sooner or later they'd undoubtedly use this reflex against him, but he was in no hurry to add any more pain to his current total. They'd driven him into unconsciousness once already, he knew. Even immortals had their limits and this rough-voiced man was mapping his very carefully.

"Sooner or later, Connor MacLeod, you will have to speak," the grey-haired immortal told him calmly. "I find I don't have quite the patience for this that I once did, so I think I shall go and confess my failings and pray for forgiveness of them. And when I return, perhaps you will have found your tongue."

He turned and left, dull black habit rustling around his legs in the familiar susurrations of wool rubbing against itself as his sandals slapped against the stones of the floor.

And Connor bit back more words then: pleas for more of the liquid, for the cords spread-eagling him on the wood framework to be loosened, for the barbed wire around his forehead to be removed. He ate his own words, and fed them to the carefully banked fire of his rage.

Only when he could no longer feel an immortal's presence on his skin did Connor MacLeod close his eyes and take refuge for a few moments in his own tormented body and brain to wonder again who these people were and why they were doing this.

Part of him knew that the confusion was almost certainly intended as yet another subtle torment. Whoever had planned this was too skilled not to know what the uncertainty must be doing to him. The whole thing had been set up perfectly, so far as he could tell. The mortal hit team had been damned good and undoubtedly equally expensive. This site had been arranged in advance, he suspected, or they knew it would be left alone for long enough for their purposes. And the habit and sandals on the other immortal were perfect enough to almost make him doubt his own memories of what year it was.

The Highlander held no illusions. He knew perfectly well that, given enough time, these people would break him. They were getting sleep, and food, and water. They could go away and relax, think about something else before they came back and began their games again. He'd had no food since this began, and barely enough water to wet his mouth and throat against the screams they'd forced from him. On top of that, he'd been unable to sleep; they had used barbed wire around his forehead to make him keep his head up. Probably so they could gauge his responses, Connor knew, but the sleep deprivation was an added bonus for them.

Each time they left him alone, too, it was with some different, subtle reminder that what they had done so far was not even close to what more they could still do. Eventually, even sleep might not be a release.

He only clung to one hope: whoever had had him kidnapped might not be counting on the granite stubbornness bred into highlanders. Despite the way time seemed to expand endlessly while they
tortured him, Connor knew he'd been gone long enough that Rachel would have called Duncan by now. His kinsman would be looking for him, growing more angry and more frantic by the hour as no body was found, no quickening reported... so by now Duncan would have started calling in the favors accumulated in four hundred years of random kindness. Aidan would be looking too, Connor knew, and Damiano as well. The redheaded immortal would be none too happy about losing his silent partner of a century's standing.

And not least, Duncan and Aidan's concern would drag that wily snake, Methos, into this. Connor had never underestimated Robert Morgan even before he'd found out the man was really the oldest of the immortals. Morgan was a tough, nasty customer in a fight, perfectly willing to do anything necessary to win. What he would do to people who deliberately hurt and frightened his two lovers might very well make Connor's own torment look like a peaceful picnic after church.

A slow, nasty smile spread across Connor's face, totally incongruous on his bound and blood-streaked naked form. One way or the other, whether he lived through this or not, someone was going to regret this. He took that thought with him as he forced himself down into a meditative trance. It wasn't sleep, but it would do for now....

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New Orleans, Louisiana -- late afternoon, April 10th

Methos finished typing in passwords and the Watcher logo faded away to reveal a menu screen. The last afternoon light slanted across the room and gilded dust motes in the air as he worked; he ignored the beauty of the day and the temptations of the fine spring weather outside as he queried the network he wasn't supposed to be able to access anymore.

John FitzAlan

Status: Unknown

Location: Unknown

Last sighting: Melbourne, Australia; 03/06/98

Details: Shot and 'killed' during mugging. Body vanished from morgue. See also Engeles, Johannes (a.k.a. Urquhart, Jan).

Watcher: None currently assigned

"None assigned?" Methos snapped. "Why in the hell not? Who was the last...?" He pulled up the recent history and growled softly when he saw the notation. "Dead in a car accident an hour before the mugging. Somehow I doubt that was precisely a coincidence."

Thoughts and plans spun across his mind, then settled into place. "Right. If they're both missing...."

Johannes Engeles

Status: Unknown

Location: Unknown

Last sighting: Melbourne, Australia; 03/06/98
Details: Shot and 'killed' during mugging. Body vanished from morgue. See also FitzAlan, John.

Watcher: None currently assigned

"Well," he muttered, rubbing his hands against the worn denim of his favorite jeans, "that answers that. They vanished a month ago; now Connor's gone, too. I'd say, Edana, that you really should have killed this bastard in Italy when he first crossed you." But he'd voiced that opinion before and not meant it then, either. Owain Rhys-Tewdor might well be able to kill the Irish woman and Methos knew it.

The lean immortal stared at the screen, not seeing the characters but the memories that spun behind his eyes as he dug for the information he needed. "Gwydion ap Ydris is dead; Chris Henslowe is dead. Both Johannes and Owain have vanished. Now, out of that line, the best fighters remaining would be Jirina Petesceu and Erik Olafson."

He shrugged, then mentally flipped a coin. "Start with the woman, I think. If I remember Damien's gossip correctly, she's probably more dangerous."

**Jirina Petesceu**

**Status:** Unknown

**Location:** Unknown

**Last sighting:** Riga, Latvia; 03/12/98

**Details:** Last seen at her apartment; could not be found next day by her secretary/Watcher or any other employee. Has since been sought, in vain, by members of the Latvian Mafia.

**Watcher:** Olena Pradzynski

"Jirina's vanished, too? I'd say that it's the line of Rhys-Tewdor doing this, then. This is a few too many of them gone," Methos muttered to himself. "Of course, anyone in their right mind would 'disappear' if she knew she'd annoyed the East European Mafia," he snorted. "Right. Time to pull up Olafson, I suppose. Now that I think about it, didn't Kyra say something at Christmas about a tall Swede stalking her in D.C.?"

**Erik Olafson**

**Status:** Active

**Location:** Washington, D.C., USA

**Last sighting:** 4/9/98; at dock in Baltimore, MD, USA

**Details:** Currently acting as an agent for counterfeit Nike gear shipped into Richmond, VA, Norfolk, VA, and Baltimore, MD. Source of goods uncertain; may be Lim Mahn (q.v.) of Hong Kong.

**Watcher:** Linda Haywood

"Oh, now this has possibilities." He began to check other reports, and quickly pieced together the location of the warehouse where Olafson stored the goods, and his usual time-table. "Well, well,
well. If he received the load last night, he'll be distributing it tonight. And unless I'm mistaken, and I don't think I am, this is the sort of thing that gets handled on a federal level."

Methos chuckled nastily, then used his status as a system administrator to erase all traces of his research. The Watchers had assigned him to help test the new system after he and Don had designed the database; he'd simply added a few things to the root directory while he was at it. The programmers, when they'd noticed his access in the test version, had ignored it for a while; like most computer people they believed that those who wrote and tested the code had an inalienable (if rarely mentioned) right to put in backdoors. It had been removed in the final version, but Methos had learned some interesting tricks from Damien.

When the first file was removed, a small subroutine had kicked in and created a new folder in another directory. Methos had promptly fallen back on his second backdoor and reset his subroutine in case this one was discovered, too. The Watchers were much better at following immortals than securing systems; he suspected he could keep this going for quite a while.

The modem chirped and whirred as it disconnected from the line, and Methos typed in the password for his files, then a second password to access the phone listings. They wouldn't have been much help to anyone; everything was written phonetically in Cyrillic letters. Even someone who puzzled out the names, though, would have found the numbers were in Phoenician. He found the entry he needed, picked up the phone, and dialed the man's mobile phone.

"McCormick."

Methos heard the familiar Southern voice and smiled. "Matthew, it's Robert Morgan. I have some information you might find...useful. Not exactly your branch of the Bureau, unfortunately, but...."

"Robert Morgan, hmm?" The immortal FBI agent sounded mildly amused; he'd met Methos fairly recently, and knew that his current name was not Robert Morgan. "I begin to see where this is going," Matthew continued. "What exactly do you have for me?"

"Eight tractor-trailers' worth of counterfeit Hilfiger and Nike clothing."

A soft chuckle rumbled across the line, and Matthew sounded almost smug. "Really? You're right, Robert, it's not exactly my department, but I wouldn't mind if some of the people over in white-collar crime owed me a rather large favor. Now, why are you giving me this?"

"I need this man...removed. For an extended period of time."

"Robert, did he actually do this, or is it a frame?" Now Matthew McCormick's voice poured over Methos like liquid nitrogen.

"Oh, I promise you, he most certainly has been doing this. For quite a while, I might add. I found out about it, no more."

"And his life line?"

"Might be a bit lengthy," Methos conceded coolly. "Is that a problem?"

"What's he done, Robert? The truth, please."

"What I've told you is the truth. But he stalked Kyra Phaedras a few months ago, and he's working with the men who kidnapped Connor MacLeod."

"Who?" For one of the few times that Methos could remember, Matthew McCormick sounded
"I think you heard me," Methos told him grimly. "We're hunting for him, but Matthew -- no one's taken his quickening yet."

"Do you think your smuggler knows where he is?"

"No, he's being used by the ones who do. I can't find them, yet, so I'm removing their tools. If you don't want him, say so, and I'll go to Baltimore and issue the challenge."

"He's a criminal," came the cool reply. "I'll deal with him, Robert. One way or another."

"Good enough. His name is Erik Olafson. You'll find him at the Roberts & Sons warehouse on the Baltimore wharves. He's distributing a shipment tonight, and judging by previous behavior, he'll be there already to break it into loads."

"We'll handle it," Matthew told him. "Anything else?"

"I'd think that was plenty."

"I'd have to say I agree. Fair enough, he's my problem now, and we'll grab him tonight. Good luck finding Connor, though. I take it that official help would be useless?"

"He hasn't been gone long enough for the police to take a missing persons report seriously," Methos answered. "Not even forty-eight hours. If they found a missing man carrying a katana, Matthew, none of us would be happy with the questions. So Damien's working on it, and Kyra."

"If you need me, let me know. This isn't a precedent we want set, Robert."

"Agreed." Methos smiled, the same implacable expression that had watched half a thousand atrocities when he rode with Kronos and the others. "Don't worry; we're going to overturn it. Enjoy the favors, Matthew."

"I'll owe you, yes," the Southern voice calmly agreed. "Good hunting."

"And you," Methos told him before he hung up. He glanced around the room, then called down to the front desk. "This is Matthew Adams. I'm afraid I'll have to check out tomorrow. A family emergency has come up, and I'm needed at home...."
"You just want me to stop pacing."

"That, too," he agreed calmly. "So tell me about this Cory."

The Irish woman sighed and brought the portable phone with her as she pulled a chair of her own over. "Cory is a rascal. Actually, to be perfectly blunt, he's a charming rogue who'll smile at you while he's talking you into robbing a bank to give money to an orphanage."

"You've got to be kidding," Marc replied, eyes widening. "He's a bank robber? An immortal bank robber?"

"He and Amanda were right up there with Bonnie and Clyde for a while," Aidan confirmed. "With the significant distinction that they were the only people who ever died during their heists."

"And he claims he gives the money to orphanages?"

"He actually does give most of it to charities, or directly to people who need it," Aidan managed to chuckle. "Cory doesn't really care about laws, or such irrelevant and picayune details as ownership and deeds of sale, and certainly not taxes. Consider him a random force of nature that blows in, blows up, redistributes the resulting wealth, and storms off again leaving everyone standing there asking what in the world happened."

Marc grinned. "He sounds interesting. But why is he going to call?"

"Because Duncan left word that he wants Cory to pay off a favor he owes. And since Duncan's out looking for Connor, he had to leave my number. Rachel isn't quite up to dealing with Cory right now."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but my sister from the NSA is looking for Connor, another one of my sisters is backing her up, and my brother, the hacker, is tearing cyberspace apart looking for reports that might lead to him."

Aidan cocked her head. "And?"

"Well, if I ever vanish again, I won't worry as much about being found," Marc admitted. "But...why this guy, Teach? I don't get it. I mean, he's not part of the family, is he?"

"No, he isn't. However, Cory has sources we don't. It's always possible that whoever did this was hired, Marc. Cory can put out feelers that we can't. He has friends in the back-room poker games and the all-night 'money lending' establishments that we don't."

Marc studied her thoughtfully. "Why do I get this feeling that your contacts are just out of date?"

Aidan glanced at him and then forced a smile. "Me, Marc? Would I know people like that?"

"You sounded like you might," he pointed out. "Is he gonna let you call in Duncan's favor?"

The Irish woman shrugged and tossed her braid back over her shoulder. "He owes me one or two, now that you mention it."

"Right," Marc nodded. "Why not Amanda, though? I mean, she's a friend of yours, a really good friend of Duncan's, and I don't really think favors would come into it with her."

"We'd have liked to call her," Aidan admitted. "Despite the fact that Amanda's so unpredictable when she's trying to help. But she's on a circus tour in Russia, and this wasn't anything we wanted
to send a telegram on."

"What's wrong with phones?"

"Too many listeners," Aidan told him quietly. "Especially on overseas calls."

"Okay, I can see that. Teach...."

When he didn't continue, she looked up, grey eyes worried. "What is it?"

"What's going on? Why would someone kidnap an immortal? How do you kidnap someone as nasty and practical as Connor seems to be?"

Aidan looked across at him and admitted quietly, "I can think of a few ways to do it, but they all require more than one person. It's the logistics that makes this bad, Marc. You have to drop him and then move him, you see."

"Through New York City? How much attention are people going to pay?"

She shrugged and commented, "The right story and no one would pay a bit of attention. You're just moving a drunken friend, say, or taking a sick friend to the doctor.... You get the idea," she said wryly, mouth twisted with disgust at how easily the stories came to her. "The only good thing is that we can be fairly sure that he's still alive."

"How?" Marc studied her, disturbed by just how worried she looked.

"There've been no reports of explosions, or unusual weather. Damien has search engines roaming the 'Net, and friends keeping feelers out for such reports. Apparently the UFO believers keep a careful eye on the skies and strange storms."

"That makes sense from their point of view, I guess." The young black man shrugged, looking even thinner and more loosely jointed than usual. "Teach, I'm still confused on one thing. Why are you so sure there'd be word?"

"What do you know about quickenings?" the Irish woman asked him instead of answering.

Marc grinned sidelong at her. "Well, Rich said it makes him horny as hell, but that may just be Rich."

"And Christopher told you about them too, didn't he?"

"Yeah," he admitted quietly. "But I don't pay much attention to what he said, Teach. So much of it's been wrong, or backwards, y'know?"

"I know," Aidan agreed gently. "Quickenings do tend to arouse, though. Your nerves are on fire, afterward, and sex does seem to help a great deal. Failing that, high proof alcohol isn't bad, either. What else do you know?"

"Lightning, thunder, sparks, and someone else crawling through your mind." He eyed her gravely. "That sounds really shitty, too."

"It is. There are reasons I make you meditate so much, and I promise you, that's one of them. But do you know about the cumulative effect of quickenings?"

"Yeah. The older you are, the stronger your quickening is. Plus the more heads you've taken, and the more heads they had taken, the stronger your quickening is." Marc paused, foot tapping on the
rattan edge of the papasan as he thought, then went on more slowly, "And Connor is enough of a legend that Chris told me about him. Is he a major head-hunter, Aidan?"

"Not really," his teacher said, her hand tracing the edges of the phone buttons. "He's incredibly dangerous in a fight, mind. But several of the people he's killed have been head-hunters of some reputation. Including the Kurgan."

"Okay, and?" He eyed her expectantly, sure that she thought that sentence should make sense.

"The Kurgan was taller than you, bigger than Duncan, and as fast as I am. He'd been head-hunting for a thousand years, and he killed my teacher, Ramirez, in the sixteenth century. Ramirez was almost three thousand. The Kurgan's quickening was so strong that Connor once told me he wasn't sure he had lived through it. Anyone who took Connor's head would unleash a quickening that would be noticed a mile away, I suspect."

"Are you serious?" Marc sat up in the chair, ignoring its tendency to make him sprawl back.

"Completely. When I said a mile, Marc, I meant it. There is no way anyone took his head in New York without it being noticed. If they used the subway tunnels, it would short out the systems. If it happened in the open, glass would shatter for hundreds of yards around, I suspect, and every alarm in the area would go off. If they moved him out of the more populated areas and onto open ground, weather satellites would still notice it or UFO sightings would erupt. None of these things have happened."

"Do I want to know -- " The phone rang and Marc hastily waved her to it.

"Logan. ... Thank Gods, Cory, we were starting to worry you'd lost your head this time. ... Mmm-hmm. What's her name? ... Yes, Duncan was looking for you; he's out of touch at the moment, so I'm handling it for him. You do remember that favor you owe him, correct?"

Marc watched the scornful look spread across her face and winced when she spoke in a caustic tone that reminded him of one of the Sisters who taught Geometry back in Philly. She'd sounded exactly like that when someone screwed up a proof.

"A small matter of digging your carcass out of pine boxes across five states in the Midwest over a three month period. ... Yes, I do know how long ago that was. ... Cory. That most certainly does not cancel the debt. Because of you, Amanda was kidnapped by a Russian mobster. ... Don't be ridiculous."

Marc tried to imagine the irrepressible Amanda in the hands of a thug with a bad Slavic accent and decided he'd been watching too many late-night movies. He grinned, fighting down a rather salacious image of Amanda in handcuffs, and watched his teacher as she stood up to pace the room while she argued with the bank robber.

"No, actually I'm not impressed," Aidan went on. "I heard something about a motorcycle being run off the road, and a pedestrian, too? ... Yes, that favor you owe Duncan. I'm glad to see we both remember it the same way now. For that matter, I seem to remember a diversion I created in Bonn a few years back? ... Cory, Cory, Cory -- arson is such a harsh word. We both know the Germans are much more distressed by minor offenses such as oh, say, counterfeiting? Do you really want to hold this discussion?"

Aidan perched on the side of the couch, carefully controlling her voice so that no trace of her agitation reached it. Her fingers told another tale, though, drumming a steady beat on the cloth of the couch back.
"Do I have your attention yet? ... Well, yes, as a matter of fact I did need to put it that way, Cory, because I have no idea if you're going to want to do this and I need it done regardless. ... I need to find out if anyone hired a hit squad in New York City to take out a target yesterday. ... Yes, I'm quite serious. ... If you can think of another way to grab Connor, I'd love to hear it. It wasn't a duel, we know that much. ... Yes, that's exactly what I need."

The lengthy diatribe on the other end of the phone made a faint smile cross her lips. It was soon gone again, but to Marc's relief it left more light in her eyes than they'd held since Duncan's phone message the day before.

"As a matter of fact, yes, I was hoping you'd look at it that way, but I wasn't going to make any bets on it. ... Oh, yes, I do have rather permanent plans for any of us who would do something like this. ... Thank you, Cory. Will you call me here if you hear anything? ... Certainly I'll relay it to Duncan. I think he'll be here tomorrow night anyway. ... Kyra's looking into it from the other side of the law and Damien has feelers spread across the 'Net. ... I know. Cory? Thank you."

Whatever else the bank robber said before he hung up made Aidan smile again for a moment. She looked at the phone affectionately before turning it off. "That wretch."

"You just blackmailed him," Marc pointed out mildly. He couldn't really be too angry with her for it; he knew he'd have done the same thing for his family. A small part of him wondered how angry Cory was going to be, and when the price on that might come due, but he pushed that aside for the moment.

"No, not really. I don't actually have anything on him. It's all past the statute of limitations except the Russian mobster problem, and Amanda's implicated in that one, so I'm not about to use it."

"Does he know that?"

"Not really, no," Aidan told her student, "which makes this more interesting. Cory's no happier about this than we are, thank goodness. I don't even think that he minds the professional hit so much as they idea that someone may have dragged mortals into it. Cory's actually a perfectionist, believe it or not."

"Wouldn't he sort of have to be?" Marc asked, startled. "He's a bank robber, after all."

"You've never met Cory," she groaned. "Yes, he would have to be, but he manages to look, and act, like a walking libido with no interest in anything more important than the nearest pretty legs. He's fooled any number of immortals into thinking he wouldn't bother to carry a sword, much less know how to use it."

"So he's that dangerous?"

"Only if you underestimate him and attack," the Irish woman shrugged. "He could care less about the Game, were truth told. He wants to be left alone to design his scams, rob his banks, and comfort the poor, the needy, the afflicted, and, occasionally, his own lock box."

"You like this guy?!

"He's hard not to like." Marc was both startled and amused to see that Aidan looked mildly guilty. "Besides, he's that essential thing in life."

"What's that?"

"Someone I don't understand but don't worry about."
"Because he won't hurt you?"

"Because I'm not likely to do anything that would force him to become my enemy, yes. And Cory genuinely likes people. He enjoys life and makes it contagious. I would forgive him a great deal just for that."

"Yeah, well, is he gonna forgive you for blackmailing him?"

"Hmm?" Aidan glanced over at him, clearly thinking about several things at once and yanking her mind back to her student by sheer force. "Oh, almost certainly. Say, until he comes up with dirt on me and needs something. I said I liked him, Marc, I didn't say he was an idiot."

Marc threw up his hands. "Okay, you're not worried about it. Me, I'd like to have you around for a few more years to finish training me, okay?"

"I'm working on that," Aidan said dryly. "Speaking of which, have you been practicing your katas?"

Instead of answering, her student studied her thoughtfully. "Teach, what time did you get up this morning?"

"What does that have to do with your training?"

"Minor details like it's time to get some dinner?" He added quietly, "Look, the others are three hours ahead of us. If they hear anything, they'll call; we both know that. And if they need you, Aidan, they'll need you sharp."

"Meaning will I please make some dinner?" But she looked almost amused.

"And eat some of it. You were so busy talking to Adam that I'm not sure you got lunch."

"Actually, yes, I did, oh worrier. I can tell your mother is Italian," she muttered. "All right, Marc, grab a coat."

Now he looked at her quizzically. "A coat."

"No sense getting cabin fever; that would dull my edge. And yes, I have enough sense to eat and sleep, student mine. I've done things like this once or twice. But come along; I'm buying dinner. The others have my mobile phone number."

"Right," he told her cheerfully. "You're buying dinner, so I'm spotting for the movie."

"We're going to a movie?" Grey eyes met amber, amused, before she headed for the coat rack beside the elevator.

Marc pulled on his own long jacket and slid his katana into the sheath in the seam. "Yup. You're muttering about this the same way you do when the plot sticks on your novel. So we're going to a movie. After that, sure, you can go back to trying to figure out what happened and what's going on."

Aidan swung her braid to hang outside the trench coat and snagged the house keys. "Sounds reasonable. How long did you work on katas today, then?"

"Two hours," he told her. "And another two hours on sword drills, Teach."

She nodded and forced her mind away from Connor as they continued to discuss his progress on
the various things she currently had him learning. There was nothing more she could do just now, and Aidan knew perfectly well that her brother would want her to train Marc properly. But in the back of her mind, at the edges of conscious thought, Connor's absence grated at her like a barely heard wrong note.

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At the restaurant, Aidan glanced at Marc and told him, "I need to make one call, I'm afraid. My apologies for such ill manners."

The tall black man rolled his eyes before pointing out, "State of emergency, Teach -- quit worrying about it." He sipped his water again, almost visibly relaxing in the familiar smells and sights of their favorite Italian restaurant as she'd intended. Aidan had picked it for dinner deliberately, knowing that in Marc's mind Italian cooking equaled home and security. "Who are you calling now?"

"Stormy. There's a possibility I want someone to check, and she's most likely to be free."

Marc folded and unfolded his napkin on the table, shaping it into a flower, then a fan, and back again. "Do you want me to drop the subject?"

Aidan focused in on him, seeing the way the day and a half had worn on him, too, and debated what to say to that. At last she answered what she thought was his concern, rather than what he'd said. "Marc? I have no regrets at all for taking you as a student."

That brought his head up, and he smiled at her, all the day's worries falling away for the moment. "I try, Teach."

"That's why I don't regret it."

He nodded as if they had settled some longstanding, critical problem. "Good. Make your call. You want lasagna or cannelloni if he comes back while you're talking?"

"The cannelloni," Aidan told him as she punched in the number. "And extra breadsticks."

"And vinaigrette on the salad," he chuckled, hands falling still at last. "Got it."

Aidan nodded absently as she listened to someone on the other end of the line. "Sorry to call so late, Stormy. It's Aidan."

In Charleston, the tiny blond woman sighed and rubbed at her eyes. "Not a problem, Aidan, I hadn't gone to bed yet. You holdin' up?"

"Passably," the Irish immortal told her, grateful again that Stormy's husky voice and drawling Southern accent were so distinctive. Other than the voice, Stormy generally reminded Aidan of one of her dead lovers, and that was not an association she cared to make under the circumstances. "How are you doing, though?"

"Not bad at all. Why do I think you've got an idea?"

"Am I that obvious?" Aidan asked curiously.

"No, you're just polite enough to have told me immediately if you had news," Stormy told her, audibly amused. "So let's cut to the chase, woman, what've you got?"
"That depends on whether you're busy."

"I'll get un-busy if necessary," came the plain-spoken answer. "But I may already be hunting the same fox you have in mind. Were you thinking about Jan Urquhart and John FitzAlan? Johannes Engeles, one of 'em was. Damien said the other was a man named Owain Rhys-Tewdor, an old enemy of yours. Do y'all have young enemies?"

"I think it probably depends on your definition of young," the Irish immortal admitted, and sighed in relief. "So that's where he's been. I can't say I'm surprised that he turned up with Johannes. But I'm so glad that I'm not the only one who's worried about attacks from that direction."

"Not a chance," Stormy retorted. "Awful damn suspicious that they 'died' so conveniently. The two of 'em had a bad time down there, you know."

"No, I didn't know," came the surprised reply. "What happened?"

"From the news reports, and it was all over the Australian news for a while, their company played fast and loose with customs and revenue services here and there. The investigations are still going on, too, in at least two countries: US and Australia, both."

"Hmm. And they died before they could be charged with anything, I take it?"

"Sure did. In a mugging, apparently."

Aidan snorted. "As if those two could be taken out by muggers? You're right, Stormy. That's too convenient. Actually, that was what I wanted to talk to you about. You tracked money back to Johannes once before. Could you do it again?"

"Hunt the money to find 'em? Sure can, Aidan, and Seth and I are already on it. I figured that even if they weren't behind it, Damien might need to know where they were later."

"Seth?"

Stormy chuckled, a husky sound that made Aidan think that Damien might well have gone down for the third time over this one. "Seth is my receptionist. He also happens to be a computer expert with some really interestin' attitudes towards privacy, if you get my drift."

"Ah." Aidan did laugh at that. "A very well-paid receptionist, I take it?"

"Mmm-hmm, with an extremely understanding boss who doesn't complain much if he lives on the 'Net some days."

"Good." The Irish woman exhaled gustily, releasing another problem for the moment. "Thank you, dear."

"You're most welcome, Aidan." After a pause, the Southern woman said more grimly, "By the way, about this mess with Connor?"

"Yes?"

"If I can help, y'all let me know, hmm? I may not be grim death with a blade, but you give me line of sight and I can shoot a quarter off a can at 500 yards."

Aidan blinked and sat back in her chair, surprised and thoughtful. "Really? Does Damien know that?"
"He knows I can use a pistol," Stormy answered, "but he doesn't know about the rifle, no. I mean it, Aidan, if y'all need a back-up, well, I think the other side brought mortals into this already, now didn't they?"

"We don't know that for sure, Stormy."

But her napkin crumpled in her fist as she said it, and Aidan wished the words sounded less like a lie to her.

"I'd bet a case of beer on it," the petite blonde told Aidan bluntly. "And this is my specialty, remember. For that matter, you'd do the same, Aidan Logan, if you could find someone fool enough to take the bet. Just keep my offer in mind, hmm? As soon as Seth finds somethin', I'll let you know."

"Thank you, Stormy. And I'll remember."

After she'd put the phone away, Marc asked curiously, "Good news?"

"Hmm? Oh, just that Damien had even better luck this time than I'd thought. Sorry, Marc, I'm going to need to think about this."

He nodded and passed her a glass of wine. "Let me know if you want to talk, hmm?"

Aidan registered his concerned expression, but part of her mind was far away, juggling possibilities and probabilities, enemies and friends and trouble. "Trust me," she muttered ruefully, "you'll know. With my luck, I'll think of something at three in the morning and come wake you up to talk about it."

"Wouldn't be the first time we've been up and talking over tea in the wee hours of the morning, Teach," Marc shrugged, forcibly pushing down memories of the last few months where nightmares had woken him up two and three times a week. Each time, either Aidan or Rich had shown up before the water had really had time to finish heating. And each time someone had let him talk, or filled the silence for him, until he could sleep again. So Marc simply told her, "It's my turn to listen, that's all."

"Thank you, Marc."

He chuckled, forcing down the memories in hopes they wouldn't surface that night. "Hey, all in a day's work. So, what movie do you want to go see?"

New York City -- mid-morning, April 11th

In her most reasonable, patient voice, Kyra flatly ordered, "Go home, Duncan."

"No."

"He's not here," she told the angry Scot. "The fact that we can't prove it is completely irrelevant."

"Kyra--"

She cut him off. "Duncan MacLeod. Someone managed to make your kinsman and teacher vanish off the face of the earth two days ago. That's on top of all the other trouble our line has had for the last few months. Now Stormy tells me that Owain Rhys-Tewdor and his right hand, Johannes, both 'died' a month or so ago and she's having trouble tracking their money. If this is a line war, Aidan will hear about it first, and she's in Seacouver, not New York. Go home."
"But--"

"And if it isn't a line war, anyone looking for you with news is going to call Paris or Seacouver, not New York. Right?"

"Yes, but--"

Kyra firmly placed a hand over his mouth. "Bite me and you're a dead man. Shut up and listen. Mandisa and I will keep hunting for him here, and Kate and Nick are on the way, too. Apparently," Kyra added dryly, "she's acquired mob connections from somewhere. I don't want to know, so I didn't ask. But you, Duncan MacLeod, can do us the most good coordinating this mess from Seacouver. And it makes the most sense for you to be there, because that's where any news is most likely to go."

"She's right, Duncan." Rachel stepped out of the hallway shadows and handed Duncan a slip of paper. "I made reservations for you and Joseph. The flight takes off in three hours, and he'll be here in thirty minutes. You'd better go pack."

"And if someone comes after you?" Duncan growled, one hand wrapped firmly around Kyra's wrist where he'd pulled her palm from his mouth.

Rachel smiled at him. "Sol's numerous grandsons will be taking turns staying with me while Connor's gone. I believe Jake is coming over tonight."

Duncan rolled his eyes. "Just don't let him read any of Connor's papers."

"Of course not," she told him sharply. "I've been doing this for years, Duncan. But Kyra's right; someone needs to coordinate this." Rachel sighed and suddenly looked her age. "And I think they're long gone, too. The city feels empty, somehow."

Kyra wrapped a comforting arm around her shoulders. "We'll do the best we can, Rachel. You know that."

"I notice you didn't tell me I'm wrong," came the tart reply as Rachel drew a deep breath and straightened up again, tucking her weakness away for a more convenient moment. "Go on, Duncan. Go get your bag. And thank you for coming."

"One word about an 'old woman's nerves', Rachel Ellenstein, and I'll shake you myself. That or tell Sol you're trying to steal his best line," Duncan told her. "You were right to call, and I would have gone crazy if I hadn't come."

"I always thought that it would be one of his hunts that he didn't come home from. Or that I'd hear that some bomb went off and a decapitated body had been found nearby. At least then I'd have known something. This, though..." She ran out of words.

"It's deliberate cruelty, Rachel," Kyra said coldly, although she didn't let go of the other woman. "He's not dead yet. Whoever did this wants us to go mad wondering. So quit wondering. He's alive. He's intact. If they decide to change that, they'll let us know. And when we do know something definite we'll call you. It's no comfort, but I don't have any to give right now."

Rachel smiled at her. "That may be the kindest thing you could have said, Kyra. I don't want false comfort and pretty platitudes. And I've kept you two long enough. Go pack, Duncan. And Kyra? If you can't find him, at least make the people who took him nervous."

"I think we already have. If it will make you feel any better, Rachel? We are going to make
"Good." The fierce resolve in Rachel's voice and face were so much like Kyra's that Duncan almost flinched. He ducked into his room to get his duffel bag, and found himself remembering something from the Indian tribes he'd lived with. It always seemed to be the women who thought up the most inventive things to do to the prisoners.

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Near Seacouver -- sometime, April 11th

Enrique sipped cautiously at his tea and then blew on it to cool it some more as his mind continued to work at the problem of the Highlander's... obstinacy. Yes, that's the word, he decided as he unthinkingly scalded his mouth and had to set the mug down for a moment while his mouth healed. He is faithful, that I know, and yet he persists in clinging to these pagans. A man who lights a candle every year for his first wife, and yet he consorts with... heathens. Why?

From down the hall he heard the pealing laughter of delighted women and rose hurriedly to his feet. "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her," he muttered as he strode toward the room where he'd left his captive.

The sight that greeted him from the hallway met his worst expectations. MacLeod's face wasn't visible over the women's shoulders, but Enrique could see that his hands were wrapped, white-knuckled from strain, around the ropes which held him.

Damita's husky laugh sounded more appropriate to the boudoir than the abattoir. She raised one bloody hand and purred, "Now, hombre, you know you aren't going anywhere. And you don't want to make me angry."

Beside her, Bianca chuckled, too. "He bleeds like anyone else. He heals like any other immortal. This is the man who killed the Kurgan?"

Enrique saw her shoulder move as she pulled at the Highlander and he snarled, "Stop."

"Why?" Bianca shrugged. "It's not like we're doing anything to him that you won't. I haven't even started to play with some of your toys yet, Padre."

Damita traced a honey-gold hand across the Scot's mouth and left a trail of his own blood on his lips. Gold-black eyes called her every name he wouldn't say, and she backhanded him viciously in retribution for the look. The barbed wire tore into his scalp and forehead, fresh blood sheeting down over his face to obscure the gore she'd already traced there.

Enrique grabbed the apparent adolescent by one slim shoulder and threw her against the far wall so fiercely that her head cracked against the stone. She slid to the floor in a heap of denim and tight-braided black hair. He spun to face the Italian woman, next, snarling, "He is mine. Not yours, slattern, but mine. He will recant or not under my urging, not to feed your infernal lust for men's cries."

"Oh, and your holiness redeems his pain? Is that it?" Bianca snapped, dark eyes flashing with rage and her once-beautiful face twisted. "Such piety in our Mother Church! I'm well familiar with it, Padre -- my lover was a cardinal, remember? And his father was the Pope."

"The Borgias," and Enrique spat on the floor. "The Church was well rid of them. And your concern for your student is touching."
"Former student," Bianca pointed out. "And it's not like you've done her permanent damage."

"Unlike what your lover did to you?" Enrique asked, and caught her arm as she swung at him. He forced her back against the Highlander's side where the man's blood and sweat would stain her clothes. Still holding her there, he studied her face as calmly as if he'd never seen it before. "I see a broken nose, a break in the line of this cheek, a scar and white streak to match it in the eyebrow on the right, another scar and another white streak at the temple...." He spun and threw her into Damita who had been coming at him from behind. "And your honor, what little you had, more broken than your face ever was," Enrique snarled. "Take your bitch student and go, Bianca. Get out of this room and keep your hands off MacLeod. He is mine, remember?"

"He's right," Johannes said from the doorway. His negligent pose against the frame fooled no one; they knew the tall, bald immortal had a gun or sword within his rain-speckled coat. "Is there a problem?" MacLeod's mouth twisted in a wry grimace as if he considered saying something and Johannes glanced at him inquiringly. "Yes, Highlander?" But the man held his silence to himself like something precious and Johannes sighed in mock regret. "A pity. I would have dearly loved to have heard your view of this."

He turned his cold stare to the young woman who had picked herself back up from the floor and was flipping her corn-row braids behind her shoulders. Damita Santos looked fifteen or sixteen, looked part African, part Asian, and -- above all -- looked sweet as the child she appeared.

Johannes, on the other hand, knew perfectly well that the little bitch was closer to fifty than fifteen, and had spent three years with Bianca before the Italian woman declared her trained. He'd always suspected it was because Bianca was nervous about sleeping in the same house with the Brazilian. Damita stood there in fitted jeans and an oversized denim shirt with the sleeves rolled up, looking like any teenager about to go to the mall... except for the blood congealing from hand down to mid-forearm.

She met his gaze for a few moments then looked down at the floor and her bare feet, apparently contemplating the bright purple nail polish on her toes. Beside her, Bianca glared at Johannes and Enrique impartially. Johannes took in the blood on her hands, her shoes, and the small sparks of healing still dancing around MacLeod's face. Then he turned his gaze at Enrique, who stood there stolid and immovable as a stone. The man looked like the peasant he'd been before rising to the Church, with the sturdy shoulders, back, and legs of a man who had grown up doing hard physical labor in the fields. But those dark eyes were furious, and, for once, not with the Scot.

Johannes asked mildly, "Still stubborn, then?"

"He is obdurate, yes," the one-time Inquisitor agreed grimly. "But I cannot do my work properly with these... 'women' interfering." His voice made their gender a malediction.

"No, I suppose they do interrupt your plans," Johannes agreed in that same mild voice that he'd learned from Owain could be more terrifying than open wrath. Damita, at least, was beginning to cringe back from it. "Ladies? Out."

Bianca stood her ground and another time Johannes might have enjoyed watching that statuesque figure. Not now. "We were told...."

"I know what you were told," and his voice cracked over them like a whip. "But the padre has first chance at him."

"First?" Enrique frowned.
Johannes saw the way MacLeod's eyes dropped to study the floor and decided the opportunity to erode the Highlander's damnably solid façade was worth adding to the current dissention. "First. We're on a time-table, I'm afraid. Do what you can with him, but not all can be saved, as you well know."

Enrique glared at the women and then turned his anger on Johannes. The bald immortal merely smiled pleasantly at all of them and waved a leisurely hand at the doorway he occupied. "Shall we finish this discussion outside? After all, I'm sure the Highlander's ultimate fate can be of no interest to him, and I'd hate to keep him awake when he could be sleeping."

Damita and Bianca never looked back at Connor as they walked cautiously past Johannes, too busy watching the unbound men in the room. Enrique was too preoccupied with the need to find out what, exactly, the women had done, and MacLeod's reactions to each torment. Johannes trusted none of them, and wasn't about to let them at his back under the circumstances, so he never turned, either.

None of them saw the small, vicious smile on Connor's face.

They might not have understood it if they had.

Charleston, South Carolina -- early afternoon, April 11th

Damien leaned perilously far back in his computer chair before stretching and almost falling over. The resulting cacophony of popping and snapping joints was worthy of a symphony orchestra's percussion section; it made Rich flinch just listening to it. The burly redheaded computer specialist rubbed his eyes fiercely before growling, "I need a shower."

"Yeah, you really do," Rich agreed. "Go get cleaned up and I'll make something to eat."

"That'd be good," Damien commented absently, taking one last look at the program he'd just started.

"Shower. Now." Rich pushed the older immortal's chair back to vertical and spun it away from the monitor. "And then food. You're starting to look like a cast member for Night of the Living Dead."

"Yeah, yeah, right," and Damien stood and stretched again, then twisted from side to side. This time it was his vertebrae that gave off the protesting noises. "How long have I been sitting here?"

"This time? Ten hours, maybe eleven. You started this run about, oh, three this morning, I think. You got off that chat with your hacker buddies muttering something about hotwiring a settee, and went back to work."


"Okay, and?" the younger man asked impatiently.

"Unexplained, regionalized lightning storms?" came the tolerant, if upside-down, reply.

"Got it." Rich shrugged an apology for his denseness, although he knew Damien didn't mind.
"Right. Get a shower, while I start lunch. You want coffee, or you gonna grab a quick nap?"

"Coffee. Make it double strength."

Rich rolled his eyes, muttering, "You already drink it at double strength as far as I'm concerned. And it'd be easier to stretch if you got a shower first."

"Nag, nag, nag," Damien chuckled as he straightened up. "No wonder Mandisa and Kyra picked you."

"Thanks." Rich deliberately pretended to be offended and grinned when Damien threw a mock punch at his jaw. "What was that for?"

"Cause you coulda been a contenda' -- and instead you got mixed up with those two," Damien told him, dropping back into his usual accents after mangling the quote. "I'm off. Try not to turn on too much hot water while I'm in there, okay?"

"Sure. How hungry are you?"

"Starving."

This time Rich waited until he actually heard water running in the shower before heading to the kitchen. He'd already discovered that the burlier immortal's concentration on problems was every bit as intense as Kyra had said. Damien had woken up from a three hour nap to start this latest run, and his hands had been typing commands into the computer even before he sat down.

Come to think of it, I wouldn't put it past him to run down the hallway wearing nothing but suds and water if inspiration strikes while he's in the shower. Rich chuckled at the thought as he first started water boiling, then threw together spaghetti sauce and a salad. Spaghetti, the bachelor's meal of choice. 'Cause even a confirmed bachelor can't screw this one up.

In point of fact, living with Duncan and Tess, and then with Aidan, had taught him more than he usually gave himself credit for. He'd already discovered that the burlier immortal's concentration on problems was every bit as intense as Kyra had said. Damien had woken up from a three hour nap to start this latest run, and his hands had been typing commands into the computer even before he sat down.

Halfway down the hall, the feel of another immortal sent him diving for the sword just inside the door of the office. Rich yelled again, "Just a sec," and opened the bathroom door. Damien was already sticking his head out and swiping soap away from his eyes when Rich told him, "Immortal at the front door. We expecting someone?"

"No," and Damien stuck his head hastily under the water to clear the last shampoo that threatened his vision.

Rich told him grimly, "Then I got it."
He closed the door on Damien's outraged bellow and moved to the front door. Right hand holding the saber behind his back, Rich stepped back with the door and stared at the slimly built, gold-haired man standing on the porch. A straighter version of his saber came up from the folds of the man's coat and he stepped inside leaving two suitcases behind him.

"I'm Navarro Rodriguez, of the line of Ramirez," the stranger told him tensely. "And you may have red hair, but you're not Damiano the Red. Who are you?"
Rich dropped into a low stance, weight to the back; his own blade swung up to guard automatically as he did. "I'm Rich Ryan. Also line of Ramirez, also a redhead. And I'm supposed to be here. Are you?"

Damien came out of the bathroom wearing only a few drops of water and carrying a gun, still cursing in what Rich thought was probably German. The blond stranger saw him over Rich's head and grinned, an expression which softened the arrogance of his fine-boned, thin-nosed face.

"Damiano. How are you? Other than underdressed, as usual," Navarro added.

"As usual, peacock, I'm only underdressed because of your bad example," He glanced at the two blades and the partially open door behind Var and used a deliberately cheerful voice to say, "Rich, this is my brother, Navarro Rodriguez. Var, this is Rich Ryan, Duncan MacLeod's most recent student and the person who's cooking dinner, so do you want to let him go back to work while I finish my shower?"

"Of course. Do you have a guest room or couch, Damien?"

The implications of that question widened Damien's eyes. "You came to stay for a while?"

"There's trouble," Navarro said simply. "I came."

Rich nodded slowly and straightened back up as the Spaniard put up his own blade. "Glad to meet you then."

"And I to meet you, Rich." Var deliberately turned his back to the younger immortal as he went out to get his bags, and Damien grinned briefly.

"Hey, Rich?"

"Yeah, Damien?"

"See if you two can't hold off any invaders long enough to let me finish this shower, okay?"

Rich grinned at that. "Sure. I'll even let you clean up the water in the bathroom, but you'd better throw me a towel or the hall's trashed."

Damien looked at the water on the hardwood floors and cursed again as he dove back into the bathroom. Rich caught the towel, and heard Var comment from behind him, "My fault, Rich, so my job. See to lunch or dinner, if you would; I'll get this."

Rich tossed it to him. "Thanks. And I've been napping on the couch in the living room, so the guest room's free. It's that door," and he pointed across the hall.

"Thank you."

Rich glanced at him before he turned to head to the kitchen. He didn't quite know what to make of the combination of a three-piece suit with a bolo tie, silver and turquoise watch, and a pair of obviously expensive, and well-worn, boots. "Um -- beer, wine, or coffee?"

"Coffee, if you would. I haven't had Damien's in ages and it's been a long day already."

"Ain't that the truth," Rich muttered. In the kitchen, the tomato sauce hadn't quite splattered all over the stove and he hastily cleaned it up. He sniffed at the sauce and then shrugged. "Oh, screw it. A pinch of sage shouldn't hurt."
A few minutes later, while he was halfway through the vegetables for the salad, Var came back in wearing lightweight cotton drawstring pants and a loose cotton sweater, both black. "What help would you like?"

Rich glanced around. "If we want to be fancy, set the table. Otherwise, just stick your head in the bathroom and tell Damien the pasta's gonna be done in ten minutes if he wants to eat it while it's hot."

Var grinned again, that same surprising expression. "Right. I'll tell him, then I'll set the table. But you'll have to make the coffee; he doesn't allow me near the stuff."

Rich grinned at the amused resignation in the other immortal's voice. "Do I get to hear about this one?"

"Oh, I'll tell you," Var promised. "I'd rather get my side of the story in first, thank you."

"Now this sounds promising." Rich grinned as the blond man headed off down the hall. "I love family dirt."

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By the time Damien made it from the shower to the kitchen, after stopping to check on the programs running on his computers, the two of them were trading stories back and forth like old friends. From Rich, he wasn't surprised; the young man had a knack for never meeting a stranger. Var, though, had been raised a minor aristocrat at the height of Spain's power. Damien had half-expected to find the two of them bristling at each other on opposite sides of the kitchen. The sight of Var sitting across the table from Rich, his hands wrapped around a mug of coffee as he teased the younger immortal about its quality, surprised Damien immensely.

All he said, however, was, "At least he didn't burn it, Var. Now, is dinner edible?"

"Damien, it's not far past noon; are you sure you mean dinner? And are you never going to forget that story?"

"Of course not. It's nice to find something you don't do well, peacock."

Rich traded a grin with Var and commented, "Yeah, I see why you wanted to get your version in early."

"His version?" Damien snorted and sprawled onto the metal stool by the counter. "What is there to tell? He burned the coffee beans while he was roasting them--"

"--I was rescuing the meat from Mandisa, who, you must admit, cannot cook."

"Well, there is that," the muscular redhead agreed, "but then you burned the meat, too."

"Um, Damien?" Rich interrupted.

"Yeah?"

"What were you doing while all this was going on?"

Var flashed a truly evil smile at his brother. "Oh, do tell him. Please. I want to hear the most recent version of this."

"Var!"
"Ah. It's that good," Rich stated. "C'mon, big guy, out with it."

"Or I could tell him if you'd rather," the Spaniard said cheerfully.

"No, thanks, I'll do it," Damien groaned. "Isn't lunch about ready?"

"Ah, now that he wishes to change the subject, it becomes lunch," Var crowed. "Damiano...."

"I was cleaning all the bedding," he sighed. "Because the bottle of perfume broke."

"No, Damien, because the bottles broke."

"Who's telling this story?"

"You are trying very hard not to, and it is our duty to properly instruct our younger relatives, isn't it?" Var smiled at Damien, obviously daring him to argue. The burly redhead just groaned again. "He was, Rich, trying to improve his luck by seeing several women at once, in hopes that perhaps one of them would be worth the trouble. So he had brought back a bottle of scent for each, and secured a bottle in the middle of each bedroll to keep them from breaking...."

Damien stood and went to stir pots on the stove. "How long until lunch?"

"A minute," Rich told him, pointing at the timer. "And the colander's in the sink. So what happened?"

"He didn't tell us," Var chuckled. "The problem was not when we slung the bedrolls onto the ground, but when Mandisa sprawled out onto them."

Rich groaned. "Perfume everywhere."

"No," the blond Spaniard told him imperiously, watching his brother squirm at the stove. "Bad, cheap perfume everywhere...."

"Saved by the buzzer," Damien muttered, carrying the pasta to the sink and ignoring the laughter behind his back. "How was I supposed to know she sold me stinkum?"

"Why didn't you know better than to ask a woman for three bottles of the same perfume?" Var laughed. "Bring the food to the table, brother."

Damien glanced at him. "During or after?"

"After, I think. It's waited this long."

"What?" Rich asked curiously.

"The real discussion, like why a Caracas businessman is in Charleston," Damien said levelly, piling pasta onto plates and passing them to Rich for sauce. "Like what's going on with the line of Ramirez, and how much trouble Magistra is in that we're putting out storm warnings."

"And that my sister is not in Charleston after all the favors I called in to get her here," Var agreed calmly as he served salad into bowls and set them around the table. "All of it can wait until we've eaten. No sense ruining appetites when we'll undoubtedly need the energy. And the food smells very good, Rich. Thank you."

"No problem," the young immortal told him. "Food first, then strategy. Got it. So, any more family stories? Say, some good dirt on Aidan? Or Adam?"
"Adam?" Var asked.


"Ah, the one with a tongue sharper than his blade. Hmm. I seem to recall a time that he went drinking with Alex and Xan...."

Seacouver airport -- late afternoon, April 11th

The airline clerk glanced over at the knot of people, then shook her head and went back to checking in customers. They were quiet, they were out of the way, and they weren't disturbing anyone. But it was an odd-looking group.

She'd noticed two of them while they were waiting, the tall woman with a braid past her waist and the taller black man, largely because they didn't act like a couple. She couldn't help looking over there again, though, because the two men who'd just arrived on the Atlanta flight were definitely worth staring at. Well, if you like older men, she admitted to herself. Great face on the older guy, and my God, the ass on the younger one! Honey, if you aren't treating him right, I'll take him off your hands for free!

Marc noticed the young woman behind the desk looking over at them again, and hastily repressed a grin. There had been hugs all around, of course, but he and Joe were still waiting for Duncan and Aidan to let go of each other.

Joe grinned at him. "You or me?"

"You're older."

"Yeah, well, you don't bruise for as long," came the practical answer. "Ah, what the hell. Hey, you two, you're holding up traffic."

Duncan straightened up and informed Aidan, "You changed your shampoo."

She shrugged and told him, "It was on sale and I was too busy to make my own." She left one arm around his waist as she turned to Joe and Marc. "How are you, Joe?"

"Ready to get my bags and then some food, Aidan. Been a long day, darlin', and I'm starving."

Aidan smiled at him and promised, "I've food at the house, Joe. I know what airlines are like."

That drew a snort from the Watcher. "Yeah, they schedule your layovers so they don't have to feed you, that's what. And airport food is worse than being on stakeouts."

"Nah, now that Starbucks is all through the airports, you can at least get decent coffee," Marc argued as they walked. "My cousins on the force tell me they live on cold, boiled-down caffeine."

"I didn't know you had cops in the family," Joe commented, then had to stop suddenly as a very energetic ten-year old tried to run him over. The child instead smacked headlong into Duncan's legs when the Scot moved in front of his Watcher.

"Sorry 'bout that," and the kid bounced off and ran off down the corridor, barely losing speed.

Marc shook his head. "Grandmama would have had our hides for that. Nice block, Duncan."
Duncan shrugged. "Practice."

The young black man eyed him thoughtfully, then suggested, "Well, why don't you practice some more? We need to get over there." He pointed to the Starbucks across the corridor full of Easter travelers.

The Scot forced a quick smile for Aidan's impetuous young student. Marc seemed determined to keep the conversation light, and Duncan did appreciate the help; he knew his own mood was deteriorating quickly. "Out of caffeine already?"

"Come on, it's four in the afternoon; breakfast was a long time ago. And we've got a good forty minutes to kill, so what's wrong with getting some coffee?"

"Forty minutes?" Joe growled, seeing his dinner receding out of reach. "Why?"

Aidan smiled at Duncan and said, "Because that's when Adam's flight gets in. Let's park these two at the Starbucks and put your bags in the car, then meet back at gate fourteen."

Joe shook his head, grinning. "One stop for everybody, huh?"

"It worked out that way," she shrugged, looking innocent and glad to see Duncan's mood slowly lightening under Marc's deliberately normal small talk. "Even the same concourse, thank goodness. Marc, will you get me a cappuccino, please?"

"I'll put some nutmeg on it, too," he told her. "Duncan, what do you want?"

"Water or iced tea, thanks." He reached for his wallet and passed Marc a twenty. "I understand you're an underpaid research assistant."

"Thanks for the subsidy, Duncan," the younger immortal laughed. "Gate fourteen it is, Teach."

Aidan shook her head as Marc and Joe worked their way to the Starbucks; she and Duncan simply moved with the flow of traffic toward the baggage carousels. "Yet another student who lives on caffeine."

"He wouldn't be the first."

She wrapped an arm around his waist again as she asked, "Are you all right?"

"Mostly." Duncan slid an arm around her shoulders as they walked. After a few more strides, he continued, "I hate the waiting."

"We all do. And the uncertainty," Aidan agreed softly. She glanced over at him, disturbed by the brevity of his speech and all too aware that Connor's disappearance was eroding one of the foundations of his world. "Dhonnochaidh..."

He cut over her, saying, "You think it's Owain."

She tilted her head to study him as they walked, then allowed him to shut down any discussion of how he was doing for the moment. "That's what I'm afraid of, yes."

"Does Marc know?"

"That I think his old line is behind this? No. I didn't want him feeling guilty. It's no fault of his."

Now it was Duncan's turn to glance down at her. "You sound like you think it's your fault, Aidan."
One shoulder moved under his arm, and she wouldn't meet his gaze. "I should have dealt with this years ago."

Duncan switched to Gaelic as they walked past the security guard. "Could you have taken him?"

"In Italy, when we first ran against each other? I think so."

"You don't sound very sure of that," was his only reply as they took the escalator down.

"I took out his best student at the turn of the century. Maybe I could take Owain. I honestly don't know, Dhonnchaidh. He's very good."

"Could Connor take him?" The unspoken question that hung in the air was Could I?

"I think so, yes. You probably could, for that matter. You're both fast, and you both have more mass than I do. Connor might have trouble because Owain's a little bigger; you might have a problem because he's very... focused."

"But you're just not big enough," Duncan said flatly, trammeling his fear of losing her into a ruthless practicality. He wasn't willing to add yet another death on top of all the others of the last few years. And in some part of himself, the Scot wondered what he would do to keep from losing anyone else and who he would be after this was over, one way or another. "What do you weigh these days, about 133?"

"I'm up to 140 now," Aidan told him. "I've been putting muscle mass on since that debacle with Ned White last fall. But Owain has a good thirty pounds on me, all of it muscle, and he's very quick."

"If it's a line war, you'll have to fight him."

"Probably." She sounded thoughtful, though, rather than resigned. "We'll see what happens."

"Not a single premonition? You Saw Marc coming for months, but nothing about this?"

She looked up at him, grey eyes intent in a face full of sorrow. "I did tell you that 'gift' was not the right word for it, didn't I, Dhonnchaidh?"

He couldn't think of any answer for that.

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Heedless of the local customs for once, Methos wrapped Duncan in a bear hug as soon as he came through the gate. He'd felt the Scot's tension and fear in his own muscles and stomach while waiting impatiently to get off the plane. So he held the Scot fiercely, whispering to him, "We will find him, Duncan."

Through their link Methos felt the tension spike and then ease. Duncan relaxed against him and the oldest immortal sent a wave of reassurance to him before continuing, "Now let's get out of here. I hate giving free shows."

"And people say Scots are cheap?" Duncan stepped back anyway, taking a deep breath and releasing him only a little reluctantly as Aidan moved in to hug her teacher.

Methos tipped her chin up with one hand, then tapped the end of her nose. "Cheer up," he murmured. "No sense advertising that we have problems."
"I'm glad you're here," she told him quietly before stepping back a bit, but she managed a smile. "Shall we go?"

"Probably a good idea, yes. Airport food is dreadful." He smiled at Joe, nodded to Marc, and readjusted his backpack over one shoulder as he asked, "Anyone else coming in?"

"I hope not. This is as many as I have room for in the car, and it's a good thing you and Marc are skinny," Aidan told him. "The back has Joe and Duncan's luggage already."

"And we're all too tall to sit on it comfortably," Duncan agreed.

"Come on, folks," and Marc shooed them along. "Move, or we're gonna be here all day."

"Hungry or something?" Methos asked, amused.

"Joe is." The tall black man shrugged. "And someone has to get you three in gear or you'll stand there looking at each other for another hour or so. What were you doing down in New Orleans, anyway, Adam?"

"Booksellers' convention," Methos told him. "Contacts, gossip, backbiting, and good food -- all tax deductible, too."

"Damn, must be nice," Aidan's student laughed. "One of these years I'm going to get back to doing things like architect symposiums."

"What, and listen to boring lectures and watch slide shows by people with less talent but better contacts?"

Marc glanced sideways at him as they rode the escalator down to the luggage carousels. "Are you running a fever, or was that a compliment?"

"Who said that would be an either/or situation?"

"Adam," Aidan chided. "Behave."

"Take it as you will," he shrugged. "Ah, good, I was overdue to have my luggage come up first." Methos passed his backpack to Aidan, then collected a rolling suitcase and duffel; Duncan held out a hand for the latter and Methos handed it over cheerfully, but he waited until they were outside to say, "So. No news is good news, I take it."

"Nothing," Duncan confirmed. "I think Kyra is starting to take it personally."

"Yes, well I have a few ideas," Methos said grimly. "We'll try them after we get to the dojo. I assume that's where we're going?"

"You are," Aidan said quietly. "Duncan needs to be there to answer the phone, but there are calls coming in at my house, too."

"And we don't want to miss those," he agreed, eyes narrowed and darkening to brown as he thought. "On the other hand, at this point safety in numbers is a consideration. Don't you have call forwarding?"

"Yes, I'd been thinking about that until you said you were coming in tonight," she admitted.

"We'll see then. So. Traveling with Marc, I assume?"
"Mmm-hmm, and both of us armed," she told him. As if to reinforce the statement, she opened the back of the Range Rover for his bags, and neatly scooped a pistol out from under Duncan's duffel and into the waistband of her jeans, under the jacket.

"Good." Methos watched Joe settle into the front seat before he told his lovers, "We'll have to wait until Joe's gone, I'm afraid, but I'd say it's time to see what new information the Watchers may have."

"You still have valid passwords?" Duncan asked him, surprised.

"Not my own, no," Methos smiled.

"And if they don't know?" Marc asked.

"We'll try something else, then," came the cool reply. "Something will break somewhere, given enough time. A plan is only as perfect as the people involved, after all, and I doubt we're up against Moriarty. Or Lucifer."

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Near Seacouver -- early evening, April 11th

Owain lounged in the rickety ladderback chair as best he could, and reminded himself that the privations were only necessary for another day or two. But it galled him to be so uncomfortable when he had the money for better. Soon, though. Very soon, now, I'll have what I want. A decade's work to set everything in motion -- what's a little more anticipation to that?

He felt another immortal coming, a familiar sensation with five of them mobile in the house and the Highlander secured in the barn, but he drew his sword nonetheless. Not even Johannes did he fully trust, and the two women were worse. Instead of the devils he'd contemplated, though, the knock on the door was followed by Enrique.

"I want to know what your plans are," the monk told him, moving to stand in front of his teacher and ignoring his sword completely.

"Ah. No small talk, no preamble -- that directness is one of the things I value most in you, Enrique." Owain settled back into his chair again, deliberately moving to place his face in partial shadow as the lamplight fell across black curls and spilled down his lap and feet to the floor. "I assume you mean my plans for MacLeod," he probed cautiously.

"The Highlander, yes."

Shadows slid across one cheekbone as Owain cocked his head, amused that the other man could justify his work more easily if his subject lost his name to a race. "As you will," he indulged the inquisitor. "The Highlander will be leaving us early Monday morning."

"I need more time. He is close to repentance, I think." Enrique growled. "He is almost ready to recant, and you'd return him to heretics who'll strengthen him in his blasphemy again?"

"I need more time. He is close to repentance, I think."

"Then you have, oh," and Owain consulted his watch before tugging the cuff of the black sweater back into place, "thirty hours. At midnight tomorrow, though, I'll have to get him ready to be... properly returned."

"To the witch?" Enrique growled. "He is almost ready to recant, and you'd return him to heretics who'll strengthen him in his blasphemy again?"
"Enrique, Enrique," his teacher chided. "Is that truly what you think I'm doing?"

"You offer a war, but I see no way to bring the other side to arms," the priest told him bluntly. But he pulled a chair over and sat down, scooping his black wool habit into place under him with the same casual ease of a woman smoothing her skirt. "What good does that do us?"

Owain tsked at him, shaking his head and glancing down at the floor as if the cheap carpet held some secret. But his saturnine smile matched the cold pleasure of those glacial blue eyes as he looked up again at the priest and told him, "MacLeod is our goat, old friend."

"And the witch the tiger?" The priest leaned forward, intrigued despite himself. "How?"

"He is her youngest, and therefore dearest, brother, the last student of Ramirez. Insult to him is insult to her, and Cynthia has always been proud. We'll return him to her in whatever condition we see fit, and ensure she takes offense."

"It will have to be as much by the implied threat as any damage," Enrique frowned. "We do heal, after all. And I will not give him back unless you are sure it will bring the witch to us, Owain."

As if it's your decision? Owain almost snapped, but he composed himself, anger dancing in his blue eyes and producing the sudden tension of his back. "I think," he purred instead, dangerous and controlled as ever, "we can guarantee that, old friend. Leave that to me."

Deep brown eyes, dark as rich loam, imperturbable as the earth, studied him earnestly. "We must destroy her, Owain, and as many of her get as we can. She is an abomination in all ways."

The Welsh immortal studied him from half-closed eyes, hands in his lap and fingers steepled as he thought. "What, Enrique, the fact that she's no Christian?"

That drew a disgusted, scornful exhalation from the priest. "Hah. Simpler to list the few ways she could be considered seemly, Owain. She's an adulteress who sleeps where and with whom she will, without regard for their faith or their gender. For that alone, she should be stoned. But she blasphemes as well, refusing to acknowledge Christ and worshipping her false goddess instead. Most of all, old friend, she is a witch, a diviner who claims to give the blessing of her gods. She should be killed before she contaminates any more good Christians. Were she not one of us, I would fear she might be a succubus, given her successes."

Owain leaned back even further, stretching his legs before him and crossing them more comfortably at the ankles. "A lengthy list, that. Mind you, I don't think it at all likely, Enrique, but what if she offered to repent?"

"She values him that much?" came the surprised answer. "I would not have thought such an old witch placed that worth on anyone, even her lovers. But her heart is too hard, I would think. Would you believe such a conversion?"

"No," his teacher said slowly. "I don't think I would. And you?"

"No. She has had over a thousand years to come to the true faith; if she wishes to have her goddess, then we will let her die for it." The priest nodded, sure of himself again.

"Agreed, old friend. She does need to die," Owain chuckled softly. "But if I can take her alive, I will."

"What?" The priest drew himself up, clearly furious at the betrayal of his goal until he remembered that Owain Rhys-Tewdor had loathed the pagan bitch longer than he'd been alive.
Confusion spread through him, then, and Enrique's voice held nothing but amazement as he asked, "Why?"

"Because," the Welshman purred, "she doesn't deserve a quick death. I want to make it last. I despise arrogant women, and I want her to have time to realize that her friends and family died for her... and for nothing. That she still lost."

"'Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord'," Enrique chided him.

"Even the Lord has been known to use tools," Owain pointed out. "He sent wild bears to avenge Elisha, after all."

"True," the priest agreed slowly, brow creased with thought as he worried at the plan. "But I think you overstep yourself. Do not let the woman's wiles bind you over to her sin. Not for nothing is Satan the Father of Lies, old friend."

"I'll take every care," Owain assured him. "But enough of me, Enrique. You're running out of time to convince the Highlander of the error of his ways. And tomorrow is Easter."

"You'll come to Mass?"

"Of course," Owain assured him. "Dawn service?"

"Yes, certainly." The priest rose. "In the morning, then."

"Until the morning." Owain watched him leave, and only after the door had closed did he let his contempt for the other man cross his face.

Impotent, Rome-ruled man. Even if you live through this, Enrique, you're not long for this world. You serve your God so enthusiastically, I'm afraid I'll have to send you to Him if Cynthia's people don't. So you'd kill a diviner, hmm? What would you do to someone who could perform 'miracles' such as the elemental magic I seek to gain with Cynthia's quickening? No, old friend, it's a pity but it seems your faith is a greater flaw than I thought. I can't risk a tool that might break in my hands, much less one that might aim itself at my heart. You'll have to go, one way or the other.

Owain stood up and stretched, carefully removing all the kinks that had worked themselves into his muscles during the interview. He had learned years ago to direct his rage into his back and shoulders rather than let it show on his face. This way, he had only to make sure he wore loose clothing and few knew what he really thought. The occasional cramps and aches were a small compensation to pay, so far as he was concerned.

Before he had entirely finished, another presence rolled across him, followed by a knock on the door. Johannes stuck his head in and, seeing what Owain was doing, asked calmly, "Is this a bad time?"

"No worse than it could be," the Welsh man shrugged. "It was only Enrique."

The balding immortal rolled his eyes as he slipped in and closed the door behind him. "Now what? He wants us all at dawn Mass?"

"Probably," Owain replied sardonically, "but he was more concerned with how long he has to break MacLeod to the will of the Church."

"Do you think he can?" Johannes spun the recently vacated chair around and sat down backwards on it, forearms resting on the top. He looked genuinely interested in the question.
"His curiosity might even be real," Owain thought, amused. "Why? Planning on taking lessons?"

"No, just wondering. I don't think he's going to manage it, myself. MacLeod's held on better than I would have ever expected."

"Oh, he's strong, all right. Will Damita and Bianca be ready?"

"For tomorrow night? Oh, they're ready now." Distaste crossed Johannes' face, quickly followed by resignation and then anticipation. "You know, when this is all over, and the second truce is over, I may have to go to Manhattan."

Owain chuckled softly. "I don't blame you. I doubt he'll be there, but it would be a good place to start looking."

"I'll find him," the bald immortal chuckled. "That's a quickening worth hunting."

His teacher studied him closely, having noticed the brief flash of repugnance that had flared his nostrils and tightened his lips down to a thin line. "Will you be ready?"

"To make an object lesson out of him? Certainly. It has to be done." Johannes shrugged. "I just don't like the fact that Bianca is reveling in the opportunity. That bitch would bathe in men's blood if she thought she could get away with it. Why the hell did you train her? She's mad as a rabid dog, Owain."

"Yes, she is, in very predictable ways," came the cool reply. "She has her uses, Johannes -- in this case, against MacLeod. Never throw away a tool you can use. I thought I taught you that."

"You did. And Damita?"

"Now that one," Owain slowly agreed, "needs... handling."

They eyed each other, both knowing what he meant. Johannes smiled slowly and asked, "Do you think Cynthia has anyone who can take her?"

"Kyra, perhaps. Or Coventry. For all his fop's ways, the bard can fight."

"And if she wins, well, perhaps she won't make it home and we can say they broke truce. After all, they'll be the ones who know where she is and where she's returning to."

Owain chuckled softly. "And what reason could we have to kill one of our own, after all?"

Johannes smiled back at him. "You did promise this would be profitable."

"So I did. The opportunities here are exquisite."

"Quickenings, cash, and revenge: what more could a man ask for?"

"Victory," Owain told him, "complete and unfettered."

"Well, there is that. The tall, bald immortal walked to the filing cabinet and unearthed the scotch and two glasses. He poured them both a drink and passed one to Owain. "To victory."

"To achieving our goals," Owain agreed and drank. *To power, and Cynthia's destruction.*

Johannes tossed his down and set the glass on the desk. "I'm off to see what those two bitches are up to now. I don't trust them as far as I can throw them."
"Did Enrique really throw Damita the length of the room?" Owain asked, idly curious.

"Oh, yes. She never knew what hit her."

A slow, cruelly amused smile spread across the Welshman's face. "Good."

Johannes nodded and left his teacher in the office contemplating things he didn't really want to know about. He had his own affairs to tidy up, after all. Let Owain worry about making sure MacLeod's condition on Monday morning would convince Cynthia to fight.

Sacramento, California -- mid-morning, April 12th

For the fourth time that morning, Xan Morgan set down his drill, pulled his mobile phone off his belt, and glared at it. For the fourth time that morning, it didn't ring. Lying flat on his back under the kitchen counter was not the most conducive position for a steady stream of curses, but he'd certainly been in worse. He proceeded to vent some of his temper and worry in a string of profanity that started in English, switched to Russian, and finally descended into gutter Greek.

When he stopped at last (and opened his eyes, which he'd closed at one point while trying to call up a particularly vivid string of curses) his partner's relatively mild voice commented, "Feeling better?"

"No, damn it. Why haven't they called?"

Alex Daniels sat cross-legged next to him, elbows propped on his knees and chin propped on his hands as he blew curly black bangs out of his eyes -- again. "Because there's nothing to tell us yet? Just a guess, mind."

"Do you have to be so calm?" Xan gave up on his temper for the moment, though, soaking up some of the serenity the other man gave off.

Alex glanced at him, an ironic tone in his voice as he answered, "I've noticed, Xenokrates, that the rest of you tend to think that if I abandon my temper that it should then become a joint project. Since we're just now getting this house into the shape we want, I don't see any point in demolishing it."

"By the time you lose your temper, Alexandrias, the rest of us have already exploded," the blond Greek muttered. "How long have you been sitting there?"

"Long enough to hear that lice from a diseased, scabrous, mange-ridden cur would rather stay there than jump to our unknown opponent. Not bad. That one had style." Alex twisted around and lowered himself to rest with his head on his lover's stomach. "Worrying about Connor?"

"You aren't?"

"There's not much we can do for him."

"You're dodging the question, Alex." Xan tucked one arm under his head. The other hand was buried in his lover's dark curls, smoothing them back from the high, olive-skinned forehead.

"So are you. But, yes, I'm worried." He left it there for a minute and the two of them lay on the tiled floor and just enjoyed the peace and quiet, the comfort of each other's company. Alex finally suggested, "I think we should call Edana."
"Oh, good."

That drew a chuckle. "You just didn't want to give in and suggest it."

Xan laughed too, but didn't deny it. "Get up, lazy bones, I'm not paying digital rates for this one."

Alex rolled up off him, and Xan turned to collect drill, screws, and rollers. "And get some coffee while I put everything up, would you?"

The dark-haired man not only brought coffee, he tossed his lover the address book, too. Xan nodded his thanks and dialed the number, then stirred long past the time it took the sugar to dissolve as he waited for someone to pick up. "Come on, Edana, you should be there, damn it...."

A snatch of conversation between two or three men could be heard over the line before a clear female voice said, "Logan."

Alex chuckled. "Usually we get your student, sister."

"Alexandrias." He could hear the sigh she gave and he could just see her shoulders slumping the way they always did when she let go of tension. "Is Xan there, too?"

"Right here," Xan called toward the speaker phone. "No news?"

"None. Well, not about Connor. And you?"

"Going half-mad waiting," Xan told her bluntly as he set down his coffee mug. "I gave up and tried to turn the kitchen island into a pig."

"Oh, those curses. Did they help? I may have to try them myself." Her humor sounded half-hearted at best. They heard her moving around; in the background, the men were still talking.

"Are you coping, Edana?" Alex asked, leaning towards her voice as if that would help her hear him or simply give her more comfort.

"I'm managing, yes. So is Duncan, for that matter."

"And your student, young Marc?"

"He's all right so far." She even sounded fairly cheerful; they didn't particularly believe it.

"All right." Xan snorted in disgust. "Meaning he's doing better than you are?"

"Wretch," she murmured fondly. "Any trouble on your end?"

"We aren't line of Ramirez, remember? Not a thing in the world out of the ordinary, Flame." Alex ran his fingers through too-long hair, and reminded himself again to get a haircut soon.

"True enough, you aren't," she sighed. "Gods, I miss him."

"We all miss him," Xan pointed out gently. "I think Ramirez was the one brother all of us got along with. How is it really going on your side of things, though? How is the rest of the family holding up?"

"Adam is... well, Adam," Aidan chuckled. "He's pretending this is all irritating, and none of his concern, but I'm learning all sorts of things I didn't know you could do on a computer. He and Damien held an hour-long conversation that undoubtedly played merry havoc with my phone bill, but it was very informative, I will say that."
"And our favorite walking temper of a nephew?" Xan asked, grinning himself. He could just see their teacher trying to pretend he was the detached, uninterested observer. Methos never could resist sticking his nose into things.

"He's well enough. I'm not sure he's sleeping, but he's always like this on hunts. Rich and Var are keeping an eye on him."

"Rich?" came Alex's question, dark eyes unfocused as he tried to place the name. Xan settled in snugly against his side and gave him an innocent look when Alex tried to glare at him for the distraction.

"Richard Ryan, Duncan's last student. Impetuous, some days, and too young, but he copes well under pressure. I understand he's getting along well with Var." Aidan's almost succeeded in keeping her bemused surprise out of her voice, but the two Greeks were familiar with both her and her Spanish student.

"Don't you mean that the other way around?" Alex asked, familiar with Var's foibles from long experience. "I've always noticed that he bristles over some of the strangest things."

"He did get over that, I think," she chuckled, obviously agreeing with her brother's implications. "He's still alive, you'll notice."

"Which is more than I would have bet money on," Xan agreed calmly. "Is Disa doing all right, too? Those two were always thick as thieves."

"She's in New York with Kyra, looking for Connor."

"We're all moving into pairs and triads, have you noticed?" Alex mentioned. "Jarunsuk left word on my voice mail that Salim had 'shown up on his doorstep,' I believe he said. And the last I heard, Fahizah was 'visiting' Terrence."

"Fahizah?" Aidan asked curiously. "I believe I met her at Connor's party last year, but I'm not sure. East Indian woman, a bit under average height, and a gloriously wicked sense of humor?"

"That's her. She's one of his students, sister, did no one introduce you two? We met her a few years ago over a little matter of some mineral rights. She was doing legal research those days. Who have you heard from?" Alex asked, bringing the conversation back around.

"Most of my students, thank goodness. They've been holding... family reunions, I suppose you could say, at very short notice. I understand that a simply astonishing number of grandmothers have met sudden demises, or so several employers think."

The two Greeks couldn't help chuckling at that, not least because she had managed to say it with such a bland voice. "Do tell," Xan snickered at last. "Whose idea was that? Flynn's or Ish's?"

"Would you believe Duathor?" Aidan laughed.

"Oh, the one with the hair," Alex snickered, remembering a whip-fast Egyptian girl whose one vanity had been an absolute mane of blue-black braids. "And all the beads in it. Wasn't she the one you picked up in Alexandria a century or so before they burned the library?"

"That's her," his sister confirmed. "She informed me she'd take over tracking the European and African branches of the family if I'd deal with North and South America, and then she called back to tell me that she'd delegated Asia out, too, and would let me know about any problems. Between us, we think we've accounted for most of them."
"Who got Australia?" Xan asked, aware that her line was scattered across the globe and trying to remember what gossip he'd heard recently. "I thought you had a student or two over there, too, Flame."

"I did," she told him quietly. "Rabi is dead, and no one has heard from Pravat."

"Jarunsuk has," Alex immediately replied. "He got a call from Pravat the day before yesterday looking for help with a short-term visa into the States. I think our brother pulled a string or two; he's on his way to San Francisco, too."

"Thank you," she sighed, and from the creak of leather, Xan suspected she'd just sagged against a couch. "That's a relief. Any idea why the rush on the visa?"

"If Jarunsuk knows, he didn't tell us. Look, sister, if Duathor is dealing with your branch of the family, is there anything you need from us?" The taut silence on the other end of the line brought a slow nod. "Edana ni Emer, don't be such a complete idiot. If this is a line war, we'll be there. You know that." Alexandrias didn't even look at Xenokrates as he committed them both; nothing needed to be said between them on this topic.

"I didn't want to ask," she admitted quietly.

"You're terrified this may all be your fault, that Owain's behind it because you never killed the son of a bitch. Well, no one else has gotten around to it, either, and with Damien's temper being what it is, that alone amazes me," Xan told her bluntly. "It's not like you ever received some divine directive that Owain's your problem; you've at least kept the snake in check for a few centuries. Now quit dithering, idiot woman. You can collapse when it's all over, and we'll loan you our house in Thessaloniki so that you'll have someplace lovely to do it. But that's later. Right now, you have us, and those two lovers of yours. We will win this, Edana."

"But at what cost?" She sounded marginally more confident, and Xan and Alex traded relieved looks. It took a while to drag their sister's spirits down... after which it took even longer to shake her back into her normal cheerful state.

"Whatever the price may be," Alex pointed out in a voice more gentle than Xan's but just as inflexible, "it's already being paid, sister, and there is nothing we can do to stop it that we aren't already doing. And it was a very skilled, very professional job of taking Connor. The only way we could have stopped an attack like that would be by locking ourselves away from the world... and none of us are made that way. You gave warnings when the danger first seemed directed, and you trained your students as well as you could. Leave the guilt be, Edana -- time enough for it later, when you know whether or not you deserve it."

"Besides," Xan added, "the more energy you spend worrying, the less you have for thinking up ways to win this."

"A touch, a palpable touch," she chanted, sounding more her usual Irish self than she had in days. "In the meantime, we're running up your phone bill. I'll call you when I know something, brothers, or when I start to go mad again."

"Again?" Alex snorted. "Start?"

"I love you too, Alexandrias. Take care, you two."

"Always."

"Get some sleep at some point, sister," Xan called, "and tell Adam and the rest that we said hello
and all that."

"Of course."

Alex glanced over at Xan after she'd hung up, and anyone else might have thought he was smiling. Xan knew that twist of his lips, though; it was the look that meant his temper was finally fraying at the edges -- a rapid process once it started.

"Are we going to wait until she calls?" Alex finally said, voice too calm to suit his lover.

"No," Xenokrates decided, standing up to glance around the house. "I don't think so. It's Easter Sunday, which makes this a little more difficult, but let's plan on heading up there first thing tomorrow morning, or tomorrow afternoon at the latest. Time we found out if our assistants are worth their salaries."

"Monica will love it," Alex grinned abruptly. "She's been wanting to prove she deserves a raise."

"Jeff, on the other hand, will shake his head, say he knew I'd go gallivanting, and they'll never notice I was gone," Xan shrugged, thinking of the phlegmatic older man who supervised most of his restoration jobs. "Make your calls, Alex; I'll start packing."

"I'll let you know as soon as the phone's clear so you can call Jeff," Alex agreed, glancing quickly around the house as he forced his mind away from rage and back to practicalities. "Clear the bills for a few weeks, too, you think?"

Xan took two long strides to reach him and wrapped both arms around Alex. His grip was fiercely possessive as he pulled his lover against him and kissed him with all the skill of centuries of practice, apparently trying to leave him both breathless and compliant. He succeeded in the latter at least. When he finally pulled back from the acquiescent mouth, it was to a soft groan of frustration and Alex had locked arms around his hips, clearly not intending to let Xan escape any time soon.

Alexandrias stared at him, dark eyes dilated with pleasure, and asked, "What brought that on? Not that I'm complaining, mind you."

"Because I'm supposed to be the practical one, remember?" When all that drew was a soft laugh, Xan tightened his grip in Alex's curls almost to the point of pain, saying fiercely, "That, Alexandrias, was an incentive to get this shit done. Because as soon as we're ready, I'm going to drag you into bed and keep you there until we have to get up tomorrow morning to leave."

"You'll have to feed me; we'll need our strength." Alex slid his grasp up to Xan's waist, enjoying the feel of lithe, solid muscle under his grip as he leaned forward just a bit to ease his lover's grip and rest his forehead against Xan's. "But I know what you mean; I want you, too."

The blond leaned back just far enough to kiss him on the tip of the nose; predictably, Alex drew back and frowned at him. "Get to work, Alex. The sooner we're done, the sooner we get our wicked way with each other."

Alex spoke aloud what they were both thinking. "And it may be a while before we can make time for this again."

"Yes," Xan agreed without letting him go. "That, too."
Marc wanted to scream as he watched Aidan's hands tap a steady, violent drumming on the tabletop; he suspected she did, too. His teacher was speaking rapidly to Damien in Charleston, using some guttural language that the young black man had never heard before. She sounded both angry and upset at the same time. In his two months with the Irish woman, Marc had grown used to her ready smile, the near-laughing voice as she took everything, apparently, in stride. Those smiles were fewer now, and he hated that with a slowly rousing fury which his grandmother would have recognized, but which Aidan and Duncan hadn't yet seen.

Marc barely knew Connor. They'd only talked on the phone a couple times but the other man's caustic humor had been a rough-edged pleasure. That sharp-humored immortal had teased him about falling in with a bunch of opera-lovers, but never mentioned Chris Henslowe, or Owain Rhys-Tewdor, or that Marc had ever been part of a different immortal family. Instead Connor had compared notes about favorite Philly delis and parks, and then extended a casual invitation to catch a Knicks game together some time, claiming the others didn't properly appreciate New York basketball. And he'd gone to the trouble of setting up a business trip that would give him a chance to come visit his 'new nephew' for a few days.

It didn't look like that was going to happen now. Instead, Duncan's teacher, Aidan's youngest brother, was missing, and the others were much more worried than they wanted to admit.

Duncan had claimed that Connor was probably playing cat and mouse with another immortal and hadn't had a chance to call. But the Scot's smiles didn't light his face they way they usually did. Adam merely commented that Connor had the lives of half-a-dozen cats to have survived the Kurgan; he'd turn up. Hell, Joe had even brought dinner over last night as if he knew that, despite Aidan's claims to the contrary, none of them wanted to cook. He seemed strained, too, although Adam drew a wry smile from the Watcher with his immediate question of "Do you think Sol's grandsons will ever get off KP for not seeing this?"

Marc had managed to grin at him before asking, "Hey, Joe? While it's nice to know Watchers aren't infallible, couldn't you guys have missed Rich's racing wreck or something?"

"We'd agree with you," Joe told him, and that was that. There were no questions as to how the immortals had heard what the Watchers did or didn't know. It was probably sufficient for Joe that he hadn't told them; Marc had gotten the impression that the musician considered his own oath enough of a problem for most days. Before he headed home, Joe mentioned that he suspected Sol would call them if the Watchers heard anything... and if Sol didn't, Joe would.

But none of the older immortals had suggested that Owain Rhys-Tewdor might be behind this, although Marc knew damn well they were wondering if he lay in wait at the bottom of the problem -- probably with surface to air missile, knowing Owain. As Chris Henslowe's former student, though, Marc had no doubts Owain was involved.

For the moment, though, there were only two things he could do. One was to feed his teacher, which he'd done by sticking coffee and a sandwich in front of her and glaring at her, hands on hips, until Aidan finally began to take bites in between comments to Damien. The other course of action was to rack his own brain for useful information, something Adam had strongly encouraged over breakfast.

So, coffee mug in hand and his own building rage no less hot than the caffeine in front of him, Aidan's newest student summoned the calm control he was learning in the meditations she had
shown him and thought. Slowly, carefully, rationally, Marc went back to the start of the whole matter so far as he was concerned: his death.

It was a Thursday night and all I wanted to do was meet Dave at the pool hall. We were going to shoot a few games, drink a few beers, and I was going to go home and get some sleep. I needed to be at work early Friday to try and finish some research project for my boss. I was walking and it was raining, that cold, misty drizzle that both Josie and I like to walk in. I remember that's what I was thinking about when the pain started. Was there anyone on the street? I don't think so; I don't remember them.

I couldn't really see anyone. What else, Scipio? Well, it hurt. I remember that. I think I actually felt the blade turn in my chest as he pulled it out. Why 'he'? Because the hand on my shoulder was so strong? Aidan's hands are that strong... but not that big. I remember now. The guy's fingers wrapped down to my collarbone. He had a hand on my shoulder, holding me, and the other hand twisted the knife as he pulled it back out. Can you feel a blade in your heart, or was my imagination working overtime afterwards? Well now isn't the time to ask Adam and Duncan that, Scipio, don't be an idiot.

I couldn't see anything at that point, except pain-sparks in my vision. White, and purple, and red. That's a strange thing to remember. At some point, I'll have to put all this in my diary... but it can wait a while, I think. Hard enough to be calm thinking about this, but if I write it down it'll be just a little too real.

Jay told me that there was never a death certificate for me. I remember, he thought it was an odd question until I told him that Chris had claimed he forged one. He didn't ask anything else after that, just told me that he'd personally taken my picture to every hospital, morgue, and police precinct in the city. No one had seen me. No one. And there was no paperwork with my name on it. So if I wasn't in the hospital, where and how did Chris find me?

He claimed he found me in the morgue. Fat chance of that, then. The young immortal snorted softly at the thought, and took a sip of his coffee before leaning back in his chair again, eyes closed as he reassembled the memories of that night with a more critical eye for the fit of fact to fact. Besides which, that raises the whole question: why was Chris in Philly anyway? He lived in the western Cascades, for God's sake. Right. An immortal who lived three thousand miles away just happened to 'run into me?' Bullshit. Slice it with Occam's Razor, Scipio, Adam's certainly been trying to teach you how to think through plots. What possible reason could Chris have to be in Philly?

To be in Philadelphia? Plenty, Marc decided. But to be in a mid-city residential area like ours? Not much at all. Once is happenstance: Chris being in the city. Twice is coincidence: him being in my neighborhood. Three times -- my death when he was there to 'rescue' me -- is enemy action. Ten will get you one, the Italian man concluded, that Chris stuck that knife in my back. He always kept one in his belt. I wonder if Aidan or Adam has figured all this out? Why didn't they just tell....

And then the pain knifed through him as his detachment shattered momentarily. Strong, long fingers, made even more powerful by two months' constant weapons practice and weight training, nearly broke the thick coffee mug before Marc could make himself let go. He stood and walked upstairs with his usual quick pace, trying to get to the couch on the fourth floor before he completely lost control of his expressions. The older immortals had other problems than his emotional shock.

My first teacher didn't just send me out to lose my head, he realized as he sank onto the overstuffed plaid couch in a tightly curled ball. Suddenly, despite the unseasonably warm April morning, he
was cold. Chris killed me. He took away my family, my life, my career -- everything. He put my family through two years of this hell, wondering if I was alive or dead and never knowing, just to have another male in the line of Rhys-Tewdor, because he thought there were too many females -- 'Treacherous bitches,' he could almost hear his first teacher muttering -- in the family. And when I didn't live up to what he wanted, what he tried to beat me into becoming....

Marc pulled the old carriage blanket off the back of the couch and curled himself under its warmth, grateful for the heavy comfort of the upholstery velvet and fur against the sharp-edged answers in his memories. He called Owain. That's why Owain showed up in the back of beyond. To see if he could make me into someone strong enough, ruthless enough, to suit them. And when he couldn't.... They both sent me out to die, then. To die under Aidan's sword, or Duncan's, and immobilize them long enough to... what? Lose a head? Be taken prisoner like they've done to Connor? What?

He doubled up and let the shakes roll over him, feeling the spasms wrack him down to the bone. For a small eternity, it was all he could do to keep breathing as the fear of those earlier days poured over and through him. Eventually, though, the warmth of the sunlight and the blanket seeped into him, easing the tremors and he managed to draw a deep breath, then another. Marc sat up at last, pulling calm around him like the heavy fabric that was covering him until he could think clearly again.

Oh, God, I thought I was over this. Never mind. I'll deal with this later. I can come apart later. Right now, they need me to think. He shivered again, then forced himself to relax and went back to his previous train of thought.

What would Owain want to do if Duncan was down, or Aidan? He'd probably take their head. I think. I mean, he couldn't train an older immortal the way he tried to train me. But if they did take Connor, why? What is he trying to do? Draw us out, see where we are? No, that doesn't seem quite right. Owain was... precise. He's already done the research; he knows where we are and what we're doing. Trying to paralyze us? Yeah, that's what Chris would have done; it's probably what Owain is up to. So -- is Connor alive or dead?

I guess the first question should really be, what advantages are there to Owain in killing Connor now? That's what Adam wants me to think about. And he's right; I have the inside track on how Chris thought, which means I'm the logical one to look at this mess. Right. Time to start writing this down and sorting it out.

Marc stood up and stretched, trying to release tight shoulders and reassemble his control before going back downstairs. If he took much longer, though, he was afraid Aidan would decide she needed to worry about him in addition to her other problems. He grabbed a pad and pens off the computer desk on his way down to the kitchen, then refilled both his mug and Aidan's. She was still talking on the phone, but the language had changed again.

After a quick look at him, Aidan said something that might have been 'hold on, Mandisa' before putting one hand over the receiver. "Marc? Is everything all right?"

"Fine, Teach. Do you want some fruit before I go back to work on this?"

Grey eyes studied him closely, then she smiled and shook her head. "No, I'm fine. Have you done those point-work exercises I showed you?"

He managed to grin as he nodded. "Ninety minutes, as ordered, and my wrists and forearms are still killing me. And before you ask, I did an hour on katas after that. You want me on this floor or first?"
Marc shook his head quickly, loose curls flying around his face. "Take your time, Aidan. Adam handed me an assignment at breakfast, and I think it's going to take a while." That drew a raised eyebrow and a very inquisitive look before she shrugged, quirked a half-smile at him, then nodded and went back to her discussion.

Well, he did. Marc shook his head in resignation as he sat down at Aidan's writing desk to work out the list. When the man orders me to start detailing differences between Henslowe's training style and Aidan's, the odds are, he's looking for something. In his place, I'd want any and all information on my old line from an insider's point of view. I think I was as outside as you can get and still be in that family, but even living in the middle of nowhere, now that I think about it, Chris did stay in touch with some of them.

So. Who, what, and how, in organized form -- and by tonight, because I don't think Adam has a lot of patience left. They need this information too badly, and Joe can't get it for them. Aidan said these Watchers shot him once already for associating too closely with immortals, and damn if we're going to lose him, too.

The young Italian considered the legal pad, contemplated methods of arranging his data, and then started titling pages: 'Phone calls,' 'Immortals Mentioned,' 'Anecdotes, Training Methods & Requirements.' This could take a while, and soon enough he'd want to switch to one of the computers. It would be much more convenient to do this on a database and let Adam or Aidan resort the information whatever way they wanted it.

For right now, however, he would work where his teacher could see him and not have to fret. By itself, that was enough reason to put up with longhand instead of keyboard. Only immortal healing was keeping Aidan from acquiring a fine-grooved line where worried frowns kept drawing her eyebrows down toward her nose, and if the older immortals were so concerned then there was probably a reason. One Marc would undoubtedly find out about far too soon, he decided as the pen scratched quickly across the pad.

I hope I can remember something that will help. Marc couldn't see the smile on his face, which was probably just as well. It would have reminded him of Adam at his nastiest. But no one gets away with fucking with my family the way Owain and Chris did. Either family. Not if I can help it.

Mandisa's journal -- April 12th 1998

An exquisite cathedral, and a truly welcoming congregation. I do not know why I was surprised that Rachel could recommend such a place, for although she is Jewish and this place is for Christians, still she strikes me as a woman of great knowledge. Riverside it is called, surely for the location, and yet I thought of the old hymn, "Shall We Gather at the River," for they all do.

After the very straightforward bias in Charleston, and oh, but Damien's Stormy is a very cat for playing with her prey, I had not expected this place. Will I never stop being surprised by things? They were very kind, and I was no stranger than many others who were there for the morning service. A relief, truly, for it is death for our kind to be too noticeable, and yet I wanted to come to Easter service. If I am still here Tuesday, I shall have to try to make time to come back -- they have a labyrinth for the faithful to walk in meditations and it is available to all on Tuesday nights. I have not seen such since I visited Chartres.
If this kinsman of mine, this Connor MacLeod, yet lives, then we shall have to bring him there to heal. Such peace in the place, seeping from the paving stones of the nave, carved into every oak leaf on the capitals -- he will need it if he yet lives. Perhaps the bells will soothe him. I truly hope so.

Too long since you and I have hunted together on the plains, Shahar, my teacher. There was a time when we ran after our prey and you did not hesitate to cast your spear and kill them. I think perhaps too much time in the cities has dulled your edge, my teacher. You should have killed these long ago, before they had time to raise up their young. Kyra is sure that this is the doing of Rhys-Tewdor, your old enemy, and Stormy growls that she cannot find their spoor quickly enough. The lioness only vanishes when she is preparing to strike; I think that is what Rhys-Tewdor does now.

More surprising, perhaps, is that Johannes Engeles yet lives. I had thought that Damiano, my brother whose temper rumbles and burns as constantly as Mauna Loa, would have finished him by now. I do not remember how long they have hated each other, and yet it may be nearly two hundred years now since Johannes Engeles found it amusing to try to implicate Ishtvan in the assassination of Gustavus III. Surprising that my two brothers did not hunt him longer and find him. Perhaps I should tell Damiano he has gotten hoary and lethargic in his dotage.

Then again, perhaps not. His back swing has gotten no weaker.

Still we have found nothing. No man who remembers Connor's passing; no woman who remembers his fall, for fall he surely did somewhere. Damiano has found no sign of a storm, of a quickening such as his would be, anywhere, and he says that it can not have happened on this continent without his knowledge. Myself, I have looked at the charts of population densities, and I think there are places where such a thing could be done, but I will not argue my brother's specialty with him. I am far behind on current technology, and he is not.

So we look for Connor MacLeod still. He is not here; we know this, although there is no proof, and it is proof we need. But the island feels... empty. Rachel agrees with this, which is not encouraging. Kyra and I have been all over Manhattan, and through all the other boroughs: Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island and the Bronx. I have felt other immortals, here and there, but none have rolled over me like the surf over the sand. Small brooks, only, which means none of them is the man we seek.

This was done by those skilled in such things. Kyra delights in hunting such men, in facing them and killing them and letting them see that a woman is no weaker than a man. It makes her furious that these, at least, continue to elude her. She snarls, and paces, and we return to Rachel's shop only reluctantly to see what news there is, to eat and clean up and nap before we hunt again. We are hunting shadows, though, cold tracks long hidden.

A wise woman would run, some would say. I have no doubt many would say that is the course of wisdom now, that this man is after my teacher and this is none of my affair. And yet, I remember that I was hunted in Ethiopia, in Egypt, in Morocco. No, I do not think these things are unrelated, and neither does my brother, Damiano. The wise hunter sees the predators running and fears the fire or stampede that must be behind them and will destroy her, too. I see the hunt against Shahar and I see a force that will kill all in its way, all that is not of itself.

Navarro is here to fight for her if there is need. All of a long century they have declined to speak to each other, but he has come nonetheless for that she taught us both, and taught us well. If my brother fights, then I must fight, too. I cannot fight for him, nor he for me, but I will be there to see it, to remember him should he fail, and to know that he will remember me should I lose my own match.
What might have been is not -- we are not children, to wail at the sky and the earth that this is not fair. Things are, and you go on. Or you do not. The earth and the sky are permanent, and our Lord, and that is enough. And so we hunt for this missing kinsman, because he is dear to Shahar, and to Kyra. And we wait for the lion to show himself, and hope that we kill him before he kills us.

Until that time, I have had the comfort of communion, and the pleasure of my brother's company in Charleston, and my sister's company here. I have met Rachel Ellenstein, who is a delight, and Solomon Goldberg, who should be treasured. If we live through this, I look forward to sitting by his chair and listening to his stories, and letting him tease me about being his tall, dark 'granddaughter' while his grandsons laugh and steal Rachel's cookies and bread from the kitchen.

If only Var were here, instead of in Charleston, that I could catch up on gossip with him, I would have no regrets at all. I hear the shower; Kyra is awake again. Time, then, to close this. We eat; we hunt; and with a great deal of luck, perhaps we kill. Today is the day of the Resurrection; it would be miraculous, Lord, if You should resurrect my teacher's brother to her. But Thy will will be done.

Seacouver, Duncan's loft -- early morning, April 13th

Duncan picked up the phone up on the second ring, even as Methos growled about, "It's five in the bloody morning...."

"MacLeod. This had better be good," the Scot said harshly.

"Smooth, almost silky," the Scot growled, before turning toward the spiral stairs up to the loft and the spare bedroom that first Rich, and now Marc, used. He called up, "Stay here, Marc. Don't come down until we tell you it's safe," as the three older immortals moved swiftly into the hallway. Without waiting for a reply, he closed the door again and continued, "Cadenced, Aidan. Rhythmic,
like someone reciting poetry."

"Owain."

The gun appeared in her hand, and he had a moment to wonder where she'd had it concealed. Then he felt the muted presence ahead of them. "Adam, you're rear-guard. Aidan, take point." When Methos started to say something, the Scot snapped, "She's lighter to drag if they shoot."

"And if they're after me, then killing me will end this," the Irish woman added quietly as she slid ahead of them and opened the door to the alley.

Duncan almost slammed into her suddenly rigid back when she froze just outside the door, and her careful, precisely controlled tones reminded him again that Methos had trained her. "Duncan. Go into your office and bring me the toolbox. Run."

Katana at his side, he pushed her forward with his shoulder even as four centuries of warrior's instincts screamed at him that this was a battlefield. In the chill morning breeze, he could smell too-familiar scents: blood, and charred flesh, and the acidic tang of ozone. "Aidan, move."

"Don't argue with me now, Dhonnchaidh -- go. Adam, I need a shower curtain from the locker room."

"Damn it, what is--" Then the Scot shoved her forward enough to see by the pre-dawn light what was on the wall. He spun under Methos' hand, which was still holding his shoulder where his lover had tried to stop him from moving forward, and went back up the stairs at a run for his office. Because the only thing that had let Duncan recognize his teacher was the bloodstained shock of sandy hair topping that mangled form.

Methos followed him inside, not waiting to ask what had brought that tone to his student's voice. He'd heard her speak that way on a hundred battlefields and skirmish lines. It was the sound of a stomach which would not be allowed to rebel until everything was done, of tears which would not fall until there was time to spare. Whatever was in the alley, whatever had been done to the immortal--and Methos was almost certain it was Connor, but he hadn't looked yet--it was undoubtedly gruesome. And so he began to shield his own feelings and emotions against whatever the morning might demand of him.

As their conjoined presence receded behind her, Edana ni Emer stepped out into the alley, grateful in a dispassionate portion of her mind that the dumpster would conceal Connor's body from the street for at least the first few minutes of dawn. Grey eyes flicked back and forth as she systematically appraised the extensive damage, filing the images away for another time. Fuel for rage would be invaluable before all was said and done, but that would be later.

She reached out for a too-long moment, extending her presence out into the streets until she felt thin and friable as a child's gum blown into an over-sized bubble. Nowhere, though, could she feel another immortal, and while she had no way of knowing what mortals might be out there, Edana gave Owain credit for more sense than that.

Too many of us know what's been started, and in too many places. Kyra in New York, Terrence in Tacoma, Damien in Charleston, and that's only in the States. Then there's Brighde in Capetown, Duauthor in Copenhagen, Ish wherever he is in the Western Sahara this month.... No. There's no hit team waiting for us, only an invitation to death's own ball. Owain's pushed this precisely as far as he can without bringing other immortals down on his head... or justifying a pack hunt by our line.

She moved closer to Connor, one hand lifting to the dried stuff that had seeped from the charred
ruin of his eyes, and paused, not able to touch him yet. *Oh my brother, that he should use your body for his invitation....* Then she tucked her guilt away and banked it until she could afford anger. The memories would make a fine backlog for her anger, Aidan knew.

The fire imagery calmed Edana as it always did, based as it was in her name and her self. With the same unflinching precision that she had used in first examining Connor and then calming herself again, she pulled her main gauche from the coat and buried it to the hilt in the shredded muscles of his chest, remotely horrified that she could count the revealed ribs to see where to sheathe the steel. Without letting herself think about the injuries in between, Aidan turned her attention to the railroad spikes which transfixed her brother to the wall like some grotesque butterfly tinted in shades of carmine, aubergine, and rust. Each forearm had been pierced between the bones, a few inches above the wrist, and his corpse sagged from the metal, dragged down by gravity even as the occasional spark of lightning danced across the wounds in chest and torso.

She had just moved to stand directly before Connor, using her body to conceal the worst of the injuries until she could find a gentle way to break the news, when gravel crunched beneath Duncan's feet. He loomed behind her, his anger almost a tangible force against her back, and fury quivered just beneath his grim tones as he asked his lover, "What do you want me to do?"

"Start sizing the vice grips to the head of the spikes," Aidan replied. "Once Adam has something to carry him up on--" Both of them felt Methos' presence as he slipped up behind them and laid the plastic shower curtain on the concrete of the alley. "We'll hold him up. You're strongest, Duncan; pull straight out, as hard as you can."

Neither she nor Methos made any comment about the blood and gore that rubbed onto them as they pushed Connor up the wall to lessen the pressure on the spikes, Aidan supporting his left shoulder and Methos bracing Connor's chest. Duncan found himself pressed along Methos' back as he took firm hold of the vice grips, planted one leg on the wall for additional leverage, and pushed.

It still took all of his strength to pull the metal free from the wall. There was no spurt of blood, but the gaping wound didn't spark and start to heal, either, which meant his kinsman's injuries must be.... Duncan resolutely pushed that thought away and set the vice grip on the next spike. There were four in all, and he had to trade places with Aidan to get the two in Connor's left arm, shifting around Methos and leaving him to support the dead man's weight by himself for a few long seconds.

Between them, Edana and Methos caught Connor's weight and lowered him to the plastic, still blocking Duncan's view. Without turning, the Irish woman ordered, "Get the alley, Dhonnchaidh."

"He's heavy."

"We can handle him," she said firmly, never moving out of his way, "and we're better suited to start setting bones. Clean the blood away before we've dogs and questions."

Duncan started to argue, but Methos gave him a cold stare and deliberately used every trick of posture and voice that he'd learned in five thousand years to overwhelm the younger Scot. "Later, Highlander. The sooner we begin to work on Connor, the less he will hurt. He's already suffered enough, I think."

Methos' highhandedness made him furious with a cold rage he hadn't let himself feel in years, but Duncan couldn't argue with the logic. His anger shifted, coiling and raging as it shifted targets, but everything -- his temper, his lovers' authoritarian actions, even the responsible parties for this -- could and would wait. Connor's safety, however belated, had to take priority. So the Scot moved to collect a hose and eradicate the evidence in the alley while his two lovers took his kinsman
upstairs.

Part of his anger, he knew, came from terror, but he couldn't let go of it yet. Despite the fact that Aidan and Methos had used their bodies to keep him from seeing many of the wounds -- and what had they been hiding from him? How much worse was there? -- his years of experience on battlegrounds across five continents left Duncan queasily aware of how much damage Connor must have taken. One fact had been too obvious for them to hide: Connor's right hand was gone, chopped off at the wrist, and then cauterized either to make the healing more difficult or to add to the pain. Either reason would have been sufficient, but taking an immortal's sword hand.... That alone would be enough reason to start a war.

His rage was too far gone, as Duncan carefully directed water along the wall, to allow even speech. Deep in his mind, though, so far down that words were superfluous, a primal need for revenge, for his enemy's blood and fear, for the sounds of their screams, was beginning to build. He could feel the need hammer through his soul like a new Quickening. He was going to make someone, somewhere, pay for this. Or die trying.

The shower curtain lay on the floor of the men's locker room, blood already pooling in the folds when Methos returned from double-checking the locks on the dojo doors. Edana cursed softly and continuously in Gaelic so profane that he suspected she was corrupting some of the old hymns to come up with the commentary. Her hands were carefully pulling metal from a new incision as she called on Brighid to scorch Owain, listing body parts and temperatures in precise detail.

He knelt next to her, completely disregarding the mix of blood and water which immediately soaked into his pants. Rather than comment on the mess, he went to work on Connor's remaining hand, setting bones into place and lining muscles and tendons back up as he went. His student broke off her invective long enough to ask, "Opinions?"

"On which?" His voice was as cold as hers, both of them controlling their fury for the moment. Her litany, while excruciating, wasn't particularly serious. The gods probably wouldn't move fast enough on this to suit Edana ni Emer, but she wasn't likely to wait on their timing, either. Methos happened to agree with her. This is... excessive. It looks like Caspian's work, had Kronos kept an eye on him during the process. What warped mind conceived of this?

"They castrated him," Edana pointed out. When he raised an eyebrow and tilted his head in a manner that clearly asked why she thought he had missed seeing that, she went on, "They also stuffed cock and balls entire into the stomach cavity. If we reopen the wounds at his groin and on the base of the organ, I think that it might actually reattach. Vachon did something similar with a hand once."

"Javier Vachon is a vampire, not an immortal," Methos remarked caustically. Then he said more thoughtfully, "However, regenerating it will be so painful that I don't see where it could be any worse to make the attempt. He's still dead; let's try it."

She nodded once. "My idea. I'll do it. How bad is his hand?"

"Everything is set," he told her calmly. "Nothing is healing yet. The internal injuries are probably responsible for that."

"Check anywhere there's massive bruising--"

"Teach your grandmother to suck eggs," Methos cut in, cataloguing the blood still oozing from the
nail beds. There was nothing he could do for that, so instead he checked the alignment of forearm bones and used surgical tape to close the gaping holes where the spikes had gone through the left arm.

Edana ignored his interruption and continued coldly, "Magister, they left caltrops in some of the wounds."

"Looks more like they used barbed wire clippings," he told her, both of them using biting comments and gallows humor to cover their rage and despair. Methos pulled out his own dagger and began working his way down through a black and purple bruise to pull out another piece of imbedded steel. "Have you checked his feet?"

"Not yet. Thank the Gods he's dead; the wounds aren't bleeding too badly without circulation." She studied the exposed flesh carefully for a moment, then laid open Connor's groin again and held his privates back in place. "Does Dhonnchaidh have any Superglue in that toolbox?"

Methos found it for her, then leaned in and carefully applied the adhesive, trying not to catch either of the living immortals as he worked. Edana took over on her side while Methos applied pressure to hold things in place, and then he took the tube back from her and finished the make-shift suturing. The attempt would work or not, but she had no intention of removing the dagger from Connor's heart anytime soon, and they'd know before then. Either the wounds would begin to close, or she'd find some place safe to stash him with an IV in his arm and a steady drip of drugs while everything regenerated.

That decision made, she left Methos' steady hands to continue probing for, and excising, bits of metal while she moved down to start putting her brother's feet back together. Misbred sons of syphilitic llamas. Part of her wanted to howl, to scream and whimper rather than try to decide where to start. But centuries of getting up and going on held her to the task, and her fingers didn't shake as Edana reshaped Connor's foot, setting bones somewhere close to where they should be.

The boot had crushed his feet thoroughly; if he weren't immortal, Connor would have never walked again. As it was, his quickening was going to have match bone fragments like a jigsaw puzzle to heal them. But she did the best she could, ignoring the seeping nailbeds much as Methos had and for the same reason, then went on to the other foot.

Methos passed his student the surgical tape to use when she got to the right arm, and mentioned calmly, "Duncan's coming."

"Is there any way to keep him out?"

"No," Duncan replied grimly, standing in the doorway to stay out of their way. "How bad is it?"

"Hours of healing for the lesser wounds," Edana told him bluntly, distantly grateful that she'd reattached Connor's manhood before his younger kinsman could see that. "He's blind, for now at least, and the internal injuries are bad. We haven't managed to set all the bones; it's going to take a while yet. For the greater, his sword hand is gone, which will take months to regenerate." She took a slow, careful breath through her mouth, not wanting to smell any more of the blood and battlefield reek of open bowel than she already had, and end up ignominiously sick.

"Dhonnchaidh, tend to Marc if you would. And call Sol. Let him know that Connor's alive, if not particularly well. Such surgery as this is more what Methos and I are trained to."

"He's my cousin."
"And he'll need you soon enough," Methos told him, head down as he continued to work with that same methodical precision. "When Connor's conscious, it's you he'll want, not us. For now, though, someone needs to take care of everything else, and I need Edana's help if we're to set everything quickly enough."

Duncan forced himself to look at his cousin -- at Connor. Say it; this is what someone did to your teacher, Connor -- because if he was certain that if he didn't, he would always feel that he'd taken the easy road and run off to let his lovers handle something he couldn't. Then he nodded, once, and told them, "Marc and Sol. And Joe."

"And food," Edana said quietly. "Connor will need to eat when he wakes."

The idea of eating turned Duncan's stomach and he turned away abruptly. How she could kneel in blood and bile, the cloth of her pants soaked in it at the seat and from mid-thigh down, fingers and palms drenched in the stuff and streaks running down to her elbows, was beyond him. The coppery reek alone knotted his gut, and he wasn't as close to the smell as she was.

Green-gold eyes glanced up to meet brown and the Scot shivered, pulled away from the memories of one battlefield too many. Only the steady, unflinching regard gave him any hope as he felt the older man's strength reach to him across their shared quickenings, and Duncan leaned on it unabashedly for a second. Methos had forced the calm onto both of them, but it was there, and sufficient to the moment. Duncan nodded to him both in acknowledgment and thanks before he told Aidan, "Aye. I'll work on it."

"Let Marc deal with food," Methos told him as he looked back down to where his hands were still delicately probing for metal. "Tell him we're busy. For that matter, tell Joe if he shows up before eight you won't let him in."

Edana added, "Marc will want to treat this as a normal day, Duncan. He can't. Katas in the center of the roof if he absolutely must go outside, but no running. Don't let him out of the building without one of us." She finished taping the second rough-edged puncture wound and added softly, "Go on, please. Bad enough we have to do this; it's no help for you to have to see it. And my student will be frantic by now."

The opportunity to do something both necessary and useful steadied Duncan even further, and for a moment he let himself think about what he would have felt if Connor had ordered him to lock himself in and gone charging off. He winced and headed upstairs to change clothes and deal with Aidan's young student.

Behind him, Methos continued to work his way down Connor's torso, checking for both implanted metal and broken bones while ignoring Edana's dagger. The burns he dismissed as being comparatively minor, although a distant memory told him that the damage to the nipples had been done by heated pincers. He heard Edana's litany of curses switch to Arabic and asked in the same language, "What is it?"

"The elbow doesn't want to--" A grunt of effort broke off her sentence, then she finished, "--go back into place. That did it. Are you near done on this side?"

"Just about." He noted the clipped precision of speech, filed it away in the same corner of his mind that tracked Duncan's accent, and concluded Edana was not coping with this at all well. A moment's consideration added the codicil that they had a little while yet before she would fall apart, so he went back to work. "I'll hold the muscles in place if you'll apply the glue."

They worked in silence for a minute, pulling rent muscles into place and reconnecting them to each
other with surgical tape or minute amounts of the glue. Absolute precision wasn't a concern for them with this patient; a sloppy job would still speed Connor's healing a great deal. The black, swollen bulges across his abdomen had even begun to subside, a sure sign to Methos' mind that they had gotten most of the metal. But it was nerve-wrackingly slow, like having to look away to watch a flower bloom.

"How bad is the face?" he asked as he held a torn pectoral for her to tape.

"I never set noses well," his former student commented. "But I think it will do. And the jaw's back in place. His eyes... are going to take a while."

"Gouged or burned?"

"Burned, eyelids and all, I think. The eyelid edges don't look severed, and they're certainly not healing quickly," Edana told him. "But the eyes are regenerating, I think. The oozing isn't quite as bad as it was."

"Ready to flip him?"

She tilted her head back to draw a deep breath, then straightened back and shoulders and answered, "Yes. On three."

They turned Connor over and began the process again, easing flaps of skin back over muscle where it had been flayed or flogged half off him, cutting down into muscle to remove potentially crippling shards of metal left in the wounds. Methos was pressing gently along one bruise to see if the skull was both intact and aligned when he heard the hissing intake of breath from across their patient's body.

"What is it?"

"What do you think?" she snapped.

"I'd have been more surprised if they hadn't raped him," he responded, his voice deliberately detached. "How bad is it?"

"Tearing, blood, what look like some burns." She made an effort to control her voice and succeeded. "External burning, though, not internal."

"Could have been worse," Methos commented, but she could tell from the tension around his mouth that her teacher thought it was bad enough. Done with his investigations, he pulled out elastic bandages and said calmly, "Shall we tape his ribs?"

"After that we can set the collarbone. Do we want to turn on the shower first?"

"Well, that is why we brought him in here," Methos agreed calmly. "It's not like it he'll feel it, and he's already dead, so we certainly can't drown him." And it may keep us from vomiting too soon. We need to finish this first.

Edana managed a smile that was closer to baring her teeth as she added, "As many holes as are in his lungs, I doubt we could drown him anyway."

It took both of them to rinse the gore off both Connor and the shower curtain, trading the occasional dark jest over both his state and their own as they went. It was a welcome relief to finally strip off and clean themselves as well. Methos walked into the supply closet to get a garbage bag for their blood-soaked clothes, patting the last water off with a towel before tossing it...
"They'll have to be burned," Edana told him when she glanced up from drying Connor's body. "Good news: his eyes are definitely healing."

"What about his cock?"

"I haven't dared check. I was afraid of the answer."

"So look," he said implacably.

Edana took a deep breath, and then knelt to check their makeshift surgery, muttering, "Do you know, these are not exactly the circumstances under which I had considered examining his balls so closely, Magister."

Methos commented almost pleasantly, "If you get the chance to examine Owain's balls, I don't suppose you'd use a blowtorch for a light, would you?"

"Don't tempt me," she murmured. "That would be far too quick. What about Greek fire? Or napalm?" She paused, then sounded surprised as she said, "Blessed Mother, I think this is actually going to work." Her relief swung almost immediately back to rage, fury grating through her voice as she whispered, "Damn them, why couldn't they have nailed Connor's hand to the wall, too? We could have tried to reattach it."

"Because they want him helpless?" her teacher suggested, his voice deliberately prosaic. "I can't imagine why. Do you suppose the fact that he killed the Kurgan makes them nervous?"

"They should still be nervous," Edana growled. "Did they think the calluses on his left hand were an accident?"

"You think Owain's pet torturer is that observant?"

"No, not really. Shall we strap his ribs, then? I'll hold him upright, if you'll wrap the bandage around." Between them, they got the ribs bandaged and the collarbone settled back into alignment, then carefully lifted Connor back onto the now-clean shower curtain.

"You realize we're going to drip water all over the floor?" Edana pointed out. The composed voice made it quite clear that she didn't really care about the dojo's hardwood floors at the moment.

"I am not carrying him up the stairs," Methos told her implacably. "We can clean up after he's moved."

"Right," she agreed as they hefted Connor's improvised litter by the corners and moved towards the main room of the dojo and the freight elevator. Sure enough, drops of much-diluted blood hit the floor here and there, sometimes splattering Edana's otherwise clean skin since she was at the rear.

Standing in the dojo office and using the phone, Duncan glanced over and started to put a hand over the receiver. Methos immediately warned him off with an incisive shake of his head and waved him back to the call. He pushed reassurance to the Scot over their link. Duncan gave him an odd look, uncertain and irritated both, but he nodded and went back to what he was saying.

Methos frowned when he realized that the office door had been closed. Did he not want to hear what we were doing, or did he not want us to hear something he was doing?
He punched the elevator button and made no comment over the fact that Edana's curses had reduced themselves to Roman infantry insults on parentage and hygiene. Usually her maledictions had all the rolling flow of a caravan on the march or a ship in swift seas. *Reasonable enough, given that she perfected half of them in such times. I'd say we have about five minutes, maybe eight, before she loses all control. Damn I wish this elevator were a little faster.* The protective grate creaked as he swung it upward, and Methos winced against the noise. *I suppose I should be grateful; I could be carrying him up the stairs, instead.*

On the fourth floor, Marc was waiting to lift the screen up and the young man said curtly, "There's a tarp and blankets on the couch." With a casual precision that Methos planned to congratulate him on later, the Italian cut neatly in front of his teacher, taking one corner of the plastic from her hand and then bumping her out of the way with his hip to take the other. Somehow, probably because he was too intent on the crisis at hand, Marc didn't blush at the sight of his teacher standing there, still naked as the battered form in front of him. "I've got it, Teach. You've got clean clothes in the bathroom and the bath's running. Get moving."

Methos glanced over at her and said coldly, "Edana. Go."

She nodded once, a jerky motion, and headed toward the bathroom at a careful walk. Marc turned his attention back to the couch, not looking at the mess he was carrying, only listening to hear the bathroom door close. The click sounded startlingly loud in the silent loft and he sighed in relief.

Adam pointed out, "We're not done yet, Scipio. Let's get him on the couch. Nice work, though."

That raised Marc's eyebrows. "Damn, I really must have done it right." He realized too late that he'd actually said that out loud. "Screwed up again. Shortest duration for a compliment yet."

"That depends," Adam commented as he arranged blankets around Connor and checked the placement of the dagger. "*Don't* remove the blade, or do I need to tell you that?" he asked, tapping the hilt.

"Got it," Marc muttered, trying not to look at the injuries visible around the pommel and guard. "It stays in. How long?"

"Until the worst of the wounds are healed. Until that's the last wound left to heal, more likely. And if you put clothes in there for me, the compliment stands."

The young black man managed to point to the bedside table closest to the bathroom by tilting his head. "Right there. Didn't know if Teach was gonna want company. Duncan's downstairs in the office talking to Joe, since you didn't ask."

Methos nodded. "We saw him. Nicely done. Now, did Damien send you that coffee recipe?"

"The one we've been playing with?" Marc asked in surprise. "Yeah, what about it?"

"Start a pot. Lace it with more milk than usual, and add brandy instead of whiskey. We'll need it." He turned on one heel and headed for the bathroom, his own control wavering so much that he didn't care whether or not Edana's student agreed. It didn't matter nearly as much as getting to someplace he could be sick.

Methos opened the door, slid in, and closed it behind him again before he took in the scene in front of him. Edana half-crouched, half-leaned over the toilet, face green and tears streaming from her eyes. Fingers gripped the bowl so tightly the veins were standing up in blue lines under the skin and the knuckles were ivory against the faint spring tan of her hands.
The only good thing, he reminded himself as he reached over her head to flush the toilet, is that the bath oil is covering the smell. Otherwise I might be doing the same thing right now. He reached over and turned off the water in the tub before it could overflow. While he was there, Methos took a slow breath of the rose perfume rising from the water and used that scent to force his own gorge back down where it belonged. Then he wrapped a towel around Edana's shoulders, pulling her back against him. After a long moment, she relaxed her grip on the porcelain and sagged back against him.

"Better?"

"Not really," was the husky-voiced reply, a sound he knew too well from years on the battlefield. She'd been sick until her throat was raw, and even immortal healing was going to take a few seconds to cope with the acid that had seared her vocal cords.

Her teacher tried to repress the memories and images that sound evoked, and almost succeeded. In the end, though, what set him off was the sight of her arms wrapped protectively around stomach muscles strained from vomiting. When Methos could see past the faint remnants of the previous night's dinner spinning down the drain, it was Edana who had an arm around him and had just flushed the toilet again. She reached up and turned the tap off, then handed him a glass of water to rinse his mouth out.

Methos took a cautious mouthful and passed the glass back to her. In the end, sitting there on cold tiles, trading water to rinse the bile from their mouths, all they could do was giggle helplessly because they wouldn't cry yet. Or so they intended, until Edana slid into the hot bath and made room for him and the heat leached tension and control from their muscles, and the tears slid faster down her face. One dark head bowed over the other, and her tears slid across his collarbone as his soaked into her hair because neither intended to let go just yet.

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Marc finished arranging a cloth over the slowly filling hollows of Connor's eyes and glanced over at the elevator as Duncan came in. "Did you get through to Joe?"

"Yeah," the Scot said, tone uncharacteristically short. "He'd only been asleep a couple of hours, too."

The young black man gave his alternate teacher a closer examination. Red-rimmed eyes and a sallow tone to his skin made Marc wonder if Duncan had lost last night's dinner, too. He'd heard both Aidan and Adam throwing up, and was grateful that he'd missed the initial sight of Connor's body. What he could see under the copious surgical tape was bad enough. His mind superimposed the tape onto his brother Jay's familiar form, trying to imagine how Duncan must be feeling, and he shuddered. "Vaffanculo."

"That sums it up," Duncan agreed grimly. He didn't even tease Marc about the Italian obscenity as the younger man had half expected he would.

Marc considered his face, the tension strung along those broad shoulders, and shook his head. "Right. Look, it's a big tub, and I think they're expecting you. I know damn well they need you right now. Will you guys trust me to take care of things out here and shoot anyone coming through the door who isn't Joe?"

That got a startled, considering look from Duncan as he worked through the wording. Dark brown eyes finally focused, though, actually seeing Marc, and he managed a real, if no little dangerous, smile when the young Italian produced a semi-automatic pistol from under his t-shirt. "Which one
of us is training you?"

"Yes." That all-inclusive answer drew an even more wicked smile from the Scot as Marc went on, "Aidan's training me, Adam's corrupting me, and you're playing mediator and substitute teacher. Go get in the tub, Duncan, you look like hell, and you smell worse."

"One of these days--"

"Yeah, yeah, pow, right in the kisser. That was two days ago in sparring, MacLeod. What, losing your memory already? If Grandmama hasn't taught me to be tactful, you think you're going to? Go on. Tell Adam there's no way I'm making coffee for this crowd, but I'll bring in something if you'll put some bubbles in there so I don't have to blush. Joe coming over?"

Duncan headed toward the bathroom, stripping off his clothes as he went with a fine disregard for Marc's modesty. The bubbles were probably to cover Aidan, not either of the men. "Yeah." With an effort the Highlander gentled his tone. "And Marc?"

"Yes?"

"Burn those."

Marc shook his head at the closing door and sighed. "Was already planning on it." He glanced at the slowly healing body on the couch again before turning his gaze heavenward. Only the flinching around the corners of his mouth gave away what he thought of the bruises and gashes still visible despite immortal healing. Finally, though, the young black man extended his hands toward the ceiling, palms up in supplication, before he sighed and turned back toward the kitchen. "Right. Forget breakfast, too."

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Methos raised his face from Edana's hair and extended a hand to Duncan; she scooted forward to make room. The Scot crawled into the tub between them, accepting the offered comfort silently. He settled against Methos' chest and then pulled Edana back against himself.

All three of them sat wordlessly, listening to near-silent breathing that finally eased in too-tight chests. When Edana reached to run more hot water into the tub, Duncan lifted a foot from the water to point out the bubble bath he kept on the ledge for her. "Marc said to put in some more."

"Why?"

"Something about bringing us something to drink."

"Marc and his modesty," Methos sighed. "I thought he grew up in an Italian family?"

"He did. They're also Catholic, Magister, remember? He's not supposed to look at his sisters, and he's certainly not supposed to be paying more attention to my chest than my sword."

"Edana," Methos said cautiously, taking full advantage of the fact that she'd have to get past Mac to get to him, "you don't have a chest."

"Damn it," Duncan growled from his spot between them. He knew, intellectually, that it was a defense mechanism on their part, that they were not taking Connor's condition anywhere so lightly as their comments indicated. The knowledge did him no good, though; he wasn't even close to the point where he could tease yet, and, unreasonably, it annoyed him that they were. He ought to be happy that they could crack bad jokes, he knew that, but....
"Damn them, more like," Methos agreed quietly as he caught the spike of emotion conveyed through the tensed back resting against him. He rubbed his cheek against the side of Duncan's throat like a cat scent-marking his favorite human. "But Marc still has to be trained."

"Yes, he does," Aidan said calmly. "And besides, Magister, everyone in this tub knows I don't have a chest, but looking for one instead of watching what I'm doing will get Marc killed."

"By you," Methos commented, still gauging Duncan's temper where the younger man was settled between the two of them. *I wonder if I need to set him off? This is certainly a safe place to defuse some of that.*

"Well, yes," she admitted, "but I got the habit from you." Edana settled more comfortably against Duncan as the hot water ran, and only then realized that she had badly miscalculated his reactions. His body almost quivered against her with the need to move, to hit something. "Dhonnchaidh? Beloved?"

"Connor's been tortured, Aidan." His voice was flat, cold and furious as he lashed out verbally at his lovers. "They cut off his sword hand. I saw that much before you two chased me off, so what else is there?"

Aidan twisted around, ending up on her knees between his legs, hands resting palm-up on his chest in supplication or apology, but entirely vulnerable regardless and both Celts knew it. "Was," she told him gently. "Not is, but was, Dhonnchaidh. He's healing slowly, but the rest of it will heal."

"And how much is there? How long until he heals?" Duncan growled, breath coming more harshly now. He hadn't thrown off their hands, though, and Methos rubbed his upper arms reassuringly.

"Highlander, you already know they tortured him," Methos said quietly. "What they did to him, though... remember, she and I were acting as his physicians for this. You wouldn't ask Darius to break the seal of the confessional; don't ask us to tell you about what they did to him. If Connor wants to talk about it, he will. Otherwise, we're going to try to forget--"

"And hope he was unconscious during most of it." Aidan shuddered as memories of days in a small cell with Sinan ibn Sulman rolled over her. Grey eyes dilated almost black with fear for a moment, and she hoped devoutly that whatever similar memories Methos might have hadn't also been called up... but she doubted it.

"What did they do to him?" Duncan insisted. "And don't try ordering me to drop this either, Methos."

*Is that what this is about?* Methos thought, then nodded slowly. "No. But it's Connor's business. Besides, Highlander, what good would it do to tell you?" he added, deliberately twisting his voice to something sharp and lethal as Duncan's katana. "You'd only decide we were 'sparring' you the worst and imagine even more."

"Damn it!" Duncan twisted, knees coming up so that he was in between them and yet facing neither.

For a moment, Methos wondered if he would strike out, and he decided the time had come to defuse this. "You can kill us, MacLeod, but you can't take our heads unless you have a straight razor in that vanity. Considering that all we've done is patch up your teacher, Edana's line brother, that would be an interesting payment for services rendered." He gentled his voice and said softly, "We love you, Duncan MacLeod. If we told you what they did to him, in every excruciating detail, that would only be in your thoughts," *and your eyes,* "every time you talked to your teacher. Are
Duncan met his eyes, finally, and Methos saw the apology in the set of his shoulders, heard it in every slow lap of water against the edge of the tub as Duncan shifted back into his embrace and reached silently for Aidan. The Irish woman stared at him for a long moment, her own apology and sorrow written across her face, before she twisted and settled into his arms again. More quietly now, Duncan said quietly, "So I call Sol and Rachel and lie about how he is."

_You're not sliding down into that Gaelic burr at least, which means you're holding up better than I had hoped_, Methos decided as he wrapped his arms around both of them, nuzzling against Duncan's nape again. "They'll know about his hand soon enough, but I'll call Sol if you like. We've been friends for quite a while now. And Duncan, yes, he was tortured. He'll heal. We always do. Even the sword hand."

"He's good with either hand," Edana added as she stroked lightly along his forearms where they encircled her waist. "We all are, _muirnin_. And there's no shortage of immortals who would help guard him for whatever time it takes his hand to grow back and be strong again. Did we but ask, Gina and Robert would be here within twelve or fourteen hours."

"Bitching about the cost of Concorde tickets," Methos said thoughtfully, "but, yes, they'd come."

"Do you two have to joke about everything?" Duncan complained, but the very tone of the question was an acceptance of the situation. His arms tightened around Edana's ribs for a moment, and he buried his face against her hair, his cheek pressed against the dampness of Methos' tears. Methos stilled so that his own cheek rested against the nape of Duncan's neck, a sensation as comforting as the strong hands which now moved to rub tension out of the Scot's thighs.

"We've already been crying," Edana told him gently as she rubbed more firmly at his forearms, trying to convey comfort simply through touch. "So, yes, we might as well joke about it while we can, Dhonnchaidh. Do you truly think we care any less just because the gallows humor has reappeared?"

"His hand may heal, but...."

"She and I have both been here before," Methos answered. "Connor will have someone to talk to, if he wants it."

"Who? Sean's dead, remember?" The lingering bitterness of that scalded his throat as much as the bile had. Connor would need Sean now, and Duncan had taken his head -- another place where he had failed his kinsman and teacher.

"So is Darius," Edana pointed out, "which is none of your fault. There are still those of us who listen well. And I rather think that, despite all his Watcher oaths, Sol will take care of him if Connor can abide no one else. But Dhonnchaidh, listen to me. Listen.

"How often do I give you advice, _mo chridhe_?" Her voice was unexpectedly serious as Edana went on, "Dhonnchaidh, this is the beginning of a line war. What they did to Connor is their warning that they can take any of us, do anything they like. There was no note in the alley, but there will be soon -- here, in the alley tomorrow morning where they left him, or maybe they'll simply slide it under my door. But it has begun." A cold rage to match Duncan's moved through her voice on those last words, and she paused, taking a deep breath and stuffing her fury back into the corners of her soul for a later time. "This was done to break us, Dhonnchaidh, to shatter our morale or to goad one of us--you, I would think--into moving without thinking. If you do that -- they win."
"I'll not break," came the growl against her throat, and his arms tightened even further, making breathing difficult. "And I won't do anything stupid. But you'd better mark one of them down for me, because I'm going to fight at this line war, and I'm going to kill one of the bastards who did this."

There was no joy in Edana's answering chuckle, only rueful acknowledgment of a battle she'd hoped not to open. "I'm not Owain, *muirnin*. I'll not bribe you to come to this thing, and I'll not coerce you to fight for me. Make no mistake -- if I can give you one of Connor's tormentors, I will. But I don't know yet who'll come, how many I need to call, or who. If I need you to fight a bigger threat elsewhere, then I'll pair you against someone more dangerous and let another avenge Connor. I don't just want Owain dead, I want every person who helped do this to Connor, and every member of his line who would have helped had they but been there. I won't promise you something that might be a lie, Dhonnchaídh. Either you agree to abide by my choice of your opponent... or I ask Ishtvan or one of the others to fly in."

Methos calmly pointed out, "Edana, your tact is evaporating. But she's right, Duncan; depending on who's willing to help, she may have point you at someone worse. Bear in mind, they've already removed Connor from the list of possible fighters for our side. And we could have used him. Owain is deadly: quick, cold, and precise. Johannes Engeles, one of his more recent students, is your height and weight, and faster than his size would make you think. And then, too, we don't know who actually did this."

"Don't you?" Duncan asked, forcing himself to keep in mind that it would have taken several people to control Connor to do that to him. It was damned unlikely there would be anyone at the fight who *was* innocent. "How many of the line of Rhys-Tewdor do you know by name and description, Edana?"

"Probably most of them," she admitted. "He's only trained nine immortals, so far as I know, and three of them are dead. Of his students, I only know of sixteen immortals *they* have trained, and seven of them are dead. I'm not counting Marc in that, mind."

"Only three of his students are dead?" Methos asked in surprise. His hands had never stopped moving on Duncan's arms and shoulders. He could almost taste his younger lover's fury through their link: iron black and blood red, salt and bitter and char.

"Gwydion ap Ydris, Saffron of Norwich, and Christopher Henslowe."

Duncan growled, "Henslowe. Marc's teacher." The idea that an immortal would deliberately sacrifice his student still infuriated him, and he added it back to his mental ledger. Lately the debt column for the line of Rhys-Tewdor was filling steadily.

"Mm-hmm," Methos agreed quietly. "And Gwydion lost his head in the early 1900s. I remember thinking you'd be pleased, Edana. I don't suppose you know who did it? The Watchers had no idea."

"I found him. He made the mistake of trying to sell an El Greco at Sotheby's and I heard about it."

"Not that one that Diego commissioned?" Methos asked incredulously. "Was he just *trying* to get killed?"

"It worked."

"Anyone want to explain this conversation to the youngster?" came Duncan's sarcastic comment, but his temper was slowly settling again.
"Diego de Grenada was a student of Ramirez', Dhonnchaidh," Edana told him, "and one of my favorite brothers. He studied with Graham Ashe, as well. Between the two of them, Graham and Ramirez turned out an immortal who kept a sword on hand, but thought that the real meaning of life was to smile at a lady, offer her a glass of wine, and maybe a verse or two of the latest song fit for her ears. Gwydion ap Ydris challenged and killed him in the early 1820s. And, yes, I know that's just the Game, but.... I couldn't find Gwydion after that, until Diego's painting came up on the market."

"A gorgeous portrait, Highlander. Rebecca sat for it."

A cautious knock on the door interrupted them. "Teach? You decent?"

"That's a loaded question," she called back, and gave him points for waiting until the volume in the bathroom had dropped off. "The bubbles are nice and thick, though, Marc. It's safe."

The door opened cautiously, and Marc chuckled as the steamy, rose-scented air poured past him into the cooler loft. "Yeah, I see what you mean. I've got mint tea for everybody."

"I thought I said coffee," Methos pointed out coolly.

"Yeah, so? All three of you have already puked your guts up; did you just want to do it again? If you decide you really want food, I'll pull out some of the muffins, but for now, Adam, put up with what I brought."

"Edana, I thought you were teaching him to listen to older immortals?"

"Why would I do that?" she asked him in complete seriousness. "Besides which, he's right. If you want coffee, you can make it later."

Duncan, meanwhile, reached out for the mug Marc was handing him, and smiled a silent, wry apology to the younger man for his earlier mood. "Thanks."

"Welcome. Look, Duncan... do you want me to take care of some of the calls? I mean, they don't know me, so they won't push as hard for answers we don't want to come up with."

That drew an approving look from his teacher and Adam, and a reluctant, dissenting shake of Duncan's head. "I appreciate it, Marc, more than you know. But if I'm not the one who calls, they'll worry even more," the Scot told him, but his smile grew a little wider so that Marc would know just how much he did admire the offer.

"Boy Scout," Adam muttered without stirring any farther than necessary to take his mug. "Something wrong with letting someone else help?"

"When it will make things worse?" Duncan retorted. "Yes. Do you really want to have, oh, say, Damien charging in here half-cocked, thinking we're lying to keep him calm?"

Marc snorted laughter at that, lounging with one hip cocked against the doorway. "Did you just put Damien and calm in the same sentence?"

"Damien can be calm," Aidan sighed. "That's normally the point at which to duck, too. All right, loves. Sometime soon I'll need to check the mail at my house. Adam...."

He nodded once. "I'll go with you. Marc will stay here and guard Connor while Duncan handles necessary phone calls."
"Any idea when this battle will take place?"

"Not the least clue," Aidan told him calmly. "It's my prerogative to determine the place and time of
day, but his to set the date. Soon, I would think. Not less than eight days, as there's usually a seven
day truce to get to the site, but not more than fourteen, I would think. Owain meant to shock us
with that flamboyant warning of his; he'll not want to give us time to catch our balance. He
probably resents having to wait even eight days."

"Reasonable. Now as to where -- I may have some ideas on that," Adam told her thoughtfully.

Marc gave him a sardonic look. "It's time I got out of here, and went back to watching the door.
Look, you three, stay in the damn tub until you finish the tea. None of you look too good."

"Who's teaching whom?" Methos asked him as Marc walked out of the bathroom.

"Who needs to learn?" was the calm reply over one shoulder, and the door closed firmly behind
him.

"Not bad at all," Methos muttered, still staring thoughtfully in the general direction of the loft. "He
may do very well."

"Not in the line war," Aidan told him firmly. "But yes, I think he will." She took another cautious
sip of tea and waited to see if she had finally quelled her stomach's rebellion. When the soothing
liquid stayed down, she drained the rest and sat up in the tub to collect the pot and refill everyone's
mugs.

Duncan's eyes spoke the protest his mouth didn't utter, and Aidan told him gently, "Better we
gather our strength now, gradhach. There will be little enough chance in the days ahead. And I
think you still need us."

"There's no time...." But he kept his voice carefully level, already a little ashamed of having taken
his temper out on his lovers when he knew he'd have probably done the same thing in their place.

Methos pulled his legs up, water-slick thighs wrapping against Duncan's ribs where the younger
immortal leaned against him. "You need this now, Duncan. Rest a moment. Center yourself. We'll
all be better off if you do."

To his surprise, Duncan did take a couple of deep breaths, finally relaxing back against him. "I'm
going to keep seeing that--"

"--until you see him healed," Aidan finished for him, leaning back into his embrace. "Yes, you will.
Methos and I aren't carrying this lightly, either, Dhonnchaidh. But it won't be healed in a day, and
neither will we. I'm of your mind, beloved, I'm wishing we could call Darius. Since we can't, we'll
have to care for each other." Against her back, she could feel him sliding into the disciplined
breathing of meditation, and Aidan tilted her head back to rest on his shoulder as she did the same.

Soon enough they would all have to get up and begin to act, rather than react. But for now, they
could take comfort in the simple pleasures of hot water, and strong arms, and mint tea warm in
their bellies. There was a little time to allot for this.  

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Marc Scipio's journal -- April 13th 1998

I didn't make Easter services again this year. Last year, and the year before that, I was living with
Chris. This year, well, no one was going anywhere without company and I didn't want to ask Duncan to go with me. With Connor missing, Christ's death and rebirth weren't anything he needed to be contemplating. Adam and Aidan aren't Christians, so it didn't seem like something I should ask them to do, either. Mama always said the Lord understands trouble, so I think He'll understand why I spent Easter morning watching the sunrise instead of being in church.

I don't understand why we have to do this, though. Well, I don't think I do. I mean, I still have trouble with the idea of the Game. Why do we have to kill each other? Do we have to kill each other? Teach has something like sixteen living students, seventeen if you count me, and they've got students scattered across the globe, too. She's got line-brothers and a few line-sisters all over the world, too -- and from the phone calls and letters around here, they try to talk to each other. Even the ones who don't really get along at least make sure they keep in touch by remote, y'know? I mean, I don't think Teach and Navarro get along too well, but she checks with Mandisa to see how he is. So if the line of Ramirez doesn't kill each other on sight, why do we have to kill the others?

Do we have to kill any of them? The world would destroy us fast enough, I think. Yeah, all those stories about secret government facilities are written by conspiracy buffs, but... they sell. The market's full, and they sell. Hell, Mel Gibson and Julia Roberts got paid the big bucks to make a movie about it. They say a cliché's just a truth that's happened so many times that it's become a verbal shorthand. What does that say about conspiracies, and secret research labs? I don't want to find out the hard way that they're real.

And I can't talk to any of the Fathers about this. I mean, yeah, Christ came back from the dead, but I'm not Christ. None of us that I've met is. The Church burned witches and heretics for hundreds of years; what would they do to me? No one gets burned alive any more, but that just doesn't reassure me. People in the Middle East still get stoned or beheaded. Even if the Church just excommunicated me -- just? Damn, that's scary when excommunication looks good, comparatively -- my family would be heartbroken.

I'm rambling, I guess, but hell, I don't know what to think. We got Connor back this morning. Got him back? They sent him back, more like. Someone nailed him to the alley wall, and the parody of the crucifixion makes me furious. Easter was yesterday, damn them. Did they mean it that way? Or were they going back to the old Roman punishment for criminals? The others aren't discussing it, may not have considered it. Me, I may have to ask Joe how old Owain is, whether he'd do that. But no matter how we got Connor back, it was nauseating what they'd done to him. I wanted to be sick, and I haven't seen half of what those three have. But if what he looked like by the time Adam and Teach got him up here was this bad, what did Connor look like when they found him? I hope like hell no one ever tells me, 'cause Aidan threw up in the bathroom after she helped patch him up. That was bad enough, but Adam, who's usually so damn controlled and contained, did the same thing. I wouldn't have thought anything could upset him that much. And I think Duncan went downstairs to be sick without disturbing them, or me, not to make his phone calls somewhere out of their way, like he said.

They had a dagger in Connor's chest when they brought him up, and we left it there. Apparently that's enough trauma to keep him dead and out of it for awhile. They didn't want him waking up while the worst of the damage healed, which makes sense, except.... It took hours. I didn't know you could hurt one of us that badly, especially not one of us as strong as he feels.

Joe came over and kept me company for the morning while Duncan made phone calls to New York, and Washington, and South Carolina. Me trying to be polite, him trying to be polite, and both of us so angry and so sick and me at least so scared it just about hurt... we finally just sat at the bar together. Joe hugged me like Grandpa used to, one strong squeeze around the shoulders. Like you'd
tell a kid it's going to be all right. I don't think it really can be all right, not any time soon.

And Connor just lay there, with the bruises fading and static electricity finally crawling over him, making the threads on the blanket stand on end occasionally over his arms and feet. Teach and Adam came back from our house with a piece of thick, heavy stationary which started an argument over where to hold the line war, and who to call to see if they'll fight.

Guess I'd better put that stuff in here too. For me, that is, not because Teach checks occasionally to be sure I'm putting in details I might need decades down the line. I'll admit, the line war rules were sure as hell a revelation. I never want to see one of these again, I know that much, but I guess I'd better know how to play if one of 'em ever comes up. And somehow I just don't think she's gonna want to go over this entry with me and correct anything I got wrong. Not that I'm likely to forget any of this!

It kinda reminds me of some of the stories Grandfather used to tell me about the vendettas back in the old country when his Papa was young, just a little more formalized. Owain told her how many people he's bringing, and Teach needs to bring an equal number of folks from her famiglia. This is definitely a family fight; she's only allowed to bring folks out of her line, and the way she smiled when she said that... she and Adam are sure as hell up to something, and I'm really glad I'm already on their side. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, but that man's scary when he smiles like that.

Anyway, the rules. Screw it, I guess I'll just do this as a list so I can sort it out later. Right.

Owain: picks the number of fighters, the date we fight on, and he's gonna get to send out his people one at a time for Teach to match with someone on our side. Sort of like playing War, I guess, but she gets to pick what card she puts down.

Aidan: gets to decide where and what time of day we fight, and she decides who goes out to meet his folks. From a couple things the others aren't quite saying, I think she gets to challenge anyone from Owain's side who wins. Nastiest part of this to my mind is that, if she dies, it's over. Owain's after her, for whatever fucking reason passes as sense in that convoluted mind of his, and once she's gone it's done. Hope like hell she doesn't decide to suicide somehow. Doesn't feel like something she'd do, but this is really stressing her. I mean, Uncle's hand.... What a mess.

Those are the main rules. There's some other odd stuff, like everyone involved has to be from the two lines fighting. Which means Amanda couldn't help, if we wanted her to. Which we don't, really. She's an impressively good thief, and no slouch with a sword from what they tell me, but Teach would rather get Kyra or Mandisa, honestly. Oh, there's a week's truce on either side of the date, but, hey, that only applies to our lines. I wouldn't put it past Adam to see if some folks outside our lines would challenge some of them. No reason for 'em not to. But if he can do that, so can Owain. Which means I'm hauling my butt to Holy Ground until this is done and Teach is back. I'm not in their league and we both know it. Wonder if Duncan would let me use his island? It's close, it's Holy Ground, and it's not like dumping me in the wilderness is exactly a problem. That's one thing Chris did for me, at least. Probably the only damn thing, actually.

Anyway, back to the rules. Suppose I'll go back through later and underline them, but I really hope like hell I never need to know this stuff ever again. Apparently they do introductions first, to make sure the people are supposed to be there, I guess. Sort of makes sense, if any of this really makes sense. And if they draw blood and want to let the other person surrender, they can. Damn if I can think of any reason to do that, though. I wouldn't let Owain walk if I thought I could kill him, or Chris if he was still alive. And I didn't think I was a vindictive person, but if I could find the people who did this to Uncle, I'd drop them in a shark tank and stay and watch. Bastards.

Fuck. Guess I should mention that poison and projectile weapons aren't exactly kosher for this. I
didn't think we were supposed to do that anyway, but man, I didn't want one of Adam's glares for asking. God knows I carry a gun when I need to, but I don't think I'd use it to cheat. Hope not. That strikes me as one of those really slippery slopes, the kind that you don't ever climb back up from starting down... and I think Duncan and Connor are waiting at the bottom for the folks who start playing that way.

But man -- I don't want to see Teach fight Owain. He's quick, maybe as bad as Duncan or Adam. I'm not sure who'd win. Does she have to fight Owain? Yeah, she's old, and fast, but he's not exactly small. Fuck. I don't want any of us to have to fight him, and yeah, I'm biased 'cause Teach is female, which is stupid, since she still kicks my ass on a regular basis, but hell, I outweigh her anymore. Maybe one of the others'll fight him? I know Duncan and Adam want her to live through this.

That's one good thing, I think. Alex and Xan are already on their way north from Sacramento. They called to say 'screw it, enough of this, we're on our way', and when they heard we had Connor back, they just said they were throwing the bags in the car and would be here late tonight.

Teach looked relieved, like some of the weight had come off her for a second or so. Then she took a deep breath, the way she keeps telling me to, and picked it right back up, went back to the argument. But she kept breaking off the discussion to check on Connor every twenty minutes or so. Scary. I could almost see her forcing herself to look at various wounds, comparing what they looked like to what she had first patched. I don't know that I could have done that. Guess I'm going have to learn, though. I'm in the Game; I may have to kill people. Should I be able to look at Connor? If we all live through this, I'm going to need to talk to Aidan about that, or Joe, if he can talk about things like that with us. I wonder -- does that push the limits of his Watcher's oath? Or did they ever think to tell him not to?

As for the discussion they were having.... Owain's a sick motherfucker, I've always known that. But this -- Jesus wept. I guess I'm grateful that Aidan doesn't believe in hiding things from me. This time I almost wish she had. The card he sent her was attached to a small box that had one of Connor's fingers in it. They speculated that Owain destroyed the rest of his hand so that we couldn't reattach it. I hadn't known you could do that, but Aidan just said that if you do it soon enough, yes, you can. The look on her face made me think she'd rather not know that, much less discuss it, and even Duncan didn't push for details.

The card was an invitation for Cynthia Torriani, a.k.a. Aidan Logan, to bring eight others of her line to a place of her choosing on April twentieth. He even left a number to RSVP with the location, which strikes me as being cocky. Adam pointed out that it's probably an answering service. Some days it scares me the way that man thinks. This time I suppose I'm grateful that we've got someone on our side who can think like Owain. But apparently Teach gets to decide where we fight, and who fights, too. At least for our side.

Eight days. And the truce starts tomorrow for people to travel. Nine immortals on each side. Nine people who aren't going to go home. Well, assuming it goes the full nine fights. Aidan hasn't said much, but from something Duncan said, she might not make it through all the fights, and if she dies, it's over. I didn't know we did things like this. I mean, this sounds like the Hatfields and the McCoys, only with rules.

No, it's my journal, I'll be honest. It sounds like the Gathering. Eighteen immortals in one place, and a lot of them aren't coming back down the hill. Damn it, I know I'm being selfish, but why does it have to be the first good teacher I've gotten? And it's my old line that's challenging her. I hate this, God, do you hear me? I hate this. I know life's not fair, but this sucks. Why do we have to do this?
I asked if we could just challenge Owain and get it over with. I've seen Duncan and Adam fight; they might be able to take him. Aidan just shook her head. Says it's gone too far because, by now, Owain has found eight of his students or their students who'll come fight, and knowing him he's promised them a chance at quickenings, or money, or who knows what. So they're going to come after us no matter what we do, and at least this way, we know where and when.

I guess that makes sense. She also said there aren't too many he can call on. Six students left that Owain trained himself, and then another nine students that they trained. She's not sure who trained him, but she doesn't think he's got many brothers or sisters who'd help. At least, she's never heard him admit that he's not the head of his line. Fits with what I've seen of him. Owain always had to be the center of attention in everything, at least when I saw him. Claiming a teacher and their line really isn't his style.

Joe doesn't want to break his oath, but there was something in the way his shoulders eased just a bit that makes me think that Aidan's right, that Owain won't or can't draw on his teacher's folks. He looked into this at some point, maybe because he heard them say enough to know trouble was brewing. I have to wonder if Owain killed his own teacher. Wouldn't surprise me, really. Makes me wonder if any of his students ever made a play for his head, for that matter. And that wouldn't surprise me either.

I suppose what's really pissing me off about all this is that no matter who wins, no matter who dies, Aidan's going to feel guilty about this. She already does. Connor's sword hand is gone. The only good thing, or so Adam says, is that they did a clean job of taking it off at the wrist. But it's going to take months to regrow, if he lives that long. A one-handed immortal is pretty damn vulnerable. If nothing else, he's subtly off balance, because we spend years learning exactly where our center of balance is and now it isn't there anymore, it's somewhere else. For another, all the jobs we do with two hands are going to take him extra effort or assistance for a while. That could slow him down badly. Hell, just fastening your pants back up after you take a leak could get him killed -- it's slow doing buttons and zipper with one hand. I broke the hell out of my wrist when I was nine; I remember. Pants around ankles mean no maneuvering.

But even if he lives, even if he gets the hand back... that's months of pain Teach is going to feel responsible for. Like she decided Ramirez was going to train Connor?

She didn't kill Owain years ago, and she thinks she should have. Adam hasn't said it, but I think he may agree with her. He'll glance at her occasionally, this annoyed look on his face, and he's so damn cold-blooded (and says he's just 'practical') that I'd bet he thinks she ought to have killed Owain all those years ago. Duncan's too busy worrying about his teacher, but if he thinks she's guilty, too....

One good thing, I guess. If they get through this and they're still lovers, nothing's going to break those three up short of losing their heads. If.

What worries me is that she's already hurting over Connor's hand. What happens if someone she asks to fight for her gets killed? And it's way too damn likely. Nine fights. The odds aren't real good that we'll win all of them. I mean, Owain wouldn't have started this if he didn't think he'd win, and win big. He's cocky, not stupid. And everyone who goes will be there for her, when you get right down to it, or to avenge Connor. I've already heard Teach mutter that there wouldn't be anything to avenge if she'd killed Owain eight, ten centuries back.

Aidan thinks it's her fight, her people on the line. Duncan would have fought anyone who did something like this, even if it wasn't Connor they did it to. So would Teach, and that would probably drag Adam with them. But I don't think she's going to listen to that right now. I'm going to
have to try anyway, maybe later tonight. Because if I don't get her to see it, then no matter how well we do, if we lose even one battle, even one immortal on our side, it's going to slice her up inside. Same way Connor's hand already has.

-- April 13th, part 2 --

Connor woke up. Well, I guess that's as good a way of putting it as any. He finally started reviving around the dagger and I could see someone home in his eyes. I was sitting there watching him and catching up on this while Aidan talked to Damien on the phone, asking him to come out here and plan on bringing Rich and Var out here with him. That was spooky; I haven't seen many of us come back to life. I never killed Chris in sparring -- hah, don't I just wish! -- and I didn't get to watch him practice with Owain. And you don't really see it when you do it yourself, just feel it. As for the folks here, well, I've seen them spar with live weapons, but they only kill to make a point about defense, and all three of them are good.

Anyway, Connor. He woke up, like I said, kind of this shiver from knees to shoulders, good hand clenching at nothing and chest trying to rise and pull in some air, which must have hurt like hell around the dagger. And his eyes finally opened. He's got strange eyes, my new uncle does -- they were almost gold, maybe because of the afternoon sunlight. But as soon as his eyes opened, just about, I heard the discussion at the kitchen bar stop. I could almost tell the difference between how he felt live and dead; I think I'd know it again. The other three sure as hell do.

Anyway, his eyes opened, all right, and for a second there was someone in there. But then it was like he just... pulled back, into his own skull. I've heard eyes called stony before, but I understand it a lot better now. His went from being alive, and hurting, and wondering where he was, to these flat, killer stones in his face. I guess he thought that Owain still had him, 'cause that one hand he had left was trying to come up to my throat, and I was scrabbling backwards in one hell of a hurry -- landed on my ass on the coffee table.

And then Duncan was there, and I think that may have saved me dying again. He and Connor just looked at each other for a second, and it was Connor in there again, before Duncan put one hand on his teacher's chest and yanked the knife with the other hand. Connor started coughing, and Aidan lifted him partway off the couch, holding him and helping him sit up while he coughed like his lungs wanted to come up, and his hand was squeezing Duncan's arm so hard it left bruises for a couple minutes. Adam came over and passed me some water and when Connor caught his breath, I held it for him while Teach braced him. He didn't seem to want to let go of Duncan, and I don't think Duncan wanted to let go of him, either.

He doesn't seem to be much on talking, not right now, anyway. I mean, he'll ask for food, or something to drink, but he keeps it short and to the point. I can see that, but it still worries the hell out of me. Sooner or later, he's gonna need to talk about this.

Adam was tearing the bread into bite-size pieces for him, as matter of fact as if he normally did this for folks. I think that was the only reason Connor didn't try to hit him. His mouth tightens when the loss of his hand hits, and I think it's a new shock every time. He's surprised when he has trouble eating or drinking, trying to reach for something with his wrist or having to heft a pistol left-handed to see how it felt....

He and Teach are going to spar in the morning. She muttered about having a set of vambraces in storage back at the house, and a katana that might suit him, and he just nodded. She helped him take a shower, too -- and no, I'm not going there. There was nothing sexual in the request. More like he really didn't want men touching him for that, not even Duncan.

I'm not going there. Never again. But I hope Owain's entire line gets trashed, if the rest of my former 'kin' are like this. I can't decide which would be worse, though, his sword hand or the fact that they raped him. Both are bothering my uncle, but he's not saying anything. For that matter, they're bugging the hell out of all of us. I wish to God there was something I could do to help.

But I think Owain screwed up. We've got eight days. That's more than time enough to be get over being upset, feeling vulnerable. It should be just long enough to go from pissed off to sweet, cold revenge. And I don't know about Aidan and Duncan... but I think Adam, Connor, and I can do it just fine.

As for Aidan -- I think that if we all live through this, we're going to have to just... go on vacation, I guess. I have a bad feeling that it'll be small groups gone off to get some R&R, too. I'm not sure anyone will want to be together. I could be wrong, but when this is over, we may all need some breathing room. And Teach is going to need some looking after. Right now, she's trying to take care of us. But when it's over, someone's going to have to look after her and it may just be me.

-- April 13th, part 3, damn it! --

Fuck! A guy should be able to get some sleep sometime, right? We didn't exactly get much before Owain made his wake-up call, or while we were worrying about Connor. But so much for a nap, now that folks are showing up.

We finally get things sort of settled down. Why Teach wants to fight in New Mexico I don't quite get, other than the fact that she says Owain won't be expecting it. There're other reasons behind her eyes, but she's not talking yet. Anyway, Connor got enough to eat, finally. Healing that much must really take it out of you. They made him eat, and eat, and eat, before we'd let him off the couch even to get that shower. I think Adam was buying time to be sure all the bones were healed before Uncle tried to walk on them.

So we got the couch cleaned up -- I've burned more stuff in the incinerator today! There's food sitting around going to waste because no one really wants to eat. Not even Connor; he just needed to, which is different. Anyway, there we were, with me keeping an eye on Connor -- who was just sitting on the couch and listening while they argued over which relatives are going to New Mexico with Teach -- when we all felt an immortal.

Okay. I felt 'an' immortal. Teach said there were two of them, and Adam nodded. He pulled a gun and moved over by the kitchen island. I guess he was going to drop them as they came in the hallway. Better figure out what he was going to do before he remembers to ask me, too. I don't want to listen to another one of the 'positioning, maneuvering, and why I'm not gonna make it to fifty' speeches.

Duncan grabbed his katana and set himself between Connor and the door. Like I need to be able to interpret that? And if Adam asks me if that was a good idea, I'm gonna tell him to take it up with Duncan and I'll just take notes.

Before anyone can start toward the door, though, or decide who's going to open the door for that matter, the folks in the hallway yelled something in a language I've never heard. Whatever it was, though, Teach just started smiling and Adam shook his head. Said those two were never going to learn prudence. Teach muttered about 'Why should they start now?' -- incredibly sarcastic voice, but still grinning.

Anyway she let Alex and Xan in. It's weird. They don't look alike, really. Alex is about Teach's height, maybe an inch taller, so he's the shortest guy in the room, including Connor. But Alex looks like he should be an extra for some movie set in a Mediterranean love nest or something. Just
a ton of black, curly hair, curly as mine. And I thought I had problems. His are ringlets, where mine almost spirals since I never remember to cut the stuff soon enough. Nah, I wouldn't look that good even if I did let it go that long.

Anyway, Alex. He's got that dark tan, and the black eyes, and he looks like the guy who walks on-screen and you know right away that if there's a duel or an affair, or a lady's window to swing out of, he's your man. Not at all what I expected from that phone call in February, that's for sure.

Xan, on the other hand, looks nothing like him, even though they're about the same height and fairly similar builds. I mean, Xan may have an inch or two of height on him; Alex has a bit more muscle. Xan's built like me and Adam, all shoulder and leg. But Xan has dark blond hair, that kind of deep gold that hasn't quite gone brown. And sun-streaked to white here and there. Not as much tan on him as on Alex, although I think he's probably outside more. It's like his skin goes dark gold, too. His eyes are the same dark brown as Duncan's, which looks really odd. I'm not used to seeing that with the gold coloring. And he's got that kind of stamped coin look to him, like some of the old portraits. The clean lines of cheekbone to nose to jaw that they used to love for the statues. Put those two next to each other, and well, I'm not going dancing with them. The ladies will never notice me.

But they move together like they've got radar. Alex can talk to Xan without ever turning his head to see where he is; Xan passes him something before he asks for it, and gets a nod and thank you without a pause in the conversation. And they both know Connor. Pretty well, I'd say, from the way they acted. They came in, slinging duffel bags to the floor as soon as they cleared the hallway, and saying things to Aidan and Adam that sounded friendly and teasing. Picking on each other, I think, in whatever language that was. Then they saw Duncan and cut off pretty much in the middle of words. They nodded to him, that sort of look you give someone you think is on your side and you want it to stay that way?

But then they saw Connor and God, their faces. It was like the teasing just... evaporated. Gone. Very serious, very intent, and getting angry fast. It was like watching one of the Bond movies. They moved around Duncan like he wasn't there, in that perfect coordination they both seem to have, and settled in on either side of Connor, both of them wrapping an arm around his back and just... I don't know, touching him with their free hands. Not a doctor's touch, the kind that probes for pain, but not really -- Delicate, I guess. Very sure. Like Mama would have, checking out a piece of china that had fallen off the shelf and might have hairline cracks.

And he let them. Connor just closed his eyes and kind of sagged against the couch and their arms and let them do whatever it was they were doing. Reassuring themselves and him from the looks of it. Alex was on his right, and ended up pulling Uncle against his chest, deliberately leaving his remaining hand free I'd bet. He just sat there, finger-combing what hair Connor has and holding him. And Uncle let him, too, just curled right into it like he wasn't coming out anytime soon. I wouldn't have bet anyone could touch him like that, not this fast.

Xan turned to Teach and said something I'm not going to forget. He said, "This is not forgivable, and it is not forgettable. We are going to kill them, Edana." Like there was no doubt in his mind that he and Alex were going to go fight for her, and that she was going to allow it.

Teach just nodded and told him, "We're in agreement, brother. But then, we usually are." I think she had been counting on them from the moment they said they were coming. Funny thing is that I would bet money so was Adam. Weird. I thought the only people he really trusted to come through when the chips were down were Duncan, Aidan, and Joe. Maybe in that order.

I guess I'm curious why Adam trusts them. Why Aidan does. I mean, I like my new uncles. I think
I'm going to like them a lot, if we all live through this. Because there were times when they'd forget they were angry, and when they did, the jokes and teasing never stopped. They were extremely polite to Duncan -- and to me, for that matter -- when we got the formal introduction. They knew our names, but not who we were. I came in for some friendly harassment over the name. From the name and the voice, they were not expecting me to be black. Can I help it if I grew up in the Italian section of Philly? Funny, that -- Alex looks more Italian than I do. Grandmama would like him.

But I'm not sure why they just fit into place the way they do. It was like watching Mama and Grandmama open up the dining room table and add the extra boards, then slam it shut again. One piece of furniture and two additions just equals one bigger piece of furniture. That kind of fit. And Connor can stand to have them touch him, which adds more folks to the list. 'Cause it was just Aidan and sometimes Duncan.

So they're family all right. But what I don't understand is how they're family, 'cause they call Teach 'sister', which makes sense. But Alex called Connor 'nephew' when he was trying to tease him into saying more than one word at a time. So I guess I'm confused. If Aidan studied with Ramirez, and Connor studied with Ramirez, and they call each other brother and sister, well, I get that. But... why does Alex call Aidan sister, but Connor's his 'nephew', just like I am? I'll ask Teach in the morning, I guess. Right now, though, she's making calls to people, telling them where and when the fight is, asking for help.

She's been telling people to call her at our place with questions, so I guess we're headed back over there. Xan and Alex sure aren't unpacking, and Duncan's throwing stuff into a duffel. Makes sense. Teach has more room, and more beds, than Duncan does. And none of us want to split up right now, truce or no truce. Uncle still looks rough, but he's up to being moved, so that's not a problem. I'd better mention to the uncles that Rich's apartment downstairs is free. Or they can have mine if they want and I'll sleep in the basement, whatever.

I like the way they do things in this line. Owain and Chris tried to force me to do what they want, and when that didn't work, they lied to me. It doesn't work like that here. Hell, my new brothers and sisters have been volunteering to fight. So much for blackmail. It's a lot of names, though -- my sibs, and their students, and all the other 'relatives' she's calling. More than I can really track or sort out, to tell the truth, which is really embarrassing. After the Scipios, you'd think I could do this. I don't want to call someone the wrong name.

Great. A line war, and I'm worried about courtesies. Except... someone has to. It's like a really big family wedding, or a really nasty family divorce. Just the kind of tension to leave people not speaking to each other when it's over, even if we win big. We don't need that. And they aren't going to let me fight. Teach still makes me do half of my training with wood weapons. So the only thing I can really do is play peacemaker.

At least it's something I've got practice at. Another big family. Suits me.

Hey, that's a thought. I know Aidan's not Christian, but I wonder if she has something like Grandmama's Family Bible where everybody's name and students are in there? Maybe I can get her to talk to me about them, once she finishes making phone calls. I mean, I need to know. And she needs to think about something pleasant. Family gossip frequently is.

Right. Time to go distract Teach.

Seacouver -- early April 14th
Aidan sighed again and stared at the notepad on her desk, but the words twisted in front of tired, strained eyes. The topo lines on the New Mexico map were worse. They simply fused together. She reached blindly for the mug sitting to her right... and found nothing.

Alex's crisp baritone came from behind her as he said, "I poured it out. The coffee was cold."

"That wouldn't kill me. And it's still caffeine," she pointed out.

"It's also late, sister, and there are two perfectly functional men in that bed of yours. At least, I'm assuming they both are; I've never heard complaints about either of them. So what are you doing down here?" He moved into the ring of light cast by the lamp and perched on the side of her desk. One hand idly ruffled his hair back into place as he refused to let her look away.

"Thinking."

"Worrying," he countered.

She sighed but didn't deny it. "Connor wants to fight, Alexandrias."

"So would I. For that matter, so would you." He stood again and moved to stand behind her, strong hands descending on her shoulders to dig for knots. There was nothing gentle in his technique, but the muscles gave way immediately under his forceful ministrations. He scowled when she only modulated her breathing. "Other people usually bitch when I do that."

"Long practice, brother. Bless you. I don't suppose you remember how to pop necks?"

"I suppose you'd prefer I not snap it," he chuckled as he shifted his hands. "Deep breath... relax."

"After that comment?" she muttered, but she did as he said and then groaned her appreciation as vertebrae were precisely realigned and everything eased. "Oh, Gods, Alex...."

"I'm surprised if they didn't hear those bones pop upstairs," he told her. "Deep breath again, I need to get the other side." Another, quieter, snap and he let go and moved away.

"Talk to me, Edana. You shouldn't still be awake; it's three in the morning and we're going to need you for this." He pulled her favorite chair over, a dilapidated Victorian piece still upholstered in a red velvet that had faded down to deepest rose in places and been worn bare in others.

"You look decadent in that," she murmured, enjoying the contrast of olive skin and jet black curls against rose-petal red fabric.

"And you're changing the subject," he told her remorselessly. "Talk, woman, or I'll go call our teacher in to give me a hand."

"Don't do that," Aidan hastily demurred. "I don't want Dhonnchaidh waking up alone."

"Yes, well, he'll handle it better than Connor would, or I'd threaten you with Xenokrates, too. Talk to me, damn it. What are you worried about?"

"Marc," she admitted quietly. "And Connor. And far too many of the rest of us. Speaking of Connor -- did he actually manage to sleep?"

"A lesser man would be offended by that, sister," he complained, irritated. "Did you think I'd have left him otherwise?" He relented when he saw the concern and curiosity in her face. More sympathetically, Alex told her, "He's asleep with Xan."
"Will he stay asleep?"

"Probably," Alex shrugged, black eyes oddly gentle despite the ruthlessness of his expression. "We drugged him tonight, and tomorrow I want to talk to you about some of your herbal alternatives. But Xan will keep an eye on him, sister. Now, what about young Marc? I like him, by the way. He may turn out to be one of the best of us."

"Not with a sword, I don't think," his teacher sighed, "but... we could do much worse than to have another peacemaker in the families."

"Very true indeed. Where do you plan to send him during this?" His intent stare refused to let her change the subject again and his stillness in the chair was its own warning that she wouldn't be allowed to drop this discussion.

"Duncan has a house on Holy Ground; the island is a few hours' drive and canoe trip from here. I've some ideas on how to get Rich to go with him. They'll be safe enough there, for the duration of the war."

"And if they haven't heard from us by the twenty-second," Alex added calmly, "then they'll need to know who can give them shelter. Jarunsuk, maybe? He'd take them in and get them out of the country."

"That's a thought," she sighed, "and thank you. I'd been trying to figure that one out. Alex... how do we keep Connor from fighting?"

The look he gave her was both exasperated and tinged with affection. "Edana. We don't." He waited for her argument, then smiled, slowly, when she offered none. "I did rather think that if Someone had died and made you Goddess, you would have mentioned it," he told her casually. She swung in her chair to glare at him, furious color coming up in her face; Alex grinned and refused to relent in his arguments. "Now, you're out of that rut, Edana. Good. Sister, you're staying awake for nothing. Listen to me. This is not your choice. It's his life. Not mine, not yours: his. If Connor wants to fight, then you give him a sword when he wakes and see if he's up to it. And if he is, then you let him decide. It's that simple.

"Your only concern should be whether he can cover his share of the fight. If he can, and he wants to claim his revenge, then let him. If he isn't up to it, we'll deal with that, too. We could always chain him up in that cabin of Duncan's that you mentioned," he suggested.

"Alexandrias!"

His voice cut through her irritation and laughter both. "If this weren't so serious, Edana, I'd shake you like a leaf. Idiot woman, what do I have to do to get it through to you? There is a limit to what you are responsible for." He glared at her, and added, "No matter what you may have been raised to, sister mine, you are no longer the clan druid. Get that through your thick Celtic skull, would you? The safety of that young man of yours upstairs? Yes, that's your concern. Connor's life, though? Edana, if he thinks he can fight, then he has the choice. Not you. And not me."

More softly he added, "And since we've come to that, my life is my responsibility, Edana. I choose to fight in this, and should I lose, then that's my responsibility, too. Not yours."

"Are you saying none of this is to my account, then?"

Alex studied her and shook his head, frustrated by her lack of comprehension. "You're too tired for this discussion, do you know that? What I'm saying, sister, is that it's your party... but at least
you're sending invitations. We all have the right to refuse. And that makes our lives -- or deaths --
our doing, and our decision. If I had challenged Owain five hundred years ago, and lost, you'd have
hated him for it, but you wouldn't have felt guilty over my death, would you?"

"No, but that's not the same thing, and you know it."

"As a matter of fact, it is the same," he countered firmly. "We're in the Game, Edana. You can't
protect us and once we're trained, you shouldn't try. Marc is still your responsibility; I haven't met
young Rich yet, to know if he's Duncan's. But the rest of us? No."

"Connor lost his hand because I didn't kill Owain nine centuries ago."

"No," and Alex leaned forward, his hold on her arm as firm as voice as he tried to bring her around
to his point of view on the matter. "Connor lost his hand because Owain took in and trained a
Spanish Inquisitor who didn't stay properly dead. And none of us killed Enrique Alba years ago;
we should have. Connor lost his hand because Enrique was bastard enough to torture him at
Owain's request; nothing said Enrique had to do it. I think we both agree that was his work?"

She nodded slowly, her face hidden by the dim lighting of the room. The slow clenching of her
hand around the arm of the chair gave away her anger as clearly as the slow, level tone of her voice
did. "Very precisely done, for a maximum of pain. I haven't really seen anything like it since the
seventeenth century, and it reminded me of the worst of the Inquisition's excesses. So, yes, given
that Owain made the call... it was Enrique. And at least a few others. To give the priest what little
credit he's due, I cannot see him committing rape. Not of a man."

"No," Alex agreed, releasing her arm at last to run his hands through his hair. "I think you're right.
But, Edana, you're forgetting something. These opponents of ours are centuries old adults. They do
know evil from good, particularly Enrique. You can not hold yourself responsible for the fact that
some of them, at least, have chosen evil. And don't go sophist on me and point out that most people
don't consider themselves villains. Most people don't torture other sentient creatures for pleasure,
either."

"Is this the part where I ask you when you grew so wise?" Despite the sarcastic words, Alex could
tell she was actually listening to him.

"No, dear. This is the part where I gallantly refrain from asking why you locked up your brain and
threw away the key. Come along, sister, I'll escort you up to your bed, before returning to my dark
abode in that damp torture chamber you refer to as a basement."

"It's not damp," the Irish woman retorted sharply as they went headed up the stairs. "Rich and I
insulated it and graded the floor again to boot."

"And it's well-ventilated, too," he agreed calmly. "Not to mention the fact that Xan and Connor are
keeping the bed warm. Hush, now, or you'll wake up your two." He chuckled at her soft, indignant
sniff, then turned his attention to navigating her living quarters in what little light was thrown into
the second story by the street lights.

Once at the bed, he kissed her gently on the cheek, murmuring, "Sleep well, sister. We'll talk over
lunch."

"Breakfast."

"If you get out of bed before ten, I'll drug you myself and throw you back," was the level reply. "I'd
rather you made it noon; you need the rest. I think we can plot a bit without you, thanks." He
headed back to the stairs, secure in the knowledge that she couldn't yell at him without waking up Methos, who hated rude awakenings for no good reason. On the other hand, he reflected, rubbing ruefully at the back of his head where her wallet had hit him before rebounding to the ground with an audible 'thunk', I always forget she has perfectly good night vision.

Gatwick Airport, London, England -- late April 14th

"Yeah, but what's in it for us?" Will growled, remembering to keep his voice down. The stocky immortal squirmed around in the airport seat, fair skin flushed with irritation as he tried to find a more comfortable position.

Lim Mahn on the other hand swiveled easily to face his traveling companion. The standardized, comfortable-for-none seating didn't bother his slender form, and to the outward eye his patience was unstrained. Inwardly, however, he found himself amazed that he and his brother's student could be so completely different. They might be the same height and relatively close in age for immortals, but Lim appeared to be in his late twenties and Will looked closer to his mid-thirties. In reality, Lim was more than forty years older than the other immortal.

I'm also a great deal more intelligent, he decided again. I will never understand why Johannes didn't just take this simpleton's head when he found him. Opponents of this caliber, gathered in one place at one time... he's a fool if he doesn't want the chance for their heads. And he asks what's in it for us? Did he run out of money again?

"You're an idiot," he answered in a deliberately pleasant voice. "Now, keep quiet and listen while I explain this to you." A quick glance around the room, pitch-black hair gleaming under the incandescent lights of the waiting area as he moved, was meant to remind Will that there were people around. The other passengers might be interested in a conversation that got too intense, after all, or that included such words as 'kill,' 'steal,' or 'blackmail.' Lim ignored the sulky look that told him the younger immortal resented the admonition; instead he reduced the situation down to its essentials.

"At the heart of it, Will, it's very simple. Owain wants us to meet this Challenge, so we're going to do it. It's much safer than the alternatives."

"Yeah, but... Lim, the more I look at this, the less I like it. Cynthia took out Gwydion, remember?" Will pointed out, digging nervously at the cuticle of a thumb with a fingernail.

"Watch what you say," Lim murmured. "And yes, she did. So? Rabi is out of the picture, remember? I seem to recall you handled that." When the only answer he received was a nod, Lim went on softly, "We've been eroding her support for a few years now, Will. Her students are scattered; some of them have been removed from play. Keep in mind, we made her brother, one of the infamous MacLeods, into an object lesson. They won't want to fight us. Cynthia just won't be worth it to them."

"Really?" came the sarcastic reply from the younger immortal. "I'd have said Owain wasn't worth it to me, either, but you'll notice I'm waiting for this bloody plane. And you know what else? Some of Owain's students are out of the Game, too. The odds on this aren't as good as you're saying, Lim. Come on, what's Owain got planned for her and for us? What good are we to him when it's done?"

You? Not much at all, Lim carefully didn't say. I wonder if Johannes would notice if you simply disappeared after the war was over? Maybe I can point him at someone in the line of Ramirez, head him off that way....
Out loud, though, he said quietly, "As much good as ever, I suspect. It's not as if he won't have other... work for us."

"Yeah, well, maybe I can find work elsewhere, too."

Lim's face, thin-featured and intelligent, didn't change as he asked, "And if Johannes calls you?"

"Then we'll talk about it," Will muttered unhappily. "But I don't like this, Lim. Are we sure that Owain knows what he's doing?"

"I am," the Chinese man replied calmly. "He's bringing our best for this, and he's eliminated some of her best allies. Connor MacLeod won't be there, or Rabi. It's line only, which means those Greek friends of hers can't help. Besides," and now Lim smiled, a thoroughly predatory expression meant to cow the other man into silence, "when have you ever known Owain to lose a bet?"

William Moran, abandoned as an infant to the mercies of an orphanage in the poorest parts of San Francisco's Irish district, had never lost his instinct for danger. It had kept him alive for thirty-two years in the rough and tumble of the docks, saved him from the shanghai experts, from the worst of the pimps and crimp artists and hired killers in that harsh life -- and it was screaming with every word that Lim said. The last time he'd been this worried had been just before he died the first time in a back alley, dragged down by four men and beaten to death for using a marked deck. Damn right this isn't safe, he decided grimly, even as he looked down at his hands to keep Lim from seeing the thoughts flitting across his eyes. But maybe it isn't the line of Ramirez that I should be worrying about, after all.

And he thought about that, in a grim silence that Lim took for pre-fight nerves, all the way to the States.

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Assembling the Forces

Seacouver -- late morning, April 15th

Damien sprawled back into the kitchen chair, disregarding the creaks that shifting two hundred pounds of compact immortal caused. He looked tired for once, both from lack of sleep and from getting up in time for a red-eye out of Charleston. Rich actually looked worse; the younger redhead was contemplating leftovers in the fridge with a desultory air that made it clear that hunger was only barely winning out over exhaustion.

From his perch on the couch, Xan assessed the various immortals in the room and decided that he didn't like what he saw. Only Var looked like he'd had both enough sleep and enough food lately. The blond Greek put down the whetstone he'd been using to hone his blade and commented, "Rich, if you're hungry, choose something. If not, go crawl into the bed upstairs, or sack out on one of the couches."

"Yeah, in a minute," he shrugged, giving up and picking up his half-empty mug of coffee and draining it in one long, distracted gulp. "Sleep would be good," Rich admitted around a yawn.

Damien eyed him narrowly. "Have you been sleeping at all, cousin?"

"Sure," came the immediate, blithe reassurance and the younger redhead tried to look alert and cheerful.

"When?" Mandisa asked, glancing up from where she sat at the kitchen table, warming her long fingers around a mug of hot tea. "I don't believe I made a single call to Charleston that you didn't answer. If you were guarding Damien both while he worked and while he slept, when did you sleep?"

"Other than on the plane this morning," Var mentioned. "You were rather soundly out of it, cousin."

"Catnaps here and there. No big deal." He was studying his now-empty mug stubbornly, to all intents and purposes deliberating what to fill it with next.

Xan stood, as casually graceful as any dancer, and walked toward him. Rich never knew he was there until a surprisingly strong hand caught his jaw and tipped his head back. Nut brown eyes stared into blue, and Xan refused to let him back away.

"We drugged Connor, Rich. We'll drug you if we have to. You're no damn good to any of us like this. Come along." He released Rich, finally, and stepped back a pace. It wasn't far enough to let his young kinsman evade him, but it let him save a little face for now.

Mandisa flashed a brilliant smile at Rich. "I believe the correct American phrase is 'busted'? You won't win this one, cousin; save your strength."

"I can put myself to bed, thanks," Rich growled, not moving yet.

"Worried about your reputation or your virtue?" Xan chuckled, not budging. "You are a bit young for my tastes, Rich. But I think I'll walk you upstairs anyway, just to make sure you can find some place to stretch out."

"Damn, I'm getting tired of being the youngest!" he complained bitterly and reflexively as he
stalled for time.

"Without sleep," Damien growled, "you might not outlive the condition. You did a damn fine job, Rich; now go claim your reward. The only thing going on down here right now is bitching, speculating, and plotting. Trust me, this is the boring part. Go sleep."

"He's right, cousin," Var smiled. "This is the point at which to get some sleep. Mind, after you wake up, we'll discuss why you didn't ask me to take some of the watches."

"This is a reward?" Rich groused, watching Xan warily. The others might know this tricky, slender man, but the young redhead didn't and he liked to form his own impressions. So far, the strange immortal just made him understand one of Aidan's muttered quotes about 'I still fear Greeks bearing gifts.'

"It beats being dragged upstairs in a hammerlock," Xan told him agreeably, clearly amused by the younger man's caution. "Which, I might add, is your other option."

Rich somehow had no doubts that Xan could enforce the threat, and he gave in, however grudgingly, to his body's demands for oblivion. "All right, all right, I'll go get some sleep. But it's not like I need an escort; I've got a perfectly good bed of my own downstairs."

"Unfortunately," the blond Greek corrected him, "it's occupied. Connor's still sleeping off the drugs and herbs we poured down him."

Rich nodded as all the worries of the last few days wiped his smile away. "How bad is he?"

"Nothing that won't heal, but some of it is going to take time. That's why Duncan is down there with Alex instead of up here talking to you. We wanted someone very familiar there when Connor woke up."

"Hell, yes!" Marc agreed enthusiastically, one hand going instinctively to guard his throat.

"I was wondering if you talk," Mandisa chuckled as she looked over at her newest brother. His obligations as nominal host fulfilled, he had been sprawled on the couch for the last fifteen minutes or so, silent and largely motionless. "Why so quiet?"

"Listening," Marc answered, then shrugged. He rubbed at his throat as if to ease some discomfort before putting his hand back down. "But trust me, we really want Duncan there when Connor wakes up. He tried to kill me Monday afternoon, and that was when he hadn't been drugged. I think."

"And none of this conversation, interesting though it is, is getting you out of going to sleep. Come on, Rich." Xan studied the younger man, a disconcertingly wicked smile on his face. "Last chance, cousin: move or be moved."

"Fuck," Rich growled. "I give up."

Damien laughed, too tired to keep quiet as his mind slid into the gutter. "No, no, Rich -- sleep, not fuck. And you don't strike me as the type to make a good submissive."

"That's not what I--" Blue eyes wide, Rich knocked into the refrigerator in his haste to back away. Xan continued to smile that same villainous smile at him. "It would certainly put you to sleep," he said thoughtfully, thoroughly enjoying the younger man's panic. "And I haven't done that in a while; the practice might be good for me." Behind him, Mandisa caught Marc's eye as he hastily
sat up. Before he could say anything, she shook her head, an unworried smile flashing against her dark skin.

"The stairs are behind you," Rich pointed out carefully, not moving from his safe position against the fridge. "I can't go up and get some sleep unless you move, Xan."

"At this point, you're not sure you trust me behind you, either, but I am going up with you, and I am going to wait until you go to sleep," came the implacable answer. "Now, shall I bring my sword and the whetstone so that you know my hands are occupied, or shall I occupy them with something else?"

"Seducing them young, uncle?" Mandisa asked in interest.

"Simply wondering which he's more worried about: his head or his virtue. So which is it, Rich?"

"Bring the sword," the younger man told him, eyes still a little wild. The teasing was starting to reassure him that nothing was going to happen, though, and Rich's temper flared as he grated, "The metal one, Xan."

Xan chuckled. "Getting sword and stone ought to give you a fifteen second head start, at least. Get moving." He went to collect his weapon, and even managed not to laugh at the hasty footsteps behind him.

Marc shook his head and said, "That was cold, Uncle. He's dead to the world, even if his eyes are open."

"Mmm-hmm. That's why I'm being nice and giving him an extra minute to get stripped down and under blankets," Xan agreed, still grinning. "But he seems to be as stubborn as certain other redheaded members of the family," and Damien growled a protest, which was ignored, "so I'm going up to sit with him for a few minutes until I'm sure he's asleep. Unless you're volunteering for the job?"

Marc tilted his head in a fairly good imitation of Aidan at her sarcastic best. "If you go up there, he's gonna sleep with his butt glued to the crack of the couch and wake up even grouchier than he is now. So, yeah, I think I'll volunteer. Like I'm gonna help plan this war? Teach isn't even going to let me fight."

"That's reassuring," Damien growled. "Nothing personal, Marc, but you're not up to these folks."

"I know that better than you do," was the level reply. "I used to live with them, remember?"

"So you did, brother," Mandisa agreed in her calm, low tones, easy on the ear as an alto flute. "Do you ever regret leaving them?"

Marc pushed up from his chair and headed up the wooden spiral stairs at a more leisurely pace than Rich had used. "No." The cold finality of that one word silenced them until after he was up on his own floor.

Xan's hands lay idle in his lap, sword and whetstone on opposite thighs, as he finally asked, "Did anyone ever get all of that story from Aidan?"

"Not I." Mandisa frowned in thought as she looked at the stairs. "Should I go after him and apologize, do you think?"

Damien shook his head as he took another sip of his coffee. "Not yet, Disa. Give him a little while
to rein that temper back in. When someone that calm explodes, it's gonna be impressive. But Marc's a good kid, he makes good coffee, and both Aidan and Adam trust him. What more do we need in a brother?"

Xan laughed at the burly redhead and pointed out, "You just like having another coffee fiend in the family."

"That, too," Damien admitted without hesitation. "But let's face it, he's a good one. What, you doubting him?"

"No, and I think I talked to him before you did," the Greek pointed out.

"Right. If that's settled, let's get down to business. Why are we fighting in New Mexico?"

Mandisa shrugged and said, "I had wondered myself."

"Your teacher's idea," Xan said calmly. "You can take it up with her when she gets back from the airport."

"Is she picking up Stormy?" Mandisa asked.

"She and Adam both. Better them than Damien," Xan answered. "Speaking of whom, you look like hell, Damiano. I take it you were up a bit early?"

That drew a level stare from Damien. "Early, late, does it matter? After we finish this argument, I'm going to sleep for twelve hours straight. When does Kyra get in?"

"She won't be coming. She's working for the NSA right now, Damiano," the tall black woman told him. "They would have wanted to start prying if she had needed another week off for this 'family emergency,' so she has gone back to work. Shahar told her we had sufficient fighters and to try not to worry overmuch."

"We do," Xan shrugged. "I think the entire line of Ramirez is up in arms over this."

"And what are you?" Mandisa asked him coolly. "If our business is none of yours, 'uncle,' you have only to say so."

"I'm not line of Ramirez; that doesn't mean this isn't my business. And I am going to help avenge Connor. Any other questions, niece?"

A quick smile quirked her lips. "When I liked those last answers so well? Of course not, uncle. Not yet, at least."

"Yeah, well, I've got one," Damien interrupted. "What happened to Connor?"

"We're not sure. He's not talking about most of it." Xan looked at the redhead thoughtfully, clearly trying to decide how much to tell him.

Damien stared back at him, then took a slow, deep breath. "Xan, how long have you known me?"

"A few centuries. Long enough to know some of what you've seen," the Greek told him. His voice hardened to a relentless anger. "Long enough, too, to know about your temper, Damiano Rufio. Why are you assuming I have the right to tell you this?"

"It's common knowledge, isn't it?"
"No, it isn't. Edana and Adam patched him up; Marc stood guard while they cleaned up and started making phone calls. But not even his student, Duncan, knows everything that was done. Why should I tell you?"

Var interceded almost casually, but the precision of his timing left Mandisa in little doubt that it was intentional. "What can you tell us, then?"

"His primary sword hand's gone, severed at the wrist."

Mandisa said simply, "And if that's what you will tell us, then there is worse. They must be faced, and all who helped with this must be destroyed, brothers."

Var glanced up swiftly, dark blue eyes dilated almost black with shock. "His hand is...?"

"Completely gone," Xan reiterated grimly.

The Spaniard nodded slowly, gold hair sweeping across the collar of his sweater as he did. "As you say, sister. This is not something that can go unopposed -- or unpunished."

Damien had clenched his hands around his own wrists, and the knuckles were white with strain, blood pooling around his fingers where the nails had dug into the flesh as he tried to control his own rage. "What else, Xan?"

"The rest of it is calculated insult, or Connor's business, or both," came the cool answer as he moved to sheathe his sword. "If your temper's going to erupt, Damien, take it up to the third floor and spar with Mandisa and Var."

"I suppose Rich might still sleep through sword play," Var mentioned apparently carelessly. "After all, he's young yet."

"I'm not going to break anything here," Damien growled. "Not even Rich's dreams, Var, so quit being so damned subtle. Fine, Xan, you've convinced me not to push this. So answer this instead. Why New Mexico?"

"The population density for one thing. She knows a mesa that is barely accessible and should make the quickenings almost invisible."

"Why not Wyoming? Population density there is damned low and it's a little closer."

Var glanced at Xan, reading the tension in his hands and the carefully blank expression. "She doesn't know why, does she? Another of her visions?"

The blond Greek admitted, "I think so. She and Adam started trying to come up with out of the way locations, places where you could conceivably have nine quickenings go off--"

"Nine?!" Damien interrupted, amazed and shocked. "Has Rhys-Tewdor lost his fucking mind? Or does he just want to start the Gathering early?"

Var and Mandisa glanced at Xan and then each other. Mandisa finally said slowly, "Brother, I had thought you knew. Did Shahar not tell you, or was your mind elsewhere?"

"Not the number, no. She said it was going to be bad and that she needed me and Var if we'd come. But hell, Var's fast, and you're here, too, so it made sense to invite both of us; he was just going to come anyway."
"And Gods forbid you miss a fight," Xan muttered. "We knew you'd come."

"Yeah, you did. Or you should have. Nine? Good God, Xan, who's fighting in this?"

"You, Var and Mandisa make three. Duncan and Aidan is five. Adam, Alex and I make eight. Connor wants to fight, but we'll have to see if he can do this left-handed. If not, well, Fahizah is in Tacoma with Terrence, and either of them would do it. For that matter, Salim said he'd come if we need him. He's in San Francisco at the moment."

"Wait," Var said coolly. "This is a line war, isn't it?"

"So it is, nephew." Xan didn't quite emphasize the word. "We're not line of Ramirez, Alexandrias and I, but we studied with Ramirez' teacher, just as Aidan did."

"And Adam?" Damien asked, nodding slowly as nicknames he'd heard the older immortals use over the years began to make more sense.

"He's from the same line that Alex and I are. Salim is one of my brothers, too." Xan almost grinned as he danced neatly around the issue of who Adam really was. If his old teacher wanted these three to know he'd tell them. But like Aidan, Xan and Alex had years ago decided that it was safer if they didn't mention that they'd been trained by the legendary Methos.

Mandisa smiled slowly. "We go hunting lions, and we show them the kid. And the lions think they have only to face spears."

Var's predatory smile matched hers, despite the fact that he was all gold hair and fair skin and she was all blue-black skin and tight-braided black hair. "And it will be... entertaining to see them when we finally sweep aside the shields and they see the real weapons."

Duncan caught Connor's arm as he lunged for Alex and wrapped himself bodily around his clansman. At the same time he was speaking to him in Gaelic, using the most reassuring tone he could muster. "Easy, Connor. It's me, Duncan, and that's Alexandrias. Easy, man, you're safe with your kin now. They were only dreams."

He could feel the moment when Connor finally fought free of his nightmare; the older Highlander quit struggling and deliberately relaxed into his kinsman's grip instead. "I'm here, Duncan."

The dark-haired Greek slid behind Connor on the bed and settled himself more comfortably against the headboard. "Want a backrest?" Connor didn't answer in words, but he did lean back against the offered chest. Olive-skinned hands moved up to his shoulders and started rubbing casually as Alex asked, "That bad?"

"Not as bad as some," was the only reply.

Duncan gave Connor a wry grin, a look that clearly said, 'I know you don't want to talk about it and I'll drop it -- for now.' Instead he asked, 'Hungry?"

"Not yet. Aren't you bored with watching me sleep, cousin?"

Marc clattered down the stairs into the basement and groaned, "I hope not."

All three men turned at that. "What's wrong now?" Alex asked with a sigh, clearly resigned to the idea that something else had gone amiss.
"Rich." Marc's eyes made his apologies to Duncan even as he told him, "I can't seem to talk him through his nightmares. Could you come upstairs and see if your voice will work?"

Connor answered for him. "He'll go. I'm all right, Duncan."

Duncan still paused, clearly torn. He glanced at Connor, then Alex, and back at Marc's worried expression. "Any idea what the nightmares are about?"

Marc shook his head. "No clue. He's not saying anything while he's dreaming and he clammed up both times he woke up. I'm about ready to see if Xan can intimidate him into talking, if you want the truth."

Connor pushed his cousin with one foot. "Go on, man. Go take care of the lad."

"And you're fine, I suppose," Duncan snorted.

"I'm at least awake," Connor shrugged. "And thanks to Aidan's last concoction I've slept a good while. How is he, Marc?"

"Honestly, Uncle?" The slender black man scrutinized him, then said, "I think you look marginally better than he does. He looks like he should have circles under the circles under his eyes. You know -- that hundred yard stare, 'cause he can't focus on anything closer and can't think up to a thousand?"

Alex caught Duncan's eye and looked down toward Connor's head before nodding once. His hands had never stopped rubbing the older Highlander's shoulders. Connor trusted the Greek immortal, Duncan knew, and torn by the need to be in two places at once, he reluctantly accepted that silent promise to look after his kinsman. "Connor...."

"He's young, Duncan; he needs you. Go on. For that matter, see if Aidan will make another batch for him."

Connor's eyes were clear this time, unclouded by nightmares, the younger Scot noticed as he stood. He hated having to make the choice, though and let that into his voice as he said, "I'll be back down when I can."

Connor nodded. "Aye, I know." He smiled briefly before adding, "But you still worry too much." The older Highlander watched Marc and Duncan take the stairs two at a time and gave it a good fifteen seconds after he'd heard the upstairs door close before asking Alex, "What did you get Marc to agree to?"

"I take it that it wouldn't do me any good to claim I don't know what you're talking about?" Alex chuckled and blew dark curls off his forehead with a resigned puff of breath as he continued to work on Connor's shoulders. "Roll over and lie down, Connor. I can't get to your back like this and half the problems seem to be centered on your shoulder blades."

The Scot twisted around to give him a disbelieving stare. "You're up to something, Alexandrias. And you need a haircut."

"I'm always up to something, Connor, you know that. And I usually need a haircut. I'll get Xan or Edana to take care of it." The Greek pushed him forward. "Now lie down, you idiot."

His hands traced their way across the knots with a slow care that bore no resemblance to the sheer force he'd used on Aidan the previous morning. Instead, he mapped the snarls and tensions by fingertip or Connor's reactions, carefully tracking back to the major knots. When the Scot's
breathing eased somewhat, Alex casually mentioned, "Since you asked, I told young Marc that I thought you might like some time to yourself and if he saw a diversion for Duncan to use it."

"Ah." Connor lay there and let the older immortal minister to him, breathing slowly but making no other sound until he asked, "Why?"

The tempo of the hands didn't change, but Alex took longer to answer than Connor would have expected. "Because it's true, I suppose. I thought you might like to be able to rant, or curse, or cry, without worrying about adding to the local stress levels. Or is there some other reason you're locking all your reactions away?"

Connor tensed under the question. "Alex--"

"Connor, just because we shared a bed for a while two hundred years ago doesn't give me any right to pry into your mind."

"One hundred and eighty. And that never stopped you before," the Scot muttered.

"On the important things, Connor, yes, it did."

Connor lay there and let Alex continue to unlock pockets of pain. Even asleep, he had been tensed against new torture and that meant he woke up as stiff and sore as if he'd been working out for hours. The longer he thought about what the other immortal had said, though, the more he had to agree; Alex had been fairly tactful in the past, only probing when he needed someone functioning at full strength because of an ongoing emergency.

*Like that battle near New Delhi. Or the British frigate that boarded us off the Aleutians to see if we were gun-running,* he remembered. *Other than that, he left things alone unless someone brought them up.* "You may be right," Connor admitted quietly.

"So." Alex shifted on the bed to grab the bottle of massage oil off the bedside table, then straddled Connor's waist. "Tell me if it hurts too much or you need me to stop for a few minutes." The dark-haired man began to work on the Highlander's back in earnest, digging down into knots, seemingly lifting the muscles off bones and pulling them into proper alignment again. At the first hiss of pain from Connor, though, he gentled his technique, asking, "All right?"

The Scot let back out the air he'd pulled in. "Better."

"Next time, why don't you warn me before it starts hurting that much?" Alex traced along the line of lateral muscle overlying bone with a surprisingly delicate force. "What did they do? Keep breaking the ribs?"

"Aye." Only after he'd admitted it did Connor realize what Alex was doing. "You're tracing out--"

"Where they probably attacked you, yes. It seemed the simplest way to unlock some of this."

For the first time since Alex and Xan had gotten to Seacouver, Connor chuckled. "Some of what, you tricky Greek? The muscles or my head?"

Alex bent forward and let his forehead rest against Connor's nape for a moment, wrapping the Scot in the warmth of his body and the feel of another person pressed against him for comfort rather than pain. "There's not much difference at this point, you know. Your mind is locking up your body, and as I unknot your muscles a lot of your memories are going to react to it. I'm sorry, Connor."
His only answer for a long minute was a sigh and a gradual relaxation in the tense form under him. Then Connor reached to wrap the fingers of his remaining hand through Alex's fingers on his shoulder. "No. You're sorry I was tortured." Connor managed to get the word out with barely a catch in his voice. "But you don't have any regrets about making me look at it, do you?"

"Only a few," Alex agreed quietly, not moving from where he lay against Connor. "I know that looking at it hurts almost as much as the actual torture did. But not dealing with it will be worse in the long run, Connor."

"That sounded like the voice of experience talking."

Alex spoke grimly, his mouth so close to the nape of Connor's neck that he sounded like the Scot's own conscience. "It is. Which is the other reason I'm here. As the current phrasing puts it, I've been there and done that. I do know exactly what you went through, Connor. Including the hand... and the rape. If you want to talk, I'll listen. If you want me to leave you the hell alone because I'm too close to it, I'll do that, too. But you're not alone, Connor MacLeod, and we won't leave you alone unless that's what you truly want and need."

The stiff, hurting body shivered, a convulsive almost-controlled motion that, in the end, only quivered his skin like a horse throwing off a horsefly. Alex sighed and pressed his cheek against Connor's nape, dark curls falling along the Scot's cheek until he could smell the faint, herbal scent of Alex's shampoo as the Greek asked, "Shall I leave?"

"No."

His voice was subdued but firm, and Alex chuckled against his throat. "All right. Let's see what I can do for your muscles then. So does this mean I have permission to pry?"

"I plan to fight them, Alex. Why do I think Aidan's going to ask for your opinion?"

"She might," Alex told him quietly, wiping black curls out of black eyes again before he went back to stroking Connor's shoulder. "More likely she'll hand you a katana this afternoon and see if you're still up to this or if we need to see where we can stash you on Holy Ground for a few months."

Connor relaxed a little further under the light grip of his hands. "And if I can give her a fight?"

The dark-haired man snorted derisively. "As if that's in question. I know damn well you can fight left-handed, and one-handed for that matter; I remember that mess at the cotton bales in 1815. No, Xan and I are more worried you might get yourself killed just because they tortured you, idiot."

"Just?" But the Scot's voice held as steady under kindness as his silence had under pain.

"Your body healed," came the gentle answer. "So will the rest of you. Which was worse, Connor? The torture or the rape?"

The same not-quite shiver traveled through the prone body. Alex stroked his cheek against Connor's nape again, tanned thumbs smoothing the skin across the tops of Connor's paler shoulders in a constant, repetitive motion meant to soothe. "No, Connor, pay attention to what you're feeling, not just what you're thinking." He ran his hand along the Scot's shoulder again, a firm pressure meant to pull him back from his thoughts. Connor nodded, but he was still shivering, the reaction to the question too intense.

"Too soon to ask?" Alex felt the tension still locking Connor's body, tightening from nape to thighs under him, and frowned. "Connor, take a deep breath for me. Come on, MacLeod, if you give in
to this, they still win."

That got through. Connor forced in a long breath, back and shoulders rising with it, before he exhaled in a long-winded sigh. "You always did use dirty moves, Alex."

"We always won, too," the dark-haired Greek pointed out, trying to keep his relief out of his voice. "Good point." Connor didn't say anything else for a little while, only matched his breathing to his friend's and tried to relax into those probing hands. After a few minutes he quietly admitted, "I don't know."

"Which can you talk about?" Alex asked as he dug carefully into a snarl at the juncture of shoulder and neck. "What caused this mess, anyway?"

"That damned barbed wire.... I suppose that answers that," Connor muttered. "Where do you want to start, Alexandrias?"

Alex felt the tension still singing through the muscles under his hands. He could also see the careful concentration Connor was putting into breathing deeply and evenly. But his friend's determination to do this raised his hopes that Connor would in fact recover from this completely, if they could keep him alive that long. "Why don't we start at the beginning, Connor? How did they capture you, or do you remember?"

"No questions about the rape?"

Alex ran the back of his fingers along Connor's cheek, twisting his hand at the bottom of the stroke to trace his friend's mouth lightly with the pad of his thumb. "Eventually, yes. But right now let's start with the ones you can handle, hmm?"

"Waiting for reinforcements?" But Connor sounded more amused than annoyed.

"Xan will probably come check on us after a while, yes. I'll send him back upstairs if you like."

The Scot sighed and shifted to press his cheek against Alex's palm. "Ask me about it when he shows up, then."

"All right, we'll deal with Xan when he gets here. Until then, though... how did they kidnap you, Connor?"

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Duncan glanced around Aidan's loft, frowning at the emptiness of the area. When he and Marc had walked through more than an hour earlier, there'd been five immortals making plans, sharpening weapons, and 'discussing' which members of the line of Rhys-Tewdor they most wanted to see at the ends of their swords. Now, though, Mandisa was perched in an easy chair that she'd relocated to a point where she could watch both stairs and the elevator, and Damien was snoring on a nearby couch. Otherwise, though, the room was empty. "Where is everyone?"

Mandisa smiled at him. "Pull up a chair for such a question; they've scattered with the winds."

The Scot glanced around again, then shrugged and brought over a papasan from the other side of the room while Mandisa stood to refill her glass. "Water or tea, Duncan?"

"Nothing -- no, water, please."
The rangy black woman worked in Aidan's kitchen with an economy of motion and precise placement of long limbs that reminded him of a heron. When Mandisa turned around with both glasses she commented, "You sound almost hoarse. Is young Richard finally resting easily?"

He started to say something caustic, a match for Methos in one of his foul moods, until he realized she'd been honestly sympathetic. Duncan gave her a crooked smile instead and answered, "I think he'll sleep now. I'll go check on him again in a few minutes, but I wanted to see if Aidan and Adam were back yet."

"She called to say that Stormy's flight had been delayed and they would be late. Fortunately, I had already convinced Damien that since the plans were made, a nap would be a fine idea. I promised to wake him in half an hour or so."

The mischievous smile dancing across her mouth slowly drew an answering light to Duncan's eyes as he asked, "And when are you actually going to wake him up?"

"He has this dislike of the first moments after sleep." Disa shrugged, her laughter escaping only in her voice as she handed him his water. "I thought perhaps we should let someone wake him up that he would be a bit happier to see?"

"Like a certain Southern blonde?"

"With claws? That was the one I was thinking of," she admitted, still grinning as she sat back down, pushing her mug out of the way to put down her own iced tea. "And at that, I think we should let her decide when to wake him."

Duncan took another sip of his water and asked, "So where are the others?"

Mandisa rolled her eyes. "Given up on small talk at such a young age, Duncan MacLeod?" She watched the consternation cross his face, and had to bite down on a laugh which he was not likely to appreciate in his present mood.

"This is the time for it?" he asked sarcastically, confirming her suspicions about his current temper.

"Why not? The plans are made, the army almost assembled, and the supplies are being acquired while we talk. If you're not going to sleep, you might as well sit and pass the time with me. Would you rather play cards?"

Duncan eyed her narrowly and decided she looked entirely too confident in that last offer. "No, I guess not. Who's getting supplies?"

"Navar decided that Marc should get out of the house for some time, so he's taken him along to get groceries."

"Ah, someone else figured out that Marc and Rich might starve on the island," Duncan commented, draining his water and heading to the kitchen for more. He found himself studying Aidan's herbs in the afternoon sunlight and thinking that they needed to be watered.

"That Xan did, and in a few moments I'll start packing what's already here. Marc had a few comments about the whole matter, I must admit. Apparently he thinks that he'll have to allow Rich to cook? He didn't seem happy about that."

"He wouldn't be. Rich makes a mess in a kitchen."

"Ah." She nodded and moved to tug the blanket back over Damien. "That would explain his
discontent,” Mandisa commented as she turned back.

Duncan thought he heard something in her voice, some tone or shading, and he turned to look more closely at the tall black woman as he asked, "Marc was actually complaining?"

"Yes, and I'll admit it relieved me to see it. We had been wondering if Aidan had adopted a saint, and quite bluntly this family neither needs nor wants one. I think the most polite comment he made was something about 'overbearing older immortals,' but he's agreed to let Rich think he needs protection."

"Marc?" Duncan asked, off-balance again at where the conversation had gone. "They're going to be at my cabin on Holy Ground. This is the man who spent two years in the northern Cascades with Chris Henslowe. If anything, Marc's going to be keeping Rich from wandering into a bear's favorite fishing spot!"

"Yes, and Marc knows it, which is why he's decided to let Rich cook so he'll feel he's contributing. But Marc has also realized that the truce is only between Rhys-Tewdor and Ramirez--"

"--which means that anyone who comes to Seacouver looking for me or Aidan would find him," the tall Scot nodded, his face grim. "He's right; he'll need Rich to protect him. Marc's still not nearly dangerous enough yet, and he knows it."

"Very sensible, and with the most intriguing depths and silences to him.... I rather like this new brother Aidan claimed for us. In any case, he didn't quite explode, but Var thought it best we got him into fresh air for a while before he ended up at your cabin for a week or two. So he took the list, our new brother, and Damien's rental car and left word that they would be back sometime late this afternoon and not to fret if it ran late."

"Aidan will just love that," Duncan muttered.

"Which is surely one of the other reasons Var did it," Mandisa agreed ruefully. "They do enjoy irritating each other; they've been doing it for some years now. But I think he wanted some time to meet Marc properly, too."

"Where's Xan, then?"

"Downstairs with Alex and Connor. He said he thought your clansman had undoubtedly had plenty of time to work himself into knots by now, so he took down some of Aidan's herbs and went to help. He also left you a message," she added more slowly.

"Why do I get the feeling I won't like it?" Duncan asked quietly.

"Because I would not like such a message if it were about Aidan," Mandisa admitted. "He suggested that you stay up here and keep an eye on your student."

The tall Scot cocked his head, dark eyes studying the elongated black woman. "And the rest of the message?"

"That some things should not be bottled up, but are rarely discussed easily with family. That he would appreciate it if you would let them see if Connor could talk to them first. And that if your teacher would rather talk to you, they will yield the field willingly... but it might be easier for both of you otherwise."

Mandisa waited for the explosion and grew more worried when there wasn't one. His fists clenched, yes, nostrils flaring as temper raged across his face, through his eyes... but he did not
snarl, or throw things, or even curse as young Marc had. "Duncan?"

"So I'm supposed to let two men I've never met before take care of my clansman because I can't?" he finally forced out past gritted teeth.

"No, Duncan MacLeod. You're to let two old friends of your teacher try and give him relief from his pain," she told him bluntly. "And in the meantime, there is a young man upstairs who also needs you, one we both know that you can help. I am a bit older than you, although wiser may be in question. Wait and see, MacLeod. I will admit -- I would not wish to describe such things to a student. Would you be able to talk to Rich about it, if it were you they had tortured?"

Fury focused his gaze on her, set his face in sharp lines of anger and resolve. Then, with an effort so visible she could see every muscle relax, Duncan let out a long slow breath. "No," he said at last. "I wouldn't."

"So," Mandisa said sympathetically. "The afternoon is still young. Come and help me pack food and books for the young ones, before you go back to check on yours."

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It was never bright in the basement at the best of times, but Alex had lit candles against the encroaching twilight. The flickering light was surprisingly comforting, almost as soothing as the way Xan fitted himself more snugly against Connor's side. The sun-gilded Greek murmured, "Lift your head, Connor." Xan slid one arm under the Highlander's neck when he obeyed, still whispering reassurances as he did. "I've got you, Connor. You're safe on this side, I promise."

Connor tightened his arm around Xan's waist, trying to stroke his back with the hand that wasn't there. Rubbing the stump along all the smooth muscle didn't really hurt; it just felt... odd. The strangeness of the sensation nearly let him ignore the fear slowly coiling in his belly and groin. Xan lay along his right side, guarding him where he had no hand to hold a weapon, where the phantom pain came and went. The feel of that strong body stretched along him, the arms wrapped around him and the warm leg under his own spread thighs, should have been reassuring. It wasn't. Minute spasms shivered through his quads as Connor forced himself to hold still, to remain open to Alexandrias' hands where the curly-haired Greek knelt between his legs. This was your bright idea, Connor, he scolded himself. Have the guts to go through with it, man. A small part of his mind wondered, though, if it had really been his idea, or if Alex had somehow led him to the conclusion that he should, so to speak, get back on the horse. Or is that, be the horse and let them in the saddle?

The thought had flashed through his mind before he could stop it, and his mouth quirked with a smile at the mordant humor. Alex smiled back at him, black eyes sympathetic, as one hand rubbed gently along the inside of his thigh and the other lifted to trace the edge of his lip firmly with one thumb. "Are you still all right, Connor?"

"Aye."

"For now?" Xan asked him, that deep voice somehow managing to laugh even as it seduced. "We'll have to do better than this, Alex -- 'all right' is just not quite what I had in mind for him."

"It's a start," Connor pointed out, almost amused himself. Two good-looking men, both of them wanting to make me scream with pleasure instead of pain, and the best I can do is 'all right'? When Alex tugged gently at a hip, he lifted up to let the darker immortal slide a pillow under the small of his back and realized, I feel naked and exposed. His mouth quirked again with his usual
black humor. Of course, that might be because I am naked and exposed.

"He's right," Alex chuckled. "I suppose it might be arrogant, but we were actually shooting for wonderful. We won't even be offended if you go to sleep afterwards. But try to keep your eyes open and on one of us, Connor, hmm?" the dark-haired man added, stroking firmly along his friend's thighs to ease the tremors. "I don't want you to get confused about who you're with."

"Well," Connor pointed out, his voice deliberately steady, "you're both smaller than Owain or Johannes."

Xan chuckled and said, "Hey, no insults, MacLeod." His free hand teased at Connor's nipple, dark gold fingers tracing spirals as he murmured, "Besides, I don't remember you being a size queen."

Connor did smile a bit at that. "I wasn't referring to those. Fishing for compliments?" He shivered against the blond and arched into Alex's hands as one teased briefly along his too-slowly rousing cock. The other hand traced along the sensitive edge of his ear, knuckles stroking his neck.

"I was looking for the worm, myself," Alex laughed, his hand carding into Connor's hair as he leaned in to kiss him. The dark-haired Greek kept the touch light, only the tip of his tongue tracing along Connor's lips, tickling at the inside corner of his mouth, until Connor pressed up into the offered caress. His thumbnail scraped lightly against Connor's neck as he kissed him, and the Scot shuddered in both pleasure and fear.

It was Owain's touch for a split-second, then, not Alex or Xan's, and Connor had to open his eyes to be sure who was with him. His grip tightened around Xan's ribs almost convulsively, and he buried his face against the other man, inhaling the familiar scent of his body.

Xan felt him shiver and whispered, "Easy," against his friend's hair. "It's us, Connor. Not Johannes, not Owain. You're safe, Highlander, safe and loved. No one's going to hurt you this time." His hands stroked a constant soothing counterpoint to his words, soundless reassurances and unmistakable tenderness. He reached up to run the back of his hand down Connor's cheek, an old intimacy between them; that seemed to do it at last. Xan sighed in relief as the shivers slowed and then stopped. With one last lingering stroke along his friend's face, Xan made a mental note to return to that more innocuous touch if necessary. Until then he had other things in mind that he thought Connor might enjoy more.

Connor forced himself to relax against the sun-gilded Greek again and gave himself over. Tanned hands skimmed across him, seeking his pleasure with the familiarity of old lovers. All the favorite spots learnt over three years of traveling together, and frequently sleeping together, were sought and explored. Best of all, though -- and the greatest contrast to the memories that kept flashing through his mind -- was the cheerful playfulness that Alex and Xan had always brought to sex, as if it were too much fun not to delight in it.

Xan never left him exposed, never moved away from his side, but he took great glee in teasing Connor by shifting and rubbing against him. His hips and cock pressed against Connor's thigh in a rhythmic, flirtatious dance while he rubbed his cheek and mouth against Connor's neck and face, lapping and nipping and scent-marking like some great cat. Connor snickered helplessly when the other man's stubble first tickled and then irritated the tender skin just under his jaw and had to ask, "What are you, an overgrown house cat?"

The blond Greek deliberately purred into his ear to make him laugh again, then asked cheerfully, "If I plead guilty, does that mean I get the cream?"

Alex swooped down and blew a raspberry into Connor's navel, which promptly drew a protesting
noise from the Scot. He looked up at him, all dark hair and eyes and injured innocence, before saying, "Just reminding you both that I was down here first." He wrapped both arms around Connor's thighs and murmured thoughtfully, "Possession is nine-tenths of the law, right?"

"No, you half-mad Greek, it isn't," Connor sputtered, then gasped as that dark, curly head ducked down and a warm, agile mouth first licked the tip of his cock, then blew cool air across the now damp skin. "God, Alex...."

Alex glanced up to trade a quick look with Xan, then nodded and turned those dark eyes on Connor. "Feeling experimental?"

The faintly suspicious look on Connor's face didn't last through the feel of Alex's mouth on his balls, a firm, lapping motion with his tongue as if he'd decided to memorize the feel and taste and shape by Braille. Xan leaned in and caught Connor's moan with a kiss, purring against the Scot's lips as he leisurely explored his mouth and tongue. Someone's hand was playing at Connor's nipple, although with his eyes closed he couldn't quite tell whose. Despite his own misgivings at what they were doing, what he'd asked them to do, Connor was surprised by his momentary disappointment when Xan pulled back.

"Connor," the blond coaxed, "open your eyes, hmm? I know you'd rather pay attention to what Alex is doing." That same solid caress to his cheek caught his attention, but Connor knew the other man was grinning even before he opened his eyes. He could hear it in Xan's voice as the blond added, "I don't blame you a bit for wanting to concentrate on his mouth, but we want you to remember who you're with, hmm?"

From farther down his body he could feel Alex stop and wanted to groan or curse when the darker Greek pulled back and commented, "If you tell me they did this to you, Connor, I'm going to be highly upset."

"With me for lying?" the Highlander managed to say, good hand fisted in the sheet as much to hold to the current reality as to keep from dragging Alex's head where he wanted it. These sheets were cotton flannel, not wool, and he ran his thumb against the fabric to remind himself where he was, and when. Memory flashed over him, poured through in a shivering cocktail of dread and adrenaline; he'd concentrated on the wool before, during the worst of the rape. This time, though, it was the women he remembered, not the men.

Bianca's voice whispered to him, half-remembered words of malice and pleasure at seeing 'the mighty brought low.' She'd been speaking more to herself than him, muttering in some dialect of Italian he didn't understand like some third-rate witch in a bad play. He'd been just as glad to be able to ignore her, until there'd been no ignoring that sudden shock of pain. Then her words became unimportant, lost in the sensation of flame on sensitive flesh, the pull and tear of tender skin stretched too quickly around hot, quasi-liquid wax....

Xan nuzzled his jaw again, stroked his cheek, and the familiar scent of sandalwood and male musk that engulfed Connor was enough to let him control the convulsion, willing it into a shivering motion that could almost be disguised as pleasure. Familiar voices and remembered humor finished the task of pulling him back to the present again, and he went willingly.

"You're supposed to be lying there," Alex snorted. "Hold still, and try not to crush me, hmm?" He dove back into his task before Connor could come up with a coherent reply, and this time he obviously intended to drive his friend half-mad. He sucked and licked, poked playfully with his tongue at the skin between the Scot's balls. No matter what his mouth did, though, Alex's palms and fingers stroked and eased the trembling skin of Connor's inner thighs.
Xan slid up Connor's body and used the tip of his nose to burrow into the sensitive spot at the juncture of jaw and neck. He had to back hastily away, however, when something Alex did made Connor snicker helplessly. He pushed up onto one elbow and grinned at Connor. "You're giggling."

Connor's eyes widened, the irises dark gold around pupils dilated with pleasure. He growled indignantly, "I am not!"

"Yes, you are. Alex, do whatever that was again," and Xan smirked at Connor as he tried not to make the noise again. "I was right. You were giggling."

"I was no-- oh, God!" He laughed again, helplessly, and choked out, "At least I didn't drop a nail file." Connor had the satisfaction of hearing both of them guffaw, although he was very grateful Alex had pulled back first. "Careful where you've got that mouth when you're laughing with it."

Alex chuckled and asked gleefully, "What, it could be in a strange place, MacLeod?"

"There's anyplace you haven't put that mouth?"

"Do you know," Alex murmured, hands cupping the Scot's ass, "there's one place I can think of that I haven't gone...." He ducked his head, nosed Connor's balls out of the way, and began tracing spirals with the tip of his tongue on the sensitive flesh just behind them.

Xan leaned in and nibbled his earlobe, free hand rubbing across his nipples. He felt Connor shudder against him, draw breath to say something, and then decide not to after all. "Come on, Connor, surely someone's teased you like this before?"

"Not... for this long," the Scot gasped, and spread his legs even wider for Alex without thinking about it. "God. Is it supposed to feel like that?"

"Does it feel good?" Xan asked practically, and let his palm skim down Connor's belly until it rested just above the darker curls at his groin. He grinned into the Highlander's neck when he felt the man's cock swell, twitching against the back of his hand. Well, that answers that. Thank the Gods. This may work.

"No, you sheep-chasing goat, it feels dreadful -- what do you think, Xan?" Connor growled at him. He gasped again at the exquisite, maddening torment. It didn't hurt that Xan's fingers were carding through the curls of pubic hair, another feathery sensation that pulled his attention more and more tightly to the damp, heated caresses below that touch.

Alex tightened his grip on the Highlander's ass, trying to keep the man from breaking his nose and ruining the mood. He was having entirely too much fun pulling those breathless noises out of Connor to stop now. There were several thoroughly despicable words for what he was doing, he knew. Rimming not being one of them, the dark-haired Greek thought, amused and pleased by the prayerful obscenity he evoked with a flickering probe of his tongue. If you asked Connor right now, I think the word might be 'prick-tease,' which is just fine with me. I want him whimpering for this, instead of whimpering from it.

Xan sketched the line of Connor's jaw with kisses while carefully not moving his hand. He didn't really need to. The Highlander's enthusiastic arching up to give Alex more room to work kept pressing the back of his cock against Xan's knuckles, and Connor's strained demand for "More," was what he'd been waiting for. He had just wrapped his fingers around the Scot's cock, amused with how well he remembered the feel from years before, when Connor's good hand locked into his hair and pulled.
This Xan remembered even more vividly and he cheered mentally. The sound never made it out past Connor's devouring kiss as the Highlander pulled Xan more firmly over and onto his chest, his fingers flexing in silky gold hair while his mouth shifted constantly over Xan's. A few moments' urgent search apparently yielded the angle he'd been seeking. Connor locked onto Xan's mouth as if feeding from him, while his hips flexed up into the hand still stroking his cock.

Alex reached up and wrapped one hand around Connor's cock, fingers interlocking with Xan's as they deliberately drove the Highlander further up toward orgasm. Xan's fingers tightened and Alex chuckled against the tender skin he was still licking and probing, felt Connor arch even higher, and let Xan drive the rhythm of their hands as he set himself to match it with his tongue. He remembered vividly the way Connor tended to latch on to lovers with his mouth when he got close to coming. He had no doubts as to what had silenced the two of them.

Connor managed, surprisingly, to arch just a bit higher off the sheets before he went rigid and came, spurting heat between their joined fingers while his thighs wrapped around Alex's head. Fortunately, it only took a few seconds for him to relax that grip and sag down onto the bed again with Xan moving to lie half across him, half beside him again. The blond cradled Connor in his arms, stroking ribs and chest as the Scot's breathing began to ease.

Alex sprawled face down onto the bed, head pillowed on Connor's thigh as he disregarded his own erection for the moment. He waggled his jaw experimentally for a brief moment, and grinned as he contemplated how best to tease Connor about trying to break it. From farther up the bed he heard Xan chuckle and say, "See, Connor? I told you I'd get the cream."

Connor groaned. "I'm not opening my eyes yet, damn it. I'm an injured man who's just been worn out, and I'll laze around in bed if I want to."

"And your blanket had better not move either?" Alex asked him, amused. He pushed up onto one elbow to look at Xan and laughed when he saw the mess Connor had made. "He's right, Connor. He got the cream. On his back and shoulder, and his hair.... I foresee a shower in your future, Xenokrates." Alex was still grinning as he eased the pillow out from under Connor's hips.

"Not yet you don't," Connor said, still without moving or opening his eyes. He did, at least, squirm the bare minimum to let Alex have the pillow back.

The two Greeks traded concerned looks over him for a moment, and Xan asked casually, "Why not?"

Forest green eyes opened and Connor pulled Xan's head back down to kiss him again, more gently this time. "Because," he muttered when he let the blond back up for air, "it's your turn. And if you tell me you don't have a hard-on, I'm going to start thinking you brought food into bed with you."

He let go of gold hair and ran his hand down Xan's side before worming it in between their bodies to grasp the erection digging into his hip. "You were going to say something?"

"Hmm." Xan looked at him thoughtfully, a more sober expression than Connor thought he could have managed with a hand stroking an erection that hard. "What were you thinking I should do about it?"

"Talk to Alex," Connor suggested. "But you don't have to go anywhere. I like noisy Greek blankets."

Alex pushed black curls back from his face and purred, "That sounds good to me." His voice turned more serious as he told Connor, "If you start to feel trapped, though, tell us, and we'll move."
Xan shifted up onto all fours and moved over Connor, then settled down carefully, his chest on Connor's, head tucked into the Scot's neck and his ass up in the air. Alex knee-walked to the side of the bed and retrieved the massage oil he'd been using earlier on Connor's back, then settled between both sets of legs.

Connor draped his thighs over Xan's calves where he knelt over the Highlander. The blond nuzzled into his neck again and nearly purred as the Scot's good hand came up to stroke his back. "Trying to make sure I don't go anywhere, Connor?"

"I'd hate to get cold," was the lazy reply. "Or for Alex not to have enough room to make you scream like you always did."

Sun-streaked white and gold hair shook as Xan laughed, but he wrapped his hands around Connor's biceps, kneading them like a cat settling his blankets into the perfect napping position. "Calumny. That was him screaming."

"Not from where I was lying it wasn't."

Alex moved behind Xan and simply pushed slowly into him, feeling his lover yield to him. "I hate to tell you this, Xan, but he's right. You scream. Loudly."

"Hah!" The blond bucked back onto him, eliciting a shuddering gasp and then a tightening of Alex's hands on his hips. "I'd say you're the one making the noise."

Alex muttered, "Oh, is that the way you want to play?" and thrust into him. Xan groaned against Connor's throat, and then tried to follow Alex with his hips when the other man pulled back to start all over again.

Connor continued to trace patterns on Xan's back with his one good hand, lazy and languid from his orgasm and oddly... content to be resting here under Xan's moving body, hearing Alex gasp above them as he tried to hold on long enough to make his lover come. It was familiar, lying with the two of them as they traded pleasure back and forth. Even the smells were similar: humid air and perfumed oil and the particular scents of the lovers moving against him.

He knew the sounds Alex was making, the shuddering attempts to swallow gasps of pleasure as he slowly increased the pace of his thrusts. Xan's half-muffled gasps and moans against his throat were the same cries Connor had heard so often before. His own contented noises as he settled more comfortably under the blond's weight slid into their inadvertent harmony as smoothly as if the three of them had never quit traveling together, sleeping together.

Connor could feel the way Xan shimmied and squirmed, trying to take everything Alex could give and return all the pleasure with interest added. That was familiar, too, and as welcome as the grip of Xan's hands on his shoulder and arm and the feel of careful teeth against the juncture of neck and shoulder. Alex was rocking all three of them with his thrusts now, arms braced on either side of Connor and Xan. That, too, was a welcome reminder of previous times, instead of a return to the pain and fear of a few days earlier.

Connor slid his hand down Xan's back, along his waist and on to his cock, stroking in time with Alex's thrusts. He twisted his hand to cup the head of Xan's cock in his palm before sliding back down with his fingers almost too tight just the way Xan liked. He'd forgotten that he knew the motion until he did it. The wailing cry in his ear as Xan shouted his name, then thrust back onto Alex again, comforted him as nothing else could have. Connor did it again, a third time, heard another shout before teeth sank into his shoulder and laughed at the familiarity of that, too, as he stroked a last time and felt hot, sticky liquid shoot across his fingers, onto his stomach and chest.
He could almost have done a countdown to the exact instant when Alex stilled abruptly, then jerked forward again with a hoarse, harsh noise of pleasure and triumph, a purely possessive sound from above them. The feel of Xan's weight half-collapsed onto him, the way Alex was carefully bracing himself despite his ragged breathing so that he wouldn't fall on both of them: all of it repeated every claim they'd made for the last few hours in a way, and at levels, that Connor could no longer deny. He was loved; he was safe again; and there was nothing Owain and his bastard crew had done to him that couldn't be healed, sooner or later, with his family's help.

Connor heard Owain's voice again, words meant to insult and degrade, to add emotional salt to the physical wounds of the rape. "So you know what this is like, hmm, Highlander? Not even a blushing virgin for us?" At the time Connor had clung grimly and silently to the certainty that he knew what it was supposed to be like. Nice of Alex and Xan to prove me right, though, he thought contentedly.

Connor was asleep again, still smiling, before his lovers recovered enough to untangle themselves from him.

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Somewhere over the mid-Atlantic -- late afternoon April 15th

"Here," Farrell told his traveling companion dryly. "Trust me, you need this."

Jirina looked at the proffered comb and shrugged. "It will only tangle again."

"Probably," he agreed, "but the back is trying to stand straight up."

She shrugged again, but ran the comb through tousled curls, restoring herself to her usual order. She had never understood this brother of hers, and that by itself was enough to make Jirina nervous. On top of this line war Owain was calling, well, perhaps it was time she found out more about him.

"What did Owain promise you?" the blond woman asked casually. Owain always went after a person's vulnerable spots, after all, and this might tell her one of Farrell's. Any key to his personality would be an improvement over her current ignorance where he was concerned.

"What do you mean?"

When she turned to look at him, surprised by his apparent incomprehension, Farrell was gazing out the window. She watched him drink in the sight of the surrounding clouds and the ocean far below before asking impatiently, "What's so fascinating? It's just water."

"It's stronger than we are. It's older than we are. And no matter what you do to water, Jirina, it always flows back together, in its own place and its own way. There's something comforting in that."

That drew a disbelieving snicker from the Slavic immortal. "You sound like a mad druid, you know."

"No," he answered coldly, turning to glare at her, "I sound like a man who can believe in something outside himself. You might try it sometime, Jirina, it's an interesting sensation."

Blue eyes sparkled angrily over flushed, prominent cheekbones. "Don't think to insult me. Faith is for the weak."
"Really?" he asked her almost idly, but his own temper was rising, betrayed by the miniscule tightening of his mouth. "Is that why you think you can take out Cynthia? Because she has faith and you don't? I wasn't promised anything, Jirina. I'm here because I owe Owain and he's calling it in. What did he promise you, then, hmm? Money? Power?" Neither of those had hit the mark, so Farrell went on, calling on half-remembered gossip to ask, "Damien's head on a platter?"

Her hand closed over his wrist, seeking to gouge pressure points, but Farrell Jameson had been a farmer for long years before he died, and thick bones lay under thicker layers of muscle. He twisted away from her almost negligently. "Don't try that again, 'sister," and his contempt was corrosive. "So. What did our teacher promise you?"

"Duncan MacLeod's demise," she growled softly. The other passengers might be engrossed in watching the movie, but paranoia was a survival trait in immortals, not a psychosis.

"What did he ever do to you? Turn you down?" Farrell gibed.

"No," and she cast a quick, cutting look at her line-brother, seeing the sheer plebian normality of him anew. Farrell was disgustingly, annoyingly... ordinary. Medium brown hair, medium brown eyes, moderately fair skin that tanned brown anywhere it didn't freckle, all atop the stolid facial structure that cropped up everywhere the Union Jack had ever waved -- he looked like John Bull, like Everyman. It was maddening. Farrell could go anywhere, be anyone, and people who had known him for years were capable of waving vaguely at him on the street, thinking that he reminded them of someone they knew. He had for free what every old immortal would have given their eyeteeth for, or their firstborn were they capable of such: effective invisibility.

And it's wasted on this... cowardly, apathetic layabout. Bastard.

"It was who he said 'yes' to," Jirina smiled nastily, aware that Farrell would be appalled in some too-soft portion of himself by her answer and enjoying that sensation. "He and Amanda Darrieux have been lovers off and on for three hundred years, now."

"And hurting her is as much of a life's ambition as you've managed to come up with," he drawled, his gaze cold rather than stunned.

"Well, we can't all be artists."

"My photographs sell decently, but I wouldn't call them great art. And what you do of late, sister dear, is simply stupid. Or have the Chinese quit looking for you yet?" His smile was frankly malicious, a surprising expression on that normally pleasant face.

"How did you hear that?" she snapped.

"Johannes," Farrell told her coolly. "You were stupid, Jirina."

"No. I wasn't," Jirina snarled, voice deliberately quiet but no less venomous for that. "I never cheated them, Farrell. I'm not an idiot."

"You were doing business nalyévo and I'm supposed to believe that?" he commented mildly, but some of his sharp edge had blunted as he thought about what she'd said. I have to admit, Jirina has been working in the black markets for long enough that working 'on the left' in Latvia shouldn't have given her this much trouble. Of course, I'd have never believed that Owain would be idiot enough to.... That's a bit much of a coincidence, come to think about it. I wonder if Jirina knows about that.

After a moment more Farrell commented almost casually, "Interesting correspondence, actually.
Did you know that Johannes swears he and Owain were manipulated out of Melbourne?"

"Really?" The bright betraying color in her face, signal of Jirina's own rage, ebbed slowly away as she considered his offhand question. "We may have to compare notes. And it's not difficult to work with the Russians if you can deliver what you promise. Perhaps we should talk later," the statuesque blonde mused. "I could use you as a spokesman to reestablish myself there. With your face, they'd believe anything you told them."

"I think not," Farrell told her easily, concealing his distaste for the idea. "I like what I'm doing, thanks."

"Photographing weddings?"

He leaned back into his seat, propping his head against the side of the plane. "And babies, and old men and women who've been married forty-five years, and the latest fads for vacations or entertainment. I photograph both what I like and what I can get paid for, and it's getting to where the two overlap a good bit, Jirina. We don't have much in common, I know. Get over it. I'm going to get some sleep. I'll talk to you when we hit Memphis."

The Slavic immortal glared at him, but his eyes were closed and he didn't seem to care. Acidic Russian commentary on his heritage brought no response except his slowly deepening breathing, so at last she settled down in her own seat and pulled out a novel she'd been saving for some leisure time. Instead of reading, though, Jirina stared unseeing at the page as her thoughts tore again at the questions of who had betrayed her to the Chinese, of Owain's plans, of her own chances of surviving this.

After a few minutes, Jirina Petesceu put the book back in her lap. Wheat-gold curls rubbed against the seatback, swiftly reduced to disarray again from the order her brother's comb had induced as she twisted and turned in a futile attempt to find a comfortable position in which to sleep. Muttered curses in Russian marked each shift in position.

There was nothing wrong with her seat.

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Joe Dawson's private journal -- April 15th

Now I remember why I was so damn relieved to give up being Northwest Regional Coordinator. Keeping the Paris Island drill instructors happy was easier than trying to get fourteen-plus Watchers to cooperate. And I don't know half of 'em well enough to know if they're Hunters or not, whether I should be wondering if Rhys-Tewdor just hired a hit squad.

Shit. What a SNAFU'd mess this has all turned into.

Thank God for Dave Goldberg. How Sol ended up with grandsons the size of stevedores is beyond me, but I can see why he gets them to follow Connor to challenges. What kind of a moron would it take to mug one of these guys? Anyway, Dave's a big man, and he's got a voice to match that bulk. When he told the room to shut up, the echoes bounced off the walls and their thick heads.

Hell, that's not fair. Some of 'em are decent folks. Tomas Montoya's a good man, and so is Ayeisha Moulavi. Good thing those two are getting along well; Navarro and Mandisa are probably gonna spend some time together if they live through this mess. I wish to hell Roger'd been there for the meeting, instead of off trailing Rhys-Tewdor's bunch. But Roger Brown is one of the best trackers the Watchers have, which is why he gets the pleasure of Owain's surveillance. Unlike his
poor replacement last month, Rog has a good chance of not getting killed. God, I know he needed a
day off, but he's gonna feel guilty about that for a while. I think that's why he volunteered to
track 'em during this meeting, and damn if Claude wasn't just as happy to stop following Enrique
for a little while, anyway. I'm glad Claude told us when Enrique linked up with Owain and
Johannes, but I have to agree with Watcher HQ for once. Damn if I'm happy about knowing where
those two are. If he lives through this we may have to consider classing Owain as too dangerous to
follow, and we haven't done that since Melvin Koren.

As for Damien's Watcher, well, Luke Davis just has this talent for finding my last nerve and
settling down on it with a six-pack of beer and a barbecue grill. I wonder if I annoy him even a
third as much? God, I hope so. The man's a complete pain in the ass. Gotta put up with it, I
guess; he's managed to Watch Damien through two moves and three name changes. Man needs to
retire soon, though. He's too damn hide-bound to suit me.

But as a group, those idiots were as fractious as the immortals we're chasing. I don't know what
angered them more, the idea that anyone could think one of 'em might be a Hunter, or the idea that
I have some inside information on all this. Funny thing is, I really wonder if one or two of them
wouldn't like to talk to their immortal occasionally, set up a friendly relationship of 'Yeah, I'm
keeping an eye on you; don't kill me and I'll try not to be too much of a pain in the ass'. Ayeisha
definitely likes Mandisa, and it ain't hero worship, either. Good thing. Mandisa's about as earthy
as anyone I've met lately; the woman'd laugh herself half-sick at the idea of someone worshipping
her. Gotta see if she can sing. If she can, we're gonna have to talk, 'cause with an attitude like that,
she'd be perfect for blues.

Rest of those idiots are probably debating whether they should report me to the Tribunal again.
Sophia Finocelli is a bitch to match her subject; I can see why someone assigned her to Bianca de
Grazia, that's for damn sure. She wasn't surprised that mortals had helped kidnap Connor, but she
hadn't taken that to the obvious conclusion that some of those mortals might include a few of us.
Got offended when I pointed it out, said I had no room to comment on her professional behavior
when I was the one who'd been brought in on charges of talking to my immortal.

And Luke Davis had the gall to ask if the Hunters were real or some excuse to weed older
Watchers out, force 'em onto pensions. Son of a bitch. As if we didn't lose good Watchers to that,
and some damn good immortals. As if Jakob Galati didn't wipe out most of the senior European
Field Coordinators because Hunters killed his wife and tried to kill him. No wonder that man gets
on my nerves. Hell, he probably doesn't believe in evolution, either. Wonder how he explains
immortals, or does he have enough imagination to even be curious? Hell, did he just not have any
friends among the ninety-plus Watchers who got killed?

Fuck it. I got it through their thick heads that we were gonna have to do this in shifts, at least,
'cause if we don't these folks'll spot us from a mile away. And one or two of 'em might do a damn
sight more than just notice us.

When all of this is over, though, Aidan and I are gonna have one damn long talk. Too many
immortals in the line of Ramirez are shaking their Watchers in some nasty ways: arrests for
stalking, for harassment, for violation of Peeping Tom laws, for God's sake! Those are the lucky
ones, though. I'm getting reports that some of 'em are waking up with a headache, no equipment or
notes, and a letter in their pockets that they should find a safer job. I know Aidan doesn't like the
idea of being followed, and I can't really blame her, but shit, did she blow our cover to the world?

Have to admit, worries aside, tonight was kinda fun. I got to yank some chains hard. And the
looks on their faces when I told 'em that I wouldn't tell 'em what was going on if I did know --
damn, that was priceless. Hell of a thing to have to eat your own words like that, but after chewing
my ass about talking to Mac, it was damned hard for them to justify asking me what he had told me. And I damn well left them wondering if he might not have. Yeah, it was childish, but oh man, I enjoyed that. Almost made up for the way my collarbone's ached in the damp this winter.

I think one or two of them have some ideas about what's going on, even if they may not know what a line war is by that name. That nondescript man Watching Johannes had an interesting look on his face when I told him Will Moran had just flown into Albuquerque with Lim Mahn. Plus I think Roger has figured out that Owain's found one of his old enemies, and what that's gonna do to Aidan's cover, I don't know. First they're going to have to find a way to Watch this fight, and it ain't gonna be easy. I think she's taking that into account, and she gets to pick where they fight. Should be a mess.

Damn shame, though. That cover story Sol and I had come up with about her was holding up so well. Ayeisha asked if she was immortal, and when I told her Aidan was nowhere in our databases, she assumed that meant no. Well, I knew it couldn't last forever. Maybe I can get Erin assigned to her when she moves here? They got along pretty well in Paris; Aidan wouldn't hurt her, and I don't really know who else to use. One of Sol's grandsons, if they'd move, I suppose, or maybe Mike if I could spare him from the bar.... But it's got to be someone she likes, 'cause I don't think she'd hesitate to do whatever she had to do to shake a Watcher.

Suppose I'd better close this and check my duffel one more time. Mike called in and said Marc and Navarro are buying groceries and packing them into ice chests. Are they moving today? Or tomorrow? Somehow, I don't think I'd better plan on hearing it from Duncan, either. Funny. He and the old man are the ones I'm not worrying about as much. After they both made it through Koren and Caspari and the rest, well, Owain Rhys-Tewdor just doesn't seem nearly as bad somehow. Bad luck might get them, but I don't think he's up to the job any other way. Now, Connor, yeah, I'm worried about him. They hurt him pretty damn bad, and how I'm gonna tell Sol about that I just don't know. And I'm worried about Aidan, too, 'cause she's just not big enough for some of the bruisers coming to this, especially Owain. By her age, she'd better have more sense than to feel guilty when someone on her side drops, 'cause with this many people fighting I don't see how they can win all the fights. She's got a student, though, which means she's gonna be trying her damnedest to stay alive... doesn't it? Or does she think Duncan will take over if she dies? If she's looking to die, hell if she just doesn't try hard enough to live, this'll do it. I think even a year ago, I'd have had to wonder if Duncan would be trying hard enough. Now, though, with the old man and Aidan in his bed, he's just too damn happy for me to have to worry about that. Now I think maybe it's Aidan I should be worried about.

Aidan, you damn well better live through this. Because I'm saving some choice words for you when this is all over, woman, and hell if I'm gonna use 'em in a funeral home.

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Seacouver -- early evening, April 15th

Marc glanced over at Navarro, a measuring look that his brother had come to recognize as the precursor to a question the younger immortal thought might be unwelcome. Rather than make the lanky black man dig up his nerve for yet another 'prying remark' that wasn't, Navar said gently, "I don't bite, Marc, truly." He tossed his youngest brother a thoroughly mischievous smile as he added, "Despite what Shahar may tell you. When this is over, and you're farther along in your own training, I'll have to tell you some of the stories about my time with her. What is bothering you this time, brother?"

"Ah." Var considered that in silence as they loaded bags of ice into the cart. "Can you be more specific, or does it need to wait until we get back? I believe Shahar has a roof if you need solitude for this, Marc."

"About... the way we got him back, actually. And what they did to him. Should I be dealing better with this?"

"Which parts of 'this?'" Var dropped the irony when he took a closer look at Marc's face. "Let it be until we get to the car, brother."

Once they had the ice in the coolers, Var commented, "So. God knows this whole thing is enough to give any of us hysterics."

"But that's just it," Marc sighed. "You aren't coming apart at the seams. Any of you."

"Not where you can see it, no."

He passed the younger man a Coke. "It might interest you to know that Shahar was up until three in the morning after Connor was returned. Alex escorted her to bed under much the same style of threat that Xan used on Richard."

"Did he really?"

Marc smiled as he popped his drink open, a laconic expression that made Var suspect his younger brother was probably stronger than he had originally assumed. The Spaniard smiled as he thought about just what kind of surprise must have been for Rhys-Tewdor's line. "Oh, yes. I understand Alex scolded her, took her coffee away, and walked her back to her bed." The smile faded off Var's face. "None of us are nearly as calm as you seem to think; we're simply more skilled at deception than you."

"Really."

"Really," Var promised. "Nicely done -- your sarcasm is coming along very well. Too much time around Adam?"

"Probably. Var, what they did to Connor... I couldn't even look at it. Not like Aidan did. Not look and go away and come back and check to see what's healing."

"I'm not entirely sure that I could have, either," Navarro told him as he pulled out a Coke for himself. "How bad was it?"

"It was... he...." The color faded from Marc's face as he remembered, leaving him a yellowish-grey that made his brother wonder for a moment if he was going to be sick. The next words didn't reassure Var either. "Var, I wanted to barf everything I've eaten since I got out of Canada. God, it was bad, bro."

Navarro sighed and reached out carefully, almost diffidently, his hand coming to rest on Marc's shoulder as lightly, as cautiously, as a mouse first investigating the peanut butter in a mousetrap. The younger man didn't flinch away from the affectionate touch, though. He sighed instead, relaxing visibly in the sun-warmed air of the rental car.

"Brother... no one expected you to deal well with this. No one. We are not dealing well with this. Mandisa has decided to kill everyone involved. Damien stayed awake for the better part of five days over it." His mouth twisted in a sardonic half-smile. "Shahar and I spoke to each other for the first time since Spain ceded Cuba and Puerto Rico to the Colonies."

"I majored in architecture, Var, but, um... wasn't that about a hundred years ago?"
"Yes." The golden Spaniard studied him from dark blue eyes. "Do you begin to see, Marc? None of us are taking this lightly; most of us are handling it as best we can and we will fall apart later. I assure you, it will not be pretty. You've done nothing to be ashamed of, brother. We would be more frightened for you if you were not having trouble. And we are very worried, I promise you, or the two of us would not be buying supplies to send you and young Richard to Holy Ground for a week," he added grimly.

"Var, you're Catholic, aren't you?"

Var raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Yes. Why?"

"When they... brought Connor back. On Monday morning." Marc paused, trying to find a way of asking that wouldn't, hopefully, make his aristocratic brother even angrier. He'd seen the tightly leashed passion under the bored, languid façade the other man tried to hold. Actually, he mostly does that around Aidan or Xan and Alex; it's like he drops the mask around Mandisa and Damien. Or me.

"So. No words for it?" Var asked him quietly.

"Var -- they crucified him. Nailed him to the wall. I saw the holes in his arms while they were healing. And to do this on Easter Monday... I can't figure out if they were trying to say we're criminals, that it was just the old Roman punishment, or if they were spitting on the fact that Uncle's Catholic as much as he's anything, or, or... what I'm supposed to think!"

"Or who to ask?" But Navarro's grip on his shoulder tightened almost to the point of pain, and the tight, thin line of his mouth, the suddenly prominent muscles along jaw and wrist, told Marc he was holding his temper on a leash made of titanium steel.

Marc welcomed the fierceness of his reaction, not least because he'd been wondering if he was the only one shocked and infuriated by that. There'd been no chance to ask Joe, and while Aidan would have answered, he didn't want to distract her. He wanted her mind on the fight so that, hopefully, she'd survive it and he wouldn't lose her as a teacher. But it was such a relief to hear and see Var's answering rage and know that it wasn't just him, that he wasn't somehow overreacting. Paradoxically, it both eased some of his tension and made him even more fiercely angry.

"Yeah," he said softly, staring down at his Coke can and seeing only his own rapidly-freezing fury, "that too."

"Look first at the possible explanations, and then at the people involved," Var said, his voice as cool as if he were discussing some minor point of obscure academic trivia. "You mentioned the possibility that it might be the old Roman punishment for slaves and other, lesser beings."

"Owain probably does think a bunch of us are lesser beings; he's pretty damned arrogant. But he doesn't take Uncle's reputation lightly. He and Chris were pretty damned impressed by him."

"Then that interpretation can be put aside," Var agreed immediately, perfectly willing to take his calm brother's assessment. Shahar and Mandisa both considered him quietly reliable. That took him to the next option, though, and it didn't seem to quite fit what he had heard of Enrique Alba. "It could be blasphemy, then, if it is aimed at Connor and some of the rest of us. But since Shahar is no Christian--"

"--it doesn't make sense. Agreed."

Var glanced at Marc, a cautious sidelong look meant to conceal his study. The younger immortal
was steadying down nicely with a problem to consider. His color had improved, the grip on the Coca-Cola can had lost a great deal of its tension, and that expressive, loose-jointed body was relaxed into the seat. "What else have you come up with, Marc?"

"Maybe...." Marc paused before saying more slowly, "Var, what if it is blasphemy? What if they're associating Connor with Christ? Was He one of us?"

"Not that I have ever heard," the Spaniard told him firmly. "And I assure you, that is the sort of thing that would have been passed along over the years. Put that from your mind, brother. Our faith may be false in other things -- I seem to have a problem with the Sixth Commandment myself -- but no, Christ was no immortal."

"Owain seems to have a real problem with the Golden Rule," Marc pointed out dryly. "Given the Game, bro, I wouldn't worry too much about your lapse. But, this kind of reminded me of one of the Arthurian legends I read last month. About the Fisher King and the wound that wouldn't heal."

"That was the country's wound, and the earliest versions of the story that I heard were very specific that the king had been castrated so that the land's fertility vanished with his. I think Xan would have told us if that had been done to him." Gold eyebrows lifted in a mild inquiry and Marc shook his head.

"Not that I know of," his brother growled. They just cut off his hand and raped him. But I don't have any right to tell Var or the others about that. I mean, no one's come out and told me about the rape, which probably means I should keep it to myself. Connor'll tell the people he wants to talk about it with, right?"

"I think, perhaps, that we are crediting Owain with more subtlety than he planned to use," Var went on, although the lifted eyebrow told Marc his brother knew there were things Marc hadn't said. "You have met him, and I have not, but it would seem to me that he would wish to do something unambiguous in this situation. I think this is a threat, purely and simply. They have taken one of the most dangerous of the immortals, injured him and then returned him, to prove that no one of us is safe."

"And to make sure we'll fight." Marc nodded. "That sounds like Owain. He was subtle, and precise, but -- I don't know, bro, he gets obsessive."

"And obsessive men overlook things." Var studied him thoughtfully. "Will you mention this to Shahar, or shall I?"

"What, the way he thinks?"

"Yes, and any proof you can give."

The young black man studied his can for a minute and Var started the car. "Yeah," Marc finally agreed. "I'll tell her. But it's a stupid thing."

"Really?" came the mild question. "Why is it stupid?"

"It was just something I saw while he and Chris were playing chess. He would get so busy launching his own plans that he wasn't paying enough attention to what Chris was doing, and then he'd have to scramble to salvage the win."

"That," Var told him firmly as he drove back toward Aidan's house, "is far from stupid. What it is, brother, is important. Chess is war, you know. Both are strategy and tactics, and knowing how he thinks may yet save us."
"Good," came the fierce reply. "Because damn if I'm letting my new family get trashed. Not if I can help it."

Var glanced at him at the stop light and then smiled. "Then something good has finally come of this feud. Welcome to the family, Marc."

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Techado Mesa, New Mexico -- mid-morning, April 16th

"Bloody bitch," Will groused as he climbed the path. It was a nice, cool sixty-five degrees and drizzling in the New Mexico spring, and he had more mud on his pants than he wanted to think about.

"Who, Cynthia?" Johannes asked.

Will's one-time teacher sounded almost cheerful and Will found himself resenting that, too. Did an immunity to hangovers come with age? If so, at a century-plus he thought he damn well ought to have developed it by now!

"Yeah, Cynthia bloody Torriani. Or whatever the hell her name is this decade."

"Aidan Logan," Bianca said over shoulder as she walked in front of him, her designer boots and jeans scarcely better off than his cheaper, broken-in brands. "And I agree, Giuliamo. What a miserable place to fight."

Johannes shrugged and let his unconcern show in his voice. "It could be worse, Bianca. It could be July or August. Then you'd be wishing for the rain."

"Besides, Bianca, if you were still on the Riviera, it would just be drizzling there, too." Farrell hiked on, enjoying the easy rain and the landscape too much to listen to the Roman woman's bitching. **Who am I kidding? Bianca would complain over a four-star meal in L'Ami Louis because the decor didn't live up to her standards.**

He heard her muttered comment and suspected from the cognates that he'd just been called an ignorant peasant again. His only response was a grin. He'd been a farmer and was proud of his experience with the land; it gave him a solid grip on reality that Bianca had never had. Her company, however, was something to be avoided when she was in one of these moods so he stepped up his pace, moving ahead to walk beside Owain.

His teacher flashed him a fairly sympathetic smile. "Still at it, is she?"

"Mm-hmm," Farrell chuckled. "Does she ever admit to having bad decades or living like the rest of us?"

"Not that I've ever heard," Owain said, amused. "And she usually finds ways to make ends meet."

"I'm amazed." The New Zealander looked around, studying the terrain and enjoying the rising breeze as the clouds slowly cleared off. "This is a beautiful land."

"A bit stark." His teacher glanced around, too. "But it's not bad."

"No, look at it. The lines of land to sky, the way the green tinges it and you can still see where it will be dry again in a few months.... I wouldn't farm here, but it's not bad land for horses, I'd think."
"There's a horse ranch about forty miles from here," Owain agreed, diverted again by Farrell's interest in such things. "So what do you think?"


"No, fighting here." Owain watched him thoughtfully, wondering, as always, what was going through the younger man's mind. Farrell was the most opaque of his students, the one he had never quite understood. He insisted on holding to honor, to friendships that didn't bring him advantages, and to loyalty. The last, at least, was useful.

"It'll do. What time did Phoebe say?"

Owain let the question hang there for a moment while he considered the name Farrell had used. "An hour past sunrise."

"Not much time for any mud to dry," Farrell frowned. "We'd better hope we don't get rain on the nineteenth, then. Other than that I want to see what the top of the mesa looks like. God help anyone who hasn't been doing their running. The hike to the top will take some of the edge off of all of us."

From behind him, Johannes said calmly, "I wouldn't want to try taking a horse up this trail, though."

"No, I wouldn't either," Farrell told him. "Owain, why in hell did an Irish woman pick New Mexico? I'd have thought this was too dry and hot for her."

"It's spring, Farrell, neither hot nor dry at the moment." He was thoughtful, though, clearly distracted by a question he hadn't considered. "Because it's out of the way, I think."

"Inconvenient as hell," Johannes offered. "Now that you mention it, Farrell, this has to be inconvenient for her, too."

"No witnesses," Owain said coolly. Farrell glanced at him, the sun glinting across wavy brown hair and opaque brown eyes, but he said nothing and Owain wondered, again, what motivated this one. *Still. He'll kill at least, unlike Chris's brat. He'll do. For now.*

Bianca sniffed, a strangely dignified sound. "Who would live out here?"

"Anyone who wanted to be left alone," Will told her. "I spent some time out in Colorado around the turn of the century. You had your land, you did your work, and you didn't get visitors as long as you went to church on Sunday so the neighbors didn't think you were some mad killer."

"And you did this deliberately?"

"You don't have to sound so surprised." Will shrugged, watching the carefully concealed contempt on her face. Farrell caught his attention, laughter dancing in his own eyes. The other immortal's humor roused an answering cheerfulness in him, too, making it easier to ignore Bianca's constant sniping. "Colorado is lovely, Bianca. High hills and cold, fresh streams, incredible views and clean, sweet air. You'd probably love it there."

"Maybe for a vacation," she admitted, but a smile was starting to form on her face, too. "I love fly-fishing. Aren't the trout streams there supposed to be exceptional?"

"You? In waders?" Will grinned at her, suddenly in a good mood again and in synch with the woman he'd always considered a complete raving bitch. *Damn, I guess you never know!* "I'd have
never thought you'd like fly-fishing. Yeah, some really great streams for it. When this is over, we'll have to go, if you don't mind camping to get to some of the best spots."

Dark eyes flashed and then she did smile. "For good trout, I will camp. I'll even bring the cooking supplies and the skillet."

"Deal."

Ahead of them, Johannes traded a more sober glance with Farrell. In a surprising unity of thought they both acknowledged that neither Will nor Bianca might live to make that trip. Neither of them mentioned it. Instead Farrell said quietly, "I'll drop back down the trail, see what's keeping the others."

"Jirina's probably baiting Damita," Johannes muttered. "Raise your voice if you need another referee."

Farrell nodded to him once, wondering again when Owain was going to rein the two women in. Actually, he already has, several times. Maybe he's waiting for them to actually explode at each other and settle the whole 'alpha bitch' question once and for all and get it over with. Damn if I'd know which way to bet. Jirina's tough, but Damita's insane.

For the moment, though, all he wanted was to make sure all of them made it to this damn fight on the twentieth, so Farrell dropped to the side of the path, loosening and then re-lacing his boot as the others went past. He took his own sweet time and when that delay still didn't show him the other four, he headed back down the trail, thinking that at least he was getting his aerobic conditioning for the day.

Sure enough, they were still two switchbacks down the trail. Enrique was stumping steadily along, moving much the way Farrell had always suspected a tank would walk if it acquired legs. He looked oddly off-kilter in modern clothes, as if he'd worn a habit for so long that even the faded, worn denim was an unwilling compromise to modernity. Only Enrique would wear jeans like an unconvincing disguise.

Farrell looked past him and decided that yes, Jirina was taking verbal potshots at Damita and Lim was enjoying the entertainment far too much to stop it. So he paused and adjusted the other boot, too, then stood up just in time to join them.

"Surely you know French by now?" Jirina asked mockingly. "They speak it just up the coast from you in Guyana -- oh, you don't travel, do you?"

Damita sneered at the older woman and said venomously, "Voluntarily, sometimes. Not because I'm being hunted."

"Travel is good for the mind," Farrell inserted casually before Jirina or Lim could respond to that. "Different views give different viewpoints. Pascal would have never been so afraid of the reaches of space if he hadn't lived in the middle of Paris."

Lim glanced at him curiously, then asked, "So you think philosophy is purely perspective, Farrell?"

"The stark black and white attitudes of Judaism coming out of the deserts?" Farrell suggested.

"What, the complexity of voudoun comes from the jungles?" Damita asked scornfully.
"How's this? Really good Cajun cooking comes from the complexity of the swamps," the New Zealander offered.

Lim did laugh at that. "I had Cajun food in New Orleans once. It reminded me of eating in the back street dives of Hong Kong, where you just chew, swallow, and enjoy without trying to find out what you've just put in your mouth."

"Or some of the small coastal trattorias," Enrique offered unexpectedly. "There are places in Venice where it's best not to ask, but the food is incredible. They use recipes older than we are."

"That's Italy," Farrell agreed cheerfully. "Families handing down recipes from the time of Christ, or Julius Caesar."

"And charging you for the age," Jirina growled yearningly. "You're all making me hungry."

A comment about women with PMS needing chocolate sprang immediately to mind, but Farrell stifled it just as quickly. Immortal women didn't have that problem, he knew, and somehow he doubted Jirina had enough of a sense of humor to catch the joke or appreciate it, either. "Well, by the time we get to the top, look everything over, and get back to Albuquerque again, it will definitely be time for a late lunch, if not dinner."

Damita offered unexpectedly, "And Johannes and I got sandwich makings and soft drinks. They're in the cooler in our jeep."

Jirina looked over at the younger woman, her usual sharp-edged cynicism put aside. "Thank you. I should have thought of that."

Farrell nodded at their growing unity and carefully didn't mention the bar of chocolate in his own shirt pocket. That was his own weakness and he had no intention of sharing it. Not when they were meshing so well again without it. Besides, I've had too many things in common with Jirina, lately. Let's not add to the list.

Salt Lake City, Utah -- early evening, April 16th

Mandisa settled herself more comfortably on the overstuffed hotel couch, blissfully unconcerned by the idea that either Adam or Duncan might want the best spot in their own suite. Once she had her legs arranged, Var leaned back against the base of the couch and asked, "Care to come spot for me later, sister?"

"Weight-lifting, Var?" She wrinkled her nose and made a counteroffer. "I had thought to go swimming instead. They have a pool here, apparently."

Damien grinned at her from where he was flopped on one of the king-size beds. "You brought a suit?"

"I have shorts and a T-shirt." She dismissed the rest as immaterial, then glanced over at Aidan. The Irish woman was sitting on the floor near the couch and twisting her spine through a series of yoga poses to unlock all the knots from twelve hours on the road. "It would do you good, too, Teacher."

"It sounds wonderful," Aidan agreed immediately, left arm still wrapped around her right thigh. "I'm too tired to sleep yet. And my back would love it, I've no doubt."
Alex knocked on the connecting door, and stuck his head cautiously into the room. "Don't some of you have rooms of your own? I'd have sworn you were in the two rooms across the hall?"

Stormy smiled sweetly at him as she continued to finger-comb Damien's hair. "But, Alex -- I didn't get enough of your melodious voice during that drive today, and I live and breathe for the dulcet sounds of your words." From behind him she heard Xan crack up, and for a moment her Southern belle pose slipped enough to reveal a wide grin.

"Stormy, you're terrible." Alex chuckled and settled onto the bed next to her and Damien. "Seriously, though, folks. Who wants to go swim, or maybe hunt down a movie in this town?"

"Afraid we'll get cabin fever and end up useless?" Damien asked the older immortal.

Xan answered that from the doorframe. "Not really, but I'd be happier if you'd all remember that nothing's really changed."

The steady stroke of fabric over steel paused and Duncan looked up from oiling his sword. "How do you mean, Xan?"

"Because it hasn't." That answer, surprisingly, came from Connor. He walked in and settled himself onto the floor next to his kinsman without needing to use his maimed arm for balance. Of course, he hadn't needed it the day before, either, when he'd first refused several offered swords, preferring to stick with what he knew, and then made it abundantly clear that a katana could be used one-handed quite well if the wielder knew saber techniques.

"Think about it rationally, Duncan," the older Highlander went on. "Name a day when we don't know we could be challenged. So we'll have a fight on our hands in a few days. At least now we know the date. In some ways this is easier."

"Easier?" Mandisa asked him in disbelief. "Uncle, what they did to you--"

"--is over and done," Connor shrugged. "It could have been worse, Mandisa." He smiled cynically at her. "They could have just nailed my head to the wall of that alley. That would have brought some of you to this fight, too."

"Damn right it would, Connor." Damien's slow growl drew answering nods and rage from most of the younger immortals: Mandisa, Duncan, and even Var who was letting his reactions show for once.

Aidan, however, shook her head slowly. "I see what you're saying, brothers. You're right. Every day has its own chance of challenge. And no one is going to attack us while we're travelling in a group like this."

"And they'd love it if we were off-balance when we got there," Alex added. "Think about that, too, people. Angry, upset, ready to do anything to kill them -- that's a great way to lose our own heads."

Stormy looked directly at the dark-haired Greek immortal. She knew, intellectually, that he was probably older than dirt, but a fondness for old movies kept making her think she should find him a burnoose and a fast horse. It made it hard to remember what he was. "Alex, sugar, are you really goin' to try and tell me this is a normal day in the life?"

He grinned at her slow, thick drawl. "Woman, you should be doing phone sex, not private investigation. You'd make a fortune. Oh calm down, Damien," Alex added cheerfully. "I'm not about to proposition her in front of you, nephew, or behind your back for that matter."
"I didn't figure you were," the redhead admitted. "I just didn't like the idea."

"No problem. And honestly, Stormy? Connor's right. This time, we know where it's coming from and who it is. That is an improvement. Besides, you've been investigating Owain and Johannes. Do you think we should leave those two bastards alive?"

"No," she told him bluntly. "But I don't think they deserve a fair fight, either, after what they did to Connor. If they cut my hand off, I'd probably die from shock and blood loss. Why should we let 'em off just because he healed? Doesn't seem right."

"Because if we let you shoot them and we take their heads," Adam answered surprisingly tactfully, "then one day word gets out and someone does that to us, Stormy. Otherwise, I'd be happy to hand you the ammunition myself."

She turned to look at the enigmatic immortal who was sprawled over the parts of the couch that Mandisa hadn't already occupied. An inappropriate smile twitched at her mouth as she remembered some off-color jokes he'd traded with her at Christmas. "Would it, Adam? Really?"

"Oh, yes. You don't think Bianca deliberately set out to get a reputation for using poison? Or that Owain wants people to know just how quick he is? Word gets around. You can't always be sure you'll get everyone. Sooner or later, someone finds out."

Duncan smiled at his lover and agreed, "Always. It might take a while, but the problem is that we might still be here by then, too. In some ways, reputation is more important to us than it is to mortals, Stormy."

"I suppose I can see that," the tiny mortal drawled, "but you'll pardon me if I'd like to shoot them?"

"Certainly," Adam told her promptly. "By all means, picture them on your targets. I've sparred that way a few times--"

Aidan giggled at that and got out, "Just a few times, Adam?"

"Excuse me," he said indignantly. "I remember a few times you and I sparred when you took your temper out on me."

"Ah, but you were the one I was angry at, too," the Irish immortal pointed out.

"Remember that time you took out my ribs with the training sword, Adam?" Damien laughed. "Who were you pissed at that time?"

"Don't ask," Adam smiled. "I did apologize, didn't I?"

"Oh, yeah." Damien gave him a sarcastic glare. "A lot of good it did, too, when I was lying there trying to breathe. Bastard."

"Well, probably," Adam agreed, unperturbed. "Anyway. Much as I hate to admit it," and he gave Alex and Xan a patently suspicious look, "the Greek maniacs might be right this time. There's no sense in acting like this is anything but a routine challenge."

"Perhaps if anything we should take this a step or three further." The speculative sound of Var's voice brought everyone's attention to where the Spaniard sat on the floor with his gold hair setting off Disa's dark skin.

"What do you mean?" Aidan turned to look directly at her former student, unsure whether to be
pleased or worried by the near glee in his voice.

"I think that the reason they didn't take your head, uncle, was to mess with our minds, as the Americans say. So perhaps we should disabuse them of the notion. Why not act as if this is a vacation? After all, the company is excellent, the weather has been glorious, and Shahar has promised us some good rock-climbing." Var grinned at the lot of them, the rare full smile that transfigured his normally arrogant air to an all-inclusive pleasure.

The Spaniard was nearly purring as he went on, "And just imagine their reactions when we show up in good humor and fine fettle, making jokes and acting as if this were any other day and we already expect to win?"

Connor leaned against the wall and smiled slowly. "That ought to shake them up nicely, nephew. I like the way you think."

Var shrugged and smiled himself, a tight-lipped, disdainful expression. He couldn't hold it, though, and the grin got free again. "What can I say, uncle? It seems like such a pleasant way to annoy Owain and his people. I have wanted to irritate that strega, Bianca, for decades now and this will certainly do it."

Aidan tilted her head and glared at the gold-haired Spaniard. "Strega, Var? Bianca isn't witch enough to change tadpoles into frogs!"

Stormy chortled. "From what y'all have told me, the woman could curdle milk by looking at it. Aidan. Give the man some leeway. Didn't that used to be a favorite charge against witches?"

"Well, it's questionable whether she's truly a witch or a poisoner," Var admitted with apparent reluctance. Disa kicked him in the side for baiting Aidan again, knowing it wouldn't stop him but unwilling to let him get away with it entirely.

"Oh, come on!" Alex snorted in disgust. "She got that reputation the first time some poor bastard let her cook!"

Aidan and Stormy glanced at each other and started giggling. Alex licked a finger and marked a point in the air. "One for the men."

"Were we counting?" Disa asked him, amused.

"No," Var said hastily. "We were talking about why we should treat this as an opportunity to enjoy a family vacation, so to speak."

"Because it is." Xan shrugged, then grinned and added, "Besides, why should we let them be in charge of how we feel?"

Connor said firmly, "In that case, why are we all sitting here? I want some dinner first, but after that, didn't someone say something about a swimming pool?"

Duncan smiled, glad to see his kinsman's mood so far improved from the day before. He wasn't sure what Xan and Alex had said or done, but if Connor wanted him to know, he'd tell him.

"Dinner, definitely. I saw a place that looked perfect, too. Shall we meet downstairs in half an hour?"

"For a party of ten, we might want to call ahead," Adam suggested.

"I'll take care of it." Duncan grinned at him and followed Connor back to the room he was sharing
with the two Greeks to call the restaurant. Methos was going to either love this or hate it, but he didn't want the surprise ruined.

Connor sprawled back against the concrete rim and sighed. The hotel had a huge swimming pool and a hot tub the size of a small pool; he strongly suspected that only the fact that it was past ten on a work night had cleared out everyone except their group. All the businessmen went off to get some sleep for their morning meetings, I suppose. About time. He had no intention of admitting it to the others, but the Scot was already tired of the quick glances at his arm and then away. Knowing the hand would eventually grow back wasn't much consolation against the constant rudeness of strangers, and it was aching again tonight as his quickening slowly repaired the damage to his wrist. He didn't want to think of how much it would hurt when the hand really began to regenerate.

Someone settled in against his side, all sleek skin and resilient muscle through the hot water; he opened his eyes to see Mandisa lolling next to him. She had her eyes closed, clearly basking in the hot water and (purely incidentally, he knew she'd claim) guarding his off side. Family. He chuckled softly, remembering the confusion at the restaurant every time the table behind them heard the tall, dark Masai woman refer to a pale Celt or an olive-toned Greek as 'Uncle.' He grinned at the memory of the strangers' confusion and closed his eyes again, slouching even farther into the buoyant heat around him.

Mandisa said pleasantly, "Should I ask what thought summoned such a wicked smile?"

"Those poor fools at the table behind us. They thought we were with Interpol. That or grad students."

"Those were the innocent interpretations," Var chuckled. "I liked the version of the story where we were UN delegates on holiday, myself."

"Really, Var?" Xan chuckled. "I didn't think you sleep with men."

"No. Why?"

"Because what I overheard was a debate over whether you were interested in Stormy or Damien."

He's come along nicely, Xan decided when the Spaniard only laughed instead of growing offended. Good. "Besides," the blond Greek added blandly, "I thought the best part was watching Stormy rob you and Damien blind."

"That woman...." Var laughed helplessly. "I spent a good fifteen minutes trying to show her how to use chopsticks -- and she nearly stabbed Damiano with them three times -- and when the food finally appears, she switched hands and used them more neatly than Shahar!"

"And farther up the chopsticks, too," Connor mentioned. "Nice work. How many of Damien's shrimp did she steal?"

"All she wanted," Mandisa chuckled. "And some of Var's steak, too."

Connor shook his head at the memory and grinned, remembering Adam's complaints that Benihana's wasn't Japanese food, it was pop culture. Their chef had been hard put to keep a straight face when the two Scots kept apologizing to Adam in idiomatic, insultingly insincere Japanese. "Tell me we tipped that man well."
Adam snorted. "Very well. Damn it, Aidan, are you ever going to quit swimming laps?"

"Yes, actually." The brunette woman levered herself up onto the side of the pool and wrung water out of her braid. She lolled there for a long moment, legs dangling in the water as she leaned back on her arms with her head sagging back until it seemed she was trying to touch her crown to her shoulder blades. She finally sat upright and asked, "How's the hot tub?"

"That depends on whether we're going to have to pour you back out of it and up to the room."
Adam splashed hot water at her, ignoring the fact that Alex was sitting in the line of fire.

The dark-haired man said calmly, "Adam, if you have that much energy, you can drive the first leg tomorrow. Sister, it feels wonderful. Get in here."

"If I do that, you will have to pull me out."

"Wouldn't be the first time," Xan chuckled, pushing the dark curls out of his lover's eyes where the steam from the hot tub had plastered them. "Come on, sister."

Once she had settled between them, braid smoothed over the front of her bathing suit rather than against the concrete where it might snag, Alex asked calmly, "Ready?"

"Ah. Have my sins come home to roost?"

He swatted her, not gently, on a shoulder. "Didn't we have this talk already? Do we need to have it again? You are not a goddess; you are not personally responsible for everything Owain has done; and if you don't stop being so idiotic, I'm going to drown you so you'll at least have an excuse for acting as if your brain were water-logged."

"Nice to know I'm not the only one he yells at that way," Connor offered without ever opening his eyes. "Aidan, if you try to claim my hand is your fault, I'm going to ask for volunteers to hold you down while I spank you."

Duncan muttered something in Gaelic that made Aidan blush and his cousin's eyes open, the lashes spiked and darkened by steam until they made his eyes more golden than usual. "I'll deal with you later, Duncan. I thought I taught you better than to discuss a lady in public like that." The older Scot glared across at Aidan. "Once and once only, sister: Owain is not your fault."

"Connor...." Aidan gestured at his maimed wrist, a wordless, surprisingly helpless, gesture from a woman who was normally so decisive, and the memories that evoked nearly broke his heart. The last time he'd seen her so unsure had been nine years ago when Dani had broken up with her. Aidan had taken it badly, but she'd always been one of the strongest women Connor had known. She'd proven it by forcing herself to try again.

Four times in a row, she'd gone out on a date with someone who seemed promising. And in four tries, with men and women both, not one of them had been remotely compatible with her. The cumulative effect had been to break her faith in her judgment -- for herself at least. It had taken Methos and Duncan to start her dating again, and Connor had no intention of allowing Owain's attack on him to crack what those two had finally mended in her.

"Idiot," he sighed, reaching out to stroke her cheek with the back of his hand. It worked on him, after all, and who knew where Alex and Xan had picked up the habit? "You might as well say that it's my fault Kastagir is dead," Connor went on reasonably.

"What?" Aidan shook her head in as if to clear it, clearly taken aback by the new direction of the conversation.
"The Kurgan was looking for me that night," Connor pointed out, noticing in the edges of his vision that the others were closing in, wrapping both him and Aidan in their presence and comfort. The gesture warmed him in the spaces where he buried his loneliness, eroding some of the ache that had settled in when his cousin and clan chief had exiled him to keep him alive. For a moment he was reminded of how very alone he’d thought he’d been on that long ago New York night when the Kurgan hunted him for the last time, and once again, killed his friends. "If I’d killed that overgrown steppes mongrel sooner, Kastagir would still be alive, Aidan."

"Connor, it's a miracle you killed the Kurgan at all," she snapped, shrugging off Xan's hug. "I fought him myself, once, remember?"

"If you're not blaming me for Kastagir, I don't see how you can blame yourself for my hand.” He shrugged before adding in that same unrelenting tone, "Or any of the rest of it. You warned me there might be trouble coming. It's hardly your fault if I got caught by a mortal hit team."

Damien said grimly, "He's right, Magistra. They could have taken any of us that way, most likely. Anyone who didn't have constant company and an irregular schedule was prey for them; the miracle is that you took on Marc when you did. Otherwise, we'd still be hunting for you, Aidan, and by now, teacher mine, you'd be broken, too."

"I know," she said softly. "That... had crossed my mind. And yet -- he's up to something, you know. There's something convoluted behind all of this, something cold and scheming that I can't... quite...." She stared at nothing for a long moment, then shook her head, face pale. "I don't know what it is. But, Connor, I don't think you're the first one they've tortured."

"No," Connor answered grimly, "I don't think so either. That damn monk was too good at it, and he wore that robe like he was used to it."

Alex wrapped an arm around Aidan's shoulders and wouldn't let her shrug it off. "Behave, woman. You don't get to fall over just because you Saw something."

Methos ignored them, knowing that Alex would take care of her if she started Seeing things that weren't there. Instead he asked thoughtfully, "Older man, Connor? Say, mid-fifties when he died - - tonsured and brown eyes?"

"And built like a rock," the older MacLeod agreed. "I... went over them with Xan and Alex. We think we know who most of them were."

Alex offered, "From Connor's descriptions, it was definitely Owain, his students, Enrique, Johannes, and that bitch Bianca. But damn if I know who the young woman was."

Methos said calmly, "Describe her."

Rather than make Connor think about it again, Xan cut in. "A teen-ager with corn-row braids, thin, mixed blood, probably black and Asian, maybe black and Amerindian--"

"Damita Santos," Adam cut in. "I've been hearing about her. Bianca trained the little bitch. This could be a problem."

"If she died that young, what's the problem?" Damien asked practically. "That much speed? It doesn't sound like she's got much muscle mass."

"She doesn't," came the exasperated answer from Adam. "And it's not speed, exactly. Have you ever gone up against someone who uses capoeira?"
"Hell, I don't even know what language that's from," the redhead grumbled.

"It's a Brazilian martial art. Part dance, part tumbling, and very nasty. They come in from angles you wouldn't think anyone could manage and tend to dodge like they have rubber for joints." Adam's hands moved to indicate a horizontal attack coming in at waist level and Damien's eyes widened.

Xan commented, "Not a bad description, Adam. She's mine then, sis."

"If you're sure you can take her, then yes," Aidan agreed. "Thank you."

"No problem. Just tell me one thing, would you? What really started this between you and Rhys-Tewdor?"

That drew an indelicate snort from the Irish woman. "Why didn't you ask me that a week ago, brother? When Connor vanished?"

"Because it wasn't important then; he was." Xan went on in the same casual voice, "It's not really important now, if you want the truth, but this is the only good time to ask. Tomorrow we'll already be focusing in for the fight. Tonight we can afford to be distracted. And you're dodging the question."

"That bad, Aidan, or that stupid?" Stormy asked her. The little Southern blonde grinned sympathetically at Damien's teacher. "Has to be one or the other, you know."

"A little of both, actually," Aidan sighed. "Do I get a beer when this is over?"

"Sorry, sister, the bar's closed by now," Connor told her.

"Lovely. And you truly want to know this?" she asked, looking at all of them.

"Hell, yeah," Damien snorted, but Var and Mandisa both simply shrugged. Duncan met Aidan's gaze and gave her the faintest of smiles but said nothing.

"No votes from the rest of you?" she asked again.

"I'll just pull it out of your journals later if I want to know," Methos said coolly. "I can read most of the languages you write."

Connor studied her, then said thoughtfully, "I'd say I have the most right to hear this right now, yes?"

"Yes."

"Then no, I don't want to hear it. When this is all over, you can explain it to us. Or not. It doesn't really matter why it started, sister. What matters to me is that they frightened Rachel and Sol and tried to terrorize the rest of you. I say we kill them."

"Simple, blunt, and that suits me just fine," Alex agreed. "If you do want to talk about it sometime, sister, come find me and I'll get you drunk afterwards."

"Damien?" she asked quietly. "Do you need to know?"

"For a shot at Johannes? Hell, no." Damien forced his temper out with his next exhalation. In a more reasonable tone he told her, "Connor's right, Magistra. From our point of view, it doesn't matter why the hell this started. I hated Johannes' guts before I ever knew who he studied with."
The only thing that kept Enrique safe for two hundred years was his association with the Church and the way that kept him near Holy Ground. Too damn many of the people in that line are the kind of scum that we'd want to kill even if they weren't immortal, all right?

"Right now, the only thing I give a shit about, Aidan, is making sure we all get out of this intact -- including you. If I can figure out a way to rig it so not a one of us loses, I will. Rationally, I know that we don't have much chance of winning nine straight fights, but that's what I'm shooting for."

"That," Xan said grimly, "will be part of the plotting over the next two days. There are only so many people he could bring, after all, and I think Adam may know all of them."

Adam shrugged; the half-smile that twisted his lips was nothing Stormy ever wanted to see directed at her. "I have some information, yes, and a few ideas, too."

Duncan glanced at him and the paler man shook his head in answer to some silent question. The tall Scot frowned, dark brows pulling down in disapproval before he tilted his head as if at some comment only he heard. A wicked smile crossed his own mouth and was gone again.

"Fine," Connor said, ignoring the by-play between them. "Tomorrow we'll start looking at who should fight who, instead of who wants to fight who, and try to get all of us out of this intact. We have the best, most motivated fighters we could get together in time, after all, and we had a wider pool to draw from than Owain did."

"Wider than he even knows," Aidan said grimly. "I'm counting on that, Connor. He doesn't know that Alex and Xan can fight for me, for one thing."

Connor considered that. "And I'd have to say you two are at least marginally competent...."

"If that's how you remember those fights, Connor, you must be tired," Xan chuckled. "On that note, though, I think it's time to go to bed. If we're going to hit Albuquerque tomorrow night, we have another ten or twelve hour drive ahead of us -- depending on who drives and how well the radar detector holds out," he grinned, remembering Duncan's horrified reaction to some of the low-altitude flying they'd been doing that day.

"Oh my aching ass," Stormy sighed before the younger Scot could say anything. "And the first charitable soul who offers to rub it out for me is goin' to get swatted, I'll tell you right now." She turned to look squarely at Damien who, like several of them, was trying hard not to laugh. "Not a word, you redheaded stepchild, you. Come on, let's go to bed." She waved a good night to the rest of them and gathered Damien in with a single fierce look. The door into the hotel closed behind them while he was still trying to explain that, honestly, it was just a friendly offer to the person in the group who didn't heal as quickly.

Farrell Jameson's diary -- April 17th 1998

There's a history degree in my future if I live through this.

I have no excuse for not having looked at some of this earlier, but it's only in the last day or so that I've really started to get antsy, as the Americans would put it. Apt description, that. My nerves are crawling like I've got fire ants inside my skin, and as a note to my future self? That's every bit as unpleasant as it sounds.

So what's the problem? Simple to say, harder to define: Owain's up to something.
The sun rose in the east this morning, the same way I've seen it rise for more than a hundred years now, so yes, of course it follows that Owain's up to something. But I'd give my second-best sword to be able to call Darius right now.

Curiosity killed the cat, and that's an unsettling thought when you're on your eighth or ninth life. I started thinking and that may have been a mistake right about now, because it's either far too early or much too late. I've been pondering loyalty, and allegiance, and other stupidities that may well get me killed, and since I was hiding from the rest of my line in a library -- it worked, too -- I thought, what the hell, I'll look it up. My mistake.

Loyalty: 1 - the state or quality of being loyal; faithfulness to commitments of obligations, or 2 - faithful adherence to a sovereign, a government, cause, or the like, or 3 - an example or instance of faithfulness, adherence, or the like. Suggested synonyms were fealty, devotion, constancy. It's from late Middle English, by way of Middle French.

I guess I'm an idiot; I should have stopped there. Instead, I had to go look, and Middle French dates to the fourteenth-sixteenth centuries. Owain, on the other hand, dates to the tenth. In other words, he's so much older that the concept isn't in his upbringing. Which means it isn't in his base values, his base behavior.

Fealty comes from the Middle English. That's 1150-1475, according to the dictionary. Owain predates that, too. Allegiance, meaning the loyalty of a citizen to his government, or of a subject to his sovereign, is also Middle English.

And it occurred to me that these words keep insisting on a rather... one-way flow of obligation. When I was still mortal I'd have never questioned that. But Queen Victoria's been dead for almost a century now, and duty and responsibility went out of vogue after two World Wars in a row decimated too many countries. So I did something I'd have never done when I was younger; I looked up the base of the problem.

Loyal: 1 - faithful to one's allegiance, as to a sovereign, government, or state; 2 - faithful to one's oath, commitments, or obligations; and 3 - faithful to any person or thing conceived of as deserving fidelity or imposing obligations. Comes out of Old French, by way of Middle French. But its basic root is the Latin word *legalis*. Legal, among other things, means appointed, established or authorized by the law; deriving authority from law. All of it ultimately comes from the Latin *lex*, *legis*, which is a law or statute.

But the Romans were pretty damned precise about some things; they had separate words for laws of government, men's customs, and laws of nature, physical and universal necessities. *Lex* applies to government. *Ius, iuris* on the other hand, means natural law, or inherent right. Jefferson's claim of inalienable rights, if you put it into Latin, would definitely be *iurem*, not *legem*. Fine, the idea of being loyal to something or someone specific, as opposed to the more abstract notion of loyalty, predates my teacher. But I don't support Owain because of any law... do I?

Owain was a minor Welsh border lord in the tenth century, back when the Welsh were friendly with the English one day and attacking them the next, depending on how matters stood in the Danelaw. He's used to alliances of convenience, agreements made to be broken as soon as it's expedient or profitable to change your ground. Shifting alliances, look out for your own, hold your own by whatever means necessary, and trust only your own and not always them.... I should have looked up his past, his mindset, years ago. It explains everything I've ever wondered about, I think.

But if loyal comes from legal -- and I'm dealing with someone who lived through the evolution of
the word -- what does that do to his ideas of loyalty? I know Owain grew up acting as the local law. Does that mean he still thinks he is the law for our line? And, as such, that our loyalty is something we should give automatically and that he's both entitled and expected to ensure? He considers us under obligation to him, for his training. And he did train me well, I won't argue with that. I've been in the Game for more than a century now and I still have my head. Some years, that was saying something. But is it really a debt?

Yes, he trained me. But... do I owe Owain, or do I owe any students I take? Is it like the bread on the waters, where you pay forward rather than back? Am I loyal to Owain for what he did for me, or am I loyal because of who and what I am? Because to be disloyal isn't in me? But then, too, there's that last definition of loyal. I don't like some of the implications I see in it. Does Owain deserve my fidelity? Or is he just imposing an obligation?

I've listened to people blather about 'death before dishonor' who've never heard of Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg, and probably couldn't tell you which army the Light Brigade was part of, much less which war they fought in. Probably never heard of Thermopylae, either. 'Go tell the Spartans, thou who passest by, that here, obedient to their laws, we lie.' What's left of them still does. The Spartans held the retreat, oh, yes... and Leonidas' force was wiped out to the last man. The Sacred Band held the line against Philip of Macedon until the last of them was dead, each pair dead or dying, sword mate by shield mate in the hot afternoon sun. But Owain isn't Philip of Macedon. He's not doing this for a kingdom, and I damn well don't think he's doing it for any goal that I would want. He's not Leonidas, either, holding a retreat for someone else. I no more believe that Phoebe and the rest of the line of Ramirez are a threat to immortals as a whole than I'd believe the tide won't come in and go out.

But does that matter?

Wait. Where did I go from disloyal to dishonored? My honor lies in who I am. Not who others think I am -- that's just my reputation. Do I owe this, is this a payment I can make? If I cross Owain, will I live to regret it? Hell, will I live to morning? But... can I do this and still face myself in the mornings?

Owain and Johannes are up to something. Too many quiet discussions in Afrikaans, too many discussions that have shifted when someone comes near them. They're good, but the sound of the voices changes, even if I can't hear the precise words. I learned that in Australia, about the same time that I learned that Phoebe Syn/Cynthia Torriani isn't the manipulative bitch Owain makes her out to be.

Lim is up to something, for that matter. I've seen him calculating odds on something, considering a cost or consequence in the silences behind his eyes. I may not know what he's thinking, but I don't think I'll like it, either.

Jirina... well, Jirina is always up to something, but this time I think she's wondering how to blackmail me into fronting for her. She's probed, these last few days, at what I value -- and who. I never thought I'd be grateful that last relationship didn't work out, and no, I'm not going to put her name down in here. The only way Jirina will get to my permanent journals is if I'm dead, so that's safe enough.

Bianca would be up to something if she didn't think I'm stronger than she is. And all that means is that she won't do anything now, but another time, when I think she's miles away, may be something else entirely. As for that crazy student of hers, I have never wanted so badly to shoot someone from behind and take their head. Some times Damita's completely normal; others, I feel like I'm looking at a rabid animal, and that it would be a kindness to kill her.
All told? I'd be safer in the middle of a pit of vipers. They wouldn't know to take my head. What the hell am I doing here? What am I doing? Sooner or later, I'm going to have to choose. God, Sunda, why in hell did you have to go up against the Kurgan?

Albuquerque, New Mexico -- late evening, April 17th

Thrashing against Duncan's grip only made him bite her shoulder hard enough to draw blood. Aidan moaned, craning her head back for a kiss or a chance to bite him back, and he just laughed, a deep, husky sound that she felt more than heard where her back was pressed against his chest. Instead he kissed the top of her head, and told her, "No."

"Tuili!"

"My parents were married," he told her in the same rough, amused voice. "Something wrong?"

Methos rested his forearms just below her hips, pinning her lower body more securely against Duncan's thighs, and looked up her torso. "Is she complaining again?"

"More like still." Duncan checked almost casually to make sure that her arms were still twined through his, wrists still securely within his grasp despite the sweat slicking both their bodies. Her calves were pinned under his, the two of them twined together on the bed where he acted as a very primitive set of bonds. More primitive than she'd expected, he thought, licking the drops of her blood off his lower lip. So far, between the two of them, she hadn't been able to move her hips enough to do him any damage, something Methos had been very careful to ensure. Smart man. He really didn't want Duncan to decide to do this to him sometime....

Of course Aidan hadn't figured out exactly what they were doing, either. She still thought it was a game, if a frustrating one. She hadn't realized yet that her two lovers were much too serious for that.

Methos chuckled, his hands running lightly over Aidan's inner thighs -- too delicate a touch to be any satisfaction, almost enough to tickle but not quite. "Something wrong, Edana? Something you wanted?"

"You know what I want," she moaned and tried again, helplessly, to squirm free. Duncan bent his neck to nibble just under her ear, biting and nipping at the side of her throat while she groaned and arched back into it. He could almost feel Methos calculating where he lay sprawled on the bed, his arousal treated as a distraction to be dealt with later because his mind was fully engaged in reducing Aidan to a whimpering, begging, above all pliable puddle of horny female. Duncan should, he knew, be ashamed of cooperating in this, but it was better than some of the other options that came to mind for keeping her alive. Or so the Scot kept telling himself.

Besides, Amanda and Connor would be proud of him.

Methos squirmed farther down the bed and wrapped a hand around her calf, fingers caressing Duncan's foot for a moment before he did something that made her arch against Duncan's leg as she tried to jerk away. After a moment though she made a noise that was half squeal, half squeak, pleasure and laughter blended, and settled back against him again.

The worst of it, Duncan decided, had to be the fact that her wriggling, squirming motions and unrestrained moans and whimpers were driving him to distraction, too. It made it damnably difficult to wait, to gauge her reactions and calculate just the right moment to do this.
Methos moved back up the bed, knees squarely between both their thighs, hands planted on the bed on either side of their chests, and deliberately shifted forward like a cat stretching. His chest just barely rubbed against Aidan before he hovered a bare inch or two over her body -- close enough for her to feel the heat, to almost feel him breathe, to try, desperately, to arch up to him while Duncan pulled her back down. Methos chuckled, a thoroughly predatory noise that made both his lovers even hotter, and did... something with his hips.

Aidan wailed, a frenzied sound, and tried to buck up against him. When that didn't work, she writhed frantically against Duncan, who hastily began reviewing necessary maintenance for the T-bird in his head to avoid all the temptations her movements posed.

And then Methos simply stopped. The oldest immortal paused where he was braced over them both and, with a degree of control that Duncan promptly vowed to shatter one day soon, said, "All you have to do, Edana, is give me your word."

"What?"

Duncan noted her tone of voice for future reference almost gleefully. So that was what Aidan sounded like when she was drugged with pleasure, absolutely stupid with lust the way men got when they had so much blood in their cocks that none was getting to the brain. He'd done it to women once or twice before. Sometimes, he grinned, the men win. "You promised," the Scot growled behind her, backing Methos up. The other man still seemed able to think and plot; Duncan would trust his timing on this. "Say it again."

"Your word, Edana, give it to us," Methos emphasized, voice low and resonant with power and control as he built off Duncan's words and his own. That implicit certainty left no room for anything except her obedience, no reaction possible except complete deference, utter surrender. Duncan felt Aidan's body yield to that commanding tone, to reactions conditioned into her long years before. Her struggles simply stopped and she flowed against him, pliant and yielding, given over entirely to whatever Methos had in mind.

She's never going to forgive us for this, he thought.

Across their link he heard/felt Methos' grim reply. Really? At least this way, she'll have time to get over it.

"Your word, Edana -- now." The third command did it, rolled across Duncan like a drug and poured through her as well. Her muscles contracted under his hold, shivering on the edge of orgasm and holding it off only by her will, voluntarily leashed to Methos' mastery now.

"Yes. I promise. Magister, please." She was whimpering in the back of her throat, squirming against Duncan in tiny, involuntary motions where her mind commanded stillness and her body rebelled, knowing what it wanted. Sharp nails scraped across Duncan's belly and ribs where he held her hands pinned, and he knew perfectly well it was both unintentional and unnoticed.

"Good," Methos purred as he descended, sinking into her, forcing her down onto Duncan's chest, pressing her ass back against Duncan's groin with the first hard thrust. Smooth, sweaty skin slid against the Scot's balls, and his cock slid along the groove of her spine, desperate for more contact, more something, anything. He realized he was squirming, too, hands clenching against her wrists in the same rhythm that his hips bucked up against her ass and back, but he could no more stop that now than he could stop breathing. The feel of her body moving between them, Methos' arms flexing against them both, was just too good because there were limits to his control, and this extended tease had aroused him almost as much as Aidan.
Methos freed a hand somehow, balanced between her body and one arm. He wrapped his fingers around the side of Duncan's neck, nails biting into the skin as his thumb stroked the line of his jaw. In that same fierce, controlling voice, he said, "Remember that."

Dark green eyes met Duncan's, and Methos' smile was a slow, knowing wickedness as he told them both, "Now -- come."

What surprised Duncan, in the aftermath, wasn't Aidan's boneless relaxation on top of him, or the sting of healing scratches across his stomach. He'd long suspected that Methos' voice alone could pull that kind of reaction from him, especially after the way Aidan had been wiggling against him all the time Methos had been teasing her. What did amaze him was the fact that he hadn't let go of her despite the fact that he was seriously wondering if his bones had been turned to rubber. He had a moment to wonder if Silly Putty impressions could take after sex and what he'd look like when she eventually moved. That same small, inappropriate part of his mind wondered if Methos would frame him and hang him up somewhere later to admire the view.

Then he heard Aidan's voice and all his bones resolidified as she asked languidly, "By the bye, gentlemen, what did I just agree to? I don't exactly have the facilities and supplies to bring you a handmade breakfast in bed tomorrow."

Methos shifted, lifting up and off her chest, as he casually inquired, "Can you still breathe, Duncan?"

Duncan tightened his grip on her wrists and deliberately kept his voice calm. "Yes. You?"

"Methos? Dhonnchaidh? Why am I still pinned?" The Irish immortal was rallying quickly in that annoying way women had of seeming to have all of their own energy after sex and half of the men's, too. Methos still radiated that contained pleasure, though, smug and relieved all at the same time, so Duncan wasn't bothered yet.

"Because, Aidan," the Scot told her firmly, "I'm holding you to something you promised me. And you just promised him, too." He deliberately tightened his legs, pulling her even more solidly against him and the mattress both and felt her shift slightly, testing his grip, before dropping the physical arena for a verbal one.

Her voice was soft, a dangerous growling undertone sliding into it as she asked, "What did I just agree to?"

Methos met her eyes coolly, one hand resting on her solar plexus to subtly emphasize who was in charge just now. "You gave your word, Edana. You'll hold to it, too."

"Almost," Methos told him. "To be more precise, Edana, you're going to allow one of us to fight
Owain. He's too fast, woman, and too strong on top of that.” She tried to speak and he froze her with a glare. "There is a reason that he has decided, now, after nine hundred years, that he can take you in a fight. And there is a reason he has declared a line war instead of simply sending that hit team against you. Marc's presence wouldn't have stopped them and you and I both know it. Since when do you play by the other side's rules? That's not what I taught you."

"Are you finished?" Aidan asked him, motionless between their bodies now, as she had not been those minutes before.

"That depends entirely on whether you're going to think. I'd rather not coerce you, Edana, but better to have you angry at me for a century or so than dead, buried, and rotting," Methos said bluntly.

"Always nice to know how you feel," she snapped. "Since when am I a complete fool, Methos? And I want him dead, you two. I want to see his blood drenching the ground, and I'll be sorely tempted to dismember the body. Did you think I was going to give him the satisfaction of fighting me if one of you would do it?"

Duncan tried to follow that and decided again that something about the shape of a woman's body must influence the structure of their arguments. "Was that a yes?"

"Yes, it was a yes," Aidan growled. "Do you have any idea how much revenge that one refusal to fight would be? Believe it or not, Duncan, I'd been trying to come up with a good way to ask one of you to risk life and limb, ag--"

Duncan pulled himself up long enough to see that Methos had decided to kiss her wordless and then let his head flop back on the pillow. Done. She'd agreed. Now he just had to work on getting Methos to let him fight Owain, since the oldest immortal always freely admitted he'd gotten a little rusty the past couple centuries.

"Rusty?" a small portion of his mind muttered sarcastically. *This is the man who took out Silas, broadsword against great axe. Rusty. You're getting delusional, MacLeod.* Rather than keep arguing with himself, Duncan growled at his two increasingly-heavy lovers. "I'm getting stiff and sore. Are you two through kissing and making up?"

Methos finally moved, settling back onto his knees to let the two of them disentangle themselves. He smiled at Aidan's muttered curses about over-controlling men and domineering idiots who didn't trust her to keep her word. Pulling her up and helping to rub out her sore arms seemed a much simpler solution than countering her insults which were, he had to admit, fairly accurate. Irrelevant, to his mind, but accurate.

Behind them, Duncan stretched out spread-eagled on the bed. Fingers pointed, toes pointed, long limbs trying to reach all four corners of the king size mattress, he groaned in relief as all the muscles which had been fighting Aidan got to extend at last. Sprawled out, eyes closed and sleep prowling ever closer as it murmured seductive suggestions such as letting the other two clean him up, he barely noticed as a warm, sweat-slick body slid up his belly and chest and settled comfortably on top of him.

Blithely disregarding his sticky state and her own, Aidan sprawled across Duncan's torso to plant a kiss on the end of his chin... then bit him in the same spot, hard. Duncan yelped and jerked involuntarily, smacking his chin against her nose, which drew a startled cry from her. The Irish woman sat up hastily, digging for something to stop the bleeding.

Methos, who had been contenting himself with a smug smile, broke into outright laughter when
she tried to snap at him. "Dab id, quid laughin' and cob sed dis. Id's your fauld, eddyway," just didn't have the right authoritative tone somehow....

Alex's voice came from the connecting door, asking blandly, "Are you three going to keep the entire hotel up all night?" He walked in just as Methos, who was still chuckling, turned on the lamp. Black eyes gleamed with amusement as the Greek surveyed the three of them. All of them were still sticky, sweaty, and rumpled; the bed was in complete disarray with sheets untucked and blankets and pillows scattered on the floor; and blood from her clearly-broken nose had splattered both Duncan and Aidan, neatly completing the carnage. Methos, however, looked entirely too smug about something.

"I'm sorely tempted to go back to my own room and ignore this," Alex chuckled after a long pause. "Didaskalos, go get some cold cloths to clean them up, why don't you? Sister, sit down and I'll set that." He gave the tall, well-built, and very naked Scot an appreciative grin as he suggested, "And Duncan? Why don't you put the bed back to rights?" Besides, Alex grinned to himself as he began to examine the damage to Edana's nose with part of his attention, that lets me watch that lovely ass while he's straightening sheets....

Marc Scipio's journal -- April 18th, 1998

I love Rich like I do my own brothers, and if he says one more word about cable, phones, movies, or even just bitches about the cold snap, I swear I'm going to take a swing at him.

After which I'm probably gonna spend a few hours waiting for all the broken bones to heal. Duncan did train him, after all, and Aidan hasn't exactly smoothed down any rough edges. But it might be worth it.

I know he hates this. I don't blame him; I don't like it either. After two years, four months, one week and two days in the wilds of Cascades, I was really looking forward to burying myself in civilization for a while again and enjoying girls and ice cream and movies again. Maybe even in that order. But, God, Seacouver is too small for the number of immortals who come through there, just judging from the last two months and some of the stories Joe will tell when it's late and it's just him and me bullshitting while Aidan spars with Duncan. We don't -- no, I don't -- have a choice.

Shit, I really need to cut Rich a lot of slack. He's in the middle of nowhere, by his standards, just to take care of me. Which by itself is enough irony for one of Teach's novels; I'm the one who knows how to live out here, and if some young idiot of an immortal came after me, I might even be able to use the environment to drop them without needing my sword. I'd better not need my sword; I'm just not good enough with it yet.

Rich, though -- oh, yeah, he's good enough. I asked him once if he'd taken a head and he looked... sad doesn't cover it. Ashamed, almost. Defiant and embarrassed and proud and guilty all at once. He went head-hunting for a while, trying to prove something to himself or to Duncan, and damn if I understand that. But oh yeah, he's good. He's taken some old immortals, and he's only been in the Game four years. He told me some of the names: Kristov, Nasser, Lars, Carter, Ivy. That last one.... I still have trouble believing he killed a woman, but the look on his face when he said her name made me wish I could take him home and let Mama take care of him for a while. He sounded like Neil did when he broke up with that little bitch Doreen. I think she burned something into Rich, somehow: something she said or something she did, maybe just asking for mercy that he wouldn't give and he regrets it now. But she's got her revenge, dead or not. I think she shredded him from the inside out even after he took her quickening.
Funny. Rich's the more dangerous immortal, he's been in the Game longer than I have, survived more than I have -- but I'm the one worried about him. There's something strange in that. But I think I'm right, too.

I wonder what he's thinking about? I know he's finally caught up on his sleep, and shit, he slept all day yesterday the way I did those first couple weeks after Aidan took me in: exhausted, and dreaming madly any time he wasn't so deep under that he barely breathed, much less twitched. Ran himself ragged looking after Damien, I think. Var chewed him out for it over dinner before we came out here, too. Something's eating at Rich, but damn if I know what. Wouldn't care to bet that he knows, either.

He said something when he came out to watch the sunrise with me, about the porch planks freezing his feet, or maybe he griped about the steam coming off the coffee... and I told him that if he was going that stir-crazy he should try writing in his journal, take his mind off the weather, sort himself out. He looked at me like I was crazy. I'm not sure Duncan's had him keeping a diary. Aidan didn't give me any options on it, and now I kind of like dumping my mind out on the page and looking at what I'm thinking before I sort it out and put everything up where it belongs and go back to trying to make it in the Game.

But I think Rich must have decided to see what was so damned interesting about doing this, or maybe he just figured out I was ready to deck him, who knows. He looked irritated at first, but then he got kind of absorbed in it. He's been sitting over there for probably forty-five minutes now, doing this two-finger hunt and peck on Duncan's laptop. Pretty funny, actually. I need to grab one of the typing shareware programs for him, maybe one of the ones where the faster and more accurately you type, the faster your race car goes or something. He's got to learn to type better than that; it's just gonna get more important as the years go by and I want both of us to make it.

Looking at all of that, I'm dodging what I've been worrying at all this time.

Okay. Fine. I'll say it -- I'm scared.

About a lot of things, really. That Aidan will get killed, and where that will leave me, for one. Selfish, but true. Yeah, I'm scared for Teach, but I'm scared for me too. Spending the last two months with her and Duncan has shown me just how much I don't know yet, just how bad I am with a sword compared to immortals who've been using weapons for years. And I have to compare myself to people like them, 'cause there are immortals out there that old and that good who would try to kill me in a heartbeat, just because I'm in the Game.

And I'm scared she's going to get killed, too. I like Aidan. She's a good teacher, and I don't want another one, damn it. And Duncan's at risk, too, and Connor. Fuck. Okay, I don't want any of them to die, damn it. I want time with my new brothers and sister. Hell, I want to run down to Sacramento, spend some time with Alex and Xan, see if maybe in oh, five, six years or so a certain house renovation company and a security system group might not want to put an architect on retainer.

It's only the eighteenth. They were planning to make Magdalena today. Stormy wanted to sleep on the mesa tonight, so she could get a look at the place by morning light tomorrow before doing it for real on the twentieth. Damien wasn't happy about that, either, but Var just reminded him that she's the professional and knows what she needs to do to do her job right. And Connor just gave Damien this know-it-all smirk, like he was being nice and not reminding him of something. Shut him up, too. But no matter how I look at it, it's the eighteenth. Two more days until they fight. Two more days until someone I know dies, because I can't forget -- I know Owain, too. May not have met some of his folks, but I know about all of 'em I think, and I've talked to some of them
briefly, even if I was just answering the phone for Christopher. And what does it matter if I liked 'em or not? Somebody once said, 'Any man's death diminishes me.' I hate the Game.

And God only knows when they'll contact us, or how. I mean, yeah, Joe knows where we are, but it's a two-three hour drive and then another hour and some in canoe. Without his legs, he doesn't swim that well. Too much upper body muscle to have enough buoyancy, I think. And I forgot to ask Teach about it. I hope like hell she thought about it, or Duncan. I don't want to wait until they get home again to find out what happened. The twentieth is going to be long enough. Waiting until the twenty-third or so.... No. I'd go crazy. Rich would beat me by several days, too. Hell, he may be there by tonight.

There's no use speculating, I'll just drive myself into a frenzy. I need to study, I need to spar, and I may go out to those stones later to sit and pray. They don't seem to mind, and it's... quiet there. Please, God, one night without dreams. Please.

In the meantime, I have a restless redhead on my hands. And in my kitchen. Fuck. Guess I'll drag Rich out to spar with me; at least out there, he doesn't get coffee grounds and baking powder across the floor. Besides, I need the practice. I'm getting sick of needing to hide to stay alive.

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Albuquerque, NM -- April 18th

The irony of the masseur's name hadn't been lost on Owain.

The hotel had recommended a health club within walking distance, and he'd gladly spent the morning there rather than with his students and theirs. There would be time enough this evening to calm them again and forge them back into a unified tool of his will. Until then, though, let them snipe at each other and build their irritation into a seething resentment whose energy he could redirect at Cynthia's people.

He'd arrived at that plan on the walk over. After that an excruciating endurance session on weights temporarily burned most of his concerns from his mind. Next he'd settled in on a rowing machine until his pulse had pounded through his veins, drummed across his brain, eradicating all other thoughts. Sweat had soaked him by the time he spoke to the young woman at the information desk and found that yes, their massage therapist did have an hour free. George Daniels had been highly competent, the massage worth every penny it had cost... and Owain had left him a generous tip simply for the amusement of his name.

Relaxed and as close to being at peace as he ever managed, Owain settled back into the booth at the bagel bar and raised his iced tea in an ironic toast to a dead man: Georges Danielou.

Such a complete coward he was, too, the Welsh man mused. Come Monday, Cynthia, I'll have to tell you who betrayed you. He smiled, an unpleasant twist of thin lips as he considered the effects of those betrayals on her. That idiot was weak; the amazing thing is that she ever let him find out she could do any kind of magic at all. I wouldn't have allowed that simpleton to see me working so much as a two card monte. Cynthia, the trusting fool, let him see her call fire. And he was so desperate to keep his head that he offered me an alternate, far more valuable, target: a true witch.

Did she really let him see anything? The Welshman considered that more carefully, again. It was a familiar worry in the dark of the night. Had he started the avalanche in motion, only to find that the exposed ground held no gold? Danielou was terrified, after all. Could he have been lying to me? Have I started this for nothing more than Cynthia's head? Granted, it's been profitable in some ways. We've taken some useful quickenings, but the counter-attacks this winter were...
expensive. New identities for myself, Johannes, and Jirina, as well as the deaths of some of our students and allies.

No, it's worth it if only for the quickenings. Cynthia is surely close to two thousand, as is Kyra; Damiano is near the millennium mark himself, as is Coventry. And the MacLeods are both valuable out of all proportion to their ages. Connor's quickening alone is priceless; he took the Kurgan. Duncan eliminated Grayson, and there are rumors that he may have taken Darius' quickening. Who better to have done the deed than the one who found the body, after all?

No. Regardless, this is worth it. Cynthia may not have let Danielou see it; it's possible he was simply repeating something that someone else offered to him in an attempt to stay alive. Or he might have stolen someone's journals. He was a competent scholar, if an imbecile with a blade. This, however, is why I don't keep such records. Owain snorted softly at the very idea. Let others record their thoughts, their musings -- it was a waste of paper but some of the immortals swore by it. The Welshman preferred to keep his memories to himself and his address book up to date.

Perhaps, though, Danielou did acquire his information from journals. Whose, then? Owain shrugged and drained the tea, his body clamoring for liquid the way the other immortal had cried for mercy. No matter where he got it, he told the same story sober and drunk, drugged or tortured, so I think I can assume that he believed it at least. Fool -- he thought that I'd leave him his head for such information. As if I won't need every bit of strength I can gather to take and break a woman twice my age.

This won't be easy. It's one of the most intriguing campaigns I've planned in years, mind, but Cynthia has always been a worthy opponent. Her strengths are the oddest thing, made up of her weaknesses. She actually cares about these chess pieces. Remove her people, though, and I remove her defenses. It's already begun. I'll tell her of Rabi's death, the way Pyotr barely managed to spit at me, of David's wasted frame when I bought him out of Auschwitz. The man couldn't even pick up the dagger I gave him to make it entertaining. As for Constantine's betrayal, well, that should rub salt into the wounds beautifully.

Oh, yes, I have the weapons I need to break her, and when she shatters, then I can take her head. The important thing will be to destroy her will before I take her head. I have no wish to find that the legends about Darius were true, that a personality can be reshaped by an older immortal's dying will. No, I mean to win both battles, the physical and the mental.

This is almost done, though. Ten years. Ten years to set this in motion and find her. Ten years of ensuring that my own would be here, one way or another. It's a pity that Erik was fool enough to get himself arrested for smuggling -- I wanted him for this. With Gwydion dead, I'd have enjoyed having his student here. Instead, I have Will, and I suspect it's inevitable that he'll be a casualty. He's simply not good enough, or vicious enough. But he'll occupy one of Cynthia's people, which is sufficient, I suppose. I'd have far rather had Johannes' other get, Pieter, but we never did learn who took his head.

Owain shook his head as he refilled the glass and sat back down, pulling a leather-bound blank book out and jotting notes in a desultory fashion to conceal his thoughts. A man working on a paper or project was always left alone, he'd noticed. A man sitting and trying to think, on the other hand, was likely to be interrupted by well-meaning fools wanting to chat or ask if he was all right, or suggest that it was time to move on. For the price they had charged him for the tea, he intended to tie up the booth for a while yet.

All told, this will go well enough. The older MacLeod is removed, and the younger one undoubtedly off-balance. Rumor has it that they were close, and would have been closer still if it
weren't for the threat of the Kurgan. I wonder if they were lovers? Is that a handle I can use on Duncan? Or another button on Cynthia? As for Connor, with his sword hand gone, the older MacLeod has surely gone to ground somewhere. There will be time to find him later. I'll make time.

One of Connor's other students, Sarisvati, is available, and they may well bring her... but she's said to fight by the rules. She won't be up to dealing with Damita or Bianca. Now the notes he made were more purposeful, as he filled in columns of 'Certain to come,' 'Might come,' and 'Not available.'

Duncan MacLeod, I think, can be trusted to come to this. Between his blood and his balls -- Connor and Cynthia, both -- he wouldn't dream of missing this, and should be off-center. And if he isn't, a few comments before the fighting starts should ensure it. Thin lips smiled in pleased contemplation as Owain made a note to that effect by Duncan's name before going back to his list. Cynthia, of course, will have to be there. Damien's temper, I think, can be trusted to bring him to this. The one time I mentioned that, Johannes just chuckled and said that the redheaded fool would show up. I wonder which of them Rufio wants to kill more: Johannes or Jirina?

My spy in Charleston reported that Damien had a tall black woman living with him for a while; she seemed quite disgusted by that. Idiot. Two possibilities there: Mandisa vanished out of Alexandria and Charles never called in. I suspect he lost his battle. But that description could also fit that Yoruban bitch, Isoka, and I haven't been able to find her in the last ten years. Is she dead? Or did she resurface in the States? Whichever of them it is, she'll be here, almost certainly. Damien always got along with both of them. For that matter, that walking disaster, Ishtvan, lost my tail in Marrakech. If they can contact him, and Damien almost certainly can, he'll be here.

His pen scratched names down the column of certainties only to pause. Navarro, now... he may come -- or then again, perhaps not. He's line of Ramirez, certainly, but I could never find any communications between him and Cynthia. Gwydion said there was dissension in the ranks there, that he was going to work on Rodriguez and see if the man would turn coat.

One day, my son, I will find out who took your head and see you avenged. Of all my students, Gwydion, you were the one who learned the most, understood the most... if I'd still had my lands in Wales, I would have made you my heir. But his favorite student, his true child, had turned up in a Southampton mortuary almost a century ago, and Owain had always prided himself on dealing with reality and the present.

He wrote Navarro's name in the 'maybe' column and forced his mind back to the subject of who Cynthia could bring to oppose him. This is the real list, Jirina, not that makeshift I gave you months ago. Did you really think that any true intelligence would have that kind of half-life, would still apply after all that time? Or have you been putting your own list together? The dark-haired immortal chuckled at that and leaned back, blue eyes narrowed under black brows as he considered both the list and the various members of the wide-spread line of Ramirez.

Coventry is in Tacoma; he might well come to this, despite that mortal wife of his. Damien's student, Andrew, is in Taos. Damien would be a fool not to call him in for this; he's a natural with a bastard sword. Owain's pen hovered indecisively between the first two columns before he nodded and put Coventry under the 'Might' column and added Andrew to the 'Certain' list. Kyra will come for this, however. That Spartan bitch should have been born in Trondheim or Oslo; she slavers for battle the way the Viking war maids did.

That Egyptian slut, Duathor, is a definite possibility. The last I heard, she was in Copenhagen working as a potter. She might well show up for this. Or MacLeod's young student, Ryan. He was
starting to get a reputation as a headhunter, in Europe at least. Would he want to miss this?

Owain glanced over his list again and nodded. Seven of them he felt were certainties, and he had five possible names for Cynthia's other two fighters. Of those, Coventry, Sarisvati, and Ryan seemed most likely. This will be interesting. We're more evenly matched than I like, but there are ways around that. Johannes needs no advantages, and Bianca and Damita both tend to make their own. Lim is a natural fighter good enough to give almost anyone on their side pause. Enrique's faith does lend him a certain invincibility in a fight; he takes chances no one else would, because he believes his Lord will protect him. It does seem to work. More because no one quite believes he would do something so idiotic until it's done and he's inside their guard, than because of his innate skill, of course, but if it works....

He shrugged. We'll manage. So long as I come out of it with Johannes alive and Cynthia in my hands, I'll be happy. Owain smiled, then, as he contemplated one other strategy. Even dead, Christopher serves me well. He thought that giving an immortal PCP before a fight might make them more reckless... but less inclined to notice pain. He considered the trade-off worth trying. Mixed with DMSO, it will work its way in through skin contact before they know what's happened, and I've a little bit available. I'll try it, on Jirina, I think, and possibly Lim. More than that would be both obvious and more than I can control should they get out of hand.

Owain glanced at the scribbles he'd drawn down the margins and saw the profile of a face that his subconscious had apparently dredged up. He frowned for a moment, trying to place the man, then smiled faintly. He'd always been a fair artist, and more than once he'd used that to his advantage; it was amazing how much information on troop movements could be gained while painting landscapes, or how much people were willing to pay for that information. And the landscapes sold well, too, he mused. But this may be even more use. I had almost forgotten Cynthia's husband. What was the old fool's name? Rufio, yes.

Owain smiled maliciously as he remembered the man's reddened, enraged face. "Red indeed," he murmured. Red as Cynthia's eyes when she heard. She broke down and sobbed in the Pallavicini courtyard and had to be 'consoled,' my spy said. I wonder in whose bed? But for what? A pair of children not even her own, and an old man who would have been dead in another ten years anyway. Fool. What are mortals compared to our kind? And what are the concerns of mortals compared to the challenge of destroying another immortal?

Blue eyes studied the list once more, darker blue ink tracing intricate spirals and curlicues along the headings as he considered the names again. He knew most of them, or knew enough to be fairly sure he could predict their behavior. Oh, yes. I know what they'll do, how they fight, who they hate. This can be done.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Certain to come</strong></th>
<th><strong>Might Come</strong></th>
<th><strong>Not available</strong></th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Duncan MacLeod</td>
<td>Fahizah Sarisvati</td>
<td>Connor MacLeod</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cynthia Torriani</td>
<td>Navarro Rodriguez</td>
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<tr>
<td>Damiano Rufio</td>
<td>Terrence Coventry</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandisa or Isoka</td>
<td>Duathor Negra</td>
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<td>Ishtvan Aziz</td>
<td>Richard Ryan</td>
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<td>Andrew Pilgrim</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kyra Phaedras</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Owain stretched and considered his list one last time, then tore the page out and shredded it slowly,
a predatory, vicious tearing and rending as if the paper were in actuality the flesh of his enemies. Finally he gathered the scraps together and closed his hand over them, reducing them to a wrinkled, irregular mass of paper. He threw the remnants into a trash can on his way out the door. A lazy, feral smile spread across his face while he strolled back to the hotel because already he was considering the next few days and their possibilities. *Soon, Cynthia. Soon.*

Magdalena, NM -- April 18th

Damien studied the town as Xan drove and shook his head ruefully. "Well, at least it has a gas station. Puts it ahead of the last one we hit."

"Does this make it a one-pump town?" Stormy asked cheerfully.

"Probably," Xan muttered as he slowed to let a dog cross the road. "But what are they pumping?"

"Xan! And me a lady," Stormy teased him ruthlessly, fanning her throat with the map she'd been looking over and widening her eyes at his reflection in the rear-view mirror.

"Stormy," Alex said without looking back, "that would work better if you weren't grinning like a hyena."

"Lioness, thank you very much. I keep my mane much better than any mangy hyena."

Xan chuckled at that. "Stormy, have I mentioned today that you're a treasure and I'm glad you came?"

"Xan, you sweet-talking man, you can say anything you like, but I'm still making you pay for your own dinner."

Damien snorted. "After the way you stole mine in Salt Lake City, he'd be safer sitting at another table, Stormy." He glanced across the road and saw the charred foundation stones of a building, then noticed the still-legible sign that no one had bothered to take down. "Aidan promised us the best biscuits in New Mexico, right?"

"She did that," Stormy agreed cheerfully. "Why?"

"At a place called the Arrowhead Café, right?" and the redhead pointed to the forlorn signpost without saying anything else.

Stormy considered the general neglect of the lot, the name on the sign, and the run-down air of the entire town. "Mm-hmm. I take it she hasn't been here in a few years -- say, my lifetime?"

"I don't think it's quite that bad," Alex commented, "but I have to admit I'm starting to feel like a George Lucas character."

"Oh, you're not the only one who's got a bad feeling about this," Xan smiled. "But if worst comes to worst, we have camping and cooking gear in the back. One way or another, I think we can get some of the best biscuits in the state out of Aidan."

"We may yet be glad she's a good cook," Stormy grinned. "Besides. At least we're findin' this out early in the day; better 10:30 in the mornin' than, say, eight o'clock at night?" She glanced around again before asking thoughtfully, "Do they just shut down at sunset, you think, or do they fold up the sidewalks while they're at it?"
The lobby was that of a motel that had once been quietly tasteful, comfortable and restful without being exorbitantly expensive. Now? Methos mused. If this place were a loaf of bread, I'd be making it into French toast today before it molds tomorrow. Hasn't quite gone to seed yet, but let this moron manage it even three more years and it will. Poor Edana. I'll admit, I can see why she remembered it fondly, but I'm going to have to tease her about how long it's been since she's been here.

Damien had already murmured the bad news to him about the diner that Aidan had mentioned so cheerfully at breakfast. The chances of getting feather-light biscuits and home-style cooking were probably shot to hell, too, unless they either found a grocery store on the way to the mesa or backtracked to the Cracker Barrel on I-25. Twenty-seven miles for a restaurant? I doubt we'll bother.

Aidan was quietly 'discussing' things with the hotel manager, and Methos doubted that this two-bit slime was quite what she'd expected, either. He managed to make Benny Carbassa look like a reliable, reputable member of humankind, and a greater insult Methos didn't really have available at the moment. From the set of his one-time student's shoulders, though, she did.

"It's not complicated, sir," Aidan said in the same patient voice she'd been carefully maintaining throughout the discussion. "We want four rooms. Three of them with king beds, if you have such," and her raised eyebrow spoke volumes of doubts. "The last room with a pair of beds. Now, unless you're simply overwhelmed with other guests, do you suppose you could accommodate us?"

"Sure, sure," the weasel gushed at her and Methos decided they were all going to have to do laundry. The man made his hands feel oily, and he hadn't even touched anyone yet. "If you'll just give me a credit card, I'll run it through--"

Duncan moved forward two deliberate steps and settled in at Aidan's shoulder as she smiled at the man, her expression growing colder and colder. "I don't think so. We'll be paying cash."

"Hey, you think we can't deal with credit cards or something?" the manager blustered. "That report to the BBB was bullshit, we didn't rip anyone off."

Methos fought to maintain his expressionless mask. That idiot just admitted to overcharging a credit card? Oh, if Edana can't run with that, I'm going to tell her to hand Marc off to someone and take a refresher course.

"Of course you didn't," was her level reply. "And we'll pay cash anyway, thank you. The last time I looked, the currency did still say it was legal tender. We'll be here for two nights at least, possibly three. I assume that's not a problem?"

"If you're gonna pay cash, I'm gonna have to have a night's charges up front, in advance. That's um...," he paused for a moment, "sixty-five a night for the king-size beds and sixty for the doubles."

Damien walked in with a suitcase in each hand and headed that way, already frowning as he took in the way Aidan's hand had fisted behind her back in irritation and Duncan was looming over the manager. Before Duncan could reach across the counter, Methos moved forward, deliberately taking advantage of the way the weasel reflexively turned to track the motion in the corner of his eye.

The oldest immortal let his own growing anger show through, hazel eyes cold in that
expressionless gaze as his 'Adam Pierson, friendly grad student' image slid away for the moment. He didn't smile at the manager as he said softly, "You'll be paid, in full, when we check out. For the correct rate, as posted on the doors of the rooms. That is state law, isn't it?"

Methos reached out, a folded fifty dollar bill in his hand, and slipped it to the manager who had reached out automatically, then stood there running his fingers numbly over the bill as if he weren't sure it wouldn't bite him but didn't dare put it down. "But you didn't see us, and you don't know what we look like. Do you?" A thousand years of atrocities spun across arctic green eyes as he didn't quite threaten the mortal. On his left, Damien radiated heat like a volcano slipping across that fine line between dormant and erupting. On his right, Duncan's anger, accumulated and nursed over the last several days, seethed under dark skin and tight muscles until the heat nearly seared even the mortal.

To the rapidly deflating hotel manager, it was all too clear that the dark-haired woman who was simply staring at him was the only thing between him and those very large, very angry men. The wood counter seemed fragile, almost immaterial, when compared to the tangible danger standing in his lobby wanting four rooms for a few nights. Forgetting them suddenly became one of his life's ambitions, following close behind the need to get them back out of his hotel in a day or so while his skin was still intact.

"Um.... I'm sure you're all law-abiding citizens," the manager babbled hastily, "so if you'll just sign the register, I don't even need to see ID's or anything. And, well, you can just come and go, there's no charge for parking or anything."

"Good," the dark-haired, clearly Irish, woman purred, grey eyes intent on his face. "I'll sign us in. And the sooner you hand us keys, the sooner we'll be out of your lobby."

"Yeah, no problem," but his smile was as false as a campaign promise, and ruined by the trembling lips. He turned only as far as absolutely necessary, nearly dislocating his own neck trying to watch the four of them and select the keys simultaneously. She was quickly scribbling initials and last names into the register; the tall, dark-skinned man took the keys as they came across the counter.

Duncan held up the last one and asked calmly, "Is this the one for the double beds?"

"Yeah, that's it. The maid can get you extra towels or anything you all need. Um, are we talking double occupancy or...."

Methos simply raised an eyebrow. "And here I thought you already quoted us prices. Let us worry about that, why don't you?"

Her voice surprisingly menacing despite its quiet tones, Aidan said, "I think that takes care of everything. Thank you so much for your... cooperation, sir. We do appreciate it."

The four of them had just turned to bring in the remaining bags when Stormy walked in, looked the lobby over, and remarked pleasantly to Damien, "Right up there with the biscuits, I take it?"

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Mandisa lounged contentedly in the early afternoon sunlight, a dark shadow idly rubbing back and forth against a large boulder to scratch the one, precise spot between her shoulder blades that itched. That done, she asked again, "Are you sure you don't need help, Shahar?"

Aidan simply laughed; her mood had clearly improved during the long drive out to the mesa. "You helped with the shopping, Disa."
Duncan, who had already heard chapter and verse about Mandisa and kitchen implements, said firmly, "We're almost done, thanks."

"Your reputation precedes you, sister." Var chuckled as he handed around cold soft drinks and beers. "But I must agree. We'll get it."

Aidan set bread, meats, and cheese next to the onions and tomatoes she'd been slicing and called, "Will someone cut up the apples while I get the carrots? Other than that, we can eat."

Damien and Stormy continued to double-check the contents of the backpacks against the items on her list. The little blonde waved a dismissive hand at lunch in acknowledgment, but never stopped working. "Be there in a minute, Aidan."

Adam was chopping apples, but most of his attention was on keeping his beer from falling off the cutting board rather than precise sectioning of fruit. He commented, "Take your time, Stormy. It just means more for the rest of us, after all."

Alex chuckled and snagged an intact apple and some of the carrots onto his plate before folding himself down next to the rock where Connor was sitting. "Here, pass your plate for a second, Connor." He pulled a knife off his belt and casually sectioned the Scot's sandwich into quarters so that he could manage it more easily one-handed.

Connor nodded his thanks and went back to studying the mesa. "We'll want to reach the top an hour or so before dawn, I'd think." His tone was that of a man continuing a previous conversation, although they had all put off considering the site until they got food.

Damien, who had grown up in the foothills of the Alps, looked the path over and nodded. "Agreed; we don't want them catching us on that. Stormy, what do you think?"

"I think I'm not looking at anything other'n this list until I'm sure I've got everything, Damien Appesard. Your problem is that you don't focus tight enough," she scolded him as her hands continued to check items by touch alone. She finished the second backpack and nodded her thanks when Var set a Coke down within reach, but went on to the third one without stopping. She'd checked the clothes and med-kit the night before, but she examined them again briefly before pulling out the bag of ammunition to reconfirm that, yes, the rounds she wanted were in fact in there.

"Everything all right, Stormy?" Aidan called over.

"Fine, Aidan, just fine. I'll clean the guns again tonight before I go to sleep, but that's not a problem." She latched the straps on the last backpack and walked over.

Mandisa chuckled and said, "Over here, Stormy." She waved at a plate of sandwiches and fruit and the little blonde grinned her thanks before settling next to her long, lanky friend.

"I want a photo of those two together," Connor commented. "We'll come up with a title later."

"I thought you wanted to discuss this fight," Var mentioned mildly.

"Why? We know who we want to throw against who," Connor told him. "I wanted to consider the terrain, which is something else entirely, Rodriguez."

"I'm always in favor of staying alive," the blond aristocrat agreed, caustic and amused at the same time. "I assume everyone wishes to walk the mesa top so we know what the footing is like?"
"I'd rather not make four trips to tote all these packs by myself," Stormy stated bluntly. "Y'all can damn well go up if only to help me carry things." She tore back into her food, anxious suddenly to get moving and get on with this. "But lookin' at that path, y'all will want to be here by about 4:30 or 5:00, I'd say, to make the top in plenty of time.

"We'll know after we go up this time," Duncan pointed out, taking a practical viewpoint as he studied the mesa. "But like you said, Stormy, let's do this one step at a time. Do you have everything you need?"

"Check me if you hear something you think I've left out." She shrugged as she ran one finger down her list. "Tarps, tent, stakes, rope, hammer -- yes. Cot, sleeping bag, travel alarm clock, lamp, first-aid kit -- yes. Matches, firestarter, charcoal -- yes. Jerky, Gatorade, salt tablets -- yes. Clothes, sunglasses, hat, poncho -- yes. Guns, ammo, cleaning kit, binoculars -- yes. Last and not least: shovel, toilet paper -- yes. Anything I missed, y'all better think of it and bring it tomorrow," she told him, clearly amused. "Can I finish my sandwich now?"

"The radio we brought for you," Aidan reminded her calmly as she idly sliced an apple into thinner slices. "But that sounds like everything, Stormy. Oh, do you want a book, dear?"

"Got one in my backpack." Stormy chuckled. "Good reading for a night or two out here, too."

"Which book?" Mandisa inquired curiously.

"Women Who Run With the Wolves." The little blonde grinned. "Been meaning to read it. Thought I could pick up some tips for dealing with y'all."

Var put up his hands and solemnly conceded, "I surrender. Truly. Damien, you're my brother -- you protect me."

Aidan smiled, and even Duncan grinned as he watched the gold-haired Spaniard deliberately cringe away from the tiny mortal woman. Connor chuckled, a raspy staccato sound, and agreed, "I don't think you need the hints, but you'll enjoy the book."

"Are you sure you need to spend both nights out here, Stormy?" Damien asked her again, clearly worried.

"Damien, I have to do it this way," she responded firmly. "I've got to see the top of this mesa by mornin' light, sugar. You know better'n I do just how deceptive that first grey stuff is for distance work. It's just the way it has to be."

"Do you have to stay out here by yourself, though?"

Alex cut over the two of them, addressing the others. "I think it's time the rest of us started up. We'll see you two at the top." He hefted one pack and passed another to Duncan. That left the last frame backpack for Damien, and one of Stormy's gun cases for her; Mandisa had already taken the other. Xan contemplated the two glaring lovers before he pulled an extra pack out of the back of his vehicle and left without a word.

After the other immortals had vanished up the winding, packed-dirt trail, Stormy flatly told him, "Damien, I don't like spending the nights apart either, but you're a damned distracting man and I can't fuck this up. I just can't."

He paused, surprised, then took a deep breath and resisted the urge to start one of their usual explosive arguments. "Fuck what up, Stormy?" he replied instead, his voice as gentle as it ever was with Mandisa. "Protecting us?"
"Yeah," she muttered in a tight voice that was nothing like her usual languid Southern drawl. "What else would I be afraid of?"

"Anyone else your size would be afraid of the local wildlife," Damien snorted. At her instantly offended expression he held up both hands in apology. "All right, all right." He heaved a sigh and sat down on the boulder Mandisa had vacated. Watching her pace, hands jammed into her pockets as if she were afraid to break something by accident, made him shake his head ruefully. He gave her a moment to settle down, then decided that wasn't going to work either.

"Grab a seat, Stormy, 'cause this doesn't sound like it's just the line war you're afraid of. What's wrong?"

The little blonde turned to face him, clearly startled that her defensive ground had been cut out from under her so swiftly. "Aren't you supposed to be stormin' and rantin' and ravin'?"

"No audience," the bulky redhead commented. "Seriously. What's wrong?"

"What makes you think somethin's wrong?"

Damien drew on his memories of Aidan's best 'you must be joking' look and simply watched Stormy until the tiny woman sat where Mandisa had been, picking at a seam of her jeans that didn't have so much as a single loose thread. When she looked up at last, he told her, "You make me think something's wrong. Now, either I've been pissing you off in bed and this is your way of deciding to break up with me when this is all said and done--"

"I've got better manners than that!"

"--or," he went on in the same deliberately calm voice, "it's something else. Why don't you want me here, Stormy? What are you afraid I'm going to see?"

"Are you supposed to be this smart? I thought Mandisa and Var said you were lousy with women," she argued, only to throw her hands up in resignation when he glared at her. "All right, Appesard, fine. I don't get to change the subject. Look. Do you have any idea just how good I am with those rifles?"

"I saw you with pistol," Damien reminded her. "Two men pulled guns on you and two men died."

"No, one of 'em pulled a gun on you. He never pointed it at me, Damien; he was too damn scared o' you." She took a deep breath, then forced herself to admit her secret before he could tell her to get back to the subject. "I missed Barcelona by one shot, Damiano."

"Barcelona?" he asked, puzzled, then stared at her, green eyes widening in surprise. "The Summer Olympics at Barcelona? Fuck."

"That describes it perfectly," she told him grimly. "I fucked up. I froze, Damien, and I missed a shot I should have had. I just... froze."

"You had it and you choked?" he asked thoughtfully, trying to make sure he understood what she'd said.

"Yeah. Now do you see why I'm so scared?"

"Nope." He watched her eyes widen, her chest heave as she drew breath to argue with him, and deliberately cut over her voice at his full volume. "Sylvana Storm, shut up and listen to me for once in your stubborn life!" When she paused, Damien lowered his voice to say, "You're not going
to screw this up, woman. I can prove it."

"How?" she growled. "If I can fuck up a target shoot, Appesard, I can damn well screw up this."

"Bullshit. You screwed up something where the only one who'd get hurt was you. When have you ever fucked up something when other people were depending on you?" He watched as she looked for something, some example, but he'd known her for almost half a year now, and the tiny blonde was just too good at what she did. "College doesn't count," he interrupted before she could start with that argument. "Everyone blows off at least a little their first time through."

"I don't want to lose one of you," Stormy admitted softly, looking down at her hands. "And I don't want it to be my fault if we do."

"Did you listen to anything we told Aidan in the pool? What is it with women and guilt?"

"I'm Southern," she snapped, the old fire back in her blue eyes. "We grow up with free-floating guilt!"

"Yeah, but Stormy, you're supposed to use it on everyone else, not fall for it yourself!" he countered, glaring at her.

That startled her into giggling, golden curls falling from her short ponytail to snag across the collar of her shirt as she buried her face in her hands. "Damn you, Damien Appesard, you're not supposed to make me laugh!"

He shrugged massive shoulders, pleased to see her relaxing again and enjoying the hiccuping music of her laughter. "Why not? Remember, Var did say we should be having fun, not being so damn serious that Owain wins. And as he keeps pointing out, he's better with women than I am."

"You ever gonna tell me about that?" Stormy asked him, trying to stifle her bubbling laughter and be serious.

"You could always let me stay and tell you stories tonight," Damien suggested amiably. "We wouldn't have much else to do until sunrise, you know." He saw her hesitant expression and added a further bribe. "Besides, if I'm here, you can investigate even higher perches to set up in."

Stormy looked at him, then sighed and conceded this battle. "I can't fight both of us, Damien. All right, if you stay, we get to bed -- and to sleep--" she glared at him, "at a decent hour, 'cause I need to be up and in place a good hour before dawn. That means my little butt's gotta be out of the sleeping bag by 4:30, hothead."

"And no fire," he agreed quietly. "You'll just blow your night vision. I know what you're doing, Stormy."

"Been here and done this, hmm?" she wondered.

"Yeah, once or twice," he admitted, a reminiscent smile on his face. "You might ask Connor and Aidan if they have any advice. They've both done some serious sneaking around in their day."

"I think most of 'em have." Stormy shrugged. "I'm half-expecting to get up there and find that they've already set up camp for me and been scouting out perches I can get up to."

Damien stood up and extended a hand to pull her up. She smiled and let him tug her up, then unselfconsciously brushed the dirt off the seat of his jeans before she turned to get her gun case. The muscular immortal chuckled as he returned the favor with a conscientiousness that earned him
a swat on the back of the head.

"Just helping you out, Stormy. After all, you can't see back there, can you?"

"Come on, Appesard, let's get topside and see this place."

Damien hefted the pack with the tent and muttered something that sounded distinctly obscene before he added, "And of course they're hunting for the best spot for you. Haven't you figured out by now that they like you?"

Her quick, wicked smile made him nervous even before Stormy told him sweetly, "I knew that, Damien. Now I just want to hear your version of some of these stories...."

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Duncan held the blankets up as Methos came to bed, and pulled the familiar, wiry form against his chest. "Come get warm."

"Thanks. I forgot how cold it gets here at night." The oldest immortal tucked his feet under the Scot's legs and shamelessly wiggled until the other man scooted back a bit and left him the sections of the sheet that had already warmed up. Instead of indignant protests, he only got an indulgent chuckle against his ear and strong arms wrapped around him.

"It could be worse; you could be on the mesa with Stormy and Damien."

That drew an amused snicker. "Did you see the look on Damien's face when Xan pulled out the extra cot and sleeping bag for him?"

"Yeah, and I saw the look on Xan's face when Stormy swatted him for thinking she was predictable." Duncan buried his nose in Methos' nape and pointed out, "And I thought you were used to warm climes? What about all those complaints of 'Bora Bora is nice this time of year?'"

"Bora Bora doesn't drop below freezing at night in the spring, Highlander." Methos sighed and squirmed against Duncan, shaping the other man to his satisfaction with a series of shoulder fidgets and an unsubtle nudge from his hip. "Better."

"It's at least thirty-eight out there," Duncan chided him. "Shall we leave the light on for Aidan? Is she still talking to Xan and Alex?"

"Mmm-hmm." Methos sighed and basked in Duncan's warmth, then added, "And if we turn the light off, we'll just have to listen to her stumbling and muttering about idiot men."

"Good point. Warm yet?"

"Better. You could quit talking now," Methos suggested hopefully, then decided that Duncan was entirely too tense for a man getting ready to drop off. He wasn't acting like a man with amorous intentions, though, which left other options such as a serious discussion or another argument over who got to take on Rhys-Tewdor. However, Methos was determined that the Highlander could start this, or at least let him thaw his feet out first.

"You awake?" Duncan asked unnecessarily.

"No, I'm talking to you in my sleep," Methos grumbled, and decided it was just as well they'd left a lamp on for Aidan; he might yet want to watch Duncan's face. "Why are you awake?"
"Did you know about Connor and Xan and Alex?"

"What, that those two lunatics are seducing him again?" he replied lightly.

Duncan laughed softly, ruefully. "Well, that answers that. I wasn't sure, and I didn't really want to ask. Whatever they're doing, it's helping."

"And you wish you could leave it at that?" Methos inquired thoughtfully. He twisted in Duncan's embrace and pushed the younger man onto his back before settling onto his shoulder and half over his body. "Pull the blankets up, will you?"

The Scot tugged them back over Methos as he slowly explained, "It's not that I can't leave it alone, Methos. It's just... he surprised me. Connor's always dealt with people by how they acted more than what they looked like." He smiled at that and his voice sounded fond as he went on, "Kastagir, for one. Those two were campaigning together in Valley Forge when black men in the colonies had to worry about being sold as escaped slaves."

"He put up with my over-civilized peacock of a student," Methos pointed out reasonably. "For a barbarian Highlander, that's an accomplishment by itself." He frowned, though, when his lover failed to rise to the barb.

"Yeah." Duncan stroked Methos' back in an absent-minded fashion, his hand following the same monotonous arc from shoulder blade to ass and back again and again.

"And?" came the gentle prompt when silence fell around them into the shadows.

"I didn't expect it. How he'd feel about them. It makes me wonder what else I don't know about Connor. If I've been deliberately blind to the people I love."

"Because my past blindsided you," Methos said flatly.

That drew a snort. "Well, that too. No, I was thinking more of Mary Lindsey. It never occurred to me that Anne Lindsey's reaction to my death would be to go and end up pregnant."

"Or that Connor slept with men."

"Plural, not singular?" Duncan chuckled. "Yeah. Or that they'd treat him the way they do and he'd put up with it."

"Xan and Alex won't cosset him any more than he needs," his lover calmly replied. "I suspect they're a fairly pleasant memory for him, and Connor appreciates that right now."

"Memory?" Duncan sat up, dumping Methos off his chest. He ignored his lover's complaints, staring incredulously at him instead. "Wait, you said seduce him again. You knew about them?"

Offended as any cat evicted from a lap, Methos took his own sweet time arranging blankets back around himself as he commented, "If you don't keep your voice down, it might just go through the walls. And I suspect that if you wanted to hold this discussion in front of your teacher, you'd have asked that earlier this evening."

"But you knew?" Duncan repeated, then irritably pulled the blankets into place around Methos' shoulders when he saw goose bumps break out. "How you can get so cold in one or two places so quickly--"

"--is more than compensated for by the way I get so hot in others. And of course I knew. I saw
them with him when they first hit Seacouver." Irate brown eyes glared at him until Methos smiled and admitted, "And they mentioned him in a few letters back in the early 1800s. I'd have to check my diaries for exact dates. Does it matter?"

"You knew that Connor wouldn't--" Duncan broke off, but the rising color in his face gave Methos some idea of what he wasn't saying.

"That he wouldn't be upset about us?" Methos smiled at that, too. "You took everything else in stride, gradhach, including Joe. Why didn't you tell me you were worried about Connor?"

Duncan tilted his head, a sarcastic mannerism he'd picked up from too much association with Methos, and asked ironically, "How?"

"You're right," came the amused reply. "Somehow I can't quite see you asking me, oh, 'So, do you think my teacher will approve or throw us in the gutter?' No, it would probably be something more like, 'Do I strangle Aidan for telling Connor, or throw myself at his feet and on his mercy?'"

Duncan growled, "He wouldn't have thrown us out even if he didn't approve."

"Knowing that, you didn't know that he'd at least reserve judgment?" Methos asked him incredulously. "Did I never tell you that he got me drunk at Christmas and asked what my intentions were?"

"He what?" The Scot stared at Methos in disbelief, sure that this was some kind of diversion. After it sank in that his lover was serious, Duncan groaned in dismay. "I'm surprised you haven't held it over my head ever since."

"He thought I might be after your head, actually," came the thoughtful comment. "But then we ran into each other just after the Revolution."

"Head-hunting?" Duncan asked curiously.

"No. Well, I thought about it for a moment or two. Between them, he and Kastagir stiffed me for quite a bar tab."

"Did he ever pay you that ten pounds he mentioned last summer?" Duncan wondered, more than willing to change the subject.

"He converted it to dollars, calculated a disgustingly conservative interest rate," Methos grumbled, "and then had the gall to send me the figures and a receipt."

"A receipt?" Duncan repeated, amused and curious. Somehow this did sound like something Connor would do, though. "For what?"

"My half of a Burne-Jones. Since Aidan had just moved, he gave her a house-warming present from both of us. As many times as that woman has moved, and as many things as she has, he had to give her something that expensive?"

"That's where the painting came from?" Duncan smiled. "She did say you and Connor had been insanely generous."

"And she likes it," Methos growled. "She hung it in her office where she can see it any time she looks up from the monitor."

Duncan leaned down and kissed him. "I seem to remember she gave you a rather thorough thank
you, too. You didn't argue about that part of the deal. Give up, Methos, he won this one."

"And who's winning about his relationship with Xan and Alex?" came the cool question as Methos routed the discussion back to its original topic. When Duncan tried to look stubborn, the older immortal shrugged. "Have it your way. Worry and brood about it. Toss and turn and keep me and Edana from sleeping, then show up in the morning snappish and irritable; that should worry the others nicely. Including your teacher and kinsman," he added, aiming straight for the holes in Duncan's defenses. "At least your manners are good enough that I doubt you'll do anything rude around Xan and Alex, even if you don't approve--"

His words were cut off by a large, square palm over his mouth and the hissed threat, "Don't even think about biting me." Dark brown eyes glared at him. "If you think I'm so much of a hypocrite that I wouldn't want Connor happy, no matter who he's with, you're probably in the wrong bed."

Methos raised an eyebrow at him and deliberately settled back against the mattress. Duncan nearly growled, but he did remove his hand.

"Better." Methos commented judiciously, "You're getting some of Kyra's manners and she always was a Spartan."

"Meaning?"

From the motion of the blankets, Duncan was pretty sure Methos had shrugged. "Entirely too blunt and convinced that diplomacy and subtlety were for other people."

Remembering when she'd done the same thing to him in Manhattan, the Highlander had to nod. It surprised him when Methos sat up and opened the blankets, ordering, "Come here." But he went anyway.

"What are you really worried about?" his lover asked as he lazily carded long fingers through Duncan's hair. "Connor and those two maniacs?"

"Not really." Duncan sighed and let himself sprawl across Methos, as much for the comfort he derived from the other man's skin as to keep him warm.

"Ah. Connor's state of mind?"

For a little while Methos almost thought he'd gone to sleep, despite the regular breathing. Eventually, though, the younger Highlander admitted, "Not as much. Some."

"I still won't tell you what was done to him," Methos told him gently. "It's irrelevant at this point. It would only distract you and possibly Connor as well."

"And Aidan?"

"She's distracting herself all too well, but a good hard spar tomorrow will help. It wouldn't hurt you, either," he added.

"I could use that," he agreed. "We've spent too much time in cars these last few days."

"It'll get better," Methos chuckled. "And you remember how long this would have taken on horse, Highlander."

"And how much our asses would still hurt," Duncan said reminiscently. "Did I ever tell you about..."
"What?"

He could almost see Duncan consider what to say, how to say it, then the younger man answered quietly, "What you said reminded me of a time I did wear myself and a few horses out going after another immortal."

The careful set of his face, the attempt to keep his mouth and eyes from giving anything away, told Methos that his lover wasn't sure this was going to be welcome information. "Your past or mine?"

"Yours, I'm afraid," Duncan told him. "Melvin Koren."

"Kronos." Methos nodded, then said quietly, "We can't dodge him forever."

"No. There's too much of your past tied to him, and too much of our past, too. But--"

"But that was what you thought of, and I did ask." Methos chuckled for a moment. "That was when you were helping the Texas Rangers, wasn't it?"

"Yeah."

"Look at it, this way, Highlander. They did finally get their man." Methos shrugged. "It's done, Duncan. Let it go."

"Can you?" He propped up on one elbow to meet hazel eyes, surprised as always at just how much the older immortal let him see.

"You learn to," was the rueful reply. "At least, I had to." A lazy, indolent half-smile told Duncan he was in for some kind of slight even before Methos went on, "Of course, you're still such a young pup...."

"I'll show you young," Duncan mock-growled, moving swiftly to crouch over Methos. The barely-contained smirk on his face gave his good mood away, though.

"Really?" Methos struck out with both arms, hitting Duncan's elbows to drop the other man onto him, then rolling both of them so that he came up on top. "Not this time, I don't think. Do you trust me?"

"Yes." It was such a simple word to contain so many layers of answers. The larger man relaxed under him, sable eyes closing as he tilted his head back to expose his throat. "What do you want me to--"

A single finger touched his lips and Duncan stilled, trapped in darkness and silence by his own consent. He shivered when the covers were pulled back and away, but more in anticipation than from the faint chill of the air. Time slowed even as his heart sped, feeling each shift of fabric under his back and thighs, hearing each slight noise of wood on wood, of displaced air as Methos moved. Then he gasped despite the injunction to silence, startled by the feel of silk trailing across his closed eyes.

The touch of lips to his was almost chaste, light as any kiss of peace from a respectable matron in church... until a tongue traced warm moisture across his lips and drew back. He groaned and raised his head, blindly chasing that mouth, only to feel the lightest of touches on his forehead. A finger pushed him back to the bed and tapped lightly on his mouth, whether to remind him of the previous touch or request his silence, Duncan didn't know.

Now the silk trailed down his face to his throat in the lightest, most shivering of caresses. Duncan
arched back to get more, disconcerted by how good it felt and then even more startled by the teeth that followed the same path. No nibbling caresses, these, no soft nuzzling -- they were sharp nips and hard, sucking, bruising kisses that contrasted sharply with the fine-weave fabric which lay across his collarbone.

He could almost see the line of marks trailed down his throat, could imagine the shift through the spectrum as blue sparks trailed across bruises, shading them from red and purple down to yellow and green.... Freezing cold across those same marks interrupted his thoughts, and he gasped when Methos pushed him back and settled the ice cube into the hollow of his throat.

"Hold still," Methos murmured, richly pleased and almost amused as Duncan shuddered under the ice and his voice. "I'll want that back in a moment or so."

Under the familiar desire, alarm set in at Methos' easy control and his own immediate surrender. Uneasiness raced through Duncan's blood and sent shivers across hyper-sensitive skin as centuries of leading, of being the responsible party, tugged at him. What am I doing? Methos is giving me orders, and I'm letting him! It's not that I don't trust him, but....

"Hush," Methos whispered, his hand an anchoring weight over Duncan's heart. "There's nothing to fear here, Highlander, only pleasure and relief. Let me take the weight for a while, gradhach. Give it over. You can trust me."

Absurdly, what flashed across Duncan's mind was a line from a book that Aidan had loaned him. Something about the strongest bows being the ones that must be unstrung most often to keep them from warping out of shape. That sparked thoughts of Aidan's surrender to them both a few months earlier, of the relief and, yes, joy she had taken in submission to their will. I never thought that was weakness. Which means this isn't weakness, either, Duncan decided and arched his back just enough to press into Methos' palm.

A soft chuckle stirred the soft fabric, sending it drifting down his throat and across his shoulder. Duncan shivered again, this time from arousal, and subsided against the bed.

"Better," Methos murmured, and began again. The pattern of silk and then teeth, sparks and then ice, repeated itself across collarbone and nipples, leaving the ice in his navel this time. Strong hands held him in place when he squirmed, and the threat to gag him was as silky as the fabric resting now on his thigh.

Somehow he held still when Methos followed the same sequence across his ribs, traced the same nearly unbearable patterns up the inside of his thighs, although that required a new, and comparatively colder, ice cube. Silk wrapped around his cock at last then, wound up from the base in a spiral that stopped just under the flared crown and he shuddered again from anticipation as much as the irregular trickles of cold water running down his waist.

Methos pressed his arms up and back, murmuring, "Lace your fingers behind your neck, Dhonnchaidh."

The still-rare use of his name tremored across Duncan's nerves, making his heart pound, and he did as Methos requested, muscles clenching in anticipation as he felt the sheets and mattress shift under his legs. Weight settled between his thighs and callused palms spread his legs even wider. The silk slid across sensitive skin in a terrifyingly slow progression around and up, the constant friction across the slick head of his cock not enough to burn, but far too much to ignore.

Teeth grazed the skin at the base of his cock, and even as his cock twitched the Scot moaned, low and deep in his throat. Strong fingers rubbed along his thighs, stroked behind his balls, teased the
underside of his cock even as his teeth went up the outside. The nips weren’t quite sharp enough to be pain, but the possibility held Duncan taut between the sheets and his lover’s hands and mouth.

He shivered as Methos worked his way inexorably toward the crown, then gasped in relief when what touched his skin was hot, moist air instead of teeth. Duncan subsided against the sheets... and then felt teeth press into the skin, not enough to hurt yet, but it drew a startled cry from him anyway. A chuckle rumbled against his cock as Methos took him deeper into his mouth, barely scraping the sensitive skin with his teeth, tongue applying sudden, unexpected pressure at the sensitive point where the vein slid under the crown. Duncan moaned again, then, and arched, mouth open for a cry that never escaped. Methos’ hand, damp and cool now from the ice-melt, wrapped around the base of his straining cock. Slowly warming fingers pumped Duncan as that hot, slick mouth engulfed him and the Highlander gave himself over to his lover's ministrations willingly, fingers knotted through each other and strands of his hair running through them as his head thrashed on the pillow.

When he exploded at last, it burned up and out of him, fluid pouring from his cock as fire sheeted along his spine, kindling along his limbs until it burst in opalescent sparks behind his eyes. Later, he didn't know when, Duncan felt strong hands coaxing and arranging him until he lay half-curled on his side. A soft weight of fabric was smoothed up and over him, wrapping him in comfort as muscular arms enfolded him, and Duncan slid into sleep to the reassuring sound of a familiar voice purring contented, reassuring noises against the nape of his neck.

Albuquerque -- early afternoon, April 19th

It was the implausibility of the combination that slowed Johannes’ step in the hotel's restaurant, that prompted him to set his feet more lightly and to watch how his shadow fell so that he didn't startle them. And it's a damned good thing for me that we're all getting careless of these buzzing presences, was his harsh conclusion. Although they're fools not to check who I am. Unless....

He moved swiftly to sit in a nearby booth, and barely had time to lift the menu in front of his face before Damita walked past him to sit next to them. He gave it another few minutes, though, before he set down the menu; long enough to see if Bianca would join them. To his surprise and worry she didn't.

When the waitress came, Johannes pointed to what he wanted rather than speak, holding a hand to his throat as if it pained him. She looked at the entry for hot tea, grinned, and promised him cheerfully (and more loudly than he liked), "And honey and lemon, too, don't worry."

Once she was gone, the bald immortal went back to listening to the others, eavesdropping on their German with the ease of a native Prussian and occasionally wincing at Damita's accent. Of course, who knows where -- or from whom -- she learned the language? No matter, I can still understand most of it, and we'll see what they think I shouldn't know. Johannes chuckled sardonically, if quietly, at the thought that they could outsmart him.

Lim answered the young woman's query calmly. "German isn't the best language for this, Damita, but it'll do if we don't take too long. Have you had any replies, Jirina?"

"A few," she answered, her voice so tense Johannes could imagine the white knuckled grip on her silverware, or maybe her glass. Her next words shocked him, though. "I found a private investigator in Seacouver who, amazingly, could give me a very quick report on Duncan MacLeod
and this Aidan Logan. Neither one has been seen since late on the fifteenth."

"Anyone else?" Lim asked.

"No one in Charleston would look into Damiano," she nearly snarled, biting off the words as if she would rather rend someone's flesh. "They were perfectly amenable to the job... until they heard his name."

"Chasing shadows, spinning in circles. The whirlwinds only spin around you, they never come to your hands. And pigeons are useless," Damita told her in an apparent non sequitur. Then she added gleefully, "But did they tell you anything useful?"

Jirina stared at the mad child, grimly silent until the perpetually-teenaged woman finally shifted her gaze down to the table. The Slavic woman nodded once and continued, "Connor MacLeod never returned to New York."

"Ah." Lim nodded slowly. "That could make this more interesting, yes. I thought you said he wasn't going to be here?"

"No. That's what Owain said," the blond woman corrected him before looking thoughtfully at the young Brazilian. "Now, Damita, this is where you prove your usefulness. Why is Owain so sure that the older MacLeod won't be there?"

Dark eyes stared at the table, and Damita ran one long, thin braid back and forth through her fingers as she shook her head. "He won't be there. The lord is the land and what use is the king when there are no crops?" She sounded petulant, like nothing so much as a child whose doll had been taken away.

"Why not?" Lim pressed her. He didn't trust Damita in the slightest, but he was aware that her answers always made sense -- to her at least. When she only shook her head, he said levelly, "You haven't brought much to this, Damita. I'd recommend you produce something, or you'll receive nothing more."

"Pawns become queens. But kings can become rogues." She glanced at both of them, then shrugged and smiled, showing teeth so sharp that Lim wondered if she had filed them. "Not after what Bianca and Owain did to him, though."

The other question, of course, is what she chews with such teeth. The deceptively fine-boned Oriental man frowned, unwilling to let her see his unease. "Owain gave any man to Bianca? You're right; he won't be there. Did she leave him intact?"

"Intact as a puzzle her work was." Damita smiled, then shrugged and added in a contemplative tone, "Did you know that if you sort out the edge pieces first, it's easier to work the center?" She saw Lim shift in his seat and suspected that he had just crossed his legs. Inwardly she smiled. Just another man, focused where they all focus. So kind of Oyá to build them with a leash. He's a fool, though. I enjoyed helping with MacLeod's hand, but he hasn't even thought of that. I suppose his mind stopped at MacLeod's balls. Of course, why should he be any different from Bianca? Although I'd have never expected the pious priest would be more cruel to a man than my teacher.

"He screamed," the Brazilian girl said thoughtfully. "They all do, but he healed. Like the little man where you draw with the stick and the iron filings paint him to look like whatever you want?" She looked at them questioningly. "You know, the ones where you shake it and start over." Jirina was staring at her, eyes wide as Damita went on, "Of course, we shook him while we drew on him, so I guess he went back while he was still."
"Ah. I think we can count him out, then," Lim made himself say calmly. It was an effort to relax before he turned back to the Slavic woman, and he found himself grateful for Jirina's company. Jirina Petesceu was dangerous and tricky, but it was a relief to talk to someone who was at least in the same reality with him. "Who else, Jirina?"

She shrugged quietly. "I don't know. Owain had most of the information on who was where."

"Not as much as some, more than others." Damita added bitterly, "But he'll tell us what he pleases, and sit by as we work. The blood ran deep before he lifted his hands." She tightened her grip on her own fork, muscles standing out under brown skin until crimson blood ran down onto her napkin. The young Brazilian pried her own hand open then, and watched it heal, apparently fascinated by the tiny blue sparks that danced in the bloody punctures.

Lim said coldly, "Wrap that before anyone sees, fool. But who told you that Owain ever gave away anything?" Certainly not information he might be able to use later, Lim thought. He frowned at the young woman until she finally clutched the napkin to the wounds. In the meantime, he had yet another problem. She understood Owain too well, from the sound of that. Was his old teacher slipping so badly? Or was Damita so much more intelligent than her half-crazed façade would seem to indicate?

"Bianca didn't, and she learned that same silence from him, didn't she?" Damita snapped. "And the Prussian spare cock is no better."

Jirina chuckled at the apt imagery; her laugh was a richer sound than either of her two companions had expected. "Oh, that's rare. Owain's spare prick, indeed."

The dry humor that flashed across Lim's face surprised Damita; it implied a subtle, quick mind and she had only heard the others comment on the skill of his fencing, not this mental sharpness to match it. "Oh, indeed, and Owain uses him to ream us all. I don't trust him," she purred, even more suspicious of them than she'd been before this first tentative sounding out.

She didn't trust any of them. Only Oyá could be trusted. Cemetery queen, let me in and out through your gates. I pay for everything; I ask nothing. The Scotsman's blood ran sweet and thick to the floor, his screams rose to the winds for you. Keep me safe from my enemies, Oyá Yansa, and I'll give you my opponent's blood, too. I'll draw his breath for you with his cries of pain, and dedicate his skull to you.

"Of course you don't trust Johannes," Lim pointed out. "You don't trust us, either. Nor we, you," and Lim's voice was the more frightening for its levelness. He'd put no emphasis at all on the words, and that lack freighted them with more terror than a more distinct tone would have. "What else do you know, about either our enemies or our kin?"

"Johannes knows more about Owain's plans than the rest of us." Damita shrugged, aware that that was obvious. "And the priest is spending too much time on his knees. He doesn't think Bianca fits into his god's plans." She laughed softly. "What does he know of God? He talks to Him, but never listens for replies."

"Lack of faith, in God or Owain, would require more imagination that Enrique has," Lim pointed out, startled that she had, for once, made sense. "What of your teacher?"

The skinny half-breed girl gave him the contemptuous look that teen-agers throughout time had mastered and now she sounded like one, too. "What about her?"

"Is she stable or not?" he asked bluntly.
Her laughter was shockingly pure, a crystalline sound of merriment at some joke only she saw. Whatever it was, clearly it amused her.

"Yes or no?" Jirina grated. "Is she sane?"

"Men and more men and yet more men this Cynthia knows and claims as kin. Barbed wire and poison wouldn't keep Bianca away from such perfect targets." Damita shrugged, a surprisingly eloquent motion of delicate shoulders.

"And you?" he went on, cold and precise. "Are you stable enough?"

She smiled at him mockingly, almost sweetly, as she stood from the table, and her eyes were suddenly far too old and much too knowing for that eternally young face. In that moment Damita Santos was suddenly, shockingly present, as she had not been for much of the discussion. "You'd better hope so. Because the rules that they've told me don't seem to allow for showing up short on fighters. Do have a nice afternoon," she added mockingly as she left.

Jirina watched her walk away, the twitching hips deliberately provocative, and shook her head. "Born to be hung."

Lim shrugged, the twist of his lips a wry punctuation to his sardonic eyes. "She did train with Bianca, after all."

"Good point." Jirina sipped her coffee, then switched to Hakka. "Do you speak this one?"

Lim raised an eyebrow in a rare show of real surprise. "I had no idea you did," he answered her appreciatively in the same dialect of Chinese.

"I propose an alliance between us until the war and its truces are over. You're competent, sane, and willing to kill, and I think we may be the only ones here who fit all of those qualifications."

"There's always Owain and his 'spare prick',' the Chinese man pointed out thoughtfully and wrapped his hands around his tea mug again.

"Owain trusts no one but himself, and I think Johannes is the same in his core."

"All of us are. Why should I agree to your idea?"

She regarded him from scornful eyes which were the same pale blue as early morning mountain skies; anger swept down across her face as swiftly as storms descended in those same regions. "Don't then. Go into this on your own, Lim Mahn. I hope you have your own rental car, though. Or do you trust our mutual teacher when the fights are over and he has the goal he's fought for in his fist?"

He leaned back in his seat, fingers steepled over the hot tea now, and said calmly, "You always hurry, Jirina Petesceu. If you take a jump too soon, you'll only hit the hurdle rather than clear it. I merely ask why I should trust you."

"You and I have worked together," she pointed out. "I don't entirely trust you, but I believe you can work with me toward a goal. In this case, getting out of here alive when it's over. I trust you that far, which is farther than I'm willing to go with the others. But since you're not interested..." The sturdily built Slavic woman stood up as if to go and carefully did not smile when he reached out a hand, apparently casually.

"You are hurrying again. That is a sufficiently specific target that I am willing to discuss it with
"Are we allies or not? There's no time for this; I don't know where Owain or Johannes is. Do you want to be interrupted in this discussion?"

Lim shrugged and smiled pleasantly. "And why not? We've merely been speaking about our enemies. Let the others assume they're among the line of Ramirez."

"And some of them even are?" Jirina asked, amused. She sat back down, however. "All right. I have the P.I.'s report on the younger MacLeod if we need it as an explanation."

"If we both survive, we assist the other in reaching the rental car and an international airport. After that, our obligations to each other are completed. 'Agreed?'"

"Agreed." Relief swept through her at finally having a safe ally, but Jirina forced that down. She'd spent centuries without trusting anyone, after all. This was a bad habit and one she didn't intend to indulge in or repeat.

Lim nodded once. "So. Your primary concerns?"

"Owain," Jirina answered immediately. "I don't trust him at my back once it's over. I'm not entirely sure I trust him at my back before then."

"After it's over, certainly not. Before...." The slender Chinese man shrugged and echoed Damita's earlier comment. "He'll need us to make up the bouts."

"True enough." Jirina drained her glass as she ran options and possibilities through his mind. At last, she said more quietly, "I don't think he'll have hired mortals for this. He wouldn't trust us not to suborn them ourselves."

"Wise of him." Lim smiled at that thought, but his smile faded to a more sober expression as he asked, "Didn't you fly over with Farrell?"

"What about him?"

"Do you trust him for this?"

She shook her head immediately. "No more than necessary. He actually thinks he owes our teacher. He even likes mortals."

"But does he like other immortals?" Lim asked thoughtfully.

"Yes," she said grimly. "Those two Greek madmen, the de Valicourts, even Ishtvan and Cory."

The last two names pulled Lim upright. "You must be joking. I would have thought he was too responsible to deal with thieves and troublemakers."

"Apparently not. Owain may have miscalculated with him. And why isn't Erik here instead of Will?"

"Erik was arrested by the FBI for smuggling counterfeit merchandise."

Jirina raised an eyebrow. "And of course you know nothing about where he got this merchandise, or how the FBI found out."

"I did not sell him out. I would much rather have had Erik Olafson here than William Moran."
Contempt sharpened Lim's voice as he said, "That one is a fool. What was Johannes thinking when he trained such an idiot?"

"Maybe he wanted an assistant who wouldn't dare try to take his head. Does it matter?"

"Only in that we're stuck depending on him to win a fight." Lim shrugged. "Best we consider him lost already. He's cannon fodder, brought here to tie someone up and die. Why nine fights, though? Against Kiem Sun, perhaps, but Cynthia?"

"It's a mystic number for Celts, too," she told him grimly. "He's attacking Cynthia on several fronts with this, and for some reason he thinks nine fights will undermine her will. I don't understand it, Lim, but I won't assume it's not there."

"No, it would not do to assume he has no reason for this," he agreed, rubbing absently at an old scar on his hand.

He was obviously thinking hard about something, that much she could tell, and she felt no impatience as she sat back to enjoy her Coke. Lim's mind worked in different ways than hers, but he was no fool and as paranoid as she was, which meant Jirina was willing to wait for his opinions. His first question, though, surprised her.

"This Cynthia he's hated for so long -- is she such a prize, then?"

Jirina frowned at that for a moment. "Old, strong, and a powerful enemy to be cleared away before the Gathering, certainly." The Slavic immortal paused then, busy thinking herself, and then went on more slowly, "And valuable for her connections at the very least, Lim. She's leverage on both of the MacLeods, on Damiano, on Navarro, on any number of others."

"To be leverage," he pointed out coolly, "she must be perceived to be alive. Does he wish her head, or her person?"

"Revenge on her has been one of Owain's more minor ambitions for years now."

"Precisely." Lim sat up, face animated and intense now as he threw his mind at this problem again. "A minor ambition you say, and you've known him for almost six hundred years now. Why now?"

"He's been setting these plans in motion for years now. At least ten, maybe more. If it goes back to Gwydion's death...."

"Now he was reliable. We could have used him for this," Lim agreed. "Do we know who took his head?"

"No idea," Jirina admitted. "He might have run afoul of almost anyone in Southampton that year. It was a fairly major port."

"True enough. Leverage, or an exorbitantly expensive revenge?"

"With this many people involved," she said slowly, "the word will get out if he captures her. No matter what happens. She would be extraordinarily... useful alive."

"And if enough of her people died fighting for her, would it damage her will?"

"I don't know," Jirina answered, obviously still thinking furiously. "Perhaps. I've never met her before, Lim. Now, if we look at her friends -- FitzCairn, Rebekah, Darius, that bitch, Elizabeth--"
"All inclined to sentiment," Lim agreed. "But what of Haresh Clay and Carter Wellan? I would not say they had soft spots."

"Neither do several of her students." She glanced at him and added sarcastically, "Do let me know which names are familiar to you. Damiano Rufio; Flynn O'Doherty; Ragnor Swifthand who's dead, thank God; Duathor Negra; Kyra Phaedras; Ishtvan Aziz. Any of them ring any bells?"

"She trained those?" Lim stared into his cup for a long time before saying softly, "Owain cannot afford to have even three of those immortals united against him. The question becomes, does he know that?"

"Does he care? There have been times he's disappeared and I couldn't find him. One of her fingers could prove a powerful inducement to some of those thieves and assassins. All manner of jobs suddenly become... possible."

"You have been working with the Mafia for too long," Lim murmured, "but perhaps you have a point. So. Now we know why this is worth the fighting. Perhaps we should insist upon a share of the profits, since we are certainly providing a share of the start-up capital, so to speak."

"It's worth considering. However, let's make sure we stay alive to discuss that with him, shall we? You do have more modern weapons, don't you?" Jirina asked.

He smiled at her, a mocking expression that said nothing aloud but was an answer nonetheless. "As to the mesa," Lim commented. "Perhaps we should plan on leaving the party early?"

"After our bouts?" Jirina smiled. "That is certainly worth considering."

"I was thinking of leaving as soon as Owain is committed to his," came the silky reply. "Much safer, I think. Once we're at an adequate distance, then perhaps we should discuss with him what he has gained and what should be," he paused, looking for the right word, "shared."

"Just another business day, in other words," the blond woman chuckled.

"Yes, I think so." Lim dropped money on the table to cover his bill and stood up. "Best we split up now, Jirina. But I'll remember our pact."

She slid money onto the table to cover her own portion of it, and still leave a tip so average as to avoid being memorable to the waitress. "So will I."

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Johannes watched them leave, his eyes cold and dark as the tea still in his mug. Even the parts of that discussion which he couldn't translate had occasionally been interesting. The evident alliance between Jirina and Lim didn't surprise him very much; they had taken each other's measure while hounding MacLeod in Paris and come to some sort of arrangement, apparently. That they would work with Damita Santos, however, even in so limited a capacity, shocked him.

She's not even close to sane. She never was, and training with Bianca only made it worse. He refused to let that little fiend make him shiver, but his nostrils flared like a frightened horse's and worry etched fine lines around his eyes and between his brows. The two women had been competing over MacLeod's body, trying to outdo each other in inventive butchery.

What she did after Bianca helped with the rape... Johannes drank his tea without noticing the bitter taste. The way Damita slid that dagger into him was unnerving. The little bitch rocked it in and out, asking if he liked it slow or did he want it faster? And after Enrique castrated MacLeod --
God, I still don't believe he did that. He just... twisted it off. Johannes did shudder at that memory. Some things not even he could control himself against, and that had nearly driven him out of the room. Damita insisted on slicing MacLeod open afterwards and dropping his cock back into his belly, chanting 'Some assembly required' and 'Batteries not included' until I wanted to backhand her just to shut her up.

Johannes tightened his grip on the table, fist clenching convulsively until the edges of the wood bit into his palm. Admittedly Jirina doesn't know about any of that, but there have always been stories about Damita, and they've never been good. Jirina must really be nervous if she's willing to work with that bitch. Owain, what did you tell her that has her so panicked? Or not tell her?

I'll have to ask him that later -- when I see him again, damn it. First Bianca grabs one of the cars to go shopping in Taos, then Owain slides out of sight again. Johannes caught the waitress' eye and signaled for the check even as he turned over the latest problem in his mind.

My first question has to be, was the information they gave Damita correct? I didn't hear them bring the MacLeods and Logan back up when they changed languages, but they may have already discussed that before she got there. He wrote that off as irrelevant for now, but made a note to discuss some of the more intriguing tidbits from the discussion with Owain. I wonder why Damien is off-limits for Charleston private eyes? Jirina sounded thoroughly frustrated, which means she was probably refused three or five times before giving up. Interesting. I wonder if Owain's spy knows about this?

As for the rest of it, though, well, their evaluation of Enrique had been accurate enough. He'd been in a church all day, and wouldn't return until dinner, most likely. If Johannes hadn't pointed out that he'd need fuel to fight 'the witch's minions' he might very well have fasted in preparation for the fight instead. Imbecile. He probably believes that his strength is as the strength of ten because his heart is pure. I don't think Sir Galahad would have anything to do with Enrique except take his head.

As for Farrell... when this is over, we may have to do something about him. I've never trusted him anyway. He's a little too noble to suit me; it makes it too hard to predict what he'll do.

Damn it, I want to know what they were discussing. I can understand discussing the line of Ramirez, and I think that's part of what they were doing. But what does Cory have to do with this? Or the de Valicourts? Some of the other names were just as worrisome: healers and pacifists, then Clay and Wellan? Why the contrast? And why bring up the names of Cynthia's most dangerous students immediately after? What are those two up to?

Maybe it's time I double-checked my own precautions. I'll mention some of this to Owain, but this time he can cover his own back. He was the one who wanted to involve so many immortals; let him be the one who leashes them.

He took the check from the waitress, nodded, and gave her a five, then waved away an offer of change. "Thank you," he told her instead. "You've been very helpful." It was a measure of his distraction that Johannes never noticed the startled look she gave him at his sudden 'recovery.'

Magdalena -- evening 4/19

"So, who takes care of you?"

Connor asked the question bluntly, and Xan made no attempt to dodge the issue. That had always
been the unspoken contract between the three of them: questions received answers, and if you
didn't like the truth, you shouldn't have asked. Xenokrates never flinched away from the Scot's
eyes as he told him, "Until this is over? No one."

"What? You're not good enough to hurt like the rest of us?"

Xan finished unbuttoning his shirt and tossed it onto the chair. Lamplight shone on gold skin and
blond hair as he asked, "Do you really think that, Connor?"

"No. But you haven't answered my question." Connor pulled the long-sleeved maroon T-shirt
over his head and threw it to lie beside his duffel bag, then stood there, paler than Xan but more
solidly built.

"There's no easy answer to that one, though." Alexandrias walked out of the bathroom and sat on
the end of the bed, all black hair and olive-toned skin, as easy in his nudity now as he had been in
denim and broadcloth earlier while climbing rock outcroppings.

"All told, which members of this group would you say are currently the most stable and least
injured?" the black-haired man asked patiently.

Connor raised an eyebrow at him, his eyes shifting slowly from dark green back to hazel. "I
assume you mean emotionally as well as physically?"

"Mmm-hmm." Alex watched the Scot unfasten the top button on his jeans and slide off the
comforter to kneel in front of him. Lamp light sparked blue highlights across dark curls as he bent
his head to work on the laces of Connor's boots.

Damien, not Var, and after what they did to me, neither my sister nor my student, although those
two are doing better than I thought they would."

"That's emotionally," Xan said quietly as he finished stripping off his own clothes and began
folding them away into his bag. All three of them wanted to be able to leave at a moment's notice,
and the sun-gilded Greek finished with his gear and Alex's before going on to Connor's as if the
three of them had never quit traveling together.

"So long as Aidan and Damien get sleep, I'm the only one of us who's having trouble physically." 
Connor toed out of his boots and nodded his thanks when Alex helped him out of the jeans. "What
am I missing?"

"That Adam's too busy keeping his lovers intact to worry with much else," Alex told him,
sprawling back into an overstuffed chair. "And how is your wrist doing?"

"Well enough," Connor shrugged, trying to dismiss the subject. The dull ache flared when he least
expected it, but stubbornness had gotten him through the torture, and he suspected it would do well
enough with the aftermath, too. "There's not much to be done about it, anyway."

Alex snorted. "Not as much as we could wish, but there are some pressure point manipulations
that will help with the phantom pain. Trust me, it's much better than nothing. So tell me when it
hurts, hmm?"

Instead of responding, Connor turned to admire him. "Nice view," he chuckled at last, ruffling his
own brown hair straight up for a moment. "I'd forgotten how comfortable running around with a
couple of heathen Greeks is."
Xan shrugged. "Nothing wrong with nudity as long as you don't get sand or sunburn in unpleasant places. But tell us, hmm? As to the rest of this group, Mandisa holds Damien and Var stable -- she always has, thank God. That leaves Stormy free to focus on what she may have to do and any preparations she needs to make, and the two of us to care for you."

"Not the easiest job right now," Connor nodded, eyes narrowed as he brought up something he'd been considering for a day or so now. "Alex -- you said you'd gone through this yourself. Am I bringing up old memories?" Unspoken but heard nonetheless was his worry of, Am I distracting you?

"Not too badly, no. You've slept with me the last few nights, Connor. I think you'd have woken up if I'd been having nightmares."

The Scot flushed, heat rising through him to match the arousal triggered by memories of waking up with one of them curled against his back, nose against his nape or cheek cradled against a shoulder blade, while the other slept under his arm, lulling Connor back to sleep with the slow, regular rhythm of his breathing. Alex was right. They'd been so close that he wouldn't have been able to miss it.

"I don't know, though," the darker man went on. "Xan, you've had to help both of us through this at different times. And rape trauma is such a bitch...."

Xan shrugged and said quietly, "Connor, if we're not going to get a shower yet, come sit down." The blond held out an arm and then sighed contentedly when the Highlander sprawled against him on the bed. "I'm fine. Alex is fine. What are you really worrying about, hmm?"

"You two. You're worrying about everyone else; are you saving enough energy for yourselves?"

"Oh, yes." Xan nodded emphatically, knowing Connor would feel the motion even if he couldn't see it. "Trust me, Connor, we're both being careful."

"You'd damn well better," the Scot told them firmly.

Alex came and sat down in front of them, one foot tucked under the other thigh. "When this is over tomorrow, Connor--"

"When we win, you mean," he interrupted.

Alex nodded, dark hair gleaming in the lamplight, but his voice was very serious. "Yes. When we win. Will you come back to Sacramento with us?"

Hazel eyes widened in surprise for just a moment, then narrowed as Connor began to think again. "My hand? Or the rape?"

"Both." Xan's arms tightened around him. "And we've missed you."

"Which is it?" he asked.

Alexandrias smiled at him, the slow-blooming pleasure that lit his face from the inside out. "Yes, Connor, we know it matters. We have missed you, you know." He moved further onto the bed so that he could wrap an arm around each of them. "And we're selfish. If you're going to heal with someone, and you still have healing to do, we all know that, well--"

"--then we'd rather it was with us," Xenokrates told him resolutely, one gold-tanned hand resting possessively on Connor's waist. "We'll just worry about you otherwise and be coming to visit all
the damn time. We'd like our house intact and our businesses running smoothly and still in our hands, thanks. So come stay with us for a while, would you? In our best interests.

"You almost make that sound convincing." Connor studied them both, then said quietly, "You're worried, aren't you?"

"That the three of us will win tomorrow? Not too much," Alex admitted. "About some of the others? Yes. Damien and Var can both be impulsive."

"How good is Rhys-Tewdor?"

Xan's arm tightened around Connor's waist and his voice sounded worried as he answered, "Too good. Fast and strong. If you still had both hands, or had more time to get used to the loss of your right, you could take him... but it would be a fight."

"And Aidan has to fight him?" the Scot inquired, clearly contemplating something.

"We thought so," Alex shrugged. "Didaskalos has been looking smug, though, so perhaps he found a loophole."

"She might win anyway," Connor said calmly. "She's more vicious than anyone ever seems to expect."

"She can be, yes. You may have been Owain's worst mistake yet, you know, Connor." Xan smiled at him, but it was a feral pleasure. "What they did to you was meant to break us. Instead Owain may have made Edana furious enough to unleash everything at once. I wouldn't want to cross her in that mood."

"No," the Scot smiled. "Neither would I." He pulled Alex against him and relaxed into Xan's arms, enjoying the feel of both bodies against him, the heat of their skin and the warmth of their company as silence fell companionably around them. "As for Sacramento?" he eventually offered.

"Yes?" Alex replied, never lifting his head from where it lay on Connor's shoulder, although some of his tension escaped into the muscles of his shoulder and back.

"I asked who takes care of you, remember. So, do custodians get room and board?" Connor chuckled.

Xan nuzzled his hair. "The position has all sort of perks. Starting with scrubbing your back in the shower, because I want to get clean before we go to bed."

"Before or after?" Alex asked, smiling at both of them with an anticipatory air.

"Are we discussing showers or sex?" Connor wanted to know.

"Both," Xan maintained, laughter tingeing his voice. "Shower, then love-making, then another shower and some sleep. Two in the morning's coming too damn quickly, gentlemen, but damn if I'm not taking you both to bed tonight."

Alex snorted. "I remember more than a few times when we fought pitched battles on two hours of sleep."

"In the mud," Connor added reminiscently, then grinned. "We sound like the old jokes. You know, walking five miles to school in the snow--"
"--uphill both ways," Alex and Xan chorused, grinning themselves.

"And we were **grateful,**" All three of them chimed in on the punch line, then looked at each other and laughed.

"Right." Xan smiled at both of them, a pleased, lecherous look. "Hot water, then other types of heat."

Aidan smoothed the blankets against Methos’ back when he shivered and sat on the edge of the bed for a few moments while she stroked his hair. Duncan muttered something incoherent in his dreams and pulled their lover more firmly against his side, one arm sliding around him under the covers. Finally Methos slid back down into a deeper sleep and she straightened and pulled on the clothes she'd deliberately left in the bathroom, collected paper and pen, and silently let herself out the door.

She went only as far as the room nominally in use by Damien and Stormy. Navarro and Mandisa had been taking great glee in rolling around on the bed to make it look as though someone was in fact sleeping there, but the tall African woman had been enjoying sitting up and talking with her Spanish brother too much to use the king-size bed herself. So the room was empty, with no one to be disturbed if Aidan wanted to use the desk.

She pulled the curtains open and then the window as well, grateful that the hotel had been built before the advent of central air. The chill night air swirled around her in a bracing blast, clearing her mind and easing her spirit as well. The Milky Way threw its white trail over the sky, unblurred as yet by moonlight, and Edana smiled at the sight. She'd grown up thinking to spend her life following the cycles of the sky; even now the patterns of the night were immensely comforting simply through the myriad associations they called up.

"So many nights, Mother. So many lands, and so many friends. Thank you." She smiled as she spoke, hands running through her hair and loosing it from its long plait. The finger-combed mass fanned in static-filled waves around her shoulders and face as she leaned on the sill, sinking her self into the darkness and the wind. When she began to be chilled by the night rather than energized, Aidan finally closed the window, although not the blinds, and sat down to write. She hadn't formally promised Damien an explanation, but....

"But you came, Damiano," she murmured. "I owe you this." She smiled then, an expression as clear and cold as the sky and as primeval as the moon. "Surprise, Owain. This is my last weapon, old enemy. The last bindings to check, the last edges to hone, are those on my rage. So. Tomorrow, whichever way this goes, will be the end. This is the beginning."

And Edana set pen to paper and began to write, swiftly, decisively, letting the words come out as they would rather than looking for just the right phrasing as she normally would have done. The last thing she owed to her own was the truth as she knew it, untainted by any effort to sanitize it or render it more palatable.

**Damiano,**

You wanted this story, student of my student, a request from the pupil that I feared most to lose for so many years. Did you know that? I thought you'd never learn to control your temper, old friend, and that it would be your death. Instead you forged it into the sharpest, most dangerous weapon in your arsenal. Remember that, will you?
If you're reading this, you may yet have to teach Marc that rage and that edge; he'll need it, if he's to live.

I know you. Whatever bouts we win or lose tomorrow, if you survive, you'll hunt the rest of Owain's line. Don't bother denying the truth, discipule meie. If you go hunting, take help: Ishtvan, Duathor, Flynn, any of the others. And see Marc settled with a good teacher first.

I suppose this might end up read by the others, but you were the one who asked, so I'm writing it for you. Share it with whomever needs to see it, mind, but enough of that. You wanted to know how this started.

It began with a clear day, that pristine shade of blue that the sky only gets in autumn. The shade you never want to see when you still have two ranges of mountains to cross before you reach home, and the horses are tired of carrying the gold and the trade goods. English woolens are still some of the best, but they've always been heavy and hot.

They attacked us in Brenner Pass, coming home from the trade fairs. We'd hit Turin and Lyons, Tours and Orleans, Paris and Metz, Strasbourg and Zurich, and finally Salzburg. By the time we hit the Zillertalen Alpen, all we wanted was to get to Milan and let some other poor bastards unload the horses and see to the packs while we pulled on tunics we hadn't worn bare and talked to people whose faces we hadn't been looking at for months. In other words, we'd been on the roads for too long. An insanely profitable trip, though. The Pallavicini and a few other families had invested with us, and even with taxes and the cost of the armsmen, we'd made a glorious profit on it, I remember that. I think I was working on an argument to convince my husband that repairing the warehouse roofs would be more sensible than buying up more farms which we couldn't staff, when the attack began.

Well-organized for brigands, I remember, and they almost succeeded. Unfortunately for them, though, I'd hired some Scots clansmen who'd fallen out with Alexander before his coronation and thought it might be a good idea to stay well away for a few years. They'd fallen in with a few Irishmen, including, you might tell Rich, one Ceallach O'Maoilriain (Kelly Ryan in English) and I'd hired the lot of them as reliable fighters. You remember what it was like finding able-bodied armsmen that year, with Jerusalem and Acre taken already and all the younger sons who could usually be hired already gone to win absolution and make their fortunes in the newly Christian kingdom.

They hit us with arrows first, then moved in to go hand to hand; at that point, they found out about Scottish great swords. The last few fled and I took some of the clansmen and hunted them down so that they wouldn't find another group and lead them back to us. We'd lost too many men in that first hail of arrows to be able to take another attack like that, and worked too hard to lose to bandits. I'll admit, part of my worry lay in the fact that the Torriani had tied up too much of their wealth in this trip. If we didn't get home, my husband's family was likely to starve.

Somehow, I've never known how, Owain found out who'd destroyed that band. They were his men and a large part of his force, I think, judging from his response. But the first I knew of it was when I came home from discussing the next caravan with the Pallavicini and Rufio, my husband, told me a bandit had come to Milan and offered to let our next caravan through safely for a price. Danegeld, though, only brings more
Danes; Rufio, Niccolo and I decided we wouldn't pay. Increase the number of men traveling with us, yes -- pay a bandit for our passage, no.

The next afternoon, just outside the town gates, I met Owain for the first time and realized it was one of us making these threats. He was still young, perhaps two hundred, maybe three, and the only thing that kept him from revealing me to them as an immortal was the fear that I'd take him with me. Neither of us wanted to risk that. Owain was furious when Rufio told him that if it weren't for his escort we'd destroy him here and now. He tried to freeze me with a glare, and when that didn't work, he told us one way or another we'd pay to cross the pass. Rufio told him to get out while he still could.

It took me two days of arguing and another three of refusing to argue before they gave in and agreed that I would lead the next caravan, too. I hated that. Reina and Francesco, Rufio's children by his first wife, were six and eight by then. I'd already missed most of the previous year with them, and they grow so quickly at that age, but I couldn't leave someone else to come up against an immortal running a pack of brigands.

This time we were ready for them, and they found out the hard way that unarmed men in wagons aren't always unarmed. We took some of them from a distance, and mowed the rest down at close quarters. When the last of them were dead and the last of my people tended, we hung the bodies from the trees as a warning after writing 'Thieves' on their tunics with their own blood.

By the time we made it home, though, with another profitable caravan for the Torriani/Pallavicini alliance, a plague had swept through Milan. Rufio and his children had been the first ones struck ill, and among the first of the dead.

I know, Damiano, it could be coincidence. Niccolo Pallavicini told me, however, that Rufio had said some brigand had come to warn them to pay his toll through the mountains or watch the Torriani vineyards burn that fall. He hadn't been at either meeting with Owain, but his description matched perfectly.

Then, too, Reina's nurse told me that someone had sent her a poppet horse just before she fell ill, a white horse's head with red ribbon reins.

Do you know what the Mari Llwyd is? Did Rihana ever tell you that tale? The Grey Mare, she is, a skeletal horse with a halter of red ribbons. She runs ahead of the Wild Hunt, they say, run by them in older days and unable to die she runs still. I think they still take a horse's skull with red ribbons through some of the Welsh villages at Christmas, presumably to chase out evil. Death's own horse, Damien, Epona's distorted shadow, I suppose you could say. And someone had given this to a child who promptly fell ill and died.

It's not enough, I know that. But... do you remember one of my brothers, Kare Haraldson? When Kare died, someone delivered a package to Darius for me under my old name of Cynthia Torriani: the shattered pieces of his sword and a horse's skull wound with red ribbons. The next time I ran into Owain was on Holy Ground, and he asked if I'd enjoyed the present he'd left for me, told me that red ribbons suited me.

I don't know if he killed my foster children and my husband. I don't know if he found a way to start the plague that killed so many people that we were burying them in mass graves so the priests could conduct the funerals before they fell over themselves.
I just don't know, Damiano. But I've seen thwarted rage before, and I've seen that kind of gloating satisfaction before, too. He may not have caused the plague, but he made a point of letting me know he'd killed Kare. And the white horse heads were too much to have been coincidence.

I'd forgotten that one of his students was responsible for my meeting Rihana. Did I ever tell you that story? I'd heard from Darius that Ramirez finally got around to training another woman. (Most women just didn't seem to think they'd get the training they needed from that glorious lecher. Need I say more? Ask Stormy to explain if you don't understand.) In any case, I was in Ireland in 1486 because I couldn't stand to be in England after Richard's death. Glorious king, sadly maligned by Will Shakespeare. Oh, dear, this is getting off track, isn't it? All right, I'll try to speed this up without skipping too much.

I met two women outside Galway, both of them immortal, and the one trying to goad the other to fight. Well, I heard one of them call the other Rihana Silver-tongue, and imply that the name wasn't for the music but for other skills. This Rihana looked like the description I had of my new sister, the name was the same, and she admitted to studying with Ramirez a century or so back.... Then the other woman named herself Saffron of Norwich and said she'd trained with Owain Rhys-Tewdor. I suppose I could say that she insulted Rihana and Ramirez so badly that I wanted her head, and it would be true but only part of the truth. Saffron managed to be offensive just by breathing Irish air and treading Irish soil. A thoroughly dislikable, arrogant woman, and she was insulting a bard on Irish ground. So I challenged her and took her head.

Of course, then Rihana looked at me when it was over and said something like, 'Well, it took you long enough. I thought I was going to have to talk her to death.' Rihana never was any damn good with a sword. Other than that, I'd hesitate to put her and Connor in the same room; two of them at once would simply be too much.

But to get back to Owain. I've killed two of his students; Adam killed another one earlier this year. He's killed at least two of my brothers, and I've wondered for a long time about two of my students. I never did learn who set Luther's brat on Holly, or who bribed the guards to let David out of Auschwitz. And somehow it's... spread. I know about your loathing of Johannes, and if it was because of this feud that you and Jirina had those problems, then I'm truly sorry. I won't apologize to Var about Bianca -- some things not even I will take responsibility for. (And you can tell Alex or Xan not to choke on that one, thank you.) I suppose this has become a feud, a clan skirmish that's gone on so long that we can't seem to let it go anymore because it's taken on a momentum and life of its own.

I'm hoping that by the time you read this, someone will know why this erupted now. Because I don't, and that's what has frightened me the most for all of us. I don't know why Owain has finally decided to push this to challenge after nine centuries, and I don't know why he wants a line war. He could have challenged me if he wanted my quickening; he certainly managed to find me. Why he had to involve so many of the rest of you and torment Connor, though -- there's a reason to it, I'm sure of that, knowing him, but I have no idea what it might be.

Hopefully you won't need this letter, student mine, old friend. We're older than they are; I managed that much at least, largely by stacking the deck with Xan and Alex. I suspect strongly that we're trickier than his people as well. After this is all over, I'm going to pin Adam down and find out how he eliminated Erik Olafson from this fight,
too. I didn't want to know in advance; I might have felt obliged to interfere. Or perhaps not -- Duncan's nobility may not be quite that contagious.

As may be, Damiano, if you're reading this because I lost? Know that I love you all, and look for me in twenty years time or so. I'll be the new student making someone's life a merry madhouse. May the Lady bless all of you. Be well,

Edana

Her pen had stopped scratching across paper a good ten minutes ago and still she sat there, one hand idly rubbing the writer's cramps out. Grey eyes stared into thin air, seeing Ireland and a lanky, red-haired Welsh sister with an angel's voice that she hadn't heard in far too long. The pages she'd already folded neatly into thirds and addressed lay under her elbow. Aidan finally shook herself back into the present and stood up, picking the letter up as she did so.

The paper in her hand was comforting in its own odd way; it was the last preparation she had needed to make. Everything was done, every advantage she could manage secured, every weakness shored up or accounted for, all the plans made.... Now all that was left was to sleep and then see if the tide of fortune would bear them up or swamp them.

"Iacta alea est." The Irish woman chuckled softly as she crossed the hall. "Gaius Julius did use just the right phrases some times. Cras videbimus, Fatae. Nos pugnati salatamus te."

She checked perfunctorily to be sure that the alarm had been set and turned on, then crawled in beside Methos to nap for the few hours remaining before they needed to be up and on their way to the site. He pulled her against his side without ever waking, wrapping an arm around her shoulders as they both settled more comfortably under the sheets. Her breathing evened into sleep within minutes.

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Challenges and Survivors

Techado Mesa, New Mexico -- pre-dawn, April 20th

The waning moon loomed in the east as they sprawled across the boulders or paced around them, and its light illuminated the steam which rose in wisps and streamers from the cups of coffee. Soft chuckles slid through the frosty air when Damien growled and refused any of the caffeine. Stormy, on the other hand, muttered something into the radio to the effect that they'd damn well better save her some of the coffee. That comment pulled more muted laughter into the early morning air when Aidan repeated her demand to the group.

Alex glanced around as he ran his hand through close-cropped dark curls. Xan had cut his hair short the day before so that he wouldn't have any distractions when he fought. The problem was that he actually would have appreciated a diversion as he sat wrapped up in a parka, waiting for the sunrise to reveal the terrain they'd explored previously. He'd fought on unknown ground more often than not, but he still preferred to look his sites over immediately prior to a challenge.

**Things do change after all,** he thought to himself. The dark-haired man considered the circular area they had outlined with trees and boulders and smiled while he contemplated what Aidan had spent the previous afternoon doing there. **Oh, yes, things do change.**

Regardless of who had found this place, Methos or Aidan had picked a perfect site in many ways: limited access, damned few sight lines from the ground, and plenty of maneuvering room once up there. **Only a mile to work across.** Alex nearly chuckled at the thought; he'd fought on smaller battlefields than this, more than once.

The mesa was huge, an irregular crescent oriented with its tips pointing north and north-east. The western curve of the crescent sprawled out, running three miles from northern tip to southern point and taking up as much as a mile and half of width as it went. There was only one road to the mesa, however, and it ran to the eastern side, forked at the north-east tip, then dead-ended at the two trails to the top. That side of the mesa was only half a mile wide or so. The wider, western side had a couple of small lakes on it, but they could only be accessed by walking across the mesa from those trails in the east. The highest point on the mesa, the stone pillar where Stormy waited with her rifle and the hope that she wouldn't have to shoot anyone, stood just past the center of the curve. It was in the middle of that curve, almost a mile wide from edge to edge, that they had cleared two areas: one for fighting, one for Aidan to consecrate.

**It's a little dry,** Alex mused, **and we'd have to walk another mile to get to the only water up here... but it could have been much worse. For one thing, it's not raining, so at least we're not going to fight in mud or drizzle. The soil up here is nicely absorbent, to soak up any blood, but not so dry that we'll be getting dust in the air or our faces. And if we're going to have several fights in succession, we'll be grateful that no one can see us from the ground. Of course, in this part of the country the main concern is the Indian reservations, or the radio observatory we passed. But we've got the Datil and Gallina mountains between here and the observatory, and Aidan briefed us on two of the nearby ghost towns if anyone wants to know why we're here.**

Xan perched on the rock next to him and slid an arm around Alex's hips. "Penny for them."

"I thought the phrase was 'your two cents' worth?" Alex smiled.

"It's like the comment from 1776 about treason in the third person and rebellion in the first," Xan said cheerfully. "When they're your thoughts, it's a penny. For my thoughts, it's two cents."
The dark shape pacing nearby laughed at that, and Alex called, "Connor, come get some coffee."

"I've got some, thanks," the older Highlander replied. "Besides, I'm awake. It's Damien who needs it."

"No, I don't," the redhead growled.

"Damiano, you always need coffee," Xan pointed out. "Or are you expecting the sun to rise in the north today? Because if so, then I hate to break it to you, but in a galactic sense this battle just isn't that important."

"Xenokrates, I know I haven't had my coffee this morning. It's deliberate. Do you have any idea how irritable I'm going to be by the time I actually get to fight someone?"

Both of the Greeks considered that as well as his rare use of Xan's full name. Alex finally said thoughtfully, "Damien? Do try to remember who you're related to. Why don't you go pace near Stormy's column? You can call very sincere consolations to her about being stuck up there without coffee."

Connor appeared out of the darkness and asked Damien, "How is she doing?"

"Cold, tired, and grumpy. In a perfect mood to shoot things," Damien told him in a deadpan voice. The muscular redhead sounded more normal, and slightly more cheerful, as he went on, "She's fine, Connor. She didn't like climbing in the dark, and she's making plans for an hour-long bath when we get back to the hotel, but she's fine. Wander over and talk to her if you want; she's not that high up."

"How long have we known each other, Damien?" Connor asked him.

"What, a century and some? Why?"

"I was trying to figure out how many favors you owe me by now," the Highlander laughed. "I know about you and women. There's some bubble bath waiting for her in your hotel room; tell her you got it for her when we went through Albuquerque."

"Hey!" Xan protested. "You bought it, but I thought of it."

Damien just laughed. "And you thought I kept investing with you because you generally make a profit."

"Well, that, too," Connor agreed amiably. "Is she comfortable enough? I didn't go up the column Var found for her."

"Yeah, no problem. Adam's idea of marking the edges and the handholds with florescent tape was perfect. Where'd he pick that up?"

"Too many drama departments with completely black stages, he said." Connor waited to see who was walking over to them and grinned when he saw Aidan swinging her arms to warm up and loosen the muscles. "Still sore, sister?"

"If you aren't, brother," she chuckled, "then I truly don't want to hear about it. I feel like we moved half the boulders in the world yesterday."

"I didn't think clearing the boulders was that hard," Var commented from farther away. The Spaniard sat in the star-filled darkness and sipped his coffee. "Sparring with you, Damien, nearly
jarred my arms out of the sockets, though. You've put on even more muscle since the last time we fought, the blessed Virgin alone knows how." He glanced up into the sky, gauging the remaining time until sunrise. "Virgo and Libra are nearly gone. Dawn must be coming soon."

Xan studied the horizon before pressing the light on his watch and chuckling. "5:41. Ever consider getting a watch with a light, Var?"

"I like the old radioactive sweep hand watches, myself," the Spaniard told him calmly. "Even an Indiglo interferes with night vision, and if I were willing to do that, we would have a fire. However, surely they should be here by now. Have you heard from Stormy, Aidan?"

"I was about to check in with her again," the Irish woman answered. She reached for the radio and activated it, saying "High Point, this is Base. How are you doing, Stormy?"

"Awake, alert, and reading you five by five," came the Southern belle's drawl. "When do we start this hootenanny?"

"Theoretically? Within an hour of sunrise. But we're fifty minutes from that, and it's a good hour's walk up the trail and another forty or fifty minutes to reach us. I suppose Owain wants to make a dramatic entrance; it would be in character for that swaggering braggart. I assume you'd have told me if you saw any vehicles?"

That got a snort. "Of course. Do you think they're stupid enough to drive without lights?"

Now Aidan was the one making inarticulate disgusted noises into the radio. "I don't think they're going to want to walk if they take out an axle in a rut. They're using lights or horses."

"We'd have heard horses," Stormy said certainly. She had learned the night noises on the butte already, and learned, too, how far sound carried out here away from the cities. "They're driving... if they're comin' at all."

"Hmm?"

"What if they don't show?"

"We hunt them down like the dogs they are," Aidan told her pleasantly, then fell silent momentarily. "Oh, damnation. Stormy, do you count as an officer of the courts?"

"I didn't hear a thing," the little Southerner promised, faking a yawn. "Really. Aidan, if y'all are winning and some of 'em want to run, what do I do then?"

Aidan replied slowly, "Do you know, I'm not sure. I wish you knew them on sight, dear, because, truly, some of them I don't want to allow to run. They wanted a fight; Gods forbid I let them leave without one."

"Well," Stormy said practically, "I know five of 'em that I'd shoot if they ran. Tell you what, keep the radio on when they get up here and give me their names as they come up the trail. Now, I know we're all hoping the Jameson boy doesn't come, but was there anybody besides him that I should let live?"

"I don't know anything one way or another about Will Moran, and I'm told that Rafferty Conlan isn't too bad. Of course, for that report I have to consider the source, too." Aidan shrugged. "I'd say, though, that most of them we want to fight. Owain's line runs to thieves and murderers, smugglers, blackmailers, and pimps."
"And poisoners," Stormy said. "Is anyone goin' to explain that joke by the way?"

"It's a long story," the brunette told her. "The simple version is that it's a translation error that Disa and Var use to annoy me. Check Exodus 22:18. The word really should be poisoner. But other than Farrell, dear, I'd rather you kept them around to fight."

"What if they don't want to fight?"

"Then I'll convince them," came the silky answer. "I suspect that if the options are to fight or to lose their sword hand, they'll fight. It's more choice than Connor was given, after all."

"There is that," Stormy conceded quietly. "Could you do it, though?"

"Yes." There was no hesitation before she answered, and Stormy nodded to herself when she heard that. "Did you get any sleep?" Aidan asked, deliberately changing the subject.

"I'm no good to you otherwise," the tiny blonde replied, somehow not really offended by the question. "Don't worry. I've had five hours' sleep, a bit of jerky, and some Vivarin washed down with Gatorade that just made me wistful for Damien's coffee. You worry about your end, Aidan; I've got mine."

"There's half a thermos waiting for the both of you, I promise. Besides," Aidan chuckled, head tilted back as she spoke to the woman she couldn't see, "it's entirely too late to worry. I gave up on that hours ago. However. Did I say thank you yet, Stormy?"

"Once or twice -- not more'n half-a-dozen times, honest. Tell you what. You show me how to make soda bread and we're even," Stormy suggested, remembering a few longing comments Damien had made about his teacher's baking. Of course, after last night's dinner, she could see why. Maybe experience really did pay in some things. She followed that thought to its next corollary, then grinned, blushed, and looked around for something else to think about.

Light had begun to seep slowly into the black sky, dimming the stars a few at a time. As still another landmark emerged from the fading night, it reminded Stormy of the passing time and she fell back on her personal responsibilities gratefully. Later she could grieve as needed, but this wasn't the time for it. She was, or should be, busy.

"Last check. No interference once a fight's begun; you can't counter-challenge until they stand up; and no applying... interesting substances to the blades. Anything goes wrong, they only get one warning shot. The next one drops them hard and semi-permanent."

"That's it," Aidan agreed quietly, all the while listening intently to the other woman's voice for any sign of undue strain. "Can you do this, Stormy?"

"Damn right I can, Aidan," and now Stormy did sound angry. "I saw Connor four months ago, remember? The man used to have two hands, and eyes that didn't check every corner of a room every few minutes. Get real, woman. I don't trust these bastards any farther than I can throw 'em. You've seen me; do you really think I could even pick 'em up?"

"Well, maybe a couple of the women," Aidan admitted, remembering how tiny Damien's lady was. At 4' 10" and ninety-five pounds soaking wet, she was not likely to outfight the opposition with muscle.

"I'll see you all when it's over, then. Tell Damien...." Her voice fell silent, although static told the immortal woman that the channel was still open.
"I'll tell him," Aidan finally promised. "Thank you, Stormy."

"You're most welcome," came the answer, and now Stormy's voice was determinedly cheerful. "High Point out."

"Base out."

From her vantage point, thirty hard-won feet of scrabbling, muscle-wrenching height above the majority of the butte, Stormy checked her gear one more time. Water bottles in the pack just within reach, ammo in the side pouch where she always kept extra bullets, camouflage hat firmly jammed on her head and pony tail jammed up under the hat -- everything was ready, she decided. Now, where in the hell are the visitors? Can't throw a party without guests, after all.

She lifted her binoculars to scan the road leading to the butte, despite the fact that there wasn't enough light to give her details. She'd told herself firmly that she'd settle for outlines that she didn't remember from yesterday morning, but by the time her gaze swept across the horizon on the off chance they were coming by horseback, her patience was running out. "I knew I should've bought that Starlite scope on sale last winter," Stormy complained softly while trying to decide whether something was a far-off horse or a closer coyote. At last, though, she heard engines and saw lights approaching along the packed dirt road.

"I think this is our group," she muttered. Stormy triggered the radio again. "Base, this is High Point. Incoming, Aidan. Three vehicles coming up the road from the north. They should be at the bottom of the butte in just a few minutes."

"Right," came the crisp reply. "Thank you, Stormy. Idiots," Aidan said more quietly as she checked the time. "They've still got to climb.... Oh, well. We'll see you when this is all over."

"Damn straight you will. How am I gonna cuss you out for not killing this man sooner if you don't make it?" For a moment, Stormy thought the other woman hadn't heard what she'd said, then she heard a startled snicker from other end of the radio. Part laughter, part surprise, but little or no guilt left, thank goodness. And I'd know. I'm a Southerner at heart; we know guilt when we hear it.

"This is your idea of encouragement?" Aidan asked her at last, clearly amused.

"Did it work?"

"Swords on one hand and your scolding on the other? I'll let you know my decision later," the immortal commented, almost chuckling. "Base out again."

"High Point out." Stormy continued to watch the horizon, listening to the night and waiting for the dawn. "Soon enough," she whispered to herself, "it's all coming soon enough." Part of her, though, was more than ready for it to be over.

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Nothing was going as Owain had planned.

He had planned for them to reach the top of the mesa barely within the appointed time, hoping to put Cynthia and her people as far off-balance as he could manage. Instead, a flat tire had almost brought him there too late to reach the top on time, and far too late to tamper with their cars as he had longed to do. Rather than a steady, purposeful hike that would give his fighters an internal momentum to match the external motion, they were having to push the pace... which might be enough to corrode their confidence.
No, this was not at all what he had planned. In addition, his people were less confident than he'd expected. Instead of being a coherent group, ready for the day's fights with their hostility focused on their opponents, they seemed almost... fragmented.

Will and Johannes had taken point on the path, after Johannes had flatly said he was worried about treachery. Farrell, the trusting fool, had given Johannes a disgusted look before pulling on the backpack he'd brought along and moving well ahead of them on the trail. The New Zealander had climbed steadily, as self-contained as Owain had ever seen him. That, too, was a bad sign. When Farrell Jameson grew that silent, it usually presaged an explosion of some type -- and this was the worst possible time for that.

Owain followed them up, listening to his other students and watching as the sunrise made their flashlights superfluous. Enrique's constant quiet chant as he walked was nothing unusual, but Damita was staying far from him and, judging from the muttered conversation she was holding by herself, the Brazilian madwoman was paying less attention to this reality than usual. He rolled his eyes when he heard her address someone as Oyá and dropped back to get between her and Enrique before the priest heard her. Owain only hoped that Enrique didn't speak Portuguese

*She's more aware of what's going on than I thought if she's invoking that one, Owain thought irritably. But this is *not* the time! Not this close to a man who would kill her as a witch without thinking twice about what a quickening might do to this path! I don't care what happens to her after her bout, but I need her alive to fight!*

Behind him, her voice slid into a monotonously repetitive song that he recognized after a few moments; it was a nursery rhyme she had sung again and again while torturing MacLeod. He suspected that he would never again hear those words without remembering blood dripping from those slender fingers and stippling her face where she had stood in front of the Highlander, stroking his face while Bianca flayed the skin from his back. Their smiles had made even Owain nervous, and now he dragged his attention back to the path and away from her singing. Not for the first time he hoped Damita would lose her fight today.

The Welsh immortal glanced back to see where Lim and Jirina were, but they were walking silently upward with a unity of purpose which worried him more than a little. They had ridden in together also, now that he thought about it. After the conversation Johannes had mentioned, that seemed a warning signal he needed to heed; the Prussian had a discerning nose when it came to smelling treachery.

Whatever they might be planning, though, Owain knew they both wanted a chance at a head. Lim, at least, wanted a shot at one of the immortals in Cynthia's line, preferably MacLeod, but he would take whoever he could get. Jirina simply hoped to kill one of Damien's friends.

*No, those two will fight. As for Enrique, he'd sooner die than disappoint his God by missing a chance to get his hands on a witch, and the rest of them have their reasons to fight. They may try to kill me later, but for now, they'll try to kill Cynthia's people first. He listened until he heard a complaint in Italian, and smiled. And Bianca is still back there. As if that was ever truly in question. I'm more surprised that she hasn't outpaced us all for the opportunity to kill a man. A pity she didn't get to kill Cesare herself; instead she seems determined to use any and every other male as a substitute for her dead lover.*

He shrugged and put it from his mind. Happy or not, united or not, his students were here and would fight, and that was all he needed for the moment. He needed them to fight, so that he could defeat Cynthia and take her alive. As he walked, Owain turned his attention inward, focusing his energies on the coming fights and the eventual battle of wills with Cynthia Torriani. He didn't
want her dead, after all -- that would come later. For now, he simply wanted her head on her shoulders and her body under his control.

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Stormy couldn't help laughing as she watched the trailhead. Still holding the binoculars with one hand, she carefully set down her rifle, picked up the radio, and said quietly, "Base, this is High Point. Aidan, come in, you have got to hear this one."

In a moment she heard the Aidan's voice. "High Point, this is Base. I'm here, Stormy, what is it?"

"Sugar, they're so mad they're just about spittin'." Stormy dissolved into giggles again for a moment before going on, "Apparently they expected y'all to be waitin' at the top of the path. They're looking at the trail like dogs standin' around a tree wondering where the cat went. I'd say they're trying to decide whether or not to follow it."

"Don't these idiots know there's a truce?" Aidan chuckled herself.

"I'd say one of 'em does. Tall man just headed your way -- medium brown hair, kinda wavy, and he's wearin' jeans, denim shirt, and a backpack. Would that be the Jameson boy?"

"Certainly sounds like Farrell. Mother bless us all, I was hoping he wouldn't be at this. Damien is not going to be happy. Does he look completely ordinary other than a very quick pace?"

"That'd be him, although I think I'd remember a spread of shoulders like that," Stormy agreed, amused. "Coverin' the ground at a good clip and headed your way. Aidan, the last time I saw a face that blank, someone was trying not to tell their boss to take a job and shove it. He's not a happy man, but then look at his company. Speakin' of the devils, the rest of 'em just quit millin' around. Hold on, I'm counting -- seven, eight -- yup, there comes number nine. My Lord, that has got to be Bianca. Didn't her mama ever warn her about her face freezin' like that? I think you'd better pull out your binoculars and tell me who's who, 'cause they're comin'."

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"Damn her!"

Nine people faced him where they stood between the two cleared areas on the top of the butte, oh, yes, and Owain Rhys-Tewdor even knew most of them... but his wildest contingency plans had not included some of these faces. For a moment rage painted his cheeks into crimson competition with his shirt. As swiftly as the emotion flared, he banked it again, a cold smile replacing the color as it subsided.

"Planning on fighting half the bouts yourself, Cynthia? Or did your students decline to come?" he snapped, stalling for time to reevaluate the situation. He had to regain his equilibrium; there was no turning back at this late date. But how had she justified this? His plans had all assumed that his disgustingly honorable opponents would play by the rules. Had she changed the rules... or had she found a wild card?

Cynthia sat cross-legged on a boulder probably forty yards away, dressed in loose, sere khakis and hiking boots under the gloriously blue spring sky. That long fall of hair, the same one that Owain had dreamed for decades of using to strangle her, had been braided and coiled at the back of her head. Despite her apparent youthfulness, it gave her a surprisingly regal air. With that same unnervingly calm gaze that she'd had centuries ago in Italy, his adversary, his best enemy, studied him. Her voice was as steady as ever when she said, "As usual, Owain, you're wrong on all the
Without giving him a chance to respond, she looked over his team and commented in the same carrying voice, "You brought William? Is Erik still in jail then?"

"Where is Kyra?" he countered. "And Andrew, for that matter?"

"She was busy," the Irish woman told him calmly. "Job responsibilities, I believe."

From where he lounged a few feet away from his teacher, Damien studied Jirina. Without thinking twice about it, he called on all the nuances he'd learned while they were lovers to evaluate her, contrasting the mocking confidence of her stance with the defiant set to her shoulders. He'd fought long and hard in the discussions to convince the others that he should be the one to fight her. More than ever he was certain he'd been right.

The redhead looked away from his chosen opponent to glare at Owain before growling ominously, "And Andrew is busier than Kyra. Why should you care where my student is?"

"I simply expected to see him," Owain said maliciously. He made a deliberate show of looking over, and dismissing, Alex and Xan before adding, "You should have brought him since you're short so many fighters."

From her apparently comfortable perch on a nearby rock Mandisa glanced up. She had one long leg drawn up with her arms wrapped around it to provide a rest for her chin and her voice was as lazy as if she were up there for a picnic. "I thought you learned to count before I was born, Owain. Your literacy has occasionally been in question, but rarely your numeracy -- not below eleven, at least." She deliberately looked him up and down, her gaze lingering at his crotch. "Or did you lose something?" White teeth flashed when she grinned at his offense. Beside her, Var tried not to chuckle.

"Still, I suppose we can total this up for you. Two," and she pointed to the MacLeods, "three," pointing to Adam Pierson, "four and five," and she indicated Alex and Xan, "six," as she indicated Aidan, "and my brothers and I make seven, eight, and nine. As invited," she added politely, still smiling that same fierce baring of teeth as she leaned back against Navarro, who wrapped his arm around her waist.

Yes, I know who the Spaniard is, Owain thought grimly. A pity. I had hoped he'd be elsewhere. His eyes narrowed in an almost blinding emotion that another, more honest man might've called fear and rage. For a moment he was frozen, trapped by the sense that his carefully laid plans had been hijacked and he was no longer in control.

Owain saw movement in the corners of his vision as his people began to fan out alongside him. Johannes' presence on his right was a comfort that allowed him to concentrate even more on the opponents opposite him. Breathing deeply, he willed himself to focus. There was no time to account for unexpected knights when the queen was still at stake.

"Oh, I assure you, I can count, Mandisa. Unlike you, however, I also know what to count. The challenge was to the line of Ramirez, remember," the Welshman pointed out almost pleasantly. "That disqualifies the two... Greeks." His voice made their homeland an insult before he turned to the slim, almost gawky, man she had indicated as number three. "You, sir, I don't know."

"That's right," came the composed reply. "You don't know me, do you."

Owain glanced past him to the two MacLeods and managed to control his reaction fairly well; he
only frowned rather than snarling. "The challenge is for Cynthia."

"So it is," his unfamiliar adversary agreed, clearly almost bored as he glanced up, hazel eyes meeting blue without flinching. He lounged against a boulder, all boneless indolence next to the upright posture of the two MacLeods. "You wanted this line war. Were you going to start any time soon, or shall we all go home?"

Owain raised one eyebrow, still fighting down his surprise that Connor MacLeod had shown up at all. He should have been holed up in a den somewhere, living on alcohol or drugs while body parts grew back. Instead, he was standing across the clearing wearing vambraces to protect his maimed wrist, with a katana in his remaining hand.

No, if I'm to be off-balance, I think it's time to return the favor, he thought nastily. "Oh, by all means, let's begin. However, first...." The Welsh man slipped his nylon sword case off his shoulder and knelt to unzip it. He straightened back up and tossed a sheathed sword across the clearing to the younger MacLeod. "I brought this for you, so that you could return it. Since your kinsman's hand seems to be full...."

"Maybe I should return the favor," Duncan grated as he caught Ramirez' katana out of the air. "I could fill your hand the same way," he offered, and the smile on his face was as savage as anything Owain had seen in his days on the Welsh borders.

"Dhonchaidh," Cynthia said quietly. "Check the blade and hilt for poison, then give Connor his katana, would you, kinsman? Poor Ramirez is turning in his grave still, I don't doubt." She turned her gaze on Owain again, a genuinely amused smile hovering around her mouth as she said, "But I think we'll start at the furthest beginning," Cynthia told him, "namely the introductions on both sides, and the rules."

"They know the rules." Blue eyes narrowed as he observed the demeanor of the fighters on the other side. Both the MacLeods were too calm; even the return of the katana hadn't broken the younger one, and Owain had been half-expecting him to charge them. On the other hand, this was the man who had taken Grayson. Maybe that one's quickening had cooled the Scot's brashness....

Cynthia took her time before answering, her glance flickering from the impatience in Johannes' eyes and in the tilt of Bianca's head, to the resigned, bitter expression on Will Moran's face. Her voice was almost sorrowful as she asked, "Do they even speak, Owain, or did you beat that out of them as you tried with Marc?"

He nodded slowly, black curls gleaming in the sunlight as another answer slid into place. "So you did take the brat in."

"Your student tried to take him over, you mean," she pointed out calmly. "And Marc was never a brat. He was simply a young man who didn't take well to being murdered and then told he had to become a murderer himself." Her eyes held Owain's as she answered, until motion at his side caught her attention.

Farrell Jameson stepped forward, easing around Enrique to face her. He looked as if he should have worn a lasso at his belt rather than a sword, but his stride accommodated the blade naturally. "Did you say murder?"

"Fair morning, Farrell." Her greeting was courteous, almost regretful in its very gentleness. "I tried to tell you Owain would get you into trouble eventually, acushla."

"So you did, Phoebe," the New Zealander agreed, not looking back at his teacher even as he spoke
against him. He went on, "Of course, he said the same thing about you."

"I had assumed as much," she told him gently. "And it's Aidan these days."

"Murdered though?" Brown eyes studied her and the frozen expression on his face thawed minutely, becoming more human as Farrell waited for the answer he clearly never doubted she would give.

"You've come to the war," Owain reminded his youngest student coldly, and his stillness was more imposing than any motion to halt Farrell would have been.

"So I did," Farrell replied, his mouth tightening at the implied insult to his honor. When he turned to face his teacher, his eyes held the same glacial control for which the Welshman was known and Owain began to wonder just how soon he would have to kill this one.

The tall young man raised one brown eyebrow, his façade otherwise unbroken as he studied his teacher, looking for something in Owain's bearing that apparently wasn't there. He let the tension drag out until it was ready to snap before adding, "But I want the truth if I'm going to be killed for it, thank you." Turning his back on Owain, Farrell looked across the cleared area and asked again, "Well, Phoebe?"

From their positions on either side of the Irish woman, both Alex and Xan nodded to him, short hair gleaming black and gold in the light. They looked as they didn't mind seeing him but would have preferred to be doing it in a trattoria over espresso and biscotti. Damien, meanwhile, was shaking his head as he growled, "God damn it, Jameson, what are you doing with these bastards?"

"Owain trained me," Farrell shrugged, hearing and ignoring the indignant noise which Damien's blasphemy drew from Enrique. "And for once Ish didn't get me thrown in jail, so here I am."

"Yeah, I just found out this week that you studied with that bastard. Next time, you idiot, call us and we'll arrange to get you arrested," the burly redhead growled. "Fuck, Farrell, we don't want to fight you."

Aidan cut over her redheaded student's voice with the easy timing of much practice. "Farrell, do you really want this story now?"

He knew without looking back that the others, Jirina and Lim in particular, clearly wanted him to shut up and get on with things. Instead, Farrell laughed with his first real humor in what seemed like weeks and forced them to allow his will to prevail this once. "Yes, I do, Phoebe. And since I don't think any of them want to fight an extra bout if I leave, they can wait a few minutes. Who's Marc?"

"My newest student. Chris Henslowe sent him to challenge me and I took him in rather than take his head."

Farrell's smile shifted subtly, became something less mocking and more genuine. "Leave it to you. Nice to see you're still rescuing wayward immortals. But you said something about murder?"

"Chris stabbed Marc in the back and kidnapped him, so far as we can tell. There's no solid proof but the circumstantial evidence is fairly conclusive, if a long story. Chris then sent him to challenge me, having told Marc that I was only ten years in the Game and a drug dealer."

The tall black woman, Mandisa, looked as if something had suddenly become clear to her and it clearly didn't please her. Farrell only nodded slowly, pleasant farmer's face still held to a deliberately neutral expression. "I see. And Christopher?"
"He's dead, now," Aidan told him. "He threatened the wrong immortals."

Across the clearing, the younger MacLeod let that same nasty smile briefly curve one side of his mouth, but he said nothing. His pale, lazy companion, apparently bored by the conversation, managed to sag another few, impossible degrees, showing an impressive degree of flexibility in his back. Rather than deal with their reactions, though, Farrell asked, "Immortals?" He stressed the plural to make his point, before going on, "Fair fight I hope?"

"One on one, yes, but he was badly outclassed. If we both live through this, acushla, I'll tell you about it. Anything else?" Aidan waited patiently, clearly willing to continue the explanation if he wanted.

The New Zealander studied her thoughtfully, ignoring Johannes' quiet growl. Then he raised one hand in a casual, British-style salute, palm out. "That will do for now, Phoebe. No, you said it's Aidan these days. In any case, thanks."

"Most welcome, Farrell." She smiled at him sadly, grey eyes momentarily wistful. "I wish you'd taken me up on that offer all those years ago."

"It didn't seem like a good idea," he told her as he stepped back to rejoin Owain's other students. "You weren't entirely sane by the end of that war, you know."

Before she could answer that, Damien pushed himself up off the ground, nervous energy boiling out as he paced. "Are we going to do this or not?"

"Yes," Aidan agreed, seeing the palpable tension roiling off Owain's kindred and grateful that while hers were impatient, they were also united. She considered pointing out that the coffee would still be there when everything was over, then decided not to push her luck or his temper. In a deliberately level voice she began, "These are the rules for a line war."

"The rules for a line war are as follows. No projectile weapons, no poison, and no assistance once the bout has begun. Your hand weapons may be thrown, but no crossbows, no bows, no guns." Aidan looked from face to face as she spoke, trying to be sure they understood. "The truce begins again when the last bout is fought and lasts for a week to give all involved time to get safely away. Each bout must go to first blood; it may go to death, or final death, if one of you so wishes."

Jirina Petesceu snorted at that, a derisive, condescending noise that made Aidan wonder for a moment if she was going to waste moisture spitting at them. "We're immortal, Aidan or Cynthia or whatever your name is. We fight to the death. 'There can be only one,' or are you too old to remember that?"

"This isn't the Game. This is an extended grudge match. And I've never noticed that the Game has to be to the death in any case," Aidan told her coldly. "Of course you might not understand that concept. I've certainly never heard that mercy is one of your besetting virtues, Jirina Petesceu."

"I didn't spend time in a convent, unlike some," was the only answer from the Slavic woman. The use of her full name worried her somewhat, but she suspected the answer to that was standing
across the way glaring at her and clearly short of temper... as always.

"No, you didn't," Damien rumbled, green eyes angry as he looked at his one-time lover. "Of course, I'm not sure even a nunnery could have taught you anything." When she hissed angrily at the insult, he turned to Aidan, deliberately presenting Jirina with his shoulder to start goading her own short temper. He'd spent enough years fighting with her to know where her buttons were, and she never had understood that he could, and sometimes did, push them willfully. "Go on, Magistra. Let's get this over with."

"Those are the rules for the fights; these are the rules for the ordering of those fights. As the challenger, Owain sends out his representative; I send out my response. Should you win," and here Aidan caught first Jirina's eyes, and then Johannes', "I have the right to avenge my line kin as soon as you stand from the quickening."

Will Moran turned to stare at Owain, his face pale as he snapped, "You didn't tell us that part. I came here for one fight, not two!" Johannes reached over and set a hand on his shoulder. Will shrugged it off impatiently as he glared at his teacher's teacher, the man who'd gotten him into this.

"It's within the rules," Owain agreed reluctantly. He cast a suspicious look at Aidan before he admitted, "I had hoped she didn't know it."

"It's no less than Henslowe would have done to me. Why else send a student of two years' training to challenge me while waiting around the corner?" Aidan watched that accusation spread through them, leaving ripples of surprise in some places and comprehension in others. The young ones, Will Moran in particular, are vulnerable; they can be manipulated by words and emotion if I'm careful, she decided. Well enough, then. Let's show them the tiger behind the next door, shall we?

Almost casually Aidan went on, "Then too, Owain, you hoped they'd not realize they were walking corpses." Her voice was deliberately impassive and her words inexorable as water running downhill. "One way or another, you're all dead, you know. If you lose... well." She shrugged; that fate was evident. "Should you win, you face me." A slow, ironic smile twisted her face as she dropped the next grenade in their midst. "And should you win that round, then dead you are still. Aren't they, Owain?"

"Enough, Cynthia. Finish your explanation." The Welshman's face remained as impassive as her voice had been, and his eyes gave nothing away.

Connor laughed, a cold, rasping noise, before he said softly, "It's her party, Cymro. Let the lady speak. You didn't try to silence me."

"You weren't speaking," Johannes pointed out loudly and smiled at the younger MacLeod when he growled. His gaze swept across the others as he turned back to Owain, and the glittering rage from the two Greeks amazed him. He'd run across them once or thrice, heard stories of them from other immortals more often than that, and neither of them was prone to losing their temper. For a moment, that controlled intent had startled him; now the implications of it ran through his blood in a draught as warming and heady as good whiskey. Well, well, so Connor MacLeod is a lever for those two. Or is that lover? I'll have to remember that if they live....

"Enough! What does she mean?" Damita Santos might look a fragile sixteen or so, but she was no child, and no one's fool, despite what the others might think. In her time in the slums of Rio and among the smugglers around the Gulf of Mexico, she had seen treachery and betrayal more than once. Owain's attempt to quash the discussion brought her immediately, fully, alert.

"It's simple enough." Aidan almost laughed as her fish took the bait. Now to set the hook.... "Nine
centuries we've avoided this, but now of a sudden he wants my quickening. Do you truly think he'll stop in that desire simply for that it has taken up residence in one of you?"

"Why would I attack my own?" Owain countered promptly as he saw mistrust, never far from the surface, rise among his people. The best defense, Cynthia, is a strong offense. "And you've neglected an essential rule, the one I brought up earlier. This is a line war, remember; you may only bring your line. You've brought six to oppose my nine."

"I begin to understand why your line generally runs to idiots -- no offense intended to you of course, Farrell," Alex interrupted. "Do you always reason ahead of your data, Rhys-Tewdor? How have you lived this long?"

"Cross blades with me and find out, catamite," Owain countered, irritated and worried.

"And sodomite," Alex agreed, smiling as he wrapped an arm around Xan's waist. "And lover of women. Although not," he added almost thoughtfully, "goats. Which means, of course, that you're nowhere on my dance card, Rhys-Tewdor. My sister has other plans for me in any case. Oh, I forgot -- you don't tell your people your plans. Enough, though. Edana, start the introductions so that we can get this over with, would you, please?"

"By all means, Cynthia," Owain snapped, stepping forward a pace to press his point. "Explain why this blithering idiot is here, and why you think he will fight for you. And make it quick."

"Oh, come, Owain! As my Scottish brother pointed out, this is my party." Aidan grinned at him, her other brother's good humor sparking her own. It didn't hurt at all that she knew her high spirits would only make Owain angrier. "And Alexandrias did rather volunteer, so 'will' is not in question. I think you meant 'will be allowed' but that verb form could just have been too complicated for you...." She trailed off deliberately to goad him, enjoying the way frustration raised color in his face. Just as he started to speak Aidan interrupted him, asking sweetly, "Did you want the introductions or not?"

Enrique frowned at her and the two Greeks, crossing himself against any enchantment within her words. "If you're capable of such things as introductions, then do so. Although I suppose we cannot expect too much of a woman who cannot recognize the one true God," he said, trying for their stinging lightness.

The Irish woman shook her head and pulled a silver oak leaf from under her shirt. "I'm Edana ni Emer of Eire. That would be Ireland," she added in a condescending voice, clearly bent on educating the younger, less intelligent immortals. She smiled sweetly at Owain as she went on, "I studied with Ramirez, and with his teacher -- although not in that order. And Enrique? I'm older than your Christ; whyever should I worship Him?"

Damien grinned at the spluttering, near-apoplectic priest and said cheerfully, "I suppose we should go by age, or something vaguely close, but why don't we go down the line of the Flame Child here," and he waved at his Irish teacher, "and come back to the ones who seem to have you confused? I'm Damiano the Red and I studied with the lady in question back in, oh, what, the early tenth century, Magistra? Something like, anyway," he continued jovially. "I know I'm older than these two, at least." He gave the slightest inclination of his body, not deep enough to be a bow, really, before gesturing to one side and saying, "Sister, I think you're next."

"Mandisa," the tall woman said shortly, never moving from her perch. "Her student also. I assume you will agree that I should be allowed to fight since you challenged my teacher?" she asked, the bland, dangerous tone flaring as brightly as those white teeth against her blue-black skin. It was not, by any stretch of any imagination, a smile.
"Navarro Rodriguez," and the aristocratic blond man poured upward off his seat to stand facing Owain. The sheer intricacy of his bow managed to convey affectation, derision, and contempt; the little flourishes of hand and wrist in particular were intended to show his contempt for their putative skill. "Mandisa and Damien's brother, also a student of Shahar's. Next in age, and the last of her students at this... imbroglio."

Connor, who had seen duels fought over less, snickered despite himself. "Nice work, nephew." He looked up at Owain, all barbed smiles and banked rage, and stated, 'I'm Connor MacLeod. I studied with Ramirez."

"Ah, yes," Bianca purred, stripping and mauling Connor with her eyes. "The one the Kurgan killed."

The older Highlander chuckled softly, a nasty sound that carried on the still morning air. "That's been dealt with." He cocked his head to one side, studying her, then replied in a low, threatening tone, "And you're not in the Kurgan's league. Even if you had another millennia, you wouldn't get there."

The lanky immortal with the raptor's nose chuckled, and managed to make it sound thoroughly smug, as he asked Bianca, "Are you that far behind on your gossip, woman? It's only been... what is it now, Connor, thirteen years since you took his head? Is there no one who'll talk to you, De Grazia? I understand the quality of personal hygiene products has improved this last century; you might be able to remedy that. If you live."

Duncan cut in before she could respond to that salvo. "I'm Duncan MacLeod, and I studied with Connor, here." He smiled fiercely at the dark-haired woman across the way before adding with patentuly false courtesy, "My clansman? The one who killed the Kurgan? You managed to put together the pieces they gave you, didn't you?"

"Ah, you're the man with the convenient wall," Johannes mentioned carelessly, although the intensity of his gaze belied it. He had been gathering information on Duncan MacLeod for long enough, and heard enough rumors over the years, that he wasn't about to underestimate this formidable-looking opponent. Potent in more ways than one, I would suspect. A pity he's likely to die soon. "The surveillance photos didn't do you justice, I see."

"Still depending on spies?" Alex asked with that same apparent calm; beside him, Xan leaned into the arm around his waist to further provoke Enrique's palpable distaste. "When are you going to develop intelligence of your own instead of hiring out for it, Owain? That's always cost you, you know. But that's the line of Ramirez, then. Now it's our turn."

"Then you admit you're not line of Ramirez."

"Of course we do," the tall, pale immortal told him pleasantly from where he stood next to the younger, olive-skinned MacLeod. "But then that's something of a misnomer. It's not really the line of Ramirez at all."

His words dropped among them with all the impact of an unveiled viper, and in that moment the entire line of Rhys-Tewdor froze. "What do you mean?" Owain snarled finally, drawing breath against the shock and resisting the sinking sensation in his stomach. His back and shoulders had tensed already against the next blow because he had no doubt this unknown man had just played Cynthia's wild card. "For a thousand years and more, her boast and claim has been that she is line of Ramirez."

"Yes, well, it was simpler," Aidan said mildly, her tone full of wondering pity. "People knew who
Ramirez was. How could you miss him, bless the man? Even more so than FitzCairn, entire
generations of women were grateful for him." The Irish immortal glanced thoughtfully at blond
Jirina and smiled so sweetly that she thought she might yet need insulin, immortal or no. "Not
you, though. How did you manage to get him to say no?"

Even Johannes and Owain had to glance away for a moment to control their faces. Farrell laughed
openly, although he moved forward a step to be out of range of Jirina's arm. "Did he really? I'm
sorry I never met the man!"

"I never met the man," Jirina grated out from between clenched teeth.

"I'm so sorry," Aidan immediately answered, and imitated Navarro's intricate, irritating, flourishing
salute of hand and arm. "I must have you mistaken with some other tavern... worker. Pray excuse
me."

"Bloated warthogs, hmm?" Xan asked Connor in an interested tone of voice, a small smile playing
around his mouth as he watched several of their opponents' tempers fray. "Do you know, Connor,
there are days I have no trouble believing that you two are related."

"It's the Celtic blood." Connor shrugged, grinning maliciously from his seat next to Duncan. "I
always wanted a sister like Edana. I'd have died even younger, probably, but it would have been
worth it."

His obvious mental stability shocked Johannes. He'd been expecting the older Highlander to be in
hiding, not at this fight, and now the Prussian was appraising everything through the focused
sharpness of an adrenaline overload. No plan ever survived the actual start of the combat, but this
one had gone belly-up almost from the start. \textit{What the hell is going on here? How did she put him
back together so swiftly?! God's blood, I knew Cynthia was dangerous, but I didn't expect this!}
\textit{Fighting the Greek madmen is not something we expected.}

"Enough!" Owain roared, his patience shredded by the whimsical behavior and good humor of the
other side and further macerated by the implications that, somewhere in his research and planning,
he had missed something crucial. \textit{How had Cynthia hidden this?}

"Shut! Up!!" the Welshman snapped, glaring impartially at his opponents.

The politely attentive reactions from the other side were even more infuriating than their comments
had been, and it goaded Owain to an even greater intensity, although now he could drop his volume
again. "Explain yourselves, you prattling ninnies, or leave!"

"Ninny. It lacks a certain grandeur." The tall, indolent immortal slouching beside the two
MacLeods stood, and his voice made it quite clear that he found the whole thing immensely
entertaining. "Oh, well. I suppose we should make this simple enough even for you, so I'll try. I
suppose you want the full formal introduction?"

Owain ground his teeth against the immediate response he wanted to give that detached, inquisitive
expression. \textit{Damned scholarly gawk...!} "Oh by all means, make your introductions if you're
able of it -- which I'm beginning to doubt," he added darkly, the blood rising crimson to his face
again.

"Since you insist," the other man shrugged. "Do pay attention, if you're competent enough for
that. I have no idea what my first name was, haven't bothered to remember it in centuries....." He
straightened from his slouch as he spoke, his posture transformed to the balanced alertness of a
mongoose who had finally found a cobra to attack. His face changed subtly, too, naiveté and
nonchalance sliding away to reveal a man who had not missed any of the nuances and undercurrents of the morning.

The metamorphosis shocked several of them, as unnerving as the first time the eye glanced at the goblet and saw the profiled faces instead. Owain's startled, protesting noise never had a chance to become words. The slender warrior interrupted him with the same precision of timing that Cynthia used in cutting over Damien, and his voice was cold and far too clear as he said, "But I used the name Semnut when I trained Ramirez and for several decades thereafter."

"When you did what?" Johannes choked out, almost nauseous for a moment as one too many assumptions shifted too far, too fast. *This is not what Owain and I expected. These people were not in our calculations... and having Will here wasn't part of the plan either. Damn you, Erik, did you have to get arrested right before the fight?!* A small, ironic part of his mind wondered if going to Mass last Sunday counted as Last Rites, if he needed them.

"Do your ears work?" Semnut asked, all razor-edged courtesy in his inquiry. Those hazel eyes were an unbearable intrusion, too knowing and far too piercing as he evaluated Johannes. "I trained Ramirez. Two centuries after that, I trained a Celt who had more obstinacy than sense -- but she's still alive, and he isn't."

Owain snapped out, "The rule calls for your first name. You don't look Egyptian."

Semnut stared at him with that same unnervingly accurate assessment. "Nothing says I have to give you time to get your balance, Owain Rhys-Tewdor. As I already said, I don't know my first name and didn't remember it when I trained Ramirez." The supercilious, biting tones made it quite clear that he hadn't really expected Owain to either be paying attention or be capable of comprehending. Semnut shrugged as if the subject were of no further interest to him before adding with spurious, pointed clarity, "As both Edana's teacher as well as Ramirez', I should certainly be eligible to fight for her at this... feud."

"I don't know, I'm not sure if this is quite a feud, Semnut. Grudge match?" Xan suggested helpfully. "Vendetta, maybe? Although I think Sicilians would have finished this more quickly. Anyway, does anyone really care to dispute the gentleman's right to be here?"

"That doesn't explain you, bellus," Jirina pointed out nastily.

"Of course it does, Jirina," Alex told her, grinning openly at her attempted slight against his lover. *As if Xenokrates has never been called 'pretty boy'? Oligarchs and philosophers wrote odes to that profile, and maneuvered in the gymnasium to gain his smiles.*

Xan cut in, speaking with the same clear, sharp courtesy and patience they had all been wielding. "You simply have to apply logic, Jirina. You do know the word, don't you? If Edana and Ramirez studied with Semnut, that means the line of Ramirez is eligible to fight as part of the line of Semnut. So if he and I aren't out of the line of Ramirez, then the odds are good that we're out of Semnut's line, wouldn't you think? Or do you think?"

"We'd draw you a diagram," Alex told her cheerfully, "but we didn't bring an easel and flip chart. So sorry. Alexandrias, son of Stamos," the dark-haired man introduced himself as he took the argument back from his partner. "Student of Semnut, brother to Ramirez."

"And Xenokrates, son of Feoras, also student of Semnut. Also brother to Ramirez. And to Edana, there, of course -- let's not leave her out," Xan added cheerfully and he smiled at Owain and Johannes, knowing who the strategists on the other side were. The dismay on their faces was too obvious; he couldn't resist goading them even further. "No need for introductions on your side, of
course. There are so few of your line left that we know who you are.”

Alex’s smile matched Xan’s, all jovial good humor which, like the god it was named after, might yet break into lightning. He nodded to the Welshman opposite as he said, “You, of course, are Owain Rhys-Tewdor, who would have the world think he sprang forth full-grown and fully trained. You claim no teacher, and I’ve never heard any man or woman claim you as line-sib.”

Semnut glanced over and said coolly, ”He has none. Pwyll ap Morgan was only a hundred and some when he took on a student named Owain. He didn’t survive that mistake.”

Will and Damita eyed Owain warily at that statement, unsurprised and less and less happy with the situation as the revelations grew worse and worse. The small print in the contract had just come into play, apparently, and gold nuggets were turning out to be fool’s gold. Owain, however, gave nothing away in face or stance or word... as ever.

The darker Greek raised a surprised eyebrow at his teacher's information, but he pointed to the tall, bald Prussian standing next to Owain and continued, ”You are Johannes Engeles, his right hand and most apt pupil in all forms of deceit and treachery since Gwydion ap Ydris died.”

Semnut had turned that penetrating gaze on the women, to Johannes' relief and their agitation. Still watching them, he took up the acidic commentary and immediately drew blood. "Let's not forget the ladies -- not that any of you are. The females, in any case. You,” and he pointed directly at the solidly built blond woman with the spectacular chest, "are Jirina Petesceu. If you had any patience, we'd have met in Paris months ago.”

He pointed at the brunette woman whose nose had obviously been broken once or twice and went on, ”You are Bianca De Grazia. Or more precisely,” and Semnut paused, having obviously remembered some detail, "Bambi De Grazia, former mistress to Cesare Borgia, first beaten and then poisoned for not accepting your dismissal from his bed. What was the reason for that, anyway? Ineptitude?” She stiffened, and he added thoughtfully, "Or boredom? His? Or yours? In any case, the would-be waif to your left is your student, Damita Santos, who shows signs of being almost as poisonous as you.”

"Where did you hear...." Bianca broke off, fuming and angrily aware that arguing would only make her look even more foolish. Beside her, Jirina was trying not to smile at the insinuations about Bianca's talents, and even Damita looked as if she were enjoying the catty insults. The claim of poisonous obviously didn't bother her.

Semnut merely smiled at Bianca's outburst, his expression that of a teacher contemplating a student who was claiming that the dog had eaten the papers. "I simply did my homework, fessa." Outrage widened her eyes, drew her up to deliver a vituperative harangue, and he leveled an edged smile at her and said pleasantly, "Merely returning the courtesy you paid my student, de Grazia. Give this one up; you're insufficiently armed.”

While the Italian woman was still sputtering and working herself up to a fishwife's crescendo over his gutter insult, Aidan looked straight at her New Zealand friend and said calmly, "You are Farrell Jameson, who studied with Owain.”

The former rancher nodded in acknowledgement, but said quietly, "Enough, Phoebe. Let's drop the sarcasm and get this fiasco over with, one way or the other.”

Her eyes raked the other side, seeing Johannes and Owain just now recovering from the shock of 'Semnut's' identity and the way so many of the others had drawn back from Owain at the uncontested announcement of his teacher's death; they had yet to press back around him. Aidan
needed only a moment to weigh their mood and decide she could afford to hold back any further bombshells.

"I do owe you a kindness or three, don't I?" she told Farrell gently. "Agreed. Enough. Lim Mahn of Hong Kong and William Moran of California, I believe?" They each nodded in acknowledgment of the introduction, although Will's motion was jerkier than Lim's. The slim Chinese man had given her the faintest, appreciative smile, and his slight bow was the eyes-up, respectful inclination given by a cautious opponent just before the sparring match started.

Aidan noted both attitudes, calculations spinning behind her mind as she turned to face the last man. "And you would be the butcher, Enrique Alba."

"Phoebe...." The New Zealander frowned at her, surprised that she had reversed herself and gone back to sniping at his line. Her word had held longer than that when they worked together in the '40s.

"You didn't see what this so-called Christian did to Connor," she told Farrell icily, never taking her eyes off Enrique. "Butcher he is and butcher I'll name him, Farrell. Nine days ago, my brother had both his hands."

"Not to mention other things," Enrique snapped, goaded past silence at last by the behavior of the heathens. Whores and abominations, the majority of them, deserving of his efforts on his Lord's behalf. "I see some of the ruin, at least, is rebuilt."

"The fingernails, certainly," she told him with spurious naïveté. "Or did you think you'd claimed his innocence?"

The implication struck more deeply than she had ever expected. Enrique first paled, then flushed a flustered, blotchy red as he protested, "We would never... I did not say--"

"Then you're traveling with Godless men, false priest. You already killed me once or thrice. Feel free to do the same to them," the older Highlander told him grimly, turning towards Aidan to make it clear that he was finished with that argument. "Any other rules to announce, sister, or shall we start the killing?"

"Hold it," Farrell snapped, shoulders tight as his impassive expression began to erode from within. "MacLeod, I always--" He stopped, clearly swallowing words, then tried again. "I've never heard anyone say you're a liar. Did you just say that Enrique and some of the others here tortured and raped you?"

Connor gave him an odd look, clearly surprised by both the question and its source. He raised an eyebrow as he asked, "You give a damn?"

"We haven't met, I can tell," came Farrell's angry comment. "As a matter of fact, yes, I do. Did I understand you two correctly or not?"

Connor studied him and nodded once. The honest, worried expression began to explain why so
many people on his side were upset that Farrell was fighting for Owain, and why Kastagir had spoken so fondly of the man. But Jameson had asked; time to see what he did with the answer.

"Enrique, Johannes, Owain, and those two dark-haired bitches over there," the Highlander told him bluntly, pointing at Damita and Bianca with his recently returned katana. "Those were the ones I saw before they blinded me. Why?" To his surprise, Farrell stalked out to stand between the two groups and turned to face his own people. Did the boy actually trust them not to take his head from behind? His next words answered that question for Connor immediately.

"Is this the truth, Owain?" Farrell challenged his teacher.

"You gave your word," Owain said softly, blue eyes dancing with rage at this betrayal. "Is it worth so little?"

The New Zealand man studied him for a long minute before making his decision. His shoulders loosened, back straightening at last from its cramped indecision as Farrell stated grimly, "It's my word, Owain, and my honor. I have to live with it in the middle of the night, not you. But someone who would do something like this has no right to my word, Owain. Did you do what they say?"

Enrique answered before Johannes could silence him. "He associates with heretics."

"So do I," Farrell snapped, glaring at the tonsured immortal he had loathed for so many years now. "Several of them are standing on the other side of this fight. Hell, Enrique, so do you -- or do you really think Damita's a good Catholic girl? She follows Santeria, and probably enjoys twisting the rooster's neck. I wouldn't put it past her to drink its blood, too."

Enrique stared first at the young Brazilian, then back at Farrell, his rising doubts twisted across his face.

Farrell paid no attention to his reaction, more concerned with what Owain had done, and what he would do. He scowled at his teacher, wondering if this was going to be what finally pushed them into going for each other's heads. "You're awfully quiet over there, Owain. When are you going to answer the question? Or are you? You're not usually a coward."

"You call me a coward? I'm not the one afraid to fight," Owain snapped, drawing himself to his full height in a last attempt to impose his will on the young fool who had apparently learned less of pragmatism and reality than he'd thought.

"I'm facing you right now, not them," came the blunt, and unexpected, answer. "Don't start asking if I'll fight; you might not like the answer. Did you do this or not?" His voice dragged the words out, spacing them too clearly to be misunderstood.

"It's customary to start a line war with a warning. He was our warning," Owain answered in a silky voice; his eyes threatened Farrell with the same fate. "It's within the rules."

"Rules? Allowed? You cut off an immortal's sword hand," Farrell said disbelievingly. "You son of a bitch. Did you just figure MacLeod wouldn't come to this little soirée and you could pick him off later at your leisure?" His voice rose steadily in volume as he glared at his own line kin, grateful that his back was to Phoebe's people; they'd at least kill him cleanly if they were going to attack from behind, and he didn't think they'd even do that.

A memory rose up and fell into proper perspective this time; Farrell stared incredulously first at his teacher, and then at Jirina. "Promises.... Fuck, Owain, what did the five of you do? Dice for who
got to go up against him later? Or were you going to do it after today? What else did you do? Jirina, you wanted to know what he promised me for this. You were serious, weren't you? You're here because he promised to destroy Duncan MacLeod. Jesus Christ, Owain, did you take lessons from Lucifer?"

"Enough," Owain hissed as he accepted that he had just lost one fighter; now he had to ensure it was only one. "MacLeod was a warning, a visible sign of just how serious this is. And you will fight for me... or against me."

"Screw that."

Farrell pulled his sword in a single smooth motion, no longer concerned with those who stood at his back, only with the dangers in front of him. With a surprisingly exhilarated smile, he unleashed the one weapon he'd held in reserve for sixty years now. "I'm not fighting for you, Owain. I'm not fighting for anyone who'd do that. If you want to try me, go right ahead, but you aren't the only immortal I've ever trained with -- or the oldest."

The tall, farm-bred immortal let that threat lie between them, sharp as his blade, and then laughed in a sudden burst of relief as he burned his bridges. "And Owain? You don't know who the others were. You can't be sure how I'll fight or who'll win. This time, you don't know everything. Are you absolutely sure you want to do this?"

"What? Who...?" Owain stared at him, more shocked by his own miscalculation than by Farrell's threat. "It doesn't matter who you studied with later; you studied with me first, Farrell Jameson. You came to fight for me."

"Then you're a fighter short," came the implacable reply. "Unless Phoebe decides she's willing to drop this to eight bouts. No. Screw that. You want Phoebe -- fine. You get your treacherous Welsh ass out there and fight her. Don't use the rest of us for your little mind games, or whatever the hell you're up to. Just fight her. See who's better and get this damned pissing contest over, why don't you? You've only been waiting eight hundred years for it."

"Oh, we'll fight all right," Owain growled, "but in our own time and in the proper way. You always claimed you appreciated tradition, Farrell Jameson. Changing your mind now that tradition is inconvenient?"

Farrell studied the angry faces looking at him, the hands that obviously wanted permission to draw blades and attack him, and laughed again. It wasn't even remotely funny, but in the rush of adrenaline the laughter spilled out of him, half-wild and ironic. "If this is your idea of convenient, Owain, you are a seriously deluded man."

From behind him Farrell heard footsteps, but he didn't dare take his attention off the man in front of him. Come what may, if he and Owain lived through this, the Welshman would come for his head. That was inevitable now, Farrell knew, as inevitable as his break with Owain had been. There was something strangely comforting in that knowledge. Then Alex was on one side of him and Xan on the other.

Alex moved just far enough to let Phoebe come up on his left, and she said very softly, "Farrell, if you renounce his line, they'll attack you. There would be nothing to stop them; the truce is between our two lines, and if you cast yourself out--"

"Forget it, Phoebe," he muttered. "I'll take my chances, but there's no way I'm fighting for him after that."
Xan laughed softly from his right; Farrell never looked away from Damita's hostile face.

"Now you decide to ditch him?" the blond Greek asked, amused and exasperated at the same time. "Look, Farrell, you sparred with us often enough in Athens; do you want to claim us as teachers? That would make you line of Semnut, and place you back under the truce. We'd claim you gladly, you know that, or Damiano would, for that matter."

Farrell kept his voice too low for Owain to hear. "Actually, I was going to claim Kastagir."

A soft snort of laughter from behind him told him the older MacLeod had moved behind him too, and he wondered if he was going to live through either side until he heard the question. "Did you really study with that damned reprobate?"

"Three glorious years." Farrell chuckled, taking a fatalistic pleasure from each moment and each breath. "Well, they were a hell of a lot of fun after we got away from the German agents at least. It's sort of a long story, MacLeod."

"His always were," Connor agreed, sounding amused and... friendly? "That would explain a few things," the Scot muttered, but his next question shocked Farrell. "Care to join the family?"

Owain watched, narrow-eyed, as the line of Ramirez flanked the student he had clearly wasted years training. "Farrell, you cannot renounce me now."

Damien laughed outright at that. "Sounds to me like he told you to haul your own ashes, Rhys-Tewdor. Tell you what, Jirina, shall we go settle our business while your teacher figures out where he left his balls this morning?"

"Why do you think I'd go anywhere with you?"

The burly redhead studied her then said softly, "You always used to. And Jirina? If you don't, then in eight days you can start looking over your shoulder, woman. Because sooner or later, Amanda and I will be there. And then you won't."

"This is a line war, Rufio," Owain snapped. "It has rules."

"Yes, well, you've just broken them," Aidan called immediately. "You called for nine challenges and have only fighters for eight." More quietly she said, "Farrell, if you'd rather not claim us, then head straight for the chests of food to our right. The area inside the circle of rocks and trees is Holy Ground; you'll be safe there."

"Care to join me, MacLeod? She's only going to need eight fighters, and I did just promise you a story," Farrell offered softly.

That got an almost malicious chuckle. "I might enjoy escorting you over there, but there are some people I need to see about my hand."

Owain stepped forward and said grimly, "For me or against me, Farrell -- which is it?"

"Owain Rhys-Tewdor, if the lessons I've learned had been yours, I'd still be standing by you. As far as I'm concerned, you trained eight students, not nine." Farrell watched him, his sword never dropping from ready. "I renounce your line, you treacherous bastard, I renounce your teaching, and I renounce you."

"Treacherous?" Owain wrapped his voice around the word, lacing it with incredulity and outrage to make very clear what he thought of that claim. "You came in good faith, Farrell. You knew
"Yes, but I didn't know what kind of scum I was fighting for," Farrell interrupted swiftly.

"Going to claim your own line?" Owain asked smoothly. "Establish yourself *sui generis*, Farrell, and say you've made yourself?"

"You'd know how it's done," Semnut pointed out coolly. He hadn't moved from his spot to the side of the others, and he raised an eyebrow in mocking salute when Owain snarled.

"Actually," Farrell grinned, "once you're dead, I'll claim my other teacher. He wouldn't have minded. But I'm not going to give you any keys to my fighting style just yet, Owain -- such as his name." He spun the tip of his blade through a tight circle, making an ostentatious display of his control of the heavy long sword. "Care to try me, old man, or shall I go sit over there and watch? If you're lucky, Phoebe might let you cut this to eight bouts." A swift motion of his head indicated the clearing Aidan had mentioned, but he never took his eyes off Owain. "If."

"Sit and watch, then, coward." The Welshman watched him coldly, and said softly, "And from this moment forward, watch your back."

"I've done that every day since I met you," Farrell half-lied. "Xan, why don't you let me by? For some reason, I just don't feel like taking my eyes off him until he's dead."

"I don't blame you," Xan said cheerfully as he stepped back. "We'll see you when it's over. Try to leave us something to drink, would you?"

As soon as Farrell was clear of them, though, Owain sprang to attack; his former student was barely four or five paces away, after all. The tall Welsh man had only made it three steps when the crack of displaced air rang against everyone's ears, and he automatically threw himself back and away from Farrell. Owain came up out of the controlled tumble, sword still in hand, and stared at the divot of displaced earth.

"What the *hell!*" Johannes bellowed as most of his line dove for cover behind rocks or trees.

Jirina and Lim came up with their pistols, looking for a target, and the whine of the ricochet had barely faded away when Enrique called loudly, "Treachery!"

"No," Semnut corrected him. "A referee. And I'd look at your own side before I went too much farther with that claim."

Aidan said grimly, "Connor, Var -- escort Farrell out of the way, please. Jirina, Lim, I would recommend you safety your guns and toss them toward that clearing before the referee runs out of patience."

Farrell had never stopped walking, although he hadn't put his sword away either.

Johannes snapped, "Referee? Don't you mean assassin?"

Aidan shrugged, certain that Duncan and, more importantly, Stormy were tracking Farrell's progress towards Holy Ground. "If Owain hadn't launched that attack, you would have never known she was there. She won't shoot unless someone breaks the rules."

Owain snarled, "We're to believe your shooter will follow the rules?"

"Why not?" Aidan countered. "She's not line of Ramirez, so she's not involved in this. And
Owain, your people already broke the rules. You know full well pistols are not allowed."

Lim stood up and paced slowly into full view of any shooter before removing the clip from his gun, ostentatiously clearing the chamber, and then throwing both clip and gun in the indicated direction. Jirina hissed softly, but did the same. The Slavic woman glared at Aidan and said grimly, "Satisfied?"

"Not until your fight is over," the Irish woman told her coldly. "If you have another gun, Jirina, I'd recommend you leave it alone. As you've just seen, they aren't healthy to use today."

"You have the area bugged?" Lim asked in a bland tone of professional interest.

Aidan tilted her head and gave him a wickedly amused smile. "No."

Enrique stared at her, watching for the witch's latest trick. "Then why did your shooter fire?"

"Owain attacked someone who wasn't on my side." She shrugged as if that should be completely self-explanatory to anyone with wits.

Owain drew himself up. "I thought you said your shooter knew the rules, Cynthia."

Aidan rolled her eyes and allowed some of her exasperation to show. "Owain, I've given up on getting you into this century. The rules say that you are to fight us, not each other, but the sweet gods forbid you should actually understand the rules. Just send out your first fighter, why don't you?"

Alex glanced at Xan and said thoughtfully, if loudly, "Do you remember the *Four Musketeers?"

"What about them?" The golden-haired man was grinning, a knowing, cynical smile as he waited for his lover to finish this latest goad.

"I meant the movie, not the people." Alex checked his watch, looked at the distance the sun had already risen above the horizon, and ostentatiously sighed, "I'm beginning to sympathize with Rochefort: we may die of old age."

Damien smiled savagely and pointed out, "I offered to start the festivities, Alex. Don't look at me."

"Enough!" Owain pointed at Will Moran. "He's first. After you send one of your fighters away, woman."

"Send your man out and I'll match him," she said calmly, "but why send someone away when I'm still waiting for two of them to walk back? You needn't worry, Owain. If I send out two to your one, my shooter will drop one of us. Fair is fair."

"I'm to believe that?" he scoffed.

"Why not?" came her silky answer. "I'm not the one with the reputation for treachery."

Navarro laughed and concluded, "Point for her."

Will hadn't moved. "Who am I fighting?"

Aidan glanced over at Connor, who had just returned with Var, and said softly, "How badly do you want this, brother?"

Connor looked Will up and down, a penetrating appraisal that did nothing for the other man's
"nerves. "That scared boy?" The Highlander snorted softly. "I'd rather take the priest."

"I'd rather you didn't fight at all," Aidan sighed, "but you were the one they hurt. As to who you fight, well, you should remember the contingencies, Connor. You helped plot them, after all. Will is yours, then."

"I don't think so," Will snapped. "Farrell rabbited, and he was one of yours. I'm Johannes' student, Owain, not yours. Why in hell should I do this for you?"

Aidan watched them, her face impassive as Owain's coalition fell farther apart.

Johannes said coolly, "You'll fight, student, because you agreed to." He looked at the panic on Will's face and lowered his voice before he said, "You'll do it because they'll kill you if you don't."

"They don't care if I fight," Will said frantically. "Why should I?"

"You took Rabi's head," Johannes stated, still quiet. "Three of her siblings are over there, and her teacher. They'll come for you sooner or later."

"They don't know that," was his immediate reply.

The tall, balding immortal studied the timorous man he had trained and shook his head in disgust. "Disgrace me by fleeing, William, and I promise you -- they will."

"Damn you," Will whispered, his last retreat gone.

"Stand up and act like a man," Enrique told him scornfully.

"Your turn's coming," the younger immortal snarled. "And Enrique? They want you a hell of a lot more than they want me." The surge of bravado carried Will three paces away from them, then four, and he managed a death's head rictus that was intended as a smile. "Ready, MacLeod?"

Connor gestured to his left with his metal-guarded stump. "Shall we?"

Will risked a glance at the clearing. "That wasn't here when we came up before."

The Scot shrugged and commented, "We thought clear space to fight would be an improvement. It's not mined. Come on, Moran." He chuckled and said grimly, "It's no different than any other day and any other immortal. Come and fight, or shall I challenge you to make this feel more normal?"

 anytime the Highlander challenged me, I'd want to piss my pants, Will admitted to himself, but he nodded and walked silently beside the other man. The wall of buzzing presences behind them faded for a moment, then surged again as the entire group began to walk that way.

"Why are they coming along?" Will asked, trying to keep his voice calm. "You've got your shooter."

"Because they're going to be fighting here, too," Connor told him. "And probably to make sure you don't pull a gun. Aidan hates taking chances like that."

"Did Enrique really...." He trailed off, not quite willing to ask.

"The hand?" The Highlander gave him a sidelong glance before saying coldly, "No, Owain and Johannes did that. Enrique did other things." Connor stopped in the middle of the clearing and indicated the rough circle. "Fifty feet to play in, give or take. Ready?" He let the katana circle
through the air, loosening his wrist and making it clear that he had at least some practice with his left hand.

"I don't think I've ever seen one of us wearing armor," Will pointed out as he stalled for time. The arm guards -- vambraces, I think the replica catalogues call them, he remembered -- were unusual, but he'd seen stranger things. He wanted the extra time however, as he desperately sought a plan that would let him take down one of the Highlanders. From the way that katana was swirling through the air, he was going to need a plan, or more luck than he'd ever seen in his life.

"You're not that young," Connor stated bluntly, aware Will was stalling. Oddly enough, the glinting malice in those peculiar, changeable eyes stiffened Will's spine almost as much as the caustic question, "Ready?"

Self-preservation instincts kicked in and while Will was unsheathing his long sword he suggested slyly, "You're going to be easy prey, Highlander. Give up and I'll at least make it quick."

Gold eyes laughed at him and the Highlander chuckled harshly. "You know, I don't doubt you would. Not today, though, Moran. Fight and die." And he moved in on the other man, katana carving hissing lines from the air.

Will blocked the first two attacks, ducked a little too late from the third, and heard cloth rip. He spun into a half-kneeling position, lashing out with his free elbow at the other man's stump. He connected with steel instead of bone, and the pain in his elbow matched the sudden sheet of pain in his side. It took an instant to realize that he hadn't evaded that third strike, and by then he was too busy angling his blade up to block the Highlander's katana to worry about how badly he might be hurt.

The scream of shearing metal left Will staring at the shank of his sword. He threw himself to his left, hard, to take advantage of MacLeod's missing hand. Muscle ripped further in his side as he rolled frantically back up, still clutching the useless remnant of blade, but by then MacLeod was almost on him again. That damned katana lashed out as he came to his feet, twisting around what little defense he could put up, and laid his inner arm open down to the bone. Will felt his hand spring open involuntarily as the tendons were severed; the hilt hit the dirt with a thud.

Those odd gold eyes held no pity and no remorse as the Highlander quoted him. "Give up and I'll make it quick."

"You don't have to kill me," Will said quickly, too focused on the other immortal to risk prayer or even hope. "She said it was in the rules."

"You're right," Connor told him. "I don't."

Aidan watched the lightning play briefly over Connor's body and shook her head. "Maybe now he'll sleep a bit better."

"He'll be fine," Alex told her calmly. "Trust me. Make me happy, Edana -- worry about yourself, would you?"

That got a smile, but she watched Connor anxiously as he walked back, alert for any signs of
distress or discomfort. He came directly to her and raised his right arm to stroke the chased steel vambrace gently along her cheek. "All right?"

"You're the one who just fought," Aidan pointed out, but she was smiling. "Better?"

"I had to know I could, sister." Connor gave her a wry smile and a half-shrug, then commented, "I'm going to go steal my kinsman to get these off me. Unless you think you'll need him?"

"We'll see," she shrugged, still watching Owain. "I don't suppose you'd at least move over to the right?"

"So I can head to your new altar if need be?" He shrugged noncommittally, then caught Duncan up in a hard embrace as his clansman wrapped both arms around him. "I'm all right, Duncan."

"Aye, so you are." Dark brown eyes met dark gold and Duncan laughed softly. "I don't know why I worried."

"Because you always worry?" Connor suggested. "Come on, man, come help me get these vambraces off, and then I want to see if I nicked my poor blade."

"Your poor blade?" Duncan was saying incredulously as they walked away. "At least it's in one piece, Connor!"

Across the arena, Owain's face was impassive as Johannes and Lim deposited Will's body beside a pair of boulders, and laid the pieces of his sword on his chest. Rather than reveal any of his feelings about the first death, he waved Damita forward.

Aidan hissed softly as she examined her more closely. The girl was carrying two machetes, which wasn't entirely unexpected from a capoeira fighter. It was the way she was dressed that worried the druid; from fifty feet away, Aidan could sense some kind of power hovering around the chocolate-skinned woman. It sparkled across the multi-colored beads on the tips of her braids, and something about her clothing struck Aidan as curiously significant. Possibly it was the fact that the flower-printed maroon top didn't flatter her complexion, which was odd; the carefully applied makeup did.

There was an odd, off-center concentration to her, too, a focus on something not quite material that Aidan recognized from personal experience. The other woman had been doing ritual magic, and recently. Some kind of protection, or adrenaline-boosted speed or strength? Maybe on the hike up? That's when I would have focused myself.

From beside her, Xan said calmly, "See the way she walks? She's capoeira trained, all right. Like I said, Edana, this one's mine."

"She reeks of magic," Aidan told him. "Be ready for anything, brother. Somehow I wouldn't be at all surprised if she went for your eyes." She paused then said more slowly, "Will you take my blessing?"

Xan dropped to one knee in front of her, his gaze never leaving hers. "Always, Mother." Mischief danced in oak brown eyes when he cheerfully asked, "After all, do you know how hard it is to find a pagan priestess to confess to? Bless me, Mother, for I have refused to call things sin."

His voice was reverent despite the teasing, full of laughing respect given willingly, and that made Aidan smile even as she bent forward to kiss his forehead, then his closed eyes, and finally his mouth. "Go in war, my brother, and may the Lady protect you and the Lord guide your hands."
He smiled up at her, a laughing golden rogue who cheerfully pointed out, "That's no kiss to send me off with."

"Collect a better one from Alex then," she suggested, chuckling. "But you and I are far too busy as it is, Xenokrates."

Alex brushed his lips across his lover's and laughed as he pulled back. "She always does scald with those blessings, doesn't she? I can still feel the heat on your mouth."

"That's not just Edana," Xan chuckled even as he took the pair of axes Alex had pulled out of their bag, weapons brought against just this eventuality.

Dark eyes shone with unspoken words and well-known emotions as Alex said softly, "Try to come back to me, hmm?"

"Leave you to handle Connor by yourself?" Xan laughed even as his smile promised everything Alex had and hadn't asked. "Don't be ridiculous."

Damita broke off the sing-song nursery rhyme she'd been chanting to call scornfully, "Is anyone going to come fight, or do I win by default?"

Rather than respond, Xan strolled into the cleared area. She was already swaying, machetes up in defensive positions as her feet shifted constantly across four points that formed a loose rectangle for her dancing. Her body moved fluidly, now, but he met her eyes confidently as she sneered, "Ready to die, little man? Her blessing isn't going to help you."

Xan deliberately widened his vision, sliding into the blurred focus he'd learned to use in *capoeira*. Her attack could come from any direction, he knew, and the indicator might be eyes or torso or feet. So he watched all of it as he said casually, "Your gods can't save you from everything, Damita. Sheer curiosity -- Oyá or Ogún?"

Now he was moving himself. Her widened eyes and then narrowed mouth gave away the exact moment that she realized he wasn't imitating her, but actually knew what a *jinga* was and how to launch from it... and guard against it. "Where did you hear those names?"

Xan pushed off one foot casually, launching his first attack from mid-air before he spun through a one-handed cartwheel. Damita threw herself to the side, blocking his blade and coming back up to launch her own tumbling attack at his thigh. He slapped her machete aside with his axe, nearly hooking the blade, and laughed. "The same places you did, *chiquita*, only sooner." He dropped back to his defensive position and mockingly switched from a basic *jinga* to the provocative, swaying footwork of *salsa*. "Care to dance?"

"Come and die," Damita hissed. "I've promised you to Oyá."

"More fool you," Xan told her as he stepped out of the way of her next attack, spinning lightly on the ball of one foot to follow her as she circled. "Never promise what you can't guarantee."

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Bianca absently bit the edge of a thumbnail as the fight went on. She didn't actually like Damita, but the girl was the only student she had trained, and Bianca found herself swaying sympathetically with the other woman's attacks. This had gone on far longer than that first travesty, and both sides were bloodied, their clothes rent and stained where sharp-edged weapons had hit. Feet had struck almost as many times as blades, though, and hands or backs had hit ground nearly as often as feet. It had been instructional for both sides, she could tell. The shocked noises when double attacks
came in, sometimes paired weapons, sometimes blade and kick, had made it clear that most of them hadn't seen this kind of fight before. Unfortunately, the Greek catamite had seen capoeira before. He was even good, though Bianca hated to contemplate that.

The Italian woman hissed through clenched teeth when he hit the ground on one hip, rolled back into the impact, and pushed up off his shoulders to land on his feet. Damita was already coming in and slashed him across the upper arm. That proved to be a mistake, as the Greek man twisted, contracting in on himself to trap one of her blades with both axes and sent it flying across the circle.

The slender girl tried to go after it, but Xan pressed his attack despite the wounded arm. Bianca leaned forward, willing strength into her student as he struck with those damned hooked axes of his. Damita threw herself out of the way, but it took her away from her machete and she visibly decided to finish the fight with one weapon rather than leave herself open again while pursuing the other. She was deadly enough without it, Bianca knew.

Damita threw herself at Xan's side, braced on one arm while her remaining machete came in from one angle and her kick from another. He'd set himself, though, and took the kick, hooking around with his axe to slam her blade out of line. Then he struck, and Bianca saw the trap a moment before Damita did. His other axe came up after her retreating leg and ripped the calf muscle apart.

The Brazilian girl didn't seem to feel it at first, lost in the adrenaline focus of the fight, but blood was everywhere and that leg gave way when she tried to throw herself out and away to start another tumbling run. The Greek showed her no mercy, coming after her in a mid-air attack at her crippled, unarmed side. As he went past, one axe sank into her back with a meaty thunk. Xan abandoned it there, clearly buried in her shoulder muscle and spine, as he came down behind her and spun on the ball of one foot to gather momentum.

His head whipped around before the rest of him, sighting in on her neck even as she collapsed further forward, driven down by the impact of his first blade and by muscles that were no longer receiving signals. Then Xan's second axe came around, propelled by all the force of his spin. The quickening was already starting to gather around Damita's body when Xan kicked her head back toward her teacher, his face set and angry now as he had not allowed himself to be during the fight.

"Present for you, Bianca!" he called, and the Italian woman couldn't seem to look away from the sight of her student's head flying through the air, thin braids trailing it in a comet's tail of black hair and bright beads....

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Var sauntered into the blood-stained circle and stood waiting. The aristocratic, golden-haired man didn't have to voice his contempt for his opponent. It was written in the line of eyebrows and mouth, in the slow, appraising stare that started at her feet and traveled upward without slowing anywhere along the way, and in the refusal to grant her so much as a nod of his head or a salute of his blade.

After a long, silent second he said only, "De Grazia," his recognition both coolly correct and insulting in its brevity.

"Rodriguez. You're a long way from Nice."

Var shrugged. "The scenery needed improving. Of course, some of the growths around here could stand to be trimmed, too." His unimpressed assessment made the comment an affront as pointed as their weapons. He tossed a white oblong to her from his left hand, and it spun a lazy arc in the air to land at her feet.
"What...?" Bianca stepped back before dropping carefully to one knee to pick the box up. "Handi-Wipes?"

"Too many rumors for too many years call you a poisoner, strega. Clean your blades." His voice left her no options and his weapons were already dancing a distracting double orbit as he spun the hafts across palm and back of hand. The precision of it was horrific; one hilt was always solidly in hand before the other was released, and yet the sword and dagger never seemed to slow.

"How dare you?" The Italian woman snarled as she threw the box at him. He let it lie in front of him and smiled as Owain stalked toward the cleared circle.

"Enrique Alba." The cool voice cut over them, projected perfectly so that it was loud enough to be heard without sounding excited, and Owain slowed as Aidan's teacher commented, "What does the Bible prescribe for a poisoner? Stoning, isn't it?" Now Semnut turned on the Italian woman and said calmly, "And after all, Bambi, if you didn't poison them, there's no reason not to clean them."

"I should trust him?" she snapped.

"Not in the slightest," Var commented, languid and bored as a courtier judging by his voice and relaxed stance. "I intend to kill you. However, unlike you, I'm perfectly willing to do this." He dropped to one knee and sheathed his dagger at his belt before opening the box. A quick swipe of cloth down blade, and he propped his sword against his thigh, before pulling his dagger and cleaning it, too. Then he threw the cloth to lie between them. "Clean."

Var picked his sword up before kicking the box of Handi-Wipes to Bianca. "As you can see, my blades are not poisoned. Clean your weapon, strega -- without re-sheathing it afterward. I knew a man once who slipped a poison-laced sponge into the collar of his sword sheath. Amazing how many of his opponents never survived the ring," the Spaniard said meditatively, dark blue eyes intent on her face.

"And if I refuse this insult?" Bianca asked haughtily.

Var shrugged. "Then we would have to assume you're using poison... and act accordingly. Shall I raise my voice, strega, and explain to our so-accurate referee that your weapon is surely coated with something?" He laughed sharply and offered, "Come, clean your sword, puttana. I'll not even ask to see the cloth. Why should I, after all?" he inquired sardonically.

"This is not within the rules, Cynthia," Owain pointed out, his hands relaxed at his sides but his shoulders tight and furious.

"So it isn't," Aidan agreed, clearly unconcerned as she lounged on a boulder. "On the other hand, you're welcome to demand the same of any of us you suspect of contaminating our blades."

"If not for your shooter--"

"--you'd still be outnumbered," Alex told him bluntly. The black-haired Greek had been rubbing Xan's shoulders as if to reassure himself that his lover was intact; now he moved forward to the edge of the cleared fighting circle. "Don't bother, Rhys-Tewdor. The more you stall, the more obvious it becomes that she's hiding something. Do you want her to clean the blade, or do you want this to degenerate into a melee of nine against six?" Alex smiled graciously as he pointed out, "After all, we know who we're supposed to fight. We'd be perfectly happy to settle all of this at once... but you might not be."

"Do it, Bianca." Owain added coldly, "We'll remember this."
"If you live," was Aidan's mocking reply.

Var watched Bianca closely to be sure she had cleaned the entire blade. It didn't surprise him at all that, rather than throw the cloth to the center as he had, she crumpled it and tossed it to one side. Then she was coming after him, and he was busy parrying her long sword.

Bianca struck at him furiously, wielding her blade like a too-light bludgeon, and Var smiled maliciously as he caught it with his dagger and simultaneously struck at her head with his epee. She twisted her blade up and around to block, and he laughed as he sidestepped to disengage. "You've been relying on your tricks too long, strega."

She dropped back, and now Bianca tried to use her blade more effectively, taking advantage of its lighter weight to try and change her attacks in mid-strike so that he wouldn't be able to counter. Centuries of practice with two weapons paid off, however, and Var continued to guide her blows away with main gauche and follow up with his sword, precise and regular as clockwork. He found himself imitating Xan's earlier taunting motions, something he knew the other man would tease him about later, but for now the dance steps infuriated Bianca and he wanted her angry.

"So, what else has he taught you, pretty boy? How to spread your legs?" She laughed and struck again with her blade, seeing the flush on his face that said her verbal attack, at least, had hit a vulnerable spot.

"This." Var slapped her blade aside with the epee this time, spinning into her body to strike with the main gauche. No one ever expected a duelist to strike with the shorter weapon, he'd found, and this time was no exception.

His blade ripped into her stomach with a horrible ease, and he buried the main gauche almost to the hilt before yanking it sideways and out. She didn't drop her sword, but both arms instinctively tried to cradle her wounded abdomen. With the same considered precision, Var drew his blades across the backs of her arms, just above the elbow, and heard her scream this time as she had not found breath to do before.

Her sword dropped from nerveless fingers and he kicked it away as he moved to her side and used the epee to repeat the same slicing movement across the backs of her legs. Hamstrung in legs as well as arms, Bianca folded at the knees, unable to bring her arms away from the agony of her torso to try and block the fall. She was still screaming in rage and pain when Var almost casually buried his dagger in her side. Once he had a hand free, he reached down and yanked her upright by her mane of dark hair.

"Those were for MacLeod, strega," he purred as he lifted his sword one last time. "This, however, is for me."

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Methos caught Duncan's arm as Enrique moved into the circle. "Highlander." His lover's dark brown eyes were already gleaming with anticipation and a lust for revenge that positively crackled in the air between them. Methos smiled back at him reflexively, the sly, knowledgeable expression that he'd sometimes thought would etch itself into his face in the days when he manipulated and planned for Kronos and the others. "I thought you wanted revenge on Enrique?"

Duncan's smile matched his for cold rage, and the darkly glittering desire Methos saw in his usually honorable lover was enough to make the oldest immortal wonder how much damage Owain had done with Connor's torture, and to whom. The last time Mac had worn that expression he'd been under the influence of a dark quickening.
The Scot raised one eyebrow and said, "Definitely. What did you have in mind?"

"Two things," Methos pulled him in, trusting Duncan to twist his unsheathed blade out and away. He captured the other man's mouth in a kiss that staked his claim as if possession were never in doubt, only what he would do with it. His lips moved over Duncan's, searching, opening, searing him with Methos' own hunger and desire before he softened the kiss into something gentler, no less passionate, but less bloodthirsty.

From the quirk of those full lips as he drew back, Methos could tell Duncan knew what he'd intended and accomplished. The younger man made no complaint at being soothed, though; instead he asked fairly steadily, "And the other part?"

Methos chuckled. "If it won't offend your sensibilities, take Aidan's blessing."

"That would incense that unholy priest, wouldn't it?" He made no effort to keep his voice down, and Alex and Xan both laughed.

Aidan chuckled softly herself. "It would indeed. But if you want the blessing, Dhonnchaidh, ask it for yourself, not against Enrique. My Lady is more interested in you than worried by him, if you take my meaning."

Duncan glanced sidelong at Methos, remembering a worry that had occurred to him on the long climb up. Very softly he asked, "The bond?"

"What about.... Ah." The older immortal nodded slowly. "I'll shield against the quickening, Dhonnchaidh. Worry about yourself, not me." He smiled suddenly. "Go on, Highlander. Take her blessing and go before the priest starts thinking he's so righteous no one will fight him."

Remembering what Xan had done and drawing on his own memories of courts in the early days of his life, when mistresses were common and courtesy to them respected, Duncan slid to one knee in front of Aidan. His katana rested on his shoulder, blade up and angled back, as he met her eyes. Xan's words seemed appropriate too, so he asked, "Bless me, Mother, for I too refuse to call this sin."

Aidan's hands cupped his cheeks, shockingly warm as her pupils dilated with some internal jolt or change. Duncan felt her body shift and saw her posture change, back suddenly straighter and shoulders more relaxed. Even her voice changed timbre and tone, going deeper into Aidan's range and carrying a richly lilting accent such as she never allowed herself even when drunk. For a lover's voice suddenly to be so strange and yet so familiar startled him into stillness. The unmistakable love that remained in it, however, eased his worry.

"Go well in war, Dhonnchaidh mac Maire, and know that you are loved and have always been loved."

The words seared into him as surely as her lips burned against his skin. He could feel their touch like a brand, not painful, but nothing he could ignore either as she kissed him on the forehead, just above the line of his eyebrows. The same heat touched each eyelid in turn, leaving him to wonder when he had closed his eyes. Then she kissed him on the lips and while there was nothing sexual in it, he was nonetheless suddenly, startlingly, aware of his entire body.

The touch of the breeze against his skin, the feel/smell/taste of moisture in the air as a morning shower slowly built up, the growing heat of the sunlight against his exposed skin and the rasp of denim against his legs, the way his katana fit his hand as if they were shaped to each other -- all those things poured through him, nothing new, it was only that now he noticed them. Duncan
opened his eyes in time to see her pupils contract back as her smile changed, shading from something fiercely maternal to the merry expression he had missed so much throughout this crisis.

"Thank you, luaidhe." He rose to his feet and smiled back at her. "Try not to worry. I won't play with my food too much." Her peal of unforced, unshadowed laughter followed him into the circle and lightened his heart as much as the odd blessing had.

Duncan evaluated Enrique automatically as they circled each other, body searching for weak points even as his mind sought the cracks in the other immortal's certainties. He found them both at the same time, slapping the falchion away and down rather than counter the full force of the heavier blade. Simultaneously, the Scot commented, "And how does the Lord reward consorting with heathens? Do you suppose that's why your side keeps losing?"

"The others were weak in their faith," Enrique grunted as he drove in, slipping in under the katana's range to body-check Duncan. The impact left him breathless for a heart-stopping instant, but years of training paid off. Duncan not only held his ground but managed to take full advantage of his greater height and mass by sweeping both arms across the other man's jaw.

The force threw Enrique back to the side, and the curve of the heavy falchion dragged its unsharpened back across Duncan's side, thrusting Enrique's arm back. The sharpened back-edge drew across him at the end, but it only left a fine line of blood along the thick cotton of Duncan's shirt.

The priest scrabbled upright from his off-balance position by main strength of body more than skill or dexterity. Duncan, on the other hand, moved smoothly from his center, completely focused on the fight as he drew a deep breath. Practice and perception showed him that Enrique's defenses were weaker on the left, and the Scot immediately circled to his own right.

Duncan feinted with the tip of the katana as he commented indifferently, "Weak in something, I suppose. But I don't know if your faith is doing all that well, either. Didn't the Lord say, 'I am not come to destroy but to fulfil'?"

"Even the Devil may cite Scripture for his purpose," Enrique said shortly, twisting to block the katana and failing. His sleeve flapped along his arm and the edges of the new cut ran red with blood.

"Ah, but the prince of darkness is said to be a gentleman," Duncan commented while skipping easily away from the other immortal's charge. He'd learned his lesson about letting Enrique inside his blade's reach. "That would certainly put him ahead of you."

"Your teacher consorts with witches," Enrique snapped, trying to rush the younger man and having to twist aside from his blade again.

"So did you," Duncan said casually as he slammed another strike out of line, holding the falchion off with his own blade. "Even I know that. Suffering a poisoner to live?" He shifted and thrust a side-kick into Enrique's stomach, driving him back. "And Christ also said, 'Love your enemies, bless those that curse you, do good to those that hate you.' Did you forget that one?"

"God judgeth the righteous!" Enrique bellowed as he charged, and Duncan reversed his katana, holding it with the blade running along his forearm so that it was point down, blade out. With both hands on the hilt, he caught the priest's blade with his own and snapped his weapon upward. Enrique's leg had been extended as he rushed forward, and blood fountained over them both when Duncan laid open his inner thigh and femoral artery. Momentum carried Enrique forward, driving the edge of the katana over his pelvic bone, but it also carried his blade up so to hit Duncan high on
the chest, sliding upward off the Scot's ribs and across his collarbone.

The snap of breaking bone carried across the ring, but Duncan managed to keep hold of his katana with his left hand as pain burned across his right shoulder. Enrique's leg gave way, the hamstring and quadriceps both partially severed, and he hit the ground hard, one hand reaching for his groin and the other trying to bring his blade back up. Duncan stomped downward sharply and trapped Enrique's blade under his foot.

The priest glared up at him defiantly, both hands locked around his thigh where he was bleeding his life out into the dirt. Then he pulled his head and shoulders up as best he could and waited for death to come. It took all his fading energy for Enrique not to shriek with the pain in his groin, and his only solace lay in the fact that he had at least sorely wounded one of the notorious Highlanders. "Finish it, witch's slut," he grated through clenched teeth.

Duncan only smiled at him as he spun the katana back into a one-handed, upright grip. "One last thought for you, priest. If ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." His sword came around then, and Enrique had no time to place that piece of Scripture.

Owain reached out for Jirina's arm. "Don't underestimate any of them. Enrique did."

She snorted at that. "He was fighting one of the MacLeods. He never stood a chance."

Her teacher studied the line of immortals opposite them, mouth compressed against curses as his plans slid into rubble. He had never been arrogant enough to think they would come out of this unscathed, but the demolition of his first four fighters appalled him. Too many of his people had lost, and too many of Cynthia's lived. With Farrell's defection, her surviving forces would outnumber his now even if his line won every fight still to come. The truce and the fabled honor of the MacLeods notwithstanding, they would never allow him to take Cynthia away alive without a fight, of that he was sure. So the battle for her quickening and his sanity must be held here, now, with her ego only partially softened as he had originally planned, and with nowhere near as many of his own left to guard him as he would have liked.

Owain frowned again, hand going into his pocket apparently casually as he deliberated who to send next. The sun was climbing steadily into the sky, and it had warmed up enough that the men might yet start shedding shirts to fight. He glanced at Jirina, then at Lim. Johannes would fight just before he did, that he had decided from the start. Now, though....

Owain had applied the latex to his fingers the night before and tested it to be sure the DMSO wouldn't go through it to affect him. Now, without that fear, he squeezed PCP from the tube onto his hand and wrapped his fingers around Jirina's wrist. "Your turn, I think."

She only looked at him, blue eyes cool and remote. "You can't meet my price, Owain. The younger MacLeod is still alive."

"That can be remedied," he told her. "And as Johannes pointed out earlier, we've come too far. They won't let us leave without a fight."

Jirina shrugged and absently rubbed at the dampness on her wrist. "True enough. But you owe me for this. One way or another, I expect to be paid."

"You will be," Owain promised, watching the color rise in her face. He watched her stalk
impatiently into the cleared area and switched to his native Welsh to croon, "Oh, you'll be paid all right, Jirina. One way or another."

Johannes nodded, unsurprised, when Damien stalked out to meet her, although Lim had to restrain a wince when he saw the sword the redhead was carrying. Usually Damiano Rufio used a hand and a half bastard sword, a solid, multi-purpose sword that was well suited to his build. This time, though, he'd pulled out an older weapon -- a two-handed sword that only someone of his strength could use safely in single combat. It was too large and too heavy for lesser muscles to wield, easily five feet from pommel to tip, and probably twice the weight of most long swords. A weaker fighter would exhaust himself swinging it, and soon his parries would slow and his head roll. Damien, however, was tall enough, strong enough, and fast enough to use it... and parrying that monster was a bone-battering experience even in a shield wall where several people could share the impact.

Lim had recovered his composure enough to ask calmly, "Is he as muscle-bound as he looks?"

"Unfortunately, no."

The slender Chinese man considered the ease with which Damien swung, changed target, and parried, without ever seeming to lose control of the massive blade. "She had better be very quick indeed."

"Jirina fought with him for years; she knows how fast he can move," Johannes said confidently, although his hand tightened on the pommel of his own sword when she barely slapped his blade aside and spun, trying to attack Damien's side as she went past. "For her sake, though, I hope she remembers how to goad him out of his control. She used to be very good at that." The tall Prussian smiled when Jirina managed to draw blood on Damien's arm, a red streak that almost matched his dark hair.

"Tell me something, teacher," Lim asked mildly. Owain had time to glance aside at him, concerned by something in his tone, before the youngest immortal left on their side went on, "How many of our opponents did you truly expect to see? It's too late for me to run, you understand. I'm simply wondering how you miscalculated so badly that so many of us are dead. Or was it miscalculation?"

Owain turned the full force of his fury on Lim for a moment, a gaze that should have withered the young Chinese man where he stood. Lim did in fact back up a step, apparently aware of just how close death was. Instead of attacking, though, his teacher finally said softly, "Five of them were a surprise."

He only expected four of them? More than half our opponents unanticipated, unplanned for.... Lim glanced downward for a moment, hooding his eyes to conceal his fury. After a second, he observed carefully, "Obviously, the Greeks and the Egyptian were a surprise."

Johannes raised an eyebrow at Owain, then went back to watching the fight in front of them. Jirina was now the oldest of Owain's students, almost two centuries older than Johannes, and it was taking every trick she had learned in almost six hundred years of fighting to hold Damien off. Both of them were bloodied now, but still fighting with a ruthless savagery that went beyond this one fight. Johannes scowled as he slowly concluded that what he was watching was five hundred years of grudges brought into the light.

Jirina and Damien had hated each other before he'd ever been born, much less gotten into the Game, but he knew from chance-made comments that they'd been lovers for a decade or so. It had, Johannes suspected, been an explosive relationship, full of all the sparks of Jirina's prickly
personality and Damien's incendiary temper. Neither had ever forgiven the other for the break-up or the sniping, back-biting, and betrayals that had gone on afterwards. Now they were finally settling it, in blood and fury, and the only question was which would hold out longer: Jirina's strength, or Damien's control of his temper?

"I never thought the older MacLeod would be here either. Not after the loss of his hand," Owain admitted as he watched the fight. He suspected the PCP had begun to take effect. Jirina had never been a cold fighter, but he could almost feel the heat of her temper from thirty feet away, and he had never before heard her snarl like that in battle.

"And you actually expected Farrell to fight. Why did you bring him?"

"I thought his honor would hold him," Owain growled. "And you saw their reactions. If Farrell had fought, no matter who lost their head, it would have hurt Cynthia."

"So now we fight to see who may live and run," Lim said bleakly. "They'll hunt us, now, when the truce is over."

"You always knew that was a chance," Owain pointed out. Jirina was fighting more recklessly than usual, but she was also completely ignoring several wounds that Damien had inflicted. Her pain tolerance wasn't that good, Owain knew. The PCP was working, then.

"Yes, but now it is a certainty. And the line will not be demoralized by losses, either." Lim frowned as he considered the fighters on the other side. "So. The black woman or the Greek, I wonder?"

"For you?" Owain shrugged, more intent on the current fight than the upcoming one. "I would think Alexandrias."

Lim nodded. "Fast and tricky if he's anything like his blond lover." More casually he informed Owain, "If we do come through this, I'll expect a larger reward. You have fewer payments to make, after all."

Owain glanced at him, then turned back to the fight. "You'll have what's fair, I assure you. If you live."

No, Lim thought to himself. If you live, Owain. The stakes are too high, the odds less favorable by the moment -- time I folded on this hand while you think I'm still playing.

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Damn you!

The words poured through her monotonously, part of a rage that propelled arms and feet through harder and harder thrusts. She wasn't thinking it so much as chanting the phrase to herself, a two note mantra that fuelled her heart and buried her conscious mind under the control of reflex and instinct, fury and habit. Jirina was slowly realizing, however, that something was very, very wrong.

Even as she blocked a combination they had practiced together centuries before, while she was forcing her own blade up Damien's in an attempt to lay open ribs and lung, grief welled up under her anger. Her regrets were for years lost, for all of the nights and days fighting together, arguing together, making love afterwards as fiercely as they'd raged at each other. In that moment, Jirina felt as if they'd separated days before instead of centuries ago. A heartbeat later, though, wrath rolled back over her, memories of his adoration of that bitch-thief Amanda swamping the remorse.
until it hissed and vanished.

What's wrong with me? Her skin burned with conflicting impulses that hazed her vision red at the edges, and her wrist itched fiercely. Her sword almost gave way under a strike, and Jirina felt muscle shudder under the impact, heard/sensed the grating of a bone giving way in her arm ... but it didn't hurt. Pressure, yes, and awareness, but no pain. It was harder and harder to focus on Damien, too, and she knew he was getting in shots that should never have hit her.

Anger surged again, and she struck for his upper arm. The loss of one arm would make the tall sword too unwieldy even for Damien's strength. The plan felt like the epitome of calculation and the sensation of his blade ripping across her from hip to sternum came seemingly out of nowhere.

Steel sliding through skin, muscle, organs, was a cell-deep, body-wide trauma as pervasive as jumping into ice-cold water after a long run. It shocked her mind back into full coherency for a brief, terrible moment and only then did Jirina realize why her arm itched, why her thoughts had scattered. She couldn't seem to gather breath to scream her knowledge of the betrayal. In her sudden, brief rationality, it sank in that Damien's sword had punctured her diaphragm. She managed to turn her head with an effort like walking through knee-deep mud, trying to direct her last words where they belonged with what clarity she still had.

Her head lay on the ground, and the blue eyes were fading even as the incandescence of her quickening began to gather around her body. Damien hunched over himself, blood-streaked chest rising and falling as he tried to catch his breath before the lightning came, but one question was running through his mind. He could understand the defiance of that final 'damn you,' but why had Jirina been looking at Owain as she forced the words out?

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The weight of a shield he wasn't carrying kept trying to pull his arm down, and Alexandrias kept thinking that he was only half-dressed because he couldn't feel the weight of greaves and vambraces. A sardonic smile twisted the dark-haired Greek's face as he looked Lim over, but the sight of a Chinese opponent with a scaled-down Japanese weapon was more than enough to pull him back to the present.

Of all the times for me to flash back on being in the legions! This is what I get for fighting with spear and shortsword, I suppose. Soon enough I'll see if it was a good idea or not. Alex ruffled his hair back out of place from sheer habit, although it was far too short now to get in his eyes, and studied Lim's weapon as the Chinese man paced smoothly toward him. Nasty. A naginata with a shortened hilt. Good for close in, faster than a full naginata would be... but still a two-handed weapon. I'm going to have to keep him away from me, that's for damn sure.

"Lim Mahn." Alex's opponent nodded to him, calm but cautious. "And I have a suggestion."

Alex raised an eyebrow, surprised and intrigued. "Alexandrias. This sounds interesting. What's your idea?"

"I had nothing to do with the attack on MacLeod," Lim declared coldly. Despite his best efforts, disgust and anger slid into his voice as he went on, "And I see no point in trying to kill you to further the plans of a man who has miscalculated this badly. Therefore I have no need to take your head unless you simply insist. Shall we stop this at first blood?"

Dark eyes, black as Lim's own, stared at him long and thoughtfully. No, I wouldn't want to go after a head knowing that, even if I won, I'd have to fight Edana. "First blood only?"
"Yes. You object?"

Alexandrias shrugged, saying nothing, but inclined his head to indicate he was willing to consider the offer. A small, amused smile spread across his face when he caught sight of Owain leaning forward slightly in a vain attempt to overhear them. Most of his mind, though, was running back over comments the others had made on Lim Mahn. The general consensus had been that he was quick, deadly, and someone to beware... but not quite as predatory as some of the rest of his line. A smuggler, a counterfeiter, and a cold-blooded snake, but with a reptile's torpor unless aroused.

Fine. This will let all of us get a look at his fighting style, and if it turns out I was wrong, we can hunt him down later. And for Connor's sake, it would be a good idea if one of us in the bed tonight hadn't taken a quickening. I don't want to set back a week of work for one night. Alex reached his conclusion within seconds and nodded. "First blood on the ground it is," he granted calmly, hands flexing on the spear as he agreed.

"Ah, a traditionalist," Lim commented and struck in the same breath.

He didn't waste any more air on words, and the pattern of attacks impressed Alex immediately. Lim was perfectly willing to use blade or butt, anything that would damage or slow an opponent. Blocking the shaft only meant that suddenly Lim was corps a corps with him, his naginata sliding across the haft of Alex's own spear to strike at him.

The Greek immortal managed to contract back, yanking most of his torso out of the way as he forced the blade of his spear down toward Lim's shoulder. It nearly worked. Blood sprang out on the smaller immortal's shirt from a slanting wound that ran from mid-collarbone to sternum, clearly coming close enough to the neck to shock Lim. Alex, however, had come off the worse in the exchange -- Lim's blade had rotated around his own spear shaft and laid him open from underarm to floating ribs. The gash was bone-deep at the top, thinning at the bottom to something that a mortal wouldn't have wanted stitches for.

Blood was pooling in his shirt, Alex could tell, but he didn't trust the other man to stop when it hit the ground. Without conscious thought his hands snapped his spear up and jabbed inward with the butt spike, forcing Lim to bring the naginata around to deflect the blow. Alex held Lim's weapon in place just long enough to yank his thigh up in a perfect, painful blow to his opponent's balls. The smaller man doubled over to curl around his wounded groin, and the pressure from the naginata lessened. Alex reversed his spear again, this time slamming the shaft against Lim's throat.

The Greek shifted, twisted, pushed, and suddenly Lim lay on the ground staring up at him. Alex caught himself before he could stab the other man and take his head, but it took an effort. Lim apparently recognized that, for he lay perfectly still as he watched the Greek back away another step to regain control of his instincts. Alex finally trusted himself to say, "You're on the ground. First blood?"

"I think your blood hit at almost the same time I did," Lim told him with calculated serenity. He let the naginata sag minutely towards the ground in a deliberately peaceable action as he impassively offered, "However, I concede you hold the upper hand. And now?"

Alexandrias drew a deep breath and released it, trying to control his own thirst for his opponent's head. It was nothing personal against Lim Mahn. However, he was a student of Owain Rhys-Tewdor and therefore the only chance Alex might have to repay the Welshman for what he had done to Connor, to all of them. *I knew all that when I agreed to first blood. But Gods, I want to kill him.*

From the sidelines he heard Xan call, "Alex?"
"I'm all right, Xan." He drew another breath, anchored now by his lover's voice, which had probably sounded completely calm to everyone else. To Alex it meant something else entirely. He had to have worried Xenokrates badly for him to do something that might distract Alex during a fight. Longstanding habits of being the stable foundation everyone else leaned on kicked in, and Alex reminded himself that he wanted to be able to face Connor and Xan in the morning. "We agreed to first blood," he called back to his family. "Anyone have any idea if mine hit the ground before he did?"

"Just this once," Mandisa declared gravely, "I suspect it does not truly matter, uncle. There is blood on the ground, and if you have agreed to stop, then stop."

Var snorted. "Sister, if they agreed to first blood, it matters. Alexandrias, I believe your blood hit slightly before he did. That last strike splashed some from your shirt."

"Alexandrias." Xan spoke before Alex could answer. "Graham once told me that it goes to first blood only if he's willing to renounce his teacher."

"What do you think first blood at something like this counts as?" Damien commented ironically. "And damn if I'm willing to put him in Farrell's league. Screw it. Let the man go for now. We don't want him."

"You're both correct," Aidan admitted. "But... no. Let it be, Xenokrates. Let him leave." She turned cold grey eyes on Lim Mahn as she went on, "For I agree with Damiano. I don't crave his death, but I don't want him as kin either." She chuckled suddenly and added, "Gods forbid we leave you forsworn, Alex. Do as you see fit, brother."

Alex nodded slowly, having listened to all of it as he caught his breath against the pain along his ribs. *I do seem to recall that Graham said that first blood involved going over to the other line, but I wouldn't trust Lim Mahn to train him. And I still don't want his head at the cost of Connor's sanity. It's not worth it. He's not even close to being worth that.*

"Your match, then, Lim Mahn." Alex backed away, rather than help the other man up. Dark eyes watched Lim intently although his voice was even, almost conversational, as he said, "Remember this, though. If I'd wanted your head, I had it."

"I'll remember," the Chinese man replied coolly as he rolled up to his feet, only the faint, tight lines around his eyes betraying the continuing pain where he'd been racked. "I have no quarrel with you, Alexandrias, son of Stamos."

"Keep that in mind." Alex smiled at him unpleasantly as he promised, "Because I tell you now, Lim Mahn, if you ever hound my family again, I will take your head." He paused a moment before adding, "You might want to consider this, too. Spear isn't one of my top five weapons."

That brought Lim's chin up, head setting into an attitude of wary defiance before he nodded slowly. "Long life to you, Alexandrias... some place else." The Chinese man walked away from both groups toward the path down to the cars without looking back.

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Lim's retreating form had stopped only long enough to retrieve his gun, Owain noticed in disgust. The Welsh immortal looked from the bodies of his students, neatly laid out on the ground, to where Farrell was currently sitting on a cooler and watching intently, if silently. The traitor had watched each fight, sometimes pacing the limits of the grove of trees and boulders, but Farrell had stayed within the bounds as if it were a self-imposed penance. *Unless of course, Cynthia has somehow*
gotten someone to consecrate land here between Saturday and today. It's certainly possible, and there had to be some reason she chose to fight in this part of the world.

Owain turned his glare back at Cynthia's people. Almost all of them had taken a quickening, but instead of pacing or sparring, anything to work off the energy that had to be firing across their nerves, most of them were standing on the other side of the open area and openly studying him. Disgusted with both their control and the failure implied by the bodies laid out around him, Owain shifted to stare at Johannes instead. The Welsh immortal barely contained his exasperation over the defection of two of his students as he asked, "Well? Are you planning to leave, too?"

Johannes snorted at that, brown eyes cynical as he pointed out, "They had no real reason to stop Lim. We both know their 'neutral' shooter would cut me down before I took two steps. But I'm not looking forward to fighting the man who trained Ramirez, either."

Owain said more quietly, "I know. Johannes... I'm sorry." The words came grudgingly. "It never occurred to me that the Egyptian's teacher could still be in the Game."

"I knew what the risks were when we started this." Johannes chuckled suddenly. "And you have to admit -- we did want Bianca and Damita eliminated."

"True enough," Owain agreed. He rolled up the crimson sleeves of his shirt against the growing heat of the day and asked, "Ready, then?"

"Every day of my life," the Prussian immortal replied with a laugh. "See you in a few minutes." He stepped forward, only to stop in surprise when Cynthia turned from giving Semnut her blessing and walked towards him. "What the hell?"

She smiled at him, grey eyes wicked and her weapons unsheathed. "An opponent, Johannes. Surely you've run into one or two in your life?"

"Wait!" Owain snapped, stalking into the circle, outrage pressing him into motion before he could really think of anything other than the fact that this would end the line war. He barely noticed Semnut pacing forward to join them as well, although the other man stood facing him as he growled, "What are you doing, Cynthia?"

"It's Edana, idiot child, since you can't remember more recent history," she replied, head cocked to one side as if to wonder what he had done with his mind. "And we went over the rules. Surely you remember? You sent your fighter. I sent my response: myself."

"You fight me, not him." Owain pulled his own blade then. "Those are the rules."

"No, Owain Rhys-Tewdor, they aren't."

Cynthia -- no, Edana -- looked up at him then, and for the first time Owain truly began to accept that she was indeed more than twice his age. Under the sentimentality he had thought was her weakness, she burned with the same unyielding fury that Damien Appesard wielded so dangerously. Her thick veneer of civilization was cracking from the inside, sectioned and shed like armor to let out someone older and fiercer. Primal, he realized uneasily and shifted his weight without realizing it, moving fractionally farther from her. Not primitive, nothing so stupid or so simple. Focused on what she wants and uncaring of law or society. She's not two thousand years old. How old is she?

Those grey eyes were still studying him, her face and weapons motionless as if they had been etched from stone. Her teacher, Semnut, stood beside her with that same deadly, temporary,
"Now, Owain Rhys-Tewdor, you have sent me presents and invitations to this dance. In return, I have three gifts for you." Edana smiled at him, the angry flame burning more and more brightly through the too-wise grey eyes and the resonant soprano voice.

"And if I don't want them?" Owain asked, wary now as he realized he should have been earlier. The rising breeze ruffled his hair; the contrast of the gentle air to the contained ferocity across from him was unsettling.

"You have as much option as you gave Connor." The Irish woman watched that sink in, despite Owain's carefully bland expression, and purred, "I have great hopes that you will like these presents perhaps as much as I have yours. Only equitable," she chuckled softly and waited out a heartbeat for him to start worrying. "Your first gift is my true age. I am two thousand, six hundred and twenty-five."

Aidan gave Owain no time to recover from that. "My second gift is the fate of your son, Gwydion. I killed him in Southampton, England. 1909 -- I'm sure you remember the year?" she inquired. "It took all of five minutes. He wasn't as good as he thought."

Owain's hand tightened around his sword hilt. He'd always claimed Cynthia had done it, but he had never been sure despite what he told his other students. He felt his shoulders knotting with fury, and let that cold rage burn through his eyes as he leaned forward and lied, "Oh, I knew who killed him, bitch. But at least he didn't beg for his life the way your brat David did."

"Never," Aidan contradicted him flatly. She looked away for a moment, lost in some thought or memory before stating, "David died with the shema on his lips." Triumph flashed in Owain's eyes, only to twist into envy.

Aidan stared at him, confounded by his reaction until she realized what he thought he'd seen, what he thought she had just done. Comprehension flashed through her at last, shedding new light on the last few months.

"Is that what this is about?" Her voice was low at first, layered with shock and growing disdain. "Owain Rhys-Tewdor, you couldn't pass the test to be the village idiot. You're hunting me to gain the Sight, then? Or were you wanting Voice? Did you think to take them with my quickening?"

Owain straightened to his full height and addressed her directly, intimately, catching her gaze with his own as if to draw her into some confidential discourse. "Is it truly wise to discuss--"

"We all know what she can and can't do," Semnut cut over him, cold, clear, and certain. "Better than you do, certainly. You may keep your people in the dark, but what did you think a woman named after fire would do?"

Johannes carefully inquired, "Are you trying to tell me she can do magic?"

"Some very odd forms of it, I'm told," Owain replied coolly. "I suspect they are of no use to her here or she'd have used them."

"And have someone know who might run and fight another day, and, just incidentally, pass along the word that I can do magic? I'm of no mind to be hunted for my power, thank you." Aidan's voice was matter-of-fact, belying the rage welling up in her. "You started a line war for magic?"

Owain snarled, "Stupid woman, magic makes you a force in this Game. I want that power."
To his shock, she started laughing, an angry, bitter sound. "Oh, I was right. A thousand years old, and you're still a fool."

Semmut shook his head slowly, a wry, disgusted smile barely twisting his lips. "She's right. No sense of imagination, and deplorable reading habits."

Johannes glanced between them both, but he didn't dare turn enough to look at his teacher. "Fine. I'm the youngest here, by a good margin, and I don't mind admitting that I don't see a single thing about this that's amusing. Did I miss something?" he inquired. "Or were you two just stalling while she tries to figure out who she has to fight?"

"Oh, she fights you," Semmut told him bluntly. "That was never in question. No one ever made any rule that the challenged had to fight the challenger. But oh, yes, your teacher's stupidity is very funny -- to anyone who knows how many years Edana's wanted to be rid of half of those 'gifts' of hers." His voice made the word a profanity as Semmut switched his attention back to the tall Welshman he apparently intended to fight. "Did you truly think you could control the power once you had it, Owain?"

"I'm to believe she can't?" Owain countered, still watching Aidan. "She's alive."

"Owain Rhys-Tewdor, could I give you the Sight, I would."

Her blades never lowered as she collected herself, coiled energy held in check until she barely seemed to be breathing. Her voice still vibrated with barely-contained rage as she snapped, "You started a line war, killed my students, tortured my brother for that?"

"Do you have any idea what it's like to be so lost in a vision that you have no choice but to watch it, smell it, hear it? You've no clue what it feels like to taste somewhere else in the back of your throat, feel the bruises and strains where you're trying desperately to hold yourself in the real world because if you let go you may never get back. You only think you want this. Do you truly want to See the things you'd prefer not to know, never sure whether or not they're real? The Sight is a gift of Fortune, and She's a fickle patroness, Owain, sending what She wants regardless of what you desperately need to know."

Now Aidan moved, shifting to widen her stance, still holding her weapons at guard. "You're a fool. Did you think it an accident that Seers have always been sent to the heights, to the far silences of the world? It wasn't merely so that only the serious would bother them, simpleton. It's because they need that stillness when they lose themselves. Oh, if I could give you the Sight, Owain Rhys-Tewdor, rest assured that I would. It would serve you right to find yourself in service to something else, with no choice and no escape save madness."

"Then give me your head," Owain suggested silkily, sword circling idly in his hand as he flashed sunlight at her eyes, "and you may have the pleasure of knowing you've given me your worst curse."

Semmut smiled, a twist of his lips and half-closing of his eyes that contained no amusement at all. "No, her worst curse is already granted. It's our last gift to you, Owain Rhys-Tewdor. You'll fight me, not Edana."

Johannes glanced at Semmut, then Aidan, and moved a half-step away from Owain as he flexed and released his shoulders and arms. He'd been ready to fight when he first walked forward, but the uncertainty of when and who he'd fight kept tightening his muscles just when he needed them limber. "You honestly think magic is real?"

Aidan gave him a pitying look. "You don't?" She glanced at Owain, whose sword was still ready
to deny her right to choose her opponent, and a slow, considering smile spread across her face. Beside her, she could feel Methos gather himself as he tasted her temper on her quickening. Her teacher knew her well enough to know just how angry she was, and she had great faith that he’d follow her lead. It wouldn’t be the first time they’d baited opponents, even if they were usually mortal.

"So, Johannes Engeles, magic for you," she purred, her entire body relaxing as she felt the conflict finally surge up around them, almost tangible, almost there.

"Edana," Methos murmured, never taking his eyes off Owain, "do remember you're supposed to live through this."

"Oh, I plan to," Aidan murmured. "Be ready." More loudly the druid explained, "Magic is simple, Johannes. As simple as, say, Swiss bank accounts. Both are incantations, after all. If you know how to ask, which words to say, what codes to use, then events and power lie open to your will. Power is a great deal like money, in some senses. It doesn't matter who put it in place; anyone who knows how to retrieve it can use it, sometimes quite profitably."

Stormy's voice poured through her memories, caustic commentary on the improbability that Johannes was supposed to empty an account that Owain had set up more than fifty years earlier. Aidan gambled that the younger woman had evaluated their opponents correctly and innocently suggested, "Say that someone had stockpiled power in Stonehenge for years upon years, until finally another mage came forward and tapped it for their own use. It would be no different than a Zurich account set up in 1947 by--"

Johannes lunged, desperate to shut her up before she betrayed the fact that he'd stolen more than twenty million Deutschmarks from his teacher. Aidan slid back, feet dancing over the blood-stained ground as she led him away from the clash of steel where Semnut had blocked Owain's attempt to fight her. Johannes' only concern now was her death and his own survival. He struck at her again and again, his long sword testing her defenses as he tried to use its extra weight to buffet her blades away.

It took him long moments to realize she was allowing his attacks. Smaller than he was, lighter by at least fifty pounds, Aidan was inviting his strikes nonetheless, drawing him toward the interior of the mesa. The assembled members of her line stood between them and the path off the mesa, some of them watching Aidan and some of them turned toward the fight between Owain and Semnut.

Farrell had no line of sight to them now, Johannes noticed in the small part of his mind not preoccupied with the fight, and he had only a moment to wonder why that worried him. Aidan's hands were moving more and more swiftly now, blades drawing an intricate silver calligraphy through the air. Sometimes she used Italian patterns, but she would get perhaps two-thirds of the way through and slide into a French attack instead. A moment later, she'd pull out an English sequence and switch to a Dutch variant partway through. Johannes's mortal memories were of the days when duels were still common, and he would find himself responding to a progression with the correct counters. Each time she segued unexpectedly from one sequence of strikes and ripostes into another, it took a frantic effort to recover.

Once he parried a strike automatically with his hand and hissed a profanity in Russian when her blade slid through leather and mail to flesh. *I forgot I don't have my usual gauntlet*, Johannes realized, dodging her again as he wished desperately for the chain-lined glove he usually wore to fights. The sun beat down on his exposed scalp and he cursed again. *Damn it, if I live through this and get my hands on the bastards who screwed us in Australia -- these mail links are not up to
what I make. I should have made time to get to a forge.

He kicked out, twisting and dodging as she attacked, only to watch her dance effortlessly away from him. The bitch is toying with me, he realized uneasily as his long sword beat her saber away and he narrowly dodged her dagger coming behind it. His hiking boots scuffed across the ground for traction, and he briefly debated drawing a knife of his own. Her dagger scored his chest, slicing open fabric and leaving behind a heated wetness that told Johannes he'd been cut. And she's not going to let me go after first blood! As soon as Farrell couldn't see us, she got more vicious about this. She's going for pain, not a quick kill. Fuck this; I need that offhand weapon!

The Prussian beat her saber out and away with his sword, used a forearm block to hold off her main gauche, and ignored the flare of pain as she still managed to score a line across the back of his wrist. Instead he brought that arm in and threw a hammer-fist at her head. Aidan rolled with the impact and it still staggered her, driving her back and away for a few precious seconds. In those moments, Johannes yanked free the Bowie knife he'd had cross-sheathed on his hip and came back on guard. Broken mail links pressed into his hand where it was wrapped around the hilt but he ignored that small pain and the growing wetness under the leather and along his wrist.

"Ready, bitch?" the bald man growled.

Aidan didn't look nervous, and he decided that was overconfidence. "More ready than my brother was," she responded. The malicious pleasure in her voice narrowed Johannes' eyes, and he reminded himself she was in fact smaller than he was.

"Well, you know what they say," the Prussian immortal insinuated coarsely. "There's only one thing women do better than men. MacLeod was a decent lay, though, I'll give him that."

Grey eyes measured him, but she didn't snarl, or attack. Aidan simply smiled and wondered, "Is that the best you can do?"

"What?" Johannes studied her, too, appreciative of the brief respite in which to consider what he'd seen of the Irish woman's fighting.

"Oh, come, Johannes," Aidan prompted, grey eyes lit with something that might have been amusement... or contempt. "Isn't this the part where you start telling me all the vicious things you did to Connor, so that I'll grow angry and attack you mindlessly and lose my head?" She tilted her head then, clearly listening to the scream and whine of metal on metal as Semnut and Owain fought without pause. "I outgrew all of that before I died the first time, child. Besides which, there's nothing you can tell me that I don't already know. Who did you think patched up what you left of my brother?"

Aidan beckoned with her main gauche, a mocking come-hither motion which did not match the boiling venom of her voice. "Come and see what I know, little man. You wanted power. You wanted a quickening worth the taking. Here I am. All you have to do is overpower me, overmatch me, smash me down into the dust. I'm only a woman, Johannes," and she almost purred the words, taunting him with the very insult he might have used. "Come on, man. What are you waiting for?"

"Does the other Highlander scream when you fuck him?" Johannes countered, flexing his hand to find a more comfortable grip on the Bowie before they began again. He ran his eyes over her, leering at her before he gibed, "You strike me as the kind of bitch who likes to strap on what she hasn't got. You play with the big boys, but you'll never be one of us."

Aidan laughed at him, settling just a little lower, thighs flexing as her stance deepened. "There is a Goddess, then. Caught your breath yet, infant? Are you finally ready, now that you have two
"Weapons to match mine?" She returned his appraising look, gaze lingering at his groin briefly before she pursed her lips in obvious disappointment. "Ah, I suppose that does explain that over-heavy blade. Did you rape my brother to try and compensate for what you don't have? Or do you secretly prefer men and that was the only way you could get one? I can't imagine money would be enough to compensate anyone for you."

"Presumptuous slut," he snarled. This time, Johannes launched his full weight and strength at her, no longer looking for her measure but going for the kill. He no longer cared that Owain wanted the Irish bitch, that his own teacher might well challenge him when he won. Johannes’ one desire now was to see her on the ground, bleeding, dying, begging for mercy.... His teeth ached where he had clenched them together in his rage, and his sword rang against hers from the force of his strikes. The bald Prussian set out to overmatch her with his superior height and weight, with the extra length of his arms, and it seemed to be working. The brunette slipped his attacks off her blades, constantly sliding away or aside. She evaded the full force of his blows desperately, apparently unwilling to match him blow for blow now, and Johannes' growl sounded like a wolf sighting its rightful prey.

Owain fought with his usual swift precision and grace, mind whirling though combinations and strikes, automatically calculating and discarding possibilities. He had already assumed that this Semnut had to be good to have survived more than three thousand years, but he found himself reluctantly impressed by the extent of the other man's skill. More worrisome in the levels of his mind not caught up in the fight and his strategies for it, was the fact that they were well-matched. I feel like I'm fighting some twin I never knew I had, the Welsh immortal realized uneasily. Even while he was parrying, pressing, falling back, twisting away from a not-quite-unexpected leg sweep, he kept comparing himself with Cynthia's infuriating teacher. They were both slimly built, although Owain carried more muscle; both tall, although Semnut had perhaps two inches over his own 5' 11". Both were dark-haired and fair-skinned, both quick and deadly, and both fighting with broadswords.

Owain rushed Semnut, trapped their blades together, and tried to body-slam him. He wasn't entirely surprised when the other immortal twisted out and away; it was what he'd have done, after all. This is too close, Owain decided grimly. The ringing clamor of metal on metal where Cynthia and Johannes fought had fallen silent, and he braced himself for the thunder of a quickening while wondering who had lost.

Semnut paused, too, dropping back one pace, then another, sword up and angled to defend his torso even as his head cocked to listen. A wicked smile crossed that aquiline face as he considered his opponent, then Semnut idly inquired, "Were you planning to stand there all day while I kill you?" His sword was moving again with the last word, as he moved forward.

Fencer's footwork with a broadsword? Owain blocked him, having no choice but to let his student tend to his own fight. His own scattershot, adrenaline-framed observations were enough distraction as he tried to stay alive, and yet... Why is it so silent over there? He had neither time nor attention to be relieved when he heard Johannes' fight resume.

Aidan dodged another strike, blocked his knife reflexively, and concentrated on outstaying both Johannes' temper and the energy it had given him. The idea didn't worry her. Years of training to exhaustion and past it had made her quick, built up her muscle, and taught her endurance. It had
also given her a reputation as a skilled physical fighter, which had an odd side-effect that Ramirez had once explained to her.

"If your reflexes are good, your reactions quick, Edana, another fighter is likely to assume that you've always had them, and that you rely on them." She still remembered that bright, proud smile on her teacher's sun-bronzed face, the mischief in his rich voice as he went on, "So once they decide you have no idea what strategy is, my dear, then you unleash it. Make sure you have one," he'd added sternly and pulled her back to her feet. "Now, you've rested long enough: begin again."

For the moment she didn't quite toy with the Prussian, but Aidan did let him wear himself out in attacks that she held off with only the most basic of strategies. This time he faced no intricate patterns of attack and defense, no careful footwork to lead him into or out of the sun, nothing but her blades and his own. The Irish woman was waiting for the first signs of overconfidence, for Johannes to outreach himself or overextend. She had little doubt that she could hold him off until he did, no matter how long it took; she'd been sparring with Duncan for most of a year now and the two men were evenly matched for strength and mass.

Her opening came more quickly than Aidan had expected. Johannes was clearly out of practice at double-handed attacks, and as more and more of his attention went into his weapons, his footwork began to slow. That suited her perfectly, and she went on the offensive again, darting in and back out as she struck, blocked, and skipped away again. A plan slid through her mind, one she had considered off and on over the last day. Owain was almost too quick for what she intended. Johannes was another matter entirely.

Aidan feinted to his left and then dove to Johannes' right, rolling and coming up out of his range and just behind his peripheral vision. In the instant it took him to come around on guard, expecting her attack, she had managed to trade her weapons between her hands. He saw the change, brown eyes narrowing as he tried to understand why she had bothered, but Aidan was already beginning her new tactics.

This time she turned him, constantly dashing toward his right so that he could only strike with his longsword. Johannes kept twisting toward her, forced to use backhand strokes to drive her saber back even as he tried to twist around to get some use from his offhand weapon. Aidan baited him, sliding in and out, putting more and more force behind her blows, holding to the same pattern twice, three times, a fourth....

The Irish woman felt him lower his guard more than saw it, but it dropped the bare fraction she needed. As Johannes relaxed his attention that little bit, she invited another backhand and stepped just past the block point for his sword. Instead of striking against his blade, Aidan came in behind his wrist. Johannes' own momentum drove his arm into her crossed weapons, and she yanked her arms apart, scissoring her blades against his arm with the full force of her own strength.

Blood sheeted across Aidan as she took his hand off just above the wrist. It fell to the ground, longsword still clenched tightly in the fist.

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The scream carried across the mesa, high with pain, yet not high enough to have been a woman's voice. Owain had heard that sound often enough on battlefields over the centuries, and had no trouble thinking of reasons his student might have cried out like that. None of the possible explanations boded well for Johannes' survival.

Owain had his own problems, though. Blood slicked his chest and had dried in sticky, uncomfortable lines down his chest and arms. A lucky dodge had left the Welshman with a rip
along the fabric of his pants leg, rather than a bone-deep gash in his thigh. Semnut looked only marginally better. Both of them had managed quick slices, relative pinpricks intended to impair footing or grip because they couldn't quite get a lethal shot, but so far they seemed almost evenly matched. It had made them both cautious, too aware that the first mistake would rapidly lead to a last.

From the sound of that first cry and the ones which followed, though, the Welsh immortal suspected Johannes was losing -- slowly. A particularly nasty attack came to mind as he maneuvered for any advantage. Before Kalas lost his voice, Owain had nearly lost his head to a move the opera singer had used against him. Only the treacherous footing in that alley had saved him; Owain had slipped and rolled down the hill, out of control and more worried about getting away than about the muck on his clothes. Fortunately for him, Kalas had declined to chase him through a rubbish-lined alley.

Owain had sorted out the attack later, admiring its devious simplicity. Now he launched it, hoping that perhaps his own victory could distract Cynthia from his student. He stepped up his attacks on Semnut, matching him weight for weight, as the fight degenerated to hacking, thrusting strikes, sheer bruising force instead of skill: exactly what their weapons were designed for. Strike, block, strike and then counter again, and all the time he was crowding in on Semnut until they were fighting dangerously close with no maneuvering room if something went wrong. Exactly where Owain wanted them to be.

He shifted his grip automatically to catch a blow coming in hard at waist level, swung down at Semnut's knee and felt the counter to that reverberate through his arm and shoulder. Momentum threw Owain's blade up and he allowed that gladly; it was exactly what he had in mind. He stepped left and struck backhanded at Semnut's neck, knowing the other immortal had no choice but to block it.

Sure enough, the tall, black-haired immortal caught the blow on his blade. Owain smiled and with a scream of metal on metal, he drew his own broadsword down Semnut's until his edge was caught in the crosspiece. He pressed the other man's arms back, and twisted his blade against Semnut's sword, using it as a pivot point while he stepped even farther to the left and drove his blade down at the unprotected nape of his opponent's neck.

"Turnabout is fair play," Aidan purred as she slid past Johannes' attempt to block her out with knife and stump. Her main gauche drew a long line of blood as it opened his flesh from eye to chin before he could back away. He tried to bury his knife in her side, but blood loss had weakened him considerably; she dodged away to the sound of his involuntary moan of pain and the feel of another line of hot blood on her arm. It was his, she knew, not her own.

The Irish woman gave him full credit for still being on his feet instead of curled on the ground, but she'd seen terror drive men to greater lengths than this before. Aidan had made sure Johannes had no chance to retrieve his sword during any of the retribution she'd been meting out. Now she was simply waiting to see if he'd drop before her fury subsided, and hurting him viciously to speed the outcome one way or the other. What she wanted, badly, was to recreate the worst of Connor's wounds on the Prussian, but Aidan wasn't entirely sure how far she was willing to go.

It wasn't his screams that concerned her; Johannes' pain meant nothing to Aidan. Her worries were entirely for herself and Marc. Sooner or later, she acknowledged reluctantly as she maneuvered again to keep Johannes from his sword, Marc is going to ask how his line-kin died. He would understand it if I tortured Johannes to death, but it would leave him wary of me for the rest of his
life. She slapped the Prussian's Bowie aside with her main gauche, side-stepped a clumsy rush, and slashed his thigh as she circled neatly behind him.

Connor, brother, I'm sorry, but revenge for you is not worth my student's fear. Then too, if I slide too far down into darkness again, Rebecca is no longer alive to talk me back or take me to one of the healers. Not that we've many of those left, either -- which makes it even more vital that I not scar Marc with this.

"May Brighid scorch your soul, Johannes," Aidan snarled as she gave up on vengeance. She spun on the ball of her foot, blocking his knife with her own and stepping directly in front of him as she drove her saber into him. It slid through his solar plexus and up to the heart, a strike not even an immortal could survive. She saw relief widen his eyes and loosen the tension in his mouth just before the tall Prussian yielded to the pain and his wounds.

Blood spilled from his lips as he died, poured out around her blade as she drew it back. Years of caution made Aidan twist the saber as she yanked it free, a reflexive action meant to slow his recovery past any hope of survival. Cleaning her main gauche was impossible; there wasn't enough unstained cloth on either of them for even a knife. She finally plunged the main gauche into his belly as Var had done with Bianca and twisted his bloody body so that she could get a grip on his collar.

Weariness hollowed her bones, waited in the depths of her muscles, and Aidan forced it away through an effort of will. She hadn't made it this far to lose her mind to Johannes' quickening, and there was still too much to be done before she could rest.

"May Lugh Samildanach craft you a proper fate," Aidan cursed Owain's student as she pulled his deadweight upright. She wanted to get an angle on his head that wouldn't nick her blade against the rocky ground, and in the meantime she vented her fury in maledictions against whatever future his soul might have. "May Macha and the Morrigan shred you as you go for judgement. May Goibnu use you as fuel for his forge."

Behind her, silence fell across the mesa and she dropped Johannes' body, heedless of damage to her knife. Aidan spun around, almost afraid to see who had lost.

In five thousand years, Methos had seen quite a few tricks, and had even more tried on him. The irony of someone trying to kill him with one of Kronos' favorite moves was a black humor that caught even his attention. His response to this attack, however, was honed into muscle memory at a level that required no thought and in fact allowed none.

Methos abandoned his sword and dove left and away, rolling and twisting to come up on one knee facing his attacker. Owain's gaze lingered for a crucial, astonished moment on the broadsword lying in the dust. When the dagger slammed into his chest, it came as a complete surprise.

It hit with the full force of Methos' strength, thrown from only a couple yards away, and cracked a rib as it penetrated to the hilt. The point stuck out from Owain's back for the few seconds it took the Welshman to slide to one knee, hands reaching futilely for a knife that Methos could tell from long experience was going to take his full strength to extricate.

Methos stood up and kicked Owain's blade away from him, then watched coldly as the light faded from those shocked blue eyes. He could finally feel the pain in his right shoulder and arm where Owain's sword had sliced into him as he tumbled. It hadn't been enough to interfere with his throw, fortunately.
"Idiot, and overconfident besides," Methos named the dying man, and he waited for the last effort at breath to fail.

Silence shocked his nerves after the constant ring and clang of metal on metal, the hisses of pain or effort. It took a moment for Methos to realize that the stillness extended to the other fight too, and he paused to consider this. A double duel had been one of the possibilities he and Edana had discussed; no one had expected Owain to take his change of adversaries calmly, and once Aidan met a challenger, it was, technically, over except for the wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Another double quickening, however, was something Methos wanted to avoid. Hazel eyes considered the bloodied, unmoving corpse in front of him and he smiled chillingly. "You'll hold for a while. And I have a few ideas on how to deal with you."

Methos walked to his sword and scooped it into the air with one foot, catching it easily with his left hand. Then he walked away from Owain's motionless body. He could see the surprise in Var's raised eyebrow, in Damien's halted pacing. Xan and Alex knew him better; they were waiting to see or hear what he was up to.

Methos simply said, "Connor, if you want his head, have it."

Duncan stared at him in surprise. "Adam--"

Methos glanced over and saw Aidan standing there, bloodied but intact as she watched the discussion. He hadn't really thought Johannes could take her, had known the screams he was hearing were pitched too low to be hers... but it was still a relief to see her alive and clearly the victor. Relieved of that worry, he shrugged and told Duncan, "The sooner his hand heals, Highlander, the sooner quite a few people will quit worrying. And all things considered, I'd rather have one person in our bed tonight who hasn't taken a head."

Alex nodded his understanding of that point, and Methos gave his student a wry smile of acknowledgment before turning back to his lover. "It's not as if I need this quickening, after all. I've taken a few here and there, you know."

Connor studied him carefully. "Pity, Adam?"

That got a disgusted snort. "For you? Why bother? You'll survive, MacLeod, you always do. This is solely for my own comfort. They're going to fret until you're well." Methos turned to Aidan and called, "And get that idiot over with, Edana. Do you realize it's nearly eleven and we still have bodies to hide?"

Whatever she snapped at him made both Alex and Xan double over with laughter and left the younger immortals glancing at each other. Mandisa finally said thoughtfully, "What language was that?"

"Hittite," Xan gasped between snickers. "You're in for a bad night, Didaskalos."

Connor chuckled. "All things considered, I'd better take this head before the old reprobate changes his mind in self-defense."

Alex caught his arm and said softly, "Wait a moment, Connor. Let Edana take Johannes first."

"Why?" The older Highlander raised an eyebrow at him, but he made no attempt to shake the hand off.

"If you both take a quickening at the same time, you might end up... bound together," Alex
answered, combing curls off his forehead with his other hand as he watched Aidan pull Johannes up again. "Like Duncan and Adam, or me and Xan."

Connor's glance took in the easy way Xan was reaching for Alex's shoulder without really looking and the ongoing silent dispute that had Duncan frowning and Methos raising a cynical eyebrow at his lover. A quick smile crossed his face, and he commented, "I've seen better arguments, Alex. I can stand to be bound to her, thanks." More loudly he called, "Sister?"

"Brother?" She took in the scene in one quick comprehensive glance. "Ah." Aidan and Connor shared a long look before she asked, "It's what you want?"

"Unless you object," he shrugged, but he could feel that empty spot in his soul cringe at the possibility of rejection. Connor stifled that feeling remorselessly rather than allow it to influence her decision. Coercion of any kind had no place in a relationship such as they were contemplating.

Grey eyes measured him for a long moment before one dark eyebrow quirked upward in wry amusement perceptible even from a dozen yards away. "I'll just bring this idiot over there, then. From what little I've heard, it'll work better if they're near each other."

"Is this a good idea?" Methos asked her surprisingly calmly. He made no real attempt to interfere, however.

Ramirez' two students, the oldest and the youngest, traded mischievous looks. "We think so," Aidan told Methos firmly. She glanced at Duncan, one hand raised in a palm-up inquiry. "Unless you want to object?"

Duncan looked at Connor, then at Aidan, and a slow smile spread across his face. "No," was all he said, and Methos turned to stare at him incredulously. Some unspoken communication between the two of them angled Duncan's smile to a more sardonic quirk and brought Methos' hands up in a gesture of resignation at some idiocy.

Aidan chuckled and turned to the burly redhead she'd trained so long ago. "Since that seems to be settled, Damiano, would you be so kind as to point out to Stormy that this is still two on two and she doesn't really need to shoot either me or Connor for this?"

Damien snorted. "She's not going to shoot you when any fool could see the sides are even, Magistra. What are you two up to?"

Connor answered for her since Aidan was busy burying her dagger in Johannes' heart to keep him from reviving at her back. "I've always wondered what it's like to share a quickening. We're going to try it."

Mandisa glanced between Xan and Alex, then Duncan and Adam. "Connor, you know full well what the results will be."

He flashed a quick smile at her. "I have my suspicions. But that's not quite the same as proof."

"I suspect," Navarro commented mildly, "that this is the point where I should bring up the old saw about sticking your hand in a fire to see if it's hot. Since you don't seem inclined to listen, shall we consider me to have argued with you and given up?" Gold hair gleamed in the sunlight and repressed laughter lit dark blue eyes as the Spaniard reached for the radio. It was perfectly obvious to him that Damien wanted to argue, and that Shahar was going to win as she always did when she truly wanted something. Neither trait struck him as sufficient reason to keep Stormy trapped on a rock outcropping.
"Sounds reasonable," Connor agreed, amused by Var's sense of humor. "After all, it is nearly eleven, and we do have bodies to deal with." Methos growled at the comment, but said nothing.

"And swords to dispose of, as well," Aidan concurred as she dragged Johannes' body toward Owain's. "Damien, if you're going to argue with me, come be useful while you do it."

The burly redhead was moving before he thought about it, accustomed to obeying her from several years of hearing orders issued in just that tone. He studied her fierce smile, the tilt of her head and line of her shoulders, then sighed. "I'm learning, Magistra. Never mind. I'll help."

Behind him, Damien could hear Var explaining, "Yes, Stormy, we are almost done here. Shahar and Connor have decided to finish this simultaneously for some reason, that's all."

Aidan flashed Damien a quick, approving look as he took Johannes' shoulders and let her grab the body's feet. "You're learning. Stormy has been good for you."

The two of them laughed at that while Var paused, then commented, "Of course Adam can give Connor -- no, perhaps we should discuss this face to face rather than over the air. Would you feel better if I assured you that all of this is perfectly within the rules?"

They propped Johannes' body against a rock, head lolling forward in death, and Connor dragged Owain closer at the same time. Apparently Duncan had taken the radio; they could hear him saying, "It's fine, Stormy, really. A little odd, but perfectly fair." He hesitated as she said something, then chuckled and agreed, "Yeah, that does describe those two, doesn't it? Look, you'd be safer up--" He held the radio away from his ear, and then waved a thank you to Mandisa and Var when they smiled and headed for Stormy's perch, presumably to help the little blonde get her gear back down the pillar.

"All right, Stormy, they're on the way." Duncan watched Aidan move to confer with Connor and couldn't help shaking his head in amusement at Methos' irritation. Just once, he should accept that other people know what they want and what they're doing, he thought and restrained a grin at the annoyance that flared over their own link.

Aidan waved Damien back to the others before she offered quietly, "Truth be told, brother, I haven't asked Dhonnchaidh and Methos enough questions about the effects of this. Are you sure you want to do this?"

Pleasure and mischief lit Connor's face, lifted his eyebrows over his quizzical gaze as he asked her, "Why should we let them have all the fun?" He swung his katana in quick, easy circles out of habit and in an unconscious attempt to ease the pain in the other, truncated wrist.

"Or all the good women?" she consented, smiling herself and bringing her saber up to rest on her shoulder. "I must admit, the other pairs I know of are, or were, the same gender."

"It'll make this more interesting," he shrugged, dark green eyes more serious than his wicked smile suggested. "If you don't want to, Edana, say so."

"And stop you from 'persuading' me, Connor? Are you mad? Any other good reasons we should do this? I'll admit, none of the arguments against it seem sufficient to me, either." Aidan rubbed absently at an itchy, drying line of blood on her cheek.

"You worship a God and Goddess both, right?" Connor waited for her nod before tilting his head in echo of her own mannerism and pointing out, "It'll give you insight into the other half of your religion?"
"That's it," she said firmly, smiling with delight at the notion. "An opportunity to gain a new theological perspective? You've convinced me. Shall we?"

"Ladies first." But he swung his blade across Owain's neck a bare moment after Johannes' head dropped toward the ground.

Light coiled around both bodies, pale luminescence in the late morning sunlight, and Aidan frowned as it wove in between the bodies rather than jump for the two living immortals. She glanced at Connor, and saw motion in the corner of her eye as the pooling mass of light shuddered upward and split in half. "Oh, Mother," she whispered as Connor moved to stand shoulder to shoulder with her. Then the lightning struck.

Aidan had taken two quickenings simultaneously before. It hadn't felt like this.

Lightning etched memories and skills across her body and into her nerves, as always, but Connor's thoughts and memories were almost as strong in her mind as Johannes' or Owain's. Her brother fought with her to master the combined personalities in much the same way they'd have fought another pair of fighters in a spar, each one guarding the other's mental flanks and back. When the last rumbling thunder subsided, the last crawling spark had seeped into flesh, Aidan came back to herself to find she was on her knees on the ground with Connor a heated pressure against her back.

"Are you all right?" she asked, then realized she could feel the ache in his wrist as the quickenings sped his healing. For a moment, she wasn't sure whose shoulder was hurting, then heard him chuckle.

"The shoulder's yours," Connor said matter-of-factly, then shivered when she moved. Her center of gravity felt odd to him, too low to be right. They both laughed softly at that thought, then Connor stepped aside in his own mind and felt the twinned sensations shift and separate, still overlapping but no longer completely the same.

"This is going to take some getting used to, isn't it?" he commented, amused despite himself at the way they shifted back toward that total unity if he didn't concentrate.

Aidan leaned back against him, brushing straggles of hair back from her face with her free hand as she added her strength to his to hold them as two separate personalities. She tried to picture them standing shoulder to shoulder as they had during the quickening and felt/saw Connor change it to walking arm in arm. The linkage eased and stabilized as they agreed on the visualization. She sighed, then laughed softly and asked, "Is this the point at which I say it was your idea?"

"Only if you want to start another of those decades' long disagreements," Var interrupted them as he came up. "Are you two quite done?"

"Do you still see any lightning?" Connor inquired sardonically as he rolled up to his feet and then pulled Aidan to hers. He turned slowly, surveying the area where they'd been fighting. Blood and scuff marks covered the ground; grasses had been uprooted, rocks flipped over, and one tree had taken a gouge when Damita's machete went flying. Connor shook his head ruefully. "And we need to clean up the worst of this? Wonderful."

Aidan stretched, trying to ease two sets of stiff muscles, and laughed softly when Connor felt his own shoulder relax in unison with hers. "I always said you'd be a natural at this sort of thing, brother, but I'm beginning to wonder what Ramirez meant to teach you if the Kurgan hadn't interrupted his time with you."

Mandisa had followed Var over. She bent to pull Adam's dagger from Rhys-Tewdor's chest,
grunted with the effort, then planted a foot against his chest and straightened. The full force of her legs and arms both finally freed it. "That is almost certainly a topic for the trip home, Shahar. Myself, I am not looking forward to moving the bodies. How is your wrist, though, uncle?"

"It aches," he answered with a shrug, and then Xan and Alex wrapped him up in a fierce hug.

Xan nuzzled his neck and inquired softly, "Are you all right?"

"I keep wanting to brush Aidan's hair off my face," Connor complained contentedly, if truthfully. "Other than that, I'm fine."

Alex drew back and studied him through narrowed black eyes, then smiled in relief and rested his forehead against Connor's cheek. "You will be. Gods. I don't believe Adam did that."

"Yes, you do. You just don't believe I did," Connor snorted. The hand he no longer had tried to close around the dagger Mandisa had just handed back to Aidan and he shook his head in amused irritation. "Wonderful. Do you suppose I'm going to start Seeing things now?"

"Did you before?" Xan asked him, his voice determinedly practical in marked contrast to way he kept stroking Connor's shoulder with his fingertips.

Hazel eyes sparkled with laughter and a surplus of energy as Connor told him, "Well not exactly. Usually I just dream things. How did you think I ended up with that one?" He jerked a thumb at Duncan and watched the two Greeks shake their heads. In the corner of his eye he saw golden motion as Stormy's ponytail went past them, attached to her and headed for Damien like a human-shaped homing missile.

"And you shared a quickening with Edana." Alex started laughing, arm still snugly around Connor's waist. "Oh, Gods, this will be entertaining to watch over the next few decades."

Aidan hadn't let go of Duncan or Methos yet, either, but she called over, "It's done, brothers. It certainly can't be undone."

"In other words," Var inquired ironically as he turned away rather than watch Stormy kissing Damien so fiercely, "you forgot, too?"

"Yes," his teacher admitted, not moving. She tipped her head back to meet Duncan's gaze, and murmured, "Didn't feel like arguing with him?"

"He's been alone too long," the younger Scot whispered. More loudly he commented, "I never win arguments with Connor."

"Try sometime," Methos suggested ironically. He tightened his grip around Aidan's waist then, asking, "Are you all right, Edana?"

"Well enough," she shrugged and worked free of their embrace, regret shading her eyes as premonitions crowded against her skin. Aidan glanced up at the sun, still high in the sky, at the moon setting in the west, and frowned as she shook her head, wondering what exactly was worrying her.

Behind her, Connor bluntly stated, "We've been here too long." He contemplated Stormy and Damien, who were finally coming up for air, and concluded that the mortal had left her gear up on the column of rock she'd been using as a base. "Mandisa, help Stormy get her packs and rifles back down that column, then the three of us will carry all of it off the mesa. Everyone else, start moving bodies."
"Did we put him in charge?" Alex asked of no one in particular, but he moved towards the laid-out corpses.

Aidan looked at the blood-splattered khakis she was wearing and shook her head in disgust. "I hate being this filthy. But Connor's making sense, Alexandrias. Argue with him while you're working, why don't you?"

"You just want to get clean," Xan retorted as he began moving swords off to the side. "On the other hand, so do I. All right, where did we put those damned sacks, Duncan?"

"And what do we do about Farrell?" Damien asked as he walked over with one arm firmly around Stormy's shoulders. He glanced at the immortal who was watching them from the newly consecrated Holy Ground. Farrell's expression was so impassive it had to be deliberate.

To everyone's surprise, it was Connor who said firmly, "He studied with Kastagir. I'll handle him."

"Connor." Var waited until the Scot gave him his attention before pointing out, "He's on Holy Ground, remember."

"So he is. With any luck, that'll make him feel safe enough to talk to me." Connor flashed the Spaniard a quick smile before he commented very casually, "Nice to know we didn't move all those boulders for nothing."

Aidan called over her shoulder, "I heard that. I seem to remember that you thought it would be a good idea to have refuge nearby, too."

"That was then, sister, this is now. And of course you heard. I meant you for you to." Connor grinned at Stormy and Mandisa. "Sorry, ladies, you may have to haul those packs without me."

"We're female, Connor, not fragile," the diminutive Southern blonde said pleasantly, waving him away with one hand. "Go take care of that poor, misguided son of a bitch, why don't you? 'Cause I think Disa and I still have some business to handle."

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Near Techado Mesa -- noon, April 20th

"Yeah, well, my grandfather didn't raise any idiot Watchers," Dave Goldberg stated flatly. Hazel eyes glared furiously at him, but he met that show of temper without flinching. "What's going on, Dawson?"

"I'm not gonna--"

Dave leaned in and cut over him. "If you think any grandson of Sol Goldberg's would turn you in for talking to a man as decent as Duncan MacLeod, then you really don't know shit about my family. I never said I was going to report this any farther'n the rest of my family... but I want to know what the fuck is going on, Joe. The truth, not that snow job you buried the rest of 'em under."

A furious, fragile silence fell between the two of them. Joe worked his jaw as if to say something, but instead his mouth tightened into a stubborn set. Dave snapped, "God damn it, Mr. Dawson, who told you you had to do this by yourself? You think you're the only Watcher who talks to his immortal? How many times does my family have to have Russell Nash over for dinner before you figure out we're on the same side?"
Joe's shoulders tightened as he turned away, cane swinging out to one side with each angry step. He turned back after a minute and threw Dave a bottle of water. "What do you want to know, Dave?"

The large, solidly built man caught it easily and twisted the top off in an idle motion as he spoke. "I figure we've got about ten minutes before Roger reports in again. Now he's only seen one immortal coming down, but we've seen six quickenings so far and that last one was fucking huge. Last time I saw anything like that was when Connor killed Fasil back in '85. Now, you want to tell me what you know about this? Like why in hell the Gathering hasn't started? I mean, I'm not hearing that we got every other immortal in the world pouring' down on top of our head. But I am hearing that it's you and me Watching the line of Ramirez--" He paused when that jolted Joe's careful composure, and nodded cynically.

"Oh, yeah, Grandfather mentioned that little phrase. Me, I figure we're talking something close to a genealogy here. Now, Duncan ain't gonna kill either of us, and Connor ain't gonna let anyone else kill one of Grandfather's grandsons. What I wanna know is why some of those people are up there. Line of Ramirez, huh? So who are some of these people, Joe?"

Joe growled, "Why don't you ask them?"

Dave wiped the sweat off his face and poured half the bottle of water down his throat before he looked up and smiled. "You know what? I think I will."

Joe rolled his eyes ruefully, then chuckled. "Let me know when you're gonna do that, huh? I just might want to come watch the fireworks."

"I'll do that." Dave pulled another bottle of water out and passed it to Joe. "Now, drink this, and let's talk about how we're gonna convince the Watchers that no, we couldn't find a line of sight for this, and no, we don't know who fought who."

"Well," Joe started, "we've got Roger's photos for the proof on the sight lines, and we've got a policy of no video cameras, either."

"And no talking to our immortals," Dave chuckled. "Let's make good and damn sure that we mention that once or twice. 'Too bad, so sad, so sorry we can't actually ask the people who were there.'"

"They're gonna want to recruit Stormy." Joe poured some of the water over his head and then ran his hands through his hair, rumpling it farther. Even standing in the shade of the tarp they'd rigged for shelter, it was getting pretty damn warm.

Dave flashed him a quick and surprisingly dangerous smile that reminded Joe of Connor's wicked sense of humor. "I wouldn't worry about that, Mr. Dawson."

"Cut that shit out, Dave. Unless you're still pissed off at me, go back to Joe, wouldya?"

"Well, now that we've got that settled, Joe.... A little bird tells me that Stormy's not going to be a likely candidate for Watcher school."

"Really." Joe glanced sideways at him. "And why not?"

He took a swig of his remaining water, and ended up spitting it back out when Dave chuckled and told him, "'Cause Mandisa and Damien hit a jewelry store in Seacouver. Wonder who's gonna be best man at the wedding?"
"Not Luke Davis," Joe told him, and chuckled himself at the idea of Damien's Watcher, one of the most vocal advocates of 'no contact with your subject,' standing up at Damien's wedding. "And I hope like hell you're right." He took a deep breath, and then said, "Right. Let's go back to work on this damn report." But the grin kept breaking free at odd moments.

Near Alamo, New Mexico -- early afternoon, April 20th

Farrell finished checking the knots on his rope by touch despite the fact that he had already used his flashlight to examine them visually. Once he was satisfied, the New Zealander moved carefully up the long-abandoned mineshaft, double-checking each successive knot on the other three ropes as he went. Brown eyes regarded the half-rotted timbers holding up the roof and walls dubiously. "Phoebe's right," he whispered, voice hushed by worry. "This place is going to go soon anyway."

Each step was chosen with deliberate care as he moved. Paranoia was a wonderful motivator to grace and precision, Farrell had noticed more than once -- usually when a challenge was over. He emerged into the bright afternoon light and saw Damien pacing and everyone else avoiding the obviously irate redhead. "They're ready."

"You idiot!" Damien exploded, whirling to face him. "What in hell were you doing?"

"Making sure this would work," the New Zealander answered patiently. "Someone had to tie the ropes off, Damien, and I've had recent mining experience. And I wanted to lay the bodies out properly," he admitted with a half-defiant shrug.

Var finished tying off the ropes on Adam's truck and asked, "Damien, would you please yell at him another time? I'd rather you did it somewhere else, as well. This mine is not as stable as I'd like."

"He's right." Farrell wiped sweat from his forehead, and not all of it was the result of his work in moving dead weights and finding the stress points on the support beams. "It's damned shaky down there. That entrance should have been demolished a decade ago just to keep children and horses out."

Aidan tugged one last time on the rope attached to the trailer hitch. "It wasn't in the best of shape twenty years ago, either. The state owns it, though, so I've no remorse in closing it for them. There, that should hold, and the one on the jeep is fine, too." She turned worried grey eyes on Farrell, then asked softly, "Are you all right, Farrell?"

"Remember when I asked you the same thing in '42?"

Aidan smiled faintly. "I remember. You shocked me. I knew who you were, after all."

"Yeah," Farrell agreed in a flat tone. His hands yanked at the knots fastened to the Bronco he was driving, and he nodded as if to agree that they'd hold. "I had no idea who you were for a while, you know."

"I noticed." Some thought drew a smile to that triangular face, then Aidan added, "I was certain of that when you asked me if I'd get drunk with you." She studied the ropes leading from the vehicles into the mineshaft, then nodded. "Everyone ready?"

Xan shrugged. "The bodies are well down the shaft, Edana, and Farrell's right -- that damn thing looks so unstable, no one will have trouble believing it collapsed naturally." He walked over to Farrell. "She's right, too, though," the blond Greek said softly. "Are you going to be all right?"
"I will be," Farrell told him shortly. "Let's do this, Xan." He saw the way the other man's expression closed down at his curt response and remorse drove Farrell to say, "I'm sorry. Neither of us wanted... this. But I need some time to work through all of it, Xan."

"All right," Xan agreed slowly, and reached for his wallet. Farrell watched, puzzled, until the Greek pulled out two business cards. "This is how you get in touch with Alex or me. Don't tear yourself up over this, Farrell. You're too damn good a man for that."

"Flatterer," Farrell replied automatically, tucking the card into a pocket as an excuse to look away from that intent gaze.

"No, it's not flattery," Xan emphasized, leaning into Farrell's personal space to make his point. "You did what you thought you had to do, despite what it's costing you. There aren't many people who could have done that."

Damien had walked over in time to hear that exchange and agreed fiercely, "He's right, Farrell. Don't tell me you're feeling guilty over this mess?"

Farrell turned on him. "Leave it alone, Damien. When I know how I feel, maybe then I can talk to someone else about it. Until then--"

"Until then," Damien growled, taking the two necessary strides to clasp Farrell's shoulder in a hard, friendly grip, "we're going to get you drunk and in trouble, thanks. I'm calling Ish." The redhead Swiss immortal ignored the flinching reactions from his family, more intent on the flicker of interest he'd seen in Farrell's eyes and the slight smile that quirked his mouth and vanished again. "Feeling responsible for Connor's hand or something equally crazy?"

"There's some reason I shouldn't?" Farrell frowned at him, pleasure gone as if it had never existed. He made no attempt to get out from under Damien's hand, however. "I was going to fight for someone who did that."

"You didn't fight for him," Damien pointed out, his free hand jamming into his jeans pocket as the excess energy from the Quickening surged through him with his rising temper. "And he tried to kill you for it, too. Screw it, you're determined to take some of the blame? No redemption without sweat and blood? Fine. How would you like a way to work some of that guilt off?"

"I thought that was why you made me help your lady with her gear?" Farrell countered, not backing down from Damien's angry posturing. More warmly, though, he added, "Congratulations, by the way. You finally developed taste."

"Ah heard that," Stormy drawled from her seat on the cooler. "Thank you, Farrell. Damien, do you mean I finally get to meet your brother Ish?"

"Well, there's a team of hit men who know too much about immortals to make me happy," the redhead said bluntly. "I was going to call in Ish to help hunt them, maybe Duathor if she's free. Kate already said she'd help find them. You want to help make up for some of this shit, Farrell? That job's on the list."

"Gentlemen," Aidan said quietly, "can we continue this in a minute? I need four drivers with two hands apiece -- sorry, brother -- to pull these beams down, and I want us out of here in the next ten minutes. Farrell, when we finish this... I have a favor to ask of you."

"You want a favor from me?" he asked her, incredulously. "You already let me live, Phoebe."

"You renounced Owain's line," Aidan replied as she pushed sable hair back off her face. "And I
never wanted to kill you, Farrell. None of us who knew you did, acushla. You owe me nothing for that. However, the favor isn't for me in any case."

That drew startled looks from several people, but Adam glanced from Farrell to Duncan and then at Aidan. "Marc?" he asked calmly as he accepted a bottle of water from Stormy.

"Yes," Aidan told him. She had never turned away from Farrell, and her hands were conspicuously empty at her sides as she made her request. "Will you please come to Seacouver soon and talk to Marc? He's wanted to meet you."

"And he needs to know his old line wasn't completely treacherous?" Farrell commented cynically, forcing down the spark of interest at her invitation. "Are you sure I'm a good example?"

"Do you mean to betray Marc?" Aidan probed. "All you'd have to do would be ignore him."

Farrell flinched at that, lips tightening on a frown. "That was a low blow, Phoebe."

"He's been hurt enough," she replied grimly as the line of Ramirez began to surround Farrell. Aidan wasn't sure that was a good idea, but the ones closest to him were his friends, so perhaps it wasn't a bad one, either. "And so have you, Farrell. There were at least two honorable members of the line of Rhys-Tewdor, and I would very much like for the two of you to get a chance to meet. Chris made sure that Marc never had a chance to talk to you, apparently."

"Christopher kept him from...?" Farrell paused then said more quietly, "That would explain a few things. This was the first I'd heard of him, too, Phoebe. I didn't know Chris had taken a student, but if they were going to use the man as a stalking horse, I'm not surprised they didn't tell me about him."

Farrell stared at the ground under his feet, seeing the grass and rocks, the tire and boot tracks, without really registering them. A firm hand rubbed circles on his back, not quite a backrub but not hard enough or sharp enough to scratch either. Friction, strength, maybe a reminder of the solidity of life, he supposed, knowing it was probably Alex or Xan. Damien was tactile in different ways, and the Swiss immortal's imposing presence had moved aside a few moments ago.

And I never knew what kind of touches Jirina or Will gave to those they liked and trusted, he admitted to himself. I'll grieve later, when I figure out who I'm hurting for. This isn't the time or the place. "Life goes on, I suppose," Farrell finally told her, looking up again to meet those grey eyes levelly. He glanced to his right and saw to his surprise that it was the older MacLeod who'd been rubbing his back. The same way Kastagir would have, Farrell realized, smiling at Connor despite the morning's events. He was oddly pleased when he recognized the faint, sardonic quirk of the Highlander's lips as an answering smile. There may yet be some good things out of this. Let it settle, then, and I'll see.

"Let's bury them, Phoebe," Farrell surrendered. "I have to go back to Albuquerque to clean things up, but--"

"We're not going to let you just vanish on us, Farrell," Damien said grimly, watching him intently. "And I'm willing to take a few minutes more to make sure that doesn't happen. You're, what? A century and some small change?"

"Yeah," Farrell agreed. This much solicitude from a group that he'd thought would try to kill him was beginning to rouse a perverse sense of humor in him. "Why?"

"Then there's no way in hell you can take responsibility for an immortal who was older than I
was," the burly redhead argued as he hunched his shoulders in an irritable attempt to excavate the words that would persuade Farrell.

Connor interrupted bluntly, "Jameson, you're a good enough man that half of the people at this war didn't want to fight you before you renounced Rhys-Tewdor. We'd already agreed that whoever fought you would try to get you to go to first blood." He waited until Farrell met his eyes, surprised brown meeting cynical, compassionate hazel. "And you studied with an old friend of mine. I wouldn't mind spending a few nights and a few bottles of whiskey comparing stories sometime. You have to go back to Albuquerque, and set your stage there -- fine. We'll meet you there tomorrow after we get a few things cleaned up ourselves. But Damien's right, man. It's not your fault." Connor held up his right wrist for emphasis as he said forcefully, "None of it."

Farrell had no doubt there was an emotional bill pending for what he'd done this morning. Payment was going to come due, and it was going to be a bitch. For now, though, he was willing to live in the moment, to enjoy some of what he'd already bought because of his own allegiances and the dictates of his own nature. So he conceded, "We'll argue that another time, MacLeod, say, when I take you up on the drinks and the talk. And yes, I'll meet all of you for lunch tomorrow."

"Good enough," the Scot told him, hazel eyes finally releasing him from that implacable gaze. "And it's Connor to any student of that old pirate."

Farrell reached out with his left hand. "Yeah, well, it's Farrell to anyone with enough taste to call Kastagir a pirate."

"That's an improvement over most of the names we could call him," Connor told him, shaking his hand and grinning.

Adam interrupted them in a cutting voice. "Now that we have this latest crisis under control, can we collapse this mineshaft before anyone shows up?"

For some reason that Farrell didn't understand, that caused amused glances to be traded among the MacLeods, Phoebe, and Adam. Phoebe murmured something that sounded like, "Oh, dear. He is going to yell, isn't he?"

"It's good for him," Duncan said bluntly, but he waved Farrell to his vehicle. "Move, everyone. I want a shower, and I want to get the hell out of this state tomorrow."

Mandisa chuckled and held out a long, thin hand for the taller MacLeod's keys. "Yes, and as one of the few who hasn't taken a quickening? I'm driving."

Duncan started to argue then saw the glare he was getting from Adam. "Fine."

"When you get snappish, Duncan MacLeod," Stormy drawled sweetly, "then I know all the stories I've heard about quickenings must be true."

Mandisa flashed the little blonde a wicked smile. "Something like." As she walked past the parked vehicles, the tall black woman murmured, "Come see me tomorrow if you need a good rubdown."

"Thanks," Stormy told her equally softly, her smile simultaneously anticipatory and mildly nervous, "but I thought I'd make him do it."

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Duncan's cabin -- twilight, April 20th
It wasn't that Marc heard anything. It was, rather, the sudden absence of sounds that brought his head up. He stood immediately, grateful that he'd been checking the shingles on the cabin and thus had a perfect look-out perch. At the edge of the trail to the lake, a bird launched itself towards the sky, wings beating madly for altitude; closer to the cabin, a deer bolted through the woods in a sudden drumming of hooves.

"Rich," he called, grim and worried. "We have company." The tall, slim black man knelt then, swiftly dropping hammer and nails back into the tool box before scooping up the bastard sword that had been lying next to them. After his time with Chris, he had so many bad habits with a katana that Aidan had started him on bastard sword, and had him mostly using it with his left hand instead of his right. The frightening thing was that she was correct; it was easier to learn those good habits than to unlearn the bad. They both had hopes he'd master katana correctly in a few more years, but for right now, Marc was much more interested in survival.

From the porch, he heard Rich answer, "Can you see anyone yet?"

"No." Marc moved up the roof toward the peak, studying what he could see of the trail. "But it's too late for Joe to be coming here. It's almost dark on the lake; he shouldn't be out in that."

"Tell him that and you'll eat a cane," Rich warned him, but he didn't sound happy. "All right, this is Holy Ground. We stay on it, if we have to."

The tall black man snorted. "If Owain sent them, Rich, it's a hit team and we're out of here. Are the backpacks ready?"

Marc could almost see the quick flash of grin that crossed Rich's face; it was implicit in his voice when the redhead quipped, "Unless you moved 'em, or they had enough sense to run like hell. Think we should?"

Marc could see figures on the path now, and he squinted, trying to make sense of the shapes. "Two of them," he muttered, "but...." The stride on one of them was familiar, an ambling walk that still ate up the distance. What identified them, though, was the courtesy of the hand extended back toward the smaller figure at what Marc knew was a muddy turn of the trail.

"Oh, man! It's cool, Rich." Marc laughed in sheer relief before he cupped his hands in front of his mouth and bellowed, "Terrence! Carolyn!"

From the path, he could see his brother jerk in surprise, then wave a long, tan-clad arm at him in greeting. Carolyn's raucous, Jersey-accented voice yelled back, "You better be hungry. We brought dinner!"

Rich chuckled suddenly, every bit as relieved as Marc was. "I hope they bought it."

Marc walked down the roof, grabbing the tools as he went, and grinning as he remembered Duncan's description of Terrence's cooking. "Me, too, Rich." He lowered the tool box down on a rope, then went down the ladder with his blade in one hand. Sword finally sheathed in his coat, he and Rich went to meet their visitors, desperate for news and at the same time dreading it.

Terrence looked torn between moving ahead of Carolyn's slower pace and keeping his wife company. Marc studied his line brother, wryly amused that even in chamois shirt, jeans, and hiking boots, Terrence couldn't look anything but casually elegant. He'd been as annoyingly composed and suave when Marc had first met him just over a month ago.

Terrence's wife, Carolyn, was carrying the smaller of the two baskets. From the look of her jeans,
getting out of the canoe had not agreed with her. She had a prominent nose, brown hair that tended to look less than neat, especially next to Terrence's calm composure, and had extended a surprisingly warm greeting to her new 'brother-in-law' when she and Terrence had come over from Tacoma to spend the day visiting Aidan and Marc.

Rich took the basket from her. "Hey, Carolyn. Come on, we've got a fire going. Canoe dump you?"

She gave him a suspicious look, then decided that was the voice of experience talking rather than a slam, and flashed him a quick smile. "You too?"

"Oh, yeah. Plenty of times," the redhead groaned. "Mac says it's proof the lake likes me."

Marc smiled and reached for the basket Terrence was carrying, waving them towards the cabin. "Come on in," he offered. "We've got some soup going, and all I have to do is put the coffee pot over the burner."

Terrence quietly informed them, "Marc, Rich -- everyone's alive."

"What?" Rich choked out, stumbling as he tried to walk and stop at the same time.

Marc, however, did stop, eyes closing as his shoulders slumped. "Everyone... on one side, bro."

He inhaled slowly and looked up. "All right. Tell us the rest of it after dinner, okay? But... thanks for coming."

"Hey!" Carolyn frowned. "We sure as hell weren't gonna leave you out here wondering who was alive or dead, okay?" She looked at him, then in one of the quick, awkward, always unexpected gestures Marc was coming to associate with her, she hugged him, hard. "You gonna be all right?"

He didn't look at her, although his free arm did tighten around her waist. "I'll be fine, Carolyn, thanks. Come on, let's get you dried off and dinner set out, then we can talk."

Carolyn Marsh, née Carol Ann Marshak, exchanged a concerned look with her husband, then changed the subject. "How do you two stand all this wilderness? I mean, no phones, no cars--" she paused, searching for just the activity she'd miss and settled on, "--no shopping?"

Marc shrugged and absently pushed dark curls back off his forehead. "It's all right."

Rich commented in disgust, "Oh, sure. We haven't gone stir-crazy, but that's probably because Aidan sent a ton of homework with us." He shrugged as they walked up the steps to the porch, and swung the door open for their visitors. As the good news began to sink in, Rich went on more cheerfully, "Nah, between books and repairs to the cabin, we're doing okay."

Marc let Terrence and Carolyn sort their gear out themselves. Instead he moved directly to the wood-burning stove and set the coffee pot over the heat. His voice still sounded subdued as he said, "Carolyn, there's hot water if you want to get a bath. Did you two bring extra clothes?"

"We're here for the night, yeah," she told him, stripping off her wet tennis shoes and putting them in front of the fireplace to dry. Carolyn dropped down onto the thick rugs gratefully and propped her feet in front of the fire with a complete lack of regard for her dignity. It might be April, but the lake water was still cold. Without moving from the heat, she added, "Terrence said you could probably spare a bed."

Rich glanced at Marc, then replied, "Yeah, no problem at all. I'll change the sheets on the bed in the loft after dinner."
Terrence took firm control of the situation. "Dear, go get a quick shower and pull on some warm
clothes. Rich and I will heat up dinner while Marc keeps an eye on his coffee."

Carolyn favored him with a wry look. "Immortal shop talk? Time to chase the sword-challenged
person out?"

"Nah," Marc said and he flashed a quick smile. "A lack of cold medicine that isn't past its shelf
life. That lake still feels half-frozen this time of year, Carolyn. Go on, go get warm. Take your
time, okay? As soon as the coffee's ready, we'll get some to you."

Terrence stood up and held the chair for Carolyn, then sat back down at the heavy oak table. Rich
passed her a stoneware plate loaded with rotisserie chicken and fresh salad, and Marc slid the
wicker basket of bread to her. "How much did I miss?" she asked bluntly.

"Nothing," Marc said quietly. "We waited."

"There's not much to tell," Terrence warned his brother, disturbed by the young immortal's
uncharacteristically somber mood. "Aidan wasn't on a secure line, apparently, so I'll give you her
message word for word as Kyra passed it to me. 'We're fine. Farrell defected. Lim took first
blood.' "

"Madonna." Marc pushed his chair back from the table, stalking toward the night-blackened
window as if he couldn't sit even a moment longer.

Terrence started to reach for him as he stood, but Rich caught his arm and shook his head.
Carolyn, however, ignored the redhead's nonverbal advice. "Marc? I thought this was good
news?"

"I knew--" He broke off and spun back to face them. "I knew both sides, okay, Carolyn? Jesus
Christ. I didn't like most of them, but fuck, you're telling me that people I knew and talked to, are
dead. That Lim Mahn managed to...." Marc twisted around and climbed onto the cushioned
window seat. "Just... give me a second, okay?"

Rich stood up from his chair. He managed a reassuring smile for Carolyn before he walked over to
where Marc was wrapped around himself. He didn't try to come up with words, just put one hand
lightly on the thin immortal's shoulder. He's shaking, Rich realized with concern, and looked up to
see their reflections in the window. Marc's eyes were closed and as Rich watched he put his head
down on his knees, his arms curling tightly around his legs so that he formed a self-contained
bundle of flesh on the seat-cushion.

The young redhead perched on the edge of the window seat and slid his arm around Marc's waist.
Rich dropped his own head onto his friend's shoulder, determined to sit there and hold him for as
long as it took. That was what Mac had done for him more than once when the Game had just been
too much. He could do at least as much for Marc. Besides, Rich had sat that way himself some
nights, too lonely to do anything but curl up on himself, and feeling too deserted to seek support
from so much as a wall. He knew exactly how that felt, and remembered how badly he'd wanted
someone to hold him.

Terrence brought over two open bottles of beer and set them within reach, then moved back to the
table. Seating himself with his back to the two younger men, he determinedly drew Carolyn into
conversation about her upcoming book tour. His wife stared at him for a few seconds as if he'd
lost his mind, then abruptly nodded and set to work filling the crackling tension with something
purely mundane.

Under his arm, Rich could feel Marc's breathing ease, becoming less ragged, until finally he was inhaling and exhaling in one of the meditation patterns that Aidan had taught both of them. The young redhead found himself matching it automatically. His own circling thoughts and worries began to slow until he could sit up, arm still around Marc's waist, and reach for one of the bottles. "Here you go," Rich offered. "Drink this."

Marc opened amber eyes and looked at the beer, then took it. "Thanks." He drained a third of it in a long swallow, then wiped his mouth on the cuff of his denim shirt.

Rich reached for the other bottle and took a smaller drink. "You okay?"

Thin shoulders moved in a shrug and Marc said, "Yeah, I will be. Sorry to put a damper on things."

All Rich could do was shrug, one eyebrow going up in cynical acceptance of the way reality was going lately, as he answered quietly, "Hey, it's not like this has been easy for you. You sure you're gonna be all right?"

Marc nodded and sat up. "Yeah, I'll be fine. Thanks, bro."

The young redhead flashed him a quick grin and finally let go. "One hug and I'm 'bro.' Damn, you'd better get back to the table and eat something or they'll think we're carrying on some torrid affair."

That got a chuckle from Marc before he pointed out, "Are you kidding? Teach and the guys make much better gossip than we do."

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Rich woke up to the certainty that something was wrong. From the loft he heard Terrence's soft, purring murmur that wasn't quite a snore, a noise that had amused him earlier when he was dropping off. That wasn't it. So what is? I don't think it was anything outside... Wait, where's Marc? He sat up, trying not to make too much noise and wake the others, and saw the figure silhouetted by the fireplace. Flame danced along the logs, rode a sullen red line above the backlogs, and painted highlights across the still, dark amber profile.

The young redhead sighed, gave up on a peaceful night's sleep, and stumbled out of bed. He wrapped the comforter around himself as he walked over, then extended the edge of it over Marc's shoulder when he sat down.

"Go back to sleep, Rich," Marc whispered.

"Yeah, right." Rich yawned until he thought his jaw would unhinge, then settled himself more comfortably onto the rug. "You gonna sit here all night?"

"Maybe."

Rich sighed again, shrugged, and inquired tiredly, "Do you have to think about whatever it is in front of the fire?"

"I suppose not," came the very quiet answer. "And I can't seem to meditate."

"Yeah, well, come back to bed and we'll talk about it," Rich told him then. "You sleep better when
"I'm there. After the last couple nights, we both know that."

"You are gonna get us one hell of a reputation in the family," Marc chuckled softly, eyes lighting up as his mood lightened. In the firelight, the irises were a golden-amber around night-widened pupils.

"Like you said, compared to the rest of them, we're not even gossip. Come on, come back to bed, okay?" Rich whispered. "We'll talk until you can go back to sleep."

Marc stood up silently and Rich was faintly surprised by just how much grace he'd gained in two months of training with Aidan and Duncan. "Come on, Rich; let's get you back in bed, bro."

Setting the sheets and blankets back to rights without waking Caroline and Terrence took a few moments and Rich was thoroughly chilled by the time he slid back under the flannel sheets. He held the covers up anyway, glaring at Marc in the dim light until the slender black man climbed in.

They lay on their own sides of the bed, rigidly motionless. Marc, at least, was determined to be silent; Rich had other plans. "Been awake long?" he asked softly. "Or did you ever go to sleep?"

"Couldn't sleep," Marc admitted.

"You can't keep this up," Rich sighed as he turned onto his side to face Marc. "You know that."

"It's one sleepless night--"

"Bullshit." He hissed it, barely remembering to keep his voice down. "Come on, Marc, how many nightmares did I wake you up from last night, and the night before? You can't keep doing this, damn it. Wear yourself out and you're easy prey."

"Done it yourself once or twice?" Marc snapped.

Rich bit back his temper with an effort. He reached over and grabbed Marc's shoulder and whispered harshly, "Yeah, Marc, I've been that stupid. The only thing that saved my head was the fact that Martin Hyde wanted Mac, not me." He released Marc and rolled to his back.

"Merda." Marc sighed and draped his arm over his eyes. "Sorry, bro."

Rich shrugged, temper fading almost as fast as it had roused. "No big deal," he acquiesced. "Look, do you want to talk about them?"

"I don't know," the young black man murmured. "I didn't like Owain, Rich. But in two years, he was the only person I saw other than Chris. Now both of them are dead. That's a chunk of my life gone, you know?"


"Went and got them," Marc said tonelessly, clearly unwilling to discuss how Henslowe had brought the supplies in or why he hadn't been able to escape back to civilization at those times... or any other.

A warm weight settled onto the mattress next to them, still smelling faintly of cologne. Terrence pulled his blanket more firmly around his shoulders as he curled his legs under himself. Only then did he ask softly, "Can't sleep?"
"No," Marc muttered. "Sorry, Terrence, didn't mean to wake anyone up."

"It's all right." The former bard scooted back, propping himself against the headboard with his hip against Marc's shoulder. "Do you mind some terribly clichéd advice, brother?"

"Am I going to get it anyway?"

Terrence chuckled at that. "I'm afraid so. Are you fretting over Owain and the rest of them?"

"You don't sound angry," Marc murmured, surprised and relieved.

"Why in the world would I be?" Terrence reached down and lightly patted the pile of blankets that made up his youngest brother's torso. "You spent two years with them, Marc, which is certainly longer than you've known the rest of us. This has to have been rough for you. Are you angry that I didn't come out here sooner?"

"Rich's good company." Marc shrugged and scooted over to give Terrence more room.

"You're dodging the subject," Rich said grimly. "Hell, no, he's not okay, Terrence. He doesn't sleep, or when he does, he has nightmares half the night. Come on, Marc, you've been snapping at people since I hit Seacouver again. For all I know you've been like this since Connor vanished."

"Vaffanculo, Rich!"

Terrence hastily said, "Hush, hush, you two. We don't really want Caroline coming down here. She's testy when she doesn't get enough sleep."

"That's got to make life fun when she's writing," Marc growled, fighting down a desperate longing for life to be normal again, or as normal as it ever got. Right now, he'd settle for being back in Seacouver with Aidan rubbing her eyes and protesting that she almost had the section finished and he should stop being an Italian mother hen. I got two months of relative peace and quiet after two years with Chris, though; I ought to be grateful for that much. So he told both Rich and Terrence, "I'm fine."

"Which is why you're awake," Rich snorted. "You wouldn't take an answer like that from me, buddy. You think we're going to take it from you?"

"They were the only life I had, Rich, and they're dead. I don't know how in hell I feel about that! Part of me hopes they died slow, after what they did to Connor--"

Terrence interrupted, "Marc, how much did you see?"

Marc shivered again wordlessly and after a second Rich moved to curl against his side, lending his own warmth and solidity to Terrence's offered comfort. "Hey, ah, hell, Marc, I didn't know you.... God, is that what you've been dreaming about?"

"Scoot over, hmm?" Terrence sighed as he stretched out on the bed, lying on top of the covers facing Marc. "Time I taught you this, I can tell, brother."

A laugh broke free of Marc despite his best efforts, although he muffled it under his arm. When he could control himself, he said gravely, "I think I know how to snuggle people, Terrence."

The English bard just waited out his black humor patiently. "Would you like some help with these nightmares or not?"
"Oh." Marc sobered abruptly. "Oh, God, yes, please."

"A few questions, then," Terrence replied, surprisingly stern and very unlike his usual pleasant manner. "First. If you had to, could you take Owain's head?"

"I'd never--"

"Not could you win the fight," Terrence explained patiently. "Could you take his head if you had the opportunity? If you won and he was on the ground, dying, could you cut off his head?"

Marc shivered. "Does it have to be Owain?"

"I'm sorry, brother, but yes, I think it had better be." Terrence's voice managed to be simultaneously sympathetic and unyielding. "Could you take his head in cold blood?"

"I--" Marc flipped over onto his stomach. "I don't know," he growled into the pillow.

Terrence glared Rich into silence, and the shock of seeing that usually laid-back immortal looking so fierce quickly shut the redhead up.

Marc turned back over and glared at the ceiling. "Maledizione, Terrence. Yeah. I could take his head. Even knowing him. After what he did to Connor, yeah, I could kill him."

"You've got to learn to do it, you know," Terrence told him with that same implacable gentleness. "Because it's that, brother, or Holy Ground. And you aren't suited to that."

"I know. I like people too much to stay in cloisters, bro." Marc shivered then said more softly, "Christ have mercy. Yeah, I could have killed Owain."

"I think He might understand," Terrence commented. "Do try to remember He whipped the moneychangers out of the Temple, hmm? Very well. Next question. How much did you see of what Owain's people did to Connor?"

"I saw--" Marc stumbled, looking for words, then went on grimly, "I was there when Teach and Adam brought him upstairs. He was this... mummy of superglue and bandages, and sweet Mother Mary, what they'd done to his eyes." Lost in his memories, he never noticed that Rich shivered against his side as he spoke. "They crucified him, Terrence. The holes were still there in his arms, and God, I don't know everything they did.... Some of it's none of my business to discuss."

"But you're dreaming about it, brother?"

"Yeah." Under the blankets, Marc's hands tightened into fists. "It was kinda membrable." He held the sarcasm to a faint tinge of the acidic burn that coated his memory and burned in the back of his throat late at night when he tried to sleep. "And I still don't know -- Terrence, should I have been able to look at it?"

Terrence considered that question for a while, his arm thrown over Marc's torso and his hand resting comfortably on young Ryan's ribs. He could feel them, both so tense that they were almost vibrating with each word or sound. This had been a very difficult time for both of them. I keep forgetting how young they both are. "Sooner or later, Marc, you're going to have to be able to deal with such events. If Edana hadn't been there, or Adam, you'd have had to help Connor, you know. Do you think you could have?"

Marc answered hesitantly, "I'd have tried, bro, but I don't know some of what they did. Setting bones? Got no clue how to do it."
"I'm more concerned with whether you could have thrown up somewhere other than on Connor and then gone back to work," Terrence told him bluntly. "Could you?"

The young black man managed a hollow-sounding chuckle. "I was the oldest of five in an Italian family. I had plenty of practice in patching folks up and keeping 'em calm until we could get them to a doctor. Yeah, I think so."

"Was it your job to deal with Connor's wounds?" Terrence pressed. He was rubbing Rich's ribs idly, soothing the other immortal as best he could while most of his attention was focused on the young Italian.

"Then?" Marc shook his head finally. "Nah, I don't think so. Not when Adam and Aidan are better medics than I am. I'm better at keeping people's heads straightened out."

"And what would you be telling one of your brothers who'd seen this?" Terrence asked levelly. He smiled in the darkness when he felt Marc relax suddenly.

"I'd be trying to get Jay to talk to me," Marc told him in relief. "You're right."

"All right, then. You looked at more of it than you liked, but as much as you had to. Yes?"

Marc nodded slowly, gradually becoming aware that Rich was as tense as he'd been. He reached out and pulled the young redhead more firmly against him, giving back some of the comfort he'd been offered as he answered, "Yeah."

"Could you do that again?" Terrence went on. "Even knowing that you'd pay for it later in nightmares and loss of appetite?"

Marc gave Terrence a sardonic look. "Taken up mind-reading, bro?"

"Simply observant." Terrence shrugged, carefully monitoring their tension levels where his arm rested against Marc's chest and Rich's ribs. "I won't lie to the two of you. This sort of thing still happens. The States are more civilized than, say, Russia under the czars, or Italy under the Medicis, but it could happen again, easily."

Rich growled quietly, "Yeah, and it still does. We know that, too. Okay. So we need to get used to this?"

"You need to be able to cope with it," Terrence agreed easily, pleased and relieved that they were beginning to treat Connor's disappearance and their own stress as problems to be solved rather than wounds to be endured. "Very well. I want your word, each of you, before I teach you this."

"What do we have to promise?" Rich asked suspiciously. He made no attempt to move away from Marc's warmth, however, or to shrug off Terrence's hand. "And what are you going to teach us?"

Marc swatted him lightly on the arm. "Hey, be paranoid somewhere else, bro. He knows neither of us would promise without knowing what we're promising."

"It's something very simple," Terrence said quietly, "and that's what makes it so difficult. I want to teach you how to... lessen the shock, make it less immediate, but no less vivid."

"And in exchange?" his dark brother asked, clearly interested.

"The trick is that once you've done that, Marc, you still have the memories, but they're... softer. More like the memory of a particularly absorbing movie than like something that happened to you. 
Which means that you have to promise to look at the events, and deal with your reactions to them, before you soften the edges."

"Wait." Marc propped up on one elbow, until Rich yanked it out from under him, complaining that he couldn't see.

"Shh!" both Marc and Terrence hissed, and all three of them listened to see if they'd woken Carolyn up. After a few minutes in which the only sounds were wood popping softly in the fireplace and the wistful cries of an owl, all three of them exhaled softly.

"Terrence, I don't get it. Isn't the point to make stuff like this easier?"

"Yes and no, Marc. You have to learn from experience, brother, or you'll end up dead... or worse. I think we all agree that there is such a thing as 'worse'?” He watched them in the firelight and nodded once. "We do. Good. If something is simply so bad that you can't examine it by yourself, well, that may be why you have so many line kin. Any of us would likely help you, it's just a question of who you get along well with.

"Damien tends to find Ish and they go drinking until he can cope. Mandisa shows up on Var's doorstep and he waits her out until she talks. Duathor spars with someone until she's so exhausted that all she can do is spill out whatever is bothering her." Terrence shrugged at that. "You'll find ways to look at it, to survive until you can look at whatever it may be. But there's no sense in having nightmares for night upon night, until sleep is something you fear more than taking a challenge. Once you've taken a good look at whatever it was, and how you reacted -- and more importantly, how you plan to react if something similar happens again -- why, then you can blur the edges a bit."

Marc looked at him thoughtfully, amber eyes black with expanded pupils. "Does Teach know you do this?"

"Yes, of course. Why?"

"Cause, bro, I think someone had better pin her down and make her talk."

A frown crossed Terrence's face and settled there. "Sore spots, I take it? This latest problem, or something older?"

"Both, I think," was Marc's grim reply.

"Well." Terrence nodded once, a curt decisive motion. "I'll see to it, brother, but it may take a month or two before I can find someone who can handle it. I seem to recall hearing that some of the people I would normally call to cope with her are dead. We'll manage, though. Tomorrow, after you've had some decent sleep," he emphasized with a shake of Marc's shoulder, "you can tell me what you've seen."

"So how do we do this?" Rich asked.

"You, sir, do not. You didn't see Connor, and don't need to blur that." The bard studied him for a long moment, then reached out to ruffle his hair and let his hand slide down briefly to clasp Rich's shoulder. "I'm always available if you need to talk, Richard. Always. It's not that long a motorcycle ride to Tacoma, you know."

Rich grinned briefly at that, a return of the cocky expression that reminded Terrence of himself at that age. "Yeah, well, if I need to talk--"
"If you're asking about this," Terrence pointed out with that same watchful gentleness, "then most likely you do. You're Duncan's student, not Aidan's, but that doesn't mean that you aren't family, you know. If you need to talk, well, Carolyn and I can stay for a few days. She would enjoy working on the porch, and there's a great deal of island to walk."

The young redhead's nod accepted the information and the offer, but was not an assent; that much was clear in the stubborn hazel eyes. Terrence smiled at him briefly, then returned his attention to Marc. The Italian man inclined his head so slightly that even Terrence barely saw it, but the bard smiled inwardly. So. One of us will be available if Richard needs help. Fair enough.

"Ready, Marc?" At the young man's nod, Terrence deliberately pitched his voice into what he still thought of as his 'performance tones,' the rich, precisely enunciated, rolling cadences he had learned years ago while singing and telling tales for room and board. "Then we begin with one of the most basic meditations, which, hopefully, Aidan has already taught you...."

Upstairs in her own bed, Carolyn heard her husband begin his explanation, and smiled and turned over. She plumped the pillow under her cheek and settled the blankets more firmly around herself to make up for the loss of his warmth. I wonder how I'm gonna get Terrence into Seacouver more often? I mean, he's gonna need to check on those two, from the sound of that. Hmm... Aidan's a writer. I could tell Terrence that I want to try and talk her out of some stories. She'd be a great source for juicy gossip about some of the other female immortals. I bet I could sell a new series to my publisher -- a line of strong, unconventional heroines, set 'em in traditional settings....

Carolyn drifted off again to the sound of her husband's voice still speaking quietly. It mingled smoothly with her own musings on whether the whole desert heroine genre was done to death or still sellable.

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Albuquerque -- late evening, April 20th

"Dawson," Joe growled, yanking his attention away from his laptop on the dinky motel desk. He was tired, sun-fried, and worried; whoever this was, it had better be good.

"Joe, you sound as rough as we did. Are you doing all right?"

The pleasant shock of hearing Methos' voice over the phone rendered Joe literally speechless for a few moments.

"Joe? Come on, Joe, talk to me."

The worried tone of voice was gratifying, and Joe seriously contemplated leaving him hanging, but he wasn't willing to do that. Quite. "Yeah, I'm here. Hadn't expected to hear from you, you want the truth."

Methos snorted, and Joe could imagine the exasperated twist of his friend's knowing smile. "You knew perfectly well one of us would check in with you. Any listeners on your end?"

"Nah, it's fine, buddy. I got a room to myself at the end of the corridor, and Dave Goldberg's in the next room. By the way, you tell Stormy and Mandisa for me that if I catch up with either of them, I'm gonna tan their backsides for that stunt this afternoon!"

"Hey, Joe, if you want to keep this confidential, you might want to lower your voice," Methos commented, but he was chuckling. "Besides, Roger needed the shake-up. He'd gotten too used to anticipating FitzAlan. Having those two rob him blind will make him rethink some of his
"Yeah, but come on, Adam, frisking him?" Joe was starting to grin himself, now, however reluctantly. He could imagine how it must have chapped one of the best trackers in the Watchers to find himself held at gunpoint by a tiny woman in camos with a very large rifle while a tall black woman searched him and took away all his careful notes, and every bit of film or audio tape on his person, in his equipment, or in his bag.

"Stormy didn't have much sympathy for him," Methos agreed, chuckling himself. "Seriously, though, how are you?"

"Hey, I'm not the one who lit up the top of that butte," Joe countered.

"No, but we do heal quickly when we heal. Answer the question, would you, before Aidan and Duncan finish running the hot water out and come ask you themselves."

"Ah, some sunburn, my stumps hurt like hell, and this batch of Watchers is enough to give anyone a headache. It was easier when I actually had some authority, y'know?" Joe relaxed back into his wheelchair, headache already beginning to ease with the certainty that Methos would have told him by now if something was wrong. He wasn't even worried that he'd tacitly admitted to being in New Mexico himself; Methos, at least, had been expecting it, the Watcher was sure. "Nothing some sleep won't fix."

"They should have reinstated you as head of Northwest Region," Methos growled. "You did a better job of it than that last incompetent imbecile."

"Truth be told, Adam, they offered it back to me right before this shit hit the fan. I'm thinking about taking it, too." Joe shrugged and went on, "Enough, buddy. Talk. Is everybody okay?"

"Everyone is fine, Joe. It got a little complicated for a while, but our side came out of it intact." Joe paused, stunned. "You didn't lose anyone?"

"We stacked the deck," Methos told him with a smug chuckle. "Owain never expected Xan or Alex."

"Or you," Joe guessed, mind whirling as he tried to process those details and their attendant implications. "Only six quickenings though, pal. So who walked?"

"On the record or off?" Methos inquired calmly.

"You think I can put this on the record?" Joe had to laugh at that. "Although you should see the sarcastic comments in Dave's report. Makes it damn clear that it's a pity policy says we can't just ask some of the friendly immortals up on that mesa what really happened. The man has a vicious pen."

"Well, off the record -- ah, the shower just went off. I'll let you talk to the other two in a minute. Quick and dirty, though, Joe? Lim Mahn fought Alex and they agreed to let it go to first blood. And Farrell Jameson is as much a Boy Scout as Duncan, apparently. He found out what Owain had done to Connor and renounced his teacher. Refused to fight for him."

"Son of a bitch," Joe breathed. "Travels from Switzerland to New Mexico, and then tells the man to go fuck himself? Did he live through it?"

"Stormy made sure of it," Methos purred. "That couldn't have worked out better if I'd planned it. 
"Demoralized Owain nicely."

"Which part?" Joe asked bluntly. "Jameson bailing out on him or Stormy taking a shot at him? Roger heard the rifle, but wasn't sure where it was. Not 'til Stormy pulled it on him," the Watcher added caustically.

"Both, actually. And Roger shouldn't have been so sure no one would be looking for him after all those quickenings."

"Uh-huh," Joe restrained two or three caustic comments; he'd try to pry some of this out of them later. Over beers, maybe, when he had a better chance of getting all the information. "All right, buddy, explain somethin’ else to me. My math tells me there should still have been seven quickenings, not six."

"Yes, well, Owain and Johannes lost their heads at the same time."

"Another double quickening?" Joe growled. "You and Mac okay?"

"We didn't take it, Joe," Methos told him, amused. "And Aidan wants to talk to you." He handed off the phone before the Watcher could do more than sputter.

"Joe? How are you?"

"Fine, woman, just wanting one of your backrubs," Joe said, frowning at the way Methos had dodged that bullet. "So who took Owain and Johannes?"

"Fought them or took their heads?" she asked, sounding amused. "Half a moment, Joe." He barely heard some muffled comment in the background, then Aidan came back on. "Ah. He's being evasive again?"

"His normal pain in the ass self, yeah. Come on, woman, tell me somethin' before curiosity kills the musician." She laughed at that and Joe added, "Now that's nice to hear again. Come on, Aidan, spill. Are those really two different answers?"

"Yes, actually they are. Since you insist, Joe," and he could almost see her smile in her voice, "I fought and took Johannes. The beak-nosed reprobate here fought Owain, but Connor took his head."

"Son of a.... You can do that in a line war?" the Watcher asked, professional curiosity piqued.

"It wasn't two on one," and the dismissive tone of her voice let him see the lazy one-shoulder shrug Aidan used when she was feeling particularly relaxed. "No rule against it, and we want Connor's hand to grow back as swiftly as possible. Owain's quickening seemed poetic justice when Magister offered."

"How is Connor doing?"

"He's a stubborn man, and he's healing well," Aidan promised. "The wrist is coming along well, and Xan and Alex are seeing to any other injuries."

"Thank God. Tell me he's gonna call Sol, 'cause I don't know how much longer I can put this off," Joe admitted.

"I'll make sure of it, but I suspect he'll call Sol and Rachel both tomorrow. Aught else, Joe? Duncan is waiting to talk to you as well." She sounded slightly impatient, and Joe repressed a
smile. The Watchers had always made jokes about lightning-charged libidos and he had to wonder what, exactly, was making Aidan so restless.

"Nah, I'll catch you later about that double-quickening with Connor," Joe drawled, hoping for a reaction. She didn't say anything for a long moment, and he scored a mental point for himself. Not really fair catching Aidan when she's this tired, but I'll take all the advantages I can get. That woman's caught too many of us on sucker bets. Turnabout's only fair, as she keeps saying. He grinned at that. "Oh, and Aidan?"

"Yes, Joseph?"

"In the doghouse again, huh? Well, I'll have some company, darlin'. Don't suppose you know why the Watchers on the line of Ramirez keep getting arrested for stalking or turning up unconscious and missing their equipment?"

"Do they?" and Aidan sounded highly amused again. "Well, Joe, it might have something to do with following some very paranoid people who were warned that Owain was using private investigators as spies. Here's Duncan."

"Damn it, Aidan!"

"Sorry, Joe, she handed me the phone already," and Duncan was chuckling. "I take it you want to say a few more words to her?"

"I'll say a lot of words next time I see her," the Watcher growled. "Tell her from me I expect some backrubs and dinners out of this."

"I'll tell her," Duncan promised.

"Good enough. You okay, Mac?"

"I'm fine, Joe. We all are."

Joe listened to his immortal's voice carefully, slowly growing concerned. "You sure, buddy? You sound pretty damn tired."

"It's been a long couple of weeks," Duncan pointed out quietly. "We're heading back towards Seacouver tomorrow, though."

"No problem. Well, other than finding a way to explain where I got the news," Joe added with a chuckle of his own. "Look, I'm gonna let you guys off the line -- not off the hook, though. But you sound like you need to get some sleep. Tell Connor to call home, would you? And call me tomorrow if you get a chance. Take care of yourself, buddy."

"We will," Duncan promised. "Thank you, Joe."

"Look, sometime soon we'll have some drinks and shoot the breeze on this when I'm off the job, okay? See you back home, Mac." The Watcher hung up before his immortal could worry about any parting words, but he sat there for a long few minutes staring at the cell phone. "Wonder how long it's gonna take to put everything and everybody back to rights?" he muttered and gave up on the report he'd been trying to write. He saved it instead and pulled out his guitar. The blues had been helping him sort out problems since Vietnam -- a line war was no reason to stop now.
Farrell Jameson's diary -- April 20th, 1998

I know this'll get easier in a few years, but oh, Christ, I feel like Judas right now.

There's not enough whiskey in the world to get me drunk, not tonight. Which means there's no point in trying.

God, Sunda, I wish I could call you and ask you what else I could have done.

I had to choose the way I did. Some of the older immortals would probably disagree with me, but some things you can't condone and remain yourself. That Owain would take an immortal's sword hand and leave him alive, prey for the first headhunter to come along -- no, that's not something I could overlook.

They. Fuck that. I'm going to name names.

Owain Rhys-Tewdur, my first teacher; Johannes Engeles, Bianca de Grazia, and Enrique Alba, my line-sibs; and Damita Santos, Bianca's student. All of them, singly or together, I don't know (and I do not want to know) raped Connor MacLeod, and yeah, some of 'em were female, but I doubt that stopped Damita or Bianca. No, I'll finish the list. The group of them raped, tortured, and blinded Connor MacLeod, cut off his sword hand and God knows what else. I wouldn't put it past that assortment of human scum to crucify or castrate him. They admitted all of this. Enrique never meant for him to be raped... but he didn't deny any of the rest of it. Then Owain confirmed it.

God, Sunda, one of your best friends, and I was going to fight for people who did shit like this to him? And it's so strange, because he doesn't seem to blame me for it. I thought at first it was because you taught me, but the idea that the whole group, even the ones who don't really know me, were trying to keep me alive--

Even knowing they wanted to keep me intact, that I'd probably be here to write this no matter which way I handled that with Owain, I still feel like a traitor. Lim probably thinks I am.

Lim took first blood against Alex and walked. He still has his own head, and he'll be coming for mine some year. And all things considered? Maybe I'll just shoot the son of a bitch. He brought a gun to this. Would he have used it? I don't know. If Stormy hadn't been there, then yeah, possibly. But he's not stupid. It would be a hell of a thing to come up against several pissed-off members of the line of Ramirez for something like that. Did he bring the gun as protection against Owain? Maybe. Maybe. Will he come for me in a few years, will I be worth it to him? I just don't know.

He's the only one still alive, though. He and I are the last immortals that Owain trained. God that feels weird. But I'm not going to call Owain my teacher. He trained me in certain things, yeah, but he didn't teach me.

This afternoon when I got in and cleaned up, and finished dealing with the rooms -- no, I'll come back to that later -- I took the laptop to one of the bookstores that lets you sit and read. Those poor people at Barnes & Noble had to throw me out to shut down, at the end, but I couldn't stand to be in the hotel room a minute more, and I didn't want to hit a bar. I suppose I could have looked for a coffee shop rather than come back to the hotel, but I've been up almost twenty-four hours now. I think I'll be able to sleep soon. Please, God. Worst comes to worst, I suppose there's always the old reliable method of getting to sleep: calisthenics, a hot shower, and a session with my right hand. But somehow pleasure, even that kind, seems inappropriate right now.

I know that's ridiculous, that Owain brought this down on his own head, but it's still wrong
somehow. They're dead, after all, and Phoebe's people didn't want to make it easy for them. I can't really blame the line of Ramirez, or Semnut, or whoever they are. In their place, with what was done to MacLeod, I wouldn't have wanted to make it quick either. Enrique and Bianca had it coming, Lord knows. So why does even that thought feel like a betrayal?

The loneliness is the worst part, I think. Sunda's gone, and Darius. And now most of Owain's line. I mean, Erik's still out there, I think, and Rafferty. But I don't know who else is still alive. Not many, I don't think. There were never many of us. What Owain thought he was doing coming up against that line I don't know. And they didn't just defeat him with swords. They won because what Phoebe or Aidan or Cynthia has isn't a collection of dangerous people. She has a family. It wasn't the tangibles that tipped the scales to her, it was the intangibles.

Train (once you get past the dozen-plus noun definitions): 15 - to develop or form the habits, thoughts, or behavior of (a child or other person) by discipline and instruction; 16 - to make proficient by instruction and practice, as in some art, profession, or work; 17 - to make (a person) fit by proper exercise, diet, practice, etc., as for some athletic feat or contest; 18 - to discipline and instruct (an animal); 19-to treat or manipulate so as to bring into some desired form, position, direction, etc.; to bring to bear on some object; point aim, or direct, as in a firearm.

Teach: 1 - to impart knowledge of or skill in; give instruction in; 2 - to impart knowledge or skill to; give instruction to.

Impart: 1 - to make known; tell; relate; 2 - to give; bestow; transmit; 3 - to grant a part or share of.

It's... frightening how different those words are. I'll never use them interchangeably again. Training doesn't require you to think, and hell, doesn't sound like it encourages it. You want them to think your way. Teaching requires showing a student why you do something, not just how, and it implies a gift. Kastagir taught me. Owain trained me.

The bad thing is, in a way, Owain was right. There's no time for thinking in a fight, not if you want to win. Sensei Nakamura used to be able to tell just from watching the first few seconds of a sparring match whether a student had been slacking off on their katas. Constant practice means that when an opponent throws a punch, your arm is blocking before your brain knows their hand is moving. That's great if you're both boxing, but it'll get your arm broken if you're boxing and he's swinging a mace.

Owain assumed everyone boxes. Kastagir, though, told me that there's more to life than the Game and if there isn't I won't last long in the Game. He was right. Xan dances for fun and to seduce Alex, but it paid off in the ring, too. Damien takes hacking techniques of evasion and persistence and battering one vulnerable point and applies them to fighting... and takes the stubborn strength he puts into fighting and uses it to stay alive and keep moving and learning. Everything affects everything else. Owain never saw that.

I still miss Sunda, but Owain's death just feels like moving to a new city. I'm going to keep expecting him to be there, like a bar that I think should be on a familiar-looking street... but I don't think I'm going to actively miss him. For years now there've been things I wish I could tell Sunda or ask him about. Even when he was still alive though, I never had a burning desire to call Owain and ask him about any of the nasty 'why' questions that prowl through my mind at three in the morning.

That's the worst of this. I can't even make myself-- I don't seem to-- Damn it, I know there are words for this. I feel guilty for being involved in his death, even if only by refusing to fight for him. But I'm not sorry he's dead. And I can't bring myself to be hypocrite enough to say the
world's a poorer place for his loss.

But who in hell am I to say that? No one came down from Heaven or Mount Sinai and appointed me to sit in judgment. I feel like a child wailing, "It's not my fault!" when the vase turns up broken. This is my fault, part of it at least, and I can't deny that. I won't. Owain thought he had nine people to fight. Because of what I did, he had eight instead, and the change came at the last moment. He never did improvise well. So did I do this? Was my defection the last edge Phoebe needed to win so... thoroughly?

And yet... I would do it again. That's what hurts, what scares me. If I had known that was what made Owain lose, that my defection would be the camel's straw that broke the line of Rhys-Tewdor, I would do it again anyway. So did I kill them? Or did Owain? Or did they do it to themselves by coming to this?

Where does duty end and morality begin? Do we ever know, or does some oversized male figure with a white beard straight out of a Hollywood religious spectacular tell us when it's all over, probably with Charlton Heston's voice? I don't know. I keep turning it around in my head until I'm ready to go mad trying to see even one more side of it... and all I'm left with is the certainty that, even knowing what I know now, I'd still do... exactly what I did. Tell Owain to go to hell, renounce him and everything he stands for. I refuse to associate with him, any more than I would have associated with the Nazis in the '40s. So I guess my head knows I did the right thing. My heart and gut, on the other hand, are pretty sure I fucked up. They'll find a middle ground eventually, and God I hope it's soon.

Still. It's odd watching Phoebe and her folks. They're... affectionate. Constantly touching, even before the quickenings started searing their nerves, always near each other, or watching for each other. The way Alex was running his hands over Xan after his fight with Damita, or the way Mandisa kept smoothing Navar's hair back from his face to make sure he was still there after he killed Bianca... I'm not used to seeing that among us. Not among teachers and students. And I don't know what happened when Phoebe and Connor took Owain and Johannes' heads. I've never seen a quickening like that, never heard of it. They have, I think, or Semnut wouldn't have tried to stop them.

It was important, I know that much. Connor wanted it that way, very badly, and Phoebe did too, I think. Oh, part of her did it because he wanted it -- and I don't know if that means they're lovers, or best friends, or the brother and sister they call each other. But whatever that screwy, unified, united quickening did to them, she wanted it, too.

Watching them, the whole group of them, made me feel jealous, though, like a kid staring into a warm bakery on a night when he's cold and hungry. I don't know what Jirina was like with her lovers. I don't think I ever saw Johannes reach a hand out to pull Will to his feet after a sparring session. And Owain -- Owain used touch as a tool. A clap on the back or a sudden hug as a way to make you think you had his affectionate attention. But always with that measuring light in the back of his eyes. I think the only ones of us he really liked were Gwydion and Johannes, and Gwydion died almost a century ago. I don't think Johannes would have turned his back on Owain if the Gathering started.

I wonder. All the things I saw in Owain's people, all the things I see in Phoebe's: is this what I wanted all those years, sufficient reason to leave? Was it a reason? Or an excuse? Did I know what love wasn't and want to find what it should be? Lovely. The line of Rhys-Tewdor, the ultimate dysfunctional family. Bloody wonderful. Sodding hell.

At least I got rid of those... lunatics for a while. I betrayed my own and they're trying to console
me? Or are they? Well, Damien is, yes. Maybe even Connor, odd as that would be. But Damien's right; I'll feel better if I do some of the work of putting things back to rights. As much as possible anyway.

I wonder. Does that mean I need to visit Phoebe's young student? I don't know. I'm so tangled up in self-loathing and shame and some of that dull pleasure of doing something difficult right -- I can't see where I'd do him a damn bit of good. I still wonder though. As sure as she is, as easily as the others took her orders -- was it because the challenge was to her, or because she's usually right? She was certainly correct about the hiding place for those swords, and a decent place to inter the bodies. So I suppose that meeting Marc is something to sleep on and decide tomorrow.

Maybe I can sleep now. Maybe. Looking over this, disjointed though it is, well, I'm sure of one thing. I did... maybe not the right thing. But I did a right thing. Maybe there was a better way to handle that, another option that would have still left me able to face the mirror in the morning. But renouncing Owain was what I could come up with at the time, and it was something I probably should have done decades ago. And if I didn't help anyone get away from whatever Owain may have done to bring them there, well, I didn't help him twist any arms either. And I wouldn't lay bets that everyone there was coerced. That's an awfully cold comfort at two in the morning, though.

Darius always did say that crises of conscience had the most abominable timing. Nice to know I got something right today, I suppose.

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Magdalena -- early morning, April 21st

Mandisa yawned long and extravagantly, an outrageous baring of white teeth and pink tongue against jet-dark skin. She glanced at the sky again and then settled her hip against the Range Rover's bumper and waited. The sun had been up for half an hour now; she'd been half-expecting company ever since the first peach and beige light had tinged the sky.

Aidan stepped out from the hallway exit, saw the tall black woman, and managed a brief smile. "Is everything all right?"

Mandisa stretched luxuriously. "You're late. I had almost begun to hope you were being sensible and staying in bed."

A one-shouldered shrug was Aidan's first reply, then she said, "I woke up and couldn't seem to go back to sleep. Care to walk?"

"Gladly." They strode out of the parking lot to the sidewalk and within a few seconds their bodies had remembered the old compromise: Mandisa shortened her stride just a bit and Aidan picked up her own pace to make up the difference.

"How was Albuquerque?" Aidan asked with a careful nonchalance.

Disa glanced down at her, then started laughing. "Do you know, that sounds remarkably close to the way Var spoke yesterday when he asked if I thought Adam could cope with you and Duncan both."

Aidan looked up to meet her eyes and had to smile at that. "Is he all right, then?"

"He called last night to ask if I would be so kind as to load his bags this morning, and to promise that he would see us at lunch. I believe he went home with someone from a bar." Mandisa
shrugged to indicate her lack of concern. "I suspected he would do something of the sort when he offered to deal with Owain's rental car."

"Is he all right, though?" the Irish woman asked again. "Are you?"

"What, that neither of us currently has a lover?" Mandisa chuckled at that. "Things are well enough, Shahar. At least, I am fine, and he had enough sense to go find someone with whom to burn off that quickening." They paced along in silence, enjoying the morning's breeze and listening to the sounds of a small town slowly waking.

"Why did you tell Kyra to call Terrence?" Mandisa asked at last. "I had thought that Jarunsuk was the fallback for Marc and Richard."

"He was," Aidan agreed, "but Terrence was the closest member of the family geographically. I wanted--"

"You wanted someone to take the news to young Marc in person. That is perfectly understandable." Disa nodded at that. "And you are dodging the subject, teacher. How are you doing? Now that this is over, and your old enemy is gone, and you have this new bond with this newest brother of yours?"

"I always forget the way you ask questions," Aidan sighed. "I should have stayed in bed."

"Since you didn't," Mandisa contended dryly, "I think perhaps you wanted to talk to me."

The two women continued walking, the silence between them oddly companionable given the questions and answers it was concealing. A mile went past as they strode down the main street which was also a state highway. Aidan shook her head at the empty lot that had once housed the Arrowhead Café, but didn't comment.

When she did speak twenty minutes later, she simply took the conversation up where it had stopped and it took Mandisa a moment to remember what she was answering. "I don't know, Disa. Owain's been something to keep an eye on for so long now, much like checking the sky to see what the weather will do. And he's hurt so many of us, even in death. Farrell is injured by what he did, and Connor. Duncan has been torn between wanting to savage them, and needing to avenge his teacher cleanly...."

"Damien will deal with Farrell," Mandisa answered when her teacher trailed off. "And Xan and Alex have every intention of seeing Connor fully healed, Shahar. A blind woman could see that they are good for him. As for Duncan, he is more accepting of his own darkness than either of you gives him credit for. And you may worry about the entire lot of them when we get back, my teacher, but not at this moment. Right now what I wish to know is, how are you doing? Not your students, or your brothers, or your lover who trained Ramirez, but you."

Aidan could only shake her head. "I don't know, Disa. I simply don't know."

Mandisa sighed and wrapped an arm around her teacher's shoulders, amused as always to be a head taller than this complicated woman who had taught her to survive the Game. "Then perhaps you should be thinking about it? Alexandrias said they had a house in Thessaloniki. Have you considered taking them up on that? Greece is lovely in April and May."

"I'd have to make sure Marc has a valid passport, and close up the house, and take my manuscript notes...." Aidan paused, then tilted her head as if listening to something. "You're right, Disa. A change of scenery would probably be a good idea."
"You're bound to Connor now," Disa said gently. "Perhaps it would be best, while both of you are so off-balance, if you were not so close to each other. Give him time to heal; there will be time enough after that to explore this new connection of yours. Go to Thessaloniki, Shahar. Take Marc to Italy after that and let him see where the Scipios campaigned. Go to Copenhagen for a week or four and let him meet Duathor if you like, but go away until you are recovered, as well. You have thrown yourself into this war and over our backs until there is too little of you left. Find your center again, teacher, and your energy, and take young Marc to new places to give him new memories instead of the same griefs and worries that are tearing at Farrell."

"When did you get so wise?" Aidan commented finally. A smile was easing onto her face, though, and Mandisa laughed softly when she saw that.

The tall black woman hugged Aidan fiercely, then tugged her around to go back to the motel. "I had a good teacher. And as she used to tell me, it will all look better after breakfast."

Albuquerque -- noonish, April 21st

Farrell had originally expected to be the first one at the restaurant. It hadn't quite worked out that way.

His first surprise of the morning had been the feel of another immortal in the hotel at nine o'clock, followed by a knock on his door. He'd looked through the spy hole, sword in hand, expecting Lim to have come for his head. Instead, it was the Spaniard, Navarro, bearing coffee and breakfast for both of them.

On four hours of sleep and too much adrenaline, Farrell had not been as polite as he could have wished. Rather than take it personally, Var had dished back comments as rude as he'd received, including some very sarcastic observations to the effect that he began to see why Farrell got along so well with Damien and would he simply shut up and drink this? Relieved of the need to be civil, Farrell had settled for simply letting the food and caffeine kick in. After Var had helped him clear luggage and bags from the various hotel rooms into their two vehicles, Farrell had felt much better. And when he'd tried to apologize for his behavior, Var had only laughed and told him that compared to Damien in the mornings, he'd been the soul of courtesy and not to worry about it.

Farrell straightened in his chair as he felt an overwhelming cacophony of immortal presences sweep along his skin. Beside him, Var stood up as a courtesy to the approaching women, and Farrell matched his motion more from reflex than intent. He was too busy watching the approaching immortals and trying to catch his breath under the sheer press of their mingled power.

He hadn't noticed it as much yesterday when he'd arrived in the middle of Owain's group. Sitting there with Var, however, it felt like a monsoon opening up overhead when he'd only been expecting a mild drizzle.

The sensation finally eased while people were still saying hellos and sorting out who wanted to sit where. Farrell recovered his equilibrium in time to hear Xan saying firmly, "Oh, no, Stormy. We're not abandoning the man to your tender mercies on a first acquaintance. Farrell, tell her to sit between Damien and Disa if you value your own lunch."
"I'm not all that hungry," Farrell admitted without thinking and, to his surprise, collected disapproving looks and frowns not only from the immortals who'd known him for a while, but from most of the rest as well.

Var spoke up with that languid arrogance that Farrell suspected he mostly used to irritate Aidan. "It might have something to do with the coffee and pastries I brought him three hours ago, too."

"You were awake before ten, brother?" Mandisa asked, amused. "I'm amazed. Or did she have to go to work this morning?"

That calumny drew a disbelieving, offended look from those dark blue eyes. "When have I ever kissed and told, sister?"

"Frequently," Mandisa returned blandly. "Here, Stormy, I think I can guard my lunch from you. It will be a pleasure to try, anyway."

"Never while they're still alive," Var huffed, trying not to smile and barely managing it.

"I'll grant you that, Var. But she's right; you've been known to pull out a story or two," Damien agreed as he pulled a chair out for Stormy. He wanted her between him and Disa for slightly different reasons than Var had mentioned, but was grateful to his brother for the suggestion anyway.

After they'd sorted out who was sitting where -- Farrell couldn't decide whether to be flattered or frightened about his position between Damien and Duncan MacLeod -- Aidan glanced around and asked quietly, "Now what?"

"That's going to take all of lunch to sort out, Magistra," Damien interrupted her. "And I need to do something first."

"No need to announce it, man," Connor commented, flashing a quick, irritating smile at Damien. "Or did you need directions?"

"Connor, give it a break, huh?" Damien glared at him, green eyes bright. "We're not likely to have this much of the family together again until Christmas, so will you just shut up and let me propose to the woman?" He stopped, clearly replaying what he'd just said, and then sighed and closed his eyes. "Ah, damn it."

Adam laughed and commented, "That brings back memories. Edana, why do I remember that Turk in--"

"Adam," Stormy advised him pleasantly, "put a sock in it or I'll do it for you. Damien Appesard, if you were talking about Mandisa, I'm going to shoot you."

"No, I meant to ask you."

Damien's face was flushing almost the shade of his hair, and Stormy had only a moment to wonder if he could actually match that dark red and decide that she didn't want to see it. "Well, in that case, yes."

"Isn't he supposed to actually--" Connor considered the two pairs of vivid green eyes glaring at him from across the table. Then he thought about Damien's skill with bastard sword and Stormy's accuracy with a rifle. The older Highlander ostentatiously hesitated before he told them, "Congratulations, both of you. But if you want me to remember a revised, flowery version of this, I expect an invitation to the wedding."
Duncan punched him on the shoulder, hard, and promised Stormy, "He'll remember Damien down on one knee asking you to marry him. Won't you, kinsman?" He glared at Connor, who only grinned at him. "Consider it part of my wedding present, Stormy."

"Our wedding present," Connor countered, but Farrell suspected he was enjoying all of this immensely.

"Speaking of presents," Adam mentioned lazily, "it's customary to have a ring, Damien, or were you going to see if Aidan or Mandisa had something suitable?"

'I've been carrying it so he wouldn't lose it," Mandisa purred in her low alto. "Stormy, ignore Adam. The rest of us do."

"And here I thought I was memorable," Adam commented, sharp eyes dancing with wordless laughter.

"Adam Pierson, don't you even think about a shivaree or I'll do something drastic," Stormy vowed. Damien caught her hand and she looked down and fell silent, mouth still agape. Mandisa reached over with one finger and gently tipped the little blonde's jaw closed as she looked at the ring Damien was holding out to her. "Oh, my," was Stormy's only soft comment, and even that took a few seconds to get out.

"If you don't like it, we'll find something else," Damien told her, suddenly unsure of how well he'd chosen. "I thought you'd want something that wouldn't attract too much attention when you're working a--"

Var shook his head when Stormy cut off Damien's words with a kiss and said, "I think she likes it." He leaned around the intertwined pair to look more closely at the ring. It was a slender, yellow gold snake, made to wrap twice around a finger. The maker had individually detailed the scale patterning and the mouth; the eyes were emerald chips.

Aidan traded amused looks with Xan and Alex. "I suppose we'd better order for them."

"And here we were going to discuss serious things," Adam commented as he lounged farther back in his chair. "Who's going where. How to dispose of cars. How not to get those two arrested for public indecency," he added when Stormy ended up on Damien's lap.

Xan chuckled softly, a fond expression on his face. "They won't get arrested for that. They may even get lunch free. Everyone likes a good romance."

From the corner of her eye, Aidan saw the waitress glance at the table, notice the clinch going on and carefully turn away. "Ah. The staff here is discreet; it may take a few minutes to order lunch."

Connor said bluntly, "We can fill them in when they come up for air--"

"And back to reality?" Adam inquired sardonically. "That should take a few days." The two Scots glanced at each other, then shrugged and smiled. Adam growled, "Never mind. Aidan, I assume you're headed back to Seacouver?"

"For now," his student agreed quietly. "Brothers... is that offer still open?"

Xan glanced at Alex, frowning. "Which one, Edana? The house in Greece?"

"Yes." She arranged both hands on the table, folding them just so, until Adam reached over and
wrapped his own hand over them. He squeezed gently and she looked up, managing a smile.

"Of course," Alex told her as he traded a relieved look with Xan; they'd expected more of an argument from her over the idea of taking a vacation of some sort. "Going to take Marc with you, I assume?"

Aidan laughed softly. "At this stage in his training? Oh, yes. Thank you both, though. I just...."

"You need a vacation," Mandisa said firmly. "Good. Now I can quit scolding you, Shahar."

Xan chuckled at that. "Good for you, Disa. We appreciate the support. Adam, are you going back to Paris?"

Their teacher raised an eyebrow. "I was planning on it, yes. I do own a business there, you remember. Or are you two getting senile again?"

"You're the one who keeps poisoning his brain with beer," Connor pointed out mildly.

Duncan turned to his teacher and began, "Connor--" but the older Highlander cut him off with a raised eyebrow and an expectant look.

Connor waited until he had Duncan's silence before telling him, "You don't have to move to Manhattan while my hand heals, Duncan. These reprobates," and he gestured at Alex and Xan, "have convinced me that it's been too long since I've worried about earthquakes. I'm going to make them regret offering me their hospitality."

Alex gave Xan an amused look, idly raking his hair back and shaking his head. "You always cut it too short. Should we be worried, do you think?"

"Why worry? I was going to put him to work, myself. I'm sure he remembers how to use a paintbrush." Xan reached over and smoothed his lover's hair back into place. "It suits you when it's short. I suppose you could grow it out again, though."

"And the mustache?" Alex commented, grinning. "I thought you said it made me look like a pirate?"

"Flirt on your own time," Adam interrupted with a chuckle. "So, Mac, coming back to Europe with me?"

Duncan braced himself against Methos' probable reaction and told him, "Yes and no."

Methos froze for a moment, stiffening against the chair and losing that easy slouch he'd shaped himself into. He forced himself to relax again as he drawled, "No to which part, Highlander? Bored already?"

"That's not what I meant," Duncan told him, ignoring the presence of the waitress who'd finally come over to get their drink orders. He trusted Connor or Aidan to make sure he got something, but this was the worst possible time to interrupt this discussion -- especially given that Methos had already jumped to the wrong conclusion.

"Then what did you mean?" Methos asked him, switching to Gaelic so that if he lost his temper there'd be fewer witnesses later. *I like Stormy; I refuse to interrupt her happiness with a lover's quarrel with a stubborn, idiotic Celt.*

"Idiot." Duncan growled, unconsciously echoing his lover's opinion. He deliberately kept the
discussion in English, because he suspected that changing to Gaelic would let Methos think he believed this was something they needed to conceal. "Do you really think I'd break up with you in a restaurant, in front of my kinsman and yours? Yes, I love you. That hasn't changed and isn't going to."

The waitress never paused in writing down orders, but Methos could see her cheeks redden as she kept writing. Hearing Duncan publicly admit that unnerved Methos enough to give the younger immortal time to continue, "But I need to go back to Seacouver, Adam. I need to check on Rich, and make sure Joe has forgiven Aidan for holding this where he couldn't Watch it."

Duncan could see Methos studying him, hazel eyes still bright from the declaration... but his hand clenched at his side as he waited for the shoe that he could feel coming. So Duncan reluctantly dropped it. "Then I'm going to Scotland."

Methos closed his eyes, visibly biting down on his temper and probably half a hundred caustic comments. Aidan glanced between them, worried, but it was Connor who asked bluntly, "Why, cousin? You've gone home, what, once in the last--" he glanced back at the waitress who was almost done and finished blandly, "--long while?"

Duncan watched the young woman leave and only when she was safely gone did he say, "Because rumors are flying, Connor."

Methos snarled, "So you're going to play the hero and do what, Duncan MacLeod? Perform a public fandango so every headhunter knows where to find you?"

"If I have to," Duncan snapped back. "For a month. And then I'm going to use every trick I've picked up looking for you, Old Man, and vanish off the face of the earth and let them try to follow me, thinking I'll lead them to Connor."

"I can take care of myself," came the ominously quiet rejoinder from Connor.

"Stay out of this," Methos growled, finally opening his eyes and edging his chair towards Duncan, who refused to back away. "You can yell at him next, Connor. I get him first."

"Neither of you is holding this argument in public," Alex said grimly, leaning forward to get their attention. "Stop. Now."

"You can stay out of it, too, Alexandrias. I don't know where you got this tendency to meddle--"

Alex cut over Methos' voice. "I learned it from you, Didaskalos. Now shut up and let me patch up what you seem determined to slice up. Aidan, keep him quiet, I don't care how you do it. Xan, if Connor opens his mouth, kiss him until he shuts up. He's next. And you, Duncan MacLeod, can damned well be quiet until I ask you questions, and then the only thing I want to hear from you is a succinct, concise, complete answer." The dark-haired Greek glared at the lot of them for a long moment, black eyes snapping with barely leashed anger.

Var considered the confrontation shaping up on the other side of the table and the way Farrell had leaned back and was pretending to be part of the scenery. From stories over the last few days, he seemed to remember that Farrell was more familiar with Alex and Xan than he was. So he caught the New Zealander's eye and winked at him before turning to Mandisa and starting a murmured consultation over the menu. Someone was going to have to order lunch, after all, and Damien and Stormy showed no signs of being any help. If someone didn't like what he got them, well, they should have quarreled some other time.
Alex meanwhile looked at Duncan. "You're trying to protect Connor. Yes or no?"

"And you aren't?"

"Yes or no, Duncan." Alex leaned forward and purred, "You do not want to push me on this, Duncan MacLeod. Answer the question."

"Are you threatening me?" Duncan asked him incredulously.

"In all sorts of ways," was the blunt reply. "Such as stepping out of this and letting you blow up the best relationship I've seen Edana in since, oh, the eleventh century? And the happiest I've ever seen Semnut. Do I need any other threats?"

Duncan studied him and slowly realized Alex was utterly serious. Ever? He tried to reach along their link and realized Methos was shutting him out as fiercely as he had guarded himself after Bordeaux. That loss was what shocked him into cooperating with Alex. "Yes, I'm trying to protect Connor."

"Good, now that we're getting down to basics, this might be salvageable. Why Scotland?" Alex never turned to look at Connor, who was leaning forward to say something. "Xan, I meant it. Keep him quiet."

The blond Greek wrapped an arm around Connor and murmured sweetly, "If you want a kiss, Connor, you could ask for it the usual way. But I'm not going to let you talk. We don't want Alexandrias staying pissed off for a week or so."

Duncan answered sharply, "In Scotland no one will be able to get any information about a MacLeod other than rumors. A headhunter will have to come and look to find out if it's one of us, or both of us, and then they'll be hunting on my ground."

"Fair enough." Alex nodded crisply. "In other words, you're thinking, which is what Adam always claims he wants people to do. Fine. Where from there?"

"Somewhere else. And you don't need to know."

That angry black-eyed gaze made even Duncan freeze in his chair. "MacLeod, last warning: don't push this. I don't insist on knowing where; I do insist on knowing why. Now. Explain."

"I... Alex, I don't have an explanation. It's just what I need to do." Duncan turned away to meet Methos' eyes, trying to let the other man feel his love and confusion over their link. At the same time, Duncan wanted to keep the effects of the last few weeks' waiting and wondering to himself rather than burden Methos with them.

Alex looked him over, bright black eyes taking in the slight defensive hunch of the shoulders, the pained confusion in Duncan's dark brown eyes, and the usually competent hands pressed firmly on the table top so that he wouldn't knot them together. "All right, Duncan," the Greek said quietly. "You don't have a reason you can shape into words. I'll accept that. Are you breaking up with either of them?"

"God, no!" Duncan sat upright at that, and Connor nodded to him once, the quick, accepting gesture of recognition that he'd given his clansman the first time they met.

"Fair enough, but Aidan and Adam deserved to know that." Alex turned to Methos and let his voice drop to a low, dangerously level tone as he asked, "Now, then, why don't you explain to me exactly why you don't think your lover's entitled to take the time he needs to hole up and heal?
Make this very, very good, Didaskalos."

Methos saw the waitress approach Var as hesitantly as if she were afraid the conversation at his table could scorch her skin. Rather than make them any more noticeable, lost cause though that might be, he immediately switched to French to flay his former student. "Why do you think I need to answer to you?"

"Because, you old hedonist, you don't want to be miserable wondering if you've screwed up so badly that neither of your lovers is talking to you." Alex let his lips curl up in a savage smile that he'd learned from Methos centuries before, but he answered in French himself. "Quit fucking around and answer me. Did it really never occur to you that the man could use a break? I've only heard the gossip from Gina de Valicourt, and I know he needs a vacation after the last few years. Grayson, Kalas, and St. Cloud? Matlin and Kurlow, I seem to remember hearing, too? And Kanwulf? And Quince, or did Connor take him? Gina was never sure. Come on, Didaskalos, surely you've got an answer by now."

"And a dark quickening in the middle of all the rest," Aidan added, grey eyes dark with sympathy. "Put that way, it does sound like a dreadful load, Dhonnchaidh."

"Sister, I've got this. Keep Duncan quiet and comforted," Alex ordered, never taking his attention off Methos. "As for you, Adam, consider this latest fiasco. His teacher was kidnapped and tortured at the behest of the enemy of one of his lovers. That would be a blow no matter when it was received or whatever other bruises it landed atop. So explain this, Adam. Why shouldn't Duncan be allowed a break? And given the way you tend to vanish to lick your own wounds, why shouldn't your lover be allowed the same courtesy?"

"Yes," Methos grated out. "He's entitled to it, Alex. Damn it--"

"Say it," Alex purred viciously. "Or have you said it to him?" Black eyes pinned Methos back against the wall as the Greek inquired, "You know, those three little words?"

"Yes, I've told him." Methos returned his glare. "Not that it's any of your damn business."

"Try again, Didaskalos. Because I wouldn't have been able to tell from the way you're acting," Alex commented, ignoring his teacher's attempt to divert him, "and I've known you a lot longer than he has."

Methos turned to Duncan, wrapped one hand around his nape to pull him in, and kissed him hard enough to make the waitress blush over her order pad again. As it was, Duncan's lips were reddened and swollen when Methos pulled away, and both of them were short of breath. "Yes, I love you." Methos glared at Alex for a moment before turning back to his lover. "And not just because this undergrown tyrant is sticking his nose into this."

"And?" Alex nearly purred the word, claws barely hidden under the velvet tones. "Go on, Adam, you're doing so well."

"And yes, you can go wherever you want. We don't live together, I know that."

"Adam." Alex's voice sliced across him, cold and sharp as his blade. "Try that again, and get it right this time. I'm losing my patience with your insistence on destroying something this good."

Methos had already flinched, though, when he felt Duncan's hastily suppressed pain. "That's not what I... I don't own you, Duncan," he said more gently, picking his words carefully as he abandoned his own temper in the face of the remorse and confusion he could feel pouring off
Duncan. He preferred the Highlander sure of himself and strong, even when it drove him half-crazy; Methos wasn't willing to push him even closer to the edge over a badly timed and phrased declaration. "You startled me and I lashed out. I apologize."

"No, I'm the one who's sorry," Duncan told him every bit as softly, leaning closer to Methos as he spoke. "But I need to do this. Not just to draw them off Connor. I just--"

Methos sighed as he allowed himself to catch Duncan's emotions off their link. Pain and worry surged across it, tangled with guilt and half-suppressed anger and a bone-deep weariness. Alex is right. Duncan needs to hole up somewhere and rest. And he doesn't want company, either. Afraid we'll notice you can be hurt, Highlander? You and I are going to talk about this need to be the strong clan chief... but we'll do it when you're stronger. I don't want you deciding later that you'd have won the argument if you hadn't been exhausted.

"You need to go back to Glenfinnan," Methos conceded, "and you need to put yourself back together after Bordeaux and all the rest of it." He met his lover literally halfway, wrapping an arm around his waist and leaning in to touch his forehead to Duncan's. "They're right. You've been through entirely too much in too short a time. I can't blame you for needing time to yourself. But do I have to like it?"

That drew a soft chuckle. "No, you don't. I'm sorry, gradhach. I should have found a better way to tell you."

Alex said pleasantly, "Remember that next time, would you, Duncan? I don't have the energy to straighten you two out like this very often." Methos twisted to one side long enough to blow him a raspberry and Alex chuckled. "Promises, promises. Save that for him, why don't you? You were both planning on driving north weren't you? To get people home?"

Duncan met Methos' eyes, then nodded slowly. "Yes, we were."

"Good. You can finish apologizing to each other tonight. And Adam? You'd better take a vacation yourself. Usually you fight with me for quite a while longer before giving in." Alex stared at his teacher until he was sure the other man had quit this battlefield, too, then glanced at Aidan. "Sister, let us know if you need someplace to sleep."

"I'll manage something," she said dryly, but the relief on her face belied her calm tone.

"You're not sleeping by yourself," Alex told her firmly. "Or do I have to start in on you? I can get Mandisa to help, I'm sure."

"We'll deal with that... wherever we stop tonight," she admitted tiredly. "Where are we stopping tonight?"

"If we get lunch and hit the road," Xan suggested, "we might be able to hit Las Vegas tonight. And I'd rather we headed back to Sacramento, truthfully. The drive back up along the coast might make a better vacation for the rest of you, sister."

Var glanced over. "Is it safe yet?"

"I think so," Farrell commented quietly. "Can we lower the shields yet, Alex?"

"It's safe," Xan chuckled. "Aidan didn't keep him going."

"No, although you and I are going to have a long talk tonight, Connor," Alex told the older Highlander, and some of that same dangerous anger shone from his eyes again.
Xan smiled at him and asked, "Do I need to kiss you to shut you up?" Alex only laughed and settled back into his chair. Xan relaxed then and commented, "Ah, good. So, Farrell, now that the storm has cleared up and we've sorted out where most of this crowd is going -- what about you?"

"We haven't heard from Var and Disa, either," Farrell commented casually and sipped from his tea. "How soon do you have to head home, Var?"

"Whenever," the blond man replied with a casual shrug. "You do like salmon, don't you, Xan? Since that's what we ordered for you."

"Navarro." Aidan turned away from the soft conversation she'd been having with Connor, caught by a familiar note in her former student's voice. "How much vacation time did you manage to take on such short notice?"

"Enough," he commented, only to have Mandisa point a finger at him.

"We have had enough evasions for one meal already, brother. How much time do you have? Since you have not said?"

"As much as I like," Var answered her calmly. "I resigned. And my agent in Caracas has already packed my house by now and put it on the market, so I have no immediate need to head back." He glanced at Aidan calmly and said, "I do not wish to hear a single word about this, Shahar. It was time for me to drop that identity and start over again. And I have not taken a vacation in a few years; this was overdue. Now, then, what would you like to do, Mandisa? We haven't traveled together in decades, sister."

"Not since, oh, what was it? The middle of last century?" Mandisa asked him, amusement rich in her voice. "You have wanted to do some rock climbing, and I would not mind taking some time to explore this continent myself. Uncles, we may throw ourselves on your mercies for advice on acquiring a vehicle and some camping gear. Damien, Stormy, when do you wish us to be back in Charleston to help with the wedding?"

Stormy pulled her attention back from her new engagement ring and tried to glare at Var, but her good mood made the angry look less convincing than usual. "Navarro Rodriguez, I can't believe you argued about transportation profitability for half an hour when you're out of the industry. And y'all're welcome to the camping gear we were using up on that mesa, y'all should know that."

"Truth be told, Stormy, I plan on changing fields rather completely," he told her pleasantly. "It was simply too enjoyable arguing with someone who knew what she was talking about. However, when Mandisa and I have sorted out what we wish to do, we will undoubtedly consult with you on it. But thank you for camping equipment."

"Smooth-talkin' rascal," she answered, smiling. "All right, then. Do you suppose you two could check with us in a week or two on when I need the help? I'm gonna have to have a few fights with my mama over when the wedding's gonna be, but I should know by the start of May."

"I believe we can manage that," Var chuckled. "In that case, perhaps we'll head north with Shahar and the rest and enjoy our new brother for a while before we travel east."

"And now that everyone else is settled," Connor cut in coolly, "what about you, Farrell?"

"I don't know." The New Zealander carefully arranged his silverware as an excuse to look elsewhere, then went on more slowly, "I've been working as a freelance photographer. I suppose I should head back to Lausanne and go back to work."
"The hell you are," Damien told him bluntly. "You're going north with the rest of us, so that you can meet Marc, and then you're coming to Charleston and we're going to hunt those assassins."

"Did I say I was doing that?" Farrell challenged him.

"You didn't say you weren't," the redhead told him. "And you are coming to my wedding."

"Now that we agree on. I wouldn't miss it." He smiled briefly at Stormy. "Assuming, of course, that your lovely lady agrees."

"You're comin' to the wedding, all right," Stormy replied promptly, leaning forward and grinning at him. "And when you come to Charleston we can give you the tour. Maybe drag you out to Fort Sumter."

Aidan glanced over and came to Farrell's rescue; he looked equally taken aback by Damien's insistence and Stormy's cajoling. "Damien, don't bully him. Yes, I'd like for Marc to meet you, Farrell, but if you're not up to it right now, then you aren't."

"And you're not going to convince me to do it by telling me not to," Farrell retorted. "Behave, Phoebe. Stormy, I'll think about it."

"You've got an entire lunch to tell her no," Damien told him cheerfully. "And at the end of lunch, I'm going to tell you to come with us. Because if you don't, I'll get Ish to hunt you down, and you'll still end up in Charleston."

Farrell threw up his hands. "Oh, great, I'm supposed to argue when I'm sitting between you and this overgrown Scot?"

"You're barely smaller than I am." Duncan looked him up and down. "Good luck, though. Offhand, I'd say Aidan and Damien have made up your mind for you. Besides, arguing with Stormy seems to be a lost cause."

"We'll see." The New Zealander sounded resigned to his fate, however.

New York City -- evening, April 21st

"Nash Antiques." Chaim Goldberg sprayed the display case with glass cleaner with his free hand as he spoke, working with a precision of motion surprising in a man so big.

"Which Goldberg is this?" was the sardonic response. "And did you put my assistant out of work yet?"

"Con-- Russell." Relief sheeted through Chaim in a rush that left him grinning like a fool. In addition, he felt almost giddy at the sudden release of tension that he hadn't known had tightened his gut. Dave had sworn Connor was alive and relatively well, had promised that he had in fact won whatever he'd been up to in the wilds of New Mexico. But all the Goldbergs held a thoroughly unprofessional regard for both MacLeods; Chaim was no exception in his belief that the Highlanders could win damn near anything that came up. He'd been worrying nonetheless. All of which meant that, at the moment, Connor's voice was the most welcome thing he'd heard since Angela Lamanna had said 'yes' back in high school. "Oh, thank God."

Chaim waved at Rachel, trying to snag her attention away from the register receipts that hadn't added up the first time. "Are you all right?" he asked with a certain amount of concern. Dave had
been downright evasive in some of his reports and phone calls....

"Well enough. Chaim, isn't it?" Connor chuckled, sounding amused by the prosaic question. "How's Rachel?"

Chaim gave up and walked over to the register, saying, "Yeah, it's me. I'm about to give Rachel the phone, but she's fine. Nerves a bit shot, but c'mon, we've all been worried. You scared the hell out of us, even with Dave letting us know you were okay. Look, call Grandfather next, willya?"

"Dave, hmm? But Sol's at home?"

Chaim chuckled at the indirect question as to who had been Watching Connor this time. "Yeah, Grandfather's home by now, and I guarantee, he'd love to hear from you. All right, I'm gonna pass the phone to Rachel. It's good to hear from you, though." Pleased laughter laced the solidly built Watcher's voice as he said, "Hey, Rachel? Phone for you." He was still grinning as he went to the stockroom, determined to take his own sweet time and give Rachel and Connor as much privacy as a Watcher could. It would also give him a chance to contemplate just how to celebrate the good news with the rest of his family....

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Central Maryland -- pre-dawn, April 22nd

The sky wasn't even grey yet, and the last few stars of night were shining dimly as through the haze of too many cigarettes in some all-night bar. A breeze drifted across the new growth carrying the sweet smell of dew on morning clover, and Matthew McCormick was grateful again that he'd found a fallow field in which to fight. He would have hated to destroy part of a farmer's crops in an immortals' duel, although it wouldn't have been the first time in his life he'd done it. Then too, farmers were up early, but it wasn't likely that one would be investigating a unplanted field at dawn; they were too busy with the cash crops.

Eight centuries had taught Matthew plenty of ways to pass time, so he waited for both his opponent and the dawn patiently. The apple tree he was leaning against was comfortable, after all, and watching the sun rise was an old pleasure he hoped never to outgrow. The lifting breeze carried a faint tang of approaching rain which mingled with the body-warmed scent of his leather coat into a smell familiar from decades of such mornings. He smiled when he found himself humming a war song from the First Crusade, old before he was born, and switched to singing it instead.

"Chevalier, mult estes guariz,
"Quant Dieu a vus fait sa clamur
"Des Turs e des Amoraviz,
"Ki li unt fait tels deshonors...."

He only had time to sing a few verses before immortal presence spilled across his senses and he looked across the now visible field to see a very tall Swede approaching.

"Erik Olafson, I assume?" Matthew drawled sardonically, smiling slightly at the idea that some other immortal could just happen to be in the right field at the right time. He'd heard of it happening in large cities, mind....

"I'm Olaf's son, yes," the Swede answered cautiously. "Why are you challenging, Southerner?"

Erik Olafson folded his arms across his chest, careful to keep his sword arm on top, and stared at Matthew. "We've never met."
"For one thing, I don't want to see an immortal in jail for forty years... and you may have gotten bail, but you are going to be put away. The evidence against you is ironclad." Matthew straightened, moving away from the apple tree with a trace of regret. It had been a fragrant and friendly place to pass the time, and he was not looking forward to this.

"How do you know about that?" Erik frowned now, confusion and worry passing swiftly across his face before he could mask them entirely.

"Then, too," and Matthew ignored his question deliberately, "you were stalking a friend of mine. She's a little busy, and since my boys got you instead of hers, I'm taking the challenge instead of Kyra Phaedras. Name ring a bell?"

That drew a brief but genuine flash of humor. "Small good it would do me to deny it. So you're FBI. Was that wise?"

"They've no idea about us." Matthew smiled, quiet satisfaction in his slate green eyes. "I do my humble best to help it stay that way."

"Including challenging immortals who've fallen too far afoul of the law. Why not just have me shot while arresting me? Identity gone -- new game." Erik shrugged as if the solution should be obvious.

"For one thing, there wasn't time to set it up."

"And for another?" the huge blond queried him, studying the smaller man cautiously. In his experience, no one in D.C. was ever who or what they said they were. "And you never gave me a name."

"Matthew of Salisbury," and the tousle-headed immortal dropped a half bow, never quite taking his eyes off his much larger opponent. "And answer a question for me, if you would. When did you last talk to Owain Rhys-Tewdor?"

"Why?" Olafson glanced cautiously around the field, close-cropped ash blond hair gleaming in the early morning sun.

"Because if I like your answers," came the drawled reply, "we might not have to do this."

"That's a good reason, I suppose," Erik commented. "But I'm curious, Matthew of Salisbury. What line are you from?"

"Flavius Sulla," Matthew told him. "Better known these last few centuries as the line of Marcus Constantine. You?" he asked, seemingly looking around himself. In actuality, he was watching the other man's reactions from half-closed eyes and drawing on decades of law enforcement experience to gauge the personality of the immortal across from him. Mostly, though, he was wondering if the man would lie to him or not.

"Why ask that?" Olafson straightened and put his hands in his coat pockets, but his shoulders had tightened, and his gaze was suspicious now. "You know I'm Rhys-Tewdor's line or you wouldn't have asked when I last heard from him."

"You might have been one of his allies."

A snort of laughter preceded something that Matthew remembered was a fairly obscene comment in Swedish. "That one doesn't have allies."
"So when did you last deal with him?"

"Two nights before I was arrested," Erik told him, thick eyebrows drawing down in remembered annoyance. "Why?"

"He wanted you to go to New Mexico." Matthew saw shock and rage flare across the much larger man's face and brought his broadsword up out of his coat before the Swede could draw his own blade. "Not yet. Or did you decide that fighting me was simpler?"

"You're line of Constantine," Erik growled, voice sliding down to a menacing bass rumble as he pulled his hands back out of his pockets and shifted into a more easily mobile position. "How do you know about that?"

Matthew smiled at him, and it was the saturnine baring of teeth that had greeted more than one serial killer just before his arrest. "Sulwen Freyjasdottir -- you might know her as Cynthia Torriani? -- is a friend of mine. And kidnapping a man and transporting him across state lines is a federal offense."

Olafson drew his sword as he snarled, "So? It's not like they took his head."

"Did you help Owain hire the hit squad?"

"He'd have found them anyway; I just made sure I got a cut. Why?"

"Mortals don't belong in the Game." Matthew stepped back to let his coat slide off first one arm, then the other, shifting his sword from hand to hand as he did. "So I guess we'll have to do this after all, Erik Olafson."

"Why in hell ask if you intended to fight, Matthew of Salisbury?" But Erik was shifting forward to balance on the balls of his feet.

"Because," came the regretful answer, "if all you had been doing was spying on Kyra, I could have let you die in public and I'd have dropped this. But you were involved in kidnapping an immortal, and you brought mortals into the Game. You've damn near exposed us to professional criminals, and we both know there's no honor among thieves."

Matthew brought his broadsword up into a casual salute. "So. There can be only one."

The last rumble of thunder faded away and Matthew forced himself up, groaning. "I am definitely getting too old for this."

At his car, Matthew glanced around casually for observers before tossing the bag in the trunk. "I've got to start challenging the smaller ones." He knew perfectly well he'd fight whoever he had to, though. The leather jacket went back on and Matthew stood up, hefting the bag over his shoulder with a grunt of effort. But the morning was too beautiful, his nerves still afire with the recent quickening, and he found himself singing the ancient call to arms again as he walked, taking up where he'd left off.

The languages and periods varied, but he sang all the way through disposing of the body and heading back to D.C. He was still wired and bouncing when he called Duncan MacLeod to advise him that one more loose end had been tied off. And the irony of using energy gained from a criminal to
track other criminals kept him smiling all through the afternoon's investigations.

New York City -- late morning, April 23rd

Kate gave her husband, Nick, a wry look as she picked up the phone. "Unless you have a better idea at the last minute?"

"Not me," he shrugged. "I mean, we've tried the not-so-legal ways; Cory tried the less-than-not-so-legal ways; and Kyra tried to be law-abiding. None of us had any luck. Are you sure you want to do this, though?"

"Nick... do you want to have a hit team out there that's good enough to take down Connor and has enough information to figure out that there are immortals?"

Laugh lines twisted around his mouth as he frowned, and his dark eyes were somber. "I know, Kate. I do know. But I don't like this."

"Sometimes," his immortal wife told him grimly, "we do things we don't like."

"Yeah, I know that too, hon. You don't make however many centuries you've got--"

She grinned at his teasing joke. Kate steadfastly refused to give him even an approximate age, preferring instead to let him guess and enjoy it.

"--without doing some stuff you hate. But, Kate, they're mortal."

"They're also paid assassins," she pointed out, setting the phone back on the hook. "At least we're killing them to protect innocents. And let's face it, Nick, we do have some immortals that are, relatively speaking, innocent. This is the century that invented death camps, Nick. I don't want a government to figure this out; organized crime might actually be worse."

He ran his hands through black hair that had already been rumpled that way several times in the last few hours. "Okay. Arguments for killing them -- they're paid killers."

"Check," Kate agreed in her husky voice, sitting down on the couch.

"They took money to kill Connor and deliver his body to someone else."

"Yes, they did." She ran fingers through the ends of brown sugar-shaded hair, working out an incipient tangle as she waited.

"They're working without Don Scarlatti's permission?" Nick saw her disbelieving stare and shrugged. "Well, as long as we're listing broken laws. That's a natural law. Committing crimes in a Mafia city without the Don's approval is like fighting gravity."

"If you had said 'city hall', I might have had to check your temperature," Kate commented.

"And they have enough information to be able to take out other immortals -- if they can figure out immortals exist."

"Take them out or recruit them forcibly," Kate pointed out. "I don't want to find myself working for a hit team to keep you alive, Nick, but I'd do it."

"While calling one of your friends in to get me out," he argued.
"Almost all of us have mortal connections, Nick; not all of us have immortal friends who'd help out on something like this." Kate studied him gravely and waited. The hit team needed to be exterminated, she was certain of that, but she hadn't spent eight years with Nick Sutherland, five of them married, to lose him over this fight. All he needed was time to argue himself into agreement so that his conscience would be clear that he had thought it out. Time was one thing Kate could spare.

Nick sighed. "Reasons not to kill them -- it's illegal."

"We've had to kill people before," his wife pointed out gently. "Including those idiots who kidnapped Don Caruso's daughter."

"They were shooting at us, but... yeah," he agreed. "Okay, next reason.... Have you got one?"

"Well, I suppose we could go with 'it's immoral' but, at that point, I run up against what they do for a living."

"There is that. Okay. They're professional killers, they're working in Mafia territory, and most important, they helped screw over a good man. Right. Call Don Scarlatti."

Kate walked over to him and kissed him on the cheek. "You know what I love about you?"

"I can argue my way into anything?" Nick asked, smiling slightly despite what they'd just agreed to do.

"You argued your way into my life," she agreed. "No. I love the fact that you'll look at all the sides of something and then make the decision you think is right, whether you like it or not. That takes honesty, Nick, more of it than most people have. I love it when you do that."

"Only when you like the outcome," he chuckled. "There was that time...."

"Nick -- no. We are not discussing that vacation to the Riviera, because we are going one of these days."

"Sure," he assented easily enough. "As soon as you can convince me that there are reasons to go to a stone beach instead of a sand one. In the meantime, call Don Scarlatti."

She mock-scowled at him, then waved him to the other phone. After he'd picked up the receiver, she dialed the number.

"Yes?" The male voice on the other end of the line gave away nothing in intonation or accent.

"I'm Kate Sutherland; Don Caruso gave me this number. May I speak to Don Scarlatti, please? I believe we have a matter of mutual interest to discuss."

For a very long moment, there was no answer. Then the voice warmed. "Ms. Sutherland, it is a pleasure to speak to someone who was so helpful to our relative, Ms. Caruso. We had heard that you resolved that... unpleasantness for her. May I tell the Don what this is about?"

"I'm afraid I'll have to let him decide who to discuss this with," Kate said carefully. "No offense."

"None taken," came the immediate reply. "I could wish some of my boys understood that not everyone should hear everything! Just a moment please while I see if he can take your call." The low carrier wave of a phone on hold without such annoyances as Muzak filled both Sutherlands' ears. Kate glanced at her husband and shrugged; he shrugged back, and gave her a thumbs up, but
said nothing.

After a minute or so, a second, older-sounding man said genially, "Ms. Sutherland. My associate, Don Caruso, said such flattering things about you that I have to admit I took them with a grain of salt. But a woman who understands discretion on a line this private... well, I might believe a few of those stories. Now, what is this about some mutual business?"

"Mutual interest, actually," she told him, picking her words very carefully to avoid future legal entanglements. "There was some... unpleasantness in Greenwich Village a couple weeks ago. Very... permanent unpleasantness. On April eighth, near Hudson Street."

On the other end of the phone there was a pause, then Don Scarlatti's voice said thoughtfully, "I don't know anything about a permanent solution on that date, Ms. Sutherland. It wasn't any of my boys."

"I know," she said quietly. "But it was very professional, Don Scarlatti. And it... inconvenienced me. I would be interested in the names of those workers."

"Professionals? In Greenwich Village? Without my permission?" She could almost see the pressure rising to boil over. "You were quite right, Ms. Sutherland. This is definitely a matter of mutual interest. These workers need to understand the error of their ways, you do realize. Are you sure you need their names, or shall I let some of my people explain proper working conduct to them?"

Nick raised a quick hand in a 'stop' motion to Kate, who agreed with him with an emphatic nod of her head. "I thought I'd see about getting a settlement for my inconvenience, Don Scarlatti. But you have better resources to find their names than I do, and I would hate to make their mistake and take care of a problem in your territory without your knowledge."

"Don Caruso was right, Ms. Sutherland. You're a very bright lady, and a very serious one. All right. I'll get their names, and you'll explain the error of their ways to them. We have a bargain?"

"I think we do, Don Scarlatti. Do you need my number?"

"No, I don't think that's necessary. Give me a couple of days -- call me on Saturday, Ms. Sutherland, I should have the names for you by then. I think we understand each other. May I ask if your friends have been... badly inconvenienced?"

"It's something of a family matter, Don Scarlatti, but with your permission, I'll tell them you were kind enough to be concerned about it." Nick gave her another thumbs up and carefully did not laugh.

"Ah. No wonder you called about this. Family is all we have, Ms. Sutherland. Please give them my regrets that such a thing should have been allowed to happen."

"I'll do that," Kate assured him. "Thank you for your assistance on this, Don Scarlatti."

"You're quite welcome, Ms. Sutherland. Something like this should not be allowed. I prefer that things in New York be orderly." He said it with no audible trace of irony.

"I agree," she told him. "I'll call back on Saturday the twenty-fifth, sir. Thank you for making time to talk to me."

"It's always a pleasure to have someone come to me with something that actually benefits both sides," he commented. "So often they claim it will, but I find that there just isn't enough in it for
me to make it worth my attention. I will look forward to Saturday for the sound of your voice, Ms. Sutherland. Please give my regards to Don Caruso if you talk to him."

"Of course." Kate waited until he'd hung up to put the phone down and then had to try to inhale around a fierce hug from her husband.

"You were great! Talk about dancing around something," and Nick wiped one hand across his forehead. "He's...."

"Ruthless," the immortal woman supplied. "If I hadn't said it was a family obligation, he'd have taken care of it for us."

"Should we have let him?"

"And risk Don Scarlatti finding out about immortals?" They looked at each other and shook their heads simultaneously.

"So, what do we do until Saturday?"

"We're in New York; we have money; we have time...." Kate smiled at him. "I'm sure we'll find something to do."

"Right," he agreed cheerfully. "But if we're going shopping, I want to go to at least one play."

"Deal."

Rich Ryan's journal -- April 24th, 1998

I never thought I'd be the one looking for quiet. I mean, Marc's the one who's been having trouble with crowds. He's getting better, but still, he spent two years in the middle of nowhere. Me, I'm the ultimate city rat, right? Nope. I bugged out. My ears are still ringing from all the people talking and arguing and chattering in there! Marc and Farrell will probably keep talking until this time tomorrow if no one tells them to shut up and get some sleep.

Marc keeps telling me the point of journals is to figure out what you're thinking and make sure you're gonna remember things later that you really need to know. So I suppose I'd better back up a bit, because there's a lot I want to work out. Carolyn and Terrence have been here since the twentieth, which amazes me. I mean, yeah, Terrence is worried about Marc, but sticking Carolyn in the wilderness? Blew my mind. Terrence made one trip back in, though, and came back with some more clothes for them and a cooler of beer and wine, which was hilarious. There he was explaining the fine points of wine to Marc... while Carolyn just grabbed beers for me and her. I thought she was this snooty romance writer with an attitude. Wrong again, Rich. She's just this blunt woman from New Jersey who can act like a snooty author, which makes it even wilder that she's married to Terrence. He comes across as so suave, but he's crazy about Carolyn, sharp tongue, Jersey accent, and all.

Have to admit, it's been interesting listening to Terrence -- for one thing, he's got some great stories. But I thought that he was this lightweight, not as much of a flake as Walter Graham, but not one of the serious ones in the group, either. I know better now. He's been wheedling details out of Marc so casually that they're halfway through the story before Marc figures out he might not have wanted to discuss it. And by then it's way too damn late. The man should have signs on him: 'Can hear everything you don't want to say. Will convince you to bring it up yourself, too.'
What scares me is that I think he wants to do that to me, too. I mean, there are things I just don't want to talk about. Not with Terrence, not with Aidan, not even with Connor. Sure as hell not with Mac. I don't even want to write them in here, and this damn journal is almost addictive. Marc forgot to tell me that. Anyway I've been kind of dodging Terrence, but he isn't stupid. Wonder if it's too late to run? This would sure as hell be the time to do it. They've got so many people holding family reunions in there that no one would notice. Lotta plans being made, too.

Right. Time to back up again. I'm gonna learn to do this coherently one of these days. I said that the other day, when I was giving up on this again, and Marc just laughed at the idea. Terrence said something about consistency being the hobgoblin of little minds, whatever that means, and for me not to worry about it, just write what I need to write. I still can't get used to this journal idea, though. Aidan keeps a journal, but she's female. Y'know, girls get those cutesy bound books when they're young 'cause their parents want them staying indoors instead of out playing with the boys, so that doesn't really boggle me. Hell, Maria kept one for years. I used to tease her by grabbing it and pretending to look through it. She'd scream and yell and beat on me for it, too. Joe keeps journals, but hell, he's a Watcher, it's his job. And Adam, well, Adam's a rule to himself. Besides I got so used to thinking of him as a researcher/grad student geek that I'd be more surprised if he wasn't writing something. With him, it's the sword work that always seems to come as a surprise. But every time I pull this out, I start wondering if I need to start dressing all in black like the art students on campus and wandering around with this depressed, serious look on my face, and then I crack up and have to start over on this thing. You can bet I haven't explained that one to Marc, either! He'd kill me.

Weird. Var just came out. Brought me some coffee and sat out here next to my chair and drank his without saying a word. Didn't try to look at the screen, either, not that it mattered after the screen saver came up. When he finished his mug, he stood back up, gripped my shoulder the same way Mac does, and said, "This too shall pass. Not even they can talk all night, Richard." Then he walked back inside. Did he need a break too? How did he know I was more worried about getting some quiet than working on this?

Anyway. The invasion, and man, what an invasion. Navarro and Mandisa are here, and they set up a tent since the cabin was getting a bit full. Funny. I don't think they're lovers, they just assume they're going to stay together wherever they go. It's like they're so close to each other that sex is completely irrelevant. Is that closer than lovers, or just different? I may have to talk to Aidan about that, 'cause I'm pretty damn sure she's done both kinds of relationships.

Connor, Xan, and Alex stayed in Sacramento 'cause the uncles needed to get back to their businesses. There's something I need to know about that whole thing, too, I think. Not that all three of them are sleeping together. Come on, I figured that part out before they ever left for New Mexico. And man, if the guys are that good for Connor, well, I'll forgive Xan for that pass he made at me. Now that I'm coherent, I don't think he was serious, but when I was so tired, well, I didn't know what he was up to and didn't want to find out, either. But something about the way Mac mentioned them being down there, and the way Aidan smiled and then kinda... lost focus for a second. That was weird. It didn't quite look like she does when she's Seeing things.

Come to think about it, I'm not sure what I think about that, either. I mean, she's a hundred times my age, literally, and I'm not about to tell a woman who beats me every fucking time we spar that I think she's a few burritos shy of a combination plate, but... seeing the future? Am I supposed to believe this? But she takes it seriously, and what blows my mind is that so do Mac and Adam. Adam, the world's biggest cynic, is listening to something out of a commercial for the Psychic Hotline? Except... Aidan isn't just serious about it; she doesn't like it, not one damn bit. Can't blame her, from what little I've seen. That time after Christmas, I thought she was going to just pass out on us. She froze cold, and then started to go rigid, hands curling into fists so tight her
nails were digging blood out of her palms and the muscles were standing out on her arms while the blood dripped onto her jeans and her eyes were staring at something that wasn't in the room. And Connor was trying to catch her because it wore off and she fell over. Aidan, who twists into yoga poses that make me think she's made out of Silly Putty, lost her balance and hit the ground. She didn't want to get up for a couple minutes afterwards, and the guys were encouraging her to just stay there, too.

That was... what's the word Aidan uses? Unnerving. Yeah, that sums it up. But even when she doesn't think I'm gonna like the answer, Aidan hasn't lied to me yet, that I know of. Not even when it would have been easier on her. I don't think she wanted to talk about the fact that she's been tortured or raped, but she did. So maybe this is real. But if it is, if she's really seeing the future -- and she sure as hell was right about Marc showing up and needing her -- well, I don't think the books have it right. I think maybe it sucks to be able to do that.

I wonder. Alec Hill was sure that reincarnation was real. Was he right? Was Jennifer really Genevieve? Damn, I wish I could ask Darius about it. Mac said Darius used to have dreams that came true. That he saw his own death coming. I don't think I'd want to know that. The others might disagree with me on this, but maybe it's a good thing no one got Darius' quickening. I don't know. Maybe it would be worth trading the dreams for the kind of certainty he had. He and Kamir had something, that kind of centered calm Mac gets when he's working his katas and they're flowing perfectly. But Darius and Kamir always had it, like it's something that comes with being a priest, or maybe it's why they were priests, I don't know.

Fuck. Wandered off again. Right, Connor and Aidan. Something weird happened there, but I'll get it from someone sooner or later, right? Maybe I'll just ask Var the next time he comes out here, or Mandisa if she wanders out. Maybe Damien. Not sure I want to ask Mac, because I'm not sure he wants to talk about Connor yet. That's still a sore subject.

He and Adam are still together, though, and that surprised me. Relieved me, I guess. Adam and Aidan are good for Mac, they loosen him up a lot and he's as happy as I've seen him since Tessa died. But Mac's talking about going back to Scotland by himself, and Aidan's taking Marc to Greece -- and man, he was grinning about that -- which leaves Adam going back to Paris by himself. Shouldn't be any big deal, right? I mean, he was in France and Mac and Aidan were here in the States -- different parts, but the States -- before the shit hit the fan, right? It sounds like it's a sore point anyway, like Adam wants to have Mac nearby where he knows he's safe, just... because. Funny. Mac always wants to protect everyone else, but he can't see it when someone else wants to protect him for once. Tess used to yell at him all the time about that.

Protect. God, there's something really ironic in the idea that Stormy -- that little Southern doll of a woman, and I'd never call her that to her face, she'd slap me so hard my jaw would fall off or find something worse to do to me -- was the one guarding everybody's back at this thing. And oh, man, I hate to think what Joe is going to say about her holding one of the Watchers at gunpoint while Mandisa frisked the guy for tapes and notes and film, but it is funny. They always spy on us; I bet they never thought that someone might spy on them. Poetic justice, Tessa used to call it. I just think it's perfect.

Me, I'm headed back to Charleston at some point in the near future. I mean, my bike's at Damien's place after all. And I want to talk to him and Stormy about maybe they could both use a good sales rep who understands bookkeeping, too. Got to admit, as much as I like renting from Aidan and studying with her, and spending time with Marc... I want out on my own again. Out from under Mac's wing and Aidan's, too. I need to be on my own for awhile, to fuck up with my own mistakes or make it big on my own and get some respect for myself. I want... I want them to look at me the way they look at Marc. Like I may be young, but I've got possibilities. Like I might make it to a
century, or two, or might even just get to play with the big boys. I don't want to 'grow up,' and be this stuffed shirt pain in the ass, but y'know, I don't think I have to. 'Cause Connor hasn't entirely grown up, and he's sure as hell not some 'by the book' asshole, but he's sure as hell an adult, and no one takes him lightly. I want to get there, too.

Funny thing is, Farrell's the one who set this off, and I only met him tonight. He's another one like Mac, if you watch him. All honor and nobility without even thinking about it: another knight from the Round Table -- until he starts talking to Damien. Then it's like watching the other Highlander show up. Same wicked, devious sense of humor Connor has, only less restrained. And he and Damien really are friends. They were telling the kind of stories earlier that would make any mother scream and faint. Aidan just laughed, although she was shaking her head, too.

Apparently, another one of Aidan's students that I haven't met, Damien's best buddy, Ishtvan, got Farrell drunk and talked him into getting arrested in Ankara, sometime back before World War I. I gotta look up some stuff. I don't know who the Ottomans were, but even Adam was shaking his head like no one in their right mind should have agreed. The whole problem was that Damien had shot off his mouth -- well, that wasn't how he put it. It was exactly how Farrell put it, that's for damn sure. Ish had a plan to get him out that required an assistant already in the cells -- and both of them paused and then Farrell just kind of grinned, and Damien shook his head. They both acted like they had changed their minds, that maybe this wasn't something they should tell everybody. So Aidan told them both that she was going to get the real story one day, they could consider it her Midwinter's present. Farrell grinned and told her to wait until Midwinter's, then.

This guy trained with Owain? I guess he was more ruthless than Marc, not that that's really hard. Marc's pretty sure Chris staked him out as bait for Aidan because Chris didn't know if Marc could kill someone. I can't think of any other reason that Owain let Farrell live other than the fact that he knew Farrell could and would kill. I've taken some nasty damn challenges myself, starting with Kristov, but I don't know that I could've done what Farrell did. I mean, he plays it down, but from the sound of it, he stood out there with his back to our line, not knowing we had someone to make sure both sides played fair, and told his line to go fuck themselves.

I would have bet money I wouldn't like anyone out of Rhys-Tewdor's line, but I do. Funny. Even if I hadn't already known Aidan, I'd have liked her just for taking in Marc. And even if I didn't like Farrell for anything else -- and I think I do like him; he's as crazy as Damien in his own quiet way - - I'd like him for the way he walked in and announced that just because he'd renounced Owain didn't mean he was dumping the other member of that line with enough sense to get the hell out, and which one of us was Marc Scipio, anyway?

Amazing. It's finally quieting down in there. I wonder who's sleeping where? Carolyn and Terrence are keeping the bed in the loft, I know that much. Marc and I claimed that we'd been here longest, so we got squatter's rights to the other bed, but we'd be nice and let Stormy have it and if she wanted to let Damien get to a mattress, well, that was her business. So Marc and I have some blankets in front of the fire. And Farrell just smiled at Aidan and pointed out that since he was definitely a guest, and the way he said that made me wonder how hard a time they had getting him to come up here, that he got one of the couches. Adam promptly took the other. What Aidan and Duncan are gonna do is beyond me. Damn if I want to know, either. I bet all three of them are curled up together in a heap come morning, though. Adam'll probably be trying to hog all the blankets, too.

And that's another odd thing. I mean, I started sleeping next to Marc because it was easier than staggering over in the middle of the night to wake him up from his nightmares and then staggering back to my own bed. The sheets were usually freezing by the time he'd gone back to sleep, too. But despite his bad dreams, I'm gonna miss sleeping with him when we go back to Seacouver and
he goes to Greece. Guess I've gotten used to making sure he's all right, even if I'm barely awake when I start rubbing his back and telling him everything's okay and go back to sleep. It's not sex, I know that much. I'm not interested in guys in general or him in particular. Man is that an understatement! And he'd laugh harder at the idea than I just did. But... it's nice curling up with someone in the middle of the night. Weird. Maybe I just like having a brother.

Time to get some sleep, I think, because I don't know if we're staying here tomorrow or packing, but I think we're all going our separate ways soon and that's cool too. Owain didn't split us up, after all. A few thousand miles here and there isn't gonna do it, either.

Savannah, Georgia -- April 27th

It was only the broken nose that saved him. Sometimes, unfortunately, not even that did it, because other than the no-longer straight appendage, the man was strikingly beautiful. He had the honey and ivory coloring attributed to Alexander the Great's slave, Bagoas, and with the exception of that misaligned nose, the lines of his face had the perfect proportions of a Bach fugue. Full, dark hair was a brown so deep as to look black until sunlight called up burgundy highlights; even braided into a single thick rope, it swung down his back and made him look thoroughly exotic.

Below the chin, he was even worse. A dancer's body, all lithe grace and slim, impossibly strong muscle, filled out worn khakis and a threadbare shirt that might have been red in a previous incarnation. Not even the battered work boots, worn denim jacket thrown over one arm, or the ragged duffel on his shoulder kept the women from turning to look at him.

Then he looked up to some noise only he had heard and the incorrigible mischief dancing in those dark, almond-shaped eyes revealed his other saving grace.

"Pishta!" Her voice carried across the crowd, and he turned gratefully, shedding over-solicitous traveling companions with absent skill as the tall woman in black leather strode toward him, arms outstretched.

"Katika! How are you?" He wrapped his arms around the striking brunette, hugging her exuberantly and spinning her around as he murmured, "Are you ready to get out of here, or do we need to put on a show?"

"My husband's here, Ish, try not to make him shoot you, hmm?" Kate whispered back and untangled herself from his deliberately playful embrace. More loudly she said, "How have you been? You must be ravenous, come on, the car's outside."

They walked out of the baggage claim discussing trivialities, and apparently disregarding the stares they were receiving. Once in the car, though, Nick Sutherland asked sympathetically, "So who did you piss off to get a nose like that?"

Ish shrugged. "Someone who didn't like taking no for an answer. It was years ago. Ishtvan Aziz, and ignore what your wife says, I'm Ish, not Pishta."

Kate chuckled, a low, rich sound, and said, "Sorry, Ish, couldn't resist."

"Try harder next time, 'Katyonka,'" he suggested, but he sounded amused again. "So where's Damien?"

"We're not hooking you two up any sooner than we have to." She turned around and asked curiously, "Where have you been, anyway? No one could find you."
"Damien told me I missed all the fun," Ish griped. "By the way, are you going to introduce me, or shall I just go around calling 'Oh, husband, Kate's husband'?

"Nick Sutherland," said the man in question, his attention mostly on the Savannah lunchtime traffic. "Nice to meet you. But fun?"

"A chance at that bunch? Oh, yeah." Disgust oozed through his voice as Ish complained, "I'd have rather gone after Johannes than those three Moroccan battalions. That Prussian piece of shit framed me for murder once. I had to stay out of Northern Europe for years because of him."

"Who died?" Nick asked, startled. "When was this?"

"Couple centuries ago. Gustavus III of Sweden." Ish shrugged. "It was a good frame, I'll give him that much." In a complete change of subject, he went on, "That was a while ago, though. What I want to know is what in the hell Farrell Jameson was doing in the middle of this mess."

"Ask Damien about all of it," Kate answered. "Apparently Farrell was there--"

"Why was that damned noble idiot at our line war?" Ish interrupted skeptically.

"He was one of Owain's students, Ish." Kate twisted in the front seat to look back at him. "You knew that, right?"

"Hell, no," the Thracian said, shocked enough to stare at her. When he did, the exotic, mysterious stranger façade slid away to reveal more depth of character than his beauty would have led Nick to expect. "Owain produced a student like him? Are you crazy?"

"No," Nick drawled thoughtfully, "from what I know about New Zealanders, Ish, I think Rhys-Tewdor just couldn't corrupt him enough."

Kate chuckled, a deep throaty sound of pleasure as she told Ish, "I think Kastagir corrupted him in a different direction later. Apparently Farrell trained with him for a few years before World War II."

"Son of a bitch," was Ish's only startled comment. He thought about that for nearly a mile before he finally laughed. "Yeah, Kastagir would have loved Farrell. He looks so straight-laced until he cuts loose. Then he's almost as much fun as I am." The Thracian grinned, a startlingly charming wickedness in that lovely face.

Kate laughed. "No one else in the world is quite like you, Ish. Thank God."

"Yeah, so what do we know about this hit team?"

"You can wait until we catch up with Damien," she countered, a quick, gleeful smile crossing her face as she considered who was waiting for Ish. He didn't know Damien wasn't the only one they were meeting and she was looking forward to his surprise. "I'm only going over this once, thanks. Now, we need to get you some decent clothes, including a bathing suit. Tell me you have a bank account, Ish."

"And credit cards and even money." Ish chuckled. "Shopping, hmm? Right, I'll make it quick, Kate. Any idea what image they want? Who's planning this, anyway?"

"I'm not sure which plan we're going with, Ish, it depends on which units Damien managed to get at the condominium. And I'm not explaining this more than once. Forget it. You know you're going to want to visit a dozen people here in the States, so just plan on getting a flexible wardrobe with a little of everything." She turned in the seat in time to see the mischievous smile he didn't
quite hide quickly enough.

Kate turned back, not bothering to conceal the laughter in her own voice. "You're not fooling me, Ish. Your whole family treats 'blending in' as an art form." She grinned at him in the rear view mirror, brown eyes dancing. "And I'll just let Damien yell at you if you don't get enough variety. Now, explain to me what you're doing helping the Polisarios fight the Moroccans--"

"--and how you've managed not to die publicly," Nick Sutherland interrupted his wife. "You need to teach Kate that one."

"Hey, you killed me that last time," she argued, and they spent the rest of the trip cheerfully blaming each other for all sorts of misadventures while Ish tried to find out exactly what kind of mischief Kate was up to this time.

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Ish strode through the door of the condominium already looking for Damien, and wondering whose head his brother had taken in New Mexico that his presence felt this overpowering. Instead of dark red hair, though, he saw a tall man with brown hair and a short, wiry woman with blue-black hair. After the sunlight reflected off the sand outside, his eyes adjusted to the dim light in the room just in time for Farrell to wrap both arms around him in a fierce bear hug that nearly knocked the breath out of him.

He pounded on Farrell's back gleefully and said, "Hey! Let go, you over-muscled farmer, and let me get a look at you!" Ish stepped back a pace, hands sliding along Farrell's to catch his forearms. He took his time appraising his old friend, taking in good clothes, clear eyes, and an amused grin. "Not bad, Farrell. Not bad at all." He stepped back in and hugged him hard. "Glad you kept your head, buddy."

When Farrell let him go, Ish turned and found Duathor already going up on tiptoe to kiss him on the cheek. He hugged her, too, and added admiringly, "I like the hair. When's the last time you've done it in braids like that, Duathor?"

"Too long," the Egyptian answered, her voice low and sharp as ever as she shook her head to listen to the soft rattle and clatter of dozens of beaded corn rows sliding and falling across each other. "I spent a very pleasant afternoon getting it done, Ish, and between that and the heat here, I almost feel like I'm home in Egypt again. How have you been?"

"Fine," the Thracian said with a shrug. "Fighting soldiers who have modern equipment while using as little tech as I can manage. It's been interesting."

"You always did like siding with the underdog," she agreed, amused. Dark eyes regarded him thoughtfully. "You look well, though. Kept up with your sword and knife work, I assume?"

"Oh, yeah." He chuckled, a wicked sound. "Count on it. Especially the knife."

"Good." The slender Egyptian woman wound around him, catlike, and Ish smiled as she said, "Damien's making a grocery run, but he'll be here any minute. You'll be rooming here with him, Farrell, and Nick. Kate and I are upstairs and across the hall. Our targets are directly above this unit, and right across the corridor from Kate and myself. Now, we have some ideas on how to do this, and we were depending on your help."

"Really?" Ish purred, sliding into a chair and striking an insouciant, provocative pose.

"Very much so," Duathor rumbled, lounging on another chair herself. "Well, Kate and I, in any
case. None of them seem likely to be susceptible to you, brother, or we'd happily let you help us flirt with them.

Kate and Nick settled onto the couch, and Farrell pulled over one of the bar chairs from the kitchen area. "So. Who won the argument?" Kate asked, amused. "Or were you just going to present Damien with a fait accompli?"

"Would I do that? Besides, I won easily," the wiry Egyptian woman said contentedly. "Did no one ever tell you the family motto?"

"For destruction, Damien. For mischief, Ishtvan. For death and havoc, Duathor," Ish commented, making it sound like a quote.

"I like that one." Duathor was smiling, a tiny feline smile. "No, I was thinking of something much simpler: 'Be thorough.' Damien gets distracted."

"And you don't," Ishtvan conceded, straightening up.

"No, not really." Duathor studied the Thracian carefully, seeing the effects of several hours of flights and layovers and customs. "Brother, we're being intolerably rude. Do you need to get a shower and food before we plan our tactics?"

"Tease," he answered her without any real heat. "I'd rather hear the plan first. Then I can think about it and look for holes in it while I run the hot water out and someone else cooks."

"I'll cook," Farrell said firmly. "As a thief, Ish, you're a lousy cook."

"Hey, I'm not that bad," Ish argued immediately.

"No, if he cooks French food he's quite good. The problem is that he prefers Mediterranean," Duathor said dryly. "In any case, Farrell, the rest of us are competent in a kitchen. Don't worry about it. Now, then, gentlemen, lady," and she nodded to Kate, amused, "I want this to be simple and thorough. We're going to take all of them, simultaneously. It's going to be quick, it's going to be clean, and there will be no survivors."

She considered Nick's face and was pleasantly surprised that he showed no reservations. Good. He's the only one I was worried about.

"Bear in mind: the assassins are set to check out on the thirtieth. Now, this is what I had in mind..."

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White Beach Condos, Savannah -- April 29th

"It's no problem at all," Duathor purred in the most sultry voice she could manage. It was more than enough keep the attention of the men who were staying in the condo unit across from hers. The men whose names just happened to match the names and aliases Don Scarlatti had provided to Kate.

The fine-boned Egyptian woman added just a touch more sway to her saunter and smiled provocatively at Jon, the man who'd been identified as the leader for this team. "After all, you're checking out tomorrow, and we're going home the day after that. We can't let you leave without a party."

Kate chimed in, "She's right. It's almost the end of our vacation, and what's a vacation without a party?" Her voice added meanings to party that Webster might not have intended, but their targets
had no trouble translating her proposition. The four men in the garage exchanged glances, reading minute changes in each others' faces as they silently debated who wanted to do this and who didn't think he stood a chance of getting lucky with these two.

"What time did you want to start the grill?" asked Lee, the tall blond that Kate suspected of being the second in command for the group. "Jack and Walt were talking about eating early and then hitting the Osprey's Nest."

"Right at sunset?" Kate suggested, her voice strongly implying that the sunset would make the dinner more romantic. None of the men bothered to point out that the beach faced the east.

That didn't surprise Kate. She'd been watching the assassins for two days now and knew Jack and Walt, the remaining members of the hit squad, should be back from swimming any minute. They usually came in just before sunset to clean up, eat something, and go bar-hopping. The suggestion of the Osprey's Nest, a popular sports bar in town, told her that she'd been right; her plans should run right on schedule.

"Bar-hopping would be fun," Duathor purred as they climbed the stairs. She knew perfectly well that the men had allowed the women to go first partly from paranoia and partly to get a glance under Kate's beach cover-up. At the door, she took her time finding her keys and unlocking the condo unit she and Kate were sharing. Sure enough, she had to slide a man's hand off her hip when she turned around to retrieve a bag of groceries from Ted, one of the junior members of the team. "And we certainly have plenty of food for everyone."

Kate smiled as she took the other bag from the other junior member. "Thanks, Scott. Now, we need about half an hour to get the food ready, Jon, and sunset's in about forty-five minutes. Knock on the door in about forty minutes?"

The team leader smiled at her. "Yeah, sounds good. We'll try not to get stuck in traffic," he added as they opened the door across the hall.

"You'd hate to miss our steaks," Duathor countered with a husky chuckle. "Forty minutes it is. Come on, Kate." She smiled at the assassins before she walked into the living room of her unit; behind her, she heard Kate immediately close and lock the door, a practice the two of them had passed off as the habit of single women from a big city. Then both the women were inside and out of visual range of their targets.

Kate set down her bag and traded an identical exasperated glance with Duathor as they chattered for two minutes while putting up the perishables. The tell-tale hairs had been in place on the lock or Duathor would have found a way to mention the problem of 'ubiquitous cat hairs;' the red carnations were still on the table, which meant Damien hadn't found any bugs in his daily sweep. Neither of them felt like taking chances, though, so they continued to gossip just in case the assassins who'd escorted them up could hear tone of voice through the closed door and the length of the rented condo.

When she thought enough time had expired for it to be safe, Kate ostentatiously settled her skirt over her hips and dusted imaginary hand-prints off the back of it. "Octopi, do you think?" she suggested. Her mouth twisted into a wry smile as she pulled out two wine glasses and cocked an eyebrow in question.

"No, leeches," the Egyptian woman stated flatly as she nodded her acceptance of the offered drink. "Their hands don't move once they settle. They're enough to give men a bad name. And I would love some wine, Kate. Take heart; we're almost done. How's Nick taking all of this?"
"Well enough." Kate shrugged, but her expression wasn't as confident as her words. "He doesn't like it, but we've done worse."

"And it would be another matter if you were actually sleeping with them?" Duathor pointed out mildly as she opened the refrigerator door. "It's only been two days -- they'd have been suspicious if we'd jumped them any more quickly than this, thank Bast. Pass the beer, and I'll put it in the freezer to cool. Do you want to make the marinade for the steaks or shall I?"

"Your turn," Kate told her, sounding more cheerful as she finished filling two glasses with the cabernet they'd had out on the counter. "Your glass is on the bar, Duathor. And I think the steaks were the part that startled Nick, really."

"What, that we're going to clean up the bodies, get dinner, and then check out ourselves on the first?" Duathor shrugged and reached for the few spices she had insisted on buying, intent on putting together some kind of seasoning for the meat. "We have to eat. And I thought he would be more shocked if I suggested going out for dinner afterwards. Was I that far off, Kate?"

"No, you were right about that. Although Nick is tough-minded enough once he's decided on something." The taller brunette set her own glass down, caught the bar in both hands, and leaned back to stretch out her back. "Oh, that's better."

Duathor laughed softly as she poured some of her wine into a bowl and began adding spices, measuring by sight and smell. "Shall we flip now for who gets the shower first when we're done? Or shall I plan on letting you and Nick have it, since I rather suspect you have some catching up to do?"

"If you'll leave us some hot water, you can have it first," Kate offered graciously as she dropped down to wrap her arms around her ankles, purring as her lower back began to loosen up. Voice slightly muffled by the inverted position she pointed out, "It would be suspicious if we changed, I know, but I wouldn't mind getting a shower now. Flirting with them is starting to make me feel filthy."

"I know exactly what you mean," Duathor agreed, looking at her own white and blue swimsuit and shorts set, and then at the burgundy and gold suit and wraparound Kate had been wearing when they both left the beach to shop for the 'going away party.' The wiry woman set the steaks into the bowl, ran some water to make up the rest of the volume, and pulled out plastic to cover it all. "It has to be done though, Kate. Do you think they suspect anything?"

"I think they've fallen for it," Kate told her. "I get the impression they've scored off quite a few vacationing professional women since they've been down here. Having us just across the hall seems to strike them as convenient, but not suspicious."

"I agree with you," Duathor said with a nod as she started scrubbing potatoes. "As for the shower, you're right -- it would look odd if we changed out of bathing suits before going to grill food on the beach." She paused for a moment, thinking, then asked pleasantly, "Still remember how to do an Istanbul twist?"

"You're not tall enough to do that to them." However the notion made Kate chuckle as she moved into the kitchen and started pricking holes in the potatoes before wrapping them in aluminum foil. Duathor was more than strong enough to snap a man's neck with her bare hands; those small hands worked in clay when they weren't wielding a khopesh. At 5' 2", however, the fine-boned Egyptian woman simply wasn't going to be able to get a good angle on men who were a minimum of eight and ten inches taller than she was.
"I don't have to be. I only have to lower them to my level," was the purred retort. "I'm very good at that, Kate. You get spoiled, being tall." Duathor tossed her head, enjoying the sound of beads clattering against themselves and sliding along her shoulders. "I'll have to leave my hair like this when I go home. I like it."

"It's good to see you in braids again," Kate agreed as she finished the last potato. "And I'm not spoiled; I'm just lucky." She chuckled and asked, "So. Ready to start packing the cooler?"

Duathor smiled at her, the pleased expression of a cat sighting a mouse. "Thirty minutes yet until we start this, Kate. Let's give the sun time to slide down a bit farther. Rummy?"

"Half an hour sounds right. You're right; we don't need to pack the cooler for another fifteen minutes. Actually, it might not be a bad idea if we were running a couple of minutes 'late.' Don't forget to take the beer out of the freezer, though. But we have time for one hand of gin rummy." The two women traded identical expectant glances. "Then we call Nick and the others," Kate went on softly, "and finish this."

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It was ridiculously easy in the end.

The two junior assassins were carrying the cooler at the front of the group -- the heavy cooler full of ice and beer, wrapped steaks and potatoes. Jack and Walt, the two swimmers, each had an arm loaded with towels to sit on or charcoal for the grill on the beach. Jon, the tall leader of the group, had one arm through Kate's as they walked at the back of the group. Duathor sauntered along immediately in front of Kate, her hand resting lightly on the crook of Lee's elbow. The two women suspected he was one of the most dangerous of the lot and wanted him within immediate range when their trap went off.

The stairs had forced all of them to walk in pairs as they headed down from the third floor units, to the second, towards the ground-level garage. The sun was setting in the west, leaving the south-east facing beach in darkening shadows. The garage itself was full of shadows; the automatic lights hadn't come up yet for whatever reason.

Those shadows moved as Duathor and Lee entered the garage, enveloping the first four men even as Jon turned his head towards Kate to help her around a car. He assumed his night vision was better than hers; it was the last assumption of superiority he got to make. "Watch out for the--"

The leader's words stuck in his throat as Kate let go of his elbow, reaching up as if to adjust a strand of hair out of her mouth. Instead, having raised the hand to her chin, she swung it backwards, curling into a fist as she went, and crushed his trachea with a single sharp move. In front of her, Duathor had already brought one knee up and in, collapsing the team second's leg out from underneath him as she tightened her grip on his wrist with one hand and struck at the inside of his elbow with the other. He dropped bonelessly, unconscious from the nerve attack. She dropped with him, and a muffled crack a moment later told Kate he'd never rise again.

Kate was too busy herself at that point to pay much attention to what anyone else was doing, although part of her mind registered the soft spitting sounds of her husband firing a silenced pistol. However, even with his throat crushed and rapidly swelling shut, with shock and death imminent, the assassin was still trying to kill her. Kate blocked his strikes automatically, slapping his arms back out of her way as she yanked her knee up into his stomach. Her attack forced air out that he wasn't going to be able to draw back in.

Damien loomed up behind him, a knife in one hand that Kate suspected wasn't his. The mortal
man jerked as Damien struck at his back, a shocked look on his face as his eyes widened with surprise and pain. The burly redheaded immortal lifted and twisted the mortal's head in one economical motion, and the last assassin dropped to the ground.

Farrell's quiet voice broke the silence, saying, "The cooler didn't spill."

"Good," Duathor answered calmly. "Put it in the car, Farrell. Everyone done?"

"Kate and Damien had the last one," Ish answered as he appeared out of the darkness with a body slung over his shoulder. Nick opened the back of Damien's rented SUV, face set and mouth tight with distaste, but he never flinched from the work or its necessity. All six of them, five immortals and one mortal, began loading the vehicles. Picnic gear went onto passenger floorboards, bodies went onto tarps already laid out in the back and were covered first with another tarp, and then with a casual-seeming scatter of CDs, plastic drive-through cups, and other vacation detritus. The attacks had been carefully planned to leave as little blood as possible, down to Nick underloading the powder for some of his bullets so that they wouldn't leave exit wounds. For once, luck and the speed of the attack had been with them; there was no blood to clean up, as Damien had left the knife in the leader's kidney rather than risk a stain.

The last cup thrown into the back, five of them scattered into seats. Farrell reached up with one towel-shielded hand to screw the light bulb for the garage light back into place, then climbed in as well. Duathor glanced at her watch as they drove out of the parking lot at a normal speed, and nodded to herself, pleased. Start to finish, it had taken five minutes. *A quick, clean operation. I'll have to call Aidan after dinner and tell her that this loose end is severed.*

Seacouver -- early evening, April 29th

"Yeah, Terrence went home a couple days ago," Marc answered Duathor as he sprawled back onto the couch in Aidan's living room. His teacher moved past him with a load of clean laundry but waved him back to his conversation when he started to stand and help her with it.

"You sure, Aidan? Okay. ... Nah, Duathor, it's cool. We're kind of doing the last stuff around here. ... Yeah, I'm already packed."

Aidan smiled at that, her back to her student as she put the last of her clothes away. "You've been ready to go for at least a day now," she murmured to herself as she reached for the bag of cedar balls and strewed them liberally through each dresser drawer.

She and Marc had decided to close down both her floor and his. If Rich had been staying in the house until she got back, as he had last fall when she went to Paris, Aidan would have left her floor open and trusted him to sweep and dust all of it once or twice while she was gone. He was only staying for a week or two at most, though. Rich knew who to contact at her bank when he headed out, but at some point he needed to go back to Charleston to retrieve his motorcycle and, possibly, his racing career.

Perhaps. And perhaps not. *He and Damien were talking quite seriously about salary versus commission. I think Damien may have acquired a salesman cum bookkeeper.* Aidan shook her head at that, enjoying the feel of barely damp hair pouring over bare arms. *It's so nice to be able to leave my hair down for a while instead of braiding it for challenge.*

Rich is changing so quickly. *Eight months ago, I don't think he'd have quit the racing season to go into sales. Of course, eight months ago, he wouldn't have been so offhand about sharing a bed*
with another man, either, no matter what the reason. She opened the wardrobes, scattered more cedar balls in, and closed the doors again, careful not to trap dark hair as she did.

She turned to look over the floor, intending to check for any of the night's tasks left undone. Instead, Aidan found herself thinking about the day Duncan and Amanda had helped her unpack a crate of odd and lovely mineral specimens she'd collected here and there over the years. All three of them had spent the day trading stories and bad puns, until Amanda had dragged Duncan off to dinner and dancing and bed.

Rich isn't the only one who's changed. A year ago I wasn't sleeping with immortals. A year ago I still thought Methos was dead, and Xan and Alex gone Lady knew where. A wordless, affectionate pulse stirred in her, and she smiled thinking about it. A year ago, I wasn't bound to Connor.

That thought pushed her up and into motion. Aidan strode across the wood floor to the kitchen, full skirt flaring and whispering around her calves as she walked. A few quick motions filled two glasses with iced tea and she brought one glass to Marc before sipping from her own.

"Hey, thanks, Teach. ... No, Ish, not you. I'm not studying with you, bro." Something Ish said brought a quick, mischievous smile to Marc's face and he asked cheerfully, "Shall I hand her the phone so you can repeat that? ... Didn't think so."

Aidan quirked an eyebrow up, head tilted in silent question. Marc grinned and waved her off, clearly enjoying harassing Ish at long distance. It will be interesting to see his reaction to Ish's appearance when they eventually meet.

She sat down to study her check list for the trip and found everything done except those last few things to do in the morning before their flight. Restlessness drove Aidan up to check that the refrigerator was empty.

Marc was still talking to Ish, but now he was frowning at her. "Half a sec, Ish." Amber eyes narrowed as he studied Aidan more intently. "Teach... when's the last time you caught up on your journal?"

"Why?" she asked, willing to turn her attention to his thought process.

"Because," her student said patiently, raking one hand through newly close-cropped hair, "you've had a workout and run today, you haven't had any coffee in at least five hours, and you're still pacing the house like a tiger at the zoo. I know you've got the stuff for your novel packed, but why don't you pull out your journal?"

Aidan smiled at him. "You, sir, worry too much."

"Yeah, well, I learned it from three mistresses of the art," Marc said dryly. "You, Mama, and Grandmama. Besides, you haven't said I'm wrong, either."

"I'm not sure," she admitted thoughtfully. "I'm a bit behind, yes."

"Like, oh, three weeks?" Marc asked, head tilted in her own mannerism. "We've kind of been busy, Teach, you especially."

"You're demolishing Damien's phone bill," Aidan commented idly, finger-combing a tangle out of her hair and wondering if she should pile it on her head and go work her way through tai chi forms until she was calm.

"Teach, you're demolishing my nerves," he countered. "I suppose I could call Terrence or Disa...."
Marc trailed off, still studying her reactions.

"That," Aidan pointed out calmly, "is blackmail. Go back to your conversation with Duathor and Ish, Marc. I'll deal with my mood."

"Uh-huh." He grinned at her suddenly. "I have a speed dial and I'm not afraid to use it, y'know."

Aidan chuckled at that. "All right, oh worrier, I'll go see if I can't put a dent in my journal backlog. Tell those merry maniacs that I said hello and we'll call in a few weeks."

"Will do." Marc took his hand off the phone's receiver and said cheerfully, "Right, I'm back. ... Nah, just yelling at Aidan. Is she always like this before trips?"

Aidan mock-glared at him and Marc paused, then looked thoughtful. "Actually, that's not a bad idea. ... No, not you, Ish. Hold on again, bro." The young black man checked his watch, then grinned at Aidan. "Y'know, if I get off the phone in the next ten or fifteen minutes, not only will we save Damien's phone bill from a fate worse than death, but we could catch the first set at Joe's."

"Blues and dancing," she mused, glancing down at her own skirt and top and realizing that she was certainly dressed for it. "That would be fun."

Marc shrugged. "So go write in your journal for a few minutes and I'll finish saying good night to everyone. And yelling at Ish and Damien for not warning me about you and planes."

"Oh, now that's a low blow." Aidan laughed though and pulled out her current journal. "Wretch," she called. "Don't let them rub off on you too much. We'll still be sparring in Greece, you know."

I haven't done too badly, she admitted to herself, nibbling on the end of a pen and watching her current student chat and laugh with some of her earlier students.

Why is it so hard to let go of the guilt for Connor's hand? He doesn't blame me, I know, so why am I blaming myself? I suppose because a year ago, my brother still had both hands. Honesty compelled her to add, Of course, a year ago, he hadn't seen Xan and Alex since 1819 and was still settling for the occasional one night stand. And Connor and I were both lonely.

Aidan chuckled softly at that, aware that loneliness was not precisely a problem anymore. Not when all of her students knew where to find her and all of them were talking to her again. Not when she had a new student who was going to drive her half-mad, as students with a great deal of potential always did. No, I'm not lonely.

She wasn't quite ready to start sorting everything out, that would take more than the time left before she and Marc went to listen to the house band at Joe's Bar. She pulled out a piece of stationary, however, and began listing topics she suspected she needed to look at soon: Connor, Duncan, Magister; Xan and Alex, Farrell, Owain; Rich, the Watchers, Marc; how to track down any of the books from Sean's library, or Darius' or Adrianna's....

Marc watched her from across the room, only part of his attention on the phone call with Ish until he saw the frown fade from his teacher's face to be replaced by the intent concentration she always gave to writing or planning. Her pen jumped between three different spots on the desk, which told him that if she was working on her journal, she was also using it to set up some kind of check list or to-do list.

He grinned and relaxed back onto the couch. So I'm going to be busy while we're in Europe. Big damn deal. It'll still be fun. Marc deliberately settled onto the couch, not particularly worried about whether they made the first set at Joe's or the second, and gave his newest brother his
complete attention, laughing softly at the question.

"Yeah, Ish, we're still here," Aidan's student promised cheerfully. Still here, and still intact, bro. And we're damn well going to keep it that way.

~ ~ ~ finis, 6/00 ~ ~ ~
Notes & Credits

The few, the proud: The guilty collaborators

Thanks and credits on Sirocco should probably run almost as long as the story itself, in all honesty. I've been working on this thing for more than a year, after all.

The primary band of editors, betas, whatever you want to call them, kept this thing running, kept me from scrapping it, and kicked me in the ass anytime I started to wander off-topic. That was, I regret to say, more often than I like to admit. (If you don't believe that, please note the snippet files of things that didn't work, available here.)

Included in that intrepid band and listed in alphabetical order from sheer desperation:

**Alyss:** for the research on short notice and the extensive lectures in applied angst. Connor would like to have a long talk with you, by the way;

**Devo:** who can always be relied on to ask, 'Yes, but what are they feeling?' and for all the helpful information on Manhattan;

**Dragon:** who choreographs fights, makes my villains even more villainous, and brings me more coffee when I'm on a roll;

**Merewyn:** who insists that there's always room for another sex scene... when she isn't looking over my shoulder and saying, 'Which word did you mean there?';

**Merrie Gail:** who chats with me far too late at night and came in at the last minute when I desperately needed a fresh eye on all of it;

**Raine:** for the giggles, the comments, and cleaning up my verbs;

**Shrew:** who keeps an eye on continuity, time shifts, and punctuation, because someone has to!

&

**Tarsh:** who wandered through at the end and gave comments on fights & aftermaths, as well as the care and handling of New Zealanders. Although we're still arguing over whether or not I write angst. (g)

Special thanks are due to **Don,** who listened to what I needed in a fight location, and then told me exactly where to hold it, what the climate was like, and then loaned me maps and more maps. Topological, geological, and city/road maps, to name just a few. Then he casually mentioned, "Oh, and about disposing of the bodies?" Any mistakes are of course mine and might just be deliberate for plot purposes. (That's my story and I'm sticking to it.) He also helped with left-handed fight choreography in the living room.

Then there's **Krista,** who sent me information on Franciscans in New Mexico. Trust me. You'll know when you read it. My muses may never be the same (or come back) but thank you, very much!

The kind people who wrote me feedback, listened to me bitch, and wrote back with their opinions on what was coming next and who was doing what to whom are owed a great debt. They supplied
me with virtual hugs, virtual chocolate or flowers, and frequently made my day much brighter
during the year and some this bugger took to write. Some of these brave souls even took on the
daunting task of checking web pages for typos and helping me make this as clean a story as
possible.

You all are, literally, more numerous than I can name without inadvertently leaving people out,
which I would hate to do. All I can say is thank you, so very much! And all of you who listened to
my sneakiness, plotting, and scheming and then helped with it, should probably be ashamed of
yourselves for helping me do such things to such nice characters. (Or not!)

Last but not least: Thank you to Maygra, who inadvertently broke my major writer's block on
this. At one point when I was whining about I didn't want to write a torture scene, her immediate
reply was, "Well, then don't," as if this answer should be completely obvious. At which point I
decided to write about repairs instead. Thanks, Maygra.

Comments, Commentary & Miscellanea:

In general:

Foreign languages: my translations of specific incidents (Marc's profanity, Methos', etc) are
mostly in order below. However, words used throughout indiscriminately include: luaidh(e)
(beloved, m or (f), Scots Gaelic); muirnin (beloved, Irish Gaelic, and does anyone know if the
feminine should have an e?); gradhach (loving one, Scots Gaelic, usually used as beloved in my
stories and Carmel's); Magister/Magistra (teacher m/f, Latin); Didaskalos (teacher, m., Greek);
Maistir (teacher, m., Irish Gaelic); amator (beloved, m., Latin). Mo chridhe or m'chara -- my own,
Gaelic. (I'm not sure which is Irish and which is Scots, sorry, folks.)

All Biblical quotations are from Bartlett's Familiar Quotations, 16th Edition, or from the King
James Bible. Note well: the fact that I have a character using these quotes does not mean I agree
with them! Y'all should know me better than that by now!

All of Enrique's beliefs are in fact based on biblical text and if you want the relevant scripture
passages, please email me and I'll send them to you. I drew my synopses from the Oxford
Companion to the Bible and my opinions from fifteen years in the Episcopal Church and thirty
years in the American South. What? You thought I was raised a pagan? Not quite.

(g) Since two of my beta readers have commented on this, and to reassure the rest of you that I
haven't lost my mind? According to my dictionary, blond is the correct spelling for the adjective
form of the word, and for the masculine form of the noun. But for females, it seems to be blonde.
Just the once, the English language seem to have borrowed a word with gender specific endings
intact.

By the way. This is not Luminosity's fault... quite. She didn't know she was doing it. But
somehow, after sitting around at breakfast with her at Escapade, trying to explain to the New
York/California woman at the other end of the table (hi, Devo!) about Southern women -- Well,
Stormy kind of started getting more vocal. However, Lum was kind enough to say she'd take the
blame, so we'll let her. Thanks, Lum!

4/9:

Do I really need to explain Superman and kryptonite to anyone? (g)

Undated journal entry:
The July/August 1999 *American Heritage* article by W. J. V. Heuvel, "America and the Holocaust", is an absolutely fascinating read, in all the senses of that word. Rallies were being held in New York as early as 1933 to protest Nazi treatment of Jews. (No, that is not a typo -- '33.) In 1936 Roosevelt modified US refugee laws to allow more visas to be issued, and in 1938 (after *Krystallnacht*), more than 20,000 visas were extended to allow German and Austrian to remain in the US rather than be forced to go home to a hostile environment.

Where knowledge of the camps was concerned, specific locations and names were mostly unknown until 1943 and 1944 (the specific example cited in the article is Auschwitz whose site and name were confirmed in 4/1944). The Allied leadership, Intelligence groups, and the Jewish leaders and communities in the Allied communities did in fact know about the death camps in 8/1942, and had confirmed the information by 11/1942. However, to quote a 1989 lecture of Louis de Jong, a Dutch historian and Holocaust survivor, "[There is] an aspect of the Holocaust which is of cardinal importance...: that the Holocaust, when it took place, was beyond the belief and the comprehension of almost all people living at the time, Jews included. ...[T]hat thousands, nay, millions of human beings... would be exterminated like vermin -- that was a notion so alien to the human mind, an event so gruesome, so new, that the instinctive... reaction of most people was: it can't be true." (Cited from the same article, p. 41; italics theirs.)

Last. One of my co-workers, a M.Th., once told me a story. He had it from an older Jewish friend, a German immigrant to the U.S. Apparently the Jewish man had gone to a Hitler rally in the early years, wanting to hear der Fuhrer talk. My co-worker's friend came out of the rally absolutely bubbling over with energy and enthusiasm, convinced that Hitler was right and the only possible salvation of the German nation. It took half an hour before this Jewish gentleman paused and finally realized, "Oh, my God, he was talking about exterminating me."

I have not specified what plague Owain may or may not have brought, but for the curious? The first identifiable attack of bubonic plague in Europe was not during the medieval period, but during Justinian's reign; it hit in 542 A.D. And people have known for centuries that it was necessary to burn the belongings of plague victims, even if they haven't been sure why. It's no great stretch to imagine that Owain could have brought the equivalent of 'plague blankets' to Milan.

4/9 again:

The (relatively recent) problems between the lines of Rhys-Tewdor and Ramirez begin in "Prelude to the Storm" and run all the way through the Line War stories.

4/10:

Rich ran into Kyra at Connor's last Christmas party. The rampaging December insanity can be found at "Crystalline Patterns."

For the curious? Sinners repent (are penitent again) and come back into grace. Heretics, however, recant (sing the proper songs again) and are brought back into the fold.

Johannes and Owain arranged their public 'deaths' in "Poaching" because of attacks begun on them by the Lone Gunmen in "Intermezzo." The Gunmen (yes, of X-Files fame) were also responsible for Jirina leaving Latvia in a considerable hurry.

Yes, the FBI is in charge of investigating shipments of counterfeit designer merchandise. And no, I'm not going to comment on whether the hacking technique Methos is using would work. I don't have that kind of skill and refuse to speculate on how accurate my source might be.

All speculations about fighting off the mental effects of a quickening or regeneration of severed body parts by immortals are mine, based off such canon events as Darius' Light Quickening, Duncan's Dark Quickening, and the fact that the really old immortals (Methos, Ramirez, Rebecca,
Kyra, to name only a very few) are all physically intact when honestly, they should be short a few fingers and ear tips after that many centuries of fighting.

4/11:

The quote about throwing stones is John 8:7.

*Hombre* -- Spanish for man.

"I could've been a contender." Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront*.

Navarro called on old favors in "When First We Practice" to get Mandisa out of Africa and over to the States, away from the hunters hounding her. She arrived in "Intermezzo."

The quote on vengeance is Romans 12:9. The story of Elisha is in 2 Kings 2: 23-24, in which the prophet cursed children for mocking his baldness and two she-bears tore them to pieces.

4/12:

Alex and Xan first showed up in "Force of Habit" and they also appeared in "Poaching."

Yes, Riverside is a real, non-denominational cathedral in Manhattan, over on the East River. They are in fact a highly welcoming church, and do have a labyrinth that's available for walking meditations on Tuesdays. Gorgeous bell tower, too.

Gustavus III was in fact assassinated in 1792, in the Stockholm Opera House. Ish would like to take this opportunity to categorically deny that he had *anything* to do with this. Really.

Mandisa was hounded in "Prelude to the Storm" and "When First We Practice."

4/13:

Javier Vachon reattached a hand in the *Forever Knight* episode, "Black Buddha, Part I."

Yes, according to some of my medical friends, you can use Superglue for sutures. Hospitals use staples sometimes for Caesarians.

All torments endured by Connor are in fact based on various and sundry implements used in Medieval and Renaissance Europe. I didn't use some of the worst tortures, believe it or not.

*Vaffanculo* -- Italian for fuck, fuck off, fucking, fuck you, etc. It all depends on how you say it and what words you wrap around it. A beautifully versatile word....

Sinan ibn Salman is/was an immortal who raped and tortured Aidan in the tenth century. His death is described in "Favors," which, confusingly enough, takes place somewhere after this story chronologically. Sorry, folks.

Marc Scipio spent two years being mis-trained by Chris Henslowe in the Canadian Cascades. The full story can be found in "Poaching." And before anyone asks? No, not even I know what, precisely, Chris did to him; Marc hasn't told me yet.

Yes, as a matter of fact, the reason the Romans *did* crucify Christ was because they considered him a criminal (inciting to riot/rebellion). It was considered a fairly ugly, and slow, death. It doesn't kill by loss of blood or shock, but by suffocation. The positioning on the cross keeps your diaphragm from being able to expand, thus preventing inhalation. To breathe in, you have to straighten up -- difficult when your legs are nailed to the wood. Eventually exhaustion and pain
prevent the motion, and you suffocate.

Connor's constantly changing eyes: I rewatched the first Highlander movie for this. (Poor me. The torments. The hardships. The things I go through for research! <lol>) Anyway, at different points in that movie, his eyes are gold, dark green, hazel, dark brown, and once they looked grey. I give up.

Vambraces are the forearm protectors that the gladiators (and legionnaires, and sensible SCA fighters) wore. And you know, I have yet to see anything forbidding armor in the Game.... (Bartholomew used a shield in "Two of Hearts;" Felicia Martens wore a chain shirt in "Free Fall.")

Okay. Before anyone sends death threats: yes, I am going to write the story of how Xan, Alex, and Connor met up with each other. It is in fact, already in process, and I'm having way too much fun with it. Threats will not speed it up, though. <g>

4/14:

Aidan's student, Rabi, was killed in Australia by Will Moran and Johannes Engeles in "Prelude to the Storm."

4/15:

Nope, I don't know which books were sent with Rich and Marc, but I'm slowly working on a reading/study list for the two. Any suggestions are greatly appreciated and will be taken under advisement. (g)

"Quidquid id est, timeo Danaos et dona ferentis." 'Whatever it is, I fear Greeks even when they bear gifts.' Virgil, from the Aeneid, I. 49.

Nalyévo is Russian for 'on the left'. It can also imply that something was bought or sold on the black market, according to my Russian teacher back when I studied the language years ago.

SNAFU: military acronym. Situation Normal, All Fucked Up.

No, Aidan didn't tell the world about the Watchers. But a paranoid immortal is a dangerous immortal, and Peeping Toms should expect to eventually be caught.

The Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. The Sixth Commandment: Thou Shalt Not Kill. (Now, in a discussion with a rabbi, I was told that the precise wording should be 'murder' rather than 'kill.' Of course, this was the same person who pointed out to me that it's really one commandment and nine suggestions. <eg>)

4/16:

L'ami Louis is in fact a five-star bistro in Paris. And I'm told the vinyl flooring is worn, the walls are decorated in wooden coat pegs and old photos, and you'd better hope the waiters like you. But the food is hot, plentiful, and excellent.

trattoria -- Italian for restaurant or café.

Pascal's quote which started Farrell off? "Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie." -- 'The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me,' from Pensées, 206. Myself, I wonder if Farrell also read Diane Duane's X-Men novel, Empire's End. <g> However, if you live in a city and ever get a chance to be out in the far country where there are no city lights and no trees to block the horizon, you may have more sympathy for Pascal. Myself, I don't even make it to the
end of the world. Every time I contemplate the Big Bang, I start trying to look back to where that compressed matter originally came from, at which point I have to reboot my brain.

Yes, the Italians do keep recipes and pass them down through families for centuries. A recent issue of *Gourmet* (or was it *Bon Appetit*?) had a collection of Tuscan recipes from the Borgias.

Katana and saber technique: I'm married to a black belt. I run around with fencers. Nobody wants to take katana versus saber because we don't know who would win. But in talking to them and to F. Braun McAsh (the fight choreographer for several seasons of Highlander), you, most assuredly can use saber techniques with a katana, and in fact, Duncan does. He's trained in both and uses whatever will keep him alive. So does Connor.

*Strega* -- Italian for witch

Okay, the whole witch vs. poisoner argument: "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." Exodus 22:18. Heinlein maintained in one of his books that 'witch' was a translator error, that the word should have been translated poisoner. To a desert culture, damn right the only punishment for people who'd poison a well was death. Aidan gets annoyed with 'witch' comments; Var likes pulling her chain. (g)

Dani St. Vir was Aidan's lover and Connor's friend. That story is in *Hold On.* Sunda Kastagir was a tall, muscular immortal from Africa, who is responsible for such glorious infamies as 'boom-boom' and Connor's 1783 duel on Boston Commons. He lost his head to the Kurgan in 1985. Kastagir is sadly underutilized in fic, damn it!

*Capoeira* is a very, very nasty martial arts style predominantly studied in Brazil. It's a mix of dance, gymnastics, and martial arts and they really do come in from every imaginable angle and use combination of blows and strikes, whether sequential or simultaneous. A *jinga* is a swaying, sort of four point shuffle that they use to stay in motion and set themselves into motion up or across or what have you. The movie, *Only the Strong*, shows a former military man (Mark DaCascos, of *The Crow: Stairway to Heaven*) trying to use *capoeira* to instill discipline in some inner city youth. If you get to see it, you'll understand why this style made Damita so dangerous.

4/17:

Ecclesiastes 11:1 "Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days." Random good comes back to you, from some points of view, or debts from your parents are paid to your children, from others.

I can't find the source for the quote 'death before dishonor' which will, I'm sure, drive me crazy. Help, someone? In the meantime, according to Horace's *Odes*, I. 45, it is the happy man 'who fears dishonor worse than death' (trans. per *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations, 16th Edition*).

As for Pickett's charge? General George Edward Pickett, of the Confederate army (the United States Civil War of 1861-1865, the Southern side), led his 4500 troops in a charge against the Union emplacement. He lost 75% of his men to the withering gunfire in a war where, all too often, any wound ended up being fatal.

The Light Brigade was a British cavalry unit in the Crimean War. They charged a Russian emplacement at the Battle of Balaclava, and lost 503 of 700 men; Tennyson later eulogized their deeds in "'The Charge of the Light Brigade," famous for such lines as 'Theirs not to make reply, Theirs not to reason why, Theirs but to do and die.'

The message to the Spartans? Simonides wrote this epitaph for them, and W. L. Bowles translated it. Leonidas and a band of Spartans died trying to hold the pass of Thermopylae against the Persians in 480 BCE.

Last and assuredly not least: the Sacred Band of Thebes was an elite corps of three hundred
men, one hundred fifty pairs of lovers, each sworn before the Gods to die before dishonoring his lover. They died, to a man, under Alexander's cavalry charge at the Battle of Chaerona, in 338 BCE. Phillip of Macedon had a stone lion erected to rest over their mass grave.

_Tuili_ -- Irish Gaelic for 'bastard'

Aidan promised Duncan that next time he could take the fight in _First Harvests._ And Ned White was a disgrace to immortals and bikers alike.

Marc's quote? "Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee." It's John Donne, (c. 1572-1631), from _Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions_, Meditation 17 (1624).

4/18:

DMSO is DiMethylSulfOxide -- it's an industrial solvent and is used medicinally as a penetrant to convey medications into tissue. From what some horse-breeder friends of mine told me years ago, it was primarily used by veterinarians for quite a while, and I think they also mentioned that for a while there was a problem with it being used to help perpetrate date-rapes. Last, I recall being told that it will leave a distinctive garlic aftertaste in the back of your throat, but can't be sure if that's correct or not, so take that one with a grain of salt. (No pun intended.)

The George Lucas comment? The Indiana Jones movies, the Star Wars movies, and the infamous line: "I've got a bad feeling about this." I played a Star Wars drinking game once where you took a drink every time someone said some variant of that. Thank Gods we were drinking beer....

Aidan's bad luck with the motel and café is explained in Gyrfalcon's _Signs and Portents_.

Cracker Barrel is a chain of 'country-cooking' restaurants which is slowly spreading through the United States along the interstates. The food is reliable, varied, and usually pretty good.

I have no idea if this organization exists outside the U.S. or not, therefore I'll mention them. BBB is Better Business Bureau, a national non-profit group that keeps tabs on scams, frauds, and reports of improper business practices. (Further note: my New Zealander beta tells me that there is a similar organization in NZ, but it has a different name.)

For the curious? The Revolutionary War (or the Colonial Revolt, or the First American Revolution -- your title for it may vary) was in fact fought by an integrated army. The majority of the units were combined forces, with only a few all-black combat units. The U.S. did not repeat this feat until 1959 when it became involved in the Vietnamese Unpleasantness. (Damn if I'm going to call sixteen years of troops, machines, and money 'a police action', 'peace-keeping force', or anything short of a war. I mean, yeah, we had a peace treaty, but we never declared war on Vietnam. We were 'supporting our allies.' Therefore, it's an Unpleasantness. Can you tell I'm Southern myself?)

Anne Lindsey told Duncan she was pregnant in "Mortal Sins."

Connor asked Methos about his intentions in _Crystalline Patterns._ Connor's overdue debt to Methos was discussed in _Quarrels of All Kinds._ And yeah, Connor not only used a very conservative rate of interest, but he compounded annually, I believe, instead of quarterly. (g)

Finally, Sir Edmund Burne-Jones was one of the Pre-Raphaelite painters; really gorgeous stuff.

The line Duncan remembered about bows is from Mary Renault's _The Persian Boy_. The comment is that it's the strongest men, like the strongest bows, who must be unstrung occasionally lest the constant tension warp the grain out of the true. And Aidan's surrender to them was in
(Watch the author flinch. **This note is not for the squeamish. You have been warned.**)

Damita was impressed with Enrique's technique in dealing with Connor because, contrary to what even I had expected, Enrique was the one who castrated Connor. Removing his genitalia was (theoretically) a way of removing Connor's honor and, hopefully, rendering him into a manus, a word which means meek, gentle, humble, lamblike; a castrated animal or person. By voluntarily associating with a 'witch,' i.e., Aidan, Connor had lost any claim to honor in Enrique's eyes, therefore Enrique considered it a justified punishment before returning him to Aidan.

(By the way. Yes, I really could do an entire essay on men, women, anatomy as it relates to psychology and honor, etc, etc. -- but let's not go there, hmm? Enrique doesn't really bear much thinking on, so let's take it as read and move along.)

The Franciscan brothers in New Mexico, and I'm postulating Enrique was one, were not gentle; one Fray (Franciscan Brother) Nicolas Hidalgo was notorious for the following reason. He grabbed a Pueblo Indian 'by the member and twisted it so much that it broke in half.' (Ramon A. Gutierrez, *When Jesus Came, The Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500-1846*, p. 210)

For the curious? The Franciscan treatment of the Pueblos and attempts to stamp out the native religion were sufficiently appalling that from 1680-1692, the Pueblo revolted against the abuses. Pueblo forces killed 21 of the 32 Franciscans, and over 380 Spanish officials and colonists, as well as destroying the churches and any objects of Spanish origin. They then purified themselves ritualistically from the stain of baptism and rejoined, by Pueblo rites, all couples who had been married by the missionaries. When Spain finally took over the territory again, they refused to grant the Franciscans authority to eradicate the Pueblo religion.

Many thanks to Krista and Alyss for this information.

Oyá is the Santeria goddess of the winds, the whirlwind, and the gates of the cemetery. Her number is nine, which recalls her title as Yansa, or "Mother of nine", under which she rules over the dead. Also associated with the colors of maroon, flowery patterns, and nine different colors. She is a fierce warrior who rides to war with Changó (sharing lightning and fire with him) and was once the wife of Ogún. She is essentially the Goddess of the Niger River, and is the source of Chango's power. Her Catholic analogy is Our Lady of the Candelaria, and her necklaces are nine white beads alternating with nine black beads. Much thanks to Merrie Gail and Merewyn for info on this.

Hakka is a Chinese dialect spoken in both mainland China and the Republic of Taiwan.

"My strength is as the strength of ten, Because my heart is pure." Tennyson's "Sir Galahad", st. 1

Does anyone **not** know the old jokes about young whippersnappers having it easy, 'cause in the old days you had to walk to school, in the snow/mud/driving rain/bad weather of your choice, uphill, both ways... and you were grateful? (Mind, if your options were going to school or working the fields all day, you probably **were** grateful. But it's an awfully old joke.)

**Discipuleie meie** -- student mine, in the vocative form for direct address to someone. Latin.

I ran into the Mari Llywd in Susan Cooper's excellent series of books, 'The Dark is Rising.' I believe it was in *Silver on the Tree*, the final book. The description and terror are hers, as is the showing of the beast in Welsh villages. The speculation on where the creature originated/what it means is mine. If I'm incorrect, please, let me know.

Richard, 1486 -- Richard III of England, last of the Yorkist kings, was killed on Bosworth Field in
1485. The Yorks were greatly loved by the Irish and even after Henry VII took the throne, Ireland was the center of loyalist opposition. That would be something of an understatement: the Irish refused to accept British Parliamentary edicts and killed any messengers bearing them while building up a force to put Richard's heir on the throne. Yes, Shakespeare did malign Richard III sadly in sheer historical terms, but it's a great play, and let's be realistic here, shall we? Shakespeare wrote in the Tudor era under Tudor patronage. It would have been as much as his life or freedom was worth to write something favorable about the man who lost on the field of battle to the first Tudor. But for a fictionalized account of why Richard probably isn't responsible, try Josephine Tey's *The Daughter of Time*. Fun mystery. For a more balanced opinion, as Tey is fairly solidly in the Ricardian camp, I'd recommend P. M. Kendall's *Richard III*.

Aidan lost a student, Holly Curtis, in 1917. One of Luther's students killed her at Owain's instigation, and was himself later killed by Rebecca Horne. What neither Aidan nor Owain knew was that Holly and Marcus Constantine were lovers. David Braxon (Barak's son) studied with Edana in the second century BCE; he was caught up in the ghettos during World War II and ended up at Auschwitz. His Quickening is the reason Sol Goldberg ended up recruited to the Watchers.

"There is a tide in the affairs of men, Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; Omitted, all the voyage of their life Is bound in shallows and in miseries. On such a full sea are we now afloat, And we must take the current when it serves Or lose our ventures." Brutus, in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, IV, iii, 217

"Iacta alea est." Gaius Julius Caesar's quote before crossing the Rubicon: The die is cast. Aidan's addition was "Tomorrow, oh Fates, we shall see. We who are about to fight salute you." (Yes, the usual version of that is *Nos morituri te salutamus* -- We who are about to die salute you.)

4/20:

Techado Mesa does exist; its size, alignment, and all other details were as exact as I could make them without ever having been there. The observatory at Datil also exists, as do numerous reservations within a twenty-mile distance. However, I have not let precise geography interfere with the plot, either. (g)

The quote from *1776* is one of Ben Franklin's lines: "... rebellion is always legal in the first person -- such as 'our' rebellion. It is only in the third person -- 'their' rebellion -- that it is illegal." God, I love that musical.

Have you ever done a play on an all-black stage? When we did *Oliver!* my director marked the edges of the steps and risers with florescent tape after one too many of us tried to break/sprain/strain things before opening night.

Technically, a hootenanny is a (mostly) Southern term for a party. But it's one you expect will get very, very rowdy, the kind of party where the drunks outnumber the sober, at least three fights break out, four couples break up, and the police get called in a few times. (g)

Aidan's source of information on Rafferty was the vampire, Lucius LaCroix. And LaCroix's sense of humor is sufficiently dry that taking it with a grain of salt is like taking coals to Newcastle.

Starlites are light-gathering scopes. They add a great deal to your night-vision.

Grayson was Darius' student, and broke away from him when Darius took the Light Quickening
outside Paris. He challenged Duncan and lost in "Band of Brothers." Another character who's sadly underutilized in fic.

The last line war (i.e., the other one I know of at this point <g>) was fought between Steshka of Kiev and Marcus Constantine in 1118. There were four on each side in that one, and it was considered large.

Damien's insult to Jirina -- When Hamlet told Ophelia, "Get thee to a nunnery, go," it did not mean to a convent. A 'nunnery' was a slang term for a whorehouse or brothel.

_Cymro_ -- Singular of _Cymry_. Welshman.

I don't believe I'm translating... oh, why not. Catamite -- a boy kept for pederastic purposes. In other words, the receiving partner in m/m anal sex. Sodomite -- a person who practices sodomy, which is unnatural, presumed anal, copulation, although it can include animals. In this case, the penetrating party in anal sex, since Alex refuses to deal with four-legged beasties.

'bloated warthog' -- This is the insult that got Connor into that damned duel on Boston Commons in 1783.

One of the standard illustrations to explain optical illusions is a black and white image which either looks like a goblet or two profiled faces, depending on how you look at it.

Methos' time as Semnut, and the early relationships between Aidan, Methos, and Ramirez/Ramesen can be found in "Force of Habit."

_Bella_ is Italian for lovely lady; _bellus_, on the other hand, means pretty boy and it's not particularly flattering when directed at someone who's past puberty.

Methos' insult to Bianca: _una fessa_ is Italian for a sucker, a gullible fool. Except in some of the southern Italian dialects where it also means cunt....

The quote regarding homosexuality is Leviticus 20:13.

Santeria: Much thanks to Merrie Gail, Amand-r, and Merewyn for help on this; all mistakes are, of course, mine. Santeria is a South American variant on voodoo, of which Oyá is one of the primary deities. Others include Chango, god of fire, and Ogun, god of war. Essentially the orishas, the spirits and gods, have a greater skill at moving energy than we do. A santera or santero (priestess or priest) will entreat the orishas to move energy to a specific purpose or a specific person's benefit. They do this by paying for the favor with rum, tobacco, food, drink, their own energy, sometimes their own blood, sometimes the sacrifice of a black cockerel: essentially, payment is made with life or its pleasures.

Yes, I've been writing how Farrell ran into Kastagir. It's hilarious and will be out as soon as those two chortling maniacs tell me what the Germans had to do with this whole mess.

No, I'm not joking on this: "Get your ashes hauled" used to be a fairly insulting idiom for getting laid, with the implication being that all you could afford/get was back alley sex. You know, the place you took the ashes to throw them out?

Yes, as an initiated priestess of several centuries' standing, Aidan most assuredly can consecrate ground. Usually she wouldn't, but with Connor's hand gone, it seemed a reasonable precaution. That the rest of her line agreed is evident by how many of them strained muscles helping her arrange boulders in a loose circle among some of the trees to mark the boundaries of the Holy Ground.
The Four Musketeers, the second of the 1970s Michael York Musketeer movies, opened with the Huguenots trying to execute Rochefort. The firing squad fumble-fingered their way through loading the guns, fired... and all missed. When they started to reload, Rochefort observed, "Why bother? I may simply die of old age." Great movies if you haven't seen them.

Chiquita -- Spanish for little girl

Puttana -- Italian for whore

Dhonnchaidh mac Maire -- Duncan, son of Mary. His mother was Mary MacLeod.

Quotes from Duncan & Enrique's fight:

"I am not come to destroy but to fulfill." Mark 5:17

"The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose." Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, I, 3

"The prince of darkness is a gentleman." Shakespeare, King Lear, III, 4

"But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you:" Mark 5:44

"God judgeth the righteous, and God is angry with the wicked every day." Psalms 7:11

"For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." Mark 6:14-15, emphasis Duncan's

PCP is Phencyclidine, from the chemical name p(henyl)cyclohexylpiperidine. Per my encyclopedia, its usage results in lowered sensibility to pain, a tendency towards violence, and schizophrenia. It affects the ability to think clearly, the perception of time, and a person's mood. It frequently results in anxiety, irritability, depression, as well as disturbing the heart function. One of my friends whose husband is a policeman says it makes the user feel and behave like the android from Terminator: no matter what you do, they don't care and won't drop. The Whoopi Goldberg movie, Fatal Beauty, deals with PCP and shows what it takes to take down someone hopped up on PCP. Besides that, it's an entertaining movie.

Corps a corps -- literally, body to body

Yes, duels to first blood were usually fought until the first blood hit the ground, not until first blood was drawn.

The shema is a profession of the covenant between the Jews and Yahweh, which begins "Shema, Yisroel" -- "Hear, Oh Israel." Rabbi Akiva is said to have first spoken the shema as the Romans tortured him. And no, Aidan didn't See anything; she simply knew David better than to think he'd beg for his head.

Brighid -- Celtic goddess of fire, poetry, and arcane lore, especially divination and prophecy. Also the protector of women in childbirth. The Catholics refer to her as Saint Bride of Kildare.

Lugh Samildanach -- Celtic god renowned for being skilled at all trades and crafts.

(Red) Macha and the Morrigan -- two of the Celtic battle goddesses, thought to sometimes take the form of carrion crows.

Goibhniu -- Celtic god of blacksmithing and craftsmanship.

Sight, or the Second Sight, or foreseeing. No one has ever said that it's an easy, or easily mastered, ability. It comes with no sureties and does not automatically convey on its recipient any of the skills that might be most useful, such as an ability to see what would be most useful, or to explain clearly what was seen or sensed, or, most importantly, to convince others that what you saw is real. If you doubt this, might I suggest you look at the prophecies of Nostradamus, which don't seem to make sense until after they've happened -- if then? While you're at it, read the Greek myth
of Cassandra.

Fasil's quickening in 1985 -- In *Highlander: the Movie* (yes, the first one), Connor's fight in the parking garage for Madison Square Garden was with an immortal named Fasil.

Well, from what I saw of Terrence's cooking in "Dramatic License" I wouldn't let him near a kitchen. <g>

Martin Hyde (from "Prodigal Son") believed in hunting old and powerful heads, and he thought that the fastest way to find such immortals was to hound young immortals implacably until they bolted to their teachers for help. Chasing Rich back to Duncan was a mistake he didn't survive.

*Merda* -- Italian for 'shit'. *Maledizione* -- Italian for 'damn it'. From the same Latin base that gave us 'malediction'.

Christ and the moneychangers: John 2:14-15

4/21:

A reference librarian friend of mine tells me that the Victorians considered snake rings symbolic of eternity and were thus fond of using them for engagement rings.

Alex's list of immortals who've made Duncan's last few years hell: Grayson -- Darius' old student from "Band of Brothers"; Kalas -- the monk turned opera singer from "Executioner's Song"; St. Cloud -- the assassin/thief from "For Tomorrow We Die"; Matlin and Kurlow -- the pair of thieves and rogues from "Blackmail"; Kanwulf -- a warrior-priest of Odin who killed Duncan's father from "Homeland"; and Slan "the Cat" Quince, from "The Gathering" -- and yes, Duncan killed him, not Connor. The dark quickening, of course, took place in "Something Wicked" and "Deliverance."

4/22:

The song Matthew was singing was an old call to arms from the first crusade, back in the late 11th century; more than a hundred years before he was born, actually, but old war songs do stick around.... Words, and translation, found and sent to me by Gypsy Laughing Otter, to whom my thanks!
Chevalier, mult estes guariz,  
Quant Deu a vus fait sa clamur  
Des Turs e des Amoraviz,  
Ki li unt fait tels deshenors.  
Cher a tort unt ses fieuz saisiz;  
Bien en devums avoir dolour,  
Cher la fud Deu primes servi  
E reconuu pur segnuer.

Knights, your salvation is assured  
since God has appealed to you  
to take His side against the Turks and  
Almoravids,  
who have done Him such great dishonor.  
They have seized his fiefs against all right.  
We must feel deep pain at this,  
for it was there that God was first served  
and recognized as Lord.

(Ki ore irat od Loovis  
Ja mar d'enferm avrat pourur,  
Char s'almoee en iert en pareiis  
Od les angles nostre Segnor.)

Rohais has been taken, as you know,  
and Christians are sorely troubled.  
Churches have been burnt and destroyed;  
God is no longer sacrificed there. Knights, renowned  
in arms, think of this and offer  
your bodies to Him who was  
crucified for you.

(He who goes with Louis...)

Pries es Rohais, ben les savez  
Dunt chretiens sunt esmaiez  
Les musteirs are e desertez;  
Deus n'i est mais sacrifiez.  
Chivaliers, cher vus purpensez,  
Vus ki d'armes estes preisez,  
A celui vos cors presenteiz  
Ki pur vus fut en cruiz drecez.

Let us go and conquer Moses on Mount Sinai,  
let us not leave him any longer in  
the hands of the Saracens, nor his  
staff with which he separated with  
a single blow the waters of the Red  
Sea when the great host was with  
him; and Pharaoh came in his turn  
as he pursued them and perished  
with all his men.

(Ki ore irat od Loovis...)

Alum conquer Moises,  
Ki gist el munt de Sinaii,  
A Saragins nel laisum mais,  
Ne la verge dunt il partid  
La Roge mer tut ad un fais,  
Quant le gran pople le seguitt;  
E Pharaon revint apres:  
Ele e li suon furent perit.

(Hi who goes with Louis...)

Actually, I can just see one of the really busy cities, and two sets of immortals arranging a duel at sunrise in an out-of-the-way spot... only to find one of each set getting there first. Could be hilarious. I'm half-tempted to write something like this, but if someone else wants to beat me to it, feel free and let me know, please, because I definitely want to read it.

Erik Olafson stalked Kyra in "The Gathering Darkness."

Matthew of Salisbury, a.k.a. Agent Matthew McCormick, studied with Ceirdwyn, who studied with Marcus Constantine. His two students, that I know of, are Cory Raines (yes, the bank robber -- his first student, taken when Matt wasn't even thirty years into the Game, so cut him some slack!) and
Carl Robinson (per the Watcher CD). Matt was in "Manhunt;" Cory was in "Money No Object;" and Carl was in "Run For Your Life" and "Manhunt."

4/23:

Kate and Nick rescued Don Caruso's daughter in "Two of Hearts" and have had passable Mafia contacts ever since.

4/24:

"A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines."  Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance"

Maria Alcobar is an old friend of Rich's from his days before he met Duncan. She's currently a model, and was lucky to survive Kristin. (She appeared in "Chivalry.")

"And this, too, shall pass away." From Abraham Lincoln's *Address to the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society*, September 30, 1859.

4/27:

Katika and Katyonka (kitten) are Hungarian diminutives of Katherine. Pishta is the Hungarian diminutive of Ishtvan.

The Polisarios are Saharan Nationalists who've been fighting for independence since 1976. When Spain withdrew from the Spanish Sahara in 1976, Algeria, Mauritania, and Morocco all laid claims to the phosphates-rich area. In 1979, Mauritania withdrew and Morocco laid claim to the area. Algeria has been sponsoring the Polisarios. The UN sponsored a truce in 1991, but to the best of my knowledge a referendum for self-determination has not yet been held....

Yes, at some point I will post the list of Aidan's students, including where and when she found them, and who's dead or alive. Later. That list is now up [here](#).

4/29:

Bast or Bastet -- Egyptian patron goddess of love, cats, and fertility.

Last: yes, you can use the techniques I've described in the fights, and they do work as I said. No, I won't give any more details here. If you want to know what styles, please write me and we'll discuss it. But oh, yeah, you can knock someone out that way: Sensei did it to me, once....

Works inspired by this: *Second Rate Thief* by *Raine Wynd*, *Never Swear on the Lady's Honor* by *Alice in Stonyland (Raine Wynd)*

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