

Chessman Chronicles New Immortal in Town

"I am a Watcher. I take this oath to observe and record the lives of any Immortals I encounter. I will do so without interfering in their lives, nor allowing them to know of my presence. To this I swear and pledge my life, so help me God."

Hey, I was only in this for the job. I had no idea what weird society these guys were trying to project, but the job offer to help build a really interesting database sounded too good to be true. Especially at the salary they were willing to pay.

I looked around the room at the couple dozen other new "recruits". Most of us were on the young side, though not all. There were two that looked like they were just this side of becoming street bums, three that looked like former military, and one that almost had to be a hooker. Not that I really knew what one looked like, mind you, but she looked just like the prostitutes on TV. The rest of us looked like we were just out of school. Come to think of it, the good looking red-head over talking to one of the Directors might be old enough to be a junior in high school any day now. Since I already knew at least something about each of them, I already knew there were seven nationalities represented in this "class". Whoever these Watchers were, they were definitely multi-national.

"Isn't this so exciting?" asked Andrea, one of the few Americans in the room. And the only other American student. For that reason, we had drifted together over the past couple weeks.

"Huh?" Yeah, me and my witty rejoinder. Okay, so I wasn't suave with the ladies.

"Finally becoming Watchers, Ryan. I mean, now we'll be assigned to real Immortals and start learning what they're really like!" Andrea seemed to be just brimming over with excitement, though I couldn't really understand it.

"Hey, like I keep telling you, I'm just doing this job for the database work 'cause it'll look good on my resume. Everyone keeps talking about watching Immortals. I mean, are they really, well, immortal? Like never die?" I still had a hard time believing that, even after all the evidence I'd seen here.

She gave me a strange look indeed. "Haven't you been listening to the lectures over the last week? Yes, they're immortal. Yes, they CAN die, but only by decapitation. We Watch them." As if this explained everything.

Whatever.

The packet of instructions I had been given earlier by Watcher Geibhart told me to find someone named Joe Dawson for placement after receiving the membership tattoo. I wasn't all that keen on receiving one, but figured it was some kind of weird initiation thing. The line by the side of the room was already forming of the new recruits, and Andrea and I joined it.

"Who're you going with?" I asked just to pass the time.

"Someone named Albert Gunn from the North Eastern America Territories. Hope I don't have to work in New York. I hate big cities."

She and I continued to chat until it was her turn to get the tattoo. That I couldn't watch, so I scanned the room. The two weeks I'd been here in Paris had been very educational for me, though I wasn't sure what I would do with some of the knowledge and skills. Stealth, improved recall, forced entry, and using all types of surveillance equipment might be good skills to have if I were going to be working for the CIA, but I really doubted I'd need them driving a keyboard. Oh, well. Who was I to argue against my employer's training methods? Yeah, yeah. I may actually have to Watch an Immortal sometime, but I rather doubted it. Unless it was at a gaming convention or a bookstore, I fit in about as well as a crocodile in the Mojave Desert.

I heard Andrea asking the tattoo artist to point out Mr. Gunn to her. I turned back just in time for her to point out one of the obviously American men talking together over by the lectern. Andrea thanked the French woman and headed his way.

I sat down. "Nervous?" she asked in a semi-amused tone.

"Is it that obvious?"

"Well, since you just gave me the wrong wrist to put this tattoo on, yes, it is." Her eyes glinted with laughter, but she was trying to keep a straight face.

Flushing, I corrected that mistake and let her get to work. All in all, it wasn't too bad. I didn't faint once. After my ordeal was over, I asked her about Mr. Dawson.

"That's me," came a rough but friendly voice from beside me. I turned and looked him over. Average height, beard, mostly gray hair, and a nice cane were added to the casual shirt and slacks he was wearing.

Shaking his hand, I introduced myself. "Hi, I'm Ryan Chessman. I got hired to work on a computer system for you?" He waved me toward the door and started ambling that way. Oh, that's what the cane's for. His stiff gait could only be due to prosthetic legs. Judging by his apparent age, it'd almost have to be from the Vietnam War.

"Yeah, we're finally getting a decent computer, and I needed someone to put the database and security together for us. You came to us with good references from Mr. Yeager. Both for skill and discretion. Think you can hack it?" The tone had a little challenge in it, but the smile was friendly enough.

I chuckled. "I thought part of the job description was to PREVENT people from hacking it."

He gave me a wry grin. "You know what I mean. Come on. Our flight back to Seacouver leaves in a couple hours and I need to make arrangements to restock my bar with the local grape pressings before I head over to the airport."

"Mr. Chessman."

"Hmm?" I asked as I looked up from my computer. Mr. Dawson was standing right in front of me. I hadn't even heard him come in.

"In case you hadn't noticed, there's a flu bug going around. And Angie just called in sick. I'll need you to follow Richie Ryan for a few days until she gets better."

"Me?" I squeaked. Okay, it wasn't a REAL squeak, but my voice hadn't done that since I was fifteen. I cleared my throat. "Uh, okay, but you should know that I've never followed anyone around. What if I screw up and he sees me?" This was a real cause for concern. What with all the rumors of Immortals and some renegade Watchers hunting each other a while back.

"Don't worry. He knows about us, but isn't a Hunter."

That made me feel better. At least if he cornered me, I had a good excuse for following him. "Wait a minute, he KNOWS about us?"

Mr. Dawson looked pained for a moment. "Yeah. It's a long story. I'm surprised you didn't hear it at Watcher's U," he responded. "Anyway, he does, and he isn't dangerous. At least to us. He recently finished a hunting expedition, and is still recovering. Taking several heads in a short time apparently takes a while to recover from. At any rate, it should be easy to tail him. Look him up for his current address. Tomorrow morning should be early enough to start. Any questions?"

I thought about it a moment. I had learned what I needed at WU, but my practice marks weren't the best. Okay, they weren't anywhere near. They didn't have to be for a computer jock, but they made me try all the same. "Yeah, why me?"

Instead of answering, he looked around the room. Of the two dozen chairs, mine was the only one with a warm body in it. He turned to me with a raised eyebrow.

Okay, stupid question.

"Er, I mean, no questions."

Trying to hide a smile, he turned and walked away.

Okay, first thing's first. I saved off what I was doing and entered the archives to learn what I could about one "Ryan, Richie". Turned out to be short in time, but long on detail. He'd apparently been spotted almost immediately and wasn't tough to follow. Okay, only immortal for a few years, teacher was Duncan MacLeod. Oh, that's how he was spotted. MacLeod's Watcher saw him go through first death. And that was one Joseph Dawson. Small world. I wrote down his current address and a few of his favorite haunts before calling it a night.

On my way home, I marveled at how my life was turning out. On graduation, I didn't really believe what they had told me. Enough data had passed in front of me over the intervening months that I did believe in it now. What a strange world.

Since his Chronicles said he wasn't an early riser (and thank God for small favors), I didn't feel the need to show up until seven the next morning. Even so, it was a serious problem dragging myself out of bed. A large breakfast and a fifteen minute drive later, I was at an inconspicuous spot a half block down from the exit of his apartment building. By a stroke of luck, that spot could also see into part of his front room.

I was sorely disappointed in my first day's Watching. Other than a trip to the grocery store (he ate mostly frozen dinners and junk food), he never left his apartment. Oh, I know what the Surveillance instructor said, "Watching most Immortals is usually as exciting as watching paint dry. NOTHING happens. But we must Watch anyway, because anything can happen at any time. And when that happens, it's enough excitement to last you the rest of your life."

By dusk, it was clear that he was determined to vegetate in front of the TV until the fall of civilization.

I made my way back to the local headquarters to make the entry into his Chronicles.

"How'd it go?"

Mr. Dawson again. What, didn't this guy EVER sleep? "Unless you want to know what his favorite television station is, or his preferred brand of

toothpaste, there's nothing I can tell you."

He chuckled. "Well, keep at it. There are a few Hunters in town. He's not a high profile target, but you never know. I'll let you know when Angie is better."

I just nodded. Maybe tomorrow he would actually DO something.

For the first six hours, it didn't look like he was going to. The good news was, I was getting plenty of reading done.

Finally, he came out of his place and headed over toward his motorcycle. Considering that the time was in the middle of the afternoon, there was no telling where he may be going. I hustled over to my car and followed him for only a few minutes until he pulled up beside DeSalvo's. Ah, yes. I remembered that this was one of his more frequent stops. And I also remembered that there was a surveillance post set up somewhere nearby, since this was the home and business of MacLeod.

Where's that post . . . I looked at all the line of sight upper story windows in the area until I finally spotted one that seemed to have a camera lens almost against the glass. Let's hope that's it. The downstairs mailboxes had one listed as belonging to a William Spielack. And that apartment number was on the second floor. As I recalled from my recent education, any name with the word "watch" or any derivative was potentially a front for Watchers. I hoped Spielack was close enough.

"Who is it?" An older, male, but not unfriendly voice answered my knock.

"Ryan Chessman."

"Who?"

"A friend of Richie's. Angie asked me to keep an eye out for him." That should be obscure enough to anyone except MacLeod's current Watcher.

The door almost immediately opened to a man who could've been given a red suit and asked to play Santa Claus at any children's party. Except for the blue tattoo on his wrist. I held up my wrist and he nodded, backing out of the door. "Come on in. My name's Robby Jackson. I saw Ryan enter, and expected Angie to come in a few minutes ago." The small apartment was clearly set up to be a surveillance post. Good camera on a tripod by the window, binoculars on the sill, two card tables, opened laptop plugged into a phone outlet, microwave, hot plate, a few chairs, and a folding cot. Not exactly the Ritz, but not too bad.

"She's sick with this flu. Dawson assigned me to him until she gets better."

This explanation seemed to satisfy him. He went back to his seat by the window and picked up his binoculars. "They're doing a few katas. After that, they'll practice for at least an hour. They're very predictable about that. Anyway, it gives us someone to talk to instead of staring at the walls all day long."

"At least you have WALLS. I've got this nice little niche by the apartment building."

He looked at me, almost smiling. "Read Angie's personal notes, as well as Ryan's official Chronicles."

"Huh?"

He shook his head and pointed at the laptop. It turns out to be logged into the Watcher database. After a few seconds, I pulled up Angie's notes, and discovered what Mr. Jackson was referring to. I sighed and tilted forward until my forehead was on the table. "Dumb, Chessman. Dumb, dumb, dumb." Of course she would have a post set up. Nice as that niche was during September, it wouldn't be habitable during January.

I turned back to Mr. Jackson. His mouth kept twitching, trying to contain a smile. "Um, I see what you mean. Thanks." I gave him a wry grin to show I wasn't angry. He gave me a deep chuckle as the smile broke through. "I'm rather new at this."

He gave me a shocked, "No!", one hand coming up to the side of his face in total amazement.

I glared. He laughed. "I shouldn't be so hard on you. You have to learn some way or another. Ryan's as good as anybody, and better than some. You could've been assigned to Kalas for instance."

That was true. At least Ryan only killed Immortals. And he was fair about it. Unlike that St. Cloud I'd heard about at WU.

Robby (he wouldn't allow me to call him Mr. Jackson) and I spent a few hours talking as our charges spent the time sweating. I watched some of it, and discovered that Ryan was quite good, but MacLeod was fluid motion. There was an artistic grace about him that made it nearly hypnotic to watch, but the results me glad I wasn't on the wrong side of that katana.

Thanking Robby for the information on Angie's post, I left just after Ryan did. He went straight back to his apartment block, but seemed twitchy as he climbed off his bike. Walking toward the door to the apartment building, he stopped dead in his tracks, hand reaching into his coat. I snapped my gaze in the direction he was looking and saw what had is attention. For good reason.

Looking to be in her mid-twenties, 5'9", 125 pounds. And she was staring right at him with a smile that had nothing to do with humor. Underneath that jewelry, makeup and hair dye, she would be reasonably attractive, but I've never been into the pierced nose and purple hair spikes thing myself.

Ryan cautiously walked over as she continued to stare at him, and us at her. With a wave of one hand, she indicated a quiet alley on my side of the street. He seemed to argue, gesturing at the passing pedestrians. Her smile vanished and she pointed again. Shrugging, he indicated she should lead onward. She gave her hungry smile again and crossed the street, walking past my car, and into the alley. As I got out to follow, I noticed Ryan

rubbing the back of his head. I couldn't blame him for being nervous, really.

Though I didn't try to sneak up too close, I did want to stay close enough. I had just peeked over the most disgusting trash dumpster this side of Mexico City when they started talking again.

"We don't have to do this." That was the first time I had heard him speak. Youngish voice, but calm.

She pulled a short sword out of a scabbard across her back. "My name is Sandra Rocke. There can be only one. Prepare to die." Wasn't she so very pleasant?

As he pulled his sword out of his coat, his voice shifted into a blatantly fake Spanish accent, "My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die."

She frowned in confusion; I nearly broke out into laughter. I could get to like this guy.

He had already set himself in a defensive stance, and she moved in. It didn't last long. Though aggressive, she clearly wasn't up to his caliber. After the third cut on her sword arm, she dropped it and tried to rush him. In a duck and spin, he got out from in front of her rush and hamstrung her. In a moment, he was standing over her kneeling form, "Live or die?"

"There can be only one!" Not terribly bright or original, but you had to give her marks for bravery.

Sighing, he completed the cut. I'd heard that witnessing a Quickening was incredible, but I was a little too close for my comfort. I ducked behind the dumpster for safety as the alley began to be lit with jagged bolts of lightening. One struck the light pole directly above me and everything went dark.

Ugh. What happened? I'm flat on my back, no recollection of how I got there, and my head feels like it's about to fall off. "Musta been a helluva party," I muttered.

Someone laughed. "That it was, Ryan, but not what you may be thinking."

I turned my head. And then I stopped, closed my eyes, and turned the rest of the way, much slower. When I opened my eyes again they focused on someone vaguely familiar. 5'6", 120 pounds, short hair somewhere between blonde and brown, brown eyes, mobile and expressive face. I tried to place her, but my head felt a neat freak was in there with one of those wire rug beaters. I must have been frowning at her, because she said, "Andrea, remember, from WU? You must have hit your head harder than I thought."

Oh, yeah. Andrea, Watchers, Immortals, Richie Ryan. I closed my eyes again, "I'm not cut out for this."

She must have thought that was funny for some reason. I certainly didn't. "What happened?"

She stifled her giggles enough to get out, "I was following Rocke. She found Ryan, they fought, he won, the light fell on you, he left, I rescued you."

I tried to piece that one together as I rubbed my temples. Much to my surprise, I discovered that I remembered most of it. Ryan didn't see me on his way out, or he went out the other end of the alley. The dumpster protected me from the brunt of the light's fall, but I still got clipped. "What about Rocke's body? Where'd Ryan go?"

"I called Joe. He's sending a cleanup crew. Richie Ryan went that way. How're you doing?"

Well, that took care of two problems. Ryan had headed back to his apartment, and I was perfectly willing to report that minor tidbit to Mr. Dawson. Immediately before requesting a month off. How did I feel? "Not bad, considering. The light must have knocked me out cold." My hand reached up behind my left ear where it felt the worst. Yep, lots of dried blood. "That'll be fun to let heal. All in all, much better than I have any right to expect."

A minivan pulled into the alley from the direction opposite of Ryan's apartment. I began trying to think of a good reason to be found lying on the ground with a decapitated woman thirty feet away. I wasn't having much luck. Mr. Dawson climbed out of the side door and started toward Andrea and me as three others got out and headed over to the body with cameras, rubber gloves, a body bag, and a sword case.

Once he got to us, he turned to see that his crew was doing their job properly. He shook his head and started mumbling, "During daylight. As if it wasn't ugly enough business." He turned back to us and offered me a hand up. "You okay?"

Standing, I held a hand to the alley wall to brace myself and to make sure it wasn't moving. "Nothing's wrong a couple aspirin and a night's sleep won't cure. Light knocked me out cold once the Quickening started. Andrea said Ryan went back toward his apartment. I can file this all tomorrow. Mind if I just go home?"

"Give your keys to Andrea. She'll take you. You're not driving if you may have a concussion." He turned from me and addressed my erstwhile nurse. "Andrea, since you followed Rocke all the way from New York, you have a choice. You can either go back there, or you can stay here and work for me. Think awhile about it. We'll stop by Ryan's place after cleaning up here and give you a ride back to your car. After that, I'd like you to file your report tonight or tomorrow morning, but I'll give you a few days to decide where you want to go after that. Fair enough?"

She seemed to agree, so I pulled my keys out of my pocket and pointed toward the car.

On our way back to my place, we traded stories. I told her of my assignment on Mr. Dawson's database and unexpected assignment to Ryan. She'd gone to New York after graduation and been immediately assigned to Sandra Rocke. Sandra had apparently been quite new to the Game and was a big believer in the "get them before they get me, we're all hunters" philosophy. She hunted with a reasonable degree of success on the East

Coast before moving out west. Her style depended on raw fury and chaos. Faced with such an unpredictable foe, most opponents became confused, flustered, and ultimately made a mistake. Richie Ryan had been her first challenge out here. He didn't get flustered, and she made the mistake. Andrea hadn't liked her much. Can't blame her there. The woman tried to kill my assignment for no reason whatsoever. Well, no GOOD reason, anyway. And on top of it, nearly gotten my head split open too.

Once back to my apartment, I considered inviting her in, but claimed to feel too ill to be a decent host. Besides, Mr. Dawson and his crew would be around in a few minutes to give her a ride. If she was insulted or disappointed, she didn't show it.

In truth, I was feeling pretty good, but had no idea how to act around her. Yeah, yeah, mid twenties is prime dating time for those of us who aren't already married, but I never did have the nerve to ask anyone out. Okay, so I'm a coward when it comes to women.

Once inside, I immediately stripped out of my bloodied and torn clothes and pitched them. The shower made me feel human again, and calmed me down. The dried blood came up easily, but I couldn't find the cut. Probably buried under the hair somewhere. After fixing a quick frozen dinner for myself, I crashed.

The next morning found me filling out the appropriate paperwork for a Watcher who witnessed a Challenge. Who the combatants were, relative skill, time of day, location, weather conditions, what swords they used, any conversation before, during, or occasionally after. Reasonably straight forward questions, but I never was one who enjoyed paperwork for the sake of bureaucracy.

"How're you feeling?" Damn, this guy can continually sneak up on me.

"Not too bad. As promised, here's the report," I said, gesturing to the screen.

"Fair enough. Oh, Angie's better. You're off Ryan. Back to the dull database."

"Amen," I muttered. "Leave this spy stuff to James Bond."

He just shook his head and chuckled.

Without having to try to be inconspicuous outside an apartment building for the third day in a row, things went much easier. I got back into working on the database and went home feeling that all was right with the world.

The next morning started at a much more respectable hour than had my three most recent. I actually didn't have to suffer through a sunrise this time. Cleaning up after breakfast, my juice glass slipped out of my hand and luckily landed in the sink. Clumsy. I gingerly reached in to begin pulling it out and felt a sharp pain along the side of my index finger. Okay, VERY clumsy. Grabbing a mostly clean towel, I wrapped it around the bleeding gash and went into the bathroom. I unwrapped it again and thrust it under the running faucet. With my free hand, I opened the medicine cabinet and pulled out the box of Band-Aids. Anybody who's ever tried to open one of those stinking little things with one hand can well imagine the contortions I went through for the next two minutes.

By this time, my cut finger was numb. I pulled it out and dried it with a handy tissue, picked up the (finally) ready bandage and looked at the cut. And looked. And looked.

The finger wasn't cut.

I flexed it. It was a little stiff from the cold, but otherwise seemed just fine. I looked down into the sink. Yep, little spots of blood in the sink, and a bloody towel that I had wrapped it in.

The cut had healed itself in less than five minutes.

That wasn't possible.

One explanation jumped out of my subconscious and screamed for attention. No. That can't be it. That can't possibly be it. I can't be . . .

I shook my head. What were the odds? World population of six billion, roughly five hundred of them running around. One in twelve million? Something like that. Hell, I had a better chance of hitting the lottery. But a guy from college HAD hit the lottery. Walked away with a little over ten million. So the odds weren't completely impossible.

NO! That can't be it. Hallucinations! That had to be it. What could cause me to believe what I'm seeing? Drugs? A dream? Something I ate last night? Little green men from Mars? I snorted. Yeah, maybe the Romulans kidnapped me.

My mind kept churning through the problem, but didn't come up with any explanation that I was comfortable with. After considerable thought, I realized that there were only three possibilities. I was dead and this was the afterlife. I was insane. I was Immortal.

The first two didn't bear much thought. I couldn't do anything about either of them. Not that the third was much better, but it at least it was a starting place. That one was testable.

Now that I had something to do, I went back into the kitchen. The broken glass was still in the sink. One of the top pieces had a thin layer of blood on it. May as well use that one. Coming in from a different direction, I got a grip on it without cutting myself again. Taking a deep breath, I cut along the heel of my left hand, deep enough to draw a little blood. Stilling the urge to turn on the water and wash it out, I just watched. Little skitters of energy

seemed to criss-cross the area for a few moments as the wound closed itself.

I just stared at my hand as the few drops of blood slowly dried.

I was Immortal.

The thought kept bouncing around in my head, refusing to stop long enough to be analyzed. What did I feel about this? Happy? Sad? Panic?

Well, first thing's first. I sure wasn't going to go in to work today with this revelation. Dropping the glass shard into the trash, I picked up the phone and called.

"VisionQuest. How may I help you?"

"Hi, this is Ryan Chessman. I think I've caught this flu bug running around. Could you tell Mr. Dawson I won't be coming in today?"

"Sure thing. Hope you get feeling better."

"Thanks. Bye."

That was easy enough. They won't bother me until at least tomorrow now. My first step was to learn everything I could about what it meant to be Immortal. Fortunately, I had full access to the only known books written on that particular subject. I logged onto the database from my PC and started learning.

By lunch I had learned a few tidbits, but nothing much more than what I remembered from WU. The most immediately useful item was that Immortals could sense each other, though the exact description of the feeling wasn't included. Instead, it was mentioned that it apparently wasn't the same from one Immortal to another. Mostly Watchers couldn't see anything except that the Immortal's attention was suddenly jerked away from whatever they were doing. However, sometimes something else more obvious would occur, including sneezes. I almost snickered. He, whoever the Immortal was, would have an awful time sneaking up on enemies if he sneezed the instant he came within twenty feet of them.

Enemies. With a start, I realized that my life was in constant danger from people who I wouldn't know about until they were practically standing in front of me. As if this wasn't difficult enough.

Well, with that thought, I started looking in another direction. Who were the Immortals I may run into in Seacouver? And who can I go to for help and information? MacLeod, Ryan, Rocke (they hadn't updated that record, I noticed), Smythe, Gonzales, and VanHaus were listed as currently being in the immediate area. Of course, there were always the possibilities of transients and unknowns. From the biographies, I knew that the last three mostly stayed to themselves and disliked unexpected visitors. Of the semi-stable group, only MacLeod and Ryan seemed to be liked by anyone. Smythe was quiet enough, but hadn't had a friend or student in nearly three centuries. Gonzales was too young, as was Ryan. Though Ryan's relationship with MacLeod made me think that he would help if I could prove I wasn't a threat to him. VanHaus was an eccentric hermit who'd been known to use sniper rifles on unannounced Immortal visitors. Charming fellow, that. MacLeod looked like my best bet, at least for now.

I pulled up MacLeod's full biography and learned what I could about him. Just over 400 years old, Scots highlander, initially student of Connor MacLeod. Since then has studied under several philosophers including Darius and multiple monasteries around the world. Hasn't taken any known students other than Richie Ryan. VERY impressive kill list, including Kalas, Greyson, and Xavier St. Cloud. Preferred weapon is a katana, though he originally used a claymore and has been seen with multiple others. Many known friends, Immortal and mortal, his only other semi-permanent home was in Paris. Habitually helping out the weak and defenseless. I definitely fit into that category. Mr. MacLeod was going to get a visit from me.

The drive over to his dojo seemed to take forever. I was constantly looking in the rear view mirror, wondering when someone would jump out at me with a sword. I wasn't usually this paranoid, but then, the past twenty-four hours had hardly been usual.

Parking near the dojo was easy. It was early afternoon and the streets were quiet. As I neared the door, an odd feeling started in the back of my head. It felt like the pins and needles feeling when an arm falls asleep, but it happened inside my head. No wonder this got Immortal's attentions when it happened. I pushed open the door and walked inside.

MacLeod was standing in the middle of the floor, holding his sword, and staring at me. I swallowed and stepped back.

"I am Duncan MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod." Deep voice with a hint of accent.

"I . . . I'm Ryan Chessman," I stammered. I clearly wasn't armed, but he hadn't even so much as blinked. Or lowered his sword.

"Okay. So why are you here?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but that feeling came back, vaguely from the direction of the swinging doors off to my right. I looked that way just as Richie Ryan stepped through the doors, wearing only a pair of underwear, holding his sword in a defensive posture. I'd apparently walked in just after their practice.

His sense felt less dense, somehow. Not as deep. That made sense. Even though he'd taken a few heads in his time, he was vastly less experienced than MacLeod. He continued to advance.

"Easy, Richie. He hasn't done anything."

I smiled and tried to look harmless. "Ryan Chessman," I said, introducing myself to Mr. Ryan. I offered my hand, but it was ignored.

"Let's try again. Why are you here?" MacLeod hadn't lowered his sword, but his stance somehow seemed less threatening.

"Isn't that obvious?" They looked at each other, confusion written all over their faces.

"You haven't challenged either Mac or me, so it isn't obvious to me why you'd come here."

"I'm obviously new. I need help. I need to know what to do."

MacLeod raised an eyebrow. "Obviously new?"

"Yes, my sense can't be nearly as strong as even Mr. Ryan's here. I only died yesterday."

Ryan was frowning at me. "First off, call me Richie. Second, how do you know me?"

I pulled down my shirt cuff and displayed my tattoo. Mr. Dawson said Ryan knew about Watchers, and I had to assume MacLeod did too. Seeing the tattoo, they both calmed down somewhat. "I was following you yesterday, Mr. Montoya." Richie grinned, MacLeod only looked confused. "The collateral damage from her Quickening blew a light from the wall of the alley. It must have killed me on the way down."

Richie looked saddened for a moment. "Sorry about that," he mumbled. "She challenged me."

"I know, I don't blame you. I blame her." Even as I said it, I realized I WAS blaming her for screwing up my otherwise calm and predictable life.

MacLeod hadn't moved, but had relaxed his combat stance. He apparently was still trying to figure me out. "You said your sense can't be as strong as Richie's. What do you mean?"

I looked at him with a frown. "When I first walked in, feeling you was quite a shock. When he walked in, it was the same feeling, but not nearly as strong. I can only assume that's because he's only a few years Immortal, compared to your four hundred plus. By that logic, I can't believe you see me as a threat.

I had both their attentions. "You can tell how relatively old we are?" Richie's voice was somewhere between awe and skepticism.

"You can't?" That's odd. Could be a useful skill, but why would I be the only one to have it?

"No, we can't," from MacLeod. "I didn't realize very many of us could. Pay attention to that trick. Appearances can be deceiving, but auras may or may not."

"You mean Kenny?" I recalled that one from this morning's reading. Richie winced.

MacLeod grunted. "Among others. Come on up to my place. We can talk there. Come up when you're done, Richie." He nodded and went back into the locker room.

I followed MacLeod over to the freight elevator and he opened the gate, gesturing me to precede him.

One look at his loft, and I began to drool, figuratively, of course. "This is the kind of place I want to have. Open, simple, but nice." Without touching anything, I began to walk around, examining items.

My host walked around behind the counter into the kitchen. "Want anything to drink?"

"With the way my nerves are, yeah, a beer would be nice."

He grinned. "Wait 'til you meet Adam." He placed a beer on the countertop and leaned back on the refrigerator. I noticed he hadn't put down his sword yet.

Walking over, I removed my jacket and dropped it onto the arm of the couch. After a moment's hesitation, I picked it up again, folded it in half, and laid it back down. I went the rest of the way over to the counter and retrieved the beer. After taking a sip, I motioned to the sword. "I don't blame you for not trusting me. I really am new. I've been a Watcher for less than a year, I died yesterday, and I don't even own a sword. How can I prove I'm not a threat?"

If he was embarrassed by holding a sword in his own kitchen, he gave no sign. "How can you prove you're a Watcher? Who's your boss? Who's my Watcher? Who's Richie's?"

I sighed. "Aside from my tattoo, I can't prove anything without breaking my oath. If you know anything about the Watchers, you know we can't discuss anything with anyone outside the group. Especially Immortals. My existence is going to be a problem for them. They'll probably have to move their headquarters and change phone numbers."

He just smiled and shook his head. "You and they can discuss that later. For now, why are you here? Why did you seek me out?" While speaking, he put the katana down on the counter and poured himself a glass of apple juice. Though I couldn't reach the sword from where I was sitting, I appreciated his effort to show me trust.

"I guess I need a tutor. Someone to teach me what I need to know. I have basic knowledge of what it is to be Immortal, but not how to live like one. Sooner or later I'll need someone to teach me to fight, but I don't even want to think about that." I sighed. "And I guess I'll just need someone to tell me everything will be all right."

He looked at me out of the corner of his eye. "Sometimes I forget how difficult this is for the first-timers. You're a Watcher. You already know most of what you need. The Rules, the Game, Holy Ground. You'll need to learn how to fight. You'll also need to learn how to 'die' and set up a new life somewhere else every so often without drawing attention. Almost anyone can help you with that one. As far as fighting, you need to find out what style would best suit you and find a teacher who uses that style. For instance," he paused, hand reaching toward sword. Someone coming.

"Probably Richie. No offense to him, but it isn't very deep. Pretty strong, though."

Richie's head poked up the stairway. "Just me, Mac."

MacLeod turned to me, shaking his head slightly. "Learn to use that trick."

I shrugged.

Mr. MacLeod continued, "As I was saying, I can help you determine which fighting style you need to concentrate on, but I may or may not be able to teach it. Besides, I already have my hands full with the strong, shallow one here." Richie looked over from his perusal of the refrigerator to give us a quizzical glance. "Never mind. For now, though, I think there's someone you need to meet," he said, reaching for the phone.

Grabbing my beer, I continued my examination of the MacLeod residence. I only saw a few pictures, which I found rather strange. One was of him with his arms around a smiling blonde with the Eiffel Tower in the background. The other was of a dark-haired beauty that I recognized instantly.

Richie came up behind me with a glass of water of his own, looking for what had my attention. "Ah, yes. Tessa and,"

"Amanda," I interrupted. At his quizzical look, I merely pointed to my Watcher tattoo. He nodded.

"Well, Adam will meet us at Joe's tonight at seven," said MacLeod, hanging up the phone. "For now, I need a shower. Richie, if you could educate our young friend?"

I almost had to smile. Even taking into account that Richie was about 4 years Immortal, he was still a bit younger. And he looked even younger than that.

MacLeod headed into what I assumed to be the bathroom and I continued my examination. Other than those two pictures, there was almost nothing of MacLeod's past or personality in the place.

I was about to ask Richie about this when we both felt another sense coming in via the back door.

"What is this, Immortal Central?" I muttered. This one was deeper than MacLeod, but not as strong. Somewhat older, but fewer Quickenings?

The previously mentioned Amanda came walking in, bag over her shoulder, short sword in the other hand. Seeing Richie apparently at his ease around an unknown, she relaxed a bit, but didn't lower the sword immediately.

"Amanda, this is Ryan Chessman. A newcomer to the Game. Ryan, this is Amanda, a friend of Mac's."

I'm sure I was staring as she glided across the room, hand outstretched. I'm not sure if I was drooling with my mouth open and tongue hanging, but it wouldn't surprise me if I was. Giving myself a mental slap, I composed myself. I took her offered hand and kissed the knuckles with a soft, "M' Lady." She raised an eyebrow and dropped into a curtsy. Chuckling, she dropped her bag onto the couch, nodded toward the bathroom where a shower could be heard and raised an eyebrow at Richie.

He nodded. "Adam is meeting us at Joe's at seven. See you there?" At her nod, he took my shoulder and pulled me out the door, pausing only long enough for us to grab our coats.

Once outside, he paused and looked at me with a small smile. "Earth to Chessman. You in there?"

I shot him a frown. His smile only got bigger. Sighing, I gave up. "I suppose you want this story?" With a grin, he folded his arms and leaned against the wall of the building. "You know what the Watchers do. Among other things, we have lots of pictures. Some of us use them as backgrounds on our computers. One of the favorites among the secretarial pool is a picture of the noble Duncan MacLeod looking out across the ocean during a sunset. Personally, I think it's a neat picture, but he isn't my type. On the other hand, SHE definitely is." I hoped that would get my point across without making me look like too much the fool. It did, and I did anyway.

Richie was on the verge of exploding with laughter. "A Watcher with a crush on Amanda?! She'll love that one." With that, he lost control and started howling. I simply glared. He only laughed harder.

"Actually, I know very little about any of you personally. I read MacLeod's Chronicles this morning, and I know a handful of other names, but almost nothing about any of you individually. I stumbled across Amanda's picture one day and liked it. The caption only gives her name and a date. That's all I wanted to know."

He gave a slight shake of his head. "She's gorgeous, no doubt of that. However, she's much too much for either of us to handle. Only MacLeod can handle her, and she's quite happy with it that way. They've been dating for centuries."

Oh, well. So much for my fantasy involving Amanda, whipped cream and marichino cherries.

Getting my mind back to the present, something occurred to me. I was no doubt under observation by at least one, probably three, Watchers. At least one of them knew me, and I was calmly talking to an Immortal, outside the residence of another one. I'd be lucky if I weren't lynched the instant I walked into work tomorrow. With a frown, I turned to Richie. "I need to take care of something. Give me the address of Joe's and I'll meet you all

there."

Getting suddenly serious, he shook his head. "You aren't going anywhere alone until you've been trained. You're a easy mark on the Immortal playing field right now." Fun thought, that.

"Okay, but I really do need to do something. Alone. No offense, but they won't like Immortals walking in, if you get my drift."

"You're Immortal."

The simplicity of that statement stopped me in my tracks. Yeah, I was, but they wouldn't know that. Hopefully. Knowing it intellectually, and coming to terms with that minor fact are two entirely different things. "Yes, but they won't know that. Hopefully, I won't be too long. If it makes you feel better, I'll leave my car here. When I get done, we can go back to my place and I'll beat you at Doom until seven, okay?"

He agreed to wait for me here. He apparently had some paperwork that needed to be done for the dojo, anyway. In order to keep the location of the observation post secret from unwanted Immortal eyes, I took a roundabout route back to the apartment of Mr. Spielack.

I identified myself to Robby again and he let me in. Two extra sets of eyes were looking at me. I showed them my tattoo to identify myself and gave them my name. Angie Mollson, a mid-thirties redhead was Richie's Watcher, and Bart Mancuso, a early fifties distinguished gentleman was Amanda's Watcher.

"Um, I'll assume you saw me over there," I indicated the dojo out the window.

"Yes, but we'll ignore it. There's a reason that the three of us are assigned to the three of them," Robby said indicating the dojo. "Joe Dawson picked us because we don't find anything wrong with Watchers interacting with Immortals. Within reason. I called him immediately after you showed up, but he said to do nothing. No doubt he'll want a word with you tomorrow morning, but for now you're clean. Count your blessings. They're fascinating people, and if Dawson lets you stay in contact with them, well, he has his reasons."

"Thank you," I whispered. I began breathing again. This was going MUCH better than it could have. I'll still have to figure out how to explain all this to Mr. Dawson, but I had most of a day to figure something out until I saw him again.

Robby shook his head. "Don't thank us. Thank him."

Nodding, I left without saying something that may end up getting me into even more trouble. Getting back to the dojo by a different route took only a few minutes, but by that time I was breathing normally again.

Richie looked up as I walked in. He indicated for me to wait a minute while he finished up some paperwork. Nodding, I looked around. Plenty of standard exercise equipment, floor mats, a few wooden practice swords and a matched set of Japanese swords near the door. They all had the curved, thin blades that made me think they were katanas, but of three different sizes. I'll have to start learning the different names soon.

Richie came out of the office with his coat. "Ready to go?"

"I'll assume they will be, um, indisposed for a while," I said, chucking a thumb upstairs. He grinned and nodded. "Okay, my place or your place?"

Richie and I arrived at Joe's a couple minutes early. Standing outside the door, we couldn't feel anyone inside, so we knew MacLeod and Amanda weren't there yet. Pushing the doors open, we walked into the quintessential blues bar. I began to wonder why every Immortal in the area seemed to like it so much.

Then I found out, in the form of just another shock in a day filled with them. Mr. Dawson was tending the bar. Joe's, Joe Dawson. Of course I would run into my boss tonight. To my quiet horror, Richie walked right up to the bar and sat on an empty stool. I had little choice but to follow.

Mr. Dawson noted our arrival, and without bidding, he placed a beer in front of Richie. "How ya doing, Rich? Hi, Ryan. What'll ya have?"

I stared. "You two know each other?"

Richie looked at me blankly, but Joe grinned. "I told you he knew about us. Oh, we'll need to have a talk tonight. Later. Now, do you want anything to drink?"

"What the hell. My day's already had enough surprises. A beer would help. Killian's, on tap if you have it."

"Coming right up."

I was just starting to mellow out when I felt someone take the barstool next to mine and place a hand on my elbow. I turned. It was Andrea. What was that I had been saying about surprises?

I stared. She smiled. Richie poked me on the other side. "You going to introduce me to your friend?" he asked.

Shaking myself back to attention, I smiled at her. "Richie, this is Andrea Burke, a friend from school. Andrea, this is Richie Ryan, a recent acquaintance from here in Seacouver." She gave me just a flicker of a look. She knew who he was. "Richie, I hate to do this to you, but could you leave us alone for a minute? She and I need to talk." He apparently got my meaning, because he didn't argue. He just nodded and got up. I turned back to Andrea. "So, what's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?"

I heard that," Mr. Dawson's tone was hard, but the twinkle in his eye belied any threat. Damn, this guy ALWAYS managed to sneak up on me.

Andrea laughed. "I came in here to give Joe my decision to stay out here. The northwest beats New York any day." Her expression became much more serious. "Should I ask why you were sitting with Richie Ryan?"

No. "Would you believe me if I said it was a very long story? Best left for another day?"

She just looked at me. I was saved from saying anything more by feeling someone coming in. Make that two. Felt like MacLeod and Amanda, but I couldn't be sure. Anyone with roughly the same ages and power would feel the same. Fortunately, this time I was right. They came in arm in arm looking like the nearly perfect couple. From the way he was smiling at her, it was clear that my crush wouldn't go any further than that.

Mr. Dawson nodded toward them and said to me, "Your table awaits."

Andrea clearly recognized the two of them. She looked at the two of us, a question written all over her face. Mr. Dawson patted her on the hand, but addressed me. "I'll tell her a story, a very long story. Your very long story. You're going to have to tell her soon anyway." I looked at him. How could he possibly know? The look he gave me clearly said that he did know, though. How in the world . . . ?

"Uh, thanks. Andrea, I promise we'll talk later. If you still want to." With that, I stood up and walked over to MacLeod and Amanda's table, arriving at about the same time Richie did.

"Who's your friend?" Amanda wanted to know.

She and Joe Dawson were deep in a whispered discussion even as we looked over. She caught my eye as I looked and frowned a question. I sighed and nodded back. Her eyebrows crawled further up her face than I thought possible. I turned back to Amanda, "A friend?"

Amanda gave me a "Yeah, try again, buster" look before dropping the topic, for which I was quietly grateful.

MacLeod steered us back onto why we were here. "What are we going to do with you?"

Funny, that was my question. "Unless you know a way to make me mortal again and let me go back to my quiet, tame, BORING life, I was hoping you could tell me." I shook my head. "Hell, it doesn't even feel real yet. At the least, I know I'll need sword training and some general 'How to live as an Immortal' tutoring. Sooner or later, I'll have to figure out what job I'm going to have. I can't very well stay with the Wa," I caught myself. MacLeod and Richie knew. I had no idea about Amanda.

"You're a Watcher?" Okay, so she knew. That fixed one potential problem, but created several others.

I frowned. "I thought we were supposed to be secret from Immortals. Everyone I've run into knows about us."

Amanda pointed to Mr. Dawson. "Joe and Duncan have been friends for years. And Duncan and I don't keep secrets, do we dear?" I managed to keep a straight face. Richie rolled his eyes. She shot him a nasty look and MacLeod stifled a grin just before she turned back to him. Staying calm and collected around these folks was turning out to be more than a full time job. Or maybe it was just her. Come to think of it, considering the last day and a half, it's a wonder I don't need a straitjacket.

A waitress was delivering MacLeod's and Amanda's drinks as the most powerful aura imaginable hit me. I could barely keep my seat as the feeling of static in my head nearly caused me to pass out. I was concentrating on breathing as MacLeod waved the newcomer over toward our table and Richie made room. Someone took the seat next to me. My actions had clearly not escaped anyone seated at the table. Nobody offered help, but nobody said anything, either. It took perhaps ten more seconds before I could open my eyes again. I started to my left and worked around the table. MacLeod looking on with a hint of . . . amusement? Amanda just looked concerned, Richie encouraging. I finally got to the last face and nearly fell out of my chair again. "ADAM?!?" Those surprises keep sneaking up on me.

He merely gave his enigmatic smile and tipped his head in acknowledgment. "Ryan."

Amanda was looking on in amazement. "You two know each other? And what's wrong with you, Ryan?"

"Yeah, we know each other. He's a researcher for us. I helped him set up a database for his project. Speaking of which, may I have a word with you, Adam?"

He didn't even blink. "I have no secrets from these three. Or Joe for that matter."

Here goes. "How old are you?"

He gave his half smile again. "Why?"

"I've already tried to explain this to MacLeod and Richie. I'll try again. Even without reading everyone else's Chronicles in depth, I have a good feel for ages and relative strengths. I read through MacLeod's, so I've been basing everyone off of him. Richie's aura has almost no depth, but he has a surprising strength. I take that to mean he's quite young as an Immortal, but has taken a few powerful heads." I stopped and looked at him. He nodded, impressed, and I continued. "Amanda is a lot deeper than MacLeod, two or three times his age, but isn't quite as strong. Slightly fewer Quickenings." She nodded. MacLeod and Adam had hardly blinked. "You, on the other hand, make MacLeod look like a kitten. You're at least three times Amanda's age, but you have more strength than I can possibly comprehend. I'll try again. How old are you?" I couldn't believe I was speaking to him this way. This guy had an aura strong enough that I'm surprised I couldn't see it.

Mr. Dawson, apparently sensing the tension at the table, came over. "Anything wrong?"

Adam was looking at me with perfect calm. "Our young friend believes I'm a great deal older than Amanda, though it's rude to discuss a lady's age. Very well, how old do you think I am?"

I frowned. "MacLeod's four hundred. He's the only one I really know. Amanda's something like two and a half that, call it a thousand. You're more than three times that. Thirty-five hundred?" I must be out of my mind. At that, he'd have had to been born in 1500 BC.

Joe was almost chuckling by this point. Adam glanced at him, then focused back on me. "Good try. Closer to five thousand, though." Perfectly calm.

I'm sure my jaw hit bedrock. I blinked, stared. Everyone else here had taken the news calmly. They all knew. Five THOUSAND?! I snapped my jaw shut and tried to regain my composure. "Well, this explains why all your notes to me looked like hieroglyphics. They probably were."

That got smiles or chuckles out of everyone at the table.

Adam smiled a moment then became serious. "That trick is useful, but you'll have to learn how to filter it. When I came in, you were clearly incapable of defending yourself. That will get you dead quite quickly. I can think of only one person who may be able to help you on focusing that talent to become an asset without also being a liability."

By this time, MacLeod was watching him. "Will you be okay with that?"

"My feelings don't matter." He gestured to me, "His survival depends on it."

Since I was the topic of conversation, I figured I had the right to enter it. "I'm glad you two know what you're talking about, 'cause I'm totally lost."

MacLeod shook his head slightly, "Cassandra." Amanda frowned a little, but held her peace.

I waited. Nobody said anything. "Okay, I'll bite. Cassandra who?"

Adam gave me a patronizing look. "A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away, everyone only had one name. Cassandra IS her full name."

"Okay, but that answers only part of my question. Who is she? Why will she make you uncomfortable? Why will she be able to teach me when one of the four of you can't?"

Mr. Dawson answered this one, "Who she is and her relationship to Adam is very long," I rolled my eyes, "and complicated. How she can help is much easier. She has been called several things over the ages: witch, demon, etcetera. Today we could call it Psychic. If Adam's guess is correct, you'll need mental training to use this ability of yours, which is nearly unique. She's one of the only living Immortals who could do that."

A long silence descended on the table. I sat and tried to imagine what my life was turning into. I kept vacillating between euphoria, sadness, and horror. Eventually, it just settled down into resignation.

"Well, enough of this for now. I've been informed I'm not to be on my own until further notice. Does this mean one of you has to physically be with me?"

MacLeod turned to Mr. Dawson. "Anybody in town?"

"No headhunters that we know of. That doesn't mean there aren't any, but he should be reasonably safe as long as he doesn't go looking for trouble."

MacLeod nodded. "Okay, then. If you show up at the dojo tomorrow at nine, we can start your training. I can start you out in hand to hand and find out what sword fighting technique you're suited for. I'll contact Cassandra and tell her about you. What she does from there is her choice, of course." He stood up. "Until then." He offered his hand to Amanda, and the two of them left after a quick round of good-byes.

While they were leaving, Adam had simply disappeared, for which I was quietly thankful. His aura made me skittish. I sat and stared at my beer for a few moments before turning to one of my remaining table companions. "And what about the Watchers, Mr. Dawson?"

He shook his head. "First, my name's Joe. Second, I don't know. We can't let you stay in your present position. You have access to entirely too much data. I'd like to keep you, but you have to help me think of a way to do it."

I nodded at that one. I could definitely understand his position. No matter that the idea of actually getting into a fight to the death sickened me now, I could imagine that the access to that kind of data might make me a hunter. And he couldn't have that. "Okay, next question. How did you know?"

"Adam told me. Pre-Immortals are detectable to the older Immortals, but not to new ones. Ever since Adam met you for the first time, he knew you would eventually become Immortal, and he told me. I felt safe assigning you to Richie here, because he's too new to have noticed you." He struggled to his feet. "I'm giving you a few days off. Think about what you want to do." With that, he headed back behind the bar.

Richie also stood. "You've got a lot to think about. I've only been in Oz for a few years, so I know what you're going through, probably better than most of them. If you need someone to talk to, I'll be around." After shaking my hand and waving to Joe, he too departed.

I was left staring at the tabletop with my thoughts running in circles. I'm Immortal. I could conceivably live for millennia. I'm going to be hunted by people scarier than I can imagine. I don't want this!

So wrapped up in my thoughts, I didn't notice a presence beside me until she touched my hand. "Penny for your thoughts?"

I looked up at Andrea and didn't say anything for a few minutes. I opened my mouth a few times to say something, but kept closing it without saying

a word, eventually giving up with a humorless chuckle. "What is there to say?"

"It's true what Joe said? You're Immortal?"

Mutely, I nodded.

She sat down and thought about it for a few moments. "What do you think about it?"

Good question. "I have no idea. I've only realized it for less than a day now. I don't think it's sunk in yet."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

After a moment, I shook my head. "No. For the time being, I want to pretend this isn't happening. I'd rather just sit here with you and talk."

"Why, Mr. Chessman, are you asking me out on a date?"

I tilted my head a moment. "Yeah, I guess I am." She merely smiled.

By eleven the next morning I was regretting two things. One, the fourth round of drinks, and two, agreeing to let this Scottish demon get anywhere near me. Oh, sure, he called it teaching. His definition of teaching must involve beating the tar out of me without even breaking a sweat. I was not having a good day.

"Good recovery!" His praise was underwhelming. I just grunted and came at him again. I'd been trying to get this throw to work for at least an hour. Every time I came in at him, he'd slip out of the way, usually throwing me across the room just for fun. As expected, I ended up on my back, but this time I managed to at least knock him down too. Progress, of a sort.

"Good one. That's enough for now. Go get a shower. I need to finish my workout." That made me feel good. I was so weak as an opponent, he didn't even get his normal daily workout out of me. I stumbled into the showers and let a hot soak bring me back to the land of the living.

As I was tying up my shoelaces, I felt a shallow/strong sense come into range. Hoping it was Richie, I poked my head out into the dojo and watched him come in and head into the locker room. As he was changing into his workout clothes, I told him about my beating. "You'd think he'd get tired of beating up poor little defenseless guys like me. I mean, I'm not even a challenge for him!"

Richie only chuckled. "I felt the same way when he started to teach me. I'd spend days trying to get a clean hit. It took a while, but I eventually got the hang of it. You can too."

Yeah, right. "If you don't mind, I'd like to watch you two practice. I need to find a sword fighting technique that I'm comfortable with. After that, I'll take you out to lunch. I need to talk to someone."

He smiled. "Deal."

Watching them spar wasn't so much instructional as hypnotic. The fluid dance between the two of them was complex, but beautiful. Shaking my head, I concentrated on watching Richie individually. I tried to watch how he handled his long blade, counters, thrusts, blocks. He was using it well, but MacLeod was quicker and managed to slip in a cut now and then. After a half hour, the one on the floor with a sword to his throat was Richie. And MacLeod was finally breathing heavy. He backed up, offered Richie a hand up, and gave his opponent a bow. Richie bowed back before retrieving his sword. Walking over to his duffel bag, he retrieved a cloth and a jar of oil. Taking a seat at a weight machine, he began cleaning his sword. MacLeod nodded his approval and asked Richie to work on his katana as well. MacLeod turned to me. "Did you learn anything watching us?"

"Yeah, don't piss either of you off."

Cocking an eye at his student's chuckle, MacLeod gave a slight grin. "Not quite what I was getting at."

"My impression was that you're quicker than he is. That katana looks to be a lighter weapon, though almost the same length. Therefore, you're faster. His long heavy sword style would be based more on brute strength. He makes fewer cuts at you, but each is potentially more harmful. You make more cuts, but individually each is less powerful. I'm not saying you're not strong, you clearly are, but that style seems more suited to a weak, quick fighter."

"Possibly, but not necessarily. The katana is a lighter weapon, so I can move it around more. The strength of the cut comes from the fighter, not the weight of the blade. Richie's blade is much heavier. Fewer cuts do more damage, but he can't move the blade around as much as I can. However, it's harder for me to stop one of his swings for the same reason. A heavier blade has advantages and disadvantages."

"You boys still down here showing off testosterone levels?" Amanda came walking down the stairway, wearing a sweatshirt several sizes too large. And nothing else I could see. I resisted the urge to pant. "Don't let him talk you into anything you don't want, Ryan. You pick a style you like."

"That's what I keep saying. Ryan, come by again tomorrow. I know a little about several different styles. I'll try to demonstrate a few for you and you can pick one." With that, he collected his katana from Richie and started up the stairs, Amanda on his heels.

I turned to Richie. "Wow."

He laughed. "Down boy. No offense, but she's out of your league. She's almost entirely unselfconscious, but don't take that as an invitation of any sort. She's devoted to Mac. If I were you, I'd stick to that cute brunette you were talking to last night."

I blushed, he grinned. "Okay, okay. She's off limits. Get dressed. I've thought of about ten thousand questions to ask."

Giving me a brief salute with his blade, he cleared up his cleaning tools and made his way to the showers.

Lunch at a local deli was educational. I asked him all sorts of offbeat questions and he fielded them all as well as he was able. How often do I have to move? Are any places better or worse? What's the proper care of a blade? How do you carry one around all the time without it being obvious? How do you sit down without slicing open some part of your anatomy? Where do I go to buy swords? What do I look for in a good blade? How do I recognize a bad one? How do you live, knowing that any day may bring a Challenge from someone better than you?

That last one made him pause. "Ask Adam," was his only answer to the question. "Those philosophical questions are better asked of someone a lot older than I am. I can help you with the practical day to day stuff. Adam or Mac are better at the tough ones." He shook off his solemn mood and gave a carefree grin. "But enough of this. I'm starting to sound like some crotchety old codger. Let's go."

The rest of the day was spent relatively normally. We caught a movie that neither of us had seen and walked around the mall for a while. Eventually, we parted company with a promise to meet at the dojo tomorrow.

Since I wasn't tired, I headed over to Joe's for some company. As I approached, I walked into a wall of static. Yep, Adam was in. Even though I knew what I was experiencing, it still took me almost a full minute before I composed myself enough to walk in the door. As expected, he was seated at the bar with a beer bottle in front of him. He'd been watching the door as I entered, and he turned back to his discussion with Joe as he identified me.

Since I wasn't in the mood for any more Immortal talk, I took a place at the bar a ways down from He of the Powerful Aura. "Hi, Ryan. Killian's, right?" I didn't recognize the voice. I looked up to see the other bartender I'd noticed from last night.

"Um, yeah. Sorry, but do I know you?"

He pointed at his left wrist, gave me a conspiratorial wink, and stuck out his right hand. "Sorry, I'm Mike. Joe's assistant." He paused. "And assistant bartender."

Shaking his hand, I nodded. He'd be one of the unassigned Watchers under Joe's employ. Probably administrative since a Territories Director would definitely need one. This bar was clearly a gathering spot and something of a field office for the Watchers. I wondered what the local Immortals (who all seemed to know about the Watchers) thought of that one. How do they, and Joe for that matter, deal with the conflicts of interest such a place would naturally bring about?

I shook my head. Not my problem. I grunted to myself; not my problem for the moment. I had to keep reminding myself that I WAS one of the local Immortals. And a Watcher assigned to Joe's domain. This was all starting to give me a headache.

Once again trying to shake off the morbid mood, I took a sip of beer and listened to the band playing on stage. I was never much into the blues myself, but it seemed appropriate for my mood, somehow. Listening to good music and nursing my drinks, time passed swiftly.

Around eight, my head jerked toward the door as I sensed two Immortals coming in. Before they even entered, I had them pegged as MacLeod and Amanda. Sure enough, they walked in and headed toward one of the few empty tables. I watched with detached interest as the crowd unconsciously parted before them.

They recognized Adam and myself, but nobody changed seats. I was thankful for that. Trying to come to terms with my situation was difficult enough without someone pestering me about my decisions.

Things were just getting back to normal when another sense hit all four of us. This one was old. Not quite as old as Adam, but clearly older than Amanda. And it had almost as much power as MacLeod. That combination got my attention, but not as much as the other item I noticed. While everyone else's auras had a sense of almost chaotic frenzy to them, this one was ordered. I caused me no discomfort at all.

Then she walked in. Whereas Amanda was beautiful, this woman was stunning. Appearing to be in her mid thirties with dark skin, she had a regal grace that can't be taught. MacLeod had an air of authority that created a respectful bubble around him. She had a similar effect, but it was closer to awe. Her gaze started to her left and worked around the room. She gave MacLeod a small smile, barely gave Amanda a flicker of eye movement, and settled on Adam. And stared. It wasn't overtly angry, but there was definitely something there. I made a mental note to ask him about it sometime, especially since his eyes looked almost . . . sad? Her gaze finally shifted off of him and continued until they stopped at me. She raised an eyebrow at my blatant stare and with a graceful inclination of her head, indicated MacLeod and Amanda's table. I nodded, and we converged.

By the time I arrived, MacLeod had already risen and was holding her chair, to the quiet disgust of Amanda. Giving a slight bow from the shoulders, I introduced myself. "Ryan Chessman, ma'am."

Her voice was a bit deeper and huskier than I expected, but entirely feminine for all that. "I am Cassandra."

I flicked an eye at MacLeod before turning back to her. "Thank you for coming so quickly. I'm told by more than one person that you're a unique person with nearly unique gifts." I took a seat next to her, and Adam quietly squeezed in between me and Amanda.

She tilted her head and regarded me for a moment. "I'm not sure how to respond to that."

"No insult intended, I assure you. Perhaps I'd better explain. As you may tell, I'm quite new to this group. I can tell a person's approximate age and relative strength merely by my sense of their Quickening. I'm told that you have similar skills."

Both eyebrows were nearly lost high on her forehead by this time. "Very well. Tell me what you sense about me."

I regarded her for a moment. "You're not as old as Adam, but a great deal older than Amanda. Call it twenty-five hundred to three thousand. You are something like half again as powerful as Mr. MacLeod. The thing about your aura that fascinates me, though, is how calm and ordered it is. Everyone else's is constantly shifting. Adam's has some of the same elements, but not to nearly the degree that you do."

She looked over at Adam for a moment before turning back to me. "You know how old Methos is?"

"Is that his real name? Yes, I guessed it at thirty-five hundred yesterday. He told me five thousand."

Adam and MacLeod were staring at me. "You're not surprised that his name isn't Adam?"

"He told me that her full name is Cassandra because there were no surnames then. He's older. Therefore, he HAD to have only a one word name. Considering his age, I'm not surprised he changed it. He has to be quite a target for the crazy hunters running around." Adam gave an almost soundless sigh, but said nothing.

The look in Cassandra's eyes was a great deal more respectful. "With no training, you guessed him that closely?"

"I knew how old Mr. MacLeod is. I estimated Amanda at two and a half that. Then I estimated him at more than three times that." I turned to Amanda. "If I may, where did I go wrong with those guesses?"

"I'm a little less than three times Duncan's age now. Methos is just over four times mine. Though I thought he told you it was impolite to discuss a lady's age." The twinkle in her eye belied any censure.

Giving another little bow, I said, "My apologies, Lady." She smiled, MacLeod's mouth twitched, and Cassandra's eyes were suddenly smiling.

Cassandra focused those incredible green eyes on me and continued. "You will be fun to train. I haven't had fun training someone for nearly half a millennia." She glanced at MacLeod for a moment before turning her attention back to me. "To answer your question, yes, I do have some talents in that area. I suspect you have more talent than you know, as well. There are few enough left as it is. I will train you on one condition. Never use your gifts to harm anyone, except in self defense. I've been a victim for entirely too much of my life. I don't want to add to the problem. Do you agree to that term?"

It sounded simple enough. Do good, don't do harm. I looked around at the only other people who could help. MacLeod just gazed at me with utter seriousness, Amanda was frowning down at the tabletop, and Adam was staring at a point over on the opposite wall. "Forgive me for saying so, but that sounds odd. Go forth and do no evil? It sounds like something out of a low budget movie."

Cassandra's eyes suddenly hardened, MacLeod's flared, and Amanda looked up. "Perhaps it does sound like an antiquated code of chivalry, but that's what we know." She sighed. "Perhaps Duncan's ethics have rubbed off on all of us, but the world does need more good guys. Cassandra and I disagree on a whole host of issues, including this Highlander Boy Scout here." Adam rolled his eyes and MacLeod grinned, not at all upset. Amanda continued, "But the two of us do have one thing in common. We cannot stand to unleash evil Immortals into the world. The world is ugly enough without any of us adding to it. And entirely too many of us already do. If you want help from any of us here, that's one of the conditions." Adam looked like he was about to say something, but a quick glance from Amanda stilled him.

I turned to Cassandra, "Very well, I agree to your terms of training." She gave a soft smile as I returned my attention to Amanda, "You said that was ONE of the conditions. I clearly need the help of everyone here. What are your other conditions?"

She relaxed a bit. "Those are easier. Help us when we ask for it, promise to help out a newcomer to the Game sometime in the future, and do everything you can to stop the evil ones from gaining power."

I gave her a smile. "Sounds like what a group of friends would do for each other anyway. I'm honored to be offered a position."

Once Cassandra had agreed to train me, she gave me directions to her place in Wales and told me the training would begin whenever I arrived. I spent a few days getting my local affairs in order, buying a plane ticket, and resigning from the Watchers. Joe had been saddened by my decision, but could see my point. I couldn't very well remain a Watcher if I continually spent time with Immortals.

I arrived at her secluded cottage buried in a forest almost a week after she made the invitation. She had offered me lodging, but I preferred to stay in the nearby city. I knew she meant well, but I didn't want to become too dependent upon anyone. Foolish perhaps, but an important item for me. I had found a small apartment and a job at the local computer shop.

Early on, I had expressed my concern that I couldn't defend myself if an Immortal came for me. She assured me that we were safe. From her casual comments, I gathered that she had declared the entire area off limits to uninvited Immortals. Everyone feared her powers enough to honor that declaration.

The mental training itself was fascinating. I had always been intrigued by psychic powers, but never considered that I may have some myself. Cassandra turned out to be a strict but good teacher. I had learned to better read auras, filter them, and cloak mine. She seemed to know exactly what I was capable of, and wouldn't let me rest until I had made it to the level she demanded.

Since she only expected me out at her place for two evenings a week, I found I had plenty of free time. Remembering that I was vulnerable to any Immortal who came around, I had started taking karate classes soon after arriving in the area. It had mildly amused me to catch a glimpse of a blue tattoo on one of my classmates after one evening's classes. Joe Dawson may be an acquaintance, perhaps even a friend, but he was still a Watcher. And I was Immortal.

Actually, I was slowly coming to terms with that. It still freaked me out on occasion, but it didn't send me into blind panic or depression like it did for the first couple weeks.

During all the time I'd spent with Cassandra, I had learned precious little about her. She was clearly powerful, but I knew almost nothing about her history. I knew she and Adam had known each other a long time ago, and that she and MacLeod knew each other when he was younger, but I didn't know anything about either of the relationships. She told me enough to train me, but little else.

And so the weeks turned into months.

"Very good. I think you're getting the hang of this."

I gave a small smile, but didn't open my eyes. Cloaking my aura was hard work.

"Now, keep that up for a half hour, then come find me."

I didn't make it the full half hour, but I only faltered once. As Cassandra and I were discussing the day's lesson, we felt another Immortal approach. Her face darkened for a moment, but then cleared as we both recognized the newcomer as Duncan MacLeod.

She let him in at his knock, and we greeted each other politely before he folded her into a warm hug. Well, that answered part of my questions about their past relationship.

After releasing her, we sat around her fireplace and he told the story of why he was here. He'd apparently decided to come visit his ancestral home a few weeks ago. He'd been there somewhat recently, and decided he wanted to spend more quiet time there. As he was telling the stories of his clansmen for the past twenty generations, I watched him. He was basically the same as when I first walked into his dojo a few months ago. He was relaxed and in a very good mood. Well, a vacation can do that to you. He wrapped up his narration with why he was here. He'd been on his way to London, and then back to Seacouver, when he decided to stop by here and see how things were going.

I rolled my eyes. "I'm learning, but I recognize there's so much out there that I can't do yet."

Cassandra shook her head. "I've already taught you everything you can learn. Trying to teach you the Voice would be a waste of time. You simply can't project anything; you have no skills in that direction. Beyond practice, there's no more I can help with."

I sighed and leaned back in my chair. Well, at least I had a few tricks to help me survive. "Unless you wish me to stay, Cassandra, I believe I'd like to go back to Seacouver."

A moment of sadness passed over her face as she reached out her hand to touch mine. "Be well, young Chessman. Remember, you will always have a refuge here if you have need of it."

I had to clear my throat around the sudden lump. "Hey, don't get so mushy on me now. It'll be a few days until I can get my affairs in order and head out. I'll be back out here before I leave." I turned to MacLeod. "I've a spare couch if you need it to crash for a few days." I cocked an eye at Cassandra. "Assuming you don't have other arrangements."

She glanced down, her mouth twitching as it fought a smile. "Ah, ha! I got the Lady Cassandra to blush. My day is complete."

She gave me a dirty look, but MacLeod was laughing.

Between returning the rented furniture, tying up loose ends at work, and informing all interested parties of my leaving, it took me three days before I climbed onto a plane bound for New York. Saying good-bye to Cassandra had been difficult, but the other two Immortals took it in stride.

I spent the trip reading the latest Clancy novel and watching MacLeod charm the stewardesses. The man had charisma that went beyond the natural. Once we were off the plane, we made our way to the luggage claim. Our flight to Seacouver wouldn't leave until tomorrow morning.

With our luggage secured, we worked our way toward the taxi stand. And both stopped abruptly as we felt another Immortal approach. Making it look casual, MacLeod dropped his bags and settled into a ready position.

I had been concentrating on the aura. "He's slightly older than you, and a little more powerful."

While I thought this to be disturbing news, he smiled. The unknown Immortal finally broke through the crowd and approached. Slightly taller and thinner than MacLeod, he wore a gray trench coat and a smile on his face. "Duncan! So nice to see you again." What accent was that? They shook hands, and he turned to me. "Russell Nash."

I ignored the hand extended in front of me and crossed my arms. "Try again."

"Pardon?" MacLeod looked like he was about to choke on laughter, but Mr. Nash wore only a politely curious expression.

I sighed. "That's not your name. At least not your real one. What is?" Duncan (he had insisted I drop the formality) didn't seem to regard this man as

a threat, so I wasn't afraid to be addressing him in such a manner. Besides, his aura didn't seem threatening to us.

He smiled. "Connor," he shot a smile at Duncan, "Connor MacLeod."

Both my eyebrows tried to crawl up off my face. "Ryan Chessman," I said numbly, shaking his hand. I looked at the two of them. "Let me guess, cousins?"

They both laughed. The elder answered, "Genetically, who knows. But we are clansmen. I had been chased out of Glenfinnan in Duncan's grandfather's time for rising from the dead. When Duncan was thrown out, I found him. Since then, he's had all of the fun."

"And most of the women," came the younger man's mutter. I frowned at him. He shook his head. "Inside joke. I knew Connor lived here. I had tried to get a message to him before we left London, but I didn't know if he had received it in time to meet us. We have time to kill. I wanted to at least spend it among family, as it were."

As Connor started to lead us to his car, he looked sideways at me. "How did you know I was lying about my name?"

"Your aura flickered."

He just blinked and frowned. Duncan explained, "He's got a touch of the Sight. Cassandra's been tutoring him."

"The witch?" Duncan just nodded.

I held my tongue. The term was incorrect, but she didn't mind it.

After dumping our luggage into his trunk, Connor took us to a local brewery and they started swapping stories. Duncan told about how the clan was doing, and Connor started to regale me with stories of, "When Duncan was younger". They all ended up embarrassing him, but I expect that was the point. When he began to falter, Duncan took up the challenge and started telling stories back. It never did come to blows, but I began to wonder after two hours.

Parting the next morning didn't seem to distress either MacLeod in the slightest. "How do you do it?" I asked as we checked our luggage.

"Do what?"

"Always say good-bye. Walking away from Cassandra yesterday, and now Connor today. Neither seemed to phase you in the slightest."

The look he graced me with was mostly calm, but with a twinge of regret. "It isn't easy. We've all just learned to live with it. I've been saying good-bye to people I love for four hundred years. Practice doesn't make it easier, just more bearable."

I had plenty of food for thought on the flight into Seacouver.

Arriving in Seacouver felt good. I had a few friends back in Wales, and of course, there was Cassandra, but I was far more comfortable here.

MacLeod and I worked our way through the normal airport hassles (it had never occurred to me how much trouble it was, trying to fly when you need to have a sword handy). We finally had all our belongings, and he stopped by a pay phone to call Richie before we parked ourselves at a lounge to await his arrival.

"What's the story with Adam and Cassandra?" I asked between sips.

He frowned at my choice in beers, but answered anyway. "Did you ask her?" He cradled a scotch in front of himself.

"Yes, but she didn't answer."

"Ask him. It's their story, not mine."

"Okay, then how about this one? What's the story with you and Cassandra? You don't have to tell it if you don't want, but I'm just curious."

He nodded. "No big deal. She's the only person left alive who knew me when I was still mortal. I grew up as the clan chieftain's son, and she was living nearby as the witch of Donan Woods. Robert and I would wander in those woods, sometimes. She kept an eye on us, because she knew what I would become. She showed herself to me, once. My entire clan thought she was a witch, and in league with the devil." He glanced down into his drink and chuckled. "I had forgotten about her, thought she was the figment of a childish imagination. Then a few years ago, she showed up on my doorstep. Between the two of us, we stopped a great evil. A former student of hers was using his powers irresponsibly, and we had to stop him. After that, we'd kept in loose contact for a while. Then came the mess with the Four Horsemen." He was silent for a minute before going on. "You'll have to ask Adam for the rest of that story."

I was hopelessly confused. I'd never heard of the Four Horsemen outside of biblical references, but it apparently meant something to him. I frowned a question at him, but he just shook his head.

We continued chatting, discussing good places in town for me find an apartment, and some of our favorite restaurants. It was almost an hour later when we felt the approach of an Immortal. MacLeod was on his feet almost instantly, but I assured him it was Richie. Sure enough, Richie came

walking through the door, spotted us, and made his way over. "Mac, Ryan."

I gave him a long look. "Who is she?"

He stopped dead in his tracks and stared. "How . . .?"

MacLeod just looked at him steadily, "He's been studying with Cassandra, Rich. I'm sure he can read all sorts of things about you."

Richie gave me a frightened look, and I just gave a small smile that didn't reach my eyes.

MacLeod continued, "Though the smear of lipstick on your cheek is probably what gave it away."

I dissolved into laughter as Richie blushed furiously. MacLeod calmly handed him a napkin and indicated the corner of Richie's mouth. He scrubbed furiously as I finally calmed down.

"Sorry, couldn't resist," I said between chuckles. "Hi, Richie. How's it going?"

He gave me a mock glare. "I'll get you for that one." His fierce look dissolved into a smile. "It's been active around here. I've met someone, as you can tell," he gestured to his cheek and Duncan and I both grinned. Flushing slightly, Richie continued, "Joe's also found himself someone. He's serious about her. Probably wedding bells in their future. She's a Watcher, so we don't have to worry about saying something around her."

As MacLeod and I hefted our luggage out to Richie's borrowed 4X4, he told us all about Vu Tran Hoa. How he'd met her and they'd fallen madly in love with each other. It sounded pretty intense to me, but if they were still like this weeks later, maybe they had a shot at it. I snorted to myself. Listen to me. Like I was a great expert at relationships, me who hadn't ever had a girlfriend in his life.

During the drive back to MacLeod's loft, Richie continued his stories. About meeting someone named Crispin, learning he was a sensory adept, fighting a whole group of them at once, and parting ways with Crispin once the fight robbed them both of their abilities.

"I wondered about the changes in your aura. You're much more ordered now, but in a different way than Cassandra is. Also, you've taken several heads since I left, but only one of them was powerful, and he was extremely so."

Richie gave me a respectful glance. "Yep, that was Fergus. Something like fifteen hundred, I guess. He'd send his hounds out to trap Immortals and then he'd take them down by barraging them with waves of Quickening energy. And taking their heads when they were defenseless." He shook his head. "Gang hunting, keeping young Immortals under your control with lies, no fair fights. I won't lose sleep over taking him down."

MacLeod looked quietly proud of his student. That speech sounded almost like something he'd say. I gave an inner chuckle and changed the subject. "Duncan, mind if I borrow your couch for a few days until I can get myself an apartment?" I tilted my head at him and gave a slight smile. "I offered you the same in England, even if you didn't accept."

MacLeod didn't blush, but he did cock an eyebrow. I considered that enough of a victory. Richie raised both eyebrows in question, but I shook my head.

He accepted that and continued talking, "Anyway, if you two want to come by Joe's tonight, we'll be there and Gina probably will be, too."

I nodded. "Sounds fine to me." I took a deep breath and continued. "Guys, I need sword training. I won't ask either of you to do it, Lord knows you've helped me enough, but if you could at least recommend someone, I'd appreciate it."

"What style?"

"I've been thinking about that one. I don't know if it'll work, but how about a short sword of some type in my right, and a long knife in my left? I don't know why, but that just SOUNDS right to me. I'll never be terribly strong, so I can't work with any of the bigger swords. I'm not ambidextrous, but nearly so, so two handed fighting may be possible for me. Besides, I trimmed Christmas trees for three summers. My left arm is already comfortable with a machete."

MacLeod shrugged. "You can give it a try. But I really wouldn't mind training you. I'm not very practiced in two handed myself, but I have some theoretical knowledge. Besides, sparring against one of us would be good practice."

Richie was shaking with silent laughter.

"What?"

"Huh? Oh, sorry. It's just that Crispin taught me two handed fighting over the last two months. Perfect timing. If you want, Mac and I can spar, and you can watch."

"Sounds good to me."

Richie had clearly gotten better. MacLeod still won, but he had almost as many cuts on his arms and body as he had given Richie. I began to applaud as they parted and bowed.

"You've been practicing," panted MacLeod. It may have sounded accusing, but he was clearly happy.

Richie grinned, saluting with his blade. He came over to me. "You see what you wanted to see?"

I nodded. I indicated the shorter blade in his left hand. "May I?"

Nodding, he laid aside his larger weapon, reversed the shorter, and presented it to me on his arm, hilt first. I took it tenderly, backing away from him. Giving few practice swings, I eventually settled into a defensive stance, trying to imitate MacLeod and his katana. They both chuckled. I blushed. "Okay, okay. So I'm inexperienced at this."

MacLeod walked over to the three matched weapons hanging on the wall that I had seen, oh so long ago. He took down the shorter two and returned to me. Handing me the sheathed weapons, he took Richie's blade and returned it. He turned back to me. "The longer blade is called a wakizashi, the shorter is a tanto."

He nodded for me to unsheathe them and let me get a feel for their balance. Once I was reasonably comfortable, he began to teach me a few katas with the blades. For now, he explained, I could practice with those, but they weren't permanent. They were show pieces, not fit for combat. Once I decided to continue with this weapon style, we could find permanent blades.

I ran through the katas a few times, MacLeod pointing out missteps or sloppy swings, until I had done each twice correctly. By this time, I was dripping sweat.

After replacing both blades, he went up to the loft to unpack while I took a shower. After his shower and once we were both presentable to the outside world, we went over to Joe's to meet the two newcomers to the area.

Walking into Joe's was a minor triumph for me. Adam's aura didn't even slow me down. Duncan slowed down at the two signatures, but I assured him it was only Richie and Adam.

It was a crowded place tonight. Adam and Richie were looking in our direction, sharing a table with a young Oriental girl holding Richie's hand. That must be Hoa. Over at the bar, I noticed Joe talking to two women, though I couldn't see who they were.

Duncan and I worked our way over to Adam and Richie. I nodded to them, "Gents." I smiled down at their table companion and kissed the offered hand. She was small, perhaps 5'2" and 100 pounds soaking wet. She looked relatively young, perhaps twenty-two. "You must be Hoa."

She smiled and nodded.

Someone cleared their throat behind me. I turned and was shocked to see Andrea, with Joe and another woman standing immediately behind her. Andrea held up her hand, "Don't I get at least the same courtesy as a complete stranger?" She tried to look stern, but the twinkle in her eye gave her away.

"My gravest apologies. I beg your forgiveness." I kissed her knuckles as well, then offered her a chair. She was pleased at my actions, but Richie just chuckled. Adam and Duncan pulled another table over as the group included the new members.

Once we were all settled, Joe made the introductions among those of us who didn't know everyone. Gina kept a hand tucked into Joe's elbow, but didn't say much. Hoa on the other hand, was quite open. She would be a lot of fun to get to know.

Once the introductions were concluded, Joe asked Duncan about his visit home. He started on an abbreviated version, throwing glances at Hoa and Andrea.

Joe interrupted when it became obvious Duncan was holding back some historical pieces. "It's okay, Mac. Everyone here knows."

Duncan raised an eyebrow, but Hoa was clearly in shock. She turned to Richie. "Is EVERYONE here Imm, er, like you?"

He was frowning slightly himself, looking at Andrea, so Joe came to the rescue. "Do you know what the Watchers are, Hoa?" She shook her head, so he explained. "We know what Immortals are. We've been tracking them and keeping their histories for thousands of years. I'm a Watcher, and so are Gina and Andrea. Everyone else at the table is Immortal." Andrea's and Gina's eyes got a little wider. Andrea peeked a glance at Adam, but didn't say anything.

Hoa still looked shocked. She looked over at Duncan and then me. We both nodded. She apparently already knew Adam. "Wow. How many of you are running around?"

Scattered chuckles sounded around the table. Joe continued his impromptu education, "Nobody's quite sure. The best guess is about five hundred."

She frowned. "I meant here in town."

Joe seemed to count the people at the table. "At least four." She gave him a sour look, so he continued, "Sorry, but we generally don't discuss such things. Against the group rules, though you'll find the Watchers around here already bend the rules." His voice held a trace of embarrassment, but everything else about him seemed relatively calm. Gina and Andrea shifted a little uncomfortably.

I tried to rescue them as much as possible. "You'll find a lot of ambiguity among the Watchers as to how much contact with Immortals is acceptable. Joe here broke a lot of ground, but it's still rough on most of the rest. I'm in a unique situation. I was a Watcher, but turns out I became Immortal about four months ago." I left out Adam and his story. That was his to tell if he wanted to.

Hoa seemed to digest that for a moment as Richie's hand gripped hers. Slowly, she asked, "And how many Watchers?"

Joe took another look around the table, "Three?"

Hoa growled, but Joe threw up his hands. "Sorry, but not everyone at the table needs to know. More importantly, most of them don't want to." She clearly didn't like the answer, but dropped it.

Once he realized he could speak freely, Duncan returned to his family stories with gusto. How many were still there, the peaks and valleys in the last twenty generations.

Since I was the only one at the table who had heard all this before, I volunteered to get everyone's drink refills. While over at the bar, I indicated our table and asked Mike, "What do you think of all this?"

His hands continued expertly preparing the drinks as he took on a thoughtful expression. "That isn't for me to decide. I just Watch and record, remember? What everyone else does is their own business."

"True, but do you AGREE with Joe?"

He took a long time in answering. "If I didn't, would I be here?" That didn't necessarily answer my question, but I dropped it anyway.

I made it back to the table just in time to listen to Duncan finish a story about Debra Campbell. His voice was rough, and Joe was looking at him with a touch of pity.

"I'm sorry," whispered Andrea. "I didn't realize she meant so much to you."

He cleared his throat before tossing back his drink. Standing, he asked Richie and myself, "See you two tomorrow?" At our nods, he took his coat and abruptly left.

"I'm sorry," Andrea repeated. Her eyes had misted over.

Joe shook his head, watching the dark figure make his way out the door. "You couldn't have known. She was his first love, even before he became Immortal. You never forget your first love . . ." He trailed off, lost in thought. Gina rubbed his arm, giving him a compassionate smile. His face brightened immediately, "But don't worry about it. Mac isn't the type to hold a grudge."

In an effort to change the subject, Richie turned to me. "How'd your training go?"

I smiled at Hoa's look of confusion. "I've been told that I have a very rare gift. I've been in England for a few months getting training. The idea is to read Immortal auras better than most, and even manipulate my own to some degree."

Richie appeared skeptical, "Such as?"

I looked around. Well, everyone here was a friend. Frowning in concentration, I abruptly cloaked myself. Richie's jaw dropped and Adam's eyebrow quirked. Closing my eyes completely, I tried something that Cassandra had told me about, but I'd never tried. As rapidly as I could, I cloaked and uncloaked myself, trying to shift my 'frequency' as I did so. I could almost feel Richie's and Adam's auras struggle to keep up. I head a scuffle off to my side, and opened my eyes, allowing my aura to shift back to normal. Richie was on his feet, looking around, wild-eyed. Once everything calmed back to normal, he looked at me. "Don't DO that!"

Adam, completely unruffled, said, "You did ask, Richie."

Four voices, almost in unison, "What happened?"

Richie sat back down, still slightly flushed. "It felt like a dozen Immortals just came in the door."

"So that's what it felt like," I muttered. "Sorry, but I was only trying to confuse my aura, not panic you." I gave Adam a look, but he just gazed blandly back. "Is it possible to phase you?"

He almost smiled. "Who do you think taught Cassandra?"

My jaw dropped. Well, damn. I was going to have to get some straight answers out of this guy sooner or later. Dredging up my composure, "Well, does that mean I can call you grandpa?"

Joe stifled a guffaw, Richie nearly fell out of his seat with laughter, the girls looked afraid to laugh, and Adam just gave me a sour look.

Fighting her smile, Andrea poked me in the ribs. "Ryan, be nice."

"Ah, yes. I'm supposed to be nice to my elders."

Adam gave me a stern look. "Listen, you young pup," he began.

Joe, Richie, Hoa, and Andrea chorused sotto voice, "When I was your age. . ." Everybody but Adam broke into laughter; he took on a 'wounded pride' look. For the first time, I felt his aura actually relax. I caught his eye and gave him a slight smile. His eyes smiled back and one corner of his mouth inched upward.

The remainder of the evening passed quickly. Adam eventually took his leave and Joe went back behind the bar, Gina following close behind. As it

approached midnight, I excused myself and headed toward the door. Once I made it outside, I felt Andrea beside me. "Walk me to my car?"

I smiled and offered my arm. She indicated a direction with a tilt of her head, and we fell into step. "Has Joe assigned you to someone yet?" I asked, just to pass the time.

"Yep."

I waited, but nothing was forthcoming. "Okay, to who?"

She gave me an admonishing look. "You know better than to ask that, Ryan."

"Okay, sorry. If so, why are you letting yourself being seen with an Immortal?"

She stopped and gave me a look devoid of any emotion. I frowned, "What?"

She slugged me in the arm. "For one of the smartest guys I know, you're real dense sometimes, Chessman." With that, she stalked off toward her car, leaving me rubbing my arm in confusion.

Richie came up behind me with Hoa on his arm. "I'm younger than you are, Ryan, but even *I* saw that one coming."

I turned to them. Hoa had a look of pity on her face, Richie's was carefully neutral. "Care to clue me in?"

Hoa opened her mouth, but closed it without saying anything. Richie shook his head. "See you tomorrow, Ryan." With that, they walked away.

If I ever figure out women, I'll write a book and make millions.

Whereas I found my psychic training fascinating, the physical training was simply grueling. Nine to eleven every day, either MacLeod or Richie would prove (painfully) that I wasn't up to snuff. Don't get me wrong. I was gradually getting more comfortable with the two handed fighting techniques. It took longer for them to beat me, but I never won a round. Every time I fought one of them to a standstill, they would change their technique just enough that I was incapable of defending against them again. I expect this was deliberately designed to force me to recognize a deeper pattern to their fighting, but it was taking forever to learn anything.

The only thing that could be said for my unarmed training was that it was less bloody. I still wasn't coming close to beating them, but at least I wasn't ruining nearly as many shirts.

My only place of refuge was Joe's. Several nights a week, I would go in there to escape the Immortal world for a while. Occasionally, Adam would be in there, and we would talk, but for the most part, I just relaxed in an atmosphere that wasn't threatening.

Over the next months, I gradually became more comfortable with my new life. I started my own consulting firm with a small business loan. Since it was free lance stuff, I hasn't held to any schedule. And that helped immensely when it came to my training.

One added benefit of my training routine was that I was getting into better shape. Most of my old clothing (those not destroyed by long, sharp objects) ended up getting replaced as they became too big. I trusted MacLeod's advice, when I could afford it, and Richie's most of the rest of the time.

On my semi-weekly stops at Joe's, I began to see more and more of Andrea. We would sit for hours and talk of anything and everything. This time with her was more reminiscent of our time at Watcher's University than of the recent disagreement in the parking lot. By tacit agreement, that conversation was never brought up.

Gathering my courage, I eventually asked her out. Her response, "About time," finally told me the answer to the question that I had asked Richie a few weeks ago. And that this wasn't my idea. Or at least wasn't my idea first.

Dating was a new experience for me. I'd never gone out with anyone seriously before, and I came to look forward to spending time with her, even if only a few hours at Joe's. Since she was a Watcher and knew who I was, it fixed a lot of potential problems for me. I never had to hide my sword, never had to explain if I suddenly cut a nighttime stroll short, and didn't have to explain why I healed so quickly after I cut my hand open with a knife preparing dinner one night.

One evening at Joe's, I was talking to Richie about life in general. As such things tend to do between two attached young men, the talk turned to our significant others. He listened to my stories and looked at my dreamy expression with barely contained mirth.

"You've fallen for her, Ryan."

I began to sputter, but stopped. I had, hadn't I? Spending my life with her seemed so simple, obvious.

He smiled at the expression on my face. "Actually, Hoa told me before I noticed myself. Why do women seem to see these things quicker?"

"If I knew that, I'd write a book. And sell it to the male population of this planet."

He chuckled. "True enough. Tell you what. Hoa and I would like you to come over to our place this weekend. We'll fix supper and we can make a

night of it. Saturday night sound good to you?"

It did at that, and told him that we'd be there if her schedule allowed for it.

It did, and we arrived at their apartment at the appointed time. Hoa made a lasagna that would make an Italian weep with joy, and the night only got better from there. We chatted, played cards, watched a movie, and generally had a great time. Finally making our farewells at about one, Andrea and I climbed back into my car for the trip to her place.

"They make a wonderful couple, don't they?" Despite the late hour, she didn't seem the least sleepy.

"That they do," I agreed. "They apparently bumped into each other when Richie was training with Crispin, and I was over in England. I'd never believed in 'love at first sight', but they seem to have managed it."

She had nodded at my first comment, but grown silent at my second. She spent the rest of the drive back staring out the window. Pulling into a parking spot, I shut off the car and turned to her. She looked at me with an attempt at a haughty expression, "And I thought MacLeod's manners would have rubbed off on you by now."

Realizing what she meant, I hopped out and opened the door for her. Offering my arm, I escorted her to the door to her place. Unlocking it, she turned to me, "Care for a nightcap?"

I opened my mouth the refuse, but never got the words out. Before I could react, she was pinning me up against the wall, giving me a kiss that was getting a much stronger reaction than any of our previous kisses. "Ryan, sometimes you are so dense."

I could only agree as she turned toward her open door, pulling me willingly along.

I awoke in a strange room, in an even stranger position. This was definitely the first time I had awoken with somebody pinning one of my arms down. Before my sleepy body began to consider the situation, my mind had replayed the previous twelve hours. Peeking a look at the clock, I realized I had slept in. I was due at the dojo thirty minutes ago.

As gently as I could, I pulled my arm out from under Andrea. Even that wasn't good enough. She woke with a jerk. Panic rode her face for a moment before her mind caught up with events.

I smiled at her. "Good morning. Oh, and in the future, I'll try to be less dense."

She gave me a coy look, "Only certain parts."

I raised an eyebrow and she giggled. "As much as I'd love to stay right here and prove my, um, density, I'm late for my training. Though we must do this again sometime."

Giving her a peck on the cheek, I began gathering discarded clothing and weaponry from three rooms and headed out. A stop at my house got me a fresh change of clothes and a set of workout sweats. Running back over to the dojo, I walked in only an hour late, yawning. MacLeod and Richie interrupted their sparring as my aura hit theirs.

"Well, well. Look what the cat dragged in." MacLeod looked at me for an explanation, Richie kept his face carefully expressionless.

"Blame him," I said, waving a hand at Richie.

Richie fought a smile, but the gleam in his eye told me what he guessed. MacLeod turned to him a moment before turning back, his eyebrow raised in question.

I sighed. "Amanda's back in town," I said, gesturing up to the third aura that I'd identified. "I won't ask you about your night if you don't ask me about mine."

By this time, Richie was nearly choking trying to hold his laughter in. MacLeod looked confused before realization finally dawned and he gave both of us a faint smile. "You're both adults, but if you want a piece of advice: Be careful falling in love with a mortal. Even when they know about us, it's still hard, knowing you're going to lose them eventually." He trailed off, clearly lost in memories. He snapped back when Richie moved toward the showers. "As I said, be careful. End of speech. Get dressed, Ryan. We still have an hour."

I went to Joe's early that evening. He greeted me cheerfully enough and we chatted for a few minutes. Once the opening pleasantries were over, I gave him a long look. "Can I assume you know all the relevant facts about last night?" He frowned slightly before giving a slow nod. "Good. Only one question. No, make that a request. Despite my current status, I still believe in the Watchers. My only request is that you don't let Andrea be my Watcher. Whichever way this goes for the two of us, she wouldn't be objective about me. Could you do that for me?"

By this time he was smiling. "Already done. She wasn't assigned to you in the first place, but now that will become permanent."

I relaxed into a smile. "Thank you." I felt Richie approach and turned back to the bar as he and Hoa came walking in.

She was laughing. "And what did Duncan say to Ryan?"

tured to them just as they walked up to me and Joe. Richie was tense until he spotted me, but tensed again as Hoa's question sunk in. Hoa followed his eyes and saw me standing there, looking at her. She started to stammer out an apology, "Sorry, Ryan. Didn't know you were in here."

"It's okay. His look was pretty good after I commented about Amanda. At any rate, I'm told that I should thank you. You spotted this coming long before I did." She smiled and nodded shyly. "Tell you what, if I miss something like that again, you smack me upside the head, okay?"

"I thought that was my job," said Andrea, snaking an arm over my shoulder.

"Yikes, you are sneaky, aren't you? I didn't notice you come in." I turned around to give her a hug and kiss.

"No offense, but that IS what Watchers do."

Life continued to get better and better. Andrea and I moved in together about two weeks later. We had discussed marriage, but decided that both of us didn't care.

My training gradually got better. At least I was ruining as many of Richie's shirts as he was ruining of mine. And I was actually winning some of the spars, too.

Joe's continued to be a regular relaxation stop for me. On one of those nights that Adam was present and in a talkative mood, I asked him about Cassandra. He took a long time in answering, but slowly, painfully, gave me a story about a band of marauders that went by the names of Kronos, Silas, Caspian, and . . . Methos. More properly, The Four Horsemen. The entire story, or at least his abbreviated version of it, still took upwards of two hours to tell. I was occasionally nauseated, sometimes impressed, often horrified, but always enthralled by the story. By the time he got to the Double Quickening he had shared with Duncan, Joe was sitting with us, a solemn expression on his face. When he finished, Adam took a shuddering breath and a long pull on his beer. None of us said anything for several minutes.

"You unspeakable bastard," I breathed. Adam didn't flinch, but Joe shot me a warning glance. "I don't know whether to try to put a stake through your heart or give you a medal of courage."

He gave a wan smile. "I'd like to think I don't deserve the first, and I'm sure I don't deserve the second."

I shook my head. "Well, I did ask. Now I know. Thank you."

He shook his head immediately. "Don't thank me. I have a hard enough time living with myself the way it is. I can't unload any of this guilt and I won't even delude myself into thinking I can. I can just answer the questions and hope nobody follows in those particular footsteps."

Another long pause settled over the table. "She still loves you, you know."

Adam flinched, but didn't say anything. He knew.

Glancing at the clock, I noted it was getting late. I stood and stretched out my back. Grabbing my coat, I waved to Mike. "G'Night, Joe. Methos." Joe nodded back, but Adam was lost in his memories.

The cold air felt good against my face as I walked slowly toward my car. I shuddered, thinking about Adam's life. How he remained sane is nothing short of a miracle.

Half a block before I reached my car, I abruptly sensed an Immortal and stopped dead in my tracks. Reasonably old, five hundred or so. Lots of heads, but none of them particularly strong. I took a careful look around and spotted movement in the alley. Keeping one hand on my wakizashi, I edged in. I made it about ten feet before I saw her. Huddled against the side of the dumpster, wearing hardly anything. She looked perhaps fourteen and looked at me with abject fear.

Taking a quick glance around to see if anyone else was near, I approached to within five feet. My hand never left the hilt of the sword tucked into the front panel of my coat. "What's your name?"

She just shook her head and tried to shrink further into the wall.

I sighed. "Look, you're probably five hundred years old. Don't try this game. Now, what's your name?"

The fear abruptly fled from her face and she stopped trying to press into the wall. "So are you going to try to kill me now?" Young voice, no accent I could place.

I cocked my head at her. "Why would I do that?"

"Because everyone else does. I'm a weak target. I have no sword. I have to run from everyone who knows what I am. All I need is some help, and I can get out of this miserable life, but does anyone help? No, all anyone is interested in is using me or taking my head." She looked resigned to this fate and ready to bolt if I made a wrong move.

But her aura had been flickering wildly the entire time. "That was what, four lies? You're not weak, you're just a trapdoor spider. Try another story."

The look of fear returned, but this time it was genuine. "Don't kill me," she whispered. That plea was honest enough, but there was something else in her aura that warned me.

Slipping my left hand onto my combat knife, I made a big show of removing my other hand from my coat and sticking it into my pocket. And I turned back to the mouth of the alley and started to leave.

A flicker of mental warning and just a scratch of metal on brick was all I needed. Whirling around, I brought the knife to block the slash she was aiming at the back of my neck. I reached into my coat again and drew my second sword and settled into a ready stance. "My name's Ryan Chessman, by the way."

Her face had gone deathly white when her first slash was blocked, and the second blade came into view. She backed up into a crouch, but did not try to escape.

"Don't do this," I said. She simply snarled and darted in. Her technique wasn't very good, I noted. She relied on her defenseless look too much. After three simple parries, I realized that she had had almost no training at all. Coming out of my purely defensive routine, I started pressing her backward. Within a minute, her sword was lying at her feet and mine was at her neck.

I had to try again, "Walk away." With a wordless snarl of rage, she produced a switchblade from somewhere and plunged it into my wrist. Completely on reflex, the arm moved sideways, neatly severing her head. With a cry, I dropped my knife and pulled the switchblade out of the opposite hand. Well, I didn't witness Sandra Rocke's Quickening, but I'm sure going to witness this one.

I slowly backed up until I had bumped into the opposite wall. By this time, a white fog had begun to swirl out of her body, drifting slowly toward me. The first bolt of power blasted me forcibly into the wall, making me drop my sword. The lightning strikes themselves hurt, but . . . they didn't. It stung, but each added to my own power, making me feel larger. Lightning skittered across the ground and rebounded from the walls. I don't know how long it lasted, but I eventually felt fewer and fewer of them striking me. When I had taken three whole breaths without being belted, I took stock. I was on my hands and knees, only slightly moved down from where I had first been struck. After some judicious movements, I discovered everything still worked. My hand had even healed.

Unsteadily standing, I retrieved my two weapons and wiped them clean on a old coat I found next to the dumpster. After a moment's pause, I retrieved the switchblade as well. By this time, I was nearly stable. Walking out of the alley, I paused to regain my bearings. It was late, but I needed another drink.

Walking back into Joe's was something of a relief. Adam's comforting aura was still there and I could at least relax. The first thing I did was head over to the bar and ask Mike for a rag. With a quizzical look, he tossed me one. Keeping it hidden from anyone else around me, I wiped off my hand as well as I could. Mike took back the rag with a raised eyebrow. What could I say? I just shrugged and asked for a beer. I took it back to Adam and Joe's table and sat down, completely uninvited.

I wished Andrea were here. I needed a hug and someone to tell me that I did the right thing.

Joe and Adam just watched me as I had a shaking fit. "Who?"

I pulled out the switchblade and looked at it blankly for a minute before answering. "Don't know. She never gave her name. Looked fourteen, but was closer to five hundred. She tried the defenseless innocent routine on me. Did Kenny have any students?"

Joe answered without any hesitation, "Holly Weathers. She slipped her Watcher a week ago down in San Francisco. She was a tricky little thing. Mostly went after the young, idealistic ones. Yeah, she operated much the same way Kenny does. How did you know?"

I frowned at him. "I told you. She was five hundred. And she had taken dozens of heads. When she tried the 'Poor little me' speech, her aura flickered so much it was almost strobbing. If I couldn't read her aura, she would have had me in about thirty seconds." I continued to stare at the little blade in my hand.

Adam just gazed at me. "You okay?"

I took a shuddering breath. "I will be."

He nodded. "Welcome to the club."

Chessman Chronicles Doing the Right Thing

What was it about mornings, anyway? Here I was: healthy, financially stable, curled up around the woman I love, no outstanding Challenges. No problems.

So why do I feel like death warmed over? Scratch that. Why do I feel like death that's been sitting on the side of the side of the highway for a week?

It had to be a morning thing. Coming out of peaceful slumber, the body has to get back at you somehow. Or maybe it was an adult thing. I can't remember ever feeling this way when I was a kid.

With a disgusted growl, I pried open one eyelid and glared malevolently at the clock radio that was cheerfully trying to get me up by playing some catchy commercial jingle. I spent perhaps ten seconds contemplating what would happen if I introduced this demonic device to a long, sharp object. With a sigh, I concluded that it would take more effort to get up, retrieve my spare sword from the closet, and come back to kill it than it would to simply turn the blasted thing off.

Swatting at it a few times with a hand finally shut it up. With considerable effort, I pried myself out of bed and stumbled toward the bathroom.

I am not a morning person.

Within an hour and a half (not to mention a shower and breakfast), I had become a member of the human race. After seeing Andrea off to wherever she went every day, I headed to my downtown office. Once there, the first item of note was an e-mail:

To: chessman@seacouver.inet.com From: AFriend@anonymous_mail.com

Subject: A target of opportunity

Ryan D. Chessman,

I know who you are. I know what you are.

I know about someone you'd be interested in meeting. His name is Jerry Markus. He's been in Seacouver for a few days now, staying at the Holiday Inn on Western. He's been stalking Mr. Richie Ryan.

He joined your little elite club a few years ago but doesn't hold the same beliefs you do. He's won a few fights to date but has not showed the same restraint in methods that you and your teacher do regarding Rules. Ask MacLeod about Angela and you'll see what I mean.

First, however, you must hurry if you want to stop him. He's setting up MacLeod's training warehouse as a trap and will Challenge Ryan tonight. When he suggests a warehouse by the docks, Ryan will no doubt try to direct him to MacLeod's. The trap will be sprung.

If you leave your office now, you should be able to get to the warehouse before Markus does. I'm sure you can think of what to do from there.

You're no doubt asking yourself if this is a trap. It is not, but I realize I can't prove that to you. I can only hope that you heed my advice and remove this dark stain from your group.

- A Friend

What the hell? Well, a friend of mine is in potential trouble, and I may be able to get the drop on the bad guy here. I grabbed my coat, weapons, and cell phone and hustled out the door.

Parking about two piers down from the warehouse that MacLeod occasionally used to train Richie and myself, I jogged the remaining distance. At this time of the morning, the entire dock area was deserted, with the exception of the grain loading pier. Making one full circuit around the building, I noticed no cars and no Buzzes. I took that to mean that I had probably beat this Markus here. I entered a side door cautiously. Once inside, I took a quick lap around the interior. Still no Buzzes. Good, I'd beat him here.

Since the warehouse was almost completely empty, there was no way that I could hide. And hiding was necessary if I was going to pull this off. I settled myself down next to a dirt streaked window to wait. With a little luck, I could see anyone coming, but I was shielded from outside view.

My patience was rewarded immediately. Not five minutes later, a car pulled up outside. Ducking down out of sight and sidling over to a dark spot near the door closest to where the car had parked, I carefully cloaked myself and drew my knife.

Cassandra's teachings were coming in handy after all, I mused. Unfortunately, cloaking worked both ways. I couldn't Sense him, and I couldn't move much while maintaining the concentration needed. Holding the cloak in place, I spared as much attention as I dared to my hearing.

This guy was cautious. I could hear him take a walk around the building, probably checking for Buzzes just as I had, before returning to his car. I heard the trunk open and then close before the footsteps approached the door. The door opened and someone took one step into the place before I jumped into motion.

As I started to move, my cloaking broke down. My opponent visibly jerked, a hand darting into his coat. But I was too close by this time. I grabbed the wrist that was disappearing into his coat and started pulling. Jerked off balance, he stumbled forward. Stepping around his moving form, I tripped him up and then planted a knee into the middle of his back after he landed flat on his face on the floor. Placing my knife under his chin and along the side of his neck, I took stock of the situation.

He was just a little under six feet, thin, looked to be about thirty, dark hair. His aura told me he wasn't very old at all, but had taken a few heads. His left hand held a shotgun by the stock, and a backpack was slung over the left shoulder, slightly askew from the fall. He was flat on his stomach, head facing to the right, and right hand pinned under his chest. I could barely make out a trickle of blood leaking out of his nose, probably from his fall.

While he was coughing and groaning, I told him, "Don't move." Changing hands on the knife that was poised over his neck, I held the blade steady just under the hinge of the right side of his jaw. With my left hand, I opened and started pawing through the backpack. In it I found a box of shotgun shells, two pistol ammunition clips, a cell phone, what looked like a transmitter switch, and various other small electronic devices that I couldn't recognize.

I waited a few more seconds for him to pull himself together and stop coughing. "Where the hell did you come from?" His voice was rough, with a hint of an Irish accent.

I ignored the question. "I got a hot tip that told me that you may be here. This person also told me some other things about you. You get to try to convince me that I shouldn't kill you. Are you ready?"

"Who the hell are you?" Anger started to creep into his voice, slowly replacing the fear.

"Oh, I'm sorry. My name's Ryan Chessman. I'm sure you'll forgive me for not offering to shake hands. What's your name? And while you're at it, what are you doing here?"

"Why should I answer any of your damn questions? If you're going to kill me, get on with it. Or are you too scared to try to take me in a fair fight?" The sneer in his voice was almost visible.

"You should answer because what I can see tells me that you deserve to die. If you want to keep your head, you'll answer my questions. Oh, and don't think about trying to force your way out of this mess. I may not be able to decapitate you with this knife immediately, but I can sure do a good number on your neck." I pressed the knife in slightly to make my point. "Now, what's your name?"

"Jerry Markus." His voice was sullen, but he clearly understood the situation.

"What are you doing here?"

"I just moved into town. I'm looking for a decent spot to fight if I'm Challenged." His aura flickered. He was lying.

"Do you know who Richie Ryan is?"

"No." Another lie.

"What's the shotgun for?"

I could see a small smile start to form on what I could see of his face. "I like to be careful." True, but incomplete. His aura started to calm down, his fear subsiding. If I weren't careful, he could start to try something. A wicked grin spread on my face as a plan began to form.

I took the shotgun shells and pistol clips out of his backpack and tossed them away a few feet. Leaning over a little, I got a grip on the shotgun and tried to take it. He wouldn't release it. I sighed and pressed my knife a little harder. This time it drew a drop of blood from just under his jaw. "Let go of the shotgun." After a moment of hesitation, he did. I took it and tossed it toward where I'd thrown the ammunition.

By this time you could almost see the gears turning in his head. He began squirming uncomfortably. "Would you get off me? The hilt of my sword is digging a hole in my stomach."

Without even looking up from my perusal of his backpack, I said, "No." I took out the remaining electronic gadgets and placed them in front of his face. "What're these?"

"Electronics. There's a laser tripwire and a few other items. I'm an electronics expert, and I'm putting a security system into my home myself." A few truths, but that last one was a lie.

Nodding as if I believed his lies, I got off his back, but left my knife where it was. "Looks like what I was told about you was a lie. Seems this person who contacted me thought you were going to prepare an unfair trap for Richie Ryan." His aura flickered in blind panic, but his face never twitched nor had he moved. I continued, "Looks like they were wrong about you. Sorry about all this. Hope there're no hard feelings." Removing the knife from his neck, I got up and headed out of his line of sight. While he couldn't see me, I transferred it back to my left hand while silently drawing my wakizashi with my right. I hoped this worked.

He took the bait. Rolling over as quickly as he could, he pulled his trapped hand out of his coat, bringing a pistol in line. His problem was that his aura blazed with danger as he started moving. My sword found his neck just as the gun made it far enough to bear on me. Fortunately, his finger never received the command to fire.

No sense destroying anything useful. I pulled out my cell phone and dropped it onto the ammunition. I had trotted about ten feet before the Quickening dropped me in my tracks.

Ow. That wasn't fun. I'd heard of people who enjoyed the Quickenings, but I certainly didn't. They were supposed to increase my strength, but they simply made me feel miserable.

Well, first thing's first. I pulled myself back to my feet, gathered my blades and tucked them away. Shaking out the tightness in my arms and neck, I walked back over to the center of activity. Markus certainly wasn't going to be a problem anymore. Fortunately, the ammo, shotgun, and my phone were okay. His phone and electronic knick knacks more closely resembled smoking gray amoebas than something manufactured. I was relieved to see that the ammunition was okay. I didn't want to find out what a lightning bolt would do to a box of shotgun shells. I looked around for anything else of value. The pistol was lying nearby, apparently unharmed. Reaching into Markus' coat, I drew his sword. It looked like one of those short swords you saw in the movies of Roman soldiers. What was that called? A gladius? Something like that. Good news. I can carry that one out of here without being obvious. I tucked it into the sheath with my wakizashi and stuffed the ammunition and pistol into my pockets and waistband. After a moment of hesitation, I also took the shotgun and slung it over my shoulder by the strap.

Many people would think this distasteful, but I saw it as simple practicality. After all, he didn't need any of it anymore. To the victor go the spoils, after all.

I walked outside, took a calming breath of air, and looked around. All was quiet. Fortunately, the light show hadn't drawn any attention. I walked back to my car before pulling out my phone.

"Joe's. Joe Dawson speaking."

Amazing. He's there and awake even in the middle of the morning. "Hey, Joe. It's Ryan. You'll probably get a call real soon about a Quickening down at Mac's warehouse. You may want to send a cleanup crew down there."

You could hear the concern in his voice. "What happened?"

"Long story. Could you get in touch with Adam and have him meet me there tonight? I have a story for the two of you that you need to hear. You won't want to hear it, but you need to."

A pause preceded his response, "Okay, I'll go along with that for now. You okay?"

I gave a long sigh before answering. "I will be. Talk to you later." I hung up that call and hit another speed dial button.

"Hello, you've reached Richie and Hoa's. We can't . . ."

I hung up. No sense leaving a message. I had a good idea where he was, anyway. I hit a third speed dial.

"DeSalvo's."

"Hi, Richie. It's Ryan."

"Hey, Ryan. What's up?"

"You free for a while?"

"Yeah, this place is quiet right now. Why?"

"I'll be over in a few minutes. I have a question and a gift for you."

"And it's not even my birthday." His voice held a note of curiosity now.

"Well, think of it as an early Christmas present. I'll be over in a few. Bye."

"Okay, bye."

Turning off the phone, I pulled the keys out of my pocket. Popping the trunk, I pulled out the short sword and placed it inside. The shotgun went in with it. Fortunately, my parking spot was far enough out of sight of anything that I wasn't in real danger of anyone seeing me. Well, anyone except maybe my Watcher. And I had nothing to fear from him or her. After all, I used to be one and knew how they worked.

The drive over to DeSalvo's Dojo was filled with questions. Who sent that letter? Why did they send it? What do I tell Richie?

Why I was going to Richie was easy enough. If he could tell me how to use it, I was planning to keep the pistol. Going to him would be far easier than going somewhere else. Based on his background, I figured he had at least a basic knowledge about handguns and could give me a decent

how to" lecture on guns. I'd heard about entirely too many Immortals who used guns. I figured I needed one myself. I had no need or want of the shotgun, so I figured I'd give that one to Richie. Whether he kept it or sold it, I didn't care. He'd probably know how to sell it if he wanted to, anyway. I had no idea how to get rid of something like that short of dumping it into the ocean. Yeah, I knew it was stereotypical to think I knew his knowledge base just because of his background, but it was all I had.

The question of what to tell him was proving to be tougher. I couldn't very well tell him the whole story. He'd think I was protecting him, which wasn't quite the truth. Yes, I had gone to the warehouse without help, but there was nobody around who could have helped me without being a hindrance. He couldn't cloak like I could, and that was a key point to my ambush. With him there, it would have spoiled the whole plan.

DeSalvo's was just coming into view when I decided I would tell Richie nothing about how I found this guy.

I pulled into a shadowed spot near the dojo and looked around. Nobody in sight. At least nobody obvious. Watchers never were. Popping the trunk, I pulled the shotgun out and tried to stuff it into my coat. It was too long. Of course it was too long. Cursing under my breath, I stuffed the stock as far up into my armpit as I could and held the barrel in my hand. Not terribly pretty, but at least this kept it out of sight. Mostly. I hoped.

Shutting my trunk, I tried to walk casually into DeSalvo's. Well, I TRIED to look casual. In truth, I felt as obvious as an elephant at a penguin conference. Once I hit the door, I spotted Richie in the office, looking up at the door, and Hoa over on one of the practice mats, apparently just finishing some form of stretching routine.

When she noticed me, she stood and walked my way. As she came over, I took a moment to appreciate the view. A little over five foot, perhaps 100 pounds, and Vietnamese, Vu Tran Hoa was quite easy to look at. Hey, just because I was devoted to Andrea didn't mean I couldn't appreciate the view along the road of life. Besides, both Andrea and Richie'd kill me if I did more than just passively admire.

She stopped just a few feet short of me and seemed to be giving me a good looking over. Her mouth quirked up and she asked, "So, Ryan, is that a gun in your coat or are you just happy to see me?"

Did I mention her sense of humor?

I rolled my eyes and gave her half a smile. "Yes and yes. Nice seeing you, Hoa. No offense, but Richie and I need to talk."

She just nodded and went back to the exercise mat, apparently to finish her exercise routine. Relieved that I wouldn't have to explain any of this to her, I continued on to the office.

"Real subtle, Ryan. Should I ask?" Richie leaned back in the chair and looked at me with a mixture of amusement and curiosity.

I laid the shotgun on the desk, followed by the pistol, two clips, and box of shells. "Hey, I never said I was good at concealing firearms. Remember how long it took me to carry a sword without looking like an advertisement for Ginsu?" I flopped down into the chair across from him.

Giving a chuckle, he picked up each weapon in turn and looked them over before putting them down again. The shotgun was apparently already unloaded, and he checked the clip on the pistol. "Okay, where'd you get these, and why'd you bring them here?"

"The headhunter I took them from doesn't need them anymore," I answered. "As for why here, well, I don't know anything about guns. I'd like to keep the pistol, but only if I can use it without hurting myself."

He raised an eyebrow slightly. "And what makes you think I know anything about guns?"

"I read some of your Chronicles, remember? You started out life on the street." I quirked an eyebrow and looked at him skeptically. "Are you telling me you don't know how to use a handgun?"

He winced a little at my mention of his history. "Okay, I see your point. I can point out the major items on this Glock, but you'd have to go to a gun range to practice. And if you go there, you'd better have proof of ownership of this thing. I'll assume you didn't buy this from its previous owner." One eyebrow lifted in twisted humor.

I raised an eyebrow back at him with a sour look. "Sorry, I didn't get him to write out a receipt," I said with heavy sarcasm. "I'm not going to bother with practice. If I point it and pull the trigger, the bullet goes the direction I'm aiming, right?"

He nodded with a slight frown. "It's not that easy, but yeah. Being a decent shot takes some practice."

"That's not my goal. This is going to be a last ditch weapon for me. I don't WANT to know how to use it well."

He shrugged. "Your call. What about this one?" He indicated the shotgun.

I gave him a slight smile. "Merry Christmas."

His eyebrows tried to crawl off his face. "Er, thanks, but what if I don't particularly want a shotgun?"

I shrugged. "Sell it. I'm sure you can do that discreetly as well."

He didn't even blink. "Maybe. Thanks. So seriously, where'd you get 'em?"

"Some guy named Jerry Markus. Joe's people have probably cleaned up Mac's warehouse by now. Poor guy was hardly older than we are." I shrugged. "He pulled the pistol on me instead of his sword."

was clearly interested in more of an explanation than that, but he didn't press the issue. Instead, he picked up the Glock. As he rattled off the features, he demonstrated. "Safety on, won't fire. Safety off, will. Clip release, empty chamber like so, put round back into clip, put clip back in, chamber a round after it's empty. Keep it away from children and out of sight. Ask Joe how to clean it. He has one himself. Any questions?" He flipped on the safety and handed it to me butt first.

I tucked it back into my waistband. "Yeah. I'm in a bad mood. I need to burn off some energy. You up for some hand to hand practice?"

He chuckled. "Sure, but don't let Hoa see you hit me. She's likely to try to kill you."

I looked out the glassed in office to see her in the midst of a slow kata of some variety. She was clearly very limber and the outfit she was wearing showed off her figure. It was worth showing off. I turned back to Richie with a leer. "Hmm, maybe I'll do that. Wrestling her sounds like fun."

He gave me an evil look and reached for the shotgun. I just laughed.

After spending an hour working out my frustrations by pounding on Richie (and him pounding on me just a little harder), I went back home for a while. By the time I got there, I was amazed to notice it was only noon. I'd only been up for six hours, and it'd already been a full day. I fixed myself a quick lunch and then went back to the office. I did need to get SOME work done today.

By six that evening I had calmed back down to something approaching normalcy. Leaving a message on the machine at home for Andrea in case she beat me back, I grabbed my coat and headed out the door to Joe's. I was NOT looking forward to this talk.

Walking into Joe's bar relaxed me immediately. In addition to being a relaxed bar atmosphere, I had spent many happy times in here. Just a couple weeks ago, Andrea and I had celebrated her birthday here with several friends. And then there were the uncountable times I had come in here to escape the world. However, in addition to the happy times, there were also the stressful ones in here. Just a year ago now, a table full of Immortals had helped me transition into their world. I shook my head. Lots of memories in this room. With hardly any thought, my feet took me to a barstool, and I took a seat. Time to make a few new memories here.

The more I thought about it, the more the implications of this letter scared the drek outta me. There was a leak in the Watchers, that much was clear. This person, whoever they were, was helping Immortals by feeding them information about others. And because of that, a dark Immortal was eliminated.

I frowned as something occurred to me. Why did I want to tell Joe about this? This person had HELPED me (and likely saved Richie's life) for crying out loud. Why they picked me, and why Markus was a target, I've no idea, but this person had made the world a better place for it. With a strained chuckle, I realized that my initial thought of turning my information over to Joe and Adam was typical Watcher thinking. But I wasn't a Watcher any longer, I was an Immortal. I should probably be trying to protect this person.

My mental ruminations were interrupted by Joe as he put a Killian's down in front of me. "Adam called and said he'd be here soon. Want to talk about this now or wait for him?"

I looked up at Joe and sighed. "Let's wait for him. It'll keep." He looked at me for a moment before finally giving me a nod and moving off.

I called this meeting of sorts, so I'd better have something to talk about. But did I want to talk about this mysterious letter? No, I wanted to keep this person safe for as long as they helped trim down on the bad guys out there. But what if they aren't targeting only bad guys? What if they were indiscriminate Hunters, going after all Immortals? Because of who my teacher was, sending me after a dishonorable Immortal was almost sure to appeal to me. If this person knew who I was (and the letter was clearly designed with that knowledge), it would be easy to choose targets that I wouldn't hesitate to pursue.

I needed to know if this was an isolated case or not. If not, who else had been targeted? I gave a frustrated sigh. How was I going to get THAT information? Several possibilities flashed through my mind. I could ask Andrea, but I had never asked such questions before, and if I ask now, it would look suspicious. I could try to hack the Watcher's database, but that would be time consuming, and I didn't have the time. Adam would know, but what would his reaction be? Was he more Watcher or Immortal?

Speak of the devil, and here he comes. He of the Ancient Time and Powerful Aura walked into the room and made his way to the barstool next to mine. Adam Pierson was quite the mystery to me. Physically, he was mid thirties, tall, lanky, and looked like a starving grad student. However, this guy was the oldest known living being on the planet. How he remained a functioning member of society was beyond me.

"Adam," I greeted him.

"Ryan. How's your day been?"

I turned to look at him. "Don't tell me you haven't heard."

He almost smiled. "Okay, I won't." He continued to just stare at me for a minute.

"What?" That stare was beginning to annoy me. That wasn't terribly surprising. He'd had something like five thousand years to practice it, after all.

"Are you going to tell us?"

My jaw almost dropped. Quickly composing my face, I innocently asked, "Tell you what?"

He shook his head. "Whatever it is you asked us to see you tonight about. Whatever it is, you're undecided about it."

I frowned at him. "What makes you think I'd not tell you what I asked you two here for?"

He quirked one eyebrow and tilted his head at me. "You may be able to read auras, but five thousand years of living hasn't left me completely devoid of skills. And you're entirely too young to be hiding anything from me."

Uh, oh. Better try to lead him off the track. "Are you really psychic or just a good guesser?"

"Neither. Just a good judge of human nature. And you haven't answered the question yet. Are you going to tell us?"

So much for that plan. I grimaced. "I don't know. I need more information from the Watchers first. But asking the question will tell them more than I want them to know."

"Need I remind you that I am a Watcher, and so were you?"

I sighed. "I know. Where do my loyalties to the Watchers end and my responsibilities to the Immortals begin?" I didn't really mean to ask it that way, but it was a valid enough question.

"You're protecting whoever told you how to catch Markus? You think it was a Watcher?" His voice held a note of incredulity.

Damn, how'd he figure that one out? I gritted my teeth and stared at the bar top. He already knew more than was probably safe, especially if he was more loyal to the Watchers than Immortals.

With that thought, I frowned to myself. And who the hell was I loyal to? Well, I needed a sounding board. "Which group are you more loyal to?"

He gave a soft smile. "You asking Adam Pierson or Methos?"

"I don't know. I'm asking you. Are you Pierson, or are you Methos?"

He seemed to fold up into himself. He turned to stare at the amber liquid in the bottle in front of himself. "I don't know anymore." It was almost a whisper, but it seemed to carry the weight of countless internal arguments.

Great. "Once you can tell me the answer to that one, let me know."

Since Adam wasn't going to be useful to me tonight, I still needed a sounding board. I couldn't ask Richie, because he was too close to this whole mess. It was his life that was saved by my actions. Hoa was out for the same reasons. Andrea's loyalty was to the Watchers, not Immortals. Though the fact that she was emotionally involved with me hinted that she may be more impartial than some others. Duncan would be useful, but he was in Paris. Amanda or Cassandra would be partial to the Immortals, not Watchers. Joe was loyal to Duncan first, Watchers second, and Immortals in general a distant third.

I needed to know if this person was giving information on everyone or just specific someones. Before deciding anything, I NEEDED that.

While staring at my drink, wrestling with my conscience, I became slowly aware of someone standing in front of me. I looked up to find Joe staring at me from across the counter. "What's wrong?" He sounded honestly concerned. That only made this harder.

I gave a sad little laugh. "I can't even tell you that, Joe."

He cocked his head, questioning. I shook my head. I can't talk to him about this.

He nodded. "Anyway, you two want to head back to my office? This'll take a while."

I got up and tugged on Adam's sleeve to pull his attention back to the present. Once he looked up at me, I nodded my head toward the back. We got up and headed that way while Joe made his way back from behind the bar. I entered and collapsed into a seat near the door. Adam held the door for Joe before he took a place next to me, and Joe went behind the desk. Once seated, Joe pulled out a notebook and pen. "No Watchers witnessed your Challenge, Ryan. Both Watchers followed you two to the warehouse, but neither got close to the building before the Quickening started. Do you mind answering a few questions about it?"

I softly said, "I was a Watcher, Joe. It's the least I can do." Without even realizing it, I found myself running my right thumb over my left inner wrist. Right over where my Watcher tattoo used to be. Adam caught the movement, and I stopped, feeling guilty.

Joe frowned a little at my tone, but said nothing about it. "Did he give his name?"

"Yeah, Jerry Markus."

"Who Challenged who?"

"Neither. He pulled a gun on me. I got him before he could pull the trigger."

"Good reflexes," Adam muttered sarcastically.

Joe frowned at him but said nothing to the other Watcher. He turned back to me, "What type of gun?"

Richie told me it was a Glock. He also had a shotgun, but I gave that to Richie."

Joe was scribbling notes as he talked. "Any sword?"

"He never pulled it, but I found one on him. Looks like a Roman short sword. It's back at my place in case one of you wants to go and identify it."

Adam abruptly asked, "What were you doing there?" Joe looked shocked at the interruption but didn't say anything.

I glared at Adam. "I can't answer that."

"Why?"

I gritted my teeth, "You know why."

Joe looked back and forth between us, from my smoldering glare to Adam's impassive stare. "What's with you two?"

Adam waved one hand at me. "He's trying to protect someone. A Watcher."

I almost snarled, "Careful, METHOS. You're betraying a confidence here. I hope you're aware of that."

Joe was staring at me with a frown. "Protecting a Watcher? Who?"

"I CAN'T TELL YOU!" I had this overwhelming urge to scream or hit someone or DO SOMETHING.

I was suddenly standing face to face with Adam. He yelled into my face, "Damnit, you HAVE TO!"

My right fist lashed out, catching Adam along his left cheek. I was slightly shorter but a little heavier, so the punch merely threw him back into the chair he had been sitting in moments ago. He just stared up at me, a thin trickle of blood escaping the corner of his mouth. Joe was staring at the whole scene in shock, mouth hanging open, pen dangling forgotten. I stood there, fists clenching and unclenching, trying to keep from drawing one of my weapons and doing something permanent. I stared at Adam a moment before saying through gritted teeth, "Don't you dare tell me what I have to do, old man. You have no right."

With that, I stormed out the office. I didn't break any doors on the way out the bar, but it wasn't for lack of trying.

I was sitting in the living room, glaring at the wall when Andrea came in. It had been just over an hour since leaving Joe's, and I wasn't any calmer now than I was then.

I was angry at myself for not being able to decide what to do about the sender of the letter, and I was angry at Adam for the betrayal. Joe was just caught in the middle of this whole mess but no doubt had been informed by now of what Adam knew and what he suspected. So he was going to start trying to figure out who I was trying to protect as well. As a Watcher, he had to. But that didn't mean I had to like it.

Andrea walked in the front door and stopped. She didn't say anything for a moment, just stood and looked at me. I continued to glare at the wall. With a sigh, she took off her coat and hung it up with her purse. She came over to the chair and sat down facing me. "Want to talk about it?"

My jaw clenched once before I turned to her. "How much do you know?"

She gave a small smile. "You know that the Watchers have the quickest grapevine around. I heard about you Challenging Markus this morning and that there was some sort of fight this evening at Joe's. I know the what, but I don't know the why." She tilted her head a little and asked again, "Want to talk about it?"

I shook my head. "I can't. I'd force you into an impossible situation if I did."

She sighed. "Okay, but I'll be here if you need to talk." I merely nodded and then leaned back on the couch, closing my eyes and rubbing my head. All this thinking was giving me a headache.

Andrea got up and came over to the couch next to me. Curling up beside me, she laid her head on my shoulder and ran a hand inside the jacket I hadn't even bothered to take off yet. The hand abruptly stopped part way in. "So is that a gun in your pants or are you just happy to see me?"

I let out a strangled laugh. "That's almost exactly what Hoa said today."

"Hoa?"

"Yeah, she was at the dojo when I went to see Richie. Hope you don't mind the gun, but Markus doesn't need it anymore, and I thought it'd be a good idea to have one."

I felt her shrug. "If you think you need a gun even with those overgrown steak knives you have in your coat, who am I to tell you different?"

I gave a tired chuckle as I continued to massage my temples. She ran a finger along my jaw line as she continued, "You know, I've heard about this great cure for headaches."

I cracked open one eye and peered sideways at her, a smile slowly forming. "Oh? And what's that?" It was a game we'd played before.

She stood up and offered me a hand and a smile. "Come along, and I'll show you."

What'd I ever do to deserve this woman? Whatever it was, I'm not complaining.

The next morning I awoke in a blind panic. An Immortal was nearby! I was struggling to my feet before my mind caught up. I identified the aura as Richie's just as I heard the knock on the front door and Andrea was looking up from the bed with a sleepy and aggravated, "What?"

I waved in the direction of the front door and said, "Richie."

She sighed and fell back down into bed, trying to crawl back under the covers.

Muttering dire threats under my breath, I made my way around the scattered clothing and grabbed my robe. Pulling it on, I walked out of the bedroom and to the front door and unlocked it. Opening it enough to show Richie it was unlocked, I turned around and headed for the couch. Richie pushed the door open and entered just as I was sitting down on the couch with a yawn. "Ya know, Rich, I thought I hated the way my alarm woke me up. I must now say that it's downright calm after being awakened by a Buzz."

He gave me an apologetic smile as he seated himself in the chair facing the couch. "Sorry about that. Joe called this morning and asked me to check up on you. He didn't tell me exactly what happened last night, only that you and Adam had quite a fight. You want to tell me what happened?"

"Yeah, you never told me last night, either." Andrea came in wearing her own robe and flopped down on the couch next to me with a yawn. She curled up and started to use my leg as a pillow. "Hi, Richie."

"Andrea." He seemed a little uncomfortable with our relative state of undress. He leaned forward onto his knees and said, "Look, sorry about waking you two up, but Joe was really worried about you, Ryan. What's this all about?"

I sighed and leaned back. I didn't have the energy to get into this fight right now. "Okay, I'll tell the two of you. Your positions on this will be the polar opposites of each other, so I can get decent arguments from the both of you. But first, you two need to swear that you'll never tell ANYONE about this. This'll be harder on you, Andrea. Some of this may grate against your Watcher Oath."

She propped herself up on one elbow and looked at me quizzically. She seemed wide awake now. "Remember that line about not letting Immortals know about me? I've already broken parts of that Oath for you, Ryan. I'm not about to stop now."

Richie merely nodded his acceptance of my condition.

"Okay." I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and tilted my head back. "I got an e-mail yesterday. It was someone claiming to know who and what I was. They told me that Jerry Markus has been stalking Richie here." I waved my hand in Richie's direction without opening my eyes. "Markus was going to be going to Mac's warehouse to set a trap. He would then Challenge Richie and suggest somewhere on the docks. Richie would probably have suggested Mac's warehouse." I opened my eyes enough to see his reaction. Richie nodded, a frown on his face. I closed my eyes again as I continued the story. "Richie would have shown up, and the trap would be sprung. I needed to leave immediately to get there before Markus. This person implied I would simply show up and ambush the ambusher. They told me enough about what he was going to do that I felt I should. I left immediately. Good thing I did, too. Markus showed up within ten minutes after I did. I cloaked myself, and he walked right in. I kept him pinned and asked him enough questions to determine that what I had been told was truthful. He had that shotgun and enough electronics to set up a nice little ambush for someone walking in the door. I baited him into showing his hand, and he drew the pistol on me." I shrugged and opened my eyes. "Killing him seemed the only thing to do."

Richie frowned at me. "So where's the problem?"

Andrea turned her head and glared at him. "It had to be a Watcher who sent that note. Who else would know all that about Markus? And you two?"

I nodded. "Right. And now I come to my dilemma. Do I turn this person in to Joe, or do I try to protect them? They helped me and probably saved Richie's life." He nodded thoughtfully as I continued, "If this person continues to help bring down the cheaters, I'm all for that. However, if this person targets a good guy, then they'll be no better than an indiscriminate Hunter. And I'll have to live with the knowledge that I could have done something but didn't. So do I try to turn this person in or not?"

A long pause settled over us as they thought about my little story. While they did that, I got up to see to breakfast. Popping a pan of cinnamon rolls into the oven, I poured three glasses of orange juice out before returning to the living room. Andrea had sat up, but otherwise neither had moved. I passed around the OJ before taking my seat again.

Without looking up from her frown at the carpet, Andrea started the discussion back up. "I feel we have to find out who this is. And stop them, soon. I can understand your wanting to leave them be, but that's a temporary answer at best. Once they realize that they can do this and their target goes away, they're going to continue. Eventually, either the target Immortal gets lucky and kills the one sent to stop them, or this person sends someone to kill one of the good guys. This person is bound to become indiscriminate sooner or later." She looked up at me. "Absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Richie slowly nodded. "Much as I love the idea of someone out there feeding information to the good guys, I have to agree that they'll eventually get careless, one way or another. And I owe this person my life. I hate to turn on my guardian angel, but I don't see any other way around it."

WHAT? I stared at Richie. "I figured you'd be all in favor of leaving this person alone. Or actively protecting them."

He looked pained. "Even the best of people can turn to into evil incarnate."

The light slowly dawned on me as I remembered one of the few Chronicles I had read when I was a Watcher. For a time Duncan MacLeod had become as evil as any Immortal out there. And if Duncan, who we all saw as the epitome of good intentions, could fall to such depths, it could happen to anyone. Whether by a Dark Quickening or absolute corruption, it was only a matter of time before it happened to our mysterious benefactor.

Richie roused himself from the morbid mood with a shake of the head and a deep breath. "So why did you and Adam get into a fight?"

I grimaced. "I was undecided what to tell Joe last night. I was trying to gauge Adam's attitudes when he pieced enough together to guess the basics of what I was talking about. And he told Joe some of it without consulting me. And then he tried to force me to tell them the whole truth. He betrayed me."

Richie raised an eyebrow at me. "I sure hope you didn't try anything stupid. Nobody really knows how good he is, but Mac respects him as a fighter. And that's more than enough for me to stay out of his way."

I shook my head. "Just a bloody lip." I gave a twisted grin. "I probably hurt my wrist more than his jaw, anyway."

Richie's chuckle was interrupted by the oven announcing that breakfast was ready. He stood up. "I need to go. See you two later."

The doorbell that night was right on time. I got up from the couch next to Andrea where we had been watching TV to let him in. I opened the door to find a very confused Watcher. "Hi, Joe. Come on in."

He came in and gave me a funny look. "After last night, I was surprised you asked me over tonight. What's up?"

"Have a seat, and I'll explain. First I'd like to apologize for last night. I was mad at Adam, for reasons that will become clear eventually. You know Andrea of course," I said, waving a hand at her as I settled into the recliner.

"Of course," he said as he levered himself into one of the dining room chairs. "What's this all about, Ryan?"

"This affects all of us, directly or indirectly. I don't know how much Adam told you last night, so I'll just assume he didn't tell you more than I heard, or that what he guessed may be wrong." I took a deep breath and steepled my fingers directly in front of my face, lightly pinching the bridge of my nose between my index fingers. I've never known why, but this pose helped me to think more clearly or gather my courage. I definitely needed both right now. "I'll start at the beginning and work up to the Quickening yesterday. First, I received this e-mail." I retrieved the page I had printed earlier from the end table and handed it to Joe.

As he read it, I took a deep breath and looked around the room, trying to keep myself together. Despite the logical reasons for doing this, I still felt like I was betraying someone. Andrea smiled at me encouragingly. I tried smiling back, but I'm afraid the effort wasn't very good.

I looked over to Joe as he finished reading the page and looked up at me. He looked slightly sick. "This has to be a Watcher."

I nodded. "After receiving that, I went to the warehouse. Markus showed up just as promised. Since I can cloak myself, I ambushed him. His reasons for being there, knowledge of Richie, and what he had on him sounded good. But he was lying through his teeth. When I released him, he went for his pistol." I shrugged. "I was quicker."

Joe nodded absently, not really listening. "We have to find this person." His vacant gaze cleared and focused on me. "Anything you can tell me about them?"

I shook my head. "Anonymous Mail is one of several free internet e-mail services. Most of them require registration of name and address. Some probably log incoming calls. You'll have to get a court order or hacker to dig that information out of them. Even if you get it out, it may not be worth anything. You know how good some people can be at hiding their tracks. Immortals do it all the time." I smiled at his grimace and continued, "So that information may or may not be worth anything. It'd be easier to check Watcher data access logs. Someone looked up my Chronicles enough to know who my teacher was, my location, and my friendship with Richie. And they looked up Markus recently enough to know where he was staying and what he was going to do yesterday morning." I frowned in thought. "Unless they also tipped Markus off to set him up. In which case, they were in communication with him, and he trusted them enough to try this." I shook my head. "I'm no detective. I'm sure there are a few Watchers who are. Bring them in and let them track this person down."

Joe stared off in space, lost in thought. He nodded as he pulled his gaze back to the here and now. "Can I have this?" he asked, holding up the printout.

"Sure. I'm sure you can come up with some story about how you became curious as to how I happened to be there at that particular time and broke into my place and stole it. You Watchers are sneaky and clever like that." I gave him a twisted smile. He smiled and gave a little bow from the shoulders, as if accepting praise. I continued, "Or perhaps you simply asked my devious girlfriend to steal it for you."

She laid a hand upon her chest and gave me a look that was innocence itself. Her Southern Belle accent could have come straight out of a Civil War miniseries, "Why, whatever do you mean, sir?"

We all chuckled for a moment before something occurred to me. "Joe, do you know what this person meant by asking Duncan about Angela?"

He nodded sadly. "Connor MacLeod took a student last year, Angela Bailey. Markus showed up one day, claiming to be a student of Duncan's. He and Angela sparred that day with Connor doing some training instructions. Markus suggested to her that they meet later to spar some more, without Connor 'chaperoning' them. She agreed. By the time Connor discovered he wasn't a student of Duncan's, Angela was dead and Markus had

disappeared."

I shook my head. "Seems that this guy hung around Duncan enough to know what buttons to push everywhere. Maybe our mystery benefactor is just trying to protect Duncan?"

Joe shrugged. "Who knows. I'll be sure to ask when we track them down."

"You do that. Oh, I almost forgot." I got up and retrieved the Glock. Getting back to the living room, I handed it to Joe. "I'm told you can give me a little instruction on how to use that thing without blowing holes in various portions of my anatomy."

He nodded, but looked at me questioningly. "Um, how are you going to use it?"

I smiled at him. "Relax. It'll be a last ditch weapon. I don't intend to use it unless I have to. Besides, I got that and some ammo cheap."

He smiled faintly. "I'll bet." His smile brightened. "Yeah, I can help you with this. If you have a couple rags and a clean toothbrush, we can use a little of the oil you use on your sword and clean this thing up."

I walked into the dojo a few minutes short of nine the next morning for Richie's and my practice session to find him stretching out and Hoa doing a few katas herself. Nodding a greeting to them, I walked into the locker room to change.

When I emerged, I found Richie giving Hoa a few pointers while she tried to wield one of the wooden practice katanas. For her size, it was entirely too big. At 5'2", she was barely half again the length of the sword she was trying to swing around. I stopped and stared at the almost comic scene for a few moments before giving in to silent snickers.

Hoa saw me out of the corner of her eye and turned to me with a frown. "Be nice, Ryan. You know I don't know how to use these."

Composing myself as quickly as I could, I apologized. "Sorry. I wasn't laughing at your skill. It's just that the weapon you're trying to use is a little . . . ah . . . long for you." I dug around in the storage closet for a moment and came out with one of the practice swords I had used when learning to fight with my wakizashi. I turned and extended it to her. "Try this one."

She traded me the katana for the smaller sword and immediately started swinging it around a little, getting a feel for the weapon. She nodded with a small smile. "Much better."

Putting the wooden katana point down and resting my wrists on its handle, I turned to Richie. "Dare I ask why you're teaching her how to wield a sword?"

He shrugged. "She asked."

"Uh, huh. Okay." I turned to her. "Why?" This ought to be good.

She cocked her head. "I was curious. You guys make it look so easy." I raised an eyebrow and Richie rolled his eyes. She continued, "I've never tried to do it before, and I was just wondering how tough it really was." She gave me a challenging grin. "Up for some sparring?"

I was suddenly very uncomfortable with the whole situation. "Um, I'd rather not. If something happens, you won't heal as quickly as I would."

She advanced a step on me and gave a wicked grin. "What's the matter? Afraid you'd get your butt whipped by a little girl?" The sarcasm fairly dripped off her words.

Richie was also looking concerned. "I don't think this is such a good idea, Hoa. Ryan's right. You could get hurt so easily."

Her eyes narrowed. "I'm so sick of you protecting me." Her gaze softened. "This is your world, Richie. I want to try to become part of it."

I shook my head. "No, you don't. It's bloody, and it's ugly. It's nice that you're trying to do this, but you really don't want any part of this." I was hoping to talk her out of this without being insulting.

It didn't work. She snarled and swung at me. I was so shocked by her attack that I barely got the practice katana up to block. I was in no position to take advantage of her unbalanced attack. I was hardly capable of holding onto the sword.

At her first move, Richie darted in, apparently trying to grab her before she got hurt. She must have seen him move out of the corner of her eye, because she swung sideways at him. The tip of the wooden sword caught him in one hand and across the other wrist. I winced. That almost had to have broken something. Richie backed off in shock.

Once he was no longer trying to attack her, she turned back to me. "Fight me!" Her shout was totally out of character for the normally composed Hoa I was used to. What the hell's gotten into her?

Fortunately, I had regained my balance and was in a defensive stance by this time. "Hoa, don't force me to do this."

She growled and darted in. While not skillful, she was aggressive. I needed to find a way to finish this without hurting her. While simply putting down the sword and letting her pummel me would work, it'd be a little more painful that I wanted to deal with. Okay, so how do I disarm her? I stayed totally defensive and kept twisting the direction of the fight over to one of the floor mats. Once my back was to one of the mats, I waited for her to make the right move. She obliged within a few seconds. Her overhand chop came over her right shoulder. Unfortunately for her, this meant her momentum

was carrying her forward. Angling my sword to keep the downward swinging stick from hitting, I took a half step forward and to the right. Squatting down on my right foot, I swept her from her feet with my left leg. She sprawled face first onto the mat. I hopped back to my feet and walked over to the sword she still held in her right hand, pinning it to the ground with a foot.

Richie was walking over to her by this time, but she wasn't getting up. He squatted down by her head. Reaching out, he took the sword from her unresisting hand. Handing it up to me without looking up, he continued to look down at the back of Hoa's head. By this time I could see that she was shaking softly.

Richie reached out a hand and laid it on her shoulder and asked softly, "Hoa, what was that all about?"

Her voice was rough with what I guessed were restrained sobs. "I'm just tired of you trying to protect me from your world, Richie. I was trying to prove that I can take care of myself." She rolled over onto her side and looked up at me. Her eyes were glistening with unshed tears. "Ryan just proved how wrong I was about that, though." She gave a hiccupping little laugh. "Guess I'd better not . . ." She curled up into a ball and silently started crying.

I quietly put the practice swords away and went into the locker room. After changing back into my casual clothing, I went out into the main room. Richie had gotten Hoa into the glassed in office and into a chair. He looked up at me momentarily. I pointed to him, held my hand up to the side of my face as if holding a phone, and pointed at myself, trying to communicate that I wanted him to call me. He nodded and then looked back down at Hoa. I quickly and quietly left.

I was buried up to my eyeballs in code two hours later when the phone rang. I snatched it up, "Chessman."

"Hi, Ryan. It's Richie."

I leaned back in the chair and swiveled away from the computer. "Hey. How's Hoa doing?"

"She's okay. You didn't even bruise her. Thanks."

One corner of my mouth inched upward. "You owe me one. What happened?"

I heard his sigh. "The Game. I haven't had a serious threat to my head since Fergus almost a year ago. This whole mess with Markus scared her. She's always been fiercely independent. She says she just realized that she's let herself become emotionally dependent on me. And Markus had a good shot at taking me down. That pushed her into trying to prove her ability to take care of herself. I'm just thankful she didn't get hurt doing it."

I managed to put a little petulance into my voice, "What, you aren't worried about ME?"

He chuckled. "You can take care of yourself." His voice became serious again "Seriously though, thanks."

I nodded, even though he was only a voice on the phone. "You're welcome. You two going to be okay?"

A long pause gave me his answer before he said a word. "I hope so. See you."

The phone went dead in my hand. I hung it up with a feeling of dread forming in the pit of my stomach. MacLeod had told me about how Doctor Anne Lindsey couldn't cope with his Immortality. I just hoped that it wasn't happening to Richie.

I was working my way through my third beer by the time Andrea found me at Joe's that night. She silently slid into the stool next to mine and studied me as I studied the bottle in my hand. I wasn't drunk. I was just getting to the "relaxed or morose" stage.

She finally broke our silence with, "You don't usually do this to yourself unless something's bothering you. What's wrong?"

I tilted my head, but didn't look at her "Did you hear about what happened at the dojo today?"

"Hoa apparently attacked you. She and Richie have been shut in their apartment ever since. Why?"

"Are you happy?" I asked abruptly, looking over at her. She tilted her head, questioning. I explained, "Here, with me, this life."

She frowned a bit. "Yes, why?"

"Hoa just finally realized what the Game is. I mean, what it really MEANS to our lives. Even when Richie isn't an aggressive hunter, people still come around and try to kill him. And some of them are good enough or sneaky enough to do it." I took a breath. "She was trying to prove that she could exist in our world. I didn't want to hurt her, so I went for a soft kill. I'm afraid I only made matters worse. Now she's convinced that she can't be included in that part of Richie's life. I don't know if she can handle that. And I don't know if he can handle it if she leaves."

I took another deep breath and turned to look down at the bar top. And there was one last reason I was feeling this scared and depressed. My voice dropped to a whisper, "And I don't know if I could handle it if you'd do the same thing."

One of her hands reached up to the side of my face and turned me to look at her. She gave me a sad smile, "I'm here for the long haul. Just don't get yourself killed, Chessman. That's the only way I'll leave you."

Smiling in relief, I leaned over for a kiss. When she pulled away, she wrinkled her nose and said, "Yuck."

I blinked. "Yuck?"

She nodded solemnly. "Beer breath."

This woman knew how to make me feel better despite myself. I had to laugh.

She smiled and stood up. "I'm going over there, kick Richie out, and talk with her. This will probably take a while. You going to be here or home?"

I thought about it a moment, a plan starting to form. "Home."

She had to have seen the smile slowly forming but said nothing about it. She nodded at my answer. "Okay, I'll send him there. No telling when we'll be done. Bye." She gave me a quick peck on the cheek before heading out the door.

Joe appeared across the bar top from me. "Should I ask?"

"Nope. Bye, Joe."

I left the confused Watcher standing there with absolutely no idea what was going on.

I was on the phone when I felt Richie approach and knock. Cupping my hand over the receiver, I shouted that it was open. He entered as I finished my call.

He walked over and flopped down into the recliner. "What's Andrea doing?"

I shrugged. "I don't know for sure. However, I DO know what you and I are doing."

He raised one eyebrow but didn't seem that interested in my answer. He was clearly worried about Hoa.

I walked over to the bags I'd collected on my way over from Joe's. The videos came out first. Walking over to him, I dropped them into his lap. "One mindless comedy, one Seagal movie, and one Schwarzenegger." I walked over to the storage closet and pulled out the big cooler. Carrying it into the front room, I put it onto the floor, pulled the case of Miller out, dumped them into the cooler, and dumped two bags of ice over them. By this time, he was watching me with more attention if not interest. Once the beer was settled in place, I sat down onto the couch and put my feet up on the coffee table. "Pizza should be here in a half hour. Popcorn is for later. You think you and I can get into a better mood by that time?"

He frowned at me. "What are you doing?"

I looked at him like he was an idiot. "I intend to get drunk, stuff my face with pizza, have fun watching movies, and forget all about females who drive me nuts occasionally. How about you?"

His mouth curved downward into a disapproving frown. "Hoa needs me right now."

I sighed and shook my head. This wasn't going to be easy. "Don't fool yourself. She doesn't need you." His eyes flared for a moment before I quickly amended, "At least she doesn't need you RIGHT NOW. Right now what she needs is a friendly shoulder to cry on. That's probably what Andrea's doing over there. Unless I'm missing my guess, they're doing much the same thing we are." I looked down at the cooler. "Granted, their choice in drinks and movies is probably different, but you know what I mean."

He glanced down at the movies in his lap and then over at the cooler. A smile slowly spread over his face. He looked up at me with the beginnings of interest in his eyes. "Comedy first?"

"Mawwaige. Mawwaige is wat bwings us together, today," we chorused (mostly) together with the movie. We had both watched this one enough to quote it almost all the way through. We had finished the three movies I'd rented and were now working our way through one that I owned. The night had been a smashing success, in more ways than one.

The front door opened, jerking our somewhat steady attention in that direction. Andrea walked in the room, wide eyed. Hoa walked in just behind her, looking equally amazed. I looked around the room, from the empty pizza box, to the two empty popcorn bags, to the greatly depleted cooler on the floor, to the cans scattered around the room, to Richie and myself sprawled over the couch. Come to think of it, the room WAS quite the sight, wasn't it?

I turned to Andrea as she surveyed the room. Time for damage control. Pasting a smile upon my face, I said, "Hi, hon'. How was your day?"

She turned a glare upon me that was probably supposed to be intimidating. Hoa's giggle from behind her spoiled the effect, though.

Richie roused himself from the couch and approached Hoa. "Hi."

She smiled at him a little timidly. "Hi."

The movie continued to play in the background, ignored by everyone.

Suddenly Hoa threw herself into Richie's arms. "I'm so sorry," she almost sobbed. "I shouldn't have tried to prove anything to you or blamed you for all of this. I'm so sorry."

Richie was hugging her tightly and almost crying himself. "I'm sorry for being overprotective. Can you ever forgive me?"

She almost laughed, but it sounded as much like a cry as anything. "There's nothing to forgive." She snaked a hand up to the back of his head and pulled him down into a kiss. A very long kiss. They started to stumble toward the couch as he tried to pull her coat off.

As interesting as it may be to stay and watch, I figured that discretion was the better part of valor. They hadn't lost any clothing yet, but it was only a matter of time. Stopping the tape, I grabbed my coat and pulled Andrea out the door. Richie and Hoa never noticed, they were so wrapped up in each other.

Once outside, Andrea turned to me with a raised eyebrow. "What? I figured you'd want to stay and take notes."

I chuckled as I offered her my arm. "Shall we take a walk?"

The other eyebrow rose on her face to join its twin. "Now? It's almost two in the morning."

"Yeah, so? Much as staying and watching may be entertaining and . . . um . . . educational, I think they need some privacy. He's drunk enough that somebody else needs to be doing his thinking for a while." We walked in silence for a few minutes. I glanced at her as we passed under a streetlight. "How are the two of you?"

She tried to give me an innocent look, but it didn't quite work. She gave up with a chuckle. "Much the same as you and Richie, probably. I had enough to drink that I'm pleasantly tipsy, but she's downright plastered. It's not that she was rethinking their relationship so much as her needing a stress reliever. Their relationship is fine."

I nodded, relieved.

I showed up at the dojo the next morning at my usual time to find Richie warming up, but no sign of Hoa.

After coming out of the locker room, I began my own stretching exercises. "How's Hoa?"

He barely gave me a glance. "She's feeling a little under the weather this morning."

I fought to keep the smile off of my face. I'm sure she was. "Well, since you two were gone by the time Andrea and I finished our walk last night, I was just making sure you two were okay."

He nodded. "Yep."

I spared him a glance. Something was bothering him. He was usually much more chipper than this. "What's wrong?"

He looked up with an attempt at an innocent expression. My frown apparently made him reconsider whatever he was going to say. Instead, he grimaced and muttered, "That shouldn't have happened." He looked down again. He looked embarrassed, but I couldn't figure out why.

I blinked in confusion. "Which part? Hoa getting upset over the Game or us getting drunk?"

He shook his head. "What happened later. That shows an incredible lack of self control." He seemed genuinely disgusted with himself.

I laughed. His head jerked around to me in shock and anger. I shook my head as I continued to chuckle. "You're sounding as bad as Adam or maybe Cassandra. You're both adults. Besides, you were both pretty drunk, and Andrea and I left before we saw TOO much." I waggled my eyebrows and gave him a leer.

His glare slowly dissolved as his mouth quirked up into something that resembled a smile. "Well, that proves one thing."

"What's that?"

The smile came to full bloom. "You're not really a Watcher."

I rolled my eyes at the horrible pun. "That's it. I have to beat that sense of humor out of you."

I grabbed the phone after the first ring. "Chessman."

"Hi, Ryan. It's Joe. Just thought you'd like to know, we've identified who sent you that e-mail."

"Really? Who?"

"Her name is Jenny Bright. She's been a Watcher for quite a while. She was a field operative for years, staying in Chicago. She'd temporarily Watch an Immortal moving into the area until their permanent Watcher caught up with the move or Watch a new one we'd identified until a permanent Watcher could be assigned. She quit being a field operative abruptly about ten years ago and moved over to administrative and some research. At any rate Connor MacLeod received a letter similar to yours. And your idea about checking the accesses to the database paid off. The

only name that accessed both yours and his records, your targets, and the targets' targets was Bright. I just can't figure out why she would do something like this."

"Why don't you ask her?"

"I would if I could. She's disappeared. Her last address was in southern Chicago, but her place was completely empty when her boss showed up to ask her about what she was doing. We've cut off her access to the database, so she can't do any more harm, but tracking her down is going to be tough. She's been a Watcher for long enough to know how to avoid us."

"Hmm, sounds tough. Good luck," I sympathized. Something occurred to me, "Oh, how did you know Connor got a similar letter?"

"He mentioned it to Duncan, and Duncan mentioned it to me when I told him about your run-in with Markus. Yours was actually later by a couple weeks. No telling how long this has been going on. Anyway, just letting you know."

"Thanks for letting me know about her, Joe. See ya."

"Bye."

I hung up the phone with a depressed sigh. It was too bad that she disappeared like that. It would have been interesting to hear why she was doing it.

A thought began to take hold in the back of my brain.

"FBI Missing Persons department, Agent Vires speaking."

It had taken a call to my alma mater's alumni office and another one to Washington, DC, but I had finally tracked down my old school friend. "Allen? This is Ryan Chessman. How ya doing?"

"Ryan! It's been a while. How's things?"

"Pretty good. I'm out in Seacouver, got my own little business going. Finally found the courage to ask someone out about six months ago, and we're living together. How about you?"

"I'm one of the electronic bloodhounds here at the FBI. Haven't found myself anyone yet, despite my best efforts and charming personality." I grinned. Allen Vires would never change. He continued, "To what do I owe the pleasure of this call?"

"I was wondering I could ask for an unofficial favor."

"I should have guessed. What's up?"

Here goes. I began telling the story I had put together, "A former employer of mine had one of their employees misusing some data. They don't want to go to the FBI or police officially, since this is extremely sensitive information and potentially could be very embarrassing if word of this leaked out. I was hoping you could either find this person discreetly or submit the official request while keeping the boss's and company's name out of it. He doesn't even know I'm contacting you like this. He wouldn't like it, but I'm still on good terms with him and want to help him out."

"Hmm," he thought for a moment. "Yeah, it should be possible to do this discreetly. It'll have to be an official search, but I can keep all names confidential. I'll need to know most of it, but I'll only have to make the perp's name officially known. Fair enough?"

"Sounds good. Her name is Jenny Bright. Address was in southern Chicago somewhere, but her place was empty when her boss went to find her yesterday. The company is VisionQuest."

"The international antiques firm? Wow, no wonder you wanted this quiet. Should I ask what data was stolen?"

"Misused," I stressed, "and no, I can't tell you that. I don't think what she's done is even technically illegal, but it's very much against company policies." I was walking a tightrope here. I had to tell my friend enough to get him on her trail, but not so much that he'd try to question or arrest her. "If you do catch up with her, could you let me know but not try to get her yourself? She might try to make a public spectacle out of this if she's arrested. And like I said, it's sensitive stuff."

"Uh, Ryan, the FBI isn't in the business of helping out in private vendettas. If she hasn't done anything illegal, then I can't help you out." He paused for a moment. "At least officially. However, since you're an old friend, I can do a cursory search. It may or may not turn anything up, but that's the best I can do."

I sighed. "That's what I was afraid of. Well, I'd appreciate the Surface search, anyway."

"Sure thing. By the way, if you're a FORMER employee, and it's such sensitive stuff, how do you now about it? From what you're saying, it isn't like they'd advertise it to ANYONE, let alone non employees."

"I was one of the people she sent some of this data to. Like I said, it was intended to embarrass them. She must not have realized that I parted on good terms with them. Oh, one last thing. She had an e-mail address of AFriend at Anonymous Mail."

"That'll probably be easier to track than anything else. I can't get message contents without a court order and that requires this be official. However,

I'm on good terms with one of their system administrators. I can get a log of calls without any problem. I'll let you know what I dig up within a couple days. You owe me one."

I smiled. "Dinner's on me next time I'm in DC or you're out here."

I heard his chuckle over the line. "Sounds good. Where can I get in touch with you?"

I gave him my office number and thanked him again before ending the call. It may or may not pan out, but at least it was a start.

The next couple days passed peacefully. Nobody came after anyone's head, Hoa got comfortable again with the idea of the Game, and the world drifted back to something like I was used to.

At the moment my biggest concern was Adam. I had told him that I didn't know what to tell Joe, and then he immediately told Joe what he suspected about me. That felt like a betrayal of the first order. I could see WHY he did it (I came to the same eventual conclusion that he did, after all), but it was the way that he disregarded my feelings that irked me.

Fortunately it wasn't a major problem. Adam had left town with no warning the day after our little scuffle. Joe theorized that he was trying to track Ms. Bright down, but for whatever reason, he was out of town. That was probably for the best. It'd take a while to decide how to greet him next time I saw him. Friend? Enemy?

I snorted to myself. I was considering calling the five thousand year old Immortal an enemy? Hmm, let's look up the term "suicidal" and see if that matches what I'm considering.

Okay, so "enemy" wasn't a good idea, despite how my emotions may vote. Friend or neutral? I shook my head. I didn't need to decide this now. I'd let the issue sit until further notice. Perhaps by then my subconscious would decide the answer anyway.

I hoped.

"That was great! Did you fix this, Ryan?"

I shook my head at Richie's question. "Frozen pizzas are more my speed. I have this habit of destroying anything that doesn't have instructions that could be followed by a rock. I contributed to tonight's supper by carrying in the groceries and pouring the drinks."

Hoa turned to Andrea, who was trying (unsuccessfully) to contain her self satisfied smirk. "What would they do without us?"

Andrea appeared to give the matter some thought. Then she shook her head. "Eat charcoalized pizzas or starve to death, probably."

Richie looked indignant. "Hey, I can cook."

Hoa rolled her eyes. "Hot dogs and popcorn don't count."

Richie held his hand to his chest as if she'd thrust a dagger in.

I smiled as I started to clear away the table. I didn't cook, but I could help clean up.

Once the dishwasher was humming away, I came back out to the front room and into a conversation on Immortality.

"What I can't figure out is why do it. Why bother going around, chopping people's heads off?" Hoa was asking.

Well, if she was talking about it, perhaps she was okay with how Richie's life was. At least we could hope.

Richie had winced at her phrasing but was apparently trying to come up with an answer to Hoa's question. Since the same thing had kind of bothered me, I decided to join in.

"First of all, not all of us are active hunters. Richie and I for instance will defend ourselves but don't go out looking for a fight. Duncan and dozens of others are the same way. As for the active headhunters . . ." I frowned in thought. "Hoa, have you ever seen a Quickening?"

She shook her head.

"Well, it looks like a lightening storm. And the winner ends up catching almost all of it." I frowned. "It sounds like it would hurt, but it doesn't. Not really, anyway. While it's going on, each bolt makes me feel bigger and stronger. I can see how that could get to be addictive. Afterwards though, I just feel miserable." I took a breath. "Legend has it that the Quickening transfers memories, skills, and attitudes. I haven't noticed any of that, but then again, the only two Quickenings I've taken have been pretty young and weak."

Richie chimed in, "I've taken more than Ryan. The older and stronger ones tended to leave me with some feelings, but not all, and not much. As for the feeling afterwards, I feel a little wired, but otherwise okay. I've heard stories about some who fall asleep, some who are hungry, and so on. It just depends on the individual Immortal."

It almost amazed me. Here I was, talking calmly about killing people. My, how the world changed that fateful night a year ago. Shaking away the errant thought, I continued with my narration. "And then there's the Prize the last Immortal is rumored to win at the end. Some say it's the accumulated knowledge of all the Immortals. Or enough power to rule the world. And some say it's just simple mortality again. As for the truth? Who knows. I doubt even Adam knows. I'm sure neither Cassandra nor the Watchers know."

Hoa had apparently heard some of this before. She had nodded through parts and frowned at some. "One thing I don't understand."

Andrea half smiled at her, "ONE thing?"

Hoa ignored her. "If the victor gets the loser's power, and so on up the chain, then the last one gets everything, right?"

Richie and I nodded.

She continued, "But that's already missing some. For instance Duncan once told me about Darius. There's one Quickening that nobody got. So what happened to it?"

Andrea replied, "Nobody knows. He was beheaded by a mortal, so his Quickening couldn't be transferred to an Immortal."

Hoa nodded, coming to her point. "So the Prize CAN'T happen. It can't be fulfilled. The worldwide accumulated Quickening is already missing Darius and anyone else the Hunters killed."

We all stared at her. That's a charming thought. After all this killing, the Prize isn't available?

"So why bother?" I muttered, echoing Hoa from before.

Richie leaned forward and frowned slightly. "I'm beginning to see your point, but it isn't that easy to stop. The attitude that this is our destiny is so ingrained in so many of us that it's impossible to stop. Don't get me wrong. I'd be happy to hang up my sword, but I don't want to get myself killed." His frown softened a moment, turning to melancholy. "I did that once already, and it almost did get me killed."

I was hardly paying attention. I had been thinking along a different line. I wrinkled my brow in thought and said slowly, "As for why do it, there's one more possibility, but I've doubted its truth. Like I said, legend has it that skill is transferred in a Quickening. I don't recognize that I got anything out of the two Quickening I've taken. Richie, what do you think you've gotten?"

He tilted his head quizzically at me, but answered, "I felt more comfortable and self-assured after taking Mako. Kristov made me worried for a while for my sanity, but nothing came of it. Other than that, I can't think of anything concrete."

"But did you actually GET better, or do you just THINK you got better?"

"Huh?"

I leaned forward and held out my hands, trying to shape the words that were having a hard time coming. "Did you actually become better after taking Mako's head, or did you just get more comfortable, confident, cool under pressure?" I paused as the thought crystallized. "Do you get better from the Quickening, or do you get better from surviving the fight and learning from it?"

Richie just stared at me. After nearly a minute, he slowly shook his head. "I don't know." He took a breath. "That's scary. Maybe I haven't actually been getting any better. I just THOUGHT I was, so I became so." He frowned at me. "But how do you explain the feelings I get? And Mac's Dark Quickening?"

Good point. I thought about it a moment. "Transfer of personality, memories, and attitudes, which are mental traits, versus skill, which is a physical trait?" I sighed and leaned back. "I dunno. Maybe I'm totally off base here."

Richie thought about it a little more. "Some. Skill is almost as much mental as it is physical. Having the right physical reflexes and conditioning is necessary, of course, but the mental skills of seeing the fight from the opponent's point of view, knowing the different strengths and weaknesses of the different styles, etcetera is useful."

A silence settled into the conversation before it was broken by Andrea, "Are you two done? I'm starting to feel left out here."

I gave her a small smile. "Sorry. What'd you have in mind?" This topic would require some more thought. But later.

Andrea answered my question with one of her own. "How about a movie?"

Richie asked cautiously, "Which one?"

"Pretty Woman or City of Angels?"

Hoa broke into giggles as Richie and I groaned.

It was three days later that I heard back from Agent Vires.

"Good news. I tracked down this Jenny Bright person for you. Like I guessed, I had more luck tracking her through her e-mail address than by person. As you told me, she had had an apartment in southern Chicago but had moved out and left no forwarding address. Anonymous Mail had

her registered at her old address. I got the phone numbers that she called into Anonymous Mail from spanning a couple years. Recently she's been careful. Within the past three months no number appears more than twice, and those that are twice are things like public phone booths in some of the EI stations scattered around Chicago. She's very good at covering her tracks. By this time I was curious enough to keep digging. Whoever this woman is, she knows how to avoid being tracked and how to create false identities. She's good, but either bad luck or a bad move finally caught up with her. I tracked her most recent access to Anonymous Mail, which was the same day you called me. It was from a motel room in downtown Chicago registered to one Anna Rayburn. Anyway, I couldn't find any activity by Jenny Bright after this point. On the other hand, Anna Rayburn just started renting an apartment in New York City. Since the day you called me, she hasn't accessed her e-mail. At first glance, it looks like she's gone to ground, hiding from VisionQuest."

I whistled softly, properly impressed. "And this counted as a casual search? Remind me to never piss you off and have you make a determined search for me."

I heard him chuckle.

"What's her current address?" I scribbled down the address he gave me. Since I had never spent any time New York City, it didn't mean anything to me. "Okay, got it. Thanks, Allen. I appreciate it. Give me a call if you ever need a hand with something, 'kay?"

"Sure thing. Just don't do anything . . . inappropriate with this information, okay? I'd hate to have to testify at your trial."

"Don't worry about it. At the worst, I'll just destroy all the data she has on VisionQuest. They may sue her for breach of contract, but that's their decision, not mine." I figured throwing in something like that would make him feel better. And make him think it was nothing more than a rogue ex-employee that was trying to get back at VisionQuest.

"Whatever you say, Ryan. Take it easy. Don't be such a stranger."

"You too. Bye."

"Bye."

Okay, now what? Well, four choices: One, take this info to Joe. Two, go to New York alone. Three, take Andrea since she was there just after becoming a Watcher. Four, contact Connor MacLeod and have him help me there.

Contacting Joe was a bad idea. He would want to haul her in and put her before a Watcher Tribunal and they'd likely execute her. High treason wasn't any more popular among Watchers than among governments. Getting her executed seemed a little harsh a punishment to me.

Andrea probably wouldn't go for that idea either, but she'd also have a problem with me just letting her go. And that was my eventual plan.

So my choices were to include Connor MacLeod or not. Frankly, I'd rather do so. He'd be a valuable ally in more ways than one. The only problem was that I didn't know if he knew about the Watchers and (more importantly) what he thought about his mysterious benefactor. Well, Duncan would probably know the answer to both questions. I picked up the phone.

"MacLeod."

"Hi, Mac. It's Ryan." It'd taken a call to Richie to get Mac's number in Paris, then a quick look at an atlas to see how much time difference there was between here and there. Considering that I'd have to have waited until something like midnight to call if I expected him to be awake, I waited until the next morning. Now I was just up and he was in the middle of his day.

"Ryan! How're you doing? Everything all right there?" I could easily hear the worry in his voice.

"Yeah, Richie, Joe, and I are fine. Adam's left town again. Really, this call isn't bad news."

I could visualize his smile with no difficulty. The chuckle I heard only confirmed it. "Am I that predictable?"

I let humor lace my voice, "Yes. You're a worrier, MacLeod. Ask anyone else if you don't believe me. Anyway, just letting you know the status of my mysterious benefactor and to ask you a couple questions."

"Go ahead."

"Joe's people found out who she is, but she'd skipped town before they could find her. They closed down her access to their records but haven't been able to track her. I called an old friend of mine from school who's in the FBI now. I told him as little as I could, and he found her but hasn't done anything with that information. My first question is what do you think should be done about her?"

He didn't even hesitate. "You have to stop her, but don't turn her over to the Watchers. They'd simply kill her, and she doesn't deserve that. So far what she's done has been useful, but it can't last forever."

I nodded. "Agreed."

Faint surprise was evident in his response, "Really? You benefited from her help. I'd think you would want to help her out."

It seems he wasn't the only one who was predictable. I let a small chuckle out. "I'll admit that that was my first thought. However, Richie and Andrea convinced me otherwise. As Andrea reminded me, absolute power corrupts absolutely. And she was destined to be corrupted by that power

eventually."

"Yep. But I can't believe you called me to get my opinion on what to do about this person."

"No, I didn't. I'm calling about Connor. Question one, does he know about the Watchers?"

"She's in New York, eh? To answer the question, no, he doesn't."

"Damn," I muttered. "I was hoping to get his help. If he doesn't know about Watchers, he wouldn't be able to help without learning way too much. Besides, he'd probably try to protect her if he knew who she was."

"Probably. He's protective."

I couldn't help it. I HAD to follow up after that comment. "Not unlike other Highland Scots I could name."

"Touche," his voice held amusement.

"Well, if I can't try to recruit him for help, I guess that's that. How's the City of Lights?" I asked, changing the subject.

"Much like I remember it. I just wish Tessa and Darius were still here to share it with." His voice was mostly nostalgic, with overtones of sadness.

"Wish I could have met them. They both sound like fascinating people from what I've heard."

"No doubt there. Well, if that's all, I'm late for an auction."

"Yeah, thanks. Watch your head."

"Always. You too."

I hung up with a sigh. Well, I'd have to go this one alone.

The next couple hours were busy. Calling Richie to tell him I was leaving town, asking him to take care of Andrea, running by a bank to get enough cash to survive me the next week or so that I expected this to take, and running home to pack, I didn't drive myself to the airport until just before noon.

"One round trip ticket to LA, please. Returning in two days."

The sales agent hardly looked up at me. "Next flight leaves in two hours."

I nodded. "I'll take it."

"Cash or charge?"

"Charge." I handed over one of my credit cards.

As the credit machine was muttering to itself, he glanced down at my small duffel bag. "May I check your bag, sir?"

I shook my head. "No, I'll take it as a carryon."

He nodded absently and pushed the receipt forward for me to sign. Seconds later, he handed the card and ticket to me. "Gate 7A. Have a nice trip." He sounded more like a machine than a person.

"Thanks," I responded with just as much enthusiasm.

Winding my way vaguely toward Gate 7A, I got out of the agent's line of sight before casually walking out a different door than I had entered. I got to the taxi stand without any trouble and jumped in. "Greyhound terminal." The driver merely nodded and cracked his gum.

True to type, the cabby had me there in record time. I knew a heart attack wouldn't kill me, but that wasn't much comfort. Paying him and adding a decent tip for the speed (if not stability or calm) of the trip, I grabbed my bag and got out.

Walking slowly to the door, I abruptly stopped short and parked myself on a quiet bench that gave me a view of the curb where I had gotten out but was reasonably hidden from sight. Over the next five minutes, I watched a half dozen couples and two families arrive. No individuals got out of cabs, drove by in cars, or walked in the door I was headed to. With a little luck, I'd shaken my Watcher. But I wasn't betting on that.

Getting up from my bench, I grabbed my bag and walked in and up to a ticket counter. "Round trip ticket to Chicago, please. Returning in four days."

She smiled at me before pecking away at the computer for a moment. "Next bus leaves in an hour. Stops in Boise, Helena, Bismarck, and Milwaukee."

I nodded. "I'll take it."

"Cash or charge?"

"Charge."

I paid for the ticket and she handed it to me. "Terminal C. Have a pleasant trip." She gave me one last smile as I thanked her.

Finding the right terminal and bus, I dropped my small duffel into the stack of bags that were going to be put into the bus's storage area. I climbed aboard and found my seat. The remaining passengers filtered in over the next half hour. Fortunately, it looked like I had a half aisle of seats to myself. At least I would have elbow room.

The bus pulled out on time, but I was already buried in a book before we left the city limits.

The silence of the engine and the feel of bodies shuffling past pulled my attention up. Rubbing the burning sensation from my eyes, I looked out the window. It was starting to get dark, but I could still make out the sign on the side of the building: "Welcome to the Boise Greyhound terminal".

Getting into the flow of people, I let them carry me into the terminal. Spotting the snack stand, I walked over and bought a drink and soft pretzel. Finding an empty table, I started eating.

Once the pretzel was gone and most of the drink as well, I put my plan into action. Bringing the drink up as if to finish it off, I missed my mouth and poured the remaining pop and ice over my cheek and chin. My shirt and pants were immediately soaked. Jumping up with a yelp, I suddenly had the attention of everyone within thirty feet. Glaring down at my clothing and then the glass in my hand as if they were to blame, I shook my head. Looking up, I gave a bashful grin to the sea of staring faces. "Oops."

Scattered chuckles sounded as they realized what I had done. Everyone's attention gradually returned to their own food and table companions as I used a handful of napkins to clean off the table and chair as well as I could.

Throwing away the sodden napkins and what was left of my meal, I scanned the room for the driver of the bus. Seeing him sitting with what I assumed to be two other drivers based on the uniforms, I made my way over. "Uh, sir? Could I get my bag out of the storage area? I need some dry clothes . . ." I waved my hand down my dripping clothing.

Sharing a grin with his fellow drivers, he nodded to me. "Sure."

We made our way back out to the bus and he opened the storage compartment. Three minutes of digging produced my duffel. Grabbing it out of the stack and placing it out of the way, I turned to him. "Could I just keep this as a carryon? I'll help you load all this back in." Nodding his thanks, we tossed everything else back into storage. Taking my duffel again, I thanked him for his patience. I walked into the terminal and turned away from the restaurant, looking for a rest room.

Spotting one, I headed in and checked the stalls for occupancy. Nobody home. I locked myself into one of the stalls and got to work. Taking out the plastic bag I had put in there, I placed my soaked shirt and pants into the bag. A shirt, pants, coat of a different color, fedora hat, and backpack came out. Putting on the shirt, pants, hat, and new coat, I transferred the swords and miscellaneous stuff from one coat to the other. I placed the empty duffel, first coat, and plastic bag into the backpack. Walking out of the bathroom, I turned my back on the restaurant section and walked out the door. Climbing into the first taxi at the stand, I said, "Amtrak station."

There. If THAT didn't shake my Watcher, nothing would.

"Welcome to New York City. Current temperature is fifty-five degrees. We'll be pulling into the station in ten minutes. Hope you had a pleasant trip."

Though not jarringly loud, the announcement pulled me out of the light doze that I had managed to force myself into. Stretching out the kinks that had developed in my back over the lengthy trip, I marveled at modern travel. Just short of two days, and I was on the other side of the continent. Planes were much faster, of course, but the security there would have prevented me from bringing the sword and pistol.

As it was, this was probably good enough. Unless I used my name, was spotted by a Watcher who knew me, or got involved in a Challenge, I was essentially invisible.

Well, first thing's first. I took my backpack and wound my into the station. Purchasing a map and a couple doughnuts, I parked myself at a table. Pulling out the address I had gotten from Allen, I looked it up as I munched on the doughnuts. Okay, there's the street. That number would be between here . . . and here. Checking for the nearest major intersection, I folded the map back up and grabbed my stuff. Dumping my trash into the receptacle on the way out, I stepped out into the New York sunshine.

The cabby I got was pretty helpful picking a medium priced hotel near where Jenny was staying. Checking in, I asked for nearby stores. By a stroke of luck, there was a small hardware store, a grocery, a bookstore, a laundry, and several restaurants within walking distance.

Trips to the hardware, grocery, and bookstore got me the supplies I would need to finish this trip. Since I was running out of steam, I took one of my new books and a handful of snacks with me to the laundromat to clean up my other set of clothing.

The middle of the next morning found me walking toward the apartment building that was listed as the home address of "Anna Rayburn". Walking in, I nodded politely to the woman behind the counter and headed to the stairs. After climbing five flights and walking down a hallway, I came to

apartment 6C. Taking a deep breath, I knocked.

I had two choices on how to contact Jenny Bright. One choice was to openly approach her like this. The other was to wait until she left, break into her apartment, and ambush her when she came home. I was hoping this calm method would get me most of what I needed before the situation turned ugly.

"Hello?" The voice on the other side of the door was feminine and American.

"Ms. Rayburn?"

A pause. "Yes, who is it?"

"A friend."

The peephole darkened as someone looked through it from the other side. I braced myself to bolt for the lobby if she tried to make a break for it down the fire escape.

I gave a sigh of relief as I heard the chain lock being removed. The door opened to reveal a fifty-ish brunette. She wasn't pretty in the conventional sense, but she made me feel comfortable in a matronly way. She looked at me with a slight frown. "How did you find me?"

I smiled. "You recognize me then?"

She nodded.

Good. That solved a few problems. And she hadn't tried to run. That solved even more. If only my luck held. "May I come in?"

After a slight hesitation, she stepped back and opened the door completely. I stepped into the room, and she closed the door behind me. The room looked pretty typical for apartments anywhere. A large front room that opened into the kitchen, a hallway that probably led to a bedroom and a bathroom. I noted the computer set up on the same wall that the front door was in.

She crossed the room to the couch and sat down. "How did you find me?" she asked again.

"You called Anonymous Mail from your motel room a week ago."

She blinked. "How did you know THAT?"

"A friend in the FBI."

She nodded, accepting my answer. "Now what?" Her calm was surprising.

"That depends on you. First, a question if I may?" She nodded her permission. "Why did you do this?"

Her eyes seemed to lose their focus and her face pinched in grief. She started speaking in a monotone that sent shivers up my spine. "I've Watched so many, Mr. Chessman. None for very long, but I've seen them all. I Watched Connor MacLeod, Marcus Constantine, Amanda, and Rebecca Horne. I've also Watched Kurgan, Kalas, Xavier St. Cloud, Greyson, and Kenny. I watched St. Cloud Challenge and behead an Immortal that was only weeks old. And I watched Rebecca Horne dive into Lake Michigan in November to rescue a drowning child. I saw the worst and the best that Immortality had to offer. And it never bothered me. The Watchers are never supposed to interfere. Never let what we see get to us. But you already know this, don't you, Mr. Chessman?" I gave a uncomfortable smile as she continued, "And then one day I was Watching Frank Dattillo. He was walking down a pathway in a park. A couple and their young son were eating lunch on one of the picnic tables along the side. The man stopped Dattillo, probably asking him for the time. Dattillo didn't even slow down. He just brushed the man aside like he was nothing, of no consequence. The man wasn't expecting it, he stumbled backwards and fell to the ground. His son ran at Dattillo and started hitting his legs. I can only assume he was trying to protect his father. Whatever the reason, Dattillo turned and backhanded the boy hard enough that he went flying away. And his neck struck the end of the picnic table."

She stopped for a moment, a tear making a trail down one cheek. Her voice continued in that eerie monotone. "Have you ever heard the sound of a neck breaking?" She didn't even pause for my answer. "It's the most horrible sound you can imagine. It was just like a twig snapping. But you know it isn't a twig this time. Both of that boy's parents were just feet away. And nobody could do a thing about it. And Frank Dattillo turned, straightened his tie, and walked away."

This time she stopped as she leaned her face forward into her hands. Sobs wracked her body silently for a few minutes. I fought to submerge my raging hatred for this man. Finally she brought her crying under control and looked up. Sniffing a few times, she continued her story. "After that, I just couldn't Watch anyone anymore. I transferred to Administrative and buried myself into the paperwork that makes our work possible. I tried to forget what I'd seen, pretend it didn't matter, convince myself that we can't get involved." She gave a sad chuckle. "It didn't work. Every time I stumbled across the name of an evil Immortal, every time a coworker talked about Watching this or that Immortal, the only thing I could think about was the sound of that snap. Finally I decided that Dattillo had to die. There was no other choice left." She gave an abrupt frown and waved her hand to indicate herself. "I couldn't very well do it myself. How would a forty something overweight woman with no training kill an Immortal who could wield a sword? So I needed a plan. It took nearly a year for me to think of it. It was so simple. Just convince another Immortal to kill him. It took two months after that of discretely looking through the Chronicles before I figured out exactly how to do it. At the time Dattillo was in St. Louis. And so was Alfred Fay. According to Dattillo's Chronicles, he enjoyed taking walks in parks. Specifically, he would take a walk in a certain park in St. Louis every mid afternoon. Fay had a soft spot for kids. So I mailed a letter to him, telling him who Dattillo was, where to find him, and that he had killed mortal children." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "And Fay killed that bastard."

A moment of silence passed before she continued, again at normal volume. "Since then I've been keeping an eye on various people. If I can get a Good Immortal to go after an Evil one, and I've given the Good one enough information, then I can help stop the Evil ones. I've been helping to clean up the Immortal race."

I looked at the shine in her eyes and listened to the fervor in her voice. This poor woman thought she was on a Holy Crusade. While I applauded her goals, she couldn't be allowed to continue. Hell, she would have tried to have Duncan MacLeod killed a few years ago. And that's the best argument for stopping people like her that I could think of.

Trying desperately to keep my voice calm, I asked, "How many letters like that have you sent?"

"Six." Her voice was dreamy and reflective.

Okay, now what? The Watchers would execute her if they found her. My conscience wouldn't let me kill her myself. But I couldn't just let her walk away. Well, I had the answer to the question I came to ask. Time to try to fix it. "Jenny, do you value your own life?"

Her gaze snapped back from infinity. She frowned at me and nodded.

"You do realize that the Watchers will try to kill you if they find you, right?"

She seemed saddened by this but nodded. "If they would only understand I'm doing this for the right reasons," she muttered.

I was treading a thin line. I had to get her to quit, but I couldn't afford to antagonize her. "The only way they'll leave you alone is if they get all the records you've gathered. They must be convinced that you don't have any more of this data. And you can't do this anymore, or they'll just start searching for you again. Do you understand?"

She nodded.

"Will you give me all the copies of the data you have?"

She sighed. "I can't do that. What I'm doing is more important than my life."

That's what I was afraid of, lady. Okay, Plan B. I sighed. I stood and held my right hand out to her as my left went into my pocket. "Okay, well, I wish you luck. I must be going. Oh, and thank you for the information on Markus. I took care of him for you."

She smiled. It looked like a bizarre cross between malicious, happy, and sad. She stood up and reached out to take my hand.

In a blinding move, I reached up to her right shoulder and twisted her in a circle around to her left until her back was to me. Grabbing the back of her right shoulder, I held her steady while my left hand brought out the can of pepper spray I had picked up the day before. With my hand on her shoulder, I had a stable point of reference, so I closed my eyes and held my breath as I reached over her left shoulder and gave her face a direct blast of the spray. Dropping the spray onto the couch, my left hand went back into my pocket as my right hand released her shoulder, and I wrapped my entire right arm around her face, burying her mouth into my elbow and coat sleeve. At this point, my main concern was minimizing the noise she may make. My left hand came back up holding the roll of duct tape I had also gotten. My right arm was still trying to pin her head in place, but the hand was free. Her hands were alternately scrambling against my arm and trying to wipe her eyes as I twisted around to my left, dragging her to the floor. I finally got a piece of tape off the roll. Pulling my arm away from her face, I quickly slapped the tape over her mouth, careful to leave her nose free so she could breathe. As she frantically tried to wipe her eyes clear, I quickly pinned her arms together and taped them together at the wrists. Now that her voice and hands were immobilized, I turned my attention to her legs, which had been trying to get a solid kick in at me. It was a matter of perhaps thirty seconds (and two solid kicks to my arms) before the ankles were also firmly taped together. Reaching up, I grabbed her wrists (which were up trying to rip the tape from her mouth), and pulled them down to her ankles. Taping the ankles to the wrists, I stood up to observe my handiwork. Undoubtedly uncomfortable, but effective.

Now that things were again stable, I calmly grabbed one of the kitchen chairs, pulled it toward her, and sat down, straddling the back of the chair. "Jenny, I really don't want to do this to you, but you're leaving me no choice. I have to stop you. I applaud your goals, but it's your methods I can't live with. What if Fay, Connor MacLeod, or I had failed? Not only would your target have gotten away, but one of the 'Good Immortals' you're trying to help would have died." I held up a hand. "You're going to tell me that you sent us enough information that our victory was assured. Perhaps you did. However, one of two things could have happened anyway. One, one of us may not have trusted your information enough and been too late or ignored a vital piece. Two, many of us will not kill an unarmed individual. I'm sure Connor would have given his opponent the chance to defend himself. What would have happened if he lost?"

I sighed. "Do you see why I MUST do this?"

She just glared at me. Her eyes were already clearing of the pepper spray.

I gave a tired nod. "Very well." I got up and crossed to the kitchen. Looking under the sink, I grabbed two large plastic freezer bags.

Coming back out into the living room, I checked on Jenny. She had moved across the carpet some but looked no closer to being free. "Jenny, I can secure you much tighter, but it will make you much more uncomfortable. If you behave yourself while I'm here, I'll try to keep you as comfortable as possible. If you don't behave, I'll just tie you up so tight you CAN'T do anything. Your choice." She settled down and just continued to glare at me.

I nodded. Dropping the plastic bags in front of the computer, I started to power it on. While it was booting up, I picked up a cushion from the couch and placed it under her head. No sense being cruel about this.

Sitting down in front of the now working computer, I pulled over the stack of floppies and CDs that was nearby. Checking the contents of each of

them in turn, I placed any that contained Chronicles, plans, passwords, or copies of the letters into one of the plastic bags. Once that stack was done, I glanced over my shoulder to check on Jenny. She hadn't moved from where I had left her, but it looked like she had been working on getting her wrists free.

Turning the chair around fully, I crossed my arms and looked at her. She defiantly glared back. Shaking my head, I got up and grabbed the duct tape. Kneeling before her, I taped her elbows together and then added another couple layers around her wrists up to her lower hands. Once done, I told her, "This is your last warning. After this it gets decidedly uncomfortable."

Nodding my head at the shaken look displayed in her eyes, I crossed back to the computer. Powering it down, I pulled out the set of mini screwdrivers I had gotten the previous day. Lifting the keyboard out of the way, I got to work on the CPU box. With five minutes of work, I had the cover off and the hard drive detached. That went into the other plastic bag I had retrieved.

Turning the chair back around, I looked down at Jenny. Her eyes still blazed with anger, but had a resigned look to them. Good, that increased the chance that she didn't have a backup somewhere. Most computer users didn't.

"I realize that I'm signing my own death warrant as far as you're concerned, but I just hope you eventually see the reason I'm doing this. You're probably already aware you've lost your access to the Watcher database, so you'll have nearly an impossible time doing this again. Even if you do, the Watchers will find you and execute you."

I got up and went back to the kitchen. Grabbing a steak knife from the set on the counter, I walked back over to her. Kneeling down, I smiled sadly at her frightened look. I shook my head. "I'm not going to hurt you. But don't even think about trying to send the police after me. If they catch me, I'll simply tell them that I'm working for Joe Dawson, tracking down some data that one of VisionQuest's former employees took. I'm sure he'll cover me with that story. And if that happens, the Watchers will know where you are. You already know what that would mean." Using the steak knife, I cut the tape from around her elbows and started on the tape around her wrists. Satisfied that the knife would do the job, I placed it on the floor a couple feet from her. She'd be able to free herself, but it'd take her a while to do it. I picked up the pepper spray and duct tape before getting back up. Crossing back to the computer, I picked up the two bags and walked to the door. At the last moment, I turned back to her. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry I had to do this. Unless I hear about you doing this again, I won't tell the Watchers where you are." And I was gone.

I was on a train out of New York, bound for Chicago, within two hours. Like the ticket into New York and the motel bill, it had been paid for with cash. If anyone tried to trace my paper trail, it would look like I had gone from Seacouver to Chicago and stopped there.

From Chicago, I used the back half of the Greyhound ticket I had gotten four days ago to get the rest of the way back to Seacouver.

On arriving back, I gathered my car from the airport parking lot and went straight to Joe's. Before I even entered, I felt Richie inside. Walking in, I spotted the table with Richie, Hoa, Andrea, Gina, and Joe immediately. It wasn't tough. The place was otherwise empty at three in the afternoon.

Andrea immediately jumped up and slammed into me with a ferocious hug. After five seconds, she let go, backed up, and slugged me in the arm. "You do! You had me worried. Where have you been?"

Rubbing my sore arm, I tried, "Tahiti?"

She glared.

I shook my head. "I can't tell you." My focus shifted to Joe who was listening with obvious interest. "Any of you. You know what I was doing. I agreed with her goals, but not her methods." I pulled the backpack off my shoulder and opened it. Removing the bags of various types of disks, I dropped them onto the table in front of Joe. "I can't agree to killing her, even if she so blatantly violated the Watcher Oath. So I had to get her off the playing field without killing her."

Sitting down at the table, I smiled at Hoa. "How's the sword arm?"

She giggled. "I'm okay, but Andrea's better. You should see her with a long sword."

I looked at Andrea in astonishment. She just shrugged. I turned an accusing glare at Richie, but he wouldn't meet my gaze.

Joe exploded, "That's IT?! You're LETTING HER GO?"

I looked at him calmly. "Yes." He looked capable of chewing through his cane in frustration. I sighed. "Leave it be, Joe. She isn't a threat to anyone anymore. She has no reason to expose us all, and she has no information to continue sending those letters. She was just trying to do the right thing."

Chessman Chronicles Hunter of Watchers

"So what'd you think?"

I shrugged in answer. "The effects were pretty good, but I liked the stories better before Roddenberry died." Richie and I had just finished watching the latest Star Trek movie and were now slowly heading out of the theatre with the rest of the crowd. "What I'm really looking forward to is the next Star Wars episode to come out."

Richie grunted in agreement. Lucas was still the best in the world at what he did.

Finally making it out of the theatre, we turned right to get back to my car. It was about quarter to ten, but this was a moderately popular theatre and there were still cars around. Walking past the rows of cars, shiny from the recent rain, I idly noticed that we were the only ones walking in this portion of the cinema's lot.

"Say, did you ever hear the story about how Ford got the part in the original," I broke off as someone stepped out from between two parked cars about ten feet in front of us.

Maybe nineteen, he was dressed in a heavy leather jacket and ripped jeans. "Hand over your wallets, man." The command was punctuated by him jabbing forward the switchblade he held pointed at us. Based on his jerky movements and how he kept looking around, I guessed he was either high on something or that this was his first attempted mugging. Neither bode well for the coming confrontation. I wasn't the least bit worried for Richie or myself. It was just that hurting this poor idiot would create problems.

Richie raised one eyebrow as his mouth quirked up into a smile. "You've gotta be kidding me."

"NOW, man!" The switchblade twitched forward again.

Okay, let's try to get out of this without bloodshed. Ignoring this kid for a moment, I turned to Richie. "Did you ever see Crocodile Dundee?" Richie's mouth curled further up into a smirk as he caught my meaning. I turned back to the guy standing in front of us. Pouring as much exasperated boredom as possible into my words, I asked, "Do you want this in small, medium, or large?"

"What the hell you talkin' about, man?" Though the first hint of concern entered his eyes, he didn't back down. This poor kid didn't know when to leave well enough alone, did he?

Here goes. "Small." My nine inch combat knife appeared in my left hand. "Medium." My two foot long wakizashi appeared in my right.

"Or large," said Richie as his three foot long cutlass appeared.

Our "assailant" suddenly looked like he was about to wet himself. Keeping one worried eye on us, he beat a hasty retreat. It was all I could do to keep from laughing out loud.

Chuckling and shaking my head, I replaced my blades into my coat. "What's the world coming to?"

"Kids these days," Richie agreed with a sigh and a gleam in his eye.

After dropping Richie off at his apartment, I pulled into my own neighborhood. Yawning from the late hour, I looked forward to giving Andrea a hug and going to bed. That thought died the instant I saw the first of the flashing lights near the home Andrea and I shared. Fearing the worst, I pulled to a stop in front of one of our neighbors' homes and got out. Up to this point, I had only seen police cars, so my first impression was that someone had broken into the home. Then I saw the ambulance.

Andrea! I broke into a run, heading for the front door. Ten feet short of the door, the officer standing guard there saw me coming. The look in his eyes wasn't scared of me, but it was wary. One hand going to his revolver, his other hand came up in a clear command to stop.

I forced myself to do so. Getting shot or trying to barrel through a cop within view of about a dozen others wasn't the way to get anything accomplished.

The officer relaxed when I came to a halt. "Who're you?" he asked.

"I'm Ryan Chessman. I live here. What happened?" I consciously tried to make my voice calm. It was all I could do to stop myself from going through this guy, to hell with the consequences.

His face softened immediately and his hand came away from his gun. Looking over my shoulder, he waved someone over. He looked back at me for a moment. "We got a report of shots fired." Once again, I resisted the urge to go through this guy and try to find Andrea. It must have shown on my face, because he hurried on with, "When my partner and I arrived, we found the front door open. Looking in, we saw a young lady on the floor with two bullet wounds." This time, he had to physically hold me back from entering. Unfortunately, another officer appeared from inside and helped him. It's a wonder nobody felt any of my weapons on me.

"Where is she?!" I consciously forced my hands to stay empty. No sense in doing anything violent. However, my logic was rapidly losing the fight with my emotions right now.

At that moment, a wheeled gurney came flying out the front door, guided by two EMTs whose faces held more stress than I was comfortable with. Oh, shit. Wrenching my arms away from the officers' grasp, I trotted alongside the gurney as they made their way to the ambulance.

Andrea was unconscious, an oxygen mask covering her nose and mouth. What I could see of her face was entirely too pale. The entire front of her shirt was covered in blood. Before my shocked mind could come up with any questions, the EMTs had her bundled into the ambulance. One immediately climbed in back with her and the other hurried forward to the driver's seat. With a scream of the siren, they took off.

No... A piteous wail started in the back of my mind. Shaking my head, I gathered my wits. Pulling my keys out of my pocket, I sprinted toward my car, intending to follow the ambulance.

"Please don't do that, Mr. Chessman."

I spun toward the voice. "Why the hell not?" I snarled at the man standing there. The tone of my voice was a clear, "Just TRY to stop me!"

He didn't even flinch as he held up a badge. "Detective John Furlan, SPD. You're in no shape to drive. I'll have an officer take you." He waved one of the uniformed officers over, instructing him to drive me there.

It was my first ride in a squad car, but the novelty was lost on me in my current state of mind. The mind in question was spinning in thousands of different directions as quickly as it could go while my hand tapped a rapid beat on the door handle. When we finally pulled up to the hospital's Emergency entrance, I distractedly thanked the officer for the ride. He gave me a compassionate smile in response.

Walking in the entrance, I asked the first nurse I saw for Andrea's location. I was told she was in surgery and was gently but decisively directed to a waiting room.

Half an hour later, I was beginning to calm down and bring my mind back to the present. Who would want to kill Andrea? Was it some Immortal after me, and she just got in the way? Much as that idea angered me in the abstract, it was the only one that made any sense.

The door opened, and I looked up, expecting a doctor or nurse or perhaps more ER visitors. Instead, Detective Furlan walked in and sat down beside me.

"I'm sorry to do this to you now, but could you answer some questions?"

I ignored his question. "What happened?" I asked him. I was still dreadfully worried about Andrea, but my mind was otherwise coming back on track. I figured I had to learn what happened before I could answer any of his questions coherently (and safely).

He pulled out a notebook and started thumbing through his notes. "911 got a call at 9:27 from one of your neighbors reporting shots fired from within your home. Squad car arrives at 9:35. Door's open, they enter and find Ms. Burke on the living room floor, conscious, an apparent gunshot victim. The officers immediately call in an ambulance, and it arrives at 9:42. Meanwhile, they're trying to stop the bleeding and question her. Under the circumstances, she's amazingly coherent. She tells them that someone kicked in the door and just started shooting. She gives them a description: Male, African-American, six foot two, 210 pounds, black hair, gray eyes, somewhere in his thirties. Once the EMTs take over, they do a search of the home and neighborhood, but don't turn anyone up. Multiple bullet holes in the walls and the condition of the door frame supports her story." Pulling a pen from his coat pocket, he flipped to another page in his notebook, looked up at me, and repeated his early question. "Can you answer some questions for me?" Though his tone was businesslike, his eyes weren't without sympathy.

I took a shuddering breath and nodded. He'd answered most of my questions about what happened. He couldn't answer most of the rest. Only the Watchers could, probably. That description Andrea gave them also explained why I wasn't being treated like a suspect. Thank heavens. I doubt I could've maintained my calm if I'd been cuffed. Not to mention the PD's reaction to what my coat contained.

Detective Furlan interrupted my mental drivel. "Your full name?"

"Ryan Douglas Chessman."

"What do you do for a living?"

"Own my own computer consulting business on Sixth Street. Some custom coding, Internet web pages, like that."

"Your relationship to Ms. Burke?"

My jaw clenched. I made a conscious effort to relax and answer the questions. He was only trying to do his job, after all. No sense yelling at this poor guy. "We live together." And all that THAT entails.

He nodded, clearly getting the message. "Where were you tonight?"

Instead of answering immediately, I reached into my pocket and pulled out the movie ticket stubs and handed them over. They had the name of the theatre and the start time on them.

He looked at them for a moment. "Two tickets? Who were you with?"

"Richie Ryan." I recited Richie's phone number without prompting.

"When was the last time you saw Ms. Burke?"

I placed my elbows on my knees and my head in my hands. Taking a calming breath I rubbed my face for a moment before continuing. "This morning, just before she went into work. Quarter of eight, something like that."

"Where's she work?"

"VisionQuest. She's one of their catalogers. Takes pictures of antiques, tags them, that sort of thing." I silently blessed Joe Dawson for having the cover all set up. This was tough enough without trying to come up with a story out of thin air.

"Do you have any idea who would want to do something like this? Any threats, weird phone calls, like that?"

I silently shook my head. I had an idea who (or rather what) attacked her, but it wasn't anything that the police could help me with. They'd just get in the way. And they DEFINITELY wouldn't agree with my idea of justice if what I suspected was true.

He quietly flipped through his notes for a few moments more before tucking the notebook away and standing up. He reached into an inner pocket and pulled a business card out. "Here's my number. If you think of anything that may help, don't hesitate to give me a call. If I find anything, I'll let you know. Is there anybody you want me to contact for you?"

I took the card. I'd never been through anything like this (thankfully), but I was surprised at how solicitous he was being. "No, thank you. I appreciate all you're trying to do."

He nodded. "You know how to contact me if you need to." He started out the door but paused halfway out. One hand still on the handle, he turned back to me. "Hope she makes it." And he was gone.

Leaning back on the couch, I closed my eyes and whispered, "So do I."

"Mr. Chessman?"

I jerked awake and looked around in confusion. What? Where am I? My memory supplied the depressing news. Hospital, Andrea, some Immortal gunman. I closed my eyes momentarily to get my emotions under control. Breaking down into a sobbing mess wouldn't help matters any. When I opened my eyes again, I looked at the woman standing there. Brunette, mid thirties, five and a half feet tall, she was dressed in surgery green.

She sat down on the couch next to me as I swung my legs over the edge to sit down properly. A quick glance at the clock showed it to be about three in the morning. Almost an hour and a half of sleep.

I turned to the woman. "Sorry, I must have fallen asleep. Yes, I'm Ryan Chessman."

She stuck out her hand. "Doctor Lindsey."

My head tilted while a ghost of a smile formed. I shook her hand and said, "Duncan's told me about you. It's nice to put a face with the name." My smile expanded at her raised eyebrow. "Mac's my teacher. Well, one of them, anyway."

Her other eyebrow had crawled up to join its twin by this time. "So you're . . . ?" She seemed incapable of completing the sentence.

I nodded and then switched tracks. "How's Andrea?"

She looked down. "She had lost a lot of blood before she got here. I took one bullet out of her left lung and another out of her liver. Then her heart started to give out." My chest began to implode as she looked up. "I'm sorry." Though the words were quiet, they had the same effect as a lightning bolt.

My mind simply stopped. Andrea gone? No, that couldn't happen. It COULDN'T.

" . . . in a few days." My mind snapped back to the here and now just in time to hear Doctor Lindsey finish her sentence.

I shook my head and swiped my hands over my eyes. I took a moment to compose myself and stave off the tears. "Sorry, Doctor. What was that?"

She said nothing about my lapse of attention. "I was telling you that the police have to conduct their investigation before any arrangements can be made regarding Andrea. They should be done in a few days."

Great, something else I'd have to deal with. I considered nodding, but honestly felt that I didn't have the energy.

She laid one hand on my shoulder. "Anything I can help with?"

I dredged up the energy to shake my head. No, nothing can help me. I tiredly stood up and headed to the door, Doctor Lindsey following. Once back out into the hall, I turned to her. "Thank you, Doctor. I appreciate what you're trying to do. I hope we can meet again under better circumstances." I turned toward the exit and hurried away before my composure shattered.

The next few days passed in a blur.

I stayed at a hotel for a few nights until the police let me back into the house.

The instant I walked into my living room, I nearly collapsed at the sight of the blood stained carpet. That meant that I had to wait for two more days before the carpet cleaners and carpenter repaired the damage.

Once the police pathologist released Andrea, I had her cremated, just as her will prescribed. The Watchers turned out to have a small cemetery near Seacouver, and that seemed fitting.

The only image of the funeral I remember was the marbled pattern on the urn holding her ashes. I suppose Joe, Richie, and a few others were there, but I don't know for sure.

During those few days, Richie and Hoa came to see me a couple times, as did Joe. Mac called twice, and even Cassandra called. I appreciated what they were all trying to do, but this was something I had to get through on my own. Considering my potential life span, it was something that would likely happen again.

"What do you mean, you haven't made any progress?" I was nearly yelling, but I didn't care. It had been a week, and I was calling Detective Furlan for some news. This wasn't what I wanted to hear.

"I'm sorry, Mister Chessman, but we have nothing to go on." He gave an almost soundless sigh before starting to tick the items off as if from a mental list. "The description we have can fit any one of a million men. No shell casings were found, so we have no lot numbers to look up. The bullets themselves were from a nine-millimeter, and there are literally millions of such bullets produced every year. Besides the one neighbor who called in the shots, nobody saw anything. No car parked outside, nobody running away, nothing. Whoever this guy was, he was either wearing gloves or simply didn't touch anything, so there are no unexpected fingerprints. We have NOTHING to go on." He didn't sound happy about the situation, but he didn't sound very apologetic or optimistic, either.

I fought down the desire to say something that wouldn't endear me to the police forces of Seacouver.

"Okay," I growled. It wasn't, but what was I going to do about it? "You'll let me know if you develop anything?"

He assured me he would, but his tone wasn't very encouraging.

"The cops don't know anything about it," I growled. I'd retreated to Joe's shortly after the phone call. Considering how hard I was glaring at the bottle in front of me, I was surprised it wasn't melting.

"Just give them time," replied Joe as he wiped invisible spots on his bar. It was in the middle of the afternoon, and the bar was deserted except for the two of us.

"It's been a week, and they don't have shit! The only thing that makes sense is that it was an Immortal out to get me. Robbers don't come in with automatic weapons blazing, and besides, nothing was stolen. But if it IS an Immortal, why haven't they Challenged me? Hell, I could use the distraction." I gave a grim smile that had nothing to do with humor.

Joe didn't say anything. Frowning slightly, I looked up at him. He kept wiping the bar, ignoring me.

A suspicion started to form. My initial reaction that it had to be an Immortal coming after me returned to the forefront of my mind. I continued to stare at Joe.

He stopped and looked at me. "What?" His voice was equal parts annoyance and discomfort.

"You know something." It wasn't a question. My face was a stone mask by this time.

"Huh?" His confused look was very good, but something told me it was a lie.

"Who did it?" It took a lot for that to come out calmly.

"Did what?" He suddenly looked tense.

"Damnit, Joe, this is ANDREA we're talking about. If you know something . . ." I left the threat hanging.

He opened his mouth but closed it again without saying anything. Seeing the murderous look in my eye must have made him reconsider making another claim of ignorance. He paled a little, but silently shook his head in refusal.

I had always wondered if I could crush a glass bottle in my bare hands. It turns out that I can't, but not for lack of trying. "Joe, do you have any idea what I'm willing to do to get Andrea's killer?" The pseudo threat was delivered in an absolutely flat tone barely above the volume of a whisper.

His face reddened for a moment before he burst out, "Don't you think I want him as badly as you do? But I CAN'T TELL YOU!"

"Why the hell NOT?"

He looked ready to say something but stopped himself at the last moment. I knew he'd already dropped one piece of information. He knew who did it. Or at least he knew something about it.

"Joe, I consider you a friend. Don't make me do something stupid here." My hand reached into my coat but didn't emerge.

He paled almost to the point of his face matching the gray in his beard. He knew what weapons I had on me. In addition to a combat knife, I also had a two-foot long sword and a pistol. He'd shown me how to use the gun himself. He slowly placed both hands on the bar, palms up. Without bothering to look, I knew what I'd see if I looked down. A Watcher tattoo on one wrist and the scar of a removed tattoo on the other. In a soft voice, he recited, "I am a Watcher. I take this oath to observe and record the lives of any Immortals I encounter. To this I swear and pledge my life, so help me God." He lifted his chin a half inch, set his teeth, and stared at me. He was a Watcher. Good, bad, or otherwise, that was his life.

And he knew me. He knew I was incapable of killing in cold blood.

"God damnit, tell me!" I stood up so fast that the barstool I had been sitting on fell to its side behind me.

He didn't even flinch.

"Damn you, Dawson!" My hand emerged from within my coat, empty. I grabbed the bottle and hurled it against the far wall, taking some satisfaction as it shattered. I turned on my heel and stomped to the door, slamming it open in front of me.

I had walked for nearly half an hour before calming down enough to think. Dawson knew something but wasn't telling me. That meant it was either a Watcher or an Immortal. If it had been a random act of violence by someone else, then Joe wouldn't have known anything.

Why would a Watcher kill her? Well, someone violently against Watchers fraternizing with Immortals may. After all, since she and I were . . . had been, I appended with a lump in my throat . . . together, she was blatantly ignoring that part of her oath. Though my status as a former Watcher made me a special case, the general idea still held. Okay, so she COULD have been a target under those conditions. However, Dawson was at least as guilty of the same offense, and he'd been at it longer. So why would this person kill Andrea but leave Dawson alone?

Okay, so that meant that it was more likely to be an Immortal. Would he have killed her simply because she was a Watcher, or to get at me?

If he wanted to get to me, then he wasn't doing a very good job. I'd heard of some Immortals who would kill everyone around their target on the theory that it made them suicidally depressed. That had certainly been true for the first couple days, but it'd been upwards of a week, and I was getting out of that mood and was now closer to rabidly homicidal.

Okay, it was probably an Immortal who killed her because she was a Watcher. Great, I had an idea of the who and why, but that certainly didn't help the situation any.

Or did it?

My knuckles rapped against the old wooden door. I hoped this worked. More to the point, I hoped I could get away with this without any neighbors seeing or hearing anything.

"Who is it?" a female voice queried.

"Seacouver PD. Please open the door, ma'am." I tried to make my voice a little deeper, but not so much that it was obviously faked.

A long pause followed. I could imagine her checking the peephole, but I was leaning up against the door so that nobody inside could see my face. I nervously glanced up and down the hallway and waited.

"What's this about?" asked the same voice. She was a little leery, but I heard no suspicion in it.

"We have a warrant to search the apartment, ma'am. Please open the door."

When I heard the lock unlatch and the door start to open, I slammed my foot into the opening. I needed to talk to this person, but I couldn't afford to antagonize her. Though the chain still prevented me from entering, I could see in and the occupant could see me.

"Ryan?"

I smiled. Good, she hadn't screamed or anything. This was going well so far. "Yes, Angie. Can I come in?" With a sigh, she nodded. I retracted my foot, and she undid the chain and opened the door for me. She turned and walked to one of the folding chairs by the window. I walked in the apartment and closed the door as she picked up a pair of binoculars and peered out the window. Without turning, she said, "You shouldn't be here, Ryan."

I sighed as I sat down across from her. "I know, Angie, but I have nowhere else to turn." Angie Mollson, now in her late thirties, was a pretty, petite redhead whom I had met a few years ago. I knew that she was Richie's Watcher. Or at least one of them. I casually looked around. The surveillance post set up to watch DeSalvo's Dojo hadn't changed much in the almost two years since I'd last been here. Good camera on a tripod by the window, two card tables, microwave, small 'fridge, hot plate, folding chairs, the folding cot had been replaced by a futon, and the laptop that I was halfway hoping to find wasn't in evidence. Oh, well. It's never easy.

She put down the binoculars and turned to me. Crossing her arms and leaning back in the chair, she said to me, "Look, I know how you must feel." I bit my tongue. No, she didn't, but she was on my side. At least I hoped she was going to be. She continued, "I liked Andrea too, but you know what rules we operate under."

My eyes narrowed. "Don't give me that! Dawson knows who did it, and that means that every Watcher in town does. Everyone's assuming that this Immortal is out to get me. What if he's killing Watchers?"

Her mouth opened, but nothing came out. She closed her mouth and slowly shook her head. But I noticed that she had blanched.

I pressed on. "What if this person is following Richie at a discreet distance, looking for Watchers?" Her eyes widened in surprise. I gave a grim smile. "Yes, I know Andrea was assigned to Richie. And no, she never told me. I never saw her during the day unless I just happened to bump into Richie. Therefore, she was his Watcher." I paused to wave out the window at DeSalvo's where we could see Richie doing paperwork in the glassed in office. "And now you Watch Richie too. If this person killed Andrea because she Watched Richie, then you're next."

Her forehead was wrinkled in thought. You could almost hear the gears moving. Slowly she shook her head. "No, there are still three possibilities." She held up a hand, one finger extended. "He's after you and killed her due to your relationship." A second finger joined the first. "He's after Richie and killed her when he spotted her." A third finger went up. "Or he's after Watchers. How he'd be finding us is still unknown."

Damn, I can't scare her into revealing what she knows. Well, I didn't really expect it, but it was worth a shot. I sighed. "Okay. Look, talk it over with some of the other Watchers. Look up this guy's record. You guys may be a target." I leaned back in my chair, staring up at the ceiling. "I want him for a couple reasons. I think he's killing Watchers, and you definitely don't deserve that. And this asshole killed Andrea." My eyes narrowed and my voice dropped to a whisper. "And nothing short of his head will atone for that."

The next forty-eight hours passed fretfully. Seacouver was too big a place for me to find this guy on my own. I had to wait for him to make a move on me or for the Watchers to give me something. The dead time was driving me up the wall.

The only release of my nervous energy was in my daily sparring matches with Richie. Here was an outlet for all the anger and frustration I had to bottle up. When I worked at it, I could usually fight Richie to a standstill and beat MacLeod about five percent of the time.

But my head didn't depend on it during these sparring matches with Richie.

I lashed out with a diagonal cut with the wakizashi down and to the left, followed by an immediate stab with the knife. In one fluid move, Richie deflected the sword wide and then parried the knife with the base of his blade. With the size difference between the two blades, it's a wonder I didn't lose the knife completely.

Not caring that I was losing the fight, I swiped a backhand slash at him. Holding his sword in the path of my swing, he stopped me cold several inches short of the target. And then his left fist came crashing against my exposed kidney. Grimacing in pain, I tried to back away and come back to a defensive stance, but a kick caught up to my outer thigh before I could get out of range.

In a sudden attack, Richie swung in at my chest. Bringing my sword up to block, I blunted the attack, but didn't stop it completely. Knowing I couldn't stop the momentum his larger blade had built up, I was already getting out of the way of the swing. Unfortunately, the leg that was just hit didn't react well to the move. It collapsed completely, landing me flat on my back.

Richie lightly tapped my chest with the tip of his sword. I had miserably lost that one.

He didn't say anything, but the message was clear enough. Anger serves no purpose other than to get someone rapidly killed.

Beware the dark side.

On the third morning after talking with Angie, I finally received some word back.

To: chessman@seacouver.inet.com From: mollson_a@visionquest.com

Subject: re: our discussion

Your place, tonight, 7:30.

Angie

PS: JD doesn't know about this. PPS: Don't worry about the security. I've got it covered.

Well. This'll be interesting.

My doorbell rang a couple minutes early that evening. I opened the door to find . . . Hoa. Hoa? What was she doing here?

I must have been staring, because she smiled and said, "You going to make me stand here, or can I come in?"

I didn't move. "Um, Hoa, no offense, but someone's coming over."

She nodded. "Angie invited me."

It was probably thirty seconds later when Hoa's giggle pulled my attention back to her. Pulling my jaw up off the floor, I backed out of the door, inviting her in. About the time that I was hanging Hoa's coat up, the doorbell went off again. This time it really WAS Angie. Hanging up her coat as well, I joined them in the living room.

Since Angie looked uncomfortable with the whole situation, I offered the two women drinks and got three colas out of the refrigerator when they both accepted.

Passing them around, I took a seat on the recliner before popping the seal on my drink. Looking over my can at them, I decided to ask a few innocuous questions before getting to the main (and uncomfortable) topic of the evening. "Angie, you said that you had the security covered. Should I ask what that means?"

She smiled. "Your Watcher knows we're meeting. And they've agreed to not report the two of us here."

Shit. MY Watcher. I'd forgotten all about him. I'm glad he's on our side, otherwise the trip I made to visit Angie across from DeSalvo's would get her into trouble. Slightly peeved that I'd forgotten all about my own little guardian, I asked, "And does he know what we'll be discussing?"

"I didn't say it was a 'he'," she returned with grin. "And yes, they do know what we'll be discussing and agree with what I'm doing. Oh, and the new computer system manager at VisionQuest knows as well. That e-mail won't be logged. At least on our end."

Raising my hands in surrender, I gave up with a small chuckle. "Okay, you win. You've got the security covered as much as it needs to be." I turned to Hoa. "And why might you be here?" I froze as I belatedly realized how that sounded. I hastily added, "Not that you aren't welcome of course, but . . ." I stopped as the two women burst out laughing.

Composing herself, Angie answered, "You told me to consult with the other Watchers in town, so . . ." she gestured at Hoa.

I blinked and turned an incredulous stare at Hoa. "You're a Watcher?" I glanced down at her wrist, but there wasn't a tattoo.

She gave a small smile. "Not officially, no. However, since I knew about them and about Immortals, they recruited me several months ago. Shortly after Markus came to town, if you'll remember." I nodded, remembering that mess. It all came out okay in the end, but getting there wasn't pretty. Hoa continued her explanation, "Anyway, since I've been spending so much time with you and especially Richie, the Watchers contacted me discreetly. Angie, Andrea, and your Watcher have been using me as a supplemental source of information." She blushed suddenly. "However, I get final say on what I pass along. Not everything is their business." She glared at Angie for a moment.

Angie feigned an innocent look. "Hey, I'm his Watcher. I'm supposed to know ALL about my subject." I had to suppress the smile that threatened to burst forth as I realized what these two were probably referring to.

In as bland an expression as I could manage, "I certainly hope some, um, personal and interpersonal data is kept strictly confidential."

Hoa blushed a fiery red, which was saying something considering her Vietnamese heritage. Angie merely raised one eyebrow, a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

I chuckled for a moment before turning serious. "Angie, what did you want to talk to me about?" I tried to make the question as non-threatening as I could.

She grimaced and leaned backward into the couch. "I did as you suggested. I looked up the Immortal who killed Andrea." My jaw clenched, and my hand twitched, but I didn't say anything. She continued, "Leonard Frankle is his name. It turns out that he IS hunting Watchers. He somehow managed to get a class list from Watcher's University and is working his way down the list." She paused and looked at me.

I was frowning. "But I was a classmate of Andrea's at WU." About two years ago now.

Angie nodded. "Right. He's been moving around a LOT for the past year. His Watcher can hardly keep up. And he seems to be able to shake his Watcher whenever he wants to. Each killing looks like random violence, and he moves out of town the day after killing the next target on his list, so he's trying to make it look random. The Watcher leadership pieced together the evidence a few weeks ago, and tried to warn me off about it. I'd already gotten what I needed out of the archives, though. From what I could tell, the Watcher Council knows about him, but has no idea what to do about him. Anyway, he's been going down this list alphabetically." She pulled out a sheet of paper from her pocket and started reading. "Kimberly Archon, William Bartes, Andrea Burke, Juan Carris," she looked up at me, "and Ryan Chessman." She folded the page and tucked it back into her pocket. "Juan Carris was killed in Barcelona two days ago, the apparent victim of a mugging gone bad."

I grimaced slightly. "And so I'm next."

Angie mutely nodded.

Something disturbing occurred to me. "How's he finding us?"

She shrugged uncomfortably. "Don't know."

It didn't matter much in the long run, but it would have been nice to know. In all likelihood it was via computer. He was probably tracking us down the same way private investigators would.

Shaking off the irrelevant thoughts, I tried to put a plan together in my mind. The instant he Sensed me, he might turn tail. I can cloak my aura, but to do so prevents me from moving. That meant that I had to go to him. I just had to hope he wouldn't run the moment I came near, or fix it so he didn't have much choice in the matter.

Okay, if I had to find him, I had to know where he was. And the only reasonable way to do that . . . "You said he has a Watcher on him?"

Angie looked up as if just waking up. Her attention had been pretty deep into something. "Yes, Frankle has a Watcher. But like I said, it's hard to keep up with him. The good news is that so far he has been in a city for almost a week before making his move. We always know when he's moving from one city to another, but it takes a little while for his permanent Watcher to catch up. Until he does, one of the temporaries is assigned if available. His permanent Watcher catches up within a couple days, but we never seem to spot him killing Watchers. "

"Yeah, you told me he can shake a tail. Strange that he doesn't cover his tracks from one city to another," I mused. Or maybe not. If he didn't, then his Watcher would stay behind and hear the news of the death of a fellow Watcher. This guy was either clever or lucky. Something to remember.

Hoa had been watching us and listening quietly the entire time. Now she shook her head in wonder. "I had no idea this was all so complex."

I smiled at her. "Like most complex systems, when it works, it works well. When it doesn't, it doesn't work at all. The majority of Immortals out there have no idea the Watchers exist. And they're all tracked pretty well. It's the ones who know and actively try to mess up the system that cause these headaches."

Angie rolled her eyes at my understatement.

I smiled slightly and shook my head at Angie's expression before getting back to more important items. "You realize you'll have to tell me where to find him when he gets to town." I braced myself for an argument. Angie surprised me with her response.

She nodded with a thoughtful frown. Most of the same arguments about how to trap him had apparently gone through her mind. "I know. I'll give you as much warning as possible."

Hoa frowned. "What I don't get is why you don't handle it, Angie. If the Watcher Council knows about him, why don't they get him themselves? I mean, why ask Ryan to do this?"

I answered, "Four reasons. One, Watchers DO NOT INTERFERE. Our . . . their lives are pledged to that. Most of them would rather be killed themselves than try to kill Frankle or arrange to have him killed. There are exceptions to that attitude, though. Angie is apparently one of them, fortunately."

Angie nodded. "He's killing Watchers. Immortals have been given a great gift, and I'm quite happy to allow them their peace just so long as they don't start screwing around killing mortals indiscriminately. Especially Watchers," she finished in a mutter.

I continued, "As for the second reason of why Angie doesn't do something herself: what happens if he shoots Angie?"

"She gets hurt," Hoa said with a frown.

I nodded. "And what happens if *I* get shot?"

"You get hurt," Hoa answered, clearly not seeing where I was going.

"But I'll heal. I can still be killed by this guy, but it'd be tougher. The third reason is that one Immortal killing another Immortal is how things are done. If my killing Frankle is Chronicled as such, nobody will look twice, especially with my known relationship to Andrea. Everyone else's involvement won't come to light. Lastly, she knows I'd go ballistic if I wasn't in on it."

Angie smiled. "Not exactly how I would have put it, but close enough." Her smile faded. "You be careful. This is NOT a nice man."

My mouth curved up into a predatory grin that was not at all humorous. "At the moment, neither am I."

Okay, now I only had to wait until I got warning from Angie.

Interestingly, he didn't go after the Immortals that were suddenly un-Watched. Whatever the reason, he seemed to be hunting Watchers but not Immortals. I hoped that indicated a lack of self-confidence in his swordsmanship skills.

That night was spent restlessly. I ran through a few katas that MacLeod had taught me. He had told me that they were supposed to be calming, but it didn't help me much. I tried reading for a while. I still couldn't get to sleep, so I spent a while working with my blades, sharpening and cleaning.

I finally stumbled back to bed at about 2:00, totally exhausted. Andrea haunted my dreams all night.

The phone rang the next afternoon. I snatched it up, "Chessman." I was still irritable and tired from the previous night.

"Ryan, it's Angie. Frankle's in town."

That woke me up. "Where?"

"Knight's Inn on Hudson Street, room 153."

I paused. How to ask this next question? "Angie, can I assume that anything that happens will be reported . . . favorably for all involved?"

She understood what I was getting at. "Don't worry. Your Watcher knows the score, and I'm on Frankle myself. His Watcher hasn't caught up with this latest move, so I'm Watching him temporarily."

Good, that cleared that potential hurdle. Okay, time to put my plan into action. "Okay. I'm going to call him in fifteen minutes. Call me on my cell phone if he goes anywhere, okay?" I recited my cell phone number to her before continuing. "Do NOT try to do anything directly." I gave a twisted smile. "I've got the security covered."

I could hear her strained chuckle. "Gotcha."

I hung up and pulled out the phone book. After scribbling down a number, I grabbed my coat and headed out the door.

Ten minutes later I pulled into a good parking spot and shut off the engine. Like many hotels, the Knight's Inn had only one way out of the parking lot. If he tried to make a break for it, he had to go past this point to do so.

I pulled out my phone and called the number I had written down earlier.

"Knight's Inn, how may I help you?" How can receptionists be so disgustingly perky?

"Could you connect me to room 153, please?"

"Certainly, sir." The line started playing canned elevator music. Good, she didn't ask me for his name. There was no reason he wouldn't have signed in under his own name, but if not, it would be tougher to contact him.

The line rang. "Hello." Deep voice, but unremarkable otherwise.

"Leonard Frankle?"

A cautious reply, "Yes. Who is this?"

Good, Angie's information was accurate. "Meet me in one hour." I gave directions to Mac's warehouse.

"Who are you? What do you want?" Though the tone was angry and blustery, I heard a quaver in it.

"Who I am doesn't really matter, does it? What I want is your head." I hung up.

I looked at my watch. Now to wait. Three things could happen. One, he could leave right now and try to leave the city, in which case I'd simply block the parking lot with my car. The situation would get ugly from there, but there were still ways to salvage everything at that point. Two, he could leave in about a half an hour to get to the warehouse early. Three, he could leave in forty- five minutes to get there on time.

Five minutes passed without him moving. Good, that option of his was the least controllable. I waited another ten minutes to make sure and then headed to the warehouse.

Forty minutes after my call, my phone rang. I was parked outside the warehouse, sitting on the trunk of my car. I pulled the phone out of my coat pocket and answered it. "Hello."

"Ryan, it's Angie. He's on the move."

I nodded. The timing was about right. "I'm at MacLeod's warehouse. If he tries to go somewhere else, tail him until he stops, then call me. If he comes here, just enjoy the fireworks."

"Will do." She paused and then softly continued, "Good luck."

"Thanks." I flipped the phone shut. Placing it on top of my car, I muttered, "I may just need it."

The Buzz hit me fifteen minutes later. I was still sitting on the trunk of my car, arms draped over my knees, hands in plain sight. I looked at the approaching silver sedan calmly as I concentrated on the aura that was coming with it. Relatively young, perhaps 50 years Immortal; not nearly as many heads as I would have expected for the age, though.

The car pulled up next to mine and a large black man stepped out. A couple inches over six foot, muscular without being huge, looking to be in his mid thirties, he fit the description Detective Furlan told me Andrea gave the cops. He was wearing a plain gray trench coat over casual sweater and jeans, and his hands were hanging loosely at his sides. With the fact that his coat was mostly buttoned and his hands were in plain sight, he couldn't draw a weapon on me very quickly. He stepped around the back of his car and stopped about five feet away. He tilted his head curiously as he regarded me. "Do I know you?"

I shook my head. "No, you don't. My name is Ryan Chessman."

His eyes widened momentarily.

I nodded. "Yes, the next name on your list," I confirmed.

"But you're Immortal!" he protested.

"Some of us find it convenient to be Watchers." Based on what he'd been doing, and his list of targets, he had to know about them. I wasn't about to give him the real story. That would only tell him how old (or young) I was. "Why are you doing this?"

His gaze narrowed. "What, killing those voyeurs?"

My eyes flared, and I gritted my teeth. With barely contained rage, I nodded.

He shrugged. "Ours is a Game that shouldn't be interfered with."

I blinked and shook my head. "They don't!" Usually, I amended to myself. There WERE special circumstances. Come to think of it, I was in the middle of one right now.

"They do!" he insisted angrily. He took a breath before continuing more calmly. "They killed my teacher, Abdul Jakara. They also killed several others, including the priest Darius."

I sighed. So that was it. He knew about the Hunters but not Watchers. I shook my head sadly. "You're referring to Hunters. They were a renegade branch of the Watchers. Duncan MacLeod and some of the Watchers killed the Hunter leader Horton and drove all his followers out. That was years in the past. Jacob Galanti believed as you do; that all Watchers had to be killed. The Watchers were forced to kill him in self defense." It tore me apart to try to explain the truth to the man who had killed Andrea, but my conscience forced me to try.

He waved in an offhand gesture. "You lie. You are one of them." He tilted his head before continuing, "You Challenged me." He nodded toward the warehouse. "Shall we?"

I nodded and got down from my perch. Heading toward the door, I paid strict attention to his aura. My life had already been saved a few times by the dangerous flaring an opposing Immortal broadcast just before attacking. His aura stayed perfectly normal as I led the way inside. I walked partway in before turning around. He was just inside the door, already taking his coat off. Good. I continued to the far wall before removing my coat. If he was taking his coat off, that means he was unlikely to have any more weapons on him. I hoped. An unexpected pistol would ruin my whole day. Taking both swords in hand, I walked back toward the center of the open space.

As I approached him, I said, "You seem to be an honorable man, Leonard Frankle. I would offer to let you walk away, but you made one mistake." I never let my voice flicker. I could not show the fear or rage I was feeling. To do so would show him that he had an advantage. I stopped my advance ten feet away from him.

He stood calmly, some long, wicked looking, curved blade clenched in his right hand. "And what mistake was that?"

"You killed Andrea Burke," I choked out. I paused as I regained control over my voice. "She may have been a simple 'voyeur' to you, but I loved her."

His eyes seemed saddened for a moment. "I'm sorry for your pain, but I will not apologize for killing her."

I nodded, forcing down the cry of rage. "Then this is how we finish it," I whispered, spreading my arms to indicate the warehouse and the whole situation.

He nodded and then took a half step back and fell to one knee. Putting his sword point down in front of him, he wrapped both hands around the hilt and pressed his forehead to the back of his hands. Faintly, I could hear him muttering something. Perhaps a prayer?

For my own part, I took one deep breath and consciously released the tension beginning to coil in my chest. I couldn't let emotions cloud my mind right now. Richie had proven that anger didn't improve my sword skills.

Once he stood up, I darted in to the attack with the point of my wakizashi leading. With a swipe, he parried it out of the way and stepped away from the long knife in my opposite hand.

A backhand horizontal cut came back at me before he had completely reset his stance. Due to our height difference, it was at the height of his shoulders, but coming right at my neck. Taking a half step forward and crouching, I caught his blade near the base of my wakizashi and deflected it slightly upward, letting it continue its horizontal sweep but high enough to avoid hurting me. When I had stepped inside his reach, he tried to step backward but not before I managed a diagonal cut along his right thigh with my knife.

And so the fight went. I had to rely on quickness and light strikes while he went for a brute force method. I continued to land light hits on his legs and torso, even once nearly cutting his left arm in half lengthwise when I got a blade in front of a jab. His long sweeping strikes kept me at bay for the most part, though, and one strike cut across my chest to the ribs. But I was hitting him more often than he was hitting me.

Within ten minutes both of us were sweating heavily and panting from the exertion, but he was getting clumsy from blood loss. After two quick cuts on his off arm, he suddenly looked scared.

With one final cry of frustration, he tried an overhand chop. Using a variation of a move I had learned from Richie a while ago, I blocked with one blade while moving around the side. While he was still stumbling forward, a quick slice across the back of his legs forced him to his knees. Breathing heavily, I dropped the knife from my left hand and took my wakizashi in a two handed grip. "For Andrea," I said as I brought the blade down.

Frankle's body fell away from me as I dropped to my knees, panting for breath. Well, here goes again. I was still on my hands and knees when the first blast ripped through the air.

I was lying flat on my back, trying to get my body to obey my commands when I heard the door open. Expecting Angie, I didn't look over until I was reasonably confident in my ability to stand unaided.

Twisting my neck over toward the door, I was shocked to find myself looking into the direct gaze of Detective Furlan.

Oh, shit.

Here I was, lying on the ground, bloody shirt, no wound, two bloody weapons next to me with my fingerprints all over the both of them, and a decapitated body no more than seven feet away.

Can we say "screwed"?

As I was staring at the police detective standing just inside the door, I saw something over his shoulder. Angie walked through the door behind him and stepped around him to look in.

I closed my eyes and leaned my head back to the ground. "Please tell me this is an awful dream." I figured I couldn't get into any more trouble than I was already in, and it seemed the thing to say.

Angie broke into laughter. I opened my eyes again and looked at the two of them. Detective Furlan smiled at me and slowly rolled up a sleeve. My heart began beating again when I spotted his Watcher tattoo.

I let out a breath and fixed him with a stern glare. "You could have told me."

He chuckled and shook his head. "And miss that look you just gave me? No way."

As he was rolling his sleeve back up, Angie looked over at Frankle's body. "I see that the good guys won."

My relief abruptly fled. I levered myself to a standing position before looking over at her. "'I' won if that's what you mean. Though I'm not so sure I'm a 'good guy'."

She tilted her head quizzically. "What do you mean?"

"Was what I just did 'good'?" Her frown told me she didn't know what I was talking about. I tried a different tact. "He told me that the Hunters killed his teacher. What would I be willing to do if some group killed Mac? Might I end up like this?" I gestured at Frankle's body as I bent over to retrieve my blades.

Both Watchers were silent as I put on my coat and cleaned most of the blood off the blades with a handkerchief that I had pulled out of my coat. Once everything was put away, I turned back to them. "I know what he was doing was wrong. That isn't it. My point is: was what I just did any better; killing him in revenge for Andrea?"

Neither Watcher moved as I quietly left.

Early the next morning, I knocked on the wooden door.

"Who is it?"

"Would you believe me if I said Seacouver PD?"

Angie laughed as she opened the door. Waving me in, she returned to her seat by the window. Closing the door behind me, I came in and took a seat across from her.

"This is becoming a habit," she joked. I gave a small smile in response. "You'll be interested in knowing that both John Furlan and I filed yesterday's Quickenings into the Chronicles already. You Challenged him, you two discussed something outside the warehouse that nobody could hear, entered, and fought." She shrugged. "The WHY is explained easily enough. How you knew where to find him is unknown." She gave me a sly wink.

I nodded. That covered the bases nicely. The truth could only get people in trouble. Though Joe would probably agree with us, including him would only endanger him more. The Watchers didn't need any more internal upheaval.

"Anyway," she continued, "what brings you by today?"

I sighed sadly. "I'm leaving town. I don't know if it's a case of too many bad memories, wanderlust, or what, but I feel that I should leave. I just came by to thank you and say goodbye."

She shook her head. "No, I should thank you. You helped the Watchers out, too. Without you, this would have been a LOT tougher to deal with." She paused and shook my hand. "Take care of yourself, Chessman."

"You, too," I almost whispered. I turned and headed back toward the door. Before I grasped the handle, I turned back to Angie, gave a sudden smile, and waved out the window toward the dojo. "Keep an eye on him. He needs a keeper."

"What do you mean, you're leaving?"

I sighed at the question and continued packing the suitcase that was open on my bed. I didn't want to have this conversation, but I owed Richie more than just skipping out of town without a word. Besides, I still needed his help. "Just too many bad memories here I guess, Richie."

He wasn't giving up so easily. "But what about Mac?"

I forced myself to give a small smile. "I'm sure he can survive without me."

He glared at me. "That's NOT what I meant."

"I know," I sighed. "Look, Rich, I just need to get away. Once I stop somewhere, I'll let you guys know." I continued to pack. "Do me a favor?" I asked finally.

"Sure." He sounded depressed but resigned.

I lifted a handful of papers from the nightstand and handed them over. "I've given you power of attorney for me. Could you sell all this," I waved my hand around to indicate to house and its contents, "and Andrea's car?" My voice caught on that one, but I cleared my throat and continued, "Put all the money into my account. All the instructions are in there. I'll be back for it eventually. For now, I just can't deal with all this."

He nodded, listlessly looking through the pages I'd handed him.

Putting the last of the clothing into the suitcase, I latched it closed and took it outside, Richie following in my wake. Placing the suitcase into the last free spot in my trunk, I slammed it closed. I pulled my key ring out and removed the house key.

As I handed the key to Richie, he asked, "Where will you be going?"

I shrugged. "I'll know when I get there." I gave a sudden smile. "Maybe I'll try to find Amanda while Mac's not around." I waggled my eyebrows suggestively.

He laughed at that concept.

I stuck out my hand, which he solemnly shook. "Until we meet again, Richie Ryan. Watch your head."

Chessman Chronicles Traveling

The green side along the side of the highway finally got close enough to read.

Las Vegas - 50 miles

I rolled my head around for a couple seconds, trying to release the muscle tension and general tightness that was building up. After two or three rotations, I was rewarded with a short series of satisfying pops. Driving long distances always developed tension in my neck and the middle of my back. For the past year and a half, though, I'd had the option of pulling over and letting Andrea take a turn.

But I didn't have that option anymore. Andrea had been killed a couple weeks ago, a target of an Immortal that killed her for the simple reason that she was a Watcher.

I sighed sadly. It'd been tough, (and it still was) but I was coming to grips with her loss.

Meanwhile, I was traveling some. I'd left Seacouver over a week ago, traveling down the coast. The San Diego Zoo had been fun. The handprints in front of Mann's Chinese Theatre in Los Angeles were neat. The Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco was something of a disappointment, though. It was just . . . a bridge. I don't know what I was really expecting, I guess.

After seeing the only places on that coast I had ever been interested in seeing, I headed inland. Vegas was going to be my first stop on my gradual drift eastward.

Pulling into a rest stop five minutes later, I got out to stretch. The visitor's center there had most of the information I needed. Brochures on all the major hotels and several maps of town were stacked neatly in a wire rack. Looking through the brochures, I picked several hotel casinos that would work. Pulling out my calling card, I walked over to one of the public phones to see who had a room available.

I hated lines. I always have, and I probably always will.

Unfortunately, I was in one now.

I was part of a long line winding its way through the Excalibur. We were all in line for the late showing of their version of a floorshow, featuring jousting knights and sword fights. At the very least, I figured it'd be entertaining.

At my current skill level, I had already done all the gambling I was willing to do. More to the point, I had already blown all the money I had earmarked for that purpose. I'd spent all morning walking up and down the "Strip" as the street was informally called. I watched erupting volcanoes and pirate attacks, saw roller coasters and Roman statues. If nothing else, just walking around Las Vegas was entertaining.

I looked idly at the slot machines as we slowly shuffled past. I never could understand the popularity of those things. Feed it money, pull the handle, and hope it decides to give you money back. I snorted to myself. Of course, it'd probably take me longer to lose money on one of those nickel slots than I did yesterday afternoon at the blackjack tables. Oh, well. Everyone's idea of entertainment was different.

The line continued its slow crawl forward and I finally reached the door to the arena. And a Buzz hit me. I nearly growled in frustration. Great. Just what I needed tonight.

I frowned in concentration for a moment, trying to gauge the Immortal that I was approaching. I relaxed immediately, though. Whoever it was, they were very young. Less than ten years Immortal, and only a few head's worth of power. This person wasn't likely to try to hunt me down.

The guy behind me nudged me discreetly and I realized that I had stopped the line. Blushing, I showed my ticket to the person standing just outside the door. As he gave me directions to my seat, I distractedly listened as my eyes scanned the room, trying to spot the source of my unease. It was a pointless exercise. There were hundreds of people already sitting here and more coming in. I sighed and gave up. Besides, nobody would be so insane as to issue a Challenge in the middle of a crowd like this.

Shaking off the concern, I located my seat and took it. To kill the time before the show started up, I casually looked around. The oval arena covered in sand was clearly the center of action. One end had large doors, presumably for the horses. A dozen or so tiers of seats came up from near floor level. The ceiling had the usual collection of spotlights and cabling you'd expect. Hung over each section of seats was a banner with the name of a region I vaguely recognized as Brittanic or French: Nottingham, Normandy, and so on. Each banner was done in differing colors and styles. I could only assume that they were done in the color scheme of the home territories that they represented.

My gaze idly flicked over the crowd. Rather more families here than I would have expected for Las Vegas, but then I remembered that the casino owners had been trying to increase the family trade. As I glanced around, I saw one couple who caught my eye. Sitting two rows down and about a

dozen seats over, she seemed like a relatively short auburn haired lady and she was an average height medium blonde. What caught my eye was that she was looking around continuously, looking tense. He just looked concerned. She was also wearing a trench coat. I almost smiled to myself before forcing my eyes to continue the casual scan of the crowd. I believed I'd found the other Immortal in the room, but how to test it?

Leaning back comfortably in my chair, I fixed my eyes on the opposite wall, just keeping the woman in my peripheral vision. Calling on the training Cassandra had given me two years previously, I cloaked my aura. The unknown woman immediately relaxed and leaned over to say something to her companion. After about ten seconds, I let my aura resume its natural strength. She tensed up again immediately. Yep, she was Immortal.

The waitress (excuse me, serving wench to fit in with the motif) came over to take my drink order.

I smiled at her. "Would it be possible to change seats? I just saw a friend that I haven't seen in quite a while and was wondering if I could sit by her."

The server thought it over for a few moments. "Where is she?"

I pointed.

She glanced over before turning back to me. "If the seat next to her remains empty, then I'll ask her. Who should I say wants to sit by her?"

"Just tell her I'm an old friend. I'd like to surprise her." I casually pulled a couple bills out of my wallet and dropped them onto her serving tray. I hoped she would take my gesture as a wish for relative anonymity.

"Sure," she shrugged before moving off.

The flow of people trickled off within five minutes, leaving the place about three quarters full. The server leaning over the woman's shoulder, saying something I couldn't catch from my seat. The brunette visibly tensed up even further at the conversation. The server pointed me out, and both of them looked over at me. I gave them a smile that I hoped was non-threatening. The woman appeared to give it a moment's thought then nodded. I took that as my cue and stood up. Walking over to them, I casually took off my jacket and hung it over the chair next to the Immortal. Two pair of eyes tracked the movement; two eyebrows rose. They clearly recognized that I had effectively disarmed myself. I smiled at the server who was still hovering nearby. I was tempted to ask for a tankard of ale, just to see everyone's reaction, but settled for a Killian's before taking my seat.

Once she moved off, I stuck out my hand. "Ryan Chessman."

She cautiously shook it. "I'm Natalie Lambert, and this is Nick Knight." She indicated her companion with a tilt of her head.

I smiled at her. "Don't worry. I'm no older than you are."

Both her eyebrows became lost high on her forehead at that comment. The server returned with my drink, and I dropped a ten on her tray with a thank you. I turned to the couple beside me. "Can I get either of you anything?"

She slowly shook her head, never taking her eyes off me. I noticed that Knight's posture was slowly relaxing, but his attention never wavered either. Seeing no more business here, the server continued her rounds.

"How do you know how old Nat is?" Knight asked.

I thought about it for a second. "Call it a special skill."

Hesitantly, she said, "What do you want?"

I shook my head. "Nothing. I just wanted to announce myself to you. This way, we can both relax some."

She looked almost amused. "Oh, and how can I relax? You're a totally unknown Immortal, who spotted me with apparently no trouble. That makes me concerned."

Good, she mentioned Immortals, and he didn't react. He knows about us. That solved several problems. In answer to her comment, I indicated my coat. "I disarmed myself. If that doesn't prove I'm harmless, what do you want me to do to prove it?" I paused and said sarcastically, "What, you want to run a background check and frisk me too?"

She seemed to think that over for a moment as Knight asked, "And how do you know that you can relax around us? From what I understand about the Rules, that's almost naively trusting." Lambert gave her companion a glare but didn't say anything.

I sighed at the question. "Look, you can either trust me or not. If not, I'll go back to my seat now. But I think we could be friends if you're willing to give it a try."

She slowly relaxed, but he wasn't letting it go. "How do you know you can trust us?" he repeated.

I rolled my eyes. "She has less than ten years as an Immortal. She's taken probably two or three heads. With those two facts, it's unlikely that she's a hunter." I raised a hand. "And before you ask how you can trust me, I realize I can't prove it to you. I can tell you that I'm only two years Immortal myself, that I've only taken three heads, and that they were all in self-defense. However, there is no way I can prove any of it." My gaze hardened. "If I were a headhunter, I would have already Challenged her. If my disarming myself within reach of you isn't enough to prove my intentions, then I guess we're all just outta luck." I knew she wasn't a threat, but based on the questions, it was obvious that they were VERY uncomfortable around unknown Immortals. I was trying to prove to her that not all Immortals were dangerous.

She leaned over toward Knight and whispered with him for a few moments.

While they were whispering to each other, the server brought the meal that came with the tickets. Placing one in front of me and another in front of Miss Lambert, she walked off to get some more. I looked down at my plate: Cornish hen, twice baked potato, and biscuit. And no silverware. Well, at least the napkin was pretty big.

As the server came back with a tray for Knight, he and Lambert broke off their discussion. He started talking to the server as she turned to me. "I'm sorry if we're not terribly trusting, Ryan. I've had bad experiences with a few other 'folks' I've met. It's no reflection on you." She smiled. "And Nick's pretty protective."

I smiled. "I noticed. Look, if you're uncomfortable, I can leave now. We don't have to become best friends here, but I thought that letting you know who I am would make the rest of the evening at least a little less tense."

She nodded and seemed to relax a little more.

The rest of the evening passed peacefully, at least for us. The English king who acted as the arbiter of the fight made the expected Elvis reference by singing the opening bars of "Viva Las Vegas" before the fighting started. The jousting tournament that they put on for us was interesting to watch. I vaguely wondered how they trained the horses to put up with that. The mandatory group sword fight at the end was entertaining as well. Not a one of those guys could stand in a real sword fight with any Immortal. But in all fairness, their fight was designed to look good but be as safe as possible for them. They weren't Immortals, they were actors / stuntmen. Nick seemed even more amused by some of the action than I was for some reason.

I briefly considered trying to find some armor to wear for my next Challenge. After perhaps ten seconds of consideration, I decided that the armor would be at least as much hindrance as help. It looked like heavy stuff. Not to mention pretty tough to conceal in public. Hmm, perhaps use Kevlar. That would be worth some thought.

I almost laughed out loud as another thought occurred to me. Maybe as one of my future personas, I could come back here and apply for one of those "swordsmen" positions. Or maybe as an instructor?

Through the show, I spent almost as much time watching the couple beside me as I did the events in front of us. Based on the rings and handholding, they were recently married. Which was slightly odd given how she introduced them to me. A lump formed in my throat as I considered the impact his eventual death would have on her. And the similar circumstance it'd already had on me.

Earlier, Nick had apparently told the server that he didn't want dinner. I couldn't imagine why, though. It was pretty good stuff. The "uncivilized" method of eating without utensils was actually kinda fun. Perhaps I'll eat like a barbarian more often, I mused.

Back in the arena, the good guy won in the end, of course. If only real life were so predictable. After the applause wound down and the crowd started moving to the exit, I stood and turned to Nat. I stuck out my hand again. "Nice to meet you, Nat. Hopefully, we'll meet again peacefully." She smiled and shook my hand. I offered it to Nick. "Nice meeting you, Nick." His cool grip enclosed mine, and I got quite a shock. He FELT old, something like seven or eight hundred. But he had no Immortal Buzz and his "strength" was zero. And there was something else about his not-quite-an-aura that I couldn't figure out. What WAS this guy?

My shock must have been written all over my face, because he asked, "Something wrong?"

I shook my head to bring myself back on track and frowned at him. "No," I answered slowly, "but . . ." I shook my head again. He wasn't Immortal, and that's all that really mattered at the moment. "Nothing. Nice meeting the both of you." I looked over at Nat. "Watch your head."

Pulling my coat back on, I melted into the flow of people.

After leaving Las Vegas, I saw the petrified forests, Carlsbad Cavern, and the Grand Canyon. I stopped in Saint Louis and saw the Arch. It'd been a little over three weeks since leaving Seacouver, and I was now traveling through Missouri on my way to Chicago.

Stretching out the perpetually tight muscles in my shoulders, I spotted a sign informing me of the fast food joints in the next town. Glancing at the clock on the dash, I decided to stop for lunch. Fifteen minutes later found me finishing off the sandwich and leaning back in the booth, watching the world go by.

Bringing my drink up to finish it off, I felt a Buzz come into range. Sighing in exasperation, I concentrated on it. Uh, oh. 350 to 400 years old, LOTS of heads, but most of them were pretty weak. That combination screamed "Hunter" to me even before I could see him.

I had hoped to get out the side door before he came in, but I had hardly stood up with my tray in hand before he made it in the door. Just over six feet tall, well muscled for the frame, black hair, lantern jaw, and wearing a black trench coat and sunglasses. He spotted me immediately of course. With only half of a dozen people in the place, it wasn't tough.

He looked at me in the same way that a snake looks at a mouse. He was trying to be intimidating, and it was working. Though I tried to maintain a defiant stare right back, he saw through it and smiled. Tilting his head back toward the door he'd just entered, he turned around and marched out. Since my car was out that door, I had little choice but to follow. Even if I didn't, I had the distinct feeling that he'd just track me down on foot. Dumping my trash in the proper spot on my way out the door, I braced myself for an ugly situation.

He was standing beside a Harley Davidson motorcycle as I walked out into the parking lot. Not wishing to prolong the inevitable, I walked toward him and stopped about ten feet short. He tilted his head and looked me up and down before asking, "Have you ever read the story 'The Most Dangerous Game' by Richard Connell?" An evil smile formed on his face.

Great, I had run into an intellectual headhunter. The story to which he was referring was about some crazy guy on an island who hunted shipwrecked

people for sport. Wanting to deflate him a little, I shot back, "What are you, a smaller version of Schwarzenegger in 'Terminator'?"

His smile only got bigger. Spreading his arms out as if inviting me to inspect his clothing, he replied, "Yes, actually. You like the look?"

Wonderful. An intellectual headhunter with a sense of humor. It kept getting better and better. "I don't suppose we could shake hands and each go our separate ways?" May as well try for an easy out.

"Afraid not. You see, a friend and I are in a contest. The first one to take twenty Quickenings wins."

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I don't plan on becoming just another notch on your sword hilt." My face brightened and I snapped my fingers as if having a revelation. "You know, you could behead this friend of yours, and that would guarantee you win your contest."

One of his eyebrows rose and a faint grin appeared. "Thank you for the suggestion, but I'm afraid not. Shall we?" He waved a hand toward a boarded up restaurant two hundred yards or so away across a couple parking lots.

I shrugged. "May as well," I replied with as much nonchalance in my voice as I could manage. The truth was, I was scared. Getting beheaded in some town that I didn't even remember the name of wasn't my idea of the way to go out. I suddenly wished that I hadn't buried my gun among all the stuff as I was packing.

We headed toward the back door of the restaurant while keeping a safe distance between us. As we got to the door, I could see the signs announcing that it was scheduled to be demolished within a couple weeks. We both turned and scanned the immediate area. Nobody watching. With no further ado, the guy lashed out at the door with a well-placed kick. The frame around the latch gave with a splintering crack and door slammed open. He smiled and waved a hand at the now open door. "After you."

"Thank you, but age before beauty."

He gave me a mocking smile and headed in with no hesitation. I debated trying to shut him in, but decided against it. He'd be able to go through one of the plywood covered windows, and then he'd be pissed. So far, he seemed to be following the Rules, and I wanted to keep him that way.

Letting him get about a five second lead, I cautiously followed. He led me through the abandoned kitchen and into the front of the empty restaurant. Heading to the far end, he began to take off his coat, revealing a gray t-shirt and a depressing number of muscles. Enough sunlight slipped past the blocking plywood that the room was lit well enough for the situation at hand. Based on the bolt holes in the floor at regular intervals, the room had once held tables and chairs, but they had been removed long ago. The whole room was something like thirty by twenty feet.

Pulling my sword and knife out, I said, "My name's Ryan Chessman, by the way."

He straightened from placing his coat on the floor in the corner with a simple long sword in hand. In mock cheerfulness and politeness, he replied, "Terribly sorry, I'm Charles Clay. En garde."

Two minutes into the fight, I knew I was in trouble. He had already landed a cut on each leg and one across my left arm. I could still move all right, but I was losing blood. And I hadn't even touched him yet.

Realizing I'd better do something before I lost this one in a blaze of glory (quite literally), I suddenly darted forward with both blades extended straight forward. It was a desperate move, and I knew it. It'd either work very well or very poorly.

The wrong one occurred.

In a flowing spin, he parried the wakizashi to my left, pulling that arm into my other and throwing off the aim of the knife as well. While I was stumbling away, trying to regain my balance, he planted a kick into my lower back. I vaguely heard three or four snaps before I went face first into one of the windows. It didn't shatter, but my nose did its best to go through anyway. Bouncing away from the now red smeared window, I landed on my right shoulder before my back hit the floor.

Yes, I was definitely in trouble.

As I struggled to get up, I realized that I had lost my sword somewhere along the line, but the knife was still clutched in my left hand. I had made it to my knees with my right hand still on the floor before I felt a razor thin line being drawn on the back of my neck. I froze in position and tilted my head slightly to the left to see Clay standing beside me, his sword extended calmly. The bastard had hardly broken a sweat.

He slowly drew the sword back. A cruel smile grew on his face as he said, "There can be only one."

I closed my eyes. He probably thought I couldn't stand to watch the end coming, but in truth I was concentrating. I had exactly one chance to pull this off, and my life quite definitely depended on it.

Fighting through the pain radiating out of my shoulder, face, and lower back, I forced myself to focus. Cloaking and uncloaking my aura as quickly as possible, I also shifted my radiated "frequency".

I had startled Richie with this trick once, and now it looked like it was my last chance at survival. Richie's description of the event was that it felt like a dozen Immortals were walking in the door. Based on Clay's reaction, it was pretty consistent with Richie's observation.

He stopped his swing and turned to face the kitchen area, sword held defensively.

Unfortunately for him, that meant he turned away from me. As quickly as I could manage, I tried to get to my feet and thrust my knife at his side. My plan was to sink the blade between his ribs when he wasn't looking. If I was lucky, it'd kill him. If not, he'd be immediately wounded to the point that I

may have a fighting chance. That was the plan anyway.

It started breaking down immediately. He must have broken part of my backbone, because my legs weren't working right. I fell forward, knife blade leading. He must have caught me moving out of the corner of his eye, because he tried to twist out of my way. Instead of hitting his side, I watched my knife blade slashing across his thigh, nearly amputating the leg.

With the loss of support of his right leg, Clay fell over, screaming in agony. Pulling myself along as well as I could with my right arm, I got within reach of Clay's prone form. Swinging as hard as I could at his neck, my knife buried itself halfway through the back of his neck. He immediately stopped moving. Good, he was dead. For the moment, at least. I started to pull the knife back out to finish the decapitation when I noticed a familiar blue glow starting to seeping around the edges of the still embedded knife. How was a Quickening starting without a full decapitation?

That was my last coherent thought before a surge of power turned out all the lights.

Beep . . . Beep . . . Beep . . . Blasted alarm. I vaguely tried to swat in the direction of where my alarm clock usually sat. But something was tangling up my right arm. And my left arm was pinned in place.

Both facts were unusual enough to get me to open my eyes. White walls, white ceiling, white sheets, window with an uninspiring view of a brick wall, TV, couple chairs, an IV tree, and what looked like one of those heart monitors you keep seeing on TV during those hospital scenes. This last one was what was making the annoying sound that had awakened me.

Uh, oh. I'm in a hospital. This is NOT good. Hospitals were full of doctors and nurses that asked all sorts of health questions. Having them see my rapid state of healing would not be a good thing.

I took a quick inventory. I could see what was left of my clothing folded on one of the chairs, but I couldn't see any of my weapons. I had a brace on my nose, my left shoulder was bandaged, my left arm was in a sling, and I could feel a rigid plastic brace on my back. The most unusual thing I noticed, though, was that the IV wasn't stuck in my arm. It was just taped there. And it wasn't dripping liquids all over my wrist.

Shaking off the minor mystery, I started to pull my arm out of the sling. I had to get out of here before something really ugly happened.

Too late. I felt a Buzz come into range. What the hell else could go wrong today?

Quickly lying back down and pretending to be unconscious, I studied the aura. Just under a thousand years old, he or she had only taken a few heads, two dozen perhaps. I could hear the door open and close and footsteps approach but stop at the foot of my bed.

I tried to keep my breathing regular. It was tough. I was totally defenseless, and with one arm in a sling, even my unarmed capability was compromised. However, the relative shortage of heads this Immortal had taken for the age, plus the fact that they were standing there and not attacking, made me feel slightly better.

"I expect you're awake, Mister Chessman. I'm not a headhunter. My name is Doctor Ian MacGregor." The voice had hints of English accent but was soft and non-threatening.

Deciding I had nothing to lose, I opened my eyes. Doctor MacGregor looked to be in his late forties, was a couple inches short of six foot, slightly on the heavy side, brown hair, and calm, blue eyes. He was dressed in a generic white lab coat with a stethoscope casually hung around his neck and carrying a clipboard. He was studying my face as I studied him. So far, he hadn't seemed the least bit dangerous.

Hesitantly, I started, "Pardon the mundane question, but where am I?"

He smiled. "Mercy General. What do you remember?"

I thought about it a second. "Charles Clay Challenged me. I remember killing him, but not completely beheading him. I think I saw a Quickening start, but I can't be sure. After that, I woke up here." I waved my free hand to indicate the room. Despite the fact that he was a doctor, I couldn't imagine him getting me into trouble over killing Clay. There can be only one, after all. Even those not active in the Game understood that.

He nodded. "The Quickening must have brought the building down. The rescue workers dug you out of the rubble and brought you here a few hours ago. You were mostly healed by the time you got here of course, but the blood made it look like you were hurt pretty bad. All the bandages and such are just for looks. The sword cuts can be explained by flying glass, and a piece of falling concrete crushed your shoulder pretty good. There's no medical reason to keep you here now, though. But for safety's sake, perhaps you'd better spend a few days."

I nodded at that. If someone saw me come in blood covered after being pulled out of a destroyed building and then saw me walk out the same day, it'd be pretty suspicious.

I felt another Buzz approaching and swiveled my head toward the door as Doctor MacGregor did the same. Seven hundred some years old and three times more heads than MacGregor had, I realized as a man walked in. He was black, looked to be in his mid forties, right at six foot, a little on the light side, and wearing a county sheriff's uniform complete with service revolver and badge.

He looked at me with two raised eyebrows. "Ah, this explains a great deal." His accent was pure Midwest American. He smiled at me and introduced himself. "I'm Sheriff John Clark, Mister Chessman. Your Immortality explains a great deal about some of the . . . items I found in the destroyed restaurant."

I tried to offer him my hand, but the IV kept getting in the way. Grumbling under my breath, I replied, "Thanks, Sheriff. Um, I hate to sound ungrateful, but how are you going to explain the body?"

His eyebrows came back up. "Body? What body?" A smile kept trying to twitch the corners of his mouth. "All I know is that some sort of explosion occurred in that building, probably gas. You presumably saw or smelled something and rushed in to try to fix it."

I smiled in relief. These two were clearly a godsend.

He continued, "We found your keys and wallet in your coat, and a call to the Washington DMV got us which car was yours. Don't worry about anybody knowing anything. I'm the only one who's been into the restaurant since the paramedics pulled you out. You were several feet from your opponent, and they didn't see him. Two swords survived the collapse, but the knife didn't. With your permission, I'll put whatever you want into your car."

I nodded. "The wakizashi's mine. I guess I'll have to find an army surplus store for a new knife." I shrugged as well as I could in a sling. "It did its job, anyway. The long sword is too big for me. One of you can have it if you want. If you could put the wakizashi into my car and out of sight, I'd appreciate it."

Sheriff Clark nodded. "Probably a good idea. I'll take care of Clay's body, too."

I blinked in astonishment. "You know him?"

He sighed. "Damn fool kid tried to Challenge me a few years ago. I just shot him and walked away. He has been headhunting along the highways of the Midwest since then. You just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time." He shrugged and pulled something out of his jacket pocket. "And what should we do with the rest of Clay's useful possessions?" He displayed a set of keys and a wad of cash.

I frowned. "I have no use for the bike, either. The money, however . . ." A smile crept over my face. "I'm sure the hospital's going to want me to pay for whatever's been done so far. It seems a kind of poetic justice to use his money for that, don't you think?"

The sheriff nodded and gave a crooked smile. He placed the keys back into a pocket and dropped the cash onto the stack of my clothes. "I'll take care of things on my end."

"Thanks." I frowned a moment. "No offense, Sheriff, but you've been an awful lot of help for someone who you've never met before. To what do I owe this?"

He shook his head. "Ask the doctor here." He turned to Doctor MacGregor. "Dinner tonight at my place still on, Ian?"

Doctor MacGregor grinned. "Just dinner? Then I'm going to be so disappointed."

The sheriff grinned and left after giving the doctor a wink. Okay, so they're a couple. I shrugged to myself. Not that it really matters, of course.

"Are you okay?" asked the doctor in sudden concern.

Huh? "What do you mean?"

He tilted his head. "You looked . . . hurt there for a moment."

I grimaced and shook my head. "No. Just seeing that you two are together reminded me of Andrea, I suppose."

He apparently understood instantly. "And that's why you left Washington?"

I mutely nodded, a lump forming in my throat.

He shook his head sadly. Coming over to the side of the bed, he laid a comforting hand on my shoulder. "Young, old, Immortal or not, it never gets easier." In an obvious attempt to lighten the mood, he asked, "Anything I can get you or do for you?"

I cleared my throat. "I know I'm going to have to stay here for a few nights to keep the suspicion to a minimum, but could you at least take this thing off my nose?" I waved a hand at my own face. "I feel ridiculous."

Laughing slightly, he began to tear the taped brace off my face. Fortunately, it was surgical tape so it didn't sting coming off. Much, anyway. As he was doing that, I asked, "I really do appreciate all this help, but seriously, why are you two helping me like this?"

He shrugged without looking away from what his hands were doing. "I was traveling through the area about a decade ago. I got into a car wreck in a nearby town. John was the one who investigated the crash as a 'young' state trooper. I spent a few days here while I was trying to find another car and tie up the loose ends from the crash. The local papers told about another mysterious decapitation and power surge at the hospital. They were trying to hype up the murders since they'd been spread over nearly a decade and nobody had ever been charged. Since I was a certified MD, I applied for a job. Once here, John and I started looking for the head hunter." His eyes tightened, and his tone became hard. "It turned out to be one of the nurses. She would behead any Immortal or pre-Immortal that came to the hospital. Newborns, auto accidents, old folks who were dying of heart disease, it didn't matter. She'd been waiting here for people to come to her." He sighed as he finished removing my facial accessory. "After we found her, John was so mad at the whole thing that he Challenged her. He won, of course. I was so horrified that a NURSE would do such a thing that I decided to stay here and help the town as much as I could. We've had the occasional Immortal come through, and we've taken a few students ourselves, but you're the first Immortal I can ever claim to have treated." He smiled at me.

I chuckled. "Well, I can honestly say that you're the best doctor I've ever had work on me. Of course, you're the ONLY doctor who's worked on me." He made a small grunt of amusement. "That answers why you're here, but not why you're helping me," I pointed out.

He shrugged. "What can I say? We're a couple of perpetual do-gooders." I rolled my eyes at him. "Besides, you seem to be a good kid."

One eyebrow went up. "Kid? Who says you're not younger than I am by a thousand years?"

He gave a careless shrug. "Nothing. But you ARE physically younger. Besides, you treat us with way too much deference to be very old."

He had a point. If I wanted to hide my age, I had to act differently. I gave him a semi-amused smile. "Okay, I'll buy that. You're right, by the way."

He nodded, apparently pleased with his accurate guess. "Unless you have a better idea, I'll release you the day after tomorrow, first thing in the morning. Nurses will come in several times a day to take blood pressure and temperature, but nobody will do anything else that may expose your Immortality." While saying this, he also removed the fake IV standing beside the bed and put a bandage over the unbroken skin of my wrist. Must keep up appearances, after all.

True to his word, a nurse came in every four hours or so to take the blood pressure and check temperature. They all commented on how lucky I was to have Doctor MacGregor as my physician and how quickly I was healing. One of them was a cute Oriental young lady who reminded me a great deal of Hoa from back in Seacouver.

The next morning, Doctor MacGregor came back in for a "checkup". I assured him that everything was fine, then asked a question that had been kind of bugging me. "Doctor, I don't remember beheading Clay. I DO remember cutting through the back of his neck, but not completely through. Does that make any sense to you?"

He nodded immediately. "John mentioned that he noticed the same thing. I haven't made a systematic study of it, but I'd guess that the critical point of the beheading is actually the spinal column, somewhere between the middle of the shoulder blades and the base of the skull." He smiled. "That's in layman's terms, of course, but you get the idea."

I nodded. "Thanks, Doctor. I was just curious."

He nodded and then pulled himself up and took on an "official doctor" voice. "After due consideration, it is my professional medical opinion that you could be discharged from this hospital tomorrow morning, provided we get no complications overnight."

I raised an eyebrow and gave a twisted smile. "We'll ignore the fact that I could've been discharged ten minutes after being admitted yesterday."

"There is that," he admitted. We both chuckled. "Tomorrow morning, then?"

"Sure. It'll be tough, but I'm sure I can force myself to lie here and submit myself to the ministrations of all the cute nurses you have running around."

He gave a mischievous smirk. "Not my type."

I shrugged. "To each his own."

I heard his chuckle as he walked out the door.

The rest of that day passed much as the previous one had. The only interesting item was when I saw a blue tattoo on the inner left wrist of the cute nurse I had seen the previous afternoon.

Doctor MacGregor came in the next morning and officially released me as promised. Getting dressed in some clean clothes that Sheriff Clark brought up from my car before putting the sling back on, I also put on a back brace that was uncomfortable to wear but necessary if I was going to continue the charade. Walking downstairs to the business office, I settled the account with the hospital (Doctor MacGregor didn't charge me anything himself, but the hospital wasn't nearly so generous). Stepping back out into the lobby, I was met by Sheriff Clark. Waving me out the front doors, he walked me to where he'd parked my car.

"Get a good price out of his motorcycle and long sword?" I asked casually.

He shook his head. "Ian and I are keeping them. It's handy to have a small supply of swords when you train as many Immortals as we do. As for the motorcycle . . . well, we'll have to move on soon." He gave a sudden grin. "And I've wanted a Harley for a while now."

I laughed. "Thanks for everything. Anything I can do for you, name it."

He shook his head. "Ever hear the phrase, 'Don't return a favor, pass it on'?"

I chuckled. "I hear you. Anyway, thanks for everything. Oh, how do I get back to the highway?"

He pointed. "East on Washington to Main. Take Main north two miles, then follow the signs."

I nodded and stuck out my hand. "You two take care of yourselves."

He watched me awkwardly climb into my car with the back brace on and one arm in a sling. Glancing into the back seat, I saw the hilt of my wakizashi sticking out of the pile of luggage. Next to it was a sheathed Ka-Bar, the combat knife preferred by the US armed forces. Shaking my head, I looked back out at Sheriff Clark with a raised eyebrow. He flashed me a huge smile and waved. I laughed and waved back before starting up my car and pulling away.

This world isn't exactly overrun with good guys, but they are there to be found.

Glad to get out of the hospital without any undue problems, I continued my cross-country trek. Chicago's Brookfield Zoo was a solid two days, with one evening devoted to watching the Cubs get creamed by the Braves. After that, I continued eastward, stopping at Niagara Falls for a while before hitting the outskirts of Washington, DC area at supertime.

Deciding I'd made enough distance this day, I picked a convenient cheap hotel and got a room. Since there was a restaurant across the parking lot, I just hiked the hundred yards. As I was approaching the door, I idly noticed two folks wearing black trench coats approaching from the opposite direction.

Who stopped dead in their tracks the same moment I felt a Buzz. No, two of them.

Jeez, what was it with this trip? Six Immortals in a week? I must be approaching some kind of record. I began to wonder if there were more Immortals running around the world than I had initially suspected.

Shaking off the errant thoughts, I studied them as they studied me. He was right at six foot, looking in his late thirties, with a long, solemn face. She was just a few inches over five feet, looked to be in her mid thirties, and had flaming red hair. Their auras told me that one was something like two hundred, but had taken only three or four heads, and the other was VERY young, with no heads yet. They both looked tense, but neither had reached for a weapon.

Arbitrarily deciding on an unconventional approach to see what reaction I got, I approached the two, locking my eyes on the redhead, ignoring her taller companion, and keeping a soft smile on my face. As I made it to within arm's reach, she cautiously offered to shake my hand. Instead, I captured it with my own right hand and brought it up to my lips for a soft kiss on her knuckles. Still holding her hand and now running my thumb lightly over the back of her knuckles, I said, "My name is Ryan Chessman. How may I be of service to such a beautiful lady?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw his mouth drop open in apparent shock. She gave a slight smile, one eyebrow raised. "If you're not careful, Mister Chessman, you may bring chivalry back into style."

Her reaction apparently got his hackles to rise. He possessively put a hand to the small of her back. It was almost amusing to watch.

It was also not lost on her. She shot him a disgusted look before turning back to me. Pulling her hand back, she stuffed it into her pocket. "I'm Dana Scully, and this is Fox Mulder," she said with a nod toward her companion. I offered my hand to him for a conventional handshake, which he hesitantly took.

After shaking his hand, I said, "Sorry for my forwardness. It isn't everyday that I run into such a lovely Immortal." I waved toward the door we'd all been heading to before bumping into each other. "Allow me to buy you dinner as penance?"

The two looked at each other for a moment before Dana turned to me and nodded their acceptance. Holding the door open for them, I followed them into the restaurant and toward one of the empty booths. As they were sliding into their seat, I took off my coat and hung it up on the nearby coat rack. Taking my seat, I noticed Fox looked at my coat, then turned to me with a raised eyebrow. "Rather trusting, aren't you?"

I gave it a moment's thought. In truth, one was too young to scare me, and the other had so few heads that I was convinced that one wasn't a hunter. I still hadn't decided which was which. Besides, I didn't want my little skill to become common knowledge. "Would you believe that I'm the trusting type?"

He gave me a sour look.

I shrugged. "Okay, I'm a very good judge of character. I don't think my head's in danger from you two." I smiled. "Please don't prove me wrong, Fox."

"Mulder," he replied immediately.

I blinked. "Pardon?"

Dana answered, "He doesn't like 'Fox' very much. Everyone just calls him 'Mulder'."

I shrugged indifferently and looked down at the menu in front of me. "As you will. Call me whatever you wish." I waited a beat. "Just so long as it's polite." I looked up at Mulder just in time to see him shut his mouth with a slightly crestfallen expression. I turned a smile upon the female half of the pair. "And what shall I call you, lovely lady?"

She smiled back, clearly enjoying the show. "Dana, please."

The server came and took our orders before we had said another word to each other. I leaned back in my bench and studied the two Immortals across from me. They weren't acting like a teacher / student, but that's what they had to be. They didn't act like husband and wife or lovers, either. They seemed closer to siblings than anything else. Venturing a guess, I asked, "Teacher, student?"

Mulder looked at me. "Pardon?"

I waved my hand back and forth between them. "Your relationship." I almost missed Dana's blush. "Teacher and student?" I tried again.

Mulder turned to Dana with a small smile. She continued looking down at her hands and the blush deepened. Mulder's smile got a little bigger before turning back to me. "I suppose that's as good a description as any."

I frowned. What did THAT mean? They were obviously in some deeper personal relationship than that, but it was hard to pin down. I gave a small

shrug. Oh, well. It was their life, not mine.

Our meal came a few minutes later and we silently began eating.

Toward the end of the meal, Dana asked, "How did you know that we are teacher and student?"

Pushing the remains of my meal away, I pointed at their hands. "Neither of you is wearing a wedding ring, so you aren't married." They looked toward each other for a moment, but she looked away again almost immediately, blushing furiously. He grinned widely before turning back to me. Curiouser and curiouser. I continued my earlier thought, "Though I suppose you could have been teamed up for protection, the age difference is a little much for that."

Mulder perked up. "Age difference?"

Damn. So much for that trick being secret. I sighed. "Yeah, one of you is significantly older than the other." I hoped that would be enough.

It wasn't. Mulder cocked his head at me. "And how do you know that?" Even Dana looked interested in the answer.

I grimaced. "Magic?" May as well go for an easy out.

He smiled delightedly, and she frowned skeptically. The more I saw of these two, the more confused I was. Mulder suddenly frowned. "Wait a minute, you said that ONE of us was older. Therefore, you don't know which of us it is. Therefore, neither of dropped a clue as to our relative ages. Once again, how did you know?"

Damn, this guy was good at figuring things out. "Call it psychic, if you must," I muttered, expecting the answer to generate absolute disbelief before they dropped the topic.

Their reaction was the polar opposite of what I was expecting. Mulder's smile returned tenfold, and Dana was still looking interested if a bit wary. Mulder asked, "Psychic? In what way?"

Boy, I had painted myself into a corner here. I frowned in thought before I said anything. Only the truth was left. Now how to answer him. "I don't know if I can even explain it. I can tell more about the auras I run into that most seem to be able to. I don't know how or why. The teacher I went to for this training called it a psychic gift, and that's what I think of it as. Whatever you call it, I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't tell anyone about it. It's saved my life a few times, and if it became common knowledge, then it'd become almost useless."

They both nodded.

I looked at them for a few moments. "Can I give you two a piece of advice?"

Mulder looked at me warily, "What's that?"

"You're clearly not hunters. Since there're two of you, there may be a easy way to avoid fights." Dana's interest perked up again immediately. "If one of you is Challenged, the other can threaten to behead the opponent after the Quickening if one of you is killed. That probably sounds callous, but it may keep you two out of fights. I can't think that any hunter is crazy enough to fight under that threat."

Mulder seemed to like that idea, but Dana looked saddened. "Out of curiosity, how old are you?" she asked.

I smiled. Hell, they knew everything else about me, why not? "Only about two years older than I look, actually."

They both seemed relieved at my answer for some reason.

Dana stood up. "If you two will excuse me for a moment." As she walked away, I asked the waitress for the check.

Once Dana was outside my sensing range, I realized that Mulder was the younger of the two. Funny, I would have thought it was the other way around.

I looked over at Mulder only to find him still following Dana with his eyes. Playing a hunch, I asked, "Are you two more than just teacher and student?"

He turned his eyes to me. "Why?" he asked. Nothing in his expression changed, but the answer to my question was obvious all the same.

I nodded. "In that case, I envy you. Quite a catch." My voice lowered as my memory went down a familiar but painful path, "And you two may have eternity together. Were that only possible for all of us." I shut my eyes and took a deep breath. When I opened my eyes again, Mulder was looking at me with a quizzical expression. I smiled sadly. "I envy you," I repeated.

The check arrived and I led the way to the cashier, snagging my coat off the rack on my way past. After settling the check, Mulder and I walked out the door just as Dana was emerging from the washroom. I turned to them as she stepped up to his side. Bending forward into a flourishing bow, I said, "Fare thee well, Lady Dana. Always know that I shall come to thy aid if so requested."

She giggled; he rolled his eyes and grinned. Straightening up from my bow, I smiled at them. "Take care of yourselves." I turned and walked back to my hotel, a slight spring in my step.

The next morning I started doing the tourist stuff in Washington that I'd been interested in. The Smithsonian Air and Space Museum, Washington Monument, tour of the White House, et cetera. During the tour of the White House, I noticed lots of Secret Service personnel in various corridors.

I idly wondered if any Immortals had ever tried for those positions.

It also made me thankful that I'd left my weapons in my hotel room despite the danger. There HAD to be metal detectors all over the place.

The second afternoon, I took an old school friend out to lunch. After that, I took one of the guided tours of the FBI's Hoover building. In the middle of a hallway on the first floor near a door marked "Forensics Laboratory", I was shocked to feel a Buzz. What WAS it about this trip?

Concentrating momentarily, I realized that I already knew this Immortal. It had the same signature that Dana Scully had had two nights previously. So that's what she did. I shrugged to myself. Interesting, but not really important.

Getting back to my hotel after a second full day of sight seeing, I turned the TV to CNN before crashing for the night. The lead news story was about a little brush war being fought between two unpronounceable little African countries, with the UN trying to mediate the dispute. Like any of that was news. One of the smaller items of news was the recent theft of a map from a Toronto museum. Apparently Henry Hudson drew this map during his explorations of the territories that would later become Canadian Provinces. The police were stumped on the case, because the thief was so good as to leave no clues.

As I got ready for bed, the map theft story kept coming back to me. A truly exceptional thief with a taste for antiques. Now who might fit that description?

"DeSalvo's."

"Pull your nose out of that paperwork, Richie. That stuff'll make you go blind." I smiled as I envisioned him looking startled. I had awakened that morning determined to see if my hunch would pan out.

"Ryan? Is that you?"

"Yep. How's things back at the homestead?"

"Oh, same ol', same ol'. Mac's still in Paris, so I'm stuck here. Hoa sends her love by the way. Where're you at?"

"Washington, DC at the moment. Just calling to see how everyone is, and to ask a question."

"Shoot."

"Do you happen to know where Amanda lives?"

I heard his laughter before he calmed enough to speak coherently. "Remember what I told you two years ago, Ryan? She's outta your league."

I tried to put a little hurt dignity into my voice, "Hey, I never said I was going to try anything. I was just curious, that's all."

"Uh, huh," his disbelief was nearly visible. "This doesn't happen to have anything to do with a recent map theft, does it?"

I chuckled. "I see you also watch CNN."

"Yeah. As to Amanda, yes, she does have a place in Toronto. Here, I'll look up the address . . ." he trailed off. I could distantly hear desk drawers opening before a long pause.

After duly copying down the phone number and address he read, and repeating them back to ensure accuracy, I said, "Thanks for the help, Richie. I'll let you know when I settle down somewhere." I paused. "Perhaps you could visit on a honeymoon trip."

I wasn't expecting an answer to the comment, but I got one anyway. "Perhaps," he said calmly.

That's interesting. I shook my head and brought the conversation back on track. "Thanks for the address. Give Hoa a kiss for me."

I heard his chuckle. "I'll give her a HUG for you, sure."

I smiled. "Spoilsport," I teased. "Take care, Richie."

"Later, Ryan."

Two days later found me walking down a hallway toward Amanda's apartment. Penthouse may be closer to the truth, though, based on the number of doorways on this floor and the size of the building. I shrugged. Whatever Amanda's official sources of income, she definitely knew how to live.

As I approached the correct door, I walked into a Buzz. Concentrating briefly, I recognized Amanda's signature. Stopping in front of her door, I knocked and waited patiently.

After perhaps thirty seconds, the door was opened by a fifty- something woman who was looking at me with some suspicion. "May I help you?" she

asked.

I smiled at her. "May I speak with Amanda?"

She looked at me for a moment. "Who shall I say is calling?"

"My name is Ryan Chessman. She'll know me. We're friends."

The woman let me into the front room and introduced herself as Lucy before disappearing. As I was wandering the living room admiring the decorations, Amanda came breezing in.

It'd been months since I'd seen her last, but she was as gorgeous as ever. Though I liked her hair better when it was black rather than this platinum blonde look she was currently going with.

"Ryan!" she said, walking over. She gave me a quick hug and polite peck on the cheek before offering me a seat. Her face fell into a "gravely concerned" look. "I heard about what happened in Seacouver. Is there anything I can do?"

I shook my head, not trusting my voice for the moment. I cleared my throat once or twice before trying to speak. "I'm getting over it, but thank you."

She nodded and perched herself onto the edge of the couch across from my chair. One leg casually crossed over another, elbow resting on knee, she fixed me with an expectant stare. "And to what do I owe this visit?"

I glanced over at Lucy who was puttering about the room, no doubt curious as to who I was. I raised my eyebrows and looked back at Amanda.

She smiled and shook her head. "I have no secrets from Lucy."

I nodded. "After Seacouver, I've been traveling around, looking for a new place to settle down. I was in Washington, DC a couple days ago and caught a most interesting tidbit on CNN." The smallest of smiles formed on Amanda's face, and I knew my guess from two days ago had been accurate.

I turned to Lucy to see that she was staring at me with a speculative gaze. Deciding I'd better explain who I am to her, I said, "I know who and what Amanda is. I have no intention of doing any harm. I met her about two years ago in Seacouver shortly before Duncan MacLeod began my training." Lucy's face had grown more relaxed with nearly every word I'd said. She nodded and quietly sat down.

I turned back to Amanda and continued, "Based on what was taken and the reported skill of the thief, I guessed that you lived here. A call to Richie in Seacouver got me your address." She nodded at my recital of how I got here. "I guess the purpose of this visit is twofold. One, to visit one of the most beautiful women I know." Her room-brightening smile caused me to stumble for a moment before continuing, "And two, to see if I'd like to settle here in Toronto."

Amanda stared at the wall for a moment, apparently lost in thought. "I'm starved," she announced. "Let's have lunch and we can catch up on the last few months."

Two hours later found Amanda and me finishing a leisurely lunch at a nearby outdoor cafe. I'd told her about losing Andrea and the subsequent hunt for her killer. Until that point, I hadn't realized how much I'd missed having a friendly shoulder to cry on.

As we chatted, I felt something. It was almost an Immortal Buzz, but the age and strength were non-existent. As I was pondering that one, I noticed a forty-ish man walk in, look around, and head to our table. Amanda looked up just as he stopped behind one of the empty seats, looking at me. "Nick!" she said. "I'd like you to meet a friend, Ryan Chessman. Ryan, this is Nick Wolfe, my business partner."

I stood up and offered him my hand. Raising an eyebrow, I asked, "Business partner?"

"I work for a security and investigative firm here in town. Amanda and I occasionally team up for some of the assignments," he replied as he took a seat.

I turned back to Amanda. "Dare I ask?"

She appeared to give it some thought. He smiled at her and said to me, "We occasionally make use of some of her special skills."

I managed to not laugh out loud, but it was a chore. "I bet," I said in as straight a tone as possible.

In an apparent attempt to change the subject, Amanda quickly said, "So, Ryan, you said you're looking to move?"

I nodded. "Yeah, moving away from Seacouver seemed to be the thing to do after what happened." I turned to Wolfe and said, "I recently lost a . . . close friend there." He nodded at my partial explanation.

Amanda continued, "Well, there are a few Immortals here in Toronto that I know of, but nobody particularly dangerous."

Wolfe and I glanced at each other. I had just learned that he knew about Immortals, and he had just learned that I was one. That certainly did wonders for the mood of the conversation.

I nodded at Amanda's comment and thought about it a little. My decision depended on at least as much the potential headhunter population as the

job market. I hadn't been around nearly long enough to be financially independent as most Immortals were.

As I was thinking about it, I noticed that Wolfe was still looking at me. As I turned to him, he asked, "I don't mean to pry, but how old are you?"

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. "My, my, pretty forward, aren't you? Would it really matter if I said I was three thousand, three hundred, or thirty?"

He appeared to think about it. "I guess I'm just curious if I should expect you to reminisce with Amanda about the Middle Ages."

She turned a scolding look on us. "Now, boys, play nice."

I turned an amused smirk to her. "Yes, mother." She pouted. I turned back to Wolfe to see his chuckle. "Actually, I'm younger than you are, Mister Wolfe."

He seemed relieved at the answer. "Please, call me Nick."

I nodded. "And I'm Ryan."

He said, "It's so tough talking to someone who looks younger than I am, but is vastly older. It's nice to meet someone who looks close to their real age."

I turned to Amanda. "Haven't you told him that it's impolite to talk about a lady's age?" I referred to one of our first discussions, two years previously.

She smiled. Nick looked confused. She shook her head at him. "Inside joke."

Glancing at my watch, I realized the afternoon was half over. I stood up and retrieved my coat off of the chair back. "Well, much as I'd love to stay and chat with you all afternoon, Amanda, I'd better do some looking around town to decide if I'd like to settle here or not."

She nodded. "Would you like a guide?"

I chuckled and shook my head. "Much as I'd love one, I probably can't afford your tastes. I haven't had as much time as some to . . . accumulate wealth."

She gave me a mischievous smile. "And here you were the one telling Nick that it's impolite to discuss a lady's age."

Nick smothered a laugh behind his hand.

I gave her a brief nod and a half smile. "Touché."

Nick stuttered through his laughter, "At least he was discreet regarding your method of income."

She turned a glare on him that was pure venom. I covered the case of the snickers that threatened to come out with a hand over my mouth. Once I had sufficiently recovered, I said, "Oh, come on, Amanda. Anyone who knows you knows that you're a . . . how should I phrase this?" I stared off into space for a few moments before finishing diplomatically, "Procurer of rare items."

She almost smiled. "Though nobody's ever proven that for over two hundred years."

I smiled at her. "Nobody doubts that you're very good at it."

I spent the next day and a half looking through the newspaper's classifieds section for apartments and jobs, driving around getting a feel for the city, and basically looking around.

I had lived my entire life in the United States, but I found that Canada worked much the same. Hardly surprising, I suppose. The two countries are so close ideologically as well as geographically that it was inevitable.

In the end, I decided to stay. The city had a decent enough market for what my education trained me and there were no headhunters in town. Also, I'd heard that there was quite the nightlife here. All in all, not a bad place to live, at least for a young Immortal that wants to stay out of the way.

Chessman Chronicles Helping the Newcomer

The day started normally enough. I went to my office at my usual time and started working on the stack of personal home pages I'd been contracted to put together. Nothing much exciting, but it was a quiet source of income.

It was about 10:30 when I felt an Immortal walk into range. Since Amanda had left for Paris months ago, I knew about only one other Immortal in town, and he wasn't likely to come to me.

I opened a desk drawer and pulled out my pistol. It wasn't a permanent solution to be sure, but it would buy me time if I needed it. Whoever it was pounded on the door. I relaxed slightly; headhunters would've simply kicked it in.

Since I had a moment, I paid attention to the aura. Definitely Immortal, but painfully young. Less than a year. Hmm, now who knows I'm Immortal and is (or was rather) Pre-Immortal themselves?

Calling out to the door, I said, "Come on in, Nick." When it was indeed Nick Wolfe that came storming in, I calmly put my gun back into the desk before leaning back in my seat.

He came stomping over to the guest chair and flopped down into it before fixing me with a glare. "You knew! You little asshole, you knew and you didn't tell me." He rubbed the back of his neck distractedly.

I sighed at Nick's observation. "Yes, Nick, I knew you'd become Immortal." I fixed him with a thoughtful look. "What'd you want me to do? Announce it the instant I met you?"

"Yes!"

I gave him a stern look. "You know better." Sighing, I waved my hand. "Okay, let's say that I did. First off, Amanda would kill me for telling you. For the sake of argument, let's say we didn't kill each other over it. Would you have lived your life any differently?" I didn't even give him a chance to answer before continuing, "Of course you would! Taken irresponsible chances at the very least. Probably gotten yourself killed quite publicly as well. This way, you lived a relatively normal life. And since you're here, it probably wasn't a very public death. What happened?"

I could nearly see the steam coming out his ears. "She shot me," he growled.

I blinked. "She who?" Couldn't be Amanda. She'd never used a gun in her life.

"Amanda! She took my gun and shot me when I was dying of poison."

As absurd as the comment was, it made a certain amount of sense. "Let me guess. It had to be a violent death or else you wouldn't come back, right?"

My words seemed to be taking hold. He'd calmed down to merely "homicidally pissed". He answered my question, "That's what she said."

I sighed. "Sorry to burst your bubble, or perhaps hers, but you would have come back anyway."

He stared at me in shock and disbelief.

I continued, "I've heard that it's a minor distinction." I wasn't about to tell him that where I heard it was from a research paper that was circulated among the Watchers. I continued my explanation, "Pre-Immortals CAN die of old age. Heart attack, stroke, whatever. But if death is caused by an outside agent, be it bullet, crash, or POISON," I stressed, waving at him, "then Immortality kicks in and revives you."

He opened and closed his mouth a few times before any sound came out. Staring at me the whole time, he asked, "So unless I died of natural causes, I would have been cursed with this?"

"It's NOT a curse," I answered immediately, a little ticked at his attitude.

"Sure," he snarled.

I frowned at him. This wasn't the Nick Wolfe I'd gotten to know over the preceding half year before he'd gone to Paris. There was something else bothering him. Rubbing my eyes in exasperation, I said, "Look, you know what you are. You know that there are good points to this. So what's your problem?"

He sighed, suddenly looking terribly tired. "She lied to me."

I blinked. That was not the answer I was expecting. "Pardon?"

He shook his head. "I once asked her if I was going to be Immortal. She said I wouldn't be. She lied to me."

I frowned. "I already told you why Immortals don't tell Pre- Immortals what they are going to be."

He shook his head again. "She TOLD me," he grumbled. And suddenly it became much clearer. In the time since they'd left Toronto for Paris, they'd fallen in love. Even if neither was quite willing to say it out loud yet. This simplified matters in some ways, and horribly complicated them in others. "I don't want this," he muttered, almost to himself.

Suddenly tired of his denial of reality, I said, "Tough. Deal with it." His head snapped up from his stare at the floor, and he glared at me. I got up and stretched. "Look, you've gotten a huge shock. Taking it out on everyone around you won't help matters any." He opened his mouth to retort before closing it and grudgingly nodding. He wasn't any happier, but he got the message to shut up. I continued, "You're probably not thinking straight right now, so I'll forgive you what you've said." I took a breath before continuing. "You're Immortal, with all that entails. You'd better start thinking like one real quick or you'll become a nice, pretty light show for somebody." Casually walking around my desk, I stopped by the coat rack and leaned on the wall.

He gritted his teeth. "I told you I don't want this." He'd twisted around in his seat to follow me as I wandered the room.

I shrugged. Better shock him into reality, then. In a move too fast for him to react to in his awkward, twisted position, I pulled the wakizashi out of my hanging coat and spun to him, stopping the razor edge less than an inch from his neck. In a conversational tone of voice, I said, "There's only one way to remove this 'curse' as you insist on calling it. Are you sure you want me to do that?"

Gritting his teeth, he slowly shook his head. You've got to give him credit. He didn't visibly react to the sword at his throat. Nodding to him, I replaced the sword in my coat and went back to my seat. "Now that we have that cleared up, what do we do with you?" For the first time, I noticed the dark circles under his eyes and his unkempt hair. Looking closer, I saw the fatigue under the surface in the slump of his shoulders. "When was the last time you slept?"

He frowned at me. "Why?"

Great, he probably hasn't slept since dying. Whenever and wherever that was. I sighed at him again. "You may be tougher to kill, but you still DO need sleep."

"I'm fine," he tried to wave me off.

Rolling my eyes, I said, "Sure, Nick." He glared back. On to more practical matters. "Okay, you already know the basics of what being an Immortal is all about. Learning to use a sword is the only one left that you'll need help with. For the time being, you need to lie low and stay out of circulation. You're way too easy a mark on the playing field."

"I can take care of myself."

I growled back, "No, you can't. Not until you learn what you need. A gun isn't as useful against a determined Immortal as you may think."

His fatigue was finally catching up with him. Instead of fighting me, he just asked, "Fine, what next?" He leaned back in his chair and rubbed his eyes.

"Next, you get some sleep."

I ended up taking him to my place and dumping him into my spare room. All of his possessions were back in Paris and there wasn't anywhere else for him to go that would be safe.

While he slept, I made some phone calls.

"DeSalvo's."

"Mac! Welcome back from Paris."

"Ryan. How're you doing?"

"Oh, pretty good. Set up house in Toronto. Settling in, and so far it seems like a good place."

"Nice to hear you're doing well. What's up?"

"Found a new Immortal. Well, he found me. Couple things. One, who would you suggest train him? I can't."

You could almost hear the confusion in his voice. "Bring him to Seacouver. I can at least start his training."

I shook my head at the man two thousand some miles away. "I don't think that'll work. You see, it was Amanda who killed him. For his own good." I explained on for a few moments to his incredulous silence before finishing with, "Nick knows you and Amanda have a history. That certainly won't help the situation any."

"Nick Wolfe, that ex-cop that Amanda is 'just friends' with?"

I grinned. "Good, you've heard from Amanda about him. Yeah, him. And based on what I think we both suspect about them, she can't train him either."

"Good point," he said thoughtfully.

That was surprising. I knew he loved Amanda as well. Nick was potential competition. He was taking this way too calmly. Oh, well. It's their problem, not mine.

Mac was continuing, "Well, my next suggestion would be Connor."

"Could you call him, then? I hardly know the guy."

"Sure. Why don't you two come here? Until Connor can get together with Nick, you'll need help protecting him. Besides, we can get him a sword easier that way."

"No," I answered slowly. "Toronto is actually quite Immortal bare. Aside from me, there's only one other Immortal in town, and he knows it'd be instant death from both Amanda and me to bother Nick. Toronto is probably a lot safer than Seacouver. As for the sword, you can have Amanda shuttle a few out here for Nick to try out. But we'll have to keep them from seeing each other. In his mood, seeing her won't help matters any. He blames her for his 'curse'," I explained wryly.

I could hear Mac's long suffering sigh on the other end. "And until he comes to accept his gift, the source had better be scarce. Aye, most new Immortals are like that." He paused. "I've got a better idea. Why don't I send Richie? He needs the break from Seacouver anyway."

I smiled at the thought of seeing my friend. "Good idea. Let me know once you talk to Connor and Richie?" I recited my home and office numbers. "Other than keeping him alive and out of most mischief, there isn't anything I can do for Nick." I didn't have to explain that I wasn't experienced enough myself to train him.

"I'll do that," answered Mac. "Oh, you'd better call Amanda. She's probably worried."

"Okay. Talk to you later. Oh, and thanks."

"For what?"

"Helping."

He chuckled. "What does Amanda call me? A boy scout? We help everyone, remember?"

I smiled as I hung up. Having Mac helping was a tremendous load off my shoulders. With his contacts, help for Nick was much closer to reality.

Pulling out my phone list, I called Amanda's penthouse here in Toronto.

"Montrose residence," Lucy answered.

"Hi, Lucy. It's Ryan."

"Ryan! I was going to call you. I just got a panicked call from Amanda. Nick's . . . changed and is now missing." She sounded genuinely worried. Of course, when it came to Amanda or anyone around her, Lucy was always worried.

"I know. He showed up at my office a few hours ago. I have him over at my place now. If you could tell Amanda that, it'd be a load off her mind, I'm sure."

"Thank God," Lucy breathed. "How is he doing?"

"Under the circumstances, as well as could be expected. I don't think he's gotten much sleep in the past couple of days, but that's also normal for a newly awakened Immortal. He's got a LOT to absorb right now. Which reminds me, please keep Amanda away from here. He blames her for his condition and I don't want either of them saying something that they'll eventually regret. I know she'll want to see him, but staying away is probably better for all involved."

She sighed. "I suppose you're right. Amanda will be so disappointed, but I'll try to keep her away. For Nick's sake. Is there anything I can do?"

I thought about it a second. "No offense, Lucy, but talking to a mortal my do him some good. Once he wakes up, I'll ask if he wants to talk to you."

"No offense taken," she responded brightly. "I'm as mortal as they come. With the blood pressure to prove it." I chuckled at her perpetual good humor. She continued more slowly, "Ryan, I understand why Amanda wouldn't tell me he was going to be Immortal, but did you know?"

I sighed soundlessly. Here we go again. "Yes, Lucy, I knew. And I didn't tell you for the same reason that I didn't tell him. Anybody knowing that kind of information would only alter their perceptions of him. No matter your intentions, you would have treated him differently, just as you treat Amanda, me, and all other Immortals differently. Once he noticed that, his having that information would only hurt him in the long run."

"You sound just like Amanda," she grumped.

I laughed. "Actually, we both sound like every other non- headhunting Immortal that I'm aware of." I switched gears. "Meanwhile, there are a few folks coming into town who will help. I'll call later once I have some news, either way."

Once Lucy and I finished our call, I stared at the phone in thought. I had to assume that the Watchers already knew about Nick. Based on that he said, Amanda's Watcher no doubt watched him wake up. Therefore, he was a known Immortal and I didn't have to worry about the Watchers. The only other question along those lines was whether or not to tell Nick about them. Probably not, I decided after some thought. Telling everyone about Watchers only put them into more danger of widespread exposure.

The next morning Nick didn't take his enforced inactivity very well. "What do you MEAN, I can't go anywhere?!" he snarled at me.

I rolled my eyes. "I didn't say you couldn't do ANYTHING, just that you had to lie low. Oh, and we'll be having some guests within the next few days, so staying close is a good idea for several reasons."

He muttered something under his breath in French that I was probably just as happy I didn't understand.

"As for lying low, you can go out if you want, but going to anyplace that Nick Wolfe is known to frequent would be a bad idea. Word about the new Immortal is no doubt already working its way through the Immortal grapevine. Going somewhere predictable would be close to suicidal." Actually, what I told Duncan the previous day was true. He was probably safe here in town, but I wanted him to start learning paranoia. "Meanwhile, Lucy wants to know if you'd like to talk to her."

His eyes narrowed a little.

I shook my head. "No, Amanda won't be there. Just Lucy."

He thought about it a moment before nodding.

While he and Lucy went out for lunch, I went back to my office. If I was going to stay home for a few days to keep Nick from going stir crazy, I figured I should at least have some work on hand. I still DID have to make a living, after all.

While gathering my stuff up at the office, the phone rang. I grabbed it up, "Chessman."

"Hey, Ryan, it's Richie."

My head came up. "Rich! How's it going?"

"Oh, pretty well. Listen, we're at the Toronto airport. Could you come and pick us up? I'd take a cab, but I don't know where you live."

A slight grin started to form at his use of "we". I had an idea who it was and was looking forward to seeing them. "Sure. I'll be about a half-hour."

"Great. Concourse A. Meet you at the bar?"

"Okay. See you then."

I was still a few feet short of the bar entrance when the Buzz hit me. Since I was expecting Richie, I hardly slowed down. It'd been close to a year since I'd seen him, and was looking forward to spending time with my friend.

Walking in the door, I scanned the crowd until I saw Richie waving. Making my way over to him, I took in his appearance. He hadn't aged at all, of course, but still, he managed to look more mature. Perhaps Hoa had been a calming influence on him. And speaking of her, she was smiling at me as well as I arrived.

I held out my hand to Richie as they stood. After a quick shake of his hand, I turned to Hoa and held out my arms for a hug. She gave me one without any hesitation. Leaning over to whisper into her ear, I said, "I'd give you a kiss, but Richie'd likely carve out my heart right here."

She giggled as she released me from the hug. As she was turning around to gather her coat and purse, I glanced down at her left hand. Sure enough, there was a diamond ring there. I almost missed the blue tattoo inside the wrist, but caught it as well. So she'd officially joined the Watchers? Guess so, if she was openly wearing their insignia.

Grabbing one of the suitcases and the sword case that was by Richie's feet, I said, "About time."

Richie graced me with a confused look that was mirrored by Hoa. He asked, "What do you mean? You only called Mac yesterday."

I shook my head as I slung the suitcase strap over my left shoulder. "Not that." I nodded my head toward Hoa's hand. "I was referring to the ring. Congratulations."

Her smile was overshadowed by his, but it was a close call. "Thanks," they chorused.

All three of us were chuckling as I led them to the short term parking lot. "What about you?" asked Hoa. "Anybody new in your life?"

I sighed dramatically. "Amanda hasn't succumbed to my charms yet." Hoa rolled her eyes and Richie snickered. I continued, "Of course, competing with the likes of," I adopted an accent, "Duncan MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod," I dropped the accent as my companions smiled. I did too before

continuing, "and Nick Wolfe, I'm afraid I'm out- classed."

They both looked a little surprised. Richie asked, "She and this Nick Wolfe are an item?"

I shook my head. "Neither of them will admit it, but I think so. Know anything about him?" They shook their heads. I opened my trunk and we piled the luggage in as I continued, "He's an ex-cop turned investigator. They met when he was trying to investigate her for a jewel theft." They both smiled. "He saw her die and awaken, and she eventually told him what she was. Since then, she's helped him in the various PI business that he's been contracted for, and they've slowly grown closer. Then they both went chasing off to Paris a few months ago. And then he came storming into my office a few days ago, Immortal. I don't know if Mac told you, but she was the one who killed him." They nodded. I sighed as I unlocked the car. "And here we are." In quite the mess.

We made small talk on the way to my apartment. They'd only recently become engaged, and no wedding date had been set. Despite living in Seacouver, Richie hadn't been Challenged since before I'd left. Hoa had joined the Watchers in an administrative role shortly after I'd left.

As we neared my apartment door burdened only with the sword case, we walked into Nick's Buzz. I held up my hand to Richie suddenly tense look. "It's okay. That's Nick."

I unlocked the door and opened it a crack. Without walking in, I called, "It's okay, Nick. It's me and two friends."

Opening the door the rest of the way, I led the way in. Nick was standing next to my couch, holstering his gun. Richie saw this and nodded. "Good reflexes," he said.

Nick just raised one eyebrow before turning to me. "You know those headaches I've been complaining about? Well, it just got twice as bad as usual."

I smiled. He was learning to hide his Immortality. "It's okay, Nick. They know. And the reason it's twice as bad as usual is because there were two Immortals walking into your range instead of just one. The headaches will pass, but the Buzz stays with you."

He looked over at them. Smiling disarmingly at Hoa, he said, "Which?"

I grinned. "Guess," I offered.

He grinned; Richie frowned. I said, "Careful frisking her for a sword, though. She's likely to hurt you."

He looked at her incredulously. She smiled sweetly. She did not look intimidating at all of five foot five and less than one hundred pounds. I just laughed.

Richie muttered warningly under his breath, "Ryan . . ."

I waved my hand. "Okay, okay. Nick Wolfe, meet Richie Ryan and his fiancée Vu Tran Hoa." He looked crestfallen at the "fiancée" part, but politely shook hands all around.

As they were seating themselves comfortably around the living room, Nick suddenly pointed at Hoa's wrist and said, "You're a Watcher?"

Everyone stopped. I frowned at Nick. "How . . . ?"

He shrugged. "I met one a while ago. Name of Dawson, I think." He leaned back on the couch comfortably. The rest of us were staring at him in amazement.

Hoa muttered, "Brother, it IS a small world after all."

Richie and I chuckled. I said, "Okay, but it'd probably be a good idea if you didn't mention Watchers to anyone. Some Immortals have a tendency to kill them once they learn about the Watchers."

Nick shrugged his acceptance.

I leaned over to the coffee table where I'd put the sword case and opened it, exposing a katana, a long sword, and a military sabre.

Nick looked over at my newest guests and said, "So you're the couriers from Seacouver?"

Hoa nodded from her spot sharing the recliner with Richie. Sharing apparently involved using his lap as her seat. Not that he seemed to mind, of course.

Nick got up and experimentally hefted each sword, swinging it as much as the space allowed. Richie and I kept a wary eye on him. Friend or not, having someone swinging a sword around wasn't something either of us was comfortable with.

After replacing the sabre, Nick said to me, "Are these my only choices?"

I shook my head. "No, but based on your size and strength, those three represent most of your best choices."

He shook his head. "How am I supposed to choose?"

Richie took that one. "For the moment, it doesn't matter. Most every weapon has its own style. You have to start practicing with each before you determine which style you like best."

Nick turned to look at me for a moment before looking back down at the katana. "This one looks like yours. Does that mean you can teach me how to use it?"

I shook my head. "First off, that's a katana, and mine is a wakizashi. Same blade style, different lengths. Secondly, no, I'm not going to teach you swordplay. I'm too young myself. Remember, chronologically you're my senior."

He turned to Richie with a slight frown and raised eyebrow. Richie also shook his head. "No, I'm not going to be your teacher, either."

Nick sighed in frustration. "Then WHO will teach me?"

I grinned and looked over at Hoa. She shrugged indifferently. Nick's jaw dropped. "You're kidding."

Hoa and I laughed. I said, "Yes, I am, but you need to learn something. There's nothing saying she couldn't be Immortal and better with a sword than anybody else. Immortality sometimes will show up in the damndest places. Though Hoa looks harmless enough, she could probably give you a run for your money in unarmed combat. Before you became Immortal, anyway." Hoa blushed slightly at the compliment. "Anyway, as for your sword instructor, he should be here tomorrow. I would have preferred Duncan teach you," I stopped at his growl and nodded. "But that would be a bad idea for other reasons. I can't, Richie can't, Amanda could," I ignored his louder growl, "but probably shouldn't, and there's only one other person who makes any sense that I know. He'll be here tomorrow."

He gave me a dirty look. "You're not going to tell me, are you?"

I grinned, unrepentant. "Nope."

Sighing, he gave up and looked down at the swords. "Ryan, if your sword is the same style as this . . . katana is it?" He continued at my nod, "If it's the same style, do you use the same fighting style as someone with a katana?"

"Not really. My wakizashi is about a foot shorter. I also fight with a second blade, which is relatively uncommon."

Nick nodded and turned to Richie. Richie looked at him for a moment before asking, "Yes?"

Nick looked equal parts uncomfortable and confused. "Um, what style do you use?"

Richie appeared to think about it. I said, "Most Immortals won't answer that question. To answer it gives away information, and that's dangerous." I sighed. "As a whole, we're a paranoid, selfish bunch. Even those who are not active headhunters still tend to be loners. I'm answering your questions for two reasons. One, I know you. Two, I trust Amanda's opinion, and she trusts you." His jaw tightened, but he didn't say anything. I shook my head with another sigh. "Like it or not, Amanda really does have your best interests at heart, Nick. It'll just take time for you to realize that."

He started muttering in French. Again.

Leaving him to quietly steam, I turned to Hoa and Richie. "It's been months since I had a good sparring match. Either of you interested?"

As it turned out, Hoa did want a workout after the plane ride. Leading the way back out to my car, I took everyone to a nearby martial arts dojo that I had a membership at. Given that it was the middle of the day, it wasn't terribly surprising that we were the only ones in the exercise area.

As Hoa walked toward the women's locker room with her duffel over one shoulder, she said to us over her shoulder, "Just be a minute, boys."

Richie and I headed into the other locker room as Nick wandered the exercise area. I was rather surprised he'd come. Must have been out of boredom. As I changed into my T-shirt and shorts, I asked Richie, "How good is she?"

He grinned in expectation. "Better than when you left. I trained her as far as I could, and Mac's been training her further. She isn't in his league yet, but she can keep me on my toes until she starts to tire out."

Richie and I were well into our stretching exercises with Nick looking disinterestedly on when Hoa re-entered the room. I'd seen her in her workout tights before, but that certainly didn't mean I wasn't willing to see her again. Based on the way Nick's attention was riveted on her, he had much the same opinion. Totally ignoring the both of us, she started stretching.

I heard a snicker beside me and looked over just in time to see Richie wipe the grin off his face. "Down, boy," he said with a smile. "She's off limits."

Blushing slightly, I started a light kata to get myself limbered up. When that was completed, I went over to the cabinet where the practice weapons were kept. Calling out to Hoa, I asked, "Still use a two foot wakizashi, Hoa?"

Without moving from the uncomfortable looking stretch with her face almost touching the mat as her hands clutched her ankle, she replied, "No, I use a katana now."

I nodded and began rummaging through the weapons, pulling out a three foot curved "sword" and wooden replicas of my own weapons of choice.

I turned as she fluidly stood up. Walking over, I flipped the "katana" over so I caught it by the blade before handing it to her. Taking my two weapons

In hand, I led the way over to the exercise mat.

As we faced each other and assumed defensive stances, Nick called out, "Hey, I can't believe you're going to do this, Ryan! You'll hurt her." Richie put a hand to his mouth as Hoa turned a glare on Nick.

Fighting to keep a smile off my face, I turned to Nick and said, "Don't worry about her. She's had plenty of sword training."

His face registered clear disbelief. "You say so, man."

Hoa and I refaced each other. Since I didn't know how good she was, I stayed in my defensive crouch and forced her to make the first move.

It didn't take long before I was convinced that she HAD improved. A lot. I had to work like crazy just to stay even with her before she started to tire out. Immortal metabolisms and healing powers meant that it took us a LOT longer to become fatigued than it did for mortals. Eventually, she started slowing down. When that happened, it was only a matter of time. A bad angle and a tired hand gave me a chance to disarm her. "I yield," she said between pants, leaning forward with hands on knees.

I stepped back as well, also breathing heavily. Turning to Richie, I said, "You're right, she HAS improved."

He merely nodded.

Nick had watched the whole thing in silence. I turned to him and asked, "See enough of the katana style to know if you like it?"

He nodded. "I've seen Amanda fight with her sword. Now I've seen a katana. What's that third sword's style look like?"

I shrugged. "I'm not very good with a sabre, so I can't show you the style very well. If Hoa promises not to beat me up too bad, I can TRY to use one for a while and show you."

She glanced over at Richie with a raised eyebrow before nodding to me. She obviously knew Richie preferred the cutlass and would be a perfect example of the style that Nick was asking for. But Richie wasn't interested in showing off his skills to Nick.

Walking back over to the weapons closet with my swords in hand, I exchanged them for a heavier, longer version. Once back over to the practice mat, Hoa had a wicked grin in place as she raised her retrieved katana. It only took her twenty seconds to hit my arm hard enough to raise an instant bruise.

"What'd you do that for?" exclaimed Nick.

I backed off a step to answer his question. "She saw a hole in my defenses and used it."

"Yeah, but did she have to hurt you?"

I just gave him a look that spoke volumes as Hoa giggled and Richie snickered. "Against Immortals, the rules for Hoa are that anything goes short of the neck. Partly this is to make it easier for her, since she doesn't have to check her swings. Partly this teaches Richie and me to fight even while hurt. Besides, I've already healed." I swung the arm in full circles to demonstrate.

Nick frowned a little. "This'll take some getting used to."

I was in my den the next afternoon doing some of the work I'd brought home when I felt a Buzz approach. No, two Buzzes. Nick had gone to lunch with Lucy again and Richie and Hoa were out doing the tourist thing.

As I headed toward my sword, I paid attention to the auras. One was Nick. The other was roughly eight hundred years old, with a strange mix of head's worth of power. Lots of medium strength ones, and a few strong ones as well. That made me nervous.

I reached my sword just as Nick walked in with a little boy in tow. Nick looked excited as he said, "Ryan! I'd like you to meet Kenny. He's new. Kenny, I'd like you meet a friend, Ryan Chessman."

He smiled at me nervously. I was thinking rapidly. Kenny, apparent ten year old boy. Every Watcher had heard of him. And I'd heard a few more stories from Duncan and Richie.

Nick clearly had no idea of what he'd just let into my home. He was headed into the kitchen, nearly dragging Kenny along, talking all the way. I grabbed my Ka-Bar knife and carried it inconspicuously. I leaned on the door frame to the kitchen to keep an eye on my guests. Nick was still talking, "I just died recently, so I don't understand any of this myself. Ryan here refuses to teach me, but he's arranged for someone to come and train me. I mean, I knew about Immortals ever since Amanda told me," Nick had his back turned, so he didn't see Kenny's eyes widening, but I caught it. Nick was still jabbering away. "But I never guessed that I'd actually become one." Trying to look inconspicuous, Kenny got up and casually walked toward the door.

And nearly bumped into me. Eyes again widening momentarily, he quickly composed himself and said, "May I please go to the restroom, Mister Chessman?"

I shook my head. "No. Sit down."

Nick turned from the omelet he was making. "What's the matter with you, Ryan? Let the kid use the bathroom."

Staring at Kenny, I said, "He isn't a kid, Nick."

And just as fast as that, everything changed. Quick as lightening, Kenny pulled a switchblade from somewhere and struck at me with it. When I jumped back to avoid the blade, he bolted for the front door. I caught him before he made it and grabbed his arm. He came around with the blade leading, sinking it into my side, between the ribs. Before I became incapacitated, I rammed my knife as hard as I could into the middle of his chest.

Nick hit the kitchen door just in time to see Kenny die and me reach for the knife sticking out of my ribs.

"What the hell did you do that for?!"

I gritted my teeth and yanked the blade out. Gasping, I dropped the knife and laid my hand over the bleeding wound. Waiting for my healing capacity to bring the pain down to merely excruciating, I hissed out, "Like I said, he's not a kid. He's eight hundred or so."

He stared at me a moment before his eyes flickered to Kenny and back. "Huh?"

My breath was coming easier, and I got up. I checked on Kenny and was gratified to see the handle was protruding right over his heart. He wouldn't be waking up until after someone pulled the knife out. Good, I had time. Still holding my aching side, I headed to the storage closet. "Come on. Like I said, he's old. He looks ten, so he uses the 'innocent little me' routine to put Immortals off their guard before killing them. He made a play at Richie and Duncan a few years ago. Nearly got them, too. This 'kid' is a serious menace."

Once I could stretch without bleeding, I got the plastic drop cloth I'd used from painting the guest room, one of my folding chairs, and a roll of duct tape. Carrying the stuff back to the living room, I spread the plastic over the middle of the room and placed the chair right in the middle of it before dropping the roll of tape onto the floor next to the chair. Walking back out to Kenny, I noticed that his and my blood had soaked the door mat and was spreading across the tile just inside the door. However it hadn't spread onto the carpet yet. I pulled Kenny up into a fireman's carry and hefted him to the chair. He bled more over me, but the shirt was a total loss anyway. At this stage, I was more worried about my carpet than anything else. Propping him in the chair, I strung tape from his left shoulder to right hip and across the back of the chair before stopping at his shoulder again. Repeating on the other shoulder, I drew an X over his chest to hold him upright. Tearing off a piece, I placed it over his mouth. Something occurred to me, and I placed the roll of tape down. I quickly frisked him on the chance that he had more blades on him. Sure enough, there was another switchblade tucked into his right sleeve. I tossed that one onto the couch before picking up the tape again. Grabbing one elbow, I started another piece of tape there before dragging the other elbow over and taping them together. Keeping the piece going, I started spiraling down his arms, stopping only long enough to force his palms flat together before taping them as well.

Nick had watched all this in stunned silence. I was kneeling down, reaching for an ankle, before he asked, "What are you doing?"

"Immobilizing him," I answered. Ankles got taped together, then to one of the chair legs. After a moment of thought, I taped his knees together, too.

"Why?"

Still kneeling, I turned to Nick. "I could kill him right now, but I thought I'd give Richie the opportunity. Besides, once Richie gets back, he can tell you about Kenny as well. That way, you don't think I'm a monster." He gritted his teeth, but didn't say anything. I'd apparently come pretty close to the mark with that comment. I cared what he thought of me, but I wanted Kenny dead more than that. More to the point, Kenny NEEDED to be dead. As clichéd as it sounded, it really was for the good of all Immortals. Standing up and dropping the tape next to the chair, I said, "Nick, I need to shower and change. You have to swear to me that you won't touch him or do ANYTHING until I get out. I know you don't really believe me, and that's part of why I'm holding him until Richie returns. Just believe me when I say that he's dangerous."

Nick frowned, looking back and forth between Kenny and me.

I sighed. "Look, just don't touch him until I have a chance to convince you, okay? He'll be fine when I pull the knife out, you know that."

He slowly nodded before sitting down on the couch.

I took a quick shower and put on some new clothes. After a moment of reflection, I pulled out the gun holster that Richie had given me as a present last year. Threading a belt through it, I put it on. Pulling the gun out of my closet, I check the clip and slipped the Glock into its holster.

Over-reaction perhaps, but why take chances?

Going back out to the kitchen, I grabbed a trash bag and threw my bloody clothes and the floor mat into it. I was gratified to see Nick hadn't broken his promise. He was just staring at Kenny's temporarily dead body. Grabbing a few old towels, I filled a bucket with water and headed out to the front room. I was just finishing cleaning up the spilled blood on the tiles in front of the door when Richie walked into range.

Walking back to the living room, I dumped the now bloody towels into the trash bag. I said to Nick, "It's Richie."

He settled back down with a frown. "How do you know?"

I smiled. "Magic." Why bother confusing him with the truth?

A knock sounded on the door. I checked the peephole before letting Hoa and Richie in. They were both laughing at something they said as they entered. The laughter died as they saw me carrying a bucket full of bloody water.

Hoa raised an eyebrow. "Teaching him swordplay?"

"Ha, ha," came from the other room.

grinned tightly. "Not quite." I walked into the kitchen and dumped the water down the sink before joining them walking into the living room.

Richie had made it to the door when he stopped dead in his tracks. A smile that was equal parts happiness and maliciousness blossomed. "Ryan, you shouldn't have. And here I haven't gotten you a Christmas present yet."

Frowning, Hoa joined him and took in the same scene. She gasped in horror for a moment then frowned. "Kenny?"

Nick had been watching all this with a frown. "You two know him." It wasn't a question.

Richie grinned with pure feral delight. "Yeah."

Hoa nodded as well. "There are few Immortals that I think are truly evil. But Kenny is one that I honestly feel deserves a summary execution. He suckers Immortals in and kills them when they let their guard down. Who knows how many good Immortals have been killed by this kid."

I looked at Nick with an "I told you so" look but didn't say anything more about it. After thinking for a moment, I said, "How do we want to handle this?"

"Kill him," stated Richie flatly. Neither Hoa nor I blinked.

Nick was clearly shocked. "I can't believe you're all talking like this! I thought you were better than this."

The comment was clearly designed to sting. It didn't work too well. I said, "The easy answer is that there can be only one. And that's a good enough reason for most. But you're right. A few of us are different. We need more reason to murder than that. However, this Immortal," I waved at Kenny, "is another case altogether. He is EVIL, Nick. I don't plan on executing him, but setting up a fair fight is just fine with my conscience."

Nick twisted his lip in aggravation, but didn't say anything.

"Where?" asked Richie with a touch of eagerness.

"Bloodthirsty little animal, aren't you?" queried Nick.

Richie leveled a stare at him. "When it comes to this little prick, damn right. Listen to Ryan, Nick. Kenny **DESERVES** to die. We'll give him a fair chance to defend himself, which is more than he gives his opponents. In that, we're being more honorable than he is." He turned to me. "Where?" he asked again.

I shrugged. "Lots of options. Couple parks outside of town could be used after dark. Go far enough out of town and just pick a deserted country road. I'm sure there are spots in the industrial park that would work after dark as well."

"Okay, then," said Richie. He held up one of the bags he had brought in. "Got some lunch makings. May I?" he nodded to the kitchen.

"Sure," I said.

"I still can't believe you're all doing this," muttered Nick.

Hoa sighed and rolled her eyes. Turning to me, she asked, "Ryan, you mind if I use your computer for a few minutes?"

Since I had an idea what she was about to do, I agreed readily. As she left, I looked over at Nick. He was still frowning at Kenny. In exasperation I asked, "What, you want me to talk to him and find out the truth?"

He looked up and frowned at me in confusion. "Yes," he answered slowly.

"Just promise me you won't interrupt my talk with him, okay?"

Still frowning, he nodded.

I nodded back. No harm in waking Kenny up to talk to him. He wasn't going anywhere. Getting up, I walked over to the dead boy and yanked out my combat knife. Fishing through the pile of bloody towels, I got one that was relatively clean and sat down on the couch to wipe down the knife. Once I had cleaned my Ka-Bar sufficiently, I retrieved Kenny's bloody switchblade from where I'd left it by the door.

I was almost done cleaning it when Kenny gasped in pain. After coughing for a few moments, he shook his head and looked up. Seeing Nick looking worriedly at him and me calmly cleaning his switchblade, he tried to move his arm, only to find them taped together. He tried moving around and only succeeded in tilting the chair around a little.

Finished with the switchblade, I folded the blade away and placed it on the coffee table. Reaching behind myself on the couch, I got the other switchblade and placed it next to its mate. Kenny's eyes were riveted to the blades for a moment before looking up at me with fear in his eyes. He then turned his attention to Nick and rocked again.

I said, "Don't bother. You're taped in there pretty good. Even if you do manage to get somewhat free, I won't hesitate to kill you again before you make it to the door."

He stopped rocking, but still stared at Nick. Now he began making muffled sounds.

I almost smiled. Now to give him enough rope to hang himself. "Kenny?" His eyes swung back to me. "I'm tempted to kill you outright, but Nick here has convinced me to talk with you. If you promise to behave, we'll take the tape off, okay?"

He nodded. I glanced over at Nick, and he got up. Walking over to the boy, he pulled the tape off as gently as possible. Once the tape was off, he smiled at Nick. "Thanks." He turned to me. "Do I know you? Why did you kill me like that?"

I shook my head. "No, you don't know me. As far as why, well, you stuck a knife in me first." I gestured down at the switchblades in front of me.

He frowned a moment. "Well, I'm sorry about that. I just don't like people grabbing me like you did. The last time someone did, he hurt me." Tears started to form and he sniffled a little. "A lot."

I mentally applauded. This kid was good. But I knew that already. Time to start laying the trap. "Sorry about not trusting you, but my teacher told me that I shouldn't trust anyone. The more harmless they look, the more dangerous they can be."

He tried to look even more harmless. "Well, in my case, it's true. I'm only fourteen. My family died in a car wreck four years ago. It was months before I knew what I was."

I nodded. "Well, it surprised me that you had a reaction to the name 'Amanda' in the kitchen earlier." Nick frowned but still held his peace.

Kenny shrugged as much as the restraints allowed. "That was my mother's name."

Hoa walked into the room and handed me a couple sheets of paper. Taking a seat beside Nick, she looked steadily at Kenny.

For his part, Kenny looked dumbfounded at her calm expression. "Ma'am, could you please untie me? This is pretty uncomfortable."

Without looking up from the pages I was reading, I said, "Kenny, do you know what the Watchers are?" I glanced up to see his reaction. He frowned in confusion before shaking his head. Hoa raised an eyebrow at me. I nodded at her. "Go ahead. Won't hurt anything."

She thought about it a moment. Shrugging her acceptance, she tilted her wrist so Kenny could see her blue tattoo. "Watchers have existed for thousands of years. We're mortals who keep track of everything we can regarding Immortals and the Game."

He blinked in astonishment. "Wow." He sounded like he'd been told a neat secret. His aura was a chaotic mess. He was on the verge of panic, but it didn't show.

I returned to the pages Hoa had given me. "Let me get this straight, you say you died for the first time four years ago, right?"

He frowned a little, but nodded. Nick was just looking confused.

I held up one sheet. "But it says here that about SIX years ago you were in Seacouver. You tried to kill a Doctor Anne Lindsey, Duncan MacLeod, and Richie Ryan." I looked up at him with a frown. "How can that be?"

Hoa's face showed no reaction. Nick's jaw was hanging slightly open, but he was starting to look angry. Kenny frowned. "That can't be the truth. Whatever this lady gave you, it's a bunch of lies. I died four years ago. I've been running and hiding ever since."

Richie chose that moment to come walking back in the room with a plate of sandwiches. He saw Kenny alive and smiled. It wasn't a pleasant expression. "Look who's awake." Richie put the plate onto the table and collected a sandwich for himself and one for Hoa.

Kenny's jaw was collecting splinters. "Shit!" He glared at me. "You knew all along."

I nodded. "Yep. And you helped me prove it to Nick." Kenny started snarling in a language I couldn't begin to place. Based on his facial expressions, it wasn't polite.

I stood up and handed the pages to Nick. I got myself a sandwich as well as he started flipping through them, growing progressively angrier. He got to one point and blinked in astonishment. "Amanda was your teacher?"

Kenny stopped his ranting and turned to him. His eyes got a sliver of hope in them. "Yes. And I'm sure she'd be VERY angry if you were to allow anything to happen to me."

Richie tried to stifle the laugh, but it came out as a snort. "WAY wrong answer."

Nick glared at the both of them. "Shut up."

Richie smiled and turned to Kenny. "After you tried to kill Mac the second time, Amanda intervened and saved your life. But she also removed her protection of you. Or have you forgotten that little item?"

Kenny was growing pale.

I smiled a little. "Let's see. You tried to kill MacLeod twice, Doctor Lindsey, Richie here, and now you had your sights on me and Nick. In case you weren't aware of it, Amanda rather likes everyone on that list. I seriously doubt you could expect any help from her." I glanced at Nick's frown before adding, "Not that it would matter to Nick anyway."

Kenny now looked well and truly panicked. "Look, let me go and I swear none of you will ever see me again."

Richie shook his head. "Sorry."

Kenny dredged up his courage and pasted a sneer across his face. "What, so one of you is going to execute me?"

I shook my head. "Nope. Just have a fair fight. I'll even be nice, Kenny. What sword to you prefer?"

He rolled his eyes. "What's it matter?"

"So I can let you use one when Richie fights you tonight."

Richie grinned unpleasantly. Kenny looked frightened again. "Um, a short sword."

I nodded. "I'll have a few for you to choose from. Now, you have one last choice. Do you want to be alive and gagged, or dead until we go?"

"I don't suppose I could eat?"

I looked around the room. "Anyone willing to feed him?"

It turned out that Nick was. They spent the next hour talking, with me playing guardian. Anytime Kenny strayed too far from the truth, I just pointed to a few lines in Kenny's condensed Chronicles.

After catching him in the fourth lie, Nick walked away in disgust. Turning to Kenny, I asked, "Gagged or dead?"

All the fight had apparently left him. For the moment, anyway. "Huh?"

I explained. "Do you want to be gagged or killed until we get to the battlefield?"

He glared at me.

I shrugged. Picking up one of his switchblades, I flipped it open before walking around behind him.

"Gagged," he muttered.

I nodded and replaced the blade on the table. Tearing off a fresh piece of tape, I pasted it over his mouth. "Now, as long as you behave, I won't kill you. If you don't, I won't hesitate. Got it?"

He nodded sullenly.

I laid out the two short swords and my own wakizashi in a line on a park bench. I smiled grimly. Perhaps Kenny would even recognize the first short sword. After all, I'd gotten it off of one of his former students.

After laying out the swords and checking that my gun was ready, I pulled the switchblade out of Kenny's chest. I'd had to kill him after all when he kept trying to scoot the chair out of the room when nobody was looking.

Pulling out a cleaning rag, I wiped off the switchblade as we all waited for Kenny to revive. Hoa waited patiently beside Richie; Nick was nervously pacing; Richie kept stretching out his shoulders, despite the fact that he'd already gone through a full stretching routine.

Kenny revived within five minutes. After coughing a few times, he looked up at me with anger blazing. "That hurts, asshole."

Ignoring his comment, I pointed at the bench. "I have two short swords and a wakizashi for you to choose from. You get one. Hoa will put the others back into my car after you've chosen. Richie has agreed to give you ten minutes to stretch, relieve yourself, or whatever before beginning the fight. Running won't do you any good. You're probably the slowest runner here, and I have a gun. I give you my word of honor that if you fairly beat Richie, then nobody will touch you. At least until after the Quickening has finished." I gave an evil smile. "And then I'll Challenge you and cut your heart out. But since that won't happen . . ." I shrugged. Kenny sneered at me. "Any questions?"

He shook his head.

Opening one of his switchblades, I cut the duct tape from around his knees, elbows, ankles, and then hands before stepping back. Once out of reach of him, I folded the blade back up and stuffed it into a pocket before pulling my gun.

Kenny slowly pulled himself up from the ground and started trying to stretch. Being cramped up for a few hours had apparently stiffened him up considerably. He slowly walked over to the swords and experimentally hefted each. Finally deciding on the one that his former student had no more use for, he slowly limped away, stretching all the while. Once he'd backed off a few feet, I walked over and retrieved my own wakizashi as Hoa grabbed the remaining sword and walked off toward my car.

Kenny had seen me pick mine up and put it into my coat. "You were willing to let me use your weapon?"

I nodded. "If you wanted to use it, yes. I gave you as much choice as possible." I waited a beat. "You're welcome, by the way."

He looked at me for a moment before giving a slight nod. "Thank you."

Kenny turned back to his stretches, progressively moving into more and more extravagant movements. His aura was doing funny things, but I put it down to the tenseness of the situation.

Hoa had put the remaining sword into my car and was coming back to Richie's side, giving Kenny a wide berth. As she approached, his random

movements took him progressively toward her until they were ten feet apart. At the point, he dropped all pretense of stretching and jumped at her. By the time I could snap a shot off, Hoa was in the line of fire. As he went rushing by the startled Hoa, Kenny reached out with one fist and punched her in the stomach. Crossing around behind her doubled over form, he kicked out one knee from behind and she fell to her knees. Quickly taking her head in a one armed lock from behind, he brought the blade to her neck.

"Hold it!" he shouted over Hoa's coughing. Richie and I stopped dead in our tracks. Shit. Now what? For lack of anything better, I drew a bead on what I could see of him. I was a pretty poor shot, but if he did something stupid, I'd like SOME options.

"If you hurt her, you little shit, I'll," began Richie.

"Kill me?" interrupted Kenny. He gave a humorless laugh. "Wasn't that the idea anyway?" He turned to me. "Put down the gun."

I hesitated. If I did that, he'd be able to make it to the woods before I could get a shot off.

"Now," he growled. He pressed the blade closer to Hoa and she sucked in a breath.

Not seeing any other options, I slowly crouched down and laid the gun on the grass. "You'll never get out of here if you harm her. You have to know that."

He grinned. "That's why she's coming with me. We'll be borrowing your car, Chessman. Toss the keys over here."

"Don't do it," said Hoa.

"Shut up," Kenny snarled to her, kneeing her in the back.

Her small gasp of pain nearly brought Richie forward at a run, but he checked himself before he finished the first step.

"Now," Kenny said forcefully to me.

I slowly reached into my coat pocket and pulled out my key ring, thinking furiously all the time. There HAD to be a way to get out of this mess. Not seeing anything else I could do, I tossed the keys to land beside him.

Nobody caught them. As everyone was tracking the keys in flight, I heard a sudden CRACK from the side. Kenny's head snapped to the side, and he fell over. Hoa scrambled up and rushed to Richie as I snatched up my gun and aimed at Kenny again.

When I realized that he wasn't moving for a little while, I looked over to the source of the gunshot. Nick was calmly holstering his gun and walking forward.

When he leaned forward and picked up the fallen sword, I asked, "What're you doing?"

"Pest control," was the answer as he swung the sword.

"Shit!" Richie and I chorused. I took off running straight away from Nick. I could only assume that Richie was doing the same.

After making it a hundred feet or so, I stopped and turned around to see that Hoa was okay. She and Richie were about the same distance from Nick that I was in a different direction. Seeing that they were okay, I watched Nick.

I'd taken a few Quickenings myself and watched Richie take one, but they were all young compared to Kenny. It was quite the light show.

The next afternoon, Nick listened as Richie and I were catching up on our lives while Hoa was out shopping.

Richie was describing how he'd caught a petty thief in the dojo one night when another Buzz entered our range. Nick reached for a gun; Richie reached for a sword; I was paying attention to the aura. A little older than Mac, and slightly fewer heads. That did in no way diminish my respect for his probable skill. Slightly fewer heads than Duncan MacLeod was still pretty damn good.

A knock sounded on my door. Pulling my sword and walking over, I called out, "Connor? That you?"

"Yes."

Replacing my sword, I opened the door to reveal the lanky Immortal. Who had his hand in his coat. He recognized me, but was taking no chances, apparently. Standing aside, I waved him in. He entered to find Richie flopping back down on his seat and Nick warily resuming his as well.

As I closed the door behind him, I said, "Thanks for coming, Connor. I hope you can help us out."

He and Richie nodded to each other. I didn't realize they knew each other, but they apparently did. He then turned his piercing stare onto Nick. "So you must be Amanda's friend Nick." As always, Connor's bizarre accent totally defied description.

Nick bristled at the comment. "Was," he growled.

Connor merely raised one eyebrow and gave a small smile as he pulled his empty hand out of his coat and folded his hands in front of him.

"So you're going to teach me to use a sword to cut off people's heads," challenged Nick.

Connor's smile got a touch bigger. "That remains to be seen."

"So why're you here?"

"I owe Amanda one. Besides, Duncan asked me to come." Utterly calm.

"Duncan?" Nick growled, eyes narrowing. Richie's eyes were slowly brightening in anticipation.

I sighed. "Nick Wolfe, meet Connor MacLeod." I anticipated the next question by adding, "Kinsman to Duncan." I smiled at the elder MacLeod. "Same clan, different vintage."

"Great!" Nick exploded. "I can't get away from you guys!"

Time to shock him again. "Since you say you're not Amanda's friend, let alone anything more, what do you care if she jumps into bed with a MacLeod?"

He turned to me to shout something before stopping himself.

Connor was wincing. "I do wish you'd phrase that differently."

Richie nearly burst into laughter. I grinned. "Didn't you once say that he gets most of the good women?"

A soft smile formed on Connor's face. "Hardly once, but I take your meaning."

Richie choked out, "You two have met?"

I nodded. "Flying back to Seacouver from London after my training with Cassandra, Duncan and I had an overnight layover in New York City. Connor was good enough to host us for the evening."

"Which is to say that I showed them a good bar," added Connor.

"You most certainly did." Not to mention the stories the two MacLeods traded for hours.

Nick was still stuck on Connor's surname. "What if I don't want you for my teacher?"

Richie blinked in astonishment. I sighed in exasperation. "Connor here is one of the better swordsmen around who is taking students. You got four choices, Nick." I raised a finger as I ticked off each. "Ask Duncan to train you; ask Amanda to train you; hope you don't get yourself killed before finding another teacher; or ask Connor to train you."

"I can take care of myself," he said sullenly.

Connor turned to me. "You didn't tell Duncan that he'd be acting like a spoiled brat."

"I didn't think he would," I sighed.

Nick started muttering in French again. To my delight, Connor answered him. I couldn't follow any of it, but Richie was frowning in concentration as he listened.

After perhaps a minute where Nick got progressively louder and angrier, Connor suddenly jumped forward with a left cross that knocked Nick out of my recliner. Before Nick could recover, a katana blade was resting against his neck.

"Still think you can take care of yourself?" asked Connor mildly.

Nick glared at Connor, but nobody moved. Finally, Nick said, "Ryan, are you going to get this maniac off me?"

Leaning back on the couch, I said, "Connor?"

He didn't even look up. "Yes?"

"If you're going to kill him, please do it somewhere else. I don't want to have to explain this to the police. Besides, I can't afford to repair this place after a Quickenings." Connor nodded; Richie raised an eyebrow; Nick turned slightly to stare at me in shock. I looked mildly back at him. "What, you expect me to defend you after your recent behavior?" I leaned forward to add emphasis to what I was about to say. "You've been given an incredible gift, Wolfe. You just have to bend that stiff neck of yours enough to give yourself a chance to enjoy it."

A knock sounded at the door. Connor threw a questioning glance at me.

"Don't move," I said to Nick. He glared daggers at me as I stood up.

Checking the peephole, I saw Hoa with a armload of bags. Throwing a grin at Richie and a wink at Connor, I opened the door.

She came walking in talking, "Rich, you'll never believe the deal I found on jewelry for," she broke off as she took in the scene. Connor standing over Nick; Richie and I without any weapons in sight. "Okay, what'd I miss?"

As I recrossed to the couch, I said, "Connor MacLeod, meet Vu Tran Hoa, Richie's better half." She smiled at him uncertainly.

He said, "Ah, the lass is taken?" I nodded calmly, Richie with a frown. Connor sighed as he turned back to Hoa. "Oh, well. I'd offer to shake, but my hand is otherwise occupied."

She nodded with a frown. Slowly putting her armload of bags down next to Richie's chair, she walked over to Connor. "So you're the infamous Connor MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod. Duncan's talked about you."

He smiled. "Only the good parts are true."

Nick spoke up acidly, "I hate to break up such a touching scene, but when are you going to get that thing away from me?"

I answered, "Just as soon as you start acting like an adult."

Richie smothered another laugh behind his hand. Hoa, apparently deciding that there wasn't any real danger here, went over and took her usual seat on Richie's lap.

Nick spared a glare at Richie before visibly reining in his anger. Once he calmed himself down some, he looked up at Connor again. "May I get up now?"

Connor nodded before swinging the sword around in a semi-circle to let it rest "at ease" against the back of his arm. Stepping back, he allowed Nick some room. Nick cautiously stood as Connor watched for a moment. Nodding slightly, Connor turned to walk to the couch. The instant his back was turned, I felt Nick's aura flare dangerously. I opened my mouth to stop Nick, but he'd already started moving. Jumping at Connor's back, he was stopped cold in midair by the hilt of the katana slamming backward into his jaw. Nick crumbled to the floor. I closed my mouth, not bothering to voice any warning to the unconscious man on the floor.

Richie and I shared a raised eyebrow as Connor replaced his sword into his coat. Taking off the coat and laying it over a nearby chair, Connor took a seat next to me before asking calmly, "Any good pubs around?"

It was almost two years later when I received a letter in the mail.

Ryan,

First, I want to thank you. I don't know if it's for putting up with me, helping me find a teacher, being a friend, or just for being there, but thank you.

Second, you were right. This IS a gift. Once I had some sense beaten into me (literally), I realized just how valuable a gift it really is.

Last, hope to see you in June.

- Nick

Also in the envelope was an invitation to the wedding of Nick Wolfe and Amanda Montrose in the coming June in Paris.

Well. This will certainly be interesting. And I have so much to tell my friends . . .

Chessman Chronicles My Nightlife in Toronto

Today was definitely NOT a good day, I noted to myself while hiding behind a rail car.

It had all started during lunch. I was quietly eating at my favorite deli when a Buzz came into range. It took only a second to realize that it was trouble. Nobody I knew, less than fifty years old, and several heads of various strengths to his credit I noted as he walked in the door. Based on the number and strength of the heads he'd taken, I guessed him to be an up and coming Hunter. Looking to be mid twenties with a beaten up leather jacket, torn jeans, and a crew cut, his pallor spoke of too much time away from the sunlight.

He caught me looking at him and walked over jauntily. Taking a seat across from me without a word, he seemed to radiate arrogance. I just stared at him, looking bored. Taking one of my French fries off my plate and popping it into his mouth, he studied me. Presently, he asked, "How's the pickings around here?" A slight New York accent was added to my mental description.

I shrugged. "I wouldn't know. I don't hunt."

He grinned unpleasantly. "Too bad. Looks like you'll be my first victim here in town."

I raised one eyebrow and let one side of my mouth curve up in a sarcastic grin. "Arrogant little shit, aren't you?"

He grinned evilly, but his aura flickered a little. "Perhaps," he allowed. "However, one way or another, we'll find out which of us will be the One."

I rolled my eyes. Where did they come up with these lines? In a lower voice, I continued, "Look, jackass, walk away. I don't want to kill you."

His grin widened. "Afraid not. Rail yards at ten tonight?"

I shrugged.

He stole another fry from my plate before standing up. On his way out the door, he resettled his jacket across his shoulders, and I noticed a suspicious bulge in the middle of his lower back. I grimaced in annoyance. Great.

By ten 'til ten that night, I was settled in for what was to come. I'd parked my car nearby, so he'd know the general area to find me in. Fortunately, I'd found a spot that rail cars encircled fairly well, and I was at the entrance to that area. He had to come by me to get into the open space. Hopping up onto the coupling between one car full of steel coils and another full of building supplies, I waited. Presently, I heard a car pull up near mine and a car door open then close. Here he comes.

His Buzz hit me less than a minute later. I dislike cheating myself, but he had a gun. And he's a Hunter. Pulling my own pistol, I crouched down on top of the coupling and cloaked my aura. When he felt my Buzz fade, he came to the only conclusion he could: I'd backed away from him. So he came further forward, confident that I was retreating. At least that was what I was hoping he'd think.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," he sang.

I nearly lost the concentration needed for cloaking due to laughter. Sure enough, I watched him walk by in a crouch, gun in one hand and short sword in the other. The instant I had a clear shot at him, I uncloaked myself and aimed. He froze when he felt my Buzz come back, but that only made my shot easier. A single crack from my Glock cured the problem for the time being.

Jumping down from my perch, I brushed myself off as I walked over to my opponent. I tucked my gun back into my waistband and took his gun from the limp hand.

Walking away from him, I looked it over. A nice SigSauer. Might have to keep this one. I reached a spot about fifty feet away from him and sat down on the ground with my back against the wheel of one of the train cars. And waited.

It took him nearly ten minutes to come around. His first move was to reach to the middle of his back, presumably for his gun.

I stood up, and he froze at the sound of the gravel shifting under me. Warily looking up, he saw me with his gun in my hand. "I wasn't going to use that," he said, slowly getting up.

I didn't bother to respond to the obvious lie. Reaching over with my other hand, I released the clip out of his weapon. Crouching down, I placed his gun on the ground and pulled mine out. Pulling the clip out of that one as well, I placed my gun next to his and backed away a few feet before tossing the clips under the rail car. I reached into my coat and pulled out my sword and knife. "My name is Ryan Chessman, and I believe you Challenged me."

He'd watched the whole thing in silence, never taking his eyes off what my hands were doing. After I introduced myself, he gave me a mocking salute with his blade. "Dale Stanley. There can be only One."

I sincerely hoped not, but it didn't matter much. It wasn't going to be him in any case.

I was cleaning the swords after retrieving both guns when I heard another car pull up. Grabbing everything, I sprinted fifty yards away from the body before hiding behind a rail car full of lumber.

And so here I was, still a little dizzy from a Quickenings, holding two swords, a combat knife, two guns, and hiding within fifty yards of a decapitated body. Oh, did I mention that the car that had just pulled up was next to where I'd parked mine?

Like I said, it wasn't turning out to be a good day.

Listening intently, I heard two sets of footsteps approach Stanley's body and stop. "Shit," I heard a female voice say.

"There," said a male.

Oh, oh.

I looked down at my hands and found my Glock in one and combat knife in the other. I certainly couldn't be taken to jail, but neither could I allow these two to recognize me.

I heard the footsteps approach at a run before stopping. "Toronto PD!" shouted the male voice. "Come out with your hands up!"

Damn! Now what? My conscience wouldn't allow me to kill two cops. But I couldn't be taken. Alive at any rate. I'd heard Duncan tell a few stories about sneaking out of morgues, and it looked like that would be my only way out of this. Much as I hated to do this, I had to get myself killed.

Stepping around my hiding place, I snapped a shot in the general direction of the first figure I spotted. Since I really didn't want to hurt anybody, I aimed high. My goal was to get killed, not to kill someone.

The other voice (I'd aimed at the man) shouted, "Nick!" before I felt a sledgehammer blast into my right shoulder. Inadvertently dropping my gun, I gritted my teeth and prepared to charge forward with my knife. I HAD to get them to kill me.

"Ryan, stop!"

I froze. How in the hell did he know me?

As if in echo, the woman asked, "Nick, how the hell do you know him?"

Ignoring her for the moment, the man holstered his gun and walked toward me with both hands low and palm forward in a comforting gesture. Ignoring his partner's frantic calls, he said to me, "Ryan Chessman, it's Nick Knight. We met in Las Vegas a year ago, remember?"

Pressing my fist to my shoulder to at least slow the blood flow until my healing could close it, I studied him. Yep, it was the same man I'd met at the Excalibur jousting tournament when I went through Vegas just after Andrea had been killed. I nodded to him, and he relaxed at once. In Vegas he'd been with an Immortal named Natalie Lambert. So he'd probably not be a serious problem for me.

His partner, on the other hand . . . I looked over at her and frowned.

He called over his shoulder, "It's okay, Tracy. He's Immortal."

I snapped a glare at him. "You really shouldn't tell anyone that."

He shrugged. "She's a Watcher."

Walking over to us, she holstered her gun before whispering to him, "You shouldn't tell Immortals that."

I laughed before my shoulder made me suck in a breath. Gritting my teeth, I said to her, "Don't worry about it. Look up my Chronicles. I was a Watcher when I was killed the first time."

Nick tore his gaze away from my shoulder. "Sorry, I should make introductions. Ryan Chessman, meet my partner Detective Tracy Vetter." He turned to her and spoke rapidly, "Tracy, stay with him a few minutes. I'll go take care of the body." He turned and walked rapidly away.

I frowned at his retreating back. You'd think a cop wouldn't be squeamish about a little blood.

Vetter was standing there, looking at me. "Sorry about the shoulder. What were you doing? TRYING to get yourself killed?"

I grinned. "Yep. How else was I going to get out of this mess without either killing you two or becoming a fugitive with the cops close on my trail?"

She nearly giggled. Tilting her head back toward where Knight was lifting the body with amazing ease, she asked, "Who was that?"

"He said his name was Dale Stanley. I expect he was a young Hunter, new to town." I gave a one shoulder shrug. "I was the first target he stumbled across." Since my shoulder had at least stopped bleeding, I removed my blood covered hand and started walking toward my car. She fell in step

beside me. Stiffly putting my knife back into its sheath in my coat and pulling out the bloody handkerchief to clean my hand, I asked Tracy, "Before I make a fool out of myself, is he still with Natalie?"

She nodded. "Yep. In fact, we were on our way to meet her at the Raven when we got a call of a shot fired at the rail yard." I almost missed a step before she assured me. "Don't worry. Nick and I were the only ones called in to investigate."

I nodded, relieved. By the time we passed where Stanley had lost about a foot of vertical, Knight had already removed the body. Something occurred to me about what Knight had called her. "He called you detective?"

She nodded casually. "Nick and I are homicide detectives."

I nearly laughed out loud. "Quite the cover for a Watcher. Very convenient."

She smiled and nodded again. "In more ways than one," she said enigmatically. I shot her a questioning look, but she shook her head.

By this time, we had gotten back to the cars. Nick tossed me a set of keys. "To the victor go the spoils," he nodded toward a gray Taurus.

I didn't need it. More to the point, I didn't know how to fence it myself. Therefore, I couldn't keep it myself. I handed the keys to Tracy. "Contribution to the Watchers."

She raised an eyebrow. "Thanks."

I nodded. Turning back to Knight, I said, "Thanks for the help, but what makes you think I'm not a problem?" Okay, so I was suspicious of do-gooders.

He nodded to Tracy. "She gets updates about all the Immortals in town and shares the pictures with me. Just in case we stumble across one in the course of our job you understand," he added with a smile. I added my own smile while he continued, "I recognized your picture when you moved here days after we met in Las Vegas. Since then, she's kept me up to date regarding your actions. You're not a threat to anyone, Mister Chessman."

Well, that explanation certainly covered everything. Including how he recognized me immediately and why he didn't introduce me to her. I smiled sheepishly. "Thanks." I opened up my trunk and bundled Stanley's sword into one of the old blankets I kept back there and tossed his gun next to it.

Tracy held up the keys to the Taurus. "I'll be along, Nick. Tell Vachon I shouldn't be more than a few minutes. I have to drop this off at an appropriate place and hitch a ride."

"Don't you want me to give you a ride?" Nick asked in surprise.

She shook her head. "The less you know about the Watcher activities here in town, the better for everyone involved."

He didn't seem happy, but didn't argue it, either. Getting her partner's grudging acceptance, Tracy waved to me and took off in the car.

I turned to Knight. "Um, need help with Stanley's body?" He shook his head. I was tempted to ask, but refrained. "Okay, then. Thanks for everything."

He opened his car door before stopping and turning to me. "Why don't you come with me to the Raven? We're off tonight, and I'm sure Natalie would be happy to see you again."

I raised an eyebrow. "With a blood soaked shoulder but no wound? Don't you think I'd stick out in a crowd?"

The briefest of smiles flickered across his face. "Point taken, but the owner is an old friend of mine. He has a few guest rooms in back. I'll ask if you can borrow one of them to clean up in."

Hell, why not? A few drinks after a Quickening always calmed me down.

I followed my apparent rescuer back into town until he stopped outside a club. As he got out of his car, he indicated to me to wait one minute. He stepped into the bar and came back out within two minutes with somebody in tow. As they approached my car, Natalie's Buzz walked into range.

Getting out, I approached them with hands out in plain sight. Once Natalie recognized me, I rotated my arm to stretch out the shoulder.

"Hello again. You okay?" she asked.

I nodded. "Already healed. I'm trying to keep the shirt and coat from stiffening up with the dried blood."

She flicked a glance at Nick before nodding.

He said, "Nat'll show you the back way in and the guest rooms. I'll be in the bar. Come on out when you're done."

I nodded at his comment before opening my trunk and pulling out the duffel bag containing my emergency change of clothing. That retrieved, I followed Natalie down an alley beside the bar. I said, "It's been a while. How've you been doing?"

She glanced at me as she opened a door. "Pretty well. How about yourself?"

Rough night, but otherwise I can't complain."

She smiled as she pointed me down a hall. "Second door on the left."

After a quick shower and change, I followed the sounds out to the bar area. Stepping out of a side door, I made my way over to the bar for a Killian's before looking for Nat and Nick. They were sharing a booth with Tracy and a dark haired man in a leather jacket she was using as a backrest. Not that he seemed to be minding, of course.

As I approached, Nick stood up and pulled another chair over. "Ryan Chessman, meet Javier Vachon."

I offered him my hand which he took without hesitation, though he didn't get up. Once I touched his hand, I felt something odd. He FELT old. Four hundred years or so. But no Buzz. I remembered that Nick had felt the same way back in Las Vegas. Vastly older than they look, but no Immortal signature. What WAS it about these two?

Something must have been showing on my face because Javier asked, "Something wrong?"

I shook my head. "Sorry, long night."

He nodded. "Tracy told me."

I frowned at her. She shrugged, unapologetic. "Hey, I can't keep secrets from Vachon. Don't worry, though. He's good at keeping all KINDS of secrets." Both men leveled sideways glances at her; Natalie covered a case of the giggles with a hand.

There was definitely something more going on than met the eye.

As I took my seat, Tracy said to me, "Nat and I are arguing the merits of the various Star Trek series."

I smiled. "Ah! A deeply philosophical discussion."

Knight and Vachon groaned. Nat, Tracy, and I laughed. After fifteen minutes of being totally lost, the guys pleaded for us to change the subject. Talk turned to other topics, including Immortality.

"What I don't get is why you do it," commented Vachon before taking a sip of his drink.

I shrugged. Trying to keep my voice down to keep the discussion away from nearby ears, I said, "For myself, it's a case of simple self-defense. I don't go looking for trouble, but I don't back down from a fight if the opponent makes an issue of it."

He nodded. "So why would THEY do it?"

I sighed. "A lot of people find the Quickening itself enticing. Then there's the thrill of the hunt. And as the saying goes, there can be only One. And some people try and become that One."

"And what does the One get?" asked Javier.

Nat shrugged. "The Prize."

Everyone looked at us expectantly.

Vachon broke the silence. "Okay, I'll bite. A new Ferrari and a trip to Tahiti?"

With a slight grin tugging at the corner of my mouth, I shook my head. "Nobody's quite sure. Some feel it's ultimate power to rule this planet. Others feel it's simple mortality."

Vachon stared at me for a moment. "You go around decapitating people to get a Prize, but you don't even know what it is?"

I shook my head. "I* don't, no. Others do."

He thought about it for a few moments. "How depressing."

I raised an eyebrow at his observation and nodded agreement. Shaking off the slight depression threatening to overcome the conversation, I said to Natalie, "Nick and Tracy are detectives. What do you do?"

"Police pathologist, part of the coroner's staff."

I shuddered. "No offense, but that's gruesome. I couldn't handle high school biology, let alone pathology."

She grinned. "It really IS fascinating, but I understand your attitude. It's common enough."

I turned to Vachon. "And you?"

He waved a hand negligently. "Oh, a little of this and a little of that." He grinned mischievously.

I was about to comment when somebody stopped at our table. Looking up, I found myself staring into the prettiest pair of deep green eyes in existence. Okay, so I'd not taken a recent poll, but I wouldn't bet against these two. Tearing my attention away from them, I noted the rest of her features. She was a slim, middle-of-the-back redhead standing at about five foot seven. Since I'd already studied her eyes, I'd seen the slight slant at the corners. Initially, I guessed her age to be close to mine. My physical age, anyway.

She smiled down at me. Holding out one hand, she asked softly, "May I have this dance?"

My analytical mind was still functioning, and noted the lack of major accents. It took a moment before my conscious mind caught up. Okay, so it had to stop panting first, but that's the same thing. Smiling up at her, I said, "Sure." I stood and took off my coat.

Hanging the coat over the back of my chair, I heard Natalie say, "Jen, he's a friend of mine. Play nice." Vachon nearly barked out a laugh, but muffled it in time.

I turned to look at her in annoyance before turning a glare on Vachon. Before I could say anything, "Jen" took my hand and started lightly pulling me toward the dance floor. "Come on," she whispered to me.

Threading our way through the tables to the small dance area, I said, "My name is Ryan Chessman. What shall I call you, lovely creature?"

She laughed quietly. "Jennifer Frost. But most people call me Jen." Nodding agreement, I enfolded her slim waist as her hands interlaced behind my neck.

We'd been slowly dancing for perhaps a full minute before she broke our silence. "So, Ryan Chessman, what do you do for a living?"

I smiled at her. "It's just Ryan, and nothing much exciting, I'm afraid. Programming web pages and like that. You?"

She shook her head. "Just graduated. Haven't found anything yet."

I nodded. "Give it time."

She raised an eyebrow in amusement. "Says the voice of vast experience?"

I chuckled at her teasing. "Okay, so I'm a little older than I look. Not to change the subject, but why'd you ask me to dance? Not that I'm complaining in the least, but I would imagine that such a stunning looking woman has difficulty sorting through all the offers that SHE receives, let alone have the time to go looking herself."

She frowned slightly and stopped dancing. "Are you accusing me of something?"

I blinked in confusion before her meaning sunk in. I shook my head. "No, I'm not." I hung my head sheepishly. "I'm sorry, but I'm not used to anyone finding little ol' me to be good looking."

We resumed dancing after she nodded. "Don't believe it if you must, Mister Self-Effacing, but you really are. However, if it makes you feel better, then I'm after you for your mind."

I raised an eyebrow. "You're after me now?" I appeared to give it some thought, staring off into space over her shoulder. "Hmm, perhaps I should let you catch me," I muttered to myself.

She giggled before resting her head on my shoulder. She immediately pulled her head back and looked at me with a frown. "You hurt?"

I frowned in confusion. "No, why?"

"I smell blood."

I forced myself not to react. "Well, I was earlier, but I thought I'd cleaned it all off." How do I explain that the bullet wound had long since healed as well?

Nodding at the end of that minor mystery, she replaced her head on my shoulder. The rest of the dance passed in silence.

Once the music shifted to a faster number, we headed back to the booth I'd started at. While I was trying to pull a chair over, she smiled at me and shook her head. Turning to Nick, she said, "Interesting friend you have here. Take care of him, Uncle Nick." She leaned over to me and gave me a quick peck on the cheek. While she was still bent over me, she whispered, "Maybe we'll see each other again sometime." So saying, she headed out the door and disappeared.

I must have had a priceless look on my face when I turned back to the group because Tracy's eyes were shining in amusement and Vachon was grinning. Quickly composing my features, I said to Nick, "Uncle Nick?"

He winced. "Long story."

Late the next afternoon, just before I left my office for the day, the phone rang.

"Chessman."

"Hi, Ryan. It's Natalie."

"Hey. What's up?" We'd all spent a pleasant evening together last night, but I wasn't really expecting anything to come of it. Correction: I was HOPING for something to come of it, but not from Natalie.

"I was wondering if you wanted to spar. It's been a while since I had an Immortal opponent, and I thought it'd give us a chance to talk."

I wrinkled my brow in confusion. "Sure to the sparring, and sure to the talking. But why? I was under the impression that you'd be just as happy if we kept our distance." Last night she had struck me as being vaguely uncomfortable when near other Immortals.

I could hear her soft sigh. "I would. But both Tracy and Nick pointed out that I needed more Immortal sparring opponents. Sparring against Nick is all well and good, but only having one opponent makes me potentially blind to other people's styles."

I barely heard the second half of what she said. "'Sparring against Nick?'" I asked.

There was a short pause. "Um, yeah. He did some fencing in college."

Uh, oh. College fencing teams used foils, fencing sabres, or epees, which were much lighter than swords. Not to mention the vastly different styles. I couldn't believe a foil opponent would do her any good at all. In fact, it would probably only hurt. Thinking through that one, I began to wonder who her teacher was to not give her enough training to see that obvious problem. "Okay, sure. You have anywhere in mind?"

She rattled off an address that I vaguely recognized as being in a slightly disused industrial park. Jotting it down, I said, "You trust me enough to not do this on Holy Ground?"

I could hear the wry amusement in her voice, "Is there any reason I shouldn't?"

I chuckled. "No, but you didn't strike me as the overly trusting type. No offense intended."

"None taken. And you're right; I don't trust very many people. But Nick'll be there."

I grinned. "Well, now, if you two are going to outnumber ME, I'm not sure I can trust you."

She laughed at my teasing. "See you at eight?"

As I wound my way through the industrial section, I noticed that the whole area was quiet without feeling deserted. After the day shift, it apparently closed down for the night, I mused as my headlights reflected off of Nick's Cadillac.

Getting out, I walked into the doorway and stopped in pleasant surprise. The building was once a light manufacturing plant of some kind, but the machinery had been removed, leaving a large open space. Off to one side was a couch and a mini-fridge. Not exactly all the comforts of home, but definitely better than I was expecting. I whistled as I made my way over to the stretching Natalie.

"I sure hope you're not whistling at my wife," came Nick's amused comment from where he was leaning comfortably back on the couch.

I chuckled. "No, sir, I was not. This is a nice place." I waved my hand vaguely around.

Nat nodded. "It is, isn't it? Unfortunately, it isn't mine. It's my teacher's, but he lets me use it whenever I want."

I nodded. Unless she was independently wealthy BEFORE she died, she wasn't nearly old enough to afford a place like this.

Walking over toward the couch, I called over my shoulder, "Spar with real swords, or would you be more comfortable using the wooden practice ones?"

Nick raised an eyebrow and his mouth quirked into a smile. Nat called out, "Real would be my first preference, unless YOU would rather start at the wooden ones?"

I shrugged. "Naw, the real deal would be fine by me." If she had only been sparring against someone with a fencing style for a while, I'd be surprised if she could keep up with me, but I had to give her the choice. I took off my coat and laid it over the side of the couch and placed the carrying case down beside it. Taking my weapons in hand, I walked back toward Natalie. Stopping a few feet short, I placed my blades on the ground before going into a few stretching routines before a couple light katas.

Once I was loosened up, I took my swords back up and said, "What rules do you want to go with?"

She quirked an eyebrow and a small grin formed. "You choose."

Why did these two seem so amused with the whole situation? "Okay, how about anything goes short of the neck or cutting off anything. Drawing blood is acceptable, but nothing permanent."

Her eyes flickered over my shoulder to Nick for a moment before returning to me and giving a calm nod.

Giving her a quick salute with my wakizashi, I stepped back and reviewed the situation. We were roughly the same height and build. Her sword was longer and heavier with a basket hilt, but I had two weapons. Depending on her skill level, this could be fun.

It wasn't. She had me reeling backwards and frantically defending less than a minute into the fight. A minute and a half later I was on my back with a

sword tip touching the middle of my chest. Both of my weapons were way too far out to be useful in defense if she wanted to press the point.

I panted out, "I yield."

Nodding, she pulled back her sword and offered me a hand up. I dropped the wakizashi to get to my feet.

Nick came walking forward with two towels and a water bottle. "Good fight, Ryan. Who was your teacher?"

I glared at him. "Good? It took her all of two minutes to beat my ass." I turned to her. "Where the hell did you learn to fight that well? I thought Duncan was good, but even after his training for a few years, I couldn't hope to keep up with you."

She smiled. "Well, Aaron is pretty good too."

I grunted and wiped my face. "Say, you said that you'd only sparred against Nick here for a while, right?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him turn to her quickly. She nodded to me.

"And that he'd taken some fencing in college?" I continued.

Her eyes narrowed a little, but she nodded again.

I turned to him. He was frowning at her before turning to me. I said, "Fencing uses foils or similar weapons. She couldn't stay nearly this good against swordsmen just by sparring with someone using that style." I looked back and forth between them. "What gives?"

He stared at me a moment. Slowly, he said, "It wasn't me she spars against. It's someone else."

I raised an eyebrow and looked back at her before turning my attention to him again. "She just said it was you."

Still using the same slow enunciation, he said, "You misheard her. I'm not the one she spars against."

Frowning, I turned to her. "Okay, one of you is telling me one thing, and the other is saying something else. Make up your minds."

Neither said anything. They caught each other's eye, and he shook his head slightly. "It didn't work," he said to her. Turning to me with a sigh, he said, "Okay, I also know how to use a long sword."

I rolled my eyes. "Now at least you two are consistent." I frowned at him. "Where'd you learn to use a long sword? Unless you're Immortal, which you aren't, how would a forty something homicide detective know how to use a long sword?"

He grimaced. "I'd really rather not say."

Something that I couldn't really explain about him suddenly clicked. I stared at him for a moment. "How old are you?"

He frowned in confusion. "What?"

I enunciated slowly, "How. Old. Are. You?"

With a little confusion and a lot of 'humor the crazy guy' tone lacing her voice, Nat asked, "How old does he look? You'll be . . ." She frowned at him a moment before continuing, "forty-five in April?"

I shook my head. "Remember in Las Vegas when I told you that I could guess Immortal ages?"

He suddenly looked wary. They both nodded.

I continued, "Well, when we shook hands, you felt a LOT older than forty-five. You have no Immortal Buzz, so I don't think you're Immortal. But you feel something like eight hundred, as odd as that sounds. And you know how to use a long sword. I'll try again." I clasped my left wrist in my right hand behind my back and looked at him. "How old are you?"

He sighed. "Eight hundred and thirteen in April." Nat frowned, but didn't interrupt.

For my own part, I was simply staring. I worked my jaw for a moment before anything came out. "What?" Okay, not the most intelligent thing I'd ever said, but it was the best I could do under the circumstances.

He calmly crossed back over to the couch with Natalie. I numbly followed, almost unconsciously. He calmly threw over his shoulder, "You were right. I'm a little over eight hundred." She propped her sword up against the side of the couch as he settled down against the arm. Once he was settled, she stretched out beside him, using him as back support.

At this point, a good sneeze from somebody two blocks away would probably have knocked me over. Trying desperately to wrap my mind around this idea, I said, "Uh . . ."

Natalie giggled. "You notice how they all react like this?"

He smiled briefly before saying, "Come on now, Ryan. You are yourself Immortal. I'm sure you're aware that there are Immortals that are thousands of years old. Why is it so hard to imagine someone else being that old?"

Finally regaining composure, I got my mouth to start responding to commands again. "Okay. Let's start at the beginning. You look human, but you can't be. You're not Immortal, so what ARE you?"

One eyebrow rose in amusement. "I'm not an alien if that's where this is going."

I shrugged. "That would be one valid answer."

He rolled his eyes. "Despite TV and the movies, I've never seen anything even vaguely hinting at another intelligence in the universe. And I've seen some pretty strange stuff."

I nodded. "Okay, so you aren't an alien. Fine. That doesn't explain what you ARE."

He sighed in exasperation. "I was born Nicholas de Brabant in the year of Our Lord 1188. I was brought across in Paris in 1228."

I blinked. "Brought across? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Turned into a vampire," was the calm answer.

Oh, of course. Silly me. I should have thought of that. Good joke, guys. I paused, waiting for the punch line. The only problem was that neither of them was smiling. I slowly shook my head. "I'm sorry, I can't believe that. You're claiming to be a blood-sucking undead being from mythology who died nearly 800 years ago?"

"All except the part about mythology, yeah," he answered with a patient sigh.

"Okay, prove it," I challenged.

"How?" he asked. I suddenly noticed exactly how pointed his incisors were. And were his eyes really glowing?

Shaking off the hallucinations, I said with a grin, "Turn into a bat."

"It's always the same thing," muttered Natalie from her position in Nick's arms.

Nick swatted her arm playfully. "Now be nice. Remember how hard it was for you to come to terms with vampires and Immortals yourself." She nodded grudgingly as he turned back to me. "Hollywood has gotten several parts of the mythos wrong. Turning into bats, mist, or wolves is one. No reflections and coffins as well. Other than that, most of the rest is correct."

I frowned in thought, trying to remember what else I'd heard. Physically powerful, superior senses, hypnotic powers, oddly seductive, sunlight would destroy them given time, wooden stakes would stop them but not destroy them, religious icons would repel them, rumor said garlic would too, and of course the blood-sucking thing. And one was calmly sitting on a couch talking to me?

I abruptly sat down on the floor, nearly skewering my leg on the knife I still held clenched in a now bloodless hand. "This is unreal," I said to myself.

Natalie snuggled in a little more. "Nope, he's quite real."

I looked at him. He looked normal enough. "Sunlight and wooden stakes are bad, blood is tasty, garlic stinks, the whole nine yards is RIGHT?"

He nodded.

I rubbed my forehead with my free hand. "Wake me when the nightmare is over," I muttered.

He frowned at me. "Look, I didn't want to tell you, but you were obviously picking up bits and pieces. And you're a resistor. Telling you the truth seemed like the best solution. I hope to keep you out of more trouble with the Community this way."

"Community," I echoed, mind suddenly running at warp nine. I looked at him. "You and Javier and who else?"

He blinked. "How'd you know about Vachon?"

I shrugged. "He feels four hundred."

"Oh, yeah. Well, more than just us. It'd be better for you to not know who else is a vampire."

"And a resistor? You said I was one."

"Someone who I cannot hypnotize. Most Immortals and various mortals are resistors."

He discusses it so calmly, I noted irrelevantly. Shaking off the random thoughts, I said, "Okay, you're a vampire. No offense, but you're far from what I imagined."

He nodded. "We've learned to fit in." He gave a grin. "I don't even own a cape." Natalie's snicker interrupted him for a moment. "We behave as normal members of society so we don't attract attention. Yes, we do drink blood to survive. However, killing innocent mortals isn't how we do it anymore. There are better solutions now. Expired donor blood, animal meat packing plants, autopsy waste, bodies like your Dale Stanley last night that need to be disposed of, and so on." He sighed. "Don't let me fool you. We don't use these alternate sources of blood because of concern for mortals. We do it because it causes less exposure for us. Most vampires don't care about the welfare of mortals. In that, I'm actually something of a maverick." He gave Nat a light squeeze, and she smiled.

This idea will take some time to come to grips with. "Okay, now what?"

"That depends on you."

I blinked. "Me?" What the hell did I have to do with this?

He nodded. "You have three choices. Never tell anybody and stay in touch with us or never tell anybody and avoid us."

I waited. When he didn't continue, I said, "And the third choice?"

"I kill you," he stated in a flat tone. And his eyes were most definitely glowing this time.

I swallowed hard on a suddenly dry throat. "Uh, no offense, but this is quite a bit to take in at once."

They both nodded. Nat said, "That's not surprising. This IS a lot to dump on you." She pulled herself out of Nick's embrace and levered herself upright again. Taking her sword back in hand, she said, "For the time being, though, I believe we were here to spar?"

I looked up at her with a small smile. "And get my mind off of the second most shocking revelation of my life?"

She smiled and offered me a hand up. "Exactly."

The night was spent restlessly, to say the least.

Vampires? Who would believe in something like that in this day and age? I snorted in amusement. Who would believe that grad student and researcher Adam Pierson was actually five thousand years old and had to be decapitated before he would die?

In a way, it all made sense, though. Such stories had been floating around for who knew how long. Where there's smoke, there's fire, after all.

Well, what to do about it? Of his three choices, I only had two real options. I had no doubt of his ability to kill me if he felt the necessity.

To keep in contact, or not? Until I knew they were vampires, I thought Nick Knight and Javier Vachon were relatively normal people. Which means that they ARE normal people, with one or two quirks.

After a little thought, I figured (hoped) I was safe enough around them. Unless one knew how to kill me, they really couldn't do any harm. Besides, Tracy being a normal mortal and Nat as an Immortal were both obviously comfortable in the company of two vampires.

So it all came down to whether I wanted to. Much to my surprise, I concluded that I did want to stay in contact with them.

"Toronto PD. How may I direct your call?"

"Doctor Lambert, please."

"One moment." After listening to five seconds of the music, I wondered if everyone in the world used the same "hold" background.

"Corpse pickup hotline. You tag 'em, and we bag 'em."

I shuddered. "Doctor Lambert, you've spent entirely too much time around dead people. Do you always answer the phone that way?"

She chuckled. "Just the internal line from the PD. What can I do for you, Ryan?"

"I wondered if we could talk."

"Sure. About what?"

I shook my head. "Too long to go into over the phone. How about we meet for supper in a few?" It was getting late, and I was getting hungry.

"Sorry, Ryan. I just got into work. I work the night shift, you know."

"Why," I cut myself off. Of course she would structure her work schedule around Nick's. Think it through, dummy. "Okay, when will work for you?"

She paused a moment before answering. "I assume it's about what Nick and I discussed with you the other night?"

"Yeah, it is."

"Okay, how about in the morning? Call it nine?"

"Sure. Where?"

"Meet me here. We'll find a quiet park bench somewhere."

"Oh, this feels good," she said, face upturned to the sun. The next morning, we'd gone to the city park on the theory that it'd be deserted at that time of the day. We were right.

I chuckled as we walked along the footpath. "I understand why you wouldn't get out in the day much, but have you really given up sunlight completely?"

She took a deep breath before shaking her head. "No, not really. It's just that so few of my friends are out and about during the day that I kind of miss it sometimes."

I grinned. "That explains it."

She turned to me with a raised eyebrow. "What?"

"Why you and Nick would go to Las Vegas on vacation. Where else would a vampire go on vacation than the city that is world renown for its night life?"

She smiled and inclined her head in affirmation.

We continued in silence for a few minutes before I spoke. "I've given some thought to Nick's offer the other night. I'd like to ask a few questions before answering, if I might." She nodded silent agreement. "Okay, where do I start?" I muttered to myself. "How do I treat them?"

She shrugged. "Treat them as normal people. Or perhaps normal people of a specific group. For instance, you wouldn't tell blonde jokes in a room full of blondes, right?"

I shook my head. "Probably not."

She nodded. "There you go. They're mostly normal, just one or two topics aren't fit for conversation."

"Okay, what are those topics?"

"Suntans, garlic pills, Dracula movies, I'm sure you can imagine the rest. It isn't all that tough so long as you think before you talk."

I rolled my eyes. "I try, but it isn't always easy."

She nodded in agreement. "True, but the more time you spend with them, the more you realize that they're just a special group, much like Immortals are."

She had a point there. How would I react to a joke about the guillotine? Much as Nick would to "Good morning, sunshine" comments, no doubt. "How many of them know about us?"

"Some."

"Some?"

She nodded. "Some."

I sighed. "That isn't an answer."

She grinned. "But giving you more of an answer will tell you who more vampires are. Don't worry about them giving away our secret, though. They're in as much danger of persecution and witch hunts as we are. More, considering how vampires have been portrayed in history."

Another good point. Time to switch tacks a little. "What rules do they operate under?"

"Much the same as ours. Blend in. Don't bring attention to yourself. They don't age either, so they have to move around some if they have mortals around who may notice. However, most don't have many mortal friends. But vampires don't tend toward hermitism as Immortals do. They tend to gather. As much for protection as anything, I suppose. There's very little large scale internal fighting, so having large groups together isn't an issue with them."

Uh, oh. "So how many vampires were there at the Raven?"

She shrugged. "I don't know."

I frowned at her. She relented, "Okay, yes, the Raven is a vampire club."

My jaw nearly fell open. But it had looked so NORMAL. I recalled that Vachon's drink looked a little thick, but other than that, nothing seemed different than what I was expecting. I said as much.

She smiled. "See? If you aren't looking for it, they're perfectly normal people."

I smiled back. She had another point. Okay, switch tracks again. "Nick said that most vampires don't care about the welfare of mortals."

"Most don't. Nick and Vachon go very much against the grain on that one, but there are more converts on that topic all the time."

I frowned. "Are we safe in there?"

She nodded. "You and I have little to worry about, of course. Tracy and I are known, and under the protection of Vachon and Nick. Since you were openly seen with us, you're under their implied protection as well."

"Not to sound ungrateful, but is that enough?"

"Yep. Nick's sire LaCroix runs the Raven. And he's one of the oldest vampires around. Nobody would mess with that authority."

"Sire?"

"The one who brought him across. It's something like a child / parent relationship or student / teacher for us, though not exactly."

"Anything else about them that I should know about?"

"They're incredibly strong and have superior senses. They can sense each other though not in the same way we do. Smelling blood will sometimes send them into a frenzy, especially if they're hungry. Religious symbols will repel them, or burn them if they're actually touching it. They fly and can move blindingly fast. Their regenerative powers are even faster than ours."

Mental note: don't get a vampire pissed at me.

"With those kinds of powers, what happens when one goes out of control? It's bound to happen, isn't it?"

She nodded. "Yes, it happens. To answer your question: they police themselves. There's a group within the Community called the Enforcers. They're basically vampire cops."

I tilted my head. "Like Nick?"

"Cops of the vampires," she corrected herself.

"Okay, are they stronger or better trained, or what?"

"Not especially. They just act as a team when necessary. As for stronger, physical powers are a function of age. The oldest are the strongest."

One of her comments from the other night came back. "Jennifer called Nick 'Uncle'?"

"Before becoming vampires, they're perfectly normal people. Spouses, kids, whatever. Having normal living relatives isn't all that uncommon for a young vampire."

"But Nick isn't young."

She mumbled something.

"What's that?"

It was hardly any louder this time, but I caught it. "I said, 'Jen is.'"

"Is what?"

She sighed. "Young."

"A young vampire," I corrected.

She raised an eyebrow at me. "Yes. You're taking that revelation well."

I shrugged. "She smelled blood on my shoulder even after my shower." Nat nodded. I continued, "Unless Nick is Jen's dozen times great uncle, they're not blood relation."

She shook her head. Taking a deep breath, she said, "Here goes. My teacher is Aaron. His wife is Theresa, a vampire. Theresa sired Michelle. Michelle sired Jennifer. So in effect, I'm Jennifer's aunt, and Nick's her uncle due to our marriage."

I mentally sorted that one through for a while before chuckling slightly. "Those of us who never had family, or lost it, rebuild it where we can."

She nodded brightly. "None of those are parent / child relationships, of course, but we're all relatively close." She grinned at my groan. "No pun intended."

"Of course not," I muttered in mock disgust. I softened it with a smile before frowning. "Wait a minute. If she knows Nick's her uncle, then she knows about us?"

"Afraid so. Michelle knew through Terry, and she told Jennifer."

"Great," I muttered.

"Relax," was the soothing answer. "Remember, they're in more danger from exposure than we are. Besides, they can keep secrets better than

anyone I know."

It was two more days before I screwed up enough courage to return to the Raven. Once I passed the threshold, I was struck once again by how normal the place seemed.

Shaking off the random thoughts, I scanned the crowd for any familiar faces. Okay, so one in particular, but four other possibilities. I spotted Vachon and Tracy sharing a table toward the back. I made my way over to the bar for a drink before heading that way. "May I?" I asked the couple, waving at the empty seats.

"Please," said Tracy.

"Welcome back," said Vachon. "Looking for anyone in particular?"

I gave him an amused smile. "Two, actually. The other one is our friendly neighborhood Watcher here," I inclined my head to Tracy as I took a seat.

She tilted her head warily. "Yes?"

"How much, if anything, do they know about vampires?"

Both of them stared at me in abject shock. Vachon slowly frowned. "Whats?"

I grinned at him. "You and yours."

He rolled his eyes and sighed in exasperation. "What are you talking about?" All in all, it was a good performance.

I pointed to his drink. "I'll bet that's not the red wine it looks like." He started to frown again. I raised one hand. "Don't worry. I started to piece things together and asked Nick his age." I grinned. "I'm a resistor, apparently. He felt that telling me the truth would be better for all involved."

Vachon groaned again. "Great. Just great. Hell, Knight, why don't you place an ad in the paper?"

I continued nonchalantly, "And then he threatened my life if I told anyone."

Vachon seemed to calm down some. "Well, that makes me feel a little better."

"I bet," said Tracy sarcastically. Turning to me, she said, "To answer the question: nothing. Those Watchers assigned to Immortals with vampire spouses know, but nothing's ever been recorded." A small smile formed around her eyes. "Why? You have anybody in particular in mind?"

I let a small answering smile form. "Perhaps. Mostly, I was worried about what MY Watcher would think if I ended up in contact with Nick for a prolonged time."

Tracy nodded thoughtfully. "True. Well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Meanwhile," she focused her gaze over my shoulder, "speak of the devil, and here he comes."

I twisted around in my seat just in time to see Nick walk in the door and survey the room. Spotting us, he made his way over and took the remaining seat at the table.

"I can't believe you told him," stated Vachon without preamble.

Nick raised one eyebrow and shifted his focus to Tracy and me before returning to Vachon. "It seemed the thing to do at the time. Besides, we already know his secret."

"Fair's fair," said Tracy.

I looked at her. "But I don't know any secret about you. That isn't fair."

"I have no secrets," she said loftily.

"I know all your ticklish spots," remarked Vachon offhandedly. Tracy suddenly looked less sure of herself. "And the contents of your bottom two dresser drawers," he continued.

I nearly choked on my laughter when she hissed, "Don't you dare."

Both Nick's eyebrows were raised in amusement. "Do tell," he bade Vachon.

Tracy glared around at the three of us. Turning the full force of that look on Vachon, she repeated, "Don't. You. Dare."

"Spoilsport," he muttered.

"Yeah, spoilsport," echoed Nick childishly with a gleam in his eye.

"Men!" Tracy exclaimed.

"Can't live with us," started Vachon.

"Can't live without us," I finished.

She looked at the three of us as we were laughing. "You're all hopeless," she stated with a theatrical sigh.

"I disagree," said a voice to my side. I turned to see Jennifer approach behind Nick. Laying her hands upon his shoulders, she said, "Some have a few redeeming features. Hi, Uncle Nick." She leaned over and gave him a peck on the cheek. She turned and smiled at me as well.

Standing, I said, "Would you care to join us?" She tilted her head in acceptance.

As I was dragging a nearby chair over, I heard Vachon mutter, "Oh, brother."

Tracy poked him in the ribs. "Sure, Jen. You're welcome to join us anytime."

Jen smiled at Tracy as she took the seat I held for her.

As I retook my seat, I said to her, "I'd offer to get you a drink, but I don't think that'd be a good idea."

"Why's that?"

"I doubt the bartender would give it to me."

She frowned at me in confusion. "He knows," said Nick quietly.

Her eyes widened noticeably. She opened and closed her mouth a few times before anything came out. Finally giving up with a frustrated sigh, she said, "Well, I guess you know my secret."

I nodded. "As you know mine."

She looked at me in frank appraisal. "You're full of surprises tonight."

I grinned. "Ah, but the night is still young."

Vachon groaned. "You've watched entirely too many movies."

"What can I say? Unlike some here, I grew up in the age of TV."

"So you ARE still young?" asked Jennifer.

I nodded. "Only four years older than I look." She brightened considerably at that news. "You can't be much older than that yourself." I didn't feel any age from her like I did Vachon and Nick.

She shook her head. "One year now. A rogue vampire was running and tried to use me as a hostage one night as I was on my way home from class. He broke my neck when he was cornered, but one of the vampires chasing him brought me across just in time."

I raised an eyebrow slightly. Turning to Nick, I said, "Nat didn't tell me Michelle was an Enforcer."

He shrugged. "Does it matter?"

Jen was looking at me in surprise again. "You're amazingly well informed for a mortal."

I grinned. "I'm not mortal."

She smiled. "So I heard."

"If you'll excuse us," interrupted Vachon. So saying, he stood up and pulled Tracy to the dance floor.

I looked after him a moment before asking Nick, "He always like this?"

He shrugged and then looked up as Natalie walked in the door. Turning to Jen, he asked, "I'm going to get Nat and myself something to drink. You want one?"

"Sure, thanks."

Nick was to the bar before I asked, "He didn't ask what you wanted?"

She looked at me with an amused smile. "How much choice do I really have?"

I opened my mouth to say something before my brain caught up. Duh! I shook my head sheepishly before saying, "Sorry, I'm kinda new at this."

"That's okay. So am I. Relatively, anyway. Some things still catch me by surprise."

"You know, even knowing about Immortals, it never occurred to me that something like vampires could exist."

She shrugged and raised one eyebrow in mild amusement. "Surprise."

Nat and Nick arrived at the table from two different directions. Nick placed a goblet with thick "wine" in front of Jen before taking his seat. "Glad to see you're still with us," said Nat as she took a seat next to Nick.

"Are you going somewhere?" Jen asked me.

I blushed as Nat answered, "No, it was just that he wasn't so sure about coming back in here when he found out about the majority of the clients."

Jennifer nodded with a slightly sad expression.

Nat continued, "What made you change your mind, Ryan?"

My blush deepened. I flicked a glance toward Jen but shook my head.

Nick's eyes were lost high on his forehead. I didn't dare look at Jen to see her reaction. That is, until I heard, "I'm flattered." At that point, my gaze shifted over to see her smiling at me.

I smiled back tentatively. I'd never been good at expressing emotions. My last girlfriend had to literally pin me to the wall and kiss me to get me to admit that I was attracted to her. Though this wasn't exactly the way I'd hoped that Jen would find out, it did solve a lot of problems.

I was saved any further response as Vachon and Tracy returned. "Are we all done baring our hearts here?" asked Vachon sarcastically.

Jen hid a smile behind taking a sip of her drink. Tracy saw this and looked to me with a raised eyebrow. She smiled and nodded at my continued blush. Completely oblivious, Vachon effortlessly picked up a chair and brought it over before sitting down.

"You're a real ass," commented Nat.

He shrugged. "Part of my charm."

"Is that what you call it?" I muttered low enough to not be overheard. Well, not overheard by human ears anyway. Jen hid a smile behind her hand, Nick's lip twitched upward in amusement, and Vachon turned a mild glare on me. Seeing their reaction, I sighed. "Damn bionic hearing." Nick's smile was matched by Nat and Jen's laugh came to full force.

"Just remember that," suggested Nat. "Most anything we say in here is potentially overheard." My face drained of all color as I rapidly reviewed all the conversations I'd had in here. Nat hastened to reassure me, "Like I said, most everyone in here keeps secrets well, though. Don't worry too much about it."

"And if they didn't, they'd have to answer to me," chimed in a new voice. Looking over, I saw a dark, pretty, slim lady standing between Jen and Nick.

Nat looked up and said, "Hi, Michelle. I'd like you to meet Ryan Chessman. A newcomer to our little clique."

I stood and offered her my hand. "So you're Nat's 'sister' Michelle. Pleasure to meet you." I peripherally caught her age at fourteen hundred as she shook my hand and smiled.

"Sister?" she asked. She shook her head immediately. "Oh, Aaron. Right. So you know that I have a vested interest in keeping Immortals a secret." Turning to Jennifer, she said, "You're right. He IS good looking." She smiled at everyone at the table and said, "Just stopped by to say 'hi'. Everyone have a good evening," before walking away.

I retook my seat with a bemused smile. Looking at Jen's mortified expression as she tracked Michelle, I said, "I'm flattered." Her eyes shifted over to me before falling into an embarrassed stare at her lap.

Tracy and Nat broke into laughter. Vachon looked vaguely sick.

Standing again, I offered a hand to Jen. "May I have this dance?"

Her eyes snapped back up to me in surprise. Seeing my relaxed smile, she apparently realized I wasn't upset. Nodding her agreement, she stood up and let me lead her to the dance floor.

Once we were comfortably swaying to the music, I muttered into her ear, "As embarrassing as the last ten minutes were for BOTH of us, it told us something we wanted to know, but weren't about to ask." I sighed. "I'm interested in seeing more of you, but frankly I don't know if it's safe. For either of us."

I could feel her shrug. "I'm safe enough. After all, Nick, Vachon, and Grandma Terry all openly associate with mortals. It isn't like the Community doesn't know about them. With Michelle's position, I wouldn't be bothered. As for your safety?" She shrugged again. "I don't know." She looked at me with a little gleam in her eye (that was also glowing faintly). "In stressful or emotional situations, there's no telling WHAT I may do."

I looked at her in surprise before laughing nervously. "And here I was worried that I was being too forward." I sobered before continuing, "You do have a point, though."

We finished the dance and made our way back to the table. I noticed that Vachon and Tracy had left sometime during the dance. As we were arriving, Jen picked up her and Nick's empty goblets. Announcing that it was her turn to buy, she turned and headed to the bar.

Nick looked after her for a moment before looking at Nat's empty glass and asking, "Want another?" She nodded and he picked up her glass. "Ryan?"

I shook my head as I sat down. "I'm fine." Nick nodded and headed off with Nat's glass in Jen's wake. I turned to Nat. "Jen mentioned her 'Grandma Terry'. You folks are pretty close knit, huh?"

She shrugged. "Jennifer seems to make a bigger deal out of it than most, but yes, we are pretty close." She chuckled a moment in remembrance. "Jen gets her zest for life from Terry. That's one spirited woman."

I smiled at her unintentional pun. A spirited vampire. For some reason, the phrase just sounded funny.

We watched Jen and Nick at the bar silently for a few moments before Natalie continued, "Incidentally, you may be interested to know that Immortality protects us from the effects of vampirism." She waited a beat before looking me in the eye and smiling slightly, "And blood loss."

My mind gradually picked up on her reference, and I dropped my jaw open in shock. I vaguely noticed Nick and Jen return, Nat take Nick's hand and lead him to the dance floor, and Jen flopping down into her seat.

I looked over at Jen as she laughed nervously. "You'll never guess what Nick just told me." Her expression was equal parts embarrassment and amusement.

My earlier astonishment melted into a smile. "Probably something very much like what Nat just told me." I turned toward Nick's retreating back and said in a normal tone. "Damn bionic hearing." Without slowing or turning, he threw a wave over one shoulder. I laughed before turning back to Jennifer. "Do you sense a conspiracy?"

A small smile started to form. "They DO seem to be ganging up on us, don't they?"

I smiled fondly. "And I thought Lucy was an incurable matchmaker," I said, referring to Amanda's friend's continuing efforts to get me to go on a date with her niece. I looked over at where Nat and Nick were dancing. "But she doesn't have anything on those two over there."

Nick looked over at us and raised an eyebrow. Turning to Nat and whispering something, she then turned to us with a nearly comic "Who, me?" look on her face.

I groaned and rolled my eyes as Jen giggled. I continued, "Just as Michelle no doubt is." I looked quickly over toward the bar where I'd spotted her to see her suddenly shift in place to turn her back more squarely toward us.

Jen smiled, a little embarrassed. "This place has too many ears," she announced to no one in particular. "Let's go for a walk." Nodding agreement, I retrieved my coat off the back of the chair and shrugged it on. I helped her on with hers before I offered her my arm.

On the way out the door, I said to nobody, "Thank you all for the concern, but kindly leave us be. We ARE adults." I was rewarded ten seconds later by distantly hearing Nat's laughter. Jen and I shared a grin as we exited.

Randomly picking a direction to walk, we headed out. We'd gone about two blocks in silence before I asked quietly, "So what's it like?"

"Being a vampire?" she finished. She continued at my nod. "Not much different. It's not like this has altered my personality or anything. I still enjoy Harrison Ford movies and Danielle Steele novels. I HAVE lost some pleasures like ice cold lemonade on sunny days, but gained some others. Flying is the most incredible experience imaginable." She sighed. "It has its upside and its downside." Shaking her head, she asked, "How about you?"

I thought about it for a few moments. "Everyone imagines Immortality to be this wonderful gift, and in some ways it is. But it's also lonely. Knowing any mortal friends I make I have to leave within a few years. Even with Immortal friends, it's hard, knowing that any day the Game may take one of them or me in a Challenge. Mostly knowing that all this," I waved my hand in a vague all-encompassing gesture, "will be gone long before I am makes everything feel kinda pointless."

She squeezed my arm. "You're getting maudlin. Stop it." She paused before adding, "You're entirely too young to be thinking like that."

I laughed despite myself. "Okay, you win. I'll be in a better mood. Let's see, the upside of being Immortal?" I paused in thought. "I get to play with knives."

I could see her make a face out of the corner of my eye. "Michelle never explained everything about Immortals. For now, let's keep it that way, shall we?"

Nodding agreement, I said, "Okay. Just don't be surprised if I suddenly pull a sword out of my coat."

She looked at me in disbelief. "Tell me you're kidding."

I shrugged. "If an Immortal Challenges me, I have to fight, run, or hide on Holy Ground." I pulled my arm from hers and draped it over her shoulder. "I rarely run, and hiding on Holy Ground in present company won't work very well."

Her arm curled around my waist. "Thank you, but Holy Ground doesn't bother me. Holy SYMBOLS make me uncomfortable, but nothing more than that unless I'm touching it."

"That's weird," I said. "Why would a symbol made of stone or wood made in a specific design bother you?"

Dunno, but that's how it is."

We walked in silence for another block before a yawn escaped me. She stopped in her tracks. "Why didn't you tell me you were tired?"

I shrugged sheepishly. "I was enjoying our time together. But it IS the end of the day for me, and I am tired." She nodded and we steered back to the Raven's parking lot where I'd left my car. Once there, I asked, "Can I give you a ride?"

She stepped right up in front of me and laced her hands behind my neck. Giving me a lazy smile, she asked, "How about to your place?"

I stammered nervously, "I'm not so sure that'd be a good idea."

She stepped back and sighed. "You're still not comfortable with me." It wasn't a question.

I frowned in frustration at myself. Sometimes I felt like I should tattoo "Prize Dolt" across my forehead. "It isn't so much what you are as it is the fact that this is going so fast. I'm just uncomfortable with inviting women into my home after knowing them for only two days."

She smiled coyly. "Playing hard to get?"

I shook my head in frustration. "No, I'm not. The speed of everything is just making me uncomfortable."

She folded her arms across her chest. "I'm interested in getting to know you. You said yourself that the Game, whatever that is, could take you any day. If that means we don't have much time, so be it." She peered at me a moment. "What are you afraid of?"

Good question. Here I was, refusing to take a gorgeous woman home with me. What's wrong with this picture?

My frustration must have been parading across my face. She saved me from aggravating the situation further by saying, "Look, if it makes you feel better, we'll just say goodnight right here on two conditions."

"What're those?" I was also angry with myself for the sense of relief I felt.

"We meet tomorrow night when you're more awake." I smiled. That one I could easily live with. After seeing my nod of agreement, she continued, "And you give me a goodnight kiss."

Laughing at her teasing tone, I held my arms open for her. After enfolding her in a hug for perhaps fifteen seconds, I pulled one hand up and brushed a strand of hair off her cheek. Cupping the side of her face in one hand, I tenderly kissed her for a few seconds.

After pulling apart again, she smiled impishly, "Is that a sword in your coat, or are you just happy to see me?"

I laughed. "Both," I admitted. "Hope you don't mind, but going unarmed is unhealthy for me."

She nodded calmly. "Fair enough."

Pulling her back into a hug, I murmured, "Good night."

"Hmmm," she hummed. "This feels good. Keep this up and I may not let you go."

Smiling, I released her and stepped back. She pouted. Chuckling at her words and expression, I said, "You ARE a tenacious thing, aren't you?"

An almost predatory grin surfaced. "Only when I see something I want."

One eyebrow rose in amusement. "Should I be concerned?" She smiled an enigmatic smile that women seem to be so good at. Sighing dramatically, I said, "Yes, I definitely SHOULD be concerned."

She laughed. "Tomorrow night at eight, right here?"

I ducked back in for a quick kiss. "Looking forward to it."

And indeed I was, I admitted to myself. It was twenty something hours later and I was on my way back to the Raven. Sometime during the day I realized that I enjoyed spending time with her. And so I was determined to spend what time I could.

That evening we went for a walk in the city park and talked until well after midnight. The next evening we went to an outdoor concert. We always met at the Raven, because it was relatively neutral ground and central for both of us.

As I was on my way to the Raven to meet Jen for the forth night in a row, I reflected on her subtle hints that she was willing to take the relationship to the next level. It wasn't so much that I was unwilling as it was that I didn't want things to go so fast as to become impossible to manage. Considering how well everything had gone up to that point, I wondered why I was still hesitating. "Why fight it?" I asked myself.

After parking, I walked toward the front doors of the Raven but never made it that far. "You're late," announced a voice behind me.

Stopping in my tracks, I turned to Jen. She was wearing tight jeans and a baggy maroon sweater tonight. Reining in my wandering attention, I looked back to her face with a raised eyebrow. Checking my watch, I saw that she was correct. Bowing extravagantly I said, "A thousand apologies, milady. I beg for forgiveness."

She smiled at my antics. She suddenly frowned in thought. "Well, I'll have to think of some suitable punishment for later." I grinned, wondering what kind of "punishment" she had in mind. Walking up to me, she threw her arms around me in a strong hug that lasted until I could hardly breathe. Releasing me, she said "What would you like to do tonight? We can go in there," she chuckled a thumb at the Raven, "or we could walk."

I shook my head. "Entirely too many prying ears in there. One other choice is to rent a few movies and go back to one of our places."

Both of her eyebrows were riding high. "Mister Bashful is letting his hair down? What brought this on?"

I shrugged a little uncomfortably. "I'm attracted to you, and you are apparently attracted to me. Why should I be fighting this?"

Her grin was pure delight. "There's nothing 'apparent' about that second one. And you shouldn't be fighting what's happening between us. Sure, let's get a few movies, but we'd better go to your place. My roommates have erratic enough schedules that they may be a problem. Let me just run in and grab a drink to go, and we'll be on our way."

As she was heading inside, I reflected that she was definitely in a good mood. Now to just get over the butterflies in my stomach.

"I certainly hope you won't break that child's heart," observed a voice behind me.

I whirled around and came face to face with a severe looking man who apparently took delight in looking the part of a modern vampire. He had a long, pale face and was dressed entirely in black.

"Don't scare me like that," I said as my heart slowed down to something approaching normal. "Who're you, and why do you care?"

"My name is LaCroix," he didn't offer me a hand, "and why I care is immaterial."

I raised an eyebrow. "Nick's sire LaCroix?"

He tilted his head and a ghost of a smile formed. "You know of me then. Yes, Nicholas is my childe." I could hear the slight spelling difference, and with it the world of difference.

I nodded, acknowledging the information. "As for Jennifer, she is an adult, isn't she? If she and I want to pursue a relationship, what business is it of yours?"

"I make it my business to keep an eye on all the children in town."

I folded my arms in an insolent gesture. "Gee, Mister LaCroix, can I take your daughter out tonight?"

His face settled into a slight frown. "Don't be flippant with me, young man. And if you think your Immortality will help you against me, you're sadly mistaken." Goosebumps formed all over me as I realized just how dangerous this individual was. He smiled (not a comforting sight), apparently sensing my mood. "I am merely telling you that to go out with her under false pretenses will bring about consequences that you will not enjoy."

I swallowed on a dry throat. Nodding respectfully, I said, "I understand, sir."

He nodded once and disappeared in a blur of movement. I leaned back against my car and took a shuddering breath. That guy could spook anyone.

"He has that effect on people," Nick observed, walking up.

I looked at him out of the corner of my eye. "What effect is that?"

"Intimidating."

I grunted agreement, but left it at that. Jen came walking back up to us with a brown paper bag under one arm. I opened the car door for her, and she grinned at Nick. "Don't wait up, Uncle Nick." She winked at him as she climbed into my car.

Nick shook his head and smiled at us. As I was passing him on my way to the driver's side, he whispered, "Take care of her."

Reaching the driver's door, I opened it and nodded to Nick over the top of the car. I intended to.

The night was a roaring success, I observed to myself five hours later, fuzzily watching the credits scroll by. Jen had picked me up a six-pack of Killian's in addition to her purchase, so I was obligated to pay for the movie rentals. I'd wanted a sci-fi, but she'd convinced me that "Pretty Woman" and "Enemy of the State" were much better choices. Besides, she argued, my life was close enough to science fiction that more wouldn't help much. Then she picked up a romance and a movie that increased my paranoia. I wasn't even going to try to figure that one out.

I was leaning back comfortably on my couch while she was stretched out and using my leg as a pillow. I ran a hand along her arm, causing her to nearly purr. "Movie's over," I observed.

"I noticed." She didn't even sound tired.

I stifled a yawn against the back of my hand. "No offense, but I'd better get to bed if I want to function tomorrow."

Nodding, she stood and walked over to the VCR. Setting the tape into the rewinder, she began shutting everything else down. "Shall we, then?" she asked over her shoulder.

I blinked at her, suddenly very much awake again. "You are persistent, aren't you?"

I could see the smile in her reflection on the dark TV screen. "You promised to stop fighting this, remember?" I had to admit that I had, but try explaining that to my nerves. She finished her chores by the TV and came back over. Standing over me, she frowned before coming to a decision. "Take off your shirt and lay down."

I raised an eyebrow in amusement. "Why?"

"So I can give you a backrub."

Definitely not the worst suggestion I'd heard today. I obligingly stripped off the shirt and rolled over to be lying face down on the couch. She swung a leg over my back so she was kneeling above me. She started rubbing my shoulders and said, "I'm stronger than last time I tried this, so say so if I use too much strength, okay?"

I barely managed an incoherent mumble and nod of agreement. It'd been entirely too long since someone had given me a backrub, and it felt wonderful. Though her hands were a little cooler than I expected, it didn't matter much. She continued silently for a couple minutes before I commented, "This feels wonderful. Where'd you learn to do this?"

Her hands didn't even slow. "Didn't I mention my degree was in nursing, specializing in physical therapy?"

My lucky day. I smiled and lazily looked at her three quarters empty bottle. I could vaguely hear her talking, almost to herself, but it seemed to take too much effort to ask her to repeat any of it. Besides, she apparently wasn't expecting a reply, since she continued methodically rubbing my back and talking softly. I was nearly nodding off when she got up and offered me a hand. "Come to bed," she said softly.

Of course.

A Buzz woke me the next day. I nearly bolted out of bed toward my closet and the spare gun in it before I identified the signature as Amanda's. Muttering darkly under my breath, I stumbled over to my robe and pulled it on. Heading to the door, I picked my way around various discarded clothing. "What're you doing?" mumbled a voice from the bed.

"I have a visitor. Go on back to sleep."

I didn't get a reply, so I closed the bedroom door behind me. I reached the front door just as a polite knock sounded. I opened the door to find a visibly distraught Amanda who walked past me and flopped herself down on a dining room chair. Accustomed to her dramatic entrances, I merely closed the front door and followed. "Amanda, what're you doing here on a Saturday . . ." I peered at the clock.

She finished, "Late morning?" I took one of the other chairs at the table and stifled a yawn. She looked me up and down, frowning distastefully at my robe. "It's about Nick, but a more important question is: What happened to you?"

I frowned at her but ignored the question. "What about Nick?"

"Yeah, what about Nick?" asked Jen, emerging from the bedroom wearing one of my t-shirts. And nothing else I could see. She came up behind me and slipped her hands under the robe to cross her wrists on my chest.

Amanda looked at our respective (but not terribly respectable) states of dress and came to the obvious conclusion in about one and a half seconds. "Ryan darling, you haven't introduced me to your friend." She stood regally and offered Jen a hand. "I'm Amanda Montrose, and you are?"

Going along for the moment, Jen shook the extended hand. "Jennifer Frost. I'm afraid Uncle Nick's never mentioned anyone named Amanda."

"Uncle Nick?" asked Amanda in blank confusion.

"Different Nick," I said, suddenly realizing the problem. To Amanda, I said, "I haven't heard from Nick Wolfe since sending him off for training with someone Duncan recommended." She opened her mouth, but I raised a hand. "No, I won't tell you who. And I don't know where, so save that question. I assure you he's safe, and he knows how to get in touch with you. For the time being, you'd better leave him alone. He probably isn't terribly happy with you." She looked unhappy, but she nodded. To Jen, I said, "Amanda is a trusted friend." I grinned at the woman in question before continuing, "But nothing more, no matter what she may insinuate. Her heart's already owned by at least two others." She looked at me with a raised eyebrow, but didn't respond to the bait.

Instead, she said, "Well, if you aren't going to tell me any more about Nick, I'll just leave you two alone." She paused. "Let me know if you hear anything?" she asked me, still concerned. At my nod, she turned to Jen. "Nice to meet you, Miss Frost." She walked over to the front door and called over her shoulder, "I'll just let myself out. Enjoy yourselves."

I stood and crossed to the door, throwing the deadbolt before turning back to Jen. "Who was that?" her question was neutral enough, but I could well imagine the concern prompting it.

I shook my head. "Like I said, a trusted friend, who happens to be older than Nick Knight." Jen relaxed as I continued, "She was concerned about a mutual friend who just recently became Immortal. He came to me, and I sent him off with a teacher."

She nodded at my reassurances. "And why is that Nick upset at her?"

I smiled. "I thought you didn't want to hear about Immortal business."

"Hmm," she agreed. Walking over to me, she loosely gripped the lapels of the robe and kept pushing until she had me pinned to the door. "But there is another kind of business I WOULD like to discuss with you."

It was more than an hour later before I got around to my shower and breakfast.

With a still wet head of hair, I was working on my eggs while Jen took her shower. I was halfway done eating before she emerged, wearing one of my spare sweatshirts and a pair of sweatpants. "Well, good morning. Or afternoon as the case may be."

She smiled at me while her hands fit one of those rubber band things into her hair. Finished getting her hair out of her face, she walked over to the couch and retrieved her bottle off the floor and took a short pull. She made a face and looked at the bottle in distaste.

I nearly laughed at her expression. "It HAS been out all night. If it needed to be refrigerated, you should have said so."

She grinned slightly. "It didn't occur to me at the time."

Finishing my meal, I leaned back in my chair. "You okay on food until tonight?"

She looked up from dumping the rest of the bottle of "food" down my drain. "I'll survive."

"As your host I really feel I should feed you, but under the circumstances I'm not exactly sure how. Well, aside from the obvious, anyway," I added.

She smiled at me slightly before turning back to rinsing the bottle out. "Thank you, but it won't be necessary. Really, I'll be fine."

I shrugged. "You say so. I'll have to brush up on my 'How to Host a Vampire' etiquette before I invite you over again." I tilted my head slightly. "Assuming you'd be agreeable?"

Placing the cleaned bottle into my recyclable container, she took a seat at the table. Propping her head up on a hand, she stated, "Most agreeable."

I smiled, which she returned. "Good." I paused before continuing hesitantly. "I'd like to ask you two questions, but I don't want to get you upset with me, okay?" She looked slightly wary, but nodded. "What'd you do to me last night?"

She grinned with a twinkle in her eye. "I thought that was rather obvious."

I gave her a wry look. "You know what I mean. Sometime during the backrub I lost all inhibitions. Up to that point my nerves were tied in knots. After that, everything seemed perfectly natural. No nervousness at all. What did you do?"

Leaning on her elbows and lacing her fingers together, she stated, "I whammied you." Huh? "Hypnotized," she explained to my confused look.

"But Nick told me I was a resistor."

She nodded. "Most Immortals are, I've heard. But I wasn't trying to get you to do something against your will. Between relaxing your body with the backrub and the light 'whammy' I put on you at that point, it broke past your psychological block."

I thought about it for a few moments. "Neat trick."

She grinned. "And your other question?"

"This one is tougher." I took a deep breath before asking, "Why are you attracted to me?" I continued rapidly, "Not that I'm complaining in the least. You're stunningly good looking, and the more time I spend with you, the more I like you. But I know I'm no Brad Pitt, George Clooney, or whoever else is the current model of masculine handsomeness. No offense, but with your special skills, you could have quite literally any man you wanted. So I guess my question is more like: Why did you pick me?" I stopped, hoping I hadn't pissed her off. It was a difficult question to ask without being insulting to her as well as to me, but I needed to know the answer.

She gave a small smile. "You don't believe me when I say you're good looking, but you are. At any rate, you're right in that with my skills I could have any man I wanted." She leaned back in her chair. "However, that isn't good enough. If I'm going to spend a lot of time with someone, and a lot of time for a vampire can stretch out a VERY long time, then I want it to be someone who I don't have to hide my nature from. And I don't like to force my will onto someone, so doing the whole 'vampire seductress' thing and creating a 'slave to my will' wouldn't make me happy in the long run." She paused thoughtfully before continuing. "I saw you in the Raven talking to Uncle Nick. I listened to enough of your conversation to realize you were Immortal, just like Natalie. So you were someone who would understand the concept of a million tomorrows." She paused again and her voice lowered slightly and taking on an almost melancholy quality. "I asked Grandma Terry once why she stayed with Aaron. She answered that he was someone who had the ability to outlive her, and that it was comforting to have someone like that. They're actually almost the same age, so they both grew up during the same times, and I think that's a bond they share as well. Before you ask, yes I could have taken up with another vampire. However, being close to someone who's actually ALIVE gives some color to this gray existence of mine. I'm still very young as far as vampires go, but I was already recognizing how dull and featureless my existence was becoming." Her voice softened even more. "I saw in you a chance to get back that vitality I lost a year ago. I've seen how fundamentally unhappy the older vampires are, and I've seen how Grandma Terry, Uncle Nick, and even Javier Vachon become more alive when they're around their respective significant other." She looked down and finished in a whisper, "And I

guess I just wanted some of that happiness."

My heart melted. Taking one of her hands in mine, I said, "I'll be honest. We don't know each other well enough to know if this'll work out in the long run, but I have no complaints so far." I stood and pulled her up into a hug, wrapping my arms around her. For her part, she nearly curled up face first onto my shoulder. "I'll have to meet your Grandma Terry sometime. She sounds like a wise woman."

Jen laughed, but it sounded almost like a hiccupping sob. "That she is. I think she'd like you. It's hard to impress Grandma, but I think you would."

"Sounds like a date then." I could feel her smile. Her arms came out of their folded position against my chest and came around my back. "Jen, I don't know anything about you. Yes, you're a vampire. I've heard some about what that means, but not everything. And I don't know that much about YOU. Who is Jennifer Frost?"

She laughed again and pulled herself out of the hug. Not releasing my hands, she pulled me over to the couch. Sitting down and tucking her feet under herself, she patted the couch. "We have hours until sunset. Have a seat. This'll take a while."

Over the next few hours, we traded life stories. I learned that she had been born of an Irish-American soldier in Vietnam to a local woman who died during childbirth. Not turning his back on his daughter as so many had done, this man took the infant Jennifer home with him when his tour was up. He'd died a few years later in an auto accident, and she'd been raised by his parents in Chicago. They had both died five years ago, and she'd used the insurance money to go to college in Toronto. She had a few friends in Chicago, but going back after what happened to her one horrifying night a year ago was out of the question.

I told her of growing up in Indiana in a foster home with a dozen other orphan children. I was never particularly close to any of the other children or our "parents", so I went to college on an academic scholarship and never went back. I still exchanged Christmas cards with my adoptive parents, but they understood that I wasn't a part of that family. I described Andrea, and how I'd known her from working together after college. She knew and understood what happened to me when I died my First Death, and she wasn't scared off. We'd happily lived together for a few years until she was killed by a crazed Immortal coming after me. I deleted any references to the Watchers. Knowing about such an organization wouldn't improve the situation, and it didn't matter for the time being.

In addition to personal matters, we also exchanged basic information on our respective "races". In addition to what Nat had told me, I learned that vampires cannot feel pain except for wooden stakes and the burning that holy symbols produce; they do feel pleasure, however. Blood is the only "food" they can keep down. Almost any blood will work, but only human blood tastes "right". Usually, they have no heartbeat or internal body heat. This explained why Jen's skin always seemed a little cooler than expected. They have the same sleep cycles that everyone else does, but since sunlight was deadly, most sleep during the daylight hours. Like Immortals, they are physically incapable of carrying diseases, having children, or being sick. Also like Immortals, decapitations would kill them.

I told her about Immortality and the Game. To my quiet amusement, she asked all the same questions that Vachon did. Why do it? What's the Prize? To the question of where pre-Immortals came from if all were foundlings, I shrugged. I had a few theories, but nobody honestly knew. I described Duncan, Richie, and my training. When I explained about Quickenings and that there can be only One, she nodded and said that that explained my comment about pulling a sword out of my coat. To my relief, she made no moral comments about what I did to survive in the face of a Challenge.

After we both finished talking, we sat quietly, absorbing the other's story. Checking the clock on the wall, I got up and quietly fixed myself a dinner. Jen sat on the couch and stared at my philodendron, clearly lost in thought.

After cleaning up my dirty dishes, I went over to Jen. Seeing she was still lost in thought, I laid a hand on her shoulder, intending to quietly get her attention.

I got her attention alright. It just wasn't quietly. Jumping off the couch in a blur of motion, she grabbed me by the throat and picked me up. Her face had elongated and eyes turned golden before she stopped. Placing me back on my feet, she let her face revert back to normal. Stepping to the far end of the couch, she sat down and hugged her legs, forehead to knees. "Sorry. You startled me."

Absently rubbing my neck, I sat down. Realizing she probably felt bad about it, I tried for a humorous approach. "No problem. Just remind me to not startle you anymore." It didn't work too well. Scooting closer, I laid a hand on a knee. "What's wrong?"

She looked up at me, her eyes still glowing. "How long until sunset?"

Suddenly realizing the problem, I glanced at the clock and did some quick mental arithmetic. "Couple hours still."

Her head sunk back down to her knees. "You'd better leave me alone until then."

I shook my head. "Not going to happen."

Her head came back up with a jerk. "You don't understand the problem."

"You're hungry." Her eyes narrowed a little, and she nodded. "Remember what I said about being a good host?" Another nod. I took a calming breath. "I have something you need. It won't hurt me to give it to you." I held out my left wrist. This scared the hell out of me, but Nat no doubt knew firsthand that it wouldn't kill me. Besides, this woman in front of me was clearly in need.

She slowly reached forward with one hand and traced a fingernail lightly along the artery. Pulling her gaze away from my wrist, she asked, "Are you sure?"

I nodded. I was scared, but sure. Trying to make myself feel better, I said, "Just promise you'll guard me until I get back onto my feet, okay?"

She wasn't listening. Taking my wrist in both her hands, she slowly brought it up to her mouth. I felt something cut into one side of the wrist before a sense of well being washed over me and the lights dimmed out.

I woke up with a start. It was only the third time I'd ever died, and I wasn't used to it. Coughing, my first impression was a cottony, dry mouth. The second impression was of thirst. I swung my legs off the couch to stand, intending to get myself something to drink. Looking up, I found Jen standing over me with a large glass of orange juice in hand. She gave it to me with a small smile. Smiling back momentarily, I drained it in record time. Finishing that one off, I walked to the kitchen and refilled the glass with tap water and drained that too. Refilling it yet again, I walked back to the living room. Jen was on the couch again, hugging a throw pillow to herself and watching me. I took a seat beside her and smiled. Holding up the glass, I said, "Thank you."

She shook her head. In a small voice, she said, "No, thank YOU. You didn't need to do that."

"Do you feel better?"

She nodded.

I reached over and wiped a red drop off her chin. "Then it WAS needed."

Her smile was all the thanks I could have asked for.

That evening, I took Jen back to the Raven. Walking in arm in arm, we caused a few raised eyebrows, but no comments. Seating her at a table along the side, I went up to the bar to get our drinks. "A Killian's and a house special, please," I ordered.

The bartender didn't slow down her wiping of a glass mug. Looking me up and down, she said, "I'm not sure you'd like the house special. It's an acquired taste."

I shook my head. "It's not for me. It's for Jennifer Frost."

That did cause her to stop wiping the spotless mug, but she didn't start filling the order, either. As she was looking at me speculatively, a voice behind me said, "It's okay, Urs. Go ahead and fill the order." She focused over my shoulder for a moment before nodding and turning to do just that. Turning my head slightly, I watched Michelle lean one arm against the bar top, facing me. "I was about to send search parties out after Jen."

I grinned. "As you can see, she's alive and well. Relatively alive, anyway," I corrected myself. I shook my head at Michelle's weary sigh. "Sorry, but I'm new at this."

"Obviously," was Urs's sardonic comment as she put the drinks down beside me.

Michelle smiled slightly at that one. Her smile faded into a harder look as she leaned over slightly to me. "I don't know how old you are, but if you harm that child, we'll have a serious problem between the two of us."

I was tempted to roll my eyes, but didn't think it would be a good idea under the circumstances. Instead, I did say, "First, I'm no older than she is. Second, I have no intention of harming her. I can't promise that this relationship will last indefinitely, but I intend to do everything in my power to see that it does."

She stared at me intently for long seconds before she nodded once. "Good."

I smiled softly. "Just so long as I don't have to call you 'Mom'."

Urs barked out a laugh. Michelle raised one tapered eyebrow in amusement. "That won't be necessary."

Nodding, I picked up the drinks. "Have a good evening then, ladies."

Moments later, as I placed the drink in front of Jen, she asked, "What was that all about?"

I shrugged as I took a seat. "I have to pass everyone's tests before I'm accepted. Frankly, that one was probably the toughest. If so, then I'm fine, at least for the time being."

She frowned in annoyance and looked over at Michelle. Shaking her head, she said, "Why do they keep treating us like children? Why can't they just leave us alone?"

"Because from their point of view we ARE children. Less than thirty years each is nothing compared to much of the clientele here."

Jen sighed in annoyance but didn't dispute that. "I hate it when you're right," she muttered.

I smiled crookedly. "If that's the case, this relationship is going to be tough."

She smiled at me speculatively. "Is this a relationship?"

I smiled back a little nervously. "It certainly looks that way. If not, perhaps you need to tell me now before I fall even further for you."

She leaned forward, and one hand started doing interesting things to my knee under the table. "I was teasing you, Ryan."

I let out a silent sigh of relief. Good. Reaching under the table, I captured her wandering hand and brought it back up. Laying a kiss on the knuckles, I laid it back down on the table but didn't release it.

"What was that for?" Her tone was innocence itself.

"Avoiding a distraction," I answered.

>From behind me, I heard, "This establishment isn't licensed for a floorshow. Please don't give us one."

I jerked my head around to find out who said that and just caught a back retreating through a door behind the bar. I turned back to Jen, shaking my head. Her mouth was hanging slightly open, looking in the same direction I was just looking. "What?" I queried.

"That was LaCroix."

So? "And?" I prompted.

"He made a joke."

Your point being? "Yes . . . ?"

"LaCroix doesn't make jokes."

I shrugged. "Hate to break it to you, honey, but he just did."

She shook her head in amazement. "Wonders never cease," she murmured.

The next afternoon, I decided I needed some additional protection. If I was going to be frequenting a vampire club, I'd better be prepared to defend myself against vampires. I went shopping at a craft store before stopping at a grocery to restock my refrigerator. Spotting something else that would be useful, I also picked it up.

I had just finished putting the final touches on my initial purchase when the doorbell rang. Tucking everything away, I answered the door, expecting Jen. I wasn't disappointed. She came bouncing in, stopping only long enough to plant a kiss on my cheek. She went straight to the refrigerator and placed two bottles in it before putting a stack of movies on top of the VCR. Picking one out of the middle of the stack, she popped it in. Finally taking off her coat, she placed it over one of the dining room chairs. Crossing back to the couch, she removed her shoes and curled up on the couch with the remote. Looking up at me, she asked, "You going to sit down, or are you going to stand there all night?"

I laughed. "Make yourself at home," I offered ironically.

She smiled brightly. "Don't mind if I do."

Shaking my head in amazement, I said, "You're impossible."

"But you love me for it."

I looked at her in thought. Slowly I answered, "I'm getting there, yeah."

I didn't even see her move. One moment she was sitting on the couch, the next she was hanging on to me with arms around neck and legs around my back. Her momentum knocked me back into the wall behind me. I would have had the wind knocked out of me, but she was doing a good job of keeping my mouth sealed with her own.

It was quite a while before we got to the movies.

We'd been dating pretty solidly for three weeks before the problems started occurring. Not between us (I was considering asking her to move in with me), but between us and the rest of the vampire Community. I was spared most of the brunt of it, but I could see her occasionally turn and glare at someone for a comment I didn't hear, or she would get "accidentally" bumped as we were walking through the Raven. Little things, but enough to make it clear that what she was doing was against peer pressure. It was all done by the "younger" crowd. None of the older vampires (at least those I was aware of) ever said a word. To her credit, she swallowed everything and never said a word. At one point I asked her why she put up with it. Her answer was about how juvenile it was to respond to the baiting, but I could tell it was really upsetting her. It came to a head five weeks into our relationship.

We were seated in the Raven, just passing a quiet evening. The crowd was relatively sparse that night and was therefore more vocal about getting rid of the "vermin". I'd heard it often enough (followed by Jen looking at me nervously) that I knew the comments were directed at me.

One individual who I recognized as being one of the more vocal antagonizers came up to the table to my left and just stood there, staring at us. Jen had previously put her hand on my right arm. She left it there and increased the pressure a little. I looked calmly up at the guy standing before us with distaste in his eyes. "Can I help you?"

He ignored my question. Turning to Jen, he asked, "How can you stand to be around him for any length of time?" Her eyes narrowed a little, but she didn't say anything.

I calmly took a sip of my soda and decided that enough was enough. It was time to do something about the situation. Deliberately antagonizing him, I said, "Maybe she enjoys my company over yours." Slipping my arm from under Jen's grip, I unobtrusively reached my right hand into my jacket pocket.

Sneering at that idea, he said, "I really doubt that." He focused his attention on her. "Come on, sweetheart. I'll show you a good time that this," he gave me a disgusted look, "individual couldn't begin to duplicate." He refocused his attention on her and held out a hand.

Pulling my right hand back out of the coat pocket with a wooden cross cupped in the palm of my hand, my left whipped into my jacket to the pocket I'd sewn in place next to my combat knife. Reaching up with my right hand as quickly as I could, I grabbed him by the back of the neck and pushed him face forward into the table. I knew I couldn't match him strength on strength, but the cross burning at the back of his neck gave him the impetuous to move along away from it, bending forward at the waist until his face collided with the tabletop, crushing our glasses under his chest. Pulling my left hand free of my jacket with a thick wooden dowel rod, I placed the sharpened end against the middle of his back. Standing up, but not moving either hand, I got a much better angle and got away from his easy arm's reach. The whole thing had taken less than two seconds.

Ignoring the deafening silence around us, I said conversationally, "Oh, but you don't know WHAT I'm capable of doing."

He hissed in pain and moved a hand to the back of his neck. "Stop," I barked. His hand did, and I continued, "No matter what you do, I figure I can ram this stake home before you could stop me. You willing to risk your existence on that?"

He stopped moving, merely hissing in anger and pain. I noticed smoke begin to curl around my fingers. "Hmm, what happens if I leave this on the back of your neck long enough? Does it burn through, or just leave you branded?" He growled outright at that one. Jen was rigid with fear by this point.

"Is there a problem here?" asked Michelle, suddenly appearing beside me. She hadn't even been in the room before this occurred. The Enforcer grapevine was even better than I'd heard.

I smiled at her. "No, no problem. Just having a discussion with our friend here. He seems to have a problem with me, but doesn't want to discuss it to my face. Instead, he's trying to make my girlfriend's life difficult. I'm just doing what I can to protect her and my honor." I noticed LaCroix out of the corner of my eye, behind the bar. He was watching, but hadn't done anything directly.

Michelle nodded at my explanation. Turning to the guy I had pinned, she asked, "Fredericks, do you have a problem with my childe spending time with this gentleman?"

I would have sworn that he couldn't have paled further, but he did. Michelle's and Jen's relationship wasn't well known, apparently. This new information changed the dynamic of the situation dramatically. "I was just asking her to dance," was the sullen reply. He was still in pain, but his fear was overshadowing it for the moment, apparently.

"Really? With her boyfriend sharing the table? That was quite impolite of you, wouldn't you say?" Michelle was enjoying this. And I could see several other smiles form around the room. This guy wasn't well liked, apparently.

He mumbled something.

Michelle leaned forward. "What was that?"

Through gritted teeth, "I said, 'I'm sorry.'"

Nodding, she straightened back up. "Ryan, you can let him back up." I cautiously removed my hands and put the weapon and cross away. Standing back a pace, I clasped my hands loosely in front of me and watched. I'd just let an angry vampire loose. I doubted he could kill me (permanently) with his bare hands before Michelle and Jen could rescue me. Even if he tried, he would be sealing his own fate. Michelle continued speaking directly to him, but everyone in the room heard. "For the record Jennifer is under my personal protection, and by extension that includes Ryan. I happen to know that Nick Knight is also a friend of them both. Now, you will not bother either of them again. Do I make myself clear?"

Based on what I felt of his age, he didn't have a chance in a stand up fight with Michelle. He apparently understood that too. Slowly straightening, he nervously swallowed and nodded to her. Throwing a murderous glare at me, he roughly pushed his way to the door.

Michelle turned to me and Jen. "May I have a word with you in the back?"

Nodding, I offered Jen my arm. She nervously took it, and we followed Michelle behind the bar and toward the back rooms. She entered one and took a seat at the conference table in there. Jen and I sat across from her.

LaCroix quietly walked in and remained standing. Opening the conversation, he said, "That was a foolish thing to do."

I turned to him. "Perhaps," I allowed. "But you have to have seen how everyone's been treating us. What'd you expect me to do? Under the circumstances, what would YOU have done?"

Michelle nearly smiled. "Torn his heart out of his chest, probably."

I tilted my head to her. So she wasn't mad at me. Good. "Okay, should I have killed him in the middle of the bar or just embarrassed him like I did?"

LaCroix answered, "In a public forum such as that, you did the correct thing. However, I have the distinct feeling that he'll attack one or the other of

you sooner or later, regardless of Michelle's protection. Killing him then may be the only option."

I frowned at the both of them. "Will Jen or I get into trouble if we have to do that?"

Jen quietly answered, "No. Destroying a vampire in self defense is acceptable."

Michelle nodded. "Correct. IN SELF DEFENSE. Ryan, I also asked you back here to tell you a few things. What that arrogant idiot did isn't against any of our laws. He was perfectly within his rights. Officially, the Enforcers can't do anything about him. Unofficially, however, I can offer you a discreet bodyguard if you need one."

I thought it over before slowly shaking my head. As tempting as the idea of a vampire bodyguard was, it would defeat the purpose. If I couldn't handle myself against young bullies, then having official protection would only hurt matters in the long run. "Probably not. Does he know I'm immortal?"

LaCroix shook his head. "Few know. There is a great deal of rumor about Doctor Lambert and now you, but very few know the complete truth."

I nodded. "In that case, as long as I don't go unarmed, between Jen and myself we should be able to handle him." I smiled at Jennifer, but she didn't seem so confident. My smile melted into a frown as I studied her. "What's wrong?"

Michelle answered. "Something else you apparently need to know about Jennifer. She isn't very good at confrontations. In the year I've known her, I haven't seen her harm a fly. I don't know if it's personality, or education, or what." She shook her head resignedly and looked over at Jen.

So did I. She was still staring at her hands resting on the table.

LaCroix addressed her. "You two will likely be safe for the time being. However, if you want young Chessman here to survive the fight that is coming, you need to get over this ridiculous hesitation of yours." She looked up at LaCroix and frowned at him in thought.

I disliked his callous phrasing, but I had to agree with the idea. Me against a vampire without the element of surprise wouldn't be pretty.

Michelle looked at Jen thoughtfully for a second before glancing at LaCroix and myself. "Gentlemen, could you leave us alone for a few minutes?"

I stood to stretch and looked down at my watch. "I'd better be going home anyway." I knelt down next to Jen. She had retreated to looking at her hands again. I tilted her head toward me with a knuckle under her chin. When she was looking at me, I softly said, "You going to be okay?"

She nodded immediately. "I don't know what Michelle wants to talk about, but I'm safe with her if that's what you're asking."

I shook my head slowly. "No. I wanted to know how you're FEELING after that little confrontation out there."

She gave a small shrug. "I'm fine."

The words didn't agree with her tone, but I didn't press the issue. "I'm going home. Call me if you need anything?"

She nodded again and gave me a spontaneous hug.

Releasing her, I stood and left the room, LaCroix following close behind. "She's falling in love with you," he commented in a slightly sour tone.

I stopped and looked at him. "Is there a problem with that?" I'd also heard several stories about his attitudes toward mortals in general.

He gave an eloquent shrug. "I disagree in principle with vampires fraternizing with mortals. Or Immortals," he allowed. "However, Nicolas's marriage to Doctor Lambert has made him a better man. Much as I doubt it, perhaps something similar will happen in this case."

I raised an eyebrow. "Thank you," I said ironically. "Nice to know you have such faith in me."

He nodded, either not catching or ignoring my tone. I should've expected it.

The next evening I went to Nat's training warehouse for our weekly sparring practice. I hadn't heard anything from Jen for close to twenty-four hours, and I was getting curious as to what Michelle said to her.

Opening the door, I heard the crash of swords. Looking in nervously, I saw Nat sparring with Nick. I quietly crossed to the couch and took a seat. Based on what I could follow, Nat actually had a better style, but Nick had strength and speed on his side. They battled across the floor for perhaps another two minutes before Nat lost her grip and her sword went flying. Panting heavily, she leaned forward to rest hands on knees.

I whistled in appreciation. "If that's what you've been practicing against, it's no wonder you're so damn good."

Nick tilted his head in acknowledgement. Nat looked up at me and smiled. "Thanks. Aaron gave me a good base, but Nick's kept me in practice." She smiled at him fondly. "Not that he would have given me the choice."

I looked back at the detective. "I just hope I'll get good enough to keep up with the two of you eventually."

Nick gave a confident nod. "You will."

All three of us looked over at the door as it opened. I was pleasantly surprised to see Jennifer walk timidly in. I stood and crossed over to her. "Jen!"

gave her a hug before pulling back and frowning at her. "Don't take this the wrong way, but what are you doing here?"

I heard Nick call from behind me, "He doesn't know?"

Jen shook her head and focused on me. Sighing slightly, she looked down and said, "Uncle Nick is going to teach me to fight."

I raised an eyebrow in surprise. "What brought this on?"

She looked up and fixed me with her gorgeous green eyes. "You."

Huh? "Me?"

"Both Michelle and LaCroix pointed out that you can't win a fight against a vampire. If I want you to survive, I have to help. I can't help unless I know how. That's where Uncle Nick comes in." She focused on him over my shoulder.

I looked back just in time to catch his nod. "Michelle called me this afternoon and asked if I'd be willing to take Jen as a student." He raised an eyebrow at Jen. "But she didn't mention that LaCroix had anything to do with it."

Jen shook her head. Pulling herself out of my grip, she crossed over to him. "Not directly. He just pointed out that if I loved Ryan, I had to learn how to help defend him against my kind."

Nat looked over at me with a smile. Both my eyebrows were quirked. That was the first time that the word "love" had come out of her mouth with regard to me. It wasn't much of a surprise, but it was comforting to know that's how she really felt.

Nick nodded at Jen's answer. Flipping the sword he held around, he handed it to Nat and waved Jen over to the center of the open space. For her part, Nat walked over to the couch and placed Nick's sword into a carrying case and hers into her coat before taking a seat. Waving me over, she patted the seat, indicating that I should take it. I did so, wondering what vampire self defense training would look like.

It turned out to be very similar to the first few lessons that Richie and Duncan had put me through. All the techniques were the same, but a vampire's speed and strength made even the most basic moves devastating. By the end of their training, Jen was starting to get comfortable with the self-defense, but still was hesitant to strike back. Well, it would be a long process, just as it had been for everyone else.

Their training continued daily (well, nightly) for the next week. By the end of that time, Nick had managed to provoke her into attacking just once. He'd given her the knowledge she needed, but she was still not attacking.

"Come on!" he snarled for the umpteenth time, eyes glowing.

She started forward but stopped herself. Relaxing her face back to normal, she shook her head.

He sighed as his fangs retracted. "That's enough for tonight."

Nodding quickly, she rushed over to her coat and then the door. I watched her go with a slight frown.

Nick came over to the couch and sat down with an exasperated sigh. "I've never heard of a vampire who refuses to attack someone."

"She was a nursing student when she was brought across," I pointed out.

He shrugged. "Maybe that's it. I don't know. Unless she's willing to fight, the training can't continue. There's only so far you can go before you have to do some hands on practice."

I nodded. Theory only went so far. Practical experience was needed at some point.

In an effort to break the mood, Nat said, "Well, enough of that. See you tomorrow for our training, Ryan?"

I agreed distractedly as I headed to the door. I was distracted for more than one reason. Tonight was the night I'd decided to ask Jen to move in with me. We'd been dating for a month and a half, and growing closer the entire time. It only made sense for us to live together. Besides, it'd simplify things for both of us.

As I'd hoped, I found Jen waiting by my car. Wrapping her into a hug from behind, I whispered, "You okay?"

She rested the side of her face against one arm. "Yeah, I'm fine."

I held her for a few more seconds before pulling away enough to step beside her, keeping one arm around her shoulders. "Come on, let's walk."

We silently began walking through the deserted industrial park. We'd been wandering aimlessly for two or three minutes before she broke the silence. "I don't know why I can't bring myself to attack Uncle Nick. I know I won't hurt him, so that isn't it."

I squeezed her shoulder. "Don't worry about it. He's given you enough pointers so that you can defend yourself. That's all that really matters." I took a breath before continuing. "That isn't why I asked you to walk. I've been giving it some thought and was wondering if you'd agree to move in with me." She stopped dead in her tracks and turned to stare at me. I continued hurriedly, "It's completely up to you, but I think it'd make things easier on both of us. We already spend so much time together, and this way it'd be easier. Besides, there's no sense in you paying rent when you spend almost as much time at my place anyway, right?" I smiled at her nervously. She just continued to stare at me.

"NO!" she suddenly shouted, flinging me to the side and herself to the other.

I landed nearly ten feet away in a state of shock. Had I misread her THAT badly?

I looked up when I heard the hiss. Our attacker from the previous week (Michelle had called him Fredricks, wasn't it?) was trying to rain blows on Jen's head, but she was parrying for all she was worth. Jumping to my feet and grabbing the wooden stake in my left hand and wakizashi in my right, I charged forward with a yell. My gun would be faster, but I'd heard from Nick that a gun was useless against vampires. Fredericks broke through her defenses while I was still one stride away. One fist catching her squarely on the temple, she flew a few feet before falling to the ground in a heap. He turned to me just as my wakizashi was reaching him. Spinning to knock the blade away from the line to his chest, his right hand went crashing into my left forearm, breaking both bones and forcing me to drop the wooden stake. My momentum carried me past him, and I spun to keep him in front of me.

Too late. Pulling the sword out of my grasp (and breaking three fingers in the process), he snarled in my face, "Now you die, mortal fool." Forcing me to my knees with one hand on my shoulder, his other forced my head to the side, exposing my neck. His fangs extended and he leaned down. Through the haze of pain my arm was radiating, I felt him tear at my neck before everything went dark.

I had no idea where I was. It was warm and comfortable, and that was all that mattered.

I must have said something, because I heard a voice say, "He's waking up."

A new voice murmured in my ear, "Ryan, honey. Wake up." I felt something trace along the artery in my neck. That coupled with the sudden realization that I was near another Immortal jolted me up and moving within a second. Ah, adrenaline is a wonderful thing.

My eyes took in the familiar warehouse that Nat and I used as a training ground as my hands scrambled for a weapon. I found my combat knife easily enough, but my sword was missing and my left arm was protesting any movement at all.

My right hand made it to my gun holster before a strong male voice cut through my confusion, "Ryan!"

I blinked and looked around again. Yep, training warehouse. Nat and Jen were sitting on the couch looking at me in amused tolerance. Nick was standing behind them, arms crossed and shaking his head slowly. "Ryan," he continued more calmly, "please calm down. Attacking one of us won't do anybody any good."

Taking a deep breath to calm my frantic heart, I took a personal inventory. In short, I felt awful. My left arm was sore around where it'd been broken. The entire right side of my neck had the tight feel of recently healed tissue. And to top it all off, I was nearly falling down weak.

Gingerly replacing the knife into my torn coat, I walked back over to the couch and took a seat. I leaned back and let my head go as far back as it could and closed my eyes. I could feel the still moist blood on my neck and over most of the coat. Figuring I had nothing to lose, I asked, "What happened?"

Jen placed a hand on one knee. "What do you remember?"

My right hand came up and waved at my neck. "Nothing after he bit me."

I felt Nat stand up from the couch. Nick said, "Apparently, Fredricks attacked you two as you were walking. I heard your shout and got to you in less than a minute to find you dead from blood loss and Jen standing over a decomposing corpse with a sword in her hand."

I opened my eyes and looked at her. She lowered her eyes in embarrassment. I cupped her face in one hand and gently raised her face until she was looking at me. "Thank you," I said simply.

She smiled timidly. "I couldn't let him hurt you," she answered.

I glanced over at Nick and said, "Looks like we finally found a way to get her to attack someone."

Nick chuckled as Nat came back over with a half gallon jug of Gatorade she'd apparently gotten out of the refrigerator. Twisting off the cap, she handed it to me and said, "Drink this. I keep it here just in case of emergency."

Nodding my thanks, I took it and drained half before coming up for air. Resting my head on the back of the couch again, I caught Jen staring at me out of the corner of my eye. Tilting my head to regard her, I realized she wasn't staring at me so much as at my neck and shoulder. Smiling, I closed my eyes again. "Jen, right now I need to rest and heal. I'll let you lick me clean later."

My comment had the desired effect. Nick and Nat burst into laughter. Jen swatted me on the shoulder and said, "Oh, grow up."

I smiled. "Don't wanna." I heard all three of them continue to chuckle.

I felt my body continue to heal, and I finally opened my eyes to find Nat kneeling in front of me, regarding my neck critically. "Healing nicely," she commented. She glanced down at my left arm and asked, "You going to be okay?"

I nodded. Holding up the rapidly emptying bottle, I said, "I'll replace this tomorrow. I'm glad you had it handy."

Nat shot a quick smile to Nick. Turning to me, she nodded. "You're welcome." Standing, she asked, "Tomorrow night still on?"

I nodded, but Jen said, "No." We all turned to her. She was shaking her head. "We'll all be busy tomorrow night."

Nick's frown reflected my confusion. "We will?" he asked.

Jennifer nodded and curled one arm around me as she leaned against my side. "After all, who else am I going to ask to help me move into Ryan's place?"

My smile blossomed as her meaning sunk in. Everything would be alright.

Chessman Chronicles A Wedding and a Decision

It'd been a good day. I was just getting home from work and stopped to grab the mail on the way past. In addition to the usual fist full of junk mail, I found one letter from Nick Wolfe with a postmark in French.

Ryan,

First, I want to thank you. I don't know if it's for putting up with me, helping me find a teacher, being a friend, or just for being there, but thank you.

Second, you were right. This IS a gift. Once I had some sense beaten into me (literally), I realized just how valuable a gift it really is.

Last, hope to see you in June.

Nick

Also in the envelope was an invitation to the wedding of Nick Wolfe and Amanda Montrose in the coming June in Paris. It'd been nearly two years since I'd sent Nick off with Connor MacLeod for training. This was the first thing I'd heard directly about Nick since then.

I smiled as I read the letter.

"What're you smiling at, Ryan?" Jennifer came over and took a seat next to me, leaning her head on my shoulder and reading the letter.

I held it up slightly, still reading. "Nick Wolfe and Amanda are getting married. You met Amanda shortly after we got together, remember?"

She nodded thoughtfully. "Tall, thin, blonde?"

I nodded. "That's her."

"Didn't you say that the Nick she was looking for wasn't happy with her?"

"Yeah. They apparently made up." Not that it surprised me much. Once Nick calmed down, he probably forgave her quickly.

Jen was still reading the invitation. "Paris in June? Never been there."

"I have, but never left the university." Watcher's University, lo these many years ago. "It'll be an adventure for us both."

She pulled her head back a little and looked at me in surprise. "Both?"

I nodded. "If you want to come, sure. I expect there's enough of a Community there that feeding you won't be a problem." Being a vampire, she had some unusual travel restrictions.

She stared off into space for a few seconds before a smile formed. "Grandma Terry mentioned once how nice the city is. I guess I'll just have to go and decide for myself."

"This is so exciting," Jen commented as we settled into our seats. The first class section of this transoceanic flight was surprisingly empty. Of course, the unusual departure and arrival times probably had a lot to do with that.

I laughed at her enthusiasm. "Never flown before?"

"Nope." She paused. "At least not on a plane, anyway."

I grinned at her joke. "I just hope all our luggage arrives with us." Fortunately, my sword case was nearby. Duncan had mailed documentation to cover that for me out of the blue after I mentioned that I'd be flying to Paris for the wedding. All in all, he'd been an absolute godsend. He'd even offered to board my anonymous guest and me with him at his barge. I'd politely refused. Jen's eating habits would be hard to explain.

"I just hope we can get around town without knowing any French," Jen commented.

"Me too." I was counting on Paris being enough of an international tourist city that our American English would be good enough.

"What's the hotel where we're staying again?"

I pulled out the directions that Duncan had given me. Staring at the name, I finally said, "I probably couldn't pronounce it if I had to."

She laughed. "We're WAY too much the children of modern American society."

"Ain't that the truth," I agreed.

The stewardess started her little safety presentation. Both Jen and I basically ignored it. If the plane went down, there was nothing in the presentation that would help us. She ended the presentation with the announcement, "And the first in-flight movie will be 'Bride of Dracula'."

I nearly laughed out loud at Jennifer's groan.

Fortunately, the rest of the flight was uneventful. We even lucked out and all of our luggage arrived with us. The cabby dropped us off at the hotel and I was pleasantly surprised to find that it was an American hotel. Duncan apparently had pity on me and was trying to make this trip as painless for us (and the local Parisians) as possible.

"So what would you like to do tonight?" asked Jen as she flopped down on the bed after her shower the following evening.

All sorts of possibilities flashed through my mind, but I decided to be practical first. "How're you on food?"

She nodded in acknowledgement. "Good point. We'll have to stop at a place Grandma Terry mentioned once and see if they're still in business."

"Okay. After that, a walk along the Seine, see the various landmarks, lots of choices. What do you think?"

She shrugged. "Whatever you want. I'm flexible."

I gave her a leer. "I know you are, but that's not what I asked."

She made a face back. "You know what I mean. Come on, get dressed. We need to hit this bar soon. I'm getting hungry."

The cab had just pulled away from the curb and I'd taken one step forward when the Buzz hit me. Better than two thousand years old, and he had as many heads to his credit for his age as Duncan did. And for those of you not keeping score, that means a LOT. And we were walking into a probable vampire club. I was definitely in trouble if this didn't go well.

"What's wrong?" asked Jen, apparently sensing my hesitation.

"Company." I paused as a slight shudder ran through me. "Very dangerous company," I amended.

She looked concerned. "Well, I HAVE to go in there. You can stay out here if you'd prefer."

I shook my head. "A crowd is actually safer."

She gave me a skeptical look but didn't press the issue. We entered the bar, and I started looking around for the Immortal. It wasn't difficult to find him. He was looking at me when I spotted him. Tall and with brown hair, he didn't have any distinguishing features. The woman holding onto his arm was much more memorable. Relatively short with a vibrant head of red hair, she even vaguely looked like Jennifer. Jen saw where I was staring and looked over in that direction. I was paying too much attention to the Immortal to see her reaction, but she let out a squeal of delight and went running across the room. To my absolute shock, the unknown woman stood and caught Jennifer in a hug when they collided. I put the pieces together and walked over feeling much better. Thank God he wasn't likely to be dangerous. I had as much chance against him as a lame rabbit trying to fight a wolf.

Stopping beside the hugging women, I offered the Immortal my hand. "I'm Ryan Chessman."

He smiled and stood. Taking my hand, he said, "Aaron Grey." His aura twitched as if that wasn't his real name, but I accepted it.

I glanced over at his companion. "And she must be 'Grandma Terry'."

He laughed. "Yes, I suppose she is. At least to Jennifer." He waved a hand at her.

Pulling her head up for a moment, Theresa said, "You two sit. We're going to get something to drink." The two women walked arm in arm toward the bar.

Taking a seat across from Aaron, I said, "I've heard about you from Natalie, but I was hardly expecting to find you here in Paris."

One eyebrow rose. "You've met Nat?"

I nodded. "First met her in Las Vegas several years ago, actually. I moved to Toronto shortly afterward. Detective Knight nearly had to shoot me after he stumbled upon the end result of a fight I had."

He smiled fondly. "How're they doing?"

"Good. The four of us meet something like once a week over drinks. That's where I met Jen, actually. She asked me to dance one evening. And as

they say, the rest is history."

"Good for you. We've heard about you through Michelle. At first, Terry wasn't so sure about one of us dating her granddaughter, but it seems she's happy. That's all that really matters." He looked fondly over at where the women were standing at the bar, chatting. He looked back at me. "What brings you to Paris? On vacation?"

I shook my head. "Attending a wedding of two friends, actually."

He looked mildly interested. "Two of us?"

I nodded. "Amanda Montrose and Nick Wolfe."

His jaw dropped. "Amanda?!?" He leaned back and started laughing. Half a minute later he calmed down enough to get out, "Who would have ever thought?"

I grinned. "You mean her marrying anyone other than Duncan MacLeod."

He nodded and grinned back. "That too. Out of curiosity, how do you know them?"

"Mac was one of my teachers. I knew her through him before I even moved to Toronto. Once there, I met Nick. He knew about her, and they were in some kind of private investigator partnership. After his accident, I helped him find a teacher."

He nodded at the explanation as the women returned. Jen set a tall glass of amber liquid in front of me. "Do you have any idea the look the bartender gave me when I tried to order a BEER for you?"

I grinned. "So sue me. I don't like wine."

Slipping in next to Aaron, I heard Theresa mutter, "He's in France and he refuses to drink wine." She gave an exasperated sigh. "Youngsters nowadays."

"Stop it, Grandma," chastised Jen as she sat. "Sorry, I forgot the introductions. I'd like you two to meet Ryan Chessman. Ryan, this is my grandmother Theresa Ryan and her husband Aaron Grey."

I offered her my hand. "Pleasure to finally meet you. Jen talks a great deal about her 'Grandma Terry'."

"Likewise," she said, shaking my hand. Her hand was the cool grasp I was learning to expect among vampires. Since I was expecting it, I didn't react to the two thousand plus years of age I felt.

"How long are you in town?" asked Terry.

"A week."

"Where are you staying? With Duncan?" asked Aaron.

I shook my head. Jen answered, "And how would I explain my . . . eccentric eating habits?"

"Good point," conceded Aaron.

I turned to Aaron. "Speaking of Duncan, how do you know Amanda and Mac?"

"Met then a few years ago here in Paris. They were with," he paused fractionally, "Adam Pierson. We bumped into them at Darius's grave."

"He was an old friend of ours," added Theresa.

I nodded. "I never knew him, but everyone seems to have held him in the highest respect."

"Who?" asked Jen.

Aaron answered, "Father Darius. He was slightly older than we are, and the last three-quarters of his life he was a priest here in Paris. He provided sanctuary for many people and was friend and confidant to many others. He was also the one who married us." Terry squeezed her husband's hand.

"So where ARE you staying?" asked Terry.

"An American hotel that Duncan recommended."

"Why don't you come stay at our place?"

Jen shook her head. "We couldn't."

"Why not?" asked Aaron. "It'd be far cheaper for you two. Besides, it'd give us some company. And keeping you fed would be a LOT easier this way."

Good points all. "If you don't mind . . ." I started hesitantly.

"Nonsense," responded Terry. "How often do I have a chance to host my own family?"

Jen laughed. "Okay, if you insist."

Having tour guides made things a lot simpler. They took us to the various attractions in town that were open in the evenings. The third night we were staying with them, they even took us out to eat. It was a vampire run restaurant that also catered to mortal appetites. I'd never heard of such a place, but I was still learning how to deal with Jen's lifestyle.

While I had the opportunity, I also asked Aaron to take me to Tessa's grave. I'd never known Duncan's friend, of course, but I'd heard a great deal about her through both Mac and Richie. Paying my respects seemed the appropriate thing to do.

While we were out and about, he also showed me the cathedral that Darius inhabited for centuries. It may have been my imagination, but I could swear I felt an almost subliminal Buzz coming from the sanctuary.

The next evening, Jen and I visited the club that Amanda owned. Getting out of the cab we'd taken over, I worried that our clothing wouldn't meet the dress code. She definitely ran a quality place.

We made our way into the place, and I stopped at feeling a Buzz. No, three of them. It took a few moments to sort them all out, but I eventually came to the conclusion that it was Amanda, Nick, and Duncan. My, oh my. This could be interesting.

Scanning the room, I spotted them sharing a table. Once Nick caught my eye, he waved me over. Nodding to indicate the direction, I led Jen over to them. On the way, I saw that Amanda had gone back to black hair. I was glad. She looked better that way.

By the time we arrived, she was standing. Waving to indicate the place and smiling, she said, "Welcome to the Sanctuary."

I raised an eyebrow. "Is that the translation? It IS holy ground then?"

Amanda shot a glance at Jen before nodding to me.

"Convenient," I commented.

She smiled and nodded again. Sitting back down, she said, "Please, join us."

I offered my hand to Nick, which he took without hesitation. "You're looking well, Nick. How have you been doing?"

"Good." He shot a sideways glance at Amanda before adding, "Better in a few days, but good for now."

Nick grinned and Duncan chuckled at Amanda's blush. Turning to Duncan, I said, "Thanks for all the help regarding this trip, Mac. Without your instructions in hand, this trip would be a lot tougher."

He nodded. "Glad I could help." He looked at Jen appreciatively. "And who's the lass hiding behind you?"

Pulling her from her hiding place, I said with a smile, "Gang, I'd like you to meet Jennifer Frost. Jen, you've already met Amanda. This is Nick Wolfe, and this is my teacher Duncan MacLeod."

She shook Nick's hand politely before turning a raised eyebrow to Duncan. "So you're the famous Duncan MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod that Ryan keeps talking about?"

"I'm not so sure about the 'famous' part, but yes, I was Ryan's self-defense teacher."

I shook my head at them. "She knows."

Three eyebrows went up but nobody commented on it. As I was pulling a fifth chair forward to sit down, Nick asked Jen, "I'm sure I'll regret asking, but you've already met Amanda?"

Jen looked down in embarrassment and stared at her hands. Nick and Duncan turned quizzical expressions onto me. I'm sure I was blushing faintly. "Yes, they've met."

Silence descended for a moment before Duncan said, "Well, don't leave us in suspense."

Amanda burst into laughter. Recovering herself and blotting her eyes daintily with a lace handkerchief she pulled out of somewhere, she said, "I doubt you'll get the story out of these two, so I may as well tell it. It was shortly after our 'incident', Nick. I'd returned to Toronto looking for you. I went over to Ryan's one Saturday on the chance that he knew where you were." She paused, staring at the ceiling. "Let's just say that they weren't expecting company right then."

I breathed a sigh of relief. That story could have been told a whole lot worse. "Well phrased," I thanked her, ignoring the grins tugging at Duncan's and Nick's mouths. Hoping to change the subject, I asked, "Would I know anybody else that's been invited?"

Duncan spoke up, "Richie and Hoa are flying in tomorrow. Adam's been invited, but I've no idea if he'll be here. Joe lives here in town now."

Nick took up the list. "Connor of course. My boss, Bert Myers. I invited a few friends from the precinct, but I doubt many of them will show."

Amanda continued, "Lucy is already here. Liam will be officiating." She frowned with a soft sigh. "I wish Rebecca could have been here, but that's the breaks." Shaking off the brief spell of melancholy, she suddenly smacked her hand on the table. "I'm being a terrible hostess. Would you two like anything to drink?"

She didn't blink at my request of a beer, however she did recommend a German brand instead of my preferred Killian's. When she turned to Jen, she said, "I'm fine, thanks."

"Nonsense. It's on the house."

Jen shook her head. "I'm on a special diet. Thank you for the offer, but I'm afraid not."

Shrugging her acceptance, Amanda got up and walked over to the bar. Also standing, Nick said, "I'll be right back." He took his bottle in hand and followed in Amanda's wake. I idly watched him as he passed behind the lounging Amanda. Since I was looking in that direction, I saw him give her behind a quick swat without even slowing down. She turned to glare at him, but he calmly walked into the restroom.

Chuckling at their antics, I said, "Those two certainly are happy together."

"Aye," was Mac's soft response.

I turned to look at him. He was staring at his drink. I'd rarely seen him depressed, but he was giving every indication of being in a serious funk. Softly, I said, "Mac, you okay?"

Looking up at me with a raised eyebrow, he attempted a casual smile. "Sure. What do you mean?"

I wasn't buying it. "You're depressed."

He managed to look mildly offended. "Nae, I'm not."

I just folded my arms against my chest and gave him a "tell me another one" look.

He returned his eyes to the glass he held cradled in his hands and spoke softly, "Okay, yes I am." He gave an almost soundless sigh before continuing. "I keep trying to be happy for her. She's clearly in love with Nick, and I think he's a good guy and will be good to her."

He silently stared at his drink for a moment before I broke the silence. "I know how to fix this." Both Jen and Mac turned skeptical looks to me. "Polygamy," I announced.

Jen bit a knuckle in an effort to not laugh. Mac pulled a small smile out of somewhere. "You win. I'll be in a better mood." I nodded. He turned to watch Amanda, but I heard him mutter, "Polygamy. Sheesh."

I hid a smile. Mission accomplished.

The next night wasn't nearly so calm.

It was time for Nick's bachelor party.

As the previous evening was drawing to a close, Duncan had pulled me aside and told me where to meet the gang that was getting together. With a little trepidation, I arrived at the appointed time and place. As the cabby pulled up outside the "Le Blues Club", I felt several Immortal signatures.

It took a few moments to sort it all out. Duncan, Nick, Connor, Richie, and Methos plus two unknowns were all present, I decided before the door even opened. Sure enough, seven Immortals plus one mortal were inside. The bar was obviously closed to the public for the occasion.

Joe Dawson was tending the bar and threw me a cheery wave. Methos was on a barstool and gave me a calm nod. We hadn't parted on good terms, but he was apparently willing to call a truce. Considering how dangerous he potentially was, that was just fine with me.

Duncan and Connor were sitting at one table sharing a bottle of scotch. As my gaze swept over them, they both saluted me with their glasses before slamming back the contents.

The next table held Richie, Nick, and the two unknown Immortals. Deciding I'd survive the evening much better there, I went to the bar and greeted my onetime employer, "Joe. How's things?"

"Ryan! Good to see you again. How's life been treating you?"

I shook his hand and asked, "This a private party, or can anyone join?"

"Feel free," he waved expansively. His smile fled and his voice shifted slightly. "Just leave all weaponry on the coat rack." He pointed to the pegs on the wall that held four trench coats and three leather jackets.

"Good idea," I agreed. I took off my coat and hung it up on one of the free spots.

When I got back to the bar, Joe asked, "What'll you have?"

I nodded toward Nick. "If I can pry it away from him, I'll probably just have some of that pitcher in front of the guest of honor."

Joe grinned. "Don't worry about that. MacLeod's picking up the tab tonight."

Both my eyebrows skyrocketed. "Which?"

His grin got bigger. "They're splitting it."

I grinned in answer. This just keeps getting better and better. "In that case, I'll start with a Killian's and then just refill from whatever's handy."

As Joe was filling my request, I heard Methos mumble, "Youngsters nowadays: No taste."

I flicked him a tolerant smile but didn't say anything. Joe handed me the full mug, and I made my way over to the foursome. I arrived just in time to hear Nick say, "I can't believe that little pipsqueak suckered me."

Richie replied, "Nick, we DID tell you that that's how he operates." He looked up at me and smiled. "Ryan! Welcome to the party!" He made room as I pulled a chair over.

Nick waved his cigar at the two Immortals I didn't know. "Ryan Chessman, these two are Father Liam Riley and Robert de Valicourt." I shook hands all around as Nick continued, "Ryan here is the one who introduced me to Connor." He turned to me. "I was just telling them about Kenny."

"About time someone got that little bastard," commented de Valicourt.

I heard Richie mutter something, but no one seemed to catch it.

I turned to Riley. "Amanda mentioned last night that you'll be officiating the ceremony?" He tilted his head in affirmation. I studied him for a moment before asking, "I'm sure I'll regret asking, but what's an Irish priest doing in Paris?"

He laughed. "It's a long story. Suffice it to say that I enjoy the city."

I faked a sad sigh. "And here I thought you'd tell me that you were in town to keep Amanda in line." That drew a grin from the four men.

He nodded in acknowledgement. "That too."

I turned to de Valicourt. "I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I've never heard of you."

He waved it off. "Gina and I are old friends of Amanda's."

"Gina," I muttered, trying to place the name. Suddenly, I snapped my fingers and pointed to him. "You're the one who's been married for three hundred years."

He nodded. "We've known Amanda for most of that. She's served on our wedding party occasionally."

My brow furrowed in confusion. "Occasionally?"

Nick nodded. "Seems they get married again every hundred years."

Interesting idea. Speaking of which . . . I turned to Richie. "I STILL haven't received an invitation from you and Hoa."

Liam raised his eyebrows and looked at Richie. "The lad's engaged?"

Richie looked at me with a slight shrug. "We're in no hurry." He grinned challengingly. "When are you going to find someone and settle down?"

I sighed dramatically and laid a hand to my chest. "Now that I've lost all chance at the delectable Amanda," I had to stop at the three laughs and one death threat uttered by my table mates. Grinning, I said, "Seriously, Richie, you'll probably meet her tomorrow at the reception."

He nearly choked on his mouthful of beer. "Really?"

"Really," nodded Nick. "We met her last night. Pretty little red-headed thing."

Liam perked up a little. I turned to him. "Yes, her father was Irish. But back off. She's taken."

He faked a pout that set the rest of us chuckling.

"I tell ye, I can so throw a hat trick!" Connor's voice rose at the next table.

Richie frowned in confusion. "A what?" he asked.

I nodded at the electronic dartboard game standing along one wall. "A hat trick: Three bull's eyes in a row."

Liam leaned forward with his eyes bright in anticipation. "You know how to play, Ryan?"

I shrugged. "Some. Haven't joined a league, but I enjoyed playing with co-workers during lunch a few years ago."

Liam looked up and said loudly to Duncan and Connor, "A hundred francs says Ryan and I can beat you two Scots."

They suddenly quieted down and turned to look at Liam. I was staring at him. "Are you nuts?" I asked him quietly.

He lowered his voice as well and said to me, "Look at them. Do you seriously believe those two stand a chance against us?"

I looked over at the MacLeod table. Three empty scotch bottles littered the scarred tabletop, and both of them were leaning at haphazard angles in their chairs. I turned back to Liam and grinned. Composing my features, I turned to the MacLeods again. They were still frowning fuzzily at Liam. I said, "Well, come on. A hundred francs says that Liam and I can beat the infamous Highlanders in a darts game of cricket."

The room was silent, but I could see Joe trying to keep from laughing.

The two kinsmen looked at each other for a moment. Duncan appeared to think it over before nodding to Connor as steadily as he could manage. Connor turned back to us. "Agreed."

I stood and walked over toward the dart board, digging some change out of my pocket. Behind me, I heard Joe say, "This I have to see. This one's on the house." He hit a few buttons on the cash register and pulled out some coins. As I fed the machine to get things going, Liam and the MacLeods picked out their darts from the mug full of old plastic tipped projectiles available to the public.

Once the machine was happy, I joined my partner, and he handed me three darts he'd rescued. "None of them are in very good condition, but these are the best I could do for you."

I nodded my thanks and watched the MacLeods loudly arguing over which of them would get a dart they'd both apparently decided they wanted. It took a few minutes with everyone looking amusedly on, but they eventually sorted themselves out. When they came back to the throwing line, Connor asked, "Who's on first?"

I flicked a glance at him and replied, "What's on second."

He blinked. "I don't know."

"Third base!" called Nick, Richie, Liam, and Joe.

Duncan looked around in confusion as the five of us laughed. "What are they talking about?" he asked his partner. Connor could only shrug.

Composing himself, Nick stuffed his cigar back into his mouth and pulled a coin out of a pocket. "Here," he said. "Call it," he said as he flipped it into the air.

"Heads." "Tails." The MacLeods' answers overlapped. They turned to glare at each other.

I bit my knuckle hard and managed to keep from laughing. Robert bit his lip. Richie put a hand to his face, but his eyes were shining in contained mirth. I could see Nick's jaw tighten as he fought laughter as well. I didn't dare look over at Liam or Joe. I was sure their expressions would only cause me to lose the fight against my laughter. Nick caught the coin and slapped it to the table but didn't expose it.

Connor said something to Duncan in a language I couldn't place. Duncan responded and they went off into a heated argument. I glanced around the room and discovered that Methos and Liam could follow what was being said, but the rest of us were being left behind.

Liam interrupted at one point, "That's disgusting even for a Scot, Connor."

The two kinsmen stopped and stared at Liam. "Ye understand Gaelic?" asked Duncan in astonishment.

Liam responded calmly, "I DID grow up nearby if you'll recall." The Highlanders blinked in tandem. Liam continued, "Well, is it heads or tails, lads?"

"Tails." "Heads." Once again, the answers overlapped. However, they'd both changed their minds.

Shaking his head, Liam turned to the grinning Nick and said, "Tails."

Nick exposed the coin and sure enough, it was tails.

Liam lined up at the throwing line as the MacLeods made room, muttering about cheats. Totally ignoring them, Liam settled back and threw his three darts with quick flicks of his wrist. At each dart, the board chirped to us, indicating him making marks. He walked up and retrieved his darts as Duncan walked up to the throwing line.

To his credit, all three of Duncan's darts DID hit the board. Not that any were close to where he was aiming, of course, but he didn't injure anyone in the attempt.

Stifling the smile, I took my place and let loose. My style wasn't nearly as good as Liam's. I used too much arm and not enough wrist. Still, I did manage to get two marks.

Connor swaggered up to the throwing line. Once positioned, he said to Duncan, "Here's how to play this game, lad." Taking exaggerated care, he threw.

His first dart missed the scoreboard completely, causing the board to give him an electronic raspberry. Two guffaws and three snickers sounded

around the room.

Glaring around quickly, Connor tried to salvage his pride. Muttering something about taking a practice shot, he lined up again and let another dart take flight. This one managed to hit the board at least. His third dart even managed (somehow) to make one mark.

After the first round, Liam and I were ahead six marks to one.

It only got worse.

Liam finished the game during his throws during the fifth round. By the time he hit the twenty-first mark and ended the game, the MacLeods had only managed four.

Scattered applause and chuckles sounded as Liam took a bow to the room. I put my darts away and made a detour by the bar before returning to my seat. In a low voice, I asked Joe, "Did you have a tape recorder going?"

Methos answered, "Let's just say that Connor's comment involved cold haggis, two live sheep, and Duncan all involved in some improbable activities."

Joe's open-mouthed stare at Methos was enough to set me to snickering. I re-took my seat just in time to hear Robert say, "Well done, you two."

Liam shook his head. "Those two are so drunk that even *I* could take their heads if I had a mind to."

Duncan fell back into his seat at the next table. "I can so throw a hat trick," he mimicked his partner as Connor also sat down.

"Aw, shut yer mouth," was the subdued response.

I saw Nick close his eyes and his face turn red in an effort not to laugh at his teacher.

Trying to stave off a serious problem, Joe said, "Once I heard this was going to be a bachelor party, I brought a few games." Everyone looked over in interest. He continued, "I've got playing cards and Trivial Pursuit."

Methos's face brightened. "How about Trivial Pursuit?"

"I'm on Adam's team," Duncan, Richie, and I chorused. Joe started laughing silently again.

A smile flickered across Methos's face, but he shook his head. "I'm on my OWN team."

The three of us groaned. It took a few minutes of argument, but eventually the MacLeods teamed up and the rest of us formed the third team.

Nick and Richie were our staples in Sports, and Liam turned out to be amazingly good in Literature, but Methos ruled the game. He won the game during his fourth turn. We'd managed three wedges, and the MacLeods had only one.

"Ah'm not going to be on your team for anything else tonight," announced Connor.

"Why not?" wondered his kinsman.

"Cuz I lose every time we're teamed up."

"You lose because you're both falling down drunk," retorted Robert in a quiet voice that didn't carry to their table.

"How about some poker?" suggested Duncan.

"Friendly or for money?" asked Robert taking another drag from his cigar.

"Friendly," answered Joe holding up two boxes of multi-colored chips.

"But I'm no good at poker," objected Liam.

Connor grinned wolfishly. "That's okay, we'll go easy on you."

I was looking at Liam strangely. His aura had flickered with his last line as if he were lying. He caught my eye and winked subtly. Grinning at his antics, I said to the MacLeods, "Speaking of money, you two still owe Liam and me a hundred francs from the dart game."

"Do not," objected Duncan.

"We all heard the bet being accepted," pointed out Joe, coming out from behind the bar with chips and cards.

"But he cheated," Connor pointed to Liam.

I tried for a dumbfounded tone, "You're accusing a priest of cheating?"

Liam managed a hurt look.

"Err . . ." Connor blinked and frowned.

"Besides," I continued, "how COULD we cheat? The board kept score."

Duncan and Connor looked at each other for a moment before they both sighed. Connor fished a hundred franc note out of his pocket and handed it to Liam.

Liam was counting out fifty francs to give to me when I stopped him. "Just put my fifty in the offering plate Sunday." He smiled slightly and nodded.

Connor turned to Duncan. "Ye owe me fifty francs for your half of the bet."

Duncan mumbled something unintelligible and paid studious attention to the chips. Nick, Richie, and I made quick work of sorting the chips into seven even amounts as neither Methos nor I were interested in playing. Everyone else busied themselves with pulling extra chairs over to the table. Once the chips were distributed and Joe started shuffling, I got up and took one of the empty pitchers with me. With Joe's permission, I refilled it behind the counter before repeating it with the other two pitchers on the table.

Once the liquid refreshments were replenished, I took a seat a couple stools down from Methos. "Truce?" I asked.

He glanced at me before returning his attention to the game. "Were we at war? I hadn't noticed."

"I hate to state the obvious, but we didn't part on the best of terms. I just wanted to make sure there were no hard feelings."

He waved in an offhand gesture. "Oh, that. No harm done."

I frowned at him before shrugging. That went a lot easier than expected. Not that I was complaining, though. We watched the first two hands go by in silence before the stakes started getting higher. It took only fifteen minutes or so before Richie became the first victim. He crossed over to the bar calmly and sat between me and Methos.

I glanced at him. "You took that well."

He grinned slightly. "I lost to Nick. At least it wasn't to Mac or Connor."

Methos smiled softly. "Good. You caught that one."

Curious, I watched the game a little closer for a few minutes and came to the conclusion that everyone was subtly teaming up against Duncan and Connor. Neither of them was getting away with any bluffs; someone or another always called them. Their stockpiles of chips were starting to show it, too.

Grinning at the subtle war going on, I asked Richie, "Hoa here in Paris with you?"

He nodded. "She's probably over at the Sanctuary with the girls by now," he said, glancing at his watch.

"Is that where the bachelorette party is happening?" I asked, only mildly interested.

Richie nodded. "Amanda invited her before we even got to town." He looked sideways at me. "I'm surprised she didn't invite your lady friend."

"Maybe she did," I mused, remembering Amanda pulling Jen aside just as Duncan was talking to me last night.

"So Hoa will meet her before I do?" Richie looked a little ticked at it.

"Don't worry about it," I soothed. "I'll introduce you to Jennifer tomorrow at the reception."

"She won't be at the wedding?"

"No, she can't make it until later." Besides, all the crosses in the sanctuary will no doubt be a problem for her. Not to mention the fact that the ceremony begins before sunset.

The three of us sat quietly watching the game for a few minutes. Father Riley and Joe seemed to be slowly doing better than anyone else. The MacLeods were taking a fearful beating.

Methos leaned over and pulled the humidor off the bar top and opened it, offering a cigar to me and Richie. Rich took one, but I declined. I'd probably yarf if I tried to smoke, though the odor of someone else smoking has never bothered me. As Methos and Richie were bringing their cigars to smoking life, Methos mentioned, "You know, with the testosterone level in this place, I expected scantily clad women to make an appearance by now."

I rolled my eyes at his phrasing. The man predated the concept of tact, so I guess I could forgive him.

Richie chuckled softly. "I'm not disagreeing with you there. I asked Duncan earlier. Connor apparently tried to hire some dancers, but Nick and Joe nixed the idea. Something about drunk Immortals being dangerous enough without that added incentive."

We continued quietly watching the game for a few more hands before Richie suddenly asked, "How do you do it?"

Both Methos and I turned to him. "Hmm?"

He glanced at Methos a moment before returning his attention to the game. Quietly he asked, "How many mortal lovers have you had?"

"I lost count somewhere around two hundred. Why?"

"How do you do it?"

I frowned slightly in concern. I thought I knew where this was going, and it wasn't good. Methos frowned a little at the question. "Do what?"

"Fall in love with them even knowing that they're mortal."

Oh, shit. Quietly I asked, "What's wrong, Rich?"

He shook his head and sighed. "Nothing, but do you realize that Hoa will be thirty within a couple years?"

"And you're starting to feel mortality," finished Methos.

Richie frowned in thought before nodding. "I guess so, yeah."

Methos stared into space for a while before replying. "I wish there was an easy answer. The short version is that you don't ever get used to losing them." He sighed and took a swig of beer before continuing. "There are two ways of approaching it. If you never take a mortal lover, then you are never hurt when they die. However, that leads you to becoming old, bitter, and lonely. If you choose to have lovers, wives, whatever, then you're going to get hurt when they die. That's a given." He stared at his bottle in silence before adding, "I've been down both roads. The heartache is better than the loneliness." He smiled sadly, "At least this millennia it is."

A lump formed in my throat as I thought about Andrea. Out loud I said, "You were there when I lost Andrea, Richie. I miss her, but I wouldn't trade away any of the memories to lessen the pain."

Methos quirked an eyebrow at me. "You're entirely too young to be that maudlin. Stop it."

I chuckled a little as Richie said, "Okay, Gramps."

Methos graced him with a sour look before changing the subject. "Incidentally, I heard that Wolfe killed Kenny and you two were there. What happened?"

I shrugged when Richie looked over at me for permission to tell the story. He answered, "I was going to have a fair fight with him, but he took Hoa hostage. Nick shot him and took his head before he got up again."

Methos nodded. "She didn't get hurt, did she?"

Richie shook his head. "Just scared."

"Argh!" Connor's voice brought our attention back to the poker game. We turned just in time to see Connor glaring at his cards in frustration and Joe trying to look calm and innocent. A sizeable pile of chips in the middle of the table only made Joe's task more difficult. "The only damn mortal in the room and he beats me," Connor muttered as he stood unsteadily and headed to the restroom. I shot a glance at Liam and Robert, but they didn't react. They apparently knew enough about Joe that such a comment didn't surprise them.

As he was gathering cards to shuffle, Duncan muttered just loud enough for everyone to hear, "See? I'm nae bad luck for 'im. He's bad luck for himself."

Joe and Liam shared a chuckle while Joe raked in his winnings. From the looks of things, those two were doing quite well. Nick and Robert weren't very far behind, but Duncan was in trouble.

It took three more hands to finish Duncan off. From there, the stakes skyrocketed again. Two hands later, Robert fell out. The next hand claimed Nick. Both Joe and Liam were content to call it a draw at that point.

While Richie, Liam, and I were clearing the table and Joe was refilling the pitchers, Nick announced, "I have an idea."

"See, I told ye he could," said Connor to Duncan.

I had to bite my lip and Richie closed his eyes to prevent the laughter from slipping out. A sound that can only be described as a cross between hiccupping and snorting came from Methos's direction.

Nick glared at the Highlanders and then Methos for a moment before continuing, "Most of you have known Amanda longer than I have. How about you all tell me a story about her?"

I saw the gleam form in Duncan's eye. Methos did too and cut him off. "Mac, you'd better keep it polite. He IS going to marry her tomorrow." Duncan looked slightly depressed but nodded his agreement while the rest of us (with the exception of Nick) laughed.

"Will you tell us one, too?" asked Joe.

Nick nodded. "Sure. Who's first?" He leaned back in his chair, bringing a fresh cigar to life and clearly enjoying the evening.

Duncan said, "Well, since I'm being limited to 'polite', I guess I'll tell you about when we first met." He leaned back in his chair and frowned in thought. "I was walking through the marketplace in Cairo. Since I was just wandering through, I really didn't want to get involved in any Challenges, but I felt two Immortals anyway. As I was looking around, I spotted two women standing there with hands on sword hilts. And two lovelier ladies ye're

unlikely to see! One was taller and red hair, and the shorter had raven black, curly hair under their plumed hats. You should remember that this was during the age when women were seen but not heard. I just couldn't fathom two women walking around on their own like that. I approached them and offered my services as escort. The taller one, Rebecca Horne as it turns out, made it very clear that they didn't need protection, least of all the type that I was likely to provide. Amanda interrupted, saying that there were much better uses for such a handsome head than to cut it off. She pinned me to the wall and kissed me, not three minutes after seeing me for the first time! Once she stepped back, she said her good-byes and they walked off, arm in arm. It was less than a minute later that I realized what Amanda's preferred occupation was: My coin purse was gone. Remembering what direction they went, I took a short cut to get ahead of them. Once they rounded the corner, I smiled charmingly and plucked my purse from Amanda's hand." He smiled at the ceiling. "Then took them to a tavern to get to know them."

"Whatever DID happen to Rebecca? I've heard Amanda mention her several times but never been told where she is now," commented Nick.

"She's dead," stated Methos flatly from his seat at the bar.

Everyone shifted their attention to the oldest Immortal. "What happened?" asked Nick.

Methos gave a half smile. "Guess it's my turn to tell a story. This one is entitled 'The Methuselah Stone'." He took a sip of his beer before continuing. "Ever since Immortals started being noticed by mortals, the mortals of this world wanted Immortality for themselves. Legend has it that there IS a way to become Immortal. It's a magical crystal called the Methuselah Stone. Rebecca Horne was thousands of years old by the time she died. As part of her training, once she let her students go out into the wide, cruel world, she gave each of them a shard of a crystal that she had. Nick, you no doubt have seen Amanda's. She wears it on a chain as a necklace. Anyway, Rebecca never did tell her students what it was, just that the crystal shards were for luck. One Immortal by the name of Luther heard this story and decided that if the stone made mortals into Immortals, imagine what it would do for an Immortal! So he started hunting down Rebecca's students for all the pieces. He eventually found Rebecca and killed her for the pieces she had left."

"How'd Luther know the story?" wondered Liam.

Methos shrugged. "I don't know where he heard the story of the Methuselah Stone, but how he knew of Rebecca's students carrying around shards is quite simple. He was one of them."

Richie's jaw dropped and I felt mine do the same. Nick asked incredulously, "He killed his own teacher?"

Duncan grunted. "You'll find that Immortals will do damn near anything to get what they want." Robert, Liam, and Connor nodded solemnly. Each had their own stories, apparently.

Richie frowned slightly. "How is that an Amanda story?"

"Because the next year I asked her to help me steal it from the collection where it was being kept."

Robert looked at him in astonishment and a little apprehension. "And why did YOU want it?"

Methos sighed sadly. "To cure Alexa. A young lady I'd fallen in love with who was dying," he explained to Robert's raised eyebrow.

"Well," said Joe with forced good cheer, "we can't let this party get depressing. Hmm, a humorous story?" He leaned back in his chair and stroked his beard thoughtfully. He suddenly turned to Duncan with a wicked gleam in his eye. "Mac, how about I tell them about you, Amanda, Fitzcairn, and the Stone of Scone?"

Duncan groaned and put his head into his hands. "Please don't, Joe. I'll never hear the end of it if you do." Liam and Connor were looking at him strangely. They'd apparently heard of this thing. I certainly hadn't.

Joe chuckled. "Okay, okay. Hmm, then I'll tell the story I heard from you about when you found her in Saudi Arabia." Duncan looked up to listen to this story, and his lip twisted into a smile. Joe smiled back and launched the tale. "Her pilfering ways had finally caught up to her. She'd been caught stealing from a sultan's treasury and taken prisoner. Instead of putting her to death or cutting off a hand as was the custom, the sultan decided to bring her into his harem. He apparently didn't have any fair skinned wives yet and found her to be attractive. Duncan was a guest of this sultan the next day. As part of the entertainment, the harem had to do a dance for the distinguished visitor. You can imagine the sultan's surprise when Duncan MacLeod expressed an interest in his newest acquisition. I'm sure she filled out the clothing well, but probably couldn't dance to save her life!" Chuckles came from everyone.

"She probably danced better than she can sing," commented Richie.

"And how would you know how well she sings?" asked Duncan.

"Because she sang to me in a bar one night."

"WHAT?" came from Duncan, Joe, and Nick.

Richie smiled. "It was several years ago now. You were here in Paris, Mac, and I was taking care of the dojo. Amanda came breezing in one evening as I was closing. When I explained that you were out of town, she invited me along instead. There was a new bar opening, and she wanted to check it out." He shrugged, a little embarrassed. "When Amanda asks you to do something, how can you say no?" Everyone smiled. "Anyway, she took me to this bar. Problem is, I didn't know it was a karaoke bar until we got in there." I saw Joe shudder slightly out of the corner of my eye. Richie continued, "She kept buying me drinks and chattering away about anything and everything. I figured, 'What the hell? I didn't have anywhere to be, why not spend it with Amanda?' At any rate, after about my tenth beer, she suggests I get up and sing her a song. I try to refuse, but she gives me that little pout that she's so good at. I make a deal with her: If I sing one, she sings one. Next thing I know, I'm up there singing 'Everything I do, I

do it for you' to her. I must've been pretty bad, because I got more laughs than applause when I was done. Once I got back to the table, she tried to weasel out of singing, saying that she had a lousy singing voice. When asking nicely didn't work, I resorted to blackmail. She eventually went up and sang 'Material Girl'." He chuckled at the memory as I snickered at the choice. That song was perfect for her. Richie continued with an amused grin, "Let's just say she was right about her singing abilities and leave it at that."

Joe held up a hand. "Backtrack a second. You blackmailed her?" he asked in an incredulous voice.

Richie's grin got bigger. "Yep. I threatened to post her phone number in the locker room at the dojo." The room erupted in laughter.

"Ah, she may not have a voice of gold, but she certainly has a heart of one," countered Liam when the sound level dropped enough for conversation.

"Not that I'm disagreeing, but what do you mean?" I asked.

"Oh, it must have been nearly a hundred years ago now. Somebody stole the cross out of the sanctuary and emptied the offering box. The box wasn't a big deal, but the cross was made of solid gold. It would take a fortune to replace." He leaned back and smiled. "When I told her about it the next day, Amanda stared at the wall for a full minute before getting up and walking out, all the while muttering about talking with her 'contacts'. Well, not more than thirty-six hours later two men walked in and put the cross back on the front table. They then started apologizing profusely to me and all the parishioners who were in the room at the time. They didn't even stop when two police officers walked in and started listening. When they were leaving led away, they kept saying that they hoped that the 'crazy woman' would leave them alone now. When I asked Amanda about it later, she admitted to scaring them into returning the cross. I asked her, 'Why did you do it?' Her response was, 'They give thieves a bad name.'" Everyone laughed. That sounded so like Amanda's reasoning.

Nick looked over at de Valicourt. "Robert, how about you?"

He frowned in thought for a few moments and absently tapped the ash off his cigar before smiling. "We were living in San Francisco in 1889." He cocked his head as a slight frown formed. "Or was it 1890? Anyway, it was time for Gina and me to renew our vows. Amanda was going to be Gina's Maid of Honor that time around, and Amanda wanted to give her a proper bachelorette party. I didn't think anything of it since Joseph was giving me a bachelor party that same night anyway. So the time for the wedding arrives and no Gina or Amanda. Another half hour later and I was getting really worried. I was about to ask the sheriff to go looking for them when they came charging up on a horse-drawn wagon with a man chasing them yelling for them to stop. Gina ran inside to the dressing room, and Amanda hopped down and sweet-talked the man into not charging them with having stolen the wagon. They were just in a hurry, seeing as how it was Gina's wedding day, and they BORROWED the wagon to make it there on time. Eventually, the owner of the wagon left. I went to Amanda to ask what was going on but stopped when I saw how she looked. Her dress was torn in three different places, dirt on her face, hair an absolute disaster, and blood along one arm. I asked her what happened. She gives me that sweet, innocent smile she's so good at and replies, 'Why, whatever do you mean, Robert? Gina and I just got back from the party.'" Robert smiled at the ceiling a moment before continuing, "I asked Gina about it that night, but never did get a straight answer. Knowing Amanda, I'm not sure I WANT to know." Scattered chuckles sounded around the room.

Connor took up the tale-telling, "She broke me out of jail once."

"Wha' were ye doin' IN jail?" asked Duncan.

Connor grinned. "The lady in question was better at evading police than I was."

The silence was broken by Robert, "Come on, Connor. Tell us the whole story."

Connor nodded and then waved his shot glass at Richie. "The lad's right. When that black-haired seductress asks ye to do something, how do you say no? At any rate, she and I bumped into each other in New York a little over a century ago. Over dinner, she told me about a sure-fire way to steal a display of Spanish doubloons that were coming into the New York Museum of History from Madrid. All she needed was for another person to help out holding the rope and to be available to drive the carriage. I tried to refuse, but that woman could get the Pope to renounce his vows." He waved his hand at Nick's low growl. "But I'm off the subject. The plan went well until we were on our way off with the coins. The police responded faster than she thought they could. We split the doubloons and went separate directions after agreeing on where to meet. Well, to make a long story short, I've never been good at evading police. They caught me within a few minutes with a bag full of Spanish coins that I had no right to have on me. That night, Amanda came and broke me out of the jail." He chuckled at the memory. "And she was more mad at losing half the coins than anything else!"

Chuckling, Joe said, "How about you, Nick? You promised us a story, too."

Nodding, Nick started, "Well, originally, I was a cop in Toronto. I was investigating a jewelry theft and of course the name of Amanda Montrose came up immediately." He was interrupted momentarily by the chuckles and snickers around the room. Smiling, he continued, "That's how I met her. Her proving Immortality to me was much more . . . interesting. She'd told me what she was by this point, but I didn't believe her. So to prove the point, she shot herself in the heart in my truck. I pulled over and tried to help, but she was already dead. I just held her for a few minutes, trying to decide what to do." He scratched the back of his head in embarrassment. "That is until she gasped for breath. At that point, I dropped her and jumped back." More chuckles sounded. "She calmly asked for a hand back up. No shock in her voice, just like people getting up after being shot is an everyday occurrence." He chuckled at himself for a moment. "Well, I guess it is for some." Shaking his head at the memories, he turned to me.

Nodding, I said, "Well, I guess that leaves me to tell a story. This one goes along with Amanda's having a heart of gold. Duncan and Nick heard the beginning of this story last night." I waved my hand at them and took breath to calm the embarrassment down. "Right after Nick died the first time, he came to me for help. With Duncan's assistance, we got Connor to agree to teach him. They'd been gone for maybe a week before Amanda came to my place to see if I knew where Nick had gone to. The previous evening and into the morning I had a houseguest." I looked between Nick and Duncan and said, "Amanda said last night that we weren't expecting company. What she didn't tell you guys was that it was nearly noon when she got over to my place. And I answered the door barely awake and wearing a bathrobe." I paused. "And my guest came out of the bedroom

wearing one of my t-shirts." Several grins formed around the room, and I felt my face warm with a serious blush. "The scene was sensitive enough between Jennifer and myself. Amanda had the compassion to not make any smart comments. She just asked about Nick and took her leave when I wouldn't tell her where you had gone off to." I looked over at Nick and said, "My story may not be as funny as Joe's, but it shows her concern for you and sensitivity for me." I raised my mug in toast. "That's one special lady you're marrying, Nick Wolfe." Everyone raised their own glasses in accord.

Whatever else she may be, Amanda is special.

I arrived at the cathedral late the next afternoon for the wedding. Walking in past the huge double doors, I waded into several Buzzes simultaneously. Sorting through it as I waited in line to get a seat, I recognized everyone from last night plus Amanda and Basil Morgan whom I'd met a few years ago in Toronto. There were also three more Immortal signatures that I didn't know, but anyone here probably wasn't a threat.

Taking the seat I was led to, I looked around to see where everyone was seated. Unsurprisingly, the Immortals I recognized were scattered around the room. Spotting Robert, I realized one of the unknown Immortals was no doubt his wife Gina.

After I was seated, it didn't take long for the ceremony to start. Once the music started, Duncan, then Nick, then Connor filed out of a side door to stand at the front of the room beside Father Liam. Seeing that they were all smiling at the back of the room, I craned my neck around to see a young girl solemnly walking down the aisle, scattering rose petals. Curious, I checked the handout and discovered that this was Mary Lindsey. Once she made it to the front of the room, Duncan gently helped her back to sit by her mother. As he was getting back to his place, the traditional music started and everyone stood. Turning to see the bride, I was only mildly surprised to see that it was Methos who was "giving the bride away". I doubted he was a father figure to her, but he was a good choice anyway. Amanda herself was wearing a gorgeous dress that had surprisingly little lace or other ornamentation. I decided on the spot that the woman made the dress instead of the other way around. Based on Nick's expression, he agreed with my assessment. Come to think of it, everyone up there seemed to agree with it.

Smiling demurely, Amanda let Methos hand her off to Nick and the ceremony got under way. While Father Riley was talking about the immortal bonds of love, Duncan's position in the front caught my eye. He was apparently standing in witness for Amanda as Connor was for Nick. Interesting choice, considering the relationships involved.

By some amazing coincidence, everything went off without a hitch. Nobody even peeped at the "or forever hold your peace" line.

After the ceremony, we all migrated to a nearby banquet hall for the reception. Joe was tuning up on the bandstand, and I was sitting with Richie and Hoa, waiting for Jen to show up.

"How'd everything go last night?" I asked Hoa. Jen hadn't said anything to me last night or this morning about the girl's party. She had just smiled and shook her head.

Hoa giggled. "Really well. Everyone got a little tipsy and started telling embarrassing stories about the men in their lives. Even Lucy got into the action and told us a few stories about her husband." She frowned a little. "Come to think of it, I think Jen was the one who said the least last night."

I tried for a superior look and haughty tone, "That's because I have no embarrassing stories."

Hoa snickered as Richie said, "Shall I repeat the story you told last night?"

My face fell. "Um, no." I paused. "Please," I added.

Hoa raised an eyebrow and smiled at me before she dropped the subject, for which I was eternally grateful. "Anyway, I talked to her a little. I like her, by the way."

I smiled. "Nice to know you approve."

"When do I get to meet her?" asked Richie.

"Soon," I promised after checking my watch and discovering it was shortly after sunset. She should be on her way.

"So do we call Mac the Maid or Matron of Honor?" asked Richie with a wicked gleam in his eye.

Hoa swatted his arm. "I think it's sweet that he'd stand with her."

I agreed with Hoa but couldn't prevent the chuckle that escaped when thinking of Duncan MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod as a "Maid of Honor".

Nearly a dozen people in the room stiffened in their seats as two Immortal signatures approached. From the door, Connor announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you the bride and groom!"

Cheers, applause, and one or two wolf whistles greeted the new couple as they arrived. Smiling in embarrassment, Nick led Amanda over to the cake for the obligatory cutting and more picture taking.

While we were watching the cake being cut, I felt a cool hand fall to my shoulder. Looking up, I found Jen standing behind me, watching Nick and Amanda. Standing, I said, "Richie, I would like you to meet Jennifer Frost. Jen, this is Richie Ryan. I believe you met Hoa last night."

She smiled at him and shook his hand politely before taking the seat I was holding for her. Richie couldn't tear his gaze away from Jen. Hoa finally leaned over to him and whispered something. He tore his gaze back to Nick and Amanda, but he flushed scarlet. Jen's mouth twitched in amusement. I grinned, realizing that she'd probably heard whatever it was Hoa said to Richie.

I turned and got my first good look at Jen and realized what the problem was. For starters, her dress was new. She'd somehow managed to find a dress that was the exact shade of green as her eyes. Between the dark green dress and vibrant red hair twined in some intricate braid falling down her back, the whole effect was stunning. No wonder Richie couldn't tear his eyes away from her!

Hoa whispered into my ear, "Now YOU'RE drooling. Behave yourself, Ryan."

I blinked and looked at her in surprise. Jen's soft laughter kept my embarrassment to a minimum, though.

Shaking off the distracting thoughts, I saw that the guests of honor had moved on to their table. Standing, I offered to get cake for Jen. As a vampire, I knew she couldn't actually eat any of it, but we had to keep up appearances. Since we'd discussed it previously, she didn't react to my ridiculous offer, merely shaking her head. I glanced over at Richie and Hoa to find them nodding and Hoa saying, "Thank you."

I nodded in response and got into the line for cake. I found myself beside the de Valicourts and chatted with Gina as the line slowly moved forward. Once we got to the head of the line, another shock awaited me. Serving cake was Lucy Becker and a younger lady I didn't recognize.

Lucy lit up the instant she spotted me. "Ryan! I'm glad you could make it. I'd like you to finally meet my niece. Rachel, this is Ryan Chessman, the young friend of Amanda's that I've been telling you about." She beamed at the two of us.

I bit my lip when I noticed Rachel roll her eyes and sigh soundlessly. Still, she smiled at me politely. "How do you do?"

I shook her hand and smiled at her, mumbling a polite reply. Gathering three plates of cake, I made my way back to our table.

"I'll kill her," Jen announced as I distributed the cake.

Hoa and Richie looked confused as I laughed. "I don't think that'd be a good idea, Jen. She's just being her usual matchmaking self. She obviously doesn't know about us."

Jen started muttering to herself as Hoa asked, "What'd I miss?"

Trying not to smile for Jen's sake, I said, "Amanda's friend Lucy Becker. She's the one up there serving the cake," I indicated. Hoa and Richie glanced over at her as I continued, "She's been trying to set me up with her niece on a date for years. Well, she finally got the two of us in the same room. Based on Rachel's reaction, Lucy has been working on her as well as me." I sighed. "How do you tell Lucy 'Thanks but no thanks.'?"

Hoa giggled. "One of my roommates had an aunt like that. Said it drove her nuts." She frowned and glanced back over at Lucy and Rachel. Turning to Jen, she asked, "You heard them from over here?" She absently started eating the cake that I'd put in front of her.

Jen nodded. "Good ears." I nearly choked on my cake. That was definitely an understatement.

From the front of the room, I heard Joe over the speakers, "As is the custom, the first song is reserved for the bride and groom. After that, everyone feel free to join in or request songs." As he was speaking, Nick and Amanda moved to the dance floor. At the first strands of the new song, they started slowly dancing. The entire room watched, mesmerized, as the couple in dazzling white gently swayed to the sound of Joe and his band.

Once that song faded out, Nick and Amanda drifted back over to their table and the dance floor filled with other couples, including Jen and me. Once we were comfortably swaying to the song, I asked Jen, "What do you think of Richie and Hoa?"

She sighed softly into my shoulder. "They're obviously in love. They're good for each other."

From my angle, I could barely make out her slight frown. "What is it?"

She shook her head. "Just thinking about something."

"What?"

"I haven't decided yet. I'll let you know."

Okay . . . Like I understand what THAT'S supposed to mean.

We comfortably moved through the crowd, enjoying the feel of each other until the song ended. At that point I led Jen back to the table and held out her seat for her. As she was sitting, I asked our table mates if they wanted something to drink.

Jen shook her head, but Richie jumped up and offered to get them. While Richie was off doing that, I scanned the room to get an idea of who all was around. Duncan and Doctor Lindsey were dancing, as were Robert and Gina. Looking over at the band, I saw Richie drop two sheets of paper into a glass container next to Joe. Taking an indirect route, Richie returned to our table and distributed the punch glasses he'd brought.

After Richie had seated himself, the four of us casually talked for a time before Jen said, "I have a hypothetical question for the two of you, if I may."

Richie raised one eyebrow slightly and nodded. Hoa propped her head up on one hand and gazed steadily at Jen.

Taking a deep breath, she asked, "Do you two believe a person's nature determines their actions and personality?"

Huh? Where was she going with this?

Both Hoa and Richie frowned at Jen in confusion. "Huh?"

Her brow furrowed in thought. Glancing at Hoa, she asked Richie, "How freely can I speak?"

I answered, "Hoa knows we're Immortals if that's what you're asking."

She nodded. "Immortality is a good example. Do you two believe all Immortals are destined to become cynical, calculating, and paranoid?"

I was frowning again, this time in mild anger. "How can you say that? If you think that about me, why are you staying with me?"

She shook her head. "I didn't say *I* think that. I'm asking if THEY," she waved at Richie and Hoa, "believe that."

Richie was frowning in distaste. "No," he stated flatly.

Hoa curled a hand around Richie's elbow. "I agree. Just because he's Immortal doesn't mean he'll turn out to be a cynical bastard like some other old Immortals I've met."

Richie glanced at her and a lip twitched toward a smile. He was no doubt thinking about Methos, just like I was.

Jen nodded. "Okay, thanks." She turned her head to watch the dancers.

I looked at her in mild amazement. "What, that's it?" Jen's attention turned to me. "You ask that question and then drop the whole topic when you get your answer?"

"Yes," was the steady response as she returned her gaze to the dance floor.

I glared at her half-heartedly for another few seconds. I leaned back in my chair and looked up at the ceiling. "Women!" I turned to Richie. "If I ever claim to understand women, kill me, okay?"

He brightened. "Can I?"

Hoa swatted his arm.

Jen looked at me in disgust. "I'll explain later, okay?"

Whatever. Instead of commenting (and probably getting myself into a LOT more trouble), I grabbed my empty drink cup and headed up to the punch bowl for a refill.

As Rachel was ladling more punch for me, she commented, "This'll break Aunt Lucy's heart."

One eyebrow rose and I half smiled. "My getting more punch will break her heart?"

She rolled her eyes at my lack of understanding. "NO. The fact that you have a girlfriend will. She can't try to play matchmaker with us anymore."

I cocked my head. "Well, I'm not going to apologize for Jen, but I AM sorry to leave you to her tender mercies."

She giggled.

I smiled in answer before asking, "Could I ask a favor?" She inclined her head in what I took as permission. "When Amanda throws the bouquet, I think it'd be nice for Hoa to catch it. She's the other Vietnamese lady sitting at my table. At any rate, I've already asked Jen to help, so if you two could bracket her in the center and then steer her toward it . . ."

Her grin was all the answer I needed.

"That is vicious, but a wonderful idea," commented a voice behind me.

I turned, afraid of who may have overheard. And I came face to face with Doctor Lindsey. I smiled and offered her my hand. "Doctor, so nice to see you again. And yes, it is sneaky. But Hoa and Richie deserve a little happiness. For what it's worth, I'm going to recruit Mac and Adam into helping me do the same with Richie and the garter."

Doctor Lindsey handed her glass to Rachel as I was talking, and once I had finished my explanation, she nodded. "I'll inform Duncan, and he'll get Adam for you." She grinned a little. "And I'll help with Hoa." She paused and studied me a moment before nodding. "Now I remember you. I met you at the hospital when your friend . . ." She trailed off. "Sorry."

I nodded. "It's okay. Yes, we did meet at the hospital just after Andrea died. I did want to meet you under better circumstances, and these certainly qualify."

She nodded back. "That they do. Sorry to cut this short, but I'd better be getting back to Mary. Nice seeing you again, Mister Chessman."

Retrieving my glass from Rachel, I walked off toward Joe and the band. Once there, I spotted a pad of paper next to what looked like a huge brandy snifter. Deciding that's where the requests were being submitted, I wrote "Everything I do, I do it for you" on one sheet and "Material Girl" on another before depositing both in the bowl.

I made my way back to the table. Taking a seat, I ask Hoa, "How long are you two going to be in town?"

She shrugged. "A few days."

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Jen nod, seemingly to herself. Richie apparently noticed too, since he frowned at her.

She must have noticed his attention, because she turned to him with a smile. "That's good. Ryan and I would like to see you again before we go back to Toronto." She pulled a pen out of her microscopic purse (how the hell did she fit a pen in there?) and jotted down something on one of the monogrammed napkins lying on the table. "We're staying with my grandmother here in town. If you two could come by at six tomorrow evening?" She handed the napkin to Richie with a smile.

He took it and glanced at the writing before folding it and placing it into his pocket. With a glance at Hoa for her reaction, he nodded his agreement. "Sure." He gave me an evil grin. "Staying with her GRANDMOTHER?"

I shrugged. "Jen hasn't seen her in years. And it's free rent and free guides." I grinned back. "Besides, neither of us is a screamer."

Jen flushed scarlet (what do you know, vampires CAN blush), and Hoa bit a knuckle and turned purple in an effort not to laugh. I held Richie's gaze steadily until he turned away.

"Ryan," Jen growled. Hoa lost control over her laughter at that.

I waved a hand at Richie. "That's what he was getting at."

He looked hurt. "Was not."

I sighed at him as Hoa frowned. Giving him a stern look, I asked, "Need I remind you that I'm an Immortal lie detector?"

He opened his mouth and shut it again before blushing faintly. I grinned triumphantly and folded my arms across my chest. Jen nodded an apology to me, and Hoa giggled.

As the band was winding down from a song, I heard a musical chiming. As I was turning my head to try to identify it, more chiming came from various directions. I grinned and turned to the main table in time to see Nick and Amanda stand and start an enthusiastic kiss. Nearly a minute later, they came up for air, to the general cheering in the room.

Once everyone had calmed down a little, Connor stood with glass in hand. "I'd like to propose a toast. And for once I'll be serious." Scattered laughter interrupted him for a moment before he continued. "To Nick and Amanda: May your love shine as long and as brightly as long you both shall live."

The general agreement of the room caused an embarrassed smile from both bride and groom as everyone ceremoniously drank.

When Connor sat back down, the band launched into "Everything I do, I do it for you." Pushing back my chair, I offered Jen my hand and led her to the dance floor. Once we were comfortably swaying, I saw Duncan moving to the music with young Mary Lindsey standing on his feet. He looked up and noticed my attention. I raised one eyebrow in query, and he nodded back. The plan with Richie was on.

I chuckled as his dance partner demanded his attention. Into my ear Jen whispered, "What?"

I nodded toward Duncan and the young Miss Lindsey and turned us around enough that she could see them.

She turned and smiled at the scene as she laid her head against my chest again. She sighed and said, "That's one thing I'm going to miss."

"What's that?"

"Kids."

I thought about it for a second. "Though neither of us is physically capable, that doesn't mean we can't adopt."

She stopped dancing and looked at me. "You're kidding."

I shrugged at her and gently pulled her back into the dance. "Why not? Duncan has unofficially adopted several kids." I paused as I thought about it some more. "Though I'd like to only adopt pre-Immortal kids."

She was frowning at me again. "You're serious."

"I've thought about it some, yeah. I'm not interested in doing this anytime soon, but it's an option for the future."

She looked at me in frank appraisal. "You're full of surprises, Ryan Chessman."

I smiled at that one. "Now, what was with that question you asked Richie and Hoa earlier?"

She shook her head. "I'll discuss it with you tonight. And I still haven't decided it for myself yet, either."

I sighed in frustration. "You're not going to tell me anything, are you?"

She grinned unrepentantly. "Nope."

I growled in mock anger as the song wound down. She didn't take it seriously since she giggled as she took the seat I held out. From the

Madonna's voice, so I can't fulfill the five requests for 'Material Girl' that have come in."

Though the sound that came from the head table was loud, it didn't QUITE qualify as a bellow. "RYAN! I'm gonna kill you!"

Everyone turned in time to see Amanda stride angrily toward our table and Richie bolt for the men's room. Since her eyes tracked him, I wasn't afraid for my own life, though I was just as much to blame since I was one of the five. I gritted my teeth in an effort not to laugh. I didn't dare look around the room for the others in the room who might have been the culprits.

Once she stalked back to the front table, Joe continued amid the snickering, "With that, we'll be taking ten minutes. See you soon."

Hoa looked over toward the men's room where Richie was still hiding. She turned to me with something resembling a smirk. "Will you please go get my big, bad boyfriend out of his hiding place?"

With my eyes alight in amusement, I excused myself and retrieved Richie. It took a few minutes before he was convinced Amanda wouldn't kill him outright, but he did eventually come out under his own volition. Amanda contented herself with merely glaring at Richie.

The next hour or so, with everyone generally enjoying themselves, passed relatively uneventfully.

Until it was time for the garter and bouquet.

When Joe made the announcement that it was time for the throwing of the bouquet, Jen jumped up and grabbed Hoa's hand and practically drug her off toward where Amanda was standing. Since I was watching, I saw how Jen deftly forced her way to the front and center of the gathering group of women. Rachel quietly slipped in on Hoa's other side and Doctor Lindsey appeared behind them. Amanda turned her back to the group and threw the flowers on the count of "three". Her aim was off. Instead of going toward the center where Hoa was, they headed straight toward Jen. Her hands came up like she was going to catch it, but her left hand inconspicuously batted it into Hoa's chest. Faking disappointment, Jen sighed dramatically as all the other women congratulated Hoa on a good catch.

Duncan magically appeared behind Richie's chair. "You realize what this means, don't you?"

Richie craned his neck around to look at Mac. "What's that?"

"You have to catch the garter now."

Richie frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Well, whichever of us guys catches the garter gets to put it on Hoa. And unless you trust one of us to reach our hands up her skirt . . ."

Richie's jaw dropped. I could see him turn to me, but I was looking up at Duncan. "That sounds like fun." I gave a leer which Duncan returned with a smile.

Richie growled and got up to stomp over to where the women were dispersing. As I passed Jen, I gave her a subtle wink. I turned to Duncan once Richie was a couple paces ahead. "Well done. He'll fight for it now."

Duncan solemnly nodded, but I could see the smile forcing its way onto his face. By the time we reached the gathering bachelors, Richie had already planted himself in Hoa's previous spot. Duncan and I bracketed him, and Methos, Joe, and Connor arrayed behind us. None of us had to worry, though. Nick's throw came right at Richie and was quickly snatched out of the air.

Grinning triumphantly, Richie walked over to where Hoa was seated. Kneeling down, he slid the garter over the foot that she helpfully held up to him. When he tried to stop with the garter just over her knee, the assembled bachelors jeered and urged him to go higher. Connor's voice rose above the others, "If that's all the better you can do, lad, let me have a shot." Richie gave Connor a venomous glare and slid it another four inches. The crowd broke into applause as Richie and Hoa stood and headed toward the dance floor.

As I was taking my seat next to Jen, I noticed that Nick, Amanda, and Connor were making a discreet exit. I flagged Duncan down as he was walking past. "They're leaving already?" I asked, nodding towards the three retreating backs.

Duncan shook his head. "Not quite yet. They have a few more pictures and then they're going to change before making the mad dash outside."

"Just so long as they don't leave before we have the chance to pelt them with rice," quipped Jen.

Duncan laughed. "Half the people in here would have my head on a platter if I let that happen."

I grinned at his comment. "Literally as well as figuratively." He tilted his head ruefully before I continued, "Anyone decorating their car appropriately?"

His grin turned slightly malicious. "Joe, Adam, Connor, and I took care of that this morning. It won't be here to take the new couple away, but rest assured, it's been taken care of." With that, he began circulating around the room again.

Jen watched him pensively. "I wonder what he meant by that."

I shrugged. "We'll find out eventually. Incidentally, good job on the bouquet."

She gave me an innocent look. "How do you know I wasn't trying to catch it myself?"

I grinned back. "Your hand - eye coordination is WAY too good."

She smiled in acknowledgement.

We had another half hour worth of dancing before Lucy came up to our table with a basket of little bags full of birdseed. As we were all arming ourselves, I introduced her to everyone. "Lucy, I'd like you to meet Richie Ryan, his fiancée Vu Tran Hoa, and my girlfriend Jennifer Frost. Gang, this is Lucy Becker, a friend of Amanda's."

She smiled politely and shook hands all around, though she looked slightly depressed over my "girlfriend". Oh, well. Can't win them all. "If you'll all line up outside that entrance," she said, pointing toward the door Amanda and Nick gone through previously, "the bride and groom will be leaving in the next ten minutes."

"Oh, goodie. I get to pummel Amanda with something." Richie looked positively excited.

Everyone had a good chuckle at him as we leisurely made our way outside.

Once we had a view outside, we realized what Duncan meant by saying that their car wouldn't be taking them away. At the end of the walkway, a white horse-drawn carriage complete with a "Just Married" poster and liveried driver sat patiently. Upon seeing it, Jen posted herself as far from the horse as she could and still be along the obvious escape route that Amanda and Nick would have to use.

Sliding in just behind her, I whispered, "Something wrong?"

Shaking her head, she leaned back into me and turned her head to tell me, "I tend to make most animals nervous. They seem to be able to sense us much more easily than humans can."

The 'us' she was referring to was clearly vampires. I thought about it for a second and commented, "Perhaps because we rely on sight much more than almost any other animals do. Our other senses are tuned down too far."

She nodded and commented almost to herself, "Fortunately."

I wrapped my arms around her and rocked her gently. Despite the fact that she'd been a vampire for a few years now, she still wasn't comfortable with all the facts of her relatively new existence.

The walkway was quickly lined with guests, and Lucy and Rachel continued to pass out the birdseed weaponry. Apparently at a subtle signal from Connor at the doors, the coachman climbed down from his seat and held open the door to the carriage and waited. This clued the rest of us sufficiently that Nick and Amanda hadn't a prayer of making it that far without being bombarded from all sides. Laughing and giggling, they both shook out their hair out before climbing into the carriage past the smiling driver. Once they were settled comfortably, he calmly shut the door and climbed back up to his seat. Flicking the reins, he set the carriage in majestic motion. Before he'd made it twenty feet, his passengers were locked into a passionate kiss, provoking another round of cheers and wolf whistles from the guests. Nick broke off the kiss and looked over the back of the seat toward the diminishing crowd illuminated in the streetlights. Throwing a cheery wave at us, he leaned over and knocked Amanda down below the visible level of the seat back. We could all hear a brief shriek (that wasn't at all unhappy) before it was abruptly cut off.

Chuckling among ourselves, everyone slowly filtered back into the banquet hall to retrieve purses and coats.

Once we had gathered our things, Jen and I headed to the door. Connor and Duncan were seeing everyone off.

"See you before we leave town?" I asked Duncan.

He nodded. "Sure. You still have the directions to the barge?"

I nodded before turning to Connor. "Nice seeing you again, Connor."

He shook my hand. "Take care of yourself." He smiled roguishly at Jen as he gallantly kissed her hand. "And the lass," he added to me.

I chuckled at her raised eyebrow. "She's quite capable of taking care of herself, but I'll accept the thought. You two need help cleaning this place up?"

They shook their heads. "Off with you," said Connor, waving us on our way before he turned to the next exiting guest.

I unlocked the door to Aaron and Theresa's home with the spare key they'd lent us. Cracking it open, I called in, "It's okay, Aaron. It's us."

"We know," replied Terry's voice.

I walked in with Jen and turned a raised eyebrow at Terry who was curled up on the couch with a laptop. "How?" I asked curiously.

She smiled. "Two people approaching, but only one heartbeat? How many other vampire - Immortal couples do you think there are?" Her smile grew. "And of those, how many are in town and have a key to this house?"

I half-grinned in acknowledgement. "I take your point."

As I was pulling off my tie and coat and heading back to our room, I heard Jen ask, "Grandma, can we go for a walk? I need some advice."

That stopped me in my tracks. I turned a questioning look at Jen, but she just shook her head. Terry had also raised an eyebrow but was putting her computer away and getting ready to go out.

Shrugging at the minor mystery, I turned to Aaron who was on the recliner next to the couch. "You up for some sparring?"

He thought about it for a second before nodding and putting his book on the table beside him. "Sure. There's an exercise room I have downstairs we can use."

He headed to his bedroom as the girls went out the front door.

I met him downstairs after I'd changed into a workout shirt and shorts. He was stretching as I walked in the room. Since he was apparently content with loosening up first, I laid my weapons down across from his longsword and started my own stretching katas. Once I was loosened up, I found him looking down at my weapons in interest. "Two blades?"

I nodded. "I know it's unusual, but it seems to work for me." I glanced at his sword. It looked like a standard English longsword except for the deep red gemstone in the pommel. I frowned at it. "A ruby in the pommel?"

He smiled slightly and shook his head. "It isn't a ruby."

I waited, but he didn't say anything. "Okay, I'll bite. What is it?"

He stared off into space for a few moments before shaking his head. "Doesn't really matter."

I cocked my head in a clear question.

He shook his head again. "We going to spar?" he asked as he leaned over to retrieve his weapon.

Fine, so he wasn't going to tell me anything about that sword. Taking my own weapons in hand, I asked, "Rules of engagement?"

"Flat of the blade. Don't ruin nearly as many shirts that way."

Nodding in acceptance, I took a step back before saluting him with my wakizashi. I settled myself into a defensive stance. In addition to having several inches of reach on me, he had better than two thousand years of experience. I didn't expect to do well against him, but I figured the practice couldn't hurt.

I was both right and wrong. I was right that I wouldn't do well. I was wrong that practice wouldn't hurt. He managed to fracture a few bones when I overextended my right hand and it was exposed, not to mention the multiple bruises he inflicted.

I did actually manage to hit him once with my knife. He'd apparently not fought a two bladed opponent very often and left himself partially open to a solid blow on the outside of his sword arm. I almost smiled at that point since the hit would have nearly disarmed him if it were real. I didn't smile since he'd already "killed" me a dozen times by that point.

By the time we'd been going for an hour, I was nearly falling over from exhaustion. I was saved from crying "uncle" by the arrival of the ladies. They came walking in after Aaron had thrown me into a particularly painful wall. I stayed down, panting.

I heard the women walk in and pause before Terry asked, "You beating up the young ones again?"

"Actually, he's done quite well."

I looked up in amazement. He'd broken a sweat but wasn't breathing heavy. "WELL? You've spent the past hour wiping the floor with me!"

"He has a few years on you," Terry pointed out.

She had a point. Better than two thousand years certainly makes a difference. But that didn't make my shoulder feel any better.

Pulling myself up with a hand from Jen, I formally bowed to Aaron. "I concede, sir."

He smiled and saluted me with his blade. "Well done, Ryan. Some more experience and you'll be a force to be reckoned with."

I'd rather be left alone, but I appreciated the compliment.

Dressing after my shower, I asked Jen, "Can I ask what's going on yet?"

She turned off the TV after a futile hunt for something decent to watch. Laying the remote down on the bed next to her, she asked, "What do you think of Hoa?"

I thought about it a few seconds as I was pulling a t-shirt and shorts on. "She's a good friend. She's fun and good for Richie. She's roughly our age, of course, so there's a lot of commonality. She's also one of the few non-Immortals who knows about us and I can talk to about it." I smiled at Jen. "She's also a good looking woman, and I would probably try to be more than a friend to her if we weren't together and she didn't have Rich."

She nodded once. "How serious are they, do you think?"

I frowned in confusion but thought about my answer. "Very. They ARE engaged, after all." I remembered Richie's comment about the fact that she's getting older and how he's feeling mortality secondhand for the first time. "In fact, I think Richie is beginning to feel regret that he'll outlive her. He made a comment to that effect at the bachelor party."

Jennifer nodded thoughtfully. She stared at the wall, obviously thinking about something before I asked, "Why are we talking about this?"

She shook her head again and stood up. Taking me by the hand, she walked me back toward the front of the house, ignoring my requests for an explanation. Once she got to the front room, she let go of my hand next to the couch. "Have a seat. This is going to take a while. Want anything to drink, Grandma?" she asked of Terry who was sitting on the other end of the couch.

"Please. Tell Aaron to bring Ryan something out as well."

Jen nodded and headed to the kitchen. Once she'd left the room, I sat and asked Terry, "Do you know what's going on?"

"Yes. Wait until we're all here and comfortable, though. Jennifer's right. This discussion will take a while."

My confusion was touched by a little apprehension by now. What was going on?

Aaron emerged from the kitchen with two brown unlabeled bottles in hand. He gave me one and took a seat on the recliner. I looked at the bottle in curiosity. "What's this?"

He grinned. "Try it."

Shrugging, I took a swig, figuring that it was homemade beer. It wasn't. It was a LOT heavier and stronger. I nearly choked. "What IS this?" I coughed out as Terry reached over and whapped me on the back.

"It's called mead. Kind of an old style beer."

"Good God. It's a wonder you survived this stuff," I commented, looking at the bottle in my hand in shock and suspicion.

Aaron was chuckling at my reaction as Jen came back in with two goblets. Handing one to Terry, she sat down next to me on the couch.

"Okay, the gang's all here. Is anyone going to explain this to me?" I asked in mild annoyance.

I could see Terry's careful expression of neutrality and Jen chewing on a lip, apparently trying to decide how to proceed, but it was Aaron who answered, "Ryan, what do you think of vampires?"

I frowned at him in blank confusion. "This a trick question?" He shook his head calmly. "Well, unless I'm mistaken, I'm sharing a couch with two of them. One's your wife, and the other is practically mine." His eyebrow went up at that, but he made no comment. I continued, "If I thought they were potentially a problem, I certainly wouldn't be here."

"Not quite what I asked, but enlightening anyway. No, what I wanted to know is what you thought about vampires AS A WHOLE."

I leaned my head back and frowned in thought as Jen snuggled up to me. Finally, I just shrugged, absently laying an arm around Jennifer. "They're people, just like everyone else. Some good, some bad. Their longevity gives some of the older ones a unique perspective on the human condition perhaps, but then so do the older Immortals." I sighed, and I looked down while my lip twisted in a grimace. "Though we're a much more paranoid bunch. Unfortunately."

I looked up to find Aaron nodding thoughtfully. "True. Though you'll oftentimes find older vampires to be more callous toward humans as well. Present company aside, most vampires don't give a rat's ass about humans."

"Outside of these two, I can only think of one besides Nick Knight who have any sympathies for humans," I agreed.

Terry nodded. "Even Michelle only tolerates them."

I raised an amused eyebrow. "Them? You WERE born human, Theresa. As was everyone else in the room."

Terry and Aaron shook their heads. Aaron said, "No, you and I aren't human. We're Immortal. We may LOOK human, but we aren't physically human any more than vampires are." He paused momentarily to collect his thoughts before continuing. "Vampirism is caused by an outside agent. Immortality is something we were born with."

Hmm. Good point. I nodded in acknowledgement. "Okay, that's true." I cocked my head to the side. "Where's this conversation going, anyway?"

Aaron shifted his attention to Jen so I did as well. She sighed softly. "I'm considering taking a child."

I cocked my head at her. "At the risk of sounding ignorant or chauvinistic, we're not talking about a young human to raise here, are we?"

Terry shook her head. "No. In essence, she's talking about creating a great-grandchild for me." She blew a breath through pursed lips before going on. "It's something all vampires can do, but most don't take it very seriously. Fortunately, Jennifer seems to understand the ramifications. She's discussed it with me, and I have no objections. That leaves only you."

I blinked in surprise. "Me? I CAN'T become a vampire, can I?" Though the idea of an Immortal vampire certainly was fascinating from a theoretical standpoint.

Jen spoke quietly, "No, but you know her."

It all became clear in one moment. "Hoa."

"Hoa," Jen agreed with a nod.

Oh, boy. I leaned my head against the back of the couch and stared at the ceiling while I thought about it.

Well, it'd make Richie happy. He wouldn't lose her anytime soon, probably. She'd be happy for the same reasons. After a few adjustments to their lifestyle, they'd potentially be happy forever.

But, oh, those adjustments.

I looked back down at Jen. "Hate to ask a stupid question, but why are you asking me? Why not ask her?"

"I intend to. But only if you think she and Richie can deal with it."

I started chuckling. "Honey, Richie can deal with anything as long as he gets to keep her forever. I'm more worried if SHE can deal with it. I'm sure it takes some serious getting used to."

Jen rolled her eyes. "It sure does," commented Terry in wry amusement. "However, having a stable relationship will make it easier on her."

Not surprising, that. "Okay, now what?"

"They're coming over tomorrow," Jen pointed out. "You boys go for a walk when they get here, and Grandma and I will talk it over with Hoa. If she agrees, then we can get Richie back in here and talk with him. If they both agree, then we can plan from there."

I answered the door the next evening. Everyone agreed that they'd be more comfortable if I was the first one they saw. And comfort was something that was going to be in short enough supply tonight.

I smiled at the couple, though Richie still had a hand in his coat. "Come on in. It's okay, Richie. Aaron is a friend." The aforementioned Aaron was sitting on the couch with his hands in plain sight. No sense in having Richie more twitchy than necessary.

As I let them in, Jen came out of the kitchen and smiled at Hoa and Richie. "Why don't you guys go for a walk? Hoa and I have some girl talk to take care of."

Aaron and I nodded at her cue. As I was pulling my coat on, Aaron said, "I have my cell phone with me. Give us a call if we're not back when you're done."

"Sure thing," Jen answered distractedly before offering Hoa something to drink.

"You sure got me out of there quick, Ryan. What's up?" Richie asked once we'd made it to the end of the block.

I was pulling my attention away from the sunset as Aaron laughed. "Have you ever LISTENED to 'girl talk'? I've been around a LOT longer than either of you two. Trust me that this is easier on us in the long run."

Richie chuckled and stuck out his hand to Aaron with a smile. "Richie Ryan."

"Antonius Aurelius Constantine, at your service," Aaron sketched a half bow to Richie. He smiled. "Though I go by Aaron Grey."

Richie turned to me with a raised eyebrow and asked, "I thought you said you were staying with Jennifer's grandmother."

Aaron (Antonius?) answered, "They are. My wife Terry is Jennifer's grandmother."

Richie nodded at the information before cocking an eyebrow at Aaron. "With a name like Antonius, you had to be Roman."

"Originally," Aaron agreed as he started walking again.

Something Aaron had said finally registered with me. "Constantine? Any relation to Marcus Constantine?"

Aaron smiled. "My father." He shrugged. "Adopted father anyway."

I blinked in surprise. Wow. You learn something every day.

We chatted easily as Aaron led us to a local brewpub and ordered a beer for each of us before leading us to a table. Once we had settled, I said, "I have a theory, and I want your opinions on it."

"Theorize away. I promise not to laugh too loud."

"Your confidence is noted, Aaron, thank you." Richie snickered. I continued, undaunted, "Does anyone know where Immortals comes from?"

They both shook their heads. Aaron spoke up, "Comments about the birds and bees aside, not really, no. I've heard some pretty wild theories, but

nothing provable."

"Well, here's another theory for you: The extra leakage from an unleashed Quickening."

Aaron narrowed his eyes slightly, but Richie widened his. "Erh?"

"Some of the Quickening energy ends up being 'grounded out', right? What if that energy doesn't just go away in the earth, but rather finds a new home in the form of an unborn child?"

Aaron frowned thoughtfully. "That's an interesting theory, but it doesn't explain why we're all foundlings."

I sighed. He WOULD have to find a hole in my theory. "True." I gave a shrug. "I don't know. Well, just add that one to your list of wild theories. If you ever DO find out the truth, let me know?"

He chuckled. "Will do. Hey, have you two heard the joke about . . ." His pocket chirped, interrupting him. Digging out his cell phone, he held it up to his ear. "Grey." He listened intently for a nearly a minute before nodding and saying, "We'll do that. We're about a twenty minute walk out. See you then." He stood as he dropped the phone back into his pocket. "Finish up, gentlemen. It's time for us to get going."

Richie and I stood and pulled on our jackets before following Aaron back out the door. We were nearly a block away before Aaron broke the silence. "Richie, how much do you know about the supernatural?"

My head jerked up and over to stare incredulously at him. PLEASE tell me he wasn't about to tell Richie what I thought he was out in public like this.

Richie was clearly lost. "Huh? Supernatural like what? Immortals probably qualify. That the kind of thing you're talking about?"

"Sort of. I'm more asking about what you'd consider to be mythological beings. Angels, devils, like that."

"Ghosts, ghouls, and goblins?" Richie asked in amusement.

"Yes," came the level answer.

Richie shrugged before turning to face forward again. "Until I see a ghost, I can't really believe in them."

"Fair enough," Aaron answered. He saw my scrutiny and shook his head fractionally. This evening was definitely going to be interesting.

The quiet walk ended once we made it back to Aaron's home. He led the way inside to find all three girls sitting around the front room. Jen and Terry seemed at ease, but Hoa's eyes seemed a little wide.

I walked over to Jen and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. Looking back up, I saw Richie sitting down next to Hoa in concern. "You okay?" he asked.

She shook her head before taking a deep breath. "Ask me again after Jen and Theresa talk to you."

"Terry," the woman in question immediately corrected.

Richie looked up and frowned as Aaron shared a kiss with her. He glanced back and forth between Jen and Terry. "Um, Aaron, I thought you said you were married to Jen's grandmother."

Terry nodded calmly. "Jen is my childe's childe, yes."

Richie slowly said, "Jen looks about twenty-five, and you don't look much above thirty." Confusion and questions were expressing themselves on his face clearly.

I took over the conversation with him. "Richie, how old is Duncan MacLeod?"

He glanced at Terry and mumbled, "Um . . ."

I waved his concern off. "She knows about Immortals."

Richie nodded and answered my previous question, "Mac's four hundred something."

"And he looks to be in his mid-thirties," I agreed. I let that thought hang in the air so Richie could process it.

He stared at her for a few seconds before asking, "You're Immortal?" It was the only possible answer he could come up with, but he knew it wasn't the truth, either.

"Of a sort. I'm a vampire."

Richie laughed nervously, obviously waiting for the punch line. He looked from the completely calm faces of Terry, to Aaron, me, Jen, and finally settled on the still pale face of Hoa. He took Hoa's hand, and she gripped him tight enough that he winced. Composing his features, he turned to me. I took it as a mark of his trust in me that first he was asking ME, and second that he wasn't trying to kill someone. "Is she serious?" he asked with a head tilt toward Terry.

"Yes, she is," I answered. "Theresa Ryan is almost the same age as her husband. You already know he was originally a Roman."

Jen's eyebrows skyrocketed as she turned to Aaron. Hoa didn't react. Heck, I wasn't sure she was even breathing at this point.

"I'll assume for the moment that you're not all insane. Why are you telling me?" His eyes widened suddenly. "You haven't done anything to . . ." he turned to Hoa quickly.

She shook her head. "No, nobody's touched me since you left."

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, apparently trying to compose himself. Opening his eyes again, he looked around the room before settling on Jen. "A vampire's granddaughter?"

"Not genetically, no. Grandma Terry brought Michelle across, and Michelle brought me across. It isn't quite like a parent - child relationship, or a teacher - student for Immortals, but it has elements of both. I like Terry, so I call her grandma." She grinned. "Besides, she likes it."

"I don't know about you, but it makes ME feel old," muttered Aaron.

I chuckled as Jen and Terry smiled. Hoa giggled, but it came out a little too high-pitched.

Richie was studying my face intently. "You knew." It wasn't a question.

But there were several answers to that not-question. "Yes, I learned Jen was a vampire two days after I met her. Yes, I knew Terry was also a vampire. Yes, I knew what they were going to be asking Hoa tonight."

"Which brings us back to an earlier question," he commented, shifting his attention back to Terry. "Why tell me?"

"Because I want your opinion," answered Hoa in a small voice.

Richie turned back to her. "On what?" he asked more quietly.

"Whether I should be . . . brought . . . across." It must have taken a lot for her to say that since she was breathing heavy. Before our concerned eyes, she suddenly paled and collapsed against Richie.

"Hoa!" he shouted, standing up and laying her down across the couch. Jen automatically started forward. She made it to within arm's reach of them before Richie turned to her with a furious, "Back off!"

She stopped, but didn't turn away. In a surprisingly calm voice, she said, "Before I was brought across, I was a nursing student. All I'm going to do is check her." Richie gritted his teeth and one hand reached into his coat. Jen continued, "Pull your weapon out if you want. If I do something you don't like, go ahead and kill me. But I'm going to see if Hoa is going to be alright." She pushed her way past a stunned and shaken Richie and took Hoa's pulse and checked her eyes. Standing, I hung my coat on the coat rack and went into the kitchen. Drawing a glass of water, I also soaked a washcloth and wrung it out before bringing both items back out to the front room. Neither Terry nor Aaron had moved, and Richie was watching Jen and Hoa intently.

Without turning around, Jen held out her hand and said, "Washcloth." I laid it in her hand, and she immediately transferred it over to Hoa's forehead. I put the glass of water down on the table near Hoa before returning to the recliner that Jen had started in. After another few seconds, Jen stood up from her kneeling position beside Hoa and crossed the room to me. Gracefully curling up on my lap, she commented, "She'll be fine. She just passed out. Emotional stress, probably."

Gingerly sitting down on the couch beside Hoa's head, Richie rested his head into his hands. Taking five or six deep breaths, he roughly scrubbed his hands over his face before looking up at us again. "Vampires." It's amazing how much meaning he could stuff into that one word.

"Vampires," Aaron agreed. He slowly removed his coat and laid it on the floor before sitting down near Terry's feet.

"Why?" Richie asked.

We were all confused. "Why what?" I asked.

"Why do you want to do this to her?"

Terry and Jen gritted their teeth, and Aaron's eyes narrowed. "What they OFFERED to Hoa," I quickly corrected.

"And if we don't want it?" Richie challenged.

"Then you are free to go," answered Aaron.

"Just like that?" Richie asked sarcastically.

"Just like that," Terry smoothly answered. "We'd ask you to not mention vampires to anyone, but we won't stop you if you want to leave. However, this isn't for you to decide." She nodded to the unconscious Hoa. "It's for her."

Richie's face slowly settled into a frown. "You've obviously convinced her," he nodded down at Hoa. "How do I know you're not all totally nuts?"

I had been expecting this. Instead of a shocking visual demonstration, I interrupted, "Richie, do you have a pulse? Does Hoa?"

Not understanding, he checked Hoa's neck with one hand before nodding to me. I continued, holding out my left wrist. "Do I?"

He didn't move. "What are you getting at?"

"Humor me," I answered.

Shrugging, he stood and crossed the few feet separating us. He pressed two fingers to the inside of my wrist for a moment. "Yes, you have a pulse," he said sarcastically.

Jen wordlessly held out her wrist. Sighing, Richie checked her. Then he frowned and shifted his grip. His face went expressionless and he shifted his grip again. Dropping her hand, he took a step back, suddenly much more pale than he had been. "This is impossible," he muttered.

"Any more impossible than two thousand year old Immortals and Quickenings?" asked Theresa quietly, holding out her wrist for him to check.

Richie folded his arms and shook his head slowly at her offer. Terry dropped her hand to Aaron's shoulder as Richie shifted his attention back to Jennifer. "Okay, as insane as it sounds, Jennifer doesn't have a pulse. But that doesn't prove she's a vampire."

"What more proof do you need?" asked Aaron. He sounded more resigned to the situation than anything.

Richie never took his eyes off Jen. "Turn into a bat," he said challengingly.

I barked out a laugh that startled everyone in the room. "I'm sorry," I said, waving a hand and fighting my laughter. "That's the exact reaction I had when Nat and Nick told me."

Terry let out a long string of grumbled words in some language, the only one of which I even had a shot at was, "Americans." Aaron smiled, but didn't say anything.

Fighting my own smile, I turned back to Richie. "No bats, coffins, or lack of reflections. Most of the rest of it is right, though. Sunlight, crosses, garlic, etcetera." From my angle, I couldn't see Jen's face, but based on Richie's tense stare, I guessed she'd gone golden-eyed and pointy-toothed at the very least.

"Satisfied?" asked Hoa quietly. Richie whirled around to look at her. She'd apparently rejoined us at some point.

Crossing back to her side, Richie asked, "You okay? You gave me quite a scare."

Waving off his attempt at help, she sat up but held the washcloth in place. "Are you listening to them? Think about what this can mean to us."

"Huh? Turning you into a vampire?!? What good would that do?" Everyone ignored the implied insult.

Hoa's hand shot out and pointed at Theresa. "She's over two THOUSAND years old. She ISN'T AGING."

Richie turned to Theresa and opened and closed his mouth a few times, but no sound came out. With his nearly wild, bulging eyes, he looked like he was about to panic. I hoped I wouldn't have to physically tackle him to keep him from hurting someone.

Hoa had dropped the washcloth to the coffee table, but she caught his hand and attention again with a quiet, "Richie, I wouldn't age anymore. We could be together forever."

He turned to stare at her as I tightened my grip on Jennifer. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Terry shift her hand to rest at the base of Aaron's neck.

Richie and Hoa continued to stare at each other. Neither said a word for a few minutes, but Hoa reached forward to caress Richie's face and smile softly.

"Well," said Terry, suddenly breaking the silence. "We've given you two a LOT to think about. Why don't you go back to your hotel and talk it over. Let one of the four of us know when you've come to a decision. I only ask that you don't tell anyone else either way. Fair enough?"

The knock on the door late the next afternoon didn't surprise anyone. Since I'd felt Richie approach, I opened the door without any hesitation as Aaron looked nervously on. "Rich! Welcome back. Come on in."

He shook his head. "Afraid not. Could Hoa and I take you and Jen out to eat?" He paused. "And talk?"

I nodded. "Sure. However, why don't we just meet Jen somewhere after awhile? Very few places cater to her tastes. Besides, it's an hour until sunset."

He chuckled nervously. "Sorry, forgot. Yeah, why don't we meet her at Mac's barge later?"

Nodding, I went back in to retrieve my coat. Hurriedly, I told Jen the plan and where I'd left the directions to Mac's barge. She agreed readily enough but then caught me in a quick hug. "Good luck," she whispered.

Rejoining Richie outside, we went back out to the cab he and Hoa had apparently brought from wherever they were staying. After seating ourselves, Richie rattled off directions to the driver. The quiet French driver merely nodded and pulled away from the curb. I greeted Hoa pleasantly. She smiled back. She looked a great deal calmer than she did twenty-four hours previously. The rest of the drive passed in comfortable silence until we pulled up outside "Le Blues Club." Joe warmly welcomed us and then steered us toward a secluded booth once he realized we had a serious talk

planned.

Once we had been comfortably seated and some light sandwiches ordered, I broke the increasingly uncomfortable silence as gently as I could. "I'll assume this discussion will center around the offer Jen made to you last night, Hoa?"

She glanced up from playing with the condensation rings on the tabletop long enough to make eye contact with me and smile fleetingly. "Yes." It was such a simple word, but it carried so much more.

Trying to smile encouragingly, I said, "Well, I'll try answer any questions you have."

"Where to start?" whispered Hoa to herself. "What will be different?"

She would have to ask an impossible question first, wouldn't she? "I can't answer that question fully. Only Jennifer or Terry could. As for what I do know: you'd be faster and stronger. You wouldn't age. You could fly. You'd have hearing and sight well beyond the rest of us." I took a breath as I let the bombshells drop, "And you could never go out into the sunlight again. And you'd have to drink blood to survive."

Hoa shivered slightly at that.

"Where would she get it?" Richie asked practically.

I assumed he was asking about the blood. "Three choices: she could kill for it, she could buy it, or you could give it to her."

Richie's eyes narrowed a little. "What was that last one again?"

I fell silent as our sandwiches were delivered. Once the waitress got far enough away, I said, "Immortal blood is more than sufficient for vampires. And our very nature makes us immune to the effects. We do 'die' of blood loss, but revive just fine." I picked up my glass and studied it for a moment. Giving her a small smile I added, "Just make sure he has a glass of water handy when he wakes up."

Giving a half-hearted grin at my attempt to keep the conversation light, Richie nibbled on his sandwich.

Fiddling with hers, Hoa asked, "You said I could buy the blood?"

Disregarding the fact that she sounded like she'd already made up her mind on the matter, I said, "Yes. Every Community has several places where they sell blood to the local vampires."

"Community?"

"Vampires tend to gather in groups. One city worth is called a Community. It is typically led by the oldest vampire living there."

"How old is the 'oldest'?" asked Richie nervously.

"Terry could assume leadership over just about any city she moved to if she wanted." I didn't bother to tell them about the power struggles that occasionally erupted in the upper levels of vampire Communities when such things did happen.

"Why the oldest?" asked Hoa.

"'With age comes wisdom' is the popular answer. More practically, the oldest is also the most powerful. Communities are not democracies in any practical sense. The leader of a Community is rarely expected to do anything other than settle disputes and take care of the occasional problem anyway." Between explanations, I was working on my roast beef sandwich. For a bar, this place had an amazingly good (though limited) menu.

"What problem could a vampire Community possibly face?" asked Hoa in blatant disbelief.

"You'd be surprised. A vampire running all over a city indiscriminately killing mortals, for instance. Hunters are another problem. Despite their apparent invulnerability, there ARE ways to stop a vampire. Occasionally a mortal will discover their existence and try to kill as many as possible. That problem isn't limited to vampires, as I'm sure Richie can tell you. At any rate, these Hunters must be stopped as well."

"Where could we live?"

I shrugged. "Just about anywhere you wanted. If there isn't a Community there, you'd have to secure your own blood supply. I have a friend who could talk to you about that if needs be. Actually living ON holy ground may not be a good idea, though. It tends to make some vampires," I paused, looking for the right word, "twitchy."

Richie raised an eyebrow at my phrasing. "How many vampires do you know?"

"Almost a half dozen that I'm aware of."

"What are they like?"

"What are Immortals like?" I answered his question with one of my own.

He frowned in confusion, but Hoa answered the question. "Normal people. Some good, some bad. Most are just individuals."

I nodded. "Of those I know, yes. I've been told that most vampires aren't very polite when it comes to mortals, though. The older ones tend to view humans as sources of food and nothing more. Much like we'd treat cows and pigs if we had to interact with them."

"Sounds morbid," responded Richie after a few seconds of contemplation.

"Yes, it is." I sighed. "Don't let me fool you. Most vampires are cold hearted SOB's." I smiled slightly. "Not unlike some ancient Immortals I know."

"Touché," smiled Richie. "Must have something to do with becoming an old fogey."

Hoa's jaw was falling open before she broke into giggles. "You two," she managed to sputter.

Smiling at her, Richie turned back to me, "Anything else?"

I nodded. "Lots. But I'm not the right one to ask everything of. There are lots of things about Jen that I'm still finding out about two years later."

My answer had sobered Hoa. She asked hesitantly, "So do you think I should do this?"

Great, the other impossible question. I stalled as long as I could, taking another sip of my drink and thinking it through. "I don't know," I eventually answered honestly. "If you do, you'll be together as long as you wish. You'll forever be in your late twenties, which I understand isn't a bad place to be," I added with a sly smirk. Richie had to hide his smile quickly as Hoa gave me a sour look. I continued more seriously, "But if you do this, it can't be undone. I've been told that making this transition can be difficult at best. And it will be a transition. For both of you." I stopped and rubbed one hand over my face. Moodily, I stared at my drink. "Do you realize I've been out in the daylight more in the past two days than I have all year? I can never take Jennifer to a tropical beach on vacation, watch a sunset, or really go out to eat with her." I was silent for a few more moments, not looking up at them. "Knowing she can outlive me is a comfort, but don't think there isn't a cost to this."

I smiled almost sadly at their twin expressions of concern. "Don't rush into this. It's a one-way trip. If you can make it work out, it works out VERY well. If it doesn't . . ." I held my hands open in a helpless gesture and shrugged, finishing with, "Then it doesn't."

Trying to lighten the mood before I got depressed, I stood. Dropping some money on the table, I said, "Come on. We'll be meeting Jennifer at Mac's barge soon. Besides, I don't want to miss tonight's sunset."

"Want a beer, you two?" Richie asked as he led the way up the plank to the barge.

"Sure," I answered. "Duncan's not here?" It was pretty obvious from the moment we left the cab. His Buzz wasn't anywhere in range.

Hoa shook her head as she settled herself on the couch. "He's out with Doctor Lindsey and her daughter. We have the place to ourselves tonight. Well, for the next couple hours anyway."

Good. Little chance of him walking into the middle of a difficult discussion.

Richie passed out the beers before stretching out on the couch. "Ryan, we asked earlier if there was anything else we should know. You didn't really answer."

I shrugged. "Lots more you'd need to know if this is the direction you're going to go. But the problem is that I don't even know where to start."

"Are you willing to answer specific questions?"

I nodded. "There are a few things that Terry and Jen asked me not to tell you until you'd committed to this course. And they'll probably be the ones to tell you most of it anyway. I'll answer what I can."

Richie bit his lip. "How should I phrase this? Will we need to make any changes in our living arrangements?"

I smiled at how he had asked that one. Since I thought I knew where this was going, I decided to have a little fun. "Vampires don't sleep in coffins, remember?" I paused in thought. "Though if that's the way the two of you prefer to sleep anyway . . ."

I trailed off at Richie's dark look. "Very funny. That wasn't what I was asking."

"Sleeping patterns don't change. She'd still need the same amount of sleep, though you'd probably want to shift it around so you're awake during the nights." That also wasn't what he was after, but it answered the question.

Richie didn't look like he knew what to ask next. Or how to ask it. Hoa took a shot, "Do you and Jen . . . Err, can vampires . . ." She blushed.

I finished her question, "Do Jennifer and I make love? Have sex? Do the down and dirty? The horizontal mambo?" At each phrase Hoa got progressively more embarrassed. Richie already looked like he was about to die. I started to snicker. Taking pity on them, I composed myself and answered the question. "Yes. Sexual drive isn't adversely affected by vampirism. Though some of the side effects take some getting used to." I let them squirm for a moment before continuing. "At moments of . . . high emotion, a vampire will instinctively let the teeth elongate and try to drain anybody in the immediate vicinity. That can be trained out, but it takes time." I rubbed my neck thoughtfully before adding, "Though it takes quite a while." I turned a smile at Richie. "Does that answer the question you tried to ask ten minutes ago?" He blushed again, much to my amusement. "Look, all four of us are in our physical prime. It was something I figured you'd want to know, since I had basically the same question." I smiled to myself. "Fortunately, Jennifer answered that one for me with her actions quickly enough."

"There are some things about your life I do NOT want to know."

I looked at Hoa mildly. "You DID ask." I snapped my fingers as another thought occurred to me. "One other thing. Since vampires are really 'dead', that means they have no heartbeat. And they're cool to the touch. You may have noticed that last night, Rich. Anyway, that's a minor fact that can sneak up and scare the heck out of you if you're not paying attention."

The door opened and Jen walked in, completely at her ease. Richie nearly bolted off the couch before he recognized her. "Jeez! Give me a heart attack, will you?"

She paused in hanging up her coat to arch an eyebrow at him. "You'd survive it."

I hid a smile behind taking a sip of my beer. Richie continued, "You know, knocking is usually polite. What if you'd come to the wrong barge?"

Jennifer rolled her eyes. "I heard your voices in here, so I knew it was the right place."

"You heard us?" asked Hoa, bemused.

"Better hearing, remember?" I commented.

Jennifer crossed the living area slowly, taking in the sites as I'd already done. She finished by curling up on my lap. "So what'd I miss?"

"Some of the basics," I answered.

She nodded before turning to them but keeping most of her attention on Hoa. "Any questions for me?"

"Um, about your eating habits," began Hoa tentatively.

Jennifer shot a frown at me. "You covered the basics?"

I addressed Hoa, "You can say the words 'drink blood'. She's a whole lot more calm about the topic than I am."

Nodding nervously, Hoa tried again, "Do you eat real food, or can you only . . . drink blood?"

"Most vampires can keep water down, but everything else except blood just comes right back up."

"What kind of blood?" asked Richie hesitantly.

"Human, cow, and pig are the only ones that I've heard of being used." It was amazing how calmly she was discussing all this.

"Hope you don't mind my asking, but where do you get yours?"

"There's a bar in Toronto that's run by one of the Community. I can buy bottles there." She shot a sideways glance at me. "Assuming I can control myself around Ryan here." I gave a grin but didn't respond.

Neither of them dared touch that one. "What are the best and worst parts of being a vampire?" Hoa asked instead.

"No PMS," she answered immediately. I had to bite my lip to keep silent, but she could obviously feel me shaking with my contained laughter. That was okay, though. Richie was laughing out loud too.

Jennifer and Hoa looked at the both of us and then at each other. In perfect chorus, they gave an exasperated, "Men!"

They both broke into giggles as Richie and I continued chuckling. Composing herself, Jen said, "Really, the best thing about being a vampire is the lack of pain. The only thing that hurts is when I touch a holy symbol like a cross. Cuts, burns, broken bones, bruised muscles, NOTHING hurts anymore. The worst part?" She stared off into space for a second. "You're going to laugh." She paused as Hoa promised not to. "Real lemonade on summer days." Hoa and Richie tilted their heads and frowned, but neither of them laughed. Jennifer continued, "I used to do a lot of running. For me, there was nothing quite as good as a cold glass of real lemonade after getting all nice and sweaty running three miles."

Hoa nodded. "I prefer tea myself, but I understand what you're saying." She took a deep breath. "So what do YOU think I should do?"

Jennifer laid her head on my shoulder and was silent for almost a minute before answering. "I wouldn't have made the offer if I didn't think it was something worth having."

"Hate to sound callous, but what do you get out of this?" asked Richie.

Jen shook her head. "Nothing in the long run. Immediately, she would be my childe. As such, she is subject to my commands. Once she's been trained a little, I would rescind my command over her." She would also get a free meal out of it, but I figured it'd be pretty crass to point that out.

"Training?" asked Hoa.

"You'll have to live with me or Terry for the first few months while you're taught how to function as a vampire. How to use your new powers, when NOT to use them, how to hide your nature, like that. Moving and changing identities will be easier. Richie probably already has that training himself." She paused for his reaction, and he nodded. She continued, "Once I'm convinced you can function on your own without harming the humans around you or exposing vampires, then I will formally release you, and you can go where you wish."

"That's the second time you mentioned releasing her," pointed out Richie.

"Some vampires create children as personal slaves, and the bond allows me to permit that level of control. However, I won't do anything that isn't in her best interest. Like I said, I'll release her when I feel it's safe."

"And we have your word on that?" asked Richie sarcastically.

Hoa hissed at him to shut up.

"It's okay, Hoa. It's a valid question." She took a breath. "Would it make you feel better if Ryan taught you how to destroy vampires? Then if necessary, you could stop me."

I certainly didn't like the way this conversation was turning out. I stared at Jennifer in blank shock. She ignored me.

Richie stared at her for a few seconds before nodding and leaning back.

"Why are you doing this?" asked Hoa.

Jen almost smiled. "You two love each other. I have it in my power to permit you to love each other until the end of time." She shrugged. "That sounds sappy, but it's the truth."

Hoa seemed to ponder it for a few more seconds before nodding. "I'll do it."

Richie's jaw dropped. I raised an eyebrow. "You don't need more time to think about this? Like I keep saying, it's a one-way ticket."

Hoa shook her head. She glanced at Richie out of the corner of her eye. "I would like to talk with Jennifer alone for a few minutes, though."

Rich looked at her in concern for a moment, but she shook her head silently. Sighing, he stood and pulled on his coat as he followed me out the door.

Once we'd made it one dark block along the Seine, I forced out, "I'll teach you what I know about stopping a vampire, but if you use it against Jennifer, I swear to God I'll tear your heart out with my bare hands and shove it down your throat. Then and only then will I take your head with a dull, rusty razor blade." The whole thing was delivered in an absolutely flat voice.

He stopped and looked at me, gauging what he knew about me against what I'd said. He finally nodded and continued walking, not having said a word.

I finally got my anger under control nearly a mile later and let out a sigh. "Since this'll probably happen, there're a few things you need to know so it won't take you by surprise. Her physical appearance will change subtly. Her complexion will become more pale. I already told you about the skin temperature and heartbeat. Until she learns control, stressful situations will force her face to 'vamp out'. Usually, her eyes will glow golden and teeth elongate. If her eyes turn red, run like hell. If she ever does drain you, initially it WILL hurt, but only slightly. It quickly becomes something close to euphoria, though. You'll revive very thirsty. Keep a bottle of Gatorade or something similar in your refrigerator at all times. Draining someone gives the vampire a glimpse into that person's life. She may learn things about you that you haven't told her, so be prepared for that." I paused in thought. "I don't know if you give Hoa backrubs or not, but it'll be pointless when she's a vampire. Sore muscles simply don't happen, so rubbing them won't help her at all. Exercise is unnecessary for them, but she'll still be incredibly strong. She could easily break your hand while holding it during a movie for instance. Do NOT treat her like she needs protection. As a practical matter, she'll be better at fighting than you will. For all the vampire - Immortal couples I know, the vampire half is under strict orders regarding what is appropriate behavior to do around other Immortals. It'll be hard for her to stay out of your fights, especially when she realizes she can win them for you in about two seconds. DO NOT LET HER," I emphasized. "If the Community hears about a vampire using their powers for anything except keeping the Community hidden, they'll hunt her down and destroy her. Never discuss vampires with anyone unless you KNOW that person is aware of them. If a vampire ever comes to talk with her, let them. Never interfere in vampire business." I thought for another half block before I concluded, "I'll tell you what I know about fighting them later. For now, I think that's all you need to know."

"That's it?" he asked sarcastically.

I half smiled at him. "It takes some adjustments, but it'll be easy in the long run."

He rolled his eyes as we crossed the river on one of the foot bridges. "How're you treated?"

"By those who know who and what I am, I'm accepted. Generally, I'm discriminated against, but only from a distance." I grinned without humor. "Jen is protected because of who her Mistress is, so she isn't getting any grief about our relationship. I'm under no such direct protection. I embarrassed one particular loud mouth one night in full view of three dozen others. He came after us a few days later." My jaw tightened. "He didn't survive the fight, but we did. Just barely. Since then, it's been more grudging acceptance than anything else. I'm left alone as long as I don't interfere with them. Almost none of them understand what I am, though. It gets kind of weird trying to keep track of who knows how much."

A few miles later we walked back into the barge in time to hear Hoa exclaim, "He said THAT?" followed by two female giggles. I rolled my eyes at Richie as we hung up our coats.

"Welcome back," called Jennifer. "Have a nice talk?"

"After he told me to behave myself toward you, Ryan gave me a crash course in vampire etiquette," Richie replied.

She turned a questioning look to me. "And did you behave?"

I nodded. "Yep. No blood drawn."

She pouted. "Damn."

Richie and Hoa stopped in their tracks and looked at her in confusion. "Damn?" they chorused.

I rolled my eyes and faced Richie. "One new pastime Hoa may pick up. Newly spilled blood 'tastes' better, apparently. So anytime I have a fight and my opponent draws blood, I certainly have no more use for it, so Jen gets it."

"And she WANTS you to get hurt?" asked Richie in confusion.

A small smile tried to force its way up. "I don't complain, due to HOW she gets it."

"Okay, I'll bite," Hoa said.

"Not yet," interjected Richie.

She glared at him as I fought a smile. She turned to me and asked, "HOW does she get the spilled blood off you?"

I turned a leer onto Jennifer. She looked slightly embarrassed. "Don't?" she asked.

"As you wish," I calmly answered. I took a seat and blandly looked at her. Jennifer apparently didn't trust my answer, because she continued to stare at me for a few seconds before she turned her head back to Hoa. I quickly said, "The same way a cat cleans itself." The next thing I knew, Jennifer had run full tilt into me and was pinning my arms behind me.

"Argh!" she screamed and glared at me. I continued to smile slightly at her even as I tried to catch my breath from the impact.

Apparently catching what I was referring to, Hoa made a face. "That's gross."

"Oh, I don't know. Sounds kinda fun to me," answered Richie with a wide grin.

She frowned in distaste at him. "You would."

He nodded. "Me and my perverted mind, I know."

Jen's glare softened as she continued to stare at me. "You're impossible."

I nodded. "It's why you love me."

She shook her head. "I love you in SPITE of it." The kiss that followed left no doubts about the fact that she loved me, but I still wasn't quite sure why.

When we came up for air, Hoa asked, "You two want us to leave?"

Jen and I stifled the chuckles that threatened to come out. "No," I answered. "We still have to work out some arrangements with you two before we fly home in twenty-four hours."

"What arrangements?"

"Where and when, mostly," Jennifer answered, composing herself as she sat calmly on my lap.

"I hate to sound stupid, but why does it matter?" asked Richie.

"Convenience and stability," was Jen's answer. "Traveling's a bad idea for the first month or so, so we all need to figure out living arrangements before we do this." She sighed. "It would be easier on you if we did this in Seacouver, but we really do need to be in Toronto for some of it. Uncle Nick is the only one who I can trust to teach her hand-to-hand combat, vampire style."

Richie shared a look with Hoa before turning back to Jen. "Actually, Toronto wouldn't be a bad idea. I need to leave Seacouver soon anyway, since people are starting to notice I'm not aging." He paused and tilted his head. "Uncle Nick? Nick is another of Terry's children?"

I shook my head. "It's more complex than that. One of Aaron's students is Natalie. Natalie married Nick."

They digested that addition to the "family tree" for a moment before Richie looked at me in concern. "If you think I'm going to call you my father in law . . ."

Everyone laughed. I waved the idea off. "Half brothers through Duncan if you want to call us anything other than friends."

"This family tree is getting complex," commented Hoa.

I grinned. "And not a one of them is a blood relation." I paused and glanced at Jennifer before correcting myself, "Well, genetic relation anyway." She rolled her eyes.

"How seriously are the family relationships taken?" wondered Hoa.

Jennifer shook her head. "Not very. I make a MUCH larger deal out of them than anyone else, mostly out of respect for Terry and Nick. As a practical matter, the only ties that ever matter are who brought who across. Everything else is personal loyalty out of respect or enforced loyalty out

of intimidation."

Richie and I nodded. We understood those concepts quite well.

Hoa got us back on track, "Well, once you get back to Toronto, if you could send us a copy of the classifieds, we'll see about finding jobs and a place to stay."

I shook my head. "Job, singular. And you can stay in our place." I grinned at Richie, adding, "Assuming you two aren't screamers." Jen swatted my arm.

"Wait a minute," began Hoa.

Jen shook her head, forestalling anything Hoa may have said. "You certainly can't work for a few months until you're trained. Staying with us simplifies a LOT of potential problems. Feeding and training being the most obvious." Though all four of us staying there was going to get kind of crowded.

"I am NOT going to accept charity," grumbled Richie. They clearly didn't like the idea, but they had no argument against it.

I shrugged. "Then contribute toward our mortgage, grocery bills, whatever."

He nodded, relaxing back against the couch. His independent streak was as wide as mine was, apparently.

"You have our phone number and address?" Jennifer asked. They nodded. "Let us know when you're moving and we'll help." She sighed. "I know this is going to be tough on you. We'll help in any way we can. Just name it."

"We appreciate it," said Hoa.

In the middle of her sentence, two Immortal auras came into range. Richie immediately stood and grabbed his coat. I was about to go get mine as well when I identified the approaching Buzzes. I held up a hand to Richie's concerned look. "Duncan and Connor."

Jennifer shook her head. "Three adults and one child."

Hoa shook her head. "I'm the only one here without an early warning system," she grumbled. She glanced at Jen. "How do you know that?"

"Three sets of long strides, one much shorter."

Richie chuckled as he went to the door to announce our presence before Duncan or Connor did something dangerous. We could hear the greetings above decks before Duncan poked his head in on us. Taking in our relaxed poses around the room (Jennifer was still sitting on my lap, playing with my shirt collar), Duncan said, "I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

The two girls shook their heads as I said, "We WERE about to have a four-way, but now since you're here . . ."

Jen swatted me on the arm again.

"Four way what?" asked young Mary Lindsey with all the curiosity of any other five year old as she came tearing down the stairs. Her mother came right behind and gave me a death glare.

I answered, "Game of cards. But I don't know any card games for more than four people, so I guess we can't do that." And THAT was pretty damn smooth, even if I do say so myself.

Mary came up to us and stopped just short of where I was sitting. Taking in our seating arrangements, she looked me right in the eye and said, "Hello, I'm Mary Lindsey."

I shook her extended hand. "I'm Ryan Chessman." I indicated Jen with my hand once she'd released it. "And this is Jennifer Frost." They shook as I waved at Hoa. "And that is Vu Tran Hoa."

Mary shook Hoa's hand before returning her attention to me. "Are you two married?"

I smiled slightly. "No, we're not."

She tilted her head. "Any kids?"

Hoa's eyes were beginning to shine in contained delight. Richie, Duncan, and Connor wore big grins. Doctor Lindsey was watching closely, but didn't seem concerned. I answered the question, "I'm afraid not. I can't have any kids."

She stepped away and nodded solemnly. "You're like Uncle Duncan then?"

Wondering what I was going to get myself into, I asked, "And what's that?"

"Immortal," came the calm reply.

"Mary!" hissed her mother, shooting a glance at Hoa then Jennifer. Richie started to bite a knuckle to prevent the laughter.

Apparently realizing she'd made a mistake, Mary sucked her lower lip in and stared at her shoes.

"It's okay, Doctor Lindsey, they know." I then looked down to address myself to Mary, "Yes, I am. But your mother's right. You really shouldn't ask that question. If the wrong people found out that Uncle Duncan's Immortal, they could hurt him."

She cocked her head first at Duncan and then her mother before turning back to me. "Why?"

Oh, boy. How to answer that one?

Hoa saved both me and Anne Lindsey. Getting off the chair and down to one knee next to the girl, she said, "Did you know that a long time ago people would hurt and kill other people just because their skin was a different color?"

Her brow furrowed for a moment, but she nodded. "Different color like Doctor Adams."

Glancing up to catch Doctor Lindsey's nod, Hoa nodded to Mary. "Yes, different color like Doctor Adams. Since some people didn't really understand that other people could have different color skin but were still nice people, they would hurt those other different people. Immortals are like those different people that got hurt, Mary. Most everyone doesn't understand them very well, but that doesn't mean they're not nice. Uncle Duncan for instance. He's nice, isn't he?"

Mary brightened right up and nodded. "He makes GREAT pancakes!" Over Mary's head, I saw Richie bite his finger harder and Connor go into silent convulsions. I fought to remain impassive.

Hoa didn't bat an eye. Instead, she nodded in agreement. "My boyfriend Richie is nice too, and he's Immortal as well. See? Immortals can be nice people too. But if someone who doesn't understand them finds out who they are, then that someone may hurt them. That's why we can't tell anyone about Immortals, okay?"

Mary thought it through before nodding. Turning to me, she said with considerable aplomb, "Your secret is safe with me."

I nodded as solemnly as I could under the circumstances. "Thank you, Mary."

She smiled sweetly at me and Jennifer then went wandering around the room, incessantly curious.

"Pancakes, Uncle Duncan?" asked Connor in a mostly steady voice. Mac dug an elbow into his side unobtrusively. Richie was wiping tears away.

After flicking a glance at the Immortal children, I turned to Hoa. "Thank you."

She smiled. "You looked like you were digging yourself a hole. Thought I'd help dig you out."

Jen finally spoke up, "You'd make a wonderful mother." She flinched and looked away, realizing her faux pas. "Sorry, I shouldn't have said that."

Hoa smiled sadly as she got back up into her seat. "It's okay. I realize I won't have any of my own. But I still enjoy kids."

Now that Connor had gotten himself under control, he spoke up, "Jennifer, if I could steal away your seat cushion for awhile, I'd like to have a word with him."

Nodding, Jennifer got up and helped me to a standing position. Once I was up, she turned to Hoa. "Want to take a walk?"

I was out the door with Connor and could hear Jen and Hoa leaving and heading the other direction. Taking a deep breath of the cool air, I asked, "What's up, Connor?"

He was silent for another ten feet before starting, "Last month I stumbled upon an Immortal. Two things about her you'll find relevant. She was new, had no idea what she was. And she's a member of the United States Secret Service."

I waited, but he didn't continue. "Okay. I don't want to sound rude, but what does this have to do with me?"

"Two weeks into her training she pointed out how useful it would be for an Immortal to be a part of the Presidential Detail."

I frowned slightly. "Extra media exposure if one of us gets shot," I commented. But she had a point. Immortal bodyguards would be effective for a whole host of reasons.

He shook his head. "She understands the need for secrecy and will take appropriate actions as needed."

"Okay, and so we get back to a previous question: what does this have to do with me?" WHERE was he going with this?

"You got extra training from the witch Cassandra."

I bit back the retort about his choice of words. "Yes, but I'm WAY too young myself to train someone else. You want me to contact Cassandra for you?"

He shook his head. "No." He took a breath. "My student wants to offer you a job as a Special Agent in the United States Secret Service."

Chessman Chronicles In the USSS

Connor MacLeod opened the door to his home in New York. Well, "home" may be something of a misnomer. The entire first floor was an antique store. The upstairs was his apartment. Based on the size of the building, there had to be more rooms somewhere. Storage space and training rooms, most likely.

"Andrea will be here tomorrow afternoon," stated Connor as he led the way upstairs. "She's bringing her husband," he added almost as an afterthought.

Great, even more complications.

"Why me? Why do you want ME to do this?" I'd been asking the question or a variation of it on and off ever since he dumped this intriguing suggestion on me a couple days ago. Since then, I'd flown home with Jennifer to gather a few items and then driven to New York City.

"She'll explain it to you," was the answer to my question. Based on his tone, that answer and his patience were both wearing thin. Fine, I'll drop it. He won't tell me anything, anyway.

He wordlessly pointed to a doorway as he went walking past. I stopped there and nudged the door open with a foot. I poked my head in to find a spare bedroom, presumably where he wanted me to stay for the time being. Fine by me. I trudged in and dropped my suitcases in a pile at the foot of the bed. Removing my coat, I fished my cell phone out of it before draping the coat over a chair. With one hand I dialed home while my other was pulling my gun out of the holster across my back. I finally dropped onto the bed as the phone on the other end started ringing. I glanced at my watch and decided Jennifer really should be awake by now.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Jen. It's me. I just got into town. I'm at Connor's place now."

"One day drive. You must be exhausted."

"Yeah, I am. A good night's sleep will do me good, though. How's everything there?"

"You've only been gone twelve hours, Ryan. Everything's fine. I hope to hear from Richie and Hoa tonight." The words were innocuous enough, but the tone was bordering hostile.

"Hon', you DO know why I'm here, don't you?"

I could hear her sigh. "Just because I understand and agree doesn't mean I like it."

"Well, if it doesn't pan out, I'll be home in a few days. If it does, DC to Toronto is only a couple hour flight. We can see each other every weekend or so."

"I suppose," came the subdued response. I couldn't blame her. I wasn't terribly wild about this idea either, but it was potentially too important to NOT deal with.

"Besides," I continued, "you'll be too busy training Hoa to miss me."

Mischief glimmered through in her tone. "During the night, perhaps, but Hoa won't be keeping my bed warm in the mornings."

A grin surfaced despite itself. "I certainly hope not!" I said, trying for an indignant tone. She giggled in response. "I'll call you tomorrow night with how the meeting goes, okay?"

"Talk to you then."

"Love you."

"You too."

The line went dead. Folding the phone closed in my hand, I gave a sigh. I was going to miss Jennifer, even if only for a few days.

The next afternoon Connor was running through a few stories about the Clan MacLeod when a Buzz walked into range. Laying a hand on my wakizashi that was mirrored by Connor and his katana, I paid attention to the aura. I relaxed immediately. Less than a year old, and no heads to

their credit, this almost HAD to be Connor's student Andrea O'Day nee Price.

"Connor?" came the hesitant voice from downstairs.

Connor released his sword and replied, "Be right down, Andrea!" So saying, he stood and waved me along.

I followed him downstairs and paid attention to the couple waiting for us there. The woman was brunette and slim. The man was slightly over six foot, broad shouldered, and wearing a bulky leather jacket.

"Pat," greeted Connor, smiling at the man. When we got to the base of the stairs, he waved at me and said, "I'd like you both to meet Ryan Chessman, a friend of the family's so to speak." I gave Connor a wry grin while the couple in front of us frowned. Connor continued, "This is Andrea Price and her husband Pat O'Day." I shook hands all around.

Pat was looking around admiringly. "Nice place you have here, Connor."

Connor gave him one of his quirky grins. "It pays the bills."

Andrea had been evaluating me the entire time. "Yes, he'll do nicely."

I raised an eyebrow at her statement. "And exactly what will I be doing nicely?"

She folded her arms over her chest and said, "Did Connor tell you what my job is?"

I shook my head. "Nothing beyond the fact that you're a member of the Secret Service."

She nodded. "True as far as it goes. Until very recently, I was head of the Presidential Detail for President Ryan. Since I got married, I was promoted to Deputy Director (Protection) of the Secret Service. It's a much more bureaucratic position, and I thought it'd be safer." She rolled her eyes and sighed. "Not that it turned out that way, but that was the plan. Since my training with Connor began, I realized how valuable an Immortal in the Presidential Detail would be." I flicked a glance at Pat, but he didn't react. She must have seen my shift in attention because she waved it off. "He knows." She suddenly smiled and glanced at him. "He was there when I died. Anyway, Megan doesn't quite understand it, but I don't intend on hiding it from her either."

"Megan?" I asked.

"My daughter," said Pat.

I nodded, accepting Andrea's decision to tell the two of them. "Okay, I can understand why an Immortal would be valuable as one of the immediate bodyguards, but why me?"

She chewed on a lip for a moment. "I asked Connor if he knew of any Immortals that looked between twenty and thirty, preferably male, were good fighters, intelligent, and could be trusted implicitly."

I raised both eyebrows at that. Turning to Connor, I said, "I'm flattered. But why didn't you recommend Richie? He's a better fighter than I am."

He nodded. "Perhaps, but you're probably a better choice for two reasons. Based on what Duncan's said about you, then you have some other skills that would be even more useful. And Richie is a little . . . rough around the edges for what Andrea has in mind."

What in the world did he mean by that? I turned back to Andrea. "Okay, I'm listening."

"Adding anyone to the official Detail involves a LOT of red tape. However, as Deputy Director of the Secret Service, I have a lot of leeway as far as unofficial means. I was hoping to put someone close to the President, but not officially part of his guard. With a little luck, potential attackers wouldn't pay any attention to anybody except the obvious protectors. With a little more training, I'm sure we could turn you into a bodyguard at least as good as any agent we have right now."

I folded my arms across my chest as I thought about it. While I was pondering the situation, Connor herded us all up to his apartment and distributed drinks. Once we were all seated, I started my questioning. "How do you intend to get someone close to President Ryan without it being part of the Secret Service Detail?"

"Personal aide."

I tilted my head. "What's that entail?"

"Part gopher, part secretary. He's the one who does the running around stuff that makes the President's life just a little easier. Also called a bag man since he tends to carry the President's bags during trips."

"Why that set of attributes for someone? Twenty to thirty, etcetera."

"Historically, that's the description of the personal aide. Since the 'incident' at the Capitol, we've been having to repopulate all the miscellaneous jobs. President Ryan has fought against this one as long as he can, but it's becoming obvious he needs someone in a position like this."

I nodded, remembering hearing about the news of the JAL 747 that wiped out three-quarters of the top of the American federal government a few months ago. It wasn't surprising that they were hiring for all these extraneous jobs. And that also explained why she got bumped UP instead of sideways when she got married. Another potential problem surfaced and I gave voice to it. "You should know that I don't live in the United States

right now."

Pat frowned slightly. "Where're you from?"

"Originally from Indiana, but currently living in Toronto."

Andrea nodded. "As I said, I have a lot of leeway. We can't let you use your real name anyway, so I was going to have to create an identity for you either way."

Good news all around. "Who would I report to?"

"Me," she returned succinctly. "You wouldn't be a part of the visible Secret Service, but you'd be taking your orders from me."

"What would be the rules for my behavior?"

"Be a personal aide until one of two things happen. Somebody dangerous shows up in front of your face or until you sense an Immortal. I don't want your real position to become known until it's really NEEDED."

I frowned slightly. "If I sense an Immortal, I'll have to do something very out of character for a personal aide. And if a bad guy gets close enough that I'm part of the immediate protection, my actions and training will become glaringly obvious."

She nodded. "President Ryan would have to be told who and what you are. The rest of the Detail would be told to obey your orders if you gave any, but to treat you as an aide otherwise."

"Slow down," interrupted Connor. "Why would you have to tell President Ryan?"

She shifted her attention to Connor. "So he would know to follow Ryan's orders if that becomes necessary," she answered.

I smiled softly. "How do you know you can trust me this close to the President of the United States?"

Her expression didn't even flicker. "I trust Connor, he trusts a friend of his named Duncan, and he vouched for your loyalty."

All this faith in me certainly wasn't doing my ego any harm. I forced myself to keep to the topic. "If I'm going to be part of his security force, however unofficial, you realize I have to be armed."

She nodded. "You'll get a badge that gets you through the metal detectors without having to reveal whatever sword you may use. You'll also be issued a handgun and taught to use it."

"That's where I come in," added Pat.

"How so?" asked Connor.

"I taught firearm safety and shooting at the FBI academy for ten years before becoming a roving inspector."

I almost grinned. "And you can teach me without it being 'official'."

He nodded with a slight grin.

"As for issuing me a handgun," I continued, "I already have two."

Connor frowned slightly in distaste, but Pat raised an eyebrow. "Where'd you get them?"

"Their previous owners have no more use for them," I answered levelly.

Andrea looked back and forth between Connor and me. "Should I ask?"

"I've been in the Game for a few years now," I answered.

It took a few seconds for Pat to put it together. He frowned. "That's criminal."

The answer from an FBI agent didn't surprise me. I shook my head. "No, just practical. If you know about the Game, then you'll know it's impossible to avoid the Challenges. You know what the end result of those fights are. Why walk away from valuable tools?"

He frowned but didn't refute the logic. "What kind of weapon?" he asked instead.

I reached behind my back and pulled the gun out of its holster. Connor was the only one of the three who didn't immediately reach for their own weapon. I calmly placed it down on the coffee table between me and Pat. Relaxing slightly, he reached for it and inspected it. Turning it over in his hands, he muttered, "Nine millimeter Glock. Not a bad weapon." He stopped turning the gun over and peered at one area along the barrel. He looked up with a smile. "Somebody filed the serial number off."

I smiled back. "Got it that way, actually. Though it was a good idea."

He returned his attention to my gun. Working the action once, he nodded in acceptance. He handed it back to me. "Not bad. I'll teach you how to take better care of it, though. How are you shooting?"

Slipping it back into its holster, I shook my head. "I've hardly ever had cause to use it."

"I'll turn you into a crack shot within a month."

I grinned. "I'll hold you to that. If I accept this proposal, of course."

"Of course," echoed Connor in amusement.

"How about your hand-to-hand skills?" asked Andrea.

"I can't beat Duncan, but I've been told that I'm pretty good."

Andrea grinned wolfishly. Connor cut in, "I can't beat Duncan either. He's a lot better than I am in hand-to-hand. He studied in Japan for a few decades when he was younger."

Andrea's smile faded. "Well, I'll teach you what I can about our techniques. Plus how to fight with the Asp." I nodded, remembering that that was what they called their telescoping metal batons. "Well, Mister Chessman, how about it?"

I leaned back in thought. The whole deal did sound interesting. "I'll have to give it some thought. Give me the particulars of the job . . ." I trailed off as she pulled an unmarked envelope out of her coat and handed it over. I took it and looked at her ruefully. "You had this all planned, didn't you?"

She tried to give me an innocent look. It failed miserably.

While I read, Pat began quizzing Connor about Immortality. It was mildly heartening to know that he had as few answers as I did.

Dragging my full attention back to the papers in my hand, one particular benefit caught my eye. I snorted quietly in amusement as I read that health coverage was included. All the other items weren't terribly surprising: pay was healthy, travel expenses covered, relocation expenses and so on.

When I finished reading, I put it down and looked up at Andrea. "Since this is already to this stage, your boss has to know some of this. Secretary of the Treasury if I remember correctly."

She nodded. "Yes, Secretary George Winston. I don't tell him how to run the Treasury, and he doesn't tell me how to run my corner of the Secret Service." She smiled. "Very good working relationship if you ask me."

Everyone chuckled.

"How long is the position good for?"

"Just President Ryan's term in office, or until you're 'killed' publicly."

Up to eight years then if Ryan got elected immediately and then re-elected. He'd filled in the remainder of Durling's term, and now the elections would decide if he was the right man in the public's opinion.

"I'll have to give it some thought." Though I was already leaning toward accepting it.

She nodded. "Not too much, though. I'm holding up the processing of this position. If I hold it too much longer, people will start to wonder why."

Connor stood. "Well, since you ARE here, how about a quick lesson before you go home tonight?"

That evening, I asked Connor about how he found her.

He smiled at the memory. "I was just walking home from the grocery and watched her get run over by a hit and run driver. Turns out she was newly married, and she and Pat were on their honeymoon. I had a hell of a time trying to get her under cover with Pat going crazy right there beside me. I almost had to knock him unconscious before she revived. It took hours before they both accepted this insane story I was telling them."

I smiled at that mental image. "How's her training coming?" I'd sparred against her, so I had my own opinion, but I was interested in his, too.

"You saw her. She isn't bad, but not good enough to go out on her own yet." That much was true. She had natural talent, but it wasn't refined yet. "Unfortunately," he continued, "she probably won't let me finish her training. She's been making more noise about having to come up here for it the past couple times."

"How serious is she about this job offer?"

"Very, as far as I can tell." He paused. "It IS an interesting idea, isn't it?"

I nodded thoughtfully in agreement. That it was.

Jennifer thought so too, but she wasn't happy about me taking a job a thousand miles away. "What do you mean, EIGHT YEARS?"

I winced at her sharp tone and the volume. This wasn't going nearly as well as I'd hoped. "We won't be apart nearly that long," I soothed. "You've

been saying that we'll have to move out of Toronto soon, anyway, right?"

"Right," she grudgingly admitted.

"Well then, once you finish training Hoa, you can come down here." I crossed my fingers, hoping it was going to work.

She was silent for nearly a minute before she sighed. "I suppose you're right. It's just . . ." she trailed off.

I thought I saw the problem. "This is the first time you've had to move, isn't it? You went to Toronto the first time thinking it'd only be for school, but you've found a home there."

"I guess so . . ."

"Besides," I continued, "I can come home every other weekend or so, and you can come visit me here."

"I suppose." She didn't sound all that thrilled about the idea, but wasn't fighting it. Abruptly changing the subject, she said, "Richie and Hoa called last night. They'll be moving into town in less than a month. They said it'd take at least that long to close down everything on that end and put everything into storage. They'll just show up here with a carload of clothing and like that. No sense in them bringing everything since this place is already stocked with all the household stuff needed."

"Well, it's good to hear that everything's still in the works." Though I'm still somewhat surprised Hoa agreed to all this. And was willing to do it so quick. "I'll be home tomorrow night. My system is still on a daylight schedule, so I'll start back toward home first thing tomorrow morning."

"Why bother?" she asked. "Go down to DC and get yourself settled there. Let Price know your decision to go through with this so she can get the ball rolling on that end. You can come back up here this weekend to get your stuff." The words were straightforward enough, but she was clearly upset.

"Hon', if you don't want me to do this, say so."

There was a long pause before she finally answered, "No, this is something that probably needs to be done. You're one of the better choices. I'll just miss you, that's all."

"Not as much as I'll miss you," I returned with a smile.

I could hear her smile on the other end. "Uh, huh. Call me with a phone number and address once you have one."

"Will do. Love you."

"Not as much as I love you."

I heard her chuckle before the line disconnected. I echoed the chuckle as I pulled out the phone number that Andrea had left me. Dialing the number, I heard, "Secret Service. How may I direct your call?"

"Deputy Director Price's office, please."

"One moment."

The dreaded music only lasted moments before the other end was answered. "This is Deputy Director Price's office. How can I help you?"

"This is Ryan Allen," I said, giving the name Andrea had told me to use. "Can I leave a message with Deputy Director Price?"

"Certainly. Go ahead."

"Please tell her I'll be in DC tomorrow and would appreciate her giving me a call at my cell phone." I rattled off the number quickly.

"Very well. Anything else?" For a large bureaucracy, they were amazingly polite.

"No, thank you. Have a nice night."

Late the next morning found me seated at a bakery in downtown DC, working on a huge cinnamon roll and poring over a map of town and a Washington Post. Looking over the classifieds section, I realized why the pay was so nice. You had to get paid a fortune to live anywhere nearby.

My pocket chirped. Digging out my phone, I held it up. "Hello?"

"Mister Allen, this is Deputy Director Price."

"Ah, Director! Thank you for calling me back." Based on her calling me Allen, I assumed that this phone call was being recorded. Better stick to formal. "I've given your offer some thought and decided to accept."

"That's good to hear. If you can come by the main offices sometime today, we can get the paperwork started. You know where we are?" At my negative answer, she gave me an address that looked easy enough to find with the map on the table in front of me. It was quite close to the White House, unsurprisingly. Once I'd indicated that I'd located the address, she added, "Oh, and you'll have to go through a metal detector, so you'd

better leave my phone in the car." That was also a round-about hint to leave any other large metal objects outside the building. Long pointy knives won't go over very well.

"Thank you for the tip. Don't want to annoy the agents at the metal detector. Until this afternoon then, Director."

Smiling politely but missing the reassuring weight of the swords in my coat, I went through the metal detector without any problem. I stopped in front of the first information desk. "My name is Ryan Allen. Deputy Director Price is expecting me."

The agent merely nodded without saying a word to me. Checking my name against a list he had, he picked up the phone and punched in a few digits. He announced me to whoever answered the other end before addressing me. "Agent Thompson will be along in a moment."

I nodded before wandering off toward the pictures along one wall. I looked at and read the history of Secret Service from Pinkerton up to a very recent plaque / memorial describing how thirty agents died in the capital building a few months ago. While studying a picture of a JAL 747 tail sticking up out of the wreckage, I heard a voice behind me, "Mister Allen?"

I turned and acknowledged the middle-aged man standing there, "Yes?"

He smiled, but the smile stopped before reaching his eyes. Without being obtrusive about it, he was studying me intently, eyes continually sweeping me. "I'm Special Agent Thompson." He handed me a "Visitor" badge and continued while I clipped it on. "Deputy Director Price sent me down to fetch you. If you'll come with me, sir?" He stood aside and gestured me down one hallway.

As we walked along, I noticed something just slightly out of place. For such a large working group, the building was surprisingly quiet. These people must be amazingly focused. But based on what they did, it shouldn't have surprised me much.

One hallway and two turns later, Special Agent Thompson walked past an empty desk and ushered me through an open door. Since I'd already entered Andrea's Buzz, it didn't surprise me to find her there. She visibly relaxed once she spotted me. Without having said a word, Thompson nodded slightly to Price, gave me another half-smile, and retreated out the door, closing it softly behind himself.

"I will never get used to that," she commented, waving me to a chair in front of her desk.

"What's that?" I asked as I idly scanned the room. A couple framed diplomas, several pictures of her with Pat, one with her and a girl I assumed to be Megan, her with three different presidents, two shooting range targets, and a group photo of some variety.

"The Sense, as Connor calls it."

My head snapped around to frown at her then flicked to the closed door.

She smiled and shook her head. "The phone calls are recorded as a matter of security, but there aren't any bugs in the building."

You say so. "Okay, now what?"

She sat back down behind her desk and studied me for a few moments. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-five."

She shook her head. "That's how old you LOOK. How old ARE you?"

I smiled slightly. "Why?"

Her smile matched mine. "I'm wondering how to treat you away from prying ears. For this position, I have to be your superior. I'm wondering if I am."

"Would it make you feel better if I said I was thirty or two hundred thirty?"

"Thirty," she answered with a more genuine smile.

"Why?" I asked, intrigued.

"I wouldn't feel nearly so bad giving you orders if I was at least older than you are. Besides, there are some times I want to talk to an Immortal at least somewhere close to my age."

I laughed at that one. "Yeah, having a mentor that's four hundred years older makes it kind of tough for him to relate to some of our problems, doesn't it?" She rolled her eyes, causing me to smile. "To answer your question, I'm thirty-two. For these discussions, so long as they remain friendly, I'll be glad to be a like-age sounding board for you. Richie has done the same for me for the past seven years. I tried to do the same for Nick, and I'd be happy to continue with you."

"There are several more young Immortals out there then?"

I nodded. "All the time. Unfortunately, young ones tend to . . . fall in the Game quicker than the older ones. You and I were lucky to be found by someone who was a good, willing teacher."

She shrugged negligently. I bit back the urge to tell her that she HAD to finish her training with Connor. This was her life, and she was capable of making her own decisions.

"Well," she said, leaning back in her chair and steeping her fingers, "do you have any more questions about this position?"

Back to the official reason for my visit then. "How much training will I need?"

She shook her head. "Not much. Pat can turn you into an expert marksman within a month. It'll take less time than that for me to train you to use the Asp. Then I'll need to teach you on some of our more important protocols, but not that many."

"Why not all of them?" I asked with a frown.

"I don't want you ACTING like an agent. For instance, if I teach you some of our surveillance techniques, you'll start using them. If you're seen using them, then you'll be pegged as part of the Detail. I want you to look like part of the scenery. I'll trust that you can act appropriately when the situation demands it."

"Don't take this wrong, but you're placing an awful lot of faith in me." I wondered what kind of response I'd get.

She shrugged. "Even if you screw up, it wouldn't be any worse than if you weren't there at all. You're just an extra layer of protection."

I nodded, satisfied with her logic. "Okay. Now what?"

"I assume you haven't moved into town yet?"

"Just started looking today." Hell, she'd only given me the offer yesterday.

"Okay. Agent Thompson will give you what forms you can fill out, then. After that, we'll issue you what you'll be needing." She scribbled down an address and held out the sheet. "Come over tonight and Pat can start your training."

I stood to take the address, slipping it into a pocket. "If I'm going to be employed by the Secret Service, why won't I be taking my courses here?"

"It'd take too long, you'd pick up some things that would blow your cover, and the fewer agents who see you, the fewer who will treat you as one of our own."

Very odd circumstances, but the logic tracked. "Anything else?"

She nodded slowly. "I'll have to be creating Ryan Allen, so I'll need some info from you." She pulled a sheet out of one of her desk drawers and started asking questions. "What's your degree in?"

"Computer Science."

She started taking notes. "Any living family?"

"My adoptive parents are still alive, yes."

"Biological parents?"

I just stared at her.

She blushed faintly. "Sorry, forgot. Medical history?" She shook her head immediately. "Never mind. This list may be easier than I thought." She scanned down a check sheet and started marking off things rapidly. She paused at a few spots and asked me questions. Getting to the end of the page, she asked, "Anything else you want me to take into consideration?"

I thought about it for a second. "Yeah, there is. Make Ryan Allen married."

Her eyebrows disappeared under her hair before an amused grin appeared. "You'll need to provide the wife."

I feigned surprise. "You mean I'm not issued one?"

She glared at me.

I chuckled and waved a hand. "Jennifer will be moving into town in about three months. We may very well qualify as a common-law marriage by now anyway. May as well make it official."

"YOU get to explain that one to her."

I grinned. "Not a problem. We've talked about it anyway. This saves us the hassle of really doing one."

"You are hopelessly un-romantic."

I gave her a half bow from the shoulders. I didn't even want to try to explain how difficult it would be for us to get married.

Seeing that I wasn't going to rise to the bait, she asked, "Let me know your phone number and address once you get one. Any more questions?"

I pointed to the sheet she'd been filling out. "Do you 'create' people often?" If so, this may be an easy way for Immortals to create new identities when they move.

To my disappointment, she shook her head. "Not often, no. The US Marshals with their Witness Protection program do it much more often. I have to go through them to get anybody created. Fortunately, Pat is owed a favor by one of the Marshals, so this one will be going through without any questions being asked."

Oh, well. It was worth a shot. But it was something to keep in mind.

Most of the rest of the day passed in a blur. I filled out a few forms (mostly having to do with the IRS), was issued a Beretta handgun, holster, Asp, Kevlar vest, and (my personal favorite) a shiny new badge. Cut loose with instructions to show up at the O'Day household by seven, I checked into a hotel.

My phone call with Jennifer that evening went much smoother than the previous few day's worth. We discussed what type of apartment we wanted, when she was going to be moving down, and what time that weekend I was going back up there. Fortunately for my peace of mind, she was ecstatic over my suggestion that our new identity had us as husband and wife.

Since I still had a few hours until Andrea and Pat were expecting me, I asked the front desk to recommend a good men's clothing store. I definitely needed more suits. Once there, the salesperson helping me get sized and picking out suits, ties, shirts, etcetera was a fount of useful information for me. She let me know where decent apartments were, what the good restaurants were, how to navigate through town, and so on.

When I was paying for my horde of purchases, she asked, "Will you be needing any alterations done?"

I frowned at her slightly. "I don't think so. The forty regular seems to fit me just fine."

She shook her head and smiled slightly. "No, I meant along the waistline in the middle of your back. You know, where that gun is."

My mouth must have been hanging open, because she burst into laughter. Wiping her eyes, she said, "Don't worry. You're obviously new in town, buying lots of suits suddenly, and wearing a gun. We do a lot of sales to the FBI, Secret Service, and police. So, do you need alterations done?" She was still smiling.

Smiling sheepishly back, I fished my brand new badge out and showed it to her. "Um, yeah, I guess I do."

I shook my head as it occurred to me that Andrea and Pat would get a kick out of this story.

On my way toward where I'd parked my car, I walked into a Buzz and stopped dead in my tracks. My eyes scanned frantically as I started moving again and hurried the last few steps to the car. I laid down my suits across the top of the car just as I spotted the woman standing across the road and staring in my direction. Both of her hands were without weapons (though she was carrying a briefcase in one hand), so I wasn't immediately concerned with my personal safety. Since we'd both obviously spotted each other, I glanced at the traffic and crossed straight over to her, careful to keep my hands in plain sight.

As I approached her, I noted what I could. She appeared to be in her early thirties, brown hair, medium height and trim. I vaguely thought she had a VERY nice figure, though it was tough to tell through the US Marine Corp uniform she wore. What was a silver oak leaf the rank symbol for, anyway? Her aura told me she was only a few years Immortal without any heads to her credit.

I stopped on the sidewalk five feet away from her. Since spotting me, she hadn't taken her eyes away from me, and I could see the wariness there. But neither hand had reached for a weapon so far. Folding my hands in front of me in a non-threatening fashion, I said, "My name is Ryan Chessman, and I avoid playing the Game if possible."

She nodded. "Diane Schonke. Me too. I'm willing to walk away if you are."

I tilted my head to her and checked traffic again, recrossing back to my car when it proved safe to do so. As I dropped my new purchases into the back seat, I glanced up at Diane just as her Buzz faded.

Well, it was nice to know that there were at last a few Immortals around here who weren't hunters. And if she, as young as she was, was still here, then there probably weren't any hunters around. Good news all around.

During the next two weeks, I moved into a one-bedroom apartment, had nightly training with Pat and Andrea, and still found time to go to Toronto once.

Due to the fact that Price felt that President Ryan was in dire need of my presence and my prior training was good enough for the interim, Pat and Andrea agreed to get me to work before my month of training was up. I'd continue working with Pat on marksmanship skills, but otherwise I was ready to go.

On the Friday before my first official work day, I drove to the Secret Service headquarters and from there, Deputy Director Price and I walked over to the White House. It was time to meet the President.

We ended up waiting in the secretary's room before being allowed into the Oval Office. I'd spent the entire time looking around in wonder and got the distinct impression that Andrea found my attitude amusing. Well, she'd been here longer than I had.

Finally, the doors to the Oval Office opened and several men in military uniforms marched out. "Still up for Monday, Robby?" asked a voice from

inside.

The last man in line, a medium height black man wearing a navy admiral's stars and aviator wings, turned around before exiting the room and replied, "Of course, Mister President."

Taking on a slightly chiding tone, the voice replied, "Now what have I told you about calling me Jack?"

'Robby' tilted his head in Andrea's and my direction and replied, "We're not alone, sir. See you in a few days." With that, he threw a cheerful wave back inside, smiled at Andrea, nodded to me, and went off in the wake of the other officers.

Andrea led the way inside. "Good afternoon, Mister President," she greeted.

"Andrea! And how are you this fine day?" He smiled pleasantly at her before turning his attention to me. Walking toward me with a hand extended, he said, "Hello, I'm Jack Ryan."

I shook the offered hand. "Yes, sir. I'm Ryan Allen." I smiled as calmly as I could, but I doubted it was very believable. The President of the United States was on the tall side and had brown hair going to gray. In person, he was less intimidating than the press made him out to be.

After shaking my hand, he crossed back to his desk and took a seat behind it. Leaning back and looking at Price, he said, "When I was told you wanted half an hour of my time, by appointment no less, I must admit I was curious, Andrea. What's up?"

"I just wanted the two of you to meet, sir. Special Agent Allen is the man who's been selected to be your bag man."

His face closed off immediately a frown, but his voice took on a weary resignation. "I've told you that I don't want a personal aide."

"Yes, sir, you did." Based on her tone, this was a discussion they'd had multiple times before. "However, everyone agrees that you need one. Moreover, his purpose here is more than just a personal aide. He will also be part of your Detail."

President Ryan looked over at me and raised an eyebrow. I had to admit that I probably didn't look all that threatening at less than six foot and a hundred forty pounds. I gave him a small smile. "Perhaps I don't look intimidating, sir, but neither does Deputy Director Price."

I could see a smile start to form on his face. He steepled his fingers and said, "Tell me a little about yourself."

"I'm twenty-five, have a degree in computer science, grew up in Indiana, dislike almost all forms of professional sports, and play a mean game of chess, Mister President."

His smile grew fractionally. He tilted his head toward Andrea, "How did you find him, Andrea?"

I answered, "That, sir, is a very long story. I'll be happy to tell you when we have the time and a little more privacy." Andrea and I had had this argument several times. She'd finally convinced me to tell him the truth. She even gave me permission to tell him about her.

Both of his eyebrows rose at my comment. "More privacy than the Oval Office?"

"Not to sound insubordinate, sir, but yes. More than this." I nodded slightly.

He returned his attention to Andrea. "Is he serious?"

She nodded.

"Do YOU trust him?" he continued.

She nearly smiled. "Sir, I'm trained to trust exactly two people: myself and my protectee. Outside of that group, I trust Agent Allen as much as I trust anyone else." She glanced at me out of the corner of her eye. "He comes well recommended."

Amusement and curiosity warred in his voice, "I can't WAIT to hear this story."

I smiled and tilted my head to him. "At your convenience, sir."

Quickly changing tracks, he asked Andrea, "Okay, what's the plan?"

"Today is just a meet and greet day. He'll report here for work Monday morning. As for daily interaction, I'd like everyone to treat him as a personal aide. He'll only reveal his identity as a member of your Detail if he's well and truly needed." She almost shrugged. "Call it a wolf in sheep's clothing."

Monday morning started way too early. Since I'd need to be working before the President did, I had to arrive at seven. I'd been introduced to all the secretaries on Friday, so none of them reacted badly when I took the seat nearest the door to the Oval Office that I'd been assigned. Booting the computer, I pulled up the latest copy of his itinerary. Meetings all morning, then a round of golf with Admiral Robby Jackson in the afternoon.

Almost nothing happened from my point of view all morning. President Ryan was clearly uncomfortable with the idea of a personal aide, and he didn't require anything at all from me. I ended up spending the time configuring my PC the way I wanted it.

As I was delivering his lunch, I said, "I saw you had a round of golf on your schedule. Who's your caddy?"

He looked up from his corned beef sandwich warily. "Why?"

I smiled to put him at ease. "Did I forget to mention that I was on my high school's varsity golf team? I'll bet I can caddy decently. Besides, your Detail will feel a whole hell of a lot better for it."

He laughed. "I'm beginning to like you, Agent Allen."

I raised one hand. "Ryan, please. Nobody's supposed to be treating me like Secret Service, remember?"

He nodded agreeably. "Ryan it is. Only if you call me Jack, though."

I appeared to think it over. "You realize that Director Price would have my head on a platter if I did that."

He grinned mischievously. "So we won't tell her."

A smile broke over my face. "Has anyone ever told you what a sneaky individual you are, Mister President?"

He cocked his head and waggled one finger at me.

"Jack," I amended.

He nodded, apparently satisfied. "Yes, frequently. Mostly, they're friends, though." He waved at the door. "Now get out of here. I need to eat my lunch, and you need to change before we all go to the course."

"Yes, sir, Mister President, sir," I replied cockily.

His laugh followed me out the door. I decided I'd like this guy. I promised myself to be more a friend than anything else to him. He probably needed it and definitely deserved it.

He was taking practice swings on the first tee when he commented, "Now, Ryan, you have to promise not to laugh. I haven't even been playing a full year yet."

"Not to worry, sir. I'm so rusty, I'd bet that my divots would fly further than my balls."

Admiral Jackson covered a laugh by converting it into a cough.

Jack looked up at me in amusement before shifting his attention to Jackson. "This young reprobate is my new personal aide and my caddy for the afternoon, Robby. Admiral Robert Jackson, meet Special Agent Ryan Allen."

We shook as he nodded to Jack. "We bumped into each other outside your office on Friday, Jack." He turned to me. "Agent?"

I nodded. "Yes, sir. Officially, part of the Presidential Detail. For all practical purposes, though, treat me as a personal aide. I'll act like a special agent only if I have to."

He nodded. "Fair enough. And I'm Robby, not 'sir'. Sir is only for personnel in uniform."

We both watched in silence as Ryan addressed the ball and smoothly went through his back swing, pausing at just past vertical, and accelerated downward. The ball went rocketing along at ten feet above ground level before it disappeared into the woods, twenty yards forward, and thirty yards to the right.

Not daring to crack a smile, I jogged over to the cart we'd been assigned. Pulling another ball out of the bag, I idly wondered if an agent nearly had his head taken off by that shot. Jogging back toward the tee station, I stopped ten feet away and tossed him the ball I'd retrieved. Casually, I said to Robby, "I played through high school myself. Made varsity my senior year. Our school hosted a six team tournament each year. I'd been watching this tournament for three years, just waiting for the chance to play. So I finally get the chance. I'm number five man on the team and therefore the first to tee off. Turns out that I'm the VERY first to tee off that morning. So I set up, smoothly back, take the swing, and look up. Nothing. Look down. I'd missed completely. In front of my entire team, coach, and five visiting teams, I'd whiffed."

"Ouch," said Robby in sympathy.

Jack had listened to the whole thing, of course. He cocked his head at me and asked, "Is that supposed to somehow make me feel better?"

I nodded. "You now know my most embarrassing golf story. Nothing you can do now would compare."

"Your caddy is trying to get you to relax, Jack," commented Robby. "He's actually looking out for your best interest."

"Yeah, I'll even promise not to tell the Post about that shot," I added innocently.

Jack glared at me as Robby muffled a chuckle. I was fighting to keep a smile off my face.

Muttering darkly under his breath, Jack set himself and tried again. This time, the ball ended up one hundred seventy yards downrange almost in the middle of the fairway.

Everyone watched it silently until it stopped rolling. As Jack was retrieving his tee, Robby said, "See? Just relax and let it flow."

"Yes, sir, Admiral, sir," he responded with a smile.

"And salute when you say it, Marine," returned Jackson.

Yep, these two were definitely long-time friends, I thought to myself as they both laughed.

We quieted down long enough for Jackson to tee off before all of us returned to the carts we had. As we neared them, I asked, "Would the President care to drive or ride?"

He raised an eyebrow at me. "You mean you'll actually let me do SOMETHING by myself?"

I shrugged. "Sure, why not?" I smiled suddenly. "Rest assured, there are several things I'll let you do on your own. Anything in your bedroom or bathroom for example."

Robby Jackson suddenly had another coughing fit.

Jack gave me a wry look. "Okay, okay."

We were heading down the rough toward Jack's ball when he asked me casually, "Is this a private enough forum for that talk you promised?"

"I wondered if this was going to come up. The discussion is likely to take quite a while, and I'd prefer not to do it around Admiral Jackson."

He frowned. "Robby has more than enough security clearance for anything you may say."

I sighed as we coasted to a stop. I stood with him and said, "It's not that. This has nothing to do with government security clearances. It's a matter of safety for an entire people."

He was in the act of pulling out a long iron and stopped and stared at me. "What?"

"Hundreds of lives are at risk whenever one of us talks about it."

His gaze sharpened. "Us?"

Shit. One little slip of the tongue . . . I nodded to him. "Yes, I'm part of the group that I'm talking about. My life would also be endangered by the wrong people learning of us."

His jaw tensed once. "I assure you that Robby Jackson is one of the most honorable and trustworthy men I know." And based on everything I knew about him, Jack Ryan wouldn't say that lightly.

I stared at him thoughtfully. He didn't avert his gaze. I nodded finally, and he nodded back and carried his three iron over to the one spot of white in the fairway. I dropped back down into the cart. This would take some planning.

By the time we'd made it up to the first green, I had to force myself to act as a caddy again. I watched as Robby expertly two putted for a par, and Jack also two putted after a short chip to make a triple bogey.

Instead of following Jack back to his cart, I followed Robby to his. He raised an eyebrow but didn't comment as I climbed in. "The President has asked me a question that I'm willing to discuss with him, but I'd rather you not be part of," I began without preamble quietly enough that nobody could overhear. "However, he's convinced me that you're trustworthy enough. I will be discussing things with the two of you that CANNOT be repeated. Considering the fate of the victims if this information becomes widely distributed, I wouldn't hesitate to kill whoever leaked the it."

"Was that a threat, Agent Allen?" he asked me in a deceptively calm voice.

"Only if you force it to be, Admiral Jackson," I returned with equal composure.

He looked at me for a moment out of the corner of his eye before giving a slow nod.

Time to mend the fence. "I really do hope we can be friends. You just have to understand that what I'm going to be telling the two of you means more than you can know."

"We'll see," was his cool answer as the cart pulled up beside Jack's.

I got out and walked over to Jack as Robby pulled out a medium iron for the par three hole. "You get everything covered with Robby?" asked Jack. I nodded. "Okay, why all the secrecy?"

"Because almost nobody in your Detail knows this information either."

THAT caused both men to stop and look at me. I smiled. "So, please, continue the game. If we stop, the Detail will wonder what's going on."

The two men in front of me shared a look and Robby continued toward the tee. As he was setting up his shot, Robby said, "Okay, Ryan. You have my attention."

I nodded. Robby took his shot, and I took a breath. Here goes. "First, I must reiterate that this information doesn't go any further than the three of us

plus Director Price." I took another breath as Jack traded places with Robby. He took his shot and I continued, "You were right, Mister President, that Director Price had no reason to pick me except for one factor. She and I are both Immortal."

They both stopped on their way back to their carts and stared at me again.

I sighed. This was getting old. "Please, gentlemen. We have to keep moving before someone starts to get suspicious."

They traded another look and then kept going. I climbed into the cart with President Ryan before he pulled away.

He drove up to his ball which was just off the green without anyone saying a word. He chipped up toward the cup, and I carried his putter up toward the green where Robby was waiting to take his shot. As he was lining up his shot and I was pulling the flag out of the cup, he asked, "And what precisely does Immortal mean?"

He rimmed out his put and tapped it in for a easy par. I said, "We are a group of people who are extremely difficult to kill. We do not age. I personally know several Immortals over a thousand years old." Robby leaned over and retrieved his ball out of the cup as Jack lined up his shot and sunk a ten footer. "Nice shot, Mister President." I retrieved his ball, replaced the flag and followed him back to the cart.

Robby said, "I find that very difficult to believe. Over a thousand?"

I nodded. "Yep. I know one at about twelve hundred and four more older than that. Not to mention the dozen or so I know that are less than a thousand." Technically, Theresa Ryan wasn't Immortal (at least this flavor of immortal), but I wasn't about to throw that into the mix.

"How come I haven't heard about this?" asked Jack.

"We're very secretive."

"Why?!" asked Robby from his cart behind us. "You'd be the perfect soldiers, police, firemen, any job that's high risk."

"Yes, IF we were left alone. Some people who find out about Immortals immediately begin hunting us."

We pulled up at the third tee and Jack said, "I thought you said you were impossible to kill."

"Not impossible," I corrected, "just difficult. We do have a weakness."

"What's that?" asked Robby as he teed up.

"I'd rather not say. Besides, it isn't pertinent to this discussion."

Neither looked happy with the answer but didn't comment. Robby hit his shot and Jack took his place. "If you're so secretive, how did Andrea find you?"

I smiled. "A friend of mine found her. She had her First Death while on her honeymoon. Once she understood about Immortals, she wanted one on the Presidential Detail." Jack hit his shot. I continued, "And here I am."

"First Death?" asked Robby.

"Until the first time we die, we are indistinguishable from mortals. We age, we get hurt, etcetera. After our First Death, we become full Immortals. We recover from almost any form of death or injury within minutes, we cease aging, and we're now part of the Game."

We were quiet until the next green. "Game?" asked Robby.

"Many Immortals hunt other Immortals. Survival of the fittest, so to speak. That's another reason we're so secretive. If nobody knows about me, I won't be hunted."

Jack raised a hand. "We'd better shelve this discussion until we're stopped somewhere. We can't continue to play and quiz Ryan at the same time."

The remaining five holes went calmly, even with the questioning looks Robby and Jack kept throwing me. We eventually finished up the ninth hole. Instead of continuing on to the tenth tee, Jack waved Robby over and said, "Let's call it a day. Come on back to the White House and we can continue this discussion there in the Residence." Robby nodded and started unloading his bag as Jack explained the change in plans to the head of the Detail, Agent Kessler.

I sat in the limo with President Ryan during the trip back to the White House. I had the scorecard from the course in my hand. "Congratulations, Mister President. You scored a forty-nine."

He chuckled. "Figures. Best nine holes of my life, and I can't concentrate on it. I'd rather go home and talk to you."

"It's my charming personality," I smiled.

He rolled his eyes.

I pulled the phone off its cradle and punched in a number from memory.

"Secret Service, how may I direct your call?"

Agent Allen for Deputy Director Price, please."

"One moment."

I must have gotten the direct line this time, because Andrea answered, "Price."

"Deputy Director, it's Agent Allen. The President, Admiral Jackson, and I are going to be having a discussion that you may be interested in. Would you care to meet us in the Residence for it?" I had to be careful. I wanted to know if it was safe to talk there, but I didn't want to worry President Ryan about it either way.

She understood what I was asking. "The Residence is safe, but I probably can't make it. Let me talk to him."

I handed the phone over, saying, "Director Price wishes a word with you, sir."

He took the handset and gave me a dirty look before speaking into it. "Yes, Andrea?" He was silent for long seconds before he spoke again. "Yes, we've started to discuss it." He looked at me a moment before continuing, "No, I don't need you there if you think he can be trusted." He nodded.

"Okay, I'll listen. See you later, Andrea. Bye." He hung up the phone.

Robby had watched this whole thing in silence. "What'd Andrea say?"

"To listen to everything Ryan says. She'll talk with us later if we want."

It was a quiet ride back to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

There were a few raised eyebrows and frowns among the White House staff at our early return, but nobody commented.

Jack led Robby and me (with a loose ring of Secret Service around the lot of us) right over to the elevator that led to the Residence. As we arrived, Jack asked the agent standing post there, "Are any of my family here?" The agent shook his head, and Jack nodded. Four of us boarded the elevator and rode up in silence. Once the door opened, Agent Kessler settled himself at the door while Jack led Robby and myself to the Ryan's current living room. There, he waved us toward a couch and asked, "Either of you want anything to drink?"

"A beer would be nice," observed Robby, studying me.

I nodded at Jack's raised eyebrow. I turned to Robby and asked, "What, have I grown horns or something?"

"Or something," he agreed, looking slightly embarrassed.

Jack came back over and distributed bottles before taking a seat. "Immortal," he observed.

"Yep."

"How?"

I shrugged. "Nobody knows. None of us know our real parents. We're normal human beings until our First Death. Then we're Immortal."

"Can you tell who will become Immortal?"

"Yes. Though mostly that skill is reserved to those Immortals over two hundred or so."

"You're over two hundred?" asked Robby in something between disbelief and wonder.

"No, I'm not. I'm thirty-two myself. I just happen to read Buzzes better than most."

"Buzz?"

I was beginning to feel like I was in the middle of a quiz show. "When two Immortals get close to each other, thirty feet to one hundred feet depending on circumstances, both Immortals will feel what we call a Buzz. For me, it's a tingly my-arm-fell-asleep feeling in the back of my brain. I can study that feeling with more accuracy than most Immortals my age." It was a lot more complex than that, but I was trying to keep this discussion as simple as possible.

"You mentioned a game of survival."

"When one Immortal kills another, our power, our soul if you will, gets transferred to the victor. Some hunters get addicted to that. This perverse Game has been going on for thousands of years. It's so ingrained into our culture that even those who wouldn't have normally been violent are forced to learn to defend themselves or they will be hunted down and killed." I sighed. "We aren't forced to fight, but many do for whatever reasons."

Jack had been watching quietly. "You know, you haven't provided any concrete proof of anything you're saying."

I sighed again. Damn Intelligence types, always needing proof. I'd been dreading this. Standing, I put my beer down and waved the two along after me as I walked to the kitchen. As I was entering, I reached inside my coat and pulled out my combat knife. When I stopped at the sink and turned to look at the other two, I saw that Jackson had stepped in front of Ryan and was subtly protecting him. I gave him a tight smile. "Good instincts, but isn't that my job?"

Jack, apparently realizing what Robby was doing, gave him a stern look and stepped around his friend to get a better look at what I was doing. I'd placed the knife down on the counter and was removing my coat. Putting it down further along the countertop, I rolled up one sleeve of my shirt. Holding my arm above the sink and gritting my teeth, I took the knife and cut along my forearm deep enough that blood immediately started dripping from the wound. Before my stunned audience's eyes, the cut slowly knitted itself together with little skitters of blue lightening. When it finished healing, I placed the knife back down and rinsed off my arm. Once the blood was gone, I presented the fully healed skin for their inspection. They both stared at it, at each other, then at me before I turned back to cleaning myself up. By the time I'd dried my arm off and dressed again, they'd both drifted back to the living room.

"Do all the Secret Service agents carry around knives like that?" asked Jack in a weak attempt at humor.

I smiled. "I'm a special case."

"What are you?" Robby asked quietly, staring at me intently.

My lip twisted in annoyance. "I'm not quite human if that's what you're asking. Superficially, emotionally, culturally, I'm an American. Look, Admiral, I didn't stop for this any more than you asked to get grounded due to your arthritis. I'm just trying to make the most of the hand I was dealt. Just like you."

He stared at me for another few seconds before nodding, apparently accepting my points.

"Okay, what do we do about it?" asked Jack.

I shook my head. "Nothing. I'm your personal aide. Treat me as such and everything will be fine. If I start to act strangely, well, you'll have some idea why I might."

"What's the Secret Service think of this?"

"Andrea Price was the one who came up with the idea of my being on your Detail," I reminded him.

"No," Jack corrected, "I mean the rest of the Detail."

I shook my head. "As I said, they don't know. They're under orders to treat me as your bag man unless and until I start giving orders. If I do that, I'm actually in charge." I smiled and shrugged self deprecatingly. "Color me important. If it gets to that point, though, my cover is blown." I sighed. "Your Detail has lots of standing orders that wouldn't make sense to you or the general public. This is just another one of them."

"Okay," said Jack, trying to come to grips with this new reality I'd presented him with, "if you're going to be my bag man, tell me about yourself."

"You want the real me or the identity Andrea made for me?"

Robby raised an eyebrow, but Jack calmly replied, "Start with the real you and then tell me about the differences."

"I was adopted by a couple in central Indiana and raised with a dozen other foster children. Once I was accepted at the engineering school of my choice, I left and never went back." I waved my hand at Robby's frown. "Don't get me wrong. I love my parents, but they understood that I never fit in there. Anyway, I got my degree in computer science and went to work for an international firm on the west coast after graduation. I was there for just over a year before I died the first time in a freak accident. My teacher found me and trained me. A friend from that first job moved in with me, and we were living happily together until she was killed by an Immortal that was after me. A few months later I started a cross-country sightseeing tour. I made it here to DC before I heard that a friend of my teacher's was living in a major city in Canada. Since I was looking for a place to settle down, I went up there and eventually stayed. She has eventually moved on, and is married herself now, but by then I'd met Jennifer. We rapidly fell in love and have been living together there for two years since. I heard that Andrea wanted someone in this position not quite a month ago and here I am." I'd left glaring holes in my story, but telling them the whole truth, including Watchers and vampires, sure wouldn't make my story any more believable.

"I notice there weren't any traceable names in that description," Jack pointed out delicately.

I smiled. "Yes, sir." He didn't appear to like that answer. I added, "I'm being deliberately vague. The less you know, the less you can hurt me, even unintentionally."

"Damn secrets," Jack muttered. "That's the one thing I like about this lousy job. There ARE no secrets from me."

"You say so, sir," commented Robby, fighting to keep a straight face.

Jack gave his friend a mock glare. "You know what I mean, Robby." He turned back to me. "And the differences between the real you, whatever your real name is, and Special Agent Ryan Allen?"

I smiled at his accurate remark. He still didn't know my real name. "Ryan Allen never left the States. He was working in a computer security firm on the west coast when someone in the LA Secret Service recruited him. He moved straight here from that point. He's been married to Jennifer for the past two years. She'll be meeting me here in two or three months."

"She'll be coming here?" asked Jack.

I nodded. "She grew up in Chicago if that makes you feel better."

"How old is she?" asked Robby.

"Twenty-four." Well, physically, anyway.

"She's Immortal, too?"

I shook my head. "No, she isn't." Not the Immortal you're asking about, anyway, I amended silently. "Two Immortals marrying each other is very uncommon."

"Andrea said you came well recommended?"

"Her teacher and my teacher know each other and trust each other. She asked her teacher for an Immortal who fit the historical profile of the bag man and eventually found me."

"How many Immortals are here in DC?" wondered Jack.

"At least two."

He gave me a sour look. "I already knew that. I was asking if there were any more besides you and Andrea."

"If they don't wish to reveal themselves, assuming there are any, then I have no right to."

Seeing he wasn't getting anywhere with that line of questioning, he switched tracks, "As a doctor, Cathy would be fascinated by this."

"No," I commented flatly. "She doesn't learn about me, Mister President. If circumstances force me to reveal it, then I will. Until then, the fewer who know about us, the better."

He opened his mouth to argue the point. My uncompromising stare must have put him off, though. Instead, he said, "Okay, I won't say anything to anyone. Who the hell would believe this anyway?"

"Hardly anyone," I grinned. "Though being Immortal, you do meet or hear about some of the most interesting people."

"Like who?" asked Robby, sounding mildly interested.

Who was the most important Immortal personage I'd met or heard about? I grinned as one name came to mind. "Emperor Constantine of the Roman Empire."

Robby's bottle stopped halfway up to his mouth. He stared at me silently before commenting, "You're kidding."

I shook my head. "Nope. I haven't met him myself, but I know his adopted son. Marcus Constantine adopted Antonius when he was still a Roman general, though. Years before he became Emperor."

Robby turned to Jack. "Could you imagine if you tried to make him your Vice President?" He altered his voice to be a fair approximation of Jack, "My fellow Americans, I would like to introduce to you Marcus Constantine, who is my appointment as Vice President. He has a long history of politics starting with the time he was Emperor Constantine of the Roman Empire."

I was nearly snickering and even Jack's lip kept trying to twitch. He said, "What, you don't think he'd be ratified by the Senate?"

I chuckled lightly before replying, "The only question would be how long it took them to impeach you on grounds of insanity." Robby chuckled and Jack smiled. I added, "Now you know why we're never mentioned in history books."

Jack got up to refresh his drink. "Either of you two want another?"

After Robby and I shook our heads, I turned to the admiral and said, "This job is going to be great. I have the President of the United States getting my drinks. What more could anyone ask for?"

Jack joined us in laughter.

"You realize that the business lobby will try to destroy you for this," commented Arnold van Damm as I walked in the door with a tray carrying a carafe of coffee and several mugs. Neither man really noticed my arrival. I'd been around so long that I was part of the scenery by this time. "You were elected by a landslide a few months ago, but that popularity won't protect you from this."

"Damnit, Arnie. I don't CARE what they think. The mainland Chinese have been abusing human rights for longer than I've been alive. Not to mention what happened two days ago. It's time we put a stop to it!"

Personally, I thought he was right. However, I wasn't a political animal, so I wasn't part of this discussion. I placed the tray down and Jack absently thanked me before looking up. "What do you think, Ryan?"

Okay, so maybe I WAS part of this discussion. I didn't pretend to not know what he was talking about. "I agree with you, Jack." I held up a hand to his impending grin. "However, how much political influence or savvy do I possess?" His grin fell. Mine came up. "That's why you have your Chief of Staff here," I waved at Arnie.

"Thank you, Ryan," van Damm nodded. He turned to Jack. "I'll admit that morally, revoking the Chinese favored nation trade status is the right thing

to do. However, I'm telling you that businesses around the world rely on the low labor costs there. It ain't fair, but there you are." He turned back to me. "What's your girlfriend think of this, Ryan?"

I continued to pour the coffee as I replied, "First, she's my wife. Second, she's half Vietnamese, not Chinese. Third," I looked up at him, frowning slightly, "when did you meet her?"

He laughed at my look. "The staff's family Christmas party. She'd just moved into town and this was her first time in the White House. She was looking around in absolute wonder, and I couldn't resist the temptation to give her a quick tour."

I smiled back before assuming a stern tone and wagging a finger at him. "Just so long as that was the only thing you gave her, Arnie."

He laid a hand to his chest dramatically and took on a hurt tone. "What kind of man do you think I am? She's young enough to be my daughter."

Jack chuckled along with me. He commented, "I'm just glad he IS married. This way I don't have to worry about Sally with him."

I smothered a grin. His older daughter was well into her teens, otherwise known as the time that all fathers fear. Not to mention what her agents think of the fact that she wanted to start dating.

Arnie waved a hand. "You'll survive it, Jack. Andrea and her crew will protect her from all the senators' sons with raging hormones."

Jack forced a smile, and I bit my lip. Arnie had always been too casual with the Ryans' personal safety. But there was no way to convince him otherwise.

Since I'd finished pouring the coffee, I straightened up and addressed Jack. "Unless you'll be needing me further this evening, Jack, I think I'll be heading home."

He nodded and waved vaguely at the door. "Go. We'll be flying to Chicago early tomorrow for that dedication. See you tomorrow."

The next morning I got up before dawn to make it to Andrews Air Force Base an hour before Air Force One was scheduled to leave.

Of course, the advantage to getting up before dawn was that I could spend time with Jennifer before I left. I'd offered her the chance to go with us (being a personal aide does have SOME perks), but she didn't want to. She was still leery of bumping into someone who knew her before her time in Toronto.

After one enthusiastic sendoff, I finally made it to Andrews with only a few minutes to spare.

The flight was wonderfully uneventful. Everyone endured the necessary arrival festivities and speeches before we all loaded into the waiting vehicles for the quick trip to the new facilities on the University of Chicago's medical school campus. Since the Ryans had been major contributors toward it, the school felt that they deserved a place of honor during the dedication ceremonies. Doctor Ryan (Well, the First Lady. Both Ryans were doctors.) was the only one of the two who had any interest in attending, but Arnie convinced Jack that it would help his public image to go as well. Once again, we all suffered through the smiles and speeches before they finally cut the huge red ribbon with a pair of gaudy, shiny brass scissors.

When the administrators finally released both Ryans from their effusive thanks and handshaking, I was royally sick of the PR circus that the local media had made of it. You'd think that after months of watching it, I'd be immune, but I wasn't. Based on Jack and Cathy's reactions, they were even more uncomfortable than I was. But I was only on the fringes. They had to bear the brunt of it.

As their escorts formed up around us, I walked beside Cathy. Softly enough that none of the crowd or reporters could hear, I asked, "You ready to blow this joint?"

Cathy laughed and smiled at me. "I like you, Ryan. You seem to be the only one around here who agrees with my attitude toward all this pomp and circumstance."

I smiled back. "I'm the comic relief. With just a few exceptions, anyone in federal employ wouldn't know a joke if it ran up and urinated on their leg. I'm trying in my own humble way to keep the President of the United States and his lovely First Lady from going nucking futs."

"Nucking futs?" she asked.

"Another example of his warped humor," commented Jack. "Switch the first letters back."

I smiled as her eyes widened. "Parrot ceeler, nose hozzel, and so on. It's sick, but it's occasionally funny."

"Give up, Ryan. You're trying too hard," said Jack as he helped his wife into the limousine.

"And I suppose you won't let me tell the broccoli joke to her, either."

She raised an eyebrow, but he shook his head. "No," was his simple response.

I sighed dramatically as I joined them in the limo. "You're no fun."

Arnie and I were teamed up against the Ryans for a game of bridge several hours later. After the ceremony, we'd all retired to a suite of rooms that

had been reserved for the presidential party. Once Jack had gotten a few items of business taken care of, he realized that he actually didn't have anything that needed to be done until the next morning. Given a rare evening off, Jack didn't really know what to do with himself until Arnie suggested cards. And so the three of them were trying to teach me how to play bridge.

My partner had won the bidding and that made me the "dummy", a role, I joked, that was my strong suit in this game. Since I was going to be watching for the next few minutes, I stood to stretch my legs. "Anybody want anything to drink?"

Jack and Cathy waved me off, but Arnie nodded. "Could you get me another beer?"

I nodded and headed toward the bar that was a part of this wonderful suite of rooms. I idly wondered how much the room went for as I pulled a bottle out of the mini-fridge.

My hand was reaching for the bottle opener when a Buzz walked into range. I put the bottle down and reached for my gun as I studied it. Since I was getting out of practice, it took me several seconds before I realized that it wasn't anyone I knew. Two hundred fifty years old, but not all that many heads to their credit. I'd better find out who and where this Immortal was.

Completely pulling my gun from its holster, I started to ask the Ryans to go into the bedroom when the door came slamming inward, clearly having been kicked in. Two men came tearing into the room immediately behind the swinging door. Both were wearing dark clothing and carrying Uzi machine guns. That was more than enough to consider them hostile.

"Gun! Get DOWN, Mister President," I yelled as I snapped off a shot at the first gunman. I was already shifting my aim at the second when I saw out of the corner of my eye as my first target's head sprayed messily on the far wall. I fired two shots into the chest of my second target before starting to look toward my protectees to see if they'd been hurt. One corner of my brain noted that there hadn't been any warning from the Service agents who should have been outside, and I worried about what may have happened to them. Since my vision had done a strange tunnel effect and I was looking toward the President, I didn't see the man standing in the doorway with another Uzi. I heard a stuttering series of shots from that direction and felt a dozen hammer blows impact my chest. I was thrown into the wall behind the bar and fell to the floor, hidden from view of whoever it was that was attacking. While being hidden from my attackers was a good thing, my body was shutting down in death far too quickly to make use of the situation. My last conscious action was to jam my left forearm into my mouth. I vaguely felt the unknown Immortal's Buzz fade out as the world drifted away.

The first thing I noticed when I came back around was the taste of my coat in my mouth. Since my body was trying to cough and draw a deep breath simultaneously, my arm effectively muffled the sounds.

Fighting through the pain in my chest, I tried to remember how I got into this position. It didn't take long for my memory to return. At that point I bit into my arm hard to prevent myself from making any noise while my chest continued to slowly and painfully heal. Hoping to distract myself, I listened in an effort to find out what was going on.

"What is it that you want?" Jack's voice was dangerously cold. Well, the good news was that he was apparently unhurt.

"You, Mister President," said Voice One. "With you under our control, anything else is possible." I couldn't tell anything useful about the voice beyond that it was male.

"You realize that you can't possibly get away with this," commented Cathy Ryan.

"Ah, but we already have," retorted Voice One.

"If you have any concept of what you're facing, you'll give yourselves up right now. The three of you can't hope to get out of here," said van Damm.

"Who said there were only three?" asked Voice Two in amusement. "Besides, your Secret Service protection hasn't been doing a very good job of stopping us so far, despite how your one man in here did."

True (and that was still a worry), but I was getting all sorts of useful information. Three of them alive in the room, and both of the Ryans and van Damm had all spoken. I knew where my principals were seated, and Voice One and Two were near them. That still left a third terrorist wandering around somewhere. Since I hadn't been shot since I'd started moving again, I assumed that I couldn't be seen.

At this point, three things happened that made my chances look much more promising. One was that I realized that the Buzz I'd felt earlier was gone, so I didn't have to mess with any Immortals. Two was that I still had my gun in my hand. Three was the bedroom door closing and Voice Three saying, "Nothing in there."

Okay, all three targets on the far end of the room. Two probably facing my principals. Can't do anything for the moment for fear that one of them would hurt some of the good guys.

Circumstances quickly saved me from making any decisions. Voice One said, "Good. Get the gun off that dead agent behind the bar. Can't leave guns lying around, now can we?" I could nearly see the sarcastic smile he must have been giving Jack at that point.

Fortunately, I'd almost finished healing by this point. I got to a squatting position as quickly but quietly as possible. I also drew my knife with my left hand. This was going to be messy.

Voice Three belonged to a non-descript Caucasian male, age approximately thirty-five, six foot tall or so. Unfortunately, he was still carrying his Uzi. Leading with my knife point, I jammed it upward under his chin. His face showed his surprise at my condition before my knife found his brain. Not

bothering to waste time pulling my knife out of him, I simply released him and brought that hand over to support my gun hand. I'd already aimed and fired at one of the men around Swordsman, Surgeon, and Carpenter. I vaguely noted that I was referring to them by their Service names as my left hand made it to the gun. My fifth target's reactions were quicker than his friends'. He jumped sideways and sprayed bullets toward me. My first shot missed him completely due to his dodge, but my second and third bullets were on target. Unfortunately for my abused body, his aim was only slightly worse. Three more bullets came slamming into my upper chest and right shoulder.

I gasped at the pain and leaned forward over the bar for a moment. When I looked up, Swordsman had already picked up one of the Uzis and was training it on the door. He'd pulled Surgeon behind him. Carpenter was simply sitting at the table, staring at me with his jaw hanging slightly open.

Surgeon visibly pulled herself together, got up, and walked toward me.

"Attention inside! This is Special Agent Kessler of the Secret Service. Drop your weapons and come out with your hands up!" Kessler's voice came from outside the splintered door that had rebounded to half open. He was probably using a bullhorn to produce that kind of volume.

"About goddamn time," I commented, straightening up. Raising my voice, I shouted, "This is Allen. Five targets down. Swordsman, Surgeon, and Carpenter are all unhurt!"

"Say again," came from outside the room.

Cathy had stopped when I stood under my own power. Now she was staring at me in blank disbelief. I turned to Jack and said quietly, "Put down the gun, Jack. I don't want you shot by accident now." I turned back toward the door and raised my voice again as I slowly put down the Uzi. "Five bad guys down. Come on in and join the party."

Six Service agents were almost instantly through the door.

Van Damm finally tore his gaze away from me as the six new agents swept through the room. He took in the five bodies, two red spray patterns on the one wall, and the rapidly spreading crimson pool under the man I'd knifed. Quickly turning his face, he bolted toward the door to the bathroom.

Cathy had been staring at me the whole time. "What . . .?" she trailed off.

"Later," Jack and I said. He was being helped to his feet from where he'd been kneeling with one of the guns. Once he was standing, he crossed to Cathy and pulled her into his arms. After he'd satisfied himself that she was unhurt, he turned to Agent Kessler. "What the hell happened?!"

Kessler pulled his quizzical expression away from me and turned toward his Commander in Chief. Hanging his head slightly, he said, "We were ordered to the lobby, sir."

"By who?" Jack asked in a dangerously quiet voice. I was in such an all-consuming rage myself that I forced my hand to holster my gun before I tried to kill someone else.

Kessler's jaw twitched once before he answered. "I don't know."

Jack and I stared at him. "YOU DON'T KNOW?!?" shouted Jack.

None of the other agents were looking any of us or each other in the eye. Kessler's head fell further. "No, sir. A man came up to me and just told me to take my Detail to the lobby and wait there." He frowned. "Why would I obey that?" he didn't appear to be asking us, rather talking to himself.

"Oh, shit," I muttered, as one possible explanation coming to the forefront. All the facts fit, and it also meant that none of the agents was to be blamed. I realized I was suddenly the center of attention of everyone in the room, including van Damm who was emerging from the bathroom looking decidedly pale. Shaking my head, I started giving orders. With my special status, I actually was in charge now. "Lock down the building right now. There're at least two more terrorists running around. Everyone moves in pairs until we get out of here. Call me the instant anybody spots one of the perps. Assume they're both wearing vests, no matter what you see. Get transportation ready to get us back to Air Force One. Make it ground, not helicopter. We're going home tonight. The White House is easier to defend than this is. Move!"

Kessler nodded to the other agents in the room and it cleared rapidly. I hoped the vampire was already gone. One of these agents trying to stop him would only get themselves killed. If the Immortal was still in the building, though, that would be one we could stop. I doubted he'd still be here, but giving the agents something to do that they understood would definitely work to my advantage right now.

Kessler was still looking at me. More to the point, he was close enough to see the bullet holes in my shirt and jacket. And the unbroken skin underneath. Quietly, he asked, "What are you?"

I glared. "I'm not an enemy. Right now, I'm also your boss. That's the only thing you need to know, got it?" I snarled.

He damn near saluted me. "Yes, sir. Any other orders, sir?"

"Yes, the press stays out of the building. You'll need to stay and liaison with the Chicago PD. We need to know who these clowns were. We're heading straight back to DC. By the time you have any useful information, you'll be able to reach us there." I took a breath. "I'll be taking the five other agents who were here with us. I promise you that Deputy Director Price or I will give you an explanation eventually. For right now, do your job. Any questions?"

He nodded. "How do I explain this to the Chicago cops?" He waved at the bullet ridden bar and knife sticking out of one of the terrorists.

I was silently thankful that he was following orders. I thought about it for a second before answering. "An unnamed Service agent was in here. I shot the first two as they came in the door. My Kevlar vest stopped the bullets that knocked me unconscious. When I came to, I knifed that one and shot

those two." I'd pointed first at the body with my knife still embedded in him and then to my last two targets. "Do NOT use my name or position," I reiterated. "I'm just an unnamed Service agent. You and the rest of the Detail were lured to the lobby by a false report."

"You would have made a good spook, Ryan," commented Jack.

I spared him a quick smile. Kessler moved off and began implementing my orders while I went into the bedroom and pulled a spare shirt out of my overnight bag. Quickly changing, I stuffed my bullet ridden shirt and jacket into my bag and carried everything to the front room.

"Building is clear. Negative on apprehending the last two suspects, Agent Allen. Transport's out front with the five agents you requested to accompany you. Chicago PD's arriving. Press and the public is being held at a one block perimeter. Any further orders?" Agent Kessler was doing his job consummately well and treating me like his boss. For the moment, President Ryan was content to let me handle things.

I shook my head at Agent Kessler. "No, no more orders. If you think of anything else that needs to be taken care of, don't hesitate. Questions?" He shook his head. I took a half step closer. In a low voice, I said, "Thank you, Kevin. You WILL get an explanation eventually. I just don't have time for it right now."

He nodded to me and led the way out the door, sweeping Chicago police and the extra newly arriving agents out of the way.

Once we were safely in the air in Air Force One, I flopped into a seat in the area used by the Service. All five of the agents who had been the first into the room with Kessler were looking at me in frank curiosity.

Fortunately, none of them had seen all that much. A creative lie would probably work. "You're all aware that Deputy Director Price put me into this position as a hedge against emergencies. Well, we definitely had one tonight. I dropped the first two guys in the door before someone shot me. I was wearing a new, super thin Kevlar III vest, so it threw me backwards into the wall, and I must have been knocked out. By the time I recovered, one of them was coming over. I knifed him and shot the last two. That guy I knifed managed to bleed all over me." Which explained why several bullets would no doubt turn up missing, why there was a time lag between two and three, and why I was covered in blood when they all came rushing in.

Silence fell for a few moments while they all compared those facts with what they'd seen. Finally, one of them asked, "Why'd Kessler order us to the lobby?"

I shook my head. "Not his fault. He was subjected to a form of enforced hypnosis. Nothing he could have done to stop it, and none of you are to blame for following his orders."

"Your shoulder okay?"

At the apparent non sequitor, I looked over at the other agent who had spoken. "Huh?" I asked with a frown.

"You were holding it when we entered."

I was? Oh, yeah. I'd been shot by number five. I must have been holding a hand over my shoulder. "Yeah, must have banged it when I hit the wall. Just bruised."

Slowly, all of them nodded. They all probably realized I wasn't telling the whole truth, but I'd given them a plausible explanation. And we weren't called the SECRET Service for nothing. None of these men would question what I'd said.

I just wished Cathy Ryan and Arnold van Damm would be as easy to convince.

"I'm going to talk to Swordsman, Surgeon, and Carpenter for a few minutes," I continued. "Once we're done, you guys had better interview us for the investigation. I'll let you know." Pulling myself wearily up, I made my way to the front of the plane. All the way forward at this level was the room that the President used, complete with folding bed. Just aft of that was a larger open space that could seat up to six in stately comfort. That's where I found both Ryans and van Damm.

Cathy began studying me the instant I sat down. Fortunately, she seemed to be calm. Perhaps this wouldn't be nearly as difficult as I had worried. Swiveling idly in her chair, she asked me, "Okay, are you going to explain to me what I saw today?"

"What did you see?" I asked, trying to get a feel for how much I would need to explain.

"A dozen bullet holes in your chest," was the flat answer.

"Kevlar vest," I returned, trying for an easy answer.

Both she and Arnie shook their heads. He said, "You had blood all over your chest BEFORE you knifed that third one."

I sighed and stood up, moving to the bar. "Anybody want anything to drink?"

"You aren't getting out of it so easy, Agent Allen," commented the First Lady.

"I know. But I lost a lot of blood an hour ago. I'm thirsty. Now, does anyone want anything to drink?" When they shook their heads, I just poured myself a tall glass of orange juice and returned to my seat, taking a deep draught of the drink. Leaning back in my chair, I rubbed a hand over my face and said, "I'm a member of a group that has remarkably fast healing powers. What would kill most people only slows us down."

"Where do you come from?" asked van Damm in curiosity. Amazingly enough, neither him or Cathy seemed frightened at my revelation.

"None of us has come up with a reasonable explanation for what we are. We were all orphans, so we don't know who our parents are."

"How'd you get here?"

I assumed she meant here as part of the Detail instead of a more metaphysical 'here'. "Deputy Director Price recruited me and made me Jack's personal aide. She wanted someone close without being a part of the visible protective Detail. She wanted an ace up her sleeve, so to speak."

"You know, if I could run some tests . . ." Unsurprisingly, Cathy was reverting to Doctor Ryan.

I shook my head at her. "Several of us have been doctors. Every one of them has tried to figure us out. None of them have been successful. We're an enigma, even to ourselves."

"There's a whole lot more to this story than you're telling," observed van Damm.

I nodded. "Yes, there is. However, there isn't any need to tell you more. My cover is blown, so I'll be leaving you soon. I just wanted you two to know enough that you wouldn't start asking questions. Widespread exposure would only cause us to be hunted for any of a dozen different reasons, from fear of the different to looking for a cure for cancer. For the most part, we tend to keep away from high profile positions, quietly living our lives and trying not to be noticed. Speaking of which, please don't tell anyone else about us." Arnie and Cathy nodded agreement.

"Backtrack a second. You're leaving?" asked Jack.

"You aren't surprised by this story," observed Cathy.

Jack shook his head. "I've known since I met him."

I nodded to answer his question. "Like I said, my cover is blown. Now that you three plus your Detail has seen me for what I really am, I'm useless as a hidden level of protection. For the reasons I already mentioned, I can't be a more high profile member of the Detail. So I have to disappear."

The rest of the flight passed in relative peace. For a while, Cathy kept trying to quiz me on my body's medical properties, and van Damm was more interested in Immortal society. I managed to avoid using the term "Immortal" since Cathy would probably realize that we couldn't age. In fact, I gave them as few facts as possible all around.

I spent an hour being interviewed by one of the Service agents, while each of the others was also interviewed. Fortunately, Cathy and Arnie didn't say anything that would expose my nature.

I even managed to call Jennifer and tell her I was alright. The story of a botched assassination attempt on President Ryan had already broken on the news scene, but a lot of the facts were skewed and a few were wildly off base.

Once we landed in Andrews, we were met by Deputy Director Price, even though it was well after midnight by this point. The group of us headed to the White House. Arnie sacked out in his office while Cathy went to the Residence to be with her kids. Jack, Andrea, and I went to the Oval Office.

He sat and asked, "What do we know about the shooters?" Kessler and Price had had hours to dig up information. With the resources of the Secret Service and FBI behind them, they'd at least have identities by now.

Andrea shook her head. "Not much. All five are former special forces. Three Force Recon Marines and two Army Rangers. All were dishonorably discharged for disciplinary reasons. Only two of the guns had been fired. Based on the number of bullet holes compared to the number of fired rounds, we're missing just over a dozen bullets." She flicked a glance at me but didn't comment further on that. "None of the physical evidence contradicts Agent Allen's testimony: One was knifed under the chin, two with single shots to the head, the other two had double shots to the chest."

She took a breath. "As for the rest of the Detail, Agent Kessler freely admits that a man he cannot describe simply told him to order the Detail to the lobby. He has no explanation as to why he followed those orders. I'm trying to decide what to do with him."

Here goes. "I think I may know what happened."

Thundering silence. Andrea and Jack were staring at me. "Care to enlighten us, Agent Allen?" the President eventually asked mildly.

I swallowed. "There are people running around this world that can force cooperation through something akin to hypnosis. This would explain why Agent Kessler can't identify whoever gave him the orders, not to mention WHY he followed those orders in the first place."

"What are you talking about, Ryan?" asked Andrea.

I shook my head. "It has nothing to do with us. Something else."

"More secrets," grumbled Jack.

I almost smiled. "This one isn't mine to give." I turned to Andrea. "It also means that Agent Kessler's actions cannot be held against him."

She frowned but didn't argue the point.

"What's the drill?" Jack asked his highest ranking agent.

"Service and Bureau investigators find out everything possible about those five attackers. Find out who sent them, what they wanted, who financed them, how they got your itinerary, and so on. It's basically a normal criminal investigation, but since it was an attack against you, then it calls in more resources."

He nodded. "Keep me updated, but it sounds like I can't do anything to help. So, unless there's something else I'm needed for, I'm going to bed. It's been a very long day and tomorrow is looking worse by the moment."

I held out my hand to him and said, "Well, Mister President, it's been an honor to serve you. Good luck in your future endeavors."

He'd automatically started to shake my hand before his mind processed what I'd said. "You're leaving so soon?"

I nodded, but Andrea responded, "His cover is blown. If he wants, he can still be part of the Service but not part of your Detail."

He sighed. "I'll miss you, Agent Allen. Even with your sense of humor."

I smiled back before Andrea and I turned around and headed out. Silently walking out of the White House was depressing. I'd actually enjoyed this identity and job. Once we'd made it to the parking area, Andrea asked me, "Where's your car?"

"Probably still at Andrews," I replied, tallying a mental list of things to do before I moved again.

She nodded and waved at her car before offering me a ride. I gladly accepted. Besides, there was another few things we needed to hash out before I rode off into the sunset.

She steered toward Secret Service headquarters. "You need to drop off your weapon for ballistics. I'll figure out something about how to explain the lack of a Kevlar vest. There're no questions about what happened, but it's just for the records. You can requisition another Beretta immediately."

"Assuming I'm going to be an agent tomorrow, yeah."

"Why not? I just got you broke in."

I almost smiled at her attempt at humor. "You know better. My identity as Immortal is probably known. I sure can't stay here. My head would be targeted by every hunter who heard this story and wondered." I sighed. "One other thing. I Sensed someone just before we were invaded."

"Shit," observed Price quietly, staring out at the traffic. After a few seconds of contemplation, she glanced at me. "Your cover as an 'undercover' Service agent is blown, that's true, but your identity is secure. You COULD investigate this. You can stay away from Service headquarters, and I've already taken steps to keep your name out of the press. Your head is safe for the time being."

You say so. I frowned to myself as I thought about investigating it. I DID have a better chance of tracking this guy down since I'd Sensed him. And I knew about the vampire angle, too. The only problem is . . . "I don't know how to do an investigation."

"I know. I'd do it, but I'm too high profile. Not to mention swamped with paperwork. So that leaves us any other investigators, preferably Secret Service since it was an attack on the President."

I didn't have to mention that we were the only two Immortals in the Secret Service. Which left us choosing among any other investigators we knew. It has to be someone who knows about Immortals . . . Pat O'Day would work, but he'd be more useful here running down information and helping keeping Andrea alive. Nick Wolfe would work, but he's been Canadian all his life. Nick Knight would be a good investigator, and he'd be an ace in the hole regarding the vampire attacker, but his daylight limited schedule would screw things up royally. After thinking about it for a few seconds, one more possibility came to me like a thunderbolt out of the clear sky.

"A couple years ago, I met a pair of FBI agents who may be able to help."

Chessman Chronicles Tracking Them Down

I walked through the front door of the Hoover Building, holding up my Secret Service badge as the metal detector pinged. I was waved through by the agent stationed there without being stopped. I loved this badge. It hid the fact that I was carrying two swords in addition to the handgun that the agent expected.

Fighting back the grin that threatened to surface, I stopped at the first information desk and asked for directions to Assistant Director Skinner's office. One elevator, three turns, and one backtrack later, I saw the door to his office. Stopping in front of his assistant, I opened my badge again. "I'm Special Agent Allen of the Secret Service. I have a one-thirty meeting with AD Skinner."

She didn't even look down at her appointment book or clock. "You're two minutes early, Agent."

I raised an eyebrow and checked my watch, discovering that I was really THREE minutes early.

Meanwhile, she'd leaned forward and hit an intercom box. "Sir, Special Agent Allen of the Secret Service is here."

"Send him in," responded a voice.

Smiling charmingly at me, she waved me toward the door and bent back to her work.

Reflexively smiling back, I opened the door and entered. Closing it softly behind me, I walked toward the tall, balding man rising from behind the desk that was planted firmly in front of the windows. I offered my hand, which he shook after a small start of surprise. "AD Skinner, I'm Special Agent Allen." When I released his hand, I folded my hands behind my back, still holding the folder I'd brought with me.

"Have a seat, Agent," he said, waving at one of the chairs in front of his desk, retaking his own seat. Once we were both seated, he steepled his fingers and studied me a moment before saying, "I was surprised that a member of the Secret Service wanted to speak with me. What can I do for you?"

"Did you hear about the assassination attempt on President Ryan a week ago, sir?" I responded with a question.

He nodded. "Five terrorists were killed by the Secret Service without any casualties of their own. The media hasn't released much more information than that."

I handed him the folder without a word. It was a watered down version of the Service report of the incident. He read it through in silence as I perused the room. The walls included pictures of various Presidents both current and past, some having been taken with Skinner in the frame as well. A couple diplomas, and one picture of a family sitting on a bookcase. His desk didn't have any personal effects on it at all save for a small display of flags.

Turning the last page in the folder over, he closed it up and slid it back toward me. "How can I help?"

"The Secret Service needs to investigate this case since it was an attack on President Ryan. I have been assigned that task. The problem is that I have no experience running an investigation. I've been Protective Detail since being recruited. So I need an experienced investigative team to help me."

He leaned back in his chair and raised an eyebrow. "Forgive me, but wouldn't it make more sense to assign this investigation to an experienced Service agent? Why you?"

"I was the agent in the suite with the President," I answered simply.

Both eyebrows went up. "Okay, so why doesn't Price assign one of her investigators to you?"

I shifted slightly. How can I phrase this? "Some aspects of this case are likely to become . . . unusual. An experienced Service investigator may not look in all the directions that will be needed. We have precious little experience investigating attempted kidnappings. The FBI has a lot more experience in that direction."

"So you want to borrow one of my investigative teams?"

I nodded.

"Do you have anyone in mind?"

I nodded again. "Agents Mulder and Scully."

His eyebrows went back up. "You DID say 'unusual', didn't you?" He sighed and I thought I saw him roll his eyes before leaning forward and hitting the intercom button. "Kimberly, please ask Agents Mulder and Scully to come to my office immediately." He released the button and leaned back again. "They shouldn't be too long. Out of curiosity, why them?"

I almost fidgeted. "Deputy Director Price recommended them." Actually, I recommended them to her. She didn't know them.

"Should I ask what aspects of this case you expect to be unusual?"

I shifted again. Lying to a senior agent didn't sit well with me. "Specifically, the perpetrator who hypnotized Agent Kessler and got the remainder of the Detail to abandon their post. We still don't know who that was or how it was accomplished." Two Buzzes walked into range. Since I was expecting it, I didn't even slow down my explanation. "With this unusual ability, there's no telling what we may run into."

The intercom buzzed before Kimberly's voice announced, "Agents Mulder and Scully, sir." Since I had a moment, I studied the auras. Neither had taken a head since I'd met them almost four years previously. He was still very young without any heads to his credit, she was a little over two hundred with a few heads, but not enough to be active in the Game.

"Send them in," answered Skinner, oblivious to my far away stare.

The door opened and Dana Scully came in, looking wary. Her eyebrows fixed on me and then raised in surprise. Fox Mulder came in immediately behind her and mimicked her actions, also seeming to be surprised at my relaxed appearance in their boss's office. Not noticing their reactions to me, Skinner had stood and was saying, "Agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully, this is Special Agent Ryan Allen of the Secret Service."

I stood and offered Mulder a smile and my hand. With a sense of bemusement, he shook my hand. Once I released his hand, I offered my hand to Dana. She started to shake it, but I twisted my hand around and pulled her hand up to my face and kissed her knuckles. Rubbing her knuckles softly, I smiled at her slightly surprised reaction. The men's reactions weren't nearly so slight when I finally looked. Mulder looked on the verge of saying something. Skinner was just looking confused and almost shocked.

Shaking off my odd actions, Skinner waved us all back to our seats. Mulder took the seat next to mine, looking like he was subtly protecting his partner. Skinner said, "Agent Allen has requested your help in the investigation into President Ryan's attempted kidnapping."

Both Mulder's eyebrows went up again, but only one of Scully's did. I grabbed the folder I'd brought off of the desk and handed it to Mulder. He skimmed through and pulled out a few of the sheets to hand to Scully. As AD Skinner and I waited quietly, they both read through the pages quickly.

While reading, Scully muttered, "Five terrorists killed, one knifed and four by gunshot. Whoever that agent was has guts."

I smiled. "Thank you."

Even Mulder looked up at that. "You're the mystery agent in this report?"

I nodded.

He gave a sardonic grin. "Bet your chest hurt. Stopping a dozen bullets with a Kevlar vest and all."

I shot him a frown that he completely ignored. Scully gave him an indecipherable look that immediately shut him up. He went back to blazing though the report.

Scully turned to me. "Why us?"

"At least one of the perpetrators got away. The one who ordered Agent Kessler to take the Detail to the lobby seems to have an odd ability. I've been told you two are uniquely qualified to deal with the strange and unusual."

"Special Agent Fox 'Strange and Unusual' Mulder, that's me," muttered Mulder without looking up.

I sighed. Turning to Skinner, I asked, "Is he always like this?"

"You have no idea," Skinner and Scully deadpanned in chorus.

Mulder looked up with a hurt expression. "Hey."

She laid a hand upon his elbow. "Mulder, we're just teasing you."

His expression was as close to a sulk as a grown man should get, but the gleam in his eye gave him away. Working with these two was going to be quite a trip.

Finally finished with reading the report, Mulder looked up at Skinner. "Sounds interesting. It's probably not an X-File, but I'd be happy to help our friends in the Secret Service. I have nothing pending that requires my presence here. Scully?" She shook her head. He turned back to Skinner. "In that case, sir, I officially request we be allowed to assist Special Agent Allen."

Skinner was looking at him strangely but agreed readily enough. "Okay, you're both on temporary loan to the Secret Service. Keep me in the loop. Have fun, you three."

We all stood and trooped out the door and past Skinner's assistant. "Somewhere we can talk in private?" I asked Scully.

Mulder nodded. "I swept the office yesterday. It should be clean."

I looked at him strangely. "You sweep your office for bugs?"

He gave me a half smile. "Special Agent Fox 'Strange, Unusual, and Paranoid' Mulder, that's me."

I peered at him closely for a moment before I turned to Dana. "Is he for real?"

"You have no idea," was her only reply.

They led me to an elevator and then into the basement, finally stopping in front of a door with just their nameplates on it. Unlocking the door, Mulder led the way in. I followed and took a seat at one of the few guest chairs.

"How have you been, Ryan?" asked Dana.

"Pretty good. And how have you two been?"

"Heads still firmly attached," replied Mulder dropping into his seat before leaning back in the chair at an alarming angle. He cocked his head at me. "Special Agent Allen?"

I grinned. "I couldn't very well apply under my real name, could I? The Secret Service isn't likely to hire a Canadian."

"You're Canadian?" asked Dana.

I shook my head. "Not really. Lived in Toronto for a few years after we met, but I was raised in Indiana."

"Why Secret Service?"

I smiled at Dana's question and asked one of my own. "Why FBI?"

She smiled back. "Touché."

Mulder looked back and forth at us. "What'd I miss?"

"A position where we think we can make a difference," she replied.

I nodded in agreement. To her, I commented, "I see he's still under your tutelage."

"It's a never ending struggle," she sighed, folding her arms across her chest as she leaned back in her own chair.

"Hey, why are you all picking on me?" whined Mulder.

"Cause I don't often have allies against you, Mulder," Dana shot back with a grin.

"I can see that working with you two is going to be an experience and a half," I commented.

They both chuckled. "Speaking of work, why DID you ask us?" queried Mulder.

I sighed. Here goes. "Two items. First, I Sensed an Immortal just before we were invaded. We need to figure out who that was, determine if they have anything to do with the kidnapping attempt, and take action as appropriate."

Dana nodded. "And the second reason?"

I hesitated. They weren't going to like this. "I told you that someone ordered Agent Kessler to send the Detail to the lobby. I have a good idea how that happened. Once I confirm that, I need you two to help track the culprit down without asking any questions."

"What makes you think it wasn't the Immortal?"

I bit my lip. "Because there's a more likely answer that doesn't involve Immortals."

"How do you know it wasn't one of the attackers you shot?"

I shook my head. "Like I said, there's a more likely answer. But I can't tell you about it."

They shared a long look without speaking a word. They both turned back to me before Mulder gave a slow nod. "We'll help, but I can't promise not to be curious."

"It's not my secret to give," I apologized. "And even if you heard, you'd have a hard time believing it."

He grinned. Tilting his head back toward a poster of a UFO, he responded, "You'd be surprised at what I'd believe in, Chessman."

I looked at the poster that proclaimed that he wanted to believe. Shifting my attention, I stared at him pensively for several seconds before slowly responding, "Perhaps so. We'll see." It was entirely possible that they'd find out about the vampires by the end of this case. Perhaps telling them up front would solve several problems, I mused. Shaking off that thought, I pulled a pair of tickets out of my coat. "American flight ten forty-two to

Chicago leaves Washington International at 18:30. See you two at the gate?"

"Do you want me to go along?"

I stopped packing and looked up at Jennifer. She was sitting on the bed, reclining on the headboard and watching me while I packed for an indefinite visit to Chicago. "Yes, I would," I answered. "For multiple reasons. I thought you were worried about running into someone in Chicago that you knew before you were brought across."

She shrugged. "I am. But you need me there if your assumption about the vampire attacker is true."

"No offense, honey, but I'll need more than just you to tackle a vampire. I was planning on calling Nick and Michelle and asking them to come and help out. Hoa and Terry would also be nice, but I don't know how they would react to being pulled into this mess."

She shook her head. "Hoa's still too young. She's still not used to her speed and reflexes. Grandma Terry would certainly be useful, but she and Aaron are in Paris right now."

Neither answer surprised me. "Hey, if you're willing to come along, the more the merrier."

She smiled and pulled out a bag that she then started packing. Once I finished stuffing the needed materials into my suitcase, I picked up the phone. Doing some quick mental arithmetic, I hoped I wouldn't pull these two out of bed. I dialed the number and waited.

"Hello?" muttered a slightly out of breath female voice.

"Why, Doctor Lambert, you sound out of breath. Have you been engaging in strenuous physical activity?" I teased. Jen gave me a dirty look from across the room.

"Very funny, Ryan. You caught me in the shower. What's up?"

"I wondered if I could interest you and Uncle Nick in helping me track down a vampire and an Immortal that were part of the team that made that botched assassination attempt on President Ryan last week." They were already aware I was a member of the Secret Service.

"YOU'RE investigating that?"

"Thank you for the vote of confidence," I replied sarcastically.

"You know what I meant. An Immortal and a vampire in addition to the five that are dead, huh? Sounds like a mess. I'm on vacation this week, so I'm game. However, you'll have to pry Nick away from the station if you want him. He isn't scheduled for any vacation time for a while yet. If you can pull that one off, we'll be there."

Damn. Hadn't thought about that. How could I claim I needed a Toronto cop in the investigation? "Okay. If I manage it, I'll call back with a timetable, but don't hold your breath. Thanks for the help anyway, Nat."

"No problem. Bye."

I glared at the phone for perhaps a minute before coming to the conclusion that there was no reasonable way I could ask for Nick to be part of the group. Unless our trail led us to Toronto, Nick wouldn't be in the hunt. However, there were more vampires I knew who weren't nearly so constrained by national borders.

One more call to Toronto got Michelle's promise to join the party. As an Enforcer, she was definitely interested in the possibility of a vampire being part of the attack. As a vampire who already knew about Immortals, she wouldn't hurt our secrecy by coming.

And that left trying to figure out how to get Jennifer there. I watched Jennifer pack and frowned in thought. To make my flight, I had to get to the airport before dusk.

She zipped one suitcase up and handed it to me. "If you could take this one, I'll take a later flight and join you there."

Taking the offered bag, I smiled. "Is mind reading a vampire skill you just neglected to mention?"

She smiled back. "No, but why else would you be staring at me with a frown, pulling on your bottom lip?"

"I ENJOY staring at you."

"Perhaps, but you usually grin, not frown."

Good point. "Okay, okay. You were right."

She mumbled something that sounded like, "As usual."

Giving her a mock glare that she smiled at, I continued, "We'll be at the Knight's Inn, across from the Marriott downtown. I'll assume you can find us there?"

At her nod, I gave her a quick peck on the cheek and headed out the door.

As I approached Gate 22, I walked into Mulder's and Dana's Buzzes. I spotted them both standing in line at the Starbucks, and they both visibly relaxed once they spotted me. I took a seat in the waiting lounge.

After a few minutes they came over to join me, liquid prizes clutched firmly in hand. Both taking seats in the aisle across from me, they took a sip of their coffee before Dana spoke. "What can you tell us about the case? The folder you left with us didn't provide much."

We had a degree of privacy given the fact that nobody was sitting nearby, so I felt free to discuss it. "Not much more to tell. I was the agent in the suite. The third one in the door hit me with a dozen rounds. Once I revived, I heard enough to place everyone in the room and made my move when one came over to me to retrieve my gun. Fortunately, he bled on me enough that my own blood on my chest wasn't obvious."

"How much did anyone see?" asked Dana.

"POTUS knows the whole story. FLOTUS and Carpenter have abridged versions. They know enough to not ask any more."

Mulder cocked his head. "I don't recall any of the agents being named Carpenter. And who are Potus and Flotus? Sounds like a comedy act."

I coughed to prevent the laughter. Composing myself, I answered, "Acronyms. President of the United States and First Lady of the United States. Carpenter is the Service 'handle' for Chief of Staff van Damm."

Mulder nodded at my explanation.

Dana muttered, "Wait 'til I tell the Gunmen that you called the President and Doctor Ryan a comedy act." She shook her head immediately. "No, I'd better not. They may agree with you."

Mulder turned to her. "Actually, they almost respect President Ryan. Despite repeated digging, they can't find anything shady in his past. Lots of classified CIA stuff, but what rumors exist about them leads them to believe he was acting in the best interest of the people. The Three Stooges have finally found a political figure that they actually LIKE."

"Should I ask?" I interjected.

"No," they chorused. They both blushed, smiled timidly at each other, and took a sip of coffee. It almost looked choreographed. I fought to keep myself from commenting on how alike they were in so many things.

"Anyway," I said, continuing the synopsis of the investigation to date, "forensics hasn't been able to provide anything useful about the five dead terrorists. All five were former military, special forces of one variety or another. All were dishonorably discharged for disciplinary reasons. No surviving family or close friends. All had been living in the Midwest in various places before all disappeared about two months ago. The Uzi's and ammunition they used were traced to a gun shop theft six weeks ago in Chicago. The rest of their gear was off the shelf stuff you can buy anywhere in the world. All trace evidence points to them having been living in the Chicago area since disappearing."

"Did they know each other?" asked Mulder.

"No indications they did, at least before they left the military."

"Group affiliations?" queried Dana.

I shook my head. "All five belonged to various groups, local militias and like that, but none of them overlapped. And the militias in question haven't been of the more obnoxious variety before. I'm leaning more toward the idea that these five were recruited independently by someone for a single mission."

"The question, of course, is who that 'someone' is."

I nodded. "And that is the million dollar question."

"Since you seem to be the leader of this intrepid band, what's the game plan?" The words and tone were innocuous enough, but something was just off about Mulder's question.

I looked at him silently for a few seconds. He looked blandly back, but I saw Dana shift uncomfortably. I sighed and kept my voice low for the response. "First I need to disabuse you of the notion that I'm 'leading' you two. You're both much better at this investigative stuff than I am. I may be your senior as far as Immortality goes, Mulder, but your teacher here is another matter entirely. And you ARE my chronological senior anyway. For all those reasons, I can't give you two orders anymore than I can President Ryan. The only reason I'm here is because it was an attack on the President, so the Service has to have a representative on the case. Because of the Immortal angle, I was a natural choice for Director Price to assign, despite my lack of experience." I paused as one of Dana's eyebrows came up slightly. I continued, "So don't get sullen on me for being a heavy-handed administrator when I have no intention of being one. Now, I WILL be doing some investigating on my own, but you two are the crack investigators. I have suggestions, but don't let that stop you from telling me what an idiot I'm being if it's deserved."

He studied me for nearly a minute before giving a slow nod. "Okay, I can live with that. You said you have some suggestions?"

I saw Dana give a silent sigh of relief. Giving her a half smile, I answered the question. "Several things you need to know. As I said, before I was killed, I Sensed an Immortal. Two hundred fifty or so, a few heads, but not enough to be an active hunter. I also have a good idea how the rest of the Detail was lured to the lobby. I've called in someone to help me track that lead down. Unless you two have some other ideas, I'd suggest that first

thing tomorrow we go over the suite, so you two can get an idea of what happened. Then our resident pathologist here," I nodded to Dana, "goes over the remains of the not-so-dearly departed to see if there're any leads to be found there. Mister 'Strange, unusual, and paranoid' Profiler will be doing his magic with an assailant's Immortality in mind. I'll be trying to track down the lure with the friend I've called in."

"Who's that, and what lead is it?" asked Mulder.

I sighed. "I was afraid you'd ask. I can't tell you it is. The lead goes back to the item that I can't discuss. Sorry, but that's a confidence I can't break."

They both frowned.

I held up a hand to the ensuing argument. "If a mortal friend of yours knew about your Immortality, agreed to keep it secret, but then started blabbing it to everyone when the mood struck them, how would you feel?"

Dana nodded. Mulder frowned, but nodded grudgingly as well. "That important?" he asked.

I nodded. "That important."

He took a breath. "Okay. I won't say I like it, but I'll accept it."

Dana looked at him in what seemed to be amazement. "Who are you, and what did you do with my partner? He'd never accept information being withheld."

He made a face back. "But he's admitting that he's withholding information. Besides," he turned more fully toward her and smiled softly, "my worldview has radically changed in the past couple years."

She smiled back and replied softly, "There's a line here about how radical your worldview was BEFORE, but I'll leave it alone."

I looked back and forth between them. They were both staring at each other, smiling almost shyly, and completely ignoring the outside world.

I cleared my throat.

They both jerked their attention away from each other and back to me. I fought to keep the smile off my face and out of my voice. "Based on the way you two were gazing at each other, I figured I'd better interrupt before I had to arrest you for lewd displays in public."

Dana flushed scarlet and dropped her gaze to her coffee. Mulder managed to look indignant. "I was not gazing."

I rolled my eyes. "Whatever. So you two claim that you're no closer than partners?"

Both auras flared, but neither let any emotion leak to their expressions. In fact, they both looked slightly exasperated at the question. I held up a hand again. "Okay, okay. I'll leave it alone." I studied them for a few moments before adding, "You two know I can read Immortal auras, right?"

They both nodded. I'd told them that after they cornered me with some pointed questions when we first met. I continued, "Well, in addition to reading ages and strength, I can also sense emotional shocks. Adrenaline does things to the aura, I guess," I shrugged. "Anyway, one last thing you two would be interested in: both of your auras are shifting frequency TOWARD the other's. I've seen this once before."

Despite herself, Dana asked, "Where?"

"A couple I know who've been married for three hundred years."

They both glanced at each other before turning identical quizzical looks to me. Mulder asked, "Okay?"

I smiled. "I'll let you figure out what that implies about the two of you."

One feminine eyebrow went up but both masculine eyebrows did.

I was saved from a double barreled retort by the speakers announcing the boarding of our flight. Standing, I picked up my carry-on bag and led the way to the gate.

I walked up to the airline representative keeping a discreet eye on the line to the metal detector and showed him my badge. As he was looking at it, I said quietly, "I am armed and didn't want to scare the other passengers when the detector went off." I tilted my head back to Dana and Mulder who were quietly standing behind me. "These two are Special Agents Scully and Mulder of the FBI." The representative handed my badge back to me and studied the next two badges presented to him for a few seconds before nodding and letting us walk around the metal detector.

As we walked down the concourse toward the plane, Mulder leaned toward me and said, "That's fun, isn't it?"

I cocked an eyebrow at him in a clear question.

He elaborated, "Waving your badge and getting your own way."

I laughed. "Yeah. I got this shiny new toy with the job. Lots of fun."

Dana sighed dramatically and muttered, "Children."

Mulder and I grinned at each other then at her. In perfect chorus, we replied, "Yes, mother."

She sighed again and shook her head as we laughed.

They'd been to Chicago before, so I let them drive the Service car I'd requested be left at the O'Hare long term parking. As Mulder was threading his way out of the airport, Dana asked, "Where're we going?"

"I've reserved rooms at the Knight's Inn across from the Marriott where the attack took place."

She nodded and turned back to the front to navigate us to our hotel. As we were approaching our destination, Mulder said, "How about we hit a drive thru for dinner and then do the Marriott yet tonight? We can look over that scene and that way we each go our separate ways first thing tomorrow."

Dana turned back around to me. I shrugged. "Sure. Doesn't matter to me."

Parking the car, we all got out and I held the door as first Dana then Mulder walked past.

As we approached the desk, Dana said to Mulder, "Are you taking notes?"

He looked at her quizzically.

She elaborated, "On how Ryan is treating me. You could learn some things from him on how to treat a woman."

His jaw dropped open.

She smiled, patted him on the cheek, and said sweetly, "Just a suggestion, Mulder."

He quirked an eyebrow as a smile played around his lips. "Are you suggesting that you can teach me how to better treat a woman?" His smile inched up as he continued, "If that's the case, I can be over to your room tonight for the first lesson."

She merely raised an eyebrow at him. My jaw was hanging somewhere around my belt. Mulder spun on his heel and faced the man behind the desk, digging out his badge.

I shook myself and turned to Dana. Lowering my voice, I asked, "Did he just insinuate what I think he did?"

One corner of her mouth quirked. "It's a game we play. The first one to make the other blush wins. He wouldn't follow up on any of those comments of his."

I studied her completely composed face. I also studied her aura and came to a decision. Leaning forward so I was whispering into her ear, I asked, "Despite what you may wish?"

The sudden intake of breath and corresponding jolt of her aura answered my question.

From behind me, I heard, "Come on, come on. Break it up before I'm arresting YOU for lewd acts in public."

I stepped back and turned to Mulder. I idly noticed that Dana's impassive mask was firmly back in place as I answered his jibe. "What can I say? I'm partial to redheads." I tilted my head and asked, "Jealous?"

He raised an eyebrow back. "And if I am?"

I folded my arms and appeared to think it over. Dana's face had shifted first to a stone mask and was now edging into annoyed. I quickly answered the question before she got mad. "Then I'll just have to find another cute redhead to moon over, I guess." I turned to her and continued, "I apologize, Milady, if my comment offended you. I beg forgiveness." I doffing an imaginary plumed hat, I swept into a low bow before her and held it.

In a haughty tone, she responded, "Very well. Just don't let it happen again, Sir."

I pulled myself back erect and replaced the "hat" on my head. Giving a cocky smile, I waved them toward the elevators. "Shall we, then?"

As we walked past the desk with the slack-jawed man behind it, I smiled at his incredulous expression and said, "What, you thought all FBI and Service agents were dull?"

He hesitantly smiled as I continued on my way after Dana and Mulder.

The elevator door closed on us before Dana snickered. "You keep that up, Agent Allen, and you'll ruin the Service's reputation of being a bunch of cold, humorless automatons."

I shrugged. "I'm hardly a typical agent by any definition. What harm does it do to have a little fun every now and then?"

I was still chuckling slightly when the elevator door opened on the correct floor. The humor stopped abruptly when we all saw the yellow crime scene tape and a Chicago cop guarding it. Wordlessly, all three of us dug out our badges and showed them to the guard. He nodded and held the tape up for us to duck under and enter the suite.

It was the first time I'd been back since the shooting, of course. I stopped and looked around at the scattered blood stains, two of which decorated one of the walls. Fortunately, there didn't seem to be much of an odor to the room. I doubted I could handle it if there were. Staring at the dark maroon spray pattern of the fourth man I'd killed that day, I slowly drifted over to the bar that I'd hidden behind. In addition to the dozen slugs that had been stopped by my chest, there were another dozen and a half in the bar itself and the wall behind it.

I was still staring around when Dana put a hesitant hand on my upper arm. "Ryan, you okay?"

Startled out of my trance, I focused momentarily on her. Over her shoulder, I saw Mulder had squatted down by one of the bloodstains beside the table that had held my protectees. He was looking over at me in concern. When I refocused on Dana, I saw equal concern reflected there. It was distantly comforting to know that there were people who cared. I took a deep breath and nodded. Giving her a sheepish grin, I said, "Sorry. Zoned out there for a minute." I sighed and continued in a lower voice, mindful of the cop in the hall, "These were the first mortals I had to kill. My life's ugly enough at times without having to add something like this on top of it."

They both nodded. Dana left her hand on my arm and quietly asked, "Do you need to talk about it?"

I shook my head. I'd already talked to Jennifer about it after I woke up from a nightmare. Multiple times. "I've already talked to a friend. Thank you for the offer, but I think it was just the shock of seeing it again that got me. I'm fine now."

Mulder nodded and immediately turned back to his slow perusal of the room. Dana stared at me for several more seconds before giving one emphatic nod and starting to question me on the exact circumstances of the evening. Who was in the room, where we were sitting, why I'd gotten up and gone to the wet bar, my first indication that something was wrong, which bloodstain belonged to which victim, and so on. Mulder continued his slow pacing around the room the entire time, seeming to absorb the feelings and images of the room as he did so. I know he was keeping up with our conversation since he interjected specific questions during Dana's interview. She didn't seem to mind. It was such a smooth machine in motion that I came to the conclusion that this was probably their normal routine when examining a crime scene.

She ran out of questions at the same time that he seemed to finish his own tour. They looked at each other before each gave a single nod and then turning to the door. "We're done here," Dana told me over her shoulder as she and her partner headed out.

I followed, but was stopped by the cop's quiet voice as I ducked back under the tape he held for us. "Sir?"

I straightened and looked at him. "Yes, officer?"

"I couldn't help overhearing you three in there," he began, encompassing all three of us with his eyes before settling on me. "You were the Service agent in there?" he asked, nodding toward the suite.

I nodded cautiously.

He smiled hugely and stuck out a hand. I numbly shook it as he continued, "I just want to say good job and thank you for getting those perps. Every cop in Chicago would like to buy you a drink for the great job you did."

I fought the blush that the praise was causing. "Thank you, but you and I both know just how lucky I was. Not to sound cliché, but I was just doing my job."

"Perhaps," he allowed, "but we're all proud of you anyway." It wasn't as condescending as it sounded seeing as how he was old enough to be my father. Figuratively, of course.

Mumbling a thank you, I extracted my hand and headed to the elevator. When the elevator doors closed, Mulder commented, "I've heard basically the same thing around the Hoover building. For the time being anyway, you're the unknown national hero."

I ducked my head to avoid the furious blush. Mulder chuckled as Dana said, "You ARE young, aren't you? You have to learn to take a compliment, Ryan."

"Yes, Mom," I muttered. Mulder stifled a laugh as one of Dana's lips twitched in amusement.

Once back outside, Mulder went to move the car over to the Knight's Inn as Dana and I walked across the street. Dana followed me in as I headed to the registration desk to get us checked in. Smiling at the clerk, I said, "I have three rooms reserved under the name of Allen."

She nodded and tapped away at the computer before frowning at it. Looking back up at me she said, "Well, we seem to have a problem."

Oh, wonderful. "What's wrong?"

"We hold rooms until eight with reservations, but it's after eight now." She pointed at a clock that proclaimed that it was 9:15. "Since you were a no-show, we rented out one of the rooms you had reserved."

"Well, do you still have three rooms?"

Her eyes shifted away from mine. Uh, oh. Confirming my suspicions, she said, "Um, no, we don't. We still have two adjoining rooms. We're full otherwise."

"Do the rooms have two beds?" asked Dana from beside me.

The clerk nodded, finally able to give a piece of good news. "One does."

Dana nodded and turned to me. A Buzz walked into range before she got a word out. It took me a moment to identify it as Mulder's, but she'd already relaxed. A Buzz hits her and she RELAXES? No, she was whipcord tense in the Hoover building and again in the airport until she'd identified me. So it was just Mulder's Buzz that made her relax even before she can see him. Hmm, that's interesting . . .

I dragged my attention back to what she was saying. " . . . and Mulder can share that room and I can take the single."

I winced. How will I explain this to her?

I was saved by the door opening, allowing Jennifer to enter, followed by Mulder. I smiled at her and she walked straight up to me, dropped her bags, and jumped up onto my chest, forcing me to catch her before she fell. Wrapping her arms around my neck, she said, "Hi, Ryan," before leaning forward for a kiss that sent tingles down to the soles of my feet.

By the time I came up for air, Mulder had moved up behind Dana and both were looking at us in amusement. "I take it you know her, Ryan," commented Mulder dryly.

Jen giggled. Giving her a grin, I lowered her until she was standing under her own power again. Keeping my arm around her shoulder, I turned to the agents and said, "What, you think I don't have this natural effect on women?" Mulder's eyes crinkled upward in the corners, Dana's mouth turned down, and Jen swatted me in the arm, hard. Wincing, I corrected myself, "What I meant was: I'd like you two to meet Jennifer, my wife. Jen, these are Agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully of the FBI. They're the help I mentioned I was going to get here."

She shook hands politely and exchanged words of greeting as I tried to figure out how to handle this. Fortunately, Dana came to my rescue. "Well, since Missus Allen is joining us, that changes the room assignments." She turned to the clerk who'd been doing a good job of not appearing to have seen anything out of the ordinary. "Which room has the two beds?"

He handed her two electronic keys. "Two nineteen." He pulled out two more keys and held them out to me. "Two twenty-one has the queen."

I took the keys and thanked him before we all trooped out the door. Once we were all back around the car, Jennifer said, "If my being here is causing a problem . . ."

She stopped as Mulder shook his head and opened his mouth to say something. Dana beat him to the punch. "No, you stay with your husband. Lord knows this isn't the first time we've been forced to share a hotel room."

"And such torture it must be for you two," I commented blandly.

Dana shot me a dark look, but Mulder seemed to be fighting a grin. I managed to keep a straight face, but it was a chore.

Mulder jumped into the car and said he'd meet us at the rooms. I picked up one of Jennifer's suitcases and started walking back along the rows of buildings to ours. Jen walked beside me and Dana fell into step on Jen's other side.

Idly, Dana asked Jen, "So how long have you two been married?"

Jen shot me a questioning glance. I hadn't told her how much these two knew about me. I answered, "It's okay, Jen. They met me before I moved to Toronto." And therefore knew my real name.

Jen nodded and answered, "Officially, we aren't. We were living together in Toronto when Director Price offered this position to Ryan. He asked that 'Agent Allen' be married since she had to create this persona anyway."

Dana nodded. "Okay, so how long have you been together?"

"Four years now. How about you and Agent Mulder?"

Dana thought about it for a few seconds before responding, "Jeez, going on ten years now?"

We'd just gotten to the rooms and found the car trunk open and the door to 219 open. Reaching into the trunk, I pulled out my suitcases as Dana grabbed hers. Jen opened the door to our room and came back to help me with the remaining suitcases. As she approached me, she stiffened and her head jerked around to look further down the parking lot. She relaxed almost immediately.

I turned to look at what attracted Jennifer's attention and saw Michelle walking toward us. I smiled and waved. "Hi, Michelle."

She nodded to me. "Ryan." Jennifer got a nod and a smile. "Jen. How've you been?"

Jennifer nodded back and grabbed two suitcases. As she was going back into our room, Mulder and Dana came back out to the car and stopped dead in their tracks when they saw Michelle.

Michelle looked back and forth between them and me before saying, "I take it these are the two Immortal investigators you mentioned?"

I groaned. This was NOT going to go well. Mulder's jaw dropped and Dana's eyes narrowed before they both turned to me with nearly identical expressions of anger.

Well, start with polite. "Special Agents Dana Scully and Fox Mulder, meet Michelle. She's the other investigator I invited along to help me out."

Michelle's hand had stopped in mid-air on its way to shake Dana's hand. She abruptly turned to Mulder and asked, "Fox Mulder? Spooky Mulder of the X-Files?"

I groaned again. This kept getting better and better.

Mulder visibly stiffened. "Yes, that is one of my nicknames. Do I know you?"

She slowly shook her head. "No, but this is actually a good thing. It greatly simplifies what I can tell you."

"Really?" I asked sarcastically.

"You've got to be joking," added Jennifer where she was standing in the doorway to our room.

Michelle made a face at me. "Yes, really." She turned to Mulder and said, "He's well known to us as one of the few people on earth who has the imagination to deal with us."

"Us?" echoed Mulder in suspicion.

"Perhaps we should take this inside," I interjected.

"No, I want to know what's going on first." Mulder planted himself and didn't look like he'd budge for anything short of a charging elephant.

I walked over to him. Fortunately, Jennifer and Michelle kept their distance for the time being. Lowering my voice, I said to Mulder, "What we're about to discuss has the same secrecy level as Immortality. We do NOT want to be talking about this in the parking lot of a motel in downtown Chicago."

He narrowed his eyes at me and appeared ready to argue it, but Dana had been paying attention. Between my quiet plea for privacy and the girl's calm demeanor, Dana apparently came to the conclusion that things were stable for the moment. She laid one hand on Mulder's shoulder from behind and said, "I think we should go inside and listen to them, Mulder. None of them are threatening us right now."

He turned his head far enough that he could see her out of the corner of his eye. Trying to allay his fears, I offered, "If it'll make you feel better, you can hold my weapons until the discussion is over." Not that it'd matter, but even the illusion of control and safety might make him feel better.

He looked from one of us to the other before stiffly turning and walking back into the hotel room. I followed, whispering a, "Thank you," to Dana as I passed.

She whispered back, "This'd better be good."

Once into the hotel room, I slowly pulled my gun out and removed the magazine and chambered round, placing them and the empty gun onto the dresser across from the bed. Mulder and Scully took seats on one of the beds, facing the door and with their back to the bathroom. I took a seat at the chair beside the door as Michelle and Jennifer walked in. Jen immediately took her seat on my lap. Michelle saw this, shook her head slightly with an amused grin and took the other chair, turning it around and straddling the back. All three of us were something like eight feet from the pair of FBI agents. Leaning over, Jennifer pulled the door closed and dead bolted it.

Michelle studied Mulder silently before leaning forward with her elbows on knees and asked, "How's your knowledge of mythology, Agent Mulder?"

Dana made a sound as close to a snort of amusement as I'm ever likely to hear from her. Mulder smiled at both of them and replied, "Pretty good, I guess."

"What can you tell me about vampires?"

Dana's mouth dropped open. Mulder's eyebrow went up before he slowly began nodding. "The terrorist who told Kessler to order the Presidential Detail to the lobby." He turned to his partner. "One of the few consistent threads among the folklore about vampires from one culture to another is their incredible suggestive powers. If true, that would explain why a highly competent Secret Service Agent would do something so completely out of character and then not remember it afterwards." He turned to Michelle. "You said 'us'."

She nodded calmly. "Yes, I am a vampire."

He didn't even blink at the admission before he turned to me. "And you already know all this."

I nodded. "When Agent Kessler told me what happened, that answer is the only thing that made sense. And if there's a vampire AND Immortal teamed up and trying to kidnap the President . . ." I left the thought hanging. Besides, the implications were obvious to everyone in the room.

Mulder nodded. "That's why you wanted a pair of Immortal investigators to help. And you called in a vampire to help you deal with that one." He cocked an eyebrow at me before continuing, "Can I assume that you know how to deal with this vampire if and when we catch him?"

I nodded, but didn't go into detail.

Michelle added, "I'm what's called an Enforcer. Sort of a vampire police force, if you will. If there was a vampire involved in this, then he's broken several of our laws and must be held accountable for that."

"Wait a minute," interjected Dana. "Vampire? Like a blood-sucking, bat-changing creature of the night?"

Michelle's face shifted to a slightly disgusted look. Mulder interjected, "Hollywood has added several things to the popular image of vampires. Historically, the only consistent threads are heightened strength; drinking blood; sunlight, religious icon, and wooden stake fearing; and powers of suggestion." He turned to Michelle. "Did I miss anything?"

She smiled. "Yep, but all of our powers aren't really your concern. Ryan and I will deal with this one if and when he's found."

Mulder nodded, apparently accepting the information. Dana was anything except calm. She stood and began pacing frantically. "I can't believe you're listening to this, Mulder! This woman hasn't produced one shred of proof of what she's claiming." She stopped her pacing to turn a glare on Michelle. It took her only a moment to back up, her face shifting to surprise.

I glanced over and wasn't very surprised to see Michelle's eyes glowing. "Is this enough proof for you, Agent Scully?" Michelle asked.

Dana swallowed but didn't directly answer the question. She continued to stare at Michelle and I could nearly hear the gears turning. Before she did something she'd regret, I spoke up. "Dana, be careful of what you say here. You're the SECOND oldest person in the room." I glanced at Michelle's calm expression before adding, "By a fair margin. Try not to piss her off." Dana stared silently at me before tearing off her suit coat and dropping it onto the bed Mulder was still sitting on. Turning back around, she took a seat next to him again. I felt Jennifer twitch subtly and saw Michelle scowl and start to fidget. I looked over at Dana and immediately saw the problem. "Dana."

"What?!" Her stress level indicated how well she was dealing with the entire situation. Which is to say 'not very well at all.'

"Could you either take off your necklace or tuck it inside your shirt, please?"

Mulder glanced over and nodded to himself but didn't say anything. One of Dana's hands came up to grasp the gold cross necklace she was wearing. "Why?"

How to phrase this delicately? "Crosses tend to . . ." I glanced at Michelle before continuing, "make vampires uncomfortable." I raised an eyebrow. "And irritable. So please take that out of sight before Michelle decides that this whole thing is more aggravation than it's worth."

Dana shrugged and dropped it into her shirt. Michelle immediately calmed down.

Mulder studied Dana for a few seconds before turning back to the rest of us. "One thing I don't understand."

"ONE thing?" muttered Dana, staring down at her hands.

Mulder ignored her. "If this vampire did coerce Kessler to take the Detail to the lobby, why didn't this vampire go into the suite with the President? Those powers would have made the whole situation easier on the attackers."

Michelle and I nodded. I answered, "If you assume the Immortal I Sensed was with the vampire, then they would have known there was an Immortal with the President BEFORE the door got kicked in. Immortals are notoriously resisters. Instead of facing whatever was in the suite with the President, the Immortal and vampire sent in their mortal flunkies and then they took to the hills."

Mulder cocked an eyebrow at me. "That's making several assumptions, including one that a vampire and Immortal together were reluctant to take on one Immortal."

I nodded. "I can't come up with any other explanations, though."

"Me neither." He frowned suddenly. "You used the term 'resistor'."

Michelle said, "An individual that can resist the power of vampire hypnosis. Most Immortals and some mortals are resisters."

He nodded then leaned against the headboard, his forehead wrinkled in thought. Dana was still in a state of stunned silence. I turned to Michelle. "Honestly, I have no idea how to start tracking down a rogue vampire. Any suggestions?"

She nodded. "Lots. First, though, I have to get in touch with the local Enforcers and determine if indeed it was a vampire that got the Detail to the lobby. Until that's proven one way or another, I can't start a full fledged hunt."

"Anything I can do to help?"

She shook her head. "I'll coordinate my activities in town through you. You're uniquely useful to the Enforcers but most won't acknowledge that. I'll call you in the morning after I've learned everything I can. Your cell phone still the same number?"

I nodded and then turned to Mulder. "I'm about beat. It's been a long night. I suggest the three of us meet in the lobby for breakfast at eight and discuss the day's plans then."

He nodded to me before turning to Michelle. "I have so many questions for you . . ."

She shook her head. "You already know more about us than I'm comfortable with, Agent Mulder. I'll answer any questions from you only if you have a need to know the information. And at the moment, you have no need to know." She stood and turned to me. "Talk to you tomorrow?"

I nodded.

She smiled down at Jennifer and said, "Your lady friend looks tired, Ryan. Take her to bed." She smiled cordially at the FBI agents and said, "Good night, all." With that, she opened the door and exited.

Jennifer DID seem to have fallen asleep, much to my surprise. She hadn't said anything during the entire conversation and had the appearance of having fallen asleep on my chest some time ago. I smiled down at her and said to Mulder and Dana, "Looks like Jennifer is dead to the world. Unless there's something else, I'll be taking her to bed."

Mulder stood and crossed to where my gun was still sitting on the dresser. As I carefully stood, trying to not let Jennifer drop, he loaded my gun and slipped it into my holster when I turned my back to him and asked him to replace it. He then opened the door for me and bid me a good night. As he was holstering my gun, it vaguely occurred to me how much I trusted Mulder to let him do this when my hands were full of Jennifer.

When the door closed behind me, Jennifer peeked up at me and smiled. "You can let me down now."

I smiled fondly at her, "Faker."

I set her down as she grinned. "True, but they don't know I'm a vampire. That may come in useful. The fewer vampires they know, the better for them in the long run anyway." She unlocked our door and entered. "Besides, I'm here to help Michelle," she nodded toward the woman in question, who was sitting calmly in our room.

I blinked at her. "How the hell did you get in here?"

She held up one of the keys with a smile. I patted the pocket where I'd left mine. Her grin widened at my frown when I came up empty. "Come on, with my speed and reflexes, do you think I'd make a BAD pickpocket?"

I sighed and dropped onto the bed. "Remind me to never piss you off."

She shook her head. "Naw. For some totally unfathomable reason, my childe here seems to be fond of you. I wouldn't do that to her."

Jen rolled her eyes. "Thank you, Mom."

I chuckled at Michelle's sour look. "Seriously, is there anything I can do to help?"

Michelle shook her head. "Not until tomorrow at the very least. I'll give any useful information to Jennifer before she makes it back here tonight. Have a nice evening." She stood and headed to the door with Jennifer hot on her heels after giving me a quick kiss.

"Michelle," I called. She stopped and turned to me with a raised eyebrow. "Leave my key," I tell her.

Grinning, she pulled it out of her pocket and dropped it onto the table. "'Night."

I awoke to the sound of someone coming in the door. I had my gun in hand and aimed before my mind caught up. Jennifer froze in place with her key still in hanging from her hand until I lowered the gun and replaced it on the nightstand.

"Good morning," she said, cheerfully.

I looked at the clock and discovered it was all of four thirty in the morning. I groaned and fell back onto the pillows. "If you continue to be this cheerful at such a god-awful hour of the morning, I'll have to kill you."

"Too late. I'm dead already." She put several bags down on the table and grabbed the ice bucket.

"You take all the fun out of my threats, you know that?"

"What, you want me to apologize?" she threw over her shoulder on her way back out the door. She returned within a minute with the bucket half full of ice. Taking a full bottle of blood out of one of her bags, she placed it into the ice bucket. Looks like she found somewhere to buy food for herself.

I rubbed my eyes in an effort to wake up. "Did you and Michelle learn anything useful?"

She nodded. "Turns out the local Enforcers are already on the lookout for a vampire by the name of Maxmillian Johns. He's been skirting close to the edge of breaking the Code for some time. Seems he enjoys hypnotizing unsuspecting mortals to do all sorts of strange things. He gets a kick out of it, I guess," Jen shrugged. "Anyway, the Enforcers have been looking for him for two months. They know he's still in town since there have been a rash of people doing things completely out of character without any explanation, usually with amusing and embarrassing results. BUT," she held up a finger to make a point, "there have been no reports of missing blood from blood banks or hospitals and not even any attacks on mortals that could be him feeding."

I nodded. "So he's still in town, but has a separate supply of blood. Presumably his Immortal cohort."

She nodded in response. "Before he disappeared, he hung around with a 'mortal' named Jenny Stanley."

I checked the name against my memory but came up blank. Not surprising, really. Well, that's what I had older friends for. "I don't know the name myself, but lots of people to ask. Not to mention access to the FBI database."

She talked over her shoulder as she changed into a pair of sweats. "I wonder if all investigations are this straightforward."

I shrugged. "No idea. But among us we have three sets of contacts. Conventional FBI, vampire Enforcers, and among the Immortal community. I daresay we've got an unfair advantage over your standard homicide detective." I watched as she put one of those hair ties into her hair without the aid of a mirror or two extra arms. How the hell does she do it? Shaking my head at the mystery of women, I glanced over at the bags she'd brought in. There were several, but nothing was marked. "What all did you pick up while you were out?"

She spoke without her hands slowing down. "A bottle for me to drink today while you're out playing 'cops and robbers', a book, and some materials

to fashion weapons for when we catch up to Johns."

That last one threw me for a loop. "And why are you making weapons to destroy Johns?"

She crossed over to the bed and crawled under the covers with me. "Not all of us go around perpetually armed, Ryan. I need a weapon, and Mulder and Dana need something just in case they have to be part of that fight."

I was yawning into my juice glass later that morning when Mulder and Dana found me in the lobby. Fortunately, we were staying in a place that served a continental breakfast, so I could at least get a jumpstart on my breakfast.

Mulder crossed over to the coffee pot while Dana took a seat across from me. I looked up at her and gave a half-hearted smile before my gaze dropped back to my juice as I tried valiantly to wake up.

"Good morning," she said into my silence.

I shook my head. "'Morning,' yes. The 'good' part still hasn't been decided."

Mulder arrived and placed a styrofoam cup in front of his partner before taking a seat. I was still looking down at my cup, so I don't know for sure, but I was guessing Mulder was studying me. Proving my suspicions correct, he said, "Ryan, you look like the poster boy for the 'I'm not a morning person' foundation."

A chuckle escaped. "Nice of you to notice, Mulder." Deciding I'd better start acting like the federal agent I was, I straightened in my chair and looked at them. "You two look rested. Have a nice night?"

If I hadn't been actually looking at Dana's face at that moment, I wouldn't have caught the miniscule blush that stained her cheeks for a moment. Mulder calmly answered, "This place is significantly better than our usual accommodations when we're on the road, so I slept as well as I ever do."

I nodded. "Well, shall we have breakfast here or find someplace else?"

Dana raised an eyebrow. "Aren't we going to wait for your wife?"

I shook my head. "She grew up here in Chicago. She'll be off doing her own thing while we're in town." That wasn't quite the truth, but close enough.

Mulder nodded. "Okay. Well, as for breakfast, I'm all in favor of finding someplace where I can get an order of bacon, hash browns, and eggs."

Dana made a face. "Do you realize how much cholesterol is in that stuff, Mulder?"

He turned a quirky grin on her. "What's it gonna do, kill me?"

I chuckled. "He's got you there, Dana."

She sighed. "Well, don't come complaining to me when your blood turns the consistency of half-congealed hamburger grease."

That mental image made my stomach turn. "Hey, I'm considering food here. Please don't do that."

She smiled sweetly at me. "You encouraged him."

I glanced over at Mulder. "How do you put up with this?"

He leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. In a perfect mimicry of one of Dana's comments yesterday, he said, "It's a never ending struggle."

"Hey," objected Dana. She turned to me. "I thought you were on my side."

I just grinned.

Sighing, Dana said, "Well, since this breakfast is paid for out of our rooms, we may as well stay here." She turned to Mulder's pouting look. "Don't worry, Mulder, we'll go someplace appropriately artery-clogging for supper tonight."

He perked up a little at that news before turning and looking at the selection available to us. Giving a slight frown, he said, "You two go ahead. I'll hold the table."

"You ARE going to eat, Mulder," stated Dana.

He nodded and waved one hand negligently. "I know, I know."

Chuckling at their antics, I got up and went to get myself some breakfast, finally deciding on a bagel with cream cheese, two glazed doughnuts, and another big glass of orange juice. Carefully balancing my food, I made it back to our table without dropping anything and sent Mulder off to get his own. Within a few minutes all three of us were working our way through breakfast and deciding how to attack the day.

"Did Michelle get back with you?" asked Dana around a bite of her own bagel.

I nodded. "Either of you two know one of us named Jenny Stanley?" I paid more attention to Dana seeing as how she had so much more time to

meet people than we did.

Since I was looking that way, I saw her pause in mid-bite. I vaguely noted that Mulder was shaking his head, but I was more concerned with the absolutely blank expression that was on Dana's face. Mulder finally noticed her look and asked, "Scully, you okay?" She put her food down and rested her elbows on the table and tilted her head forward into her hands before she started silently shaking. Mulder and I frowned a mutual look of confusion at each other before he turned back to her. "Scully?" He laid a hand on her shoulder, an expression of concern starting to form on his face. Dana leaned back on her own, and I saw that she was silently laughing so hard that tears were making tracks down her cheeks. Mulder had calmed the instant he saw her face. "Care to let us in on the joke?"

Leaning forward onto one elbow again, her other hand wrapped around her stomach, Dana fought to catch her breath. "Jenny Stanley? Oh, I haven't heard that name for a hundred years. Yes, I knew her." She wiped her eyes free of tears and continued. "I was wandering England at the time and had just stopped in a small town for the night when I felt a Buzz enter my range. Since I was upstairs in the rooms of a small tavern, I figured that the Immortal was downstairs. Mulder, you know how fond I am of fights, so I stayed where I was, figuring I would leave well enough alone. After ten minutes, I started hearing a loud female voice from downstairs, raised in anger and demanding something or another. A calm voice responded, but before he could finish, a resounding slap stopped him in mid-sentence and the female loudmouth went off again. Well, I may not enjoy fights, but I don't like Immortals using their status against mortals even more. I got dressed again and went downstairs. Down there I found a large woman terrorizing everyone in the room. Now by large I don't mean heavy, I mean LARGE. A little over six foot and muscled without being a Hercules type. Anyway, she looked like she'd been living in the woods for years. Hair matted with twigs, dirty face, and she was wearing some kind of stained leather jerkin. All in all, she almost looked like she could be one of the legendary Amazon women. And she had each and every man in this English tavern quaking in his boots." She paused momentarily to savor the memory before continuing. "When I entered the room, she spotted me immediately. Instead of responding well to another woman like I was hoping, she started in on me just as bad as she was riding everyone else in the room. After listening to her demands that I repair her clothing and make her supper 'just like a proper little woman' should, she turned her back on me and kept yelling at the rest of the room. To her turned back, I said a simple, 'No,' and she nearly went through the roof. Turning back to me in a rage, she demanded my obedience. When I refused, she took a swing at me." She shook her head. "No finesse. She just flailed one of those fists at me. I ducked it and shoved her into a table. While she was wiping the ale out of her face, I told her to leave or this whole thing might end up as a Challenge." She shook her head again. "That idiot tore a leg off one of the tables she'd destroyed in her fall and used it as a club to attack me. Well, the next ten minutes were a slaughter. She was too used to using brute force to get her way. She had no way of dealing with someone who wouldn't be intimidated and could stay out of her reach and keep beating on her. I finally knocked her unconscious." Her grin reappeared. "And was lauded a hero by everyone in the place."

I chuckled, but Mulder looked pensive. "I'd call her a bully, but bullies are basically cowards. She should have run once it was clear you weren't going to be intimidated."

"Maybe she learned her lesson," I offered. They both looked at me with frowns. I elaborated, "Now she knows how ineffective she is against Immortals, so that's why she ran from me last week."

Neither looked convinced by that argument, but neither tried to dispute it. "How'd you get her name?" asked Dana.

"Michelle learned that the local Enforcers have been after one of their own named Maxmillian Johns. Johns was last seen two months ago. At the time, he was often in the company of one Jenny Stanley."

Mulder nodded. "All tied up with a nice little bow. That two month window keeps showing up, doesn't it?" He went back to his monster chocolate doughnut.

I nodded as well. "I noticed that too. Makes the tie-in more believable, anyway. I just don't want to be led around by the nose, following one obvious lead to another."

Dana shook her head. "Some cases turn out like that. Unless you put some serious effort into disappearing, tracking someone isn't as tough as many would like you to believe."

I nodded, remembering my Watcher training from years ago. Unless the subject knew you were there and was actively avoiding you, all the instructors assured us it was easier than it sounded. Pulling my mind back to the present, I asked, "So what's the plan today?"

"Where's our workspace?" asked Mulder.

"Well, the bodies are at the Bureau Chicago Field Office. I presume they'll have some spare offices there we can use. The Service typically doesn't have a lot of workspace at any of its field offices."

Mulder nodded. "Okay. Your plan from yesterday sounds good. Scully can look over the autopsy results and re-do anything she needs, you can start researching Stanley and Johns, and I'll start on the profiles." With that, he stood and headed to the door, dumping his trash on the way.

Dana and I shared a shrug before following suit. As I held the door for her, I asked quietly, "Don't take this wrong, but how do you put up with him?"

She nodded slightly and we continued the conversation on the way to the car in Mulder's wake. "I know what you mean," she said. "But that's just the way Mulder is. Besides, he's a better investigator than I am, and he's usually right."

I frown slightly. "Better investigator? I find that surprising. You're a medical doctor, so I figure you'd be more prone to structured methodology."

She nodded. "True, but he's been proven correct entirely too often to discount anything he may say. His leaps of intuition aren't scientific, but they usually DO save us time and effort."

We found workspace easily enough in the Bureau's field office. In fact, once they heard that we were investigating the attack on President Ryan, they offered us any and all help we needed.

Once the three of us had been shown separate offices, Mulder commented, "Isn't it nice to be so highly regarded."

Dana shot him a look of reproach. "Mulder, play nice."

I shrugged to myself. These two seemed to do a lot that didn't make sense to the rest of the world. And then they're surprised when everyone thinks they're a couple, I amended with a snicker. Oh, well. It was their life, not mine.

I went into my assigned office, closed the door, turned to the computer, and started running down what information I had. The name Maxmillian Johns was pretty uncommon, but Jenny Stanley was much more so. Probably why she's still using it instead of changing her name. I knew how old Stanley was, but I had no idea about Johns. Jennifer didn't mention, and I didn't think to ask. No matter. I had to track down two people who were going by the names Maxmillian Johns and Jenny Stanley two months ago here in town.

It took a few hours, but I finally ran down all the information I was looking for. Driver's licenses, Social Security numbers (like they'd ever need a Social Security check, I grinned), and so on. The licenses had birth dates that put them both in their thirties. The licenses also had separate addresses on them, but a search through the titles in the surrounding counties proved they'd bought a house together three months ago. Well, that indicated they were probably together at least.

I was sure the Enforcers had a way to do at least this much of an investigation as well. That means they had this address and had no doubt investigated it. Which meant Johns wasn't there. BUT, I corrected myself, it didn't mean Stanley wasn't there. They weren't looking for Stanley, so they wouldn't have done anything to her if they found her there. Well, here's a starting point.

I turned away from the computer I was working on as Dana walked into the room. She dropped a handful of files onto the desk and dropped into a chair before rubbing her eyes. "Not much there," she commented, waving at the files.

I nodded. "Doesn't surprise me much. I don't know how to read them myself, but everyone who did read them didn't give me much hope of anything useful being found." I waved a hand at the computer. "However, I've dug up a three month old joint address on Johns and Stanley. The Enforcers would have already checked it out, but they were looking for Johns. I'm at least as concerned with finding Stanley. You and Mulder willing to go check this place out with me?"

She nodded but didn't stand. Since she had moved her hand from her eyes to the back of her neck, I thought I'd spotted the problem. Just because Immortals recovered from injuries didn't mean we were immune to simple muscle fatigue and stress. I stood and crossed around the room to behind her chair. She stiffened as I started softly massaging her shoulders but slowly relaxed as I did nothing more than that. Within fifteen seconds her hands were in her lap and her head was tilted forward in relaxation as I applied more pressure.

"You're good at this," she said, nearly purring.

I grinned but didn't slow. "Thanks. It was a hobby with Andrea. And Jennifer's degree is in physical therapy, so she's given me lots of pointers." I continued silently massaging her shoulders and back of her neck for a few more minutes before gradually slowing and stopping. Once finished, I quietly recrossed to the chair I'd started in and sat back down.

Dana languidly stretched before opening her eyes and smiling at me. "Thank you."

I nodded. "I can do a more thorough job, but I don't think either of us would be comfortable with that." I smiled at her cocked head. "Let's just say that clothing impedes the effects. Even IF you agreed, Jennifer and a certain male FBI Agent would try to kill me outright." I raised my hand to her retort. "Save it. You two may not openly admit it, but it's obvious in all the small things." I grinned to ease the tension my words were causing her. "Besides, you already know I'm partial to petite redheads. I may not be able to keep my hands to myself. And I'm SURE I wouldn't survive that. Not with all my anatomy intact, anyway," I added.

She grinned but didn't pursue that line of conversation. "You said you found an address?"

I nodded. "Johns and Stanley bought a house together three months ago." I waved a hand at the door. "Shall we gather your wayward partner and do some investigating?"

Once again driving, Mulder pulled up across the street from our destination. The address itself was just another in a row of brownstone homes in an area that could politely be called destitute. "Charming," Mulder muttered.

We all got out of the car, but nobody went anywhere. They were likely thinking the same thing I was: To walk away from our car would invite it to be stripped in a matter of moments. "Why don't you two hang loose here. I'll just get close enough to tell if Stanley's home."

They both nodded. Scully walked around the front of the car to stand next to Mulder as I crossed behind the car to go across the street. I reflexively checked for traffic, but it was a pointless exercise. There weren't any moving vehicles in sight, though there was quite a crowd of curious pedestrians forming. Better move along. I crossed the road and walked up the sidewalk toward the front door. Fortunately, it was open space and nobody was thin enough to hide behind the weeds growing in the few patches of dirt visible. By the time I got to the door, I already knew Stanley wasn't home, but I knocked anyway for the benefit of my audience. When nobody answered, I turned and walked back to Mulder and Dana. By the time I was approaching, they had subtly turned their backs to each other in a clear defensive move. Casually glancing around, I spotted the problem. A dozen teenagers of all nationalities and both genders had formed a loose ring around them, leaving me space to enter the net. Without bothering to check, I knew I was cut off from retreat as well. Well, we were in this together. I kept walking until I'd finished off the triangle with Mulder and Dana.

Turning around, I left them to defend my back as I was doing for them. As I turned, I saw my guess was correct. The noose went around behind me as well. And along the path that I'd entered, a larger girl stepped further forward and stopped only a few feet from me, folding her arms and looking me up and down with a grin.

"What's up?" I ask, trying for nonchalance.

"Man, you guys are SO lost," was the response I got.

I shrugged. "Well, if you can ask your friends to get out of our way, we'll be going."

"Oh, eventually, maybe. First, though, I wonder how much money you got on you."

I appeared to think it over. "I believe that this is called theft or possibly extortion."

She shrugged. "Whatever you want to call it, you three ain't leaving until you fork over some dough."

I sighed and reached my left hand into my coat. Smiling hungrily, she stepped even closer and reached one hand forward. Grabbing her outstretched hand by the wrist, I pulled her toward me, spinning her in the process so her back was against my chest. My left hand had come out of my jacket by this time, holding my combat knife. With my right arm across her chest at shoulder height, my knife resting just under the hinge of her jaw, she had absolutely no options. At my first quick movement, both Mulder and Dana had pulled their service weapons out. That caused the assembled gang to reveal their weapons including a few cheap guns but mostly knives and bicycle chains. The spectators had vanished somewhere along the line. In the tense silence that followed, I whispered into her ear, "Don't even think of trying something. This knife is more than capable of slicing your face off before you even noticed." I raised my voice and addressed the gang, "Now why don't all of you place all your weapons on the ground five feet in front of me before I give your friend here another mouth about two inches below her original one. Oh, and all three of us are wearing Kevlar vests, so trying to shoot us wouldn't help much, but it WOULD piss me off."

Nobody moved. The various gang members started trading glances and muttering to themselves after a few seconds. To my new friend, I asked, "Do you know the people who used to live here?"

"Screw you." For having twelve inches of knife hovering over throat, she sure sounded fierce. But I could feel her trembling.

"No, thanks. I'm sure my wife's better than you are, anyway. Oh, and you better convince your friends to cooperate before I have to get this suit all bloody. That would really ruin my day. In fact, I may be cranky enough at that point that I'd have to beat the shit out of a few of them just to feel better." I grinned unpleasantly for those facing us before continuing. "You wouldn't be around to worry about that, though. Now you'd better have them start dropping their weapons in a pile in front of you before I start having a muscle spasm here. And get that left arm back up," I added to let her know I noticed that her arm had been drifting downward.

The arm came back up immediately, but she was silent for a moment before she ground out, "Jorge, get your ass over here and drop that knife in front of pretty boy like he said."

"But Penny," one of the boys started.

"DO IT!" she shouted angrily, one drop of sweat falling off her jaw to wind a lazy trail along the knife blade.

Sullenly, Jorge shuffled forward and dropped the knife before scuttling away.

"Marita," Penny called.

One of the girls came over from near Mulder and dropped her gun on top of the knife.

"The butterfly knife too," called Mulder.

Marita gave him a glare and flipped him a one fingered salute, but she pulled a folding knife out of a back pocket and dropped it as well. I tilted my chin to indicate that she should stand near Jorge.

One by one, Penny called everyone over to add weaponry to the increasingly impressive pile until everyone had been disarmed. Once the whole gang was standing in front of us, Dana holstered her weapon and patted Penny down, relieving her of a gun and a pair of folding knives. Once Penny was disarmed, I removed my right arm from across her chest and reached around to my back and pulled out my gun. Placing the muzzle against the back of her head, I got my left arm and knife out of her way and gently pushed her forward with the gun. Woodenly, she went forward until she was among her gang.

Keeping my gun out and pointed, I replaced the knife in its sheath. Reaching across to the other side of my coat, I awkwardly pulled my badge holder out of my coat, but didn't open it. Addressing myself to the group, I said, "We were never here, you were never here, and you never threatened us with these weapons." I flipped open the badge. "Understand?"

They scattered.

Mulder finally relaxed when the last one was out of sight and holstered his gun. He turned to me with a slightly angry expression. "What the hell was that for?"

I rolled my eyes as I opened the back door of the car. "What would you have had me do?" I started shuttling all the weapons into the back seat of our car as I continued. "If we identified ourselves the instant they surrounded us, either they'd all split and just do this to someone else again, or they'd attack and we would have had to hurt several of them. This way, these weapons are off the street and we're all walking away. No way in hell

we could have arrested all of them, either."

Dana helped me with the last few items but kept the matched knives we'd gotten off of Penny. "You really ought to pick something up, Mulder," she commented.

He stared at her. "What?"

"Free chance to arm yourself," I clarified, picking through the pile myself. I'd seen one of the gang drop a large knife that I could use . . . Ah, there it was. I checked the blade and decided it was worth saving. Slipping it into the sheath next to my Ka-Bar, I turned back to Mulder.

"But . . . but . . ." He looked absolutely mortified at the suggestion and what we were doing.

"Stop thinking like an FBI Agent for a minute and think like an Immortal," I told him. "How many weapons do you own aside from a sword?"

He frowned. "One."

I nodded. "That Bureau issued SigSauer. Problem is that it's registered to Fox Mulder. What happens when you outlive this identity? You can't take any weapons with you that can be traced back to Special Agent Fox Mulder. So you need more weaponry that isn't linked to you." I waved a hand at the pile. "Take your pick."

He frowned and stared at the weapons, pulling on his lower lip in thought. Tucking her knives into a coat pocket, Dana walked up to him and placed a hand on his forearm. "You know we're going to have to leave the Bureau soon, Mulder. When we do, we'll have to return our issues. I sure don't want to go around unarmed." She paused, studying him for a moment before finishing, "If you won't do it for yourself, then please do it for me, Fox."

His gaze snapped over to her in surprise. Whatever he saw there caused him to smile and cup the side of her face in one hand, running a thumb down a cheek. He finally sighed and nodded. Squatting down outside the car, he started poking around through the pile.

Dana turned to me with a smile, but her eyes were glistening with unshed tears. "For such a young Immortal, you're amazingly wise."

I smiled. "Thank my teacher. He's honorable to a fault, but he's also practical in many regards."

She smiled again, this time sadly. "So was my teacher."

Back in the car, I pulled out my phone and an overseas number that I'd written down in DC before coming out here.

"Grey."

"Hey, Aaron. It's Ryan Chessman."

"Ryan! What's up? Nothing wrong, I hope."

"No, nothing wrong. Just needed to pick your brain."

"Shoot."

"First, is Terry there?"

"Yes."

"I'll need to talk to both of you, anyway. Put her on speaker?"

I heard a click before Terry came on. "Hi, Ryan. I have the other extension. What's up?"

"Do either of you two know an Immortal named Jenny Stanley or a vampire named Maxmillian Johns? She's two hundred fifty or so, but I've no idea how old he is."

There was a pause before Terry asked, "What's going on, Ryan? Why are you asking, and who are the two people in the background of whatever car you're in?"

"You heard about the attempted assassination of President Ryan? I was in the suite with him, and shot the five terrorists. Circumstantial evidence pointed to a vampire being part of the attack, and I'd Sensed an Immortal before we were invaded. I was given the investigation due to the Immortal angle, and I recruited some Immortal investigators and talked Michelle into coming along to Chicago to help on the vampire side. Once she was introduced to my compatriots, she explained vampires to them on her own. Michelle dug up those two names last night. I have some info but not enough to track them down."

Terry didn't respond, so Aaron said, "We bumped into Jenny Stanley about a hundred fifty years ago in Ireland. She was a typical bully until she realized I wouldn't be intimidated. I killed her but walked away before I made it permanent. Haven't heard anything about her since."

"Sorry, I don't recognize the name Maxmillian Johns," added Terry.

I nodded, even though they were half a continent and an ocean away. "Well, thanks for the help."

Good luck," they chorused. All three of us chuckled as we disconnected.

"Anything useful?" asked Mulder from the driver's seat.

I shook my head. "Not really. A friend bumped into Stanley fifty years before Dana here did, but it was in Ireland. She was a bully then, too. Nothing since, and nothing at all on Johns."

By the time we made it back to the hotel, night was falling. We all got out of the car and talked in the parking lot in front of our rooms. I leaned against the side of the car and Mulder and Dana stood in the next parking space over.

"How about tomorrow?" asked Dana.

"Depends on what Michelle finds tonight," I responded. "I'll give her the address and let her poke around. If she finds something of interest, then we'll follow up on that. Mulder, how's your profile coming?"

He shook his head. "Nothing useful toward finding them. Since we found where they stayed before the attack, I can add that tidbit to the mix, but even that won't help in getting us a current location."

Jennifer opened the door to our room and stepped out to meet us. Since the sun was down and she could most likely hear us, it didn't surprise me. She walked up to me and gave me a quick kiss before turning her back to me and snuggling up to me when I put my arms around her. "How was your day, dear?" she asked.

Mulder rolled his eyes and I chuckled. "Other than trying to track down an Immortal bully and her vampire henchman who sent five terrorists in to assassinate the President of the United States, you mean? Other than that, nothing much happened."

I couldn't see Jen's expression, but I saw Dana roll her eyes and Mulder grin. Jen replied, "Let's try again. Did you get the bad guy?"

"Nope."

Michelle suddenly appeared behind Mulder and Dana. Draping one arm over Mulder's shoulder, she said, "I guess that means I'm still part of the hunt?"

Mulder yelped and jumped. Dana looked startled, but then she hadn't been touched, either. Mulder was breathing heavy from the overdose of adrenaline that he just got. "Don't DO that!"

"What am I going to do, give you a heart attack?" asked Michelle with a hint of humor.

Mulder glared at her half-heartedly before turning to me. "Are all vampires like this?"

I thought about it a moment before replying, "After about their three hundredth birthday, yeah, most of 'em."

"Jeez, I guess that makes me seriously over the hill," commented the seemingly thirty-three year old Michelle.

I smiled at her mild joke. "Mulder, Jen and I will probably go out to eat tonight. Can I have the keys?" He fished them out of his pocket and tossed them to me. "Thanks. You two have my cell number if you need the car for something?" At their nod, I said goodnight to them after agreeing to breakfast again the next morning.

I ducked into the room and grabbed a few items before waving the two ladies into the car. I got behind the wheel and drove us back out to the street. "Why are there a bunch of guns and knives in the back seat?" asked Michelle in amusement.

I recounted the story of Penny and her gang to them as I negotiated the streets, heading south out of downtown. I still hadn't figured out a way of disposing of those things. Maybe the local Watchers?

"Where're we going?" asked Jennifer.

"Either I can park the car and one of the two of you carry me to this place, or I can tell you where it is and you two can check it out."

"Park. I can carry you while Jennifer navigates," ordered Michelle.

The look of the neighborhood didn't improve after the sun went down. And you'd think that the dark would hide some of the problems.

Michelle landed me on the roof of the building while Jennifer landed closer to the trapdoor leading into the home. As I made my way as quietly as I could over to her, Jennifer tore the padlock off the door by brute force. All three of us entered the building quickly and pulled the door shut behind us.

I made a move to pull the flashlight out of my pocket, but Michelle's hand stopped me. "No lights. Jen and I can cover this building in a matter of minutes without it. A flashlight would only make it look like we were stealing something."

I frowned. "Then why did you want me along?"

"To tell us if anyone we meet is Immortal," Michelle calmly answered as I could hear her walking away.

Great. I'm stuck in the dark and can't turn on a light for fear of attracting attention. I sat on the floor and tried to relax as much as possible, hoping

that neither of the women would decide to play a joke on me and try to scare me when they were done. Having a heart attack and dying would just top off the evening, I thought sarcastically.

True to her word, Michelle came back a couple minutes later, softly calling my name from several feet away before she approached. Jennifer joined us within a minute. "Did you find anything?" I asked them.

I could almost hear them shaking their heads. "No," Michelle answered. "Evidence of at least six people living here within the past month, one of them female, but nothing more useful than that."

I nodded. That didn't surprise me. "Okay, now what?"

They were quiet for a moment before Jennifer replied, "Now you and I go back to the hotel."

I turned toward where I'd heard Michelle's voice before. "And what will you be doing?"

"I have a few other things to check out. I'll call you tomorrow if I find anything."

"Why doesn't that reassure me?"

"Because you're a suspicious individual?"

"Hey!" Jennifer came to my defense as I chuckled.

I could feel Michelle move past me before she opened the door to the roof. We all trooped back out to the roof, Jennifer closing the door behind us. She stepped up behind me and got a firm grip across my chest, just under my arms. "Ready to go?"

The alarm went off way too early the next morning. Since both Jennifer and I were there and awake at the same time, we'd spent some of the previous evening talking and otherwise spending time together and so I'd gotten to bed late.

While I was in the shower, I heard my cell phone ring. I didn't bother getting out. Jennifer knew everything going on, and if it was important, she'd come and get me.

When I finally did emerge from the billowing steam, she was sitting up in bed and flipping through the channels in a doomed quest to find something worth watching. Giving up about the time I was getting my tie on, she threw the remote onto the bedspread in disgust.

"Good morning," I said, looking into the mirror as I continued working on the 'Accursed Choking Device'.

"Humph," she replied. She got up and walked over to me, taking the tie from my hands and working on it herself. While she was standing before me and I had nothing more pressing to do, I enjoyed the view. She hadn't worn anything to bed last night and she still hadn't. Finally getting the tie under control, she tightened it up to a comfortable point before smiling up at me. "See anything you like?"

I grinned and pulled her into a hug. "Lots," I answered. "Unfortunately, I have to get going, so I don't have time for any browsing." She effected a pout that got both of us chuckling. "Who was that on the phone?" I asked, dragging my attention to her eyes.

She gave a small smile, having no trouble reading my distracted thoughts. "Michelle. She gave me a phone number for Stanley that you can track down today."

I frowned slightly. "Where'd she get the phone number or shouldn't I ask?"

She shrugged, paying more attention to one of her hands which was tracing lazy designs under my jaw and around my neck. I vaguely felt her other hand resting on my chest just over my heart, but the one hand was definitely distracting. "She found parts of that gang you mentioned yesterday. She eventually tracked down Penny, I think her name was, and got the story." She paused in her explanation, continuing her lazy lines with her hands.

I fought to keep my mind (and the rest of my body) under some level of control. "What story was that?"

"Oh." She blinked at the sudden reminder of what we were talking about. "Stanley had hired the gang to watch the house and kill anyone who showed an interest in it and to call if anyone did."

"You keep that up and I never will get out of here," I growled, my hands around her back again of their own accord.

"And that's supposed to make me stop?" she asked in amusement.

I finally got to the lobby and took a seat with Mulder as Dana was gathering a breakfast for herself.

"You're late," he commented with a half-smile.

I shrugged as innocently as I could. "My alarm didn't go off."

His smile turned up a hair. "Your shower came on at the same time mine did. Try again."

I gave him a half nod in acknowledgement and smiled slightly. "Okay, I was distracted. Don't tell me you've never been distracted by a petite redhead, Agent Mulder," I said, glancing at Agent Scully as she finished picking through the fruit selection and headed back toward our table.

Mulder's jaw snapped shut and he stood up abruptly and brushed past his partner on the way to the doughnut display. Dana's eyes tracked him until he stopped and picked through the offerings. She turned to me with a frown. "What's gotten into him?"

I shook my head helplessly, fighting to keep the amusement from showing. As she placed her breakfast down on the table, I excused myself and got up to see to my own food.

By the time we'd returned, both Mulder and I had sufficiently recovered our composure that Dana didn't say anything further. Instead, Mulder asked, "So what's on tap today?"

I swallowed my bite of oatmeal and answered, "Michelle got me a phone number. I hope to track that backwards and find Stanley and Johns."

"Where'd she get this phone number?" asked Mulder suspiciously. I explained that she'd found Penny last night. He modified his previous question, "Okay, HOW'd she get this phone number?"

I smiled slightly and sighed. "Ask me no questions, and I'll tell you no lies."

"Do you realize what you're doing to due process and chain of evidence?"

I stared at him in amazement. "What, you think we're going to ARREST them?"

He opened his mouth to reply when Dana placed one hand on the arm he had resting on the tabletop. "Mulder, think it through. We CAN'T arrest them. If they do get thrown in jail, sooner or later someone will notice they aren't aging, and you know what that would mean to us all."

He frowned and asked me, "So what ARE we going to do with them?"

I shrugged nonchalantly. "I was going to turn Johns over to Michelle and kill Stanley myself."

"That's premeditated murder!" objected Mulder, though he had the sense to keep his voice down.

I stared at him icily and answered in a low voice. "Yes, it is. Agent Mulder, we are Immortal. According to the Rules, that's enough reason all by itself. Hell, going by the Rules, I could Challenge you here and now, and Dana couldn't interfere in the fight. But I won't do that because I don't consider you a threat to me or anyone I love. Stanley, on the other hand, already had me killed once and tried to kidnap the people I swore to defend with my life. That's more than sufficient reason to kill her."

Mulder snapped his jaw shut and glared at me, silently fuming, as Dana calmly asked, "And Johns?"

I turned to her. "Vampires have very strict rules regarding revealing themselves to mortals. His actions are endangering all vampires. I'm simply going to turn him over to their police force equivalent. What they do with him is their own business."

She nodded. "Under the circumstances, that sounds like the best answer." She turned to her breakfast for a moment before looking back up. "Oh, and if you DO Challenge Mulder, I wouldn't interfere. However, I WOULD tear your head off with my bare hands if you killed him." She smiled sweetly, but the cold look in her eyes told volumes about her seriousness.

I nodded, accepting the threat of retribution. Not that I'd expected anything less.

The clerk at the Bureau office handed Mulder a sheet of paper and asked us if we needed anything further. At our negative answer, she turned and when back to her desk as Mulder scanned the information we'd received. He shook his head and handed the sheet to Dana, pulling out his phone.

I read it over her shoulder as he dialed. The number was a cell phone registered to one Jennifer Stanley. Address was given as the brownstone that we'd checked out yesterday. One call was received yesterday afternoon from a pay phone nearby with another call going out from the cell immediately afterwards to one of those twenty-four hour hotlines to cancel the account. Other than those two calls, the account had absolutely no activity since being opened three months ago.

I listened to Mulder as I re-read the apparent dead-end lead.

"Hi, Frohike, it's me. Turn off the tape." He paused before continuing, "There were two conversations last night from the same cell phone." He rattled off the exact times and frequencies from the sheet that Dana was still holding. "Can you tell me WHERE that phone was?" He paused again before a grin formed. "Great! You know how to get a hold of me. I owe you guys one." Another pause followed by a nod. "Name it." This time a frown formed. He glanced at Dana, trying to smother a grin. "I don't think that'll work. Better pick something else." He smiled at her, and she sighed. He listened for a few more moments before nodding. "Okay, that'll work, but you'd better promise that the tape'll come back in one piece. I don't know WHAT you guys did to the last one, but it hasn't worked right since you borrowed it. Deal?" He said goodbye before folding the phone, ignoring Dana's grimace.

Looking back and forth between the two of them, I asked, "Dare I ask?"

"No," she answered, only to be overlapped with his, "Sure."

He grinned at her repeated and long suffering sigh. "You have some contacts that have been useful, Chessman. Let me use mine. I'll have a location for that cell phone within two hours."

I looked at him apprehensively. "Your friends are that good?"

He nodded confidently. "In two hours, I can get you to within two feet of where that phone was during the calls."

I stared at him a moment longer before turning to Dana and chucking a thumb back at Mulder. "Is he serious?"

She nodded grudgingly. "Much as I hate to admit it, those three really ARE that good." She looked down and muttered, "I just wish Frohike would stop hitting on me all the time."

Mulder opened his mouth but didn't say anything, apparently reconsidering what he may have said before anything came out. I jumped in, "Well, I for one can't blame him."

She looked up at me in surprise for a moment before her eyes dropped in embarrassment again.

When will the woman ever learn to take a compliment?

Since we were waiting for Mulder's mysterious techno-wizards to pull the proverbial rabbit out of the hat, we ended up reviewing all the information we already had in hand. None of it could be taken into a court of law, but it was more than enough to prove to the three of us that Stanley was the one we were looking for. Johns was a tougher case to prove, but circumstantially, he was also part of the cast of our little drama.

"Nothing here," commented Mulder in disgust as he dropped the latest page back into the pile.

"As my teacher always said, 'Perseverance in the face of adversity is a character builder,'" replied Dana without looking up.

He rolled his eyes and looked over at me. "She'll drop these 'Rebecca's Pearls of Wisdom' on me at exactly the right moments to drive me totally insane."

"Teachers are like that," I commiserated with him. "Especially after their hundredth birthday. They think that makes them wise or something."

THAT made Dana look up. "Hey."

Mulder and I grinned at each other. Nothing like teasing your "parents" to make you feel better. I turned to Dana. "Sorry, just picking on you." I tilted my head as something Mulder had just said finally penetrated my thick skull. "'Rebecca's Pearls of Wisdom'? Rebecca Home?"

Both Immortals were suddenly staring at me. "So?" Dana finally asked.

I shrugged. "Just curious. I know another of her students. Amanda."

Dana smiled suddenly. "And how is Mandy?"

My eyes got wide before I burst into laughter. "Mandy!? Oh, wait until Rich hears that one . . ." Still chuckling, I composed myself and answered the question. "Got married two years ago, actually. I attended the wedding just before moving to DC."

Dana's eyes got big and she smiled. Dropping her head onto a propped up hand in a charmingly casual gesture, she asked, "Duncan finally pop the question?"

I shook my head. "Nick Wolfe, a guy she knew in Toronto and was in an investigative partnership with."

She pouted. "Not Duncan?"

I shook my head. "They're in love with each other, but they both realize he isn't the marrying type."

Mulder had been watching this whole thing in silence. He finally asked, "Who are you guys talking about?"

Dana answered, "One of Rebecca's other students was Amanda. I met her during my training when she came to visit Rebecca. I've bumped into her on and off since. Once when we spent an evening trading war stories, she admitted to me that the only one she would ever consider marrying was one Duncan MacLeod. Based on her description, he was quite the catch, but their moral sets kept colliding."

I silently fished out my wallet and pulled out one of the few pictures I had in it. It was a picture of me, Mac, and Richie, taken during one of Seacouver's festivals during my training. I handed it over to Dana and said, "Mac's the one in the middle."

She glanced it and made a low noise of appreciation.

While she was studying it, Mulder turned to me with a raised eyebrow and asked with a touch of sarcasm, "You just happen to have a picture of the person we're talking about?"

I smiled at him. "Don't tell me you don't have a picture of yourself with your teacher." I nodded to Dana. "Or she doesn't have one of herself with hers."

Mulder nodded in acknowledgement of my point.

Dana looked up. "He was your teacher?"

I nodded.

She thought about it for a second before turning to her partner and commenting, "Mulder, you might consider asking Ryan to help you spar."

I raised my eyebrows but said nothing.

Mulder frowned from me to her. "Why?"

Reluctantly handing the picture back to me, she said, "Because Duncan MacLeod is arguably the best swordsman alive today. Anybody he trained will be better than I am."

My eyebrows went further up.

Mulder's frown deepened. "Who says?"

I entered the conversation, "An Immortal named Luther killed Rebecca. Amanda tried to avenge her, but Luther beat her too. Duncan showed up in time to save Amanda, and he beat Luther."

Dana nodded and sighed. "When I last ran into Rebecca about fifteen years ago, she mentioned Duncan MacLeod as one of the few Immortals she truly respected for his integrity AND for his skill. Since then, I've asked various other Immortals I know. ALL of them put the Highlander at the top their lists of powerful 'good guys'. That was enough of an endorsement for me to treat him with respect."

"Which Highlander?" I asked casually.

She blinked. "We were talking about Duncan MacLeod . . ." she trailed off with a slight frown.

"I only ask because there are TWO Highlanders. Duncan and his kinsman, who is also his teacher, Connor."

They both raised eyebrows. "Which is better, do you think?" asked Dana hesitantly.

I shrugged. "I've never seen Connor fight." I grinned. "But he WAS Duncan's teacher. That has to mean something."

"And you know them both?" asked Mulder in something akin to wonder.

I shrugged again, trying to stay modest.

"Um, if you're that good, I'm not sure I'm in your league," said Mulder slowly.

"I'd be happy to spar with you if we can dig up the time. As far as how good I am . . . Well, I'm still standing, and that's good enough for me."

Dana nodded, agreeing with my point.

We continued to trade stories of Immortals we knew until Mulder's cell phone rang. "Mulder." After a few seconds, he pulled out a pad of paper and wrote down two numbers that looked vaguely like GPS coordinates. Under that, he wrote down a conventional address. "Thanks, Langley. Tell your little cohort in crime that the tape will be waiting for him when I get back to D.C." He smiled. "Yes, you can watch it too, but only if your mother gives you permission to stay up late." The answer he got caused him to chuckle as he shut down the phone. Tucking it back into his pocket, he checked his watch. He looked up at me with a grin. "What did I tell you? Ten minutes to spare."

When we finally arrived at the address, we found a small ranch home tucked into a quiet neighborhood. Definitely a step up from their previous home.

"How are we going to handle this?" asked Mulder as he shut off the car after parking across the street.

I'd been thinking about that. I had a good guess what her reaction would be when I confronted her. Now just to give her enough of a wrong impression to get her to play along . . . "Dana, what'd you look like when you last ran into Mizz Stanley?"

She cocked her head in a clear question, but answered me anyway. "Slightly shorter hair and I had a little more color from the sun than I do now."

Damn, I was hoping for more visible differences. Well, at least the sun was out now. That was something. "Okay, to keep her from running, she can't know you two are Immortal. Both of you, put on sunglasses and stand outside the car, but STAY OUT OF BUZZ RANGE. Just stand there and look like FBI agents trying to look intimidating."

"I have to look intimidating?" muttered Mulder.

Dana poked him in the ribs. "Stand there and keep a solemn, boring expression on your face." She shot me a sideways glance and added, "You know, look like a typical Service agent."

"Ha, ha," I shot back as I exited the car, slipping on the sunglasses that hadn't seen much use in the past few years.

I crossed the street and approached the front door, walking into a Buzz as I neared the door. Once there, I hit the doorbell and stepped back,

positioning myself out of immediate reach of the door. I carefully chose a spot that was in the sunlight, though not obviously chosen for that reason. Leaning with feigned casualness against the porch beam, I crossed my arms, slipping my right hand into my coat and gripping my wakizashi. While waiting, I studied the aura. Two fifty, not too many heads, it was the same Immortal I'd felt just before the door to the Presidential suite was kicked in a week ago.

The door opened and someone looked cautiously out, keeping a sword visible to me, but not visible to anyone else outside. Once they were convinced I wasn't going to attack them on the spot, the door opened further, giving me my first look at Jenny Stanley. Dana was right, she was big. Several inches over six foot and a physique that was mostly muscle without being obscene about it, she WAS intimidating on a purely physical level.

"What do you want?" she snarled, keeping her sword handy (was that thing over five feet long?) but out of sight.

In a conversational tone of voice, I replied, "You sent those assassins into President Ryan's rooms a week ago. They killed me. I took that personally."

She eyed me a moment, not bothering to reply to my comments. "Who're you?"

I tried to give a feral grin. "Ryan Chessman, currently of the United States Secret Service."

One eyebrow rose. "So?"

"Like I said, I took getting killed personally. And I'll have your head for it." Her grin slowly formed, but I cut off anything she may have said. "Unfortunately, I can't do it right now." I tilted my head back toward where the car was and she followed the gesture momentarily before returning her attention to me. "Those two agents have no idea what this is really about. But we WILL hash out our . . ." I grinned maliciously, "disagreement."

Her answering grin wasn't any more humorous than mine was. "Tonight, eight o'clock." She gave me an address.

I nodded. "I tracked you down once. I can do it again, so don't piss me off by trying to skip out."

She shrugged. "Your funeral." She shut the door in my face.

I headed back to the car, breathing a sigh of relief. Everything was going as well as it could be.

At five minutes short of my deadline, I pulled up outside the address Stanley had given me, unsurprised to find an empty warehouse. What was surprising were the lights illuminating parts of the interior.

I got out of my car and quickly glanced at the other car already here. So Stanley (and probably Johns) had preceded me. Not too surprising, that. I checked that my gun, wakizashi, and combat knife were all secure before heading inside to finish this mess. I just hoped the cavalry would arrive as they'd promised. Both of them.

I stepped through the open door and looked around, still not Sensing anyone. I was on the ground floor, perhaps fifty feet on a side, with catwalks ringing the area ten feet up. One corner held what looked like a manager's office and a hallway. The lighting was pretty good along the floor, but the catwalks were in shadow. Anything or anyone could be hiding up there.

As I stepped further into the room, I felt Stanley approach and saw her emerge from the hallway by the office. "Welcome to your doom," she said with a grin.

I felt Dana and Mulder approach but carefully kept my face composed. Everything was occurring right on time. I sighed at Stanley's comment. "Where the hell do you people come up with such melodramatics? What, you have freshmen literature students write your lines for you?"

She glared at me. "For that, I'm going to make you suffer before you die."

I rolled my eyes. "You know, Dana said you were a bully. I'm beginning to believe that."

Her eyes narrowed. "Dana?"

Dana stepped through the doorway, holding a short sword. Stanley stiffened as their auras finally intersected. Dana stood beside the doorway and said, "Surely you haven't forgotten me." Mulder entered behind her, taking a position on the other side of the door. He put his long sword point down and rested his hands on the pommel, looking like he was settling in for a long guard duty.

Stanley turned her eyes back to me. "They cannot interfere! You know the Rules."

I nodded as I pulled off my coat. "They're here to prevent cheating. You already have used mortals, so I figured a little insurance couldn't hurt." I placed the coat and the gun holster in a neat pile beside Dana's feet before I took my swords in hand and headed five feet back toward Stanley. I silently blessed the fact that I'd been sparring with Andrea enough over the past months that I was still in decent shape for a Challenge.

Stanley turned a furious expression on Dana. "And I still owe you one from our last meeting." She suddenly grinned. "And now I'll have my revenge!" Her aura screamed a warning at me, but I forced myself to remain still. Stanley took a breath and bellowed, "MAX!"

A gray streak came flying down from the catwalk above and to my right. It was clearly coming at me but was intercepted by a blue streak followed closely by a green streak that came flying out of the door between Dana and Mulder and crashed into Johns. The whole snarling mess of fighting

vampires went barreling into a wall in a blurringly fast mix of flashing arms and legs. An ear-piercing shriek was followed by a gurgling cry before it went silent.

"Everything okay over there?" I asked calmly. Dana and Mulder were staring intently in that direction with their service weapons out. The whole thing had taken less than two seconds.

"No problems," answered Jennifer, stepping out into the light, wearing jeans and a teal shirt. She stopped at the edge of the visible open space and stood calmly with her arms folded.

Dana's and Mulder's auras jolted when they identified Jennifer as a vampire, but that wasn't anything compared to the reaction the situation got out of Stanley. Her face had drained of all color as she stared toward where we could vaguely see Michelle standing over a prone body. Stanley turned to me with a cry of frustration and anger. She raised her broadsword and just started hacking away. I quickly realized that Dana was right. Stanley relied on brute force instead of finesse. Within a couple minutes of dancing around just outside of her wild, powerful swings, I'd worn her down to the point where I was starting to score more and more hits along her arms. Finally able to attack at will, I used a sequence Duncan had taught me years ago and hamstrung her. She fell to her knees, her sword falling from numb fingers. Her off arm pressed against a particularly nasty gash across her stomach, she turned to me and snarled, "See you in hell."

Taking my wakizashi in a two handed grip, I nodded to her. "Perhaps," I allowed, as I made the final cut.

Falling my hands and knees, panting from the effort, and waiting for the Quickening to start, I looked over at Jennifer. She hadn't moved from her spot since the fight began, for which I was quietly proud. She gave me a small smile before her eyes got big watching the light show beginning.

I came back to consciousness later and reacted instinctively to the presence of a nearby Immortal by fumbling for a weapon.

Dana said from nearby, "Easy, Ryan. I'm taking you back to the hotel. Take a couple deep breaths and you'll be alright."

Easy for you to say. I laid my head back down in the backseat I found myself in and rubbed my eyes, waiting for the headache and adrenaline rush to ease. Within a minute, I felt coherent enough to ask, "What happened?"

"You won," she pointed out succinctly.

"Thanks," I responded sarcastically. "I figured that one out. I mean after that."

"Jennifer helped me get you into the car and then said she and Michelle would take care of Stanley, Johns, and their car. Mulder is following us in the second car we rented this afternoon."

Gently sitting up, I nodded. "I guess that just about wraps up everything." I saw her glance at me in the rearview mirror. "What?" I queried.

"Mulder and I have a few questions . . ."

I chuckled tiredly. "I bet you do. Save it for the hotel, okay?"

She glanced at me again before giving a brief nod. "Incidentally, I guess this answers one of Mulder's earlier questions. You ARE a pretty good swordsman." Without waiting for a reply, she returned her attention to the road.

I smiled slightly at the compliment. Impressing two hundred year old Immortals wasn't the end-all be-all of my existence, but it was a nice feeling, nonetheless. I leaned back comfortably for the rest of the ride to the hotel. I just hoped Michelle or Jen was there when we arrived.

Unfortunately, it was not to be as I discovered when I opened my door back at the hotel. I was expecting Jen to be here for her usual "clean up Ryan" activity, but she wasn't. As I was pulling off my coat, I noticed why. Stanley hadn't managed to draw blood, much to my surprise. Without blood, there was no reason for Jen to want to clean me off. That thought drew a tired chuckle.

"What's so funny?" asked Mulder. He and Dana had followed me into my room when we got back.

I shook my head. "Nothing." I laid my coat on the chair and dropped onto the bed. Rubbing a hand over my face tiredly, I asked, "You two had questions?"

"How do we want to report this?" asked Dana, covering the official stuff first.

I shrugged. "Remember that we're just here to discover if there was more to the attempted kidnapping of President Ryan. My report will basically say that we didn't uncover any sign of a bigger conspiracy. I killed the only five people involved a week ago. End of case."

She nodded. "And the rest of it?"

I turned my head to look at her. "You aren't seriously suggesting that we include vampires, Immortals, and death duels in official FBI or Service reports, are you?"

She shook her head and Mulder smiled slightly. "No," she said, "I was asking about what will happen with Johns."

I shrugged. "I don't know for sure, but I can make a guess. He's in trouble for endangering the Community. He fought against an Enforcer who was trying to apprehend him. The laws governing vampires are pretty strict. I seriously doubt we'll ever hear from Maxmillian Johns again."

We all heard a key being used in the door before it opened. All three of us were tense before it revealed Jen walking in. "You won't," she stated.

"We won't what?" asked Mulder.

She sat on the bed beside me and eyed him with a small sigh. "Have to worry about Johns again. After Michelle got the information that she wanted out of him, we turned him over to the local Enforcers. Based on their comments, he won't survive long."

Dana shivered slightly, but Mulder frowned. "You heard us through the door?" he asked.

I could see the corner of Jen's mouth curve up slightly. "One of the benefits of vampirism. Very good hearing." She let that sink in for a moment before continuing with a slightly wider grin, "So please try to keep it down next door."

My eyes flashed to Mulder and Dana in shock. Dana's face was almost glowing red, and Mulder's eyebrow was lost in his hairline. Well, well. Perhaps they WERE more than work partners after all. Though nothing incriminating had been said yet.

Instead of pursuing that line of thought, Mulder quickly asked, "So you ARE a vampire?" Jen leaned back and propped herself up on her arms, giving Mulder a calm nod. "You could've warned us," Mulder grouched.

She grinned. "What, and miss the look you two gave me when I mentioned your . . ." she paused just long enough to be significant before continuing, "nocturnal activities?"

Both of their faces froze into masks, but their auras spiked momentarily. And neither of them denied anything.

"Well," I commented. "Is there anything you two want to share about your relationship?"

"No," they chorused.

Jen smiled and I chuckled.

Trying to head off the conversation again, Mulder said, "Well, the only thing I wanted to know out of Johns was who wanted the President kidnapped."

Jen shook her head. "We asked. He didn't know. The only conversation he overheard was in some language that he couldn't place but sounded vaguely Arabic to him."

Great. Half those countries would be suspect anyway. And that's assuming that it really WAS an Arab nation.

Mulder and Dana shared a look before Dana turned back to us. "Well, I guess that covers everything."

I nodded, smothering a yawn. "I'll call the airport tomorrow and get us a flight." I waved them to the door. "Have a night off, courtesy of the Secret Service."

"And, Agent Mulder?" Jen asked. She continued when he raised an eyebrow at her, "Michelle telling you about vampires was quite a compliment. Don't make it misplaced confidence in your discretion." She left it short of a threat, but he got the message.

Nodding solemnly to Jen, he escorted Dana out the door with a light hand possessively on her back.

It was two days later and all three of us were seated in front of AD Skinner. Dana was winding down on the official report.

" . . . In short, sir, we found no evidence of a larger conspiracy than the five suspects which Special Agent Allen shot." She closed the folder and handed it across to her boss before leaning back in her seat and folding her hands in her lap calmly.

Skinner took it and laid it down on the desk in front of him without opening it. He looked at Mulder. "Any further comments, Agent Mulder?"

"No, sir," he replied with a slight shake of his head.

He shifted his attention to me. "Agent Allen?"

I also shook my head. "Not about the case, sir, no. Regarding Agents Mulder and Scully, however, I would like you to know that I have the highest respect for their investigative capabilities and their professionalism. I would consider it an honor to work with them again if the circumstances warranted it."

Both of them shifted slightly in their seats, apparently unused to such praise.

Skinner glanced at them with a half visible grin, probably coming to the same conclusion I was about their discomfort. "Very well. Good job, all three of you. Unless there is anything further, Mulder, Scully," he nodded to them as he addressed them, "that will be all."

"Yes, sir," they chorused as they stood and quietly exited. I didn't move. He hadn't dismissed me.

Once the door shut behind is two agents, Skinner leaned back in his chair and studied me a moment before asking, "Can I ask you a question, Mister Chessman?"

I nodded before something occurred to me. "I'm sorry, what'd you call me, sir?" Surely it wasn't Chessman. He didn't know me by my real name.

He waved a hand at me and recited, "Ryan Douglas Chessman, student of Duncan MacLeod and former Watcher before he died." Taking pity on my wide-eyed surprise, he grinned and slipped his left cuff down far enough that I could see his blue tattoo.

"Damnit, Skinner," I growled. In this context, he wasn't an FBI AD anymore. "You could've warned me."

He gave another small grin and asked, "What, and miss that look you just gave me?"

I glared balefully back. Last time I heard that phrase, it was amusing. From this angle, it wasn't nearly so humorous. Finally sighing, I asked, "What was the question you wanted to ask?"

"Are Mulder and Scully . . . more than partners?" he finally finished.

One eyebrow rose almost of its own accord. "Are you asking as their boss or as their Watcher?"

He smiled openly. "District supervisor actually, but I have a more vested interest in those two than any of the other Immortals in town. They've done nothing wrong overtly, so as their boss, I have no problem. So the question is more for the Chronicles."

I smiled back. "And your own curiosity."

"And for my own curiosity," he agreed.

I shrugged. "All you have to do is watch them, no pun intended, to see what they mean to each other."

He nodded absently, but was still frowning.

Realizing what question he wanted to ask but couldn't, I said, "If you're asking if they're sleeping together, I don't know. I didn't see any evidence one way or another." Besides, I only knew what Jen had said and what their reactions were. That didn't prove anything. Besides, the Watchers didn't need to know EVERYTHING about them.

He nodded with a small sigh, accepting but not happy with my answer. "Unofficially, what did your investigation turn up? It was Stanley?"

So he'd read the report of my fight. Hardly surprising. One of our Watchers must have filed it and sent him a copy. I hoped it wasn't Scully's or Mulder's Watchers, otherwise explaining Jennifer, Michelle, and Johns was going to be tough. To answer the question, I nodded and said, "Yeah. I felt her when she attacked the first time and tracked her down. She never denied it, either. Circumstantially, it looks like it was instigated by an Arab power, but that's as much as I know, and probably as much as will ever be known. All the witnesses are . . . gone," I finished with a small sigh, staring off into space.

"You did what you had to under the circumstances," he quietly pointed out.

I pulled my attention back to him. "That doesn't make it easier," I said, tiredly shaking my head.

"But it lets you live with your conscience intact," he returned.

I smiled softly and stood. "You're an amazingly wise man for a mortal, Walter Skinner."

He laughed and stood, accepting the hand I'd offered. "Godspeed, Ryan Chessman. And watch your head."

Chessman Chronicles Moral Questions and Answers

I settled back into my seat on the airplane and gave a tired sigh. I'd been going full tilt for days now. It had taken several days to track the Immortal and vampire behind the attacks on President Ryan, and then a few more to clean up afterwards.

Since Washington DC was shortly going to be crawling with head hunters looking for the Secret Service agent who had "miraculously" saved the President, I figured that I'd better pull a fast fade. Between resigning from the Service, packing up our apartment, and arranging for all of our stuff to get shipped back to Toronto, neither Jennifer nor I had had much of a chance to relax.

Fortunately, my brilliant girlfriend had thought about where to go from here. She'd called her Grandma Terry and asked if we could stay in their place in Toronto temporarily. Terry readily agreed, then invited us to Paris for a week to visit and let the furor die down a little. Since it'd probably take at least that long until some of our stuff made it to Toronto anyway, we immediately agreed. Besides, it'd been a few years since either of us had seen any of the friends we had living out in that direction.

And so here I was relaxing into a seat on a trans-oceanic 777 flight. I had never ridden in one of the Concorde supersonic jets, and I quietly bemoaned the fact that I probably never would. The speed would have made this endless flight much easier to deal with.

Once the safety presentation was finished and we were in the air, I pulled out the Cussler novel I'd been working on and settled in for the duration.

I didn't make it through the first chapter before I faded off to sleep.

Jen didn't let me sleep long, though. Which was fortunate, because if I had slept for a good chunk of the flight, I wouldn't have been able to go to sleep after we landed. As it was, we got into Paris shortly before dawn local time.

Landing, disembarking, French border customs, getting my swords back from security, and finding our luggage passed in a tired blur. Fortunately for us, Terry knew which flight we were on and met us in the airport. She took one look and simply hugged us and pulled us out to her car.

I woke up the next evening curled around Jen, who was still dead to the world.

It took several seconds before my mind caught up with the situation. Paris, Aaron and Terry's home, vacation. Oddly, the fact that I felt an Immortal Buzz on awakening didn't panic me. Maybe it only woke me when a Buzz walked into range?

I rolled out of bed and fumbled into a pair of shorts and a t-shirt before shuffling out into the hallway, heading to the kitchen. I knew that if I didn't get some breakfast in me, I might keel over.

I found Aaron in the kitchen, fixing himself a plate of scrambled eggs. He glanced over his shoulder at me and nodded a greeting before returning his attention to the food. I stopped and looked at what he was doing for a moment before announcing, "I'll be your friend forever if you fix some eggs for me too."

He laughed and turned back to me with a smile for a moment. "Grumpy when you wake up, huh?"

"Mornings should be outlawed," I announced around a yawn, dropping down onto one of the stools at the breakfast bar.

"Hate to break it to you, Ryan, but it's evening."

I glared half-heartedly at his back. "You know what I mean," I grumbled.

He chuckled again and waved the spatula at the refrigerator. "Sure, I'll fix some more. Get the eggs out, please."

Standing, I crossed to the refrigerator and pulled the door open. Looking through it quickly (and ignoring the unlabeled bottles lining the back wall), I pulled out the carton of eggs and the gallon of orange juice. I placed the eggs on the counter beside Aaron and held up the juice. "Mind?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Pour me a glass too?"

I nodded as I pulled out two glasses and poured some juice for the both of us.

We were both working on our breakfasts, and I was starting to act like a civilized human being again when Terry came stumbling into the room. She came straight to one of the stools and collapsed into it, not looking up at either of us. Without a word, Aaron got her a goblet of blood out of one of those unmarked bottles I'd seen and placed it in front of her. She snatched it up and took a few sips, still staring at the countertop.

Jen came walking into the room, hair charmingly tousled from sleep. "Evening, everyone," she commented perkily.

Aaron greeted her with a raised hand. I smiled at her. Terry gave a wordless snarl.

I looked over at Terry in shock. "And I thought *I* was an unpleasant morning person."

"Bite me," Terry muttered back.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that Jen also began staring at Terry.

Without looking up, Terry said, "Aaron, if I hear one word out of you, you'll die a horrible death."

I looked over at him and realized her warning was needed. He was turning purple in an effort to suppress his laughter.

Deciding I'd better leave the room before the scene became bloody, I stood and carried my plate to the dishwasher. "Thanks for breakfast, Aaron," I called over my shoulder as I escaped in the direction of the bathroom for my shower.

Arm in arm, Jen and I walked toward "Le Blues Bar". No visit to Paris would be complete without stopping in and saying hello. Approaching the bar, I wasn't surprised to wade into Mac's Buzz. Once inside I led Jennifer over to where Joe and Mac were smiling at us. Once close enough, I said, "Hi, Mac! You remember Jennifer?" They'd met last time we were in Paris. Mac nodded to answer my question and smiled charmingly at her. I continued the introduction, waving at Joe, "Joe Dawson, this is Jennifer Frost, my . . ." I glanced at her and finished, "significant other." He no doubt already knew a great deal about her from my Chronicles, but we must maintain appearances.

Joe reached over the bar to take Jennifer's hand and said, "A pleasure to meet you, lovely lady." In a gallant move, he bent over and kissed her hand.

As Joe turned to the cooler, Jen leaned into me and whispered, "So many charming men." She sighed and fanned her face as if she were a love struck teenager.

I chuckled slightly at her actions as Joe pulled a Killian's out of the cooler. "I know what Ryan wants, but what can I get for you?" he asked over his shoulder, addressing Jen.

She smiled politely and said, "Nothing, thank you. I'm fine."

Joe dropped the beer in front of me. "Well, Ryan, what brings you to Paris this time?"

I shook my head slightly. "Just visiting some of Jen's family." Taking a quick pull of the beer, I asked, "How have you two been doing? Keeping out of trouble without me around to keep an eye on you?"

Joe turned to Mac as Jen giggled. "Listen to his young punk, Mac," Joe said with a straight face. "Not even forty yet, and he's claiming to be keeping US out of trouble."

I grunted in amusement. "You'd think that Mac could be better at it after four hundred years, Joe."

"Hey," Mac objected weakly, trying to look offended.

Joe chuckled but looked from me to Jen and back again. I immediately waved a hand and reassured him, "Relax, Joe. She knows about Immortals." Hmm, so maybe he doesn't know about her. Which means my Watcher hasn't been including her in my Chronicles. Isn't that interesting?

"Well, he DOES seem prone to getting into trouble," Joe allowed.

"Hey!" Mac objected a little stronger this time.

We all chuckled.

"Seriously, how've you been?" I asked.

"Doing as well as I could expect for an old, washed up bartender," Joe said with self-deprecating humor.

I snorted in disbelief. "Don't give me that line. You're still as sharp as you ever were, you old liar."

He looked at me with a totally indecipherable expression for perhaps ten seconds before glancing at Jen and saying, "Perhaps you're right."

After the initial pleasantries, we didn't spend much longer at "Le Blue's Club". Both Joe and Mac were concerned about something Methos was into, and so they weren't much into conversation.

So Jen and I headed over to "The Sanctuary" to see Amanda and Nick. Sure enough, the instant I stepped into the bar, I ran into their Buzzes. Nick had taken a couple heads since I'd last seen him, I noted absently as I scanned the seating area for them. Neither one was in sight.

Knowing that they had an apartment upstairs, Jen and I seated ourselves and waited. Sure enough, within five minutes their curiosity got the better of them, and Nick came down and looked around. Spotting me, he smiled and indicated that we should wait for a moment. Turning around, he went back upstairs and came back down a few seconds later with a smiling Amanda. They both walked over to our table.

Standing in an attempt at chivalry, I greeted them. "Nick. How've you been?"

We shook hands and he smiled, "Good. Nice seeing you again, Ryan."

I turned to Amanda and smiled at her, giving a half bow from the shoulders. "Mandy."

Her eyes narrowed and the smile faded. Nick was looking at me strangely when she commented, "Hardly anyone calls me that, Ryan. Where'd you hear it?" She didn't sound angry so much as curious.

"Bumped into another student of Rebecca's in DC. Dana Scully."

Her face blossomed into a smile. "I haven't seen Dana in years! How's she doing?" She gracefully sank into a stool at our table and plopped her head down onto a cupped hand. Nick quietly sat down as well. Without either of them having said a word, our waitress arrived at the table and deposited a wineglass in front of Amanda and a beer in front of Nick. Amanda absently smiled in thanks to the waitress, but her attention was clearly on what I was saying.

"She's fine. Working for the FBI at the moment. Her partner is her student, believe it or not."

One of Nick's eyebrows went up in surprise. Amanda laughed delightedly. "I bet that's interesting to watch," commented Nick. "Being his partner in front of everyone else, but his teacher after hours."

I shrugged. "What's more interesting is that they're clearly in love with each other, but neither would admit it to me."

Amanda smiled again. "I'm glad things are working out for her," she said.

I nodded, and all three of us stiffened in our seats as an Immortal Buzz walked into range. I frowned since I thought I knew this Immortal but couldn't come up with the name.

Nick and Amanda were looking toward the door. They both abruptly relaxed, and Amanda said, "Liam!" She got up and walked off in that direction.

Jen turned a curious glance my way. "Liam?" she asked me quietly.

I nodded and smiled reassuringly as Amanda walked back to our table with her arm linked in Father Riley's. Nick and Liam nodded a greeting to each other, but Liam seemed more interested in Jen.

Amanda made the introductions. "Liam, this is Jennifer Frost and Ryan Chessman. This is Father Liam Riley, who officiated at Nick's and my wedding."

I stood and offered him my hand. "We met at Nick's party," I told her and reminded him.

Liam nodded in recognition. Turning an appreciative eye to Jennifer, he asked, "And this must be the cute, redheaded lass you spoke of?" At my nod, he sighed. "Pity she's taken," he commented to the general amusement of the table. Holding his hand out to her, she allowed him to bend and kiss her knuckles. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Milady."

Jennifer nodded back solemnly, but the gleam in her eye showed her enjoyment of the show.

"So, what brings you two to Paris?" Amanda asked once Liam had pulled a fifth chair over to the table.

"Visiting some of my family," Jen answered.

We all caught each other up on our recent histories for a time before Nick commented, "No offense to you, Liam, but I don't really understand the idea of living on Holy Ground in the long term."

He shrugged. Somewhere along the line he must have come to the conclusion that Jen knew about Immortals. "I'm not in the Game any longer, Nick. I have to do something to keep my head. Since I can serve the Good Lord as well as protect myself all at once, living on Holy Ground makes sense."

"It's not that," denied Nick. "It's more along the lines of knowing that the only safe place is Holy Ground. You can't do any traveling to speak of, and these weekly trips of yours here are actually dangerous for you. I guess it's more a case of not understanding how you can not play the Game."

"I wouldn't if everyone would leave me alone," I told Nick. Everyone shifted their attention to me, so I continued, "Don't get me wrong, I have and probably will again hunt someone if I think they deserve it, but I will NOT kill some random Immortal just because of the Game."

"Avenging angel?" asked Liam.

I shrugged. "If you think in those terms, I guess so. I lured Andrea's killer in, his name was Leonard Frankle by the way, but it was in vengeance for her, not simply because he was Immortal."

"Would you have killed a mortal under the same circumstances?" asked Nick.

I opened my mouth to deny it but stopped when the dichotomy of my reaction surprised me. "No," I answered slowly. "I would have gotten them arrested, but I wouldn't have killed them."

"So you're willing to kill an Immortal, but not a mortal for the same offense?" asked Nick pointedly.

"Immortals can't be arrested, Nick. You know that," I answered glumly. But I knew where this was going.

"So what you do is just to stop the killer? Are you going to deny you ENJOYED killing this person?" asked Nick relentlessly. Amanda was looking uncomfortable with the conversation. Liam and Jen looked concerned with the turn of events but weren't joining in.

"Are you accusing me of something?" I asked tiredly, just wanting the conversation over.

"Yes," he returned flatly. "You're GLAD that this guy was Immortal. That gave you the excuse to kill him yourself, instead of turning him over to the police."

Much as it pained me to realize it, he was right. Even if Frankle HAD been mortal, I would have wanted to kill him anyway. His Immortality provided me a convenient excuse to kill the bastard myself.

My emotions must have been parading across my face, because Nick nodded and leaned back with a smug look.

"That was cruel, Nick," commented Liam.

"But true," I countered quietly before he could respond. Jen laid a hand along my arm in concern. I ignored it. I turned back to Nick and said in a low, cold voice, "Yes, his Immortality gave me the excuse I wanted to kill him. Are you happy?"

His smile faded and he shook his head. "No, I'm not happy about your answer." He cocked his head and finished with, "But I'm glad you were honest about it."

Amanda's look nearly killed him where he sat. I hissed back, "Yes, Nick, I'm a killer. By necessity, perhaps, but a killer nonetheless. You think I enjoy that? You think I enjoy what I've become due to my God-forsaken existence?"

Liam winced. "He hasn't forsaken you, Ryan."

My attention snapped over to him. "WHAT?" The tone was in a shout, but I was trying desperately to keep the volume down.

"God hasn't forsaken you," Liam repeated calmly.

I sighed again and rested my head in my hands. "Damn it, Liam, I'm not in the mood for a religious discussion right now."

"Why not? You obviously need one."

I resisted the urge to yell or become violent. It certainly wouldn't help anything. "Because HE," my hand snapped out to point accusingly at Nick, "just accused me, rightly by the way, of being a killer." I turned to Nick, "Now that you have your precious answer, MISTER WOLFE, what now?" My tone shifted to mocking sarcasm. "Want me to bare more of my soul for your viewing pleasure? Maybe step off Holy Ground and hand you my sword? No, how about going to the nearest police station and confessing to all ten or so murders I've committed."

I would have continued, but Jen's hand clamped down on my arm, hard. She didn't break any bones (yet), but it was clear that she could. "Ryan, shut up before I have to drag you out of here for making a scene," she said calmly and quietly.

My gaze went to her hand for a moment before I turned a glare onto her, but I didn't say anything further.

Once she was sure I was going to hold my tongue, she released me and leaned back in her chair. "Your morality is clashing with what you have to do and what you choose to do as an Immortal, and it's eating you up inside. You have to let it out before something gives."

My hand tightened on my beer glass until the knuckles turned white. "What on Earth are you talking about?" I was rather proud that that question came out civilly.

Amanda joined the discussion for the first time, "Your mortal set of ethics versus your Immortal actions."

Liam picked up the thread of what she was saying, "You're young enough that the concepts of right and wrong that your adoptive parents taught you still control your view of the world. In this instance, you haven't started thinking like an Immortal yet. Morality changes once you cross that line. It has to, unfortunately. The Game changes us." He sighed. "I used to play the Game myself, so I know how you're feeling, Ryan. And I can sympathize. As a priest and pacifist, I can't advocate it, but as an Immortal, I can understand it."

Amanda laid one hand over Liam's on the table. She continued, "Don't be mad at Nick or Liam, Ryan. Nick antagonized you intentionally. Both of them know that you need to consciously recognize that difference in yourself before you could forgive yourself. And then form a new set of morals."

The anger slowly leaked out as her words penetrated. I leaned back in my chair to think. Liam asked Jennifer what she thought of all this, but I tuned out her reassurances that she was fine with me and my actions.

Liam was right that my moral set was what was taught to me by my parents. Of course they were just reflecting current social mores of the United States. Correction: current MORTAL social mores. And when dealing with a mortal, I'd damn well better keep following those self-imposed rules of behavior. But when talking about Immortals, those same rules didn't necessarily apply. For the most part they did, but not all the time for everyone. And even social mortal morality changes over the years. Seen through that lens, my behavior toward Leonard Frankle was acceptable as well as justified.

Did I just conclude that killing Frankle was acceptable? And what about the other Immortals that I've tricked into fighting? I wasn't referring to those

I'd killed in self-defense. I had no problem with them. I was referring to those people I'd pulled into a duel with the sole intention of fighting them to the death.

But what was a set of morals except rules of behavior for the situation? As the situation changes, so do the rules. And who I'm interacting with changes the situation. Male, female, mortal, immortal, or little gray men from the planet Reticula, it all changes the rules I have to operate under.

But does that give me the moral right to kill?

I was staring moodily at the fire Aaron had built the next evening. My mind kept going in circles, from one of the people I'd killed to another.

Most had been in self-defense. A couple I'd had the chance to walk away from, but I chose not to. I justified that to myself with the thought that they'd probably simply track me down again later if I left them alive. And they'd all been fair fights, I thought desperately. Well, aside from the five mortals I'd killed while defending President Ryan that night in Chicago, but that was in defense of three other innocents.

But it was the couple of immortals that I'd deliberately hunted down and slaughtered that were haunting me. Jerry Markus for threatening Richie and Leonard Frankle for killing Andrea.

Even with the reasoning behind my actions, was that enough?

"Jennifer told me," commented Aaron from behind me.

When I didn't say anything immediately, he sat on the couch while I stayed on the floor in front of the fireplace. "How do you do it?" I finally asked.

"Do what?" he asked calmly.

"Live with yourself."

"If I hadn't killed them, they would have killed others."

"And what gives us the moral right to decide who lives and who dies?" I returned.

"Do you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that those people you've killed were evil?"

His question pulled my eyes from the dancing flames. His gaze steadily held mine as I answered, "Yes, but that isn't the point. What makes me right? What gives me the authority to choose who is 'evil'?"

"Every one of us must make that decision on our own. If your decisions start disagreeing with what everyone around you believes, they'll tell you in one way or another. As long as people whom you respect continue to respect you and your decisions, you can feel confident that you're still making the right choices."

"But then how do I know that the people around me are not a problem?"

He rolled his eyes. "Jeez, you're really into his guilt trip, aren't you? To answer the question: you don't, really." I frowned at him. That didn't help. Ignoring my look, he continued, "If you love and respect them, though, then they're probably just fine. If you need more proof, then there's one piece of truth I've discovered in the previous three thousand years. Good is loyal to other good, evil is only truly loyal to itself. If there's someone you feel is truly loyal to you, then either you're both good, or you're both good liars."

A shadow of a smile formed on my face as I slowly nodded. What he said made perfect sense.

"Now," Aaron said, smacking his knees with his hands as he stood, "you need to get up and go out with Jen. You've been staring at that fire and brooding for hours. Too much thinking and your brains will start to melt and ooze out your ears."

I laughed at that mental image.

We had decided to come back to "Le Blues Club". I took a seat a couple stools down from Mac and pulled another stool over and placed it just in front of mine, hooking my feet over the lower rungs on that one. Jen immediately hopped into the seat and leaned back into my chest. I leaned forward enough that we were balancing each other. Since getting together, Jen and I had been very tactile. She preferred using my lap in place of a seat of her own, and this was the best we could do on barstools.

Joe placed a Killian's beside me and asked Jennifer if she would like something. Shaking her head, she explained that she'd share mine, even going so far as to fake a sip from it. And then she waited until Joe's back was turned to refresh Mac's glass before she grimaced at the taste.

A few minutes quietly passed as I enjoyed the closeness with Jennifer. My mind slowly drifted back to what Nick, Amanda, and Liam had told me last night, and what Aaron had told me this very evening. I was tempted to talk to Mac about it, but he may not agree with all my decisions. Besides, based on his expression, he wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone. Damn, I wish Richie was here. I could always talk to him.

My internal musings were interrupted by Jen's quiet giggles. I pulled my head back a little and cocked an eyebrow at her in a clear question. "The lines some guys use," she explained. "I can't believe they expect a woman to fall for them."

I looked over at where her attention was focused and saw a young couple. He was smiling at her charmingly, but she was just giving him an exasperated look. Chuckling slightly, I hugged her just a little tighter. "Bionic hearing. I wonder sometimes how you can stand it."

"The noise, you mean?" she asked. I nodded in response and she shrugged slightly. "You just lean to filter it out." Sighing slightly, she leaned back and snuggled into my embrace just a little more. Not that I was complaining, of course.

She suddenly stiffened in her seat, making it feel like I was holding a statue in my arms. Her gaze darted over to the door and she looked almost frightened by whatever had snared her attention. Immediately, her eyes softened a touch and she slid off the stool and turned toward the door.

I stood and turned to see what had frightened her almost to the point of bolting out of the room. The only person I saw coming in was a small, dark haired woman. Between Jen's reaction, the set of this woman's shoulders, and the age of her eyes, I concluded that this was an old vampire.

Her eyes locked onto Jen, the mystery woman seemed to glide along as she crossed the room. Stepping forward and subtly protecting Jennifer, I held out my hand to the woman and respectfully said, "Ryan Chessman at your service, my lady."

She stopped and studied me carefully for a moment before accepting my hand. As was my custom with "older" beautiful women, I twisted her hand slightly and brushed my lips across her knuckles instead of a more modern handshake. Since I was actually touching her, I could gauge her age at roughly three thousand five hundred years.

Her eyebrows rose in response to my actions. "Tiana," she replied to me. Retrieving her hand, she turned to Jen and said, "I see that Theresa was right. He IS a gentleman."

Jen smiled and murmured a quiet, "Thank you." She leaned toward me and whispered, "Mistress of Paris."

Nodding at Jen's words, I turned back to Tiana and bowed respectfully again. "An honor to meet you."

She politely smiled back and took Jen's arm in a friendly manner. "Please excuse us, but I would like to have a chat with this delightful child."

Jen smiled in obvious relief. She nodded slightly to me to indicate that she was okay and then walked with Tiana to an empty booth.

Knowing that Jen was not in trouble with the local Community, I slid back onto my barstool and took another drink of my beer. I caught Mac looking at me out of the corner of my eye and explained, "She's a friend of Jen's family."

He nodded and turned back to his drink.

Jen came back over to me a minute later. "Ryan, Tiana would like to talk with you." Seeing my expression, she smiled and laid a hand on my arm. "She just has a few questions. We're not in trouble."

Nodding, I stood and turned to Tiana. "Perhaps we could take a walk?" I offered.

Smiling slightly at my suggestion, she agreed. Offering one arm to each of the two vampires, the three of us stepped past Mac's stool.

"Look at that," Mac said just loud enough for me to hear. "He's walking out with TWO women."

"Jealous?" I tossed back over my shoulder.

Jen's giggle, Tiana's slight smile, and the laughs from Mac and Joe answered my question.

Once beyond the door and another half block past that, Tiana gently disengaged her arm from mine. "A friend of yours?" she asked me in amusement.

I smiled. "Yes, he is that. How may I help you, Mistress?"

"You are Immortal, correct?" she asked.

I tried to prevent my reaction to her words, but it failed. My steps faltered for a moment.

"It's okay," Jen soothed me with words and her hand running along my arm. "She knows about Immortals, Ryan."

I glanced at Jennifer for a moment before turning to Tiana. "Yes," I answered simply.

She nodded. "Do you know an Immortal who stands just under six foot, blue eyes, long brown hair, usually in a ponytail down his back?"

I mentally compared that description to all the Immortals I'd met and came to the conclusion that I didn't know this person. "I'm sorry, I'm afraid not."

She sighed. "Well, if you DO run across him, please tell him Tiana is in Paris."

My eyebrows went up and my mouth twitched into a sad grin. "Assuming we're not fighting, I'll do that."

She stopped in her tracks and turned to me fully. "If you two DO fight, it would be because YOU chose to do so. He doesn't fight unless forced into it. And if that occurs, you won't survive it." Her words didn't sound angry, just matter-of-fact. And that scared me.

Nodding at her words, I bowed slightly in silent apology. Waving along the sidewalk, I convinced her to continue walking with us. Changing the topic, I asked, "What brought you to 'Le Blues Club'? Terry tell you where to find Jen and myself?"

Tiana shook her head. "No. That bar is well known to me as an Immortal gathering place."

Nodding at her answer, I said, "Well, I'm afraid I can not help you, Mistress."

"Thank you anyway," she responded. Nodding politely to both Jen and myself, she turned and walked back the way we came, almost immediately lost in the shadows.

Early the next afternoon, I paid the cabby and stepped toward the church. I'd almost made it to the huge wooden doors before I felt Liam's Buzz. Last night's talk with Aaron had helped, but I wanted a second opinion.

About Immortal morality and maybe a couple of other topics.

I was standing in the sanctuary, looking around before Liam stuck his head in from one of the side doors. "Ryan! Welcome! How may I be of assistance?"

I shook the offered hand and gave him a small smile as well. "Call it a crisis of conscience, Father. Can we talk?"

He blinked at my formality but nodded. He waved toward the door through which he'd entered and said, "Come back to my office." He led the way down a hall and into a functional and cozy office. Taking a seat, he waved me toward a chair and asked, "What can I do for you?"

I sat, but my eyes kept wandering around the room. "What you and Amanda said the other night made sense," I said, stabbing straight to the heart of the matter. "But I still feel bad about all the people I've killed."

He nodded. "As long as you feel badly, then you still have an intact conscience. Once you don't care anymore, then you're beyond hope."

I shook my head. "You're not understanding me. I don't feel badly because of most of those I've killed. Just two of them. The rest were self-defense or in defense of others. Those I feel bad that they're dead, but I'm not guilt-ridden for killing them."

Liam nodded again. "Self-defense is morally acceptable, of course. And when it comes to Immortals, decapitation IS the only reasonable form of defense." He sighed. "As for the two that you DO feel bad about, do you want to tell me about them? Perhaps then I can help you deal with it."

I stared at him for a few moments before nodding slightly. Leaning back into my chair, I tilted my head backwards and stared at the ceiling. I never could face anyone when having a difficult discussion. I vaguely wondered what that said about my psychology as I began. "Richie Ryan is the closest thing I have to a brother right now. He and Mac helped train me. Anyway, shortly after my training was finished, I got a tip from someone that an Immortal head hunter was laying a trap for Richie. I was told where to find this hunter, and I left immediately. I went there and ambushed this guy, Jerry Markus. Pinning him in place, I asked him to explain what he was doing. He lied. Acting like I believed him, I turned my back, tricking him into attacking me. And I killed him. His sword wasn't even out," I finished.

Liam was quiet for a second before asking, "How did he attack you then?"

"Pulled a pistol on me," I answered absently.

"Then you did nothing wrong," answered Liam. My gaze snapped over to him. He was looking at me calmly. "You defended yourself, and incidentally, defended Richie as well."

"But I tricked him into attacking me," I objected.

He shook his head. "He didn't have to pull that gun on you. He attacked; you defended. End of story."

Well, put that way . . .

Seeing my expression, he smiled faintly and asked, "And the other one you feel guilt over?"

Nodding as the first one fell into place in my mind, I pulled the second memory to the surface. "Andrea was a mortal that I knew before my First Death. She knew about me, and it didn't matter to her. We'd been living together for a while." I winced as I realized how that probably sounded to a Catholic priest.

He smiled. "Don't worry about that. I have rather liberal views on the subject, myself. Besides, as an Immortal, the rules of morality are slightly different for us."

You say so, man. I continued, "Anyway, one evening an Immortal kicked our door in and shot the hell out of the place. She died a few hours later at the hospital. I was devastated. It took a while to piece the information together, but I finally learned that it was Leonard Frankle. I called him and blatantly Challenged him. We met, fought, and I killed him."

"Why did he kill Andrea?" Liam asked.

"A group affiliation she had," I responded delicately. No telling if he knew about Watchers.

"Had he killed others in this group?"

I nodded.

"Then you were defending this group of mortals," he concluded.

"I didn't kill him because of this group. I killed him because he killed Andrea."

"On the surface, it may have been vengeance," conceded Liam, "but it also WAS in defense of others."

"Aren't my motives at least as important as the results?" I asked.

"And why are you determined to feel guilty over him?" he returned. "He was an Immortal bastard who had to die to make the world a better place."

I blinked at Liam in surprise. "You're not at all what I expected from a priest," I said eventually.

He laughed outright. "We're also part counselor by our very natures. And many Immortals need more counseling than mortals. As I said two nights ago, our reality is different, with different rules to govern our actions."

I continued to look at him. "You don't think I should feel any guilt over them, do you?" I asked in quiet surprise.

He shrugged. "If it'd make you feel better then I can hear your Confession, but I don't think there's anything to feel guilty about. If you were mortal, then it'd be a different story. But since you're Immortal . . ." He trailed off with another shrug, having made his position known.

"You've given me a lot to think about," I eventually responded. Shaking my head, I changed the subject, "One last philosophical question and then I'll get out of your hair."

"It's no bother," he assured me, "but go ahead."

Repeating the same question that Jen had asked Richie and Hoa a couple years previously, I asked, "Do you believe a person's nature determines their actions and personality?"

He frowned slightly and tilted his head. "I'm not sure I understand the question."

"For instance," I clarified, "because of our Immortality do you think we're predisposed to be murderous, cynical bastards?"

He stared at me for a full five seconds before breaking into laughter. Wiping his eyes, he responded, "Ryan, I haven't lifted a sword in better than a hundred years, even in defense of my own head. I've been a priest since the beginning of that same time. Granted I'm an exception to the Immortal rule, but I assure you that I'm not murderous nor cynical. Neither are you, Nick, Amanda, or dozens of others I could name. To answer the question: no, our natures don't necessarily force our personalities, though it definitely influences our actions." He looked at me for a moment before asking, "Why?"

I shook my head. "I don't know if I can tell you." He appeared confused for a moment before I elaborated, "It's not my secret to give, sorry."

Shrugging away the mystery, he stood with me and shook my hand.

"Thank you for the talk, Father," I said.

"Anytime."

I got back to Aaron and Terry's home well after dark, but everyone was still there. Aaron himself was reading a book on the recliner, and the girls were chatting on the couch.

Jen looked up at me and asked, "Everything go alright with wherever you went?"

I smiled and nodded. She knew something was bothering me but wasn't pressing me on it. Yet.

Seeing that I was okay, she returned to her discussion with Terry. Without removing my coat, I asked Aaron, "Take a walk with me?"

That caught the attention of everyone in the room. Aaron nodded and collected his coat without comment, but Jen was looking at me in concern. "I'm okay, really," I assured both women. She nodded dubiously, and Terry looked on curiously but not with concern. "You two stay here and enjoy your chat," I continued. "That's why we're in Paris, after all."

Aaron and I made it a block before he opened the conversation, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," I assured him.

"Then why are we out here?" he asked reasonably.

"Why did you marry Terry?" I asked.

"Because I love her," he answered, frowning at my question.

I shook my head. "From what I understand, you were already basically living together before that point. So why marry her?"

He nodded, apparently not surprised or angered at the question. "You're right, it was probably pretty redundant at that point, but it seemed the natural thing to do." He paused momentarily before asking, "So you're going to ask Jen?"

I nodded, not surprised that he'd seen where the conversation was going. "Darius performed the ceremony for you?"

He nodded.

"Did he know about Terry's vampirism?"

Aaron laughed. "Oh, yes. He certainly did."

"How'd you tell him?"

He shook his head. "We didn't have a choice, really. He stumbled into a scene where it was glaringly obvious. She was feeding off of my wrist," he explained to my questioning look.

I chuckled at the described scene. "How'd he take it?"

"Surprisingly well. Didn't even try to banish, turn, or exorcise her or anything," he joked. He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye and asked, "Based on the question, I'm assuming that you're not considering a civil ceremony."

I shrugged. "Legally, we may already qualify as a common law marriage, so that part is already taken care of. I'm not terribly religious, but like you said, getting married to Jen seems to be the natural thing to do." I sighed. "Now the problem is how to explain this to Liam."

"Father Liam Riley?" Aaron asked.

I nodded. "Know him?"

He shook his head. "I know of him, but I don't know him personally. I doubt telling him will be a problem, though. As an Immortal priest he's probably already carrying more secrets than we can comprehend."

"Probably true," I agreed. "Now just to ask Jen if we can tell him, and more importantly to ask her to marry me."

I suddenly found myself flat on my back in the lawn of the house we'd been walking past. Gasping for breath, my mind hadn't caught up with what had happened before I heard, "Yes, I'll marry you."

By the time my mind could process the situation, I found my arms full of Jennifer who was leaning over me giving me a kiss that was trying to obliterate all conscious thought from my mind again.

Once she surfaced so I could breath again, I heard Terry state, "About time."

I looked over at her standing calmly next to Aaron. I frowned at her then at Jen. "You followed us," I accused, gasping for breath.

Jen raised an eyebrow. "So?" she challenged.

"No privacy in my life," I muttered.

"You're the one with a Watcher following you everywhere," commented Terry.

I rolled my eyes. "Don't remind me."

"Well," exclaimed Aaron as he clapped his hands together, "this calls for a celebration. How about the four of us go to 'Eclipse'?" he asked, mentioning a restaurant that dealt with mortal / vampire couples.

After sharing a glance, Jen and I readily agreed. This certainly was something worth celebrating.

I called Richie several hours later before going to bed the next morning. Paris to the west coast of the US was nine hours earlier, so he was early in his "day".

"Hello," he answered.

"Rich, it's Ryan."

"Ryan! How's everything?"

"Just fine. Say, could you hop a plane to Paris soon?"

He paused. "Yes, but why? Something wrong?"

"No," I assured him. "Nothing's wrong. In fact, everything is most definitely right. I need you here because I need someone to be my best man."

"Congratulations! So you're doing it there?"

Hoa's voice came on the line, "Congratulations, Ryan! I'm so happy for you two."

"Thank you," I said to both of them. "And yes, we're doing the ceremony here, probably. We need to talk to Father Riley first, but none of us expect there to be a problem on that end."

"When do you want me out there?" asked Richie.

"Like I said, I need to talk to Liam first. I'll probably talk to him tonight. It's almost dawn here, and I'm ready to crash."

"Can't blame you there," commented Richie. "Call me when you have a timetable?"

"Sure thing," I answered. "Just wanted to make sure you'd accept the request."

"Don't be ridiculous," returned Hoa. "Let me talk to Jen."

I chuckled and said goodbye before handing the phone over. I gave half an ear to their conversation as I got ready for bed. Jen explained how Terry had agreed to be Matron of Honor, and Aaron would have walked her down the aisle, but we weren't planning on that much of a ceremony. Jen was wanting to invite Nick and Natalie, but that was all, really. Unless we wanted to tell someone about vampires, we couldn't invite all that many.

The next evening found me repeating the cab ride to Liam's church. Once again, he stuck his head out the same side door and greeted me warmly. "Nice to see you again, Ryan. Come on back."

I shook my head. "It's a gorgeous evening, Liam. Why don't we go outside instead?"

He stopped and looked at me with a slight frown.

"We can stay on the church grounds if that'd make you feel better," I assured him.

He continued to look at me a moment before agreeing. We got outside, and I let him pick the route. As I expected, he kept us on Holy Ground. He may be a priest, but he didn't know me well enough to leave Holy Ground with me.

"How much do you believe in the supernatural, Liam?" I asked after a few minutes of wandering.

An eyebrow went up. "I'm a priest, Ryan. I believe in God."

I smiled. "I was thinking a little more tangible than that."

"I also believe in immortality," he said ironically.

"Ghosts, devils, angels, vampires?" I asked.

He stopped and stared at me intently. Presently he said, "I believe that there are things that can't be truly explained by science or nature. Why do you ask?"

I ignored the question, instead starting to walk again and changing the subject. "Are you willing to perform a wedding ceremony for Jen and me?"

"Of course," he said. His face reflected the confusion I expected after such a radical change of subject. "Could I speak with you and Jen together?"

I nodded. "She's by the front gate by now."

His brow knitted in even more confusion, but he didn't say anything. Instead, he altered his course and brought us by the front entrance to the church grounds. Sure enough, Jen was standing just outside, casually leaning against a tree.

Liam greeted her with a slight frown. "Jennifer. Nice to see you. Please come in and we'll discuss this."

She shook her head. "I can't enter the church, Father Riley."

His frown deepened. He looked back and forth between the two of us before asking, "Okay, what's going on?"

"Do you believe in vampires, Father?" asked Jen quietly.

His mouth opened once or twice before anything came out. Finally he turned to me. "That's why you asked that question last night and then the one just a few minutes ago?"

I nodded.

He turned to Jen and studied her. "Vampire," he asked as a statement.

She nodded, allowing her eyes to glow golden for a moment.

He took a hasty step back, but her eyes had reverted to normal as quickly as they'd changed in the first place. He calmed quickly and stared at her for a few more seconds. You could nearly see the gears turning in his mind. "Fascinating," he eventually murmured. Shaking his head, he asked,

"Why can't you enter the church?"

"Religious icons. Crosses mostly," Jen answered.

He nodded slowly then suddenly smiled. "I was going to make sure you two knew what you were getting yourselves into, seeing as how Ryan's Immortality would separate you two eventually. I can see that won't be a problem."

Jen and I smiled slightly.

"How much of a ceremony were you two thinking?" Liam asked, dragging his thoughts back to the practical.

We both shook our heads. I answered, "Not much. Just an exchange of vows, mostly. We've lived together long enough that we may well qualify as husband and wife legally. We just want to make it formal. Half dozen guests or so, including witnesses."

"Outdoor, evening ceremony of course," added Jen.

Liam smiled slightly. "Of course. Religious preference?"

"Non-denominational," I answered. "We both believe in the existence of a God, but neither of us is a member of any church." I paused before adding ironically, "For obvious reasons."

He grunted softly in what I took to be agreement. "When?" he asked next.

"Couple days," I answered. "We aren't going to do any of the civil paperwork, so it's more a case of waiting for all the guests to arrive. And some of them are coming from the US."

He nodded. "Attire?"

"Semi-formal," answered Jen. "I'll be in a dress but not a wedding gown."

"Where?" was the next question.

I pointed to the gazebo on the church grounds not more than a hundred yards away. "Here if possible."

He smiled. "Sounds like you two have this all figured out. All I have to do is show up with a script?"

I chuckled. "Not quite how I would have phrased it, but essentially correct."

He studied Jen for another few seconds before commenting, "You know, I have all sorts of questions for you." Jen's face fell into a frown, and Liam nodded. "Didn't think so. Okay, I won't ask. Let me know when as soon as possible?"

Richie called hours later. "Change in plans, Ryan. I'm sorry, but I won't be able to be your best man."

My face fell. "If the timing doesn't work, Rich, say so. If it's a problem between the two of us . . ." I didn't think it was, but there had to be a reason he was turning me down.

"No, no, that's not it," he assured me. "I can't be your best man if I'm going to be getting married myself." He let that sink in for a second before hitting me with, "Hoa and I would like to have a double wedding with you and Jennifer if it's okay by you."

Jen picked up the extension in the kitchen. "YES! Oh, I'm so happy for you two!"

Damn vampire hearing eavesdrops on everything.

Richie and I chuckled at the same time over Jen's enthusiasm. Richie continued, "I was planning on asking Mac to stand with me." He rushed on before I had a chance to interrupt, "I know this means we'll have to tell him about Hoa and Jen, but he'd find out eventually anyway if we continued to be in contact with him for much longer."

Hmm, good point. I was almost surprised that he hadn't noticed Jen wasn't aging before now. But as an Immortal, he might be a little more oblivious to that for the simple reason that so many of his acquaintances aren't aging themselves.

Hoa had joined the conversation. "Jen, could you ask Grandma Terry to stand with me, too?"

"YES!" shouted Terry from somewhere in the house.

Jen laughed as I said with no small amusement, "I think Terry just agreed, Hoa." We all chuckled before something occurred to me, "Hoa, wouldn't Terry be your great-grandmother?" Jen was her "mother" after all, up to Michelle, and then Terry.

"If you followed the pattern strictly, yes, she would. But she told me to call her 'Grandma Terry'."

"I'm still not going to call you my father-in-law, Ryan," added Richie.

Everyone chuckled again before Hoa asked, "So everything went well with Father Riley?"

"Yes," answered Jen. "We'll have to tell him that you two'll be added to the ceremony, but I can't imagine that's a problem. You two going to invite anyone?"

"Nobody to invite," commented Richie. "Mac and Ryan are the closest thing to family I have."

"And I don't have any family left, either," interjected Hoa.

Richie continued, "I'd want to invite Joe, too if you two think it'd be alright."

"I'd like that, too," I agreed. "No reason to tell him anything, really." I've wanted to, but I understood the reasons to keep vampires a secret.

As if reading my mind, Jennifer said, "We're already telling enough people the secret, here. Let's not be adding too much to it."

Richie sighed. "I was afraid of that. Anyway," he continued, "we'll be there in a few days."

"Call once you have an arrival time and somebody will get to the airport to pick you up," said Jennifer.

"Rich, you and I had better talk to Mac together once you arrive."

"Good idea. See you in a few days."

I went back to Liam's church the next evening (again). I explained the addition to the wedding to Liam and he readily agreed to the changes. It really wasn't going to matter much to him. He hardly had to do anything for this wedding, anyway. Actually, Jen and I had agreed to keep it extremely simple. Other than waiting for everyone else to show up, none of us had much to do.

Jen called Uncle Nick in Toronto and invited him and Natalie. They happily agreed to come for the wedding and even agreed to go to our house and pick up my suit and one of Jen's dresses.

It was amazingly short notice, but everything seemed to be falling together anyway. Nobody had a problem getting time off or plane tickets.

Richie and Hoa arrived two days (well, nights) later. Once Terry got everyone back to her place, Richie, Hoa, Jen, and I discussed our strategy on how to tell Mac about vampires.

"Calmly or brute force?" I asked. Those were the only two choices, really.

"Calmly worked for me," pointed out Richie.

"Relatively," commented Jen dryly from where she was curled up on my lap.

Hoa giggled. "She's got you there, Rich. It DID take you a while to believe."

"And Jennifer flying around the room with glowing golden eyes would have improved matters somehow?" he asked.

Smiling at the mental image, I said, "Sounds like we're agreed on that one, then. Only one problem left. Watchers."

"How're they a problem?" asked Hoa with a frown.

"There will be, what, nearly a dozen Watchers there? Joe, of course. And you, too, Hoa. Plus Richie's, mine, Liam's, Nick's, Amanda's, Mac's, Aaron's, and Natalie's Watchers. How many of them know about vampires?"

"Five including me," Hoa answered after a moment's thought.

I nodded. "And what will the rest of the Watchers report?"

"That Richie Ryan married Vu Tran Hoa and Ryan Chessman married Jennifer Frost. Where're you going with this, Ryan?"

"Bear with me for a second. What happens in a hundred years if some Watcher sees that report and then finds out you two are still alive?"

"Oh," Hoa responded, suddenly seeing where I was going. "Watchers would suddenly think that we were Immortal, or that there was some other kind of immortal running around."

"Which there is: Vampires," Richie agreed with a sigh.

"This is getting messy," commented Jen.

"So we can only invite Immortals who have Watchers that already know about vampires?"

I sighed in exasperation. "Can't see a way around that."

Terry walked into the room, handing a goblet to Jen and Hoa before taking a seat for herself. "I'll talk to Daniel," she volunteered. "You two girls can

talk to your beau's Watchers. Hopefully one of the three of them can think of something."

"Beau?" I asked with a grin. "Does anyone use that word anymore?"

She grimaced at me. "In case it hasn't penetrated yet, Mister Chessman, I'm a little older than I look. Let me talk however I want."

"Just so long as it isn't in Olde English," I said. "One of my high school English teachers made us memorize and recite 'Wan that April'. Felt like I was tying my throat in knots trying to talk that way."

She rolled her eyes and left the room, muttering, "Children!"

The next evening, the four of us piled into a cab for the trip to "Le Blues Club". It was going to be an interesting evening.

I was relieved that only Mac's Buzz met us when we climbed back out of the cab. Having Methos there wouldn't have improved matters any.

When all four of us made it through the door, I saw Mac at the same time that he saw Richie. Standing with a wide grin, he strode toward us, enveloping Richie into a hug when he arrived. Pulling back after a couple slaps against Richie's back, he greeted Hoa with a smile.

"What are you two doing here in Paris?" he asked, waving them toward a table. He snagged his shot glass of scotch on his way past the bar as we all seated ourselves.

"Nice to see you, too, Mac," I said dryly.

He rolled his eyes at me as Jen and Hoa giggled. "I've seen you for the past three days. I didn't know Richie was here."

"Just arrived this morning, Mac," Richie answered. "As for why we're here . . ." he waved at me.

When everyone's attention switched to me, I took a deep breath and plunged in. "I've asked Jen to marry me, and she's accepted. I asked Richie to be my best man, but . . ." I threw the ball back in his court with an evil grin.

Mac's face had lit into a smile, but then frowned in confusion when I trailed off. He looked over at Richie with raised eyebrows.

"But I couldn't be Ryan's best man," Richie picked up, "seeing as how Hoa and I decided to make it a double wedding."

"Congratulations!" said Mac. Standing up, he crossed around the small table to where Hoa and Jen were sitting together. Pulling one of the girls into a hug with each arm, he managed to get both of them at once.

Joe came hobbling over. "Rich!" he greeted. "Whatever brought you to Paris must be good news based on how Mac's acting."

Richie and I chuckled. He answered, "Yeah, it is, Joe. Ryan and I are getting married."

"No, we're not!" I objected with a stern look at him. Turning to Joe's mystified frown, I said, "Don't listen to him. I'm marrying Jen, not him."

"That's not -" he started, only to be interrupted by everyone's laughter.

"Well, my congratulations," Joe said, extending his hand first to me and then to Richie. Shaking Richie's hand, Joe added, "With whoever you're marrying."

Giggling at his words and actions, Hoa allowed Joe to kiss her hand gallantly.

After repeating the same with Jen's hand, he pulled a chair over and levered himself down. "When and where?" he asked.

"Two days, eight in the evening, gazebo at Father Liam's church," I answered.

"You're invited, of course," Richie added. He turned to Mac and asked, "Mac, Ryan and I would both like you to stand for us."

"I'd be honored," the Scot answered with a smile. "Who's standing for Hoa and Jen?"

"A friend of ours," answered Jennifer smoothly.

"Well, I'd better dig my tux out of storage," said Joe.

I shook my head. "It's only going to be semi-formal. No reception or any of that. Just a quiet little ceremony. Not even going to do any of the civil paperwork."

"Dress code for me?" asked Mac.

"Would you wear a kilt if I asked?" queried Hoa with a twinkle in her eye.

"Yes," he answered promptly.

"Oh," was her slightly dejected answer.

Richie chuckled. "Don't bother trying to get him to feel embarrassed over his Highland heritage or their customs." Turning to Mac, he said, "Ryan and I will be wearing suits, the girls will wear dresses, though they won't be wedding dresses."

Mac nodded, accepting the information.

The perky young waitress came over for our drink orders and returned with beers for Richie and myself moments later. Joe returned to his bar shortly afterwards to leave the five of us to discuss inconsequentialities for nearly an hour before Mac indicated his interest in leaving for the evening.

Biting my lip a moment, I asked, "Mac, mind if we go to your barge for a while? We all need to talk with you about something."

Frowning slightly in confusion, he said, "No problem, though I'm not sure I can fit all four of you in my car."

"We won't take up much space," said Jen. "In fact, I daresay all four of us could fit into your back seat if we wanted to."

MacLeod raised an eyebrow at her. "I'd like to see that, actually." Standing, he hooked his coat off his chair and waved to Joe on his way out the door. Once outside, he waved us to a mid-sized sedan of French make. Richie and I slid into the back with no problem, and the girls squeezed in and took their seats on our laps. Mac just looked at us for a moment before shaking his head. "Young love," he said with a grin.

All four of us grinned back.

"Not that I'm complaining in the least," I whispered into Jen's ear as Mac climbed into the driver's seat, "but I've noticed that you enjoy sitting on my lap a lot. Any particular reason?"

"You're warm," was the whispered answer. She must have seen my frown, because she explained further. "In essence I'm cold-blooded. You're warm."

My face cleared. Oh, that made sense. Besides, it gave me more reason to cuddle up to my fiancée. And it also explained why Hoa had become more tactile with Richie since she was brought across.

Mac presently pulled to a stop at his barge and we all piled out of his car. Walking up the gangplank, he asked, "Anyone want anything to drink?"

"I'll take a beer," Richie replied.

"I'm fine," I said, "but you may want one, Mac. You'll need it before the night's out."

He focused a long stare at me but didn't say anything to that. Instead, he fished a beer out of the refrigerator and handed it to Richie as he and Hoa were arranging themselves on the couch. Taking off his coat, he hung it up on the coat rack before pouring himself a scotch and seating himself on the chair across from where Jen and I were sitting. "Okay, what's going on?"

Richie and Hoa looked over at Jen and myself. Jen was just staring into space. Sighing, I opened the conversation, "Mac, how many types of immortals are there?"

He frowned. "Types? What are you talking about?"

"Okay, I'll rephrase. How many groups of people can potentially live forever?"

"Just Immortals," he answered with a frown. "What are you talking about?" he repeated.

"What would you say if I told you that there's another group of people who can live hundreds or thousands of years?"

He started to laugh before he realized I wasn't smiling. "You're serious?" he asked.

I nodded.

He frowned and leaned back in his chair. "Assuming I believe you, why are you telling me?"

"Because there's something you need to know about Jen and Hoa," I answered quietly.

His gaze went from one to the other before he asked, "You're immortal?"

Hoa nodded, and Jen said quietly. "Yes. Though we're not the kind of Immortal you're familiar with. We're vampires."

The fifteen second silence was broken by Mac calmly replying, "Vampires."

The four of us nodded.

"Blood sucking, wooden stakes, sunlight, and so on vampires," Mac continued in an amazingly calm voice.

"Yup," I answered, hugging Jen a little tighter.

"Why are you telling me?" Mac asked after perhaps a minute of silence.

Richie and I both snorted in amusement. "And if you saw me with Hoa in fifty years?" Richie asked.

"She wouldn't have aged," Mac deduced.

"Right," Richie agreed.

Looking from one of the women to the other, he asked, "How old are you two?"

"Didn't anyone ever tell you that it's impolite to ask a lady her age?" I teased.

He frowned at me in response.

"Jennifer brought me across less than two years ago. Just after Amanda's wedding," answered Hoa calmly.

"Brought you across? Made you a vampire you mean?" MacLeod asked.

At Hoa's nod, he turned to Jennifer and asked, "Why?"

She shrugged slightly. "I had the ability to let Hoa and Richie spend forever together."

"So you brought her across," he said, sounding just slightly angry.

"With her full knowledge and permission," Jennifer defended herself.

He turned to Richie and asked, "And you knew about this?"

He nodded. "I'll admit I wasn't thrilled with the idea when I first heard it, but it's turned out pretty well."

"Speak for yourself," Hoa muttered. "I still miss sunsets."

Three of us smiled slightly at her attempt at lightening the mood.

Mac turned to Jennifer and asked, "And how old are you?"

She shook her head. "Younger than Ryan, actually."

He leaned back again and processed everything we'd said, taking a sip of his drink occasionally. "Once again, why are you telling me this?"

"Sooner or later you'd notice that Jennifer and Hoa aren't aging," I said. "And instead of you asking embarrassing questions and perhaps getting yourself or us in trouble, we figured we'd better tell you the truth now."

"Trouble?" he asked with a slight frown.

"Telling mortals about us is against the Code," Jennifer replied. "Generally, nobody knows about us. But there are special circumstances."

He didn't bother asking why vampires never told mortals about themselves. He'd lived through the witch hunts and already knew the answer, no doubt. Instead, he nodded and said, "Okay, what are we going to do about this?"

"Nothing," I answered. "Don't tell anyone, don't treat them different, don't do anything differently than you have been. We told you for everyone's safety." At his nod, I added, "You know, Mac, you're taking this a whole lot calmer than I expected."

He smiled slightly. "This explains a few things. A few people I meet after a hundred years who aren't immortal, but I would have sworn are the same person. Also this explains why the vampire legends have been so persistent. And why the two of you suddenly went to a night time schedule," he finished, indicating Richie and myself.

We grinned back. "Well, we had good reason," answered Richie.

"So I see," Mac answered in amusement. "Besides, this will be easier on you two in the long run than marrying mortals."

"Thanks, Dad," I said facetiously. "Glad you like my girlfriend. Can I borrow the keys tonight? Huh, can I?" I continued, trying to act like a seventeen year old.

Smiling widely, he answered, "Yes, Son, but you be back before dawn."

We all chuckled before he placed his drink on the coffee table and stood. Reaching out a hand, he helped Jennifer and Hoa to their feet. Pulling them into gentle hugs, one at a time, he said to them, "You two take care of these two arrogant, young fools. For what it's worth, I'm glad you're happy. All of you," he added, including Richie and myself in his statement.

"That went well," Hoa commented as we walked up the steps to Terry and Aaron's home.

"As well as could be hoped," Richie agreed.

Terry opened the door before we got there. "I talked to Daniel," she announced.

While walking in and hanging up my and Jen's coats, I asked, "And?"

She shrugged. "He said he'd give us an answer tonight."

We spent the next hour or so just chatting, Terry and myself working our way through a few games of chess to pass the time.

She was beating the pants off of me for the third game in a row when all the women looked up simultaneously and swiveled their heads toward the door.

"Someone's coming," Terry said with a frown.

"Joe," Jennifer said in surprise.

"Joe?!" Richie and I chorused.

She nodded. "Well, someone with a can and two prosthetic legs," she amended.

Standing, I peeked out between the curtains and did indeed see Joe Dawson walking up the sidewalk to the front door. I crossed over to it and opened it before he could knock.

"Joe! How're you doing?"

He smiled at me. "Hi, Ryan. Can I come in?"

"Uh, yeah. Come on in." What was he doing here?

He came in and greeted Jennifer, Hoa, and Richie with smiles. Then he turned to Terry and Aaron. I was about to introduce him when he said, "Mister Constantine. Miss Ryan. I'm Joe Dawson." Smiling charmingly at them, he approached with hand extended.

They both shook his hand with bemused expressions.

Well, it's hardly surprising that he'd know their names. Even Aaron's real name. Though why he would address him by it and then introduce himself was still completely beyond my understanding.

Joe had asked Terry for permission to sit down and then done so when she granted it. I finally pulled myself together about the time that he was settling himself down. "Joe, forgive me for the question, but what are you doing here?"

"Daniel asked me to come," was the calm reply.

All six of us looked among each other with expressions of incomprehension.

"Okay . . ." I finally prompted.

He turned to Aaron and Terry. "You two don't know me, but I'm a District Director of the Watchers." They both nodded, apparently not surprised by this bit of news. He continued, "Ryan, could you come over here? Hoa, you too."

Glancing at each other in mutual confusion, we both approached where he was sitting.

He presented his right inner wrist to us. "Recognize this?"

We both glanced down. "Your Watcher tattoo," I stated, not knowing where he was going.

He smiled slightly. "Look closer. Compare it to what you both received when you became Watchers."

Looking at each other again, Hoa and I peered closer at his tattoo. Mine had disappeared within a month after becoming Immortal. Hers had disappeared days after becoming a vampire. The only thing different I could see about his tattoo was that there were three small "stars" above and between the legs of the stylized "Y" that made the bulk of the tattoo.

"You mean those stars?" I asked.

He nodded and then twisted around so that he was showing the tattoo to Terry and Aaron. They hardly glanced at it but gave Joe a piercing stare.

"What's going on?" asked Richie.

"You want them to join?" asked Aaron of Joe, completely ignoring Richie's question.

Joe nodded, pulling his wrist back to rest with the other hand at the head of his cane.

Aaron puffed out a long sigh. "Have a seat," he told Hoa and me. "This'll take a while." Once we were seated, he continued, "You all know that Watchers have been following Immortals around for millennia. What you don't know is that Watchers have been aware of vampires for most of that time."

Utter silence greeted his remark. Watchers knew about vampires? My mind immediately went spinning off with a thousand questions.

Hoa was a little more vocal. "Why didn't . . . Why don't . . ." Well, vocal but not necessarily coherent.

Looking among the four of us, Joe smiled slightly. "You all know about Watchers, and two of you were even Watchers yourselves for a while, so I won't go into that part of it. What you don't know is that Immortals and vampires have been together for thousands of years. Antonius and Theresa here are only one example."

"You've known about vampires all this time," I said. At his nod, I continued, "How come I never heard anything about this when I worked for you?"

"As a whole, the Watchers DON'T know about vampires. Once we make high enough rank, we're told. And some of the field agents DO know, obviously."

"You worked for Mister Dawson?" asked Aaron, looking at me.

That's right, he never heard that story. "I was a Watcher when I died the first time," I explained to him and Terry. "Actually Watching Richie here," I added, waving at him.

"That's how you found Duncan MacLeod," mused Aaron.

I nodded. "I watched a Challenge of Richie's. Some of the Quickening blew a light off a pole and it landed on me. By the time I woke up, Richie was gone. I was pulled off surveillance after that, and it was a few days before I realized what I was. At that point I ran to Mac for help."

"When was this?" asked Hoa.

"Just before I met you," Richie answered. "I'll tell you about it sometime."

"Okay," Jen said, "Watchers know about vampires. Vampires as a whole don't know about Watchers or Immortals. Immortals as a whole don't know about Watchers or vampires. However, the four of us know about all of the above." She looked around and we all nodded at her. Turning to our three seniors, she asked, "Why are you telling us this?"

"Because there's a small group made up of all three that actually keeps the peace," Aaron said.

We turned to him. "Keeps the peace?" Richie echoed.

He nodded. "The upper echelons of the Watchers, the more influential Enforcers, Masters and Mistresses of a few cities, and a handful of Immortals make up this Council. Terry and I, and apparently Mister Dawson here, are members, though we don't necessarily know who the other members are." He paused to let us absorb that for a few moments.

"Keeps the peace?" Richie repeated.

"When one group starts warring with another, this Council steps in. If an Immortal starts running out of control, we step in. If a vampire starts to become a problem, we step in, though the Enforcers are usually enough to keep the vampire segment under control. Between the resources and strengths of the three groups, there is little we can't contain if the situation warrants it."

Everyone was silent for a few moments, digesting this news. "A secret group made of members of three OTHER secret groups," I muttered.

"Let's try this again," said Jennifer. "Why are you telling us?"

Terry and Aaron looked to Joe. He said, "Because I believe you four could be useful members. You four already trust each other implicitly, so you could be a potent fighting force if a situation calls for that. Individually, either of you two couples are already a good team if a smaller group is needed."

"You mean we would do your dirty work for you," I accused.

Joe and Terry frowned, and Aaron said, "Not exactly, though it may seem that way. You're correct in that you MAY be sent out on a hunting mission. You're incorrect in thinking that you'd become an assassin. If you're hunting for the Council, you'd be instructed to bring them in for the Council to put on trial. You would NOT be instructed to execute anyone."

"Ryan, you especially would be useful," Joe put in. "With your extra training, you could be an Immortal lie detector."

"You're making it sound like we'd be agents of the Council but not members," Richie said.

"True," conceded Joe. "None of you are old enough."

"Go to hell, Dawson," Jennifer snarled. "What gives a MORTAL the right to judge Immortals or vampires?"

I was startled by her attitude, but none of the three eldest in the room even blinked at her. "We don't," responded Joe calmly. "Vampires judge vampires, Immortals judge their own, and so do us mortals."

"But you let me go after Jenny Bright," I noted.

"Different circumstances," Joe said with a wave of one hand.

"Who?" asked Aaron.

A Watcher who gave Immortals enough information to hunt other Immortals," I answered Aaron. Turning to Joe, I said, "Bullshit. You let an Immortal clean up a Watcher problem."

He suddenly looked a little uncomfortable. "We would have cleaned it up if you'd let us know where she was."

"You would have tried her and executed her," I retorted flatly.

"And what about Fredericks?" Jennifer asked, referring to the vampire she and I had killed early in our relationship.

"Seems Jennifer and I have been doing you dirty work for some time now," I remarked acidly.

"No," Terry said flatly. "Fredericks was YOUR problem. It wasn't widespread enough to involve anyone else."

"So if these aren't the kinds of problems the Council deals with, what WOULD qualify?" I asked in exasperation.

"Horton," answered Aaron. Joe flinched and let out a sigh.

Terry nodded agreement. "The Council was about to move on that one when Duncan MacLeod went after him."

"For killing Darius and kidnapping Hugh Fitzcairn," Richie added.

Terry shrugged. "Whatever the reason, MacLeod did the work for us. Without any prompting from us, before you ask."

"The first time, anyway," Joe added quietly. "I took care of James the second time around myself."

"So what HAS the Council done?" asked Hoa.

"Nothing any of you would have heard of," answered Joe. "Mostly, we help hunt renegades of all varieties. It may appear that Enforcers police the Communities and Immortals and Watchers police their own, but at least one Council member is usually a part of those actions. And the Council helps in the hunt with detective work and information. Discreetly."

"So what WOULD we do if we were agents for you?" asked Richie tiredly.

"Whatever we asked," responded Terry.

Richie and I glared at her.

"The reasoning WOULD be explained to you," she assured us.

"Explain to me again why you're telling us this?" I asked, rubbing my fingertips to my temples to try to minimize the headache forming.

"All four of you would be useful," Aaron answered patiently.

"I'm honored," interjected Hoa dryly.

He flicked a glance at her but hardly slowed his answer. "As agents, you would have skills that we could use. You are already Immortal / vampire couples, so you know the strengths and weaknesses involved, as well as already trusting in each other. You are all willing to do the right thing, as you've each proven. And you all believe in the three of us."

"So we just became your private army?" I asked with an edge to my voice. "Go to hell. I have my own life without you telling me what to do."

"We'll never TELL you what to do. We'll ASK. Council members and agents are volunteers," Terry said.

"Sounds like you're trying to draft us," I replied.

All three of them shook their heads. "No, we're asking you to join us," responded Aaron.

"And if I refuse?" I shot back.

He shrugged. "Then you refuse. No harm done. You already know all three groups exist. Knowing that a Council exists doesn't hurt." He smiled at me and added, "And I trust that you won't hurt one of the three of us for our part in the Council."

Jennifer had been quiet for a while, so I was surprised when she said, "Think about it, Ryan. The Council is for the good of Immortals and vampires. Don't we owe it to each other to try to help?"

I turned and stared at her. Rubbing a hand across my face, I said, "You WOULD have to phrase it that way, wouldn't you?"

Richie and Hoa chuckled. "So far, I don't have a problem with this," Hoa said. Richie nodded his agreement.

I sighed, dropping the argument for the moment. "Watchers have known about vampires?" I asked instead.

"For thousands of years," confirmed Joe.

"Do you Watch them?"

He shook his head. "Can't. As any of the ladies here will tell you, a Watcher is easy to spot for the vampire. A mortal following a vampire around would just be asking for trouble. No, we rely on the vampires who know of us to tell us enough to keep the vampire chronicles."

"They don't know much," added Terry. "Who is a vampire, who isn't, where they live, when someone is destroyed, and like that. Our daily lives aren't recorded."

"Following Immortals is probably tough enough. Following a vampire would be downright suicidal," Aaron said.

We all chuckled tightly. After studying my expression for a few seconds, Richie said, "Well, this solves one problem."

"What's that?" I asked distractedly, still thinking about the Council and whether I would want to be a part of it.

"We can invite Joe and more Immortals to the wedding without a problem. Our Chronicles won't expose the Community."

"Your Chronicles won't, but you want to be careful about what Immortals you fraternize with," cautioned Joe. "Most Immortals don't know about vampires. If Nick Wolfe for instance went to the wedding and then met you again in a hundred years . . ."

"He'd know about vampires by circumstance," finished Richie.

"He and Amanda have met me," pointed out Jennifer.

Joe frowned slightly. "They may be a problem eventually."

"Well, add Father Riley and Duncan MacLeod to the list of Immortals who know about vampires for sure," said Jen.

Joe nodded. One eyebrow rose slightly and he asked, "How'd Mac take it?"

"Amazingly well," Richie said. "He suspected something already. We just confirmed it."

"He suspected something?" queried Terry.

"He met a vampire again a hundred years later, the way it sounds."

She nodded, accepting that answer.

"You're quiet," Jen whispered to me.

I nodded slowly. "What do you think of the whole Council thing?" I asked her.

She shrugged. "Sounds legit to me. I'm willing to give it a shot on a probationary basis."

I looked over at Hoa and Richie, knowing that they probably heard the question as well. They both caught my eye and nodded.

Terry had noticed every by-play going on. She asked, "Ryan, you okay with this?"

I took a breath and nodded to her. "For the moment. I'll want to know everything going on before you send me off on any missions, but it sounds okay so far." I turned to Joe. "Anything else we need to know?"

He shook his head. "Any Council business will come through one of the three of us. If someone else approaches you and claims to be a member, play dumb until getting confirmation from someone you KNOW is a member."

I waved at his wrist. "Is that modification of your Watcher tattoo an indicator?"

He nodded. "Among Watchers, yes. Though a tattoo on a vampire or Immortal is pointless, so you can't rely on it for them."

"Is Tiana a member?" asked Jennifer of Terry.

Terry's eyebrow rose. "You met her?"

Jennifer and I nodded.

"Who?" asked Richie.

"Don't ask," Aaron said to him.

"Yes," Terry answered Jennifer's question. "Though she's unlikely to know you're agents."

"And don't advertise the fact," Joe added. "Few know of the Council's existence. We prefer to keep it that way, since the members tend to be the most powerful and / or influential members of each of our respective segments."

I frowned at him. "Then if you don't necessarily know the other members of the Council, why weren't you hesitant to mention it in front of Aaron and Terry here?"

He shifted uncomfortably for a moment before answering quietly, "Tiana told me."

"You KNOW Tiana?" asked Terry incredulously.

"She'd been coming into my bar on and off. She recognized my tattoo for what it was and introduced herself."

"The Mistress of Paris introduced herself to you?" asked Terry in disbelief.

"Mistress of Paris?!" asked Richie.

"Told you that you didn't want to know," interjected Aaron.

Richie ignored him. "The Mistress of Paris, who is a vampire, comes to YOUR bar?"

"You don't have to sound so shocked by it," Joe said, hurt by the implication.

"Vampire, your bar," Richie repeated. "Unless you serve something besides beer, what was she doing there?"

"Looking for a friend, from what she told us," Jennifer answered.

Joe nodded. "That's what she told me, too."

Richie had calmed down a little. "Sorry, didn't mean to insult you, Joe. I was just surprised that a vampire would go to any bar except one run by one of the Community."

Hoa frowned at him slightly. "It's not that I CAN'T go to a bar, I just don't."

"I know, and I'm sorry. It's just weird, that's all."

"Apology accepted," remarked Joe with a slight grin.

Richie smiled nervously back.

"Now what?" I asked the room at large.

"You okay with everything?" Terry asked.

"For the moment."

She nodded. "Then we decide who all gets invited to this wedding."

"You fiddle with that tie one more time, Richie, and I'll either strangle you with it or tie your hands together," Mac remarked calmly.

His hands froze in place then slowly lowered to his sides. "Just nervous, I guess," he said sheepishly.

"Noooo," I said with deep sarcasm followed by a grin.

Mac grinned slightly, but Richie glared. "What about you? You seem way too calm, Ryan. You're going to get married in less than an hour. Aren't you nervous?"

I shrugged. "Nervous? Why? It's not like this ceremony is going to change anything. We've lived together for years. We love each other. How will being married change anything?" I leaned back comfortably in the chair I was sitting in and folded my arms, looking up at the incredulous Richie.

Richie stared at me. Mac studied me for a moment before turning to Richie. "He's as nervous as you are, Rich."

I grinned slightly. "More."

"Then why aren't you showing it?" he nearly shouted.

"Why?" I asked again. "Working myself into nervous and physical exhaustion won't do anyone any good, especially me. Besides, you're nervous enough for the both of us."

Richie glared at me again. Mac chuckled.

A tap sounded at the door. MacLeod answered it and let Liam in. I noticed with relief that nothing about Liam's attire could be considered religious icons. No embroidered crosses or anything.

"Ready, lads?" he asked Richie and myself.

Standing, I answered, "As I'll ever be."

Richie contented himself with just nodding and fiddling with his tie again.

Sharing a quick chuckle with Mac, Liam led us back out of the room and down a hallway, finally emerging from one of the side doors of the church

out into the grounds. Once outside, he turned toward the gazebo and the small crowd that was already gathered there.

Stepping forward, we waded into several Buzzes. My feet still automatically following Liam, I sorted through the sensations and identified Amanda, Nick, Natalie, and Aaron.

As we converged on the gazebo, I saw Hoa, Jennifer, and Terry approaching from off the grounds. Hoa was wearing a royal blue dress, as was Terry. Jen, on the other hand, was wearing the same emerald green dress she'd worn to Amanda and Nick's wedding. Though I couldn't see it in the twilight, I knew the dress matched the shade of her eyes perfectly. And she knew how much I liked that dress for exactly that reason.

Everyone arrived at the gazebo simultaneously and took their agreed positions. From the audience's point of view, Terry was standing on the left, followed by Jennifer and me, Father Liam in the middle, then Hoa and Richie, and lastly Mac on the far right.

Mac gave Nick Knight a strange look, but I wasn't paying that much attention to anyone but my bride-soon-to-be.

Smiling from Jennifer and myself over to Hoa and Richie, Liam nodded when he saw that we were all ready. Looking up and addressing the small audience, he said, "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here this evening . . ."

Chessman Chronicles Trouble in DC

Jennifer was in the shower and I was idly flipping through the channels when I came to a crashing halt.

"... To repeat, Baltimore police today found Deputy Director Andrea Price-O'Day of the United States Secret Service dead this morning near the Baltimore docks. Police spokesmen will not release the cause of death but do admit that it is being treated as a homicide investigation. However, they will not comment on a possible motive. Deputy Director Price-O'Day was head of the protective branch of the Secret Service, serving recently as Chief of Detail for President Ryan before he promoted her to Deputy Director a year ago. A spokesman for the President called the act 'a shocking waste' of a valued agent."

The scene cut away from the solemn faced reporter standing in front of a warehouse in a docking district back to the front desk where they promised us the financial news right after this commercial break.

I flicked off the TV before dropping the remote. Leaning forward to rest my head in my hands, I let out a tired sigh. Shit, shit, SHIT. There goes another one of my friends. True, it'd been better than a year since I'd left Washington, but what was a year among Immortal acquaintances?

I was still staring at the carpet between my feet when I heard Jen pick up the phone and dial. Until then, I hadn't even realized she was done with her shower. Once someone answered at the other end, she said, "Yes, I'd like two tickets from Seacouver to Washington, DC leaving tonight." She paused, and I looked up at her in appreciation. I didn't have to explain or ask anything. She'd heard, and she understood. Smiling sympathetically at me, she continued into the phone, "Yes, that will be fine. Have them at the counter under the name of Ryan Allen, please. Thank you." She hung up and walked over to me, still clad only in a towel that barely covered her.

Tugging gently on one arm, she pulled me up and wrapped me in a hug, laying her head on my chest and twining her arms around my waist. I hugged her tight and sighed. "Thank you," I mumbled after nearly a minute. Nothing else really needed to be said.

She nodded before pulling back and looking up at me. "Plane leaves in two hours. We'd better pack." She smiled suddenly and placed one finger on my chest where her hair had left a wide damp spot. "You need to change."

Smiling slightly at her attempt to cheer me up, I nodded and followed her into the bedroom to begin packing.

Hours later at National Airport in DC, I approached the security desk with my paperwork firmly in hand. They had my sword and gun, and I wasn't about to leave them there.

"Ryan," Jen muttered from beside me.

"Hmm?" I asked, making sure I had the antique transfer papers and the permit saying it was okay for me as an armed courier to have the gun. I would have rather had them on me for the flight, but that paperwork is even harder to deal with.

"That man in the charcoal suit behind us has been following us since we got off the plane," said Jennifer casually. From her tone, she may have been talking about the weather.

Pulling Jen over to the water fountain, I whispered for her to take a drink as I casually looked over to spot our tail. The instant I spotted him, my face and his broke into grins.

He came up and stuck out his hand to me. "You're slipping, Agent Allen. It took your girlfriend to spot me?"

Laughing, I shook his hand and replied, "Hey, you guys never taught me any of your cloak and dagger tricks. How're you doing, Kevin?"

His face fell and he sighed. "Well enough under the circumstances."

Realizing that he was looking at Jen curiously, I introduced them. "Jen, this is Special Agent Kevin Kessler of the Secret Service. Kevin, this is Jennifer, my wife." They shook hands politely as I continued my explanation, "He took over the Presidential Detail when Andrea got promoted. He and I bumped heads a few times when I worked for Jack."

"Bumped heads," Kevin muttered good naturedly. He shook his head and addressed Jen. "Don't listen to him. We ignored each other until that night in Chicago. THEN this young man had the unmitigated gall to begin giving orders! Can you believe that?" he finished with a theatrical sigh.

Jen looked at me with a raised eyebrow, not knowing Kevin was teasing.

I shook my head and sighed. "Andrea gave me that authority for a very specific reason, and we'd just hit those reasons. No offense, but you didn't

know what you were dealing with."

Flicking a glance at Jen, Kevin folded his arms and said, "I still don't, really."

One of my eyebrows went up. "I thought Andrea explained us to you."

He shook his head, more in reflection than to indicate rejection of my comment. "I heard her. That doesn't mean I believed her or understand it."

Jen was looking at us both strangely by this point. I dropped my voice a little and said, "Believe it, Kevin. Immortals exist."

Jen and Kevin shared a glance and discovered this wasn't news to either of them. They both relaxed slightly, knowing that the other knew.

"Anyway," Kevin went on suddenly, "I just wanted to meet you when you got here to give you this." He dug a wallet out of his pocket and handed it over.

Opening it, I found a Secret Service badge. I idly noticed it was even my old badge number. Looking up at him, I smiled and asked, "What is this for?"

Kevin shrugged, looking almost embarrassed. "Officially, it's easier for you to wave that to get into Director Price's funeral."

I looked at him for a moment, waiting for him to continue. When he didn't, I prodded, "And unofficially?"

He sighed. "Unofficially . . ." His gaze fell to the floor before he went on, "I figured you would want to look into the reason that Director Price was killed . . ." He looked up and continued, "It was easier this way to let you into the crime scene."

I smiled. I did indeed want to track this asshole down. Kevin just simplified my life. Nodding, I folded the holder and placed it into my pocket, just as it had been resting there a year ago. Holding out my hand to him, I said, "Yes, I do. Thank you, Kevin."

He shook my hand again and said, "For what? I didn't do anything." A mischievous grin appeared and he pulled an envelope out of a pocket and handed it to me. "As I said, I haven't done anything officially." Stepping back, he folded his hands in front of himself and took on his official Secret Service bearing again. "Have a nice visit to Washington, DC, folks." With that, he turned and melted back into the flow of people.

I slipped the envelope into my coat pocket and chuckled. "I always did like him."

"What was that all about?" asked Jen in confusion.

Smiling, I said, "Kevin knows what Andrea and I are, obviously. He wants her killer tracked down, but he can't officially catch this guy. He knows that I can do so unofficially, so he gave me the means to do it." I sighed slightly as I flipped through my courier documentation again and started heading back toward the security desk. "Since it was unofficial, that means that I'm on my own, though." I grinned when I remembered two Immortal friends here in DC with connections of their own. "At least from Service resources," I finished as I got in line to get my swords and gun back.

I got up after only a few hours of sleep and left Jen sleeping in the hotel. Andrea's funeral was the next afternoon, and I wanted to do a little investigating before then.

As I parked my rental car in front of a warehouse among a dozen identical siblings, I pulled the first page out of the envelope that Kevin had given me earlier that morning and compared the address with the large numbers printed above the human sized door in front of me. Seeing that I had arrived at the right place, I climbed out of my car and gave the other vehicle parked there a cursory glance. It was a cherry red SUV with Virginia plates. That could mean anyone.

I took three steps toward the door before stopping in my tracks at a Buzz. My hand made it to the pommel of my wakizashi before my brain caught up with my hands. Studying the aura for a moment, I concluded it was a very young Immortal (less than ten years) and had no heads to their credit. I relaxed. Whoever it was, I doubted they were a hunter.

Finishing my walk to the door, I opened it and cautiously stepped in. It was a large open space, looking vaguely like Mac's place in that there were support pillars but nothing else in the place. Toward the center, there were two people standing within a rough rectangle composed of yellow police tape. They were both looking at me as I closed the door behind me and strode toward them calmly, keeping my hands out in plain sight.

As I neared them, they both ducked under the tape and approached. The tall man wearing a tan uniform and pilot's wings said, "Do you mind my asking what you're doing here? This is a crime scene." He seemed slightly annoyed but also curious.

Lifting the side of my coat slightly with my left hand, my right disappeared into the pocket and came up with my newly returned badge. The whole thing had been done slowly enough to not panic the Immortal of the pair but quick enough to not look too suspicious. When my hand started moving toward the inner coat, I saw the woman tense but then relax when it reappeared. So she was the Immortal, I assumed.

I flipped open the badge for their inspection. Since he'd been the only one speaking, I addressed myself to him. "Special Agent Ryan Allen of the Secret Service."

The tall man took the badge and studied it as well as he could in the partial light. While he was otherwise distracted, I looked over at his partner for a moment, seeing an attractive woman dressed in a similar tan "casual" uniform top with an olive green skirt before returning my attention to him. Wait a minute . . . I looked over at her again. Yep, I HAVE met her before. Diane Schonke wasn't it?

"Thank you, Agent," the man interrupted my musings and handed my badge back. "I'm Commander Harmon Rabb of the Judge Advocate General." I shook his offered hand as his other waved at Diane. "This is my partner, Lieutenant Colonel Sarah MacKenzie." Releasing his hand, I also shook hers. Sarah MacKenzie, huh? To be fair, I hadn't given him my real name either.

Once I released her hand, I cocked my head at the both of them and asked, "JAG? How's the military interested in this?"

"The killings took place close enough to the Baltimore Shipyards to be a concern to the Navy, Agent Allen," responded Diane. No, that's SARAH. I'd better remember that.

First thing's first, though. I smiled charmingly at her and replied, "Ryan, please. I'll never forgive myself if I force such a pretty woman to call me 'Agent Allen'."

She gave me a small smile in return before nodding her head slightly. "Then it's Mac."

I nodded and turned back to Commander Rabb. "Is the Navy still concerned, Commander, or is this just a quick look?"

He looked somewhere between amused, disgusted, and . . . annoyed? "Honestly, it doesn't look like anything to concern JAG about. Still, it is odd. A prominent Secret Service Director gets beheaded in a Baltimore warehouse that shows signs of electrical discharge?"

That's what it would look like, anyway, I silently agreed.

Nodding vaguely to agree with his assessment, I ducked under the police tape and looked around the crime scene. I certainly wasn't trained in the forensic arts, but I wasn't looking for evidence to use in a court of law, either. Besides, I already knew the motive at work. Nothing of use inside the taped area except the requisite outline and a pool of blood, I saw after a few seconds. Make that TWO outlines, I noted with a grimace. Andrea's head had been far enough from the rest of her body to get its own outline. Slipping back under the tape, I wandered the area, looking for other evidence. The layer of dust and dirt over the floor was scuffed up beyond all hope of interpretation. Either it was a long fight, or the subsequent investigators didn't think to preserve any of it.

Once I started looking at the walls and concrete support pillars, Mac turned to her partner and said, "Harm, could I speak with Agent Allen alone for a minute? I'll be right out."

He didn't seem to like the idea, but he didn't say anything against it, either. Instead, he threw me a look that was so neutral that it bordered on hostility before turning and stalking out the door.

It shut with a reverberating clang, but I was already looking back at the concrete pillar that had caught my attention. More specifically, I was looking at the nicked and scraped side.

I turned to her for a moment as Mac slowly approached. "So he doesn't know?" I casually asked as I refocused my attention on the scratches. More like gouges, I decided.

"No," she responded with a sigh. She shook off the faraway stare and looked at me again, "I would prefer that it stayed that way."

I nodded agreement and then gestured at the gouges. "She fought, of course. Though it probably didn't take long."

"Why not?" she asked tightly.

I shook my head. "Nothing to do with her being a HER, I assure you. We sparred together on and off a year ago, so I know exactly how good she was. There isn't blood anywhere else in here, so she never hurt her attacker. I'd guess that whoever it was toyed with her before finishing it abruptly when they got bored."

She tilted her head as she processed my comment. "Why do you say he or she toyed with Director Price?"

I waved back at the taped off area. "If you're concerned about losing, you disable your opponent as soon as you can. Hamstring, cut open the sword arm, whatever. Based on the lack of blood elsewhere and the autopsy, neither happened. So either Andrea was toyed with, or her first goof got her beheaded outright. She wasn't very good, but she wasn't THAT bad."

One eyebrow went up. "Pretty confident in your capabilities versus hers, aren't you?"

My mouth opened but closed again without anything coming out. What COULD I say to that?

"Okay, why couldn't they BOTH have been inexperienced?" Mac continued.

Hmm, good point. "Okay, I'll buy that one. It's just that most of my fights have been pretty bloody, so I'm still inclined to believe she was played with."

She shrugged. "It's your investigation. I just wanted to talk to you and make sure that our mutual non-aggression pact was still in force."

I gave her a half bow and said, "I have no wish to fight you, Diane. Go in peace."

She sighed but nodded. "Please, it's Mac. Harm knew Diane. That would only confuse matters."

One eyebrow went up. That was brave but foolhardy. I gave an internal shrug. It was her life.

Seeing my agreement, she turned and strode off after her partner.

Since I was in DC, I also wanted to stop and see two more friends.

I spotted one of them on my way along the sidewalk toward the front entrance of the Hoover building. I'd already walked into his Buzz, so I knew to look for Mulder in the mass of people. I finally spotted him standing near the doors facing another man. I got close enough to hear them at the same time that Mulder spotted me and gave a small smile while he relaxed his tense stance.

"... Spooky! What, can't I even talk to you without you zoning out? Your brain get beamed to Mars again?" the other man asked acidly.

Mulder sighed and refocused his attention on his interrogator. "Colton, I don't have time for this. What is it you want from me?"

He stared at Mulder for a moment and then gave an explosive sigh. "I SAID," he reiterated, clearly angry, "that you really should let Dana go to pursue her own life. God knows being stuck with you in the basement isn't doing her career any good."

I'd stopped slightly behind "Colton" and held my peace until now. "Has it occurred to you that Agent Scully is an adult and can make her own decisions?" I mildly asked.

He whirled and gave me a quick look over. "Who the hell are you?"

I didn't bother to offer my hand. "Ryan Allen. Who the hell are you?"

"Agent Tom Colton," he returned arrogantly. "Why do you care what I say to ol' Spooky here?"

I heard Mulder sigh again. I could easily picture his long-suffering look without bothering to look for it. I just raised an eyebrow at Colton and answered, "I'm a friend to Mulder and Dana. I just think it would be common courtesy to treat your fellow agents as adults, Mister Colton."

"AGENT Colton," he returned coldly. He looked at me for a few moments before turning back to Mulder. "Jesus, another of your weird friends. What, these people crawl out of the woodwork when I'm not looking?"

Mulder looked mildly back. "Some people are just worth more effort to be friends with, Colton."

"BAH!" Colton threw his hands up into the air before jamming them into his pockets and stalking off. The fun over, our small audience dispersed quickly.

I looked after Colton. "Very... interesting co-workers you have, Mulder," I commented.

"He's an asshole," Mulder returned bluntly. Shaking his head slightly, he stuck a hand out and said, "Hi, Allen. How you doing?"

I shook his hand warmly. "Good, considering. I'm in town for Director Price's funeral. Thought I'd stop in and say 'hi' to you and Dana. She here?" I asked, waving vaguely at the intimidating building.

He nodded and led the way in. Our badges got us past the metal detectors without any fuss. Once a visitor badge was safely clipped to my suit, Mulder led me to a bank of elevators. Safely ensconced into an elevator heading down, he glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. "I thought you quit the Service."

I tilted my head slightly. "Call it a temporary loan," I said, referring to the badge.

One eyebrow went up, but he didn't comment.

The elevator doors opened up, and we walked down a hallway, neither of us even slowing as we walked into Dana's Buzz. Mulder opened the door and led the way in.

Dana's wary face dissolved into a smile as she recognized me. "Ryan!"

She came over for a hug, and I managed a quick peck on her cheek. I looked over at Mulder quickly to see his reaction. Seeing the goad for what it was, he merely smiled at me.

"How are you doing, Ryan?" asked Dana as she waved me into one of the guest chairs.

I shrugged as I seated myself. "As well as can be expected. I'm in town for Director Price's funeral. Just thought I'd stop by and say 'hello' to my two favorite Feds."

Mulder gave me one of his quirky grins, but Dana raised an eyebrow. "I didn't realize you were that close to her."

I nodded slightly. "She's the one who got me the Service position a couple years ago," I replied, not remembering how much I had told them about Andrea.

"Was she Immortal?" asked Mulder directly.

I nodded again.

Both of them grimaced. "Great," muttered Mulder. I certainly agreed with his sarcastic comment. Nobody liked to hear that there was potentially a head hunter running around.

Dana looked up from her frowning contemplation of her desktop. "Why are you telling us this?"

I shrugged. "Like I said, I was in town for the funeral and wanted to say 'hi'." I sighed before continuing, "And I guess I wanted to warn you, too."

They both nodded, almost looking synchronized. They'd been doing that since I met them. I vaguely wondered if they'd taken their relationship any further since the last time I'd seen them.

Someone knocked on the door and then opened it at Mulder's invitation. Assistant Director Skinner walked in with his head hunched down over a file in his hands. "Mulder, I don't know what game you're playing, but if you think you can expense off a -" He stopped his forward motion when he noticed me in the room. He frowned slightly at me for a moment before his face cleared and one hand came out. "Agent Allen isn't it?"

I nodded and stood. Shaking his hand, I greeted him, "Assistant Director Skinner. Nice to see you again, sir."

Skinner looked at his two agents and then back to me. "Don't tell me you're here to borrow them again." I couldn't tell if it was dread, resignation, or glee that I detected in his voice.

One of Mulder's eyebrows crawled its way up under his hairline, and I smiled at Skinner's comment. "No, sir," I answered. "I was just in town and stopped by to say hello." I turned to Mulder and Dana. "I'd better let you two get back to work. I'll call you tomorrow for dinner if you're interested?"

They shared a look. Dana raised an eyebrow and tilted her head slightly. Mulder turned back to me and said, "Sure. Call us here around five-thirty?"

I nodded and turned to leave, but Skinner stopped me. "Hang on, Agent Allen. I'll walk you back out." He turned back to Mulder and dropped the file he'd been carrying onto the desk. "Agent Mulder," he growled, "I'm sure you're well aware of the Bureau's policy regarding 'frivolous' expenses." He glared at Mulder but only received a half smile from the unrepentant agent. Skinner sighed and continued, addressing Dana, "Agent Scully, would you kindly rein in your partner's spending habits?"

"Yes, sir," responded Dana to his retreating back.

Throwing a quick wave back at Mulder and Dana, I hustled after Skinner, catching him in the elevator. Once the door closed, I chuckled and shook my head. Turning to him, I asked, "Do you seriously think that little speech will do ANY good?"

He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye and almost smiled. "Naw, but if I don't call him to the carpet for some of the obvious stuff, they'll wonder what's wrong with me."

Another chuckle escaped as I remembered something else he said. "'I don't know what game you're playing?'" I mimicked. "You have a wicked sense of humor, Watcher Skinner."

He turned to me and grinned outright at that one. "It's one of the few things I can get away with around them. I have to do SOMETHING, or my sense of humor will atrophy."

The elevator door opened and we headed back toward the public entrance. "Too bad about the non-interaction policy," I mused. "Once you retired from this position, I'm sure the three of you could become great friends."

One corner of his mouth quirked, and he stared off into space for a moment. "We already are," he said softly. He focused on me again as we stopped at the sign-out counter. "Take care, Agent Allen."

I shook his hand again. "You too, Assistant Director Skinner."

Television shows and movies usually have funerals and burials taking place on days that are overcast, drizzling, and all around miserable.

The next day wasn't anything of the sort. It was a pleasantly warm, sunny day in early summer when the earthly remains of Deputy Director Andrea Price-O'Day were laid to rest.

I arrived at the graveside service in plenty of time and waited my turn at the checkpoint like everyone else. Like most of the other attendees, I just waved my badge and went in without any trouble. Looking around at the tastefully landscaped area, I casually walked over to the contingent of Service personnel. I only recognized one or two faces, though.

Once the line to get in had been processed, everyone arranged themselves around the priest and waited. He didn't start immediately, much to my surprise. I was starting to wonder what the holdup was when a motorcade quietly pulled into the area. Oh, of course.

Once the armored limousine stopped, President Ryan and his entire family (which included four children now with the birth of another son) stepped out, followed by Treasury Secretary George Winston. The other vehicles disgorged even more Service personnel, and suddenly the graveyard became crowded. Once everyone found a spot to stand, the priest began his eulogy. It was a quiet service, focusing on her selfless service to her country and her young marriage to Pat O'Day. President Ryan came forward and spoke for a few minutes, talking about her as a friend in addition to everything else that she counted as.

As President Ryan was stepping back toward his family, I felt a Buzz come into range. I sighed. Now was NOT the time to deal with an Immortal. On the upside it wouldn't be dangerous. A cemetery was Holy Ground after all. I looked around and spotted Connor MacLeod settling onto the outskirts of the small crowd of non-Service attendees. He saw my scrutiny and nodded to me in recognition.

The priest started after that point, and Andrea was gently lowered into the ground, the only sounds being sniffs from multiple locations and sobs from more than a few.

The President was bundled back into his vehicle, and that whole group quickly left. Most everyone else slowly started drifting back toward the entrance and their cars, except for those who stopped to talk to Pat and his daughter Megan. I made my way over to Connor, stopping to greet my few acquaintances among the Service. Once I got to Connor, it was clear he was toward the end of the line of people waiting to talk to Pat O'Day. We greeted each other with merely a nod and quietly waited in line.

Once we got to the head of the line, Connor stepped forward to talk with O'Day while I hung back.

Pat recognized Connor, and his face became a mask of anger. "Go away, Connor. You can't say anything to me that I want to hear."

Connor opened his mouth to say something, but the blinding hostility and all-encompassing grief on Pat's face kept him silent. Nodding tiredly, Connor turned to leave. O'Day focused that same expression at me, and I just turned away, not saying anything, either.

Once we'd made it ten feet, I said, "Hi, Connor. Glad you could make it."

He gave me a smile that had nothing to do with amusement. "Ryan. How have ye been?"

I shook his hand and just sighed and shook my head in answer. Stopping and looking back toward the devastated O'Day, I asked quietly, "Does it ever get easier?"

He also looked back at Pat silently before eventually sighing out, "Nae, it does nae."

Before we'd made any more progress toward our cars, another Buzz entered our range. Grimacing in aggravation, I scanned around and spotted Mulder walking toward us from the front gates.

As the FBI Agent approached us cautiously, I noticed Connor stiffen slightly once he spotted Mulder. "Peace, Connor," I muttered quietly. "Mulder is a friend." He relaxed slightly but didn't let his guard down, either.

Mulder stopped several feet short and gave me a short nod before returning his attention to Connor. "Mulder," I greeted. "I told you and Dana I'd call this afternoon about supper. Couldn't wait?" I asked, trying to ease the tension.

"Something's come up," he answered, not taking his gaze away from MacLeod. "I need to talk to you, Chessman. Alone," he added pointedly.

"Connor, this is Fox Mulder. Mulder, Connor MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod," I introduced, waving my hand back and forth. They nodded tensely and didn't offer to shake hands. We Immortals are notoriously unfriendly to each other, after all.

Mulder cocked his head. "CONNOR MacLeod." He stressed Connor's first name slightly before turning to me. "So this is the other MacLeod you told us about. Not your teacher?"

I shook my head, and Connor turned a questioning glance to me. I explained, "Mac's name came up in conversation once. Mulder's teacher had heard about the infamous MacLeod prowess with a blade." I grinned a little and continued, "When I mentioned that you had taught Mac, I'm afraid I may have made you into some kind of object of legend."

Connor grimaced.

Mulder shook his head and corrected me, "Not legend. Just cautious respect."

MacLeod nodded, apparently satisfied with that answer. He turned to me and shook my hand. "I gotta get going. I just stopped here in DC to say goodbye to Andrea. Take care of yourself, Ryan."

"Watch your head," I returned. He gave me his quirky grin and headed off, quickly moving out of sight. I turned to Mulder and asked, "What's up?"

He shook his head and moved slowly off in Connor's wake. "Let's get something to eat. This'll take awhile."

We only had to walk a few blocks before a delicatessen provided us with a place to stop and talk. Over a light lunch, he told me what had happened the previous evening. "I went over to Scully's apartment with some files for us to work on last night. When I got there, her car was in her usual spot, but I couldn't feel her anywhere. Concerned, I went to the nearby park at a run. I got there just in time to see a man run her through the chest. My Buzz hit him about one second before the final stroke. I pulled my sword out and threatened to kill him while he was down if he took Scully's Quickening." He paused to take a shuddering breath. "He glanced over in my direction then just kicked Scully over and took off." He paused again, almost embarrassed. "I went to Scully instead of chasing him."

I nodded. I wasn't about to gainsay that choice. "Okay. I hate to sound insensitive, but why are you telling me this?" I asked, though I suspected that I knew the answer I was going to get.

He shifted in his seat. "I want to kill him."

I waited.

He sighed. "But he's too good for me. He beat my teacher, after all," he said, frustrated. He took a breath and looked me straight in the eye. "Will you kill him?"

My suspicion was correct after all. "You're asking me to hunt," I commented.

He nodded solemnly.

Great, I thought sarcastically. "What makes you think I can beat him?" I asked, stalling for time as my mind raced.

He frowned slightly. "Scully told me that he admitted to killing Price and attacking her just because they're women. Therefore he would be intimidated by a male Immortal. We've seen you fight. You're better than Scully is. At least we both think you are. Which means you're better than I am."

"That doesn't answer the question," I pointed out.

"I don't KNOW you can beat him," he admitted.

"Wonderful," I growled. "So will you apologize to my widow if it comes to that?" I asked acidly.

He grimaced and looked down. He realized what he was asking of me but wasn't backing down either. "If you don't kill him," he began in a whisper, "then he'll kill Dana." He sighed and continued in an even quieter voice, "I can't live if that happens."

Aw, hell. He'd called her "Dana". I tried one last time, "You realize that Dana will try to kill the both of us if she finds out about this."

His expression brightened considerably. "So you'll do it?"

I sighed as I resigned myself to the situation. "You help me, and I'll TRY," I emphasized. "What's he look like?"

Mulder shook his head. "I didn't get a good look at him. Six one and solidly built, but beyond that, I have no idea. I'll try to get a better description from Scully to give to you, though."

I nodded absently as I thought through what I knew so far between what Mulder had told me and the report that Agent Kessler had given me. "Why do you think he'd be intimidated by a male Immortal?"

He shrugged as he idly used a french fry to draw a large headed alien on his plate out of ketchup. "It fits the profile. He's attacked at least two female Immortals and admitted that he targeted them BECAUSE they were female."

"Did he give a name?" Might as well try the easy route.

"Dan Axemon, and no I didn't find anything about him from the FBI database before you ask. Or any of my other contacts," he added after a moment.

"So I have no way of finding him?" I summarized the important point I was getting to.

He mutely shook his head after a few seconds of thought. I noticed that he had dropped a thin, jagged fry down in the alien's hand, completing the picture by giving it a sword.

I rolled my eyes and leaned back. "So what exactly do you expect me to do, Mulder?"

"I don't KNOW!" he exclaimed, exasperated. Fortunately, he had the wisdom to keep his voice down. He took a breath and continued more calmly, "I don't know what to do now."

"Where'd he find Dana?"

"He came to her apartment."

"Is that the first that she noticed him?"

He nodded, beginning to draw a second figure on his plate.

I had no way of knowing where he spotted Dana or Andrea then. After several seconds of thought, I couldn't think of anything else to do. "If I run into him on my own, I'll try to stop him, but I can't promise anything, Mulder."

He nodded morosely, continuing to stare at his plate as his hand kept the artwork going. A tall human took shape.

When he dropped a bigger "sword" in the human's hand, I chuckled.

He looked up at me with a questioning expression.

I waved at his plate and commented, "I wonder what that says about your subconscious, Agent Mulder."

He looked down at the plate, apparently really seeing it for the first time. His mouth twisted into a sardonic grin and he looked back up at me. "I'm a psychologist myself, and I don't even WANT to try to analyze this one." He took one of his remaining fries and deliberately smeared both figures. Standing, he pulled enough money out of his pocket to cover lunch and dropped it onto the table. He stuffed his hands back into his coat pockets and looked down at me. "Thanks for listening, Chessman. Keep me in the loop?"

I nodded, and he turned on his heel and strode out the door, leaving me staring at blurred drawings and wondering how to find Dan Axemon.

In frustration I headed back to the warehouse where Andrea had died, hoping that there would be a useful clue to find that I'd missed the first time around.

I was somewhat surprised to find a red Corvette parked out front. Wondering idly who it would be, I closed my car door and headed toward the warehouse.

I stopped dead in my tracks when I felt two Buzzes. One was Diane, and the other was just over one hundred, with several weak heads to their credit. One hand on my wakizashi, I cautiously approached the door.

Two sharp cracks from a gun inside the warehouse caused me to duck to the side of the door and move my hand to the gun instead. A moment later I heard a male voice cry, "Mac!" Jumping back into motion, I kicked in the door to find a mess.

The far door was just closing on a rapidly retreating figure in a black trench coat. His Buzz faded a few seconds later.

I focused on the other occupants of the room and winced. Diane was lying on the floor, a short sword lying by her side. Her hands were over a bloody wound in her chest and stomach that made sucking sounds as she tried to breath. Commander Rabb had pulled Diane's head over to his lap and was smoothing her hair back with one hand. I doubt he even noticed the trickle of blood coming from a gash above his left eye.

"Mac," whispered Rabb. The pure anguish in that voice caused a lump to form in my throat instantly.

"It's okay," she whispered back. She looked up at me as I holstered my gun. "Tell him," she instructed me, followed by a hacking cough.

One eyebrow rose. "How much?"

"What?" asked Rabb, totally confused.

"Everything," answered Diane after her coughing fit ended. She looked up at Rabb and tried to smile, but a spasm of pain flashed across her face. When she schooled her features again, she raised one bloody hand up to Rabb's face and said, "Listen to Ryan, Harm."

"Sarah," whispered Rabb brokenly, "I . . . I love you. Don't leave me," he finished in a hoarse whisper.

She smiled then. Another flash of pain and her body relaxed all at once. Her Buzz faded out moments later.

"Sarah?" asked Rabb. Once it was obvious she wasn't going to respond, he broke down completely. "No! Don't leave me!" he cried, leaning forward and burying his face into her hair.

I quietly came up behind him and laid one hand on his shoulder. "She isn't leaving you, Harm." I hoped he would react well to my using his first name.

It took a few seconds, but he finally responded to me. Pulling his head up to me, he brokenly asked, "What?"

"She won't leave you."

He continued to look up at me, his tear streaked eyes reflecting a mix of disbelief and wild hope.

I sighed. She did ask me to tell him. "She WILL wake up soon. She is Immortal."

He just kept staring at me, clearly not knowing what to make of my words.

Shaking my head in frustration, I crossed around Diane's body so that I was facing him and squatted down a few feet away from them. I reached into my coat and drew my knife, slowly enough not to panic the man in front of me. I showed him the knife and my bare right hand. Gritting my teeth, I slashed my right palm deep enough for blood to begin dripping immediately. I let my hand fall toward the ground so the blood would drip off my fingers onto the floor, keeping my palm facing Rabb the entire time. Placing my knife on the ground, I reached my left hand back into the coat for a clean handkerchief. Once my hand stopped bleeding, I wiped enough blood away for Rabb to see the unbroken skin underneath. "Immortal," I repeated, looking into his incredulous expression. Heedless of the dirt on the ground, I took a seat next to Diane's head. I calmly wiped the blood from my knife and hand before folding the handkerchief and putting everything away. Only then did I look at Rabb again.

He was staring at me, mouth hanging slightly open.

"Like I said," I began conversationally, "she's Immortal. She should be waking up momentarily."

He slowly shook his head, not taking his eyes from me.

I just shrugged and looked down at Diane. In addition to a horizontal cut across her stomach, there were two bullet holes in her stomach and lower chest. Axemon apparently didn't want to kill her outright but wanted her to suffer some. I frowned in anger at the sadistic bastard.

Diane's growing Buzz preceded her resurrection by about two seconds. Her eyes snapped open, staring unseeingly upward. Her sudden, sharp intake of breath startled Rabb. He jumped away from her, spilling her off his lap. Since I'd been expecting just that reaction, I was there to catch her head before it came slamming back into the ground. This left me leaning half over her, arm under her head, looking like I was nearly embracing her. After a shuddering breath, her mind apparently started working again, and an arm came rocketing straight at my chest. Since I was also expecting that one, my other arm was still free to block that blow. "Calm down," I said. "I'm not an enemy." After those first few seconds of confusion and

panic, Diane stopped struggling. Seeing that she recognized me, I helped her lean forward as she began coughing, clearing the remaining blood out of her lungs. Once she was moving under her own power, I stood and fished my remaining clean handkerchief out of my pocket and dropped it onto her lap. Looking up at me gratefully, she began cleaning her hands. While she was otherwise occupied, I looked over at Rabb again. He'd backed several feet away and was staring at Diane in open astonishment.

Once she'd finished cleaning herself to some degree, Diane looked up at Rabb and smiled sadly at his look. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner, Harm," she murmured.

"Who . . . What are you?" asked an incredulous Rabb.

"Immortal," I answered. "I already told you that. Most injuries will heal in a matter of minutes, including fatal bullet wounds," I waved at Diane.

Rabb stared back and forth between us mutely.

Getting to her feet with a helpful hand from me, Diane leaned forward again and retrieved her short sword and smoothly put it away somewhere under her cut and stained uniform jacket. Handing my now bloody handkerchief back to me, she politely thanked me and then turned back to her partner.

"Harm," she began, taking one step toward him.

He flinched and took a step backward, almost reflexively.

She stopped and let her hand fall to her side. Her eyes slowly teared up and she said, "A few minutes ago you said that you loved me. What I never said to you is that I've loved you for almost fifteen years now."

He frowned slightly. "Fifteen years? We met seven years ago, Mac."

She smiled sadly and shook her head slightly. "You and I met in the Academy, Harm. Though my name was Diane Schonke at the time."

His jaw fell open. Again.

Her smile brightened slightly at his expression. "I know you investigated my first death, so I don't need to tell you about it. I woke up in the Bethesda morgue hours later, to find a kind man explaining Immortality to me." She smiled at the memory before continuing, "You know him as Matthew O'Hara. He took me to Red Rock Mesa for my Immortal training. When I finished my training, he helped me manufacture the identity of Major Sarah MacKenzie, who you met seven years ago."

Rabb's expression was a study in amazement, but hope was beginning to show up. He took a hesitant step forward, one hand reaching up to gingerly touch her cheek. "Diane?" He chuckled to himself. "Or is it Mac?"

She smiled, apparently truly happy with his reaction. "Either way, Flyboy."

I reached into a pocket and pulled out one of my business cards. Clearing my throat slightly, I stepped forward. "I assume you two are okay from here?" I asked in amusement.

Rabb was still staring at his partner in wonder, but Diane turned to me. "Yes, I think so."

I handed her the card. "Call me later. I have my cell phone with me. I'm trying to track the man who attacked you." She nodded and slipped the card into a pocket.

I turned and headed toward the door.

"What about . . . Mic . . . You . . . Diane?!"

"Yes, Harm," came her answer through a giggle.

His reply was lost as I shut the door behind me.

I met Dana and Mulder that evening as planned at a Georgetown restaurant. I'd had another quick nap that afternoon, so my body was almost to a local daylight schedule.

Dana had been in a withdrawn mood all evening, only coming out of her self-imposed shell to dispute Mulder's wild theories regarding the origins of Immortals. My personal favorite theory of his was that Immortals were products of alien experimentation to develop longer lived humans.

I was just telling them about my own pet theory of Immortals being the result of "leakage" from unleashed Quickenings when a cell phone chirped. All three of us checked our own phones. "Mine," I announced. "Hello?" I answered into the receiver.

"Ryan, it's Mac, err, Diane."

I brightened. "Hi! How'd everything go today?"

"Great," she responded with a dreamy sigh.

I bit back the laughter. I'm afraid my face turned purple, but at least Diane didn't hear my reaction. "Thanks for calling," I continued when I was sure of my voice again. "Could we meet and you tell me about the guy who attacked you?"

Both Mulder and Dana perked right up at hearing that.

"Sure," answered Diane. "When and where?"

"Tonight if possible," I answered. "I need to stop this guy before he attacks anyone else. I'm in Georgetown at the moment."

"Harm and I are in the area. Where are you?"

"Pat's Tavern."

"We'll be there in ten," Diane answered. She disconnected before I had a chance to comment.

I hit the disconnect button on the phone with a sigh. "We'll be having company within ten minutes," I announced to my two companions.

"Who?" asked Mulder, taking a sip of water.

"Diane Schonke and her JAG partner, Harmon Rabb."

They both perked up again, I noticed. "Someone attacked Sarah?" asked Dana.

I rapidly reviewed my conversation and concluded that I didn't mention Diane's current name. "You know her?"

"Them," Mulder corrected. "We've bumped into them in a few investigations." He turned to Dana and said, "If she was attacked, you need to tell Ryan as well."

I carefully hid my knowledge of what he was talking about behind a quizzical expression.

She stared at him for a moment before turning to me with a sigh. "I was attacked last night by someone who introduced himself as Dan Axemon."

I nodded slowly. "Three confirmed attacks on female Immortals," I mused. Changing my mind, I waved it off immediately. "We'll discuss it when Diane arrives." I cocked my head at them. "Assuming there aren't any bad feelings between the four of you."

They both shook their heads. Mulder answered, "All three of us are as interested in playing the Game as we are in having root canals."

I nodded, silently wondering what that said about me. I was, after all, willing to hunt this guy. I flagged down our waitress and informed her that two more people would be joining us momentarily and that we'd like our suppers held until their meals were ready, assuming they ordered anything.

The next five minutes passed in idle chatter before Diane's Buzz entered our range. All three of us tensed, and I stood politely once I identified it. Diane and Rabb (in civilian clothes) threaded their way through the dining area until they stopped at our table. Everyone smiled politely at each other. No hostility, I noted, but they weren't friends, either. No matter.

Once Diane and Rabb ordered, I addressed myself to the two of them, "Dana just told me she was attacked last night. That makes three confirmed attacks on Immortal women in less than a week, one which killed Andrea Price. Anybody willing to call that circumstance?"

The three Immortals shook their head, but Rabb looked between me, Dana, and Mulder. Guessing what his concern was, I turned to Dana and said, "We'd better forgive Commander Rabb for his hesitancy. He only learned about Immortals recently and rather abruptly."

She and Mulder both nodded. Rabb looked at me for a moment and then gave a self-deprecating grin. Tenderly touching a Band-Aid on his forehead, he added, "And painfully."

Dana immediately stood and crossed around the table to him. He held up a hand, but she waved it off, stating, "I've been a doctor since well before your grandfather was born, Commander. Just let me have a look."

He looked at her strangely before commenting, "You don't look any older than I am."

Diane touched his arm and said softly, "Remember that Immortals don't age, Harm. If she says she's older, believe her."

He nodded shortly and let Dana gingerly pull back the bandage and look over his wound. Meanwhile Harm looked over at Mulder with a raised eyebrow. Mulder gazed back at him calmly before nodding subtly.

"You're the only mortal at the table, Commander Rabb," I confirmed as Dana finished checking him and seated herself again.

He looked at the four of us and took a calming breath. "I AM new at this." He smiled at Diane and continued softly to her, "This still feels like one of my infamous metaphysical moments, but I'm learning." He focused on me again and added, "Please call me Harm, Agent Allen."

I nodded. "It's Ryan Chessman, actually. Call me Ryan." That bit of tension disposed of, I steered us back to the discussion. "Five days ago an unknown Immortal Challenged and killed Andrea Price. Last night someone named Dan Axemon attacked Dana here," I waved at the petite redhead. "Then this afternoon someone went after Diane." I stopped and turned to her. "Want me to call you Diane, Mac, or what?"

She laughed. "Diane's fine, but better call me Mac if we're in front of anyone else."

Most of us nodded, and I continued, "I hope that if we combine information, I can hunt this guy down."

Harm looked confused. "I applaud the goal, but why you? Why don't you just turn him over to the police?"

Diane answered, "Then throw him into jail for fifty years? Someone would notice he doesn't age, and then we'd all be exposed."

I heard a muffled snicker from Mulder's direction as I successfully stifled my own smile. Dana poked Mulder in the ribs. "I don't want to hear a single comment about exposing Diane or myself, Mulder."

He managed to look wounded.

Diane smiled, and Harm chuckled. Dana said to the rest of us, "You'll have to excuse his sense of humor. It's closer to the gutter than the rest of us civilized individuals."

"A dirty mind is a terrible thing to waste," quipped Mulder.

Harm and I had to hide smiles behind our hands, but Diane and Dana turned death glares upon him. He just smiled benignly back.

"Getting back to the discussion," I interjected before it broke out into a fight, "we can't turn Axemon in, Harm. The only thing you can do about a hunter in town is run, drive him out, or take him down."

He stared at me. "You're talking about killing him."

I stared coldly back. "Yes, I am."

We locked eyes for a few moments before Diane's hand found his arm again. "This is the way we live, Harm," she said quietly. "Don't be mad at Ryan for that. I for one am glad that he's willing to risk his life to help me."

Harm's gaze softened. "Okay, I'll buy that, but why you?"

"Simple," answered Mulder. "He's the best fighter among the four of us."

Rabb cocked his head at me before turning to Mulder. "Why do you say that?"

Dana answered, "Axemon beat me and presumably beat Diane. I've seen Ryan fight. He's a lot better than I am." Harm turned to Mulder, but Dana cut off the question before it came. "Mulder is my student and still isn't finished with his training. If anyone here can stop Axemon, it's Ryan."

Harm absorbed that silently for a moment before looking at me again. "Not that I don't appreciate your efforts to help protect Sarah -" he cut himself off and corrected, "Diane, but why do this? What do you get out of it?"

I sighed and leaned back in my chair. "Andrea Price was a friend. Dana is a friend. Diane . . ." I trailed off for a moment and smiled at her before continuing, "Diane isn't a friend yet, but she could be. I guess I just have too much of my teacher in me. I'm protective to a fault. I just can't stand the thought of a hunter running loose if I can stop him."

Harm stared at me silently for a few seconds before nodding. "Am I correct in assuming that you might be killed doing this?"

Everyone nodded.

Harm shrugged. "Why not put a bullet into him, then? Hell," he added, "I'll put a bullet into him, and then you tell me how to finish him off."

Diane looked shocked at the suggestion. Dana and Mulder just looked pained. "It's a matter of honor," I answered. "Yes, that would work, but I refuse to use dirty methods to win."

"What if he cheats?" Harm persisted.

I smiled, but it didn't reach my eyes. "Just because I don't use dirty tricks regularly doesn't mean I don't know any. I can take care of myself."

Harm opened his mouth again, but Dana cut him off. "Leave it, Commander. Ryan is quite capable of handling himself in a fight."

He sat back, clearly not happy with the answers, but also clearly leaving the topic alone.

The tense silence was cut by Mulder. "If we get all the information onto the table, maybe we can predict Axemon's next move."

I nodded, slowly relaxing the tense set of my shoulders. "Very little is known about the attack on Andrea. She simply never made it home from work that evening. Phone records don't show any unexplained calls to her home, cell, or office. She left the building for lunch, and her administrative assistant stated that she acted 'tense' all afternoon. I'd assume she received a Challenge during lunch, set for that evening."

Everyone nodded, and Dana took up the story with her experience. "Last night at about eight thirty a six foot tall, brown hair, brown eyes, one hundred sixty pound, Caucasian male showed up at my door." That description showed her FBI training, I mused with an inward smile. "I'd never met him before, but he directly Challenged me." She frowned slightly, staring at her water glass before continuing, "I couldn't very well escape it. We took it to a park behind my apartment building. He followed the Rules but continually threw graphic sexual and derogatory comments at me during the fight. He admitted to having killed Director Price and claimed that he enjoyed the 'feel' of a female Quickening." She shuddered and continued, "He beat me. Mulder showed up at the last moment and saved my life." She smiled at him, and he smiled back slightly.

I threatened to take his head if he took Scully's. He took off," added Mulder.

"Take his head?" asked Harm.

"Immortals die permanently by decapitation," reminded Diane. "Remember how Director Price died."

We could just about see the light bulb go on above his head. "That's why you had a sword on you," he said to Diane.

She nodded. "That's why I always DO have a sword on me, yes."

He looked at her outfit. Between the casual blouse and jeans, it was hard to believe she was armed with more than a pocket knife. "Right now?" he asked with a slight grin and raised eyebrow.

"You can frisk her later," interjected Mulder with a wider grin.

Harm and Diane both blushed, but Diane shot back, "Don't tell me you haven't frisked your partner for the same reason, Agent Mulder."

Mulder's expression shifted subtly to a self-satisfied smirk. Dana blushed faintly.

Yep, they definitely have furthered their relationship, I noted to myself. "Hey," I objected in mock anger, "I'm feeling left out since I don't have a partner to frisk."

"You've got your own cute redhead to cuddle, Chessman," returned Mulder.

"Hey!" objected Dana. She immediately blushed as she realized what she had revealed by that reaction.

The rest of us chuckled.

Diane picked up the thread before the conversation degenerated further. "My fight went much like Agent Scully's. I had drug Harm back to the warehouse, looking for something. I'm not even sure what I was looking for, honestly. Anyway, I felt someone approach. I thought it was you, Ryan, so I wasn't terribly worried. He walked in with his gun out." She turned a chiding look onto her partner and continued, "Harm tried to rush him and got his head cracked open for his troubles." The Commander in question had a sheepish grin on his face by this time. "Once Harm was down, Axemon introduced himself and Challenged me. Fortunately, he put the gun away first. Just like during Agent Scully's fight, he threw out comments that were blatantly sexist. Also like that fight, he had me beat before Ryan really did show up. Once we both felt him, he pulled his gun back out and shot me before bolting for the door."

I nodded thoughtfully. "I didn't see his face, so he probably didn't see me. Therefore he doesn't know what I look like. Maybe I can lure him in," I mused out loud.

"That still doesn't explain how he identified all three women," pointed out Mulder.

I was saved from commenting by our waitress arriving with our meals. As we ate, we tried to backtrack how he was identifying his victims. The only common factor that we could find to the three days was that both Diane and Dana (and presumably Andrea) had felt an Immortal when they were walking through the Mall. Since the Buzz faded almost immediately, neither Dana nor Diane had been concerned at the time.

Based on everything I'd been told, a plan began to form.

Getting the women's grudging agreement to stay out of sight at least for a few days, the rest of the evening was spent in friendly chatter.

Jennifer stared at me for a long moment the next afternoon before commenting, "You're serious, aren't you?"

I nodded. "Yep."

She sighed. "Explain to me WHY you're going to fight him."

"He killed Andrea and tried to kill Dana and Diane."

She thought about it for a second and asked in a dangerous tone, "He targets women specifically you said?"

I nodded again. "Hence the plan."

"Then WHY shouldn't I tear his heart out myself?" she wanted to know.

I frowned at her. "In spite of your justified feminine anger, this IS an Immortal. I don't poke my nose into vampire affairs, you don't poke yours into Immortal fights, remember?"

She cocked her head at me. "Then why am I part of this plan?"

Damn, she had me there. "Because I'm asking you politely?" I asked hopefully.

A hint of a smirk appeared, and she folded her arms across her chest and tried to look haughty and arrogant. "Nice try, but not good enough."

I thought about it a little more before offering, "Because you'll enjoy watching me dice him into little pieces?"

She grinned and sauntered up to me. "I knew there was a good reason." She began playing absently with my shirt collar with one hand, but her other was drifting a great deal lower. "You know, it's a couple hours yet until sunset," she commented conversationally.

"Hmm," I tried to come up with a witty remark, but I could feel my IQ dropping with every passing moment. "Whatever shall we do?" I asked with what was left of my ability for intelligent speech.

"Oh, I have a few ideas."

She did, too.

After sunset, Jennifer and I were walking along the Mall. Despite its name, it wasn't so much a shopping place as it was a pedestrian area. I was hoping he'd still be trawling his same hunting ground. With a little luck, we could snare him in his own backyard.

We talked and wandered for nearly an hour before I felt an Immortal. Knowing immediately it was the same signature as the guy I'd chased away from Diane, I whispered, "He's nearby." I didn't even turn toward Jennifer. Her hearing was more than adequate to the task, and we didn't want him paying any attention to me. In fact I forced myself to not react to the Buzz at all. Going with the plan we'd worked out earlier that afternoon, Jennifer stiffened in place and started scanning around almost frantically.

All in all, she looked the part of a panicky, young, FEMALE Immortal.

Which was exactly the point.

The Buzz faded seconds later. "He's gone," I immediately conveyed.

Jennifer visibly relaxed and leaned over to whisper, "How'm I doing, coach?"

I laughed and pulled her in a little closer. What'd I ever do to deserve this woman?

She led me to the end of the walkway we were currently on and then pulled me gently toward a quieter area. A mile later we were in a much more run down section of the city that had been almost deserted by the local population. Smiling, she pulled me into a deserted alleyway, conveying the image of a semi-public seduction about to occur. We stopped halfway down toward the bricked dead-end of the alley and stayed in the middle of the open space.

We didn't have to wait very long.

"He's back," I whispered as I nibbled my way up her neck.

Still going according to the script we'd come up with, she pushed me toward one wall of the alley and fell back toward the other, frantically digging around in her coat.

"Ah, ah, miss. You really don't want to do that." I got my first look at Dan Axemon as he stepped toward us, gun in one hand pointed at Jen. I vaguely noticed he fit Dana's description almost perfectly. That meant that he had a few inches of reach over me, but he probably wasn't much stronger.

Jen froze in place, doing a wonderful job of looking like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car.

Once he advanced far enough that he couldn't cover both of us, I snapped my gun up from where I'd had it palmed since entering the alley. "I really wouldn't do that if I were you," I suggested calmly.

His eyes flashed over to me for a moment, taking in my gun before his attention returned to Jennifer. "You have no place here, mortal. Run away while you can," he returned arrogantly.

Once my gun had appeared, Jennifer had relaxed, folding her hands before her. At his words, we both chuckled. She commented, "You're assuming he's mortal."

His look of confusion was priceless.

"Besides, I'm not about to leave you alone with my wife. She'd enjoy killing you too much. I plan on having that privilege," I added.

Fear started to work its way onto his face. "If you shoot me, I'll kill her."

"I strongly doubt that. Besides, if you DO shoot her, I'll simply put a bullet into your skull and take your head before you get back up."

He digested that threat for a second before whirling and aiming at me. "Then why shouldn't I shove this gun up your ass and pull the trigger?"

I smiled, but it didn't have any warmth or humor to it. "As graphic as that image is, I still don't think it's a good idea. If you shoot me, she'll tear your throat out."

While I'd held his attention, Jen had been moving slowly forward. At my last words, she darted forward with all the speed available to her vampire strength and reflexes.

Axemon lost his gun before he knew she was anywhere nearby.

He stared at his empty hand before turning his gaze back to Jen. She was back in the same place he'd held her at gunpoint only moments before. She held his gun out for inspection. "Magic," she commented with a predatory grin.

His arm fell to his side, and his face drained of all color before turning back to me. "You're going to let your woman fight for you?" he asked, practically in a sneer.

I knew it was all bluster, so I smiled coldly back. "You'd enjoy that too much. You DO enjoy fighting women after all." I snapped on the safety and tossed Jennifer my gun. She fielded it smoothly and pocketed it but kept his gun out and ready. What I was doing was probably completely insane. I had the chance to just shoot and kill him, but I was voluntarily going with my swords instead. My conscience wouldn't allow any other choice, though. I pulled out my blades and commented, "You know, I don't think you could handle fighting a male Immortal."

His face drained of what little color it had, even though I would have sworn it wasn't possible. He reached into his coat and retrieved a wakizashi and held it up in a guard position, trying to keep an eye on both of us. He began slowly backing out of the alley.

"No, no," commented Jennifer. "Back in here." She held the gun up and motioned for him to come back in. I crossed the alley to her side and she waved him past us, more toward the dead end. Once he was well past us, I headed back toward the center of the alley, blocking him in.

He stopped and looked back and forth between us. "You know," he commented to me, "using mortals to help is against the Rules."

I sighed. "So is using a gun," I pointed out. "Besides, she won't interfere with the Challenge. She just helped me set this fight up. It'll be fair."

"Not that you deserve it," commented Jen.

He looked indignant. "What do you mean?"

"Andrea Price, Dana Scully, and Diane Schonke," I answered.

He shrugged. "They are all Immortal." He grinned suddenly and added, "Or were at any rate. What's the problem?"

She threw him a disgusted look and glanced at me for direction. I tilted my head back out of the alleyway. "Go on. I'll see you later."

She gave him one last venomous glare and stalked off. I turned back to him. "I'm Ryan Chessman. I Challenge you in vengeance for Andrea Price." It all sounded very arrogant and formal, but I wanted to follow the forms on this one.

He nodded and saluted me with his blade. "Dan Axemon. There can be only one."

We started trading blows, starting out slowly and gradually learning the other's defenses. One particularly cunning move almost made it past my sword, and he laughed. "Almost got you, bitch." His face immediately twisted weirdly as he registered what he had just said.

I laughed at him. "Too used to using words to distract your opponent, Danny?"

He snarled and jumped back at me in a daringly offensive series. He didn't come close to scoring a hit, though.

Once I had finished beating him back, I said, "You know something? It just occurred to me WHY you attack women exclusively, Danny boy. It's probably an attempt to make up for some less than manly attribute you may have."

He howled and came at me in a rage. With all his energy focused on the offensive, he left himself wide open to my knife. With my sword blocking his own flailing wakizashi, I stuck my knife into the side of his chest, no doubt puncturing a lung.

He fell back, grimacing in pain and holding his left arm against his bleeding wound. I stalked back in. "As fun as it may be to toy with you the way you did with Andrea, I just don't want to deal with it." Since he was already seriously wounded, it took only seconds more before I hamstrung him. Without another word, a single slice of my wakizashi finished the fight.

Jen reappeared at the mouth of the alley as the white mist curled toward me.

She was still calmly watching several minutes later when I stumbled back to my feet after absorbing enough energy to put a small thunderstorm to shame.

I leaned against the wall beside her and stiffly managed to pull a cloth out of my pocket to clean both swords and my knife. Tucking everything away, I looked up at Jennifer to find her offering both guns back to me. Putting those away as well, she tilted her head back the way we'd come and said, "Go back to the hotel. I'll meet you there in a while. I'll take care of Axemon."

Too drained to argue, I just nodded and started walking.

Once back to the Mall, I flagged down a taxi. The cabbie had to wake me up when we reached the hotel five minutes later.

Jen woke me up just before dawn the next morning, crawling into bed and snuggling in next to me.

"Hey," I muttered, partially awake.

"Hi," she greeted quietly. "Go back to sleep."

I shook my head. "Can't. Everyone I need to talk to will be on a daylight schedule. Unless you'd like to stay longer, we can go home tonight."

She sat up, apparently resigned to seeing me out this morning. "Sounds good to me."

Standing up and stretching the kinks out of my back and neck, something occurred to me. Glancing over at Jennifer who was quietly flipping through the channels on the television, I asked, "You took care of Axemon?"

She nodded without looking over at me.

"Dare I ask how?" How did that line about curiosity and the cat go?

She looked over at me and gave me an adorable smile that was both mischievous and cunning. "You really don't want to know."

One eyebrow went up.

She relented. "Didn't you ever wonder where all the blood for the Community comes from?"

The eyebrow came down. So did my jaw.

"Don't worry," she added. "They don't know where the blood came from. Nobody will question it."

"But my Watcher . . ." I objected. Unless the Immortal cleaned up his own mess, the Watchers did so for him. At least two Watchers knew about the fight and would have expected to take care of the body since I hadn't done so. Come to think of it, they must not have had a chance to clean up Andrea's body in time. Otherwise none of this would have happened.

"Your Watcher and I have an agreement, Ryan," she answered soothingly. "He got the other Watcher out of the area before I did anything with Axemon."

"You KNOW my Watcher?" I nearly exploded.

She shrugged. "Sure. Daniel introduced us."

I calmed down immediately. That part of it made sense at least. Aaron Grey's Watcher knew about vampires (seeing as how Aaron's wife Terry was a vampire herself), and so would have had to make sure my Watcher did as well. Daniel would have introduced him to Jen. It was safer for all concerned that way. I nodded slowly as everything settled in place. "It's nice to have some guardian angels around," I smiled fondly at my wife.

One of her eyebrows came up. "As a member of the undead," she said dryly, "I would hardly qualify as an angel. I would think that Watchers are a tad too voyeuristic to count, either."

I jumped back down on the bed and pulled her into a hug. "Love ya anyway," I said.

Her responding kiss assured me the feelings were mutual.

Eight o'clock found me walking in the front door of the Hoover building. Once past the metal detectors, I headed straight for the elevators. Halfway there, I stopped at feeling Dana's Buzz. Since it was still early, I followed the crowds as they entered the cafeteria for liquid caffeine and assorted other breakfast items. Sure enough, Dana was in there, standing calmly in line with Tom Colton right behind her.

She spotted me and relaxed as I got close enough to hear what Colton was saying, " . . . telling you, Dana, you really want to get away from him. He's bad news."

I sighed. Christ, not again. "Mister Colton, I do believe we had this conversation two days ago," I said as pleasantly as I could under the circumstances.

His head snapped up and twisted into a grimace once he saw me. "You again? Look, asshole, I told you it was AGENT Colton. Besides, why the hell do you care?"

All traces of amusement fled from my expression. "I told you, AGENT," I sneered at his title, "that I'm a friend to Dana and Mulder. I'm asking you politely to leave them the hell alone. They can make their own decisions without YOUR input."

He looked like he was about to explode. He opened his mouth but was interrupted by another voice.

"Is there a problem here?" asked AD Skinner as he appeared at the edge of the crowd that was suddenly surrounding us.

Colton nearly snapped to attention. "Sir, I was just having a discussion with this," he looked at me in disgust before turning his attention back to Skinner, "CIVILIAN. Permission to escort him out of the building, sir?" It was clear he wanted nothing more than to beat the tar out of me.

Skinner looked from him to me to Dana whom I was subtly standing in front of. He turned back to Colton and said, "First, this gentleman is SPECIAL AGENT Ryan Allen of the Secret Service." Colton's smirk evaporated instantly. "Secondly," continued Skinner, addressing the crowd, "fifty bucks on Allen."

Dana and I looked at him in amazement. So did a few of the assembled agents before bets began flying. Colton merely looked pissed at the whole situation.

I addressed Skinner, "I can't promise not to draw blood."

Skinner nodded just before Colton's fist came flying at me. Since I wasn't expecting it, it came crashing into my jaw, making me stumble back a step and drop to one knee. I looked up at Colton who was trembling in rage. Maybe it was the lack of a good night's sleep, or the stressful couple of days I'd had, but my next action should have been to walk away. Instead, I stated calmly, "Leave now or you won't leave this room under your own power."

"Get up and fight me like a man!"

Your funeral, idiot.

The assorted spectators quickly backed off, forming a ring around us. I stood and assumed a basic defensive posture.

"Don't hurt him too badly, Ryan," called Dana.

Colton snarled and threw a quick series of punches at my head and chest. I easily blocked them all, not even trying to go on the offensive. Frustrated, he threw a kick at me. I backed a half step and caught the foot as it was at its full extension. It nearly broke several bones in my hand to do so, but I wasn't terribly worried about it. Instead of moving forward or backward and tipping him over, I just lifted his foot up, forcing him to stop in place to hold his balance. His arms couldn't reach me, and he couldn't move for fear of falling and cracking his head on the hard floor. He contented himself with glaring at me.

I slowly walked a circle around him. Since I was still holding his foot, it forced him to awkwardly hop and twist around on his other foot, fighting for balance the entire way. His expression became gradually darker and angrier. It didn't help that I offered the crowd, "Anybody want to take a shot at him?" Several agents giggled or chuckled. Dana frowned disapprovingly at me. Skinner grinned widely.

Finally growing tired of this, I dropped his leg. I couldn't help one last dig, so I pulled off his shoe as his foot was falling. Once he was standing again, I took a few steps back and tossed his shoe back. "You dropped something," I casually remarked.

He caught it and continued to glare at me as the crowd cheered and laughed. He slowly brought his foot up to slip the shoe back on. Once the foot was back on the ground, he rushed at me, hands extended to try some sort of grappling or wrestling move. A quick series of blocks, shoves, and twists later, we paused again. This time, his back was parallel to the floor, precariously balanced on my bent right knee. I was kneeling on my left leg, my left hand had his right wrist trapped far to the side, and my right hand had a fist full of his tie. His left arm was to the side in a futile attempt to balance himself, his feet barely touching the floor. All in all, I clearly had him at my mercy. The crowd went silent.

Leaning forward and softly whispering in his ear, I said, "You leave Dana Scully, Fox Mulder, and myself the hell alone. If you bother any of us again, I'll tear your heart out, the consequences be damned. Do we understand each other?" I asked. His expression looked like enough to melt the floor we were on, but he gave a barely perceptible nod. I nodded back and continued, "Now get out of here before you get yourself hurt, AGENT." Smoothly standing and pulling him along with me by his tie and wrist, I got both of us upright again. Quickly backing off a couple steps, I folded my hands in front of me and waited for his reaction.

The crowd was nearly holding its breath by this time.

His hands fisted, his face went red, and his jaw clenched.

I braced myself, expecting the situation to get ugly in an awful hurry.

In a surprising fit of self preservation, he spun on his heel and stalked out of the room, roughly brushing past the co-workers who were in his path.

The room broke into cheers and applause, a decent amount of money changing hands. I stayed where I was, several male agents congratulating me, thumping me on the back, or shaking my hand. A few female agents also congratulated me, a couple gave me pecks on the cheek, and one even slipped her phone number into my hand.

The cafeteria gradually emptied until it was just Skinner, Dana, and myself left. Even the cashier was nowhere to be seen. Dana put down the two cups of coffee she'd been holding the entire time and walked up to me. Putting one hand on my chest, she said softly, "I would like to thank you." Her other hand snaked to the back of my neck and pulled me down into a mind-blowing kiss. After several seconds, she pulled back and smiled at me. Wiping a smear of lipstick off of the corner of my mouth (which was hanging open), she winked at me. Turning on her heel, she walked back to where she'd left the coffee, picked them up and headed toward the door without another word.

Before she reached the exit, Mulder's Buzz approached, followed closely by Mulder himself as he came flying into the room. He stopped at finding his partner standing in front of him, me staring at her in shock, and Skinner smiling at the both of us in amusement.

"Ah, Mulder, there you are," greeted Dana calmly. She handed him one of the coffees, which he took reflexively.

"What happened?" he asked, sounding almost panicked. "Kimberly called and told me there'd been a fight."

Dana hooked her free arm around his elbow and turned him back toward the door. "Oh, nothing much," she said, leading him out of the room.

Skinner burst into laughter, casually stuffing a handful of money into his pocket.

Shaking off my amazement, I turned to him, raising my eyebrow in silent question.

Composing himself, he waved me along and led me toward his office. Walking past his assistant, he let me into his office and shut the door behind us before breaking into chuckles again. Taking a seat at his desk, he removed his glasses and rubbed the tears out of his eyes. "Thank you, Chessman. I needed a good laugh." After a few more snickers, he composed himself again, put his glasses back on, and continued, "To what do I owe this visit?"

Ignoring the question, I asked, "Why'd you let that happen?"

He shrugged. "He deserved it. Besides, that ought to bring him down a peg or two. Might even make him a bearable individual," he added with a grin.

"What about Dana's reaction? Wasn't that a little . . . out of character?" I asked. I'd only known her for a while, but that was an extreme reaction to the situation from what I understood about her.

His smile widened. "She's been known to react strongly when someone defends Mulder."

There's an understatement. I smiled back hesitantly before shifting gears toward the official reason I was in the building. "Are you still the regional director?" Last time I was in town, I'd found out that was his position in the Watchers.

He nodded.

"Okay, you should know that Schonke and I told her partner about her Immortality." I figured he would know who I was talking about. He'd very likely know all the Immortals in the immediate area by name and face.

His eyebrow went up, and he leaned back in his chair. "Okay," he slowly began. "Are you suggesting that I should try to recruit him?"

I shrugged. "Your choice, but I thought you should be aware of it, if you haven't already been told by my Watcher or her's."

He nodded. "I'll have to think about it, but I'll probably have Roberts approach him. Anything else?"

I shook my head. "I was in the building to see Dana and Mulder, to tell them about Axemon."

He merely nodded, not saying anything else on the subject.

Shaking his hand, we said our good-byes. "Watch your head, Chessman," his well wish chased me out the door. Once beyond his doorway, his assistant Kimberly gave me a smile and a wink.

I smiled back and headed toward the elevators.

"Come in," Mulder called in response to my knock.

I entered and smiled at the both of them. "Hi. Just stopped by to tell you that Axemon won't be bothering you."

Dana nodded, and Mulder sighed in relief. "Thanks," they chorused.

After they shared a timid smile, Dana stood and politely excused herself, slipping past me and out the door. Once she'd closed it behind her, I turned to Mulder. He drug his eyes away from the doorway to return my look with a raised eyebrow. Studying him for a moment, I reached into my pocket and produced one of my cards. "Just in case you need this," I said. He took it with a raised eyebrow. "I know an Immortal priest that is willing to perform marriages," I explained nonchalantly.

His other eyebrow went up. He opened his mouth once, but nothing came out. Finally nodding with a small smile, he tucked the card away into his desk.

Seeing he'd accepted what I'd implied, I continued, "Do you know where JAG headquarters are?"

Stepping out of the elevators an hour later in Fall's Church, Virginia, I pushed my way through the swinging doors with the JAG emblem and into a open "bullpen" area with offices along the walls. I still hadn't run into Diane's Buzz. Not knowing what else to do, I scanned around, looking for a familiar face.

"Can I help you, sir?" asked an earnest faced Lieutenant with a folder in his hand.

"I was looking for Lieutenant Colonel MacKenzie," I answered.

"She's in court all day today."

I nodded. That explained why I couldn't Sense her. "Then how about Commander Rabb?"

He nodded and led me toward one of the closed office doors. Before he knocked, he said, "I'll announce you, Mister . . ." he trailed off in an obvious question.

Ryan Chessman." I was looking right at him, so I caught his miniscule hesitation at my answer.

"Lieutenant Roberts," he introduced himself as he poked his head into Harm's office and announced me. Once done, he left the door standing open and nodded at me. "The Commander will see you."

Remembering something that Skinner had said earlier, I smiled and dropped my voice a little. "You keep WATCH over Colonel MacKenzie, Lieutenant. She's worth knowing."

He gave a subtle, secretive smile that seemed oddly out of place on his open face before his cheerful expression took over again. "Yes, she is," he agreed before moving off again, leaving me standing outside Harm's office.

Smiling at the young Watcher's back, I pushed open Rabb's door and entered, closing it softly behind me. Harm stood and shook my hand as I leaned over his desk. He waved me to one of the visitor chairs, and we both sat down. "What brings you to my humble abode?" he asked cheerfully.

"Just wanted to tell your partner that the reason I asked her to keep a low profile isn't an issue anymore."

His smile fled. "You . . ."

I nodded. "Took care of the problem, yes."

He sighed. "I doubt I'll ever get used to this life you have to lead."

I shrugged. "Not like I have much choice in the matter. Anyway, I just wanted to say goodbye to the two of you." I pulled a business card out of my pocket and handed it to him. "If either of you need to talk to me about anything, here's how you can get in touch with me."

He took the card without comment, standing to shake my hand again as I stood to leave.

With my hand on the doorknob, I paused in place and turned back to him. "There aren't all that many young Immortals running around that are worth knowing. Take care of her, Harm."

He nodded. "She's been my best friend for more than a decade. In one incarnation or another," he finished ruefully.

We shared a chuckle, and I waved on my way out the door.

The bell tinkled as I walked through the door marked "Nash Antiques". I was already within Connor's Buzz range, so I just waited, wandering around the room. I'd made arrangements with Kevin Kessler to return the borrowed Service badge that evening, but I had hours yet. I'd gone back into DC after talking to Harm and caught a shuttle to New York. One last piece of business to take care of.

An older woman, early sixties perhaps, smiled pleasantly at me and asked, "Can I help you?"

I smiled back. "May I speak with Mister Nash please? I have an item to deliver to him."

She took a step closer and held her hand out. "I can give it to him."

My smile fell a touch. "I'm afraid I have to deliver it directly to him. I'm a courier from MacLeod Antiques in Seacouver, you see." At least some of my documentation said that, anyway.

One eyebrow rose and she crossed over to an antique desk, lifting a phone and punching in a few numbers. Once the other end was answered, she said, "There is someone down here claiming to be a courier from MacLeod Antiques." She listened for a moment before looking up at me and responding to his apparent question with, "Mid twenties, brown, brown, five ten." She listened for another moment and asked me, "Your name?"

"Ryan Chessman," I answered immediately. I was surprised that Connor was leaving her down here unprotected as his first line of defense.

She repeated my name to Connor and then immediately relaxed. "I will," she answered and hung up. Turning to me, she said, "Connor is upstairs. Do you know the way?"

Connor? Then she knew who he really was. That meant that she was willingly protecting him. "Thank you, I've been here before," I answered her. I headed toward the stairs and stopped with my front foot on the first step. Turning back to her, I said, "I'm a student of Duncan MacLeod. I have no wish to harm his kinsman."

She nodded, apparently accepting my words. She turned back to the paperwork on her desk as I climbed up the stairway to the apartment above the antique store. Coming out on the landing, I saw Connor down the hallway, his katana in hand. When he saw that it was indeed me, he twirled his sword in a quick circle to come into an "at rest" position along the back of his arm and waved me toward his apartment.

I slowly shuffled in, fatigue finally catching up with me after a rough week. I collapsed into his couch, leaned my head back, and let out a sigh. I'd caught some sleep on the train, but a Quickening, a short night, and all my running around today meant that I was seriously fatigued at this point.

Connor had silently watched me enter. I could hear him closing the door, then he crossed over to his kitchenette, laying his katana aside as he pulled something out of his refrigerator. Popping the top off a can, he walked over to me and placed the drink on the coffee table that I was currently using as a footrest. Taking a seat beside me, we were both silent for a few minutes before he commented, "Hi, Ryan. Nice to see you, too. Here, come in and have a seat. Want a beer?"

I smiled without opening my eyes. "Hi, Connor. How've you been? Mind if I come in? We need to talk. Yes, please."

He chuckled, and I could hear him lean back into the couch. "You okay?" he asked quietly.

I opened my eyes and stared at the ceiling for a moment, studying the wooden beams. Sighing heavily, I leaned forward and grabbed the beer, taking a quick slug. Leaning back, I answered, "No, not really."

"What's wrong?" he asked in the same quiet, understanding, patient voice.

I was silent for a few more seconds before giving the most honest answer that I could come up with. "I'm just tired of the Game," I said quietly, studying the aluminum can in my hands. I absently noted that Connor had abysmal taste in beer.

He got up and poured himself a drink from a large decanter before sitting on a chair facing the couch. "Want to talk about it?"

I shrugged lethargically. "I found Andrea's killer. Nothing more to talk about, really." Pulling myself upright again, I put the beer onto the table. Reaching into my coat, I pulled out the wakizashi I'd taken off of Axemon. It was an amazingly light weapon, I noted in passing as I placed it onto the table. Taking my seat again, I idly studied the sword. It wasn't a classically produced weapon. The hilt was in geometric designs instead of some sculpture like the MacLeods' dragon head katanas.

Placing his drink down, Connor gently picked up the wakizashi and stared at it for nearly a minute before looking back up at me. "How?" was all he asked.

Staring at the beer in my hands again, idly rolling it around, I answered in a monotone, "That friend that found me at Andrea's funeral told me about someone taking a shot at another friend in DC. She escaped, barely. I later stumbled into him trying to take down yet another female Immortal." I took another drink before continuing. "Seems he exclusively hunted female Immortals." I smiled grimly and went on. "I hunted him back. Found him, too." I waved at the weapon Connor was holding and facetiously said, "He had good taste in swords, though." It wasn't even nicked from our fight the previous night.

"Thank you," Connor said quietly, referring to my actions instead of my last comment. He probably hadn't even heard it, since he was still staring at the sword he held. Shaking off the melancholy threatening to drag him down, he asked. "You going to keep it?" He already knew I used a wakizashi and combat knife in tandem.

I nodded. "Probably. That one is in good shape. Amazingly light and durable." Besides, I wasn't all that emotionally attached to my weapon like the MacLeods were.

"Titanium alloy," ventured Connor. "Tough to do, but it produces excellent weapons when it's done right, as this one apparently was." He flipped it over and offered it to me by the hilt.

I stood and slipped my new primary weapon into the special sheath in my coat. Taking my seat again, I raised my drink in a toast. "To Andrea Price-O'Day. An honorable woman who fell entirely too early."

Connor raised his shot glass and nodded. "To Andrea."

Chessman Chronicles Hunt, Home, and Harm

"Welcome to O'Hare Airport. Land of windy cities and some of the worst professional sports teams in their respective leagues. To be fair, it also has some of the BEST professional sports teams as well, but who's counting?"

"Be nice, Ryan. I grew up here."

I nodded and continued in my announcer voice. "Among the famous former inhabitants are Michael Jordan, Walter Peyton, Richard Daly, Mike Ditka, and Jennifer Frost-Chessman."

She just rolled her eyes and kept walking.

"What?" I asked, keeping up with her on our way to the baggage claim.

"What is it with you?" she asked.

I blew out an annoyed breath. "I'm frustrated with what we're doing. I have to blow off steam somehow."

She found the correct carousel and waited patiently for our luggage to arrive. Looking at me sideways with a small smile, she said, "I know a few ways to relieve tension if that's what you're saying."

I chuckled and wrapped my arms around her from behind. "I know you do. Tension isn't the problem. I'm just frustrated at this hunt and retrieval mission that Aaron has us on."

She leaned back into the embrace, laying her own arms over mine. "You heard him. This guy needs to be found since he's been hunting Watchers."

I sighed into her hair. "So we're the bird dogs?"

She shrugged. "As good a description as any, I suppose."

I dropped a kiss onto her neck just above the collarbone which drew a low hum from her. Gently pulling my arms away, I said, "You get our stuff, and I'll start on getting my weapons back, okay?"

She sighed in disappointment when my warmth moved away but nodded.

I turned and threaded my way through the crowd toward the security desk, pulling out my courier documentation.

I called in the next evening as soon as I got out of the shower.

"Last spotted heading south on Highway 31, near the town of Pilmouth, Indiana. A credit card hit puts him in an EconoRoom in Cromoko as of three hours ago."

I nodded, even though Joe Dawson was in Seacouver. "Okay, we can be there in three hours or so. Once we have him, what do you want us to do?"

"Find another hotel and get in touch with Aaron. This is his show. I'm just providing logistical support."

"Okay. Who do I submit my expense report to again?" I asked with a grin.

He chuckled. "Aaron. He's got the finances to deal with it. I'm just a poor, lowly bartender."

I grunted in amusement. "Don't give me that. You're not JUST anything, Joe. Anyway, take care of yourself. I've got my cell, so if you need to get in touch with me, I can be reached through that."

"Will do, Ryan. Watch your head."

I hung up as Jennifer came out of the bathroom, drying her hair. "So what's the plan?"

I looked up and down her still wet body and grinned. "First I thought I'd take that towel away from you and throw you down on the bed. Then I thought that I would -"

"I meant about Schuller," she interrupted me with a mock glare.

"Oh," I replied with a small pout. "He's heading south through Indiana. Joe told me where he's stopped for the night. If we rent a car, we can get to him well before dawn."

She nodded and pulled open her suitcase. "Let's go then. The sooner we finish this, the sooner we can go home."

We pulled into Cromoko hours later and I directed her to an all-night superstore that was near the EconoRoom where our target was apparently staying.

"How do you know your way around town?" Jen asked as she pulled into a parking space and stopped.

"I grew up about an hour that-a-way," I replied, pointing north.

She nodded. "So how are we going to do this?"

I'd been thinking about that. "The EconoRoom is across the highway. If you go to the front desk and ask in that persuasive tone of yours which room Mister Schuller is in, I'll be in here buying a few items we'll need. Once we know which room he's in, you and I can just walk up to his door. My Buzz will wake him. He comes to the door, we stick a knife in him, tie him up, stuff him into the trunk, and drive away."

"I'll erase the desk worker's memory of him, then. I'd better check for video cameras, too."

I thought for a moment. "No, don't erase the guy's memory. Just say that Schuller came up and checked out, claiming insomnia. Maybe wanted to get to Indianapolis early. We don't want the trail to end abruptly here in case someone ELSE tries to track him. Better erase the memory of YOU, though."

She nodded and got out of the car, heading across the road to the hotel. I stepped into the supermarket and quickly picked up a small package of garbage bags, a couple cheap towels, and a roll of duct tape. Climbing back into the car, I drove across the street and parked, trying to stay away from the front desk and as far from any of the rooms as possible.

Jen approached the car as I got out. "Night clerk is taken care of. She thinks Schuller left just a few minutes ago, talking about making it to Cincinnati before breakfast. He's in room 147. I already did a walk through, and there aren't any cameras in the building. One sleeping individual in room 147, and only one other occupied room nearby."

I nodded and picked up the plastic bag containing my supplies for the night. With the bag swinging idly from one of my hands, Jennifer and I walked into the hotel.

Entering the hallway, she turned left and led me down past room 161, 159, 157 . . . His Buzz hit me at that point. I peripherally rated him at fifty to sixty years old, with one or two heads to his credit. Continuing down the hallway, Jennifer held up two fingers and pointed to room 154, indicating that this was the only nearby room with anybody in it. Hopefully it wouldn't matter, but just in case, it was nice to know. Without waiting for my reaction, she continued on and stopped beside the door to room 147. Taking a position out of sight of the peephole, she took the bag from me as I leaned on the wall opposite the doorway.

The only problem now was the possibility of him just shooting me through the door. I was hoping that first, he wasn't stupid enough to fire a gun in a hotel, and secondly that Jennifer could hear enough to warn me in time if he WAS that stupid.

Leaning down, Jen gingerly placed the bag on the carpeted hallway and looked like she was prepared to spring.

I heard someone approach the door on the other side. After perhaps a thirty second pause, the door slowly opened.

Jennifer sprang forward, shoving her way through the door but holding it with her left hand so it wouldn't slam into the wall and create noise. Her right hand landed a crushing, open fisted blow to the sternum of the man standing in front of her. The force of the blow threw him backwards onto the bed. I stepped forward quickly and picked up the bag of goodies as Jen entered the room in pursuit. I stepped into the room and was closing the door behind me when I heard a series of splintering snaps. Shuddering at the sound, I turned to see Jennifer release Joe Schuller's jaw with one hand and the back of his head with the other. She'd broken his neck with brute force.

The whole thing had taken four seconds and probably wasn't heard outside of five feet from the door. Shaking my head at the efficiency of a vampire on the prowl, I got to work. Jen had left him lying on his back across the bed and was now standing calmly, waiting for my instructions. Shoving the long sword out of my way, I requested, "Hold him up, please,"

Jen grabbed him under the armpits and held him upright, her vampire strength easily keeping him up. Holding one of the towels in place across his chest with one hand, I secured it in place with a loop of duct tape around his back. Repeating the duct tape loop lower on the towel, I pulled out my switchblade and flicked the blade open. Feeling along his chest, I positioned the blade and rammed it home through the towel and between ribs to lodge it in his heart. There. He won't be waking up until that's removed. Taping the blade in place, I saw that without the heart pumping the blood, the wound wasn't bleeding all that much. With the towel in place, I hoped to prevent any blood from spilling.

Taping the other towel to the back of Schuller's head, I jammed the other switchblade into the hollow at the base of the skull, angled to avoid the spinal cord. I also taped that one in place. Hopefully, even if one knife works free, he still won't wake up until we want him too.

I taped Schuller's arms to his sides and then his legs together and bent at the knee. I pulled out the garbage bags and taped one over each of the knife wounds and then double bagged the rest of Schuller's body. Stepping back and surveying my handiwork, I nodded in satisfaction. Now he's ready for indefinite transport.

Jen laid him down on the bed and went into the bathroom to start packing him up. I put his long sword into the coat that was hanging on the coat rack and then tossed all his clothing from the low dresser into his suitcase.

By the time I finished my packing, Jen emerged from the bathroom with his smaller bag containing all the rest of his stuff. I fished the car keys from the trench coat pocket and then tossed the coat itself on over my other coat. Each of us taking one of the bags in hand, Jen and I calmly left the room, making sure the door remained cracked open behind us. Exiting the building, Jen casually asked, "Which car?"

I pointed to the silver Mustang that Joe Dawson had described as belonging to Schuller.

"Hmm," she said. "Hope he'll fit. Open the trunk and put these bags into the back seat, please."

Unlocking the trunk, I let it swing open as I opened the driver's side door and tossed the suitcases into the microscopic back seat. While my back had been turned, Jennifer had gone back into the hotel. As I turned around, she emerged bluringly fast with an armload of Schuller. She slowed down to mortal speeds once she'd dumped him into the trunk and shut it.

"Okay, now what?" she asked calmly.

I removed the trench coat and tossed it into the back seat on top of the suitcases. Pulling my cell phone out of a pocket, I said, "Let's find out." I dialed and waited.

"Grey."

"Hi, Aaron. It's Ryan. I have a present for you. Where do you want it delivered?"

"Hi, Ryan. You have it already? That was fast. Where are you?"

"Cromoko, north central Indiana."

He paused and said, "Indianapolis. There's a Vacation Inn on the east side at exit 136. I'll meet you in the lobby there at eight tomorrow night. Well, tonight, I guess."

I nodded. "Vacation Inn in," I checked my watch, "eighteen hours. See you then." I folded the phone and put it away. "You hear all that?"

She nodded and held out her hand. "Can I drive the Mustang?" she asked with a smile.

Laughing, I tossed her the keys as I headed over toward our rental.

Jen and I were sitting in the lobby eighteen hours later, watching television and waiting on Aaron to show up. The remaining two hour drive the previous night had passed uneventfully, and we'd checked in. Jen had assured me that the car and all its contents were fine. Nothing was noticeable outside the trunk, including any odors.

Aaron's Buzz entered my range at the same time that Jennifer looked up at the front door suddenly. Her face broke into a smile almost immediately. She stood and walked over as Aaron and his wife Terry entered. Aaron and I shook hands as the girls hugged.

"So how's it going?" Aaron asked as I gestured everyone down the hallway toward our room.

"Fine," Jen answered. "Everything went smoothly, and I even got to drive a really NICE Mustang!"

Everyone chuckled as I carded the door open. Once the door was safely closed behind us, I asked, "Okay, now what do we do with him?"

"Where is he?" asked Aaron.

"In the trunk of the Mustang," Jen said, producing his keys.

"Secure?" asked Terry with a raised eyebrow.

"Indefinitely," I answered with a nod.

"Pack up," Aaron said, taking the keys from Jennifer. "You can follow me in your car."

Jen pouted. "Can't I drive the Mustang, Dad?"

He sighed and handed the keys back. "Just this once, young lady."

I pulled into the driveway behind Jen. Aaron had led us to a house just outside a small town about two hours outside Indianapolis. Piling out of the cars, we approached the front door only to have it open before he reached it. A five and a half foot or so man was standing there, clearly having expected us. "Mister Constantine and Miss Ryan," he greeted Aaron by his real name. "If one of the ladies would bring Mister Schuller in, I'll show them where he can be revived safely."

Terry nodded and turned back toward the car.

Aaron turned to where Jen and I were frowning in confusion. "Ryan, Jen, I would like to introduce you to Clayton Webb. Clay, these two are the Immortal Ryan Chessman and his vampire wife Jennifer."

Webb smiled at us pleasantly. Jen and I were looking at Aaron in shock. He smiled at us and said, "He's a Council member. He already knew who you are."

Whatever. I offered Webb my hand hesitantly. "Mister Webb."

He shook my hand firmly and kissed the back of Jennifer's hand. That action seemed natural for him instead of the slightly uncomfortable feeling I got whenever I did it.

Terry was patiently waiting with Schuller slung over her shoulder by this time. Webb waved everyone in and shut the door behind us. He then lead us into the basement of this basically but not Spartanly furnished house. There were only two rooms down here, a bedroom at the foot of the stairs and a small bathroom off to the side. Terry dumped him unceremoniously onto the bed and started stripping off the garbage bags.

"Good idea with the garbage bags," Webb said, watching Terry work.

"Thank you," Jen and I said, almost in chorus.

He looked up and smiled slightly at the both of us.

"Should I go ahead and remove the blades?" asked Terry.

"His bags are in the car," I said. "Should I bring them in for him before we let him wake up?"

Webb nodded. "Sure. No sense making him uncomfortable. We aren't uncivilized after all, though I'd like to check them before letting him have anything."

Shrugging my acceptance, I turned to the stairs. Lugging the suitcases back inside, I found Webb in the front room, indicating that I should put the bags on the couch. Totally ignoring the bag of toiletries, he searched through the bag of clothing quickly. Not finding anything there, he carefully checked each of the seams of the bag. Pausing as his hands ran along the long side, he pulled a small knife out of one of his pockets and ripped the side of the suitcase open and pulled a thin dagger out of the concealed pocket. Dropping the dagger onto the other bag, he resumed his inspection. Not finding anything else of note, he folded his knife away. Rising, he tapped on the trim beside the hall closet door to reveal a numeric keypad. Quickly tapping in a code, he pulled the door open. He placed the smaller suitcase with the dagger into the closet.

When he reached for the trench coat that I was still holding, I asked in curiosity, "What IS this place?"

"It's a safe house," he answered evenly as he hung the coat in the closet. Closing the door, he continued, "It's used by the Company to house dangerous or suicidal . . . guests. It's quite secure and more than adequate."

"Adequate for what?" I asked in confusion as he picked up the bag of clothing.

"Whatever tomorrow may bring," he said cryptically, leading me back downstairs.

We found that Terry had been busy. She had removed the blade from the back of his skull, laid him on the bed, and removed all the tape. One of the plastic garbage bags was still under him to protect the bedspread. Jennifer was just finishing cleaning the switchblade as we entered, and she handed it to me.

Nodding at all the preparations, Webb dropped the suitcase at the foot of the bed. He then grabbed the remaining blade and smoothly pulled it out of Schuller's chest. Aaron took the bloody towel and dropped it into the trash bag he was holding.

Webb pulled a handkerchief out of his suit pocket and absently cleaned the blade as he led us all back up the stairs. The door closed with a solid sounding "thunk".

"Okay, what's going on?" asked Jen.

"This is a Company safe house used to hold dangerous individuals," repeated Webb as he seated himself in a chair. "I'll be holding Schuller until tomorrow when another Council member arrives. Then we'll hold a trial. As a Watcher, I won't have a vote at the trial, but I'll be acting as arbiter. What happens after that depends on the outcome of the trial."

"He can't escape?" I asked, waving at the door to the basement.

Webb shook his head. "No. Nor is there anything down there that could vaguely be used as a weapon. He's secure as long as we want him." He stood and flicked the blade closed casually. Handing it to me, he asked, "Anyone want anything to drink?"

"Um," mumbled Terry with a frown.

Webb held up a hand. "Not to worry. There are two bottles of refreshments for our vampire guests."

Terry blinked and then nodded. "Please." Jen nodded as well with a raised eyebrow.

"Just a water for me, thanks," I said.

"Me, too," seconded Aaron.

Webb nodded and entered the kitchen. Raising his voice, he continued, "Gentlemen, I know it's early in your day, but it's beyond dinner time for me. I'm not up to fixing a full meal for myself, so I'm going to order a pizza. You want some?"

I seated myself on the couch. "Sure," I called. "Sausage, pepperoni, or both would be my first choice." Jen curled up in my lap.

"Mister Constantine?" queried Webb.

"Pepperoni is fine," he said as he took a seat in a chair. Terry sat beside me and Jen.

Webb came out of the kitchen carrying two glasses filled with a thick red liquid. While he handed one to each of the women, Aaron and I stiffened as a Buzz grew.

"Our guest is waking up," said Aaron.

Webb nodded calmly and headed back to the kitchen. He returned moments later with two glasses of water which he gave to Aaron and myself. One more trip to the kitchen and he retrieved himself what looked like a scotch and a portable phone.

As he was settling himself into a chair, we all heard a dull thud followed by other muted sounds.

"Good sound insulation," commented Terry.

Webb just smiled and dialed the phone.

Aaron and I were sharing a breakfast the next evening when another Buzz walked into range. I dropped my fork and moved toward my coat immediately. This guy was nearly four thousand years old and had a respectable number of heads. Probably not a hunter, but certainly was dangerous.

Webb saw my actions and raised a hand. "Calm down, Mister Chessman. I was expecting him."

"Him who?" I asked in concern.

Aaron had moved to the window and was peeking out past the blinds. He smiled suddenly and moved to the door, throwing it open. "Father!"

Father? I could feel Jennifer come up behind me and rest one hand on my shoulder.

Terry came into the room at the same time and smiled as a formidable, distinguished looking man walked in the open door. "Antonius!" he greeted, claspng Aaron's arm in a formal looking manner. "Theresa!" he said, smiling broadly before folding her into a hug that nearly smothered the diminutive vampire.

"Marcus," she responded when he stepped back. "How have you been?"

"Good, good. You been keeping my son out of trouble?"

She laughed and shook her head. "If you couldn't manage it, how do you expect me to?"

"Hey," objected Aaron, standing beside his father.

Terry and Marcus laughed. Terry turned to Jennifer and I and said, "Ryan, Jen, I would like to introduce you to Marcus Constantine, Aaron's father. Marcus, this is Ryan Chessman, student of Duncan MacLeod, and this is his wife, Jennifer Frost, who is also my grand-childe."

Jennifer smiled timidly as he took her hand in a gentle grip and bowed over it but didn't kiss it. "Lady," he greeted with a smile. He turned to me and stuck out a hand in a traditional handshake. "Student of Duncan's?"

I nodded. "Once upon a time, sir." I cocked my head and asked, "Should I call you general or emperor?"

He smiled sadly and shook his head. "Neither. It's been literally thousands of years since either mattered."

Webb stepped forward from where he had been trying to blend into the woodwork. "Mister Constantine," Webb greeted.

"Mister Webb," nodded Constantine.

"We met a few years ago when I was in Rome," Webb explained to Aaron's raised eyebrow.

We all looked over at the basement door as it gave another muted thud. "Shall we dispense with the unpleasantness?" Constantine asked with a soft sigh.

Webb nodded and turned to Aaron. "If you would set it up, Mister Constantine?" He flicked a glance to Marcus Constantine and amended, "Mister Constantine the younger."

Aaron and Constantine laughed. Aaron said, "Call me Aaron or Grey. I'm used to them."

Constantine sighed. "Giving up the family name, Antonius?"

"Never, Father," he responded, "but you must admit that Antonius Aurelius Constantine is rather unusual outside Italy."

Constantine frowned but didn't argue the point.

Webb caught Terry's eye and tilted his head over to the door. "Would you do the honors?" he asked.

She nodded and turned to Jennifer. "Jennifer, could I have your help, please?"

Confusion written all over her face, Jen joined her grandmother.

I nearly followed, but Webb caught me by the arm. "No, let those two ladies deal with him. Since you aren't a Council member, could you play guard at the front door?"

I nodded and headed toward the stairs and our room. I'd been expecting to be guard and / or lie detector. Since Webb hadn't said anything about it, I guessed that he didn't know anything about my extra little skill.

Once I had retrieved my gun and its holster from beside the bed Jen and I had shared, I returned to the front room to see that Aaron had been busy. The dining room table had been moved to an open space in the front room with three chairs along its sides. Marcus Constantine was at one end, with Aaron beside him, and Webb seated beside him. A few feet away, off the open end of the table, a straight-backed chair was set up, apparently for the accused.

I walked over to the wide-armed overstuffed chair beside the front door. Placing my gun down on the chair's arm just below my right hand, I seated myself comfortably. I didn't have my swords on me, but with the gun I figured I could stop Schuller cold if it came to that.

Jennifer came back upstairs through the partially open door and held it wide. Joe Schuller came up next with Terry immediately behind, and I got my first decent look at the target of our hunt. Perhaps five and a half feet tall and a hundred ten pounds when soaking wet, he didn't look all that intimidating. He had a slightly hunched over stance and was constantly twitching and looking around. The girls had apparently decided to forgo any restraints.

Jennifer and Terry each grabbed one arm and firmly led him over to the chair. Sitting him down in it, each of the two women took a step back and stood in a ready stance with their hands folded in front of them.

He looked around the room quickly, studying everything. When he turned to look at me, his gaze locked on my gun for a few seconds before looking up at me. I kept my expression neutral. His attention eventually shifted off and finished the sweep of the room. Once finished, he turned to the three people at the table and asked, "What's going on?"

Webb flicked a glance at him but immediately returned his attention to his discussion with Constantine.

This apparently annoyed Schuller. He started to stand. "I SAID -"

One of Terry's hands was immediately clamped down on his shoulder, forcing him back to his seat.

He stared at her hand before looking up at her in blank amazement.

She graced him with a feral grin, released his shoulder, and stepped back.

"Okay, we're ready to begin," said Webb. He, Constantine, and Aaron turned to Schuller. Webb removed a small tape recorder, pressed a button, and then continued, "This is a recording of the trial of Immortal Joseph Schuller by the Council. This Tribunal includes Immortal Antonius Constantine, Immortal Marcus Constantine, and Watcher Regional Director Clayton Webb. Also present are Theresa Ryan, Jennifer Frost, and Immortal Ryan Chessman. The accused is Immortal Joseph Schuller. He is charged with hunting and killing Watchers. Do you have any questions or comments at this time, Mister Schuller?"

"What in the world is going on?" Schuller asked in confusion.

"You are being charged with killing Watchers," was Aaron's calm reply.

"Who?"

Webb pulled down the cuff of his sleeve to reveal his tattoo.

Schuller glared at Webb. "You mean the voyeurs," he spat out.

Everyone sighed. Webb kept going, "Do you admit to killing Penny Abraham, Jonathan Corvis, Franklin Dempsey, Henry Forrester, and Marcia Norris? All five of these individuals had this tattoo."

He shrugged. "Were those their names?" he asked in a bored tone.

Constantine's jaw clenched, but Webb continued calmly, "I'll take that as a 'yes'. Were they harassing you, communicating with you, or otherwise interfering with your life?"

Schuller spat at Webb.

Aaron's and Constantine's eyes narrowed. Webb glanced at the glob of saliva on the table next to his hand. "I'll accept that as a 'no'," he said dryly. "Have you told anyone else about the Watchers?"

He didn't answer, but his gaze flickered around the room again.

"I would advise against trying to escape or attack anyone, Mister Schuller," Constantine said. "Those two ladies are more than capable of keeping you from accomplishing much."

Schuller sneered at the Roman. In a lightning move, his left arm struck at Jennifer. She parried it cleanly, and we all heard a sharp SNAP. He pulled his broken forearm back to cradle it against his chest, staring at Jennifer in shock. She grinned back. Nobody else had moved.

Aaron broke the tense silence. "I can't see any point in continuing. Schuller has admitted to killing the Watchers. He has not provided any reasoning behind his actions. I would suggest that we sentence him and be done with it. I apologize for taking up everyone's time."

"What sentence?" asked Schuller in the beginnings of fear.

"Execution," Aaron answered.

"Hey, don't I get a chance to defend myself here?"

"You had a chance. You didn't give any reason for your actions."

"They were following me!" he objected.

"But were they INTERFERING with you?" repeated Webb.

"They were following me," he repeated, "so I killed them. What's the problem?"

"You caught and tortured the first one into revealing the locations of several more Watchers. You systematically hunted and tortured five good people to death, Mister Schuller," Webb ground out through clenched teeth.

"I must agree with Antonius's comment about this trial being pointless," commented Marcus Constantine.

Webb nodded. "The two voting members of this Tribunal have come to an agreement. The mandatory punishment is execution. Suggestions?"

"Wait a minute!" Schuller was closing in on hysterical. "You're just going to kill me?"

"Yes," responded Webb flatly.

"I don't get a chance to defend myself?" he asked again.

"Did you give the Watchers a chance to defend THEMSELVES before you shot them, Schuller?" Aaron asked.

"But . . . But . . ."

"If it's all the same to you, I could use him," Terry spoke up.

"How so?" asked Webb.

"Drain him first, then one of you Immortals can take his Quickenings."

"Drain me?!?" Schuller squeaked.

"Of blood," Terry confirmed with glowing eyes and a pointed smile.

His face went stark white. Webb and Constantine looked uncomfortable, but Aaron and I didn't even blink.

"There's no need to be cruel here, Miss Ryan," said Webb in a mostly steady voice.

Terry shook her head. "If I wanted to be cruel, I could take him and drain him over and over, keeping him alive only to provide blood. By letting him get killed after the first time, I'm actually being quite generous without being wasteful."

"V . . . Vam . . . Vampire?" stuttered Schuller. Everyone ignored him.

"I have no problem with that plan," offered Aaron.

"Nor I," said Constantine. Webb just shook his head.

Seeing everyone else's agreement, Aaron turned to me. "You want him, Ryan?"

I shook my head. "I don't want his Quickening, if that's what you're asking."

Aaron nodded, but Constantine raised an eyebrow. "You don't WANT a free Quickening?"

I shook my head again. "If nobody else will do it, then I will, but I'd rather not if it's all the same to everyone." I grinned slightly. "My head's crowded enough the way it is, and I don't know that my conscience can deal with executing someone."

Aaron appeared to agree with my statement, but Constantine just shrugged. "Very well, then. I will take him unless Antonius wants him." At Aaron's head shake, Constantine turned to Terry and said, "He is all yours, Nosferatu. Tell me when and where you'll finish with him, and I'll take care of him there."

She shook her head. "I need an hour with him to do a proper job of it. Of more concern is the effects of the Quickening if you tried to behead him in a building."

"Hey! You . . . But . . . I . . ." Schuller couldn't seem to form a sentence.

I got up from my chair, knowing everything was over but the shouting. Holstering my gun in the middle of my lower back, I picked up the duct tape roll from where it was lying on an end table. When I approached Schuller, Jen and Terry secured one of his arms each. Tearing off a six inch piece, I put it over Schuller's mouth.

Aaron chuckled. "Give me the tape, Ryan. You and Jen have done everything I've asked, and for that I'm thankful. Go home. I'll give you a call."

He got up from the table as Webb reached out and flicked off the recorder. I handed Aaron the duct tape which he started to use to secure Schuller to the chair with Terry standing guard nearby. Webb was collecting his papers off the table as Jennifer and I headed upstairs.

By the time we'd packed and were on our way out the door, Schuller was secured to the chair and being roundly ignored by everyone. Terry and Constantine were discussing times and places. Aaron looked up from his discussion with Webb. "Ryan, you want his sword?"

I shook my head. "Long sword's too big for me. I use a wakizashi, remember?"

"But he'll take the Mustang instead," interjected Jen with a hopeful smile.

Everyone smiled. Aaron shook his head and said, "Just offering the sword. Thanks for the help, you two. Watch your head."

"You take care of yourself, childe," called Terry.

Jen smiled back. "You too, Grandma."

We were heading into Indianapolis again a couple hours later. I had been staring out the window for most of the trip as Jennifer drove.

"What are you thinking?" she finally asked.

"I'm only two and a half hours drive away from where I grew up," I answered absently.

"You want to stop and visit?" she asked.

I frowned. "I don't know."

"Why wouldn't you?" she asked calmly.

"Well, I haven't aged in nearly ten years," I answered in amusement.

She shrugged. "Mid-twenties to mid-thirties hardly produce any apparent physical changes."

Well, that's true. It was more a matter of emotional maturity than physical. "You up to meeting the in-laws?" I asked with a small grin.

She laughed. "Where is this place?"

We'd made it to Lanchester well before dawn and checked into one of the new motels in town. When I'd moved out over ten years ago, there hadn't been any hotels in the place, but I'd heard about these places going up. Lanchester was apparently growing.

After a day's sleep, I got up and hesitantly got ready to visit my parents.

Jen caught me fidgeting with the collar of my shirt. "Are you okay with this?" she asked quietly.

I sighed. "I don't know," I answered honestly. "These are the people who raised me, but so much has happened since I left . . . I don't know what to think."

"If you don't want to do this -" she offered after a moment.

I shook my head. "No, I SHOULD do this, regardless of whether I want to."

"Well then," she paused as she put her watch on, "I would like to go meet these people who raised my husband."

I laughed and offered her my arm, snagging my coat off the rack on my way out of the hotel room.

Turning down the long driveway outside of town, I passed between the tall rocks that had stood there since well before I was born.

Jennifer flinched and then turned to the rocks in amazement. "This is Holy Ground?" she asked.

My eyebrows shot up. "Is it? Rumor has it that those rocks have been here since this area was a popular Indian campsite."

"Well, something on those rocks is a holy symbol."

"Yeah, there are ideographs all over it. Nobody knows exactly what it says, though."

Puzzling over that tidbit of information, I absently pulled the car into the driveway. The instant I got out of the car I froze in position. I'd just been hit with multiple Buzzes and more pre-Immortal signatures. Shocked beyond words, I spent a few seconds sorting them all out and came to the conclusion that there were two two hundred-twenty to two hundred-fifty year olds, one fifty year Immortal, one forty year, and two pre-Immortal signatures. None of the Immortals had more than one head each to their credit.

The front door opened and a teenaged head poked through cautiously. I immediately recognized my brother Rob. His face brightened when he saw me. "Ryan!" he called, coming out the door and holding a hand out to me. I automatically shook it, trying desperately to keep up with the situation. He leaned toward me slightly and whispered, "We'll explain everything to you later, once the kids are asleep." He pulled back and looked over at Jennifer with a smile. Holding his hand to her, he said, "Since my brother here isn't going to do it, I'll just introduce myself. I'm Robert."

Smiling at my stunned expression, she shook his hand. "Jennifer."

Several more heads had poked through the open front door by this time. Rob waved them over. "Gang," he called, "this is another of the kids that Mom and Dad raised." He indicated me and then continued, "Ryan left here about ten years ago, so most of you don't know him, but he was a brother of mine for a long time. This is his friend Jennifer." He addressed us, indicated the kids, and named them starting at the oldest at thirteen and ending at the youngest at about five. "Ken, Marcia, Richard, Elisabeth, Laura, and this little one is Katie." My sister Christi, Mom, and Dad exited the house and stopped in shock at seeing me. Rob continued without missing a beat, indicating Christi and then the adults, "Christi and our parents Doug and Lois Morgan." He addressed them and said, "Ryan's friend is Jennifer."

Mom came over and hugged me. Dad shook my hand. They each repeated the actions with Jennifer, in addition to Christi hugging her.

My mind was just coming out of its "gibbering uncontrollably" stage when Dad clapped his hands and said, "Okay, everyone in the house. No point in everyone standing outside."

As we filed indoors, all the younger kids didn't seem to know how to react to me. Figuring I'd better do something before it became too tense, I asked "Hey, does Dad still eat macaroni and cheese with ketchup?"

"Hey!" he objected with a grin.

"Eww!" almost everyone chorused with smiles.

"Yeah, he does," volunteered little Katie.

I smiled down at her and asked, "Does Mom still try to get everyone to eat that chipped beef on toast stuff?"

"Eww!" everyone chorused louder. Jen giggled.

"Hey, I like that," Katie objected.

Mom laughed and rested a hand on Katie's shoulder.

"Don't talk," Christi shot back at me. "I seem to remember you eating tater tots with MUSTARD of all things."

"So?" I asked.

Another chorus of, "Eww!"

Jennifer was laughing by this time, hanging onto my shoulder to keep from falling over.

We all finally managed to get seated around the big front room, though it was a tight fit. Katie remained standing and looked at me curiously. "You're my brother?"

I smiled at her. "Yes, I suppose I am."

She looked at Jennifer. "Are you his girlfriend?"

She smiled and nodded.

"Do you two have any kids?"

Mom's, Dad's, Christi's, and Rob's faces froze in position. Well, that explained who the Immortals were.

Jennifer shook her head calmly. "No, we don't."

Katie nodded, still looking at Jennifer closely. "How come you have red hair?"

"Katie," Mom said warningly.

Jen looked at Mom and smiled. "It's okay." Turning back to Katie, she said, "My real Dad had red hair, so I do too."

She nodded again. "Do you like ponies?" she then asked in a lightning fast change of subject.

Jen smiled. "Do you have some ponies in your room?"

Katie's eyes lit up. Nodding vigorously, she grabbed Jen's hand and pulled her from the couch and went tearing down the hall.

"Katie's made a new friend," commented Christi.

"So you're another brother," asked the oldest kid after Rob.

I nodded.

"What do you do?"

"I'm a computer programmer in Toronto," I answered smoothly. Well, that was true if not quite complete.

"I wanna be a programmer when I grow up," chimed in one of the younger girls.

"I'm going to be a doctor," claimed the slightly older boy.

"Jennifer is a nurse," I told him, "So I've heard about how much school it takes to be a doctor. You must be pretty smart."

He smiled. The four other kids rolled their eyes. Rob and Christi muffled their snickers.

"Okay, time for you lot to go to bed," announced Mom.

Five groans met her announcement. "But we just met our brother," objected the oldest boy.

"I'll be back tomorrow evening," I said, shooting a glance at Dad and Mom.

At their nods, the kids calmed down. There was a half-hour flurry of kids brushing teeth and getting into pajamas before things started to calm down. Dad waved all the Immortals plus Jen to his study. Closing the door behind us and sitting at the desk, he said, "This is soundproof. It'll allow us to talk without young ears. How have you been doing, Ryan?"

Remaining standing, I looked from him to Mom who was perched on the table, and then to Rob and Christi who were sharing a loveseat. I ignored his question for the moment. "Why didn't you tell me?" I asked instead.

Dad shot a glance at Jen.

I sighed. "She knows," I told them. To her, I said, "All four of them are Immortal. Which I DIDN'T know before we got here." I turned a stern glance onto each of my family in turn before continuing to Jennifer, "Two of the other kids are pre-Immortal, though I don't know which."

Christi asked, "You can sense pre-Immortals? You can't be more than ten years Immortal yourself."

"Don't ask," I waved it off. Sighing tiredly, I collapsed into one of the chairs, Jen taking the one next to me and holding my hand.

"If you've dealt with pre-Immortals before, you know WHY we didn't tell you, Ryan," Rob said calmly.

"Do you realize the panic I went through when I found out about my Immortality?" I asked.

"Yes," Mom answered dryly. "We've all gone through it. We've learned that the best thing is to just raise you right and then let you go."

I stared at her. "How long have you been doing this?"

"Raising pre-Immortals?" she asked. At my nod, she answered, "A hundred fifty years or so."

"And nobody's ever noticed?"

"Did you?" Jen asked. I snapped my attention over to her while everyone else chuckled. She continued, "Your brother and sister here appear to be seventeen and eighteen. You didn't notice that they never aged?"

My gaze shifted over to the two of them, calmly looking back at me. They did indeed look seventeen and eighteen. It'd been ten years since I had seen them last, but they still looked like my mental image of them.

I sighed and leaned forward, rubbing my face in my hands. "Okay, start at the beginning."

"As Lois said, we've been raising pre-Immortal kids for a hundred and fifty years," started Dad. "We had to move every twenty years or so unless we could keep a low profile in the community. Neither of us believe in the Game, so we've lived on Holy Ground whenever possible. Rob and Christi found us. We didn't raise them. The four of us have stayed together for quite a while, now. Once Katie grows up, it'll probably be time for us to move again."

While I digested that, Rob stood up. "I'm going to grab a beer. Anybody else want anything to drink?" At my small start of surprise, he grinned at me. "You know I'm older than you, despite looking seventeen, LITTLE BROTHER."

I chuckled in embarrassment. "Okay, you've made your point. Yeah, a beer would be nice."

He nodded and took everyone else's orders before fetching the three beers and two glasses of wine. Once he distributed the drinks, he took his seat next to Christi again, laying his hand on her leg.

Dad caught me staring at it. He chuckled and said, "They were married when they found us."

I closed my eyes and leaned back in my chair. "My brother is married to my sister, and they're both Immortal. Mom and Dad are also Immortal have been raising mortal and pre- Immortal children for a hundred and fifty years. This is going to take some getting used to."

Everyone chuckled. "So tell me what happened to you after you left, Ryan," requested Dad.

I nodded, time to tell them a story that won't get me into much trouble. "After college graduation, I got a job in Seacouver doing database work for VisionQuest. I died the first time in a freak accident and didn't even know I'd died until a few days later. I eventually stumbled upon Duncan MacLeod, and he explained everything to me and began my training. A girlfriend from college moved in with me the next year and we stayed together a few years until she was killed by an Immortal. I wandered the country for a couple months after that and ended up in Toronto where I met Jennifer. We've been together since and we've been married a year now." I was horribly mangling the story, but unless I wanted to explain Watchers and vampires, that would have to do.

"Congratulations," Rob saluted me with his bottle.

Mom, Dad, and Christi also raised their drinks in toast. Jen and I blushed.

"Duncan MacLeod, huh?" asked Dad after he took a sip.

I nodded. "Know him?"

He shook his head. "Not personally, but I've only heard good things about him."

"He's a good man and a great friend," I assured everyone.

"I have a question," Jennifer said.

"Yes?" Mom asked.

"Robert here said that your last name is Morgan?" she asked.

Rob shook his head. "I said THEIR last name is Morgan," he corrected, pointing to Mom and Dad.

Mom nodded. "Doug and I are Morgan. Rob and Christi are Barr, actually."

"And Ryan is a Chessman," Jen frowned. "Why the different last names?"

"What would happen if we gave our name to every pre-Immortal we have raised?" Dad asked. "Sooner or later someone would notice that many Morgans and try to figure out why," he answered his own question.

"So you give us all different names for your protection?" I asked.

"Ours and yours, yes. If someone tracked us down, they could find your address since we have it in our address book. Then ALL of our children would be hunted. By protecting ourselves, we're also protecting you."

I shook my head. "That won't wash. My address book at home has almost a dozen Immortals in it as well. Most Immortals probably have several Immortal friends and acquaintances."

Mom sighed. "Well, we DO try to protect our kids."

I frowned. "How many pre-Immortal children have you raised?"

"Including Katie and Laura? Um, twenty something now."

I blinked in astonishment. "Where do you find them all?"

"Networking," Dad answered with a grin. "Now that you know about us, if you find a pre-Immortal that you don't want to raise yourself, you know someone who IS willing to do so. Several of our kids have been found by our earlier kids."

One of my eyebrows came up. "I'll have to remember that."

Christi yawned. "It's getting late. I'm going to bed."

Jen and I stood. "We'd better get going. If it's okay, I'll come by tomorrow evening."

"WE will come back tomorrow," corrected Jen with a glare.

Rob grinned. "Welcome to married life, little brother." Christi dug an elbow into his side.

Mom and Dad chuckled.

A whole group of us were in the midst of a vicious game of Monopoly early the next evening when my cell phone chirped from where my coat was hanging.

"You have a cell phone?" asked the fifteen year old boy. I vaguely though his name was Ken, but I couldn't keep them all straight.

I nodded in answer as Jen dug the phone out of my coat and answered it. After a few seconds of conversation, she walked over to me and handed over the phone. "It's Dana."

I stood and waved Jen down into my chair. "Careful," I told all five of my opponents. "She's bloodthirsty." I smiled at Jen's glare and brought the phone up. "Dana, what's up?"

"Ryan, I'm glad I caught you. Would it be possible for you to come to Washington?"

My smile fell instantly, and I casually walked into the kitchen for a degree of privacy. For her to call for help couldn't be good. "Yes," I answered slowly. "I can, but why? What's wrong? You and Mulder okay? Colton hasn't gotten out of hand, has he?"

"We're fine," she assured me, "and Tom hasn't bothered us since you left town." She neatly sidestepped the humiliation that I'd dished out to the arrogant agent. "No, the problem is Diane. Or more precisely her partner."

"Harm?" I asked. "What's wrong?"

"How good is your medical knowledge?" she asked in response.

"Not very. I passed biology, but that's it. Give it to me in words of one syllable or less."

My attempt at levity fell flat. "He's dying," she stated bluntly. "He's managed to catch a very unusual disease. The filtration properties of his liver and kidneys are irrevocably shutting themselves down. Dialysis is a stopgap measure, but a side effect of this disease is for the liver to start producing and releasing various poisons. His body will quickly poison itself to death and there isn't a thing medical science can do about it. He wouldn't survive kidney and liver replacement surgeries, even if we had the time."

"Okay," I said slowly. It wasn't, but what else was I supposed to say? "Why are you telling me, and what can I do to help?"

"Come to Washington and bring your wife."

"What? Why?"

"She can cure him," Dana answered delicately.

Aw, hell. Dana and Mulder knew about Jen's vampirism. She must mean that Jen can bring Harm across and therefore cure this disease.

"This is her decision, not mine. How long do we have?"

"Two days, maybe. Better hurry, Ryan. Harm will be going downhill soon and rapidly. Emotionally, Diane will be in worse shape."

That was true enough. When I'd left them a few months ago, they were just realizing that a relationship was something that both of them wanted. Harmon Rabb dying now would decimate his Immortal partner.

"Bethesda Medical Center?" I asked, mind whirling.

"Yes. Mulder and I are leaving for a case tomorrow, so we won't be in town."

"I can't promise anything," I said slowly. "It's Jen's choice and Harm's." Dana remained mute, and I took a breath. "We'll get there soon. If nothing else, Diane will need some moral support."

"Yes, she does," Dana said quietly.

"Thanks for the info, Dana. We'll head that way immediately."

"Good luck," was her only response before she disconnected.

"We'll all need it," I commented to the air as I folded the phone. Shaking my head, I stepped back out into the front room. Jennifer was staring at me intently. To Mom and Dad, I said, "Jennifer and I have to go. A friend of ours is dying, and we need to get there."

"Go," Mom answered immediately, standing up. "We'll be here. This friend won't."

Everyone else stood and Jen and I hugged our way to the door. Among promises of keeping in touch, we finally got outside and to our car.

"You heard?" I asked, turning the car back toward our hotel.

"Yes," she answered tensely.

"Any problem with at least going to Washington?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No harm in checking it out. I'll decide more once I meet this Harm and Diane you've told me about. Besides, if Dana's told them more than she should, at least I'll have a chance at damage control."

It sounded cold, but I understood what she was saying. "Dana wouldn't say anything without your permission." I hoped.

We barely beat the dawn into the hotel near Washington National Airport. It'd been a long, quiet drive into Chicago, a mad dash to the plane, and a boring flight. Now we were ready to crash. I would have preferred to go to Bethesda Naval Medical Center immediately, but I knew that if I didn't get at least some sleep, I couldn't function for more than a couple more hours.

So I forced myself to get six hours sleep and then dragged myself out of bed in the early afternoon. Rapidly getting presentable, I left Jennifer in bed and headed out. Going through a drive-thru in an attempt to get something resembling nutrition, I quickly made it to Bethesda and was directed to Commander Rabb's room.

I was still twenty feet down the hall when I ran into Diane's Buzz. Seven more steps and I gingerly opened the correct door and looked in. Harm was in a semi-reclined bed with a multitude of wires and tubes sticking out at all angles. Machines beeped and whirled all around the room. He looked alert, but the bags under his eyes and his chalky skin coloration told me something was definitely wrong. Diane was sitting at his bedside, both of her hands holding one of his.

Both of them looked up at me. Harm smiled, but it looked forced. Diane's own watery smile wasn't much better.

I stepped fully into the room and let the door hiss shut behind me. "Singing telegram," I said with a bright smile that I forced onto my face for their benefit. I stepped to a chair at the foot of the bed and seated myself.

Harm laughed but then winced in pain. When his face cleared, he said, "Now who would send me a singing telegram?"

I smiled at him. "I can think of several people who are reasonably fond of you, Commander. I'll bet a few of your co-workers can stand you as well."

"As long as he isn't blowing holes in courtroom ceilings, there are more than a few of us," commented a stern voice from the door.

Everyone's attention shifted that way. "Admiral," greeted Harm and Diane in unison. Diane continued, "Ryan, this is Admiral AJ Chegwiddden, our boss at JAG. Admiral, this is Ryan Chessman."

I stood and shook the distinguished man's hand. "Sir," I greeted politely.

"Mister Chessman," he responded. He laid his overcoat and hat on the chair I'd just gotten up from and then crossed to behind Diane. "Colonel, I'm here to spell you. You are to leave for at least an hour to get something to eat. I'd prefer that you get some sleep as well, but I suspect that THAT is asking for the impossible."

"Sir, my place is here," she said stubbornly.

"Mac," Harm said softly. "You need to get out of here at least for a little while. Your constitution is legendary, but even you have limits. Get out of here and eat. If you don't, I think that between the Admiral and Ryan, they could physically carry you from the room. If they don't, then I'd get up from this bed and kick your six out myself." Everyone smiled, and he continued, "Now get out of here, Mac. You being here twenty-four hours a day won't help anything. You know that."

"But, Harm -" she objected.

"Mac," I gently interrupted. When she looked over at me, I continued, "You really do need to get out of here. That uniform looks like you've been here a day and a half."

"Thirty-four hours and sixteen minutes," she answered distractedly, turning back to Harm.

I rolled my eyes and continued, "You need to eat and get cleaned up."

She sighed and nodded her head in resignation. Standing, she mumbled, "I'll be right back out."

Everyone's eyes tracked her as she made her way into the bathroom.

"That was too easy," said the admiral.

"She's exhausted," said Harm. "Ryan, thank you for taking care of her."

I nodded. "That's what friends are for, Harm. Anything else I can do for you?"

He grinned, but it lacked the force I'd seen in the past. "You have an immortality serum on you?"

I forced a casual grin. "Fresh out, sorry." I didn't dare look to Chegwidden to see his reaction.

"Then taking care of Sarah will be good enough for now," Harm said.

I nodded.

Chegwidden had been watching all of this quietly. "You seem to know the Commander and Colonel, son," he observed to me.

I nodded. "I used to live here in DC. I met them several months ago." Both statements were true, but the story was much more complicated than that. Besides, Chegwidden didn't need to know the whole truth.

Diane came back into the room and saved me from further conversation. She'd cleaned her face and was looking better, but she was still clearly running on empty.

"Come on, Colonel. First food, then some sleep."

"But -" she objected, coming to a complete halt.

"Go, Colonel, that's an order," said Chegwidden, but the compassionate look took the sting out of the command.

"Go," Harm said more quietly. "I'll still be here when you come back."

"Seems I'm outranked," she said to the ceiling.

"Yes you are, Colonel," agreed the admiral. "Now quit procrastinating. Go."

"Aye, sir," she muttered with a rebellious frown. She turned and slowly headed toward the door.

I started to follow, but she was moving so slowly that it was pointless. "Colonel, either you speed up or I'm going to pick you up and carry you."

She stopped and turned a deadly look to me. Her exhaustion robbed the look of some of its effect, but the intent still came through loud and clear. "You wouldn't," she stated.

"Care to test that hypothesis?" I asked calmly without batting an eyelash.

"Colonel, go," repeated Chegwidden, losing patience.

She frowned, but then turned and strode from the room without further protest. Throwing a quick wave back to the two men, I followed and caught her before she made it to the elevator. We silently waited for an elevator car to arrive and then entered when it did so. "Our physiology makes us tougher to knock down, but we're not invincible, Diane. You HAVE to eat and sleep. You'll fall over if you don't."

"Harm needs me," she said wearily.

"Harm needs you in one piece. In this shape you're no good to him. If you're still this tired after some food, you're going to get some sleep somewhere. If you refuse, I'm going to kill you and let your body do the work."

She stared at me. "You wouldn't."

"Try me," I fired back. "I will NOT let you fall apart here. Whether you work with me voluntarily or not is irrelevant."

She sighed as the elevator doors opened on the ground level. "Let me get some food and then we'll discuss it."

"Fine," I agreed, "but I hesitate to call hospital cafeteria offerings 'food'."

That finally got a small smile out of her.

We both went through the cafeteria line and seated ourselves in the dining area. I got through my salad and fruit juice quickly enough, but Diane just picked at her spaghetti. "Colonel, either you eat that or I'm going to pin you down and force feed it to you."

"I'd pay good money to see that," put in a voice behind me.

Diane looked up and half smiled at the newcomer. I turned in my seat and was shocked to find myself looking at Clayton Webb.

He smiled at me and stuck out a hand. "Hello. Clayton Webb, State Department."

Diane snorted in amusement. "Like any of us still believe that, Clay."

Frowning in confusion over the whole situation, I stood and shook Webb's hand. "Ryan Chessman," I said.

"Pleased to meet you," he said smoothly, seating himself at our table and stealing the packaged saltines from my tray.

"Are you a friend of Harm and Mac's?" I asked, sitting again and trying to get a hold of the situation.

Diane grunted again, but she smiled at Webb. "Source of most of our headaches, actually. Still, I'm glad you came, Clay."

Webb smiled momentarily before his face fell. "How is he?"

She shook her head with a worried frown. "Not good. The doctors give him less than thirty-six hours until he slips into a coma and then another twelve before he slips away completely." She said it steadily enough, but the hitch in her voice told us everything we needed to know.

"Is there anything I can do?" he asked.

"Do you have a magic cure?" she asked.

Webb flicked a glance at me but shook his head.

She stood and looked down at the two of us. "Then there isn't anything else we can do. If you gentlemen would excuse me, I want to get back to my partner." She turned and strode from the cafeteria with measured steps, head held high. The tense set of her shoulders told us how fragile her control was, though.

We both tracked her with our eyes until she turned the corner toward the elevators. Webb sighed and dropped the cracker package onto Diane's tray. "How is she?" he asked directly.

"Holding herself together through sheer willpower," I answered, shaking my head.

He smiled slightly. "That's our favorite Marine." He cleared his throat slightly and looked at me directly. "Is your wife going to offer him a cure?"

I sighed. "That's up to her. She still hasn't met these two."

He nodded. "If that happens, give me warning," he ordered, slipping me a card. "Out of curiosity, how did you know about this?"

"Dana Scully called me," I answered, slipping the card into my coat pocket.

He nodded. "I should have seen that. Mac no doubt wondered if her Immortality could somehow help cure Rabb. She'd need to talk to an Immortal doctor about that."

I shrugged. "How much do Diane and Harm know?"

He shook his head. "Nothing about Watchers or vampires that we know of."

I sighed and ran a hand over my face. "I'm going back up there. Diane needs moral support at least as much as Harm needs it."

Webb nodded and stood up, picking up Diane's tray as he did so. "I just wish there was something I could do," he said to himself.

We carried our trays to the trash receptacle and cleared off the garbage. "Maybe there is," I mused.

He looked at me. "What might that be?"

"Diane mentioned her teacher, Matt O'Hara?"

Webb shook his head immediately. "Wish I could help there, but he's serving time in Leavenworth penitentiary for stealing the Declaration of Independence. While I probably COULD get him here, I would have to pull more strings than would be healthy for my cover. Besides, it would take too long to do any good."

I'd wondered where I'd heard the name before. Now I remembered that whole mess from a few years ago. "Does Harm have any family?"

Webb grimaced. "His mother and step-father are out of touch while on vacation in Europe. Harm forbade anyone from contacting his grandmother, saying it would probably kill her."

"Stubborn jackass. NOT knowing until it's too late will probably kill her," I grumbled in resignation.

Webb shrugged. "He has Mac. She means more to him than all the rest of us combined."

"Ain't that the truth," I agreed. "Thanks anyway, Webb. I'm going back up. You joining me?"

He shook his head. "I'll be back tomorrow. My being there now would smother him. He'll need the company tomorrow more than right now."

With one final handshake, we parted company. I made it up to Harm's room just in time for Admiral Chegwidden to come out, shaking his head. He spotted me and said, "I thought you promised to keep her out for at least an hour."

I shrugged. "If you and Harm couldn't keep her out, what hope do I have?"

He just shook his head sadly and walked away with a distracted goodbye to me.

I entered the hospital room to find the scene almost identical to when I'd first entered it nearly an hour previously. I wordlessly took the seat at the foot of the bed again.

"What, no singing telegram?" asked Harm with a ghost of a grin.

I smiled back. "Naw, I have a lousy singing voice. I might scare away all the pretty nurses, and then they wouldn't give you any more sponge baths."

Harm's smile grew a fraction and even Diane gave a hiccupping little cough.

A timid tap on the door preceded a kind-faced blonde poking her head around the doorjamb. Immediately behind her was the man I vaguely recalled as being Diane's Watcher.

"Bud, Harriet," greeted Harm with a raised hand.

"Sir," he was greeted, but they were both looking at me in curiosity.

I stood and held out my hand to them. "I'm Ryan Chessman, a friend to Harm and Mac's."

The blonde smiled wide enough to brighten the room. She took my hand and said, "Harriet Roberts and this is my husband Bud."

After shaking hands, I quietly slipped out, knowing that the friends wanted some privacy. As I headed toward the visitor's lounge, my cell phone chirped, earning me a nasty glare from the nurse's station.

I hurriedly pulled the phone out and answered it, "Chessman."

"Hi, it's me," Jen responded. "Where are you?"

I checked my watch and realized it was dusk. She could join me soon and potentially start the discussion with Harm and Diane. "Bethesda, fourth floor visitor's lounge at the moment," I answered, entering the lounge and seating myself in the empty room. "Harm has a couple visitors from work, so I'll be in the lounge for a few. If not, it's room four twenty-one."

"Okay, I'll be there soon."

That was simple enough. Searching through the magazines, the best reading material I could come up with was a fifteen month old "Life".

I was saved from terminal boredom ten minutes later when Jennifer casually walked in. "Hi," she said, taking a seat and propping her feet up in my lap.

I laid a hand across her ankles. "Hey. Something occurred to me a minute ago."

"Congratulations," she said with an impish smile.

I smacked the ankle lightly before continuing, "With all the running around we've done in the past couple days, I never thought to ask you about food."

"I'm fine," she waved it off. "I had something just after I called you."

I nodded. "Okay, then. Unless you have some other suggestion, why don't we go see Harm?"

She nodded and stood before turning to help me up. We walked down the hall hand in hand until we were right on top of Harm's room. His door opened and the Roberts stepped out.

"Oh," Harriet started, colliding with me.

I caught her before she fell against the wall. "Sorry about that. You okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine, Mister Chessman. Just didn't see you there. Hello," she said, smiling at Jennifer.

"First, it's Ryan," I corrected. "Secondly, this is my wife Jennifer."

Harriet smiled charmingly and introduced herself and her husband to Jennifer. Bud glanced at me but turned away immediately.

I tilted my head toward the door and asked quietly, "How's she doing?"

Bud shook his head slowly, and Harriet's eyes misted over. "Not good," Harriet answered.

"I'm afraid she wouldn't survive if the Commander died," Bud said.

Jen and I nodded before the silence was broken by Harriet. "We'd better be going before AJ scares our babysitter too bad. Nice meeting you, Ryan, Missus Chessman."

"Sir, ma'am," Bud nodded to each of us before walking down the hall with his arm around his wife.

"Cute couple," Jennifer commented.

Nodding distractedly, I opened the door to Harm's room and allowed Jennifer to precede me. Once inside, Harm and Diane looked up at us and I started the introductions. "Harm, Diane, this is my wife Jennifer. Jen, this is Diane Schonke, though her current identity is Lieutenant Colonel Sarah MacKenzie, and the tall guy in the bed with the Tom Cruise smile is Commander Harmon Rabb."

Jennifer smiled politely at Diane but focused her attention on Harm, taking in all the various machines. When she wordlessly picked up his chart and started to study it, Harm and Diane turned puzzled frowns on me.

I grinned back. "She's a nurse. I DID tell you about the cute nurses, Harm. I just decided to bring one with me this time."

Jen smiled slightly, but she didn't look up. Diane rolled her eyes. Harm's face had a ghost of a smile on it.

"Besides," I continued to Diane, "getting more opinions IS why you called Dana in the first place, wasn't it?"

She sighed and nodded tiredly, but Harm frowned angrily. "I wondered how you'd heard, Ryan." He turned to Diane and continued, "Why didn't you tell me, Sarah? What were you thinking you could accomplish?"

"She's Immortal and a doctor," Diane defended herself. "I wondered if she knew something that the doctors here didn't. I also was wondering if something about my Immortal physiology could be adapted to save you."

Harm stopped short. "I never thought of that," he admitted. "What did she say?"

Diane shook her head. "She's tried on and off to do something along these lines. Injecting Immortal blood into an mortal doesn't do any good at all. A complete organ transplant could theoretically work, but it has at least as much chance of killing both the donor and recipient immediately as it does of either surviving."

"There's no way to MAKE me Immortal?" Harm asked with a tired sigh.

I shook my head. "Immortals are born with the potential. Nothing can alter that."

He cocked an eyebrow at me and asked, "So am I a potential Immortal?"

Diane's head jerked up and stared at me.

I smiled sadly at her. "Can't detect pre-Immortals?"

She shook her head, hope flaring wildly in her eyes.

I sighed and said to Rabb, "Typically, Immortals don't tell pre-Immortals what they are. However, there is an easy way to know if you aren't. Do you know with absolute certainty who your biological parents are?"

Diane sighed and her head flopped back down into her hands.

Harm looked at her and me in confusion. "Yes. I'm almost identical to my father, so there isn't any possible question."

I nodded. "That proves you AREN'T pre-Immortal. None of us know where pre-Immortals come from. We're all foundlings."

Jennifer had finished going over the medical chart and was now studying Harm and Diane from one of the guest chairs. Harm glanced at her and asked, "Are you Immortal?"

She shook her head. "Nope. I inherited my eyes, hair, and freckles from my Irish father. No chance that I'm Immortal."

"But you married an Immortal," continued Harm. He appeared to be about to continue, but a spasm of pain flashed across his face. His jaw clenched and he pressed himself back into the bed, one hand gripping the bed rail hard enough to squeeze all the blood out of it.

Diane frowned in worry, rubbing one hand along the arm she could reach. "It's okay, Harm. It'll be okay," she whispered.

After fifteen seconds, he started breathing again in shallow pants, perspiration beaded on his forehead. Finally calming down, he smiled sadly at Diane. "No it won't, Mac. You know that."

One tear escaped from her eye to blaze a trail down her cheek.

"Here," he whispered, reaching up with one hand to thumb away the tear.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You must think I'm a big baby for crying like this."

He shook his head, cupping her face in one large hand. "No, Sarah, you are anything BUT a big baby. You're a beautiful, charming woman who I happen to love and I hate to leave."

Jennifer's hand found mine. We were being completely ignored by the two others in the room. Heck, they might not notice a band marching through the room.

taking a steadying breath, Jen said quietly, "You don't necessarily have to leave her."

They both jerked their attentions away from each other and focused on Jennifer. Diane sniffled back another tear, though there were now multiple tracks down her cheeks. Harm's eyes were glistening as well.

I glanced down at Jennifer. "You sure?" I asked her quietly.

"What?" Diane had finally found her voice.

Jennifer nodded up at me. "Yes, I'm sure. I've seen enough to at least offer."

I nodded and took a seat. This was going to take a while.

"Offer what?" asked Diane with a little more force.

Jen leaned back comfortably in her chair. "Immortality."

They both glanced from her to me. "I thought you said there was no way to make me immortal," Harm said to me.

Jen answered, "There isn't a way to make a mortal into an immortal like Diane or Ryan. There is, however, another kind of immortality."

"Before this goes further," I interrupted, "you both have to swear to secrecy. What we're about to discuss is at least as important as immortality. If a nurse, doctor, or visitor comes into the room, we have to stop the discussion."

They both barely nodded to me before turning back to Jennifer. "What are you talking about?" asked Diane with a touch of hope.

Jen took a breath and said clearly, "Vampirism."

Dead silence. After a moment of calm, Diane's aura started flaring wildly, though nothing at all showed on her face.

"You can cure this disease by making me into a vampire?" asked Harm in an amazingly steady voice after almost a minute of silence.

Jennifer nodded.

"How?" asked Diane in a small voice as her Buzz finally settled back down.

I looked at her mildly. "Surely you've heard enough of the vampire lore that you know how a vampire is created."

She stared at me for a moment before turning back to Jen. "You're a vampire?"

Jen nodded again.

More silence punctuated by another spike in Diane's aura.

"This would let me live for more than the next thirty-six hours?" asked Harm eventually.

Jen frowned slightly, and I answered, "'Live' isn't quite the right word. By most medical definitions, Jennifer is dead. She has no heartbeat nor respiration unless she's talking. So she's technically dead but not really. As crude as the term is, 'undead' is as accurate as anything."

They both continued to stare at Jennifer. Jen sighed and stood. Nearing them, she presented her wrist.

After a few seconds of hesitation, Harm leaned forward and pressed a finger to check for a pulse. After a few shifts to try to find one, he finally leaned back and stared at her in shock, mouth slightly agape.

When Diane first touched Jen's wrist, she said, "You're cold."

I nodded. "Without a heartbeat pumping blood, her body's always nearly at room temperature."

Also failing to find a pulse, Diane leaned back in her chair, folding her arms in front of her in a subtly defensive posture. "The stories about vampires make them out to be monsters."

"The Inquisition cured a lot of that," said Jen. "We've learned to blend in much more with society. If we don't give mortals a reason to learn of us or fear us, then we aren't hunted." Instead of taking her own seat, Jen curled up on my lap.

"How many of you are there?" Diane asked.

Jen shrugged. "Thousands worldwide. Every decently sized city in the world has a Community. Some of them have hundreds of individuals."

We all stared at each other for a few moments before a nurse opened the door and stepped in. "Hello, Commander. Time for me to check your vitals." While she fussed around, he continued to stare at Jennifer, completely ignoring the activity. Once done, the nurse turned to Jen and me. "I'm sorry, but the visiting hours are over except for family. I'm going to have to ask you two to leave."

Looking directly into the nurse's eyes, Jen slowly and distinctly said, "It's okay, Nurse. We won't bother anything. It is okay for us to remain as long as we want."

"It's okay for you to remain as long as you want," the poor nurse repeated dully. Shaking her head slightly, she smiled at us and said, "Well, since you're going to be staying, is there anything I can get for you?"

"No, thank you," I answered politely.

"I'll be at the nurse's station if you need anything, then. Good night," she said on her way out the door.

Once the door closed behind her, Diane asked, "What the hell was THAT?"

"The Force can have a strong effect on the weak-minded," I intoned.

Jen grinned slightly and poked me in the shoulder. "Some of us call it a 'Whammy'," she answered the question. "It's basically instant hypnosis."

"Can you imagine how useful that would be during an investigation?" asked Harm with a grin.

Diane rolled her eyes.

I chuckled. "Trust me, that thought has occurred to me more than once. Vampires can be top notch investigators when they put their minds to it."

"Why are you telling us all this?" asked Diane.

"I'm offering Commander Rabb a cure," answered Jen steadily.

"Harm," he corrected. Jen nodded at him in acceptance.

"At what price?" asked Diane. "Call it the lawyer coming out in me, but I need to see all sides of this."

Jen nodded to her. "I wouldn't let him accept it until he's heard all the pros and cons anyway. A truly informed decision is the only way to go." Collecting her thoughts, she said, "Some of the stories about vampires are true, some are false. We DO need to drink blood to survive. We have heightened eyesight and hearing, strength, healing, reflexes, and we can fly. The stories of no reflections, bats, mist, or wolf form are all incorrect. Frankly, I wonder what the person who started those rumors was smoking when they made them up. Anyway, on the down side: religious icons repel us or burn if actually touching us. Sunlight will destroy us quickly. Wooden stakes in the heart will paralyze us, but not destroy us. Garlic is nauseating, but not truly repelling. Beheading will get us, too. On a personal level, I don't feel almost any form of pain, but doing this alters your life on a fundamental level. You would have to completely give up your current life if you did this."

They quietly digested that for a few moments. Jen was dumping this all on them rapidly, but we didn't have all that long. Harm's coloration was shading toward light yellow, proving that his liver was shutting down.

"And then there's that Jedi mind control trick," Harm added. "Do you age? How old are you?"

"We don't appreciably age, no. Personally, I'm in my early thirties. Vampires CAN age indefinitely, though most don't. Eventually, most get too bored to continue and suicide. That, or are destroyed by a younger vampire moving up in our social ladder. As for that 'mind control' as you put it, I have to be careful using it. All Immortals and some mortals are immune to its effects."

Diane seemed slightly relieved to hear she was immune to it. "Why would all Immortals be immune, do you think?" she wondered.

"My own pet theory revolves around force of will," I joined the conversation again. "Call it ego if you want, but for one of us to survive all that we do, we have to have a strong sense of self. That kind of mental armor is protection from the Whammy, though a vampire can still use it to influence a WILLING Immortal."

"Should I ask how you would know that?" Harm asked.

I blushed. The story had to do with the first time Jen got me into bed, but I wasn't about to tell him that.

"Never mind," he grinned slightly. "Based on your expression, I can guess."

I blushed deeper. Diane chuckled.

"Okay, now what?" asked Harm, getting back to the focus of the discussion.

"Now you decide if you want this," Jen answered. "I wish you had more time, but the fact is that you really don't. You have less than twenty-four hours in which you can still make decisions. Make no mistake, this is a one way deal. You CAN'T be cured of this disease without turning you into a vampire, and that is a permanent condition. Vampirism has no 'cure'."

Harm sunk into thought, staring out the small window and into the darkness beyond.

Diane asked, "How did you become a vampire?"

Jen shook her head. "I was caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. I got in the way of a vampire who was being chased by our police force equivalent for breaking our laws. He thought that taking a mortal hostage would slow them down. When it didn't, he broke my neck. This was the only way to save me. That was nearly ten years ago, now."

"Do you regret it?" Diane asked curiously.

Jen's eyes took on a vacant stare. "Yes and no," she finally answered. "There are a lot of bonuses to this life, not the least of which is marrying the man I love, who won't age." I laid a hand on her arm which she covered with one of her own hands before going on, "Parts of it are an ugly life. I had to dramatically change the direction my life was going. I have to drink BLOOD to survive." She sighed and added, "And I know that some of that blood was not taken from willing volunteers." She stared down at her now clenched hands and quietly continued, "I will never watch a sunset, nor go swimming on a lazy summer afternoon. I'm in constant danger of discovery and violent persecution. Whenever someone learns of my nature, there is the chance that they will go running off, screaming in terror, only to return later to destroy me." She looked up and smiled sadly at Diane. "Does that answer your question?"

Diane smiled compassionately back.

Harm looked up and studied the two women. Taking a breath, he said, "Ryan, Jennifer, could I talk with Mac for a few minutes?"

We nodded and stood up. "I need to find some caffeine, anyway," I said. Checking my watch, I asked, "Half an hour?"

At Harm's nod, Jen and I quietly left. I led her back toward the lounge, stopping at the vending machines long enough to buy a Pepsi. Once we were seated in the waiting area, I asked, "What do you think?" I twisted the cap off the small plastic bottle and took a drink of the sugar and caffeine. I was running on too little sleep, and I still needed to function for at least a while.

Jen shook her head at my question. "We just don't have the time for them to delay deciding this," she mumbled, mostly to herself. She shook her head again and continued in a normal tone, "I hesitate to bring him across myself. Being so much smaller and female, he probably wouldn't respect me, and that will cause problems."

I shook my head. "The female part probably won't matter. He respects the hell out of his partner, but you're probably right that he may not pay enough attention to you based on the fact that he's nearly a foot taller."

She nodded. "So I was planning on asking Uncle Nick to come. However, even if I got in touch with him immediately, there's no guarantee that he could get here before dawn. Unfortunately, tomorrow night after a flight may be too late for Harmon Rabb."

I frowned. "Does he have to be conscious?"

She shook her head. "No, but I don't know what the process will do to him if he's on death's doorstep, so to speak. Trying to bring him across my kill him outright if he's close enough to death. I just don't know."

I pulled out my cell phone and handed it to her. "Call Nick and find out if he can come tonight or tomorrow night. Better first ask if he's willing to do this, though. I recall that he has moral objections drinking human blood anyway."

She nodded and dialed the phone.

Apparently, she caught him still at home. After quickly explaining the situation, she listened for a few seconds before saying goodbye and hanging up. She laid the phone on the table beside herself. "He's going to check flights and call us back."

I nodded and stood to turn on CNN. Sitting here brooding over everything won't do anybody any good. I might as well catch up with world events.

After ten minutes of useless information, the phone rang, prompting Jen to snatch it up. After a quick conversation, she thanked her pseudo uncle and hung up. "His flight leaves Toronto in two hours. If we don't need him, he can cancel up until he boards."

I nodded. "Well, that's the best we can hope for. Nat coming with him?"

She nodded. "Yeah. Turns out that they're on a week's vacation."

I winced. "They didn't have to take time out of their vacation to do this, did they?"

She shrugged. "That's what family's for, Ryan. If the situation was reversed, would you go?"

I grinned sheepishly. "Yeah, I guess I would."

"There you go, then." She checked the clock on the wall and said, "Fifteen minutes still." Folding the phone, she tucked it back into my coat before curling her feet under herself and leaning into me as much as the cramped couch would allow.

The clock still had five minutes to go when Diane's Buzz walked into range. She entered the lounge and took a seat on the wall facing us. Leaning her head forward, she scrubbed her face with her hands for a moment before the arms dropped to rest across her knees. She looked up at us with an expression that I couldn't begin to decipher and said, "He's made his decision."

Chessman Chronicles Harm's Decision

Jen and I sat in the Bethesda waiting room while Harm and Diane talked over the proposition Jennifer had dumped on them twenty some minutes ago. I'd given up on CNN and the old magazines and was now just leaning back on the couch and relaxing.

My eyes snapped open at the approach of a Buzz. Since I was expecting it, it took only seconds for me to identify Diane. Stealing a quick glance at the clock on the wall, I realized that there were still five minutes left of their initial half an hour.

Diane entered the lounge and took a seat on the wall facing us. Leaning her head forward, she scrubbed her face with her hands for a moment before the arms dropped to rest across her knees. She looked up at us with an expression that I couldn't begin to decipher and said, "He's made his decision."

I studied her completely blank expression for a few more seconds, waiting for her to finish. When the silence continued to stretch, I prompted, "And the answer is . . ."

"He accepts," she stated quietly, staring at a spot on the wall near Jen's head.

I shared a concerned look with Jen. Diane wasn't giving us any of the reactions we'd expected under the circumstances. Reaching into my coat, I pulled my cell phone out and handed it to Jennifer. Standing, I held my hand out to Diane and quietly said, "Let's go talk to him."

She looked up at me and then frowned at my hand.

Recognizing that she was exhausted almost beyond the edge of rational thought, I slowly reached forward and took her left hand, pulling her to her feet. She didn't resist, numbly following my lead when I led her back out into the hall.

As we walked past the nurse's station, I asked them, "Could someone bring a cot into Commander Rabb's room? Colonel MacKenzie needs some sleep."

One of the nurses nodded and moved off down the hallway as Diane started to protest. "I do NOT need sleep, Ryan. I need to -"

"You DO need sleep," I interrupted. We stepped into Harm's room and I firmly steered her to one of the chairs. "You sit there until the cot gets here, then you'll lie down on that and SLEEP."

Folding her arms across her chest, she glared up at me, but gave a grudging nod.

Harm chuckled slightly from where he was reclining on the bed.

She turned her glare upon him. "Don't you start, Harm," she warned, though her glassy-eyed stare took the sting from the comment.

"Yes, ma'am," he shot back with a smile that quickly changed to a grimace of pain.

Diane was up in a second and by his bedside. She gently pushed a lock of his hair from his face and frowned in worry until he relaxed and opened his eyes again. "Can I help?" she asked quietly.

He just shook his head, breathing shallowly.

Jen walked into the room quietly and took the seat that Diane had so recently vacated.

"Now what?" Harm asked.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Jen asked.

Harm looked up into Diane's eyes. Staring at her, he quietly answered, "Yes."

The door opened again and an orderly pushed a cot into the room. He looked surprised to see Jen and myself in the room this late at night but said nothing about it. "Someone wanted a cot in here?" he asked.

I nodded and pointed to the empty corner. Diane and Harm never looked up from their intense gaze.

He wheeled the cot over and unfolded it, locking the legs in place. Thanking him, I followed him to the door and closed it behind him. Coming back over to Diane, I gently touched her shoulder. That apparently broke the trance that both she and Harm had seemingly fallen into. They both blinked and turned their attention to me. I gently steered Diane over to the cot. She balked at it again, but I pushed her down. "At least lie down, Diane. The next twelve hours are going to be hectic enough. We have a few hours of calm. We'd better make the most of it."

Harm frowned at me slightly as Diane laid down grudgingly.

Jen answered his unspoken question. "I called a friend of mine in Toronto. He'll be here in four hours."

Diane propped herself up on one elbow. "Humor me. Why are we waiting on him?"

Jen looked over at her consideringly for a moment before asking, "Do you really want to know?"

Diane's eyes narrowed slightly, and she nodded.

Jen shrugged and said, "I'll probably bring him over myself, but Uncle Nick needs to train him."

They both blinked at her. "Uncle Nick?" they chorused.

"Long story," I said, trying to head off the conversation.

It didn't work. "Your uncle is a vampire?" asked Diane.

I sighed, resigning myself to their curiosity. "Not even that simple. He's Jen's sire's sire's husband's student's husband."

They both cocked their heads at me and tried to sort that one through. "What?" asked Harm.

Hell, might as well step them through it. Harm's likely to meet them all anyway, and we have the time at the moment, I thought to myself. "When a vampire brings someone across, they're called the sire of that new vampire. Jen's sire is Michelle. Michelle's sire is Theresa. Theresa's husband is the Immortal Aaron. Aaron's student is Natalie. Natalie's husband is the vampire Nick, who is coming in four hours."

"With Natalie," added Jen, nodding at my recital.

Diane was frowning. "Aaron and Natalie are Immortal teacher and student?" At my nod, she continued, "Matt never told me that student, teacher relationships were that close."

I shook my head. "Mostly they aren't, but everyone likes Terry and Aaron so much that we've all kinda built up this 'family', for lack of a better term. Terry's occasionally told me to call her 'Grandma Terry' like almost everyone else in the family does."

Harm was puzzling through that for a few seconds before he smiled charmingly at Jen. "Does that mean I get to call you 'Mom'?"

Diane slapped a hand over her mouth to contain the laughter. I wasn't quite so quick, and it came out as an undignified snort before I stifled it. Jen turned an acid glare onto me before looking at Harm. "Go to sleep," she commanded.

He passed out immediately.

Diane gasped and bolted upright. "What'd you do!?"

"Put him to sleep," replied Jen with a slight shrug.

"But . . ."

Jen shook her head. "He needs it. Once Nick gets here, I'll wake him up and talk to him again, but until then he needs to conserve his energy." She gave Diane a level stare and continued, "And so do you."

Diane set her mouth stubbornly.

Trying to head off the storm I could see gathering on her face, I said, "Diane, while Jen and Nick are talking to Harm, you, Nat, and I need to talk as well. You need to decide what you're going to do."

After she finished checking that her partner was indeed sleeping peacefully, Diane slowly got back onto the cot. "What do you mean?" she asked me distractedly.

I pointed to Harm. "He has to leave his life," I explained to her. "You need to decide what you're going to do about it."

She frowned at me, finally giving me her full attention. "What? Why?"

I rolled my eyes. It was probably the lack of sleep, but she was being incredibly dense. "No sunlight, liquid diet. How long do you think that'll take before it becomes a serious problem for him in the Navy?"

Her lip twisted in annoyance, but she nodded in recognition.

Getting her acceptance, no matter how grudging, I continued, "Since he's dying of this weird disease anyway, that'll close out the Harmon Rabb identity quite nicely. We'll just have to figure out how to get him out of the hospital."

"Leave that to Nick and me," Jen said with a thoughtful look.

I glanced at her briefly. "I don't want to know. Anyway, that leaves you, Diane."

The woman in question blinked. "Me?"

I nodded. "You. Question one: You going to stay here or go with him?"

"He can't stay here?" she asked, sitting up on the cot.

Hadn't we already gone over this? I sighed. "If he were to 'miraculously' survive, all his friends would wonder why he had quit JAG. They'd all try to see him. No, it's much safer if he were to die now."

She frowned but slowly settled back down. "I guess I can see that. I'm going with him, to answer your question."

I nodded. That was exactly the answer I was expecting. Now for the tricky part. "Were you planning on leaving this identity behind?"

She cocked her head slightly. "Yes."

"Do you believe in fading into obscurity, or killing your identity?"

She shook her head immediately. "Killing her. Matt had too many stories of being tracked down by friends if they thought he was still alive but had just moved."

I nodded, agreeing with that philosophy. Come to think of it, it was getting time for me to move on myself. 'Ryan Chessman' had almost outlived his usefulness. I gave myself a mental shake. That was a problem for another day. "Okay, how should we kill off Lieutenant Colonel Sarah MacKenzie in a way that doesn't generate questions or problems?" I smiled at Diane shortly. "Or involve too much pain," I added.

"I have an idea on that," Jen interjected. When Diane and I turned our attention to her, she continued, "You and Harm are obviously close. Do all of your friends know that?" At Diane's slight smile and nod, Jennifer nodded back. "Good. My plan will work, then."

"Should I ask?" I wondered out loud.

"Don't worry about it," Jennifer soothed me. "I'll tell you what you need to know when you need to know it."

"What about me?" Diane asked.

"I'll explain it later."

Diane started frowning again.

I said, "I trust Jennifer. If I don't need to know, then there's a reason. She won't do anything without your full knowledge and approval, Diane."

At Jen's confirming nod, Diane settled back down. "What are you going to do about Harm?"

Jen said, "Once I bring him across, he won't be a problem. We can just find someone who's about to be cremated, replace that body, and put him into Harm's morgue tray. They'll have cremated SOMEONE, and since it wasn't who they thought, they'll assume it's Harm."

"Where're you going to get a body for them to cremate?" Diane asked warily.

Jen stared at her levelly. "You don't want to know."

Diane shivered but plunged ahead. "Just promise me it won't be an innocent person who doesn't have to die."

Jen relaxed. "No problem there."

I stared at Jen, wondering if I wanted to know. Probably not, I finally decided. Jen had cleaned up after several of my fights over the years, so I really didn't want to question too closely where those bodies went, or where this one would be coming from.

Diane nodded, apparently taking Jen at her word. Leaning back into the cot again, she rubbed one tired hand over her eyes and asked, "Okay, now what?"

"Now you go to sleep," I said.

Diane frowned at me. "But -" she started to object.

I interrupted, "No buts. You're going to need the sleep. Besides, we're waiting on Nick now, and I have a few things I need to do."

She grudgingly nodded laid down on her cot. Jen and I watched her fall asleep in seconds.

Jen turned to me with a raised eyebrow. "That's trusting of her, falling asleep with another Immortal in the room."

I shrugged slightly, standing up. "She's exhausted. Before you got here, she said she'd been going non-stop for going on thirty-seven hours now. It was bound to catch up with her eventually." Switching tracks, I asked, "You okay in here with them for a while?"

She nodded and pulled a paperback novel out of the small backpack that she'd discreetly brought with her.

"Okay, then," I said, knowing that with a Danielle Steele book in her hands, she could be oblivious to the world for hours. "If I could have my phone

back, I need to make a few calls. Do you have everything set up that you need?"

She nodded again, digging the phone out of the bag before curling her legs up under her as she settled into the chair she was sitting in. "I arranged what Nick and I needed before I came back in here."

"I'm going to arrange hotel rooms and pick up Nat and Nick at the airport. Direct flight into National?"

At her nod, I gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and headed out of the room.

I was quietly sipping my soft drink in the main seating area of the airport food court when Clayton Webb collapsed into the chair across the table from me. "Do you have any idea what time it is?" he demanded of me.

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Good evening, Webb. How're you doing?"

He glared balefully at me, clearly exhausted but still looking as impeccable as ever.

I sighed. "Sorry, but this can't wait. You told me to warn you if Jen was going to do anything to Rabb, didn't you?"

Webb groaned and leaned forward so his face rested in his hands.

"Can I get you anything?" I offered, knowing I had just ruined his entire evening.

"Scotch, neat," he answered distractedly, pulling out a cell phone.

I chuckled. "I can do that, but I think coffee is more in line right now, don't you?"

He grunted and started punching buttons on the phone. "Double espresso with a pinch of nutmeg."

I rolled my eyes at him. "We aren't in a posh restaurant here, Webb. Bar coffee, McDonald's, or Starbuck's?"

He shuddered slightly. "Anything at Starbuck's." Someone apparently answered on the other end of the phone, because he suddenly started barking orders into it.

I quietly stood and made my way over to the Starbuck's counter. One nice thing about major airports was that everything was open twenty-four hours. After getting him a large cup of a randomly chosen flavor, I walked back over to our table to find him still on the phone. Depositing his coffee in front of him, I went over to the hot pretzel place and bought a cinnamon and a glazed pretzel. Coming back to the table, I caught Webb just hanging up his phone. I placed both pretzels down and reclaimed my seat.

He looked from the pretzels back up to me. "Is this supposed to be some sort of peace offering?"

"No, it's a bribe," I fired back immediately.

He smiled slightly and pulled the glazed pretzel toward himself. Tearing off a small piece, he popped it into his mouth and asked, "What're you bribing me for?"

"Dragging you out of bed in the middle of the night," I answered, taking a bite of the cinnamon treat.

"I told you to," he pointed out.

I nodded and continued, "I also wondered if you knew somewhere we could use just for a couple days. We could stay in a hotel, but I've been told that the first couple hours after Harm's been brought across could be . . . messy," I finished delicately.

He blanched slightly but didn't look away. "I'll see if there's a Council or Agency home nearby that you can use." After swallowing the next piece, he asked, "You have new identities made up for them?"

I shrugged. "Neither Jen nor I know of anyone. I was going to ask Nick Knight who he uses or maybe call Aaron and Terry."

"Good choices, but I can take care of that."

I looked up from my rapidly disappearing pretzel. "Okay, but why? Isn't that breaking your oath?"

He smiled slightly. "I owe Harm and Mac. If this is to help repay some of that debt, I may as well do it right."

"Nice to have friends in high places," I commented. "Let me know about that house real soon. We're going to have to do this tonight. Harm doesn't have any more time than that."

His eyes widened slightly and he pulled his phone out immediately. "I didn't realize you were going to do this tonight," he muttered, rapidly punching numbers.

I finished off my pretzel and checked on Nick and Nat's flight while Webb was still on the phone. He finally folded the instrument shut and tucked it away again. He pushed the pretzel wrapper he had been using as a notepad toward me. "There's the address of a place near Bethesda. It'll need to be used in three days, but you can have it for the next two. Identities will be done in four. Are all of you going to be okay with hotel rooms for a few

days?"

I nodded, examining the address. I recognized the street name, so I figured I could find it easily enough. Folding the page carefully, I placed it into my pocket. "You realize we're going to have to explain the Watchers to them."

Webb winced. "Harm at least, yeah. Vampires can spot us too easily. Just don't mention me or who her Watcher is unless you absolutely have to do so."

I nodded agreement and stood up. Offering him my hand, I said, "Thanks for seeing me, Webb. And on Harm and Diane's behalf, thank you."

He stood and solemnly shook my hand. "They're the closest things to friends that I have. I owe them this much and more."

I smiled slightly. "Go visit them sometime once they settle someplace."

He gave me a partial grin. "Perhaps I'll do that."

An hour later found me watching people exit the Canada Air flight direct from Toronto. Natalie's Buzz hit me a few seconds before I spotted her and Nick. He spotted me first and quietly pointed me out to his wife. She visibly relaxed once she spotted me. I stepped toward them and smiled. "Welcome to Washington, DC."

"Hi, Ryan. How're you doing?" Nat asked me as we started to slowly follow the crowd to the luggage carousels.

"Jen and I are doing good. I wish I could say the same for Harm and Diane, though." Shaking off the depressing thought, I said, "I'm sorry to ruin your vacation like this, but both Jen and I thought that you could do a lot better with Harm than she could, Nick."

Nat nearly bristled. "Why, is he sexist?"

I shook my head immediately. "No, it's just that he's over six feet tall. Being so much taller and heavier than Jen, and with her decided lack of fighting skills . . ." I trailed off, hoping Nick would pick up the thread.

He did. "I would be a much better teacher than Jennifer. That makes sense. And don't worry about the vacation. We didn't have anything planned anyway."

"Speak for yourself," Nat muttered.

I shot her a sideways glance and let the ghost of a grin appear. "Don't worry, I'll make sure you two have a private room."

She blushed scarlet, and Nick smiled a tiny smile. "So what's the plan?" Nat asked, trying to change the subject.

I let it slide. "I have a place lined up where the six of us can stay for a few days. Nat, you and I will probably need to be able to get Diane after her current persona is killed sometime later this morning, probably after sunrise. I don't know exactly how that'll work, but Jen says she has a plan. Nick, Jen said she'll need your help at the hospital." I glanced at him for a moment as we waited for the luggage conveyor to start up. "Jen seems reluctant to ask you this question, but I'm not. Don't you want to bring Harm across yourself?"

He shook his head sadly. "I haven't had much luck in producing a child."

I frowned slightly. "What do you mean?"

Nat answered, studying Nick's melancholy face, "He brings them across easily enough, but bad luck seems to keep hounding him. None of his children seem to last very long." She sighed and dropped her eyes to the ground. "Like Richard."

"I tried," Nick whispered, still with his faraway stare.

Nat wrapped her arms around him and rested her head against his chest. His arms came up around her automatically while she whispered in reply, "I know you did. I don't blame you, and you shouldn't blame yourself for what happened, Nick."

I was clearly missing some important information here, but it was just as clearly personal. Sidestepping the entire conversation, I asked, "So you'd prefer that Jen bring him across, then?"

Nick nodded.

I was saved from aggravating the mood further by the carousel starting up. Nick deftly inserted himself into the crowd and plucked their suitcases out of the stream flowing past. While he was doing that, Nat had slipped over to the security counter and retrieved her sword case. By the time Nick reappeared with a couple handfuls of luggage, Nat was done with her chore, and I led them out to my rental car.

Time to get this show on the road.

Nat, Nick, and I stepped off of the elevator at Bethesda's fourth floor. I turned toward the ICU and Harm's room.

"I'm sorry, folks, but visiting hours are over," stated one of the nurses at the station as we trooped past.

I sighed in aggravation. It looked like it was a whole different shift, so none of them would recognize that I'd been there earlier. Deciding to try on the sympathetic approach, I approached and dropped my voice. "Nurse, I was here earlier with Commander Rabb. I left to pick these two friends of his up from the airport."

She shook her head stubbornly. "I'm sorry, sir, but nobody except Colonel MacKenzie is allowed to be in with him."

I lowered my voice a little more. "You know and I know that he is dying. Are you really going to prevent his friends from seeing him?"

I saw her look over my shoulder at Nat and Nick. I hoped Nick heard what I was saying and was acting appropriately. His expression must have helped, because I could see the nurse's resolve wavering.

"Tell you what," I offered, pressing her a little more, "if he asks any of us to leave, then we will, no questions asked. Good enough?"

She finally caved in and nodded. Getting her permission, I led Nat and Nick to the correct door and softly knocked. Jennifer opened it up immediately and smiled at all of us. "Come on in," she offered.

I entered and immediately approached Diane, who was stumbling off the cot, clearly just waking up after the approach of two Immortals. "It's okay, Diane," I assured her. "Natalie's a friend." I turned around just in time to see Jen release Nick from a hug. Nat hesitantly stepped forward at my urging. "Natalie Lambert, meet Diane Schonke." The two women seemed a little wary of each other, but obligingly shook hands. "And this is Nick Knight," I continued when he stepped forward. He also shook her hand with a charming smile.

Nat had started looking over Harm once she released Diane's hand. "Is he naturally asleep?" she asked quietly.

Jen answered in a normal tone, "No, I put him to sleep."

Nat looked over at her with a tilted head. "Why?"

"He asked if he should refer to her as 'mom'," I answered with a grin.

Nick's mouth twitched, and Nat smiled. Jen just rolled her eyes.

Nick leaned against the wall away from Harm's bed and said, "You'd better wake him up. We need to talk with him."

Diane immediately moved to Harm's bedside again. Jen smiled at her approvingly before walking to Harm's other side. She leaned over him and kissed him lightly. "Wake up, my handsome prince," she said softly.

Harm began to stir as Diane glared at Jen and I looked to her with a frown. "Hey," she said with a shrug, "I always wanted to play a part in a fairy tale." Nat giggled, and Nick suppressed a grin.

I shook my head and chuckled lightly. "You're impossible," I told Jen affectionately.

She smiled brightly and shrugged in response.

Diane looked like she was going to say something but Harm's groan and raspy, "Mac," redirected her attention to him.

"I'm here, Harm," she said, holding his hand and stroking a lock of hair out of his face.

"You won't believe the crazy dream I had," he said, looking only at her. "Someone offered me immortality, but I had to die first. Sounds crazy, huh?" His voice was soft but scratchy.

Diane shook her head and looked up at everyone. Harm followed her gaze and gave a small start of surprise when he saw four more people in the room. When his eyes stopped at Jen, she shrugged slightly and said, "It wasn't a dream."

He sighed.

Jen waved at Nat and Nick and said, "Harm, meet my uncle Nick Knight and his wife Natalie Lambert."

"The vampire and Immortal you told us about?" he asked hoarsely.

"That would be us," Nick confirmed, offering Harm his hand.

Harm shook it and then let his arm collapse to his chest. Even after his little nap, he was still clearly exhausted. "Could someone explain to me again why we need so many people here?"

Jen answered, "Nick will be training you. I'll bring you across."

"Why couldn't he bring Harm across or you train him?" Diane asked, pointing first at Nick then Jen.

"Because I have a moral aversion to drinking human blood," Nick answered part of the question.

"And I can't train him very well," Jen answered the rest.

Diane stared at Nick. "A vampire who doesn't drink human blood?"

Four pair of eyes narrowed at the implications.

Natalie took up the tale. "Not all vampires are the blood- sucking monsters that Hollywood has made them out to be. If you had that attitude, why did you agree to this?"

"Desperation?" Diane asked after a few moments of thought.

"I can't stand to see Mac cry," Harm stated.

Diane coughed out a moment of laughter. "Dream on, stick- boy."

He smiled at her sadly. "Seriously, I can't give her up."

"And I can't live without him," Diane added softly.

They continued to stare at each other for a few more moments before Nick discreetly cleared his throat to remind them that there were others in the room.

Both of them jerked their attention back to us. Diane was slightly flushed.

"Before I allow this to happen, I have to know that you've thought this through."

"Before you ALLOW?" bristled Diane.

Jen said calmly, "Yes, allow. He's senior in the room. One thing Harm will have to learn is that it's unwise to cross a vampire older than you are."

Diane didn't seem to calm down, so Nick said, "What Jennifer said is technically correct, but rest assured that I won't force anything. I phrased it badly. All I was asking was if you've both thought this through."

Diane slowly calmed down. Harm was looking at Nick appraisingly. "How old are you?" he asked.

I looked around the room momentarily when Nick refused to answer. Five of us on both sides of forty, five times forty is two hundred . . . "If you take all the rest of our ages together and multiply THAT by four, then you're in the right area."

Harm blinked. "Wow," he said, looking at Nick.

Natalie shrugged. "My teacher is a great deal older than Nick is. Immortals and vampires can age indefinitely. There's a rumor of an Immortal that's five thousand."

Harm and Diane began staring at her. "Wow," Diane said.

I held my peace. It wouldn't help matters if I told anyone that I knew Methos.

"Back to you two," Nick said with a menacing glance at me for my revelation of his age before he returned his attention to Harm and Diane. "You understand he will forever need to drink blood to survive and avoid sunlight, right?"

They nodded, but Diane was frowning. "You don't drink human blood?"

It must be the lawyer in her. She wouldn't let an idea go until it was answered, I mused.

Nick rolled his eyes and sighed. "No, I don't. I've done enough harm to humans over the years. I won't do more if I don't have to."

"What DO you drink then?" asked Harm.

"Cow."

Diane suddenly giggled.

Everyone looked at her. She was looking at Harm with a grin. "All those times you teased me for eating dead animal . . ."

Harm's frown slowly cleared, and he chuckled slightly. "I guess I'll have to give up my vegetarianism."

I groaned. "God, how can you eat that rabbit food? You're as bad as Dana."

Natalie frowned. "Dana?"

I waved her off. "Dana Scully. Another friend here in Washington."

Natalie nodded and smiled slightly.

Nick rolled his eyes at all of us. "Back to the topic," he nearly growled.

I held my hands up. "Okay, okay."

Jen smiled a little at my gesture and said, "Ryan, Natalie, I need to talk to you anyway."

Shrugging my acceptance, I held the door for the two ladies and we all trooped back to the waiting room.

"What's up?" Natalie asked once we made it.

Jen closed the door and took a seat next to me on the couch. "I've got a plan to help Diane close out her current identity. If the timing works out right, it'll be after dawn, though. So I'm going to need you two to help."

"Sure," I answered. "What do you need us to do?"

"Find a way to get ON the Potomac, downstream from the Memorial Bridge, but out of sight of it. I'll call you when I have some idea of when you need to be there."

Nat and I stared at her. "Should I ask?" Natalie finally queried.

"Diane's body will float past you at some point. Grab it and get to the hotel as quickly as you can. No telling when Harm will wake up."

"House," I corrected, pulling a handy notepad over and copying down the address. "I arranged a house for all three of us to stay in for two days." I tore off the top sheet and handed it to Jen. She glanced at it and pocketed the sheet.

Natalie rose her eyebrows at me. "House?"

"Hotel walls are thin. I was afraid of Harm making too much noise once he woke up. So I had an acquaintance arrange a house for us to use for a few days. He's a Watcher who knows about vampires, so he knows why we needed it."

Natalie nodded. "We'll have to tell Harm and Diane about Watchers."

"Harm at least," I agreed.

"Once you retrieve Diane, you need to explain First Hunger to her and get her to the house," Jen went on.

"If she doesn't volunteer, we'll need to make other arrangements," Natalie mused.

I shrugged. "You and I can donate as much blood as needed," I pointed out.

"Agreed, but Diane needs to learn a few things about Harm sooner or later."

Diane walked into our Buzz range, and Natalie and I stiffened in our seats for a moment. I relaxed immediately, and Nat did the same when Diane cautiously stuck her head in the door.

"Can I come in?" she cautiously asked.

"Sure," I invited. "Nick kick you out?"

Diane collapsed into one of the chairs. She nodded and said, "He made it clear that he needed to talk to Harm alone for a while and suggested that I come out here."

"Teaching Harm the secret vampire handshake, probably," said Natalie casually.

"How do you know about that?" Jen asked sharply.

Diane frowned in confusion before I took pity on her. "They're kidding." I paused at the steady looks Nat and Jen were giving me and asked, "Right?"

"I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you," Jen deadpanned.

"Anytime, babe," I fired back.

Diane stared back and forth with wide eyes, and Natalie giggled.

"You're incorrigible," Jen accused me with a small smile.

"Yup," I agreed, smiling back.

"Uh . . ." Diane didn't seem to know what to make of the conversation.

Nat took pity on her this time. "Blood drain won't kill an Immortal permanently. We just wake up thirsty."

Diane shook her head and dropped her head into her hands. "This is just too weird."

We all chuckled. "It gets weirder," Jen promised, "but that's a story for another time. For the moment, I need to talk to you about how to kill off this identity." She studied Diane for a moment before asking, "What are you willing to do for Harm?"

"Anything," Diane answered promptly.

Jen nodded and turned to me. "I won't need you here, then. You and Nat understand what you're doing?"

Natalie took that cue and stood as I did. "I know our orders, but I don't understand them."

Jennifer smiled. "All will be made clear to you in the fullness of time, young Grasshopper," she said mysteriously.

I rolled my eyes at the line.

Jen's smile faded. "Seriously, we don't have a lot of time. I will explain later if you want, but I really don't have the time right now."

Natalie and I nodded. Jennifer clearly had a plan, and neither of us was going to question it. We had our orders, and they were simple enough.

"Diane," Jen continued, "you might want to give Nat your sword."

"Why?" she asked hesitantly.

"It'll weigh you down. Don't worry, you'll get it back later this morning."

Diane shrugged and stood, smoothly drawing her short sword from under her uniform jacket. She laid it down on the table and took her seat again.

Natalie collected it and slid it away somewhere in her trench coat. "Anything else?" she asked Jen.

Jen shook her head. "Nope. See you two later. I'll call you when I know more, Ryan."

I nodded and leaned down to give Jen a peck on the cheek. I nodded to Diane and said, "Good luck. See you later."

Natalie waved at both women as I held the door for her.

As Nat and I walked slowly down the hall side by side, she commented, "She's either brave or foolhardy."

"How so?" I asked, punching the button to summon an elevator.

"Handing her sword over like that?"

I shrugged. "She's desperate. Jen's giving her a way out of this whole situation. She'll do anything asked of her, I think."

She looked at me for a moment before saying, "She must really be in love with Mister Rabb to do that."

I smiled slightly. "What would you do for Nick?"

She nodded as the elevator pinged and the doors opened. "Good point."

Instead of leaving the hospital immediately, we stopped in the cafeteria. We both grabbed a meal (it WAS late in our usual "day"), and I got another soft drink. I was still running short of sleep, and it looked like I was going to be busy for a while more.

Nat and I chatted for a little while. It was an hour yet before dawn, and Jen knew it would be well after that point before we were needed. We had a little time.

We were just dumping our trash when the intercom in the cafeteria area came on. "Doctor Fitzsimmons, code blue in room four twenty-one. Code blue in room four twenty-one, Doctor Fitzsimmons." The words were calm enough, but you could hear the underlying urgency in the summons.

Neither of us mentioned that Harmon Rabb was in room four twenty-one as we quietly left the hospital.

"Explain to me again the plan your crazy wife came up with," requested Natalie two hours later.

I shrugged as I kept one hand on the pilings of the bridge we were under. "I dunno. She just told us to be here and waiting for Diane's body to float by."

"Charming visual. Thank you so much."

"You're the pathologist. You should be used to it."

"Just because I'm used to it doesn't mean I like it," she returned.

I grunted in agreement as my eyes continued scanning the river and my free hand kept hold of the bridge. After Jen's phone call an hour ago, we had ended up stealing a small fishing boat from someone's boat dock and motoring partway up the Potomac River until we stopped here, waiting under another bridge for Diane to come by. I just hoped we could catch her, return the boat, and make it to the safe house without anyone spotting us. This whole thing would be VERY tough to explain to the DC police if we were stopped.

Our patience paid off minutes later. We both felt an on- again, off-again Immortal Buzz. Both of us looked frantically for Diane, knowing that if she

float by, it would be all but impossible to find her in the Atlantic Ocean. Fortunately, Natalie's arm shot out and she exclaimed, "There!"

I followed her arm and saw the back and shoulders of someone floating toward us in the standard "dead man's float" position. I pushed us away from the bridge pilings shortly before the body came even with us, and we drifted toward it. Once we weren't anchored to the bridge, the current caught us and we floated along beside what I assumed was Diane's body. Bracing myself in as wide a stance as I could, I nodded to Natalie. She carefully leaned over and grabbed the floating body by the armpits. Working cautiously and giving me time to adjust to the shifting balance, Natalie slowly dragged what was indeed Diane's corpse into the boat. Once she was lying on the floor of the boat, I tossed a tarp over her and started the motor again.

We had made it less than a mile back towards where we had "borrowed" the boat when Diane's Buzz grew to full strength, and she abruptly sucked in a full breath. She immediately started coughing and retching. That was hardly surprising, really. There was no telling how much water and assorted other junk was in her stomach and lungs. When the coughing jag slowed down, she suddenly started thrashing around under the tarp.

"Easy, Diane," soothed Natalie, recognizing the panic attack for what it was. "It's Natalie and Ryan. You're safe. We're taking you to Harm." Diane immediately calmed down. Natalie clearly knew exactly what Diane had needed to hear. I could hear labored deep breathing punctuated by short coughing fits for a few more minutes before Diane slowly dug her way out from under the tarp.

When Diane's head appeared, Natalie immediately handed her a large towel. "Here. I'm sure you want to dry off some. I have some clothes for you to change into as well. Let me know when you want them."

I resisted the urge to chuckle. Whoever had coined the phrase "drowned cat" could well have had a dripping wet Diane Schonke in mind.

Diane grabbed the towel and buried her face into it for a moment before starting to scrub at her hair. "Thank you," she said to Natalie, holding the towel up slightly.

Natalie smiled. "You're welcome. It didn't take much imagination to guess what your first wishes would be once you woke up."

Diane smiled slightly. "You answered one, and this towel is two. You said something about dry clothes?"

I chuckled. "We'd better wait until we're back at the boat house before you change. I can turn my back, but we ARE on a public waterway."

Diane blushed slightly. "I'll wait, thanks." She stripped off her uniform jacket and dropped the sodden mess onto the floor of the boat. Leaning forward, she dried her legs and then her arms as well as she could.

Natalie grabbed the jacket and unceremoniously dropped it into the water.

Diane looked at her in puzzlement as she dried her hair again.

"Something for searchers to find," Natalie explained. "Hopefully between it and the cap that you've lost somewhere along the line, they'll stop looking for your body sooner than later."

Diane nodded and then wrapped the towel around her shoulders and hunched forward.

When I saw her shiver, I said, "Nearly there, and then you can change into dry clothes."

She nodded but didn't look up from her little ball of shivering misery.

It took only another ten minutes to ease back into the boathouse that we had originally stolen the craft from in the first place. When I shut off the outboard motor, Natalie helped Diane stand and climb out of the boat. While I rinsed off the tarps and replaced everything as closely to where we found it as possible, Diane changed into the sweats that Natalie had brought for her.

Once everything was replaced as well as we could manage, the three of us headed back toward the road to where I had parked the car.

When she saw that we weren't heading to the house, Diane asked, "Where are we going?"

"The car," Natalie answered smoothly.

"Whose house is this?"

I shrugged. Nat answered, "We don't know. Looks like whoever it is, is on vacation, though."

"You stole the boat," Diane stated.

"We borrowed it, yes," I answered.

She made a noise that I chose to interpret as amused tolerance, but she didn't pursue the conversation further.

As we approached the car, I asked Natalie, "You want to drive?"

She shook her head. "You know where we're going. Besides, I can talk to Diane about Harm's First Hunger this way."

Nodding agreement, I unlocked the car and let the two women into the back seat. Dumping the backpack that now contained Diane's soaked uniform into the front seat, I pulled out into the nice neighborhood and turned toward the safe house that Webb had set up for us.

"First Hunger?" Diane asked warily.

Natalie launched into lecture mode. "When a vampire wakes up for the first time, he is ravenously hungry. Quite literally, he will attack and kill the first warm blooded creature to wander in front of him. Ryan and I can donate enough blood to satisfy him, but we need to get back to the house in time for me to set everything up."

"I can donate too," Diane offered.

In the rear-view mirror, I saw Natalie level a stare at Diane. "Or you can let him feed from you directly."

I heard Diane gasp as I returned my attention to the road.

"Isn't that dangerous?" asked Diane.

"Not really," I said. "I've fed Jen any number of times. I'm sure Natalie's done the same for Nick. Dying of blood loss won't keep us down, as Natalie mentioned to you in the hospital."

"What does . . . uh . . ." Diane didn't seem to know how to ask the next question.

Natalie saved her. "Initially it DOES hurt, but only for a moment. Then a sense of peace washes over you. If I do die, it's more like I fall asleep than anything else."

"There's a sensual component to it, as well," I added. "I also wake up very thirsty."

"Okay . . ." Diane eventually said before trailing off.

"But since this is Harm's first feeding, it probably won't be nearly so . . . pleasant," Natalie finally finished.

I could hear Diane's gulp from where she was sitting behind me.

"Unless he tears across the throat horizontally, or gets near the spinal cord, everything will heal. I expect Nick and Jen will want to be in the room when Harm first wakes up, and they both know what to watch out for. They can prevent Harm from doing any permanent damage to you or himself."

Diane was silent for a long moment before asking, "Himself?"

"Once the bloodlust clears, he'll see what he's done to you and he might very well try to kill himself. They can prevent him from doing that."

When Diane stayed silent for a minute, Nat said, "Like I said, Ryan and I can donate the blood to -"

"No," Diane interrupted. "I'll do this for him. I WANT to do this for him."

I nodded, and I expect Nat did too. She said, "One thing you need to be aware of is that when a vampire drinks someone's blood, they get some of that person's memories and sometimes feelings. If there's something in your history that he doesn't know . . ." Nat trailed off, not bothering to spell it out.

"No, there's nothing in my history that he doesn't know. And he already knows how I feel about him," Diane added.

Comparing the house numbers to the note that I pulled from my pocket, I pulled into the driveway of a modest two story home. There were neighboring houses, but the yards were rather wide, so I wasn't too worried about anyone hearing anything. "Here's home for the next two days," I announced.

"What are we going to do here for two days?" asked Diane.

"We will teach you how to live with a vampire, and Nick and Jen will teach Harm how to BE a vampire," Natalie answered.

"Then we move to a hotel for a few more days until your new identities are finished," I added.

"New identities? But how did -"

"You really don't need to know," I interrupted gently.

Diane frowned at me. "How much -"

She stopped when I shook my head. "Don't worry about it." I smiled at her as a thought came to me. "Just you and Harm promise Jen and myself legal advice when we need it, and we'll call it even."

Diane gradually relaxed. She even managed a small smile and said, "Okay, then. I'll stop asking."

I smiled back at her. "That's the spirit."

Both women chuckled as we all got out of the car. I hesitantly approached the house and pushed open the door. "Anybody home?" I called. I assumed all three vampires were in the building, but it wouldn't do to walk in if something had gone wrong.

I was reassured immediately when I heard Nick's voice float out to us. "Come on in."

I held the door for the two women and then followed them in, firmly shutting and dead bolting the door behind us.

"Nobody's here to greet us?" Diane asked.

"Daylight," Natalie explained as she hung up her trench coat.

"Oh, right," Diane said, shaking her head slightly.

"Don't worry about it," I soothed. "I've been with Jen for years, and I still forget some things."

Jen poked her head upstairs from the basement and smiled at the three of us. When her gaze fell to Diane, she asked, "Did Nat and Ryan explain what's about to happen?"

"First Hunger, I think they called it?" Diane asked. At Jen's nod, she continued, "Yes, and I'd like to help him however I can."

Jen smiled. "Good. Come on down." When Nat and I started to follow, Jen held up a hand. "Not you two. Nick and I can handle it. No offense, but you'd only be in the way. Nat, you and Nick are in the first bedroom upstairs. Ryan, we're in the second."

"And me?" Diane asked.

Jen looked at her with a slightly raised eyebrow. "You and Harm can stay together downstairs, or you can take the third bedroom upstairs."

Diane blushed but didn't say anything.

"My, that's a lovely shade of scarlet you're wearing, Diane," Nat teased.

Diane blushed even brighter.

"The women are teasing each other up here, Nick," I called downstairs. "Help me out, would ya?"

Jen smacked my arm as Nick shouted back, "No way! You're on your own, kid."

"Hey!" Nat shouted back down at him with a grin.

We all grinned, and Diane giggled, breaking the tension that the whole situation was slowly building.

Turning serious again, Jen said, "Diane, you'd better come down. There's no telling how much longer until Harm wakes up."

As those two women went back downstairs, I said to Natalie, "I'm going to check the kitchen. We might need to do a stock-up trip."

She nodded agreement, and we scoured through the kitchen cupboards and refrigerator, making a list as we went.

Later with a list firmly in hand, I opened the basement door and called down, "Diane, what's your favorite flavor of those sport's drinks?"

"Orange or lemon-lime, why?"

"Trust me, you're going to need it in the next two days. Nat and I are going to the grocery store. Be back soon."

"We'll be here," Jen answered with a touch of irony in her voice.

Burdened with groceries, Nat and I pushed open the door to the house and entered again. I was surprised to find Nick and Jen sprawled out on the couch, eyeing the shaft of sunlight from the open door warily.

"Hi, honey, I'm home," I quipped, closing and locking the door behind me.

"Hello, dear. Have a nice day at the office?" Nick asked me with a slight smile.

Everyone grinned or chuckled.

"How'd everything go?" I asked tiredly as I started unloading a bag into the fridge.

"As well as could be expected," Jen said with a shrug.

"That's one brave lady," added Nick.

"Everything okay downstairs?" Nat asked around a yawn.

"They're fine. Harm went nuts once he realized he'd killed her. He calmed down when she revived, though. They've been downstairs talking since."

I nodded. "Good." A yawn escaped before I went on. "Second bedroom's ours?"

Nat nodded and waved me on my way. Jen fell into step right behind me as I slowly made my way upstairs.

I stepped out of almost all my clothes and collapsed into bed immediately. As much as I typically enjoyed watching Jennifer undress, I was still asleep before she got to bed.

A scream woke me up.

I was still trying to get my bearings in an unfamiliar room when Jennifer shouted, "Diane!" and flew out of the room.

I stumbled to my feet and bolted for the door. Natalie and I nearly fell over each other on the way down the stairs to the main floor and again on the stairs to the basement. When we finally made it to where everyone else was, it took a few seconds sort out what we were seeing.

Nick and Jen had flown into the room ahead of us and were both collapsed at the base of the stairs, laughing. Diane was sitting on the bed, nearly as pale as the sheets she was sitting on, and staring at the ceiling. I had to tear my eyes away from the sight of Diane clad only in a tight t- shirt and shorts, the sheets and bedspread bunched at the foot of the bed. Chastising myself silently, my eyes followed hers, and I found the source of Jen's amusement.

Harm was plastered to the ceiling. His back was pressed to the smooth surface, and he was spread-eagled and staring downward in shock and fear. His eyes flicked from Diane's panicked face to Nick and Jen to me and Nat in a continuous cycle.

Taking a couple deep breaths to calm my racing heart (ah, adrenaline is a wonderful thing), I fought down my own smile and said, "Hi, Harm. How're you doing?"

He whimpered slightly and carefully inched his way over to the light fixture hanging in the middle of the room. Once there, he screwed his eyes shut, wrapped his arms around the light, and clung to it as if for dear life.

Without anything else to contribute to the odd scene, I sat down on the stairs behind Jen. Nat had sat down next to Nick on the floor and wasn't even trying to fight her tears anymore. She was leaning against her husband and wiping her eyes. Jen and Nick were finally calming down, though. Diane still hadn't moved her eyes away from Harm.

Nick had finally composed himself, and he put an arm around his wife, who was still hiccupping slightly. "Harm, what are you doing up there?"

Harm's only response was a small, frightened sound.

Nick turned his attention to Diane. "What happened?" he asked her.

She slowly shook her head before finally tearing her wide- eyed gaze off of the naval officer currently hunched around the light above her head. "I don't know. I felt him bump me, and it woke me up. I looked for him, but he was gone. I finally spotted him on the ceiling. I screamed, and you all came downstairs."

Nick nodded and looked up at his student.

Diane continued, "Uh, is this," she waved her hand vaguely upward, "normal?"

"Sure is," Jen answered in a steady voice. "He's young and doesn't know how to control himself." She looked up. "Harm."

Harm repeated his small sound. At least he was listening.

"Let me guess," Jen said. "You were dreaming about flying, right?"

Diane gasped, and Harm's eyes flew open to latch onto Jen. "H - How did y - you know?" he asked, stuttering slightly.

She smiled. "Because I did the same thing my first night."

I smiled and leaned back on the steps behind me. "Oh," I said brightly, "I get to hear a story about Jen's formative years."

She glanced at me and said, "Bite me."

"I thought that was my line," I fired back with a wide grin.

Natalie broke out into a fresh round of giggles.

Completely ignoring Natalie and me, Jen turned back to Harm. "So you were dreaming of flying, woke up, and found yourself on the ceiling, right?"

His responding nod was so short that it almost looked like a spasmodic twitch.

Jen's voice took on a slightly different pitch and cadence. From past experience, I knew she was trying to employ a Whammy. How effective it would be against another vampire, I didn't know. This WAS her childe, I reminded myself. Either way, it couldn't hurt. She said, "How were you flying, Harm? Were you a bird, or were you just floating under your own power?"

"F-14," Diane said quietly, eyes back on Harm.

"What was that?" Jen looked over at Diane.

"F-14," Diane repeated, turning her eyes to Jen. "He was a Tomcat pilot before joining JAG."

Jen looked back up at her child. With that same voice, she continued to him, "Is that right, Harm? Were you flying a Tomcat?"

He nodded again. If nothing else, her tone looked like it was calming him down.

Deepening the power of her voice, Jen started talking slowly. "Harmon Rabb, my child, listen to my words. Imagine yourself in the cockpit of your Tomcat. It is a pretty day, not a cloud in sight. The deep blue water beneath you and the azure of the sky above you are old friends. You have nothing to fear from them. You're on your way back from a patrol. Nothing important has happened, but because it is such a pretty day, you're in a good mood. You've been bantering idly with your back-seater, just passing the time until you get back to your carrier, but you're now approaching the carrier. It is time to land your aircraft, Harm. Speak aloud all of your actions as you perform them."

Harm's face had taken on a dreamy smile during Jen's verbal painting. Probably without realizing it, he had released the light but was still pressed against the ceiling.

Harm started muttering to himself, apparently talking through the steps that a Tomcat pilot went through during landing at sea. His hands twitched in time with some of his statements, and other times moved almost as if he were swimming through the air.

Knowing that Jen was "talking him down" (literally), I was not surprised when he started floating down toward the bed in slow motion. As quietly as I could, I walked over and tapped Diane on the shoulder, motioning her off the bed once I had her attention.

As he fell within a foot of the bed, I could see him frowning in concentration. I was concerned about this for a moment before I realized that landing was probably one of the most stressful parts of flying. He was simply feeling the imagined tension of trying to land his airplane.

He continued to drop smoothly until the last inch, which he abruptly dropped with a squeak of the springs on the bed. That jolt startled him out of his trance. He froze in position for a few moments before slowly putting his arms under himself and levering himself into a sitting position.

Diane's chuckle broke the silence.

Everyone looked over at her, a question spread over every face.

"Carrier landing," she said, as if that explained everything.

Harm laughed. "Carrier landing," he agreed, smiling and nodding at Diane.

"Care to let the rest of us in on the joke?" I asked, cradling Jen in my arms from behind.

"Carrier landings are best described as an abrupt jolt," Diane answered with a smile.

Nodding at the information, I smiled at Diane and Harm and said, "Good evening. Sleep well?"

They both laughed, the tension fading. "Yes, actually I did," Harm said.

"Since I doubt any of us are getting back to sleep, who's hungry?" Nat asked.

Everyone raised their hands or nodded.

Nat pointed at Jen and said, "You need to talk to your husband about that." She turned to Harm and said, "Now, Harm, on the other hand -"

"I'll do it," Diane said quietly but firmly. She looked a little pale, whether from what she was agreeing to or from what Nat's words were implying about Jen and me, I couldn't tell.

Harm paled as well. Turning to Diane, he said, "Mac, I won't let you do this."

"Why not?" Jen asked.

"I'll hurt her," Harm replied.

Nat suddenly broke into the conversation, "Diane, come on upstairs with me. We'll get breakfast started." Diane frowned but obediently stood and approached the stairs. Nat quickly whispered into Nick's ear, and he nodded. Nat looked at me and said, "Come on up, Ryan, and -"

"No," Nick interrupted, looking at me and frowning in thought. "He could be useful here for a few minutes." He turned to Jen and smiled slightly. "Could you go with them? We'll all be up in a minute." When Jen didn't answer with any more than a tilted head, he shook his head slightly and said, "It's a guy thing."

Nat cocked her head at her husband for a moment but didn't argue. Instead, she started chatting about something or other as the three women headed upstairs.

"A guy thing?" I asked Nick, trying to fight a smile.

With a sigh, Nick folded his arms and turned to Harm. "A guy thing," he reiterated to me.

"So what is this 'guy thing' among long-lived guys?" Harm asked flippantly, but his eyes betrayed apprehension.

Among Immortal - vampire couples," Nick corrected.

Harm balked. "Who says Mac and I are a couple?"

Temporarily diverted, Nick cocked his head and asks, "Mac?"

I answered the question. "Diane's previous alias was Sarah MacKenzie. Harm called her Mac for short."

Minor mystery solved, Nick nodded and looked at Harm with a smile trying to tug one corner of his mouth upward. "As to you two being a couple: the evidence is compelling."

"Oh?" Harm asked, with a slight challenge in his voice.

Grinning, I jumped in. "I'll start at the obvious. She said you bumped her and she woke up, so you were both in the bed. You two shared a bed all night, despite the fact that you both knew that there was another bedroom available upstairs." I indicated the bed with a wave of my hand. "Based on the single large indentation in the middle of that bed, you two had to be curled up pretty tight." I turned to Nick, ignoring the panic-stricken look that Harm was developing. "Did I miss anything?"

Nick nodded. "Harm, I'm sure you're aware that vampires have increased senses. Sight, taste," he paused slightly, "smell." He paused longer, and his stare bored into Harm. "Hearing."

I stifled the serious case of the snickers that was threatening me.

"Okay, okay," Harm muttered, waving one hand and then bringing it to his forehead in an obviously embarrassed manner. "You two have made your point. Yes, Mac and I ARE a couple. Happy?"

"Actually, yes," Nick said, relaxing his penetrating glare. "It makes the rest of this easier. You're hesitant to drink from Diane, and she's scared of the same. You'll be happy to know that under the right circumstances, drinking from her isn't so . . . traumatic as it was the first time."

Harm cocked his head in silent query.

"Three ways that I know," I said. "You can try to relax her with your voice first. Since she already trusts you, that'll be easier than it sounds. The other two methods are something that Nick may have to teach you; I don't know. Anyway, from the Immortal's point of view, the initial moments are painful, but then it becomes calm and peaceful, or almost . . . erotic," I finished delicately.

Nick nodded and picked up the thread. "That's what Nat says, too. She'll still be weakened or 'die', so to speak, but don't think that it's unpleasant."

"I'll say," I second with a wide grin and wagging eyebrows.

Nick rolled his eyes at my over-acting before continuing. "Ryan was right about one point, though. If you don't control yourself, it WILL be unpleasant for her. It all has to do with speed and mental attitude. Take it slow, and think about not trying to cause pain, and it's easier on her. I'm sure you can figure out how to make it downright pleasant from there. Though it may take some practice."

I was impressed at how Nick managed to keep a straight face with that last line.

Harm looked at Nick apprehensively for a few seconds before slowly nodding.

"Just have water, juice, or preferably one of those sport's drinks handy. We wake up thirsty."

Harm nodded again and asked, "Now what?"

I stood and headed upstairs. "Now the Immortals have breakfast while the vampires take their showers. You three can eat after we do."

"That sounds somewhat unfair," objected Harm. "How come you get to eat first?"

Nick raised a hand in a placating gesture. "It's easier on their bodies. Besides, if you were THAT hungry, your eyes would be glowing."

Harm blinked at that line and shook his head slightly. "Whatever. Nick, you can go ahead and shower first, but save some hot water for me."

I opened the basement door that the girls had closed behind themselves and shook my head. "Um, Harm, one thing you haven't apparently noticed yet. Your body really doesn't care much about hot or cold anymore. As long as the water's at least lukewarm, you'll do fine." I tossed a grin at him over my shoulder. "Now you leave ME some hot water."

My grin and Harm's glare at me were the first things that Diane saw when we entered the kitchen. We could hear the shower upstairs running, and I assumed that was where Jennifer was. "What's wrong, Harm?" Diane asked in concern, eyes going from Harm to me.

Harm walked over to the coffee pot and poured himself a cup. I saw Nat open her mouth to say something, but Nick shook his head at her. Harm was answering Diane's question, "My stepfather was just teasing me."

"Hey," I objected, trying (unsuccessfully) to stifle a grin.

Harm smiled at me before taking a sip of his coffee. His face immediately lost what little color it had. He bolted over to the sink, coughing and looking like he was going to throw up. He never quite did, but it looked possible for a moment. I calmly fixed a bowl of cereal and orange juice for myself and took a seat at the table with Nat and Nick.

Diane had jumped to his side when he got to the sink. "What's wrong with him?" Diane asked in panic.

Nick answered calmly, "He's a vampire."

Diane glared at him. Harm did too, for a moment, between coughs.

Nick looked mildly back at them and repeated himself. "He's a vampire, and he just drank coffee."

"You could have warned me," Harm muttered, finally getting himself back under control.

Nick shrugged negligently. "You had to learn. Besides, it won't kill you."

Nat smacked his shoulder. "You're awful," she accused with a smile. Turning back to Harm, she said, "Seriously, the only things you can drink are blood and maybe water."

Since Harm was apparently recovered by this point, Diane slowly retook her seat and resumed her meal.

Harm looked sadly at his coffee cup for a moment before dumping the contents down the drain.

The next day passed calmly for all concerned (though Diane had a slightly dazed smile on her face on and off). On the evening that we moved to a nearby motel, there was a note waiting at the lobby for me, by name.

Ryan Chessman, Please meet me tonight. 20:00 @ the microbrew on Sample Street. Bring friends if you wish, but NOT D. Robert Visage

I smiled as I read the note. The signature followed the Watcher's pattern of using "seeing" or some derivative as a indicator. The first name made me think it was Mister Roberts, Diane's former Watcher. If that were the case, it would explain why he didn't want Diane to attend. Checking my watch, I discovered I would have to leave soon to make it in time.

"Everything okay?" Jen asked, coming through the lobby carrying her two bags.

"Yeah," I answered, conscious of the fact that Harm could no doubt hear us across the lobby. "Listen, I need to go out for a few hours this evening. You can come if you want, but you'll probably end up spending most of your time just 'watching'," I emphasized slightly.

She nodded, apparently catching my meaning. She led me over to the other four as they stood waiting on an elevator. "Go ahead. Nick and I need to work with Harm on his flying control."

Either catching on to the ploy or having been prompted subtly by Nick, Natalie smiled at Diane as we all boarded the elevator. "How about we just have a girl's night in? Rocky Road ice cream and romance movies. How about it?"

Diane agreed, and after I dropped my suitcase off in one of the three rooms that Nick had rented, I headed back down to my rental car.

I pushed open the glass door and walked into the brewpub. Knowing I was a few minutes late (DC traffic should never be underestimated), I looked around for Mister Roberts.

A waitress came up to me with a professional smile in place. "Hi. Dinner for one?"

I shook my head, still scanning. "Actually, I'm looking for a friend." I saw Mister Roberts at that moment, sitting at the bar. "And there he is," I finished, smiling at the waitress.

Nodding her head slightly and waving me on past, she turned to greet the next couple coming into the restaurant.

Walking past the waitress, I stopped beside the barstool next to Mister Roberts. He looked up at me for a moment before returning his attention to the tall glass in front of him. "Mister Visage," I greeted him.

He smiled slightly. "You WERE a Watcher," he retorted. "Nice to know you remember some things."

"Your confidence is noted," I said dryly as the bartender paused in front of me with a raised eyebrow. "Do you have an ale or lager?" I asked her, knowing they did their own brewing here. I didn't particularly like American pilsners, and a stout was almost like drinking used motor oil.

She nodded. "Pale ale, medium Irish ale, a kolsch which is close to a lager, or an unfiltered wheat beer."

"The wheat's pretty good," commented Roberts. "That's what I'm having."

I nodded. "I'll try that, then."

She moved off to fill my order as I settled in next to Roberts. "What's up?"

He shook his head. "I'm waiting for the rest of the party."

"Who?" I asked guardedly as the bartender placed a tall glass in front of me. I took a cautious sip and found it to be surprisingly sweet.

"Mister Webb," Roberts said. "Told you it was good," he added to my pleased reaction to the drink.

"Sorry I'm late," Webb said, slipping into the stool on the other side of Roberts. When the bartender stopped in front of us again, he tried to order, "Scotch, neat."

She shook her head, absently wiping her hands on a towel. "We don't have liquors. Beer or wine."

Webb visibly winced. "Water, then."

Roberts's mouth worked as if he were fighting a smile. I knew I was.

When Webb's drink was deposited in front of him, he said, "Gentlemen, let's find a table. This discussion needs to be more private." Though he never looked over at her, it was clear he meant the bartender.

"Not everybody is spying on you, Webb," Roberts said in slight exasperation. Nevertheless, he stood with his drink and followed Webb to a corner booth that provided a measure of privacy.

Webb completely ignored Roberts's comment, instead looking over the menu in obvious distaste.

Seeing the expression on his face, Roberts said, "It IS a bar, Webb. This isn't exactly a four star restaurant, but it isn't bad, either."

"That tells me who picked this meeting place," I said, smiling at Webb's obvious discomfort.

"Ha, ha," Webb retorted, finally giving up on the menu.

"What'll it be, gents?" asked the youngish woman smiling at us.

I waved her off, but Roberts said, "An order of onion rings, please." She wrote it down and then looked to Webb, quickly scurrying away at his glare.

"Easy, Webb," I said. "You're scaring the waitress."

He mumbled something, glaring at the tabletop.

Shaking my head at the angry Watcher, I looked over at Roberts and said, "You have the floor, Mister Roberts."

"First," he said, taking a sip of his drink, "it's Bud. Secondly, I wanted to make sure Diane is okay. With what happened to Harm, and all."

Startled, I glanced over at Webb for direction. He was subtly shaking his head. Fortunately, Bud hadn't seen that, otherwise I fully expected the Watcher to know that something was up. "She's doing as well as could be expected under the circumstances," I hedged, answering Bud's question.

He nodded and stared at his beer. "I was Watching her when she received the news from the admiral about Harm," he said quietly.

"I wasn't there, and she hasn't talked about it," I said. "What happened?"

"She was out in front of the hospital, probably getting a breath of fresh air. Commander Rabb had already died, and she was barely holding it together. The admiral told her that they'd lost Commander Rabb's body."

"They lost his body?" I asked, trying to express disbelief and shock.

Webb waved it off. "They sorted it out later. His body got mis-tagged in the morgue. When they pulled out a John Doe to cremate, they got Harm. When they pulled out Harm for the autopsy, they got a John Doe who'd already been autopsied. Based on physical description, they figured out who they DID have, but it was too late for Harm." For a man who knew that Harm was still alive (more or less), Webb was certainly playing the part of a shocked and outraged friend.

Bud nodded, still not having looked up from his drink. The waitress arrived and quietly placed the onion rings down in front of Bud. He didn't appear to have noticed. "Once the admiral told the Colonel that they'd lost his body, she started pacing around, shaking her head and denying it. When the admiral tried to grab her arm, she shouted something and then bolted. We both tried to chase her, but since I couldn't go out into the open, I fell behind immediately. Once I finally caught up to the admiral, he was standing on the Memorial Bridge, looking into the Potomac River. He called in the police, but they never found her body. Her jacket was found a few miles downstream yesterday." Bud looked up at me. "I nearly went crazy worrying about her. I was about to rent a boat and start looking for her in the bay when Mister Webb told me that you had picked her up from the river."

That answered several questions about the events of that morning: how she had gotten away and why nobody was still looking. I nodded to Roberts, picking the easiest lie under the circumstances. "Yeah. Before Harm died, she told me where to go to pick her up. She wanted to close out the 'Sarah MacKenzie' identity before moving on and a public suicide seemed the easiest thing to do." I sighed and went on, spinning a tale that would be believable, "She seems pretty guilt-ridden. She explained it last night. She apparently loved Harm but never told him. She wants to get away from all the memories in DC. She said she'd probably be leaving in the next couple of days. I've no idea where she's going."

Bud sighed and nodded. He reached into a pocket and brought out a small urn-like container. When he placed it in front of me, I noticed that the JAG symbol engraved on it. I lifted the lid and saw a pair of gold wings sitting on a pile of what looked almost like gravel. I didn't have to ask. "For Diane?" I asked quietly.

Bud nodded. "The wings were from his uniform. I didn't know what else to give her." He half-heartedly began eating one of the onion rings. "I'm just glad she's okay," he mumbled.

"You've done your duty, Watcher. She's okay," I told him quietly.

He nodded, still picking at his onion ring and taking an occasional sip of beer. He gave up within a few minutes and stood up, fishing five dollars out of his pocket and dropping it onto the table.

"Take care of yourself, Roberts," Webb said, showing some compassion.

Roberts looked at me sadly. "You take care of her, okay?"

"I will," I promised.

Bud stuffed his hands into his coat pockets and slowly walked away.

"You could tell him," I told Webb, still tracking Bud with my eyes.

"Need to know," Webb said quietly.

"Stuff your rules," I snarled at him.

"They're for his protection as much as anything," Webb pointed out, completely unruffled by my anger.

Once that finished slowly sinking in, I nodded heavily. I reached over to the onion rings and took one. It was still too early for my "lunch", but I was getting hungry. "How's everyone else at JAG dealing with this whole mess?" I asked. Diane and Harm had both wondered aloud about it, and I wanted some good news to take back to them.

Webb shook his head. "AJ is nearly beside himself with grief. Those two are the closest things he has to friends right now. Roberts you saw. Most of the rest of them are in a state of shock. Tiner and Galindez are keeping the place ticking over for the moment." He snorted in sarcastic humor and said, "The only person there who's even close to cheerful is Singer."

"Should I ask?" I asked.

"Don't bother," he said, shaking his head. "Austin is being recalled to active duty temporarily, and Pike is going to be transferred in. You can tell Harm and Mac that JAG is being taken care of."

I had no idea who these people were, but I dutifully memorized the names, knowing that it would mean something to the two uprooted lawyers.

He sighed. "Anyway, I just wanted to tell you that the ID's will be done tomorrow night. They'll be delivered to your hotel."

I quirked an eyebrow at him. "Should I be concerned that you know what hotel we moved into not two hours ago?"

He smirked at me. "Two Watchers following the six of you? I'll know by tomorrow morning."

I snorted lightly in amusement. Then my gaze fell to the urn on the table in front of where Roberts had been sitting. "What do I do about this?" I asked quietly.

"Does he know about Watchers?"

"Not yet, but he will. He'll have to."

Webb shrugged. "Give it to him then. What you all tell Mac is up to you. Like I said a couple days ago, I just ask that Roberts's and my names don't come up."

"They won't," I assured him.

He nodded and then raised his glass, as if in a toast. "To Harmon Rabb and Diane Schonke."

I smiled and raised my own glass.

As it turned out, I had the chance to give the urn to Harm later that night.

Harm and Diane had gone out for a walk around two after promising to stay away from their usual haunts. The remaining four of us were sprawled around Nick and Nat's hotel room, discussing Harm's training, how to get all of us back to Toronto, and when we wanted to introduce him to Terry.

When Diane's Buzz came back into range, the talk turned rapidly back to inconsequentialities. We weren't quite ready for Harm when he came barreling into the room. He roughly shoved a slight, unassuming man ahead of him into the room. "Sit," Harm snarled at him, pointing to a chair.

Brushing himself off, the man took a seat and gazed around the room calmly.

His gaze flicked past the simmering Harm, concerned Diane, confused Nick and Nat, and finally stopped at me. He smiled. "Hi, Ryan. Jen." He

smiled and nodded to her as well.

I raised an eyebrow back. "Charlie. How're you doing?"

He sighed. "Fine until Harm here spotted me."

"You know this guy!?" Harm demanded from me. Diane looked more concerned by the moment.

"Yeah. When I was a Service Agent, he was one of the uniformed Agents on the grounds."

"And that give him the right to spy on us?" Harm asked. "When I caught him, he just asked me to bring him back here and you'd tell us what we wanted to know."

I turned back to Charlie Williams. He silently pulled the cuff of his sleeve down slightly to show me his blue tattoo. I sighed and rubbed my temples in a vain effort to head off the headache I just KNEW was in my immediate future. "Mine?" I asked him.

He nodded silently. So did Jen. Figures. She WOULD know who my Watcher was, after all.

"Okay," I sighed. "Get outta here unless you want to stay for this discussion."

He stood and calmly went toward the door.

"Wait a minute!" Harm interjected.

"It's okay, Harm," Jen said soothingly. "Charlie isn't a threat to Immortals or vampires."

Nat and Nick relaxed, apparently having pieced together what was going on. Diane's and Harm's jaws dropped. "WHAT?" they chorused as Charlie made it out the door.

"Charlie is a Watcher. He's a member of a group of mortals who know about Immortals and the Game. They record our history but have sworn to never interfere. With the increasing number of Immortal / vampire couples, they learned about vampires as well. Those Watchers assigned to an Immortal that spends time with a vampire is told about vampires since a vampire can spot them easily. For the same reason, the vampire is told as well. We just hadn't gotten around to telling you yet."

Both Harm and Diane stared at me in shock for a few moments before Diane figured it out. "You mean I've had a mortal following me around for years, and I never knew it?"

"Probably," I said, ignoring the fact that I knew a great deal more than I was telling. "Watchers aren't omniscient, so sometimes a new Immortal who isn't active in the Game can escape notice for quite a while, but you probably got one assigned to you just after you left your teacher."

"Don't worry about it," added Natalie. "I know I have one, but I'm never bothered. They don't bother you unless you bother them."

I nodded and continued, "Most Immortals don't know about Watchers. Very few vampires ever have reason to notice -- only those vampires who are with Immortals for a reasonable length of time. At any rate, please don't tell anyone about Watchers. Immortals and Watchers have already had covert wars. It doesn't help anyone."

Harm and Diane slowly sank onto one of the beds as they thought about the news I had just given them. "How do you know about them?" Harm slowly asked me. All things considered, they were both taking this amazingly well.

I grinned. "I was a Watcher at my First Death, actually."

Diane snorted. "You'd think their screening would have been better than that."

My reflexive smile froze in place. Yes, that DID make sense, didn't it? How could something so glaring make it through the Watcher's screening process?

Harm turned to Natalie and asked her how she knew about Watchers.

"My teacher told me," she answered.

I shook off the mystery of the Watcher's screening process. "That reminds me," I said, getting up and moving to my coat. I got out the urn and handed it to Harm. "I met your Watcher last night, Diane. He gave me that."

Harm and Diane looked at it for a moment before Harm looked back up at me. "What is it?"

"You," I answered with a grin. "Seems someone that the hospital THOUGHT was Harmon Rabb was cremated. That's your ashes, plus another little something that I expect you will appreciate."

Curious, he lifted the lid and looked inside. His face immediately broke into a wide smile which was reflected by Diane when she peeked into the urn. He gingerly reached in and extracted his wings, rubbing them lightly with a small smile on his face.

"What is it?" Nat asked, probably not having seen what he had removed from the urn.

"His wings," Diane said, still staring at them in Harm's hand. She looked at me narrowly. "Where'd you get them?"

"Your Watcher," I repeated.

She frowned at me. "The admiral would have gotten them from the hospital," she muttered, almost to herself. It sounded like she was trying to figure out who her Watcher was.

Trying to distract her, I said, "Oh, I have more news." I frowned slightly, trying to remember what Webb said about who. "I hope I get this right. AJ is really depressed, and almost everyone else is shocked. Austin is being recalled, Pike is transferring in, and Piner and Galindez are running the office."

Harm looked up at me. "Tiner," he corrected. "Nice to hear about Meg and Kate," he added with a smile. He abruptly frowned and asked, "You said that ALMOST everyone else is shocked. Who wasn't, I wonder."

"Something about the only nearly cheerful one was . . . Clinger?"

Diane and Harm both burst into laughter. "Singer," Diane finally forced out around her laughter.

I shrugged and smiled amiably. "Whoever. I don't know any of 'em."

Harm grunted in what I took to be agreement. "Some of them aren't worth knowing."

Diane was staring thoughtfully at me for a few moments before she broke into a gorgeous smile. She turned to Harm. "Who calls everyone by their last name EXCEPT the admiral?"

Harm cocked his head in thought. "SecNav and Webb."

I fought the urge to sweat.

Diane grinned wolfishly and turned to me. I had new sympathy for what a cornered rat must feel like. "I can't see SecNav being a Watcher, Harm, can you?" she asked almost casually, still staring at me and smiling.

"Nope," he answered.

"So Webb must be my Watcher," Diane concluded, still looking at me.

"Must be," Harm agreed when I didn't say anything for a few seconds. They were both incorrect, but it sure wouldn't help to deny it.

When I still maintained my silence, Diane asked me, "Is he?"

"Webb, you said?" I asked, forcing a slight frown of concentration onto my face. "Where have I heard that name before?" I asked in a reflective tone. I snapped my fingers and said to Diane, "A few days ago, in the cafeteria?"

She frowned and nodded to me. She continued to stare at me, apparently looking for something.

Harm grinned. "Do you know how lie detectors work, Ryan?"

I glared at him sourly. "Increased heart rate, which you heard." It wasn't a question.

He grinned wider and nodded.

"Why does it matter?" I asked them, sighing in resignation.

They both shrugged. "It doesn't," Diane said. "I was just curious."

"He would know about me?" Harm asked.

Nick shook his head, entering the conversation. "No. Watchers are told about vampires only after their Immortal spends time with one. No reason for this 'Webb' person to know about vampires."

"Your Watcher gave it to me to give to YOU, Diane," I added, still trying for a little misdirection.

She smiled and looked down at the wings again. "That was sweet of Clayton."

Good, she thought Webb was her Watcher. Not as good as her having no idea who the Watchers were, but it was better than nothing.

Early the next evening, Webb wasn't happy to hear from me that Diane knew he was a Watcher.

"I thought I told you that I didn't want her to know!"

"She figured it out on her own," I defended myself.

"How?" he demanded over the phone.

I thought back to the conversation and pinpointed what had tipped them off. "I repeated what you had told me about AJ, Tiner, Galindez, and Singer. They concluded that the only two people who would call the admiral by his first name but everyone else by their last was you or someone named SecNav. You look more like a Watcher, apparently," I concluded.

Webb laughed. "I suppose I do at that. Okay, they got me on that. Anything else?"

"They both think you're her Watcher, but you don't necessarily know about vampires."

"Good. Oh, Constantine and Ryan should be there soon with the new ID's."

"Aaron and Terry?" I asked in surprise.

"I couldn't imagine you'd object," Webb said dryly. "Besides, Mizz Ryan expressed interest in the newest additions to her family."

I nodded. Of course she would. "Okay. Do you know their timetable, and do they know where we are?"

"No and yes. In that order."

I chuckled at him. "If she asks, did you want to meet Diane?"

"No," he answered immediately. "Too much contact between Immortals and Watchers doesn't do anybody any good."

I bit my tongue over THAT philosophy. "And me?" I asked instead.

"You're a special case, and you know it."

"Fine, I'll drop it. Just wanted you to know about Diane."

"Thanks for the warning. No offense, but I hope I never hear from you again."

I chuckled, knowing it wasn't personal. "So nice meeting you too, Mister Webb."

After I hung up, I reflected that perhaps he WOULD meet Diane again eventually if my long range plans worked out.

"Peace on earth. What would YOU wish for, Harm?" asked Nick.

"My own Tomcat."

We all chuckled. That one was predictable.

"That reminds me," Jen said from the other chair at the table she and I were sharing, "I heard a crash in your room today. You all right?"

"Yes," Harm answered, a little too quickly. He must have seen our looks, because he relented, "Okay, I was sleep- flying again. When I woke up, I fell."

"On me," Diane added, with a mock grimace at Harm.

"Sleep-flying?" I asked around my snickers.

"Sleep-walking, vampire style," Nick said with a small grin.

Harm grimaced at everyone's expressions of amusement. "How about you, Mac?" he asked, continuing our game of 'What would you wish for?'

"I got what I wanted four days ago," she said, smiling at Harm. He smiled back, and the two of them continued to gaze at each other.

Nick subtly cleared his throat and asked, "Nat, what about you?"

"Somewhere safe to live," she said quietly, staring off into the distance.

"Hear, hear," I seconded. Then something about how she said it registered. "Having problems? I haven't noticed anybody unexpected in Toronto."

She sighed and nodded. Nick, looking at her in concern, answered my comment, "Two Challenges in the past year."

I grimaced in sympathy.

"Challenges?" Harm asked.

"Immortal duels," Jen answered, studying Nat.

"I hate to sound callous, but that IS how we live," Diane said.

"The last one," Nat started, "I . . . I thought she was a friend," she quietly finished.

Everyone winced.

"If I could have ANYTHING I wanted?" I asked, trying to lighten the mood. "Hmm, what would I want?" I mused aloud, tapping my fingers on my chin. I brightened and exclaimed, "A lightsaber!"

Harm and the three women broke into laughter. Nick just looked confused. "A what?" he asked.

I stared at him. "Don't tell me you haven't watched 'Star Wars'."

"Okay," he agreed, "I won't tell you that I never watched 'Star Wars'."

Nat poked him in the ribs. "Lightsaber. You know, that glowing sword thing from all the 'Star Wars' movies that the Jedi use?" At his blank look, she sighed. "Honestly, you could go to a movie that came out within the past five decades!"

He shrugged. "Nothing worth watching."

"Jeez, Nick. Just 'cause you're ancient doesn't mean that you -" I broke off in the middle of my sentence at the approach of a Buzz. All three Immortals in the room tensed and reached toward our respective swords.

"What's that?" asked Harm, frowning at the door.

Meanwhile, I'd been paying attention to the aura. Three thousand, plus all the vampires were looking at the door. Must mean Aaron and Terry. Hopefully.

Someone knocked on the door. Since we were all in Jen's and my room, I called, "Who's there?"

"Aaron and Terry," Terry's voice answered.

Nat and I relaxed. "Come on in and join the party," I offered, opening the door. Jen swatted my arm from where she was standing directly behind me, having followed me silently from our table. "What?" I asked, rubbing my sore arm as Aaron and Terry came in.

"You could've told me," Jen scolded me before she hugged her grandmother. Nat came over and hugged Aaron quickly. Once all the various 'hello's had been completed, Jen did the introductions. "Grandma, Aaron, I would like to introduce you to my childe, Harmon Rabb, and his friend, Diane Schonke. Harm, Diane, this is my grandmother, Theresa Ryan, and her husband, Antonius Constantine."

"Aaron Grey," Aaron corrected, throwing Jen a tolerantly amused look before shaking Diane's hesitant hand. Harm finally tore his attention from Terry to shake his hand.

Terry watched Harm in amusement. "What's wrong, child?"

He shook his head and visibly gathered his composure. "Nothing." He stepped forward and offered his hand to her. "Pleasure to meet you, ma'am."

She smiled. "Grandma Terry," she corrected. "You're family, are you not?" she asked, gracefully settling into one of the chairs that Aaron held for her.

Harm glanced over at Jen before nodding. "I guess I am."

Diane had watched Harm greet Terry in amusement. "Not often that the great Harmon Rabb is at such a loss for words."

He shook his head, slowly sitting back down again. "It's hard to explain. I can almost FEEL the power coming off of her."

"Vampiric strength is a function of age," pointed out Nick.

It took a moment for Harm to understand what that meant. Then his jaw nearly dropped open. "How old -" He cut himself off before finishing the sentence. "Never mind."

"Those two make Nick look young," I answered tactfully.

Aaron sighed and pinned me with a stare. "Have you no respect for your elders?"

"If I did, then I would have to REALLY respect you," I returned with a mostly straight face.

Aaron and Terry both stared at me. Terry finally shook her head and sighed, a tiny grin trying to appear. "Why do we put up with you?"

I appeared to give it some thought. "My good looks and sharp wit?" I ventured.

Natalie lost the fight against her laughter at that point. She collapsed against Nick, giggling madly. Nick and Jen let their grins appear.

Apparently realizing that there really were no hard feelings, Harm and Diane gave nervous little smiles.

Nat picked up our previous conversation. "I bet Terry and Aaron know what a lightsaber is."

The both nodded. Aaron answered, "Sure, the Jedi swords. Personally, I liked Darth Maul's two bladed version."

I nodded. "I liked Luke's green one, myself." I turned to Nick. "See?"

He grudgingly nodded.

"Huh?" asked Aaron.

"Nick didn't know what lightsabers were," Natalie supplied.

Terry almost smiled. "Where have you been living for the past forty years?"

Nick gave her a sour look. Trying to change the subject, he asked, "What are you two doing in DC?"

Aaron nodded and stood back up. Popping the latches on the briefcase he had brought, he came out with a bulging manila envelope. He handed it to me, along with a loose sheet of paper. "I was told to give these to you," he explained calmly.

He sat back down on the floor near Terry as I dropped the envelope onto the table. Aaron and Terry started chatting with everyone, slowly coaxing Harm and Diane into the conversation. I tuned out the discussion as I read the brief, unsigned note.

Hope this meets with everyone's approval. Tell them they will be missed at JAG.

Putting the sheet onto the table, I opened the metal clasp on the envelope and dumped the contents onto the table and began sorting them.

Two each of: Virginia driver's license, Social Security card, high school diploma, law school degree, and various credit cards. There was another, thinner 8 X 10 envelope as well. I peeked into it and grinned at the contents. Checking a few of the signatures on the pages it contained, I put that envelope back down. Glancing through the two piles, I slowly nodded as I pieced together what their probable history was.

During the next lull in the conversation going on around me, I said, "Okay, I have your new identities here." THAT got Harm and Diane's complete attention. I looked over at Diane and said, "Diane, you were born Diane Rose of Flagstaff, Arizona. Graduated Flagstaff High, U of Arizona, and Duke Law five years ago. Your parents died halfway through your law school education." I turned to Harm and continued, "David Bell of San Diego, California. San Christophe High, Berkeley, and Duke at the same time as Diane. You're an orphan and got through school on grants." I grinned and opened up the envelope with the pictures in it. Taking out the large one and looking it over, I smiled and said, "The week after graduation," I turned the picture around to let them see it, "you two got married."

Harm's and Diane's jaws dropped. Nat grinned, and everyone else's eyebrows rose.

I passed the picture to Jen who admired it for a moment before passing it on to Harm and Diane who stared at it as I continued, looking through the rest of the envelope's contents. "It was a civil ceremony, witnessed by Clayton Webb and Laura Delaney." I looked over at them with a frown. "I assume that name means something to you."

They both nodded, still staring at the picture. It was a nice picture, really. Somebody had spent some time in front of a photo editing computer and produced a picture that looked like a slightly younger Harm and Diane, wearing white and standing in an outdoor gazebo somewhere. Next to Harm stood a smiling Clayton Webb, and next to Diane was a woman that I didn't recognize, presumably Laura Delaney. "Here's the marriage certificate, just awaiting your signatures. Joint checking and savings accounts at Roanoke Savings and Loan." Leaving the papers on the table, I stood and smiled down at the shocked couple. "Congratulations, Mister and Missus Bell." I held out my hand to them, presenting them with the rings that had been tucked in with everything else. There was a tasteful diamond solitaire engagement ring and two paired plain gold wedding bands. I absently wondered how Webb had managed to get their ring sizes, or if he had just guessed.

Harm and Diane both stared at me. He shot a glance at her before focusing on the three rings lying unobtrusively in my hand. Diane's gaze shifted from my face, to the rings, to the picture still in her hands, to the wall, and back again. Harm abruptly reached forward and scooped the rings up. He stood from the bed they'd both been reclining in and held his hand out to her. "Let's go for a walk," he offered.

Seemingly in a daze, Diane allowed him to pull her up and gently guide her to the door.

"They know Webb?" Aaron asked less than an hour later. The remaining six of us had chatted amiably, waiting for the newest members of the family to return.

I nodded. "We had to explain Watchers to them when Harm caught her Watcher. After that and based on messages I'd relayed to them, they've come to the conclusion that he's her Watcher."

Terry frowned. "He's a District Director, isn't he?"

"Yep," I agreed. "They don't need to know who her Watcher really is, and they don't know that he knows Harm's part of the family now."

Aaron chuckled. "Sounds like some line from a cheesy Mafia flick."

We were all smiling at that when a Buzz walked into range. Aaron, Nat, and I reached for swords reflexively before I identified it as Diane. I raised my hand and said, "It's okay; it's them." I walked to the door and opened it.

Harm had his hand up, ready to knock. He looked at me, startled. "How'd you know we were here?"

I raised an amused eyebrow at him. "You might want to ask your -" I paused and checked their hands, pleased to find rings in all the appropriate

places, "wife that question," I concluded with a smile.

Diane blushed and dropped her head, fiddling with her paired engagement and wedding rings. Not surprisingly, they fit perfectly.

I sighed dramatically. "I'm just sorry I missed the bachelor party," I added.

Scattered chuckles around the room met that comment as Harm and Diane entered. I closed the door behind them and then waved them toward the table with all the papers I'd left.

Harm raised an eyebrow at finding two pens lying on top and everything neatly arranged, waiting for them. He turned to me with a silent question in his eyes.

I shrugged. "I would say it was hoping for the best, but I've watched you two long enough to know the answer you'd eventually come to."

"Presumptuous, wasn't it?" asked Diane, though the small smile told me she wasn't the least bit upset.

"Ryan's that way," agreed Nick gravely.

"Hey," I objected. The fact that I couldn't defend myself any further than that just provided more amusement all around.

"Remember your new names," offered Aaron as Harm and Diane bent over the table and started signing everything needed. As they were busy doing that, he turned to the rest of us and said, "Once we're back in Toronto, how about Terry and I treat all of you to a dinner for the newlywed couple?"

Harm looked up. "Restaurant for me?" he asked pointedly.

Nick nodded. "There are a few that cater to vampire and mortal appetites."

Diane shook her head without looking up from the pile of things she was signing. "This'll take awhile for me to get used to." She finished the last one with a minor flourish and turned to Aaron. "Toronto?" she asked.

He nodded. "Nick needs to finish your husband's training." He smiled at her slight blush at Harm's new label and continued, "We need to teach you a few things about how to deal with vampire society as well. Call it a month, then you'll be as ready to face the world as we can make you. I would recommend you figure out where to move to before that point, but that's a discussion for another day. Meanwhile," he produced a handful of plane tickets from his coat pocket, "we all have a flight to catch."

Chessman Chronicles Killers in the Night

Waking up has never been one of my favorite times of the day, but trust me when I tell you that it is much more palatable when you're awakened by a gorgeous, naked red-head running her hand along your back.

"Good morning," she said brightly, apparently knowing I was awake from the sound of my breathing.

"It's looking good so far," I mumbled, stretching one arm out in front of me from where it had been pillowing my head.

My apparent civility didn't fool her. She knew that my patience for anything except a shower or breakfast at this stage of the day was transparently thin.

"How'd you sleep?" she asked, staying polite and non- controversial.

"Strange dream," I commented, trying to gather its remnants back into a comprehensible image. I needed something to focus on before my body decided to just shut down again.

"Was I any good?" she asked mischievously.

I smiled a little and answered in the way that I knew would drive her nuts. "You weren't in it."

Her hand stopped. Too bad. It had felt good. "Was SHE any good?"

My grin spread. "No women were in it at all."

She took a moment before asking, "Is there something about you that I should know?"

I chuckled and opened my eyes for the first time, looking over my shoulder to see her hair charmingly tousled. Her green eyes were studying me intently, not so much with dread as curiosity. "Dream wasn't like that," I answered. "Imagine playing a game like hockey with a ball that floats, wearing jet backpacks, on an indoor basketball court."

She blinked as she tried to imagine such a strange combination. "This is definitely the LAST time I let Rich invite you over to their place to watch sports."

Chuckling, I climbed out of bed, ready to face another day.

I was halfway through my breakfast when the phone rang. "Chessman residence," Jennifer answered casually. Her expression brightened immediately. "Grandma! How're —" she broke off her question, and her face fell. Lowering the phone slightly, she looked over at me and said, "Get on the other extension." Her concerned look and tone got instant obedience from me. Something was most definitely wrong.

Abandoning the remainder of my cereal, I went into the other room and picked up the phone.

"Hello, Ryan," I heard.

"Terry," I greeted Jen's 'grandmother'. "What's going on?"

I heard her take a calming breath. That in itself scared me. Anyone who had lived for three thousand years was tough to rattle. Whatever had happened must have really spooked her. "You remember Tracy Vetter and Javier Vachon?"

"Uncle Nick's partner and her boyfriend?" Jen asked.

"Yes," Terry confirmed. "They were found less than an hour ago."

That didn't make much sense. Had they been lost? "What do you mean?" I asked cautiously. Since it was just after dusk here in Seacouver, Toronto had been dark for a couple hours.

"Their bodies were found," Aaron clarified when his wife didn't seem likely to.

"Shit," Jen muttered. "What happened?"

"Nobody's quite sure," Terry answered. "They were found near the Raven." Hardly surprising, that. As a vampire, that would be one of Vachon's

common haunts. Terry went on, "Vachon was decapitated, and Tracy's . . ."

"Her throat was ripped out," Aaron finished flatly.

"Hell," I grumbled. "How's Nick taking it?"

"Not very well. They weren't on duty. There's no indication that it was even a police matter. Whatever happened, it was quick. Tracy never got her weapon out."

"Service revolvers aren't all that useful against some assailants," I pointed out delicately. Vampires were nearly immune to normal bullets, after all.

"Not hers," Aaron stated firmly. "I helped her find special bullets. Useful in all sorts of circumstances."

I nodded to myself in acknowledgment. Aaron knew what it took to produce bullets that could at least slow down a vampire. Embedding wooden splinters into a hollow point bullet casting was the most common method I'd heard of using. It didn't surprise me to hear that he knew of a gunsmith who could and would do such a thing. "Any idea who?"

"I'd love to guess that it was someone angry with Tracy because she was a police detective, but somehow I don't think the answer's going to be that simple."

I heard Jennifer snort derisively. "Not likely," she stated flatly.

"Agreed," Aaron said. "Which is part of the reason we called you."

"You need us over there?" I guessed, though that didn't sound right.

"No," he answered. "It's possible that they were killed because they were a . . . mixed couple."

Oh, hell. He was worried that some sort of vampire hunter took them down because they were a human – vampire couple. I was about to comment that I was a little tougher to take down than a normal human being, but then I remembered how Tracy was killed. Someone, probably a vampire, tore out her throat. While such a thing MAY not kill me permanently, it would definitely slow me down to the point of not being any good in a fight. And Vachon was a lot older, and therefore more powerful, than Jen. We would be totally screwed if the same thing were to happen to us that had happened to Tracy and Javier.

"Shit," Jen muttered again, apparently having gone through some of the same thoughts that I had. "What do you need from us?"

"Stay put, keep your heads down, and give Richard and Hoa the news," Terry answered.

"Nick and Nat are welcome to join us here," I offered. "They might be as much a target as Tracy and Javier if your concern is valid. For that matter, you two could be a target as well."

The few seconds of silence on the other end of the line spoke of their concerns more than anything they could have said. "We'll keep that in mind," Aaron finally answered. "There've been rumors running around Toronto of something happening even before this. It might be worse if Terry leaves. And Nick won't leave town until the killer is found. You know that."

"Yeah," I agreed. The man was fiercely loyal. And two of his friends had just been brutally murdered.

After a quick call to Harm and Diane where they were living in Chicago, I called Rich and Hoa. To all of them, I gave the same suggestion: Keep your heads down and your eyes open.

After the calls, I sat and stared at the phone, chewing on a lip. I was sorely tempted to hop a plane for Toronto, but common sense cautioned against that. Nick was a superior investigator, so there was no need for me to be there for that. Aaron was a vastly better fighter, and I was just finally getting onto par with Natalie. In short, there was nothing I could do to help. More to the point, I would only get in the way if I was there.

Just try telling that to my ego.

The next week passed in uneasy peace.

Jen was working at an all-night medical emergency center, so I had the apartment to myself most evenings. While working on the backlog of software projects and web pages that my slowly increasing business was accumulating, I typically had the radio on for background noise.

So it was in a newsbyte that I heard about the second beheading in town that week. I stopped my efforts at trying to get the database query to work properly and focused my attention on the radio. " . . . are not releasing the name of the victim or any other details, but have admitted that they are asking the Federal Bureau of Investigations for assistance in what is beginning to look like a cult or serial murderer. In other news, the price of imported ham is on the decline due to . . ." I mentally tuned the radio out again and leaned back in my chair.

Rubbing one hand against my face, I sighed wearily. I wasn't particularly concerned that this had anything to do with the problem in Toronto. For one thing, there had been another vampire slaying there on the same night as the first kill here three nights previously, but it had not been picked up by the Canadian news media. The killer in Toronto was working in alleys. The killer here was working in parks. All that meant to me that the two cities had different killers roaming around.

I had visited the site of the previous killing in Seacouver to see if it had any earmarks of a Immortal Quickening, but there wasn't so much as a charred blade of grass. My concerns of a headhunter in town had faded at that point.

With a second beheading, there would be a lot of unwanted attention brought to Seacouver, though. Standing, I turned on a local news broadcast on the television and found what I was looking for immediately. The local sheriff was holding a press conference. The caption below her face told me that this was the second beheading and that the newest one was in Memorial Park.

"Can you confirm the rumor that this beheading is linked to the one on Monday?" a reporter asked.

"I can't comment on that," the sheriff replied, pointing to another reporter.

"The autopsy report released yesterday said that there was nearly a quart of blood unaccounted for from the previous beheading. Is there blood missing from this one?"

I hadn't heard that part before. I began to wonder if the Enforcers would become part of the investigation now.

"It's very tough to tell. There is a great deal of blood at the scene, so I don't know if any is missing. We'll have to wait for the coroner's report on this one before we know if any is missing."

"Is it true that you have asked the FBI for assistance?"

"Yes. The FBI is sending an investigative team to assist."

"Serial killer profilers?" the same reporter asked.

"Just a team specializing in unusual cases."

I grinned, wondering if it was going to be who I thought it might.

"Don't you think this could be a serial killer on the loose?" That reporter was persistent, but he was asking the question on everyone's mind at this point.

"It's too early to tell," was the predictable reply.

The questions and answers proceeded for a few more minutes, but nothing new came out. I was about to go back to work when the phone rang. "Hello, Chessman residence."

"Hi, Ryan. It's Aaron."

"Hey, Aaron. You don't sound upset, so I'll assume there's no bad news. What's up?"

"What's going on out there in Seacouver? I heard about a beheading."

I blinked. "How'd you hear about it?"

"It's on CNN."

"Really? Second killing was this evening. I checked the site of the first one, and it doesn't appear to have anything to do with us or our wives."

"Our wives? How do they come into it?"

"There was a quart of blood missing from the first corpse."

"Great," he said sarcastically. "Sounds like the Enforcers might need to become part of the investigation."

"They might," I agreed, "though they're keeping a very low profile if they're already here. I haven't heard anything yet. Oh, and the sheriff is talking about the FBI coming in to help."

I heard his sigh. "That's the last thing we need."

"Relax," I said. "Like I said, no earmarks of it involving us or them. At first glance, it appears to be a normal serial killer. As normal as serial killers get, anyway."

"Very funny."

"How are things there?" I asked him.

"Tense," he said. "Only the two killings, but one didn't make the news."

"Any idea what's going on?"

"Not for sure. Vachon and Tracy were the first. The second was one of Michelle's people. Everyone is thinking that it was hunters."

"Any proof one way or another?"

"Nope. Nobody's coming forth and claiming credit, so it's not a terrorist thing against the Community."

"Well, I let Rich and Hoa know, as well as Harm and Diane. Everyone in the family is keeping their head down, though Toronto is the only city to have a problem so far that I've heard about."

"Yeah. Maybe it is hunters."

"You don't sound so sure."

"I'm not."

"Then what's your theory?"

He paused for a few seconds. "It's not a firm enough idea to even comment on. Don't worry, I'll do everything I can to keep us all in one piece."

"Fair enough, Granddad," I teased.

"Say that with respect, you young whippersnapper." We shared a chuckle. "If needs be, you willing to be the Council representative out there?"

"Sure. Let me know if there's something you want me to do. Like I said, though, it doesn't look like an issue for us at this point."

"So far," he qualified.

"So far," I agreed. "I've got to get back to work. Watch your head."

"Always," he assured me. "You, too."

Making a mental note to visit the newest crime scene either late tonight or early tomorrow morning in order to check for evidence of a Quickening, I headed back to my den and the recalcitrant query.

I didn't get to check out the crime scene until early the following evening. I drove to Memorial Park and walked toward the blocked off area marked with police tape. Since there were only two people still there, I didn't think I would be bothered while I just stood outside the area and looked in. Police were used to rubber-neckers, and I didn't imagine I would be bothered so long as I stayed outside the yellow tape.

That was until I hit two Immortal buzzes as I approached the crime scene.

Halfway expecting to find them, it didn't take me long to identify Mulder and Scully. Continuing forward with a smile, I greeted the two FBI agents as they turned to watch me approach.

"Ryan," Dana greeted me in surprise once I was close enough to identify. "What brings you to this neck of the woods?"

I gestured toward downtown Seacouver. "I live here currently. You two investigating the beheadings?"

They nodded. "You know anything about them?" Mulder asked.

I shook my head. "Only what's been on the news. I looked at the first site and didn't find any char marks, which was the only thing I was really looking for. Heard last night that the first corpse was missing some blood."

"It was," Mulder acknowledged. "Did your wife have anything to do with that?" he asked.

"Mulder," Dana hissed.

I was expecting him to ask such a question. Michelle had told them about vampires several years ago, so they knew about vampires in general. A few nights later they watched as Michelle and Jen tackled another vampire, so they knew my wife was one as well. "It's okay," I soothed Dana. I turned to Mulder. "She was at work both nights, which you can confirm, so she isn't responsible. Besides, I can't believe she would do something like that. Moreover, it's well outside the norm for her people to do this. Not at all subtle."

Mulder nodded. "I had to ask. For what it's worth, I agree with you that this isn't them."

I waved around at the green trees and grass. "Or us. No char marks here, either."

They both shook their heads.

"Any ideas?" I asked, still not having entered the taped off area.

"None that are fit for polite company."

"I may not be a federal agent right now, but I don't exactly faint at the thought of blood."

"It's not that," Dana hedged before pausing.

"Privileged information?" I asked, thinking I knew why she was hesitating.

She nodded.

She relaxed a fraction when I gave a casual shrug. "No problem. I was just curious. You guys need a local guide while you're in town?"

"So you can keep an eye on us?" Mulder asked cynically.

"Mulder," Dana growled at him again, with less patience than the last time.

I looked mildly back at him, refusing to let his paranoia get a visible reaction out of me. "No, not to keep an eye on you. I thought you might appreciate someone who can help and you don't have to hide your nature from." I pulled one of my business cards out of my wallet and handed it to Dana. Addressing her, I continued, "If you change your minds, give me a call. Nice seeing you again, Dana." I merely nodded to Mulder. I then turned on my heel and walked back to my car, turning a deaf ear on Dana's one half-hearted attempt to call me back.

I got a phone call four hours later.

"Chessman Software," I answered my business line. Most of my regular business contacts knew I kept night hours, so it was common for me to get phone calls at midnight.

"Ryan, it's Dana."

"Hi, Dana. How's half of my favorite FBI team doing?"

"I'm fine. I want to apologize for Mulder."

I made an impatient hand gesture, regardless of the fact that she was only a voice on the phone. "You may be his teacher, but you're not responsible for his actions."

I could hear her sigh. "Maybe, but it's easier for all concerned if I apologize for him anyway. Besides, he had a reason for being an ass."

"I was a suspect," I calmly commented.

"Yes," she acknowledged without the slightest trace of embarrassment. "As were any of us here in town at the time. But after the autopsy I just performed, that isn't an issue anymore. True, we still could have done it, but the decapitation was too sloppy for anyone but a novice to have done it. With a dull ax, by the way."

"Did I really need that mental image?" I teased her.

"You'll be happy to hear that your wife is off the hook, too," she continued, ignoring my comment. "One quart of blood is missing, just like last time."

"Not that I'm not happy, but why does that mean my wife is off the hook?"

"ONLY one quart is missing. There was plenty available, but only a quart was taken, give or take."

"And because the perpetrator wasn't greedy, it wasn't someone who needed it?" I asked.

"Something like that. Mulder's convinced it's a serial killer, and I'm not disagreeing with him."

"From what I know of you two, that has to be a first."

"Oh, very funny."

"I thought so. So we're dealing with a run of the mill serial killer, huh?"

"Not that they're terribly normal by any stretch, but yes. Nothing supernatural in this one."

"How will you ever survive the boredom?"

"We'll manage," she responded dryly, finally giving in to my teasing.

"So do you two want a chauffeur?"

"Probably not. No offense, Ryan, but currently you're just a citizen of the fine city of Seacouver. Now if you were still a federal agent the story would be different, but since you aren't, then we can't include you without jeopardizing your cover and having to explain to our superiors why a civilian was along for the ride."

I grinned, knowing that their superior was also their Watcher. Add to that the fact that he knew me and that all meant that he was unlikely to object. But she was right. Including me would just cause too many questions for everyone involved. "Wish I could help, but you're right. How about this: before you leave town, we can get together for a meal."

"Make it a meal and a sparring session and you have a deal. Mulder needs a new sparring partner."

"So do you," I pointed out.

She made a non-committal noise.

"Give me a call when you're ready to leave town and we can figure out the logistics."

The city had been gradually growing more tense as the local media would not let the case go. The sheriff insisted that the case had been handed over to the FBI and that they were taking care of it with local assistance. The local reporters refused to accept that.

The tense calm was shattered by a third killing two nights later.

The press conference later was interesting to watch.

"What can you tell us about the latest victim?"

"I cannot release any information at this time. The next of kin hasn't yet been notified."

"Don't you even have any suspects in this case?"

Here, the sheriff paused. "No."

"Anything more you can say about the previous victims?"

The sheriff shook her head. "I've already released everything I can on them. Martha Francis aged twenty-three and Emily Zimmer aged twenty-five. Both students at Seacouver University."

"Does the latest victim match the pattern?"

"What pattern?" the sheriff asked innocently.

"Twenty-something female college students."

She shook her head. "I cannot release any more information on the victim until the family has been notified, as I said."

"Come on, Sheriff. You need to tell us something."

The sheriff on screen glared at the reporter. I agreed. She had already told what she could, but the reporters wouldn't leave well enough alone.

"The FBI has control over the case and has examined the latest crime scene. I will release more information when it is morally and legally acceptable to do so. Until then, I have nothing further." She stepped away and ignored the shouted questions. The scene on the television changed to the local anchor as the remote feed became pointless.

I nearly applauded. Tell them where the line is and then stomp on them if they try to cross it.

If nothing else, it gave me another crime scene to look at the next evening.

I heard Jen get home from her shift at three the following morning. Saving the program I was working on, I went out to the front room to greet her.

She was peering around the room in concern. It appeared that she was looking for something.

"Jen?" I asked.

She flinched and glanced at me before continuing to poke around.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know," she answered, not slowing her search. In fact, it seemed to be gradually speeding up.

"Jen, what are you looking for?" I asked, becoming concerned.

"I don't know," she repeated, voice rising a little. "Something's wrong. I'm missing something. I don't know." In the process of crossing the room again, she abruptly stopped in mid-step and closed her eyes. Taking a deep breath, she slowly lowered the tense set of her shoulders. "Something's wrong," she announced in a reasonably calm voice. "I don't know what it is or how I know it, but I do."

I looked at her. For the first time since I had met her, she was fidgeting. Something was well and truly spooking her. Keeping an eye on her, I crossed over to the phone. I had no idea what the problem might be, but I figured I could at least call Terry and either ask her what was wrong or get her to talk with Jen. I picked up the handset and hit a speed dial.

"Grey," Aaron answered after the fourth ring. Even he sounded tense.

Aaron, it's Ryan. Is Terry there?"

He sighed. "Yes, but is this about Jennifer?"

"Yes," I answered slowly, having no idea where this conversation was heading.

"She's acting tense, and she doesn't even know why?"

"Clearly you know what's going on," I accused him.

I heard another extension pick up and Terry say, "Let me talk to her, Ryan."

Jen was already reaching for the phone, having heard everything. I handed the receiver to her and sat down, watching my wife. Something was going on. Even if I wasn't going to hear what Terry said to Jennifer, I wanted to be nearby.

"What's going on, Grandma?" Jen asked, almost desperately.

The tense set of her shoulders abruptly deflated five seconds later. She hung her head and brought her other hand up to her mouth. "When?" she asked in a quiet voice. Another pause followed by, "Where?" until finally, "How?" Each subsequent question was in a softer voice than the last. "Thank you, Grandma. Let me know if you're going to do anything?" She nodded and said, "Bye," before hanging up the phone.

She had her back to me during the call, so when she turned around and I saw a red tear trailing down a cheek, it shocked me. What I could hear of her conversation had scared me, but a bloody tear was a surprise. I stood and pulled her against my chest. "What's wrong?" I whispered.

"Someone killed Michelle. Because she is . . . was my mistress, I knew something was wrong and that I was missing something. I just didn't know what."

The phone rang, and I snatched it up with one hand without releasing Jennifer. "Hello," I answered, almost politely.

"Ryan, it's Rich. Everything alright?"

I blinked. "Mostly." Something fell into place, and I asked, "Is Hoa alright?"

"Something's wrong, and she's convinced it's Jennifer."

I grimaced. The mistress – childe bond was clearly stronger than the vampires in the family had hinted. "Yeah. We just heard that Michelle was killed. Jen was a wreck until she knew what the problem was. She's calming down, now, though."

"Aw, man. You two going to be okay?"

"We should be," I answered, feeling Jennifer slowly uncoil.

"Let us know if we can do anything, okay? And if there's going to be a memorial or something, tell us. I can't imagine that sending flowers is the right thing to do, but we'll figure something out."

Jennifer gave a hiccupping little laugh and I grinned slightly at Rich's attempt at lightening the mood. "I'll let you know when I know."

Jennifer stepped away from me and pulled out our address and phone list.

"Fair enough," Rich said. "Take care."

"You, too," I answered and hung up the phone, keeping my attention on what Jennifer was doing.

Pulling out one card, she came back over to the phone and dialed a number. While it was ringing, she saw the question in my face and tilted the card enough that I could see it was the one for David and Diane Bell. That was the current alias for Harmon Rabb, Jen's other childe and his Immortal wife.

Nodding, I took the card and replaced it as Jennifer spoke with Harm. She took five minutes to calm her other childe down before she hung up the phone.

I was sitting on the couch again by this time. She sat down in the hollow I formed with my arms and legs. Enfolding her into a hug, I asked, "What happened?"

Jen shook her head. "Grandma Terry just said she was killed in the line of duty. We couldn't go into too much over an open phone line."

I nodded at the reminder. Both Immortals and vampires had turned paranoia into an art form. "How are you doing?" I asked her softly, coming to the heart of the more immediate problem.

She was silent for a few seconds before saying, "Surprisingly, not bad. Now that I know why I was so skittish, anyway. I'm sorry that Michelle was killed, but you already know that she and I weren't that close."

I nodded. Even though Michelle had brought Jen across a year before we had met, they didn't run in the same crowd. They got along fine, but they were by no means friends.

"If you want to talk about it, you know that I'm here, right?"

She nodded.

I tilted my head toward our bedroom. "Come on. You've had a rough day. Let's get you to bed."

She shook her head but stood up anyway. "You finish up whatever you were doing in the den when I came in. I'm going to take a hot bath." She smiled in a coy manner, but the stresses of the past few hours robbed it of some of its usual force. "You can join me if you get your work done quickly enough."

I raised an eyebrow and smiled at her. Standing, I went into the den to shut everything down.

Just after sunset the next evening, it didn't surprise me to find Mulder at the newest crime scene. What did surprise me was that he was sitting against a tree instead of looking at the scene. A small pile of sunflower seed shells indicated that he'd been waiting for a few minutes.

As he stood and brushed off his slacks on my approach, I greeted him, "Mulder. What's up?"

He waved vaguely at the crime scene. "I figured you'd be by this evening, Chessman."

"You were waiting on me?" I asked. "Should I be flattered?"

He graced me with a sardonic grin. "Sorry, you're not my type. You asked us to let you know when we were on our way out of town."

I frowned. "The killer's still loose."

Mulder slowly shook his head. Tilting his head toward the scene, he said, "That WAS the killer. Or at least the killer in the first two."

"Someone killed the killer?"

He nodded. "I have files on a whole series of cases like this. A serial killer starts going and then suddenly ends up dead, killed in the same method as his own victims. I have a theory that there is actually a serial killer of serial killers. He'll find the real killer and then kill them in the same method as the original victims."

"He's finding serial killers faster than the police are?" I asked pointedly.

He grimaced. "Yes," he admitted. "But he's less constrained by due process. In most cases, we find evidence that the original killer's home had been burglarized. I think that the second killer will narrow down the list of suspects to a few almost as fast as the police do. Then they'll break into the suspects' homes and look for evidence. Once the original killer is found, the second killer will stalk them just as they stalked their victims and kill them in the same manner."

"Who's to say they aren't copycats?" I had no reason to not believe him but was playing devil's advocate to understand the answer.

He nodded, not bothered by my seeming doubt. "Two reasons. First, no more murders with the same MO occur afterwards. Second, the second killer stops when the first dies. He doesn't go on and . . . desecrate the body as many of his victims had done. Additionally, the original murder weapon is always found with the last victim or original killer, depending on how you look at it."

"And what makes you think this last victim was the original killer?"

"True, we don't KNOW he was the original killer, but he was the prime suspect at the time. A search of his home is turning up a ton of circumstantial evidence against him, too."

"The murder weapon was found on the victim last night?"

He nodded again. "Dull, bloody ax. With three separate blood sets on it, incidentally. The first two victims and the original killer's."

"Sounds like it is being tied up WAY too neatly."

He shrugged. "Serial killers pick their victims by some logical criteria. Logical to them, anyway. So this serial killer's victims are all serial killers themselves."

"So is this last guy a serial killer or vigilante?"

"Legally speaking, there is no such thing as a vigilante. He's a multiple murderer, plain and simple."

"We'll ignore the fact that he's performing something of a community service."

Mulder grimaced but didn't dispute my statement.

"You said you have files of this stuff. How many?" I asked.

"Nearly a dozen going back a decade or so."

"Nothing tying them together?"

"Just the MO."

I shook my head. "Weird."

He half-smiled. "Remember what I once told you my middle name was? Fox 'Weird and Unusual' Mulder, at your service."

I grinned at him. "Wasn't 'paranoid' in there, too?"

He waved one hand negligently. "Sure, bring THAT up."

I chuckled. "So if you two are heading out, did you want to do a quick dinner and then some sparring?"

He shook his head. "Unfortunately, we can't do that. We have a flight out in three hours."

"Don't take this the wrong way, Mulder, but if you have a theory on who this killer is, aren't you going to do something about it?"

He nodded. "I have someone sorting through airline reservations. The problem is in the timing. Like I said, this pattern goes back ten years. This is too long for a normal killer. Some of the dry spells are a year long. Serial killers absolutely do not wait this long between killings." He paused and continued, "There is also a similar pattern in Europe."

I perked up at that. "So that would make it easier, wouldn't it?"

He sighed. "Yes, but that one lasted fifty years."

I blinked in surprise. "Someone's been doing this for at least sixty years?"

He nodded. "Someone's been doing this without detection for sixty years. Or the first one trained someone else so exactly that the pattern has seamlessly continued for this long." He took a breath and gave the last possibility in a quiet voice, "Or the killer I'm looking for doesn't age."

Oh, shit.

"Hell of a psychology to make one of us do this for decades on end," I commented after some thought.

He nodded agreement. "There is another possibility here, Chessman. It might not be an Immortal." He was studying me intently as he pointed this out.

I smiled slightly. "Yes, a vampire is a possibility, but a very unlikely one. You said yourself that the bodies are not desecrated post mortem. Given what I understand of the psychology you're hypothesizing, a vampire would kill the last victim in whatever manner is appropriate. So far, no change from what you've seen. Once dead, however, there's no further point in desecrating the body. And at that point, the corpse has something that the vampire can use. There's no reason a vampire wouldn't drain a body completely and then dispose of it in a manner that would assure that it would never be recovered."

"And since we're finding the bodies with blood still in them, it can't be a vampire?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Hardly conclusive, but it makes sense. To me, anyway."

He tilted his head in a manner that was neither agreement nor denial of my comment. "I'll give that some thought. At any rate, I just came over to say that we're heading out of town. Take care of yourself, Chessman."

"Watch your head."

Jen and I caught a redeye flight Toronto the next evening at Terry's last minute request.

Upon our arrival, Aaron met us and quietly filled us in on what had been happening locally once we were in the car and out of the airport.

"Michelle's second in command in the Enforcers told us that she had checked out the fifty caliber sniper rifle, so everyone thinks she knew who the killer was. She was found on a rooftop in downtown Toronto with a stake in her chest and her head lying five feet away. The rifle she was carrying never made it out of the case."

"Fifty caliber?" I asked in astonishment. Bullets that big were used as anti-aircraft rounds during World War II.

"A hit in the neck or head is a clean decapitation due to the impact force, even for a vampire," Aaron explained.

I nodded in understanding of why such a large bullet was used. The fact that it was a sniper rifle made sense, too. You would not want to be too close to the target if that target was a vampire. They could hear anyone close, after all. It wouldn't surprise me if the bullets were supersonic as well for the simple reason that the shooter wouldn't want the target to hear it coming. "I can't believe that Michelle would do that without telling someone who she thought the killer was," I commented.

"She left a note. Her senior surviving lieutenant found it, put together a takedown group and went out. According to what the Enforcers later told LaCroix, Terry, and the other senior vampires in town, the vampire that Michelle's note indicated committed suicide when he was cornered. This

happened three nights ago. The next night, someone went after Nick Knight. Nick killed him in self defense and went to report it to LaCroix, showing up just in time to help defend his sire. Under interrogation, the surviving attacking vampire, who was master to all the other attackers by the way, admitted that he was after LaCroix's position as Master of Toronto. Tracy was killed and Nick attacked in an effort to weaken Lucius's position."

"This was all an effort by someone –"

"Edwards," Aaron supplied.

"Edwards," I amended, "to improve his position in the pecking order? Tracy, Vachon, Michelle, and another Enforcer were killed so he could improve his SOCIAL STATUS?" I finished incredulously.

"Yes," Aaron answered calmly without taking his attention away from driving.

"This is how vampires live, Ryan," Jen answered from where she had been quietly curled up against my side.

"How is that much different than us?" Aaron asked. "Immortals, after all, kill each other just to become more powerful."

"Personally, not socially," I grumbled. I saw his point, though. I shook my head at another thought. "Why'd Terry ask us to come here, anyway?"

Aaron paused a moment before he answered. "Michelle's Will."

"What about it?"

"She specified who had to be at the reading. You two are on the list."

I frowned a little in confusion and glanced at Jennifer. She just shrugged, clearly as mystified as I was.

"Could you repeat that?" Jennifer asked. I'm glad she did because I was totally incapable of speech at that point.

The vampire attorney looked amused at my reaction. At that, he was definitely less overtly hostile than the Enforcers in the room. Aaron and I were the only two non-vampires in the room out of about a dozen. They were clearly unimpressed at our inclusion. The last lines of the Will did nothing to endear me to them.

Still smiling at my totally dumbfounded expression, he repeated, "The remainder of Michelle's estate goes to Ryan Chessman. After the various bequests that I've already mentioned, this comes out to a tidy sum."

"How tidy?" growled one of the Enforcers.

"That is a matter between me and Mister Chessman."

"But we deserve . . ."

The unflustered attorney raised a hand. I had no idea how old everyone in the room was, but the instant obedience from a senior Enforcer had to mean something. "What you may think you deserve has no relevance here. The Will is legally binding, both in the mortal sense and in ours. If Michelle wants to leave the estate to the chosen husband of her only child, that is her right."

The Enforcers were decidedly unhappy about that, but nobody could dispute the point.

"Now, unless there is anything further, I will be sending the appropriate paperwork and bequests to each of you individually within the next month. Mister Chessman, if you could stay, we have more than a few items to discuss."

I nodded dumbly. Me? Why would Michelle leave anything to me? Not that we hadn't gotten along or anything, but we could hardly be considered friends.

The various Enforcers and Michelle's other acquaintances left without any further fuss. Aaron and Terry began getting up as if they were going to leave, too.

I waved them back down and finally got my tongue back. "Please stay." I turned to the attorney. "Assuming you have no objection."

He shrugged. "The remaining information was intended for you. If you wish for them to hear it, then I have no objections." He studied me for a few moments before saying, "Forgive me, but I find this to be very curious. You clearly know about us." He phrased it as a statement, but his eyebrows went up in obvious query.

"Vampires, yes," I acknowledged.

He looked at Jennifer and Terry in obvious request for more information.

Aaron and I caught each other's eyes. It was clear that he didn't know about Immortals.

Terry saved us from having to explain anything. "Antonius and Ryan are not vampires, that is true. However, they are what you might call a subspecies of human that live for a very long time."

He blinked a few times, processing this.

I nearly frowned at Terry. SUB species? Hmph. Though from a vampire's point of view, anything other than another vampire would qualify as a subspecies. Besides, that neatly sidestepped a drawn out explanation of Immortals.

The attorney turned to Aaron. "Antonius?" he asked.

Aaron stood and gave him a stiff half-bow. "Antonius Aurelius Constantine, late of the Holy Roman Empire."

He stared at Aaron for nearly a minute before flicking his eyes to me. He again blinked rapidly for a few seconds before finally settling back into his chair and steepling his fingers. "Fascinating," he eventually muttered. Shaking his head, he looked up at us again. "Very well. Michelle's choice makes more sense now, as do the choice of mates for you two ladies," he made a gesture indicating Terry and Jen.

He re-focused his attention on me. "Michelle's estate is substantial. You may not be aware of it, but she was approaching her fifteenth century of life. In that time, she accumulated quite a 'nest egg' I believe the term is. On her instructions, I have sold all of the remaining items, converted the money to US dollars, and put it all into an account for you. She only has one stipulation on it." He pulled another sheet of paper out of the portfolio on his desk and read, "Ryan, I'm leaving this money for you with one request and one wish. I want you to use it to keep Jennifer safe. I already know that you would do so in any event, but this money should simplify matters for you. My wish is that you also find out a way to keep yourself, Antonius, Natalie, Richard, Diane, and all the rest of your kind safe as well. I'm aware that this is a tall order, but give it some thought. You're a bright boy. You'll think of something." He placed the page down on the desk and pulled out two sealed envelopes. "After reading that to Mister Chessman, I was instructed to give you two ladies these envelopes." Glancing at the front of each, he passed one to Jennifer and one to Terry.

Terry put hers onto her lap and folded her hands over it. Jennifer looked torn on whether to read it right then and there. In the end, she did not. Instead, she put it onto her lap.

I was still in a state of shock. Totally out of left field I had been told that I was rich. Just how rich I did not yet know.

Apparently seeing that my brain was not yet on track, Aaron asked, "Mister Johnson, have your fees been covered?" The attorney nodded. "Was the money publicly declared, or is it hidden?"

"Hidden," the lawyer answered evenly. With that simple announcement, he also showed that he understood that Immortals had the same problems as vampires with regard to keeping finances for a very, very long time. "At the moment, it is in a Swiss account. I can help you with keeping your finances hidden from the Canadian or US tax collectors if you wish. As well as Interpol, of course."

I shook my head, finally finding an even keel among all the surprises being thrown at me. "Thank you, but I've been given some instructions along those lines. Also, I have several good teachers available to me," I indicated Aaron and Terry.

"As you wish," Johnson agreed.

Aaron looked at me hesitantly for a moment before asking, "What kind of number are we talking about?"

Johnson looked to me, silently asking if he was free to divulge the information. At my nod, he pulled another sheet of paper out and looked it over. "As of the balance query yesterday evening," he slid the page across his desk to me, "slightly over fifty-two million US dollars."

Chessman Chronicles Haven

I dragged my exhausted self out of the cab and paid the cabbie his fare plus a generous tip. Turning toward the building he had brought me to and advancing at a slow shuffle, I ran into Connor MacLeod's Buzz. Not even slowing down, I walked around to the private residence entrance and knocked. Dropping my duffel at my feet, I leaned against the door frame and sighed. The day had definitely gone downhill.

It had started out nicely enough. I had flown into La Guardia on Council business. Terry had wanted me to courier a briefcase of papers and data CDs to an acquaintance of hers in New York City. Since I was heading that way anyway, I offered to take some antique maps that Duncan had mentioned he was holding for Connor. Armed with a sheaf of courier papers and permits, I had a wonderfully uneventful cross-country flight.

It all started going to hell after I'd collected my weapons and was on my way out of the airport. Before I even made it to the cab line, I felt the Buzz. Less than a hundred, but several weak and medium heads worth of power. Wonderful, a young hunter; just what I needed today. Looking around in annoyance, I finally spotted the relatively non-descript guy that was staring at me with a smirk. Keeping his hands in plain sight, he walked up to me, ignoring the dirty looks he received from the people he was rudely pushing aside.

I didn't even go for a weapon. In full view of a hundred bystanders and in the middle of the day, nobody would be insane enough to start a fight. Trying to keep a neutral look on my face, I said, "I don't know you. What do you want?"

"Your head," he answered simply, maintaining his pose of light amusement. At least he had the sense to keep his voice down.

"I don't have time for this," I answered in annoyance. "Go away before you get hurt."

All traces of levity fled from his face. "Are you afraid to fight me, coward?"

Oh, Good Lord. "Do you really have a death wish?" I asked him incredulously.

His smile came out again, this time with a wicked edge to it. "Take the airport shuttle to parking area B. All the way behind that parking lot is an old maintenance hanger. Meet me there in half an hour."

One eyebrow came up, and I let a small smile form. "And if I refuse?"

His stance shifted subtly. "I'll shoot you dead where you stand," he answered.

I stared at him. It really appeared that he would shoot me in cold blood if I refused his Challenge. On top of that, he aura told me he wasn't bluffing. "You're insane," I accused him calmly. The entire conversation had been in relatively quiet tones, and we had yet to attract any undue attention. I definitely wanted to keep it that way.

He gave me a casual shrug. Tilting his head slightly, he indicated the line for the airport shuttle. "Shall we?"

Giving a resigned sigh, I picked up my duffel in one hand and the briefcase of couriered items in the other. Joining the line for the next airport bus, it didn't take me and my silent shadow very long to get to the indicated parking lot. Spotting the hanger he'd mentioned, I headed in that direction, careful to not let him stray out of my sight now that we were leaving the crowds behind. He obliged and walked to one side of me, both hands in sight and his coat buttoned.

Upon reaching the isolated hanger, he unhesitatingly opened one of the doors and stepped inside, careful to keep an eye on me. Not sensing that this was any kind of trap, I entered and watched my opponent make it to the far wall before he stopped and began to take off his coat. Still not sensing any kind of duplicity, I dropped my bag and briefcase to the floor and closed the door. Returning my full attention to the hunter, I saw that he'd pulled a scimitar and was slowly advancing back toward the center of the room. Since I appeared to have a bit of time, I pulled my coat off, removed my blades, and draped the coat over the suitcase.

Cautiously advancing toward the opponent, I asked, "Why are you doing this? We can still both walk away."

He gave a negligent shrug. "There can be only One."

I shook my head at him and stopped ten feet away. "No there doesn't," I answered sadly.

He frowned slightly, apparently becoming annoyed. "We must play the Game."

Shaking my head one last time at his self-destructive single-mindedness, I settled down in a defensive stance. "Ryan Chessman. I have no wish to fight you, but I will if I must."

He smiled toothily and gave a mocking half bow. "Joseph Farzan, and I must insist."

I started cautiously, trying to get a sense of how good I was in comparison to him. He wasn't patient enough and responded to my tentative probes with aggressive attacks. Giving ground but curving to favor my right side with the longer blade, I kept us roughly in the center of the open space.

I had speed and reflexes on my side, but he had strength and reach. Overall, we were almost perfectly matched.

We continued to trade blows for several minutes, each scoring with minor hits that did nothing to slow the tempo. By the time I began to tire, he was also slowing down.

In an effort to give myself a breather, I stepped back and panted out, "Why don't you just let me walk away?"

Instead of answering directly, he shouted and lunged.

Blocking his scimitar slash with my wakizashi, I also managed to get my knife in front of his follow-up punch with his off hand. I cut a deep line from his wrist to near the elbow, producing a spray of blood.

Tucking his arm back in, he stepped backwards, angling his sword to protect his now weaker side.

Finally having an advantage, I started to dart forward, only to slip on a pool of the blood that was by now splattered all over the floor.

When I stumbled slightly, he jumped back forward with a sudden grin. Because I was out of balance, I couldn't prevent him from stepping around my leading knife side to have a free shot at my exposed back.

Desperately trying to protect my neck, I partially extended my right arm and angled my wakizashi across my back to intercept a decapitation attempt. Also, I tried to throw an elbow into his neck or face to distract him.

He predicted both. I saw him sinking down into a crouch to avoid the elbow. Too late, I also saw the incoming strike coming much lower than expected, aiming not for the neck as I expected, but for my legs or lower back.

I felt a dull thud in my back instead of the sharp burning I would have expected with a sword strike. Not pausing to wonder at my unexpected luck, I pivoted on my left foot, bringing my sword from behind my back over my head and around for a quick decapitation of the stunned man squatting in front of me.

I stumbled a few feet away and dropped to my hands and knees. As the light show started, I wondered vaguely why Farzan's last hit had failed to paralyze me.

The light finally fading, I forced myself back to my knees. While stripping off my now shredded and blood-stained shirt, I glanced over at Farzan's body and stopped in surprise. His chest had been blown in half. Blinking, I stood, stepped over, and took a closer look. Among all the bloodstains on the floor, I saw twisted fragments of heavy plastic and what looked like a metal tube. Frowning in thought, I studied the metal for a few moments before concluding that it appeared to be a handgun barrel.

Suddenly realizing what might have happened, I reached around to my lower back and felt that my gun holster was empty and the bottom was torn out.

Nodding, I pieced together what must have happened. I'd put my Glock into the holster after getting it back at the airport. When the fight had started, I'd forgotten all about it. That last hit of his had managed to hit the only piece of "armor" I was wearing, the gun. It would have fallen to the floor after his scimitar destroyed the holster. His body had then fallen on top of the gun. His Quickening must have set off all the ammunition in the gun at once, with the apparent effect of a small pipe bomb. Bidding a silent thank you to the destroyed gun that had quite probably saved my life, I continued with my clean up, finishing with pulling a change of clothing from my overnight bag.

I took my time. The building was isolated enough that I doubted any noise had disturbed the rest of the complex. None of the windows had shattered, surprisingly enough. Lastly, it being daylight none of the strobe effects of the Quickening were likely to have been visible outside of the building.

Finally cleaned up, I pulled out my cell phone and hit a speed dial.

"Joe's." Amazing. Mid-morning his time and he was actually there.

"Hey, Joe. It's Ryan."

"Hi, Ryan. How's New York?"

I grunted in dark humor. "Safer than when I arrived." I continued when he answered me with a short period of silence, "You might want to send a crew to the abandoned hanger beyond parking lot B at La Guardia. Tell them to bring a mop."

"What happened?" he asked. We both knew that the results of these duels typically left blood over a large area. The fact that I'd made a point of it apparently had his curiosity up.

"What happens when you run electricity through a loaded handgun?" I answered indirectly. "Listen, do you want me to stay until the janitors arrive, or can I just head out?"

"Go," he answered immediately. "You can tell me about it later."

"Right," I answered tiredly. "Assuming nothing else goes wrong, I'll see you late tomorrow."

Stuffing my ruined clothing into my bag, I only took one item of Farzan's: his scimitar.

Trudging back to the shuttle pick-up point, I re-joined the flow of people as if I was heading for a terminal but ducked back out of the airport and went back to the cab line.

And that brings me back here, leaning on Connor's door as he cautiously checked who had shown up at his private doorstep.

Identifying me, he brought his katana to a "rest" position and waved me in, offering a drink as we went by the kitchen.

I removed the scimitar from my coat and left it on his coffee table before removing my coat and collapsing tiredly on his couch. He placed my drink next to me and took his own seat.

"Anyone I knew?" he asked casually.

I shrugged without looking. "Joseph Farzan. He'd staked out the exit to La Guardia. Not a bad place for a hunter," I acknowledged grudgingly. "I got him, though luck played a part in that," I freely admitted.

He made an indecipherable noise. "Luck is as much a part of life as anything."

I repeated his noise back to him. "I thought you tried to keep New York safe for us youngsters, Uncle Connor," I teased, glancing at him sideways.

He gave me a wry grin but didn't respond.

I sat up and waved at the sword. "A present for you."

He nodded and leaned back in his chair, sipping his drink.

I took a drink of the beer Connor had given me before I leaned back again. "I'm just tired of this shit," I commented for no real reason.

Connor studied the amber liquid in his glass calmly. He didn't seem surprised by my non-sequitor. He answered my comment with a slight shrug, "What can we do about it?"

I leaned back and thought about it. Was this the right time to try to implement my long term goal? With a deep breath, I decided that it was as good a time as any. Farzan had just proven that Immortals were at risk anywhere. Javier Vachon's death a few months previously proved that vampires were no safer, really.

I opened my eyes and studied Connor as he studied his drink. Should I talk with him about it? Well, why not? He's certainly no danger to me and potentially a very valuable ally.

Starting cautiously, I asked, "We're safe on Holy Ground, right?"

He shrugged again. "Temporarily, yes. The Game will eventually find you, though. Again and again."

"But we ARE safe there, right?" I persisted.

"Sure," he drawled out, clearly not seeing where I was going but looking up at me.

"Why not build a city on Holy Ground?"

He let out a huff of amusement and returned his attention to his glass.

"I'm serious," I protested, knowing I was starting to sound like a petulant child. Taking a breath to calm down, I continued, "Build a town on Holy Ground. Invite any Immortals who agree to lay down their swords as long as they live there. Isolate ourselves from most of society, so nobody would have to move every ten years. Think about what a group of us could accomplish, Connor, if we could stay in one place for a long period of time, without fear of Hunters or persecution."

He looked up at me in exasperation. "The polite term here is 'Pipe Dream', Ryan."

"Why?" I challenged him. "What's wrong with the idea?"

He rolled his eyes at me but apparently decided to humor me. "How will this thing be built?"

It was my turn to laugh. "Need I remind you that most Immortals, yourself included, are already richer 'n God?" To some degree, I was too, but now was not the time to bring that up.

One eyebrow went up. "What makes you think I'd be willing to put any money into this hare-brained scheme of yours?"

I shrugged. "Call it a capital investment. Investing in the future of all Immortals," I finished with a grin.

He rolled his eyes. "You should sell used cars. Okay, what's to stop a small army of mortal hunters from coming in and shooting us all?"

Like I said, make it somewhat isolated. Maybe an island off the coast of Alaska?" I frowned in thought before shaking my head. "Weather'd get us. Have to be more temperate than that. An island off the coast of California, maybe."

"Why not in the middle of the Pacific?" he asked with a frown.

I shook my head again. "Utilities," I answered simply. "Unless we want to build a power plant and sewage treatment plant for ourselves, we have to be close enough to a modern nation to use their infrastructure."

He cocked an eyebrow. "And you think you can find an island close enough to the continental United States that is Holy Ground for this to work?"

"Perhaps," I mused, thinking that I had a very good relationship with the current President of the United States. I'd been his personal aide for a year, after all. "Anyway," I shook it off and focused my attention on Connor, "it doesn't have to be near the US. Any modern nation will do."

"Find a big enough island in the Caribbean or South Pacific, and you can just build the infrastructure."

I opened my mouth to answer, but discovered that I didn't have a retort. Why not do it that way? Something to think about certainly. "Depends on population," I conceded his point. "If it gets too big, though, the security of the island becomes moot, not to mention the availability of this hypothetical island. Sooner or later, it'd make as much sense to find an isolated spot on land."

Connor looked at me thoughtfully before slowly saying, "You know, you're starting to sound like you're actually going to try to do this."

I nodded. "Why not? I've been thinking about this for years, but never brought it up. Admittedly, I need to talk to several more people and see who all would be interested in living there and who would be interested in financing it. So far I haven't spent any money."

He shook his head sadly. "I don't think this'll work, Ryan." He sighed. "But who am I to try and stop you? If and when you have the details figured out, come back here and talk with me."

I smiled. That makes one convert.

Jen stared at me. "Run that by me again," she finally requested. It was the next evening. I'd done all my chores in New York without any further mishaps and flown back home that evening.

I sighed. Why wouldn't anyone get as excited about this idea as I was? "Build a town on Holy Ground. Invite Immortals who want to live away from the general public."

She continued to stare at me. "Why would you want to do this?"

"To escape the Game," I responded in a flat voice.

She sighed. "Sorry. I sometimes forget what your brand of Immortals have to put up with."

I didn't bother to respond to that. She didn't know about Farzan. "Years ago, Duncan built a cabin on Holy Ground. I want to work with basically the same idea, but instead of just one home, provide the possibility of several. It has to be isolated so we wouldn't have to move often."

She thought about it for a few seconds before looking at me and asking quietly, "What about me?"

"You'll be with me, of course," I answered immediately. I cocked my head, "If you still want to be."

She shook her head. "It isn't that. I want to stay with you. But if you'll be living in one place for years, someone will notice that I'm not aging -"

"And most Immortals don't know about vampires," I finished. "Well, I had intended on inviting Aaron and Terry, Nat and Nick, Rich and Hoa, and Diane and Harm at least. So there WILL be vampires invited as well. We'll just have to figure out what to tell people if anyone notices."

She didn't look happy with my trying to gloss over the problem, but I wasn't that worried. I was hoping that there would be enough Immortal Buzzes running around that an immortal without a Buzz wouldn't be recognized as anything out of the ordinary. Even if we DID have to tell all to some Immortals, they'd keep that secret just like they kept their own.

"What I'm most concerned with," I said, "is vampires living on Holy Ground. Isn't that a problem?"

She nodded. "For some, yes it is. It's not a problem for everyone, though. As long as there are no religious icons laying around, it doesn't bother me."

Good.

I picked up the phone and hit a speed dial, Jen looking curiously on.

"Ryan residence," Hoa answered.

"Hi, Hoa," I responded. "Got something I'd like to talk over with you and Rich. You two free tonight?"

"Sure," she agreed quickly. "Beats cleaning house. Here or your place?"

Joe's. I need to talk with him and Mac as well."

"Sounds mysterious," she commented, clearly fishing.

"You'll just have to wait," I gently scolded her. "Two hours?"

"We'll be there," she agreed.

I hung up with her and hit yet another speed dial. "Joe's," Mike answered.

"Hey, Mike, it's Ryan Chessman. Are Joe or Mac there?"

"Both. Which do you need to talk to?"

"Neither, really. I just needed to make sure they're there. Could you have a secluded booth available for us in a couple hours? Going to be six of us."

"Sure," he answered slowly. "Is there something I should be warned about?"

"No," I soothed him, knowing he'd be concerned about Immortals gathering. "Just a talk. Joe will probably fill you in later. No big deal."

"Fair 'nuf."

Jen and I walked into Joe's nearly two hours later. The instant we crossed the threshold, Jen frowned and started scanning the room.

I'd already Sensed Duncan and spotted him at the bar before turning my attention to my wife. "What's wrong?"

"One of my kind here, but it's not Hoa," she muttered, still looking around.

Her eyes stopped, and I followed her line of sight to what appeared to be one of Joe's waitresses as she locked eyes with Jen and gave a slow nod. She was fractionally shorter than me, black hair, and very good looking without quite being supermodel level. After appraising Jennifer and me, she tilted her head to an empty table.

Jen nodded and quietly said to me, "I'll just be a minute."

Nodding, I made my way over to the stool next to Mac. A Killian's was waiting for me before I even arrived.

I smiled up at Joe. "Nice to have a bartender who knows what I like."

Joe smiled easily back. Duncan gave a good-natured snort. "I don't see how you can drink that swill."

"You don't like it just because it's Irish," I accused him with a smile.

He shrugged but didn't respond.

"Can't stand American pilsners," I explained. "This," I held up the bottle, "is one of the few mass produced beers I can tolerate. No offense, Joe, but a few of the local microbreweries make some pretty good stuff."

He nodded. "I carry the pale ale, Irish ale, and stout brewed at the place down on main."

I smiled in surprise. "When I ask for a refill, then I'll have the Irish ale." The levity left my voice, and I asked Joe quietly, "Do you know about your waitress that Jen is talking to?"

A hint of a smile came to his face. "Yes. Don't worry about Korin. I'm sure you'll agree with me in about –"

A startled laugh from Jen interrupted him. All three of us turned and saw Jen leaning back in her chair smiling at Korin. Korin for her part was smiling easily back.

Smiling wider now, Joe turned back to me. "Don't worry about her loyalties."

For the moment, I would take him at his word, but I wanted a bit more information, preferably from her or Jen, before discussing Immortals or my plans in front of her. "How much does she know?" I asked obliquely.

"She knows about Immortals if that's what you're asking," he assured me.

Duncan turned back to the conversation, "She was working for you in Paris, wasn't she?"

"Yep," Joe agreed easily. "She moved here when I came back to town. Since being brought across, she's wanted to move out of Paris. Seacouver seemed to be a good choice, and she's a good waitress, so I offered to help her move and help her with her green card."

I nodded and leaned back from the huddle the three of us had been unconsciously making. One of Duncan's eyebrows came up and he turned to study her again. He'd known about vampires for years, ever since Rich and I had explained them to him about our fiancées at the time.

"Who's her Sire?" I asked.

"Terry," Jen answered, taking the stool next to mine.

I turned and stared at her. "TERRY? Grandma Terry?"

She nodded with a smile.

"Grandma Terry?" Duncan asked blankly.

I turned back to him. "That's right, we never explained the family tree to you. Jen's sire was Michelle. Michelle's was Theresa Ryan. We all call her Grandma Terry."

He frowned. "Theresa Ryan from the wedding? The one married to Aaron Grey?"

We nodded.

He turned once again to study Korin pensively.

I saw Joe smiling at him. "You knew," I accused the bartender.

He raised his hands, and the smile got wider. "Guilty," he cheerfully acknowledged. At my eye roll, he just chuckled. "Hey," he said, catching all of our attention again, "Mike said you wanted to talk to us?"

I nodded. "Once Rich and Hoa show up, I have a proposition for you all to listen to."

Once all six of us were comfortably ensconced in a booth, and even the girls had gotten something to drink thanks to a new label "wine" that Joe was now carrying, I laid the general idea out in front of these four.

Once I was done, I leaned back in my chair, took a sip of my ale, and studied the reactions. Duncan and Rich were staring at me in shock. Joe had leaned back and was now studying me thoughtfully while running a hand down his beard and chin. Hoa looked curious and interested.

She turned to Jen and asked, "For the sake of your husband's continued health, well-being, and anatomical cohesiveness, I hope we're invited."

Joe chuckled, and I smiled. Jen nodded at her child. "Vampires will be included, yes. Those of us who can live on holy ground without any adverse effects, anyway."

"Just those in contact with Immortals, or any?" Joe asked calmly.

"Any who know about Immortals," I answered with a raised eyebrow at him. He tilted his head toward the bar, and I caught a glimpse of Korin who was failing miserably at trying to ignore our conversation.

"I'll talk to her later," Jennifer whispered into my ear.

I nodded to her, and Jen turned to Joe. "By the by, Joe, I'd like to thank you for stocking up on this new vintage. It's good." She took a small drink and smiled at the mortal bartender.

He smiled back. "If you don't mind, I'll take your word for it. I understand it's an acquired taste," he finished ironically.

The two vampires smiled, and I chuckled.

"How can you joke after dropping that on us?" Duncan demanded, finally regaining the use of his tongue.

"Why not?" I asked. "Seems like a reasonable idea in principle if not in execution. I'm floating it past you for your various reactions." I turned to Joe and added, "Oh, before I forget, the Watchers will definitely be welcome as well. Overtly or covertly. In fact, the more trusted, friendly bodies, the better."

He nodded with a thoughtful frown. "It's the trusted part that will be tough to guarantee."

Duncan winced.

"Retired Watchers only?" Hoa suggested with her chin resting on a fist.

Joe turned to her with a raised eyebrow. Giving it a moment's thought, he slowly began to nod.

"The physical security of this hypothetical town is what's spooking me," Rich commented.

I shook my head. "Make it an island with only one harbor and no helipad, and that simplifies security a lot. I'm more concerned with keeping us secret from the outside world indefinitely. A town will have all sorts of contact with the state and county governments. An island, off the coast of California for instance, will have all sorts of land developers after us."

Mac shook his head. "Form a corporation. Have the corporation buy the land. After that point, it's a lot easier to hide things from the government so

long as on paper it appears to be a moderately successful company that pays its taxes and doesn't make any outrageous demands. If the island's big enough and far enough from any other country, the other possibility is to form your own country, but that has other economic implications."

I held up a hand. "Let's keep it small and simple for the moment. No need to talk about trying to find an abandoned church in every capital city of the world to set up our own embassies or printing money with my face on it. If we outgrow the small stage, we can worry about the bigger stuff later."

"Your face?" Rich asked with a raised eyebrow.

I grinned and shrugged.

Joe's smile got a touch wider as everyone else chuckled.

I commented to him, "You seem way too calm for such a revolutionary idea."

He shrugged. "This isn't the first time this idea has come up. In fact the Council has been tossing this idea back and forth for centuries."

"Council?" MacLeod asked with a frown.

Rich groaned and let his head fall forward onto the table with a thud.

Joe sighed. "Please forget you heard that, Mac."

Duncan stared at his grey-haired friend for nearly a minute before giving a single nod. He turned to me. "Who all are you thinking of inviting?"

"Anyone we can think of. The list in my head is about twenty and growing. Speaking of which," I pulled a piece of paper out of my pocket and handed it to Joe, "can you let me know where these individuals are?"

His eyebrows came up by the end of the list. "You going to contact all these folks in person or send them a letter?"

"Face to face," I answered. "This isn't something than can be done except in front of someone."

"Sooner or later you're going to need to get everyone together," Duncan commented.

I nodded. "Granted. I'm open to suggestions."

"Las Vegas," Mac answered promptly. "There's a huge antique show and auction there in March, including a lot of swords. It's held every couple of years and it's always heavily attended by Immortals."

I smiled at him. "You sound like you're getting behind this idea."

He shrugged. "Let's just say I'm interested but not convinced."

I nodded. "Then can you contact the folks in Europe? You're better about traveling than I am."

"Who are you thinking about?"

"Aaron and Terry, Nick and Amanda, and Father Liam Riley in Paris and Cassandra in Wales."

He nodded. "I'll hit Connor and Claudia in New York on my way. Joe, are Robert and Gina still in Paris?"

He shook his head. "They're in Nice. I'll get you an address if you want."

"I've already talked to Connor," I mentioned to Mac. Eyebrows went up all over.

"How'd my kinsman react?" Duncan asked.

"About the same as you. He worried for my sanity for a few minutes before thinking it through and listening to my arguments."

Duncan gave me a short smile before he leaned back in his chair and began thinking out loud. "Methos, Grace, Michelle, Marcus, Matthew, Ceirdwyn, Kyra . . ." He frowned as he trailed off. "Who else?"

Korin had quietly come up behind him while he was muttering to himself. Reaching over his shoulder, she calmly laid down a pad of paper with a couple pens and walked back to her station beside the bar. Jen stood and followed Korin, taking her drink with her.

Mac was momentarily startled when Korin silently showed up behind him, but his eyes followed her as she left. Joe and I shared a smile over that.

Jerking his attention back to the table, Mac tore a sheet of paper from the pad and began scribbling down names, Rich looking on. "I suppose we should invite Kit, Corey, and Benny . . ." Duncan trailed off in a grumbling voice.

With those two otherwise occupied, I waved at the sheet of paper that I'd given Joe. "Any problems with letting me know where they are?"

He frowned back down at the sheet.

Hoa sighed in exasperation. "You know full well that he isn't going to hunt them, Joe."

He rubbed one hand roughly across his forehead. "Yeah," he gave in, letting his Watcher Oath bend just a little bit more.

"If it makes it easier," I offered him, "I really only need to know if any of them have moved since I saw them last."

He nodded and folded the paper, stuffing it into a pocket.

Duncan looked up at me. "What cities are you planning on hitting?"

I shrugged. "Chicago, Toronto, and DC at least."

He blinked. "Chicago?"

"Diane Schonke and her husband, who's also Jen's child."

He nodded and turned back to the list.

"Can I add some names?" Rich asked, looking over the page in Duncan's hand.

I waved in invitation. "Feel free. Don't think this is my show, folks. If you have suggestions, please bring them out. However, if you want to invite someone, you may be the one who has to go and talk with them. Most Immortals would hardly invite me in for a talk if they don't know me."

He nodded, took the next sheet of paper, and grabbed the other pen.

Hoa smiled at me. "You seem to have enthusiastic approval."

I smiled back. "Apparently. Frankly, I'm glad. If this gets going, the more Immortals living there the more likely it'll halt the Game."

One of Joe's eyebrows came up. "Is that your goal?"

I gave a tiny shrug. "That, and finding a safe place for me and Jen to live. By the way, Joe, I was planning on talking to Clay Webb and Walter Skinner in DC. Any objections?"

He blinked, hard. "No," he answered slowly. "If this gets off the ground, were you wanting to make an open call to all Watchers or something? Remember the part earlier about finding trustworthy Watchers?"

"No, not an open call, but at least those Watchers who are actually friends of Immortals. You and Gina are invited, of course," I added, referring to his significant other who'd been doing long research trips almost every time I was in the same town with him.

He nodded. "If this gets off the ground, then I'll put out a quiet call."

"Thanks." I looked over at my wife to see her speaking calmly with Korin. The waitress was paying close attention and asking occasional questions. At the other end of the bar I caught sight of Mike who was alternating his attention from Korin, to us, to the customers. I turned back to Joe. "How much does Mike know? I told him you'd fill him in on this discussion if it didn't get shot down in flames."

Joe waved it off. "He knows everything."

Hoa's attention shot over to him. "Everything?"

He smiled. "Kinda hard to hide when he needs to occasionally serve the new vintage you seem to like so much."

Her mouth twitched. "Good point."

After that point, plans started coming together. The combined list of potential invitees reached sixty before the end of the evening. We'd agreed that the initial meeting of the whole group in Las Vegas gave everyone enough time to plan and for other ideas to be hammered out, not the least of which was lining up an island or two that fit the criteria.

Speaking of the island, I'd been doing a bit of online research. For the smaller end of the scale, I thought I had found an island off the coast of North Carolina. The next trick would be to convince President Ryan. I'd also tried finding a larger island in the Caribbean Sea or the South Pacific. The trick there came down to current ownership and indigenous populations. Any given island could belong to any of a half a dozen major countries or could be a country unto itself. Then came the issue that some islands had existing families or small villages that would have to be re-located if we went in that direction. Most people wouldn't want to move, which caused another entire set of issues.

Finding large, hospitable, uninhabited islands on the face of the Earth looked to be impossible.

This didn't even touch the issue of turning fifteen square miles or more of South Pacific island into Holy Ground.

Back on the recruiting front, MacLeod left about month after our first meeting to do a tour of Europe with a list of names.

I flew out the following day and found myself in Chicago entering the law office of "Bell Attorneys at Law" late that evening.

As I made it through the door to the small lobby of their practice, two shocks hit me at almost the same moment. First, Diane Schonke's Buzz was stronger than I'd remembered. Several weak heads had been added to her strength. Being a newcomer in Chicago, she'd apparently gotten some

headhunting attention and dealt with it in the only way that Immortals can.

The second shock was to find the receptionist was someone I knew. Cindy Rothchilde was a classmate of mine from way back when I went through Watcher's University. So much had happened since then, I didn't know how she'd react to me. She'd aged a bit in the two decades since I'd last seen her, but she otherwise looked very similar to how I remembered.

Seeing my wide eyes, she shook her head quickly before I could voice a greeting. Nodding in instant understanding, I quickly changed tactics. "Hello," I said pleasantly. "Could I speak with Mister or Missus Bell? Or preferably both if they're available."

"Certainly, sir," Cindy professionally greeted me. "Do you have an appointment?" She took a sheet of paper and began rapidly writing something.

"No, but I'm rather pressed for time. If possible, I'd really like to speak with both."

"Let me check to see if they're available," she promised, putting the pen down and handing me the page. Standing, she asked, "Who shall I say is calling?"

"Ryan Chessman," I answered absently, looking down at the paper. It read, "Don't blow my cover. Remember H's hearing. I heard what happened to you. Nice to see you again."

She stepped out of the first office as I casually crumpled the paper and dropped it into the wastebasket. She smiled at me and waved me on back to the office marked simply as 'Diane Bell'. "Missus Bell will see you immediately. I'm going to check to see if Mister Bell is available."

She gave me an impish wink as we walked past each other. I entered Diane's office, leaving the door open behind me.

Her face broke into a wide smile once she identified me. "Ryan!" she greeted me cheerfully. "Nice to see you. What brings you to our neck of the woods?" After giving me a quick hug, she waved me toward a chair and settled herself behind her own desk. Harm and Jen communicated once a week or so, so there was little need for us to catch up on our lives.

Taking the offered seat, I answered, "Let's wait to see if David is free. This is really something you both need to hear."

Her face fell slightly at my ominous sounding declaration.

"It's not bad," I assured her.

"Get in here, flyboy," she called loudly toward the open door. "Ryan's got something to tell us."

"I'm coming, I'm coming," Harm groused good naturedly as he came in and shut the door behind himself. "Hi, Ryan."

"Hi, Harm," I greeted him since the door was shut. I turned to Diane. "Pretty casual atmosphere you two work in."

They both smiled. "With our night time office hours, our clientele is a little less . . . formal than in most practices," she answered.

"I can imagine," I said with a grin. "On to the point of my visit."

"You didn't come here for our charming and witty conversation?" Harm asked guilelessly while settling into the other guest chair.

"Diane's, anyway," I shot back, earning a mock wounded look from Harm and a grin from Diane. When neither of them made any further comment, I continued, "In the short version: I want to form a corporation. This corporation will then buy an island from the United States government. From the outside, I want it to appear to be a moderately successful company with as few external entanglements as possible."

"From the outside?" Harm asked pointedly after digesting my opening.

"Yep. In reality, I'm hoping to invite as many Immortals and vampires as possible. With luck, we can all live in peace indefinitely and put an end to the Game."

They both stared at me in shock. Seeing from my expression that I was not making a joke, Diane slowly leaned forward and hit the intercom.

"Cindy, short of the building catching on fire, we shouldn't be disturbed for the next hour."

"Yes, ma'am," Cindy responded neutrally. I absently wondered if she had been warned about my visit. Joe knew when I'd be here and he knew what I'd be saying, after all.

Settling back in her chair, Diane continued to stare at me and said, "Would you care to repeat that last part again?"

I leaned back comfortably and launched into my planned speech.

Before leaving Chicago the next morning, I wrote out a quick note and mailed it to Cindy at the Bells' office. In short, I invited her to the meeting as well, giving Joe Dawson's name and my cell number as contact points if she didn't know what I was referring to. Since I didn't get a call and Joe never mentioned it later, I assumed that she'd already heard what I was up to.

Yielding to temptation, I rented the red convertible and drove the two hours to Lanchester to see my family. After catching up with the youngsters and getting them off to bed, I laid the high points out for my "parents" plus Rob and Christi.

Rob and Christi, being not much older than I was, were immediately interested. Besides, with their apparent ages being in the late teens, they had more to gain than most.

Doug and Lois (it was still hard not to think of them as Mom and Dad) were more skeptical but accepted the invitation to Las Vegas the following March.

Heading north and further east, I stopped in Toronto and had a very similar conversation with Nat and Nick, this time including vampires into the invitation. Once the shock wore off, Nick had several names and suggestions for the plan.

Heading back south and continuing east, my next stop was Washington, DC.

Once checked into a hotel, I started making phone calls.

Mulder and Dana agreed to meet me for dinner since they were in town.

Walter Skinner and Clay Webb would have to wait two days since Webb was out of the country at the moment. Based on Skinner's guarded responses, I figured the local Watcher hierarchy already knew what I was going to discuss.

The next call went to Secret Service headquarters.

"This is Agent Kessler." It had taken a bit of time and patience, but I had finally gotten the head of President Ryan's protective detail on the line. He already knew about me and Immortals, so he was a necessary part of my plan.

"Hi, Kevin, it's Ryan Allen," I said, giving him the name that I'd been using when living in DC and as President Ryan's aide. As well as an undercover member of his Service protective detail.

"Ryan," he greeted me warily. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm going to be calling the White House and trying to arrange a meeting with Jack. If I actually get one, I know I'm going to need a Service agent in the room since I've been outside for too long to still be trusted. You're the only one who knows enough to not be a risk."

He thought about that for a few moments before wryly asking, "Should I be flattered?"

I chuckled. "You know what I mean."

"Does this meeting need to be secure?"

I shook my head, knowing he was obliquely asking if we needed to take it somewhere that wouldn't be recorded. "The Oval will be good enough. It should mostly be a business meeting, really."

"Just calling the White House and asking for a business meeting with Swordsman? You got balls, man."

"Jack likes friends more than he likes politicians, you know that."

"True enough," he grudgingly admitted. "Alright, if you get on the schedule, I'll arrange to be on post. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough," I agreed.

My next call went through the White House switchboard and ended with Missus Sumter, one of President Ryan's executive secretaries. After much cajoling, I finally convinced her to pencil me in after hours three days hence.

I stood from the table as Dana and Mulder's Buzzes approached. Smiling at them, I shook Mulder's hand and gave Dana a quick hug before they took seats.

"Nice to see you again, Ryan," Dana greeted me.

"You, too. How's life been treating you?"

"Amazingly well," Mulder answered. "I even got a commendation from Skinner since my medical costs have gone down dramatically in the past several years."

I fought the grin, but it still emerged, though twisted. "I wonder how that happened."

"Just lucky, I guess," the younger of the two Immortals in front of me answered with a straight face.

I rolled my eyes, and Dana grinned.

"What brings you to town?" Dana asked.

"I've got a proposition I'd like you to listen to." I laid out the whole deal to them in what was becoming a routine speech on a decidedly non-routine

topic. Since they already knew about vampires, I didn't bother to hide that vampires would be part of the invited list.

Mulder kept a bland face on, but the way he was sitting tensely in his chair when I was finished indicated to me that I'd surprised him with the suggestion. Dana, on the other hand, was calmly taking a sip of her drink.

"Can we invite anyone to the Vegas meeting?"

I nodded. "Of course. Does this mean you're interested in coming?"

She and Mulder shared a look. He answered, "Scully will have to be leaving soon or it'll be obvious that she isn't aging. Hair coloring would only explain so much."

"Like I'd color my hair," she grumbled. Turning back to me, she said, "I'd like to invite Maggie Larken and Bill Skipper."

I shrugged. "Whoever. I'll trust your judgment. Once a meeting time and place is arranged in Vegas, I'll send you a note. You can forward that on. Once there, I may ask you to confirm you've invited them, but feel free to invite anyone you think should be included and can be trusted."

Mulder was frowning at Dana. "Maggie Larken and Bill Skipper?"

She half-smiled. "You know them as Maggie Scully and Bill Scully, Junior." He blinked, apparently in surprise. She continued, "Years ago, five of us agreed to act as a family for each other if we ever needed it. You would have been suspicious if I didn't have any family to occasionally show off. This was before you became Immortal, of course."

He was starting to nod, a faraway stare in his eyes. "Melissa and your father?"

Dana shook her head. "Bill fell in the Game. The story you got was what the world heard about him. Melissa was shot by Krycek just like you heard. After she revived, Maggie helped smuggle her out. She's still alive last I heard, though I don't know where she is."

"Ask your Mom?" he suggested with a faint smile.

She nodded. "I'll do that." She turned to me. "That'll make three. I assume you're already inviting Mandy." I grinned and nodded, being reminded that she was in fact referring to Amanda Wolfe, a fellow student of the late Rebecca Horne. She continued, "Unless Mulder here has someone to invite, that's all I can think of at the moment."

He waved the offer off. "Though seeing Skin-man's face if he ever heard about Immortals and vampires would be priceless . . ." he trailed off, clearly savoring the mental image.

I hid my wide smile behind taking a sip of water. If they only knew.

Watcher District Director Walter Skinner laughed out loud when I relayed Mulder's slightly edited words to him two nights later. Watcher Regional Director Clayton Webb merely grunted in amusement.

As it turned out, they DID know what I was going to discuss with them. Joe had been quietly spreading the word about what I was up to.

"Anyway," I concluded, "You two are invited." I turned to Webb. "I'd like to invite Bud Roberts, since he was Diane's friend, if you've no objections." He was also Harm's friend, but I didn't know how much Skinner knew. Mentioning vampires in front of him could be a mistake.

Webb frowned and chewed on a lip for a few seconds. "If you want to, I can't really stop you. He already knows Diane is alive, so that won't hurt. The problem is Harm." He saw my eyes widen slightly and glance at Skinner. Webb waved one hand dismissively. "Walter knows about vampires. Anyway, if you want to determine if Roberts wants to see Diane, feel free. If he agrees, then you'll need to figure out how to explain Harm. That, I'll leave to your discretion."

Much to my surprise, when I called JAG and asked to speak with Bud Roberts, I was told that he'd left the Navy. The switchboard offered to transfer me to Harriet Roberts, but I demurred, asking instead if they knew where I could currently get in touch with him. I was given the name of a civilian law firm.

"Bud Roberts," he answered after I was transferred a minute later.

"Mister Roberts, this is Ryan Chessman."

He paused a moment before the name registered. "Ah, Mister Chessman. To what do I owe this call?"

Based on how Webb had phrased it the previous evening, I proceeded on the assumption that nobody had told Roberts about what I was up to. From his point of view, I was an Immortal who was friends with Diane and had visited her and Harm just before he had died. "I have a proposition for you, Mister Roberts. It has to do with Diane."

"She's not in trouble, is she?" he asked immediately.

"No," I assured him. "She's fine. Just saw her a few days ago, actually. No, this idea has to do with you two meeting again."

Uh, there are a few problems with that idea," he began cautiously.

"I'm aware of the problems. My idea could easily be called radical, but if you're interested in speaking with Diane again, I think you and I should talk." I continued when he didn't immediately answer, "District and Regional Directors are aware of what I'm doing and have no objections."

"Okay," he finally said. "Meet me here for lunch and we can find somewhere to talk."

He stared at me over the remains of his plate of General Tao's Chicken. "You want to have a town where Immortals and Watchers live together?"

"Yes," I answered calmly, still working on my orange chicken.

"Why?"

"Several reasons. First, if enough of us stop fighting, maybe we can stop the Game. Second, if we don't have to move every ten years, consider how much each of us could accomplish. Third, keeping Immortals and the mortals who know about us separate is rough on everyone. You for instance: If you want to spend time with Diane, you know what she is, and she knows you know, then that friendship can only make the both of you happier."

"For what it's worth, thank you, but Diane really shouldn't be aware of the Watchers."

Oh, hell. How do I explain how we had to tell her when Harm, with vampiric senses, caught my Watcher shortly after he was brought across? A sudden inspiration struck, "Webb helped me arrange for her to 'kill' herself and get her out of town. So she's aware that SOME people know about Immortals. Webb let me explain some of what the Watchers do to her out of necessity. If this town idea gets off the ground, the idea of the Watchers is going to become something of an open secret, at least among the inhabitants."

He grimaced. "Not all Watchers will like that. It's in our Oath to never interfere. You know that."

I nodded, remembering the Oath I'd taken years ago. "Yes, but you're as aware as I am that there's a growing faction that thinks the non-interference policy is, to put it politely, a steaming pile of shit."

He smiled slightly. "Are you asking me to move to this town or just to visit?"

I shrugged. "Either. Once it's up and running, there probably won't be a lot of visitors, but I'm sure there will be some."

He leaned back and frowned in thought. "If we move, then I'll have to explain everything to Harriet and tell Little AJ something . . ."

He continued to ponder things while I finished eating. Cracking open my fortune cookie, I read, "You will soon witness a special ceremony." Dropping my fortune to the table, I picked up his and read, "Unexpected opportunities will be coming your way soon."

As I'd been taught by a few college friends, I tacked, "in bed" and "in the bathroom" to the end of each. Juvenile? Yes, but it occasionally did produce some amusing, though slightly lewd, variations.

"Can I ask a favor?" he asked, almost hesitantly.

"Depends," I answered him, flipping his fortune back onto the table and taking a sip of my drink.

"Could you ask Diane to come here?"

I frowned slightly. "You know she's alive and what she is."

He nodded. "However, if I'm going to tell Harriet, I'll need some proof."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "My cutting my hand open isn't sufficient?" I asked dryly.

He shrugged. "She doesn't know you. She'll believe Sarah MacKenzie where she won't believe Ryan Chessman."

Hmm, good point. I chewed my lip for a moment in thought. If Diane agreed to come, she'd no doubt want to bring Harm, and so vampires would need to be explained. Which would need to happen anyway if all involved wanted to live in the same town. All this pre-supposed that Diane agreed to come, of course.

I sighed as I thought it through. This was getting complicated.

"Tell you what: I'll call Diane tonight. If she agrees to come, then I'll arrange for her to meet the two of you. Fair enough?"

Early that evening, I parked near the White House and walked the rest of the way in. I felt nearly naked and horribly vulnerable without any weapons on me, but the Secret Service had absolutely no sense of humor when it came to allowing people to carry weapons into the White House. It didn't matter that I was a former Service member. While such an attitude may seem to be overkill to many people, I heartily approved of such measures even if it did temporarily leave me vulnerable.

Giving the guards the name of Ryan Allen, I passed through at least two metal detectors that I saw and was subjected to as thorough a search as

possible short of a pat-down. It wouldn't have surprised me at all if one of the archways I passed was in fact a fluoroscope.

Security had long since passed the paranoid stage here and was firmly settled into "a way of life".

With a visitor's pass firmly clipped to my suit jacket, I was escorted to the secretary's antechamber and told to wait. Most of the ladies recognized me and cheerfully greeted me as they were getting ready to go home.

As Missus Sumter was leaving, I raised a hand to stop her. "Ellen, does Jack still smoke?" I asked. From my time as his aide, I knew he daily bummed a few cigarettes off of her. Though I disliked the practice on principle, I recognized that the President needed the stress relief.

She nodded just as Secret Service Agent Kevin Kessler came into the room. I thanked her as Kevin escorted me into the Oval Office.

President of the United States Jack Ryan greeted me in front of his desk with a smile and a handshake. "Ryan! Good to see you again. How's life been treating you?"

Smiling back, I could see that the previous few years had taken a toll on President Ryan in grey hairs, but he was as friendly as ever. "Pretty good. Been mostly keeping out of trouble. Actually," I continued, "I have a present for you." I reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out a pack of Marlboro cigarettes and a Zippo lighter with a United States flag on it.

He started slightly before shaking his head and chuckling.

Handing the items to him, I took a seat on the couch. "How've you been doing, Jack?"

"Not too bad," Jack allowed as he took a seat next to me. "Agent Kessler here says that this is a business meeting. What can I do for you?"

"Actually, I might have a solution to one of your minor problems. I assume you're familiar with the Annacoga Bombing Range?" I was referring to one of the islands off the coast of North Carolina. The US Navy and Air Force had used the island for live-fire exercises for decades. A group from Greenpeace had then set up a semi-permanent camp on the island to prevent the military from dropping bombs on it. It had been on the news for a short time a few years back but was now just at a long-term-simmering point. What the general public didn't know about it was that that island was once a holy site for the Native Americans living in the area. That coalition of tribes had been extinguished early in the American colonization, and the only way I knew about it was a casual comment by Joe at the same time Greenpeace was making noise.

He winced at the mention of the island. "Painfully aware."

"Hypothetically speaking, what would happen if a corporation were to come along and offer to buy it from the government?"

He blinked, and a slow smile started to form. "Well, the Navy and Air Force could no longer even consider using it, and therefore Greenpeace would leave it and us alone." He peered at me a moment and asked, "What are you up to?"

I opened my hands in a harmless gesture. "Me? I'm never up to anything. I have no hidden agendas."

Even Agent Kessler snorted in amusement at that.

"Okay," I acknowledged, "so I do have an idea. I can't promise you anything at this point, but I have something in the works with a few friends. If this gets off the ground, the Department of the Interior or Department of the Navy or whoever would be getting a phone call from us. I was just making sure there wouldn't be immediate problems with the idea."

"A few friends?" Jack asked me shrewdly, grinning slightly.

"You wouldn't know them," I answered with an answering grin. "Anyway, if an American corporation comes along in the next year and offers to buy it, you'll know some of what's going on."

Jack studied me for a few more seconds before quietly asking again, "What are you up to, Ryan?"

Looking steadily into his eyes, I answered, "I'm going to try to build a home for a minority, Jack. They'd rather not have ANY publicity, hence all of this cloak and dagger stuff."

He slowly nodded, apparently realizing what I meant. He'd long since learned about Immortals, but I believed I was the only one he knew.

"I'm sure the situation with Annacoga won't be changing anytime soon. You won't have any roadblocks from this end, though I'm sure the IRS, Interior, and the DOD will have some questions." Abruptly smiling and leaning back, he asked, "So, how've you been doing, Ryan?"

Two nights later I picked up Diane and Harm at the airport and drove them first to a handy hotel and then to an out of the way pub that Bud and I had agreed on. While Diane had been mildly annoyed at me for not letting her know earlier that it was Bud who was her Watcher instead of Webb, she expressed immediate interest in talking with him now that she knew that he was aware of her Immortality. Hence, she and Harm had flown to Washington.

While driving them, I asked what they were going to tell the Roberts.

They were both silent for a few seconds before Harm said, "We've been thinking about that. You said he sounded interested in moving?"

That's the impression I got," I confirmed and hedged all in one answer.

"We'd like to tell them, then. The only problem is that we don't know how to go about explaining vampires to him."

I could easily hear the amusement in Diane's voice, "You know how much he's into the paranormal, Harm. I still say we just tell him outright."

"It's not quite that easy," I said. "I've had to explain vampires to a few people, you two included if you'll recall, and trust me that it isn't always simple." I thought for a few moments before saying, "Tell you what: I've got a plan on how to tell them in a way that isn't as likely to scare either of them to death."

"He already knows about me," Diane pointed out.

"Yes, but Harriet doesn't know about you. That's why he wanted me to get you here, remember?" When neither of them had an answer to that, I outlined the plan I had just come up with. Getting their grudging agreement, I parked my rental and walked into the bar, spotting the two Roberts immediately. After getting a Killian's from the bartender, I headed over to the couple.

Harriet smiled up at me and waved me to a seat at their table. "Mister Chessman," she greeted me cheerfully. "Bud told me that you'd meet us here and that you had something important to tell us."

I looked over at Bud with a raised eyebrow as I seated myself. On the phone, he'd indicated that he'd be telling his wife very little about what it really means to be Immortal, but enough that she'd accept that the person she was going to meet would really be her friend Sarah MacKenzie.

"Sweetie," Bud started, "I'm afraid I told you a little white lie."

She turned a slightly anxious expression to him. "What do you mean, Bud?"

Over her shoulder, I felt and saw Diane and Harm enter the room together but take widely separated seats at the bar per my request. Doing my best to ignore them, I listened to Bud. "You know all these years that I've spent working for that historical group doing research?" At her confused nod, he continued, "They do keep history, just not the kind that you would expect. There is a group of people that can live for hundreds of years called Immortals. The group I've been working for, the Watchers, keep track of Immortals." He stopped there, waiting for her reaction.

"Immortals," she eventually responded in an even voice. We both nodded. She looked at me. "Is that what you were here to tell us, Mister Chessman?"

I shook my head. "First, my name is Ryan. Second, no, I wasn't here to explain Immortals to you. Your husband already knows about us, so he didn't need to be showed. I'm here to help convince you, among other things. You see, we're very difficult to kill. What would kill most everyone else would merely slow us down. We'd revive, and continue on our way."

"Us. You're one of these Immortals, then?"

I nodded.

She looked back and forth between me and her husband. "Why are you telling me this?" All in all, she was taking it amazingly calmly, if sounding somewhat fragile. I wondered how long that would last.

"Because I've brought someone with me that you know. It's important for you to understand that this really is the same person, despite the fact that you attended their funeral."

She looked back and forth between us for nearly a minute before looking squarely at her husband. In a tightly controlled voice, she asked, "Is this some kind of joke, Bud?"

As he started trying to calm her down, I looked over to where Diane had taken a seat and caught her eye. Giving her a slight nod, I turned back to Harriet. "No, this is no joke, and I'm not trying to pull some sort of con, which is probably the next thing you're thinking. In fact, I can prove it." I looked up and stood as Diane approached us apprehensively.

Seeing the direction of my gaze, both Roberts turned around. Bud smiled and struggled to stand up. "Colonel," he smiled. "Good to see you again."

"You, too, Bud," she answered, smiling back. She looked down at the still seated and visibly shocked younger woman. "Hi, Harriet."

"S – Sarah?" Harriet whispered, one hand to her mouth and the other resting on her stomach. Seeing this, both Diane and I looked down and came to the same conclusion in about two seconds.

"You're pregnant again?" Diane put down the club soda she was carrying and hugged the seated woman tightly. "Oh, I'm so happy for you, Harriet!"

Harriet pulled herself out of her friend's grasp and leaned back. Keeping hold of Diane's elbows, she said, "How can you be here? But you . . ." She stopped and looked over at me for a moment before looking up at Diane again and answering her previous thought, "Immortal?"

Diane, Bud, and I nodded.

Seeing our reactions, she stood and gave the older woman a hug. "Sarah, it's so good to see you again. How have you been?"

"Married?!" Bud suddenly asked incredulously, eyes riveted to the ring on Diane's hand.

"Married?" Harriet echoed, reaching around to pull Diane's left hand back in front.

"Uh, yeah," Diane said in embarrassment, shooting a glance at me for help.

I just grinned at her, raising my beer for a sip. Seeing the looks but completely misinterpreting the situation, Harriet glanced down to my left hand and the ring there before turning on her friend. "To Ryan?" she asked in a slightly raised voice.

I started choking, grabbing a napkin and belatedly holding it over my mouth as I struggled to keep myself from coughing up a lung. Diane was laughing, and Harriet was looking back and forth between the two of us in confusion. Bud was also looking back and forth, but his expression was pensive.

Finally getting her laughter under control, Diane took the fourth seat at the table and shook her head. "No, Harriet. It's not to Ryan. While he is a dear friend, I don't think Jennifer would appreciate me being accused of being Missus Chessman."

"Then to whom are you married, Sarah?" Harriet asked, slowly sitting back down.

Having control of my voice again, I said, "That is actually a long story that we'll get into later. Meanwhile, I'll leave you and Diane to get re-acquainted while I steal your husband off for a few minutes. I need to discuss some Immortal and Watcher stuff with him."

Bud raised an eyebrow at me but obligingly picked his drink up and followed me over to the bar. Behind us, I could hear Harriet ask, "Diane?"

"My real name," Diane admitted as we continued further away. Harriet's next question was lost in the noise of the room.

"Watcher and Immortal stuff?" Bud asked in amusement as we settled into barstools.

"Actually, yes it is."

"Does this have anything to do with the fact that neither Ryan Chessman nor Diane Schonke are married according to their Chronicles?"

One eyebrow came up slightly as I looked at him in respect. "Indirectly, I suppose it does. What would you say if I told you that there was another kind of immortal in the world? One that some Watchers know about, but is generally unknown."

He thought about it for a few seconds before shrugging slightly. "Anything is possible, I suppose. I'm talking to someone who can only die by decapitation, after all."

"Or destruction of my body, but I'd really rather not dwell on that, thanks. Seriously, there is another kind of immortal."

"Are Jennifer and Diane's mystery husband these other kinds of immortals?"

"Yes, we are," Harm said from behind Bud. After we had sat down and Bud turned to face me, Harm had quietly moved from his concealed corner to the stool behind Bud.

At Harm's voice, Bud whirled around, nearly overbalancing his stool. A lightning fast move by Harm kept Bud upright. I couldn't see his face, but based on the amused expression Harm was wearing, it didn't take much imagination to figure out that Bud was in a state of shock.

Breaking the silence, I ironically said, "Bud, I believe you already know Harmon Rabb, Junior."

"But . . . You're dead," Bud stammered.

I grinned. He was more right than he knew, but that was a story for another time. "He doesn't appear to be," I countered, keeping to the truth, but phrasing it in a way that would leave Harm the flexibility of explaining as much or as little as he wished.

Harm's eyes flicked to me, apparently recognizing what I was up to. He smiled at Bud. "Hi, Bud. We heard about what happened to your leg in Afghanistan. I was really sorry to hear that, but how are you otherwise?"

Oh, was that what had happened to him? I'd seen that he was limping severely, but I hadn't asked what had happened after I'd last seen him several months previously.

"I'm okay. Medical discharge," he absently answered Harm's questions. He shook his head. "What about you, Commander? What happened? We thought they'd cremated your body by mistake after that disease got you."

Harm nodded. Jen had long since explained to him the circumstances around his death, the loss of his body, and Sarah MacKenzie's subsequent suicide all at the time of their leaving to move to Chicago. "How I got out of there and became a . . . immortal is a long story. And I'm not a Commander anymore, Bud. I'm just Harm, though currently going by David Bell."

Bud's head cocked slightly. "Diane Bell's husband?"

Harm nodded.

"Then forgive me for saying so, sir, but it's about damn time." With that, he raised his beer to Harm in toast.

I laughed aloud as Harm grinned in embarrassment.

"Shall we go join our wives?" Harm asked with his head tilted in the appropriate direction. "I'm really looking forward to talking with Harriet and

getting all the latest gossip about JAG."

Bud nodded and got back to his feet.

Knowing I was going to be a third (or fifth as the case may be) wheel for the rest of the evening, I said to them, "I'll let you both know as more plans become finalized. Take care of yourselves until then."

Harm nodded to me, but Bud was hardly listening, still looking at Harm.

As I made it to the door, I could hear a high-pitched shout, "Harm!?" followed by Diane's laughter cutting through the noise in the bar.

Leaving the DC area, I traveled south more or less along the coast. Stopping for lunch in the Norfolk area of Virginia, I pulled out the piece of paper where I'd written down the specifics of the Annacoga Bombing Range and the atlas to figure out the route I would have to take to get to the town of Carriwick, North Carolina. That was the waterfront town closest to the island, and I hoped to find someone there who could tell me enough about the island and the water around it to begin some preliminary planning.

Two hours later, I pulled up to a small building next to the harbor marked with a faded sign declaring "Harbormaster". Closing the car door, I looked around in appreciation.

I'd grown up in a small town, and though this was a seaside community, the town itself had the same feel as Lanchester, Indiana. The biggest difference was that this place was geared toward the seaside tourist industry which was in full swing on this early summer afternoon.

The harbor had a dozen boats of various sizes bobbing gently. Most of them appeared to be small pleasure craft, but a few workboats were scattered around as well. There were many more mooring spots available, leading me to believe that some of the boats calling Carriwick Harbor home were currently out in the bay or the Atlantic Ocean.

Stepping into the harbormaster's office, I smiled at the man sitting behind a desk, pecking away on an ancient looking computer. Looking up at me, his hands temporarily stilled, he asked neutrally, "Can ah help you?"

I nodded. "I hope so. Do you know where I can find topographical and maritime maps of Annacoga?"

He nodded back and slid his chair around and began searching through the various cubbyholes arranged on the wall behind him. "You with that crazy Greenpeace group livin' out there?"

"No," I answered. "I represent a group who's thinking of buying the island."

He stopped and turned to me in surprise. "Gov'ment owns it now, o' course. Whatcha gonna do with it?"

"A corporate headquarters. Researchers and that kind of thing."

He cocked his head suspiciously. "On an island?"

"That's what we want. We want it isolated and away from the hustle and bustle of a city."

He nodded, apparently satisfied with my answer. Turning back to his task, he pulled down a rolled up map and handed it to me. "There's the marine map of the waters aroun' it. For the topo map, you gotta talk with the gov'ment."

"Fair enough," I agreed. "How much?" I asked, holding up the map slightly and reaching for my wallet.

He waved me off. "Keep it. I got plenty of 'em."

I nodded and put my wallet away. "Thanks. You know of a boat captain I can hire for a day to take me around the island?"

He turned to look through the windows over the harbor. "More 'n one," he finally answered, "but the only one who's here right now is Jack Murphy." He pointed, "Second pier, second boat on the right. It's the Meandering Mermaid."

"Thanks again. You have a good day."

"Have a good 'un," he answered, returning to his computer.

Stepping back outside, I dropped the map into the car before heading down the indicated pier. "Jack Murphy of the Meandering Mermaid!" I called out in greeting as I was approaching what appeared to be a fishing boat designed for small groups.

A head poked up from what could generously be called a trap door next to the wheel. "Yo!"

I stepped to the edge of the pier where I could talk with him comfortably. "The harbormaster mentioned I might be able to charter you to take me around Annacoga?"

He nodded amiably. "Sure. Fishing?"

I shook my head. "Looking over the island. A group I'm representing is thinking of buying it."

He shrugged. "Two hundred bucks for a half day, three-fifty for a full day if you aren't looking to rent fishing gear."

"Just transport and pick your brain about the area. How far?"

"We can easily be there, around the island three times, and back in a half day."

I raised an eyebrow, appreciating his honesty even though it was costing him a half-day worth of charter. "When's the next half-day you have free, then?"

"Tomorrow afternoon. Call it two o'clock?"

"Right here?"

"That's right."

"See you then. By the way, I'm Ryan Chessman."

"Jack Murphy. Call me Captain Jack." Giving me one last grin, he disappeared.

"How far is it?" I asked the next afternoon after we'd cleared the harbor.

He shrugged. "Bout four and a half nautical miles." He grinned at the blank look I was giving him. "One nautical mile is about one point one five land miles. So from your point of view, it's just over five miles."

Nodding, I asked, "And the area around the island?"

He waved in the direction the boat was going and then to the right of our course. "Due east, Cape Hatteras, which is just a long peninsula, about ten nautical miles from here, about three from the island."

"From the island, where's the nearest landfall?"

"North-east of it, about a nautical mile."

"Is it inhabited?"

He shook his head. "Otter Pond National Wildlife Refuge." He chuckled his thumb behind us. "Nearest habitation is Carriwick unless you count Cape Hatteras, but along there it's just state road 12."

"So you probably helped Greenpeace set up their camp."

He nodded easily. "I lost a brother in a military training exercise. I understand the need for the military, but I don't like it much."

I kept my peace on that one. Getting into that philosophical argument with him wouldn't do us any good.

"What's the water around the area like?"

"Variable depth. Some pretty deep spots, but if you're thinking of building anything substantial on the island, you'll have to barge the equipment in. Carriwick Sound isn't deep enough for the bigger container ships."

I grinned as he answered the question I was really getting at. "Any decent harbors on the island?"

"No, but there's a spot on the north-west shore that could be made into one with a little dredging. Then building the piers, of course."

"Of course," I agreed, thinking that building this place could turn into quite a project. Floating dredge, then get temporary piers put in place to start moving heavier equipment in . . . I pulled out a notebook and made a note to check if the military had surplus equipment and material we could buy. They just had to have something for situations where they needed to quickly build a port capable of handling heavy materials.

"Where's the nearest access to the Atlantic?"

"Fifty miles south. Southern end of Cape Hatteras."

I frowned in annoyance but held my tongue. It wasn't like I could re-arrange the geography or cut my way through Cape Hatteras without having about a million people come after me with blood in their eyes. I would have preferred easier access, though. I shrugged. On the other hand, I wanted this spot in the first place because it was relatively isolated. Can't have it both ways, I reminded myself.

"There it is," Captain Jack cut into my thoughts, lifting a hand from the wheel and pointing.

Annacoga Bombing Range rose from the calm waters ahead of us, still an indistinct shape on the horizon.

"What's the geography like?"

"Mile and a half east to west by a mile or so. Roughly teardrop shaped, rounded on the south, but it hooks at the northern end to the west. That's the

one decent landing spot I mentioned. It's sheltered and has a beach. The rest of the shore is rocky. The landscape itself is very irregular due to the bombing, but since Greenpeace moved in, it's turning green again and Mother Nature is trying to smooth the land back out."

While I kept my eyes on the island we were approaching, Captain Jack maneuvered us around the island's west coast, heading north. Scattered around on the island, only visible due to their bright orange color, the tents of the Greenpeace volunteers were in no discernible order. With the boat still heading north, I spotted the landing area mentioned earlier. A rocky protuberance came west from the northern tip of the island, producing a sheltered area with a short but pretty beach.

That Captain Jack was driving toward.

I was about to question him when I noticed a rubber Zodiac boat coming at us from that direction, one man at the outboard motor and nothing else in the boat. Captain Jack idled his engines and stepped to the side to help the other man bring the two boats together. Once both boats were stopped relative to each other, Captain Jack hauled several crates over to the edge of his boat and then held the two boats together as the other man shifted them into the Zodiac. It was clear that he was a member of the protesting Greenpeacers and Captain Jack was bringing him supplies.

"Who's this?" the young but heavily bearded man asked as he lifted the crates with ease.

"He's a charter who wanted to see the island," Captain Jack answered easily.

"Why?" the man asked me.

"A company I represent is thinking of buying it," I answered him calmly.

"Why?" he asked again.

"We want to build a company headquarters away from the noise of a city."

"Pretty isolated," he pointed out with a slight frown.

I shrugged. "We're researchers and writers. We want the quiet."

"Researching what?"

"Literature and history."

"I'd prefer you didn't tear up the island anymore than it is, but just about anything is preferable to what the military was doing to it."

I shrugged vaguely, neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

The man hauled the last crate over to his Zodiac and handed Captain Jack a folded sheet of paper. "See ya in a week, Jack?"

"Sure thing, Ron."

With one last wave, Ron turned the Zodiac toward shore and opened the throttle back up.

I quirked an eyebrow at Captain Jack. "You were coming out here with or without a charter," I accused him good-naturedly.

He grinned and nodded.

I chuckled slightly and jerked my chin toward Ron's retreating back. "He took my answer a lot more calmly than I expected."

Captain Jack shook his head as he increased power to the engines again. "They aren't interested in keeping the island. They're just protecting it from being used for target practice."

My last business stop of this trip was in Charleston, South Carolina.

According to the note that Joe Dawson had given me, I could find half of the pair of Immortals I was looking for in the Charleston General Hospital. Following the signs, I parked in the ER lot and walked into the emergency room waiting area. Once I made it into the room, I walked into Doctor Ian MacGregor's Buzz. He was a friendly Immortal doctor that I'd run into back in Missouri before moving to Toronto. He and his partner had helped me out of a ugly situation that had occurred when a building had fallen down on top of me after a Quickenening. I looked around the waiting area, checking to see if he was in sight. Very few people were around at this time of day on a weekday, and Doctor MacGregor wasn't one of them. Smiling at the nurse behind the counter, I asked, "Is Doctor MacGregor here?" I knew he was, but I couldn't very well act like I had that information before asking for it.

The nurse looked at me warily but nodded from behind the Plexiglas partition.

"Could you take him a message please? Tell him that an old patient of his, Ryan Chessman, would like to talk with him when he has a free minute. No emergency."

"Sure," she agreed and stepped through the door behind her and into the staff area of the emergency department.

I took a seat in the waiting area, but had scarcely gotten comfortable when Doctor MacGregor came striding out with a smile and a hand extended.

Ryan! You appear to be doing well. So nice to see you again!" He had on a white lab coat with a stethoscope peaking out of one pocket.

Smiling back, I shook his hand. "Doctor, nice to see you, too. How've you been?"

"Fine, fine," he said cheerfully. "I'll assume this wasn't a social visit. What can I do for you?"

"I'd like to speak with you when you have some free time. Maybe a dinner?" I glanced over and saw that the nurse behind the counter wasn't paying us any attention. "John, too, if he's still around."

He nodded with a smile trying to force its way to his face. "He is. Is this a private party, or can we bring Amy and Jessica?"

I cocked my head slightly, "Who?"

"Our wives," he answered with a mischievous grin.

I stared at him for a few seconds. Last time I'd seen them, he and John Clark were a couple. And now not only were they both married to women, but they were still on good terms?

"As long as I can speak freely in front of them," I answered cautiously once the shock had worn off.

He waved that off and the grin only got wider. "Oh, that isn't an issue. They're much like we are. Same do-gooder attitude and everything."

I relaxed. That was the phrase I'd used when he and John had dug me out of that problem years ago. Hopefully I was interpreting what he was saying correctly in that they were another two friendly Immortals. I nodded. "No problem, then."

"How long are you in town?"

I shrugged. "I can stay a few days if I need to, but I'm here just to talk with you."

He nodded and stepped around the desk, picking up a phone and pressing a few buttons. "Amy Clark, please." He waited nearly a minute before he spoke again, "Amy, it's Ian. Are you and John free for dinner tonight? An old friend of ours wants to visit with us." He paused. "No, no problem. Just a dinner." He paused again and nodded. "See you in a few hours, then." He hung up and came back around to speak with me. "Amy and I get off shift at five. Come back here then?"

I walked back in through the Emergency entrance a few hours later. I'd filled the free time walking along the Charleston docks, appreciating the ocean. I'd also checked in with Joe Dawson in Seacouver. Jen wouldn't be awake yet, otherwise I would have called her as well.

Not seeing Doctor MacGregor, I took a seat to wait for him to finish his shift.

He came out a minute later, still wearing his doctor's smock. "Ryan, I'm tied up here for a few more minutes. Could you go on up to the OB area and get Amy? She's one of the nurses up there. I told her you're coming." He grinned. "Shouldn't be all that hard to figure out which one is her."

I rolled my eyes at him as I stood up. "No problem. Where's the OB area?"

He pointed. "Into the main hall and follow the signs to the main lobby. Take the elevators up to the third floor and hang a right."

"I'll be back in a few."

I left and had no problem finding the correct area. The hospital had enough signs posted that it was easy to keep from getting lost.

As I was opening the door to get into the obstetrics area, I hit a Buzz. One hundred fifty and very few heads. I hoped this was the Amy Clark that I was told to find.

As I rounded the corner, I caught sight of a white doctor having a heated but low volume conversation with a pretty black nurse. She saw me over the doctor's shoulder but immediately brought her attention back to the man speaking to her. Once I stopped behind him, I could hear the conversation. "Nurse, I don't care if you ARE the charge nurse in this area. I'm a doctor, and you're a nurse, and you'll do what I goddamn tell you!" he snarled in a Southern accent.

"Doctor," she replied in a soft voice that was clearly under iron control, "you made a mistake. I tried to tell you that, but you weren't listening. Your actions could have endangered the patient and her child. I did what I had to in order to safeguard both mother and baby. I'm sorry you interpret that as contrary to your orders, but I SAVED that child. I'm going to report it as such."

He froze for a moment before taking a half-step further toward her. "You will do no such thing," he growled. "I won't have some ni-"

"Nurse Clark," I interrupted, speaking just a touch too loudly. She looked at me with a polite expression while the doctor spun in place to glare at me. He was maybe thirty, roughly my size, and red-faced in anger.

"Nurse," I continued in a quieter voice, "I believe you and I have a dinner date with your husband and a few others."

She smiled, bringing even more beauty to a face that already had plenty to spare. "You must be Ryan. Ian warned me about you."

I affected mild surprise. "Warned you? I'm hardly a danger to such a lovely lady as yourself. Unlike some I could name." I turned a cold stare onto the

quietly fuming doctor.

"I'm not —" he began heatedly.

"I really don't want to get into this argument with you," I interrupted. I smiled at Nurse Clark again. "Ryan Chessman, at your service, milady." I gave her an abbreviated bow, much to her amusement.

The doctor clearly wasn't as amused. "Look, you little bastard, I don't care who you are. I was having a medical discussion with this nurse. Now if you'll go away and leave us alone —"

I cut him off again and quietly spoke, "You are clearly a racist asshole who gets off by treating everyone else like dirt. How you managed to get a medical degree is beyond me. In your private life you can go and feel as superior as you want to. In this building dedicated to the noble profession of healing, I would strongly suggest you don't attack the actions of a nurse who no doubt has a great deal more medical expertise than you seem to."

"Mister Chessman," Nurse Clark interjected calmly, bringing me to a stop.

I clamped my jaw shut and glared at the doctor. I had never understood racism. It was one of the few topics that could set me off this quickly.

Seeing I was going to remain quiet, she turned to the doctor. "Doctor Franklin, I am going to report the incident to the medical review board. It is of course your right to appeal. Good day." She turned and accepted a purse from the smiling nurse behind the counter. Looping it over her shoulder, she turned to me and gestured back the way I'd come. "Shall we?"

Smiling, I stepped aside so she could head toward the door. Turning my back on Doctor Franklin, I stepped quickly to the door to hold it open for Nurse Clark. Thanking me politely, she silently led me back the way I'd come, and we presently walked back into the emergency room waiting area.

Doctor MacGregor was chatting with the duty nurse, apparently ready to leave. He took one look at us and stepped over, concern etched across his face. "Amy," he greeted her, stooping to give her a quick kiss on the cheek. "What's the matter?"

"Doctor Franklin," she answered in a low voice.

MacGregor sighed. "Him again? I wish you would let me . . ."

He trailed off as she shook her head. "Thank you, no. I can't have you serving as my white knight all the time, Ian," she smiled at him.

He sighed again, apparently resigned. Shaking his head once with a grimace, he gestured to the exit. "Shall we?"

As we were walking away, MacGregor continued, "Don't worry about Ryan, Amy. He's one of the transients that John and I helped in Warrenton years ago. I think he's safe."

As she nodded, he turned to me. "John and I stumbled across Amy and Jessica when we were moving from Warrenton to here. Jessica had just been publicly killed, so they were moving with no notice. It seemed reasonable for the four of us to stick together as two married couples."

As we continued out into the parking lot, I glanced back and forth between them a couple times, trying to figure out how to ask the next question. "Forgive me for asking, but I thought —"

MacGregor held up a hand and smirked. "Just because Charleston thinks I'm married to Jessica, that doesn't mean I share her bed. John and I are still together, as are Amy and Jessica. We live in a duplex with an interior door. Not exactly a unique answer to the situation, but it suffices for us." He glanced at me. "Last time we saw you, you were grieving someone you had just lost, but based on that ring you're wearing, you seem to have moved on."

I smiled a little sadly. Yes, I had just lost Andrea when I had gone through Missouri and that whole mess had happened to me. "Yeah. I found Jennifer a few years after meeting you." I grinned at him. "Your virtue is safe around me, Doctor MacGregor."

He chuckled and Nurse Clark smiled. "I'm so relieved," he answered dryly. He unlocked the door of a BMW and helped Nurse Clark into the passenger seat. "And it's Ian, by the way. Follow us back to our place, and we'll figure out dinner, okay?"

John Clark was surprised but apparently not upset at my unannounced presence. I was then introduced to Jessica Yale. She was about a hundred, no heads to her credit, pretty without quite being truly beautiful.

When they realized that I wanted to discuss some Immortal issues with them, we all decided to order a pizza instead of going to a restaurant. So over pepperoni pizza, I laid out the whole spiel to them, omitting vampires and Watchers.

Everyone silently thought about what I'd said for a few minutes as they finished eating.

During this silent time, something suddenly landed in my lap. Yelping and nearly jumping through the roof, I looked down to find that a cat had leaped from the floor onto my lap and was looking at me solemnly.

"Oh, there you are, Tabitha," Amy remarked. Smiling at me, she said, "Sorry, I should have warned you about Tab. She always acts like she's starved of attention, no matter how much Jess and I give her. Go ahead, she's harmless."

I presented the back of my hand to the cat and she delicately sniffed it before rubbing her head against my hand. Since I was done eating, I scooted back from the table a bit and continued petting the animal.

Ian stood and started clearing away the debris, waving John back down when he stood to help. Nodding, Clark went to an overstuffed chair near the fireplace instead.

"Anybody want anything to drink?" Ian called from the kitchen.

"Please," Jessica and John chorused.

"Amy?"

"No thanks."

"Ryan?"

"What do you have?"

"Just about anything."

"Killian's?" I called hopefully toward the doorway.

"Okay, not quite everything. MGD close enough?"

"That's fine."

He came out a minute later with what looked like a scotch that he handed to John and a glass of white wine that he handed to Jessica as she moved from the table to the couch opposite John. He stopped back in the kitchen for a moment, bringing two beers back out and handing me one before sitting on the floor between John's knees. Taking a sip of his drink, he casually slung an arm over each knee bracketing him.

Jessica had seated herself at one end of the couch, and Amy laid down on the couch, using Jessica's thigh as a pillow.

Seeing my attention flick over the four of them, John (who had insisted I drop the formality) asked, "Are we making you uncomfortable?"

I shook my head. "Not really. I just haven't been around gay couples all that much. It's my problem, not yours. Please, don't let me stop you."

"Well, in that case," Jessica said before leaning forward to give Amy a searing kiss.

"Get a room, you two," Ian teased them after a few seconds.

I tried to stifle the laughter, resulting in an undignified snorting sound. The girls came up for air and looked at me in concern. "I guess I found that kinda funny," I explained, waving at all four of them, "you telling that to your wife."

They all grinned.

"We're not your typical household," Amy (who's real surname I'd learned was Azer) pointed out with a smile.

"Amen," Ian toasted her.

Everyone chuckled. I continued absently petting the cat in my lap until John suddenly asked, "Aren't you finished stroking my wife's pussy, yet?"

The four of them laughed, and I nearly choked. Coughing into my fist, I leaned forward and spilled the aforementioned pussy to the floor. She gave me an indignant glare before stalking off.

Once I'd recovered, John asked me, "You're serious about this idea of yours?"

I nodded, recovering my composure.

"Why?" Ian asked.

"I could've done this on a smaller scale and gotten myself out of the Game. If we do it this way, the Game may stop altogether."

"What are you going to call it?"

"I considered calling it Hogsmeade, but I'm afraid we'd get sued." Amy grinned at me. Everyone else just looked confused. "Never mind. Seriously, I don't know yet. Once we have a group that's agreed to live there, I figured we'd just vote on it."

"And you want us to live there?" Jessica asked.

I nodded. "That's your choice, of course. But I came to Charleston because I knew that these two," I waved at John and Ian, "had the temperament that I was looking for. You two just became a bonus," I grinned at the two girls. "As I said, I'm looking for non-combative Immortals, willing to live near other Immortals. I believe you four qualify. Now whether you are interested is entirely up to you. I'm just inviting you to the initial Q and A session."

"Thank you, but not quite what I was asking," Jessica said. "I meant you want US," she indicated the four and more specifically their obvious

groupings.

I nodded to indicate that I understood the distinction. "Most Immortals are more tolerant than mortals. We have to be to blend in whenever society changes around us. Those Immortals that don't tolerate anything are typically such control freaks that they end up getting themselves killed or are at least anti-social enough that they wouldn't want to live at this place." I took a breath. "Now, that's my thought on it. I haven't had to live with the bigotry you four have, so I can't definitively say that it's the truth. For what it's worth, I would like you to be there. I'll do what I can to help in whatever way you think is best."

All four of them gave a small nod. Looking among themselves, they seemed to have a short discussion without a word being spoken. Finally Ian nodded to me. "No promises, but we'll hear what you have to say in March."

Two evenings later, Jen and I visited Joe's.

I sat at the bar and smiled at Joe when he approached with my ale. "Everyone I talked to was willing to at least come to Vegas," I reported, "plus at least five." He nodded.

"Something occurred to me," I continued.

"I'm sorry to hear that. I'm sure you'll feel better soon," Jennifer teased as Joe put a glass of 'wine' in front of her.

"Har, har. Joe, Watchers do background checks before recruiting, correct?" At his nod, I went on, "So you knew I was an orphan. You hired me anyway. You kept me at my potentially sensitive position even after Adam told you I was pre-Immortal."

I paused to see if he had anything to add, but other than a slowly forming smile, he wasn't reacting.

"You want more Immortals who know about the Watchers, don't you?"

He gave a slight shrug, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. He had a bar cloth in hand and was wiping at non-existent spots.

"Specifically, you want Immortals who UNDERSTAND the Watchers," I realized. "You WANT the two groups to merge, don't you?" I asked, somewhere between accusingly and in wonder.

He frowned slightly, his hand still slowly moving over the bar top. "We have to. As it is, the way technology is progressing and the population density always going up, Immortals WILL be discovered sooner or later. The only way to prevent it is for us to help keep them concealed. The only way THAT will be effective is if they know about us."

"Hence the Council and their talking about a Holy Ground city," I finished, fitting another couple of pieces together. "You WANTED me to become Immortal. You introduced me to the Council. When I was a Watcher, you had me working in the same city as Mac and Rich. You wanted me to do this, didn't you? You made this possible." I couldn't decide if I was pissed at him or not.

He at least had the grace to appear embarrassed. "I didn't make you, Ryan."

"Are you going to deny you herded me in the direction you wanted?"

His eyes flared momentarily, but he evenly answered, "No. I will admit that this outcome is something I wanted. I even stacked the deck a little where it comes to you, Ryan. But I am NOT the one who created you."

"Sure," I grumbled, angry as it turned out my life had been at least somewhat scripted.

"Look, Ryan, what I've done is for the good of the Watchers AND Immortals. I haven't controlled you. If I wanted to make you my own pet Immortal, do you think I would have let you go after Jenny Bright on your own? Let Kenny get anywhere near you? Jerry Markus? Leonard Frankle, Charles Clay, or Dan Axemon? Let you do your continent-spanning walkabout? Let you become a Secret Service Agent for God's sake?" He paused his spirited but thankfully low volume diatribe and took a deep breath. "Is what you're doing is something I hoped for? Yes. Did I fiddle with some of the circumstances? Yes. Did I hope other people had the same idea? Yes. Did I arrange for you to do this? No! Like I've already said, I didn't create you, Ryan."

What he was saying sank in. True, he'd admitted that he'd nudged me from time to time. That didn't bother me much. It was the nature of society to try to get others to do what we wanted by giving them gentle pushes. My concern that he'd set me up from the word "go" was apparently unfounded. I slowly calmed down the more I thought about it.

"You okay?" Jennifer asked me some time later.

I nodded. "He's admitted to bumping me into the direction he wanted, but he's also proven that he hasn't been controlling me. That list of Challenges was proof enough that he hasn't been trying to keep me isolated and under control."

"I didn't recognize most of those names."

I shook my head. "Random encounters for the most part."

"Except Axemon," she pointed out. She knew that story as she'd been a part of it.

nodded.

"Something's been bothering me," Jennifer mentioned in a change of subject.

"What's that?" I asked.

"How are we going to guarantee we don't get problems, mortal, Immortal, or vampire, moving in with us?"

"Once we have the initial invite list, I was going to get a copy of the Immortals to Duncan and Aaron to review. If they find someone on that list that's an issue, we can deal with them then. Same thing with a vampire list to Terry and Nick Knight." I glanced over to Joe who was filling a drink order nearby. "Can I give you the expected mortal list?"

"Most of them will be Watchers, won't they?"

"Mostly. Plus people like Connor's Rachel and any spouses or lovers Immortals or Vampires may have."

Joe nodded and then frowned into the distance for a few seconds. "This list is getting complicated."

I sighed. "I know. But if I want enough Immortals to stop the Game, that's a decent list all by itself. Plus all the various others just to keep the Immortals happy, PLUS it would be unfair of me to not extend the same invitation to vampires, merfolk, lycanthropes and all the other secret, oppressed groups out there."

Jen was staring at me. Joe grinned. "Merfolk and lycanthropes?"

I shrugged. "Well, I WOULD if they existed . . ."

"Oh, you," Jen poked me in the shoulder as Joe chuckled.

"No stranger than Immortals or vampires," I defended myself to my wife, smiling.

"You have the strangest sense of humor," a voice said from beside me.

I turned and saw that Korin had silently glided to a stop beside my bar stool.

I stood and offered her my hand. "We haven't formally met. I'm Ryan Chessman."

She smirked. "I know." She flicked a glance at Jennifer before offering me her hand back. "I'm your aunt, Korin Duvir."

Joe groaned. "Not another one buying into that whole family tree structure."

I grinned at him. "Sure. We all like Aaron and Grandma Terry so much that we WANT to be family." I turned back to Korin as I sat down. "Just so long as you don't demand I call you 'Auntie Korin', pinch my cheeks, or give me sloppy kisses every time you see me."

I couldn't see Joe's expression as I was smiling benignly at Korin, but I could feel Jen shaking in suppressed laughter. Korin raised an eyebrow. "You had a traumatic childhood, didn't you?"

Joe started chuckling, and Jen lost the fight against her laughter.

I smiled widely. "Yeah, you'll fit in just fine. Welcome to the family."

"Thank you for your acceptance," she said, but her sparkling eyes belied the bland tone.

Joe continued to chuckle, shaking his head as he limped to the other end of the bar to tend to customers.

Glancing around at her tables, Korin turned back to me with what looked like a touch of fear in her eyes. "Jen tells me that you were a student of Duncan MacLeod's."

"That's right," I agreed, hiding a smile behind taking a sip of my ale.

"What can you tell me about him?" She'd asked the question calmly enough, but it didn't take any effort to hear the hesitancy there.

Letting a hint of the smile appear, I asked, "What do you want to know?" I didn't bother to ask why she was asking me and not him.

In an abrupt change of mood, one of her eyebrows went up, and she leaned casually against the bar top. "I just wanted to know if what they said about Scots is true."

Sensing the trap but not knowing what direction it was coming from, I cautiously asked, "What's that?"

"If they know how to properly handle their long swords."

Jen broke into a fresh round of laughter. I grinned up at the vampire. "I wouldn't know, and it's a claymore," I corrected mischievously. "Two handed broadsword unique to Scotland."

"Two handed?" she asked with feigned shock. "I really MUST investigate this further."

While all three of us were chuckling, I felt Rich enter. Turning slightly, I saw that Hoa was already halfway from the door to us with Rich jogging quickly in her wake.

"You two are awful," Hoa accused me, taking a seat on Jen's other side.

Rich sat next to her, looking confused. "What were you talking about?"

"The size of Duncan's sword," Jen answered in amusement.

Rich looked at her in confusion for about a second before his mouth slowly gaped open.

"She started it," I retorted, jerking my head at Korin. "By the way, have you been formally introduced to your great aunt Korin Duvir?"

Rich rolled his eyes. "Yes. Dare I ask WHY you two are discussing Mac's . . . sword?"

"She wanted to know what I could tell her about Duncan," I answered with a leering glint.

"Everything she needs to know can probably be found that book," Hoa reminded me with an overly innocent look on her face.

Rich, Jen, and I broke into laughter as Korin just looked confused. "You mean 'Blade of the MacLeods'?" Jen asked once she gathered enough breath.

Hoa nodded and turned to Korin. "The mortal wife of one of Duncan's acquaintances writes those pulp romance novels. Duncan MacLeod is the hero of one of them."

"Saint Peter, save me," Korin muttered.

"I can't imagine that he's the patron saint of merciless teasing." She glared at me. I held up a hand in a placating manner. "I'll admit that my knowledge of Catholicism is painfully limited. What's he the patron saint of?"

"Many things, but the most notable for the present company is that he's the patron saint of long life," Jen answered.

"Handy to know," Rich commented.

I looked at my wife in mild surprise. "You're Catholic?" Religion had never come up between us. We didn't really celebrate any of the holidays for their religious significance.

"Was," she confirmed. She gave a half-smile and continued, "Kinda hard not to be when I was raised by my Irish grandparents. I don't really practice anymore though," she added with a rueful grin.

"I can understand that," Hoa commented dryly, politely thanking Mike as he placed a glass in front of her.

"So what did you want to know about Mac?" Rich asked Korin.

Korin and I were the only ones who had a view of Mike's face when he hitched momentarily at hearing this. A small smile formed, and he glanced at Korin.

She gave him a dirty look. Turning back to Rich, she asked, "What can you tell me about him?"

Rich launched into an abbreviated biography. Just giving her the bare-bones information, it still took several minutes. When he finished, she thanked him politely and stared off into space contemplatively.

While Rich and I were discussing his upcoming "recruiting" trip, we both felt a Buzz enter our range. Swinging toward the door, it only took me a second to identify Duncan. Waving Rich back down, I walked toward the door and greeted my teacher cheerfully, steering him toward one of the few empty tables. I just happened to know that it was in Korin's section of the bar.

"Welcome back," I said as we seated ourselves. "Productive trip?"

He nodded and pulled a page out of his pocket and handed it to me.

"Aaron Grey volunteered to arrange a meeting place in Las Vegas. I don't know what he has in mind, but something about the situation amused him."

Shrugging away the minor mystery of his actions, I scanned down the list of names and results. I saw that Terry and Aaron, Cassandra, Robert and Gina de Valicourt, Father Liam Riley and someone listed as simply "Grace" were all coming.

"Who's Grace?" I asked looking up in time to catch the dark look Korin gave me as she delivered a scotch to Duncan.

He thanked her absently before he answered my question. "Doctor Grace Chandril. A good friend for a few hundred years, when she was a midwife. She's been a practicing doctor since, but she mostly does research now."

The remaining line marked as Claudia was 'No'. "What's with her?" I asked, pointing at the name.

"Claudia is interested in the idea, but to be cut off from mortal society isn't something she wants right now since her career is going well."

I nodded and looked up at him as my hands folded the page and put it into my pocket. "Any of them say they want to bring along friends?"

"Several. Cassandra might bring one of her students. Robert and Gina want to bring most of theirs if they can get in touch quickly enough. Father Riley said he'd probably invite several. He'll have to think that one through."

"Were you still planning on doing another round of recruiting here in the States?"

He nodded and then sighed, clearly tired. "Leaving day after tomorrow."

"No need to hurry. March is still quite a ways off." A half-smile worked its way onto my face. "Relax. Take a couple weeks off and enjoy the local scenery."

He frowned at me. "I've lived in this city on and off for decades, Ryan. What more 'local scenery' can I enjoy that I haven't already?"

I shrugged casually. "Oh, something or someone new to town, maybe."

"Subtle, Ryan. Real subtle," Jen said from behind me. She put one hand on my shoulder and gently pulled me toward the door. "Come on. Let's go home."

Duncan alternated his gaze from me to Jen. "What am I missing?"

I resisted my wife's less than serious efforts for a moment to look back at my teacher. "If you don't figure it out by the end of the night, give me a call and I'll tell you then. Goodnight." In the process of turning away from him and back to the door, I caught Korin's eye for a moment.

She looked ready to kill me with her bare hands. I gave her an impudent wink and smirk as Jen started applying enough of her vampiric strength toward moving me that I knew she'd had enough of my antics for the night.

Throwing a casual wave to Rich and Hoa, we left the bar. Once outside, she stopped pulling and simply slid an arm through mine and walked with me back to our car.

"What was that all about?" she asked.

"Don't tell me you never played matchmaker in school."

She was silent for a moment, considering. "You think they'd make a good couple?" she asked me curiously.

I shrugged. "Dunno. Immortals and vampires can make good couples, as we've proven. He's a lot older than she is, but he's taken mortal lovers on and off so it's something he knows how to deal with. Besides, you've seen the looks between them. It was bound to happen. So I just nudged it along a little." I unlocked the door to the car and held it open for her.

"I just hope it doesn't blow up in your face," she returned.

In due course, the initial list was assembled. After that, a note was sent to each of the initial Immortal contacts stating that the PADOP meeting was set for Tuesday evening at 6:00 in the "Coliseum" meeting room at Caesar's Palace. Vampires and mortals had additional meeting times over the following days, but everyone was invited to the initial gathering.

"What's PADOP?" I asked Aaron when I was taking the information from him over the phone.

"I wanted to make it as ambiguous as possible, so it's 'Primary Associates for Design and Operational Processes'."

"Sounds painfully dull."

"That was the goal. We're less likely to have unannounced visitors with a name like that."

"True."

"Though Terry came up with an alternative: Planetary Association of Deceptively Old People."

I snickered. "Your wife is creative."

"She's a professional author. It comes with the territory."

I had to agree with that point. "Why Caesar's Palace, anyway? Was there any specific reason for that?"

"Two. First, it's Holy Ground."

I blinked. "You're kidding."

"Nope. The second reason is that I know the owner."

I blinked again. "You're kidding!"

"Nope," he said in clear amusement. "Think about it a second. The answer's right there."

Caesar's Palace? Caesar was the title for the Roman emperors. Now how many Romans might I know?

I chuckled. "You, your father, or Mister LaCroix?"

"Lucius?" he nearly laughed. "That'd be ironic. No, it's Father."

"Would that also explain the Holy Ground?" I asked, grinning widely.

"That's why he built exactly there, yes," Aaron confirmed. "Incidentally, I've reserved rooms there for all the mixed couples I could think of. Us, you two, Nick, Hoa, and Harm. There are a couple more individuals here I'd like to invite as well who'll need single rooms."

"Related to your wife?" I asked.

"Not exactly, but you have the right idea."

I took that to mean vampires, but not necessarily family members. "No problem. Feel free to invite them as long as they meet the same selection criteria as everyone else. Oh, and you'd better reserve another single for Korin Duvir."

"Korin's coming?" he sounded happy. He also didn't sound surprised that I knew her.

"Yup. Though by that time she may not be staying by herself."

"Should I ask?" he wondered aloud.

"Let's wait to see if it pans out," I demurred. She and Duncan had indeed gotten together, but it was still too early to see if it would last for any length of time. "For the moment, you may want to reserve her a room. For her sake and due to the timing, it has to be in the Palace. For her pocketbook's sake, better make it a cheap room."

"Terry and I will pick it up for her. She's still a bit young to afford a spot there. Come to think of it, Rich and Hoa might need some help, too."

"They're okay. He's got a good job as a night shift mechanic here in town. Actually makes pretty good money. She's some sort of lab tech at the hospital. They already told me in no uncertain terms that they're fine."

"No problem, then. When you have flight times, let me know. Terry and I will be there earlier, so we'll pick you up. That goes for the whole family."

"Fair enough. I'll spread the word. Thanks. By the way, the timing of the meeting is a little awkward for family members," I referred to the fact that it was beginning before dusk. "Why'd you make it so early?"

"Would you rather have a meeting of a hundred people starting at ten in the evening? That would look more than a little odd to the hotel workers. Not to mention that most of the attendees won't find six to be unusual whereas ten would be."

"Another good point. I'm glad you're thinking of these things."

"You're welcome," he answered wryly. "Don't forget the flight times. Talk to you later."

"Welcome to Las Vegas," Terry greeted us in the airport very early one March morning. She smiled at the five faces of her family and then stopped at the somewhat nervous face of Duncan MacLeod. "Mister MacLeod," she greeted him smoothly. "You shared a flight with these delightful youngsters?"

"He's with me, Grandma," Korin spoke up, slipping an arm through his.

Terry's eyes hardly flickered. "I see. Well, as long as you're dating my childe, then you are to call me 'Grandma Terry'."

I nearly snickered. She was telling a four hundred year old man who looked to be roughly her physical age to call her "Grandma". I already knew that she was perfectly aware of his true age.

He smiled at her, but it looked a little forced. "It's Duncan or Mac, and I would feel more comfortable calling you Theresa if you don't mind."

She sighed with a much put upon air. "If you insist. But it's Terry. Theresa sounds so . . . formal." She waved further along the concourse. "You boys go on to the security station for your business there. The girls and I will get the bags and meet you out by the taxi stand." Without waiting for permission or comments, she swept up the women with merely a look and led them toward the baggage claim. Excited chatter and laughter were immediately coming from the foursome.

Duncan stared after her for a moment before turning to Rich's and my amused smiles. "She's not at all what I was expecting."

We laughed. Rich asked, "Didn't you listen to all of our stories of the family? Or were you just thinking, 'ancient vampire' and had a cross between Bela Lugosi and Methos in mind?"

"Well . . ." He managed to look sheepish. We laughed at him again.

"This isn't the first time you've met her," I pointed out as we started drifting over to the security desk. "You met her at the wedding and again when you went to Paris on your recruiting trip."

"Met," he emphasized. "I didn't actually talk to her at your wedding. Plus, I didn't see her when I spoke with Aaron last year."

"Get to know her," Rich suggested. "She's a lot of fun."

The three of us chatted easily while waiting to retrieve our swords. Once they were firmly in hand, we met the women near the taxi stand. The four were still talking a mile a minute, a pile of luggage scattered around their feet.

Noticing us, Terry called, "There you are. We were just talking about you." Hoa and Jen smiled. Korin dropped her eyes to the ground, apparently in embarrassment. I almost laughed when Mac hitched a step.

Terry meanwhile was frowning slightly. "I really wasn't expecting this many people. Duncan, could I prevail upon you to take Korin in a cab? I'll pay for it, of course."

He waved that aside. "No problem at all. Caesar's Palace, correct?"

She nodded. "There's a room reserved under her name."

He nodded, and between the two of them, they gathered two arms full of luggage, flagged a cab, and took off.

Terry nodded as the cab left. Taking two of the heavier remaining bags in hand, she started walking down the aisle of cabs toward the parked limousines. "How serious are they?" she asked directly.

"Very," Jen answered easily. "They've been going out since shortly after this whole idea started. He may be older than she is, but that hasn't been a problem."

"He knows?"

"About us?" Hoa asked. At Terry's nod, Hoa continued, "Yes. We told him when we got engaged. He found out about her specifically shortly before they started dating."

"How's he adjusting?"

"Pretty well," Rich opined. He suddenly started laughing as Terry led us to a limo with 'Caesar's Palace' markings. At Terry's questioning look, he said, "Sorry. I was just remembering when he asked me and Ryan about her."

I started laughing, too. "The guy's four hundred, and he taught the two of us how to live as Immortals. Who'd have ever guessed that WE would have to give HIM a 'birds and bees' talk?"

Duncan, Korin, Jen, and I were at the airport Sunday evening to pick up Harm and Diane from Chicago and Nick and Nat from Toronto.

As the newly arriving Chicago passengers flowed past us, I felt Diane approach. Leaning against a wall in plain view of the arriving passengers, I smiled at them as Harm pointed me out to Diane and they made their way over to Jen and me. "Harm," I greeted him cheerfully, shaking his hand firmly. Diane got a quick hug as Jen greeted her child warmly. Waving toward where Mac and Korin were standing, I said, "I'd like to introduce you two to Duncan MacLeod and Korin Duvir. Mac was my initial teacher. Korin is Terry's latest child." Harm and Diane smiled at them (Diane a little more reserved at meeting a new Immortal) as I reversed the introductions, "Harmon Rabb and Diane Schonke. Harm is Jen's second child. I met them when we were living in DC." Duncan and Korin greeted them cordially enough and we all started drifting toward the security station.

They got their weapons and luggage and we all parked ourselves in the Air Canada concourse to wait for Nick and Nat. The four who did not know each other gradually gave each other shortened life stories and warmed up to each other.

When Nat and Nick emerged from the flow of disembarking people, I repeated the introductions of Duncan and Korin, then describing Nat as Aaron's student and Nick as an honorary member of the family. Harm and Diane already knew Nick and Nat since the two Canadians helped Jen and me when Harm had "died". The vampires in the group immediately recognized Nick's seniority and deferred to him for leadership.

Duncan kept looking at Nick with a puzzled frown as we all walked and chatted. As Nat was getting her sword back from security, I pulled Mac aside. "What's wrong?" I asked him.

"He looks a lot like an old friend of mine," he admitted.

I shrugged. "I can assure you that Nick's like Korin, and that he's older than you."

Mac shook his head. "No, Michael was one of us." I caught the past tense and the sad tone and left the rest of my questions unasked.

Shortly after breakfast Monday evening, Harm appeared at our door, wearing swimming trunks and with a towel casually draped over a shoulder. He cheerfully announced that a fair number of the family were going swimming in the outdoor pool. Not having anything else planned until the following evening when the major meeting was going to take place, we agreed and quickly changed before the three of us went out to the pool.

Getting outside, we dropped our towels onto empty lounge chairs and quickly dove into the pool, joining Rich, Hoa, and Diane. It wasn't long before Mac and Korin joined us in the pool. More splashing and horseplay occurred than actual swimming, but since it was shortly after dark we had the pool all to ourselves.

Finally tiring of the play, we climbed out. The girls opted to retire to the large hot tub where they all soaked up the heat and chatted quietly with occasional laughter drifting out. The guys dried off and gathered at a table next to the outdoor bar.

"What brought this on, Ryan?" Harm asked me.

"What's that?"

"This," he waved his hand around, apparently indicating the entire situation. "Why are you trying to build this city?"

"Several reasons. The selfish one was that if this works, there will be a safe place for me and Jen to live for a very long time. The slightly more noble version of that is the same opportunity for all Immortals and vampires. Finally, one of the stipulations of Michelle's Will was to protect Jen and if possible all other Immortals and vampires."

"You were a beneficiary of Michelle's?" Rich asked curiously.

"Yeah. Only Aaron and Terry knew, but Jen and I inherited a . . . substantial sum."

"If you don't mind my asking, how substantial?" Mac asked curiously. He knew who Michelle had been, and he also knew how much money ancient Immortals could accumulate even without really trying too hard. Those same rules applied to vampires of Michelle's age.

I smiled slightly. "I doubt we're quite to your level, Mac, but more than comfortable."

He smiled back. "Good on you. I was curious on how you thought you could pull this off if nobody was willing to contribute a lot of money."

"We're talking about tens of millions of dollars to do this right," Harm pointed out calmly.

"Yep," I agreed.

"Damn," Rich breathed.

I shrugged, embarrassed.

"So why did you try to talk money out of my kinsman?" Duncan asked.

"I'd really rather not finance this whole thing on my own. If it falls through, we still need a means of supporting ourselves. Besides, if we spread out the costs, it'll be less likely to catch the attention of the IRS."

"A real, functioning town?"

I nodded. "That's the plan. Two possibilities, depending on size of our population. The bigger one I haven't found a site for yet. On the smaller end, I have an island already scouted out. That isn't to become public knowledge yet," I cautioned. Getting nods in agreement, I continued, "An island produces several logistical problems but increases our security. Consumables will have to be flown or shipped in. I was hoping someone would be willing to do a weekly grocery run for the entire population by either helicopter or boat."

"Probably have to be by boat," Mac mused aloud. "The weight in groceries will add up quickly for fifty households."

"Fifty?" Harm blinked in astonishment.

"Hopefully," I confirmed. "We're already at a hundred counting all the various types of people. Mostly couples or singles, but some families like the Roberts."

"Any cities within easy commuting distance of this island?" Duncan asked, staying with the previous topic.

"Little town within easy boating distance. Goodly sized city in helicopter range."

"Why not do an aircraft instead of a helicopter?" Harm asked.

"I doubt the island's big enough to support that many homes, whatever commercial buildings we'll need, an administration building, plus an airport. A helipad is the best we'll probably be able to fit."

He nodded, a little sadly. "Cheer up," I consoled him. "You probably won't get to fly much, but you and Diane will be more than adequately employed. On top of that, the island will have enough privacy from the outside world that you can just fly yourself whenever you want."

He smiled a little smile and nodded again.

"What'll we do for jobs in this town?" Rich asked.

I shrugged. "Whatever we want. Harm here is a lawyer, so that's easily enough figured out. Enough fitness buffs running around that a small gym would probably work out. A small grocery store, a bar, and a bookstore. Probably be call for a home contractor even after this place is built. There

will be enough equipment that a repairman might be needed. There will probably be call for a good metal smith with this crowd. The biggest thing, though, that I hope for is that the corporation can do artisan and other professional contracts." I leaned forward. "Think about who all will be here. Text translations, small art items by commission, antiquity authentications, whatever. In addition, enough doctors, medical researchers, and lab techs are in the mix that I expect some of them to want to do research into one or another of the various unusual medical conditions that are prevalent in our little community." All three men grinned.

"Who will be in charge? You?"

"You keep laboring under the assumption that I want to lead," I sighed, rolling my eyes heavenward. "I just started the idea and am following through since nobody else seems to want to. To answer the question: I hope we'll hold elections. Elect a council of three, maybe. One for each of the main divisions. That's something that the whole group can decide."

"Why not a true democracy?" Duncan asked. "Put every decision to vote, and everyone votes. The problem in the past with true democracies was keeping the voters informed. In such a small community, it'd be a lot easier."

"We'd need an administrator to deal with the day-to-day stuff, but for major choices, a true democracy could work," I agreed. "Like I said, that's the kind of thing we'll need to hammer out as a group."

"Cash flow?"

"That's the stickiest one that I can see," I nodded. "Cost of living is going to be high since we have to import everything. As far as who gets paid what and where that money comes from, that's something that we'll need to work out later. The folks who help pay for the startup should get some sort of compensation for that, for instance." I took a breath and continued, "I freely admit that I haven't thought everything through. I've been more focused on discovering what kind of turnout is possible. I know there is more work to be done. At the moment, the main focus is getting a group together who is actually willing to do this. THEN we can figure out the minutiae."

"I'd hardly call money and government trivial, but I take your point," Harm said dryly.

Three of us at the table felt an Immortal approach. It took a moment to sort through the three other Immortal Buzzes I was already immersed in to identify Aaron. I was also the one facing the door to the hotel, so I saw him exit and look around.

Waving my hand to get his attention, I said to everyone at the table, "It's Aaron." Rich and Duncan immediately relaxed. Harm looked over toward the approaching Aaron calmly.

For his part, Aaron pulled a chair from a nearby table and joined us. "Hey, guys. I'm glad I caught all four of you together. Terry and I would like to take the family to dinner. We know of someplace here in town that can handle all of us with our various dietary needs. I've also managed to find a special treat for those of us with normal appetites."

"Should I ask?" Duncan asked tentatively.

"It'll be a surprise," Aaron smiled. "Dress is casual. Everyone meet at the lobby at three?"

Everyone nodded agreeably. Having delivered his message, I expected Aaron to head back into the hotel to tell Nat and Nick about dinner, but instead he leaned back in his chair and gazed around at the reasonably crowded pool and bar area. While we'd been talking, the pool, outdoor bar, and patio area had slowly filled with couples and single men and women. It wasn't yet crowded, but Las Vegas's famed nightlife was clearly gearing up.

His scanning eyes stopped at a point over my shoulder and a slight smile made it to his face. "Some fine looking women there, gents."

"Aye, that they are," Mac agreed with a small smile as he was also looking that way. Harm only nodded his agreement.

I turned to see what had caught their attention and saw that they were looking at the four women in the hot tub. A slim brunette with laughing brown eyes wearing a lime green bikini; a black-haired, fashion-model sexy vision in an electric blue swimsuit; a tiny, dark-haired oriental woman wearing a cherry red material against her dark skin; and lastly the emerald green bikini top of the woman with her back to us was just visible around a mid-back length spray of brick-red hair.

The four were, of course, our wives and lovers.

"What I wouldn't give to be simmering in there with them," commented a voice at the next table.

All five of us turned. Two men were cradling beers and looking in the same direction as we were. They were both well-dressed, apparently enjoying Las Vegas and looking for some company. One, apparently the one who had just spoken, had a small grin on his face. His companion nodded in accord.

I turned back to look at the women and bit my lip to keep from laughing. Those two couldn't have any idea who they were. They'd taken their table long after we had seated ourselves.

Since I was looking in that direction, I saw Korin's eyes flick up to us for a split second before focusing her attention back to whatever Jen was saying to her. Once Jen finished, all three of the other women laughed lightly for a moment. Korin said something, causing Diane to blush.

Hoa looked over at our table and gave Rich a coy smile and wink. Rich smiled.

"She likes you, man," commented Guy One.

"I could only be so lucky," Rich said wistfully.

"Go for it. Go on over there —" Guy Two broke off his urging when Korin gracefully stood and stepped out of the hot tub. Diane threw a quick glance at our table before saying something to Korin. Korin answered calmly, causing smiles. She picked up her towel and started drying herself off, running the towel down one shapely leg after another and giving us the full view of her well-toned body. Hoa threw another flirtatious glance our way.

Finally dry, Korin casually draped the towel around her shoulders and turned resolutely toward our table. She walked over in what could only be described as a saunter. She stopped at our table and looked all five of us over very carefully.

Nobody said a word. I guessed she was going for the shock value, and I know it was certainly working on me. After appraising each of us, she started speaking, letting her natural French accent show much more than she usually did. "My friends and I were noticing you gentlemen. Perhaps one of you could help me?"

Guy One and Guy Two nearly fell over each other offering to help her in any way that they could.

Without moving or even speaking loudly, Mac said something in French.

Korin's face lit up. Answering his comment with more French, she slowly circled the table until she was standing behind him. He didn't turn in his seat but kept up what I could only assume was a conversation. Once behind him, she casually rested one hand on his shoulder and leaned over to whisper into his ear. Whatever she said caused him to cock his head in thought for a moment. Finally nodding in assent, he stood and gallantly offered her his arm. Demurely slipping her hand into the crook of his elbow, she allowed him to lead her back into the hotel.

I chanced a glance at our audience. They were both staring at the retreating backs in stupefied disbelief. I didn't dare look at any of the guys at my own table.

"Some people have all the luck," Aaron commented, watching Duncan and Korin.

As if she'd heard, Diane stood from the hot tub. Gathering her towel, she delicately blotted herself dry, ending with slowly drying her neck. Never once did her gaze stray from our two tables. Draping the towel over one shoulder so that it was covering half of her lime green bikini top, she slowly stalked over to our two tables. She circled around both tables, clearly sizing up each of the remaining six men.

We all kept our eyes riveted on her. She finally stopped next to Harm's chair and squatted down so her head was just below his shoulder level. One hand came up and she lightly ran a fingernail over Harm's bare chest.

He didn't move, keeping his gaze locked onto her eyes.

Her eyes strayed from what her hand was doing and met his smoldering stare. Her hand stilled for a moment before it moved again and came to rest over the back of one of his hands. She gently pulled him upright and toward the door to the hotel.

Neither of them had spoken a single word.

Eyes still on the newest pair of retreating backs, Rich cleared his throat and asked in a rasping voice, "Ryan?"

I swallowed dryly and managed, "Yeah?"

"Do you like oriental women?" He kept his voice low enough that the guys at the next table could hear it, but it wouldn't carry as far as the hot tub. If it weren't for vampiric hearing, that is.

I cleared my throat and turned to him. "Yes," I answered, "but I'm also partial to redheads."

Hoa and Jen, meanwhile, were climbing out of the hot tub. They stood next to the chairs where their towels had been sitting and languidly dried themselves off. Hoa kept looking over at us and smiling flirtatiously at Rich. Jen had managed to keep her back to us, only turning enough to reach around in order to dry her back. Even then, her long, thick hair hid her face entirely. She finally gathered her hair in one hand to drape it over one shoulder, allowing her to dry the back of her neck.

So it was a complete shock to the guys at the next table when Jen turned around, revealing the fact that she was not only a redhead but also clearly of partial oriental descent.

"No way," Guy Two breathed.

The two women walked side by side straight toward us, parting ways only when they reached our table. Hoa rounded the table and stopped right next to Rich. Twisting his chair around slightly, she gave herself enough space and immediately threw one leg over his lap. Settling herself down, she leaned into him and started kissing him passionately.

I only noticed her actions peripherally, though. Jen was walking around the table toward me, eyes smiling in a definitely predatory manner. She cocked on hip casually onto the table right next to my arm and looked me up and down for a moment before saying, seemingly to herself, "Yes, you'll do nicely."

"What will I be doing nicely?" I asked hoarsely, keeping my attention locked on her face. It definitely wasn't safe for me to look anywhere else right then.

She slowly leaned forward until one hand came out to balance herself against my knee. Bringing her mouth next to one ear, she spoke just loudly

enough that Aaron and the two audience members could hear, "We have hours. I'm sure we can think of all sorts of things to do with ourselves." Slowly straightening back up, she captured my wrist with one hand and slowly pulled my unresisting self along toward the hotel. Hoa and Rich were already disappearing through the door by the time I was standing up.

I didn't dare turn to see the reactions of the two guys to our various exits.

"That was fun," Hoa said cheerfully, swinging into the barstool next to mine. It was still a bit before three and Jen and I were waiting for the rest of the family in the bar.

"That was evil," I corrected, grinning at her widely. I blinked and let a frown form. "Assuming you're talking about what you four did to those two poor guys. If you're talking about what you and Rich might have gotten up to in the meantime, I don't want to hear it."

Hoa waved the bartender off and leaned her elbow onto the bar top. Resting her head on her hand, she let her hair hang down around her propping arm. She just grinned at me, refusing to answer my comment.

I didn't even have to turn to see it. I just knew Jen was rolling her eyes as she muttered, "Men!"

Hoa's smile got a touch wider.

"Rich on his way?" Jen asked.

Hoa nodded. "Are we the first ones here?"

"Yep," I answered. Checking my watch, I added, "We still have ten minutes before we need to be in the lobby."

Hoa nodded and opened her mouth but then closed it again immediately. I turned in my stool when I felt a presence at my back.

A man who was too perfectly groomed to be quite believable kept alternating his attention from one of the women to another. Eyes stopping on me momentarily, he said, "Share the wealth, pal."

I blinked at him. "I beg your pardon."

Eyes doing one more circuit, he asked me, "Which one is yours?"

I felt Jen stiffen behind me. Hoa's smile tightened up just a little bit.

Finally seeing what he was implying, I turned around completely to face him. "Unless I'm very much mistaken, slavery has been illegal in this country for quite some time. Therefore neither of them is 'mine'."

A slight frown was his only visible reaction. "You know what I mean."

Curious to see what the girls' reactions would be, I merely moved my left hand down to rest on Jen's knee.

He nodded and stepped sideways so he was standing half behind Hoa. One hand came out to lightly trace along her arm. "How much are you worth, honey?"

Quick as a striking snake, Hoa's hand clamped over his offending wrist and pulled it a few inches away from her arm and twisted it enough to cause the man to pale. Coldly, she said, "If this hand touches me again, I'm going to keep it and use it as a paperweight. If you ever again imply that I'm for sale, I'll rip your spleen out through your nose and force feed it back to you." I could see her tighten her grip slightly, causing the remaining blood in the man's face to drain away. Hoa shoved him away, causing him to stumble and grab his numb arm. "Now go away before I get angry."

Glaring at me for a moment in a combination of shock and anger, the guy turned and silently left the bar, still holding his wrist.

"Why the hell do bores like that keep thinking we're available?" Hoa asked in a huff.

"Two stunningly good looking women, in a bar, in Las Vegas, at three in the morning, sitting with one man?"

Hoa made a sound of disgust, but she didn't comment directly.

Rich chose that exact moment to come into the bar. Scanning around for a moment, he came over and sat at the barstool on Hoa's other side. She snuggled up to him so thoroughly that she nearly ended up in his lap.

He looked down at her in mild surprise. Glancing up at my amused grin, he asked, "Not that I'm complaining, but what's up?"

"She's marking herself as taken," I answered.

"What?" Rich asked in confusion as Hoa glared at me and Jen smacked me on the shoulder.

Chuckling, I stood and waved everyone toward the lobby. "She can explain it. We'd better go; it's almost three."

To the girls' annoyance, Rich had the same reaction to the story that I did: amusement. He was still chuckling and the girls were muttering to themselves as we joined the other four couples near the doors leading to Las Vegas's infamous "Strip".

"What's so funny, Richie?" Duncan asked.

"Hoa's reaction when she was mistaken for a prostitute."

All six guys smiled. Of the six girls, only Terry didn't frown.

"Face it," Aaron said to them. "This IS Las Vegas and all of you ladies are extremely good looking. A fact which you four certainly put to good use a few hours ago."

"What?" Natalie asked in confusion.

Aaron repeated the story of what had happened as he led us outside and down the neon lit street. By the time he was relating Jen's and my exit, everyone was laughing. "You should've seen their faces. Here they were, thinking they were such hot stuff and you four dismissed them so thoroughly. Took them down a peg or two, I assure you."

We continued to walk down the Strip in companionable silence. There was certainly entertainment enough around us. The flashing neon signs, drunken singers, one or two street performers, the list of entertainments went on.

I nearly stopped in shock at the sight of an elderly man in an impeccable white tux walking arm in arm with a teenaged model wearing an iridescent rainbow string bikini. I was still shaking my head over that when Korin started mumbling.

"What's wrong?" Mac asked.

"All these people. This place is too crowded."

"It IS tourist season," Harm mentioned.

"Is it?" Terry asked with a bright smile. "What's the bag limit?"

All the vampires chuckled. The Immortals grinned, but it was more restrained for us. Our views on hunting were somewhat different, of course.

We'd made it another block and regained our relaxed atmosphere when Terry started laughing. I could see Aaron cock his head at her in a clear question. Still laughing, she shook her head, pointing up at a huge marquee. Looking up, all of us read that there was going to be a professional wrestling match in a couple weeks between "The Exsanguinator" and "The Usurper".

Harm said, "Exsanguination is to drain of blood, if I'm not mistaken." Nat, Duncan, and Jen nodded. Harm continued cautiously, "You don't think that this wrestler really could be . . ." He trailed off, looking around at all of us.

Terry waved that off. "No, the Enforcers wouldn't let something that blatant happen. I was more amused by the . . . ostentatiousness of the names. One of these days, someone's going to screw up and take a professional name of Fornicator."

We all smiled. Someone suggested, "Abdicator."

This only set off a series of ridiculous professional names.

"Masticator."

"Matriculator."

"Percolator."

"Defecator."

This last one caused us all to explode into laughter.

Chuckling along with the rest of us, Terry stopped and waved us toward a shadowed doorway. Instead of a garish neon sign like most of the other places had, this door was only marked with a single word in softly glowing violet script, "Eyrie".

Aaron held the door for Terry, entering without hesitation. Nick escorted a hesitant looking Nat in next. The remaining eight of us looked from one to another in trepidation. The dark doorway amidst all this cheerful lighting looked very forbidding.

After only a few more seconds of delay, Duncan silently led the rest of us through the doorway.

We emerged into what was clearly a bar. Multiple doorways led off in all directions, none of which were marked. The lighting of the room was very uneven. The center of the room was at almost a normal lighting level, illuminating a cluster of tables at which thirty or so people were sitting. Surprisingly, only four of them were male. The rest of the roughly hundred people in the place were lurking in the deeper shadows along the walls.

A long bar along one side of the room had a single bartender standing behind it. He was paused in the act of wiping down the bar, his attention diverted to us. The dim lighting just illuminated an intricate tattoo of an Eastern style dragon that started on his left cheek and curved around behind one ear and ended on the top of his shaved head. There were surprisingly few bottles in view behind the bar.

The room was also supernaturally quiet. Every face in the place was aimed at us, most expressing interest, a few showing naked hunger.

Even as I was tensing up, I felt every immortal Buzz save one showing immediate signs of stress. Through my tense attention, I noticed all six vampires in our group were slowly maneuvering themselves to stand between the Immortals and the rest of the bar.

"Theresa!" called one of the women in the center of the room. She stood and started advancing on us, smiling slightly.

"Rhiannon," Terry greeted her with a deferential nod. "Allow me to present my family plus guest and our chosen mates."

Rhiannon's gaze flicked from one face to another, pausing slightly longer on the vampires.

Once she returned her attention to Terry she said, "I was surprised to get your message, Theresa. Now I understand some of the more unusual parts of it. Come, I've a room reserved for you." She sounded friendly enough, with a light English accent. She turned and summoned a petite, blond waitress who'd been leaning against the bar. The waitress came forward, bowed to Terry, and gestured us toward one of the doors.

Following the silent invitation, Terry tossed over her shoulder, "Rhiannon is the Mistress of Las Vegas and an old friend of mine."

"Indeed," Rhiannon agreed. She smiled at each of the Immortals and stated loudly enough for everyone in the room to hear, "You have nothing to fear here."

The tension slowly lowered as the two senior vampires in the room made it clear that we were not to be touched.

We followed our silent waitress down a short hallway and into a room with a large table and twelve chairs. Each place had an empty water glass, but nothing else in front of it. Following Aaron's lead, all the men helped their significant others into their chairs before seating ourselves.

Once we were all sitting, Rhiannon looked from one vampire to another before stopping her gaze at Terry. Slowly shaking her head with a smile, she said, "Still have your fascination with mortals, I see. You have even somehow managed to pass that on to your offspring."

Terry merely smiled, not correcting Rhiannon's incorrect assumption regarding the mortality of anyone in the room.

Not getting any further reaction from Terry, Rhiannon shrugged and turned to the waitress. "MacNair, these people are honored guests. See that they are treated accordingly."

"Yes, Mistress," she answered calmly.

Giving us one last smile, Rhiannon left.

"If any of you would like something to drink before dinner is served, please let me know and I shall fetch it from Dragon. Otherwise, dinner will be served momentarily." She looked around the room for a few seconds, waiting to see if anyone would take her up on that offer. When nobody did, she nodded sharply and left the room, quietly closing the door behind her.

"Okay, this place is just eerie," Diane deadpanned after several seconds of silence.

The three oldest people in the room smiled. The rest of us chuckled nervously.

Aaron calmly stood and retrieved the pitcher of ice water from the middle of the table and started filling the glasses of the Immortals. "Rhiannon is an old friend of Terry's. Once we heard we were going to be here, we arranged a dinner."

"Uh, Aaron," Rich leaned forward, "if this is a vampire bar, will they even know HOW to fix dinner?"

"Probably not," Terry calmly answered. "Rhi will have hired a mortal for the evening. Many of the older of us have human retainers, so this isn't a problem."

"This world will take some getting used to," Duncan muttered.

"Indeed, but that isn't the topic of tonight's conversation."

"Then what is tonight's topic?" Hoa asked.

"How vampires will fit into this town Ryan's trying to organize," Aaron answered.

Before anyone could get another word out, we heard a knock on the door followed immediately by it opening.

MacNair entered but stopped immediately inside the doorway. She addressed herself to Terry, "Ma'am, I understand that you are all honored guests, but I must ask. How freely and directly may I speak?"

"They are our mates. They know what we are and are comfortable with it," Terry answered easily.

MacNair nodded. "I have several pitchers of warmed blood ready. If any of you would like it chilled, please let me know. We also have a small supply of virgin blood if that is more to your liking." She looked around, catching the eye of each vampire.

As she looked at them, they whispered some variation of, "Warmed regular is fine," with the exception of Nick. He grimaced slightly and shook his head. MacNair cocked her head, but didn't say anything.

"Non-sapient?" Nick asked quietly.

MacNair blinked once, apparently in surprise. "Bovine?" she asked back after a moment.

At Nick's nod, she exited the room. She came back in immediately with a large serving tray balancing two pitchers of what I assumed was warmed blood and five goblets. She placed the tray onto a caddy next to the table and poured a goblet full of blood and placed it in front of Terry, taking the unused water glass away. She repeated the steps for Harm, giving him a flirtatious wink in the process. This of course elicited a frown from Diane. After serving Jen, Korin, and Hoa, she placed the still full pitcher into the middle of the table. She exited, only to return a minute later with a goblet that she placed in front of Nick. Next, she brought a large serving pan in and placed it onto the middle of the table. Next came two bread baskets, then a plate and a set of silverware wrapped in a heavy cloth napkin appeared in front of each Immortal.

Once done, MacNair quietly left, closing the door again.

"She serves the vampires but just drops our food off," I commented, standing to serve. "That just seems downright unfair," I finished facetiously.

"Such are the rules of our society, Ryan," Nick commented, taking a sip of his dinner.

I lifted the lid of the serving pan, wondering what Aaron and Terry had arranged. I was shocked to find myself staring at a delicious looking lasagna. Diane uncovered one of the breadbaskets. The room immediately filled with the scent of fresh garlic bread. The truly amazing thing was that all the vampires in the room were still calm.

I looked over at Aaron in shock. He was smiling at my reaction. "There is a very rare form of garlic that tastes like regular garlic but does not have the same effect on vampires. I secured some and had a lasagna meal made out of it as a treat for those of us who don't get any garlic in our diets any longer." The other Immortals in the room were smiling at him by this point.

"Still," Terry cautioned, "I would suggest we don't feed from our mates for at least forty-eight hours. While the odor does not affect us, the taste still does. That said, dig in!"

I laughed and grabbed the serving spatula. Cutting generous helpings, I rapidly had the six plates full, and the Immortals were indeed digging in.

"Wonderful idea, Aaron," Diane said some time later as she leaned back and dropped her napkin on top of her again-empty plate.

"Almost as good as your lasagna, Hoa," I said teasingly, also just finished.

Hoa laughed as Jen looked at me strangely. Rich explained, "Before you brought her across, Hoa made some of the best lasagna this side of Rome."

Aaron converted a bark of laughter into a cough. I grinned as I remembered that he was originally a Roman. A real one.

Rich apparently remembered, too. "You know what I mean," he said, grinning at Aaron. Most everyone at the table chuckled.

"Before the food arrived, you were saying something about the real reason for us being here?" I asked Aaron.

"Yes. I was asking about how the vampires would fit into the town."

"Other than some lifestyle differences between us and the other inhabitants, plus needing to secure a blood supply, I don't see any problems."

He shook his head. "What if one of the Immortals notices that Terry isn't aging but doesn't have an Immortal Buzz?"

I sighed. "Jen pointed that out a while ago, too. I don't have an easy answer for you. I'm hoping that either nobody will notice, or if they do notice then they won't say anything."

"What happens if they DO say something?" Diane asked.

I grimaced. "That's a question best asked of Terry and Nick. As the two eldest vampires that I'm aware of, you two will have the hardest decisions to make regarding your little Community."

"Thanks," Nick dryly answered.

"Would you rather I lied to you?" I asked. "Personally, I think we should tell the truth to anybody who notices. That, however, isn't really my call. It's yours."

At five the next evening, I walked into the Coliseum Meeting Room and looked around. The room was huge. One side of the room contained a buffet line with hotel workers still setting things up. No food was present yet. A small stage and podium was at the far end of the room, and a bar was at the near corner, across from the buffet. The remainder of the space was taken up with thirty round tables, some small, some much larger.

"Nervous?" Aaron asked me quietly from where he'd followed me into the room.

"Terrified," I answered hoarsely, staring at the podium.

"You can do this," he assured me. "You're the one that had the idea. You can present it better than anyone else. The fact that so many are showing up proves that it has a receptive audience."

Swallowing dryly, I asked, "How many?"

"A hundred and thirty-nine confirmed. According to Joe, all of them plus a few are in town."

Holy shit.

"A hundred thirty-nine Immortals?"

He shook his head and I felt a little better. "No, fifteen are mortal, and ten vampires."

Oh, that made me feel SO much better.

My expression probably echoed my thoughts, because Aaron grinned at me.

One of the hotel caterers came over and discreetly cleared his throat. When he knew he had our attention, he said, "Mister Grey, everything is proceeding well. Dinner will be served at six thirty as requested. One hundred and fifty, correct?"

Aaron nodded. "That might be a little high, but better safe than sorry." He paused a moment before going on, "Due to the confidentiality of the proceedings, I'm going to have to make a few unusual requests of you and your staff."

The man gave Aaron a slight smile. "We take our confidentiality issues seriously, Mister Constantine." Before Aaron or I could be more than surprised at the change of address, he discreetly pulled up the cuff of his left sleeve to show us a blue tattoo.

Aaron groaned. "I should have known."

The Watcher's smile grew just a fraction. "I'm the only Watcher among the caterers, though. You're aware that several Watchers will be here as guests?"

We nodded. I knew Joe Dawson was going to have a tape recorder going, and there was probably a camera catching all the faces coming into the room, but Joe swore up and down that the Watchers were laying on the security thick and heavy.

"Any specific orders, Mister Grey?"

"We'll be providing the security," Aaron got back to the planning. "Please have all of your people assembled right here in ten minutes so Miss Ryan and Mister Knight know who they are. After you set out the dessert, please have everyone leave. What we're going to discuss won't be for the ears of most mortals. No telling how long we'll be, so don't bother to come for the cleanup tonight. Is the other room being prepared?"

I looked at Aaron. What other room?

He nodded. "Twenty-three starting at eight, correct?"

"Two of which are children," Aaron confirmed.

What in the world were they talking about?

Nodding, the Watcher – caterer turned on his heel and started gathering his troops.

"What idea have you hatched, Aaron?" I asked as most of the vampires in the family came in and started looking around the room. They were the security for the night, and they were serious about their duty.

Aaron smiled at me. "Some of the Watchers you invited. Just a friendly surprise for some of our guests. Terry is letting them know to stick around afterwards. Nothing for you to be concerned with, so don't worry about it."

I rolled my eyes at him but decided to take his advice and ignore it. I had enough to worry about as it was.

I watched idly as the caterers were introduced to Terry and Nick as the senior "security".

Everyone already knew the rules of behavior for the night. Terry would be manning the reception desk and would check the given names against her master list. If it was someone she knew, she'd allow them past. If not, she would inquire who invited them and then get that person's acknowledgment before allowing anyone in. If an Immortal tried to force the issue without an invitation, then the vampires would quietly escort the gate crasher out. With a half dozen vampires running security, I had no concerns on that front.

"Nervous?" Mac asked me in amusement as I was sitting, drumming my fingers at a table near the entrance.

I looked at him in exasperation as he took a seat. "Why does everyone keep asking me that?"

"Maybe because you look worse now than I did on our wedding night," Rich volunteered as he took the next over from MacLeod.

I grimaced at him. "Ha, ha."

He shrugged. "It wasn't meant to be a joke. Seriously, are you okay?"

I let out a sigh. "I hope so. What if they don't like the idea? What if I blow the delivery so bad that I poison the idea? What if –" I stopped as Mac held up one hand.

It's no use playing the 'What if' game, Ryan. We all think the idea has merit, which is why we're all here."

I took a slow, deep breath and nodded. "Yes, you're right. Now I just have to survive this evening without throwing up."

Rich laughed. "Good idea. I don't think that would impress the crowd."

It really shouldn't have surprised me how smoothly things went after that. Aaron had voluntarily taken over the role of the event coordinator, and everything went without a hitch. Unless, of course, you count the mild panic attacks almost every Immortal had upon entering the room and hitting so many Buzzes at once. Due to the large number of overlapping Buzzes, I also tried to tune it out of my consciousness as much as possible.

Knowing I'd not be able to eat anything, I drifted from table to table, visiting with everyone I knew. After all, nearly every Immortal that I was acquainted with was in the room.

Finally, the tables were cleared of empty plates and the desserts were put out onto the buffet tables. As the last people were making their way through the buffet line again, the mortal caterers quietly left. Terry shut the door and each vampire moved to the table that held their better half.

Taking one last breath, I headed toward the podium. It was time.

Standing up there, I immediately had everyone's attention.

Looking around, I saw every Immortal I knew and would willingly call friend.

Mulder and Scully were sitting with three red-heads whom I took to be Scully's mother, brother and sister plus a woman who looked vaguely familiar.

Harm and Diane were sitting with a older, distinguished man.

Aaron and Terry were sitting with Marcus Constantine, two other men, and a woman.

Rich and Hoa were sitting at a table full of younger looking Immortals, none of whom I recognized.

Amanda and Nick Wolfe were sitting with Robert and Gina de Valicourt, plus three individuals I didn't recognize.

Nick and Nat were sitting with two women and two men. Only Nat's place had the remnants of food in front of it.

Duncan and Korin were sitting with Connor and Rachel Ellenstein. I was amused and unsurprised earlier to find Connor had been trying to charm Korin with Mac looking on in annoyance and Rachel in amusement.

Cassandra with another remarkably composed woman.

John, Ian, Amy, and Jessica. Mom, Dad, Rob, and Christi. Father Riley. Methos. And those were only the ones I recognized.

Everyone was actually here. The thought scared the shit out of me.

Swallowing on a dry throat, I silently prayed to whatever deities were really out there and opened my mouth to speak.

"First, I'd like to thank you all for coming. I think this idea has some serious possibilities, and the turnout here shows me that I'm not the only one that believes that.

"For those of you who don't know me, my name is Ryan Chessman. In case it matters to anybody, my initial teacher was Duncan MacLeod. Further, just so we all know where we stand: this room is on Holy Ground and everyone here either is Immortal, or at least knows about us." A slight wave of noise and shifting as everyone acknowledged these facts, unsurprising as most of it probably was.

"Okay, now why are we here? In the past year, someone came to you with a possible way to stop the Game. We're here to discuss that.

"My idea is to build a small city on Holy Ground. If enough Immortals were willing to live there, hopefully we could get the Game to stop.

"The side benefit of this is that with so many of us in one place, we could start one helluva historical consulting firm." Scattered chuckles sounded.

"I have a possible place lined up. The purpose tonight is twofold. First, talk it out among ourselves, looking for ideas. Second, to find out who would be interested in living in such a city.

"Looking among the Immortals in the room, we're actually a relatively young bunch. With a few notable exceptions," I added catching a few grins, Methos and Marcus Constantine among them. "The younger of us have the most to gain in terms of security and safety, but I'm hoping that the elders in the room will also see the benefits of what I'm proposing. Namely: stability of home and not having to live by the sword.

"I'm sure you all have questions. I'll answer what I can, but I'm afraid I can't answer some things until we have a confirmed population."

"Are you completely insane, or is this just a partial thing with you?" Methos asked casually.

I smiled slightly as a wave of nervous laughter spread around the room. I'd just dropped a huge bombshell on them, and everyone was still trying to grasp the idea. "I'm not even fifty yet. Please allow me the idealism of youth." More nervous chuckles.

"How will you protect this place from the world?" a young looking, black man asked from Rich's table.

"A level of isolation is the most immediate answer. Make it a little difficult to get to, and very few people will casually visit."

"That won't stop mortal hunters," the man persisted.

"Marc, we'd still be armed, and I'll bet nobody would attack a hundred armed Immortals if they thought about it," Rich answered.

"Where is this place you've lined up?" Marcus Constantine asked.

"I'm afraid I can't answer that." A few angry mutterings quieted as I raised a hand. "Like most everyone else in the room, I'm paranoid to a degree. I'll only reveal the location to people once we have a committed group. We wouldn't be completely isolated from the world if that's what you're worried about."

"What's to stop someone from getting the information for their own purposes?" one of the women sitting with Gina de Valicourt asked.

I smiled grimly. "We're a little past the use of sodium pentothal, but there are other ways of learning the truth. Without resorting to torture, if anyone's worried."

"Is it legal?" one of the men at Constantine's table asked.

I shrugged as Duncan MacLeod answered with a grin, "A great deal of what Immortals do doesn't technically qualify as legal, Matthew."

"Who all would be invited to live there?" one of the men sitting with Nick asked.

"Everyone in the room," I answered, catching his eye so that he knew what I meant. When he nodded fractionally, I continued, "Immortals and any others who want to join us and we can vouch for. It wouldn't do to let any random mortal join us, so we'll have to figure out a way to keep uninvited folks from buying homes there."

"Gated community?" another Immortal at Rich's table threw out.

"Good idea, Nathan," Rich agreed.

"What would we do?"

"Anything we wanted," I shrugged. "As I said, a historical consulting company is obvious. Translators and authenticators for museums and collectors. Contract artisans of all shades. There are at least four medical doctors in the room plus two nurses, so medical research is a possibility. At least one professional writer is here with us. Musicians, teachers, you name it. Plus there is a statistically high number of antique dealers in the room," I added ironically. "Lastly, if Father Riley is there," I indicated him in the audience, "or any other clergy, then we'd have a non-denominational place of worship."

"Why non-denominational?"

"Despite being a relatively young crowd, more than one person in the room predates Abraham, Muhammad, and Jesus of Nazareth. I personally am not completely sure know who or what to worship. If we want to keep from pissing off everyone, it must be non-denominational." I saw more than a few frowns in the crowd, but several nods and most especially Father Riley's agreement made me feel better about what I'd just said. "Listen, I'm going to work hard to make this place as tolerant as possible. Religious, sexual preference, racial, you name it. If you want to have a different partner for every day of the week, that's fine with me. Just so long as you don't start infringing on other people's rights, anything you do is your business."

"How will you keep the peace?"

"There are at least four current law enforcement officers in the room plus many more who were cops in previous professions."

"Fine, but that's not what I was getting at. How will you prevent someone using this town as sanctuary while they hunt?"

I grimaced. "The only way I can see of preventing that is to set up the laws to be pretty strict on that count. Overall, the laws we'd live under can be decided once we're there."

"You seriously expect us to live under your tyrannical rule, cut off from the world?" someone asked incredulously.

"First, it wouldn't necessarily be mine to rule. I'd hope we'd hold elections once we're there. Second, we wouldn't be cut off from the world, merely hard to get to."

"What's the difference?" he asked sullenly.

"Look, if this place was one of the suburbs of New York City, it'd be way too easy for us to be invaded by hunters working together. We'd also be much more vulnerable to people noticing we don't age. I'm trying to get us far enough from others that nobody will notice and force anyone to move every ten years."

"What if we wanted to leave?"

I shrugged. "Then you leave. I would only ask that you not reveal the location of this town to anyone."

"Ask?" he repeated sarcastically.

Who the hell is this asshole? "Yes, ask," I nearly growled. "Very insistently. Before you ask the next obvious question, yes, I probably would try to kill you if it meant protecting the town. Incidentally that includes my wife and a lot of my friends."

"All these restrictions you're placing on us are designed to protect us, yes?" asked another voice, this one much calmer.

I nearly snapped out the obvious answer before his eventual point became clear. While what I was doing was aimed for the protection of us all, I suddenly realized that the methods smacked of a totalitarian regime. I nearly winced as it occurred to me what I was proposing without having thought it all the way through. We all knew what good intentions paved the way toward.

My shoulders started to slump. I'd already lost this cause. I still thought it was a good cause, but getting it accomplished would defeat the initial purpose.

Duncan appeared beside me and placed one hand on my shoulder. "You gave it a good try, Ryan. They just aren't ready for it," he quietly consoled me.

Keeping my eyes down, I nodded. He gently pushed me to the side and toward the seat beside Jen. I expected the room to start clearing as I heavily sat down. Through the shocked and defeated haze surrounding my mind, I wondered how much I had harmed the reputations of Aaron, Duncan, and Rich with this fiasco.

It took a few minutes of self-recrimination before I realized that not only wasn't the room clearing, but Mac was still behind the podium.

"... so a few of us have another proposal. We will build an exclusive resort on Holy Ground. Immortals can come and go as they wish, staying months at a time if they want to. This isn't as good as a permanent town, but it gives us all a place to escape the Game if we need it."

"Where?"

"One of the Bahaman Islands was originally colonized by the Spanish. The first thing they did upon landing was to consecrate the land. I intend to approach the Bahaman government and offer to buy the island."

"You're going to turn this place into a beach resort for Immortals?" I didn't recognize the voice, but the note of incredulity wasn't tough to distinguish.

Mac smiled slightly. "I'm just over four hundred. Please allow me the idealism of youth." General laughter came from the audience, and I spotted Connor mark a point for Duncan in the air. "Seriously," Mac continued, "we're planning on building an ultra-exclusive, discreet resort. The kind of place movie stars and millionaires go to get away from the world for a while. High staff, few guests, high security."

"Then how will WE afford to stay there?" Rich asked pointedly. It was clearly a leading question. Neither he nor Hoa looked the least bit concerned, though several of his table-mates did.

As Mac was explaining how people could work there if they wanted to stay for a time and not have to pay, I turned to Jen, shaking off my depressed mood. She also didn't appear to be surprised at this turn of events. "How long have you guys been planning this?" I asked her quietly.

"Almost from the beginning. Your idea was good, Ryan, but none of us thought it would work. Immortals living together indefinitely sounds good in the abstract, but everyone had concerns about the long term. You're all too damn individualistic and reclusive. Plus having us there," she subtly indicated the vampires around the room, "isn't something that Uncle Nick or Grandma Terry thought was a good idea. So we came up with this alternative plan if it appeared that the original idea was going to fall through. It's not a permanent answer to your idea of stopping the Game, but it's better than anything else out there right now." She grinned. "Besides, financially it could even show a profit."

Mac was winding up his presentation, "With this plan, there is no need for anyone to decide anything right now. It'll be some time before we're ready for our next steps. If anyone decides they want more information, want to help finance this resort, or want to help with the actual construction, please feel free to contact me."

Sitting under the hanging sign proclaiming "Haven Main Lodge", I watched the sun sinking below the horizon. Once the sun disappeared, the resident vampires could come out and join us. The other Immortals and mortals on staff were still inside, finishing their dinner.

"We actually did it," Rich remarked in wonder.

"Yes, we did," Nat agreed, coming outside with a handful of drinks.

It was just over three years since that day in Las Vegas. Haven Corporation had bought Isla de los Dios from the Bahaman government and built the resort that Duncan had described. A small number of bungalows for the guests and the main lodge for everything else we needed, the island was as close to a habitable paradise as anyone could possibly imagine. It even had the price tag to prove it.

I raised my bottle to Natalie and Rich. "To Haven. I don't know if it's going to work, but it's gonna be fun to find out."