



No Fool

Lillian Wolfe

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This is the first Highlander story I wrote and it was published in the fanzine **Potpourri**. Inspired by the events in the series and plagued by this Methos voice in my head, I had to write an "episode." This story was structured with a teleplay in mind.

The following story is based on the characters created for the Highlander television series and is not intended as a copyright violation. Duncan MacLeod, Methos and Joe Dawson belong to Davis-Panzer Productions -- all other characters are my own creation. If D/P hadn't given us such great characters, especially Methos, we wouldn't have felt compelled to tell their adventures. My thanks to Taselby, Dianne and Cheryl for the beta read on this. Without their sharp eyes and wise questions, this would be a much poorer venture.

Please do not post or publish elsewhere without my permission. Even though D/P doesn't seem to be using them anymore, Duncan, Methos and Joe are under contract to them and discretion is the wiser course here. Feedback, as always, is welcome. Send to ladylily@pakra.org or comment on my Facebook Page (<https://www.facebook.com/LilliansLoft>) or on my blog site (http://lillianwolfe.me/loft/?page_id=121).

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By Lillian Wolfe

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The scene was surrealistic, like a carefully contrived image from a horror film. Indeed, some of it might have had its inspiration there, but this act was deadly serious.

In the darkness, a group of nine hooded figures circled a fire pit where the flames appeared to leap and dance with the rhythmic chant. The rise and fall of the voices sounded almost Gregorian but the words had a different root. Behind the robed figures, silent trees stood in witness to the bizarre ritual that was transpiring, but it was nothing new to these woods. Over the centuries, this particular corner of Brittany had hosted many such ceremonies.

Abruptly, the chanting stopped and the hooded heads all turned expectantly to a gap in the circle. Through the silence, the crisp crunch of boots on frozen grass signaled the approach of more than one person. A tall, graceful figure,

dressed in pristine white robes the colour of the moon, stepped into the clearing. Arms raised to the sky, they displayed priceless golden bracelets. A golden torc glittered at the throat, but there was nothing visible of the face within the robes.

Behind the figure, came another two, also clad in hooded robes. The first person walked sedately in front of a smaller one who moved behind, seeming to guide the other. As they drew nearer to the firelight, the front person's face became visible -- pale skin seeming even paler against the deep red of his robes. The man stared ahead, seeming indifferent to his surroundings. His arms hung loosely down, pulled to the front by heavy cords that bound his hands together.

The woods were eerily silent as the figures shifted into the center of the ring. With a dramatic flourish, the white robed figure's hand reached into the robes and withdrew a sword, swirling it above the head. The arm that held it was strong yet not too muscular -- the arm of a woman. She rotated the sword in her hand so the fire reflected in the blade, a precursor of what was to come. Behind the red robed man, the smaller figure stepped back.

The man's eyes followed the arc of the sword, an unconcerned, lazy look as it flashed toward him. His drugged eyes had trouble focusing on the sword except perhaps to note it as a blur approaching his face. Only in the brief moment before

the sword met his neck did his countenance reflect any indication or knowledge of his impending fate then his eyes widened with fear and a the mouth opened to yell in panic. Too late. The shrill scream was cut off as the blade made contact and the headless body crumpled to the ground.

The silence remained as the gathered coven waited, each member breathless in anticipation. Slowly, at first, rising like a slow wave, the blue wash of a Quickening flowed from the body and encircled the white-robed woman. Theatrically, she clasped the sword iin both hands and raised her arms to the sky, sucking in the power like a lightning rod. An experienced eye would recognize this as the Quickening of a young Immortal, almost gentle compared to the fierce fireworks of onel who has taken many heads. But the robed figures who circled watched in awe, not knowing exactly what was happening, only believing their spiritual leader was indeed a vessel of the gods' powers.

As the Quickening died down, the woman sank to her knees as if in reverence to the gods, but it was really to recover from the body-shaking power. A new chant began, the words ringing in the forest in a language suited to them -- ancient Welsh.

Springtime in Paris. A time for young lovers, old lovers. Couples strolled easily along the promenade, hands linked together, shoulders touching. Old men leered lecherously at the nubile young women who passed wearing short skirts and tight-fitting sweaters. The sweet smell of new grass and spring flowers whisked by on a breeze, chasing away the staleness of winter.

The world's oldest living being felt his companion's eyes on him. Duncan MacLeod had been studying him in silence for several minutes now, waiting for him to say something. Conversation between them was awkward these days. Neither of them was really sure what to say and he knew he was giving the man precious little to no help.

Methos had spent the past few weeks in the Aegean trying to get his life back together. Apart from a few comments about the warmth and luxury of the days there, he hadn't had much to say. MacLeod had nodded his head and made appropriate little remarks as he'd talked, yet the fledgling conversation had stumbled to a halt a few minutes earlier. MacLeod had asked for this meeting, wanting to open up a few doors and try to smooth some of the rough spots between them that had formed with the events surrounding Cassandra and the Horsemen. Methos was distracted, feeling a deep sorrow that reached his face. Someone had once called him an unfeeling bastard but they were dead wrong. Even though there were times he could school his face to show nothing, he also knew

when it reflected more than he sometimes wanted other people to know. Now was one of the latter moments.

"I'm sorry, MacLeod. I shouldn't have gone to the cemetery," Methos finally apologized quietly. "I haven't missed her this much in months. It's just that after being in Greece and revisiting all those places we'd been together, she was so vivid in my mind that I had to go. Alexa was the most wonderful thing to happen to me in this century... and the worst."

"I know, Methos. I often feel that way about Tessa. I'll go to an art museum that we went to together and I sometimes think I can hear her voice. But it's our memories that keep them alive, that validate their lives." The Scot's voice was gentle, the soft Highland burr barely a whisper in it.

He took a sip of the wine and forced a smile for the man who'd become his most trusted friend. He desperately wanted to bring matters back to solid ground between them. There'd been no other man, Immortal or not, that he'd willingly offered his head. That MacLeod didn't take it elevated him both in respect and trust. Never mind he'd expected him not to take it, but it was still a risk. And heaven knows, he'd given the man cause once or twice since then to take it... most recent events included. Beyond that, he genuinely liked the Highlander, normally enjoyed his company a great deal, and, lord knows, they needed to talk. MacLeod spent too much

time pretending nothing happened or looking accusingly at him.

But today-- Today, a ghost was sitting on his shoulder and company was uneasy in her presence

MacLeod cleared his throat, obviously recognizing that Methos had slipped off again into his memories of Alexa. Methos straightened in the chair, trying to shake off the melancholy.

Pointedly, MacLeod glanced at his watch. "I've got a meeting this afternoon, Methos. How about dinner tonight at Chez Louisianne?"

"If you don't mind, I'd like to pass on dinner tonight. I wouldn't be fit company any way."

Unexpectedly, MacLeod moved closer to his shoulder, hand reaching out and almost touching him. The hand hovered there a moment, then withdrew. "Sure. Let's make it breakfast tomorrow. It'll be a better day."

Methos almost jumped at the near touch. He'd wanted that little bit of compassion, that slight touch of understanding, from MacLeod for so long that it was hard to just let it go. He'd shown caring to Adam Pierson, but not to Methos... as if the two were totally different people instead of facets of the

same person. The forced smile was back on Methos' face but as MacLeod turned, it quickly faded. He watched as MacLeod strode briskly down to the corner and turned, then he laid a bundle of francs on the table and wandered down along the riverbank at a pace that said "I have all the time in the world and I'm not in a particular hurry."

He had all the time in the world. But he hadn't had much time with Alexa -- just a blip in the reckoning of his five thousand plus years -- but they had been magical. And it wasn't that he hadn't buried a wife or a lover before, or that he hadn't known it would happen. He just somehow believed they would have a little more time. He hadn't counted on the extreme human frailty or the sheer viciousness of the disease. For all his years of witnessing history, living through diseases and disasters, studying medicine and psychology, there was still nothing he could do. And he'd been devastated when she'd died. He'd been helpless, only able to hold her as she slipped away.

MacLeod had helped him bury her on that cold winter day, been there offering support. Now, there was a chasm between them an airplane could fly through and he didn't know where to begin to narrow it. It would be easier if MacLeod could understand what those first three thousand or so years in his life were like, but the Highlander had no frame of reference. If you weren't there, it was hard to even imagine it.

Pausing to gaze across at the Cathedral Notre Dame, he let his mind escape back to the first time he'd come to Paris. It wasn't called Paris then and the river wasn't surrounded by buildings. It was a little village on what was now the Isle de Citi that was inhabited by the Parisii tribe, a Celtic band who welcomed him with courtesy. He was a traveler, suspect in those uneasy times with Rome. But he'd come alone and they were many so they felt safe. He hadn't betrayed their trust and he had blended in, becoming one of them and learning their ways. He'd lived so long with the Celts that he'd become like everything else that touched them, a pure extension of the culture. Somehow it seemed appropriate that an Immortal headhunter found a kinship with a people who revered the head and took their enemies heads to gain their power.

His eyes focused quickly back to the present as the familiar psychic buzz that alerted him to another Immortal curtailed his thoughts. He turned to look for the newcomer, not expecting an encounter of any sort in so populated an area. About thirty feet away, a tall, raven-haired woman in her thirties, approached him, her eyes seeking him. As she neared, he saw that her face wore a slightly perplexed expression that suddenly changed into delight. As if she knew him. Methos thought she looked familiar but--

"Dylan? You are Dylan, aren't you?" The woman's voice had a sultry huskiness and a curious accent, one that he'd didn't

recall hearing. But the way she said Dylan was familiar to him.

"Niam?" He couldn't quite believe it, although with a few more years on her than when he'd last seen her, she would be this strikingly beautiful woman. Her huge smile was the answer as she doubled her pace, nearly running to meet him. She hugged him tightly, her head snuggled closely against his face.

"My God, Dylan. I can't believe it! Not after all these centuries." She stepped back to look at him, running her hand against his cheek. "No beard, no mustache, a little shorter hair, but still the same as I remember. It's so good to see you, *cariad*."

"And you became an Immortal since I last saw you," he said, looking at her and seeing the young woman he'd known.

"You knew it would happen, Dylan."

He nodded slightly. "I don't go by Dylan anymore. These days, I'm... Adam Pierson." He wasn't sure why he didn't say Methos, choosing instead his former Watcher persona. At some unconscious level he thought perhaps it was the safer of the two to tell her.

"Adam... Adam..." She tried the name on. "It doesn't roll as beautifully as Dylan, but it will do." She stepped back, still clinging to his hand. "Do you have plans? Can you come with me?"

"Where?"

"I'm about to go raid an antique shop. I collect really old artifacts. But I just don't want you to go out of my sight now." She bubbled with enthusiasm and promise.

"As it happens, I do have a free afternoon. And I'd love to spend it with you." He smiled at her, his dark thoughts of Alexa put aside for the moment. Delighted, Niam linked her arm in his and began pulling him toward the boulevard. For just a brief moment, something nagged at him, but he shrugged it off.

The young woman was absolutely dazzling and Duncan MacLeod couldn't take his eyes off her. Blonde, petite, with those sultry eyes and pouty lips that rivaled Bardot's, Lysette Moraine was just as charming as she was beautiful. //It's a pity she isn't destined for Immortality, // MacLeod thought. //Such beauty should be preserved.// He was almost shocked by his own admission. He never considered physical features to be the essence of a person, but she was so amazingly

beautiful. And, no, he justified to himself, it wasn't just the physical features. She was full of personality and vibrancy, like a glint of sunlight dancing on the water. Perfect.

"A banque cheque will complete the transaction, mam'selle," the third person in the room said. Lysette turned her brightness on the solicitor, a man of middle years with a paunch that spoke of too much good food and drink and a contentment that MacLeod would never know.

"But, of course," she said, reaching into the small black leather purse she'd brought with her. Even the gold trim on it matched the trim on the pumps on her small feet. She laid an envelope on the desk in front of the solicitor. "That is for the down payment and the rest will be submitted when the property closes." She favored MacLeod with a coquettish look. "I am sure that will meet with your approval, Monsieur MacLeod."

"Of course."

"But MacLeod," his solicitor protested as he studied the cheque. "This is a thousand francs less than the requested payment!"

Dismayed, Lysette lowered her eyes. "I know, monsieur. But I had a little trouble converting some of my assets. I assure you I will have the full amount at closing."

"There you go," MacLeod replied. "Besides I have nothing to lose. If mam'selle does not have the money, I reclaim the land."

Lysette flashed a smile his direction.

"Would you join me for dinner, mam'selle?" Duncan found himself saying, and immediately thinking, //Where the hell did that come from?//

Within moments, Lysette Moraine had confirmed their dinner engagement and agreed to meet him at the restaurant. MacLeod watched her leave the office, a pleased smile on his face. Maybe he hadn't meant to invite her to dinner but she was bound to be better company than Methos would have been.

"Slow down a bit, Joe," MacLeod said into his mobile phone as he maneuvered through Paris traffic. "Now who is missing?"

Several thousand miles away, Joe Dawson perched on a bar stool reading through the report that had come through on his FAX machine only a half hour earlier. He was annoyed he wasn't alerted sooner, but the Watcher in Paris hadn't felt it was that critical, just a basic report. As if missing Immortals could be a basic report.

"There's four of them mentioned, Mac. All over the last two years. Two are in France, one in Spain and one in Italy. Their watchers just lost them. They were tracking them, they went off somewhere and never came back. We haven't been able to pick up a hint of them anywhere."

"Joe, you know some of us change identities now and then. Maybe they spotted your watchers and changed id's." MacLeod was almost laughing at Joe's paranoia on this one. "Or maybe they met another Immortal and they lost."

"It's possible, Mac. But is it likely that four Immortals died without one Watcher tracking at least the winner or the loser? As to disappearing, how easy is it to totally avoid being spotted by someone in the Watcher network."

"Ask Methos," Mac replied with a laugh.

"Very funny."

"Okay, Joe. Give me the names and I'll check into it." He scribbled as Joe talked.

Joe paused before the last name, almost holding his breath. "Mac, the most recent one was Etienne Duval."

"Shit!" MacLeod muttered. Etienne was a young Immortal he'd met a few months earlier and had sparred with a couple

of times. Nice person, good sense of humour and a taste for fine French wine and beautiful women.

"Each of their Watchers reported they spoke to a woman shortly before they disappeared, but from the descriptions, it doesn't appear to be the same woman."

"When and where were the ones in France seen?"

"The first was at a restaurant, 'Le Couquille' and he disappeared on October 30th. Etienne was seen at 'Picasso's' on Rue Madeline on January 29th."

"Okay, Joe. I'll see what I can do. Don't hold your breath."

"Thanks, Mac. I owe you one."

"You owe me a more than that." He dropped the phone back into its holder.

The antique shop was a mixed collection of genuine treasures and a lot of junk. Methos studied a plastic Obi-Wan Kenobi figure, picked it up, turning it in his hand to see where it was manufactured. "Look at this. It's a little piece of plastic. How valuable can it be?"

Niam spared a glance his way from where she was kneeling in front of a bin of objects. "It could be worth thirty dollars or so if it's in good condition."

"You're kidding. It's hard to consider a little piece of molded plastic in the same category as a eighteenth century thimble." He set the figure down next to the silver thimble that had far better craftsmanship and wondered at the state of a world that placed such value on these things. Then again, he remembered what he was doing when **Star Wars** made its splash at the cinema and he was taken by it, too.

He looked over to where Niam was rummaging through a bin of old pottery. Judging from the items she separated out to look at closer, she seemed to have a good eye for what was valuable. Of course, like him, she could identify a good bit of it from first hand knowledge. As usual, he gravitated to the books and manuscripts section. There were a few old texts in the stacks, but nothing to even remotely compare to what he'd had at Shakespeare and Company. He picked up an old manuscript that could have been written around the time of Francis Bacon. It looked to be a personal journal, written in English-- or at least what passed for English at the time.

Nothing too exciting, he thought, as he carefully turned the pages. Just the day to day thoughts of an ordinary merchant in Dover... who happened to know an Immortal! The name MacLeod jumped off the pages at him. Methos turned to the

cover to check the asking price, winced at the cost, but determined he would pay it. It would make an interesting Christmas present for MacLeod.

"Look, Adam!" Niam called to him and he turned to see her pulling a stone mortar out of the bin. "Isn't this a find? I wonder if there's a pestle in here also?"

The rough stone finish of the hollowed out rock carried a permanent green stain from the juices of crushed leaves. Other images formed themselves around the stone bowl...

North Wales - 60 A.D.

Young, strong hands roughly ground the pestle into the mortar, crushing the delicate leaves between them. The stone bowl rocked with the motion as Niam exerted all her strength into pulverizing the herbs, as if the very pressure of her effort would make the magic work. She was just eighteen, but very strong and sturdy. Her long black hair was pulled back with a leather thong and draped down her back in a twisted braid. As she worked, her forest green tunic slipped off one shoulder, revealing the creamy white skin beneath and hinting at the curves hidden beneath the garment.

Methos felt a heat rising within him as he paused for a few moments to watch her work. Her breasts rose with each rocking movement, a sensuous motion that even a celibate

would be moved by yet alone a healthy Immortal. Niam was but an apprentice healer, young and still learning the craft. But she was bright and learned quickly and she had him to teach her.

"You needn't grind so hard, Niam." He was only a few paces away and could easily smell the sweetness of her body.

Niam's head tilted up to look at the tall, slender, darkly handsome man clad in a dark brown tunic. So alike, yet not alike the other men of the tribe. She smiled, warmth and passion filling the smoky gray eyes. She ran her tongue against her lips and spoke in a husky voice that sounded far older than her years. "Show me again, lord. I cannot seem to find the delicate touch."

He gave her a sly smile, ready to play this game with her, and stepping just behind her, kneeled so that his knees touched her thighs, an intimate closeness. His arms slid along her sides, reached below her breasts to gently cover her hands as he leaned forward until his mustache and beard brushed against her neck. "Like this," he said softly as he eased the hand holding the pestle into a smooth circular motion. "Around in a circle, so you don't bruise the leaves."

Niam shifted back against him, pushing her weight into his legs, forcing him to lean in even more to maintain his balance. "And what are the uses of this herb, Dylan?"

"Ah, have you forgotten already? It's Lady's mantle. With a tincture made of this-- just a small amount, you can treat bleeding wounds and other injuries. You should always carry it with you--"

Abruptly, she rolled in his arms, twisting her body to practically face him, her lips finding his and attaching like a leech. A knee knocked the mortar to one side and Methos dropped the pestle to catch the woman suddenly in his arms. Momentum unchecked, the two sprawled, laughing, in the grass. As they held each other tightly, he kissed her passionately, pulling her face closer as his fingers twisted in her hair. His face slid along hers until his lips touched her ear. Taking the lobe gently between his lips, he whispered, "Cariad."

Present

Methos blinked, saw Niam standing within arms' reach, dressed elegantly in the haute couture of modern Paris, holding an ancient mortar stone in her hands. The memory had been vivid. He'd been Dylan then, a Celtic druid with some knowledge of herbs and drugs. Niam had been his apprentice and they had been lovers. She was not an Immortal yet, merely a young, carefree girl in love with life -- and him.

"I'm going to buy this, Adam," she announced. "Isn't it fabulous?"

"What on earth for?" He lifted the heavy mortar from her hands, realized again how heavy stoneware was.

"What do you think for? To grind herbs, silly."

"They have machines for that now days or you buy them preground."

Her eyebrows arched slightly quizzically. "But that might bruise the leaves. I have an herb shop now, darling, and people pay me good money not to bruise the leaves. I have you to thank for that."

Chuckling, he set the mortar and the manuscript on the counter and began counting out the asking price. Niam started to object, but he stopped her. "No, I'll get it. For old times."

Moving next to him, Niam slid her arm under his coat and nuzzled against his neck. Smoothly, her hand slid down to touch his thigh as she licked at his ear.

"Niam! Behave!" he hissed. He struggled to keep a straight face.

"You used to like it, Dylan," she said in a soft, seductive voice.

Under his breath, Methos muttered, "Woman, you are shameless."

"...so then I attended the music conservatoire to study the violin, but I didn't like that either." Lysette Moraine's voice was soft, sultry. Her long eyelashes blinked at Duncan as she talked. She was possibly the most coquettish young woman he'd met in a long time and she reminded him of a lovely lady he'd known in 1829 when coquette was fashionable.

"Okay. You're not a model, not a musician, not an artist and not a dancer. What have you ended up doing, Lysette?"

"It's really dull-sounding. I'm a personal assistant to a business woman. I handle lots of different tasks for her so it's really quite a good job and I don't get bored." She leaned closer to him, picked up a strawberry from the dessert plate, dipped it into whipped cream and deposited it sexily into her candy red lips.

MacLeod almost laughed out loud at the cliched move, yet the girl was so charming, he was still taken by her.

"Forgive my curiosity, mam'selle. What exactly do you plan to do with the property you're purchasing?"

"I don't plan to do anything with it, Duncan. I just want the woods. They're so beautiful and old. It's like stepping into the past to go there. Do you understand what I mean?"

MacLeod nodded. He understood all too well. "Isn't it a bit pricey just to have a bit of forest?"

"Oh, I'm not buying it alone. I have--" Lysette faltered, realizing she'd said more than she should. She finished softly. "I have friends who are buying it with me."

"I see. And all of you just want to enjoy the woods."

She smiled at him. "Yes. Truly."

He laughed. "All right, It's an investment. And a good one, at that, It's what I've done with it for many years."

Lysette dipped another strawberry in chocolate, leaned across the table and popped it into Duncan's mouth. Her eyes twinkled mischievously as he sipped at a brandy to wash the fruit down. The night definitely looked promising...

Methos moved quietly, and somewhat uneasily, around the living room of Niam's flat, pausing periodically to pick up an old object here and there. The room was dark-- lots of dark wood, dark colors, heavy furniture. He'd known a monk's cell that was cheerier. Stopping, he picked up a stone carving, a crude sculpture of the horned god, Cernunnos. He studied it silently, remembering other similar carvings in niches around wells and streams.

"I remember Alwynna carving it... chipping it out of stone. I found it at a flea market four years ago." Niam stood beside him, the light scent of her perfume seductive in his mind, like a fragrant flower to be pulled. She pressed a brandy glass into his hand. "It was very odd to find something that connected me so completely with the past."

Still holding his hand, she guided him to the oversized couch. As Methos sank into the cushions, she slipped onto his lap. He barely managed to set his brandy on the end table before she slid her hand inside his shirt, rubbing her fingertips lightly along his chest and her mouth found his. Without thought, his arms went around her, pulling her closer and his tongue touched against hers.

She lightly bit his lip, then pulled back to gaze into his eyes. "I never thought I would be like this with you again."

"I often wondered what happened to you. How much longer it was before you became Immortal..."

"But you didn't come looking for me." Niam stated flatly.

"No. I didn't stay in Britain. I had to leave."

"I thought you were dead. I grieved for you-- for us." Her voice was sad, a deep sorrow still lingering in it. Oddly, it pleased him, as much as it caused guilt, to have been missed.

Suddenly, she grabbed the brandy bottle and slid out of his lap. "Make love to me like then. Let's go to a park or the woods."

"What?!"

"You heard me. I know a park near here. Grab the brandy glasses."

Exasperated, Methos resisted. "You can't just go into a public place and make love..."

"We used to."

"That wasn't exactly the same situation, Niam. There were a lot fewer people around."

"This is a very quiet park. No one will come in, you'll see." She pulled pleadingly at his hand. "Please, Dylan. I want it to be like the first time with you." This last was spoken in the Celtic tongue he'd not heard in centuries... not quite Welsh, not quite Breton. He caved and pulled the throw off the sofa.

"You know, I always regretted we couldn't have had at least a century together." Methos sipped at the brandy as he lay on his side staring into the dark pools of Niam's eyes. Around them, the wooded park was silent, not even a breeze rustling the leaves. Behind the tallest trees the tops of a few chimneys and an occasional window light were barely visible.

Niam sat up, unbuttoned her dress, revealing she had nothing on beneath it, then leaned forward, running her hand along the side of his face. Her mouth slid along his jaw line, planting little kisses along the way. "We still can-- beginning now. I've dreamed about this, Dylan. Didn't dare to hope you were still alive."

Her hands moved under his sweater, pushing it up, then her head followed up underneath it as she moved her mouth up to pull the nub of his nipple with her lips.

With a gasp, he fumbled his glass to the grass, then pulled her closer into his arms. His hands caressed her cheeks then

wove through her hair, his mouth locked with hers and a passion he hadn't known in decades surged through his body. She pulled the sweater over his head and shoved his back to the ground. Eagerly, she climbed on top of him, threw her head back and howled at the moon, a wild animal sound that seemed to echo through the park. For that moment, Methos saw again the young girl he'd fallen in love with nearly two millennia ago and he grinned ferally as he rolled over, capturing her under him. Her nails clawed his naked back and she bit at his shoulder-- eager, aggressive and passionate.

He lowered his head between her breasts, his skillful lips inching their way up the mounds. She arched her chest up toward him as a deep sigh escaped her throat. Her hand slipped down to the waist of his slacks and undid the zipper.

He could smell again the salty, crisp air of the sea surrounding Mona as he and Niam made love. His mind called forth the sounds of the night on the Holy Isle and replaced the lights in the distant windows with torches at the village gates. He'd planned to hand fast with her that spring-- and for as many springs as she would have him. Eventually, the moment would come when she'd become Immortal, then he would train her, keep her by him. Although he'd had many lovers and wives over the centuries, he'd never loved with such fire before her.

Methos flipped onto his back, breathing hard, and gazed up into the nearly full moon riding high above them. Niam snuggled next to him, tiger turned kitten in his arms. He pulled the blanket around them and they lay unmoving, watching the stars.

"We'll have a full moon for Beltaine," Niam spoke softly. "A hunter's moon."

He nodded drowsily, only half-listening to her.

The girl was like a demented beast on the dance floor, uncontrolled and full of energy. As she danced, her blonde hair bounced and rippled like a mane around her face. Her current partner, a young French student, was almost as abandoned.

Amused, Duncan MacLeod leaned against the bar and watched. He had no intention of even trying to keep up with the whirling dynamo. Next to him, a tall, statuesque, dark blonde woman sipped at a glass of white wine and turned her eyes to MacLeod. "She is uninhibited, your friend."

"Yeah. She's not exactly a friend. I'm conducting some business with her."

Alaina Greigg nodded. "I didn't think she was your type, Duncan."

"And what is my type?"

"Not saucy young girls who can't handle their drink."

He laughed. He'd known Alaina a little over two centuries and she had always been one to speak her mind.

"You're right, Alaina. Actually, I'm looking for someone-- Etienne Duval. Have you seen him?"

She shook her head. "Not since before Christmas. He came in here occasionally-- stopped at Diabolique now and again. He hasn't been around lately."

"Do you think someone--?"

"Took his head? Maybe. He wasn't anything to brag about, but he was a likable fellow. Very young though... barely twenty. There are some who prey on newbies, you know. But I haven't heard of any around Paris lately." She sipped at her drink, then added, "It's odd though-- I had a friend disappear Christmas two years ago. Paolo Debrezi. He left the club with a brunette he'd met that night and I never saw him again."

"Was the brunette one of us?"

"No. She was like your blonde friend. A party girl." There was more than a trace of contempt in her voice. "Watch yourself with that one, Duncan."

MacLeod gave her an acknowledging bob of the head. "Don't worry, Alaina. I always do." At that moment, Lysette whirled off the floor and into his arms. Laughing, she grabbed the glass in his hand and took a big drink.

"Would you like one of your own?" he offered.

Impetuously, she threw her arms around his neck. "Dance with me, *cherie*."

He shrugged at Alaina as he lead the girl back onto the dance floor for a slow, sexy dance. He glimpsed Alaina as her eyes followed them a few moments, then she turned her back, devoting her attention to the bottles behind the bar.

Duncan MacLeod was running late, not too late, but he hastened his pace to the sidewalk cafe where he'd agreed to meet Methos. He'd gotten back to the barge late the previous night after dropping Lysette off at her flat. The girl had been nearly incoherent as he helped her stumble up the stairs to her door, but she'd turned, planted a goodnight kiss fully on his lips, then plunged through the door, slamming it behind

her. He'd sauntered back down the steps and watched as the lights went on in a different room, then switched off. She was apparently safely tucked in for the night, he'd concluded and headed back to his own bed. But sleep had eluded him. Something tugged at his mind, something about the land deal-- or about the missing Immortals. He'd finally fallen asleep near dawn.

As he turned the corner, he saw Methos waiting at a table for him. Well, not exactly waiting. The elder Immortal dipped a croissant in a bowl of espresso as he read the morning papers. He glanced up as MacLeod approached. His eyes looked tired, but full of life and he grinned at MacLeod. "Morning. Or is it noon yet?"

"Don't give me that. I'm only a few minutes late."

"Yeah. Well, what is time to us anyway? How was your night?"

"Long," MacLeod grumbled. He motioned the waiter for coffee. "You're in a good mood today."

Methos took a deep breath of the misty air, looking around him like a man who has just discovered the world anew. "One thing nice about Paris is that you never know who you'll run into while walking her streets..."

He paused as MacLeod's coffee arrived and took the opportunity to down a good portion of his before he continued. "I met an old flame, MacLeod. A very old flame."

MacLeod's stomach knotted. The last old acquaintances had been brutal. "And?" he prompted.

"And the fire's still there." Methos looked more than a little smug.

"And just like that, Alexa is just a memory." MacLeod didn't know why he said it. He watched the look on Methos' face turn to hurt.

"It's been over a year. And no, she's not just a memory. Any more than Tessa is." His tone softened. "But we move on. We can't live in the past-- any of it. What happened last year-- or two thousand years ago-- is in the past."

He sipped at his coffee and waited as MacLeod pondered that one. The Highlander was silent, thinking about it. Methos let the silence drag on, waited as the other reached for a croissant, nibbled at it, then studied the swirls of cream in his coffee. His voice shook just a little as he continued, "MacLeod, have I ever-- ever in the time you've known me-- betrayed our friendship?"

The Scot's head came up and he met Methos' stare head on, met the open hazel eyes that he once thought he could read like a book. He was just beginning to learn how complex this man was and he'd thought about that a lot over the past few months. He shook his head. "No. But you haven't made it easy."

"I never said I was easy. I never said I was simple."

MacLeod barked out a laugh. "That's an understatement."

"So, are we still friends?"

"I wouldn't be talking to you if I didn't think so."

Methos lowered his eyes, let out the breath he'd been holding.

What was going on in his mind, Mac wondered. There was so much that wasn't being said on both sides. He was uneasy around Methos, not sure what to say or how it would be taken. He seemed very tense now, very uncertain. But he couldn't forget Methos' words when he'd asked him about the Horsemen, the almost mad look in his eyes as he confirmed Cassandra's story. He hadn't forgot what those words had meant. He'd found it hard to forgive him and equally hard not to. Methos was right, he'd never betrayed him-- had risked his life more than once for him. Everyone has skeletons in the closet, but he hadn't expected a whole army of them. Trust

between them wasn't an issue. Trying to understand him, accepting that this man had committed the atrocities he had, was the problem. He thought he knew him, but now-- now he was a total enigma.

He made a quick decision. "I need to visit my property this morning. Take a look around. Something doesn't feel right about this deal. Want to come along?"

Methos nodded.

For the first part of the drive, both Immortals were silent, each wrestling with his own thoughts. Methos felt slightly depressed by the earlier conversation, lamenting that his friendship with MacLeod-- he was back to calling him that instead of Mac-- was still on very shaky ground. But then, it had always been tenuous at best. Until Kronos, MacLeod never really cared much about his past. Even now, he didn't want to know. No questions about the "old flame"-- not even to ask her name. Hell of a friendship, this.

Methos almost laughed out loud as he remembered their first meeting a little over two years ago. He'd nearly been awed by Duncan MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod-- all the stories and reports he'd read about the man over the years he'd been a Watcher and even before that as rumours made their way

around Europe and America. He'd really wanted this friendship... gone out of his way to get a foothold in MacLeod's life, risked more than the man next to him would ever realize. And now, now it was worse than starting over.

Duncan glanced across at him. Clearing his throat nervously, MacLeod broke the silence. "I got this property in the seventeenth century. It's really nothing special-- just a nice wooded area, about ten acres. The young lady who bought it doesn't seem to have any real plans for it, so I'm curious why she wanted it."

"Maybe she wants to build a lodge. How's the hunting?"

"Small game, mostly. At least, it used to be. A few rabbits--"

"No such thing as a few. If you have two of the opposite sex, you have a crowd," Methos interrupted, trying to inject a little levity into the conversation.

"Rabbits," Duncan continued, "fox, badger-- that sort of thing. But the lady said she wasn't planning to build on it."

"How 'bout the wood? Is it good lumber?"

"Oak. I suppose it's worth a bit. She doesn't look like a lumberjack though. I thought maybe there was something on it I missed."

"Ah. And that's why you invited me along."

"Methos, I asked you because I wanted your company."
MacLeod sounded exasperated.

Methos gazed out the window. "I just don't know how to talk to you any more."

"I guess that's the problem, isn't it? Try letting someone in some time. You might be surprised."

When Methos didn't respond, MacLeod let it go. Methos didn't look away from the window. If he did, MacLeod might see the sadness in his eyes and he didn't want that. Did he dare risk telling him more? God, there were some good things in his past, but there were so many nightmares as well. Nightmares he still wasn't ready to talk about.

//Maybe I'm expecting too much,// Mac Leod thought as his friend lapsed into silence, his back turned to him as he stared out the window. //When was the last time Methos had ever really been close to another Immortal? I was surprised and flattered when the old man-- old man? Look at that young face-- close to my own age at his first death-- a little younger, in fact-- had wanted to spend time with me, had sought out my company. But I've felt connected to him, even more so after that joint quickening. Had Methos felt it, too?//

He pushed those thoughts aside as he turned the car off the main road and smiled fondly at the woodland that stretched ahead. It had been his first real property, the first piece of land he actually owned. He was only selling half of it-- not ready to part with all. Ahead the sun coruscated on the light green spring leaves on the trees. Around the base of the old trees, ferns formed cool, elegant skirts. It looked ancient and mysterious.

The herb shop was not large in itself, only a two room store in an old section of Paris not too far from the Left Bank. But it was packed with herbs and spices, imported as well as custom mixed. Behind the low counter, Niam wrapped up a small parcel for an elderly woman.

"This is a Chinese herb. Take just one tablet each morning and you will notice an increase in your energy, Madame."

The woman nodded. "Merci, Niam. Your advice is always sound." She took the package and started to the door. Just then, a petite blonde girl entered the shop, smiling as she passed the customer. Lysette was perky and alert, in a fine mood. She had good news. Her broad smile at Niam told it all.

"You got it," Niam purred, the pleasure of her companion's success evident.

Lysette nodded. "Yes. Even without all the up front money. But we'll have to have it all in a month."

"We will, Lyse. We will. This is wonderful news. That nemeton is one of the oldest and now we own at least one section of it. What was the owner like?"

"Very nice. Younger than I'd expected and very charming." She giggled. "But still influenced by a love charm."

Niam laughed. "I doubt you even need that, vixen. And now we have the holy wood, the perfect place for our next ceremony. No more sneaking into old woods to claim what is rightfully ours. Ancient druids blessed the forests, worshipped and performed rites there and so will we. My order will set down a root that will grow." Her eyes glowed with the vision.

"Your followers will know it soon," Lysette added. "And more will embrace the old ways you teach. It will truly be a new awakening for the ancient religion."

"Indeed it will. Beltaine will be the turning point."

"Do you see anything special about this?" Duncan asked as he and Methos walked through the forest. They'd left the car a couple of miles back and covered the territory on foot. It was a

musty wood, old trees with lots of plants growing beneath and between them, but nothing extraordinary that either of them had noticed.

Methos shook his head. "You mean apart from being a very old, very beautiful wood, no. A few unusual plants here and there-- vervain, lady's slipper, foxglove-- plants that can do healing although you have to be careful. They can be fatal also." He pointed out the plants as he named them.

"Didn't know you were an expert." MacLeod sounded amused.

"Spent some time as a druid healer in 57 A.D." Methos paused and looked around. There was something familiar about this wood though-- something that nagged at him. //Oh, hell,// he thought. //I've been in so many woods around Paris over the centuries, why not this one as well?//

"Well, if Mademoiselle Moraine and company-- whoever they are-- want it for the woods, they're welcome to it."

"Why are you selling, MacLeod?"

"I wasn't exactly. My solicitor contacted me with an offer on a portion of the wood. It was a fair offer so I agreed."

Methos turned as the afternoon sun broke through a canopy of tree limbs. There was something to the right, a vague

memory flashed. He started that way, pushing through into an overgrown meadow. Vines and ferns flourished in the open space. //This isn't right,// he thought, but decided it wasn't a true memory after all.

"Let's head back," MacLeod said from behind him.

Methos nodded, still nagged by something at the edge of memory. "Damn, I must be getting old. Memories are getting spotty," he murmured. He turned to follow his friend back.

As they drove back to Paris, Mac talked about his early experiences in Paris and meeting Rebecca and Amanda, nothing that Methos didn't already know about. But he listened anyway, glad Mac was willing to talk and glad he wasn't demanding any answers from him. But when had Mac shown that much interest except for when it affected Cassandra? In fact, if Cassandra hadn't been involved, he wondered if MacLeod would have followed him to Europe or just left him to deal with Kronos on his own? At one point, he'd felt the friendship was strong enough that he could count on Mac's support, but now he wasn't so sure.

He shifted in the seat, annoyed at himself for allowing his mind to wander down those dark alleys. For many years now he refused to give in to second guessing anything. It was dangerous.

"Methos? Did you hear me?" MacLeod's voice cut through his thoughts and he sheepishly realized he'd shut his voice out.

"I'm sorry, MacLeod. My mind wandered..."

"Uh huh. Look, I think we need--"

MacLeod was interrupted as the car phone rang. He snatched it up. Methos felt a mixture of relief and disappointment. He thought MacLeod wanted to finally talk about what had happened with the horsemen, to make an attempt to understand and he wanted to talk about it. But he was also reluctant, still not sure if MacLeod could ever accept what he had been. And God knows, he wasn't anxious to revisit the path he'd taken to get there, but if MacLeod was willing to listen with an open mind, he'd make the journey.

"Yeah, Joe," MacLeod said into the phone. "In Brittany? Okay. Yeah, I'll check it out." He hung up, glanced at Methos who waited with an interested expression. "That was Joe. A headless body has turned up in Brittany, near the coast. He thinks I should go down and have a look. Care to come along?"

"Uhhh, I don't think so. I have plans."

"A date, huh?"

He nodded.

"The old flame?" He watched as Methos looked uncomfortable. A touch of disappointment was in his voice as he continued, "Never mind. None of my business."

"MacLeod--"

"No, it's fine. Okay if I drop you at the Metro station?"

"Sure. Fine."

He pulled the car to the curb. "I'll call you when I get back."

Methos hesitated, chewed at his lip. "MacLeod, we have to talk."

"Yeah. I'll call you."

Methos sighed, climbed out and watched as the Citroen slipped back into traffic. Why was this so damn difficult? He made his way to the Metro entrance and took the stairs two at a time. Was this friendship with MacLeod really worth the anguish?

The scales were as old as most of the other equipment in the herb shop, a counterbalancing unit that inched its way to even as Niam added small amounts of a greenish-gray powder

to the tray. Satisfied the amount was accurate, she dumped the contents into a bag and sealed it.

Methos watched her finishing it up, waiting as she labeled it. She flashed a grin his direction. "I'll only be a couple of minutes more, Adam."

"It's all right. Take your time." He leaned back against the counter as she worked.

A few moments later, a petite blonde came in from the back room. Niam glanced up. "Hi, Lyse. This is Adam, an old friend of mine. Adam-- Lysette. She's my apprentice."

Lysette glanced at Adam, "Bonjour." She brushed past him and went to a mixing table where she pulled out several jars of herbs and began mixing them together in small proportions. Methos watched her a few minutes, beginning to wonder exactly what she was kind of apprentice she was. She dropped the measuring spoon twice, put too much of the wrong herb in one mix and had to start over and generally seemed distracted. Maybe he was making her nervous...

Niam came around the counter, took his arm. "Let's go, *cariad*. I'm starving." He turned his full attention to the woman at his side, bumbling assistant forgotten as he gazed into Niam's wide eyes and a hundred warm memories

bombarded his mind. He felt so lucky to have found her again, to have a second chance with her.

Much later, Methos and Niam stretched side by side in her bed. His fingers lightly traced the tattoo on her breast, a reminder of those early days. At one time she'd had one on her ankle as well but that one must have been removed. He'd never had one done then-- too hard to get them to stay on an Immortal body. He'd had enough trouble with the Watcher tattoo. Unconsciously, he glanced to where the symbol used to adorn his left wrist. There was no sign of it now, no sign of a scar to even indicate it ever existed.

Niam's hand traced along the features of his face, drawing in a mustache he no longer wore and shifting down to his lips and his chin. She pressed her face against his, rubbing against him. "So many changes, yet the eyes are the same, Dylan. Eyes like the woods themselves... browns and greens and ageless. Why couldn't you tell me then, *carriad*?"

"Tell you what?"

"What we were. What I would become. Why did you leave me to find out through trial and error?" Her voice was bitter, anger at the edge of it. //She has reason,// he thought. //How can I explain it?//

Wales 60 A.D.

"The news is bad. Roman forces are moving from the south. We fear that our holy island is their target." Guerin spoke matter-of-factly to the small council of druids. His dark eyes glittered in a leathery old face that appeared to have aged as much as was humanly possible. He was considered the wisest druid in the order, at least the most learned.

At first these incongruities in his life had amused Methos. Because of his youthful appearance he was always considered the inexperienced one by people who mistakenly placed more credence on the look of age rather than wisdom. But it also worked to his advantage. No one ever expected a great deal from him. And, in spite of three thousand years worth of experience of dealing with mortals, Immortals, and war, he didn't want to offer an opinion now. He listened with a sense of foreboding as Guerin spoke of the coming threat to the orderly existence of these people he'd lived with for the past seven years.

"They fear us," Maelwyn muttered. "What they don't understand, they think they must destroy." Maelwyn was second in the order, several years younger than Guerin and of a fierce nature.

"Nay," said Alwynna, the purest voice of the lot in Methos' opinion. Although she was nearing sixty, Alwynna's dark hair

barely showed any silvery strands and her face was nearly unlined. She was, no doubt, a stunning beauty when she was Niam's age. "I think rather they fear our control over the Cymri. If we control them, they cannot."

"What say you, Dylan?" Maelwyn asked, turning his body to face the younger druid.

Methos hesitated a moment, deciding how much to say. "That Alwynna speaks most closely to the truth. The Romans are tolerant of religion and customs so long as they control the people and it does not conflict directly with theirs. Our order represents a threat to that control. They know the Cymri will not act against the druids. Therefore, they must."

"Then we must plan to stop them..." Guerin decreed. "In any way necessary." His intense eyes met the eyes of each of the druids, one by one, saying more than we will go to war. Methos understood as well as the rest. They would fight, but one would be asked to be a sacrifice. To intercede with the gods on behalf of the Cymri. When Geurin's eyes met his, he nodded his head, signifying he was aware. At that moment, he was grateful Niam was not yet a druid and would not be a part of this.

As the gathering broke up, Alwynna came to him, touched his arm. "You are not one of us by birth, Dylan. Yet you would be part of this fight and take your chances with the selection."

"Yes. I am a druid. What threatens one threatens all."

"You seem much wiser than your years, my boy. Or possibly your knowledge is broader than any of us suspect."

He grinned. "Only a moment of insight, Alwynna. I listen and I learn. But I would like to beg a favor. If I am selected, please take care of Niam."

"Of course. That goes without saying."

It was dusk when the tribe gathered for the ceremonial meal. The small oat cakes were baked on the open fire, one cake being seared in an exceptionally hot fire to blacken it quickly. This would be the deciding cake. Young Fergus sat next to Methos in the circle, he would be the last to chose. One by one, the cakes were taken from the plate. Methos watched closely as each person took a cake, watched the expression on the faces as they touched the cake, using their fingers to explore. As he reached for the next to the last cake, Methos knew none had taken the cake yet, and a light brush of his fingers against each cake told him which was the blackened cake. He paused, hand hovering over the plate, and glanced at Fergus. The lad was barely nineteen, about to become a father. He reached for the damning bread, took it and held it tightly in his lap, not thinking about what he'd just done.

At the signal, each druid took a bite of the cake. Methos tasted the burnt grains, knew he was about to change his lifestyle again and accepted it with a resigned sigh. Guerin waited patiently for the selected one to make himself known. Slowly, reluctantly, Methos turned the cake upward to show the charred side to the rest of the circle. Across from him, Alwynna looked pained, then quickly lowered her eyes. He knew that she had expected it, but perhaps she had hoped otherwise.

"The gods have chosen you, Dylan," Guerin declared. "I think it a wise choice."

Present

"It wasn't easy after you left and the Romans came," Niam said softly. "You should have killed me then and taken me with you."

Methos pulled her closer, kissed her forehead and caressed her hair. "It wasn't that simple, love."

"Neither was being killed by a Roman dog... or discovering that you couldn't die, even when you wanted to." The bitterness gave way to the anger, renewed again at the thoughts.

"I'm sorry, Niam. Believe me, I would never had wanted you to go through that. I hoped you would be safe after I left. I spoke to Alwynna..."

"Alwynna died trying to keep the Romans from me and the children." Niam's voice broke as tears choked her. Methos bit his lower lip. There was nothing more he could say, nothing that would alter what was past. He could only hold her and love her now.

"You won't ever leave me again, Dylan," she said softly as her lips found his.

"Not willingly," he murmured as he responded to the touch and shifted his weight on the bed. Then there was no time for words as they gave way to the desire for each other.

Methos rolled off her, sweaty and breathing hard, but content. Niam reached across and pulled him to her again, until his head rested on her shoulder. His hand moved to cradle her breast but she caught it, redirected it to her lips, kissing his palm. He smiled as he closed his eyes, letting sleep take him.

In the pale light of moon glow, Niam watched her lover sleep--just as he had many nights long ago. Only the look on her face wasn't love; it was something much darker.

Part Two

By Lillian Wolfe

Even the direct route to Brittany had given MacLeod several hours to think and he found he was grateful Methos had declined the trip with him. It might have been a little too long with him. He was torn between wanting to talk and wanting to shut the older man out.

In spite of his first inclination to be done with Methos and just get on with his life, Mac found it wasn't so easy. He missed him-- missed his sarcastic remarks, his dry sense of humor, and his company. When he wasn't around, he felt almost as if part of himself was missing. Yet, he was still struggling with the reconciliation of what his friend had done. To find out someone you loved and trusted had a past you hadn't even had a hint of was a shock. He'd felt-- still felt-- betrayed.

He'd thought they could talk about it and maybe he could come to some understanding, but Methos seemed as reluctant to talk as he did. He didn't know how much longer he could go on pretending everything was okay between them when it wasn't.

He followed the line of standing stones into Brest. //Ancient stones leading the way to the sea,// he mused. //Stones with an unknown purpose. Just like The Game. For what purpose?//

Once he was into Brest, it was easy enough to find the morgue. He stayed north of the Port du Commerce and quickly located the building. MacLeod stood in the morgue and waited for the drawer to roll open. They all looked the same, dreary places where once human flesh was kept until claimed or sent to be disposed of in some fashion. Thanks goodness, they didn't rush to dispose of the bodies. It could make an Immortal's life miserable to have to recover from embalming.

"Voila, monsieur. No head. Just as I said." The medical examiner flipped the sheet back to expose the torso of a tall, broad-shouldered man. Mac looked at the cleanly cut neck and felt it was done with a smooth sword stroke. Few things cut as cleanly as a well-sharpened blade. But whoever did it was sloppy to let the body be found.

Mac's eyes were drawn to a mark on the man's shoulder, a small birthmark probably, that was a purplish spot that looked like a star. He made a mental note of it. He'd never noticed that mark on Etienne's shoulder, but the build definitely fit his friend.

"He doesn't look like he put up a struggle," Mac commented.

"No. I think he was drugged, perhaps. Not your usual drugs, mind you, but traces of arsenic, digitalis and other potentially

lethal chemicals were in his system. Do you recognize him, monsieur?"

MacLeod shrugged, "Maybe. Can't tell for sure without a head. Any sign of it?"

The man shook his head. "No. What would anyone want with a head?"

Niam peered closely at the oval-shaped object sitting on a wooden block on the basement table. She ran a finger over the smooth surface of what was once a fleshy face and now was stretched tautly against the bones of the head.

The basement resembled a museum display with old daggers, blades, chains, and other implements set on shelves about the dimly lighted room. A musty smell permeated the air from the old objects as well as the tanning solution she was using on the head.

Her eyes moved up to a shelf along the back wall that displayed another thirteen preserved heads, all with eyes open and gazing into oblivion. Only one seemed to display any alarm in the staring eyes and that was the one just before her.

"We'd better mix the next batch of the sedative stronger, Lyse. That last one almost came out of it. Double the vervain and add another pinch of foxglove. I definitely don't want our next *offering* to be able to react."

Lysette looked up from the tallboy she'd been sorting through, a copper mixing bowl in her hand. "Have you found an appropriate subject then?"

Niam's eyes narrowed in pleasure. "Oh, yes. This one is ideal. The gods lead us to the nemeton, inspired us to buy it and now they have provided the perfect offering to reawaken the woods... one of the chosen ones. One they should have had a long time ago... We must have as many followers in attendance as possible at Beltaine, Lyse. You'll see to it."

She turned to look at her apprentice. "This one will be very special. I've never taken an Immortal as old as this one. He may be difficult for me to take, but it will be spectacular. He's older than me, Lyse, and probably very resistant to drugs. Maybe you should triple the vervain..."

"I see. " The blonde girl nodded her understanding, yet there was just a twinge of regret in her voice.

Joe Dawson frowned as MacLeod reported his findings to him. He was unsure about the identity of the Immortal who was lying headless in the Brest morgue, not seeing anything that would conclusively narrow it down . There were so many new ones, it seemed. How could the game ever end when new ones kept coming along?

"I don't have any references to that birthmark in the files, Mac. Do you have any ideas?"

"One. The build fits Duval. I'm just not sure about the birthmark. I'll check it out when I get back to Paris." MacLeod changed lanes to get around a beat up truck loaded with hay and sacks of grain. "The ME mentioned that the body appeared to be drugged with some odd concoction of herbs and poisons. Has to be someone who knows how to create a drug to affect an Immortal."

"Like another Immortal. Who else would go to this much work?"

"Yeah. Hunters would just shoot, then take the heads. I'll check with Methos. He seems to know a lot about drugs and potions-- has some first hand knowledge."

Joe chuckled, then grew serious. "How is it with you two?"

"Uneasy, Joe. He's never been too talkative about his past and now is no exception."

//And you never really asked either,// Joe thought, but only said, "Maybe he'd be more talkative over a six pack."

MacLeod snorted. "It'd take a couple of six packs, at least." But he filed it away as an option. //Could I get Methos drunk enough to really open up?//

"This rash of dead Immortals is bugging me, Mac. I'm gonna fly over and check the files personally. I'll catch the noon flight over tomorrow."

Duncan could scarcely believe it when Methos told him he'd meet him at a clothing shop in the garment district. Somehow, he never thought of the elder Immortal as being particularly interested in fashion, yet here he was going into a designer men's shop. Methos was studying a rack of silk shirts when he spotted MacLeod. He held up a dark blue one against his shoulders.

"Whadaya think, MacLeod? Is this a good color for me?"

"Looks good. Since when did you concern yourself about clothes?"

"Since I decided I didn't have to look like a poor university student." He put the shirt back on the rack and pulled out a light mauve one. "Or a conservative one," he added. "How was Brittany?"

"Interesting. I think it's safe to say the victim definitely lost his head by a sword."

"And the body was left lying around for anyone to find? Sloppy."

"But the interesting part is that the victim had traces of digitalis, opium, and something called nepeta cataria in his system."

Before MacLeod had completed the statement, Methos made the mental translation to foxglove, poppy and catnip. "With honey and mint to make it palatable," he murmured.

"What?"

"Let's go someplace more private, MacLeod." He urged him out of the shop.

A few blocks away was a small green park, mostly deserted at this time of day. An small, unremarkable fountain bubbled water providing a soft backdrop as the two Immortals stood by it.

"What you're describing, MacLeod, is a sedative of sorts. It numbs the mind and the senses so the person feels indifferent to anything. Druids used to give it to their sacrifices to make the *transition* to the other side easier. Did it occur to you that the dates these Immortals disappeared happen to coincide with Samhain and Imbolc?"

"Celtic seasons," Duncan connected immediately. "The first day of the season. You think it could be someone with a strong Celtic heritage?"

Methos shrugged, "Or someone who happened to like the concept. There are enough tree huggers running around these days that it could be any one of a dozen religions."

What he didn't say was his own fear of who it could be. Just because Niam sold herbs and had the knowledge to mix up a potion of this nature didn't mean she was involved. But a butterfly bounced around his stomach all the same and he added, innocently enough, "My newly re-discovered friend owns an herb shop. I'll make some inquiries with her. She might know something about it."

Duncan nodded, giving Methos a curious glance.

A jingle of the bell brought Lysette's head up from the herbs she was weighing and bagging. Her lips pulled in amusement as she saw the tall, slender man. She stepped out to greet him.

"I'm looking for Niam," Adam Pierson said. "Is she around?"

"She'll be back in a few minutes. Wait, if you'd like." As he nodded, she went back to her work, but kept a cautious eye on him.

Casually, Methos browsed through the shop, pausing to read labels on the jars and bags. Lots of cooking herbs, including a few rare and pricey ones as well as saffron, western sage, Mexican cilantro-- items that import raised the price of more than availability. Then there was a fair collection of healing herbs and powders. Most were pre-packaged items from industry companies. A few bore a label for the shop's name. Custom dried, ground and mixed-- very expensive. And, he frowned, very uncommon. His head came up as he detected the arrival of another Immortal.

"Hello, Adam," Niam said pleasantly, setting a bag on the counter. He looked up, smiled at her. She slipped off her coat and kissed him, her fingers rolling gently against his cheek. "What brings you by?"

"I thought maybe you'd like a cup of coffee?" he asked, sounding hopeful-- all the boyish charm he could muster put into it.

"Always thoughtful, aren't you?" A touch of sarcasm. "But as you see, I just got in and I have work to do."

He nodded. "Yes. I was just looking at some of your work--" He paused as Niam turned toward him. He held up a bag of snakeroot and vervain labeled as a sleeping aid, wiggled it at her, before dropping it back on the shelf.

"What are you doing here, Niam? These drugs are archaic. You-- you can't use them on people. Some of them are illegal." Methos picked up a jar of dried *Amanita muscaria* mushrooms, a serious hallucinogenic. "Not to mention deadly."

"I'm not selling to the general public, Adam," Niam replied with an amused chuckle. "They're private stock."

Eyes widening in amazement, he stared at her. "Private stock?! This isn't brandy we're talking about." He set the jar down, turned another to look at it. "You've got ground mushrooms, digitalis, witches brew... Do you have eye of newt somewhere too? What are you-- a practicing witch?"

A few paces behind Adam, Lysette hefted a mace in both hands, swinging it loosely. Almost imperceptibly, Niam nodded her head as she smiled sweetly at Methos. She stepped closer, her eyes locking with his. "It's Wicca now days, *cariad*. And I'm still following the path."

He gaped at her. "You can't be serious?!" A prickling at the back of his neck gave a milli-second's warning. Just as he started to turn, the heavy force of the mace connected with his skull. The crack of the blow echoed painfully in his head before the full impact hit him and he blacked out. Crashing to the floor, his arm flew out, catching the shelf full on. Shelf, jars and herbs came dropping down along with Methos.

"Damn. That made a mess," Niam muttered. "It looks like we have a guest for a couple of days, Lyse. I want a large group for the ceremony-- as many of our followers as can make it. His death will make a very impressive display."

Lysette nodded. "I'll get on it tomorrow." She stepped over Methos, grabbed a broom and started sweeping up herbs.

Rummaging in a drawer behind the counter, Niam found a hypodermic, then pulled a medicine bottle out of the small refrigerator. "I'd better sedate him before he wakes up."

Through the intense pain in his head, Methos forced his eyes open to face the stiff bristles of the broom brushing roughly

against his cheek. Niam's words flitted into his consciousness and almost made sense-- at least enough to know he was in big trouble.

Groggily, he slipped a hand in his coat pocket, hoping to find something there that could be a clue. His fingers found a flat edge, closed around it, exploring it-- a book of matches. With great care, he eased it out. Keeping the movement small, he slid the matchbook out and tried to work it to the edge of one of the shelves. He had trouble feeling it, keeping focused on the task. His head was pounding with the effort. His fingers scraped along the edge of the shelf, lost contact with the matchbook and had to backtrack until he was able to slide the matchbook over and wedge it slightly under it. It was a long shot, but MacLeod-- if he should come-- had caught on to poorer clues.

Then Niam knelt above him, jabbed the hypodermic into his shoulder none too gently. "Ow! You have a-- a lousy bedside manner," he spat at her through the fog that was clogging his brain. "I thought I taught you better!"

Her response was to push harder. Muttering a curse under his breath, Methos tried to summon enough strength to flip her, but the drug worked fast. He collapsed face first back on the floor.

Niam stood, nodded to Lysette. The younger woman grabbed his legs and started pulling him to the basement doors as Niam casually tossed the needle into the trash can. "You don't need to be gentle."

With a wicked grin, Lysette pushed open the basement door and shoved Methos head first down the stairs.

As Joe Dawson went through the records of Immortals who just disappeared, a pattern was beginning to form. It wasn't one anyone would notice if he wasn't looking for it.

The first disappearance was six years ago, around Halloween. No one thought much of it. Like MacLeod said, Immortals changed identities and his Watcher just lost him. The next two occurred the following years, around the same date. But then two disappeared the next year and two more the year after that, including Paolo Debrezi. MacLeod had specifically asked about him. Then this year, two more so far. The dates were about six months apart until this year.

Signing off the computer, he sighed and dialed MacLeod's number. He needed to get this information to him. As he waited, he stared at the database screen and was amused at the thought that Methos had been responsible for so much of it.

Joe sat on a bench outside the Louvre. Behind him, the modernistic entrance to the old museum beckoned tourists, artists, and school children to come discover the beauty. A mass of school children were doing just that as Duncan MacLeod made his way to the bench.

"Okay, here's what I have, Mac. These disappearances started in 1981. The first one was a Michael Raines on October 29th. His watcher followed him to a blues club on the Left Bank. He met a pretty redhead that the Watcher thought he knew and they disappeared together. He never saw him again.

"The next disappearance was about the same time the next year. Almost the same situation. A year after that, deja vu. Then the pattern changed a bit. The next disappearance was on April 29th, followed by October 31st, then January 28th and October 30th and this past year, April 29th, July 30th and October 30th. Your friend Etienne disappeared on January 29th."

MacLeod had already connected the dates. Methos was right. "Celtic seasons," he muttered.

"What?"

"They're all on the beginning of Celtic seasons," Duncan explained. "October is Samhain, a fire holiday. May 1st is Beltaine, another fire holiday. The beginning of August is Lughnasadh-- the feast of Lugh and Imbolc is the beginning of February. Someone is offering ritual sacrifices to the ancient gods of the Celts."

"Then tomorrow--" Joe started.

"--is Beltaine. And another sacrifice."

"Most of them have disappeared from one of three clubs here in Paris, Mac. And they've all met a young woman, although the descriptions of the women varies. No way they could be the same one."

"They've disappeared in Paris, but they weren't necessarily killed here. Etienne washed up in Brittany. Which may be why they were taken a couple of days before the actual holiday-- they needed to be transported."

"One more thing, Mac. They were all young, with at least three-fourths of them being less than one hundred years old. Most probably didn't have many kills under the belt."

"So our killer doesn't want to take on any one with any real strength. It fits. Drug him, then take his head. Easy target."
Mac was disgusted.

Ba-boom. Ba-boom...

The sound pounded in his head like a ritual drum, each beat of his heart repeating the rhythm. Methos forced his eyes open, blinked into the dimly lit room. His vision focused on wrinkled objects that looked like dried fruit carved into faces. His stomach churned as he realized what he was looking at -- heads, dried human heads. Empty eyes gazed back at him from across the room. As he jerked involuntarily, he felt the sharp edge of metal cuffs cut into his wrists and realized his arms were chained to the wall behind him.

Between the gruesome sight and the splitting headache from the cranial concussion that was trying to heal, he felt nauseous, but the thick band of duct tape across his mouth discouraged that feeling from progressing. He closed his eyes again and tried to take a few deep breaths. The air was stale, an enclosed room with little ventilation, and the odors of herbs and decaying filled his nostrils. Not exactly helping, he decided.

Eventually, the pounding ceased and he took time to examine the room. No windows, one door, a single low watt light bulb hanging from the ceiling. Basement workshop, he concluded, annoyed at his own stupidity in ending up in this situation. And he was the one who warned MacLeod about Kristin? He'd

walked just as blindly into this... Well, maybe this was a little different-- he didn't know Niam had a habit of taking heads.

With only a limited view, he studied the head collection on the table in front of him. At least a dozen dried heads, one or two that looked familiar from the database Adam Pierson and Don Salzer had put together, but none that he personally knew. He wondered if Niam had made love to all of them or if that was reserved for him? //Now you are being an idiot,// he told himself sharply.

Shifting his position a little, Methos tested the chains holding his arms. Metal sliced into his wrists as he tried to pull. He had maybe three inches of slack, not enough to do anything. He leaned back, seeing no reason to continue subjecting himself to pain. All he could do now was wait.

He dozed, woke, dozed off again. His body ached, his arms felt numb, and he was thirsty, but none of that matched the mental stress of waiting. He had no doubt in his mind that Niam wanted to add his head to her collection. A scuff on the stairs brought his head up and eyes alert. No sensation of *presence*, so he knew it wasn't Niam. Lysette, then.

Moments later, a key turned in the lock and Lysette came into the room. She carried a small tray with a couple of slices of bread, cheese, fruit and a glass of water balanced on it. As she stepped to face Methos, she smiled sweetly.

"Unfortunately, you will be our guest for another day. So, I brought a little meal for you. You're probably quite hungry by now." She set the tray on the table where unseeing eyes gazed across it.

Her smile remained charming as her fingers caught an edge of the tape across his mouth and she pulled it steadily, but not quickly, off. It hurt. He glared at her, tried to make his mouth work. His lips were dry; even his tongue felt dry.

"You're thirsty, aren't you? Sedatives tend to make you that way," she taunted. She picked up the glass, held it to his lips and poured a little of the water in.

It was sweet, unusually so, but wet and cold and he was so grateful that it could have been poisoned and he wouldn't care.

Lysette set it down, broke off a piece of bread and pushed it into his mouth. He ate reluctantly as she continued to feed him bits of bread and slices of apple and cheese. Turning his head away from her, he muttered, "You know, I always fancied it would be good to be fed by a beautiful girl, but this isn't exactly what I had in mind."

"I'll bet it isn't. "

"Do you have any grapes? I once had a splendid woman feed me grapes." He almost smiled at the memory of Cleopatra dropping grapes into his mouth as he reclined with his head in her lap. That was before Anthony and Caesar.

"Sorry, cherie. No grapes." She stuffed in a cube of cheese instead, then pushed the glass against his lips again. "Now, drink the rest of this."

As he swallowed more of the water, he realized why the sweetness. "It's drugged. What is it? Valerian, passionflower and honey?" He pulled his head away from the glass.

"Close. It's just a sedative. Drink it. Or-- I can give you another shot. Your choice, Adam."

Reluctantly, he drank. Lysette smiled smugly, picked up the tray and started out the door. She paused, "Sleep well, Adam. Your roommates are quiet." Laughing, she shut the door and hurried up the stairs.

Numbly, he let his eyes drift back to the heads staring at him from the table. As he fought to stay conscious, his head dropped and his vision shifted unexpectedly to an ancient dagger with a twisted blade-- a blade very much like one he'd seen before.

Wales 60 A.D.

Methos stood alone at the edge of the grove of trees. It was nearly moonrise. Almost time. He leaned back against a tree and prepared himself for what was to come. It wasn't the first time he'd been a sacrifice, but it was never easy. More than anything he regretted leaving Niam. There was no time to tell her, no way to tell her either.

Silently, Alwynna appeared beside him, laying a hand on his arm. "It's almost time, Dylan. Are you frightened?"

He shook his head. "No. More worried about what will happen here. Niam... you... the others."

She almost smiled. "Ah, that will be your job, young man. You will need to plead our case with the gods. You must speak eloquently and true-- and I think there is none who can do a better job than that."

"I will do the best I can, Alwynna." He sounded sincere, but Methos didn't know any way to tell her that the messenger they'd selected would never make it to the gods. In some ways he was glad he was chosen because it meant none of the others would be, yet he was a fraud-- a druid in many ways, but not able to do this duty.

She walked with him to the appointed site, arriving just as the others gathered. Only a few druids were present for this ceremony, not the whole order. Methos was grateful for that, grateful that Niam would not be witness to this.

As Alwynna let go his arm, she whispered, "I will miss you, Dylan."

With a nod at her, he took a deep breath and stepped forward to meet Guerin. The elder of the order bowed his head a moment in respect to him, then offered him a goblet of mead. As he sipped it slowly, Methos tasted the drugs in the honey wine, could identify the herbs. They would numb some of the pain, would leave him almost indifferent to his fate. He barely heard the words that were being said as the rest of the order formed a row on each side of him and led him to the circle of trees near the edge of the bog.

Guerin stood in front of him, spoke not to him but to the gods. "Rhiannon, Llew-- our lady and our lord-- we send this man, our brother, to you. Hear his words--"

Methos heard no more. Behind him, Maelwyn swung an ax into the back of his head. The sharp crack of his skull breaking resonated through him, then he felt the pain even through the drug. He thought he cried out but all anyone heard was a groan as Methos dropped to his knees, struggling to stay upright. Guerin moved quickly. Kneeling beside the

nearly unconscious young man he supported him partially and, drawing a sharp dagger, he stabbed into the victim's jugular vein. Blood poured out as a ceremonial bowl was held under it to catch the flow. Methos choked, fought to stay alive as long as possible, but Guerin stabbed the long-bladed dagger into his side, through his lung but missing his heart. He collapsed to the ground, a final gurgle escaping along with the blood in his throat.

He was dimly aware as Guerin signaled to the others, thinking their sacrifice had died. Reverent hands lifted him from the ground, swung his body and heaved him into the bog. His body hit the water and sank into the muddy ground as he finally lost consciousness.

A couple of hours passed in the silent, now deserted wood. Under the silt and mud that composed the bog, the still form that was Methos shuddered awake. The first gasp brought water and mud into his mouth and he thrashed in a desperate attempt to find air. The memory of the final moments flashed back in his mind and he instantly knew where he was, but couldn't get to the surface fast enough. He died again, lungs choking on the bog water.

He revived again an hour or so later, still under the water, but closer to the edge than before. Once again, he gasped for air and once again, his lungs filled with water and silt. As he

started to pass toward the darkness once more, Methos kicked hard toward the thick reeds that edged the bog.

Sounding almost as loud as a shout in the stillness, a choking gasp cut through the silence as a muck covered head bobbed out of the bog. Methos made a desperate grab to find something on the edge of the water to clutch. His fingers closed around a thick patch of rushes and he pulled himself part way up, exhausted with the effort of getting out of the bog and trying to heal. He coughed to expel water and mud from his damaged lungs. Pain still wracked his body and his head felt like it was splitting open. //An apt description,// he thought wryly. //That was a really unpleasant experience, not one I'd ever want to repeat.//

As his strength returned, he pulled himself the rest of the way out of the bog, stumbling wearily to his feet. He had to gather up his things from the cave he'd hidden them in and get out of the area before dawn. As he started to move, he was surprised by a startled scream. Turning toward the sound, he saw the pale face of Niam at the edge of the wood, staring in horror at the mud-covered man. Without thinking, he took a step toward her.

"Puca," she screamed, eyes wide in terror. "Stay away, evil spirit." She threw up her hands in a warding sign, then turned and fled.

Methos started after her, but he stopped, sorrow and regret touching his eyes. Shoulders slumping, he turned away and staggered toward the river.

Duncan knocked insistently on the door and waited impatiently for a response. It was the third time in the past two days he'd been by Methos' flat looking for him. And once again there was no answer. He'd left six voice mail messages over the same time frame, also with no response. Even though it was early morning, he glanced around to make sure no one was watching, then deftly picked the lock on the door and let himself in.

Everything looked normal, nothing standing out to indicate anything was wrong. Duncan prowled around, looking for any clue as to where the elder Immortal was. He brushed a hand over the answering machine and was informed there were nine new messages. He played them, skipping over the six he'd left. One was the landlord saying the power would be off for several hours on Thursday, one was a hang-up and the last was from Amanda. Duncan arched an eyebrow at that, surprised that she would be calling Methos.

So where was the "old" man? With the old girlfriend? Maybe, but he hadn't been home in the past two days. MacLeod definitely didn't like it.

Uneasy, he left the flat and headed for the hall of records. Within a surprisingly short time, old volumes of books were piled high around MacLeod as he waded his way through the old land records looking for any information about the woods. Most of the transactions were simply sales or transfer of deeds from one hand to another with no other notations. It didn't look too promising.

With a sigh of frustration, Mac picked up yet another old volume from the stack and began the search for references. This book was much older than the ones he'd been looking through, hand bound and very delicate old pages. He turned them carefully until his eyes caught on a notation from 1183. The old French was difficult to read and the spidery handwriting didn't help any. But there was a line referring to the woods to the northeast of the city as being considered holy at one time by the Druids of the local tribe who claimed the land before the Romans. A nemet wood, Mac thought, used for worship, rites and sacrifice.

Lysette Moraine's words echoed in his mind. "We do not plan to build anything in the wood. We just want the land."

The land was precisely what she wanted and now he knew why. Closing the book, Mac reached for his coat. He had to find Methos... Now!

MacLeod pulled the car to the curb and stared at the small shop which was the fifth herbal shop on his list. This one wasn't listed but was recommended by the owner of the last one he'd stopped to check out. When Methos said his friend had an herbal shop, did he mean exclusively or was it a health food store? This could be a long, fruitless search at this rate.

The middle-aged matronly woman at the counter looked up from her magazine as the Highlander entered the shop. She put on a smile and greeted him warmly. "Bonjour, monsieur. How may I help you?"

Duncan glanced around the small shop. "Actually, I'm looking for the owner. Is that you?"

The woman shook her head. "No. I am only occasional help when Madame has to go away on business."

"Ah, I see. Maybe you could tell me if a man has been here to see her, a little shorter than me, slender build, short dark brown hair."

The woman shook her head. "I have not seen anyone like that. You will have to ask Madame. She will be back tomorrow."

Thanking her, Duncan turned to go when he spotted the corner of a matchbook under one of the racks. The color was a

distinctive blue and it looked like a flash of pink writing on it that he recognized. If it was what he thought it was, it was definitely out of place here.

Closing time wasn't far away and this bore a little more investigation, Duncan decided. He took the car around the block, parked it and waited for the shop to close. After he watched the woman lock up and leave the shop, he made his way around to the back and picked the lock.

Once inside, he made his way to the main shop and followed the thin trail of light from his torch to the shiny matchbook cover. He pulled it out and gave it little more than a glance. He'd been right. What was a matchbook from Joe's doing here unless Methos dropped it? And where was Methos?

He looked around the shop a little more and spotted the cellar door on the way to the back. Cautiously, he pushed it open and made his way down the stairs.

The small basement at the bottom appeared ordinary. MacLeod didn't sense another Immortal nor did he expect to find anyone downstairs. In fact, he wasn't sure what he was looking for-- a hint of where Methos' friend may be and if he was with her, if they knew who might be wanting to use the woods for a ritual, or even if he was in the right place. He shook his head as he looked around. What was he expecting? A note? An address? All he had was this small nagging

feeling, and a matchbook, that told him Methos was somehow involved.

Then he noticed the door off the basement and tried it. Locked. //Could be an office,// he mused. //Could yield a home address.// He set about breaking into it. It took a little longer than the back door, but he was soon in.

The mustiness and strong smell of herbs hit him as soon as he went in. Probably a drying room, he chuckled to himself and flipped on the light. His mouth dropped open as he was startled by the sight of a two dozen eyes staring at him. Almost choking he made his way toward the disembodied heads looking for any he recognized. He had no doubt Joe would be able to identify them.

MacLeod froze as he glimpsed a familiar object out of the corner of his eye. Gruesome heads forgotten, he took three long strides to the coat he recognized as belonging to Methos. Picking it up, he checked to find the sword still in its hidden scabbard. Not a good sign. His eyes darted around the room, taking in the torture implements, the wall chains and the drying heads and he understood the horror of the room. With a certainty, he knew where Methos was and he knew that his life was in grave danger.

He dashed up the stairs for his car.

Anxiously, Duncan pushed the gas pedal as hard as he could, hoping somehow to make the car move faster. The road out of Paris to the north was reasonably straight with few curves to slow him down and he tried to take advantage of it. It was nearly eleven and he still had at least forty kilometers to go. If the ritual started promptly at midnight, as he suspected it would, then he didn't have much time.

For a brief moment, the dark side of MacLeod considered that if he did nothing, he might not have to deal with Methos anymore. No more of his games, his contradictions, his barbed remarks. But if Methos were to lose his head, he would also miss him terribly-- for all the same reasons, ironically enough. No-- if he couldn't let Cassandra take his head, he sure as hell would stop this bitch from doing it if he could. He valued Methos too much to do otherwise. And didn't Methos do at least that much for him?

But it was going to be very close and he didn't have a clue what he was going to do.

A bonfire gained life in the center of the clearing where MacLeod and Methos had been a couple of days earlier. It was completely clear of the extra ferns and other foliage that had

covered it earlier and a circle of stones surrounded the fire pit. At the south end, a large slab of rock made a natural stage and faced a monolith that was still partially covered with vines, an indication that it had been in the wood a very long time as well. A few robed figures milled about, as one or two others added logs to the fire.

Most of the people who gravitated toward the glowing center were ordinary people looking for something spiritual in their lives; people whom the modern religions had failed. They wanted some sense and order that was lacking. A few, the inner circle, sought power and held a strong belief in the tenets of worshipping the Earth. These were the true believers of Niam's cult, those who would follow an ancient religion that was resurrected incomplete by one whose training never took her to the real rituals of the Druids. These followers had witnessed her power before, seen the proof of her right to lead in the blue fire that embraced her after a ritual sacrifice-- the proof that the god had accepted their offering.

Nestled to the south side, between the braces of two ancient trees, a canvas tent was erected, the front facing the stage and the clearing. Niam gazed out at the young flames that began to cast a light into the dark surrounding it. Her dream was almost reality now and after tonight, her cult would surely grow by leaps and bounds as word spread of her divinity. Those who looked to believe in something would find

it in her. Even those who had witnessed the ritual before would be awed by this night.

She turned to look at Methos, who sat on a rug at the back of the tent. He was still bound, hands behind his back, although he was now draped in a long red robe over his jeans.

His eyes met hers calmly, saying nothing. He wouldn't give her the satisfaction of begging, not that she would listen anyway. Another strip of duct tape covered his mouth. //Like he was going to shout for help in the middle of her followers,// he thought in annoyance.

"You will be the sacrifice this time," she said softly, "with no coming back. Most of the time my *offerings* have been young Immortals, but you're at least two thousand years old, aren't you? Your quickening will be spectacular. Then I'll stab myself and resurrect before their very eyes. My followers will be awed. They'll know I am a god."

Methos lowered his eyes, shaking his head. Amused, Niam crouched before him. "You don't approve?" She ripped the tape from his mouth as he stifled a yelp.

"Being a god has its drawbacks," he said dryly, his face still smarting from the tape.

"Oh, I think the positive outweighs the negative considerably on this one." Impulsively, she covered his mouth with hers, her hand going behind his neck to pull him into the hard kiss. Slowly, she released him and pulled back a little.

"Do you hate me so much?" Methos' voice rasped a little.

"In some ways, I still love you." Her hand brushed against his cheek, then her finger lead the way across to his nose, down it to his mouth. "You should never have left me, Dylan." She stood, took a couple of steps away and stared down at him. "You should have made me Immortal, not left it to chance.

"I was taken by the Romans, used in the filthiest ways possible and I did what I had to do to survive. But after years of abuse, I was handed over to a new master and he killed me. Imagine the shock when I revived and discovered I was still alive. After I got my revenge, I escaped. I must've died twenty times before I began to understand that I was truly Immortal and I finally found another like me. I nearly lost my head five times before I found a sword and learned to use it. You should have been the one guiding me, protecting me."

"I wanted to be," he whispered. "But I couldn't control what was happening..."

"You could have told me, Dylan!" she hissed. "You could have taken me with you when you left. When I realized what you

were and that you could have saved me all that misery, I loathed you. At first, all I wanted was revenge-- to find you, torture you and take your head."

Methos squirmed under her accusing gaze. She was right to a point. He could tell her that he couldn't choose the time she became Immortal and there wasn't a way for him to take her with him then. But there was nothing he could say to change her mind.

"After a few centuries, the hatred abated. I learned how to use my sword and my brains. All that you had taught me came into play. I didn't need to be stronger than my opponent, only more clever. Then I began to put together my druid order, the first to really worship in the old way." She paused, met his eyes directly. "The goddess approves. She sent you back to me to be used to solidify my followers. Your death will be glorious, Dylan. Maybe you'll finally accomplish what you were sent to the gods all those long years ago to do."

At that moment, the tent flap flipped aside and Lysette poked her head in. "It's almost time, Niam. We must have at least two hundred followers gathering."

"Not a bad audience, *cariad*. And when we're done I can read the future in your entrails-- Or maybe I should do it first, then take your head?" Niam said to Methos, then turned to

her acolyte. "Prepare him. And be cautious, Lyse." The girl nodded as Niam left.

"Do you know what exactly you're serving? What she really is?" Methos asked as the girl poured an herbal mixture into a large goblet.

"She's the embodiment of the goddess... an immortal. Red wine or white, Adam?" She turned a pleasant smile to him.

"An Immortal-- like me," he persisted. "Like the others she's killed. And she can die like me. What you're following isn't the Druidic path. It's an abomination of what was once a natural way of life. I was there. I was part of it. She's left what was good behind her, altered it to suit her needs."

Lysette stared at him for a few moments, as if considering his words. She looked away, reached for a bottle. "Red wine, then."

Methos bit his lip as she poured the wine into the goblet. He tried to calculate how strong the mixture was and how much he could swallow without leaving him senseless. The girl circled around and stood behind him. She slid her left hand under his chin, tilting his head back.

"Now, be a good boy and don't cause me to spill." The sweetness in her voice was a contradiction to her actions as

she pressed the rim of the goblet against his lips and carefully poured some of the drugged wine into his mouth. Reluctantly, he swallowed. She had to believe he was going to drink it all without resisting or she'd force it.

He drank more than half of the liquid before she poured the remainder in his mouth. He tilted his head back a little further letting the wine run down his throat, but not swallowing. He fought against the automatic response and held it. Unexpectedly, Lysette kissed his forehead. "You're really very nice, Adam. I'm sorry it has to end like this." She stepped away and, thankfully, left the tent.

Half-choking, Methos spit out as much of the wine as he could and hoped neither Niam or Lysette was standing anywhere near the tent where they could hear him. He tried to cough up more of what he'd swallowed, but didn't have a lot of success. "Think", he murmured to himself. "You've got to keep thinking. Don't let the mind go numb... Now all I need is a sword." His gaze drifted down to his leg where most of the ejected liquid had soaked the robe. It wasn't too noticeable and in the dark, Niam would never see it. He fought off the dizziness for a bit, but eventually closed his eyes against it.

The wood seemed to be teeming with robed figures, easily two hundred or more of them forming a horseshoe around the fire

pit and facing the open slab at the end. The fire was huge, a blazing beacon in the clearing that could be seen from any point in the gathering. A man of medium height with scholarly glasses perched on his nose lead the rest in a chant that sounded other-worldly.

Through the fog in his mind, Methos heard the ancient Welsh words, translated them easily. He remembered a similar chant, but this was not quite right. Like everything else about Niam's new religion, she'd perverted the words to her own use and there was a real darkness in it. Briefly Methos wondered if MacLeod had even found the clue he'd left. Help from that quarter was a real long shot and he'd better not count on it. All he needed were his hands free and a sword. Both seemed like an unlikely possibility at the moment.

"It's time," Niam said with decision. The moon was easily visible in the sky-- not quite an unclouded view but good enough. She nodded at Lysette, turned and lead the way into the tent. Pulling her sword, she held it at Methos.

He focused his vision on the sword tip that wavered just in front of him. He'd had enough of the drug that he could barely focus. In the dullness of his mind, he reasoned that the drug was extremely potent that an Immortal couldn't recover quickly from it. But then, an Immortal had mixed it and he suspected she'd had a lot of practice.

Lysette knelt behind him, began undoing the manacles that held his wrists. The sudden release caused pain after being held in one position so long, but the freedom was short-lived. Lysette pulled first one arm, then the other in front of him, brought his wrists together and rebound them with a nylon cord. Niam watched intently as his disinterested eyes followed the process. For a moment, her sword dropped to rest in the hollow of his throat. He was oblivious to the movement, unaware of the danger as the razor sharp tip drew thin beads of blood. A satisfied smile touched her lips. "I've waited for this a long time. It won't be quick."

Methos fought to keep the neutral look, to remain non-reactive to what was happening. Niam lowered the sword, grabbed his arm and yanked him to his feet. His body tilted, unsteady at suddenly being upright. Lysette caught his other arm to help, then he was fine. As the blonde girl straightened his robes, Niam turned away. "Bring him at the signal," she ordered. "And don't turn your back on him."

Lysette shrugged, but followed instructions. As she moved to stand behind him, she pulled a gun from her robe. //So much for breaking away,// Methos thought and considered his options at that point. Carefully he tested the cord at his wrists. Tight, no slippage. If he tried to wrestle the gun from the girl, he might be successful, but chances are she would fire first. If he waited until he was facing Niam, he might be able to get her sword. Lysette would not risk firing the gun at

both of them, and there was a chance he could manage an escape into the woods without being caught or mauled by the crowd. So he stood still and waited.

From his vantage point in the woods, MacLeod watched the chanters. It would seem ludicrous if it weren't so deadly, he thought. He'd been cautiously building a low wall of dead branches, twigs and grass from the winter's destruction. The barrier stretched around the opening toward the tent for about thirty feet. He poured the last of the gasoline from a two gallon container he'd had in the back of his car for emergencies onto the end of the barrier. If he was lucky it would be enough. The dry grass would catch fire and blaze quickly, but not too quickly that it didn't catch the twigs and small branches, which in turn would set the trees blazing.

The chanting stopped and he turned his attention to the flat rock that seemed to be the focal point. A tall woman, clad in a white robe, stepped up onto the rock. As she raised her arms, the crowd cheered, then fell silent. MacLeod felt a shiver up his spine as the zoomorphic symbols on Niam's robe seemed to crawl toward the sky. As she began speaking, he strained to see any sign of Methos. He focused on the tent in the background, but didn't notice any movement yet. He needed to get closer.

He began backtracking his way silently along the edge of the trees toward the tent. At his side, the barrier of leaves and twigs waited for him to give them life. Just ahead, one of the robed followers hung back near the trees. MacLeod took him in one quick move, knocking him unconscious and dragging him deeper into the forest. Quickly, he removed the man's robe and slipped it over his own head, putting the hood up.

He stepped into the crowd, working his way toward the stone altar. The woman's voice was compelling, promising success and tranquillity for those who would follow the gods. She would show them the way, would guide their lives. Like Cassandra, she had a magic about her voice that encouraged people to listen and believe. And she played on human desire, the needs of humanity for love, fortune and tranquillity.

Out of the corner of his eye, MacLeod glimpsed a movement, shifted his vision that direction. He saw Methos moving toward the stone, hands held calmly in front of him. He walked automatically, indifferent to the surroundings. MacLeod was not surprised to see the petite figure of Lysette behind him, guiding him. He'd expected that she would be there. They paused at the side of the woods, waiting.

Niam's voice rose. "I am the servant of the gods. Through me, they offer salvation and fulfillment. Those who accept me will

know the joys of life in their divine light. The gods have given me the power and I can share it with you. I will show you proof of my words. One who once betrayed the gods will give his life to them now. He is Chosen. They will accept him, forgive him and return his strength to me so I that I can help all of you."

Lysette shoved Methos forward. He stumbled a bit, slowing them down, and in that moment, he detected another Immortal. In just a slight movement of his head, his eyes darted toward where he felt the source was, saw only a sea of robed figures, But there was one, taller than the others, squared shoulders. Methos dipped his head a little to let MacLeod know he was aware.

Using that as a signal, MacLeod grabbed a burning log from the fire and hurled it into the barrier he'd built. At once, the flames ignited the gas fumes and the real fire burst to life, leaping and jumping all along the woods. The line of fire spread quickly and found even more dried brush to ignite. A few of the crowd noticed the flames and began shouting, pointing toward it. Taking advantage of the moment, Methos swung around and low, knocking Lysette backwards and causing the gun to go flying from her hand. He ducked and ran toward the burning woods.

A shrill scream cut through the confused voices as Niam watched the fire start to spread. Horror of the destruction to

the nemeton spread a grim look across her face as she yelled, "Put it out! Put it out!" Then she saw Methos running toward the fire. She leaped down from the stone, sword drawn and raced toward him. Even as a few of the people rushed for water or blankets to fight the fire, the rest gave way to let her through. She cut in front of Methos before he reached the edge. He halted, backed up.

The crowd formed a circle around them, giving them room to fight it out. Methos straightened, faced her. His voice was a little slurred, but he spoke loudly enough that those nearest to them could hear. "Is this – do you call this a fair fight, Niam? Give me a sword and I'll give you a fight. I'm half-drugged-- my hands are tied-- But I'll still take you on."

"You should have gone to the gods a long time ago, Dylan. I'm giving you the chance to purify your soul." She dove in, took a swing at him. He danced back, just out of reach. She reset herself, made another move, feinted to the left, then shifted in and caught a slice across that laid his left side open to his ribs. Ignoring the burning pain, Methos dropped to a slide and knocked her off her feet with a scissors chop, then rolled out of the way and struggled to his feet.

MacLeod fought his way through the shoving crowd to get close enough. Breaking through the front line of people, he pulled his sword and shouted. "Adam! Catch!" He tossed the katana into the air toward Methos. It spun into a double

spiral arc and Methos made a dive to grab it, his still-bound hands catching the hilt just before it touched the ground. He rolled off one shoulder and came to his feet to face Niam.

"It's better this way, Dylan," she spat through a grim grin. She attacked, her voice howling like a banshee.

He brought the sword up, parried and went on the offensive. He was half-drugged, hands tied and using another man's sword, so he figured she had a fair chance. She didn't have much technique, he noted as he drove her back, but she was enthusiastic.

Around them, the fire continued to spread. Many of the observers were growing fearful of the flames and began running away from the ever-growing fire. As Methos backed Niam toward the fire line, Lysette's face reflected her horror. She looked around for the gun she'd had, spotted it several feet away and started for it. As she almost reached it, a boot came down on top of it and she looked up to see Duncan MacLeod standing on it. With a satisfied grin, he said, "I don't think so." She gasped, backed away and slipped back into the small band of devotees who watched the battle.

Niam moved in tightly, trying to force a false move from Methos. She thrust the sword in, he parried easily and slipped in under her sword. For a moment, he hesitated, the face in front of him, wide gray eyes and full mouth open in a

gasp, reminding him vividly of the young girl he once knew, and Niam's left hand went inside her robe. Just as he sliced up, her left hand shoved a dagger deep into his abdomen. The thrust of his sword carried through, the katana taking her head in a smooth, quick slice even as Methos cried out against the pain. As her headless body rocked to the ground, he dropped the katana and fell to his knees, doubled in pain. A fire burned within him, hurting far more than a knife wound should. She'd promised him it would be painful and she'd made sure of it. He guessed the dagger was coated with a poison or an acid as he groped to withdraw the twisted-edged dagger from his gut, tore it partially out before the Quickening started.

A blue force dropped over Methos like a mantle, wrapping itself around him in an embrace, then the lightening started. It blazed like a thunderstorm, wind whipping through the clearing as trees caught alight like roman candles. Methos jerked and cried out as the waves of electricity poured through him, the exquisite torture that tormented and pleased. It was a powerful Quickening. Whether taken fairly or by deceit, Niam had taken many Immortal heads in her nearly two thousand years.

Lysette screamed and began running across the clearing to where the woods weren't burning. Only a handful of people

remained in the clearing and they, too, were backing away, ready to make an exit. MacLeod caught a glimpse of Lysette and started to cut her off. Sparing a glance back at Methos, he saw him slumped on the ground, not moving to get up. Without hesitation, Mac turned and ran toward him instead.

Methos could barely move, the Quickening and the nearly fatal stab wound draining what strength he'd had left. He tried to catch his breath, the painful gasps wracking his body as he struggled for air. In his mind he kept seeing Niam's head flying off her neck and feeling the searing pain in his gut simultaneously. It would be etched there to invade his dreams like a thousand other nightmares... love and betrayal. His hand still rested on the knife hilt, but he didn't have the strength to pull.

MacLeod paused briefly to scoop up his katana, then swung an arm around Methos and yanked him to his feet. With one quick movement, MacLeod jerked the knife the rest of the way out, looked at the weapon in distaste and tossed it to the ground. Gasping sharply, Methos staggered against him, the pain nearly causing him to pass out. Holding him tightly, Mac forced him to run toward the fire line with him. They barely paused at the fire, merely caught a deep breath and plunged through the flames. On the other side, MacLeod shed the burning robe he wore and beat out the fledgling fires on Methos' robe. His friend slumped against a tree, trying to breathe. Their faces stung from burns and they were covered

with ash. "You okay?" MacLeod asked and Methos managed a weak smile and a nod in response. Still holding Methos with a firm arm around his shoulder, MacLeod guided them back to his car.

Methos groaned as he leaned against the Citroen. His hand still clutched at his gut where the long-bladed knife had done significant damage to his insides. He was healing painfully, but at least he was still alive. In a bit of a daze, he gaped at the fire that blazed its way through the nemeton, jumping from tree to tree like elementals on a picnic, and a poignant sadness filled him. He'd known ancestors of these trees centuries ago, worshipped beneath them with the Pariisi tribe. Tears came unbidden to his eyes at the sudden sense of loss.

Beside him, Duncan stared at the disaster he'd started. In the distance, the wail of an approaching fire engine began to pierce through the night, a signal to any of the cult members left in the area that it was time to depart. He glimpsed a couple of silent, dark figures slipping away from the woods. Dryly Duncan drawled, "I think this is lowering the property value quite a bit."

When Methos said nothing, MacLeod tilted his head toward his friend, noting the sorrow and the moisture in his eyes and on his cheeks. He misinterpreted. "I'm sorry, Methos."

Methos stirred, pulled the grimy, torn, and blood-stained robe over his head then dropped it on the ground. In his mind's eye, he saw the young girl's smoky eyes smiling up at him, the shift sliding off her shoulder. He looked directly at MacLeod. "No, I'm sorry. I didn't see her as anyone but the girl I once knew. *That* Niam died nearly two thousand years ago."

Wearily, he opened the car door, leaned heavily against it. "It is true, you know."

"What?" MacLeod asked.

"There's no fool like an old fool." In spite of the levity of the words, there was no mistaking the sorrow, pain and fatigue in his voice.

Impulsively, MacLeod put an arm around his friend's shoulder. He felt Methos tense for a moment, then the older Immortal spoke softly, his voice breaking slightly. "Thanks... Mac."

The End

A Few Notes About This Story:

This was the Celtic story I wanted to write for several years and found a way to adapt it to the Immortals. From the time I first read "The Life and Death of a Druid Prince," I was captivated with the possible history of the body found in the bog in Northern England. The anthropologists who wrote the book came to some fascinating conclusions and also offered some amazing details about the death of the man. They believed him to be a Druid who was offered to the gods to plead their case at a time when the Romans were invading all of Britain. Queen Bodicia had raised in revolt against the Romans after her husband died and the agreement between her tribe and the Romans was no longer valid. The authors suggested that Bodicia had more than the mistreatment of her daughters and herself at stake, that the Celts had a gold route that went from Ireland, through Wales to France and she was trying to protect the gold route. The destruction of London led the Romans further north toward the Holy Isle of Mona (Anglesey).

Desperate measures were called for to stop the army and the authors believed the druids chose one of their own to plead the case to their gods. The young man who was sacrificed might have been Irish. Forensic evidence showed that his body bore no scars or calluses indicating he was not a warrior or a worker. Even a bard would have had calluses on his fingers. Therefore, he had to be of the druid class. Whether

the body in the bog was an emissary to the gods or not, the Romans never completed their destruction of the Druids and were recalled to Rome. Ireland was never invaded.

But I could see the man who gave his life willingly to the triple sacrifice of having his skull smashed, his throat garroted and then being drowned in the bog as being one who had loved, had cherished life and lost it all to save his people. Somehow, it was easy to transfer this to Methos.