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Setting Love Free

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All the usual disclaimers about not owning these characters stand. Also all the usual fobs off about how this doesn't necessarily fit the canon timeline, etc. etc. I'm not looking to fit in with scripture; I'm just looking to tell a tale.

Caution: while not explicit, this story contains slash overtones.

Duncan frowned over at the man who lounged in the leather chair. Methos' eyes were closed, his head tilted slightly to one side, dangerously exposing the right side of his neck. The sight gave Duncan pause. Was Methos so comfortable with him now that some of his natural suspicion and wariness—his guard—was waning? Well, the old guy had to sleep sometime.

Duncan stopped beside the chair and slipped the nearly empty bottle of beer from Methos' hand before the ancient Immortal could drop it while he slept. Methos murmured something in a language long past being useful but didn't awaken.

"Some fun you are," Duncan muttered as he moved to set the bottle on the counter. He took a sip of his own beer and watched the even rhythm of his friend's chest as it rose and fell beneath the gray flannel tee. He wondered then how many Immortal friends Methos had had in his long lifetime. And of those, how many he'd have been comfortable sleeping around.

Duncan blushed then, realizing he'd thought something he hadn't intended to. "That's not what I meant," he said aloud to himself.

Methos moved slightly in his sleep, his head turning a bit towards the sound of Duncan's voice.

"Sorry," said Duncan a bit more quietly. He wondered if Methos was dreaming. Five thousand years gave a person a lot of places to go in his sleep.

As if sensitive to the unasked question, Methos twitched, then sighed. It put Duncan in mind of a dog chasing a rabbit in its dreams. "What do you chase, old man?" Duncan asked with a smile.

The rumbling of the elevator made Duncan jump, and he was sure it would wake Methos, but the older Immortal merely snorted and turned to face the other direction. Duncan greeted Joe with a finger to his lips then pointed to the chair.

Joe chuckled softly. "He looks young when he sleeps, huh?"

“Yeah,” Duncan answered, although he wasn’t sure why Joe’s remark made him feel uneasy.

“He must really trust you,” Joe went on, echoing the Highlander’s earlier thoughts.

“Why shouldn’t he?” asked Duncan, his defenses going up.

“I’m just saying,” said Joe, “it’s hard to imagine him being so trusting. I mean, do you think he was this sure of-?” Joe stopped. “Never mind. I’m sorry.”

“Sure of what?” Duncan pressed, his face drawn down into a frown.

“Nothing.”

“Joe.”

The Watcher sighed. “I was just gonna say, do you think he trusted Kronos as much. There. Happy?”

But of course Duncan wasn’t happy. It wasn’t Joe’s question but the reaction it stirred within himself that disturbed Duncan. He didn’t like the idea of Methos being so close to Kronos. He realized with a start that he’d begun to nurture a possessive feeling toward his ancient friend and a deep belief that Methos himself had been more of a prisoner to Kronos’ violence than a participant in it.

“Look,” Joe said, “Never mind it, it was just a thought. Not even a very good one,” he added.

“Hey.” Joe gave Duncan a nudge, and the Immortal realized he’d been staring at the man asleep in his chair, his leather chair. Leave it to Methos to find the best piece of furniture in the place. Just like a cat. Duplicitous, sleek. . .

“You okay?” Joe asked.

“Yeah,” said Duncan, trying to shake the cloud that seemed to be hanging over him, and why? Because Methos had decided to take a nap? Why was this bothering him?

Joe wasn’t helping. “You sure? You don’t look—”

“I’m fine, Joe,” Duncan insisted. “Now. What brings you here? Beer?” he offered on his way to the kitchenette.

“Uh, yeah, sure. I just thought I’d swing by and let you know that *he*—” Joe nodded towards the slumbering Immortal, “is getting summoned back to HQ in Paris.”

Duncan frowned as he set a bottle on the counter for his Watcher. “Why?”

“They wouldn’t tell me,” Joe admitted grimly. “Hey, we knew he couldn’t pass off hanging around with us as research forever.”

“He can’t hide in the Watcher network forever either. He should get out of there and get back in the Game.”

“Maybe.” Joe appeared unconvinced, but he didn’t pursue an argument. “I thought after the Horsemen they’d have him for sure, but he wrote himself out of it quite nicely.”

“You helped,” Duncan pointed out. “But some day. . .” He shook his head.

“Some day what, MacLeod?”

Duncan started and he and Joe turned to find Methos’ piercing eyes on them. His expression was a tad severe, and Duncan wondered how much the older Immortal had heard. Attempting to keep the mood light, Duncan replied, “Some day, Goldilocks, you’re going to fall asleep in the wrong chair and have your head taken off.”

Methos stretched and stood, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans as he sauntered over to join them.

“How long have you been awake?” Joe asked.

“Long enough. Back to Paris, eh?”

“I’ll go too,” said Duncan, and Joe groaned.

“We only just got back!”

“There’s no need for it, MacLeod,” Methos said lightly. “I can take care of myself.”

Duncan couldn’t voice his reasons on the matter, couldn’t very well say that it wasn’t for Methos’ sake so much as his own that he wanted to stay close. He’d come to count on having the old guy around, and the idea of so much space between them. . . Duncan tried to force down another unpleasant wave of possessiveness by taking a big swallow of beer.

He realized both Joe and Methos were staring hard at him. “Are you sure you’re okay?” Joe asked once more.

“I’m fine. I’ve just got a lot of packing to do.”

“I can’t see how,” said Joe as he began making his way to the elevator. “I’ve hardly unpacked.”

There was a round of waves and see ya’s and then a long silence after the elevator clanked to a stop on the floor below them. Methos stared at Duncan and Duncan kept his eyes focused on the countertop between them.

“You really don’t have to, MacLeod,” Methos said evenly.

Duncan’s eyes flew to his friend’s face. “You don’t want us there?” he challenged.

“I didn’t say that. I was just thinking that Joe could use some rest. He’s not indestructible, you know.”

“Yeah, well, neither are you!”

Surprise briefly crossed the older Immortal’s features, to be replaced by consternation. “Is something bothering you, MacLeod?”

“You—you come here and you fall asleep on my chair—”Duncan sputtered.

Methos looked over his shoulder at the worn leather. “What, is it an antique or something? Did I ruin it somehow?”

“And Joe says how young you look—”

“That’s sweet.”

“And about Kronos, and—”

Methos’ head whipped around at that. “Says what about Kronos?”

But Duncan was already backpedaling. “It was nothing. It was stupid.”

“Well then you won’t mind telling me.”

“Leave it, Methos.”

They locked gazes for a moment and Duncan felt a shiver move through him.

“I’ve got to go,” Methos finally said, his voice tight with control. He started for the elevator.

“Don’t—” Duncan began, surprising himself. He’d almost said ‘don’t go.’

Methos turned as he waited for the car to trundle back up. “Don’t what?”

“Just. . . don’t let something so stupid. . .” But Duncan couldn’t find a way to finish that sentence. Not anything he was willing to say aloud anyway. He sighed.

“Nothing. Never mind. Go if you want.”

Methos nodded and stepped into the elevator, leaving without another word.

“Kronos?” Joe asked as he wiped down his bar. He paused, squinting in thought. “Oh. That. It was just an observation really.”

Methos’ eyebrows inched up expectantly. “And what observation would that be?”

Joe shook his head. “Adam, really,” he said, using the Immortal’s current pseudonym out of habit, “it probably wasn’t. . . What I mean is. . .”

“Just spit it out, Joe.”

Joe sighed. “I just *observed* that you must really trust MacLeod to fall asleep like that.”

Methos’ lips tightened at their corners. “What does that have to do with Kronos?”

“Well,” said Joe, “I sort of *observed* that you must’ve been comfortable around Kronos too.”

Methos took another sip of beer, his gaze drilling into Joe. “You think so,” he said, setting the bottle on the newly polished bar.

“Well, not like I was there or anything—”

“I didn’t get much sleep back then,” said Methos.

“Oh.” Joe was at a loss. “Want another beer?” he asked.

But Methos had stepped down from the bar stool. “Nah, I’d better go finish packing.”

“Did they tell you what was up?”

Methos shrugged. “Some new development with my chronicles it seems. They were very vague about it. I’ll just act all surprised and happy and try to put a good spin on—” He stopped and swiveled towards the door, just as Duncan burst through it.

“Good, you’re here.”

“It’s fine, MacLeod. Joe told me, no big deal.” He slipped past Duncan to the door. “Catch you later.”

Duncan stared at the door as the presence ebbed away, then turned his attention to Joe. “He wasn’t offended?”

“I couldn’t tell. You know how he is.” Joe set a fresh bottle out on the bar as Duncan took the stool Methos had just occupied.

“Thanks. Did he say why they want him back in Paris?”

“A breakthrough in the Methos research. They won’t tell him anything more than that.”

Duncan frowned. “That doesn’t sound good. At least, not for Methos.” He looked to the door again.

“No, it doesn’t,” Joe agreed. “Hopefully he’ll be able to do some damage control.”

“Yeah.” Duncan finished his beer in one long drink then stood up. “See ya, Joe.”

“Hey, Mac,” Joe called after him.

Duncan turned with his hand on the door. “What?”

“We should go with him.”

“Yeah, we should,” Duncan said as he left.

Methos closed his eyes briefly as the wave of another Immortal’s presence washed over him. He had a fair idea who it was likely to be, but he glanced over at his Ivanhoe to make sure it was within reach nonetheless. Even as the pounding on his apartment door began, Methos wasn’t sure he wouldn’t use the sword anyway.

“Methos!”

The ancient Immortal jerked open the door. “If you’re going to shout my name to the rooftops, MacLeod, at least do me the favor of calling me ‘Adam’ when other people might hear you.”

“Sorry. Can I come in?”

Methos stood back and allowed Duncan into his tiny living quarters. “Only because I don’t trust you not to stand out there and continue screaming.”

“Yeah, well, Joe and I are worried.”

Methos shut the door. “About what?”

“You. Being called back to Paris like this. What if they’ve found you out?”

Methos only stared.

“They could kill you!” Duncan insisted. “You know too much.”

“Or they could lock me in a cage and keep me as a guinea pig,” Methos suggested.

Duncan froze at the horror of such an idea. “You think they would?”

The older Immortal shrugged, secretly amused that Duncan couldn’t always tell when he was joking. “Who knows. But I honestly doubt you have anything to worry about.”

“Methos,” said Duncan, “you’ve been more and more visible in the Game lately. Sooner or later, they’re going to notice.”

“Probably.”

“So what are you going to do?” Duncan demanded.

“Disappear. Same as I’ve always done.”

Duncan didn’t want to admit the way his heart seemed to stop at the thought of Methos vanishing. “What about the people who care about you?”

Methos looked perplexed. “Who?”

“Me. Joe. Your friends!”

Methos walked past to sit at the foot of his bed. “Look, MacLeod, I appreciate your concern, but I don’t really understand it.”

Duncan looked down at the face lifted to look expectantly into his. “I can’t. . . explain it,” Duncan said, choosing his words carefully; the subject was new and uncomfortable for him, like poking at a fresh bruise. “I mean, what’s to explain? Friends look out for one another.”

“You know me better than that, MacLeod,” Methos chided. “I don’t put myself out for anyone.”

“You’re saying you wouldn’t help me if I were in trouble?” asked Duncan.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

Duncan scowled. “I don’t believe it.”

The eyebrows went up. “No?”

“No.”

Duncan folded his arms across his chest and for a minute they stared at one another in verbal stalemate. Then Methos sighed. “Why are you here, MacLeod? Really?”

“I told you, we’re worried about you.”

But Methos shook his head. “You’ve been acting out all day.”

Duncan turned away and dropped his eyes to his shoes, unsure whether to just excuse himself and leave.

“A life is defined by moments in which everything changes,” Methos said from behind him.

Duncan turned back around, a question in his face.

“Something seems to have changed for you, MacLeod.”

Duncan took an involuntary step backwards from this pronouncement. He didn’t want this to be true, and even if it was, he didn’t want Methos to know it. “Nothing’s changed!” he said a bit too vehemently to be convincing.

Methos shrugged. “Whatever. It was just an observation.”

Duncan drew himself up at Methos’ emphasis on the last word. “This is about the Kronos remark that Joe made.”

Methos’ attention had turned to the quilt on his bed as he picked at a loose thread. “Is it?” he asked idly.

“You tell me.” When that didn’t get a response, Duncan tried again. “Joe couldn’t tell whether you were offended by it. Were you?”

Methos grew still, and Duncan knew his old friend was watching him out of the corner of his eye. “I don’t invite introspection, MacLeod. But I can’t fault Joe for a moment of it.” He went back to work on the quilt, and Duncan could see the fabric beginning to fray where the thread was being pulled. He privately hoped the quilt was not an old one.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” the Scot asked.

Methos rose suddenly, fluidly, in a way that made Duncan tingle to see it. Well, five thousand years gave a person time to perfect the mechanics of his body. . . Duncan cut the thought short as Methos brushed past him to get to the small refrigerator.

“Beer?” the older Immortal asked brightly.

“No, I can’t. . . stay. . . Just tell me something.”

Methodos turned, bottle in his grip.

“What Joe said. About Kronos. Was it true?”

Although Methodos’ expression didn’t change, Duncan watched the knuckles of the hand holding the beer bottle go white.

When the older Immortal spoke, Duncan could tell it was with forced control. “What you’re really asking me is whether I’d choose Kronos over you. Or whether we have a similar relationship.” Methodos ran his free hand through his hair, the only outward mark of his aggravation. “Actually, I’m not sure what you’re asking. Is *what* true?”

“You trusted Kronos.” Duncan couldn’t keep the disappointment from his voice.

“Christ, MacLeod, you sound like a jealous girlfriend.” A thought struck Methodos then. Kronos wouldn’t have tolerated the idea of MacLeod as Methodos’ friend any more than the Highlander wanted to acknowledge the older Immortal’s connection to Kronos.

“You won’t thank me for saying this,” said Methodos, “but you and Kronos have a number of things in common.”

“Like what?” Duncan wanted to know.

“Like irritating the hell out of me,” Methodos retorted, suddenly feeling contrary. He wasn’t ready to explain his relationship with Kronos to anybody, least of all the honor-ridden Duncan MacLeod.

But Duncan didn’t take the hint. He just stood there, arms folded, as if waiting for something more.

“What do you want to know?” Methodos demanded. “Were we friends? Maybe not in the way you would define them. But we were brothers. It’s something I wouldn’t expect you to understand.”

“And you fell asleep at night feeling safe with him. . .?” Duncan wasn’t sure what the living arrangements had been like. Had they shared a tent? “Around?”

“What do you want to hear, MacLeod? That I never slept a wink? Look, if you’re wondering whether I feel safer around you than I did around Kronos, hell yes, until today it was no contest. But something’s changed in you, MacLeod, and now I’m not so sure.”

Duncan ducked his head, seeking to hide the smile that threatened to break across his face. He had the answer he’d wanted, and the other thing, well, it had just been an off day. “Fair enough,” he said. He felt Methodos’ eyes on him as he walked to the door. “See you in Paris.”

“Yeah. Right.”

“Adam’s missing.”

Duncan felt everything around him contract, as if the barge were drawing itself in to suffocate him.

“Mac?”

“I’m here.” The phone’s receiver suddenly felt heavy in his grip, and he moved to sit at the kitchen table. “What happened?”

Joe’s sigh came across as a burst of static. “I don’t know. He’s gone and so are all his books.”

“The Watchers must be furious.” Duncan’s mind raced through a list of facts stacked against Methos. The Watchers knew what Methos looked like, as Adam Pierson anyway, and if Methos ever challenged another Immortal—or if he were challenged by one—the Watchers would catch him out. However. . . “But at least we know his head is still on his shoulders. The Watchers would know if it weren’t.”

“If it were just Adam, I’d figure he’s just holed up somewhere,” said Joe, “but his student is missing too.”

“His student?”

“Madrina Perkins. Cute kid. Graduated about a year and a half ago and was assigned to the Methos Chronicles. Adam was mentoring her.”

“Hard to do when he’s been trotting all over the globe with us,” Duncan said.

“Yeah. Anyway, presumably she’s the one who made a big breakthrough on the Chronicles, and now both she and Adam are nowhere to be found. Mac, if she found something out—”

“Methos wouldn’t do that,” Duncan said abruptly, although the knot in his stomach said otherwise. His mind flashed over everything Methos had done during his stint as Death on a Horse, and his throat tightened. “He’s different now,” the Scot said aloud, without really meaning to.

“I hope you’re right.” Joe’s voice was laced with doubt.

“What are the Watchers doing to try to find them?”

“Well, I went by his place myself. Everything looked fine,” said Joe. “I mean, nothing out of place, no signs of a struggle or anything.”

“I’m going over there,” Duncan decided, “have a look around. Maybe there’s a clue somewhere.”

“Mac, be careful. The Watchers—”

“Won’t come anywhere near me,” said Duncan. “Look, Joe, I’ve got to do something. I’ll let you know what I find out.” He hung up before Joe could argue.

Two Days Earlier

Methos strolled into the vast library, certain Madrina would be there. A vivacious red-head, she seemed too jittery to get much accomplished, which was fine with Methos. But she was adept with languages, and the Watcher network seemed to think it was safer to keep her inside than to let her out in the field.

As suspected, Madrina sat at a library table, a heavy tome open in front of her. She was scribbling in a notebook.

“Madrina.”

The girl—she really wasn’t much more than one—came a few inches out of her chair at the sound of Methos’ voice. When she turned and saw him, she let out a squeal of delight. Jumping up, she threw her arms around her mentor. “Adam! I was beginning to think you’d disappeared for good!”

Methos gently pried her arms off him. “It’s a library, Madrina. Keep it down.” But Madrina, who stood a head shorter than Methos, only grinned.

“So,” Methos said, “what’s the big secret?”

Madrina turned away and closed the book that still rested on the table. Then she grabbed her notebook and pencil, looking for all the world like a schoolgirl ready to go on a field trip. She took a deep breath. “They’ve moved the Chronicles out of the library,” she said.

Methos frowned. “Why?” His pupil only shrugged. “Well, where are they?” Methos demanded.

“Come on, I’ll show you. There not on the grounds,” she added. She started for the library’s large wooden doors.

Methos trailed behind her. “But how are we supposed to get any work done without access to the rest of the library?”

Madrina came to the doors and turned, leaning against one to look up at Methos. “You mean how am *I* supposed to, since you’re never here.” But her voice was all teasing.

“It’s good for you,” Methos told her.

But Madrina frowned suddenly. “You don’t think he’s dead, do you?”

“Who?”

“Methos.”

“We don’t really know. He could just have a new name. ‘Methos’ is rather conspicuous.”

“But the other Immortals, they have legends about him,” Madrina mused. She pushed back on the door, forcing it to swing open. Methos followed her out into a carpeted hallway lined on the far side with tall windows that let in the afternoon sunlight. “Methos appears again and again in different discourses, always this source of incredible power. The Holy Grail of Immortals.”

“I suspect you’re a romantic, Madrina,” said Methos as they continued to stroll. “Anyhow, maybe Methos has become a more generic label.”

“How do you mean?”

“It could just be the name they give to whoever happens to be the oldest.”

“Then what about the person who wrote all those journals we-*I*-hover over?” asked Madrina.

They passed the guard's desk, which was vacant. "I hope they've moved them to a more secure location," Methos remarked dryly. "We may never know what happened to their author." He held the door open for her and they moved out into the late summer afternoon.

Madrina led Methos across the gravel drive and pulled a set of keys from a pocket on her skirt. "It's unlocked," she said with a vague gesture towards the passenger side door of her tiny hatchback.

Methos got in.

Methos' place was much neater than Duncan would have expected. Something about the older Immortal struck Duncan as sloppy, but his apartment belied that notion.

A duffle bag and backpack with airline tags rested on the floor by the foot of Methos' bed; he hadn't unpacked yet. The bed was made, meaning Methos hadn't slept either.

"Where are you, old man?" he asked softly as he began a circle around the room. A lot of relics and a good stash of booze yielded no answers. Duncan had just leaned over to check the dates on Methos' luggage tags when the door opened.

"What's this?" Methos asked as he climbed out of the car, grateful to be able to stretch his legs. The car was tiny, and the ride had been nigh on an hour.

"Don't worry, it's holy ground," Madrina told him.

Methos shot her a strange look, then shrugged. Watcher headquarters was on consecrated grounds, too, although what they thought that would prevent was anybody's guess. There weren't any rules about Immortals killing normal people on holy ground, as far as Methos knew. So if an Immortal were to come raging into Watcher HQ, he might kill as many people as he liked. Not that it was likely to happen.

They approached the building, an old stone thing with leaded windows and heavy wooden door and shutters. "This can't be good for the books," said Methos. "There's no climate control."

"It'll be fine," Madrina said absently. "This used to be a little church. Can you believe it? It's so tiny. It was going to be torn down, but then I bought it." She smiled. "It's so charming, really, and such a shame to let it be demolished."

Methos had been following her as she circled the little building. It didn't look like much of a church. It didn't look like much of anything. "*You* bought it?"

Madrina nodded. "I like old things, don't you?"

Duncan drew himself up. "Who're you?"

"Does it matter? Oh, but I know who you are, Duncan MacLeod." The woman dimpled at him. "I've just come for some of Methos' things." She reached for an ancient-looking sculpture that rested on the nightstand beside the bed, and Duncan caught her arm.

“A Watcher?” he asked archly, spying the tattoo. She jerked free. “Where is he?”

“He doesn’t want to see you, Mr. MacLeod.”

Duncan only just managed to keep himself from laughing. She was a spirited little thing, and her seriousness only made her look younger than she probably was. “I’d rather hear that from him,” the Scot said sternly, not allowing the dark river of dread running through him to show. This woman, a Watcher, knew Adam was Methos. It couldn’t be long before the whole network knew it, if they didn’t already. And who knew what they’d do? “You’re not supposed to interfere,” he reminded her.

The woman barked a laugh. “You think I go in for all that? Besides, I know you’re not here for Methos’ head.” Her eyes narrowed. “He’d win, you know.”

“Nice to see he has a fan,” Duncan replied dryly.

For some reason his comment set her off. She screeched and came at him, fingers curled like cats’ claws. Duncan had no problem catching her by the wrists and forcing her arms down. “Now,” he said, “you’re going to take me to Methos.”

“No!”

“Look, I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You wouldn’t hurt me!” the woman spat. “You know what they call you? The Boy Scout. You couldn’t squash an ant without feeling guilty!”

Duncan jerked hard on her arms, drawing her face to his own, forcing her to look him in the eye. “I’ve been known to make exceptions, and trust me, you don’t want to be one of them.”

“Do you like mysteries?” Madrina asked as they strolled around the back of the church. “When I was a kid, my heroes were Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot.”

Methos had ceased to pretend there wasn’t something very wrong with the situation. “Get on with it, Madrina.”

They came around to the front of the building again and Madrina pushed open the door, revealing a small room with a wooden table and one chair. Methos’ journals were neatly arranged on the tall bookcases that lined the walls.

“I was curious about the books, see,” Madrina said as they stepped inside, “so I did some research. You donated most of them yourself, didn’t you?”

Keeping his voice casual and even, Methos replied, “That’s what got me tapped for the Watchers. I was able to go around to museums and private collectors to get the others.”

“But why did you have so many in the first place?”

“I’m a linguist, Madrina. I gather books written in different languages. Preferably ancient.”

“But all by the same author?” she asked.

Methos took a deep breath. “It’s not like these kinds of books are available at the corner store. They sometimes come in lots. And clearly Methos had an interest in keeping his journals in tidy order, so they were some of the few to survive.

“Anyway,” Methos went on, “once I’d begun translating the first one, I knew I’d come across something unique. So of course I went looking for more.”

“Ah!” said Madrina. “But Methos writes in dozens of different languages. How could you know on sight whether a journal was his?”

Methos’ patience was wearing. “What is this, twenty questions?” he asked.

“But you can see how it’s a mystery!” Madrina insisted. “These are the threads I had to follow to come up with my theory.”

“Your theory.”

“You didn’t answer my last question, Adam. How could you tell a journal belonged to Methos?”

“I recognized his writing.”

Madrina broke into a wide grin as she circled around to the other side of the table. Methos stood near the door, wanting to be close to the exit.

“The clues are adding up,” Madrina said. “Adam, I’ve noticed you type all your correspondence.”

Methos’ stomach did a flip and his mouth went dry. “More official that way,” he said.

“But surely it’s more respectable to sign your letters by hand?” asked Madrina.

“I’m not sure I follow where you’re going with this.” But of course he saw exactly the direction her chatter was headed.

“I found a sample of your writing in your personnel folder. I had one of our graphologists compare it to some of the journals.”

“And?”

Madrina smiled and opened a drawer in the table. “I want you to help me test my theory,” she said, extracting a gun.

“Madrina—” But even as he spoke the fire was burning in his gut from the bullet she’d fired. To keep from falling over, he sank carefully to his knees.

In a moment, Madrina was beside him, stroking his head as if he were a favorite pet. “It’s okay,” she soothed, “I’m sure you’ve done this thousands of times.”

Methos lost consciousness.

For a second time, the door to Methos' apartment burst open, and this time two men in trenchcoats entered, each with a gun at the ready.

"Let her go," the tall blond one ordered. Reluctantly, Duncan obeyed.

"Took you long enough," the woman said as she stepped back, rubbing at her wrists. "Wiley, get the bags."

The short, stocky, balding one kept his gun on Duncan and inched forward. Duncan saw the flash of a blue tattoo on the man's wrist. "So you all know," he said, feeling defeated. He'd let Methos down; he should have been there to defend his friend.

The woman only smirked, then said impatiently to the still creeping Watcher, "Oh, Wiley, just have him toss them over!"

Wiley straightened up and wagged his gun at the Immortal. "You heard her."

Duncan sighed and turned, grabbing up the duffle in one hand, the straps of the backpack in the other. He wondered briefly what his chances would be of knocking guns out of hands, but the men were in opposite directions, and he'd likely only get a bullet for his trouble.

"Ah," the woman said warningly, clearly reading Duncan's hesitation. "Maybe just kick them over."

Duncan sent the bags skidding across the floor.

"You'll be happy to know that Methos is perfectly safe. He's a valuable asset to the network and has been put under protection. We simply can't risk the wrong person taking his head and gaining his power."

"Where is he?" Duncan demanded.

"It wouldn't be very safe to tell you that, now would it, Mr. MacLeod? Thomas, Wiley, take care of him. Then you can meet me out at the site." She took up the bags, turned, then left.

Methos jerked awake and found his body constricted in several places. Eyes still closed, he tested his limbs. His wrists were tied. Ankles too. Chest was bound. . . He was tied to a chair, he realized as he opened his eyes.

"You're heavier than you look," Madrina said. He looked up to where she stood before him. "I had to shoot you once more to keep you from waking up before I could get you settled. But," she smiled widely, "no permanent damage done."

"What do you want, Madrina?" Methos asked.

"Nothing really. I have what I want. Why, Methos, don't you understand? You're our most valuable artifact! All those years of history and wisdom. . . We'll keep you here, safe, while the others fight each other into extinction. You'll have the prize, Methos, and you won't even have to work for it."

"You're mad," said Methos. "Anyway, Watchers don't interfere, remember?"

"I don't see why not," Madrina retorted. "It's in everyone's best interest that the best Immortal win, don't you think?"

Methos sighed. "So you propose to keep me here, for centuries if necessary, until the Gathering is over," he deduced.

"Maybe once you're used to it, we can even untie you," Madrina suggested.

"Great. In the meantime, how am I supposed to eat or sleep like this?"

"Oh, you'll manage to sleep when you're tired enough. And we both know you don't need to eat to survive," said Madrina, shaking a finger at him as if he were a naughty schoolboy.

Methos froze as he began to understand what that meant.

"Mac! What happened?" Joe hurried as much as his prosthetics allowed and pulled the gag from Duncan's mouth. "Hope that was clean," he added when he saw it was a sock.

"Joe, they know. They know Adam is Methos."

Joe had begun work on the knots that held Duncan's wrists together. "Who? The Watchers?"

"They all had tattoos, Joe."

Joe shook his head in disbelief. "But I woulda heard. Who were they? Did you get names?"

Duncan was practically vibrating with the need to get free, and Joe stepped back once the Immortals' hands were loose enough that he could finish the job himself.

"A tall blond named Thomas and a short one named Wiley. But their leader is a woman. I didn't get her name."

"What does she look like?" Joe asked.

Duncan finished freeing his ankles. "Red hair. Looks young. She said they're holding Methos in protective custody."

"Sounds like Madrina," said Joe with a thoughtful frown. "But still, I haven't heard anything about Methos being discovered. Or held anywhere."

Duncan had begun to pace. "Maybe they aren't telling you because they know you're friends with Adam."

"Maybe." Joe sounded doubtful.

"We've got to find them. They can't just keep Methos locked up like some artifact! I thought you people weren't supposed to interfere."

"We don't. Which is why I don't think this is a Watcher-backed move. Look, we're already looking for Madrina's car. I'll get started on Thomas and Wiley. We have a lot of Thomases, but. . ."

"Older than Madrina," Duncan informed him. "Although not exactly pros. I wouldn't guess they were field agents. Maybe they're people she's friends with in the network."

“Give me Madrina’s car make and license number,” Duncan went on. “I want to start looking.”

Methos jerked awake a second time. He was sore all over and hungry, but on the up side, he was alone. Madrina had chattered all the previous day, well into night, nudging him awake again and again to ask him questions or show him something in one of his own journals, as if he’d never seen or read them, much less written them.

Finding that pulling at his bonds only caused them to tighten, Methos took a moment to look around and assess his situation. He wasn’t at all afraid that Madrina might behead him, only concerned that she was mad enough to keep him there indefinitely. And starve him to boot.

Methos turned as far as he was able, right then left, for a better view of the room. He was pleased to discover his motion created some slack in the ropes that bound his chest and shoulders. He twisted his wrists, too, and despite the rope burn, which quickly faded, Methos found he was able to give his hands a little more room to maneuver.

Methos felt his right shoulder go slack and he heaved a sigh of relief. Slipping his right hand free, he lost no time getting the rest of himself loose. He was tired and weak from hunger, stiff from having been so restricted, but with the adrenaline pumping and his fine-tuned survival instincts kicking in, he was able to keep himself moving.

Madrina had left his coat and sword on the table. The Ivanhoe felt heavier than it should have in his hands, but he wasn’t willing to put it down. The little psychopath could be back at any moment. Circling the cabin, he considered. Stuck in the middle of nowhere with all his books. He could leave. Madrina wasn’t likely to hurt the Chronicles in any way. But no. He wanted his shot at her.

The more he thought about it as he paced, the angrier he became. Methos cut bright arcs in the air with his sword, regaining his strength. He’d be ready when Madrina came back.

He remembered the gun then and went to the table, removed it from the drawer, and slipped it into the back waistband of his jeans.

The sound of tires crunching over gravel alerted him, and he slipped behind the door.

Madrina froze when the door slammed shut behind her and she found herself pinned against its hard wood with a long blade at her neck. “Hello, Madrina. What’s that?” Methos asked, spotting the bags she carried. “Put it down.”

Madrina dropped the duffel and backpack. “I brought your stuff,” she said, her voice shaking. Her eyes rolled to one side, trying to get a look at the Immortal.

“I’ve got friends coming,” Madrina went on. “More Watchers. They know about you.”

“Wrong answer.” The blade touched Madrina’s throat and she squealed.

The sound of another set of automobile wheels gave him pause. “Reach behind you and bolt the door,” Methos ordered. “Slowly.”

Fumbling because she could not turn her head to look, Madrina did as she was told.

“Now. Over to the chair.” The blade left Madrina’s neck and gestured at the now vacant seat surrounded by rope. Madrina swallowed hard and moved to do as she was told, although she took her time about it. Methos prodded the small of her back with the tip of his sword. “Sit,” he said.

“We don’t want to hurt you,” Madrina said, even as she took her seat. “We want to protect you.”

“By shooting me repeatedly?” Methos demanded. “By tying me up and starving me?”

“I couldn’t think of any other way!” Madrina wailed. “What are you doing?”

“Tying you up.” Methos jerked her arms over the back of the chair in the same uncomfortable way she’d done his and lashed her wrists securely. Then he tossed rope around her middle and cinched that tightly to the chair’s rungs. He froze when someone pounded on the door.

“Madrina!”

“Thomas, don’t!” She broke off when Methos pulled out the gun.

“How many?” He could tell she was considering lying. “I’ll know when I open the door whether or not you’ve been honest with me, Madrina. And you don’t want to make me any more unhappy than you already have.”

Madrina licked her lips. “Two.”

“Tell them to leave.” Madrina shook her head. “You want me to shoot them?”

“No,” Madrina whispered.

“Then send them away.”

Madrina took a deep breath and called out, “Thomas! Wiley! Go on back to headquarters! I’ll meet you there. . .”

A muffled discussion outside the door was followed by a hesitant, “Madrina?”

“Go on, I said!” Madrina screeched, like someone shooing away an unwanted stray.

“Okay. . . We’ll see you at headquarters. What time?”

Methos glanced at his watch. It was three o’clock already. He held up six fingers.

“Around six,” said Madrina.

After a long moment, Thomas said again, “Okay. . .” The sound of footsteps fading followed. And then, another car.

Methos swore under his breath. “Who now?” he asked Madrina.

“I don’t know, I swear,” she told him. “Thomas and Wiley were the only ones I told. They must have been followed.”

Car doors slammed and voices outside were raised in discussion. Methos moved to the door again to listen and froze when the familiar tingle of another Immortal's presence crawled up his spine.

"Methos! She's locked them in, Joe. Methos!" Duncan was pounding on the door.

Methos groaned and went to the door. "Other way around, MacLeod!" he called. "Did you stop the other two from leaving?"

"Joe's talking to them. Methos, what's going on? Let me in."

"I don't think so, MacLeod. She's really pissed me off, you know?"

"Help! Mr. MacLeod, he—" Madrina cut off with a squeak when the gun turned her way.

"Methos, don't! Please," said Duncan. "You're better than this."

"By whose account?" Methos snarled.

"I *know* you," Duncan insisted. "You don't want to kill her."

Methos pulled the door open and stared. "Just like I'm sure you've convinced yourself that I didn't want to kill any of those villagers when I rode with the Horsemen," he sneered. "Poor Methos, stuck with Kronos and silently suffering all the while."

Duncan's eyes were riveted to the woman tied to a chair behind Methos. "You're different now." He despised the quaver in his voice that gave away his feelings. "You helped me. . . with the Horsemen. . . you even—"

Methos turned away and Duncan followed him into the room. "I was tired of it, MacLeod. It was that simple. I got *bored* with the killing. I'd had enough."

"And now what?" asked Duncan. "You're ready to start again? With her?"

Methos stared at Madrina for a long moment. Her head was bowed, and her chest fluttered in frightened gasps for air, punctuated by hiccupping sobs. He'd seen this kind of fear in thousands of people when he rode with Kronos and the others.

"How do you want it, Madrina?" he asked, advancing on her, his sword pointed at her chest. "Shall I run you through or just cut your throat?"

Madrina whimpered without looking up.

"Methos! End this!" said Duncan.

"You want to know how it feels to be shot in the gut?" Methos continued on, ignoring the Highlander. "Or maybe I'll leave you here to starve."

"Methos!"

"I'm sorry," Madrina choked. "I'm sorry."

“Sorry now, certainly,” said Methos. The Ivanhoe came up to rest on his shoulder like a bird to roost. It was an effortless gesture; the sword was a part of Methos, an extension of him, and despite the current circumstances, Duncan found himself envying the blade. He wanted to be like that, to be second nature to the ancient Immortal. Why did Methos have to make it so difficult?

He realized Methos was staring at him, something inscrutable in his eyes.

“Get her out of here, MacLeod.”

Madrina’s head jerked up in surprise, her eyes wide, just in time to see Methos turn away from her. The next thing she knew, Duncan MacLeod had untied her and was guiding her out of the old church. “I really am sorry,” she was babbling. “I just—we just—I really thought he might kill me!” she finished.

“Yeah, well, he’s not the kind of man you want to cross.”

“It seemed so unlike him. . . I always thought he was a good person, you know—”

Duncan grabbed her by the shoulder and jerked her to a stop. “He is a good person. But any good person is going to react badly to being kidnapped and held hostage. What you did is inexcusable, no matter your intentions.”

Madrina hung her head. “We wanted to protect him. We wanted him to be the one.”

“You don’t get to decide that. And if I’ve learned anything about Methos, it’s that he doesn’t *want* to be protected.” Duncan sighed. “Believe me, I’ve tried. In much less extreme ways,” he added.

Madrina smiled slightly. “I’m sorry about you, too. I think maybe I was a little jealous. He was always spending time with you and Joe. I wanted some time with him, to learn from him. . .”

Duncan nodded. “I know it can be. . . *enticing* to have so much living history in the same room with you. Still, you can’t lock someone up like he’s a museum piece.”

“Joe’s going to tell, isn’t he?”

Duncan glanced over at the group of men that stood between the two cars, watching them. “Not if you don’t. If you really want to protect Methos, you’ll protect his secret so that other Immortals don’t start looking for him again. Now go on.” He gave her a little push towards the group of Watchers.

As Madrina and her two friends re-grouped, Duncan strolled over to speak to Joe. “He’s okay. I think,” the Immortal said without preamble.

“The guys told me what the plan had been.” Joe shook his head. “Crazy kids. But they weren’t trying to hurt him.”

“No, but they did,” said Duncan. “Joe, he came really close to killing her. I’ve never seen him so angry.”

“He still in there?” the Watcher asked.

“Yeah. His books, too. I’m going to go talk to him.”

“Want me to come?”

“It’s okay. It’s holy ground.”

“It is?” asked Joe, but Duncan was already on his way back inside.

Falling in love had always come easy to Duncan MacLeod. Always until now. Duncan stopped in the doorway of the old church and stared at the man whose back was to him. He smiled to himself. Having to work for what he wanted would make it that much more worthwhile in the end.

Methos turned around, his sword still perched on his shoulder. “Private joke?” he asked, and while his voice was casual, Duncan could see the hint of suspicion in the old man’s eyes.

“For the moment.”

“Whatever.” Methos swung the sword in a smooth arc from his shoulder and across his front, transferring the weapon neatly into his other hand.

“Ambidexterous?” Duncan asked. He stepped inside the old church.

“Not really,” Methos admitted, “but I practice with both hands, just in case.”

“Mmm.”

“So. What’s on your mind, MacLeod?” The sword cut another swath of air.

“I just thought you might need to talk.”

“About what?”

“Anything.”

Methos snorted. “I think you’re the one who needs to talk, MacLeod. Something’s bothering you, has been since Seacouver.”

Duncan sighed. “Methos, I—” He was cut short by a head appearing in the doorway.

“Mac? Adam?”

“We’re here, Joe,” said Methos. “Do you think all these books will fit in the car?”

Joe entered the room and looked around. “I dunno. . . Since when did you write so much?”

Methos’ gaze met Duncan’s. “I write down what I can’t say.”

Nearly three months had passed since Methos has packed up his books and belongings and left Paris without a word. Only through the network grapevine had Joe discovered Adam Pierson had left the Watchers. “But,” Joe had told Duncan, “they don’t know he’s Methos.”

“Yet,” Duncan had replied dourly. “It’s only a matter of time, Joe. Methos will fight and a Watcher will recognize him eventually.”

“Yeah, well,” was as much of an answer as Joe had had to offer.

They’d returned to Seacover, and Duncan kept himself busy by buying old houses and fixing them up. The labor kept him from thinking too much. Richie came and went, and even Amanda visited. Both of them asked Joe what was wrong with Duncan, but Joe wasn’t comfortable talking about it. He knew there was only one person on Duncan’s mind.

“Any word?” Duncan asked regularly, and Joe didn’t have to ask what the Immortal meant by the question. “Nah,” was the typical answer, until one day he was able to tell Duncan, “Actually, he was in earlier today.”

Duncan slapped his hand on the bar and stood up. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“He’ll be back,” Joe said. “Sounds like he’s here to stay for a while.” But when Duncan turned to go, Joe said, “Mac.”

“What?”

“I don’t think he’s ready to see you yet.”

Duncan frowned. “Too bad.”

The door was unlocked, and Duncan didn’t bother to knock. Methos would have felt him coming at any rate.

The ancient Immortal lay on his sofa, his eyes closed.

“I know you’re not asleep, Methos,” said Duncan.

“What do you want, MacLeod?” Methos asked without opening his eyes.

“To talk to you. Get up.”

The eyes opened and the old man sat up. “You’re a real pain in the ass, you know that?”

“Yeah, I know.” Duncan came around to sit down beside Methos. “Which makes me wonder why you came back.”

“To see Joe. He’s the only bartender who lets me drink all I want on the house.” When Duncan snorted, Methos said, “Actually, I’m moving. No more graduate student digs for me. I need a little more space for all my stuff.”

“Where will you go?” Duncan asked.

“I dunno.” Methos moved as if to stand, but Duncan placed a hand on his leg to indicate he should stay. “What?”

Duncan sighed. “Why do you have to get so defensive? Just sit here next to me for a minute, okay?”

“MacLeod—”

“And call me Duncan.”

Methos couldn't have looked more surprised if the Scot had told him to call him “Fluffy.” “You know, I ran into Amanda about a week ago. She said you were in bad shape.”

“I've been worried about you,” said Duncan.

“Why?”

“No one knew where you were. And now you're going to disappear again.”

“It's what I do, Mac—Duncan.” The name didn't come out naturally, Duncan noticed.

“You're trying to escape again. You did it with Kronos, and now you're doing it with me.”

“Are we back to this?” Methos asked, and now he did stand and put some distance between himself and the Highlander. “What does Kronos have to do with anything anymore? He's dead! That part of my life. . .” He sighed. “Yes, I escaped Kronos. I was tired of him and his way of doing things.”

“And now what? You're tired of me?”

“I'm tired of you condemning me for what I was! Before the whole Horsemen incident, what did you think of me? Who did you think I was? Did you think I was like you?” Methos heaved a sigh. “You know, Duncan, every Immortal has an idea about what Methos must be. Invariably, every Immortal believes Methos must be just like him. They want me to validate their existence somehow, and I can't. They want me to have answers, and I don't. I've never been anything more than the last person I was with. When I rode with Kronos, I was like Kronos. Hanging around with you and Joe, I'm just one of the guys, like you and Joe.” He shook his head. “It's hard work, all the acting.”

Duncan rose and walked over to where Methos stood and placed a hand on his friend's shoulder. “Then stop. Because I'd much rather know the real you.”

Methos tore away. “Would you?” he demanded, then stopped. “Me too,” he added more gently.

“You remember Kristin?” asked Duncan suddenly.

“Fashion queen Kristin?” Methos replied.

“Yeah. I couldn't bring myself to kill her, so you did. You hadn't taken a head in ages, but you took Kristin's. Why?”

“Somebody had to,” said Methos, echoing the words he'd said to Duncan the very night he'd won against Duncan's jilted ex-lover.

“Didn't have to be you,” Duncan pointed out. “You did it because, believe it or not, you *cared*. You weren't pretending then. You were just being you.”

“You helped me defeat the Horsemen for the same reason,” Duncan went on. “You didn't want to live that way anymore, and you were afraid of being sucked back in. You made the decision to end it for good, all by yourself. You could have killed Cassandra, maybe even me, but you made a *choice*.”

Methos smiled. “And you chose to have Cassandra spare me. Why was that?”

“Because I love you.”

Duncan could see everything in Methos go tense, like a hunted animal. “MacLeod. . .”

“Maybe I knew it even then,” said Duncan in a rush. Now that it was out, spoken and true, he couldn’t stop himself. “But the other day, when you fell asleep. . . That’s when it really hit me.”

But Methos was shaking his head. “This will never work,” he said.

“Why not?”

“Because, Mac—Duncan,” he threw up his hands in exasperation, “I’ve got a long history, not all of it pristine. *You* have never been on the wrong side of anything, but *I* have made my share of mistakes.”

“Methos, I’m not perfect,” said Duncan.

“Maybe not, but you’re also not equipped to deal with imperfection in others.”

Duncan blinked rapidly, surprised by the sting of the words. “And you were ready to kill a girl for trying to protect you!”

“See what I mean? You’re going to throw this in my face every time I’m right about something! Just to prove that I’m sometimes wrong!”

Duncan turned on his heel. “I think I’d better go.”

“I think you’re right.”

But Duncan stopped at the door. “Methos—”

“Just go, MacLeod.”

So Duncan did.

“I told you he wasn’t ready,” Joe said.

“Well, why not? I haven’t done anything,” Duncan grumbled into his beer mug.

“Mac, you remind him of all the ways he isn’t perfect,” Joe told him. “Who can live with that?”

Duncan set his glass down with a thud. “You’re right, Joe. That’s exactly it.” He stood up to leave.

“What do you mean?”

But Duncan had already made it to the door.

“What now, MacLeod?” Methos asked as he opened the door.

“You think I’m always going to admonish you for your past,” said Duncan as he entered the apartment, which was now filled with cardboard boxes. “But what you don’t understand is, I think you’re perfect. Despite your past. What’s all this?”

“I told you, I’m moving. And anyway, I’m tired of your playing psychotherapist, so cut it out.” Methos shut the door and moved past the Scot to continue to pack up one of his shelves of knick-knacks.

“You’ll still be in town, right?” Duncan asked as he took a seat on the arm of the sofa.

“I don’t think so. I’m looking for someplace a bit sunnier than here.” He wrapped an old clay vase and set it gently in a box.

“Methos, you have to stay. We have to figure this out.”

“As I understand it, there is no ‘we,’” said Methos.

“Didn’t you hear me? I think you’re perfect, just the way you are,” Duncan said.

“Don’t start singing,” Methos warned. “I suppose your opinion is the only one that should matter to me, eh, MacLeod? I should be overjoyed that you’ve given me your stamp of approval?”

“What do you want from me?” Duncan demanded. “I’m trying to talk to you—”

“Maybe I don’t want to talk. Toss me some more of that paper there on your left.”

Duncan did as requested. “Then what do you want?”

“I don’t know,” Methos sighed. “If I did, it would be easy. I need some time to myself, to figure out what it is I want, who I am. After five thousand years, it’s easy to lose oneself.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Don’t give me the sad eyes, M—Duncan. I’ll never get used to calling you that,” said Methos. “I won’t be gone forever.”

“Promise?”

“Is my word worth anything?”

“I believe in you,” said Duncan.

Methos turned and looked at him for a long moment, then nodded. “Then I promise.”

“And when you get back,” said Duncan with a smile, “I’ll make sure you get used to saying my name.”