

Highlander

The Highlander

Book I

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Prologue

AT THE END of the battle there were two warriors left on the field. The dark one, riding a black horse and wielding a broadsword, and the Mongol on his white stallion. Both men had been wounded many times during the melee, but still sat upright in their saddles, one at either end of the valley. Between them lay hundreds of bodies: the dead on either side.

The dark one, aKurgan , called to the Mongol ‘There can be only one!’ but whether the knight from the far Orient heard and understood was not evident from his posture or any gesture. He merely tested his curved blade on the wind: a few strokes to take the stiffness out of his arm muscles. The sword flashed incomprehensible heliographic messages to the hills on either side.

TheKurgan smiled to himself. This Mongol would be his third immortal. He recalled the words of his old mentor, the Arab: ‘Remember, when you meet someone like yourself, you must take his head there and then. Otherwise your opponent will have more time, over the centuries, to learn further fighting skills. The next time you meet him, you may regret not beheading him the first time - and you will meet again, be sure of that.If not in the near future, most certainly at the final Gathering. Time is a weapon too – never let them have more time to increase in strength and skill . . . ‘

The Mongol began riding down the length of the valley, careless of the bodies beneath the hooves of his grey.

TheKurgan took his sword in both hands. He had watched the Mongol fight during the battle: had observed his technique, which was to make his horse rear, just before meeting his opponent, so that the steed’s head protected the knight’s body. TheKurgan gathered his strength together, psychologically preparing himself for a single, tremendous blow.

He would need the speed of the charger to help him and the timing would need to be exactly right. A blow of supernatural strength was called for and while theKurgan believed himself capable of such a stroke, he knew it would take all his concentration, his spiritual and physical reserves.

He began riding towards the Mongol, his mount gathering in speed until the mane and tail were horizontal, flowing like black whips in the wind. The hooves thundered on the blood-soaked earth of the Russian steppes. Sweat and foam flew from the mouth of the gelding, splattering on theKurgan ’s hammered-bronze helmet with its beast’s-skull crest.

The heavily furred, narrow-eyed Mongol closed rapidly. The horses’ lungs were creaking like worn leather and sprigs of steam spurted from their nostrils.

Just before the clash the Mongol reined his mount, as expected, and the horse went up on its hind legs, its head and shoulders protecting the Mongol’s body.

TheKurgan let out a loud battle-cry, swung back in his saddle and brought the edge of his broadsword across the grey’s throat with tremendous force. The heavy blade sliced through flesh and bone, severing the horse’s head. TheKurgan ’s horse continued to surge forwards. The broadsword followed through, to impact with the Mongol’s neck, divorcing head from body.A double-decapitation in one stroke. The two heads, human and animal, hit the ground almost simultaneously, followed by a tangle of limbs.

The victoriousKurgan reined his own mount and let out a scream of joy as lightning forked down - out of the clear sky - and into his body. For several minutes, the static electricity sought him out, arced into his giant frame.

When the Quickening was over, the dark warrior turned northwards.

‘Now for the boy, Conner MacLeod,’ he said.

Chapter 1

THE BATTLE WAS about to begin.

MacLeod’s restless eyes scanned the other spectators fillingMadisonSquareGarden . As usual with such events there was a strong smell of human sweat in the air brought on by the close proximity of many

bodies, and an atmosphere of anticipation. MacLeod's damp raincoat was uncomfortable and he sat partly sideways in his seat to avoid pressure on the object he carried strapped to his back.

A scattering of applause broke out, which increased in volume as seven hundred and forty five pounds of wrestling flesh climbed into the ring in two giant lumps: the Tonga Kid and the Blond Backbreaker. Their opponents were already in there, snarling at the audience and flexing their muscles. All four wrestlers began prancing around and making threatening gestures towards one another. The crowd loved it. It was what they expected. MacLeod began to take an interest in the forthcoming battle, though his attention remained partly on the tiers of spectators that lined the ring, looking for old, familiar faces amongst the crowd.

Would any of them be here tonight? He must expect them at any time, in any place, and he could never fully relax - to do so might prove fatal. He scratched at his two-day growth of beard as the M.C. was calling for a lull in the pandemonium.

'...the toast from the coast... fromBradStreet,USA...' cried the M.C.

The words were drowned occasionally in the roar of the spectators. As one of the wrestlers was being introduced he suddenly ran across the ring and slammed his head on one of the corner posts. Women leapt from their seats, some of them cheering, some of them screaming abuse, depending upon the position of their partisanship. Show, all show. But it was what they wanted. It was what they had paid to see.

The Blond Backbreaker leaned forward on the ropes, leering at the crowd, and seductively unzipped his jacket to reveal the solid chest beneath, covered in wiry hair. There were screams of delight from the spectators. A little girl, sitting on her mother's lap looked across at MacLeod, possibly wondering at his lack of enthusiasm in the bedlam around her.

The Blond Backbreaker finally wriggled out of the slinky jacket, which he threw into the crowd, playing to their expectations.

Bloodlust, thought MacLeod. It was like a tangible thing in the air around him. Yet there would be no blood, not here: merely an enactment. If you couldn't get the real thing, you went to a place like this, which pretended well enough to satisfy but was actually quite safe, quite harmless. He had known other battles, other fights, where the gore had run in rivers, soaking the heather, turning the green and purple plants to scarlet. There had been spectators at those gatherings too - the camp followers but there had been far fewer of them than the combatants. Here the watchers outnumbered the combatants more than a thousand to one. A gladiatorial spectacle.

The sound of the bell interrupted his thoughts and he watched as the four wrestlers moved in on one another. The Tonga Kid immediately ran at his opponent and butted him in the belly, carrying him back and slamming him into a corner post. Then he gripped him by his long, black hair and began hammering his head with his fist.

While the referee was engaged in this exchange, the Cruncher took a flying kick at the Blond Backbreaker, his feet hitting just below the other's neck, sending him spinning out of the ring. The crowd screamed at the referee, the referee screamed at the wrestlers, the wrestlers screamed at each other. Flesh met flesh. Bone met bone. Each blow looked a crippling one. Each arm lock appeared to be delivered with enough pressure to snap a three-inch-thick pole. Yet always the combatants parted, turned, gestured, snarled, and went in for more.

A spectator near MacLeod shrieked, 'Kill them,' though who was supposed to kill whom, he didn't specify. Presumably it was enough for him if somebody killed somebody. The chant was taken up around the Gardens: kill, kill, kill. Gradually, it dissolved into more specific requests for maiming and the sight of blood again. There were those who were happy with the old, banal phrases, and those who were more inventive, more poetic in their demands for broken bodies. MacLeod remained silent, staring with weary eyes at the scene before him.

The little girl was sucking on a candy bar now, still staring at him rather than the wrestlers, and he grimaced at her, receiving a faint, uncertain smile in exchange. The girl tried to whisper to her mother, but the woman's attention was completely taken up by the four mounds of blubber in front of her, pounding away at each other's bodies. Her eyes were wide and shining and there was a faint smile on her face. Her absorption in the scene before her seemed more complete than that of a Tibetan monk attempting to reach Nirvana.

The little girl might just as well try talking to a brick wall.

Suddenly the woman shrieked, 'Tear his head off!' MacLeod jerked upright in his seat at these words as they triggered a reaction in him. For one second he was alert, but then he relaxed again, and stared at a Chinese spectator whose face told him he had his shirt on the Tonga Kid and his partner. His expression altered alternately from one of dismay, to one of delight, as the battle swayed, first one way and then the other. It almost seemed as if he were feeling the blows of his favourites himself. From time to time he kept touching his breast pocket where, no doubt, his wallet was situated.

The Blond Backbreaker was lifting his opponent high above his head now, ready to slam him down on the canvas. Both the woman and the Chinese were crying, 'Yes! Yes!' They wanted to see him go down, hard, and stay there, permanently. The referee was caught between two battling giants and was himself in danger of being strangled. MacLeod glanced towards the exits, but there was no one leaving or entering. Flashbulbs were filling the stadium with lightning - a silent storm - as all four wrestlers were locked together in one writhing mass in the centre of the canvas. The referee was getting his breath back, as no doubt were the wrestlers themselves.

On the opposite side of the stadium, one of the spectators held up a hand painted sign, which read 'KILL THE PIGS'. At that moment the man behind MacLeod, slammed a hand down on his shoulder and MacLeod twisted round to look into his face. It was not familiar.

'God - you've got to love it,' said the man, his eyes shining.

MacLeod nodded, pulling his shoulder from underneath the hand. The battle below, continued, unabated, with grunts and phrases like, 'That son of a bitch,' drifting upwards in the brief lulls in the shouting of the crowd. MacLeod closed his eyes, seeing a different scene, from a different time. . .

Chapter 2

THE SUN WAS low over the Glenfinnan hills, filling the valleys with long shadows and dark lanes of purple. An eagle wheeled in tight circles above a tall pinnacle of rock: a stack on which MacLeod guessed it kept its aerie. The clansman breathed the sweet scent of the heather, drawing it deeply into his lungs, and wondered how such perfect scenery could have so many faces.

He turned to his two companions, his cousins, Dugal MacLeod and Angus MacLeod, but their eyes were not on the eagle. They were studying the rocks ahead of them and Conner could feel the tenseness in the air. In that year of 1536, Conner MacLeod and his clan had decided to settle their differences with

the Frasers .

His cousins were ever watchful for the ambush which might come at any time on their ride back to their village. All three men were riding bareback and their thick Celtic legs gripped the sides of the sturdy mounts, gently applying pressure to maintain direction. Each of them carried his claymore and tard in the right hand, while the left loosely held the reins.

‘We’ll be back before nightfall,’ said Angus, in a satisfied tone. ‘I mind I said it would be so.’ His beard glistened with drops of sweat, which ran down from his cheeks into the matted tangle of hair.

Dugal said, ‘You’re never wrong, Angus. That’s one thing we could never accuse you of - being wrong.’ Dugal’s face was staring away from Angus at the time and the older man strained in his saddle to attempt to look at the other’s expression. He was never sure whether he was being made a fool of or not. Dugal turned to him now with a face full of seriousness, though a muscle was twitching in the corner of his mouth.

Conner, who knew full well that Dugal was being sarcastic, smiled at the irony of his cousin, careful not to let Angus see. His kinsmen were not above fighting him and amongst themselves, even though the Frasers might descend upon them at any time. The maxim of the MacLeod’s might be, ‘I am against my cousin, but my cousin and I are against the stranger.’ They were a warlike people, by necessity, having to guard their crofts and huts against marauders from all sides of the Scottish hills.

Suddenly, Conner’s mount shied slightly. Angus had already paused, his huge nose sniffing at the air.

‘What is it?’ said Dugal .

‘If I knew, I wouldna be worried,’ said Angus. ‘ Ah’mnot a-feared of things I can see.’

Beyond the rocks were some pines, a clump not much bigger than a spinney, but large enough to hide several men, if they were disposed to wait in ambush. Conner’s horse was doing a sidestep now, clearly feeling its rider’s agitation. The sun had been sliced in two by a flat-topped peak and the light was beginning to fade rapidly. Conner listened hard, but all he could hear was the gargling of the burn as it struggled to find a downward path through the peat.

‘The trees. . .’ Angus sniffed again. He maintained he could smell a

Fraser from quarter of a mile away, but Conner suspected that it was because the older man was going a little deaf that he trusted to this sense when his sight would not tell him what was going on.

‘Well, man? We canna stay here all night,’ said Dugal . At that moment they came; not out of the trees, but from the rocks above. There were five of them, all wearing the Fraser tart and even the hard-of-hearing Angus must have been deafened by their yells.

‘Right again, Angus,’ cried Dugal , though whether he was talking about the fact that the enemy were present, or whether he was being sarcastic again, and referring to the pines, no one stopped to ask.

The claymores were out, catching the last rays of the sun on their blades. Conner held his tard low, to protect his thigh and the horse’s flank, since the Frasers were on foot. One of them, a red-bearded man with wild ‘eyescame pounding over the turf to slash at the horse’s head.

Conner turned his mount. He brought down the claymore in a wide sweep at the Fraser’s head. But the

clansman was too quick for him, bringing up his own blade to block the blow. Both men were jarred to the teeth from the clash of weaponry. Conner's horse sidestepped then, onto the Fraser's foot, and the man yelled, striking its head with the boss of his taid .

With the Fraser's shield arm thus occupied, Conner thrust with the point of his sword. The blade entered the man's cheek, just below the bone. It was not a death blow, but the other, his foot free now, ran backwards. Conner could see him sticking his tongue through the new hole in his face.

An axe hit Conner's shoulder, but the blade was almost flat on impact because the wielder had to stand on tiptoe. Conner recognized the attacker as Ian Fraser, a youngster not more than fifteen years of age. Conner backed his mount into the lad, sending him sprawling on the heather.

'Away an' home to your mother,' yelled Conner, 'before I have to split your ears.'

'Boys,' cried Dugal . 'Just wee laddies . '

One of them lay dead on the turf, half draped over rock. The others had scattered now, all except the man that had first attacked Conner;.. He began scrambling up the escarpment, but Angus was quick to follow, dismounting and chasing him on foot. The Fraser turned to face him on the slope and blades clashed, metal biting metal. The Fraser's bonnet came off, revealing a bald head that shone in the gloaming.

Angus kicked him high on the leg and the other went over. The MacLeod's sword came down, point first, and pinned the writhing Fraser to the hillside. There was a brief yell from the victim, a spurt of blood from his mouth, then the evening was quiet once more.

Angus came down, wiping his blade on his kilt. 'What was the man thinking of?' he grumbled. 'Bringing youngsters o' that age?'

Dugal said, 'If they're old enough to lift a weapon, they're old enough to fight.'

Conner said nothing. He was leaning over from his horse, looking at the young man sprawled over the rock. The darkness had descended now, like a black shroud. He was thinking about a pig they had slaughtered a few days back and how the eyes of the animal had been wide with stark terror as the spear went into its throat. The lad's eyes were like that of the pig's - wide and full of the horror of death. He was saddened by the youth that had been spilled like water on the heather.

'Did you have to cut his throat, Dugal ? Could you not have stunned him?'

Dugal sounded incensed, but Conner guessed this was partly defensive.

'He was coming at me, man. I didn't stop to question his age. The laddie had a claymore, an' that was what I kept my eyes on, not his face. It's no my fault. It's his. . . '

He pointed with his own sword at the body lying on the side of the hill. Conner rubbed his shoulder where the battleaxe had struck him. It had not even broken the cloth but still there would be a bruise the size of Angus's fist there in the morning. Angus was collecting the weapons dropped by the Frasers when they had fled. They would be useful in the coming battle. There was a certain amount of satisfying irony in killing a Fraser with one of his own clan's weapons.

The three men then continued their journey, over the low hills, until the lights of the village came into

view. Sentries called out to them as they approached, an edge to the voice which revealed a nervous tension. There was the smell of boiled vegetables in the air, underlined with the odour of cooked meat. Conner's stomach began to respond to the stimulants, churning over. He had not eaten since the early morning.

At their approach, a figure came out of one of the peat-and-stone crofts, standing in the light of the dim candles within. As Conner and his companions passed the bonfire in the middle of the village, she came running towards them, crying, 'Conner!'

Dugal said, 'Somebody's pleased to see somebody.'

'I'll thank you to keep your thoughts to yourself, cousin Dugal,' said Conner, but he was pleased to be greeted in such a fashion.

Kate caught hold of his rein as she arrived breathless, by the horse's side. He looked down on her and smiled. Her thin face broke into an impish grin.

'Did you bring me a present, Conner MacLeod?' 'We've been out gathering recruits woman, no on a spree,' Angus said testily, replying for him.

'I brought you myself, Kate MacLeod. Is that no good enough?'

She pouted. 'It'll have to do, won't it?'

Chapter 3

CONNER MACLEOD'S EYES opened just as the Blond Backbreaker was slammed face-down onto the canvas. The big man hammered the boards with his fist, as if in great pain. The crowd cheered, delighted. His opponent pranced around the ring clapping his own hands above his head, applauding with the spectators.

MacLeod had had enough.

He rose from his seat and began threading his way to the end of the row to the indignation of the people he had to pass. He ignored them. They were soon back to their yelling and screaming in any case.

Once in the centre aisle, he made his way to the underground garage where he had parked his automobile. On reaching- it he stopped and scanned the silent cars standing in neat rows beneath the jaundiced light. It seemed empty, but he wasn't sure. There was a small nagging doubt in the corner of his mind. He took a few steps forward and there was a crunch from underfoot. Looking down he saw that he had stepped on an empty coke can. He kicked it away and it went skidding along the floor to hit the wall.

He continued walking, along the line of cars, his eyes still probing all the dark corners. He stayed away from the pillars, walking in the centre of the aisle. From outside came the rumble of traffic on the New York streets and the faint sound of a police siren.

When he reached abreast a Chevrolet he stopped suddenly, and turned. A whisper of cloth against the metal of a car had caught his attention. Then a man stepped out of the shadow of a pillar and stood there regarding him silently for a moment, before saying, 'MacLeod.'

He nodded. 'Fasil. . . wait.'

The man threw open his coat and reached inside. Something flashed in his hands as he took up a fighting stance in the middle of the garage floor. It was a sword with a golden hilt and Fasil held it like a man who knows how to use what he holds in his hands. The weapon was obviously very familiar to the thick-set Fasil. MacLeod could see the grey head nodding slightly, as if to say, this is it. The time. . .

'Wait,' cried MacLeod again, but as if this were the word which called for action, Fasil leapt forward and slashed at MacLeod's head. The Scot jumped sideways, ducking as he did so and the blade touched his hair, taking a few wisps with it as it whistled past. MacLeod jumped forwards, gripping Fasil's wrist, trying to force him to release the weapon, but their individual strengths were evenly matched and they swayed there, locked together for a few moments. MacLeod could smell Fasil's breath: it reeked of garlic. He tried to force a leg between the other man's knees, to knock him off balance. The sword was held at arm's length, over their heads, pointing towards the heavens.

MacLeod let go of the wrist and punched Fasil directly in the mouth with all his strength. The other man staggered back, still clutching his weapon and shook his head quickly. Then his face set again and he came forward.

MacLeod reached down the back of his coat collar, finding the handle of his own weapon, and drew the shorter blade: a Samurai sword with an ivory handle.

Fasil nodded, grimly, and leaned back against a pillar for a moment. 'Okay,' he said. 'Now.'

He removed his coat, deftly changing sword hands, then held it out like a gladiator's net. As they stood there, facing each other, a bulb pinged, somewhere in the garage and a patch of darkness replaced its light. Fasil suddenly threw the coat, which spread like a sheet over MacLeod's head. The Scot brushed it aside with his free hand, still keeping his eyes on his opponent and a firm grip of his sword. He pointed the blade at Fasil's throat.

'All right,' said Fasil, as if he had just agreed to go to a ball game with MacLeod. Then he lunged at MacLeod, who parried. The sound of metal on metal rang out, echoing through the catacomb-like garage. Fasil's technique, learned from the Saracens at the time of the crusades, relied mainly on the slashing, cutting strokes. He was not a thrust man, his teachers employing the scimitar's cutting edge, rather than the point. MacLeod knew this and kept well out of sword-arm length, refusing to close.

Only one of them was going to walk away from this fight alive. There would be no first blood - no mercy. Had there been a Roman emperor watching his thumbs would already be turned down. Fasil rushed at him, almost blindly, lunging as he ran. MacLeod again parried the blade, at the same time shouldering his opponent into a parked car. MacLeod's sword slashed through the air but Fasil was swift, rolling sideways and the Samurai blade struck the wing of the vehicle, skidding into the mirror and causing a shower of sparks.

MacLeod leapt at Fasil, pinning him to the side of the car, but neither man could work his sword arm free far enough to strike. Fasil kicked out, lifting MacLeod off his feet and sending him sliding across the hood of the car. . .

MacLeod found his feet in an instant and both men glared at each other across the vehicle, breathing heavily.

Fasil said, 'It's time to die, MacLeod.'

‘Do it then.’

‘I intend to.’

Fasil’s sword lashed out again, denting the other wing of the car and he cursed.

‘Yours?’ said MacLeod, indicating the car with a nod. ‘Going to need a respray.’

Fasil spat across the space between them and they both edged their way into the aisle between the cars again. For a few moments both men studied each other’s stance. They were aware of each other’s weaknesses, and in that awareness were able to protect themselves against mistakes. MacLeod watched his opponent’s eyes, hoping for a signal, an indication of his next move. There was a flicker, and suddenly Fasil rushed forward, in a bull-like charge, his sword slicing air.

MacLeod stood his ground and a furious exchange of thrusts and parries took place, each man searching for an opening. Fasil, the bigger, heavier man, began to force MacLeod backwards, into a corner of the garage. The blades rang against each other, the clashes almost forming a rhythmical sequence which begged for other instruments to join in.

There was a pool of oil on the patch where MacLeod fought to keep his balance against the onslaught of heavy blows being rained on him from all sides. His feet slipped and slid as he skated back and forth, ducking, weaving, blocking the attempts to slice, and he leaned back on the wall to get some support.

Fasil, seeing that his opponent was in trouble, redoubled the ferocity of his attack. A faint smile of triumph had found his lips. Each blow brought a grunt from him, like a boxer on the receiving end. He was using the sword in a two-handed grip now, determined that MacLeod was not going to get out of the corner and into a more advantageous position.

Suddenly, both MacLeod’s feet went from under him. He half-slid, down the wall. Fasil gave out a yell. The heavy sword was raised above his head. MacLeod slipped sideways, but Fasil had been watching, anticipating any move. The sword came down.

Just above MacLeod’s head, about three feet from the ground, was a fuse box. The main supply for the garage power ran through this point. On its descent Fasil’s sword sliced through the cable leading to the box and the blade then buried itself amongst the wires and contact points of the box itself.

There was a pyrotechnical display of sparks and flashes. Hissing, fizzing sounds filled the air and an acrid smell of burning plastic and rubber assailed MacLeod’s nostrils. Fasil danced. Tremors were rippling through his body and his cheeks were stretched taut over the bones of his face, like those of a man experiencing G-force speeds. His eyes rolled as the high voltage played havoc with the nerve ends of his muscles: His hands began to smoke, the flesh bubbling and blistering. He was screaming. The lights failed.

MacLeod fought to regain his feet as the loose end of the cable snaked above his head. He could hear Fasil’s teeth grinding and could smell the pungent odour of burning flesh. Then he was up and behind his enemy. Fasil tore the blade from the box just as the emergency lighting came into operation. He whirled to face MacLeod again. His hands were still smouldering. He was ready to fight on after a shock that would have stopped the heart of any normal man within moments. There was pain in his eyes, but no indication that the charge of high voltage electricity had weakened him at all. Behind him the severed lines still spat sparks.

MacLeod decided to try for a height advantage and sprang onto the hood of a car, then onto its roof. He was directly above Fasil, who, seeing the danger slashed out wildly at MacLeod's legs. The blow was aimed too low and shattered the windscreen of the car, showering the big man with diamond-sized pieces of glass.

It was MacLeod's turn for a chance at the head. He brought the Samurai sword round in a wide arc, sweeping downwards. It was also his turn to be thwarted by technology. The keen blade severed a steam pipe above his head and hot vapour bellowed from the tube into his face. He shrieked, falling backwards, rolling over the floor against a pillar. Fasil's blade followed a split second later, missing and burying its tough steel edge three inches deep into the concrete pillar.

The fuse box was still belching sparks and smoke and suddenly burst into flames, the fire spreading along the cable and down to the oil on the floor. There was the faint sound of an alarm coming from somewhere. Then it

beganto rain. Torrents of water poured down on the battling men as they fought to gain an advantage over one another. The sprinkler system had come into operation.

It was like fighting in a thunderstorm, but the Scot had fought in such conditions many times before. The highlands of his original homeland were not renowned for constant sunshine. He had fought in drizzle, mist, rain and storm, with mud up to his ankles and visibility down to a couple of feet. A drop of rain made him feel at home. He could see that Fasil was not happy, though, with the water hissing from the roses above them. The big man was moving his lips, cursing in a language unfamiliar to MacLeod. The water mixing with oil patches on the floor was making the surface extremely slippery and both men were having trouble keeping their footing.

MacLeod got in close and slammed the hilt of his sword into Fasil's face. Fasil spat blood into his eyes and then MacLeod felt a blow on the wrist which sent his Samurai spinning out of his hand. It struck a car and bounced back, clattering at Fasil's feet. Fasil kicked it, hard, and it skittered over the oily surface to the far side of the garage, beneath a car.

MacLeod began to run between the cars with Fasil following closely. He knew what he wanted and headed straight for the Fire Point, hoping to find an axe. He reached it, pulled open the door to the box. There was no axe, but inside a wrench was clipped to the door. He grabbed it, turning just in time to slam it into Fasil's face. The big man fell, screaming.

MacLeod knew he had to get his sword back. He could beat Fasil all night with the wrench and still the man would keep coming at him. There was only one way to stop him and that required a cutting edge. Pain was only a distraction and without a sword that was the only thing either man could inflict on one another.

MacLeod was running through water now, which hampered him. The garage was beginning to flood. He scrambled out, searching beneath the cars under which the sword had gone, looking for the shine of its blade. But the lights were playing on the water and there were glints and flashes everywhere he looked. He kept low, behind the cars, hoping they would screen his movements. Fasil was doing backflips down the centre aisle, not to put distance between them, but to keep on the move. Also he could momentarily look underneath the vehicles as he went along. MacLeod watched his athletic opponent at his gymnastics, keeping his body off the floor, on a car bumper.

With water pouring from the ceiling, steam hissing from severed pipelines, sparks still spurting from crackling cables and a man doing backflips along the shallows of a flooded garage, MacLeod was

inclined to think that the fight had turned into a circus act. He allowed himself a small, wry smile.

He peered under the car once Fasil was past.

There was the Samurai blade!

MacLeod reached under, his fingers just touching the handle. The sword tilted slightly, rolled and was still only just within fingertip length.

There was a soft plashing sound. Fasil's feet and ankles appeared within MacLeod's viewpoint, on the far side of the car. Helay still, his face half in the water. Fasil began to walk round the car and MacLeod edged beneath it.

His fingers closed around the hilt of the Samurai sword. He watched Fasil's feet as they circumnavigated the vehicle, then moved off in the direction of the centre aisle of the garage.

MacLeod was out from under the car in an instant. Fasil turned as Macleod approached him from behind and stood at the ready. Macleod closed with him and blade met blade once more.

This time the Scot's weapon caught the other right on the tip. Fasil's hands must have been either sweaty, or wet from the sprinklers above.

The sword went flying from his grip and across the water covered floor. MacLeod's blade was at his throat.

Fasil stood quite still. His eyes stared directly into MacLeod's but there was no plea for mercy in them, or from his lips. He expected none. MacLeod fought down, repressed the feelings of pity that began to rise within him. If he showed compassion now, there would only be a second meeting, and a third, until one of them lay dead at the other's feet. To let Fasil off the hook only meant a delay in the inevitable. Fasil would seek him out again and perhaps the next time MacLeod would be at the big man's mercy - and he knew that none would be shown. There could be only one ending.

The Samurai blade swept out, in an arc. It seemed to gather light to itself, brilliance flooding into the blade. MacLeod put all his strength behind the blow. Fasil's eyes were still staring into his own as the weapon sliced the grey-haired head clean from the broad shoulders. It rolled down Fasil's chest and between the open legs of MacLeod, coming to rest a few feet away. The wound on the torso fountained blood and the body crumpled as if it were boneless, hitting the ground heavily and splashing MacLeod's legs with water. The shallows began to turn pink as threads of red mingled with the water.

MacLeod turned to look at the head. The face was away from him and he was glad of that. Its hair was waving in the current, as the water flowed towards the drains.

One down, thought MacLeod. But there would be more. This was just the first encounter of the gathering of a clan that was not tied by blood, but by something far deeper: a shared power. A power that...

Then it came. Where the ceiling of the garage had been was an intense blackness. Out of this darkness came the lifeforce, the energy due to him: his right, earned by the death of Fasil. He felt the bolts of energy enter his body, was shaken by them. Pain, pain, pain - but the pain of life, not death. They surged through him, burning through his veins, along his nerves, into his heart, his brain. His whole frame shuddered as the blue, crackling lifeforce lit the garage from end to end, finding in him its contact point, its

earth. It rippled along the car roofs, down pillars, and over the surface of the water. Its dazzling brilliance blinded him and still it came, filling his body with its white light. His mind sang with colours. Pain. He shrieked, a cry of joy as well as agony. His body felt charged with strength and it seemed he could lift buildings, crush cars.

‘ Ahhhhaahhh. . . ’

He could not stop the sound coming from his own throat. The intensity of the influx of power grew until he felt he could contain it no longer. Yet still the bolts of blue-white light assailed him.

Around him, the cars began to receive the overflow of energy that passed through him. It travelled along sills and bumpers of the metal vehicles. Hubcaps split, doors burst open, rubber melted as the heat warped the steel. Engines sprang to life, one after another and headlights, radios, wipers, heaters, electric windows, all took on a life of their own as the external power found a way into their circuits, overloaded them, caused them to explode. The noise was deafening, as windscreens began to shatter, filling the air with bright crystals that fell like hail over the whole scene.

Over two hundred cars around MacLeod’s juddering body were banging, flashing, rattling, roaring. It was pandemonium. A sump cracked and split open near to where he stood, the oil splurging out over the garage floor. A piece of glass from a headlight whined past his face, like a bullet, to bury itself in the wall behind him.

MacLeod screamed, wondering how much more he could take. A tyre exploded in the car to the front of him. At last it began to ease off and he began to run along the back wall, where the fire point hoses were whipping at the air.

He reached the L turning at the end of the garage and turned the corner. His own vehicle was parked well behind the main area. Its headlights were on and the

motor was running. Steam was coming from its radiator. A strong wind was sweeping down the aisles now.

In the area he had left, the cars nearest to Fasil’s body began to explode, one by one, rocking the whole structure of the building and sending tremors beneath MacLeod’s feet. Ceiling debris began to fall and the wind collected clouds of white dust, sweeping it blizzard-like along the aisles.

Then MacLeod remembered his sword. He ran back to Fasil’s body and found the blade still buried in the concrete pillar, which it had struck after the decapitation. He wrenched it free and slid it into an overhead ducting along with its sheath. Then he took one last long look at Fasil’s headless corpse, before striding back to his Porsche.

Chapter 4

GLAMMISCASTLE , WITH its greystone towers and high ramparts, stood solidly within MacLeod territory deep in the Glenfinnan highlands. The road that ran between the village and its gate curved only once, in towards the dark waters of the loch, where it touched the silted beach, as if making a pretence of crossing the loch itself, only to swerve away at the last instant. It was a roughly made highway, with many holes in its surface, and one point where the underlying rock rose like a whale’s hump to annoy carters with tall loads. In the winter, the road was barely visible as the freezing mists drifted over from the loch and in the summer rains it became a quagmire.

This day was dry and dusty, with the warm south winds rolling down from the mountains, collecting the perfume of the heather as they came. Along the road from the castle came two men, with others behind them, through the villagers that lined the route. The first was a piper, the strange harsh music of a pibroch, tuneful only to those who had been born to its unmelodic sound, issuing from his instrument. The second, just a pace behind him, was a drummer, beating out a time which was the heart of the highlands.

Then came a priest whom the villagers knew as Father Rainey, a roughly hewn wooden cross the height of a man, held firmly by his calloused hands. He was a working priest, not afraid to pull a plough or too proud to row a fishing boat out onto the loch. He was a warrior-priest, present on the battlefield and, when the occasion called for it, willing to assist his parishioners in their fight, though he grieved sorely for the hand that wielded his dirk as if it belonged to another man.

Following the priest were the clansmen themselves, some on foot, some on horseback. Conner MacLeod and his cousin Angus rode together, children running by their mounts. Conner reined his mount at the curve in the road and lifted his claymore high above his head.

‘MacLeod!’ he cried.

The piper stopped, letting the mouthpiece fall from his lips. The drummer’s hands dropped to his sides. Father Rainey stepped into the rocks on the beach of the loch where the nets were drying in the sun. The clansmen gathered round him.

Father Rainey held out the cross, obliquely, over the waters of the loch. He let his monk’s hood fall back to reveal his bare head.

‘May this year of our Lord, 1536, bring victory to the Clan MacLeod,’ he cried.

The clansmen echoed his last word.

‘MacLeod!’

Dugal added, in his enthusiasm, ‘Victory to the MacLeods .’

There was a long silence after these words which even the excited children respected. Some of the women glanced at each other: there was fear in their eyes. They knew that some of their menfolk would not witness the setting of the sun over the purple loch that evening. They would be going to cold beds with empty hearts beating painfully beneath their breasts.

When the silence had run its course, the men continued their journey along the road, leaving the women and children behind, to watch after them. Dugal rode up alongside Conner, his black hair falling stiffly on his shoulders. He had the broad MacLeod brow and he seldom washed above this point.

‘Are you scared, Conner?’ he asked, his voice bearing a faint mocking tone. Conner felt the indignation rising within him.

‘No, Cousin Dugal .’ He looked the other man directly in the eyes. ‘I am not.’

Angus, following behind them, obviously heard the exchange, for he called out, ‘Don’t talk nonsense man. I peed ma kilt the first time I rode into battle.’

The three men laughed, together. They were easy in one another’s company at this time, having a

common purpose. Conner liked these times, when they were friends as well as kinsmen. He could almost have thanked the Frasers for that.

Dugalsaid, 'Aye. Angus pees his kilt all the time.' They laughed again, even Angus. A boy ran past Conner's horse, along the road back to the castle and he turned on his horse to watch him, remembering his own childhood and how the thought of battle had thrilled him at that age.

He had been so impatient to reach manhood and prove his worth amongst his peers that he prayed for the years to pass as quickly as days. Now? Now he was not so sure. Of course, Angus was right. He was scared. It would have been foolish to have been otherwise. Men without fear do not live long in the highlands where such an emotion is necessary to keep the awareness primed, the blood at high pitch. Death was too easy to find, if you were not looking for it around every rock.

Behind them, Glamis castle was beginning to cover itself in mist, like an old woman draping a shawl around her bony shoulders. From this direction a woman began running, calling out, weaving between the clansmen on foot.

'Conner!' she called, breathlessly. 'Conner - wait.'

It was Kate. Sharp-eyed, and, aye, sharp-nosed Kate, who had set her bonnet at Conner many summers before. She ran alongside his horse, as it began to break into a trot.

'Connor - please wait.'

He reined in his mount and allowed her to catch up to him. Her blue eyes danced with light and a little smile had crept to her cheeks. She held something in her hand, and stretched forth her arm. It was a small bunch of flowers, picked from the mountainside: delicate little alpine blooms that drooped a little now in the heat of the glen.

'Take these flowers and think of me.'

He leaned down, and clutched her hand, almost lifting her off her feet as he bent to kiss her.

'Remember,' she said, 'you fight with God on your side Conner. He will keep you safe for me.'

Conner smiled and took the flowers from her hand, tucking them into his broad leather belt.

'These flowers will be my shield - they'll ward off the Fraser blades.' Her eyes were serious now.

'No, not the flowers. They're from me. It's only God will keep you from harm. You hear me, Conner MacLeod?'

'I hear you, bonny Kate.'

She stopped then, letting him ride on ahead, staring after him. She did not even look up, when Dugal and Angus passed her, one on either side. Her attention was on her man.

'Come back to me, Conner,' she called.

'Aye,' he said, but more to himself than to the girl behind him. He looked at the loch and the hills that swept down to their shores.

‘Aye. I want to come back.’

Dugal caught up with him, the two horses bumping flanks.

‘A girl like that. . .’ Conner interrupted with, ‘. . . can wound a soldier more than a Fraser’s sword, my friend.’

The pair of them laughed. Kate called out, from far behind them.

‘Dugal. You and Angus keep him in one piece. Do you hear?’

‘Aye,’ said Dugal, looking askance at Conner, ‘and we all know what piece that is!’ but only Dugal laughed this time.

By the time they approached the far banks of Loch Shiel, it was mid-afternoon. To the east of them, Conner saw a herd of deer scattering as if they could already smell the blood on the heather. The beasts were so graceful in movement that he wanted to get down from his horse and run with them, delighting in the speed at which they carried their lithe bodies. Then he chastised himself, mentally.

Do you want to run away, Conner MacLeod? That won’t do at all. You’ll have to think of a better excuse than wanting to join the deer in their flight from the scent of man. This day you must stand and fight, though the stink of entrails drives you mad and the blood of your kinsmen reeks, warm and sweet, in your nostrils. You must not shame your mother, nor your father, God rest his soul. A father taken and hung by the Frasers, don’t forget. Today you must account for that crime.

The hot afternoon had made the mounts tire early and they were dragging their legs a little now. A piper struck up a battle tune, somewhere in the ragged ranks of the MacLeods, and the music lifted his heart a little. The lone drummer followed suit and soon the rhythmic, repetitive sounds filled him with the pride and hatred necessary to him to go into the forthcoming battle.

The banner carriers unfurled the gonfalon depicting a black bull’s head. Things were stirring in the hearts of the clansmen. Fear, yes, but old wrongs were recalled to mind, of pillaged crofts and raped women. The Frasers. Revenge. A thirst for the blood of an ancient enemy. In the order of things a Fraser was almost a lower being than an Englishman - almost.

They reached the top of the ridge overlooking the loch and on the far side of the glen, on a similar ridge, stood the Fraser, looking impatient for battle. This was the way to settle an argument! Clan against clan. It was the only way. By the sword, or the dirk.

The MacLeods reached the brow of the hill, where they paused to survey the battle area, the glen between the two groups.

Among the Frasers, looking across the valley at the MacLeods, was a man on a tall, black gelding. He was not dressed like the clansmen around him, in the Fraser tartan, but in an animal-skin cloak, a fur, that failed to hide his giant frame. Instead of a claymore at his side, there was a huge broadsword, and on his head was a helmet made from the skull of a strange beast, which bore fangs that curved down to the corners of his black eyes. His skin was swarthy and of a slightly darker complexion than that of the warriors with whom he rode and it was pockmarked as though he had at once time suffered from the pox, but had survived. His lips were full and bloodswollen, covering teeth that had been chipped in many fights. He was a strange foreigner, newly come amongst the Frasers and he had promised to help them in

their fight against the MacLeods . They had not asked him to prove his worth: that was apparent in his arrogance and in his eyes. He was a good head taller than the tallest man on the field and the Frasers were afraid of him to a man. In his offer of aid was one small request, which he was about to utter.

Suddenly, out of the clear blue sky of the summer afternoon, lightning forked downwards to the crest of the hill on which the Frasers were gathered. The stranger's horse reared and he steadied it with strong hands. Murdoch Fraser, standing close to him, said nervously, 'Kurgan, you said you had a request. What might that be, now we're here, ready for the battle?'

TheKurgan sighed and said in a hoarse whisper, 'There is one called Conner among them. . .'

'Aye,' replied Murdoch.

'The boy is mine, Murdoch. Remember our agreement. I want the youth called Conner. No one else must touch him.'

'It shall be as you say.'

Murdoch passed the word along the line of clansmen just as, from the far side of the valley, a shout came and the MacLeods began streaming down the hillside.

Murdoch said, 'It's begun.' He raised his claymore. 'Death to the MacLeods ,' and was rewarded by a cheer from his clansmen. The two clans advanced on one another, across the marsh in middle of the valley. It was soft underfoot and would make many a bed for both MacLeod and Fraser before the afternoon was out. Those on horseback fought to keep their mounts steady, and those on foot chose the harder paths amongst the peat.

Angus was the first to clash with the Frasers . He rode in amongst them, yelling, 'Die.' His sword came down on a footsoldier , the blade burying itself in the nape of the neck. The man fell, clutching wildly at Angus's ankle, trying to pull him from his mount, even in death. Angus kicked him free and the marsh swallowed half the unfortunate man's face. He did not stir.

A Fraser ran up to Angus's horse from behind and vaulted onto the beast's back, gripping Angus around the throat. There was a brief struggle before both men fell to the ground.

Angus reached to his sock for his dirk and stabbed the Fraser in the groin, then in the heart.

Nearby, a MacLeod staggered back, pierced by a spear that penetrated his abdomen and came out near the backbone. He wrenched the shaft from his body and made a weaving path between the other fighters. Something grey and blister-like was showing between his fingers as he clutched the wound. He had only gone about four paces before he was felled by another blow, from an axe.

TheKurgancame riding into the marshland on his charger, laying about him with the huge broadsword. Two MacLeods went down with as many strokes and he trampled over their bodies, using the horse to stamp them into the mud.

Then his eyes searched keenly for the one called Conner. He did not know what the youth looked like, but Murdoch's men would refrain from fighting with him. He saw, in the midst of the battle, such a youth, whom the Frasers were avoiding. The boy was riding amongst the battling figures, crying, 'Fight ! Who will fight with me?'

Fraser started to let him through, choosing other opponents. Even when the youth managed to get close enough to wound one of them, they still refrained from battle with him.

‘Come on, damn you. . .’, cried the frustrated young MacLeod. ‘I’m a MacLeod. Fight with me.’

Just below the Kurgan’s horse, a Fraser was holding a MacLeod’s head under the marshwater.

‘Now you stay under. . .’

Father Rainey, seeing this, as he wandered amongst the battling men, with the same sort of immunity as Conner appeared to possess, gripped the Fraser by the hair and dragged him away from his victim. The man turned on the priest and knocked the cross from his grasp, before thrusting with his sword. The point went through the habit just under the left armpit, and caught there. As the man fought to free his weapon from the priest’s clothing, Father Rainey cried, ‘Forgive me.’

‘Forgive you?’ snarled the Fraser.

Father Rainey gave the man a look of disdain and slit his throat with a dirk that had been hidden in his sleeve. The man slid to the ground with the priest saying, ‘I wasn’t talking to you. . .’ Then he knelt beside the body and crossed himself. ‘My son. . .’, he began to administer the last rites.

The Kurgan sneered at this sight of a man torn between his duty to his fellow men and his duty to God. In his opinion the priest should make up his mind whether he was a holy man or a warrior.

‘Fight me you cowards!’ Conner’s complaint came floating on the breeze that had sprung up within the last few minutes. Conner could not understand why no man would cross swords with him. It was almost as if he had been bewitched and they could not see him, or were afraid of the consequences of fighting someone under the influence of magic. All around him was the sound of battle and the groans of the wounded and dying.

‘Why will no one fight with me?’ he cried. ‘Fight me you cowards.’ He dismounted, hoping for close combat. Two Frasers with their backs to him turned, but one said to the other, ‘No, that’s Conner MacLeod.’

‘No,’ replied his companion, ‘not him.’

The two men moved away, to another part of the marsh and the frustration Conner felt built into a rage within him. He was determined to make someone fight with him. Angus was battling with a Fraser nearby and he ran to his side, just as the older MacLeod dispatched his opponent.

‘Death. . .’, said Angus.

Conner cried, ‘Angus. Nobody will fight with me.’

‘What?’

‘They all run away.’

Angus laughed. ‘Here laddie, stay by me.’

At that moment, Conner noticed a warrior on a horse, moving towards him. There was a lightning flash

from the sky and the dark horse reared. Its rider was smiling. He seemed a giant of a man, even in the saddle, his broad shoulders covered with a strange cloak. On his head was the skull of an animal, the like of which Conner had never seen before. The image was enough to strike fear into the heart of the bravest MacLeod. The figure reached him, towering over him, the arrogance and cruelty evident in his face, in the full-blown lips and lustreless eyes unholy eyes. To Conner, he seemed the manifestation of some nightmarish demon, sent by the Devil to collect lost souls.

‘Mother of God. . .’, said Conner, quietly.

The warrior grinned and Conner’s awe increased. Surely those teeth were made for tearing raw flesh from the backs of live men? He was not real. He could not be real. The sword arm of the mighty figure above him was raised and Conner just had time to raise his shield to take the force of the blow. Such was the power behind the strike it jarred Conner’s arm through to his shoulder and the limb went numb.

‘What in God’s name are you?’ cried the youth.

The figure laughed and struck out again. Conner fell backwards, onto the spongy marsh ground and before he could regain his feet, the warrior had dismounted. He was indeed of massive proportions. Conner scrambled to get to his feet, but in doing so he exposed the whole of his body. The giant man stepped forward and drove the huge sword into Conner’s stomach. Conner felt the blade penetrate and a leaden pain washed over him. That kind of pain, he knew from Angus, a heavy, dull pain instead of a sharp one, was a mortal wound. I’m done for, he thought. My first battle and death has come to me. There was a terror in his heart and he dropped his weapons, gripping the blade, that had him transfixed, with his bare hands.

The man holding the weapon smiled and pushed the blade in deeper and deeper still. Fresh waves of pain flowed through Conner’s frame. The warrior was not satisfied. He gripped his sword hilt with both hands and twisted the blade in the wound. He screwed it to the right. Conner screamed.

The blade was then screwed to the left. No longer was there a slit in Conner’s gut, but a gaping hole. His mouth fell open and his eyes were wide. He had even lost the power to scream. The sword was withdrawn.

Conner, still on his knees and his head bowed like a condemned man awaiting the fall of the executioner’s axe, gripped the wound with his fingers. It was almost large enough to put his hand inside. At that moment another MacLeod rushed in and the dark warrior was distracted momentarily, while he stabbed the man full in the chest. The MacLeod fell to the turf with a sigh and lay still.

Conner, through the red mist before his eyes, saw Angus running towards him. In his eagerness to get there, Angus bowled over a Fraser who had stepped in his way, but he did not pause or falter. Instead, he shouted, ‘No...’

Dugal, too, on hearing Angus, looked up and on seeing his younger cousin wounded, with another blow about to fall, joined Angus in the race to reach Conner. The warrior looked down at Conner. His voice was harsh and uncompromising as he said, ‘There can be only one.’

Conner saw the sword go up and knew that he was about to be beheaded. He wanted to move but a lethargy brought on by his wound kept him slumped in the same position. The blade began to descend. At that moment, Dugal, the fleeter of the two cousins, crashed into the warrior, sending him sprawling on the marshland. There was a third flash of lightning as the big man leapt back onto his feet, but by this time the MacLeods were carrying Conner away, across the battlefield and out of danger.

‘Another time MacLeod,’ shouted the warrior, after them.

That evening the sun sank below the mountains overlooking Loch Shiel with the bodies of many dead, still uncollected by their kinsmen, decorating the marshes with their gory remains. It was a dark red sunset, befitting the colour of the turf. A wildcat was stepping daintily between the corpses, pausing now and then to sniff at a congealed wound. As darkness fell, the creature reached the place where the Kurgan had stood, sniffed, stiffened, and then hurried on, into the night.

Chapter 5

CONNER MACLEOD REACHED his Porsche. The lights were still blazing and engine running. He jumped inside and put the car into gear, before tearing towards the exit to the garage.

Broken glass from shattered windscreens crunched under the tyres as he sped past the L junction. He hit the exit ramp at about forty miles per hour and the lights of the city were before him. Just as he reached the head of the ramp a police car arrived and swung its hood in his path. He was blocked. He sat in the car and waited as other police vehicles began to screech to a halt behind the first one, their sirens still wailing. Out on the street, the New York traffic flowed past as if nothing were happening.

A lean-looking cop climbed out of the vehicle that barred MacLeod’s exit. One arm was hanging loosely by his side, while the other had a thumb hooked in his belt by his pistol. He stood by his own vehicle.

‘Get out of the car,’ he shouted.

MacLeod stared at him. He wondered whether to try ramming the police vehicle out of the way and making a run for it, but decided against it. There were too many of them. He would have to bluff it out.

‘Get out of the goddamn car,’ shouted the officer again. This time his hand was on his gun butt and he had taken up an open-legged stance. MacLeod climbed slowly out of the Porsche and stood by it, his hand resting lightly on the roof.

‘Put your hands on the hood!’ The gun was out now and aimed at MacLeod’s chest. The officer was clearly nervous and his partner was half-in, half-out of the police car. He was talking into a mike, but his eyes never left MacLeod’s face.

‘Move. . .’, screamed the lean-faced one.

Several other policemen were beginning to walk towards him now, but cautiously, the way one approaches a dog that has been known to bite. The officer in front of him flicked the gun barrel and licked his lips as if the tension were becoming intolerable to him. Another twitch of the gun barrel.

One of his fellow policemen called out softly, ‘Gocarefully. . .’

MacLeod leaned passively against the car, his hands well in view. He made a slight gesture, showing the officer his empty palms. The policeman stopped advancing and took up the classic two-handed stance of someone about to open fire.

‘Watch it freak,’ he said to MacLeod. His voice was taut. ‘Just cool it.’

His partner dropped the mike he was holding, stepped fully out of his vehicle and drew his own weapon.

‘Watch it!’ he cried. ‘Watch him! Watch him!’

MacLeod allowed himself an inner wave of amusement. Surely they wouldn’t gun him down, here on the street? They didn’t know what, if anything, he had done? Maybe that was the trouble. Policemen hated dealing with the unknown. They preferred, like anyone else, situations which had a familiar feel to them. He, MacLeod, was a freak who wouldn’t do what he was told. They wanted him to jump around to commands and he wasn’t prepared to do that. Not yet, anyway.

Frustration was evident on the cop’s face as he cried out. ‘Move - come on. Come on. Come on.’

Repetition. What you can’t obtain by volume of voice, repeat. What if he were a foreigner? Or deaf? Stone deaf? Would they think of that, or simply shoot when he failed to understand what they wanted of him? The situation might have been comic if there weren’t so many bystanders watching, who might get hit.

Another policeman took up a position on the far side of the Porsche, aiming across the roof. MacLeod glanced at him, casually.

The lean-faced one was becoming incensed. ‘Move - come on. Come on.’

He was close enough to MacLeod to touch him now. He reached out a hand and grabbed the Scot by the collar, slamming him against the car. MacLeod let out a grunt. The other took each wrist, one at a time, and smashed his hands down on the roof of the Porsche. He felt his ankles being kicked, viciously.

‘Spread ‘em.’ Once again he ignored the command.

‘Spread them, freak.’ Another kick, this time higher up.

‘Whaddya, deaf?’

So, he’d thought of it at last, but it wasn’t a question. It was meant to be an insult, deaf and stupid being synonymous terms in their language.

‘No, I’m not deaf.’

There were hands going over him now, searching for weapons. The cop was muttering, ‘Come on. Come on,’ as though he were desperately hoping to find something concealed under the raincoat. MacLeod felt glad that he had not brought the Samurai sword with him. He might have had to use it, to protect his ownership of the blade. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt someone outside the group. The policeman leaned heavily against him.

‘Let’s see some ID., pal,’ he said, reaching into MacLeod’s inside pocket. He extracted a wallet and began to rifle through the contents, still keeping a wary eye on MacLeod. The cop’s partner called to him.

‘You okay, Haggerty?’

‘Yeah, just looking at the bozo’s ID.’

Finally he found a piece of paper which told him what he wanted to know.

‘Well, Mr Nash. Where were you going in such a hurry?’

MacLeod ignored him and Haggerty gave him a jolt with his shoulder.

‘Eh?’

The policeman from the far side of the Porsche had moved around now and stood by Officer Haggerty. Haggerty grabbed MacLeod’s arm and snapped a cuff on his wrist. Then spun him round to do the other wrist. MacLeod had had enough of this man, pushing him around as if he were some kind of recalcitrant dog in a school for obedience. He gripped Haggerty by the shirt collar with his free hand and thrust him away.

‘Take it easy,’ he said, softly to the cop.

‘Give me it. Give me it,’ shouted Haggerty, again reaching for the wrist. ‘Give me it.’

MacLeod gripped the man by his lapels and hurled him away. Another policeman stepped forward, his gun pointing. ‘Hey, hey.’

‘Just keep him off my back,’ said MacLeod.

Haggerty came rushing back and pressed his pistol against MacLeod’s temple. The second cuff was clicked on.

‘Don’t move pal- don’t even breathe.’ His partner came up then.

‘Get in the car - no, our car, dummy.’

Theybustled him into the black-and-white. Haggerty sat in the back of the vehicle, his gun pressed against MacLeod’s ribs, while his partner drove. TheNew York lights drifted past them. MacLeod stared at the people loitering outside night clubs and bars, or hurrying homewards, eyes turning neither right nor left. So many people. He had known a time when there were far fewer. Yet even then, it seemed, that there was not enough space in the world to contain them, since they had been forever fighting over this patch of ground, or that. Maybe it would all stop one day. But not if theKurgan were the one survivor of the gathering. Not then. . .’

Chapter 6

ALONE PIPER was standing on the ramparts of Glammis castle, filling the evening with the sounds of a lament. Figures were hurrying back and forth along the road past the loch, where the fishing nets, unused that day, were still spread across the rocks. One of these figures was Father Rainey. His face was creased with the worry of a priest who has many problems with his parish. His hands were employed, almost subconsciously, in moving the prayer beads as he walked. His lips were moving, whispering prayers which were carried away by the breeze, into the low hills beyond.

A dog came by, turned and trotted at the priest’s heels, looking up at him as if he were the one to whom the prayers were addressed. When the priest did not look down, the dog stopped, watched for a while, and then continued the journey it had been making before it was interrupted.

The priest continued along the road, heading towards a hut at the far end of the village. A glow from a

lamp came from the open door of the hut and as the priest approached a man stepped outside. It was Dugal . He went out to meet the priest.

‘Father Rainey . . .’

‘Is the boy still alive?’ Dugal kicked at the rocky ground.

‘He’s going down fast, Father.’

‘Then I’m in time.’

‘To save him?’ There was surprise in the clansman’s voice. Then he shook his head. ‘No. I see what you mean, Father.’

‘I’m sorry, my son.’

‘I ken. He’s . . . he’s my cousin. I promised Kate I would look after him. And I failed.’

The priest put his arm around the clansman.

‘You did your best. I saw it. That man. . .’

‘Aye. If he was a man. Did you see him? He looked like somethin’ from Hell. He was no a Fraser, that’s certain sure.’

‘Whatever he was, I hope we do not see his like again, Dugal MacLeod,’ said Father Rainey, stepping into the hut. The scene that met his eyes, brought a lump to his throat, though he was used to such sights. Kate was bent over the prostrate form on the reed bed, stroking his brow. Her eyes were brimming with tears, but she was clearly fighting back the emotion that welled-up within her, for the sake of the dying man. She looked at Father Rainey’s features, hoping, he supposed, that there would be some sign of strength from him. Kate was not one to rely on miracles. She knew that Conner was slipping away from her and that it was only a matter of time. What she wanted from Father Rainey was not an assurance that her man would live, but something to help her bear that loss.

Father Rainey gently lifted her to her feet and then bent over the bed himself. Conner’s face was the colour of cold wood ash and his breath was coming out in laboured gasps. There was dried sweat on his eyelids and in the corners of his mouth. He opened his eyes slowly, fixed them for a moment on the priest’s face, then closed them again.

‘Rest, my son,’ said the Father.

He began to cross Conner, saying at the same time: ‘In nomine patri , et fili et spiritus sancti .’ He paused, then finished with, ‘Amen.’

Kate made a soft sound behind him and the priest turned to look up at her.

‘It is over. . .’

Kate clutched her skirt, breaking down at last. ‘No. . .’, she wailed, and then began sobbing.

‘I must leave you,’ said the priest. ‘Other men are dying this day.’

Dugal nodded. 'We understand, Father.'

Angus now stood in the doorway. His great head hung on his breast and he looked like a defeated warrior. The priest put his hand on the man's shoulder as he passed through the doorway and Angus gripped it for a moment. Father Rainey said, 'I must attend the others.' Then he was gone, out into the night.

Angus moved over to the bedside of the fading MacLeod. He listened to the shallow breathing for a moment and then said to Kate, 'Be quiet.'

She looked at him in astonishment. Angus glared at her.

'He's a highlander, by God.'

Seeing that this was not enough, he added, 'The last sound he hears shall not be that of a wailing woman.'

She stifled her sobs then and fell to weeping quietly. The two men stood, equally as quiet, by the bedside of their cousin. Now that there was silence in the hut, the sound of the pipes from the distant castle could be heard and Conner's eyes flickered and opened. They held those of Angus for a moment and the clansman nodded. The eyes closed.

Angus moved towards the door, took one last look back and then went outside. He walked down to the loch and sat on one of the boulders to look out over the waters with their starlit ripples. The sound of the pipes found its way into his blood as he sat there, wondering whether it had been worth it - to lose those of his clan, including Conner, for the deaths of a few Frasers. Could they not just have agreed to kill a few of their own men, on both sides? The result was just the same. An exchange of lives. It seemed so foolish now. But he knew it would happen again. It always did. The grievances would build in the hearts of the clan and it would begin again. There seemed to be no way of stopping it. Not without losing pride, and a highlander's pride was as valuable to him as his. . . aye, as his cousin's life. Dugal had appeared by his side.

'Well man?' he said to Dugal.

'Hanging on by a faint breath,' said Dugal, 'but he'll not last long now. He'll not see the morrow, our cousin Conner.'

Angus rose, scratching his beard. 'Shall we away and see the rest of laddies that were wounded? We canna do anything for him now and I doubt he'll be conscious again.'

'Aye, as the father said, there are others in the same plight. We'll need to speak to the widows.'

'And then, I think, a dram would not be out of order.'

Dugal nodded, briskly. Men were dying but the living needed strength too, to carry on the fight. The two men went back into the village. Their cousin Conner was beyond the aid of priest or physician.

Chapter 7

FORENSIC EXPERT BRENDA Wyatt was a New Yorker, born and bred. Until quite recently, she

had lived with her father, the owner of a watch repair business who had viewed the arrival of quartz movements with the same consternation that cavalry generals had felt on the coming of the machine gun. The old man had now retired to Florida to spend his time following up his interest in antique weapons and attempting to trace his ancestry back to the 16th-century English poet whose name he shared.

Brenda's apartment had only just reached a state of order and when the call came through to her, late, that there had been a murder at Madison Square Garden, she had trouble in finding what she called her 'working clothes.' Once she was suitably dressed she took a cab across town, but her mood was one of irritation. While the guys at the precinct appreciated her looks, they tended to be a little off-hand about her position as their forensic expert and she found her attractiveness more of a hindrance than a benefit. She was determined to educate them into a more professional regard for her services.

She paid the cabbie and went down the ramp to the underground garage below the Gardens. At the bottom, she stopped and peered around her with some astonishment. The place looked as though it had been hit by a bomb, with wrecked cars all around. Strangely, they were still neatly parked.

There were people in uniform and civilian clothes milling around like bees in a hive. A young cop she hadn't seen before, stepped forward, as if to prevent her from going further but her glare told him more than any ID would have done, and he paused and pretended interest in a wayward hubcap at his feet.

Lieutenant Frank Moran was standing near a pillar rubbing his stomach. His ulcer is bothering him again, thought Brenda. Once an ulcer caught hold of a cop, it was difficult to tear it loose. The life was one of irregular meals and fast foods. She knew he tried to stick to a diet, but the job was against him.

Although she felt sorry for him, she knew she had to bawl him out, or the same thing would happen next time. She crossed the floor to him.

'Damn it, Frank. Forensics is supposed to be notified the same time as homicide. . .'

As she spoke, she looked down at the corpse and despite her training and subsequent experience, her stomach did a flip-flop. A man without a head doesn't look like a man at all - he looks like something ready for the butcher's cleaver.

Brenda said, 'Holy shit,' and then could have bitten off her tongue. She hated reacting like a layperson in front of her colleagues. She need not have worried. Frank had the same sort of expression that she knew she was wearing.

He rammed his hands into his pockets. 'Yeah. This one came unassembled.'

'Did you make an arrest?'

'No - we're questioning some guy named Nash.' Brenda nodded and then gestured at the wreckage around them.

'What happened? The Street Warriors decide to have a party?'

Frank looked up and stared at the debris.

'That? God knows. Looks like a hurricane's hit it, doesn't it. Maybe some street gang, I don't know. This guy Nash isn't some young punk with a switchblade. He's an antique dealer down on Hudson Street.'

Brenda nodded at the corpse again. It was becoming less obscene by the minute. Familiarity breeds contempt.

‘That was no switchblade. The neck’s been sliced clean through.’

Frank turned away to talk to an officer nearby and Brenda felt the presence of someone else at her elbow. It was Bedsoe. They had almost had a thing going a short while back, but Walter was a clinger and she just got out from under in time. A casual relationship would have been fine, but she realized, early enough, that Walter took everything too seriously. Once he had got his foot in the door she would have had to chop it off to get some privacy. She didn’t need that kind of problem at this point in her life.

Walter Bedsoe looked at her with sad eyes. ‘Hello, Brenda.’

She did not look at him but put on her iceberg face just the same. She did not want to encourage him.

‘Hello.’

‘You look pretty, Brenda.’

She ignored this and walked towards Frank Moran who was talking to one of the arresting officers, Garfield. Garfield was smirking.

‘Whaddyathinks the cause of death, Lieutenant, uh?’ He laughed into Brenda’s face as she came up to them.

Moran made a face. ‘Christ, you’re a barrel of laughs, Garfield.’

Haggerty, his partner, was hustling someone out of the garage. As usual, there were too many people with no answers around. A man was standing by the remains of his car wailing, ‘Hey, cop! How am I going to explain this to my wife, man?’ Walter Bedsoe had come up alongside her again, as if he were attached to her by a line. He called to one of the uniformed policemen.

‘Hey, Walker, get me a cherry cheese sandwich to go, please.’

He turned to Brenda. ‘Have you eaten?’

Her stomach did another circuit at the thought. ‘Not now, Walter. I don’t want to think about it right at this moment. Do you mind?’

‘No, sure. I just thought. . .’

His sentence drifted off the end and he looked uncomfortable. Poor Walter. She pulled herself up short. Not that way. If she started feeling sorry for him, she might end up doing something about it. Moran was speaking to Garfield again.

‘Eh? What time did they say? What time did he buy it?’

‘About ten, ten thirty.’

Brenda said, ‘Whatever made the cut was razor sharp.’

They were interrupted by some confusion in another part of the garage. A cop was saying, 'Get out. I told you to get out.'

The vultures. They all wanted to feast their eyes on the carcass, so they could say, 'My God, look at that. Makes you want to throw up, don't it?'

Bedsoeleaned forward, touching Brenda's arm and she moved out of reach. He then turned to Moran.

'Frank - about two days ago the teletype told of a guy that was killed just like this over in Jersey.'

Moran muttered, 'Yeah, but I figured what the hell, that's Jersey.' He began rubbing his stomach again.

Brenda walked away, just as Moran was saying sharply, 'Garfield- cover that head.'

She knelt down by the corpse again, to study the wound now that her stomach had settled and she was able to view it with a professional eye. When she looked up, a gleam attracted her attention. There was something under one of the cars, a few yards away. A piece of bumper?

It looked too slim for that. She pulled on a plastic glove that she had taken from her bag and walked over to the spot. She reached underneath the car and pulled the object out.

'Hey, babe,' she said to herself, 'look at you.'

The weapon brought out in her the detached, interested observer of a work of art. She had inherited from her father, a technical interest in ancient weapons, especially bladed weapons, and she could appreciate the craftsmanship that had gone into the fashioning of the sword she held in her hand. It had a beauty that almost managed to obliterate its deadly purpose, in her eyes. The blade glistened, having still some of the watchmakers' oil smeared on the steel. There didn't appear to be any blood on it, which was puzzling. She ran her gloved fingers over the finely wrought hilt.

'What the hell have you got?' It was Moran.

'A Toledo-Salamanca,' she said, turning it over under the light.

'A what?'

'A sword, Frank. A very rare sword.'

'That's got to be . . .' The light caught the hilt as he looked at it and he whistled. 'Is it worth much?'

'Only about a million bucks - any antique dealer on Hudson Street could tell you that.'

She looked at his face and from his expression deduced that he had his motive for the murder at last. She wasn't sure. WaIt had mentioned a similar beheading over in Jersey. Surely this guy did not make a habit of murdering sword sellers? It did not add up. However, she decided to refrain from comment. It might have spoiled Frank's evening and he had stopped rubbing his stomach.

Chapter 8

BACK AT THE precinct again, Garfield was told by Moran to fetch the man called Nash from the cells.

Bedsoe went and sat on the windowsill of the interrogation room, while Moran paced the room in front of the desk. There was a sharp pain in his gut and he wondered whether to send out for a glass of milk, but decided against it. He was not in the mood for taking the jibes that went with such a request. His wife, Alice, had nagged him to eat something before he went out on the call, but as usual he had ignored her.

‘I’ll get something on the way,’ he had said.

Right at that moment, he was prepared to dislike Nash intensely, for getting him out of a warm bed, beside a warm wife, just as he had been falling off to sleep. Then he mentally reprimanded himself. There was no proof, yet, that Nash was the cause of all this. Garfield entered, pushing Nash before him. The fair-haired, unshaven Nash met Moran’s stare with eyes that seemed just a shade too confident for someone dragged in as a murder suspect.

Garfield shoved Nash down into a chair behind the desk and then took up a position close by, his arms folded, leaning against the glass screen behind which the normal chaos of the precinct could be seen to be in flow.

Moran nodded at Bedsoe, who left the office, to return a moment later carrying a sword wrapped in a transparent plastic bag. He put it in front of Nash, on the desk. Still no one had spoken to the suspect. Moran went to his filing cabinet and took out a folder. He opened it, then tossed a photograph in front of Nash.

‘Ever seen this guy before?’

Nash leaned towards the photo and then shook his head.

Moran sighed. ‘His name’s Vasilek.’

Nash looked up, but there was no sign that he recognized the name. It was more a look of enquiry.

‘Polish national,’ continued Moran. ‘Had his head chopped off in New Jersey two nights ago.’ He paused. ‘You ever get over to New Jersey, Nash?’

Nash pulled his raincoat closer round his body as if to try to straighten out the creases. When he looked up again it was almost as if he were surprised that Moran was still waiting for an answer.

‘Not if I can help it.’

The tone was belligerent. Moran suppressed a desire to lose his temper. That never did any good with people of Nash’s sort. You had to treat them with at least the minimum of respect, otherwise they clamped up completely and you could be there all night, talking into an empty space.

Garfield snorted. ‘You talk funny, Nash. Where are you from?’ he said. Nash replied, ‘Lots of different places.’

Moran moved round beside the chair. He said, ‘You’re an antique dealer, right?’

‘Uh huh.’

‘Okay,’ said Moran, pointing to the sword. ‘What’s that?’

Nash leaned forward and looked closely at the package.

He smiled. 'A sword?' Garfield unfolded his arms.

'Wise up, smart-arse.'

There was an exchange of glares between the two men and Moran picked up the weapon, turned it over in his hands, then gently replaced it on the desk again.

He said, 'It's a Toledo-Salamanca broadsword, worth about a million bucks.'

The return retort was sharp.

'So?'

'So, you want to hear a theory?'

'Suit yourself.' Moran leaned over, near to Nash's shoulder.

'You went down to the garage to buy this sword from that guy. . . what's his name?'

'I don't know. You tell me.'

Moran straightened again. That goddamn trick only ever worked in the movies. They never fell for it in real life situations.

He said, wearily, 'His name is Iman Fasil and you fought about the price and cut off his head.' Nash laughed out loud.

When he had finished, he said, 'You want to hear another theory? This Fasil was so upset about the lousy wrestling tonight he went down to the garage in a fit of depression - and cut off his own head.'

Moran was irritated to hear Bedsoe laugh behind him. 'That's not funny, Wait.'

Garfield had obviously decided it was time for a jibe. 'You a faggot, Nash?' he sneered. Nash turned and smiled at the officer.

'Why? You cruising for a piece of arse?'

Garfield went crimson and Moran saw his fingers bunch into a fist. The officer stepped forward, then hesitated before saying, 'I'll tell you what happened. You went down to the garage for a blow job and just didn't want to pay for it.'

Nash looked at Moran and then back at Garfield. 'You sick bastard,' he said, his voice laced with contempt. Garfield lunged at him clumsily, from where he stood and Nash only had to move back his head a fraction for the officer's blow to miss. Then a hand flashed out and gripped Garfield's wrist, twisting it away from his body. The officer yelled in pain, pulling Nash to his feet.

Things were getting out of hand and Moran intervened. 'Hey, hey, hey. Cut it out.'

People were staring through the glass from the other room, wondering what the confusion was about. The desk sergeant looked about to come across, then changed his mind at a nod from Moran.

Bedsoecried, 'Wait. Wait.'

Garfield flung another punch which skidded off Nash's shoulder and then found himself rammed, face first, against the glass partition. His nose and mouth were flattened against the screen and a black kid mimicked his distorted features. Some hookers cheered and began stamping their feet. Nash then spun him round.

Moran shouted, 'That's enough.'

He jumped forward, forcing his body between them, his ulcer giving him hell. The winos in the charge cells were shaking the netting and hooting.

'That's enough. Cut it out. God dammit, this isn't a circus.'

'Then why the gorilla?' said Nash. Moran breathed heavily through his nose.

'I said that's enough.'

Nash queried, 'Am I under arrest?'

'Not yet.'

'Then we're through.'

'We're just getting started.'

'Well, for Christ's sake get on with it and stop screwing around. Ask me the questions. . .'

God, thought Moran, it's going to be a long night.

Chapter 9

WHEN THEY RELEASED him the following morning, unable to hold him through lack of evidence, MacLeod felt distinctly ragged. Throughout the night he had stuck to the same story: he was an antique dealer called Nash, who had gone to the Garden to see the wrestling, had become bored with the fight, had used the elevator on the far side of the garage. He hadn't heard anything, nor seen anything out of the ordinary. Since the route from the elevator did not take him through the area where the body had been found they couldn't hold him. Not without more evidence.

MacLeod wondered whether they would put a tail on him, but after three blocks, he was sure that no one was following. They probably thought they had the murder weapon, though he knew they would be puzzled about the lack of blood. A killer might stop to wipe the blade, but would he also smear oil on it afterwards?

The next thing he had to do was retrieve the Samurai sword from the overhead ducting before they decided to go back for another look around. He took a cab to the Garden and went down the ramp. There was someone in a car, but they drove away after a few moments. He went to the ducting and reached up. The sword was still there, with the sheath. He strapped it to his back, then put on his

raincoat.

He was just preparing to leave, when someone in high heels came clipping along the empty aisle. Instinctively, MacLeod ducked behind a pillar, in the near darkness, and waited. It was a woman in her late twenties, early thirties, and there was something about her movements which made him stay hidden. She seemed to be looking for something, her eyes scanning the floor and walls. She went to the place where the body had been found and stared at the spot for a few moments. Then she glanced at the pillar next to it. She stepped up to it and ran her fingers along the corner. The hand stopped and the nails scratched at something. She dipped into her bag and came out with a pair of tweezers and dug into a crack. He saw something which glinted slipped into a plastic bag.

MacLeod knew that she had found the place where the Samurai had been embedded after the fight the previous evening. Who the hell was she? A cop? She held up the plastic bag and clicked on a cigarette lighter, studying the contents. He knew then what she had found: pieces of metal from the blade of his sword: No doubt there had been other fragments on or around the body of Fasil. Perhaps someone had been studying them in a lab while he was undergoing questioning? Surely they could not tell them anything? Or could they?

As she prepared to leave, MacLeod crept around the base of the pillar and something crunched beneath his foot. He cursed, silently. A coke can. Probably the same one he had trodden on the evening before. What the hell was it doing? Following him around?

‘Who’s there?’

Her voice had a tremor to it and MacLeod could see her pale face in the dim light. She looked scared.

‘Is there anyone there?’ she called, her voice echoing in the empty garage.

He kept perfectly still, the coke can still wedged between his foot and the concrete floor. After a while, he heard her footsteps hurrying down the garage. When she reached the base of the ramp she turned again and stared back. Then she was gone, out into the street.

MacLeod hurried after her. Once on the street he looked first left and then not seeing her, right. She was just turning a corner and he raced through the crowds of shoppers. At the corner he almost skidded to a halt. She was immediately beyond it, buying a paper from a newsstand. Then she walked off briskly, crossing the road to the subway.

He tailed her back to her apartment.

That evening, MacLeod returned to where she lived, intending to knock on her door with the excuse of mistaking her apartment for someone else’s, but as he approached the entrance hall, she was just coming out.

She looked very attractive, but he tried not to let that bother him. He stayed close to the wall while she hailed a cab and heard her say to the driver, ‘Take me to P.J. Clarke’s.’

He took the next cab that came along to the same place. When he entered the restaurant, she was sitting at the bar, evidently having just arrived, since there was no drink in front of her. He took a stool about four down from her.

She called to the bartender.

‘Hey, Phil.’

‘Hey, Brenda.’ The young guy behind the bar walked down to her, wiping a glass on a cloth. ‘Usual?’ he said.

The woman called Brenda nodded. ‘Lots of it.’

Phil took down a bottle and began pouring into a long glass. ‘Say when.’

‘When.’

She began drinking. Phil then went to attend MacLeod. He called over his shoulder, “ Scuseme a minute, Brenda.’ Then to MacLeod, ‘ Glenmoran. . .’

‘Right,’ replied MacLeod.

As Phil turned away, MacLeod said softly, ‘Go to the Garden often?’

Phil turned. ‘What did you say?’

Almost simultaneously Brenda said, ‘What did you say?’

MacLeod was amused at the apparent confusion. He didn’t know why. Perhaps, after the previous evening the slightest hint of humour in a situation was grabbed by him for light relief. He didn’t want to analyse it too closely. It just seemed funny.

‘Hum?’ said Brenda. MacLeod took a sip of his drink.

Brenda picked up her bag and walked along the bar to him. ‘What did you say?’

He turned and looked into her eyes. They really were quite remarkable.

‘MadisonSquare Garden - do you go there often?’ She looked a little perplexed and then slightly alarmed. ‘Why?’

‘Basketball - the circus - wrestling.’

She turned as if to go and then halted, facing him again. Someone else had entered the bar and he supposed she felt safer with another person on their side of the bar.

‘Why are you asking me about the Garden? Have you been following me?’

MacLeod smiled. ‘I’d like to walk you home, Brenda.’

She reached into her bag and threw a note on the bar. ‘I can take care of myself,’ she snapped.

Then she strode towards the exit. MacLeod finished his drink in one large swallow and followed her out. He saw her look quickly behind her and then hurry on. MacLeod went in the same direction, weaving through the people in the street.

Someone brushed against his shoulder and said, 'Hey, man?' MacLeod ignored the remark and at the end of the block he stopped and went back to the restaurant. He went up to Phil and ordered another drink. As Phil was pouring it, he said casually, 'Nice-looking woman.'

'Who?'

MacLeod took a sip of his whisky, and nodded towards the door. 'Brenda.'

Phil said - 'Oh sure, Brenda.'

'She, ah, unattached?'

Phil shrugged. 'Who knows? One of the cops down town maybe got his eyes on her.'

'Shework there?'

'Yeah. Some kind of a lab assistant, or somethin' . You know, little glass tubes and bits of body hair. Gives me the creeps when I think of it - know what I mean? Where have those hands been, man? She's okay, though. I like her. . .'

MacLeod nodded, finished his drink, and left.

Chapter 10

IT WAS NIGHT. TheKurgan was cruising in his car through the sleazy New York areas. He liked the scene out there. The pimps, whores, petty criminals: a lost people. Their weaknesses reminded him of his strength. He had killed more people in his long lifetime than were on the streets at that time. It was a profound thought. Still, for all their lack of strength, both physical and spiritual, he preferred the night hawks. He even dressed like them, in worn leather and loose black vest. Dramatic. It suited his Image.

He drifted to the curb to observe them. A girl in hot pants sidled over to the car. She looked about fifteen.

'Want some action, baby. I'm really good,' she murmured.

But he wasn't looking for action. He was merely changing address. He grinned at her. 'When I do, I'll snap.'

Her own false smile disappeared, the muscles in her face loosening. Flaccid. She looked about fifty. Sex and drugs and long, long nights. A fifty-year-old woman in a fifteen-year-old body. His own body was many hundreds of years old. Yet it had not lost that vitality that she seemed to lack. It was still full of energy. She was lost in the darkness of herself.

Not that he, theKurgan, did not have dark areas within him. But he reasoned that everyone had those, mortal or immortal.

Immortal. Soon to be a god, a living god. That surely was the prize for being the only one left? What else could it be? His power was phenomenal now. Once only he remained, why, he would surely have absolute power. Omnipotent. Invincible. God only wise. Then he could reveal himself to the world. There would be no need to remain hidden.

A pusher wandered over to the car.

‘Hey, man, you’re bummin’ my pocket with them eyes.’

‘Yeah? You got something you want to show me?’ The pusher looked nervously around him.

‘Here?’

‘Are you selling, or just strutting?’

The pusher hopped from one foot to the other. He wanted a customer, but it was a bad place to do business. ‘Can’t you. . .?’

‘No, here.’ The Kurgan was enjoying himself. He gunned the engine, as if he were about to pull away from the kerb .

‘Okay, okay,’ said the other, ‘here.’ He opened his hand to reveal a small cellophane packet of white powder.

‘Open it,’ said the Kurgan .

‘You crazy?’

‘I wanna see what shit I’m buying.’ The Kurgan flashed a roll of notes. Greed opened the other man’s eyes wide. He slit the packet and tipped some of the stuff onto his palm. The Kurgan licked his finger as if he were about to dip, then leaned forward and blew hard. The powder and packet scattered, the former now a small white cloud.

He laughed into the distressed face.

The pusher screamed. ‘You fucker . . .’ He kicked the car door savagely and poured out more obscenities. The Kurgan reached through the open window and swallowed the man’s face with his huge hand, throwing him backwards, at the feet of the hooker who had first approached him.

‘Go play hopscotch,’ grinned the Kurgan , and roared away from the kerb .

As he drove along, through the backstreets, he switched on the car radio. The newscaster’s voice filled the vehicle.

‘. . .garage and water from the sprinklers. It also left a man’s decapitated body - lying on the floor, next to his own severed head. . .’ The Kurgan adjusted his studded belt.

‘. . .a head which at this time has no name.’

‘I know his name,’ said the Kurgan , softly. The police had obviously decided to keep Fasil’s identity a secret for the time being. No doubt they were concerned about public alarm, and an unknown person seems less frightening to ordinary people, than someone with a name and a history. It was less easy to identify with an unknown corpse. Most would think it was a gangland killing, which would not concern them or restrict them from going out.

‘And I know who did it,’ sang the Kurgan , softly. The Kurgan ’s vehicle had drifted over to the left side

of the road, but he made no attempt to cross back to the right. Soon a car came towards him, its lights flashing and its horn blaring. The Kurgan hummed softly to himself, maintaining his direction. Just before there would have been a head-on collision the other car skidded and spun out of the way, the horn still going strong.

The Kurgan placed a cassette into the player, filling the car with rock music. Just when he was beginning to enjoy himself, he saw a sign flashing. ANSONIA HOTEL. That would do. No king-sized beds - king-sized fleas more like - but it would do. It was in the right area for him. He was not fussy about temporary accommodation. Suddenly the power failed on the sign and it spluttered for a few moments before coming on again. Someone had switched on an extra appliance. Limited power.

Not a phrase the Kurgan liked. Unlimited power. That was more to his taste. He remembered those, in his past, who professed to have unlimited power. Sorcerers, magicians, wizards. All charlatans. He had dispatched a few of those in his time, too. He had enjoyed killing them. The acts had added to his own prestige amongst those with whom he was living at the time. To scorn the powers of the darkness...

He took his luggage out of the boot and stepped into the drab lobby of the doss-house that called itself a hotel. There was an old black guy with a white beard reading a newspaper by the desk. Behind the desk itself, a young guy who needed at least three showers to remove his surface grime, was flicking peanuts at a singer on the television screen. The sound was off and he seemed to be aiming at the singer's opening and closing mouth.

'A room,' said the Kurgan, interrupting this engrossing activity.

He picked up a pen and signed the register. The desk clerk spun in his chair and studied the name in the book.

'Okay, Mr Victor Kruger - Room 315 - '

'You tell 'im, Kenny,' murmured the old man, not looking up from his paper.

This was ignored. '... and I'm going to hit you for twenty in advance.'

The Kurgan reached into his leather jacket and produced his roll. He peeled off a twenty-dollar bill and tossed it down on the counter. Kenny's eyes were starting. He licked his lips as the roll was replaced in the jacket pocket.

'Er, hey - God - if there's anything you need - you know, broads - blow -', he stuttered, 'just - dial 0.'

Then he placed the sword out of sight but within easy reach.

'Come in,' he growled, hoarsely.

The door opened and in the light from the hall behind, a woman stood. He studied her legs, naked to the thighs. Her breasts were spilling over the tight blouse top. She was chewing on some gum, violently.

'Hi - I'm Candy,' she said, peering through the dimness.

He switched on the light as she closed the door.

'Of course you are,' he said.

She stripped off her clothes as if she were going for a swim, tossing them into a corner. TheKurgan watched her dispassionately.

‘Okay,’ she shrugged. ‘What?’

He slapped the bed. ‘ Poon-tang time, baby.Spread ‘ em.’

‘Just that?’

‘Just that.’

He was disappointed with the results. Perhaps, thought theKurgan , there have been too many?A sea of faces. It had been a long time since the act had been more than a few moments of amusement. The dark area in him seemed to spread. He had to keep it in check, or it would engulf him. Why now? Why did a few minutes with a woman trigger those deeper, inner feelings which had no name and which were the only things he feared on the whole earth? They were like black, ravenous birds within him, carrion crows, eating outwards from that pitch-dense void that ordinary men would call their soul.

‘Do you have any tissues?’ the gum-chewing mouth asked him.

‘Use that rag they call a towel - and then get dressed and get out.’

The girl did as she was told, used to them hating her, afterwards. Oh, they would whine and wheedle for what they wanted beforehand, but they blamed her for having needed it afterwards, when they were spent and empty and like this one - disappointed, the act having failed to live up to their expectations. She pulled on her shorts and blouse and left the room, the money safely in her purse. TheKurgan watched her go and then thought about dressing his scarred body himself. The girl hadn’t questioned the blemishes and marks. No doubt she had had too manyVietnam vets either talk her into the ground with their stories, or run screaming at the wall on being reminded of where they had been.

He remembered a whore he had had inFlorence , at the time of the Borgias . Someone had sliced off her nipples and she had white scars where they used to be. She had hidden them, with her hands, afraid he would laugh. Then, when he had revealed his own scars, she had lowered her hands, thinking him a soul-mate. Of course, he had laughed - but then encouraged her to laugh at him. TheKurgan was not without a sense of humour.

He dressed, quickly, wrapped his sword in a coat and left the room. Kenny, at the desk, said, ‘Going out Mr Kruger?’

‘What does it look like?’

‘ Er- the girl- did you like her?’ He knew what the desk clerk wanted.

‘You got your cut - from her.’ Kenny looked a little aggrieved.‘Yeah, sure. I just wondered. .

TheKurgan left him wondering. He took the car and drove to the building which housed MacLeod’s apartment. There he sat and waited, intending to follow Mr Nash to a suitable site for a duel.Only one. There could be only one. The end was in sight.The Gathering - at last.

MACLEOD LEFT THE restaurant a few moments after his enquiries about Brenda. There did not seem to be too much to worry about. So she was in forensics? And she had a few fragments of his Samurai blade? They would surely mean nothing to her. And what if they did?

He stood outside the door of P.J.'s for a moment, breathing in the soft night air. The city was humming with life. He could feel it pulsing through the sidewalk under his feet. New York, like most capital cities, never fully laid down its head and got a night's sleep.

MacLeod had seen them all: Rome, London, Paris, Moscow maybe Moscow slept? No, there were those who ruled the night, even there. The mighty hearts of the cities were never still, not these days, these nights.

He strode off, down the street, intending to take a short cut back to his apartment. There was a construction site across which he had to walk and as he stepped into the shadows from the scaffolding he regretted not bringing his sword. It was a foolish omission. In the middle of the site, he stopped. He had heard something - a small sound behind him.

Someone was following. It might be a mugger. He was lucky if it was a mugger.

A second later he saw a shape and ducked into the shadows. The figure came on, paused, and looked about uncertainly. MacLeod waited. As she came up alongside him, he reached out and grabbed her, pulling her out of the moonlight.

'Hey. . .', she began, but he put his finger to his lips. 'There's someone else,' he whispered. 'Quiet.'

She did as she was told for a moment, then wrenched herself away from him. It was Brenda.

'There's no one else - what are you trying to do?' she said, in a normal voice. She backed away from him.

The next moment there was a thump, as someone jumped between them, from above. MacLeod anticipated the stroke from the sword and ducked out of the way. The blade struck the scaffolding just above his head and sparks showered his hair. The Kurgan cursed.

'Damn you.'

MacLeod kept moving and the sword slammed into the wall where he had been standing. He could hear Brenda making a peculiar noise.

'Run!' he shouted.

There was a heavy cable at his feet, about a yard in length. He snatched it up and backed away from the Kurgan, swinging the cable in an attempt to ward off the blows. The Kurgan grunted and swung again, catching the cable and almost ripping it from MacLeod's hands.

Brenda was still there. He saw her stoop then she called, 'Catch. Here.'

A metal pipe came through the air and he dropped the cable and caught it, holding it like a sword. The next blow rang against the metal pipe and MacLeod sidestepped. He slammed the pipe into the Kurgan's chest and the big man stopped in his tracks, letting out another grunt.

‘Come,’ said theKurgan , making a beckoning gesture. MacLeod turned and ran, hoping to draw theKurgan away from Brenda. Once she was out of danger, he could look for an escape himself. What a stupid thing - to come out without his sword. They could have settled it now, which was what theKurgan was hoping to do, of course.

MacLeod put a truck between them and theKurgan rained blows on the metal bodywork, in an attempt to hit his adversary. MacLeod rolled under the truck and out the other side, coming up behind theKurgan . He swung the pipe at the skull and theKurgan staggered sideways, dropping his sword and turning to face MacLeod. The Scot struck again, burying the pipe in theKurgan ’s gut. He brought it back for a third blow. TheKurgan parried this with his arm and then gripped the pipe, wrenching it from MacLeod’s grasp.

The big man grinned, twirling the pipe like a drum major’s baton.

‘Now,’ he said.

MacLeod’s legs went from under him as the pipe smashed into his knees. He fell on his back and theKurgan stood over him, still smiling.

‘Nice to see you again, MacLeod.’ He reached down, picked up the Scot and slammed him bodily against the scaffolding. All the wind went out of MacLeod’s lungs and pain shot through his chest. He heard someone shrieking. It was Brenda.

‘Stop it!Stop!’

Why didn’t she run? What was she waiting for? MacLeod slumped forward as theKurgan hit him again. ‘There can be only one!’

He kicked MacLeod in the groin, then stepped away to retrieve his sword. MacLeod snatched up the pipe again, holding it like a bar in front of his face. The sword sent up another shower of sparks and the frustration in theKurgan was evident in the stream of curses that followed. Suddenly there was a wind and the air was full of sound. A light came on, blinding the pair of them for a moment. Over the sound of the rotors above came a voice from a megaphone.

‘You - on the ground - ‘ Where the hell else would we be?thought MacLeod. The helicopter came lower.

‘ . . .separate - now.’

TheKurgan looked at MacLeod and he braced himself, ready for another blow.

‘Put down your weapons,’ said the policeman. Brenda then stepped forward, into the light. ‘Put your hands on your head.’

TheKurgan lowered his sword. ‘Another time, Highlander.’ He nodded.

‘It’s not hard to find you.’

‘Hey!’ cried the voice from above.

'I'm not going anywhere,' said MacLeod, as the Kurgan disappeared into the shadows.

'Hold it right there. Come back here,' cried the cop. .

MacLeod began running in the opposite direction to the Kurgan, leaping over stacks of pipes. He could hear the chopper lifting again, its searchlight trying to pick him out of the night. He kept on running for a while, then realized that Brenda was following him. He could hear her gasping and stumbling some way behind. He stopped and waited. As she reached him he grabbed her.

She gasped, '- wait a minute. Who in the name of God was that?' She paused to catch her breath. 'He called you Highlander. And what did he mean - "there can be only one"? Only one what?'

'Listen lady. You almost. . .'

'I want to know. . .?'

'Shut up!' he was angry with her. 'Don't you ever follow me again. '

She stuck out her jaw. 'You followed me first. What is this? Macho time? You quit following me and I'll think about it.'

She was right. But he wasn't going to say so.

'You only have one life,' he said, in a quieter tone now. 'If you value it - go home - and don't try to see me again.'

She looked at him with mock innocent eyes and said in a coquettish voice, 'Yes, you can.'

He was taken aback for a moment by this sudden change in attitude. 'Can what?'

'You can take me home. You asked me in the bar and I'm accepting.'

He smiled and shook his head. He knew what her game was and he wasn't going to fall for it.

'So you can pump me? I think you know too much already. It's enough.'

'You - interest me.'

'Look, I'll tell you again. While you stick around me you're in great danger. I can take care of myself - I can't take care of you too. It's nothing to do with being macho - it's to do with being sensible. If you were a six-foot male boxer with a gun in your hand, I'd tell you the same thing. Go home. Leave me alone.'

'Well, walk me to the subway.'

'That I don't mind doing.' He took her arm. 'Wouldn't you prefer a cab?'

'Either. '

They found their way out of the construction site on the far side and MacLeod hailed a cab. She said nothing more and he watched the driver pull away, taking her into the heart of the city. Then MacLeod

began to walk back to his own apartment, keeping a wary eye on the alleys and dimly lit arcades which might harbour his old enemy.

Back in his apartment he made himself a cup of coffee and took the Samurai sword from its hiding place. He took an oily rag and began to wipe the blade, noting the edge and where it had been chipped by the concrete pillar. Then he took out a whetstone and began to hone the edge, back to its original sharpness. It was a magnificent weapon, two-and-a-half thousand years old and still unmatched by any modern equivalent. He had inherited it from his friend and mentor a long time ago.

The telephone rang, interrupting his thoughts. He let it ring. It would not be Rachel and she was the only one he wanted to hear from, if anyone. After a while the ringing ceased. He moved around the apartment, collecting his thoughts, pausing to lift an African antique statuette, weighing it in his hand. It was of a bad god, a squat little demon with bulbous lips and a leer that told of secret deaths in the night. There were spirits of healing, and devils for killing. Devils. He had been accused, once, of witchcraft. Of having the Devil in him.

Chapter 12

CONNER MACLEOD LISTENED to the skirl of the pipes, expecting them to fade from him at any time as death overtook him. The wound in his stomach still burned, but strangely he seemed to be growing stronger, not weaker. Still, they said that that happened just before death.

The senses flared into a final high flame, before dying. A last mean trick from the physical side of a man, before the spirit was thrown out, into the ether. Yes, that was it. A heightening of the senses, nothing more. A blaze that would soon be snuffed by the invisible hand of God.

He opened his eyes. Kate was still there, sitting, head bowed, on a stool by the door. The dawn's rays were just beginning to strike the earth-packed floor. MacLeod could smell woodsmoke from the fires in the village, and fish, yes, fish, being roasted for breakfast.

The sunlight crept forward, as the great ball rose up from behind the hills. The rays reached his hand, warmed it with their touch. Was he going to die? The wound had been mortal. No one could survive a wound like that.

Yet? Yet he felt hungry. With a hole in his stomach through which you could push a doorpost, he felt hungry. He lifted the blanket and peered beneath. There was a clotted swab covering his wound. It had stuck to the skin. He peeled it off.

The dark blood had congealed around and over the hole. He scratched at it, gingerly, and it came away in flakes and chunks. When most of it was gone he could see that the wound had closed. There was a pinched depression, like a second navel, but nothing more. He felt around his back. The same there.

And the pain had gone completely.

He was going to live.

'Kate. Kate.'

She stirred, opened her eyes.

'Kate,' he said. 'I'm well, lass. I'm not going to die.'

She sat bolt upright and her expression was one of joy for second only. It was soon replaced by a look of fear.No, terror. She looked terrified.

‘But - how - ?’

‘God has seen fit to save me,’ he replied, sitting up.

‘The wound has healed.’

Kate was up then, and backing towards the door. ‘God has healed many men,’ she said. ‘I’ve seen them recover from some terrible wounds - but noneso terrible as the one you suffered Conner MacLeod - and never in a single night.’

He held out his arms, hardly hearing what she was saying.

‘Kate, I’m well. Come to me.’

‘Never,’ she said, emphatically: Then she ran from the hut, towards the tavern where the men had gone the night before. They would still be there talking over the battle and drinking hard. MacLeod dressed himself and followed her.

When he stepped outside the hut, the warmth of the sun hit him fully in the chest and he felt grateful to be alive. The light shone on the loch, making it look like hammered silver. Hills, with their rounded shoulders, which always seemed to huddle together in the night hours, had parted again to reveal high valleys. The smell of warm milk and cattle straw came from the cowsheds nearby. All this had nearly been taken from him by that dark giant the day before. But he had thwarted death, with God’s help of course.

He made his way towards the tavern, avoiding treading on the chickens that continually tried to cross his path. When he reached the alehouse, he stood in the doorway. He could hear Dugal talking, excitedly.

‘You saw the wound, Angus. He should have died.’

Then Kate: ‘I say he’s got the Devil in him.’

Were these his kinsfolk? Talking about him as if he were some stranger from an unknown land, come among them to cause havoc? He stepped through the doorway. Instantly, all chatter died away.

‘What’s this?’ he said. ‘Have you no greeting for a kinsman that fought beside you in battle? The wound has healed. That’s all I know. Father Rainey’s prayers were stronger than you thought.’

Father Rainey, himself drinking in the tavern, crossed himself at these words. Father Rainey too? Not the good father, surely? Conner walked to the table at which Dugal and Angus were sitting and took a seat. No one looked at him or offered him anything. The silence grew uncomfortable.

Then Dugal blurted out, ‘Drinking with us, are you?’

Conner said, ‘What’s the matter, Dugal ?’

‘You,’ came the reply.

‘Why?’

‘Talking and breathing and last night, all but a corpse.’

Conner looked around the ring of faces. They were all hostile. One or two of the other clansmen had stood up and were leaving.

Dugalsaid, ‘How did you manage that, Conner MacLeod?’

A fury began to build up inside Conner. These were supposed to be his friends, his kinsmen. He had expected them to be happy at his recovery. Instead they were treating him like some Fraser that had wandered into the wrong village by accident. It wasn’t right.

‘Would you rather I was dead?’

Father Rainey had come to the table now and stood beside Kate, who hadn’t moved since Conner had entered. Her face had twisted into a mask of loathing. His own, sweet Kate was full of hate for him.

She said, ‘It’s not natural.’ She touched his arm, tentatively. ‘He’s in league with Lucifer.’

There was a murmur from the others.

‘Don’t say that,’ cried Conner, distressed.

Dugalstood up, leaning over Conner. ‘I’ll say it - you’ve the Devil in you.’

Conner leapt to his feet and faced his cousin. ‘We’ve been kinsmen twenty years,’ he cried. ‘We grew up together. See those hills out there,’ he pointed through the doorway. ‘We ran those hills together, looking for eagle’s eggs. We hunted the hare. These hands’, he opened his palms in front of Dugal’s face, ‘pulled you from the loch when you fell through the ice. Are you saying these hands are damned - the same hands that gave you your life?’

Dugal’s eyes burned with hate. ‘Conner MacLeod was my kinsman. I don’t know who you are.’

Father Rainey made a sound and buried his face in his own hands. Conner could see that the priest was in torment.

‘Father, surely you must see how wrong they are?’ The priest murmured into his palms.

‘What?’ Father Rainey looked up.

‘I don’t know. I prayed for no miracles. I asked the Lord to give your soul safe passage. It would have been wrong to ask for your life - for the life of Conner MacLeod. The wound was mortal - I saw it with my own eyes. Only one man has risen after being so close to death, and you are not He - you are. . .’ He stopped, looked confused and then turned away.

Conner was disgusted with his kinsmen. ‘What fools you all are,’ he said, not disguising his contempt from them.

Angus had not said anything, all this while, and he then appealed to the older man.

‘Angus?’

Then the chief spoke. ‘You’d better go, Conner.’

Conner smashed a fist down on the table in his frustration. They were not going to drive him out. He had done nothing wrong. Nothing. They were a pack of superstitious fools and he was damned if he was going anywhere.

‘I’m not going anywhere,’ he said, voicing his last thought.

‘No?’ said Dugal, quietly.

‘No. . .’ He would have said more but Dugal smashed a pot over his head and he fell to the floor, stunned by the blow. He felt himself being lifted beneath the arms and dragged through the doorway, out into the village square. He was dimly aware of people coming from their huts - the women and children, all come out to stare at the man with the Devil in his soul. They handled him roughly, strapping something to his shoulders so that he could not move his arms. When he came round, fully, he realized it was a yoke.

He looked up to see Kate standing over him. Her face still wore that ugly mask.

She kicked him hard in the ribs. ‘Kill him!’ she shrieked.

Her eyes were like bright candle-flames. There was a lust within them - a lust for blood. This was a Kate he had never seen before: a Kate that lived deep within the one he knew. If the Devil was in anyone at that moment, it was in her. He could see that reason was pointless. She was beyond reach of words. Her mind was not her own.

‘Kate, Kate, what have you done to yourself?’

‘Not me,’ she hissed. ‘You. I shared my bed. . .’

So that was it. She was afraid she had slept with the Devil. That the Devil’s seed might be sown within her. Looking at her eyes, he could almost believe it was.

A villager yanked him to his feet and they began to punch and kick him, with Kate clawing at his face and shrieking like some demented beast. Dugal was not taking part in this but he was jeering, almost as if he were enjoying the spectacle of his cousin being torn to pieces. Were they all mad? Only Father Rainey was calling for them to stop, but the priest did nothing physical to help him.

They pushed him forwards then and the women and children began to stone him, the rocks thudding into his body. He tried to run, staggering up a slope, but they followed him, still raining stones on him, until Father Rainey shouted, ‘No, not that way.’

Not that way? What, not a Christian martyr’s death? Had they something else in mind for him?

They grabbed him by the clothes again and began to drag him down a track, towards the edge of the village. Then he saw it. The stake with the faggots piled beneath. Fear made his legs buckle but they yanked him to his feet again. He tried to lash out at them with his legs, the terror in his heart giving him new strength. They clubbed him to a standstill.

‘ Dugal!’ he cried. ‘ Dugalhelp me.’

His cousin’s face was before him but there was no pity in its expression. Dugal raised a fist, ready to hit him. He stared into his cousin’s eyes.

‘ Dugal?’

Compassion had fled, run away somewhere and hidden itself in the heather. It would not show itself that day, not to these people who only wanted to hear the crackle of the flames, smell the stink of roasting flesh, hear the cries of the Devil as he got a taste of his own medicine.

Then Angus was beside Dugal , gripping his wrist, preventing the blow from landing on Conner’s face. Within all this madness, a sliver of sanity was still buried, like a splinter, in the mind of the chief of the clan. Angus hauled Dugal away.

‘He’s your cousin, man.’

Dugalpushed Angus away and a villager took the opportunity of confronting Conner. He butted the yoked man in the face. Then again, breaking his nose.

‘Jesus, God,’ cried Conner, in his distress.

Angus jumped in front of Conner and pushed the villager away. There were shouts of dissent and the people began to make threatening gestures towards the greybearded man. He stood his ground, glaring at them. Angus was no mean fighter and crazed as they were, it would be a very courageous soul that dared to brook the chief.

Dugalcried, ‘No, Angus. . .’

‘Quiet!’ shouted the chief.

Then again, to the crowd, ‘Quiet! Ah’llbreak the arm of the next man that speaks.’

The jeers gradually subsided. The atmosphere remained tense. Conner got up off his knees, with difficulty, and stood swaying by Angus.

The chief shouted, ‘They’ll be no burning here today.’ Dugal cried, ‘What then?’

‘We’ll banish him,’ said Angus.

Katecame rushing forward, fury in her face. She tried to claw her way past Angus, who held her back with both hands.

‘No -‘ she struggled with him, - burn him.’

Angus pushed her back, into the arms of the villagers, but she shot forward again, as if they had propelled her.

‘Angus - burn him?’ It seemed to Conner as if she were almostpleading, as if she were somehow being cheated of something she felt she had a right to. When a woman like Kate felt she had been wronged she would use any weapon at her disposal to get her revenge. She would call it justice, but it was revenge.

The Devil had disguised himself in her beloved Conner's form and had taken her, laughing at her gullibility, filling her with his demon seed.

'Can you walk?' said Angus to Conner.

The highlander looked with disgust upon his clan. 'I'll bloody well walk out of here.'

Father Rainey crossed himself. There was relief in his eyes. Conner wondered whether the priest could really have stood by and watched them burn a man.

'Go. Get out of here, quickly,' said Angus. 'Go while you still can.'

Conner stared into the chief's face. The older man looked weary, spent. Wars had not worn him down over the years, so much as the last few hours.

'Goodbye Angus. I'll not forget you.'

Angus nodded, dumbly. Conner then stumbled away, up the path that led into the mountains. He wanted to put as much distance between himself and his clan as possible before the night hours, when some of them would surely come hunting for him. The yoke was a great hindrance. At the top of the hill, he turned and took one last look, then continued along the track.

By nightfall he had found himself a cave and worked his bonds loose by rubbing against the rough edges of a rock. The yoke eventually fell from his shoulders and he threw it savagely down the hillside. Then he curled up, without a fire, inside the cave, to get some rest. In the middle of the night he woke to the baying of dogs, but they were a long way off to the west and he settled back down to a troubled sleep.

When morning came, he travelled south, eating a few roots to sustain him. After a long, arduous journey he reached a croft outside which was a lass milking a cow. He went to her.

'Can you spare some of that milk? I have no money, but I can work.'

The girl looked a little frightened and he guessed it was his appearance that was bothering her. She called out, 'Father?'

An old man came out of the croft, holding a hand axe. 'Whut?'

'This man wants some milk.'

'I can work,' said Conner. 'I'm not begging.'

The old man looked him up and down. 'Where' re ye from?'

'My name's Conner MacLeod, from Glenfinnan in the north.'

'A MacLeod, are ye? And on the road.'

Conner did not want to frighten them with talk of witchcraft, so he said, 'I wounded a man - a fight over a woman. I was drunk.'

The old man's face stiffened. 'Ye'll find nothing to drink here - except the milk maybe, if ah've a mind to

give ye some.’ He seemed to be studying Conner’s build. Conner stood up straight, filling his chest with air. ‘Can you chop wood?’ said the other.

‘I can.’

The axe was flung at his feet, the blade burying itself in the turf. No more words were said and Conner made his way to the woodpile, stacked at the side of the croft and began splitting logs. A few minutes later the lass brought him a beaker of milk and some oatcakes.

‘There’ll be porridge, after, when you’ve finished,’ she said. Her blue eyes were clear and innocent. She smiled and he returned the gesture of friendship.

‘Thank you. You’re. . . you’re a fine-looking lass,’ he blurted.

She put her hands on her shapely hips. ‘Would you be fighting over me, next, Mr MacLeod?’

He laughed. ‘I’ve done enough fighting. I’ve a mind to be a farmer now. I’m looking for a quiet life.’

She nodded, then, after a long pause asked candidly, ‘Was she pretty? This woman. . .’

Conner replied, ‘On the outside, she was bonny enough. But we’re not always what we appear to be, from our looks.’

Her expression became serious. ‘That’s true, Mr MacLeod.’

He drained the beaker and then asked her name. ‘Heather. Heather McDonald.’

He handed her the beaker. ‘Then I thank you, Heather McDonald, for your hospitality.’

Over a more substantial meal, later, in the croft, Heather asked casually, ‘Will you be staying a while?’

Her father looked at her sharply and then at Conner. He said nothing however, but continued to spoon his food into his mouth. Conner took this as a sign that the old man would not be displeased, or at least would make no objection to his staying.

‘If I can be of use,’ he said.

Heather’s face broke into a smile. ‘Oh,’ she said, ‘I think we can find some use for him, can’t we, Father?’

‘Aye,’ said the old man. ‘Ah’ll put ma mind to it but.’

Chapter 13

BEFORE THE OLD man died, three years after Conner had first arrived at the croft, he taught the young man the art of his former trade as a blacksmith. Conner then went to work in a nearby village, to supplement their income, at the local forge.

The death of McDonald hit Heather very hard and it was over a year before her grief subsided enough for them to begin living a normal life once more. Conner himself missed the taciturn old Scot, but he had found something with Heather that had made his life a pleasant experience. They were not blissfully

happy - things were too hard for such a state - but they loved each other and, more important still, they liked and respected each other.

They were comfortable enough not to need words when they were unnecessary and able to feel that silence could be shared as well as empty talk. They fought, too, over certain issues, each showing an independence of spirit without which a man or a woman wears the yoke of the other.

One fine summer day, Conner was just finishing his work at the forge. His busy right hand hammered at a bright shoe, fresh from the charcoal fire, until it was shaped to the hoof of the carthorse awaiting it. He took the off-hind leg of the beast between his own, making soothing noises to the animal to keep it still, then pressed the still-glowing iron to its hoof. The strong-smelling odour of the smoke assailed his nostrils. He dunked the shoe in a bucket of water, waited until the steam had subsided and the hissing had stopped, before nailing it into place.

Looking up, he saw Heather coming through the village to meet him. They would walk home together, through the glen. It was something he enjoyed, their strolls together. She took such a delight in the natural scene and the parts that made it whole. He found such artless joy so endearing and it filled his heart to the brim. He hoped nothing would ever happen to spoil such moments.

Heather had something in her hands and she held it up as she approached him.

‘Pie and ale. Do you want it?’

He slapped the shire on the rump and it clopped forward to where its master stood, a few paces away.

‘Aye,’ he called. ‘That I do.’

When she reached him, he lifted her off her feet and swung her round in a tight embrace.

She punched him on the shoulder. ‘You filthy cooser, you’re all muck and muscle.’

‘Aye, my bonny. The way you like it.’ He kissed her hard.

‘Put me down, you cloutie,’ she said.

He frowned. ‘Don’t call me that, Heather. I’m no a devil.’

She touched his cheek, obviously surprised that he was fashed.

‘I’m - sorry, Heather. I was thinking of something else.’

He put her down and went to the rainbarrel to dunk his head. The water was cool and by the time he had dried himself, his former fears had fled. He took her by the hand and accepted the bottle of ale, swilling it down as he walked. She then passed over the pie.

They walked up the path leading to the croft with him munching on the crust and trying to tell her about the morning’s work. Halfway to the top of the slope he swept her off her feet and rolled in the grass, pulling her to him behind a rock.

‘Conner MacLeod, what are you doing?’ He grinned at her.

‘Oh, oh, oh,’ she cried, but stroked his hair as if he were a puppy. ‘In the open, withall the world to see.’

‘There’s nane but the hoggies,’ he said, indicating some sheep nearby, ‘and they’re not looking.’

She laughed and kissed him. They began to move, rubbing against each other, through their clothes. Heather began to breathe heavily.

‘You can do that to me forever, if you like, my Lord.’

It was the “forever” she wanted an answer to. He buried his head between her small breasts and she held it there, tightly.

‘Will you, Conner? Will you?’

‘Aye blossom, I will . . .’

They were interrupted by the sound of a horse’s hooves and suddenly something went flying over the top of the pair of them. The horseman reined his mount and wheeled, to look down on them.

‘Hello,’ said the stranger, brightly.

They stared at him in amazement. He had on a wide brimmed hat, with a high plume that waved gently in the breeze. Over his shoulders was a cloak of peacocks’ feathers, the colours of which flashed in the morning sunlight. A scarlet waistcoat, black satin breeks and high leather boots completed his attire. In the broad belt was a short sword the like of which Conner had never seen before. It had a white, ornate hilt, a third the length of the blade.

‘Greetings!’ cried the rider and swept his hat off to Heather in a gallant flourish. ‘I am Juan Sanchez Villa-Lobos Ramirez, Chief Metallurgist to King Charles the Fifth of Spain.’

The incongruity of his dress with his surroundings suddenly struck the pair of them as very amusing and they laughed in unison. The man looked at them sternly enough for them to cease.

‘I’m at your service,’ he said.

Heather turned to Conner. ‘Who..?’

Conner jumped to his feet. ‘What do you want?’

Ramirez pointed straight at Conner’s chest. ‘You.’

The way in which he said it sent a shiver down Conner’s spine.

‘You’re Conner MacLeod?’

‘Maybe I am and maybe. . .’

‘You are Conner MacLeod.’ Conner said nothing. It was not a question this time.

The Spaniard continued. ‘You were wounded in battle five years ago and driven from your village,

Glenfinnan .’

Heather said, ‘Conner?’

The highlander took her gently by the wrist. ‘Heather, go up to the croft.’

She looked at him defiantly. ‘I’ll stay right here.’

‘Do as I say woman ,’ he said, fiercely.

Her arm went rigid beneath his grasp. He had never spoken to her in that tone of voice before, not even when they had quarrelled . Nor had he called her ‘woman.’ He saw the hurt in her eyes.

‘Heather - there are some things it’s better for you not to know.’

A summer storm was gathering over them now and the valley had darkened. Heather glanced at Ramirez and then back at Conner.

‘I’ll go if you ask me to,’ she said.

‘Please Heather?’

She walked away then, striding past Ramirez on his horse and shooting him a look which would have shrivelled him to nothing had the wish behind it been fulfilled.

He smiled at her and touched his hat. When she was out of sight Ramirez reached down with his arm.

‘Come up behind me,’ he said.

Conner hesitated for a moment, then accepted the hand. The horse with the double load began to walk up the slope and past the croft, with Conner clutching the stranger Ramirez and getting a mouthful of peacocks’ feathers every time it stumbled. Who was this foreigner, thought Conner? A Spaniard with a funny handful of names, aye, but what did he want? He was a buffoon, who dressed in the clothes of a madman, but Conner sensed that beneath the gay, flamboyant dress there was a man with strength, both physical and spiritual. There was a will of steel, and a sense of purpose.

‘Where are we going?’ he asked. ‘Up.’

‘Why?’

‘To show you who you are.’

What does that mean, thought Conner. I know who I am. I’m Conner MacLeod, of the clan MacLeod, from Glenfinnan . What else was there to know?

What secrets about himself could the stranger reveal that he, Conner, did not already know?

‘I know who I am - a man, like you.’

‘A man, yes. Like me, yes. But not like other men. We are different, MacLeod. Surely you feel that?’

Doesn't everyone feel themselves to be special in some way? He said as much.

Ramirez replied, 'You should have died, MacLeod. You should be dead. Doesn't that bother you in any way?'

'I try not to think about it. It was a long time ago.'

'You should think about it. It is the essence of your existence.'

The stranger's replies were intriguing but unsatisfying. Perhaps even frightening. If he was not like other men, then he was like something else. What?

'I've no devil in me,' he said. 'I'm not the spawn of Hell.'

Ramirez laughed. 'Is that what they told you? No, MacLeod, not Hell.'

'Then what?'

'Who knows? I don't have all the answers. One in every thousand is born with a hair lip. Or a cast in the eye. One man or woman, in every million is born a genius. Who knows why? I don't pretend to have an audience with God.'

'And?'

'And one in every fifty million is born like you and I, with a special gift, which comes to flower within us at random points within our lives.'

'One in every fifty million?'

'I chose that number because it sounded large. I don't really know the real figure. You ask too many questions. You must wait.'

Overhead the dark thunderclouds were moving in like a floodtide. Ramirez glanced up at them.

'Not the spawn of Hell,' he murmured, 'but there is one of us who might fit that description.'

'What?' asked Conner.

'All in good time,' was the reply.

Ramirez took him up, to a high point on the hill. There was a tall rock there, a tor, onto which they stepped from the side of the mountain after leaving the horse to graze. Thunder rumbled overhead and a qualm went through Conner. What was he doing, here on this high place, with a storm impending? Who was this Ramirez? What did he want?

'Shouldn't we be sheltering,' he said to Ramirez, 'instead of exposing ourselves like this?'

'There's a storm coming.'

As if to confirm his remark there was a flash on the far side of the valley, followed by a crash of thunder.

‘Not likely,’ said the Spaniard. ‘I’ve been waiting for this for some weeks. I watched it come up from the south, this morning. Now, I want you to stand with your arm above your head.’

Aware of the danger of such an action Conner turned to jump back onto the hillside. Ramirez drew his peculiar-looking sword.

‘You’ll do it, or I’ll cut you down where you stand.’

He flicked out his arm and Conner reached up to feel a small slit in his vest. Ramirez raised his eyebrows.

‘Eh?’ he said. The blade flashed by Conner’s cheek. He felt the coldness of the steel, but this time there was no cut.

‘Arm up,’ ordered the Spaniard. Conner did as he was told.

A few seconds later, lightning forked out of the sky and found, in Conner’s arm and body, a rod through which it could earth itself. Conner was alive with static electricity. It crackled around and through his body making his clothes smoke and lighting up his whole being with dancing, arcing flashes. Every nerve jangled. He was vibrating, vibrant. Evanescent colours snaked before his eyes. Transient white flares exploded in his brain. He could see the hills breathing, hear the Earth suck wind into its lungs. The valley pulsed below him, the mighty hearts of the mountains pounded out a beat that timed with the rhythms of blood in his temple.

‘The sensation you’re feeling,’ cried Ramirez, ‘is the Quickening.’

The sky expanded and lanced, and lanced again. Conner’s mind rang with a single phrase—the quick and the dead. The quick - and the dead.

He fell to the earth at the end of the charge. He felt weak at first, but then, by degrees stronger, revitalised.

‘Who are you?’ he whispered, hoarsely. The bolt of lightning that had struck him should have left him a charred lump on the pinnacle of the rock. Instead it had filled him with a new kind of strength. He climbed to his feet and the lightning struck again tearing the breath from his lungs.

Ramirez shouted, ‘We are the same, MacLeod.’

The rain came down, lashing at Conner’s body. Thunder crashed through the heavens.

‘We are brothers,’ came the cry.

Chapter 14

BRENDA WYATT WAS not a woman who permitted the intrusion of strange events into her life, without making some effort to discover just what the hell was going on. There was a steely determination about her character which made most men duck for cover. Except for those like Bedsoe, who were either masochists or intending to run once she turned and beckoned.

The morning after the swordfight on the construction site, Brenda was dressing herself thoughtfully, before going into the laboratory. Her mind swam with questions. What the hell were two grown men

doing, fighting with a weapon that was as out of date as snuff boxes? It seemed they wanted to kill each other. Why didn't they just buy revolvers and shoot it out, like any other respectable gangsters?

Yet, somehow, this MacLeod was not of the gangster mould. Oh, sure, she could be wrong. She'd been wrong before about people, but . . . oh, hell, what was the use of guessing? Perhaps they were just a couple of nuts, escaped from the asylum? The big one - Jesus, yes - he looked maniac enough to fit into any psycho ward. If she could get a look at that file on Nash . . . Brenda pulled on her tights. Her pet cat looked on, flexing its claws.

'You dare,' warned Brenda. 'It's the only pair you haven't laddered.' She threw a pillow at the animal and it slunk out looking disgusted.

At lunch time, she left the lab and went up to Frank Moran's office. Moran was on the phone.

'Yeah? Well there's not a hell of a lot I can do about it, pal.'

He gestured for Brenda to take the chair, raising his eyes to heaven. She smiled.

Moran put his hand over the mouthpiece of the phone. 'You see what I'm up against?'

She arched an eyebrow. Moran said, 'His Vietnamese neighbour ate his dog.' The hand came away and Moran sighed an 'Ah' into the instrument.

As he was talking, Brenda leaned over the desk, looking at a file. She lifted the corner of the cover. Moran's hand came out.

'That's confidential. . . ' Then back into the phone, 'Yeah, yeah. Well, I'm sorry, what else can I say? Dog is a delicacy out there. They keep cows as pets. You eat beef, don't you?'

The conversation went on, and eventually Moran put the phone down.

'How are you? How's things over at Forensics?'

'Dull,' she replied.

'How about some lunch?'

'That's a good idea.'

Moran said, 'Who pays?'

She shrugged. 'You know it's my turn - or you wouldn't have asked.'

He laughed. 'And you wouldn't have come up here if you didn't want something? What is it?'

She gave him a lopsided smile. 'Frank, sometimes I despair of your faith in human nature. I came to give, not to receive.'

He gave her a disbelieving look and she put on her innocent expression. She said, 'The hairs in the Moretti case - '

‘Ah huh?’

‘They matched up.’

He slammed a fist into his palm. ‘What did I tell you? Hah. Right again, Moran.’

He held open the door for her and she walked through. When they were halfway across the office, Brenda cried, ‘Oh damn, I left my purse.’

‘What?’

‘You go on ahead, Frank, I’ll meet you outside.’

‘Okay.’ He called across the office. ‘Garfield. Brenda and I are going to lunch.’ Then he walked through the outer doors. Brenda went back into his office and opened the file on his desk. It was not the one she wanted. She looked around, quickly. There was a stack of them on top of the cabinet. She took them down and flicked through them. The Nash file was the third one down. Opening it up, she was confronted with a picture of MacLeod.

‘Highlander,’ she murmured, ‘alias Russell Nash.’ She flicked through the other documents and then replaced the file. The phone rang on the desk. That would probably be Frank, calling from downstairs to find out where she was. She let it ring and rushed out of the office.

When she arrived downstairs, Frank said, ‘What kept you?’

‘Oh, I had to make a call. Sorry.’

He nodded. ‘Well, I tell you what, I’m going for the lobster today. Can you stand it?’

‘Not puppy dog?’ she queried. ‘I understand it’s all the fashion in downtown restaurants at the moment.’ He made a face at her.

While Brenda was doing her investigating, the object of her enquiries was himself doing some research - into her background. He had been to the public records office at City Hall and spent the morning poring over worthless information. One small interesting piece had still to be followed up. Her father, Peter Wyatt, had been (still was?) interested in ancient weapons.

MacLeod went to the library and picked up the fiche catalogue. He took out the appropriate fiche and put it into the viewer. Wendell. Williams. Ah, Wyatt - a whole string of them. But not Peter Wyatt. Someone more interesting: Brenda J Wyatt. ‘A Metallurgical History Of Ancient Sword-Making.’

MacLeod went to the shelf indicated by the code on the fiche. There were two copies. He took one out, noting with interest the photograph of a slightly younger looking Ms Wyatt on the dustcover.

He took the book back to his apartment and began reading it. A quarterway through the first chapter, he raised his eyes from the page. The last thing he had read was: . . . the balance of the weapon. . . He recalled a conversation that had taken place five centuries ago.

‘Sometimes, MacLeod,’ Ramirez had said, ‘the sharpest blade is not enough.’ He had taken his own blade out of its sheath and put it across one finger.

‘B-a-l-a-n-c-e-‘

In the tropical fish tank, one of the guppies disturbed the surface of the water with a flick of its tail.

Chapter 15

RAMIREZ PULLED ON the oars and the boat slid easily over the still waters of the loch. Conner, still baffled by the Spaniard’s intentions and not fully convinced of his reasons for seeking him out, was wondering why they were out there. More lightning? The sky was clear and as blue as a kingfisher. How far could he trust this glib intruder? Well today he had his own sword. If this Spaniard tried more of his tricks, he would need more than a well-balanced blade to save him.

Conner recalled, not without a twinge of pique, how smoothly Ramirez had worked himself into Heather’s good graces. She liked the man. The previous evening he had sat by the peat fire and told her stories, of strange people and foreignlands, that had had the eyes starting out of her head. She had been hypnotized by his soft, magnetic voice and gestures. His manners she had found charming. Never mind that he had tried to have Conner fried to a crisp. He was a charming man.

Still, it was a good day. He stood up and surveyed the scenery, studying the way the pine forests swept down to the edge of the loch, and the snowy tips of the tallest mountains. A good day.

‘Watch it . . .’ Ramirez was rocking the boat, gently. ‘Balance. . .’ said the other.

Conner cried, ‘I don’t like boats.’ He gripped the gunwhales with both hands.

‘Why not?’ enquired his companion.

‘I don’t like water. I’m a man, not a fish.’

Ramirez sighed. ‘And you complain endlessly.’

From beneath his peacock-feather cloak, the Spaniard drew a silver box. He opened the lid and took a pinch of powder, sniffing it.

‘Here,’ he said, offering some to Conner.

Conner glowered at him. ‘You look - you act like a woman, you stupid haggis.’

Ramirez nodded. ‘Haggis? What is haggis?’

‘A sheep’s stomach stuffed with meat and barley.’

‘And what do you do with it?’

Conner replied scathingly, ‘You eat it.’

A shudder went through his companion and the man took another sniff of his ochre powder. ‘How revolting,’ he said. Then his head went back and he gave a tremendous sneeze. The boat rocked violently, almost tipping Conner into the water. The Scot panicked and tried to sit down but the craft was rolling so much it was all he could do to maintain his present position.

‘Be still, for God’s sakes,’ he cried. ‘You’ll tip us over.’

‘So?’

‘So, I can’t swim, you Spanish peacock.’

Ramirez picked up the oars and began to row. He looked at Conner thoughtfully, before replying, ‘I’m not really Spanish. I was born Egyptian.’ Conner fought to keep his feet.

He shouted, ‘You said you were from Spain.’ Ramirez declined to reply.

Conner screamed, ‘You’re a liar.’

‘And you,’ said Ramirez, the Egyptian-Spaniard, ‘have the manners of a goat. You smell like a dung-heap and have no knowledge, whatsoever, of your potential. NOW!’

He tipped the boat well over to the lee. ‘Get out,’ he said.

Conner felt himself falling overboard and his fear of the water made him claw at the air as if to find a safety-hold there. When he hit the surface, the coldness of the loch drove the air out of his lungs. He breathed in. Water.

He came to the surface and screamed at Ramirez, who was rowing easily towards the shore. ‘Help!’

He went under again, thrashing and kicking. Green water went past his eyes - and bubbles - lots of white bubbles from his struggles. Again he rose, the panic in him still working his limbs like threshers.

‘Help. Help me. I’m drowning.’

Ramirez’s words floated back, lazily. ‘You can’t drown, you fool.’

Conner started to sink again.

Ramirez shouted, ‘You’re immortal.’

Conner gulped down water and slowly sank to the bottom of the loch, the murky fluid getting colder and colder. Fish, unimpressed and not in the least curious, swam by him. He touched the primal sediment on the bottom and it came up in clouds, obscuring his vision. Then the fish became interested. The stir he was causing was uncovering interesting scraps of food. There were rocks on the bottom. He clutched at one and pushed himself upwards. He reached the surface again, bobbed, and then went down, without taking a breath. This time he did not go all the way down to the bottom, but floated somewhere midway. The current began to take him along and after a while, though there was a pain in his lungs, he realized that they were not going to explode. His head was clear. He felt - alive.

I must be dying slowly, he thought. I’m light-headed. My mind has gone onto another plane. My spirit has left its shell. That wasn’t so bad. He had thought dying would be a painful thing. Yet, it was just like going to sleep with a bad cold in the chest. That was all. No real agony.

He clutched at some underwater reeds when they came within reach and pulled himself along the bottom, towards the shore. Maybe he wasn’t dead? Maybe people didn’t actually die from drowning? Perhaps that’s what everyone believed would happen and they died of fear instead?

Fear stopped their hearts. Actually, you could breathe under water. He was doing it. Men were like fish, if they allowed themselves to be. Juan Sanchez Villa-Lobos Ramirez was going to get a shock. Then he was going to get something else and even though Conner' had discovered that men could survive underwater, the Egyptian-Spanish buffoon would find that he was not immune to a Scot's claymore.

When Conner pulled himself gradually from the water, Ramirez had his back to him. The highlander crept over the rocks towards his adversary, drawing his sword at the same time. The Spaniard was talking to himself.

'Well, now. I wonder what he's saying to the littlefishes?'

Conner came up right behind him and held up his weapon, ready to strike. He put all his strength behind the blow - and struck the empty log where Ramirez had been sitting.

There was a sword at his throat. The same silly little weapon that Ramirez always carried. But it was sharp. And no doubt, had balance.

'Crude and slow, clansman,' remarked Ramirez. 'Your attack was no better than that of a clumsy child. You'll have to do better.'

The shorter sword wound itself around his own and the next moment his claymore was sailing through the air, to land with a clatter amongst the rocks.

'What do you say to that?'

Conner was dumbfounded. 'How did you do it?'

Ramirez grinned at him.

Conner cried, 'This is the Devil's work.'

'You have a peculiar fixation with that fellow which I find hard to understand,' said Ramirez. 'Perhaps you were kicked in the head by a demon as a child? That would explain some things.'

Conner sat down and stared at the ground. There were many things he wanted explained. But he was damned if he was going to ask Ramirez. He sulked, while the Spaniard picked a leaf from a bush and tossed it onto the water, watching it float away.

Ramirez said, 'You cannot die, MacLeod. Accept it.'

'I hate you,' he replied, vehemently.

The other laughed. 'Good! That is the perfect way to start.'

He paused, then, 'An ordinary man would have drowned - wouldn't he?'

'Aye,' he replied, reluctant to let Ramirez have anything.

'Then you are no ordinary man. Nor am I. You are immortal, like me. Unless. . .'

‘Unless what?’

‘Unless you lose your head.’

‘What - my temper?’

‘It’s always wise to keep that. No, I mean if you are beheaded, then you will die.’

‘You just said we are immortal.’

‘If we keep our heads firmly on our shoulders, we are. It’s our one weakness. Our Achilles -“ he twisted his mouth, wryly, , - neck.’

‘Who?’

Ramirez sighed, seeing his wit had been wasted.

‘Never mind. Just remember it. There are others who know of your weakness - your one soft spot. If they come across you, they may try to take advantage of your poor swordsmanship.’

‘May? I take it you mean that oaf who tried to kill me five years ago?’

Ramirez shook his head as if he were dealing with a small child.

‘That was no oaf - that was the Kurgan - and he was playing with you. Oh, he would have taken off your head all right, if your cousins hadn’t got you away, but he’s no oaf with a blade. A blackhearted boor with a penchant for power, perhaps.’

‘You said may. There are those who may try to kill me. Why?’

‘All in good time. There are also those like me, bighearted generous fellows who love their comrades. Whether we shall survive until the Gathering, remains to be seen.’ He grinned, tilting back his ridiculous-looking hat with its floppy brim.

‘Tell me,’ said Conner, ‘how did it all happen. How did it happen, for God’s sake?’

‘Why does the sun come up?’ he made an expansive gesture towards the heavens. ‘Are the stars just pinholes in the curtain of the night? Who knows? What I do know is that because you were born different men will fear you, try to drive you away - like the people of your village. Come - let’s go home to Heather’s cooking. . .’

Later that night they sat by the peat fire, as it spat out its blue-green flames, and talked more. Conner had many questions to ask, but Ramirez did not know all the answers. ‘I don’t even know all the questions,’ he admitted to the Scot. ‘If I did, I would be God Almighty and wouldn’t be sitting here talking to you.’

‘But is decapitation our only weakness? What if the villagers had burnt me, that day?’ Ramirez said with a straight face. ‘I wouldn’t test it out. It’s the only weakness we know of - there may be more. Perhaps the fire would have burned through your bonds and you could have walked away. . .’

‘A lump of charcoal.’

Ramirez shrugged. 'In any case, you're not ready yet. We must get you ready. . . ah, the food.'

Heather had cooked the hash and was offering it to them. Until that point she had been outside and Ramirez had said that Conner was to say nothing to her - at least for a while. Conner put his arm around her waist.

'What do you think of my bonny lass, Ramirez?'

'She's - very beautiful. You're a lucky man.'

'I am that,' smiled Conner.

Heather flushed, and brushed his arm away. 'Och, away with you,' she said, 'and eat your food before it goes cold.'

After Heather had gone to bed, Ramirez sat by the fire and began to read by its light.

Conner was curious. 'What are you reading?'

The book had a worn leather spine, well-used, covered in fingerprints. 'The Book Of The Sword - it's by an Italian - Cesare Lorenzo de Orazio of Florence . In this book are the secrets of the sword-makers: how to refine the metal to a purity unmatched even by the Venetians; how to temper the blade to the hardness of diamond. It's a fascinating work.'

'Huh,' said Conner, 'my claymore's good enough for me.'

'But then, you're only good enough for your claymore.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'It means, my friend, that like your rusty old blade, you are flawed in a dozen places. One good bash would break either of you.'

Conner stood up. 'Oh? Is that so?'

'Sit down, sit down. You're not going to fight me in your own house are you? With Heather asleep upstairs? We'll get plenty of opportunity to test your skill - though it shouldn't take long. You can take that iron bar you call a sword and I'll use my own weapon. We'll see which holds out. By the way. . .'

The Spaniard's voice dropped to a whisper, 'You must learn to conceal your special gift and harness your power, until the time of the Gathering.'

'What Gathering?'

'When only a few of us are left, we will feel an irresistible pull towards a far away land - to fight for the prize.'

Chapter 16

OVER THE NEXT few months Ramirez taught his pupil the real art of fencing and sword play. His skill with the weapon was beyond any measure that Conner could apply to it.

‘How did you learn all this?’ he gasped, one day, when Ramirez had disarmed him for the seventh time.

‘I’ve had a long time and many teachers myself. Teachers from lands which would mean nothing to you just names. . .’

Conner nodded. ‘And another thing.’

‘What?’

‘If the immortals are to fight for the prize - though you say you don’t know exactly what that is - then we will have to fight each other. Why are you helping me?’

Ramirez leaned on his sword and looked out over the uplands with a wistful expression on his face.

‘Good question. I’m not sure - but I have a feeling that I shan’t be there. It’s just a feeling mind, but it’s strong. I shall be one of those that fall by the wayside. I think I’ve lived too long already. There are no more surprises.’

‘Are you afraid of death?’

‘I’ve no great fondness for it, but I’m sure it has a good use. Sometimes I think we’re the unlucky ones - the freaks of nature that have to suffer longer than ordinary men. Now,’ he said, sheathing his sword, ‘we must go for our run, along the beach.’

Conner made a face. ‘I hate all this running.’

‘You have a gift - and it’s enclosed within that body of yours. The least you can do is keep the container in prime condition. Swordsmanship is a matter of fitness as well as skill. Hard work. No talent is worth anything without hard work.’

He flicked Conner’s claymore up into the air and the Scot caught it, immediately attacking Ramirez, hoping to catch him off guard. Ramirez blocked the blow and kicked Conner’s legs from under him. Furious, the Scot leapt to his feet and rained blows on the Spaniard’s head, which were all parried. Then he was disarmed again.

‘Never lose your temper,’ said Ramirez, quietly. ‘If your head comes away from your neck - it’s all over.’ He sheathed his sword again.

‘Come on. To the beach -’ he began running down the hillside and Conner reluctantly followed.

‘Come on MacLeod, why am I always in front? Can’t you beat an old man? I’m twenty times older than your grandfather...’

The insults always had their effect, despite the fact that Conner knew why Ramirez used them. It spurred him on to greater efforts, the words pricking at him, wounding his pride. A clansman’s pride was a tender thing, not difficult to pierce, and Ramirez remorselessly jabbed at it with his sharp insults. He ran, and ran, and ran.

After the run along the beach, with the salt air filling his lungs and the spray cooling his face, Conner felt better. Although the race had been won by Ramirez, yet again, he was beginning to gain on the Spaniard. He was beginning to see and feel some results of the training.

They fought again, in the woodland near the shoreline, using the trees as shields. At one point Conner thought he had avoided a blow rather expertly, only to have the thin tree behind which he had ducked come crashing down on him.

He looked up at Ramirez in despair. The Spaniard laughed. 'You'll get there, MacLeod. Don't look so disheartened. You continually over-extend your thrust. We'll cure that - with balance.'

'Balance, balance,' grumbled Conner. 'Always balance.'

'Always,' confirmed Ramirez. 'I'm glad to see you're thinking about it at last.'

They ran back up the hillside, to the croft. Ramirez was there long before him and Heather was waiting, smiling, as Conner came panting up to the well.

'Conner?' she said, as he was leaning, exhausted, against the stone wall.

'Heather, please.'

She shrugged and went indoors. After a while he followed, to find Ramirez eating.

'Food,' said the Spaniard. 'Sit. Build up your strength.'

Conner slumped into the wooden chair and began to eat. He was beginning to wish he had never met the Spaniard and was wishing him to hell.

'If it came to the two of us,' he asked, after they had finished the meal, 'would you take my head?'

Ramirez got up and came to Conner's chair. He drew his sword and offered it to the Scotsman, then went down on one knee, lowering his head. Conner sat there stupidly holding the blade while Heather looked from one man to the other. All Conner had to do was a single stroke and he would be rid of the man. He tossed the sword onto the table and Ramirez climbed to his feet again.

'Does that answer your question?'

'No. What if you're wrong. What if you do live until the Gathering?'

Ramirez said, 'We must fight - until only one remains. That's all I know. If you don't fight then you will not be the one.'

Heather said, 'All this talk. I don't understand it. You're friends. A hoggie with one eye could see that. Practise your sword fighting all you like, if you must, but no more of this talk of killing each other. Why don't you hug, like brothers, and show your feelings - instead of pretending that you're enemies. Come on, the pair of you.'

Ramirez looked at Conner and opened his arms. Conner stared at the table.

'Conner!' said Heather.

He looked at her and her mouth was set in a firm line. He climbed to his feet, clumsily knocking over the chair as he did so. He bent to pick it up.

‘Never mind that,’ said Heather.

Conner walked forward and the two men hugged. ‘Brothers,’ said Ramirez.

‘Brothers.’

‘There,’ said Heather, brightly, ‘that wasn’t so bad, was it? Now help me clear this mess from the table.
..’

Two days later they again raced on the beach while a stag looked on from the edge of the woodlands. ‘Let yourself feel the stag,’ shouted Ramirez over his shoulder. ‘His heart - beating - and - his blood coursing. Feel it . . .’

Conner concentrated and after a few moments he felt the joy, the exhilaration of high speed. He felt all his tiredness drop away from him and a fresh new energy enter his limbs, his chest. The stag’s heart was his heart, the stag’s lungs were his lungs - the secret of the highland beast’s speed was now his.

‘I feel it,’ he screamed into the wind.

‘Come on!’ cried Ramirez.

‘I feel him!’

‘Come on. . .’

‘I’m coming.’

For the first time since they had met, Conner passed the Spaniard.

‘Come on, Haggis.’

Ramirez laughed. ‘I’m close,’ he shouted.

The Spaniard drew up alongside the Scot and the two of them challenged the wind. Unidentifiable joy filled their hearts. This was life.

‘This - is the Quickening,’ shouted Ramirez.

At the end of the run they both fell into the water and after splashing around, began to fence furiously in the shallows, with Ramirez crying, ‘Yes, yes. All it took was the right frame of mind. Now, pendejo .
Now.’

The blades clashed. Salt spray was everywhere, in their eyes and hair. It ran in rivulets down their backs. They sank to their ankles in the shifting sands and still they fought on, neither gaining an advantage over the other.

‘You have it,’ cried Ramirez. ‘Very good. Balance. Balance.’

Parry. Thrust. Lock. Part.

Conner felt part of it all - the elements, the sea, the earth.

‘Shall we see what you’ve become?’ cried Ramirez, and he went into the attack. They locked swords. Conner took a step back, feinted, and then whipped the Spaniard’s sword from his grasp. It flashed through the air, to land point-first in the beach. He laid his blade on Ramirez’s throat. They stood like that for a few moments. Then Conner put aside his sword, and reached out with his hand.

‘Brothers,’ he said.

Chapter 17

JEDBURGH WAS AT the crossroads to the Southern Uplands, just north of the Cheviot Hills . Once a month was market day and people came from miles around to barter and trade. Even the English, for the border was not so far away, would bring up their cattle and sheep. Heather loved market days. They were so full of life and noise. And goods were available that were not normally easy to get hold of. Cloth - fabrics that would not find their way up to the villages in the hills. With one man on each arm, she steered the trio from stall to stall, exclaiming at the objects for sale with delight.

Ramirez obviously found her artlessness irresistible and spent most of his time arguing with Conner over whether he should buy this or that for Heather.

‘It’s my job to buy her presents,’ said Conner, firmly.

‘I see. I’m not allowed to show my appreciation for her hospitality, I suppose? I’ve just got to go on, pigging myself with her cooking and not a thank you permitted?’

‘You can thank me,’ said Conner. ‘

But there’s a difference,’ insisted Ramirez.

‘What? What difference?’

‘You’re ugly. And how am I going to win her away from you, if I can’t shower her with gifts? I haven’t any youth left to offer her, so it’s got to be money that attracts her.’

Heather jerked his arm. ‘Oh, come on, sir. You’re not old. You have a very stately profile. Distinguished.’ Ramirez smiled down at her.

‘Well, thank you my dear. Perhaps the money isn’t needed after all, in which case it should be spent. And I can’t think of a better way of spending it than. . .’

‘Don’t try to shame me with your golden tongue, Ramirez,’ said Conner, ‘or you might find me squaring up to you like those laddies over there. . .’

There was a bare-fisted boxing match in operation at the edge of the market square. Two men were busy pummelling each other’s faces to jelly. Ramirez sniffed in disapproval.

‘Barbaric,’ he said.

‘And I suppose,’ said Heather, ‘that sticking pieces of metal in each other would no be barbaric?’

‘It depends on whether the combatants have any idea of the art of fencing. If they just bash away at each other with rusty iron claymores, like your friend here was once wont to do, then yes, that is barbaric. But a man like myself, and an equal, can make a duel into a series of moving tableaux that would make Da Vinci reach instantly for his brush, in order to capture them on canvas.’

‘Och, you’re full of blather,’ she answered, letting go of their arms. ‘I want nothing. I’m off to get a dinner for us.’ She walked off in the direction of the chicken sellers.

After Heather had walked away, into the crowd, Ramirez said in a serious tone, ‘You must leave her, MacLeod.’

‘What? Are you mad?’

‘No.’ The tone was sad now. ‘I’m not mad.’

Conner had thought at first that his friend was jesting with him, but it was evident from his demeanor that this was not the case. The young man was troubled. Why should he leave Heather? He told Ramirez that he had promised to stay with her, forever.

‘That’s just it,’ came the reply. ‘There may be a forever for you - but not for her. She will grow old, and die.’

‘But what we want is a family.’

‘You cannot have a family. Our kind can’t father children.’

Conner was stunned by this piece of news. ‘That won’t please Heather. I’ll tell you that for nothing.’

Conner was morose now. He walked between the stalls kicking disconsolately at the ground. In the distance he could see Heather purchasing the chicken. She held it up and called, ‘Dinner.’ How could he leave her? It was impossible. Ramirez did not understand. He supposed the Spaniard, or Egyptian or whatever he was, was now so jaded that he had forgotten what it was like to love a woman, completely. Ask me instead, thought Conner, to tear off my right arm. That would be easier. Heather came up to them and Conner took her, desperately, into his arms, giving her a kiss.

She mistook his reasons and broke away from him, laughing. ‘He’s so full of life,’ she said to Ramirez. Then, ‘I’m away now to buy myself some cloth - for a new dress. Here’s dinner,’ she thrust the chicken into Conner’s hands. ‘Don’t let it run away.’

She moved off again, towards the stalls on the far side of the market. Conner cradled the chicken, watching her lithe body weave amongst the people. Some children played tag around her and she cried, ‘Oh, you little devils. Go on.’

Conner said out loud, ‘She is beautiful.’

‘You must leave her brother.’

Conner walked away.

‘MacLeod -’ called Ramirez. ‘Come and have an ale with me.’ He caught up to the Scot and steered him towards some benches. They bought a pot of ale each and sat supping it, not looking at each other.

‘You don’t know. . .’, said Conner.

Ramirez held up a hand. ‘Not that. Don’t say that to me. I know all right. That’s why I’m telling you what you should do. I was born two thousand five hundred years ago - thereabouts. In that time I’ve had three wives. The last was Shakiko, a Japanese princess.

Her father,’ he indicated his Samurai sword, ‘Masamune, was a genius. He made this for me. That was in five-nine-three B.C. It’s the only one of its kind. Like his daughter. . .’

Ramirez took another swallow of his ale. His brow was furrowed and a deep melancholy had crept into his tone. ‘When Shakiko died, I was shattered. I would save you that pain.’

‘Would it be any less pain to me, to leave her now? I don’t think so. Why suffer now, when I don’t have to? Why make her suffer? That doesn’t make sense to me.’

‘She will suffer anyway. You will stay young - and she will grow old. Do you want to live with a grandmother? Do you think she’ll like that? When the wrinkles cover her face - and yours is still smooth and youthful - she may hate you. Have you thought of that?’

Conner shook his head.

‘No, but it doesn’t matter. If I leave her now, she will hate me anyway. It sounds as if I can’t win. I love her, because she’s Heather - ‘

‘But you just said - you find her beautiful.’

‘Her - aye - that means what it says. She lives in a pretty body, at the moment, but I would love her anyway. . .’

Ramirez shrugged. ‘I’ve done my best. I can’t blame you. I was the same.

Three times I’ve made the same mistake. I thought you might be stronger - but we’re as weak as each other.’

‘Another weakness - we lose our heads over women’ said Conner, forcing a smile.

‘Yes, but don’t make the mistake of thinking that’s an inherent feature of all immortals. It’s certainly not shared by theKurgan - not in the same way. He’ll take a woman all right, but he’ll as soon cut her throat afterwards, as keep her with him.’

A man came up to them and shoved a cage of doves before their eyes. Conner shook his head and waved the man away. He was thinking about that time on the battlefield, when theKurgan had confronted him.

‘The black knight,’ he murmured. ‘I should like to fight him again, now I have the skill.’

‘You’ll get your chance,’ answered Ramirez. ‘Soon enough. If you don’t meet him for another thousand years, it will be too soon. It’s because of him that I sought you out.’

Conner asked, ‘Who is theKurgan? Where does he come from?’

‘The Kurgans were an ancient people, from the Steppes of a land called Russia . For amusement they tossed children into pits with hungry dogs - to fight for the meat. He...’ Ramirez paused and seemed deep in thought. ‘He is the strongest of us all. The perfect warrior. If he wins the prize mortal men will suffer an eternity of darkness.’

Once Heather had her cloth, they set out, heading back to the croft. The snow had begun to fall, as winter was coming on. Large flakes settled on the land around them, transforming the rugged scenery into something softer, more yielding. The hills became smooth mounds feminine contours. The deer could be seen, moving to new grazing ground in the south, travelling quietly through the white shield of falling snow. The trees stood out starkly now, those that had lost their leaves, in pathetic groups. While the conifers held their original shapes, beneath the outer covering of white. The land had a purity about it, as if it had just taken holy vows, turned itself inwards, rejecting all worldly connections.

Amongst those hills the animals and birds were huddled in hungry groups, part of that rejection.

‘How do you fight such a savage?’ Conner asked of Ramirez, when Heather was out of earshot.

‘Who?’

‘The Kurgan .’

Ramirez sighed. ‘With heart, faith - and steel.’

‘Are they enough?’

There was no answer to this question. Ramirez did not know any more than Conner.

Chapter 18

WHEN THEY ARRIVED back at the croft, the winter had taken the snowscape into its iron-hard grip. The world was tightening as the freeze set in and Conner went off hunting, leaving Heather and Ramirez to feed the stock and start a fire.

The croft had been built adjacent to an ancient fortification - a drystone keep to which an older race of Scots had retreated when the Roman legionaries had chased them out of their valleys. It was an unstable erection but still reasonably windproof and useful for stabling the stock in poor weather. It had no doubt seen more dramatic times; had heard the clash of weapons without - and within its crumbling walls; had received its share of battle-scars and seen men die within its confines. Now the old stonework harboured spiders and bats, was a refuge from the cold, and hardy plants found anchors for their roots in its cracks and crevices. It was a gloomy place, with a spiral stone staircase to the watchtower above and narrow windowslits .

Heather did not like to spend time in there alone, as its ghosts worried her, so Ramirez helped her lay some straw on the earth floor and start a fire to drive out the winter that had crept in through its many orifices.

Heather was a little troubled by the secrets the men appeared to be keeping and she was determined to find out what was going on from Ramirez while Conner was away. She knew that her man had been deliberately sought out by the Spaniard and while she was prepared to let things lie for a while, she had reached the point where she was concerned for their lives together. She was afraid that Ramirez had

come to take him away. If that was so, she wanted to know why, so that she could fight to keep him, on equal terms. This Ramirez had a magnetism for Conner which went beyond normal friendship. Besides, they were not truly friends - that was not their reason for being together in the first place. They may have become so, now, but that was an accident, not a design. She wanted to know the design. What scheme, what plan, had been responsible for Ramirez coming all this way to see her man?

She was stirring some stew over the fire in the tower, not wishing to waste good fuel on merely warming the place where the stock were kept. Ramirez sat, honing his sword, nearby.

‘Why was Conner so quiet today, on the return journey?’ she asked.

Ramirez looked up. ‘I don’t know.’

‘You didn’t - say anything to him? Have you upset him in some way?’

‘I said many things to him, any one of which may have got under his skin. You know how sensitive he is.’

‘But nothing specific,’ she insisted. ‘Nothing you wish to tell me?’

Ramirez stopped honing the blade and stood up. He went to her and put his arm around her shoulders. Heather felt the pressure of his hand, but it was gentle, reassuring, nothing else. She continued to stir the pot, staring down into the mess of stew. It was coming. He was going to tell her something terrible or he would not be acting in this way. He would be joking, like he always did when he teased her. Her heart began to beat faster. Oh, God, please nothing terrible. I do not want to lose my Conner now. If he’s murdered, we’ll pay together, Lord. If he’s sick, I’ll lay myself down by his side and we’ll die together. Only let it be together, please dear God. Let it be together.

‘I told him to leave you, Heather.’

She wanted to scream, but instead she said very calmly. ‘Can you tell me why?’

‘It may be hard to understand.’

‘I don’t care. I want to know why.’ Her hands were trembling violently now and she had difficulty in continuing her domestic activity. She wanted to hit the Spaniard with the fire iron. Kill him, so that he could not take her Conner away from her.

‘Heather, he and I are very special men. We’re freaks of nature. The fact is, we cannot die - not in the ordinary way. We will grow no older than we are now, and Conner will live several hundred years, if he’s careful. I asked him to leave you because I know what it’s going to be like for him, watching you grow old and die, while he stays young and healthy. I’ve been through it myself. I wanted to save you both pain.’

‘Are you bewitched, the pair of you?’ Her mind was busy, thinking through what she had been told. She was a simple country girl, not uninfluenced by her pagan forbears, and ready to accept that there were things in life that were not readily explained. That there was a dark side to nature that visited itself on the light, every now and again. She was a Christian, but heathen teachings were slow to die in that part of the world.

Ramirez shrugged. ‘Who knows? I haven’t enough knowledge to make a judgement on that, though it’s my opinion that it’s just a quirk of nature, not something that’s been put upon us deliberately, by some

wizard or demon, or even God. It just happens, the way some people catch warts and others do not...'

'And Conner? He agrees with you - about going?' Ramirez stroked her auburn hair, with a strong, calloused hand.

'Ah, sadly, no my dear Heather. He refuses to leave you. Instead of a quick, sharp parting, which both of you would have got over fairly quickly, you will have the slow pain of living together, yet knowing you cannot die together.'

Although the thought of this upset her, Heather much preferred it to a parting. She said as much and Ramirez nodded.

'It's what I would expect you to say. Who wants to do now, what can be put off until later - especially when the later is a lifetime away? I can't blame you. I'm sad for you, but I can't blame you. You know he can't father children?'

She adjusted to this idea very quickly, it being less terrible than the thought of Conner going. 'I'll never mention it to him again.'

Ramirez raised his eyebrows. 'He said you wouldn't like it.'

'I don't. I wanted children desperately - but I wanted them to be Conner's too. It was for the both of us, that I wanted them. He can't have them,' she shrugged, 'we'll have to do without. Some people have greater trials than that to put up with to stay together.'

Ramirez nodded. 'I admire you both.'

'Don't,' said Heather. 'We're just selfish that's all. Love makes one selfish.'

Inside, she was more unhappy than she liked to admit, but she had a strong spirit. She was a McDonald, and her clan did not lie down when obstacles put themselves in the way. They found a way around, or over, them.

She said, 'What happened in Glenfinnan?'

Ramirez replied, 'The villagers found out - that he was an immortal. They wanted to burn him.'

'And the priest stopped them?' She went instinctively for the most logical explanation.

'No. The priest had difficulty in sorting out his pagan beliefs from his Christian teachings. He would have stood by - no doubt in great anguish - and let it happen. It's good that it didn't - for him too. He would have spent the rest of his life in remorse - convinced that he was going to Hell.'

'And so he should do,' she said, incensed.

'Don't be too hard on the man. It's not an easy concept to accept. Christian people lay down and die when they are mortally wounded. To him, the Devil was at work. . .'

Heather cried, 'So that's why Conner gets so moody when I talk about his having the devil in him. I didn't know. Oh, my poor Conner.' She paused. 'And you have been in love too?'

‘Several times, my sweet,’ he laughed. ‘Once, I had to try and rescue a lady from one of my own kind - one who wanted to take my life. We can be killed by each other, but I’m not going to tell you how.’

‘It must have been very dangerous for you.’

‘Well, I was very much in love with her, my dear Heather. She was the only thing on my mind - not the danger. So, holding a rose between my teeth and with my sword in my belt, I scaled the forty-foot-high walls of a stronghold, then lowered myself down from the roof with a rope, to swing in through her open window.’

‘That’s so romantic.’

Ramirez laughed. ‘Unfortunately, the lady was no longer there. . .’

‘What did you do?’

‘I introduced myself to the lady that was there. She was most helpful. We got on famously.’ He suddenly seemed to have a thought. ‘Would you like some wine? I have some in my saddlebag.’

‘It’ll be frozen through.’

‘Then we’ll warm it and have it mulled.’

He went outside and she could hear his boots crackling in the snow. She was glad, now, that she knew the worst. It was not an easy thing to have to live with, but it was not as bad as she had feared. She had thought that perhaps the man Conner had said he had wounded, when he first came to the croft, had died, and that they would come and take him away, to hang him. The wounded man was obviously just a story, because Conner had been afraid of what kind of reception an envoy from the Devil might get.

He had been right, too. Her father would have turned the young man away. Instead, they had come to treat each other with the utmost respect and her father had not been an easy man to like...

Ramirez was back, with the wine, but he was looking concerned.

‘What’s the matter?’ she asked.

Ramirez kicked the snow off his boots. ‘I don’t know.’ His brow was furrowed. ‘I think. . . but it’s no use guessing. Perhaps I’m wrong. I just have a bad feeling.’

She was alarmed. ‘Conner?’

‘No, I don’t think so. My great age, for I’m over two thousand years old, my dear, has given me instincts, but has not improved their reasons. Perhaps it’s nothing. Let’s drink the wine.’

Up in the tower, the doves that nested there suddenly took flight in a flurry of wings. Both Ramirez and Heather looked up, anxiously.

‘Perhaps a wild beast?’ she said.

‘Perhaps.’

Suddenly, Ramirez whirled and stared at the door. He drew his sword. 'Heather - get out. Run.'

'What's the matter?'

Before he could reply, there was a sound of splintering wood and a huge swordblade appeared in the rotten timbers of the doorway. The blows were repeated and the door shattered beneath them. Heather screamed. In the light of the opening, contrasting sharply with the white snow beyond, stood a giant of a man, dressed all in black. He was smiling.

She scrambled to her feet and ran into the corner of the tower. Ramirez stood his ground for a few moments all that could be heard was the spitting of the peat on the fire and the bubbling of the stew. The wine had fallen from the Spaniard's grasp and the container had broken, spilling the contents over the straw, turning it scarlet.

'Kurgan,' said Ramirez, almost matter-of-factly. 'I should have trusted my instincts. Or should I say, my sense of smell.'

The Kurgan laughed. 'Always the slick-tongued insult, eh, Ramirez? Perhaps I should cut that tongue away from your body - from the neck up.'

'You've tried before - and failed.'

'That's true - but I'm here now, to try again. This time I have the feeling that you won't be so lucky.'

'It's not so much a matter of luck, as skill.'

'I am stronger this time,' said the Kurgan.

Ramirez sniffed. 'So I've noticed. An Italian cheese would have difficulty in keeping up with you. Perhaps you rot faster, from the heart outwards?'

As he was speaking, the Kurgan sprang forwards to shatter a bench with his sword. But Ramirez was faster and had jumped to the foot of the spiral staircase.

'The highlander,' grunted the Kurgan. 'Where is he?'

'You're too late. I've prepared him for you.'

'You waste your time.'

'I think not.'

They crossed swords then and the fight began. Heather crouched down, in the corner, avoiding the blows that whistled past her head. She was terrified. Who was this monster? What did he want with her Conner? Suddenly, the Kurgan reeled backwards, clutching his throat. Blood spurted through his fingers and came gushing from his mouth. He spat globules of it into Ramirez's face. When he took his hand away for a second, Heather could see that the Spaniard's sword had sliced deeply into the giant's neck. If she did not believe in immortals before, she did now. That stroke would have felled an ordinary man.

Ramirez said, 'Almost, Kurgan. You are losing your head.'

TheKurgan 's voice came through in a kind of bubbling croak.

‘No, Ramirez. That was your only chance. It’s your head that will roll across the floor.’

The swords met again, with theKurgan gargling out in some strange language that Heather could not understand. The fireplace was destroyed as the blades crashed down on the brickwork. Hot stew spilled out, over the earthen floor and a sheep sank to its knees when theKurgan 's sword sliced through one of its hind legs. It bleated, pitifully, for some time, until a second blow, meant for Ramirez, split its SkullThe rest of the animals scuttled here and there, some trying to scale the walls of the tower and others running out through the open doorway.

As the fight continued, a sleeting blizzard began outside and added to the confusion, the wind driving the wet snow through the doorway and filling the tower with swirling flakes. Ramirez, to gain the advantage of height, leaped onto the stone steps leading to the watchtower, and theKurgan gradually forced him upwards, fighting past the windows through which the sleet was funnelled . The visibility in the room had dropped with the storm and Heather could only dimly perceive the actions of the two men as they battled on the stairs. She saw Ramirez kick out and his foot landed on the throat of theKurgan . The big man grunted, obviously in pain,

‘Hurts, does it?’ cried Ramirez with satisfaction in his voice and kicked again.

They were fighting about twenty feet from the ground at this time, and theKurgan overbalanced and fell crashing to the floor in a crumpled heap. He lay still. Thank the Lord, for that, thought Heather. She hoped every bone in his body was broken and that he would not even be able to lift a finger.

Her hopes were short-lived. The Kurgan stirred even as she was thinking and was back on his feet before Ramirez could reach the bottom of the stone staircase, ‘You cannot win,’ gurgled the Kurgan, holding his throat. ‘I am the strongest.’

Ramirez cried, ‘My cut has improved your voice. You warble, my friend. Not exactly like the sweetest bird, but definitely an improvement.’

‘Still jesting,’ growled theKurgan .

‘I have lived too long to be serious.’

‘You have lived too long,’ confirmed theKurgan .

The great man swung his sword and it struck the masonry at the foot of the steps with tremendous force. The crumbling brickwork, already loose and lacking any adhesive mortar, began to give way. Blocks of stone tumbled from the walls and began thundering around Heather’s head. She screamed, pressing herself into the corner.

‘Run, Heather,’ cried Ramirez, in between parries. ‘Get out of here. Run. Run.’

TheKurgan went berserk, his sword strokes smashing into the walls of the tower, the metal ringing out, sparks erupting. Each wild stroke brought down more masonry. The whole tower now was in danger of falling, with loose stones slipping out from underneath all the time. Blocks the size of a man’s chest rolled down the staircase or fell into the snow outside. The sky opened up to the two fighters and the blizzard joined in their furious battle, itself lashing and whipping as the swords bit into one another. Heather could see the dark clouds moving above the heads of the two figures that now fought on the very pinnacle of

the staircase, the walls around them having dropped away and leaving them open to the raging elements.

Suddenly, one of Ramirez's lunges broke through the Kurgan's guard and the Spaniard buried his blade in the giant's stomach. The Kurgan screamed, but gripped the Samurai blade in his strong left hand and held it there. Another block of stone fell close to Heather. She screamed, just as the Kurgan wrenched the sword out of his own body and threw it to the ground.

'Ah,' he said. 'Hurts..'

Then he looked down, to where the scream had come from.

'Who is the woman?'

'She's mine,' said the now unarmed Ramirez.

'Not for much longer.'

The Kurgan's sword lashed out and a deep cut appeared on Ramirez's chest.

'You try some pain,' said the Kurgan.

Ramirez stood, quite still. Heather could not see his face, but she realized that he could not escape. He was trapped. Lightning came out of the clouds and struck the stonework between the two men. They seemed to absorb it, as if it were nothing but gentle sunshine.

'Tonight you sleep in Hell,' said the Kurgan. 'There can be only one.'

The sword flashed again, and something fell beside Heather. At first she thought it was another stone, with a grass clump, growing from it. Then she saw the eyes staring at her, blindly, and screamed. It was the head of Ramirez. His hair was black against the snow that had covered the floor in a thin layer and the stump of the neck was still twitching. She vomited, violently.

The Kurgan began to descend the staircase, slowly at first, but then more quickly when she jumped to her feet and stumbled over the fallen blocks to get to the door. She ran towards a group of distant pines, as lightning began crashing down onto the ruined tower and impeding the Kurgan's progress. She stopped and looked back, thinking that the bolts must surely destroy the man, but though he paused each time he was struck, he still continued to follow her. He seemed invulnerable to the charges, even gathering in strength each time he was hit.

God was surely on her side, trying to stop this beast from reaching her, but His efforts were not forceful enough. The monster came on.

She struggled through the thick snow, still trying to escape and thought she might make the trees, where she could disappear into the darkness beyond, but a rough hand gripped her shoulder and threw her to the ground.

'Hello, pretty. . .' growled the Kurgan.

She screamed and he dragged her back to the tower. Once within the walls he picked up Ramirez's head and held it in front of her face.

‘There’s your lover,’ he said. ‘Why don’t you make love to him?’

She tried to claw at theKurgan ’s face, but he merely laughed.

‘Oh, I forgot. He hasn’t got his body with him. You’ll have to make do with me. I’m better than he is anyway...’

He tore her dress open to the bare skin and threw her on the ground, where she shivered.

‘Now,’ he said, getting on top of her. ‘A small prize, for Ramirez.’ His stinking breath made her retch and she lay there as the animal grunted, forcing himself inside her. There was great pain, both physical and mental... All she wanted was for him to finish and leave, before. Conner returned.

When Conner came back from the hunt, he found Heather sitting beside Ramirez’s body. She had placed the head at the top of the torso, but Conner could see that they were separate bodily parts.

‘What happened?’ he cried, throwing down the carcass of the young deer. He took her into his arms. ‘Are you all right, my bonny? Are you hurt?’

She shook her head and clung to him, tightly.

‘No, Conner. I’m no hurt. I hid in the woods. But Ramirez is dead. . .’

‘Aye,’ he said. ‘I can see.’

‘It was a big man - in black. Ramirez called him theKurgan . He fought like a madman. I thought it was the very Devil himself. Is he, Conner? Is he the Devil?’

He hugged her to him. ‘He may as well be. Thank God you’re safe.’

‘I ran, when the fighting started. He looked for me afterwards, but I was well hidden. Now he’s gone, thank God.’

Conner’s mouth tightened. ‘He killed my friend. One day I’ll make him eat his own weapon for that. If he’d harmed you. . .’

‘But he didn’t,’ she said, quickly.

‘It’s as well, for I would’ve chased him to the ends of the earth.’

They buried Ramirez in an unmarked grave beneath the floor of the tower the next day. The earth was hard, but not iron-tough like the ground on the outside. Heather said a prayer over the spot and, privately, cursed theKurgan for what he had done to the Spaniard and to her. Now she was glad for what Ramirez had told her that these immortal men could not father children.

While he had been out hunting, Conner had thought quite seriously about what Ramirez had told him of his own experiences, but whenever he considered leaving Heather, his heart sank. Eventually, he made the decision that, as long as she needed him, he would stay with her. TheKurgan never returned to the Southern Uplands of Scotland, and Conner and Heather lived a peaceful life, if full of privation, in their

croft.

Over the years Conner watched his Heather grow older, the hard life making her age much more rapidly than a lady of more wealthy birth. She, in her turn, obviously saw that he was indeed going to remain as he was: youthful, energetic and full of vigour. Yet she said nothing. Sometimes he, forgot the gulf between them and arranged longwalk into the hills, impatient to reach the summit of this or that place, only to find her dragging herself along with laboured breathing, way behind him. It was at these time he felt sadfor them both.

One day, when her hair had turned white and her face had begun to crease into a leathery appearance, he found her lying by the milk bucket in the stall. He carried her frail body into the croft and laid it on the bed he had fashioned for them both with his own hands. She smiled up at him and stroked his hair, the way a mother would do to a son.

‘Ah, my bonnie lad,’ she said, ‘you will not grieve too much for your Heather, promise?’ He hugged her to him.

‘Lassie, lassie,’ he cried, weeping into her bosom, ‘don’t leave me so soon. I’m afraid - I need you here.’

She pushed him from her sagging breasts and said, ‘Look at me. I’m an old woman. You’re still in your prime, Conner MacLeod. I don’t want to live any more. We’ve had our time together, and wonderful it was. Don’t spoil it with regret. God gave us each other - you were his gift to me. Now I have to go and thank Him, for I am as grateful as a woman should be that has known real love.’

‘You’ll get better, you’ll see. I’ll care for you real well. You’ll get better, lassie.’

She took his head in her hands. ‘No, I must go. Don’t you see? It has to happen some times. I can’t stay forever. I’m not like you. I’ll wait for you, Conner, my lad. We’ll see each other again. A thousand - ten thousand years is but a moment in the lace that I am going. Don’t forget me, Conner MacLeod. There will be other women. . .’

‘Never,’ he cried fiercely.

‘. . . there will be other women, and I can’t tell you a lie, I’m jealous of them already. But as long as I stay in some corner of your heart, I’ll not let that jealousy turn to poison. I’m as weak as any other woman, Conner – I want my own to be my own - so don’t you forget your Heather, though you live until the sun itself dies.’

He touched her cheek. Her voice became very weak, as she said, ‘You stayed - you stayed with your Heather, though she became an old woman.’

‘No so old. I love you now as much as on the first day we met.’

‘And I love you.’

She was fading fast now. She said, ‘I don’t want to die. I want to stay with you.’ ‘I want that too. Do - something for me - Conner?’

What my bonny?’

'In the years - to come - will you light a candle to remember me - on my birthday?'

'Aye love. I will.'

'I wanted - to have your children. . .' She had suddenly turned very pale and

Conner climbed onto the bed with her and lay by her side.

'Hold my hand, Conner. Hold it tightly.'

He did so, pressing his cheek against hers and soon the warmth began to go out of her. He stayed there until the night came and then he went out to the ruined tower and stood by the grave of Ramirez.

'Well, old friend,' he said, 'I think I envy you now. I'm putting my Heather in here beside you, so you can look after her for me. His voice grew a little impassioned.

'You look after her for me, you hear, peacock?'

Then he went and got a spade and dug a grave next to that of the Spaniard's. The rest of the night, by the light of an oil lamp, he fashioned a coffin from pinewood, into which he placed the corpse. Finally, he chipped a cross from one of the stones of the tower and laid it across both graves.

'You can share it between you,' he said. 'I'll not mind you sharing.'

For the next two years he worked around the croft, then, tiring of the life decided to see some of the world: He went down to Edinburgh and stayed there ten years, learning to read and write and generally gathering knowledge to himself. Then he moved on to London.

Wherever he went he found he had to move on every few years, because newly made friends began to look sideways at him and comment on his ability to remain youthful...

There were wars - always wars - in which he fought and of which he wearied, though he tried to choose the side of right. Often, he could not see the proper cause and tried to stay out of the bloodshed as much as he was able''

There were other women, too, but he held back any strong emotion. He chose those he knew would tire of him early and leave him for some of her young man.

In the eighteenth century he began to travel more widely, visiting the Far East and experiencing other cultures. Twice, he met up with people like himself. On one of those occasions he had to fight and decapitate his opponent with the Samurai sword left by Ramirez in the weeds below the tower.

Many times, he wished he were a normal man and unable to stop the aging process which was the lot of normal men. He did not want to die - but he did not always want to live.

Chapter 19

BRENDA WYATT WAS of course intrigued by Nash, alias MacLeod - or was it MacLeod, alias Nash? - and the reasons behind the decapitations and sword fights that were taking place on the New York streets. What she had not realized, and was not prepared to admit to herself, was the fact that she had a more than professional interest in the handsome antique dealer. She kept telling herself that the gory

puzzle and the figures behind it were what attracted her enquiring mind.

The Saturday after the fight on the construction site, Brenda went shopping and just happened to walk in the direction of NASH ANTIQUES. After buying a few groceries and wandering around a large department store where the clothes were just what she wanted but not what she could afford, she found herself having coffee in a restaurant opposite the antique shop.

She observed a few customers, coming and going, and then finally the man himself arrived and went inside. She finished her coffee quickly, paid, and went across the street.

There was nothing unusual about the facade of the place on Hudson Street. It was much like any other antique shop. If it was a front for some illegal activity, then it was a very successful one. She had witnessed several purchases over the last hour. And a front for what? Why do people kill each other? If it was a drugs racket, the goods being smuggled in with or in antiques, why settle disagreements with broadswords and ancient blades? Why not just bump each other off in the way gangland killings were usually managed - an accident or just a good, old-fashioned bullet in the brain? Why all this re-enacting of 18th-century duelling? She imagined Nash saying something to her like, 'We belong to an historical society, interested in the art of duelling with the sword, only we like it to be authentic. We go all the way...'

She entered the shop and looked around. Nash was nowhere to be seen, but there was a woman sitting behind a desk and she looked up.

'Can I help you?'

The woman was quite attractive for someone in her forties, and Brenda felt an unreasonable flash of pique go through her. Was this woman personally involved with Nash? Then she kicked herself, mentally, for being so stupid. That was the kind of macho thought a man might have on seeing a perfectly innocent situation. She worked for Nash, that was all.

'I'd like to speak to Russell Nash.'

The woman smiled. 'I'm Rachel Ellenstein. Can I be of assistance? I'm sure I can. . .'

'I'm sorry. I particularly wished to speak to Mr Nash. Could you fetch him for me, please?'

The telephone rang at that moment and the woman called Rachel said, 'Excuse me,' lifted the receiver and spoke briefly into the instrument, before turning to Brenda again.

'I'm afraid Mr Nash is not here at the moment.'

'Oh, yeah?' Brenda arched a brow. 'Then who was that I saw walk in here a few moments ago? Perhaps it was a Mr MacLeod?'

Rachel looked a little startled and began to fiddle with some papers on her desk.

'May I call Mr Nash at home?' said Brenda, trying another tack. 'I have to talk to him today.'

Rachel was a little red by this time, but she seemed to become less flustered after glancing towards the door at the rear of the shop.

‘Oh, I’m afraid that won’t be possible.’

Brenda retorted, ‘No, I don’t suppose it would be, since he’s obviously in a back room somewhere.’

Just then Nash stepped from behind a curtain and crossed the floor. ‘Good morning,’ he said.

Rachel had flushed again. ‘Um - this is Brenda Wyatt, Mr Nash.’

He nodded. ‘We’ve already met, Rachel.’

‘I said you were out.’

‘That’s what I asked you to say to visitors.’ He turned to Brenda again. ‘I get all sorts of weirdos coming in here with junk they think is worth a million bucks. Rachel is my filter. You mustn’t blame her for lying to you. She hates it - you can see that by her face.’

Brenda suddenly melted towards the other woman, seeing the need to block visitors as an unpleasant, if necessary task.

‘What can I do for you anyway?’ he asked. She looked him straight in the eyes.

‘I’d like some advice.’

‘Are you the sort of person who takes advice?’

She turned and picked up a figurine, an African statuette made of ebony. It was smooth, and surprisingly light. She put it down again, aware that he was waiting for an answer.

‘That depends.’ Was this game irritating him? It seemed to be.

‘Advice about what?’

She drew a deep breath. ‘What can you tell me about a seven-foot lunatic hacking away with a broadsword at one o’clock in the morning, in New Yorkcity , 1985?’

Rachel, who had been standing listening all this while, suddenly gathered together some papers and walked to the far end of the shop. A customer had entered and Brenda thought that no doubt she had blessed his arrival in order to get out of the embarrassing scene she was witnessing.

Nash scratched his cheek. ‘Not much,’ he said. ‘You were there. It was probably some guy crazed on dope, or something. Happens all the time.’

‘Only recently. All right, we’ll skip that for the moment. What about a Japanese sword, dated 600 B.C. - the metal in the blade folded two hundred times?’

‘Ah, now we’re talking antiques,’ he said.

‘Can I show you something in 18th-century silver?’ Brenda felt herself becoming annoyed.

‘That’s not why I came here,’ she hissed, ‘and you know it.’

‘Do you cook?’ he asked.

She moved back from him in surprise and Rachel, now returned, gave her a little smile.

‘Why?’ she asked.

He said, ‘I thought we might have dinner together.’

‘Did you?’

‘Yes.’

Her mind was working very fast. Should she trust him? The hell with that. He was mixed up in something very weird. She found him attractive but that was no reason to trust the character. She would need some backup. . .’

‘Fine, I’d love to make us a meal. When?’

He named a day and time, which she agreed suited her. Then she left.

Chapter 20

When Brenda Wyatt had left the shop, MacLeod went back into his room and began working on the invoices she had interrupted. He still had a business to run.

At lunch time, he went up to his apartment. A stranger walking into the rooms might think that MacLeod had no divisions between his private life and his professional hours. The room, at first glance, into which he walked was circular, with many bookshelves and what might be regarded by others as antiques, lining the walls.

They were in fact, all personal mementos from various times in his own history. In a rosewood box, on the coffee table, was the only piece of jewellery that Heather had owned: a pendant - a Celtic bronze cross set with uncut garnets. MacLeod had made it himself, fishing the garnets from a burn on the slopes of Ben Law, where they were as plentiful as pebbles, and had worked the bronze at the forge. Heather had adored that cross and made him promise to keep it, rather than bury it with her.

He went into the kitchen and made himself a cup of coffee. There had been a time when he had been unfaithful to Heather, in the sense that he rarely thought of her and when he did, he dismissed that thought from his mind, because it was painful to look back. But just lately he had slipped back into his old dreams - those he used to have when Heather had recently died. Now why was that? He went to the rosewood box and with the coffee in one hand, took out the pendant and studied it. How crude the workmanship looked now. Yet, as he held it in his hand, the past came flooding back to him. He could recall the smell of the highlands, there was nothing else like it, and the rough weave of the texture of Heather’s tartan as she leaned against him in the doorway to the croft. They used to stand there together and stare out at the mountains, telling each other how lucky they were to have been born in the highlands. He could recall the smell of woodsmoke in her hair and the scent of womanhood about her after he had lifted her coarse kilt and made love to her in some hollow in the glen.

He sighed. It was all romantic rubbish, he supposed. Perhaps he had forgotten the harsh winters and the times they had gone hungry, and the infernal lice problem things like that tended to get pushed to the back of the mind centuries later, in a comfortable apartment in New York city. He replaced the pendant.

Suddenly, he knew why he had been reminded of Heather, and he felt guilty that the dreams had needed a trigger. It was because of that woman, Brenda Wyatt. There were certain physical resemblances between her and his Heather. The colour of the hair, the shape of the face. Memory was a funny thing though. He could recall things that happened in his first fifty years on earth, with far more clarity than many more recent events. With the exception of one. The day on which he had found Rachel.

It had been in World War Two, in a bombed out factory in Germany - the heart of the Rhineland. He had wandered into the ruins and found this little bundle of rags, inside which slept a small girl, amongst the broken glass and smashed crates that were scattered over the floor.

She had been frightened of him at first. When he woke her, she edged away from him with wide eyes. He must have looked pretty rough: unshaven and battlegrimied. They had been pushing units of the SS back for days and the diehard Nazi's had been harder to winkle out than rats from holes.

'Shhh!' he had said, trying to calm her. 'It's all right - I'm not going to hurt you.'

But of course, she did not speak or understand English and it was only the tone of his voice that reassured her (so she told him much later).

'What's your name?' he had asked her. 'Namen? Ah wie heissen sie?'

'Rachel.'

He had searched his mind for his meagre German. 'Wo- deiner mutty - mama?'

'Tot. Alle ...'

Gently, he said, 'I'm like you. I'm alone.' He bent to pick her up.

At that moment a German officer in the uniform of the SS, stepped through a doorway and raised a sub-machine gun. Without any hesitation or regard for the little girl, he pointed the weapon towards them and squeezed the trigger.

Luckily for Rachel he had aimed high and an arc of bullets swept across the spot where MacLeod stood, three of them hitting him full in the chest. He sank to the ground with a sigh.

The German ran forward and stood over him, looking down. He kicked MacLeod in the ribs and as he did so, the Scotsman grabbed his boot and threw him off balance. The gun dropped from his grasp and MacLeod picked it up. The officer was looking at him with astonishment.

'Get up,' he said. The man climbed to his feet and brushed down his uniform. He looked as tired and beaten as MacLeod felt, but there was still arrogance and contempt in his eyes.

'Move,' said MacLeod, flicking the gun.

The officer stood his ground. Perhaps he had had enough? When the dead start climbing to their feet you begin to wonder what kind of enemy you are fighting and how the devil you can win against black magic.

'Nein!' The officer began to stride off in the opposite direction, unconcerned about the fact that he was being covered by his own weapon.

‘Whatever you say,’ sighed MacLeod, ‘You’re the master race.’ He pulled the trigger and the officer spun on his heels and fell to the floor bleeding from several wounds. He lay still. Rachel looked at the body, as if she expected that at any moment it would get to its feet, the way MacLeod had done, and the whole thing would be re-enacted in reverse again. She told MacLeod later that she thought it was magic. When he thought she was ready, long after he had adopted her, he told her who and what he was.

She said, ‘I was right. It was magic.’

MacLeod had raised Rachel as his own daughter, finding a new interest in his jaded life in parenthood. Now she looked almost twice his age. He had told her all about Heather and for once it was good, it felt good, to talk to someone about the past - someone whom he could trust completely. It was like having a Heather to live with again, without the future pain of losing a wife and lover. Of course, he would be very sad when Rachel died, but it would not be the same as having his heart torn out of his chest. It would be a gentler parting. He thought.

There was a knock on the door of the apartment. He went to it and looked through the spyhole . It was Rachel.

‘I just called by to see if you needed anything?’

‘No, I’m all stocked up. Do you want to stay for a drink?’

‘Okay. Thanks.’ She entered and kissed him on the cheek. ‘You’re looking tired.’

‘You know why.’

‘Does it have to be this way - the Gathering?’

‘I don’t know any way of stopping it.’

He went to the drinks cabinet and poured them both a scotch. When he turned, she was staring at him in a peculiar way.

‘What are you looking at, Rachel?’

‘The eyes in the back of your head.’

He nodded. ‘Funny.’

She said, ‘People are asking about you.’

‘Yes.’

‘What am I supposed to say?’

He said wryly, ‘Tell them I’m immortal. Tell them how you saw me die, then stand up on my feet and walk away.’

‘That was a long time ago.’

‘For you maybe. The Boston Tea Party - now that was a long time ago, to me.’

She seemed to be getting impatient with him. ‘Would you listen to me for one minute please?’ She sat down in a chair, the light shining on her long, black locks, and in her dark eyes. She said, ‘You can’t hide your feelings from me. I’ve known you too long.’

‘What feelings?’ he mumbled quietly. He did not want to hear what she had to say. He felt he knew what was coming.

‘How about loneliness?’

‘I’m not lonely. I’ve got you. I’ve got everything I need right here.’

‘That’s not true. You don’t have everything you need. I can see it in you, quite plainly. You refuse to let anyone love you.’

He smiled. ‘Don’t you love me, Rachel?’

‘Not that way.’

‘Romantic love is for poets.’ He stroked her cheek.

‘You’re such a romantic, Rachel.’

She smiled. ‘You always were,’ he said.

Chapter 21

BRENDA WYATT WAS not above using the Force to protect herself. After all, what was the point in working for the cops if you were finicky about using them? She did not want to bother Moran, so she swallowed her pride and went to Bedsoe .

‘Brenda,’ said the bald-headed Bedsoe , knocking over a cup of coffee on his desk. ‘What can I do for you?’

She looked at the coffee, running down the desk top, in alarm.

‘Hadn’t you better mop that up first?’

There were reports on his desk and from the look of them they would be unreadable if something was not done to stem the tide of brown liquid.

‘Uh. Yeah, sure.’ He took some paper towels and cleaned up the worst of the mess. The soggy pieces were thrown into the waste bin and then Bedsoe stood there awkwardly fiddling with his gun belt.

‘So, what can I do for you, Brenda?’

She was beginning to wonder whether this was a good idea, but since she had gone this far. . .

‘I want you to do me a favour , Walt .’

‘Yeah, sure.’

‘You don’t know what it is yet.’

He smiled, sheepishly. ‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘And there’s no strings attached - you understand me?’ He looked disappointed and she felt a heel, but he smiled again and the inevitable, ‘Yeah, sure,’ followed. However there was no point in raising his hopes.

‘I’ve got someone coming to dinner tonight - Nash Russell Nash.’

‘The guy we picked up in the Garden? Hey, Brenda, he’s not clean yet. We got nothing on him, but that don’t mean he didn’t do it. I wouldn’t trust that guy as far as Mexico.’

She waited patiently for the tirade to finish, knowing she had to go through the ‘big brother’s protecting you’ bit, before she would be allowed to speak again.

‘You got to be careful with guys like that, Brenda.’ ‘Exactly Walt, which is why I came to you.’

Bedsoedrew himself up, tightened his gun belt and sat on the edge of the desk - right in a pool of coffee. Brenda winced. ‘I wondered if you’d stake out for me. Just in case I need assistance. I want to pump him for some information and if you’re outside on call, I won’t feel so - frightened.’

Bedsoewas a fool about women, but not where his job was concerned.

‘Does Moran know about this? You’re way out of line here, Brenda. You know that.’

‘This is not about the case, Walt. This is about antiques. I wouldn’t interfere in your work, you know that.’

‘Let me get this straight. You wanna pump this guy Nash for some information about antiques - nothing to do with the case, right? And because of his recent activities, you would feel safer if someone was on call?’

‘That’s exactly it, Walt.’

He walked around the desk, tapping his fingers.

‘Still sounds a bit out of line, Brenda. Moran wouldn’t like it.’

‘And if I was a man,’ she snapped, ‘then it would still be out of line?’

‘No - aw shit. Okay. When do you want me there?’

She felt relieved. She was just about ready to give the whole thing up.

‘Eight-thirty - no, you’d better get there a bit earlier. Say, eight. This evening.’

She went to the supermarket after that, to get the food they were to eat. Then back to work for the rest of the day. When she got back to her apartment, in the early evening, she set the place up as she wanted

it. Her father had bought her a Smith and Wesson .38 before leaving for Florida, telling her she couldn't be too careful in New York City, with all those weirdos that hung around the Square. This pistol was now loaded for the first time and placed in the top drawer of her writing bureau. Then there was the tape recorder in her father's old cigar box. Finally, she began to prepare the dinner.

At eight o'clock, she looked out of the window and saw Walter's car already parked on the far side. Good old reliable Walt. She still felt guilty about using him. Still, he was on stake outs all the time. This sort of thing was a busman's holiday.

At eight-seventeen the front door bell rang. She yelled, 'Wait a minute,' took off her apron and started the tape recorder. Then she went to the door, checking with the spyhole first, to make sure that it was Nash.

He stepped inside the room. 'Good evening.'

'Hi. Let me take your coat.' Not too eager, she thought.

Not too gushing. The guy will know that there's something going on, other than dinner. She stood, staring at him, for a while, wondering what to say next.

'I think I'll hold onto my coat, thanks,' he said. Really? she thought. What does he think I'm going to do with it? Throw it out of the window?

'Oh, fine,' she said.

'You want to dine in the hall, or shall we step inside?' he said.

'Oh - come in.'

He walked into the room and sat down, picking up a magazine that she had dropped on the floor. He tossed it onto the opposite chair.

'Would you make us some drinks?' she said. 'While I put the finishing touches to the supper?'

'Okay. What would you like?'

'I'll have a dry martini. The drinks cabinet is over there - you'll find the olives in there too.'

She went into the kitchen then. A little while later he brought a martini to her and she said, 'Thanks.' When she began carrying the food into the living-room he was standing at the window, looking down at the street. Damn him, what was he doing? Do you know what you're doing? she thought, with herself in mind.

'Interesting view,' he said.

She laughed, a little too tinkling.

'Yes. Good old New York skyline.'

He nodded at the rest of the room as he walked away from the window.

‘I like your place, Brenda.’

She said, ‘I’ve only been here three months. I’m still fixing it up. I used to live with my father, but he’s retired now. Florida.’

‘Lucky man.’

She laughed. ‘That’s a funny thing to say. He’s not lucky. He just waited until he got old, that’s all.’

‘Is that all he did?’ This conversation was leaving her behind a little and she decided to change the subject.

‘That woman who works for you. . .’

‘Rachel?’

‘Yes. She’s very attractive.’

‘Yes, she is, isn’t she? And you’re wondering whether we have a relationship outside that of the business?’

‘No I was not,’ cried Brenda, hotly.

‘Oh, but you were. And you’re quite right. We’ve been together for a long time. I’m her adopted son.’

Brenda kicked herself, mentally. Ouch. Why did she always assume the wrong things?

‘Your mother works for you?’

‘Anything wrong in that?’

When she thought about it, there wasn’t. If the guy’s mother wanted to work for her adopted son, why not?

‘You never told me what you do for a living,’ said Nash.

Oh, Christ. Here it comes. The whole police bit.

‘I - work for the Metropolitan Museum. In acquisitions. That’s why I wanted to talk to you.’

‘Ah. That explains your interest in ancient weapons.’

She nodded furiously, ‘Right.’

He held up his glass. ‘Do you mind if I have another drink?’

‘Help yourself.’

‘Thanks.’ He poured himself another brandy while Brenda began to serve the meal. Well, he’d fallen for that line very easily. Maybe it wasn’t going to be such a difficult job after all? If she could lay her hands on that sword, her father would be ecstatic. She wondered what the weapon meant to Nash, if he had it. If

he did have it, she reminded herself, he was the one who killed Fasil in the Garden garage. That would make him a murderer unless - unless he had just been defending himself, as he had done the night they encountered that giant with the broadsword. She preferred to believe that version. Perhaps he had been on his way back to his shop, with the sword, when another guy with a Toledo-Salamanca just happened to be passing by and decided to mug... hell, she wanted to think he was a straight guy, but the alternatives just didn't add up.

They ate the first course and she opened a bottle of wine to have with the second.

'Do you mind if I stick with the brandy?'

'Suityourself,' she said. 'How about a toast - to the Samurai sword...'

He raised an eyebrow. 'That's a peculiar toast. I'd rather drink to thisbrandy,' he sniffed the glass. 'Bottled in 1783.'

'Old,' she said.

He replied quietly, '1783 was a very good year. Mozart wrote his Great Mass. The Montgolfier brothers went up in their first balloon andEngland recognized the independence of theUnited States.'

'Is that right?'

'Yes. And now. . .'

He pulled a package out of his raincoat pocket and placed it on the table.

'What's that?' she asked.

'It's for you.'

'Can I open it?'

'That's the general idea.'

She could feel it was a book and she wondered what on earth he had thought of bringing her. Something on swords perhaps? He did not know enough about her to think of anything else. She tore away the wrapping. She was right. It was a book about swords. Her own book.

'You bastard,' she said, dismayed. 'Where did you find this?'

'I work in the business - you seem to forget. It wasn't difficult. '

He stood up and walked to the window, pushing aside the blind and looking down at the street.

'The odd thing is, your bio doesn't seem to mention that you work at the museum. It says you work for the police - in forensics. Are you and Moran trying to set me up?'

'I don't work for Moran. Not directly...' She began to edge casually towards the bureau. Her stomach was like a lump of lead.

‘Then why,’ said Nash, ‘is that bald policeman sitting outside, watching your apartment?’

She tilted her head back, putting on her ‘I-don’t-know-what-the-hell-you’re-talking-about’ look. Nash looked back at her and smiled.

‘Oh, come on. You remember him.’

‘It’s got nothing to do with Moran. I asked Bedsoe to watch my place tonight, while you were here. Frankly, Mr Nash, or Mr MacLeod, whatever your name is - I don’t trust you. Why should I? I know nothing about you.’ She paused as he walked away from the window and back to the table. The bureau was within reach now. She said, ‘What are you going to do?’

He smiled. ‘The question is, what are you going to do? Are you going to turn off the tape, or are you going to shoot me with the .38?’ She stared at him. ‘Oh, shit.’ He must have looked in the drawers and the cigar box while she was in the kitchen, fixing supper. She felt unjustified in her accusation, but she made it anyway.

‘You’ve been snooping in my cupboards.’

He held up a hand. ‘Guilty. But I did not rifle through your underwear. I’m not into that - not yet anyway,’ he grinned.

She punched the arm of her chair in frustration.

‘Why are you so goddamn nice? If you’re a killer -’ She looked up quickly, to see his reaction. ‘I’m not looking for a killer,’ she said. ‘I’m looking for a sword.’

‘Which sword?’

‘The one used on Fasil . I found pieces of it in the garage under the Garden. I only want to see the Samurai.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it’s not supposed to exist. It’s one of those myths of the antique world.’ She could not keep the passion out of her voice. ‘I dated those pieces of blade at 600 B.C. The metal had been folded 200 times.’

‘And?’

‘So, the Japanese did not start making swords like that until the Middle Ages. So where the hell did it come from? If I could verify the existence of such a weapon - it would be like - discovering a 747 a thousand years before the Wright brothers ever flew.’

‘This is crazy.’ Nash got to his feet, grabbed his coat and began to walk towards the door. She suddenly felt intensely irritated with him. Hell, he had invited himself to dinner and they had only just started the second course. There was apricot pie to go yet.

‘Wait a minute,’ she said. ‘I want some answers.’

He stared at her, so coldly that it frightened her. ‘You want - don’t you ever think about anything but

what you want? Don't you think that if I had that sword - and I say if - that it would be my discovery, not yours?'

He opened the door and slammed it shut behind him.

Brenda sighed. Well, there was no need to keep Walt outside in the car. She went to the window and signalled to him. Ten minutes later he came bounding into the room. 'Is he still here?' he cried.

'Calm down, Walter. He's gone. Didn't you pass him?'

'No - he must have taken the elevator. I came by the stairs.' He stood looking at her with puppy-dog eyes.

'Since you're here,' she said, 'would you like some apricot pie? I'm usually lousy at making it and just today - just today it went right for once. Then my guest walks out on me before we get to it.'

Bedsoe stayed for about quarter of an hour and polished off the pie. Then he left. Brenda settled down to watch the news on the TV. There was nothing about beheadings - for once.

Chapter 22

WHEN MACLEOD LEFT Brenda Wyatt's apartment, he went directly to a bar and ordered a scotch. That ought to go down well, on top of the brandy, he thought. He wondered what Brenda would have done had she known that all the time he was in her home the sword was in his coat. Ramirez, old friend, your weapon is causing me more bother than a Spanish peacock looking for converts.

He left the bar and went to the subway. At that time of night, there were only a few passengers, especially since the decapitations. He got on the first one - a carriage which belonged to Sanchez Domingo, if you were to believe the graffiti that decorated its interior. Actually, he quite liked the artwork, which consisted mainly of balloon letters with fantastic backgrounds, though he knew it gave the transport commissioner headaches.

MacLeod had seen that name Domingo on other carriages in the town and guessed that the artist had graduated to what was known as all-city: making sure that every moving train carried the name.

At the next stop someone got on at the far end of the carriage. A black guy in traditional dress. Some African country. Two more stops and a gang of youths got on. There were seven of them. The leader appeared to be a Puerto Rican and he viewed the graffiti with apparent distaste.

'See this guy, Domingo? When I catch his arse I'm gonna rip it out an' spill his guts, man.'

MacLeod was amused. 'It offends you? The graffiti?' Seven faces turned towards him. The gang leader sauntered over and put a dirty track shoe on the seat beside MacLeod. The black guy at the other end of the carriage was paying no attention to all this. MacLeod did not blame him.

'Yeah,' said the youth, 'it offends me. Everywhere I go, I gotta see this guy's name stuck in front of my nose? Shit. Who the hell is he to write his goddamn name where the Caligulas can see it?'

'You, I take it, are the Caligulas,' said MacLeod, nodding towards the rest of them. One of the slimmer youths took out a switchblade, flicked it open and began scratching out the graffiti. 'That's a pretty scary name.'

‘Damn right. This is Caligula turf.’ He pointed to his foot. ‘Wherethat shoe sits, man, is Caligula turf. You got it?’

‘I think so.’

The youth jumped back in mock surprise. ‘Then why you still sittin ’ there man? Don’t you understand what I’m talkin ’? This here,’ he tapped theseat on which MacLeod was sitting, ‘belongs to the Caligulas . This whole fuckin ’ train belongs to the Caligulas . Savvy?’

‘You mean, you want me to vacate the seat? Even whenthere’s plenty of free seats on the other side of the carriage.’

The leader turned to his gang, who now had a variety of weapons on show, from motorbike chains to knuckledusters. A small zip gun came into view.

‘You catch on real fast, man. Don’t he guys? I mean, real fast.’

MacLeod stayed where he was, ignoring them. They seemed unsure what to do next. Usually people did a lot of things when they were threatened, but they did not ignore them. The leader walked over again. ‘So va-cate man.’

‘Fuck off,’ replied MacLeod. Although he had not used the word violently, the youth sprang back as if he had been slapped in the face. He was amused to see a small debate go on then, as the train rattled along the tracks.

‘He’s gotta have a piece, man,’ he heard one of them say. ‘He wouldn’t have the balls without he was carrying a piece...’

At that point, the black guy from the other end of the carriage had wandered down and now took a seat opposite MacLeod. He smiled.

‘How are you, MacLeod?’

‘ Kastagir?I don’t need to ask what you’re doing inNew York . Have you seen the big man yet?’

‘Have you?’

‘Yeah - the othernight. . . just a minute, we seem to have a bit of a problem here.’ The leader of the Caligulas was now back by his side. He was looking from one man to the other.

‘Well, ain’t that nice,’ he said. ‘Two buddies – gonna go down together.’

Kastagirsaid, ‘Is this open to negotiation?’

‘You what?You-fucking- nego-what?’The boy took out a butcher’s knife from within his jacket. ‘I’m gonna cut your balls off . . .’

MacLeod and Kastagir both leapt from their seats and put their backs to the end of the carriage. Convinced that they had not got a gun on them now, the youths began to advance, making menacing gestures and shouting taunts. The leader was grinning, his stubble-beard split by his red mouth.

MacLeod said, 'Ready?'

'When you are,' said Kastagir .

They both produced their swords at once, in a flashing of blades. The gleaming weapons stopped the gang in their tracks.

'Holy shit,' said the boy with the zip gun.

The gang leader stared at the long blades in front of him before making a tactical decision.

'Hey,' he said, smiling nervously. 'I know what you guys are. Yeah. You figure as these vigilantes. You been to see Bronson in "Death Wish" right? Well, lookman, we don't want no trouble with you guys. I'm just gonna put this in here,' he returned his butcher's knife to his jacket, 'an' I'm gonna sit over here,' he took a vacant seat, 'an' mind my own business man. You want to go and chop the fuck outta me, that's up to you, man. I ain't gonna stop you.'

His gang were busy stowing their weapons and Kastagir and MacLeod did likewise, before the train stopped at the next station. A group of theatre-goers boarded at that point and looked suspiciously at the gang of youths. But the boys just sat staring at the floor and ceiling, looking as though butter would not melt in their mouths. At the next stop the gang got off.

Kastagir rose from his seat. 'Mine next. Be seeing you MacLeod.'

MacLeod suddenly realized he did not want to meet this man on the field of battle.

'Look, Kastagir . Why don't we have a talk?'

The black man studied his face. 'Won't do any good. There can be only one.'

'Meet me in Central Park - two-thirty tomorrow.'

Kastagir sighed. 'Okay. There isn't much point in fighting each other until we've met the big man. I don't think either of us is a match for him.'

The train doors hissed open and Kastagir stepped through them, calling, 'Two-thirty then. On the bridge.'

MacLeod waved to confirm.

Chapter 23

KASTAGIR. THE LAST time MacLeod had seen him was in the Zulu Wars of 1879, when the black Africans followed the example of their Redskin brothers in America , and told the white man to get the hell out. The Zulus were more successful than the Sioux, because of their superior numbers and well-trained troops, but only in the short run. In the long run only death or taxes sent the white man back where he came from.

MacLeod was serving in the 17th Lancers, as a private soldier. Their captain had got them into a bit of a hole, down by the River Singasi . They were surrounded by six regiments of Cetewayo's best troops.

The 17th had in fact been splintered and the fragment that remained consisted of only fifty men.

At dawn on the third day, the final attack came. The Zulus had had enough of playing gentlemen at Rourke's Drift and they saw no reason to keep letting these people, who could not even dress to the climate, off the hook all the time. They slaughtered what remained of the 17th almost to a man. That man was MacLeod.

Somehow, when the dust had settled and all that was left was to collect the fallen weapons, this single white man was still alive. The Zulus appreciated the survivor in a soldier and took him with them, in a cage. It took three days at a trotting pace to reach the encampment - a place deep in the bush country, ringed by African thorns. They did not carry him all the way, but made him take a turn at running. They covered 150 miles in three days and MacLeod was exhausted by the time they reached their destination.

That night, as he lay in his cage trying to get some sleep, the camp reverberated with the sounds of a victory dance. Feet thundered against the hard earth floor of the bushland, and drums pounded out the hollow rhythms of success. Of course, Cetewayo got all the credit, even though he had not been there, but the precedent had been set by his uncle, Chaka, who had turned a few motley tribes into a nation whose soldiers could only be compared with the ancient Spartans for their fearlessness and dedication to duty. They had been trained to the pitch of perfection, and Chaka and Cetewayo considered that it was the songwriter, not the vocalist, who should get the credit.

Apart from the fact that a small snake got into the cage with him, MacLeod was not otherwise bothered. The next morning he was the object of curiosity to the women of the encampment. They poked him through the bars and chattered amongst themselves in their own language, which was denied the menfolk. (MacLeod had the thought that perhaps they had invented it so that they could talk about their amours without fear of being overheard by boringly conservative husbands.)

At about ten o'clock, or so he judged from the sun, the warriors began to stir from the places where they had dropped the night before. They staggered down to the waterhole to dip their heads.

A plate of mashed meal was brought to him, and some water, both of which he disposed of very quickly. Maidenly interest waned and for the next few days, apart from being fed, he was left alone. The sun beat down. They seemed quite happy to leave him where he was, and he began to get that same sort of rejected feeling that prisoners in the Middle Ages - placed in oubliettes below the castle floors and existing on scraps that fell through the grill - must have experienced.

He started to yell at them and rattle the wooden bars. They stopped, looked at him in astonishment, shook their heads, and carried on with whatever they had been doing before being interrupted.

When the sun was going down one evening and filling the sky with red dust, a tall man came to stare into his cage at him.

'Who the hell are you?' cried MacLeod.

The warrior had many scars on his body, which was muscular, though lean. The man studied him in minute detail with the seriousness of a tailor. When he had finished, he looked MacLeod full in the eyes and grinned. He pointed to himself, then the Scot, and hooked his two forefingers together. Then nodded.

MacLeod realized what was going to happen. They had been fattening him up for single combat with this tall warrior. Fair enough. That was fine. He would take the man apart. Then perhaps they would let him out of the damned cage.

‘Think you’re going to win?’ The voice startled him, not because it spoke in English, but because it was familiar. A warrior, replete with plumes, stood leaning on his cage, arms folded, looking in.

‘Kastagir? Is that you underneath all that pomp?’ ‘Right first time, MacLeod.’

‘When did you leave the West Indies?’

‘Just as soon as I could. Didn’t take to all that working in the field. Too much sweat. How about you?’

‘Well, I’ve spent most of my time in London since the 1800’s, except for a holiday with Wellington, on the continent.’

The civilities over, Kastagir said, ‘You’re in a lot of trouble this time.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘That Zulu - he’s one of us.’

‘You don’t expect me to believe that?’ said MacLeod, clutching at straws. ‘Two people from the same tribe when there are only a handful of immortals on this earth?’

Kastagir grinned. ‘You’re forgetting - I don’t come from down here. I was born in Ethiopia. Africa’s a big place. He’s one of us all right. I’ve seen him in battle.’

‘Fine. As you say, I have a problem. Is he new? Does he know what he’s capable of?’

‘He knows.’

‘How can you be so sure?’

‘He fights all Cetewayo’s single combats and while he uses a broadaxe, his adversaries are always given spears. You can’t decapitate a man with a spear.’

‘You’re right - I’m in a lot of trouble.’

‘Thought I’d warn you what you were up against.’

‘Thanks.’

Kastagir left him then, to the evening full of the sound of insects and the smell of rain in the west. There was that dry crispness to the air which always heralded a still night. MacLeod settled down at the bottom of his cage to think things out.

He supposed he should have asked Kastagir what he was doing here, but he guessed the black man was getting a bit of his own back: chasing the white man.

That night MacLeod worked at the thongs that bound the cage bars together: gnawing them with his teeth. His one thought now was to get out and make a run for it. All night he worked at the leathers, biting through them piece by piece, until, as the sun came up, he managed to work one of the bars loose. He pushed it aside and began to ease his thin frame through the gap. All around were sleeping forms of those who had not bothered to go into their huts, but preferred the airy doorways. Some of them were

children, usually the first awake, and here and there a body or two was already stirring in the early heat. Chickens were beginning to peck at the hard earth, making noises around the sleepers.

The large red disc of the sun crept gradually upwards over the edge of the plain. Ragged trees could be seen being stripped of bark by elephant, half a mile away. He made his way towards these Yellow Fever Trees, hoping to put the herd between him and sight of the village. MacLeod had not gone more than a dozen steps before a five-year-old voice called to him to come and play. He tried to quieten the child by waving his hands and smiling at it, but the youngster was eager and trotted towards MacLeod, at the same time shouting to its friends to come and play with the man from the cage.

Soon, mothers were awakened, then fathers and as MacLeod raced around the encampment, the whole Zulu nation opened its eyes, jumped to its feet and formed an impassable black maze, within which MacLeod was trapped.

They led him back to his cage, not in anger, but laughing and joking. They thought the whole episode, ending with MacLeod running around like a headless chicken, hilarious. The Zulu have a wonderful sense of humour. When they saw the chewed bonds, they told him cheerfully, that since he had already had his breakfast, he would not need any more before the fight that day. Kastagir came to see him.

‘Bad luck,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘There won’t be another chance.’

‘Thanks for telling me,’ said MacLeod, ‘in plenty of time.’

‘Is it my fault you’re in a cage?’

‘No.’

‘Good. At least you gave them some amusement before ... well, let’s hope for the best. If you win, they’ll let you go.’

‘They will?’

‘Yes - but your chances of winning are pretty slim, you must admit.’

‘You’re right,’ said MacLeod, slipping back into despondency again.

They came for him at two o’clock that afternoon, just after the sun had passed the vertical. It was tremendously hot. The Zulu audience, which stretched back, wave on wave, sat in the shade of temporarily erected sunscreens. Cetewayo and his officers had a ringside seat of course, with attendants running here, there and everywhere. MacLeod, on seeing the mild-looking king, had to remind himself that this man had marched regiments of Zulus over the edges of cliffs, letting them fall to their deaths, simply to prove their loyalty to him. This was not a man to take at face value.

The drums were being pounded, as usual, and MacLeod was led to the centre of the area they had marked out and, as Kastagir had warned him to expect, an assagai was thrust into his hands. He took the long-bladed, shorthanded spear (invention of Cetewayo’s uncle Chaka) and tested its cutting edge with his finger. It was not sharp. The weapon was designed for close-combat thrusting and stabbing, not cutting.

The drums reached a feverish pitch and the tall lithe man MacLeod had seen the day before leapt into the ring and began dancing round him. There was a thunderous roar of appreciation from the crowd. This

was their champion, and their champion carried a kind of heavyhanded knife with a moon-shaped double blade. A form of axe.

MacLeod waited for his opponent to come to him, but the other man was not ready for him yet. He had not finished dancing around the area, showing off his magnificent ebony body. Finally, the drums stopped and the crowd went quiet. The two men squared up to one another.

MacLeod held the assagai with both hands, like a sword, hoping to hurt his adversary in some way so as to try to get the axe.

There was much weaving and leaping: gymnastics from both men. MacLeod found he had to be extremely agile to avoid blows from the axe, and though he could have stabbed his opponent several times, he tried instead to strike with the edge of the assagai blade, hoping that his strength would be enough to cut through the man's neck. Once, he caught the Zulu on his shoulder, but the weapon did not even break the skin.

The sweat was pouring from MacLeod's back as they each feigned a rush, then went in together, to lock weapons. He let his own fall to the ground in an effort to get hold of the other man's, but failed and thus left himself completely unarmed. The grinning Zulu attacked him with renewed vigour now and MacLeod had to ward off the blows with his hands, receiving many cuts.

The Zulu rushed him. MacLeod sidestepped and stuck out a foot. The other man saw it. Jumped. Turned and came in again. MacLeod was on him and there was a second struggle for the axe. The Zulu - lean and snaky - wriggled out of MacLeod's grasp.

At one point, MacLeod found himself on the floor with the axe descending on him. He moved his head a fraction and the blade buried itself in the earth by his cheek. Finally, out of desperation, MacLeod ran for his own weapon, snatched it from the ground, turned and slammed it point-first into the chest of the Zulu.

There was an 'Aaaahhhh. . .' from the crowd. Cetewayo jumped to his feet. All eyes were on the transfixed opponent of MacLeod. The man staggered forwards, his mouth hanging open, clawed at the assagai with frantic fingers, took one last beseeching look at his king, then flopped to the ground and lay still.

He was obviously dead.

MacLeod was stunned. Hadn't Kastagir said that this man was an immortal? Kastagir! MacLeod looked around for him, but it wasn't until Cetewayo wanted to talk to MacLeod that he saw the Ethiopian. He was standing by the king.

Kastagir cried, 'Cetewayo thinks you are a fine warrior. He praises you.' The king nodded, as if to confirm.

'Thanks a lot,' replied MacLeod, sarcastically. 'I could have killed him that way half an hour ago, if you hadn't lied to me. You said the warrior was an immortal.'

'A joke,' smiled Kastagir, and though he obviously did not understand the words, Cetewayo nodded violently and shouted something in Zulu. The nation responded warmly.

Kastagir said, 'You know what great humorists us Zulus are.'

They began to lead MacLeod back, towards his cage.

‘Hey!’ he shouted. ‘I won the combat. I get to go free.’ Kastagir shook his head. ‘I lied about that too,’ he cried, in a cheerful voice.

That night, under cover of darkness, Kastagir helped him escape and led him north, to some English troops. That was the last time MacLeod had seen him - until the incident on the New York subway.

Chapter 24

THE FOLLOWING DAY, a bright one, MacLeod made his way to the bridge in Central Park. Before he reached it he could see Kastagir leaning on the parapet, keeping a wary eye open for the Kurgan. As Kastagir had said, there was no point in fighting each other, until one of them had defeated the Russian.

‘Hey, Kastagir!’ called MacLeod.

The black face creased into a grin. ‘MacLeod! It’s good to see you again. I was only thinking last night, after I left you, that it seems like a hundred years.’

MacLeod grasped his hand and shook it. ‘It has been a hundred years - and you know what you did to me then, you bastard.’

Kastagir laughed. ‘I remember. Look, are we going to walk?’

‘Yeah.’

They took each other’s arm and began to saunter through the shrubbery. They could have been two French courtiers of Louis XIV’s era, strolling through the gardens of Versailles.

‘How have you been?’ asked MacLeod.

‘Oh, not so bad. A few years here, a few years there. It’s a living.’

They both laughed.

‘Oh, by the way. I brought you some of this,’ said Kastagir. He reached inside his kaftan and brought out a bottle.

‘What’s that?’ asked MacLeod.

‘Boom-boom.’

MacLeod shook his head.

Kastagir seemed disappointed. ‘A big strong man like you shouldn’t be afraid of a little boom-boom.’

But MacLeod knew well that anything given him by Kastagir had to be taken in the knowledge that there was more behind it than just a drink. It could be a practical joke - or it could be something more serious. MacLeod did not want to test it out.

‘You don’t trust me, MacLeod?’

‘I don’t trust anyone.’

‘Very wise. I might be trying to poison you,’ laughed Kastagir . ‘Ah well,’ he shrugged and put the bottle back inside his kaftan .

Some kids ran between them and their arms, unhooked, now remained that way. Both men glanced occasionally at the bushes, but knew that the Kurgan would be a little foolish to attack them while they were together, when he could take them one at a time.

‘So,’ said Kastagir . ‘The Gathering is here. Time has almost caught us, my friend.’

‘Has it?’

MacLeod looked at the black man.

‘Do you think we should go on?’

Kastagir smiled. ‘You’ve grown weary of life at last? It comes to us all, doesn’t it. A time when there is nothing new. Even when some fresh discovery is made in the eyes of the rest of the world, to us it’s still a great yawn. We’ve seen from swords to nuclear missiles, and many a year between. There’s nothing left of interest. Yet, we still want to live, isn’t that so, MacLeod?’

The Scot nodded.

‘It’s the part I don’t understand. To be utterly weary and sick of it all - yet still to be reluctant to leave it.’ ‘More than just “reluctant.” ‘,

‘Yes. We would fight to the utmost lengths of our skill to keep something we don’t really want.’

Kastagir laughed. ‘You’re not in love then - at the moment?’

‘I was only in love once, ever, and that was enough. Not the loving, but the parting. I don’t wish to repeat the experience.’

‘She wasn’t good to you?’

‘She was my wife - and we were everything to one another. I am only half alive.’

Kastagir was serious for a moment. ‘So. Yes, I know what you’re talking about. I too. . .’ But he clearly did not want to open himself to MacLeod.

They walked on for a bit in silence. The park around them was full of families and loners, couples and groups of youngsters, infants and the elderly: all forms of human life. In a way it was not their world at all. They were aliens amongst these people, not because of their origin of birth, but because of the twist behind it.

Kastagir slapped MacLeod on the back. ‘A hundred years. I think I see you every century. That’s pretty regularly, isn’t it, MacLeod?’

‘It’s a regular meeting,’ agreed MacLeod.

Kastagirsaid, 'The time before Zululand, was inBoston . Your famous duel - do you remember?'
MacLeod smiled.

Kastagirsaid, 'We had a party. 1793 it was.'

'1783, not 93,' said MacLeod. 'And you were drunk.' Kastagir waved a finger in his face.

'So were you, I recall, my friend. At least I was sober enough not to insult the wife of a famous swordsman. . .'

'I only insulted . . .'

'You know what I mean,' replied Kastagir .

MacLeod did indeed know what the Ethiopian meant. Kastagirhad been posing as some Eastern prince at the time and both had found themselves together at the party of a Bostonian Judge. The wine and brandy had been flowing quite freely, when MacLeod found himself pursued by the ugly wife of one of the first gentlemen ofBoston - a wealthy shipowner by the name of Bassett.

MacLeod did his best to get rid of the woman by fair means, but when she followed him into a bedroom, which he had chosen as an escape route and started to remove her clothes, he called her a name. She paled, told him he was no gentleman and went to fetch her husband.

MrBassett entered the bedroom with a single glove in his hand. He marched up to MacLeod and struck him round the face with it.

'Swords,' said MacLeod, too drunk to add any words on either side of that single reference.

'Time?'

'Now.'

'Place?'

'Here.'

'Not good enough.BostonCommon.'

'Greed.'

Somehow MacLeod found his way to the spot on Boston Common where they had agreed to stage the duel. He had with him no seconds and stated that he did not want any. All he wanted to do was get it over with so that he could either drink further and pass out, or go home to bed.

Bassett had brought with him a doctor, two seconds and his man Hotchkiss. The duelling blades were brought forth and Bassett made his selection.

Hotchkiss said, 'Theheavier blade, Mr Bassett, I implore you.'

'I am fighting this duel, Hotchkiss, not you,'came the impatient reply.

The blade was tested for strength and whip. The seconds were inspecting the ground beneath the old oak (though it had been inspected a thousand times before the spot was a famous duelling ground). Having satisfied themselves that they had done their duty they signalled to Mr Bassett and to MacLeod, though the latter was paying little attention to them. He had been studying a jay on the bough of the oak, and thinking how beautiful it looked in the rays of the early-dawn sun.

‘Are you ready, sir?’ called Bassett.

‘Eh? What?’

MrBassett sighed and said to his seconds, ‘See if the imbecile is ready.’

MrJones came up to him.

‘ MrBassett wishes to know if you are ready, sir?’

‘Of course I’m ready, sir. I’m the one who’s been kept waiting. ‘

‘Then will you please take the sword.’

He was offered the remaining blade - an epee. Bassett had taken the foil.

‘On guard!’

The two blades crossed. There was a flurry from the blade of Mr Bassett, a slight pain in MacLeod’s heart, as the thin blade went throughit (though it was considerably dulled by the amount of alcohol that was flowing through the organ at the time) and the uninjured gentleman began to walk away.

MacLeod fell over, climbed back on to his feet and called to his opponent, whose back was now to him.

‘Hi! What about this duel?’

Bassett stopped in his tracks and turned around, a look of amazement on his face. His seconds too, were staring pop-eyed.

Hotchkiss said, ‘Oh my God. You must have missed him, Mr Bassett.’

Bassett growled, ‘I can assure you,Hotchkiss, that I did not miss. I saw my blade go through his chest. It has not hit a vitalorgan, that is all. We shall have to do it again.’

MacLeod staggered forward to cross blades again and his wig fell over his eyes.

‘Jesus,’ he cried. ‘I’ve gone blind!’

MrBassett’s blade again went slickly and cleanly through his heart. MacLeod dropped to the ground. Bassett began to walk away, wiping the blade of the foil. MacLeod climbed to his feet. Hotchkiss shrieked. The seconds whirled. MacLeod said, ‘Hi! Now what. . .’

Bassett stamped his foot in frustration. He stepped forward again and once, twice, three times, ran the

body of MacLeod through with his foil. MacLeod fell over and then climbed back to his feet.

‘Now...’

Bassett tried several more places of penetration, getting more and more frustrated all the time. He was also getting angry with Hotchkiss, who was dancing around on the periphery of his vision.

‘That’s it, Mr Bassett, there and there. Yes! Oh, no. He’s back on his feet, sir. Try again. There.No there. Just below the collarbone.Very good, sir. No, not working I’m afraid...’

The seconds were becoming appalled by the carnage that was nota carnage .

Finally, MacLeod yelled, ‘Stop, sir. I beseech you. I am getting tired and a little sober. One or the other will have to go. I apologize for calling your wife a bloated wart-hog and I bid you good day.’

He turned on his heel and began to walk away. Hotchkiss grabbed a pistol from one of the seconds and pushed it into the hands of Bassett.

‘Shoot him sir.’

Bassett ignored him, throwing down the foil in disgust. ‘Must shoot him, sir,’ cried Hotchkiss, dancing around his master. ‘Before he gets out of range.’

‘Hotchkiss, stop it. Please leave me alone.’ But the servant was not to be put off. He was thoroughly agitated by this time. He wanted blood. MacLeod’s blood.His master deserved it.

‘Shoot him sir. Have to shoot him.’

Bassett said, ‘Hotchkiss, I swear...’

Hotchkiss ran a little way after MacLeod and pointed. ‘In the back, sir.Quickly. Shoot. Shoot.’

MrBassett indeed fired at that point, but the yelp of pain was not from MacLeod, but from Hotchkiss, who began doing a very different dance around the Common, clutching his rump.

‘Ow, sir!’ he shrieked. ‘Sir. . .’

‘Yes, that was some duel,’ said Kastagir . ‘I could tell that to my grandchildren, if I had grandchildren.’

‘Don’t remind me of my weaknesses, Kastagir , just when I need to recall my strengths,’ said MacLeod.

‘Meaning?’

‘Meaning that immortality, the way we possess it, has robbed us of a more traditional concept of immortality life through our offspring.’

‘You think that a weakness in us?’

‘Most definitely.’

They walked on in silence for a while, suddenly aware that they had little to say to each other even after

a hundred years - especially after a hundred years. Too little, and too much, happens over such a great expanse of time. They had no reference points with each other. They had recalled a brief meeting between them - two brief meetings if the duel was to be counted - and now they had nothing to say to one another.

They shook hands without another word and parted at the entrance to the park.

Chapter 25

THEKURGAN LIKED modern cities. They were seething with violence, always ready to explode. He liked the fever of the streets, especially in New York. Everything was close to the surface. If you stopped to listen, you could hear the city screaming, in a thousand different ways, through a thousand separate mouths.

You could feel the tension in the air. You could sense it was ready to snap.

There was always a climate of despair hanging over the false gaiety. Drunks had sudden insights to the deeper layers of the city, and tried to warn others, but people took no notice. People thought they had control. Then, occasionally, something happened - like a series of decapitations - which showed them they did not, and the normal quiet panic moved into the hysteria zone.

A salesman was talking to Kenny, in the lobby of the Ansonia Hotel. There were beer cans lying in a crushed heap on the counter between them.

‘I mean, what are the slobs doing about it, huh?’

‘Zactly,’ confirmed Kenny, crushing another beer can as if it were made of inch-thick steel and not paperthin aluminium. Kenny thought he was one of the toughest guys in the neighbourhood. The newscaster was saying: ‘That’s the mood of New York at this moment. An angry city in the grip of fear. So far the police department is continuing a vigorous investigation and following up on a number of promising leads. A Headhunter Hotline has been. . .’

‘A number of promising leads,’ sneered the salesman.

‘Those guys couldn’t find their own dicks.’

‘They have dicks? News to me,’ said Kenny.

TheKurgan had heard most of this conversation from within his room, since the walls in the hotel were about as thick as toilet paper. He came out now, slamming the door behind him. As usual, he was dressed in his old black leathers. His sword was already in his car. Tonight was headhunting night. . . .

TheKurgan tossed the room key to Kenny as he passed the desk.

‘Hey, Rockefeller,’ called Kenny, lazily, ‘hoped you liked Candy again. She said you were kinda - uh - kinky last night.’

The salesman sniggered and took a slurp of his beer.

TheKurgan stopped in the doorway and turned. He stared at the heap of crushed beer cans. There was a steel ashtray next to these and theKurgan picked it up and with one hand reduced it to the same state

as the individual beer cans. He tossed it onto the pile, while the salesman and Kenny stared at him, boggle-eyed. He leaned on the counter and said to Kenny, 'Don't you ever speak to me again.'

Kenny babbled, 'I - Look, I didn't mean - '

TheKurgan reached over the counter and took him by the collar, lifting him off the floor.

'You're not listening, Kenny. I said, don't ever speak to me again.'

Kenny wisely remained silent. He was beginning to choke.

'Understand?' whispered theKurgan .

'Yeah. . .'

'Good.'

TheKurgan tossed him onto the floor. By this time the salesman had hurried away and the only other witness was the old wino who sat in the doorway. TheKurgan stepped past him as Kenny glared at theKurgan 's retreating form. Once he was safely out of earshot, Kenny shouted, 'I hope you get your head chopped off, arsehole !' The old wino laughed.

'Shut it!' said Kenny.

'Anything I can do for you, Mr ...'

'Shut it!' screamed Kenny, slamming his fist down on the counter. The beer cans jumped and scattered, some of them falling on the floor.

'Tough guy,' said the old black. 'Tough guy. . .'

At the time theKurgan left the hotel, there was a carcruising the streets ofNew York . In its trunk were three Remington over-and-under pump-action shotguns, four hunting knives, a Colt 1911 automatic pistol with seven spare clips and a Harrington and Richardson .32 hammerless blowback.

On the passenger seat, next to the driver, was a Schmeisser MP40 submachine gun with a full clip of 32 rounds of .303 ammunition, with another clip on the dashboard. The tape recorder was playing a series of Vietnam War songs, which the driver was singing along to in a morose fashion.

The driver's name was Kirk Matunas and he was what is affectionately known as a gun nut. He was an ex-Nam veteran who considered the streets ofNew York to be every bit as dangerous as the jungles he fought in out there inAsia , and a visit to the liquor store was every bit as hazardous as a long-range patrol into Cong territory. He had seen 'Rambo' seventeen times, read 'Dispatches' five times and his favourite song was 'Goodnight Saigon' by Billy Joel.

'You can't be too careful,' he told his friends, neighbours and relations. 'You gotta protect yourself in this city. People get killed everyday.' .

Kirk Matunas was as paranoid as a rabbit living on a foxfur farm.

Matunaseyed passers-by with great suspicion as he sped through the slick, wet streets, gleaming after a

recent shower of rain. Even the little old woman with a paper shopping bag might be carrying a grenade amongst the cat food. You couldn't be too careful. He drove past a line of hookers and scowled at them. A hooker had given him a present in Saigon - one he found difficult to get rid of, even with modern penicillin. He passed an alley and glanced down. There was a flash of something in the depths of its darkness.

What the hell was that? Matunas stopped the car and put it in reverse. He edged the car backwards, switching off the tape deck at the same time.

He stared down the alley. A couple of figures were struggling together and when Matunas wound down the window of his car he could hear grunts and the clash of metal on metal.

'Somethin' going down here,' he muttered.

He picked up the Schmeisser and got out of the vehicle. Remembering his training, he zig-zagged across the road and crouched by the corner. There were two men, fighting, with swords, at the back of the alley. A black guy and a huge white man. Matunas could see the blades flashing in the light from a neon sign opposite. Swords? What the hell? These guys were trying to cut each other to pieces. Matunas contemplated on going back to the car to fetch one of the shotguns, but decided against it. The machine pistol would have to do.

'They better not mess with me,' he said to himself. 'I'll cut the bastards in half. I'll stitch belts across their bellies. I'll . . .'

He stopped as one of the men kicked the other in the groin and ran his sword through his opponent's left arm. Though there was no pause in the fighting, Matunas took the opportunity of dashing behind some garbage cans, to get a better view. One of the swordsmen struck a fire escape ladder with his weapon and a shower of sparks lit the scene for a moment.

'Jesus,' whispered Matunas to himself. He thought that these two were maybe some crazy martial arts fanatics what was it? Kendo? Maybe they were just practising or something? But he had seen one wound the other, so that was not it. They were serious all right. Should he intervene and march them down to the nearest cop?

Whatever the cause of the fight, it was not an American way of settling a dispute. All these imported fighting styles annoyed Matunas. He preferred the good old home-grown stuff. What was wrong with a good redneck punchout? Or if you wanted to hurt someone permanently, a standup gunfight? All this slapping around, chopping with the edge of the hand, barefoot kicking and battling with sticks and swords - hell, that was for faggots.

'Okay, Marine,' he said to himself. 'This is for real. Let's go. . .'

But he was mesmerized by the clashing swords and the silent, ferocious way the two combatants strove to cut chunks from one another. Their footwork and swordplay was brilliant - so far as he could make out anyway, having only seen such stuff in the movies. He could hear the whistle of thin steel blades slicing air and caught the lightning flash as they arced through the neon-lighted alley.

Suddenly he found himself shouting. 'What the hell's going on?'

No answer. 'What? One of you guys better answer me.' Nothing. The fight continued.

‘This is the last time I’m asking.’

He was completely ignored. Just as he was shouting, he sensed a desperation creeping into one of the fighters. The black guy. He saw the man slash wildly at his opponent, three or four times. Then he seemed to stumble. The big white guy gave a yell of triumph and stepped forward, the huge broadsword held above his head.

‘Wait. . .’ cried Matunas .

But even before the shout was free of his tongue, the sword came down. It sliced neatly through the black guy’s neck. The head jumped a little on the stump, then dropped with a clatter amongst the trash cans. It rolled into a puddle of filth, alongside a split parcel of rotten cabbage stalks.

‘Christ Almighty!’ screamed Matunas .

His stomach flapped and he fought down a wave of nausea and fear which both came at the same time. The swordsman who was still standing looked down the alley at him. Matunas stood up and backed off a couple of paces. He cocked the Schmeisser and flipped off the safety catch.

‘You!’ growled the killer, pointing at him. ‘Come.’

‘Fuck you,’ squealed Matunas , and pulled the trigger of the machine gun. Bullets sprayed into the alley at the rate of 500 per minute. Matunas emptied the whole clip of 32 in less than four seconds. Practically all of them struck the big guy somewhere on his body. The swordsman jerked as the lead missiles tore through him.

‘Ha!’ yelled Matunas , high on adrenalin. People began to appear at the end of the alley. Witnesses do not always see what is actually there, before their eyes. When something extraordinary happens, the brain sometimes refuses to accept what the eyes are transmitting to it and substitutes what it believes is the correct, accurate picture. The brain is an organ that has been conditioned into accepting only what it expects. High on feverish excitement, what Matunas saw was what he expected to see. The big white guy had been holed by twenty-five rounds of .303 ammunition and therefore he fell to the ground, beside the headless corpse of his previous adversary, and lay still. That was what Matunas saw, as he walked forward to inspect the body. Then he found someone blocking his way.

It was a huge man in leathers wielding a broadsword. Matunas looked at the ground. There was only one corpse lying there. He shook his head. Something weird was happening.

‘You should be dead,’ he said, hollowly, to the giant in front of him.

‘I know,’ smiled the man. ‘Disappointing isn’t it?’

‘What the hell’s going on? You’re full of lead.’

‘And you’re full of shit,’ smiled the man.

Matunas walked over to the black guy’s corpse. ‘Who’s this?’

‘That was Kastagir - that was.’

Yet he still could not figure it out. He turned to say something else and he felt the strangest sensation in

his gut. Looking down, he saw that the wide blade of the big guy's sword was buried in his belly. The other man was still smiling at him. He dropped the Schmeisser as the pain finally reached his brain and jangled there.

'Hey. . .' he said. He gripped the swordblade and tried to wrench it from his gut, but the other man was pushing it in deeper. Matunas found the edges of the steel slicing into his fingers. There were screams and shouts coming from the crowd at the entrance of the alley, but no one moved to help Matunas. It was almost as if they were watching some gory revenge drama and could not interfere with the actors.

'Here you go,' cried the swordsman.

Matunas felt himself being lifted off his feet and high above the giant's head, still stuck on the end of the sword, like a skewered fish. The pain was incredible. He tried to stop himself sliding further down onto the blade, but kept blacking-out and coming-to in rapid waves. There were fresh screams from the end of the alley. Someone shouted,

'Let him down, you bastard!'

The giant looked up into Matunas's eyes.

'They want me to let you down. Isn't that thoughtful of them?'

Matunas grunted. All his limbs were on fire. Lights were passing before his eyes. His brain was splitting down the middle. Then he felt himself flying through the air. He landed with a solid thump amongst some rubbish-filled cardboard boxes at the side of the alley. He felt his stomach and found something poking through his shirt. He poked it back again, in case it was one of his intestines.

At that moment, all around the alley, neon signs began to explode, showering passers-by with clouds of glass. Windows, behind the signs, shattered, sending their fragments flying into the streets below. In the alley itself, a manhole cover launched itself upwards, like a rocket, and went spinning, end-over-end, like a coin being tossed. The giant swordsman screamed.

'Die you bastard,' groaned Matunas, thinking he was getting his at last.

Lightning snaked along the walls of the alley, sizzling through the damp brickwork. More neon signs blew up. Nearby a generator whined into action, began to race, and finally blew a gasket.

'YES!' screamed the swordsman.

The engine of a dumped car sent bolts ripping through the hood that covered it, like bullets thrown into a fire. Then the swordsman seemed to recover. He lowered his arms and began striding towards the entrance to the alley. People scuttled out of his way, yelling and shouting, as others held them back.

Chapter 26

THEKURGAN FELT revitalised by Kastagir's death. Now there was only one left. MacLeod. The prize was within reach. Just another step, another quick beheading, and the prize would be his.

He pushed aside the crowd at the entrance to the alley. 'Get out of my way,' he growled.

They did their best. The sight of his sword was enough to get them clawing at each other's clothes in

order to clear his path for him. In the roadway beyond the alley, an old couple had stopped their car and were trying to peer over the heads of the crowd to see what was happening. Sirens were going, in the distance, now. The Kurgan decided to quit the scene, immediately. He walked to the car, took a grip on the canvas roof and ripped it off. Two frightened faces looked up at him.

‘What’s going on, young man?’ said the woman in a tremulous tone.

‘What’s going on? I’ve just cut someone’s head off, that’s what’s going on.’ He poked down at them with the sword.

‘Oh dear,’ said the old man, still gripping the wheel. ‘I suppose you want a ride?’

‘You could say that, but I want to drive,’ said the Kurgan.

He reached inside the car and took the old man by the back of his collar and lifted him out of his seat. Then he whirled him round his head and threw him into the crowd. People went down like bowling skittles. The Kurgan leapt over the top of the car and into the driver’s seat. The engine was still running. He turned to the little old woman, who shrank from him.

‘Momma!’ he cried, delightedly, then roared away from the kerb. She screamed.

By this time the old man was on his feet and running after the car.

‘Where are you going with my wife?’ he shrieked. The old woman was standing up on the front seat now, gripping the edge of the windshield.

‘Help me, Daddy!’ she screamed to her husband. ‘Daddy, help me!’

In her terror she began to climb over the edge of the windshield onto the hood of the car. The Kurgan laughed and began weaving the vehicle. The old woman’s feet went from under her and she had both hands on the corner of the windscreen and was slipping from side to side like a wiper. She was screaming all the while. When they had gone about half a mile the Kurgan stopped the car, peeled the hysterical woman from the bonnet, then continued his journey.

He dumped the vehicle before he got back to his hotel. The sword was dismantled and placed in its various pockets within the leather jacket. Then he went into a bar and ordered a drink, while he watched the mop-up operations on the television. The camera had just zoomed in on the headless corpse of Kastagir. The barman was cleaning one of his glasses and he stopped in mid-wipe.

‘God, look at that mess,’ he said. ‘Makes you want to puke, don’t it?’

‘You puke,’ said the Kurgan. ‘I’ll just have another drink.’

‘But no head! Have they found his head yet?’

‘Vodka. A double. No ice.’ The barman served him without taking his eyes from the screen above the bar.

‘They can’t find his head.’

The Kurgan growled, ‘It’s in the puddle, at the far end.’

You can't see it, because it's black and there's oil in the water .'

'Ah,' cried the barman. 'They've found it - in a pool of water, by the look...' He turned away from the screen.

'Ugh. That's enough of that for one night. I think I'll have a strong one myself for once.'

'You can pay for it yourself,' said the Kurgan .

The barman was affronted. 'No one asked you to buy anything.'

'That's good, because I'm a very poor man.'

'When are they gonna catch that guy - that's what I want to know.'

'Never,' said the Kurgan .

The newscaster's face came on the screen then. His coat collar was turned up, to show that he was out in all weathers, just to get the news to his viewers. He hugged the microphone close to his chest.

'... last the police have a description of the assailant. He appears to be a man in his early thirties, tall Caucasian, about seven feet so witnesses say - dark hair and dark eyes. Apparently there is a large white scar on his throat. . .'

The Kurgan fingered the place where Ramirez had sliced through a third of his neck. The barman was staring at the Kurgan now, narrowing his eyes in an effort to improve his vision in the dim light.

The Kurgan pointed to his own head.

'Black hair,' he said. Then he pointed to his throat. '

Nasty scar.'

The barman glanced at the doorway as if he expected, or hoped, someone was on their way in. Apart from the Kurgan , the rest of the bar was empty.

'Must be lots a people look like that,' gulped the barman. 'You been to Nam ? I knew a guy once - he had a scar like that from Nam . Some gook . . .'

The Kurgan shook his head. 'Never been to Nam .' 'Car accident then, maybe?' said the barman, probably feeling he could not leave the subject alone, now that he was so far along the road.

'No car accident.'

'Hell,' said the barman. 'I just mind my own business. Who the hell cares whether a guy's got a scar or not?'

'Vodka. No ice,' said the Kurgan .

'Coming right up, sir.' The hand that poured the drink was trembling.

TheKurgan drank it down slowly, recalling a wine seller he had strangled once in the streets ofAthens , because the man had showed too much interest in his face. What did it matter any more? There was only one man between him and the prize.

‘Will that be all, budd . . . er , sir?’ said the barman.

‘I’ll let you know if it isn’t.’

‘Fine.’

‘And stay away from the phone.’

‘I wasn’t thinking of calling anybody.’

‘Even if it rings.’

‘Yes, sir.’

TheKurgan sipped the vodka. It was foul. Some stuff manufactured inAmerica , no doubt. He wouldn’t normally use such sludge to clean his sword, let alone drink.Still, beggars.

Chapter 27

ONCE THE BIG bastard with the sword had gone, the crowd felt it was safe enough to go into the alley and take a look at things there. The headless corpse caused a little flurry of excitement, but what was more amazing was the fact that the guy who had been swung around on the point of the sword was still alive.

The ambulance eventually arrived, along with the police, and Matunas was taken away toBelle Vue Hospital , while Waiter Bedsoe and Frank Moran were left to sort out the mess. Frank stood by the doctor as he made a brief examination of the corpse.

He said to Bedsoe , ‘We got to catch this nut soon. The mayor’s going bananas.’

‘At least people saw him this time.’

‘Yeah.I guess so. Get any description?’

Bedsoehad been interviewing witnesses at the entrance to the alley and he replied, ‘Yeah.One or two. A little conflicting - you know - ‘

Moran did indeed know. People told you what they thought was the truth, but often they were so shocked by the incident itself, the details of description got lost in the blood and gore.

‘What about the victim?’ askedMoran.

‘Which one?’

‘The one that’s having trouble walking around,’ replied Moran, sarcastically.

'Foreigner.Passport was in his pocket.Name's Kastagir , fromChad .'

'Where the hell'sChad ?'

'Africa.'

Moran screwed his eyes. 'These victims come from all over.Seems like they hop on a plane toNew York , just to get decapitated. I wish I knew what all this was about.'

'The other guy - the one that was wounded.He's an American,' said Bedsoe , as if it were almost a matter of national pride that one of the victims be home born and bred.

'And we can talk to him?'

'He got a sword in the gut, but he's still alive. Give him a few hours to get over the operation and we'll get some information. '

Bedsoethen went home to a cold bed and Frank Moran to his wife. She was waiting up for him when he got into their downtown apartment.

'That you Frank?'

'Yeah.'She always asked if it were him. He wondered who else was expected to come wandering in, using their own key. Once he had shouted, 'No, it's a mugger,' in a funny voice, but she had not been amused.

He walked into the living-room, where she was watching TV.

'You want a cup of coffee?'

'Please. Your supper's in the cellophane wrapping, on the worktop. It's salad.'

'Okay, fine.Kids asleep?'

'Yes. It was just on the news.The latest beheading.' He took off his tie and unbuttoned his shirt collar wearily.

'Yeah.But we're getting somewhere at last. Someone saw it this time.'

He went out and brought in the coffees and his supper. Then he sat down on the floor, between her legs, his back resting against the foot of the chair and ate his supper while she massaged the nape of his neck.

'That's really good,' he murmured.'Really good.Poor old Waiter. I could see he didn't want to go back to his apartment.Must be pretty rough to be on your own still, at his age.'

'I thought he was chasing Brenda Wyatt,' said Sally. 'He was - but Brenda's a bit too classy for our Walt . Trouble with him is his eyes are bigger than his belly.'

Sally said, 'Well you managed to get a woman much classier than yourself.'

He smiled at her, upside-down. 'Yeah, but then I've always been a lucky bastard. Walt's a loser - he

tries too hard.'

'And you didn't?' she smiled back.

'Well, yeah, but I was a handsome swine. You couldn't resist me. What I lacked in class, I made up for in looks.'

She hit him round the head.

The following morning Moran and Bedsoe went down to Belle Vue to see the victim. As they walked along the corridor, Moran said, 'So tell me what we've got on this guy - Matunas . What is he, on drugs?'

Bedsoe mumbled, 'No. He's a survival nut.'

'What do you mean "a survival nut"?'

'Well, you know, he's into guns. He was a marine, er , Vietnam . I talked to his ex-CO. He said that the guy was, er , a little paranoid, but a good commando.'

Moran stopped. 'A gun nut with a twist to his barrel. Shit. '

'Well, he's all we've got, Frank.'

'I guess so. What was in his car?'

Bedsoe listed the arsenal found in the trunk and around various parts of the vehicle. Frank Moran whistled. 'Didn't do him a lot of good, did they? And what about the weapon we found near the body?'

'It had been fired - a whole magazine of thirty-two rounds, some of which we found around the alley.'

'Let's go talk.'

They entered the private room to find Matunas propped up in bed. His face was the colour of bread paste and there was a look of faraway pain in his eyes. No doubt his wound still hurt, even through the pain-killers. He smiled weakly at the cops. These were his kind of people.

Moran said, 'How are you doing, fellah?'

Weakly, the reply came, 'Okay, I guess - for a guy who got three feet of steel crammed through his gut.' Moran nodded.

'Listen - you saw the guy that stuck you?'

'Sure. Close to me as you are now.'

Moran reached into his pocket and took out a photograph of Russell Nash. He held it in front of Matunas ' face.

'This theman?'

Matunas said, 'You kidding me?'

'Is this him?' insisted Moran. He had a sinking feeling inside and when Matunas said, 'Nope,' he knew that Nash was going to slip the net again.

Goddamn it, he thought, I was so sure it was that bastard. He had one more try.

'Come on, quit kidding, Matunas. It was dark in that alley. You could have made a mistake.'

'Listen,' said Matunas. 'That freak was trying to kill me. I had plenty of time to see his face - plenty. I could've reached out and touched his goddamn face. I'll never forget it ...'

'Go on.'

'He had a scar across his neck. Thick as two fingers.'

'How tall is your guy?'

'Bout six-one, six-two.'

'This freak was at least seven feet tall. I tell you he was built like the Empire State. He was like some friggin' giant out of a fairy tale - and he wasn't real, man. I filled his carcass with .303's and he just laughed at me.'

'Does that depress you?'

'Yeah, but you don't grunt about depressed. I got me a Schmeisser. I got me a trunkful of shotguns. I got me pistols and ammo until they're coming out of my ears. And I ain't safe. I can't protect myself. How the hell are you supposed to protect yourself, when they won't go down?'

'Take it easy,' said Moran, as Matunas was shouting. 'That weirdo man. He got up after I put enough lead in him to drop a rhino. . .'

'Listen,' said Moran. 'Do you think you could work with one of our artists?'

Matunas calmed down a little. 'Sure. Sure. Yes.'

'Maybe come up with a picture of this guy.'

'Sure. . . Listen, I know you guys think I'm nuts. That's why I haven't told you about what happened afterwards. . .'

'What happened afterwards?'

Matunas described the neon signs exploding and the lightning streaking down the brickwork.

'Sounds crazy don't it?'

Bedsoe said, 'We have other reports that confirm what you saw. And the physical evidence - the blown neons. Maybe that wasn't anything to do with it, though.'

Matunas nodded. 'Oh, it was, all right. I could see his face. He was getting a kick out of it - you'd think he'd just taken speed the way he was reacting.'

'Is that it? All of it?'

'That's it.'

They left him then and walked off down the corridor. Bedsoe said to Moran, 'It's getting like one step beyond.'

Moran nodded. 'Yeah, but listen. When the press come, remember, all we've got is an eyewitness. Don't say anything about sword fights or guys glowing in the dark, for Christ's sake.'

'Okay Frank.'

Chapter 28

BRENDA WYATT HAD spent a day and a half in the computer room with friends of hers, trying to trace the genealogy of Mr Russell Nash. All that she could establish was that Mr Nash - at least the one he pretended to be - was dead.

Russell Nash had died at birth. Was MacLeod then his real name? The computers had come up with all sorts of possibilities - even one which said that

MacLeod had been around in the world for more centuries than was decent. Of course, she had discounted all these ridiculous theories. People did not live for more than a century and in any case Nash was not an old man. For some reason he was keeping his identity close to his chest and that was good enough for her. People had all sorts of reasons for not wishing to be recognized, not all of them criminal.

She decided to visit her father for the weekend, and took a flight to Miami on the Friday evening. It was warm when she arrived and she took a cab to the bungalow on the edge of the marine flats where her father had made his retirement home.

He was sitting on the porch when she arrived, fiddling with a fishing line.

'Brenda?' The wiry, whitehaired old man jumped from his seat and gave her a hug. 'What are you doing down here? Why didn't you call?'

She shrugged. 'Oh, I don't know. I wanted to surprise you, Pop. You're looking fit. Suntanned.'

He carried her case through the flyscreen doors and dumped it on the living-room floor. Then he made them both a fresh orange juice. 'Do you want to freshen up?' he asked.

'I'm all right. Can we sit on the porch?'

'Sure.'

They went outside and sat looking out over the yachts and boats in the marina, sipping their orange juice in silence.

'Now,' said her father, 'are you going to tell me what made you come all this way? And don't give me

any garbage about family love.’

His penetrating blue eyes stared into hers. She wanted to talk, but she did not know what to say. She had not really admitted anything to herself yet.

‘I’ve met a man,’ she said.

The old watchmaker smiled. ‘Ah. A man.’

‘But he’s a little unusual.’

‘They always are at first,’ he said with a twinkle, ‘but after you get to know them well, they’re usually pretty ordinary.’

‘No, Pop. You don’t understand. This has nothing to do with stars in my eyes. I mean he’s strange. He may be involved in a murder - or two. He uses an assumed name. He’s got an air of mystery around him thicker than a cloud of Montana dust. I keep finding new things which sink him deeper into some kind of weird conspiracy. . . Yet, my instinct is to trust him.’

Her father lit his pipe and leaned back in the wickerwork chair. It creaked under his weight. The evening insects were coming in now, - in small clouds, and the pipe would help to keep them off.

‘Your instinct may be governed by your feelings at the moment. You can’t trust love, Brenda.’

‘I didn’t say I was in love with him.’

‘No, but it sounds like it to me.’

Brenda admitted to herself that it was a possibility.

‘Well, that aside, I don’t think that’s what’s interpreting the signals. I felt this instinctive trust the first time I met him, and I certainly wasn’t in love with him then, even if I am now. I just feel that deep down, he’s a good man, caught up in something which he can’t escape from - not at the moment.’

Her father blew out a cloud of tobacco smoke. ‘If you’re coming to me for advice, you’re coming to the wrong man. My instinct is to tell you to get the hell away from this feller - well away. But then that’s the protective father coming out in me. I couldn’t give a damn about love and destiny, so long as my daughter is safe. I don’t think that anything so flimsy as love is worth the risk. It’s bad enough when two people know each other real well. When they don’t - and there’s the possibility that one of them could turn out to be an ugly customer - why bother?’

She smiled. ‘Oh, come on, Pop. You would’ve married Mom if she had been the sister of Attila the Hun. . .’

‘With a brother-in-law like that, who would need to go into business at all?’

They both laughed and Brenda went in to make them a cup of coffee. When she came out again, her father was looking at the newspaper which had been delivered by the boy while she was in the kitchen.

‘Any national news in there?’ she asked, putting down the tray.

‘Sure. They got a picture of that guy that’s been cutting off people’s heads. What a thing, eh? A mad axeman running around New York, and your pals can’t catch...’

She snatched the newspaper from him.

‘Hey!’ he shouted. ‘That’s bad manners young lady. You’re not too old...’

Relief flooded through her, as she looked at the drawing done by the police artist. It was not Nash. Thank God for that.

‘Sorry, Pop. Didn’t mean to snatch.’ She handed the paper back to him. She would have a better look later on.

Her father looked at her. ‘Is this guy - you haven’t told me his name yet. Is he mixed up in this business?’

‘I think he’s connected to it somewhere, but I still don’t know how or why. We were together on a building site one night, when he was attacked by a ...’ She suddenly had a thought and picked up the paper again. She studied the drawing.

‘That’s him. . .’ she said, slowly.

‘That’s who?’

‘The man who attacked Russell.’

‘Says here he chopped the head off a black man.’ ‘And he would have had Russell’s head, if the police helicopter had not arrived.’

Her father looked at the picture himself. ‘Mean-looking son-of-a-bitch. Talk about Attila the Hun. We got him here, right in New York, USA.’

Brenda went to bed that night with a safe feeling inside her. Miami had its crime too, but somehow it seemed a much slower, quieter place than New York city. Perhaps it was the presence of her father? Maybe she had that little-girl-protected-by-daddy feeling? Whatever it was, she was prepared to indulge herself. Plenty of time to get back to the raw, unprotected feelings when she flew back to New York.

Chapter 29

SO, KASTAGIR WAS dead. Now only he, MacLeod, stood between the Kurgan and the prize.

MacLeod dressed himself, slowly. He wondered why the Kurgan had left him until last. Maybe, having once escaped his blade, the Kurgan had some special site for their battle? There was no real hurry, now that it was just between the two of them.

But today was a special day, for MacLeod. He was not going to fight today, on Heather’s birthday. Ever since her death, when he promised to light a candle for her on her birthday, he had done as much. Whether he had been in Africa, Europe, Asia or America, he had managed somehow to get to a church and fulfil his promise.

Today, he could stroll down to the cathedral at his leisure, and do his duty. Not just a duty, a pleasure.

To renew old memories, in the quiet and peace of a holy place, was always a pleasure. And besides, theKurgan would not fight him on holy ground. Even he would not violate possibly the only law that governed the site of their battles.

He had a cup of coffee and then went out of the apartment, down to the street. Once there, he walked to the cathedral. There were children playing around the steps and one or two women hurrying to and fro. Birds were chattering amongst the stonework.

Inside the cathedral, there were one or two worshippers, kneeling at the pews. And several nuns and priests drifted along the aisles like medieval ghosts. They did not dress all that much different from Father Rainey, the Glenfinnan village priest, way back in 1536.

The sun hit the stained glass windows on the southern side of the building and splashed the tiled floor with bright colours. MacLeod wondered whether to say a prayer for Kastagir . Would the man want him to? It would not do any harm.

‘Lord, keep his soul from Hell,’ whispered MacLeod. That was the best he could do. MacLeod then took a candle, lit it, and put it in a holder.

‘For you, my bonny Heather.Happy birthday.’

Then on impulse, he took another. ‘And you, Juan Ramirez. I hope you’ve been taking care of her, you overdressed haggis.’

I hope they have been taking care of each other, he thought. He tried to picture what it was like, being dead. Nothing but black thoughts came to him. He wondered if ordinary people had the same blanks or whether they had a better insight into death than the so-called immortals. Certainly Heather used to say that she knew what it was like, only she never-could tell him. Perhaps death was nothing - nothing at all. In which case, all this ritual, all this paraphernalia was for nothing.

There was a soft chanting coming from the chapel and MacLeod guessed that the priests themselves were offering up prayers. It’s the mystery that would attract me, not the ritual, thought MacLeod. You could find ritual in everyday life, but mystical atmospheres, why, they needed special places.

Suddenly, he heard a slight commotion at the back of the cathedral. He turned in his pew and saw that theKurgan had just entered. One of two old womenwere whispering about his appearance, which was indeed a little bizarre. He looked like a biker without his gang.

TheKurgan looked down the church and caught MacLeod’s eye. The big man smiled, moving down the central aisle, touching the wooden pews as he walked. TheKurgan was not insensitive to beauty. He knew good workmanship when he saw it. It was obvious that he liked the feel, the texture of wood.

He reached MacLeod and stood over him. MacLeod looked up, but apart from that had no intention of moving any other part of his body.

TheKurgan said, ‘ Kastagiris gone. Only you and I remain.’

MacLeod nodded. ‘Nice to see you,Kurgan .’

The answering nod and smile.‘And you, MacLeod. This time there will be no clansmen to carry you off before my blade parts you from your head.’

‘You didn’t do me any favours the last time. My cousins thought I was a witch.’

‘Ah. That’s funny.’

‘They almost burnt me.’

‘But you would have risen, phoenix-like, out of your own ashes.’

‘Would I?’

TheKurgan laughed, the sound echoing around the cathedral. One or two nuns, shocked, looked up from their disturbed prayers. ‘I don’t know MacLeod. It would have been interesting.’

MacLeod said, ‘Who cuts your hair? It looks like a piece of goatskin.’

TheKurgan knelt down beside the pew. ‘I’m in disguise,’ he whispered. ‘This way no one will recognize me.’

‘I do.’

TheKurgan patted him on the shoulder. ‘That’s good.’

MacLeod waited for him to leave and when he looked as if he was staying, he asked, ‘What do you want?’

‘Your head - and the prize,’ said theKurgan .

‘You won’t take it easily.’

‘I don’t want it to be easy. It’s no fun when it’s easy. That’s why I’ve left you until last.’

‘No.’

TheKurgan looked taken aback.

‘What do you mean no? There’s only you left.’

‘Quite wrong. There’s only you left. I’ve left you until last. Now the time has come to put you to rest with your brothers. Ramirez is looking forward to seeing you. . .’

TheKurgan said, ‘I admire your spirit, MacLeod, but it’s not long for this world.’

Two nuns passed by, in the aisle, and glanced nervously at theKurgan . His whole presence was a threat to the peace in the church. He seemed to radiate a kind of black light that filled the atmosphere with foreboding. It was not just the way he was dressed - it was his demeanour , his stance, his arrogant expression. He did not have to say anything - he just had to be there. Worshippers nearby were aware of something spiritually ugly in the church.

TheKurgan called after the nuns, ‘Happy Halloween, ladies.’

The two sisters crossed themselves and took a pew in front of the altar.

‘Nuns,’ sneered theKurgan . ‘No sense of humour .’

MacLeod remained silent.

‘Maybe we should rape them?’ said theKurgan . ‘Here. Would they laugh then? I would laugh.’

MacLeod said, ‘Ramirez’s blade did not cut deeply enough. He was right about you. You’re slime.’

TheKurgan gave a snort of derision. ‘Ramirez was an effete snob. He died on his knees. I took his head then I raped his woman, even before his blood was cold.’

At that moment the choir began singing softly, practising for evensong. MacLeod felt an ice-dagger enter his heart. His poor Heather! She had never told him. He felt like tearing theKurgan ’s face off right there in the church. If he ever needed a reason for ridding the world of this monster, he had it now. The memory of his Heather was strong in his mind now, stronger than it had been for years, and he could not prevent the rush of emotion that surged through him, threatening to choke him, overwhelm him. He fought it back down, the taste of theKurgan ’s last words bitter in his mind.

TheKurgan was looking at him, at first with a puzzled expression, then with some inner, deep satisfaction in his eyes. He was feeding on MacLeod’s misery and enjoying it. He treated the pain of others like carrion.

‘I see,’ he said. ‘Ramirez lied. She was not his woman. She was your woman.’

His eyes tore at MacLeod’s spirit like the talons of a vulture, gorging on freshly dead offal.

‘And she never told you, MacLeod. I wonder why?’ MacLeod turned away.

TheKurgan continued, ‘Perhaps I gave her something you never could - and secretly she yearned for my return.’ MacLeod turned and laughed into his face.

‘You think you’ll reach me that way? You know nothing - of people, of feelings. I’ll tell you how she felt. You disgusted her. She felt unclean, dirty, for the rest of her life. That’s why she never mentioned it. You poor slob she would rather have slept with a pig, than you. You don’t make love with a woman - you rut, like a hog. Do you think that any woman remembers you having touched her, without a shudder of loathing passing through her? You don’t have the first idea, do you?’

TheKurgan was gripping the edge of the pew and his knuckles had turned white.

‘Holy ground, Highlander. Remember what Ramirez taught you?’

‘Why are you reminding me?’

‘Because I can see it in your eyes. Despite that little speech you were that much’, he held up his hand and showed MacLeod a hair, ‘away from attacking me. You are weak, Highlander. You will always be weaker than I.’ “

By this time his face was right next to MacLeod’s and the Scot gripped it in strong fingers and thrust it from himself.

‘You can’t stay in here forever,’ he said. ‘I’ll wait for you out front.’

‘We will meet when I decide we are ready, MacLeod. It’s always I who make the rules - you must know that by now. We’ll meet soon enough.’

He stood back now and roared with laughter, the sound echoing through the cathedral, disturbing the worshippers and clergy alike. A priest frowned and came hurrying along the aisle towards where theKurgan was standing. When theKurgan turned to face him, he paused in midstride, then determination set his face and he came on.

‘This is the house of God,’ he said. ‘People are trying to pray. You’re disturbing them.’

TheKurgan looked around the church with an expression of mock wonder on his features. ‘He cares about these helpless mortals?’

The priest’s reply was dignified. ‘Of course he cares. He spent his life in caring. He gave his life because he cared.’

TheKurgan laughed. ‘What a stupid gesture. Surely he could have found something better to die for than these pathetic animals?’

The priest took a step back. He did, in the course of his week, have to deal with the mentally ill, and he felt that that was what he was confronted with now: someone behaving irrationally because he was sick. He took theKurgan’s sleeve. ‘Perhaps you’d better go outside, my son?’

TheKurgan growled at him. ‘I’m not your son, even though you look like a woman in those robes. I’ll go out when I’m ready and not before. Go and fiddle with your beads or something.’

‘I will not be, intimidated,’ snapped the priest. ‘If you do not behave, I shall be forced to have you removed.’

TheKurgan suddenly went down on his knees. He took the priest’s hand in his own and kissed it. ‘Father,’ he cried. ‘Forgive me. I am a worm.’

Still holding the priest’s hand he proceeded to lick it from the fingers to the wrist, until it was wrenched from his grasp by the horrified clergyman. The priest tried to turn away, but theKurgan grasped his robes, pulling him back.

‘I have something to say, Father. It’s better to burn out, than to fade away.’

The priest swallowed hard, unable to take his eyes from theKurgan’s face. The evil in it was so magnetic he could not turn away.

‘Yes!’ cried theKurgan. ‘You understand!’

Then the clergyman managed to tear himself from the presence of theKurgan and hurried away to the chapel at the far end of the church, to pray.

MacLeod witnessed this playacting by theKurgan with some puzzlement. He wondered what the big man got out of such childish games. Perhaps they were the result of utter boredom and meant as little as

they appeared to? MacLeod left the cathedral and took a stroll through the streets. People were going about their normal business, as if all were right with the world.

Chapter 30

ONCE BRENDA WYATT had returned from Miami, she made a decision. Although she had not talked to her father specifically about MacLeod and her feelings for him, just the fact that she had been in a family atmosphere for a couple of days helped her reach that decision. She was in love with MacLeod - she thought of him now under that name, rather than Nash - that much she admitted to herself. And Brenda Wyatt believed that when you were in love with someone, you told them so, in order that they could tell you of their feelings.

It was possible - very possible - that MacLeod could not stand the sight of her. Certainly their meetings up until that point had not been models of polite and interesting exchanges of views. They had been more like minor battles. But still - she knew she was reasonably good-looking, she had brains and she was only a bitch a very small part of the time. He might just find something to like in her. There was only one way to find out.

She dressed in her killer suit. The one that made Bedsoe's eyes start out of their sockets and started him sweating. It was a very tight skirt. Then she took a cab to the antique shop and walked right in. Rachel was there, sitting in her usual place at the back of the shop. She rose and walked to where Brenda stood.

'I want to see him - MacLeod, Nash. I want to speak to him,' she said fiercely.

She saw Rachel's face turn to stone and she knew she was going to have a fight on her hands. A man is never better protected than by a devoted woman who is determined that none shall pass by her. Well, thought Brenda, I can be tough too.

'Well?'

'I'm afraid that's impossible. . .' began Rachel, in a starchy tone, but she was interrupted by Brenda. 'Goddamit, I need to see him.'

'But Mr Nash is. . .'

'Mr Nash is dead, Miss Ellenstein. That much I do know.'

MacLeod came out then, from behind a curtain. 'What are you doing here?' he asked, coldly. Christ, thought Brenda, this is a great start to telling someone you love them. I could not be more welcome if I had pulled a gun and threatened to rob him of the family silver. Still, faint heart never won fair highlander.

'I'm looking for a dead guy named Nash. He died at birth in Syracuse, New York.'

She saw Rachel and MacLeod exchange a look, then he sighed and held back the curtain.

'All right. Come on.'

'Where are we going?'

'You want to talk to me? We're going to my apartment.' She went to him then.

The apartment was like the shop - cluttered with antiques. At least, Brenda thought of them as being clutter but, of course, most of the objects would be worth a fortune. Some of the swords looked as though they were half a thousand years old.

‘Are the claymores real?’ she asked, making a circuit of the sunken lounge. ‘What is this? A museum? This stuff must be worth a fortune.’

‘They’re all things I collected myself,’ answered MacLeod.

‘Well - most antique dealers only trust their own judgment.’

‘I mean I have collected it personally - at the time of its manufacture. That claymore there’, he pointed to one on the wall, ‘I used against the Frasers in the battle of Loch Shiel in 1536.’

She stared into his eyes. Was he teasing her? He did not seem to be. He seemed to be deadly serious. Mad then? If so, Rachel would be aware of it and would not have allowed the two of them to come up without some warning, surely? He did not look mad. He looked depressed, worn down by cares. What was all this about? What could she accept and what could she discard?

MacLeod told her, ‘I’ve been alive for four and a half centuries - and I cannot die - not a natural death. I cannot even grow old.’

She made a joke on impulse.

‘Well, everyone’s got their problems.’ He nodded.

‘You don’t believe me, of course. And why should you? You’ve been raised in the knowledge that immortality can only be achieved by getting rid of the earthly form. That works for most - but not for me or my kind. We are trapped. We’re freaks of nature. We can’t die in the normal way.’

She did not know what to say to him. She had come here to tell him that she loved him and now he was revealing things about himself which, if they were true, could do nothing to help either of them, and if they were untrue brought in a question about the stability of his mind.

He went over to the wall and took down a silver dirk. ‘This was my father’s,’ he said. ‘Here, take it.’ He offered it to her.

‘What for?’

She shrank from the weapon, wondering what he was going to do next.

‘You want proof of my immortality? Take this and find your proof.’

She knew then what he wanted to do - what he wanted her to do. She was expected to plunge the dagger into his heart. But she knew that such an act would kill him and she would not touch the knife.

‘I am Conner MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod,’ he told her. ‘I was born in 1518 in the village of Glenfinnan, on the shores of Loch Shiel. Do you not believe?’

He reached across and took her hand. He placed her fingers around the handle of the dirk, holding them there with his own. She felt her arm being raised and tried to struggle, but he refused to let her go.

'I am immortal,' he cried.

He brought her hand down, with the knife in it, burying the blade deep in his chest. She screamed when she saw that it must have pierced his heart. She expected him to fall, writhing, on the floor of the apartment. Instead, he stood, stock still, staring into her eyes. Gradually, she managed to peel her own fingers from the hilt of the dirk. She saw him grasp the knife and wrench it from his own breast. There was very little blood. It should have gushed from the wound, but instead it dribbled out, clotting almost immediately. He offered her the knife.

'Do you want to see it? It might be a trick dagger.'

'No,' she said. 'I could see that it wasn't. I saw the pain in your eyes as the blade went in.'

'I feel pain as keenly as you do,' he smiled, wryly. 'It's only death I can't feel.'

She broke down then, sobbing, and he took her into his arms and whispered, 'Darling,' into her ear.

'I'm sorry I had to show you like this. I didn't want to shock you, but it's the only way I know. It'll take you some time to get used to - it's not an easy thing to accept.'

He let her cry herself out, before explaining a little more about his life. He told her about Heather and how they had lived together until she had died.

'The worst part was watching her grow old, while I stayed young. That's how it will be, Brenda Wyatt, if you choose to stay with me.'

The thought appalled her, but she said nothing. He kissed her.

'Anyway, I may be dead before the week is out, so you won't have to make the decision. The Kurgan will terminate this long run if he can.'

She gripped him tightly.

'He will not. You must stop him.'

Macleod laughed. 'I intend to try. But he's the strongest of the immortals. I'll need a lot of luck. . .'

'Or faith,' she said.

'Yes - or faith.'

She pressed her cheek against his.

'Do I - do I remind you of Heather?'

He paused but eventually replied, 'Yes.'

'I'm glad. I'm not jealous of her. . .'

He held her away from him. 'You cannot be jealous of Heather, anyway. She died over four hundred

years ago. She was my only other love and we lived a lifetime together. You must not be jealous of her, because she is part of me.'

'I know. That's why I said. . .'

'But you said it like you were . . .'

Brenda admitted to herself that she had been fishing.

She had wanted him to reject the highland girl, the memory, in favour of herself. She realized now, after he had spoken, what a terrible thing she had expected.

'I'm sorry - Conner. It's all so new and of course, I want you to myself - even your innermost thoughts. That was very selfish and I'll try to understand.'

He smiled at her.

'Come. Let's go out. We'll do what most lovers do when they first discover each other - yet rarely do again with the same sort of enthusiasm. '

'What's that?'

'We'll go for a walk around the zoo.'

She laughed. 'Oh, yes. It does sound exciting. If you had asked me last week, I should have scorned it.'

'There you are.'

They went out then and took a cab to the zoo, where they wandered from cage to cage. Suddenly, he stopped and gave out such a heartfelt sigh, she knew something was wrong.

'What's the matter?' she asked.

He looked at her sadly. 'It's no good, Brenda. I can't get involved again. It won't work.'

But she knew she had him. He was just making a last little struggle. 'You know what's weird? Most people are afraid to die. That's not your problem. You're afraid to live.'

He made a helpless gesture. 'I don't want to lose my head again...' he started to say, but then burst out laughing.

Someone, standing nearby, watching them, also smiled at this remark.

Chapter 31

THAT NIGHT, ON her way home, Brenda Wyatt sensed she was being followed. Who? She turned in the street to stare behind her. There were one or two cars moving, but few pedestrians. None of them seemed the slightest bit interested in her. On the corner stood a uniformed policeman, swinging his nightstick. Things could not be more normal.

Then she saw him, trying to hide his face in a newspaper, behind the wheel of his car. She crossed the

street in an angry mood, and rapped on the side window. A face appeared from behind the paper. The window was lowered.

‘Wait! Are you following me?’

‘No, Brenda. That is, yes. I thought. . .’

‘Walter, I do not need protection. Just leave me alone. I want some privacy.’

He flushed bright scarlet. She could have warmed her hands on his face.

‘Yeah - uh - sure, Brenda. I’m sorry. I just. . . well, goodnight.’

‘Goodnight, Walt.’

She watched him drive away, before unlocking the door to her apartment. Stepping inside, she suddenly paused and sniffed the air. There was a peculiar odour : like damp leather. Her cleaning woman had been in that day so she supposed it was something that had been sprayed on the furniture. She went into the bathroom to wash her face. She put the water into the basin, wet her skin and then washed herself with the soap. She rinsed off and towelled . As she opened her eyes, she looked straight into the cabinet mirror - and saw a face.

‘Hello, pretty,’ said theKurgan .

She screamed and whirled to confront him.

‘Who are you? What do you want?’

‘Don’t you recognize me, my pretty? We met on the construction site - you stopped me from taking MacLeod’s head.’

Brenda felt as though she had just swallowed her own heart. She tried to edge through the doorway, but he caught her wrist.

‘MacLeod usually shares his women with me,’ laughed theKurgan . She remembered that MacLeod had told her of theKurgan ’s rape of Heather. She felt a sick feeling in her stomach.

‘Is that what you want? Then will you go?’

‘Ah - a submissive one. I usually like them to fight. If you don’t struggle, it’s no fun.’

‘I’m not interested in silly games. Will you please leave my apartment?’

TheKurgan drew himself up and said, ‘I think I will. That’s a fine way to treat a visitor.’ Then he laughed and picked her up, carrying her beneath one arm. He left the apartment with her screaming and struggling under his arm.

A young man in one of the otherapartments, came out onto the landing and tried to wrestle with theKurgan . TheKurgan gripped his face and squeezed so that the young man’s eyes bulged and his jaw came off its hinge.

‘Don’t bother me,’ said theKurgan , throwing him against a wall.

Brenda remained silent after that. She allowed herself to be carried down to the car into which she was tossed and then she waited, thinking that once he began driving she could watch for a chance to get away. He would have to stop at traffic lights. No one man could hold a person prisoner in a car, unless he had a gun - which he did not appear to possess.

The car was started and theKurgan swung out immediately into the fast stream of traffic. He seemed careless of any accident, even though it might involve him. Then she remembered: this man was immortal. He didn’t give a damn whether they crashed or not. She could die, but not him.

‘Take it easy,’ she said, quietly, so as not to arouse the man’s anger.

‘Don’t you like my driving? Here,’ he swung into the centre of the road, narrowly missing a truck. ‘This is how I get my kicks - a little game of chicken.’

‘Don’t be stupid.’

‘Oh, come on. Don’t hide down there...’ He gripped her by the hair and pulled her upright in the seat. ‘Sit up and watch the fun.’

He began weaving in and out of the oncoming traffic while Brenda’s heart was racing. She tried to appear calm, as if his crazy driving did not bother her in the least. The lights of the city flashed by: red, blue, green, purple. For the moment they became part of a fairground scene, with everything spinning, turning, twisting, whipping, making her feel giddy and sick, as he skated the car along wet patches, throwing it into complete circles at times.

There was a bedlam of noise as other vehicles tried to get out of their way and ended up on the sidewalk, or blocking a lane of traffic. Horns were blaring, people were shouting and screaming: the punks and hookers on the sidewalk were enjoying the chaos, adding their own shrieks and yells to the noise. Sirens began to sound in the distance and Brenda hoped that they would come their way, arrest this maniac on the seat beside her.

Out on the highway, theKurgan really began to enjoy himself. Two articulated trucks were coming towards them, one abreast the other, overtaking. TheKurgan put his foot down on the gas and headed right for the middle of the pair of them. Brenda’s scream was lost in the sound of the horns on the trucks as they tried to warn the oncoming car that there was no extra road. Brenda watched, terrified, as their headlights got bigger and rounder, rapidly. TheKurgan was laughing. The trucks began to part, slowly - too slowly - their offsidescrapping against the walls of the flyover. TheKurgan kept his course, right for the centre of the two great juggernauts. The gap between them widened, but not enough to let the smaller vehicle through. It went into the opening between the trucks and ripped down the sides, tearing slits along the aluminium panelling . Somehow they managed to crush their way through at the other end, coming out onto open road like a cork from a shaken lemonade bottle.

‘How was that, my pretty?’ laughed theKurgan .

‘I nearly died, didn’t you?’ Brenda felt so frightened she could have vomited without any trouble at all. She gripped the handle of the door, wondering whether to risk throwing herself out. Anything would be better than what she was going through at the moment.

They went straight through a red light, leaving chaos and confusion behind them. Brenda had been

hoping he would slow down for it so that she could jump and run, but it was almost as if he could read her mind.

‘You’re not going anywhere,’ he cried.

‘You bastard,’ she shouted, trying to claw his face as he drove along. He fought her off, laughing the whole while. When she still persisted, he punched her in the stomach, sending a wave of nausea through her pain racked body.

‘Keep still youbitch, or I’ll tear your head off.’ At that point he had to turn a corner with one hand and the car skidded across the road, striking the kerb. Brenda threw the handle of the car and fell out into the road as the vehicle went on a few more yards. She scrambled to her feet and ran across the road to a group of men standing outside a pool room, drinking cans of beer.

‘Help me,’ she said. ‘That man is trying to kill me.’ They looked bemused and one of them said, stubbing out a cigarette, ‘Is he your old man?’

By this time theKurgan was out of the car and running back.

‘Oh God,’ cried Brenda. ‘Won’t someone help me?’

One of the men stepped in theKurgan’s path and said, ‘Justa minute buddy...’

He had hardly got the last word out before a fist smashed into his face, knocking him to the ground. TheKurgan hardly paused in his run. He swept two more men aside, sending one of them spinning into the road where he was almost hit by an oncoming car. Brenda ran down the street, pleading with passers-by, who merely looked shocked. TheKurgan just waded through them, a set look on his face.

At the corner of the street stood a policeman and relief swept through Brenda. She ran up to him and breathlessly told him she was being chased. The cop looked down the street and saw theKurgan running towards them.

‘Hey!’ he called. ‘Just hold it right there.’

When theKurgan did not stop, the policeman’s hand went to his revolver and closed around the butt. That was as far as he got. TheKurgan picked up a garbage can, while in mid-flight, and brought it crashing down on the cop’s skull. The officer fell stunned to the ground. People were screaming and running in all directions, but there did not seem to be any way of stopping this man.

Brenda was frantic. If a policeman could not protect her, then who the hell could?

She ran into the open doorway of a sleazy hotel and down the corridor. She tried the doors to the rooms, as she passed, one after another. They were all locked. Finally, she reached one that opened. She stepped inside and found the key in the lock, she turned it, locking herself in. Surely he would not find her now? There were too many rooms. She underestimated theKurgan, who recognized no barriers whatsoever. One by one he smashed down the doors with his fists. He entered three rooms by this method. Finally, he reached the room in which Brenda was hiding. The first fist came crashing through a panel in the door, sending splintered wood flying into the room. Brenda tried to stifle a scream, but it came out, loud and shrill.

Boots shattered what remained of the door and theKurgan stepped inside.

‘Come on you,’ he said, grabbing her wrist and dragging her through the doorway. She went limp and allowed herself to be pulled along. She had done her best to escape and it had been just a game to him, nothing more. He was unstoppable. Even guns were useless against him, as she well knew. There was only one man who might be able to face this giant, and he was not there.

When they got back to the car and on the road once more, leaving behind them pandemonium in the shape of police cars and crowds of people, none of whom knew what was going on, incredibly theKurgan started singing.

‘New York, New York...’

‘Shut up!’ screamed Brenda.

He clipped the end of a motorcyclist, sending the machine skating on its side in a stream of sparks. ‘I love to wake up - in the city. . .’

‘Shut up!’

‘I love...’ He crossed another red light and two vehicles slammed into each other, trying to avoid him.

‘Shut up!’ she shrieked at him.

He laughed into her face. Eventually, they reached a tall building with a SILVERCUP sign on the roof. TheKurgan dragged Brenda from the car to a public phone booth and pulled her inside with him. He put in a coin and dialled a number, still grinning into her face.

‘Hello? Is that my buddy MacLeod? I’ve got someone here...’ He put the phone next to her mouth.

‘Don’t say anything. Just scream, bitch.’ He squeezed her arm and she did what he asked. He put the phone back to his own mouth.

‘Your girlfriend is a real screamer. It’s very entertaining. Listen here’s the location...’ He rapidly gave MacLeod directions to the Silver Cup bakery.

‘We’ll be waiting here for you,’ he finished. ‘Don’t be too long or I might have to take another one of your women. I wouldn’t want it to become a habit.’

He put the phone down. ‘Now, my pretty, let’s go up on the roof.’

He threw her over his shoulder and went up to the fire escape and began climbing. When they reached the top, Brenda could see that the SILVERCUP sign was giant sized, each letter three times the height of a man. The whole thing was fixed to some scaffolding, about forty feet high. TheKurgan began to climb this with Brenda still slung over his shoulder. She looked down to the street, many storeys below, where the traffic moved like toys, and her stomach cramped in fright. She was past screaming now though. She felt him lift her up, against the scaffolding, by the huge letter S and there he tied her wrists to the metal framework. Below her the city stretched out like a fairyland of lights. It was strange to think that those streets were full of people - people who were just going about their everyday business, unaware of any drama unfolding high above them. Would they even believe it? Two immortals were about to battle to the death in order to obtain some indefinable prize. It was like a nightmare.

The wind tugged at her skirt and the scaffolding swayed and creaked beneath her. It seemed so flimsy, way up there - held together by a few bolts and nuts - and she felt very insecure. How long would MacLeod take? Would he even come? Oh God, what if he did not come?

Chapter 32

MACLEOD PUT THE phone down and stared across the room at Rachel.

‘Was that him?’ she said.

‘He wants to meet me - he’s got Brenda with him. Says he’ll start cutting pieces from her if I don’t get there soon.’

MacLeod slammed a fist down on the coffee table. ‘What the hell did he have to involve her for? He knows I would have met him, without all this.’

Rachel replied, ‘It gives him an edge. A psychological edge. How can you concentrate fully on the fight, when you have her to worry about too? The Kurgan does nothing without a purpose, it seems to me. He’s taking a chance. You’re all that stands between him and the prize.’

MacLeod nodded. That was it. The last battle. Perhaps he would be joining Heather and Ramirez before the night was over. That did not seem so bad. He was tired very tired. He had lived too long. His whole being felt weary and dissipated. He picked up his Samurai sword and strapped it to his back. Rachel watched him with dark eyes. What was she thinking?

‘You’re looking critical,’ he said. ‘Does my hair need combing, or something?’

‘Don’t joke. I was just thinking that perhaps this was not the right time for you to meet him. Maybe you should choose your own time and place.’

He took out the gleaming blade and inspected it. Under the strong light of the apartment he could see few blemishes to the metal. Two and a half thousand years of service that blade had given to two men - now it had one last job to do. He ran his fingers down the pattern of the dragon on the handle. Beautiful workmanship. The blade itself had a pattern too: a set of Japanese characters. MacLeod knew what they said: No one lives forever. Typical of Ramirez’s humour.

‘Did you hear what I said?’ asked Rachel.

‘Yes, I did. I know you have my best interests at heart, but there’s a woman out there. He’ll kill her just like that. I have to go. His ground, his time, but I have to go, just the same.’

Rachel said softly, ‘Are you in love with her?’

He sheathed the sword. ‘I think so.’

‘That may be bad for you. It would be better if you had no emotional stake in this.’

He smiled. ‘Not much I can do about it now, is there? You can stop yourself falling in love with someone, but once it’s happened, you can’t just shrug it off and forget about it.’

‘Can’t you?’

‘No. You should have fallen in love, Rachel. There’s still plenty of time.’

‘Maybe I will.’

There were tears in her eyes now and he went to her and put his arms around her.

‘Hey, come on. I’ll be back.’

She hugged him to her. ‘I don’t know. . .’

‘I’m telling you. I’ll be back.’

‘But you seem so . . . dispirited, as if you’re going out there with the wrong attitude to begin with. Do you want to die?’

He thought about that. ‘Not now,’ he said. ‘I have been - low. When you were a little girl, you gave me a sense of purpose for a while. I had someone to take care of - someone who needed me to look after them. Never having had children before, it was a unique experience for me. I enjoyed it. We had great fun together, didn’t we?’

‘Oh, yes, yes,’ she sobbed against his shoulder.

‘Lately, I’ve been feeling that I’ve had my time. But now - now I’m in love again, for the first time for four centuries. Now someone else needs me. It’s worth trying to live...’

She smiled through her tears at him. ‘Just keep it in mind!’

He left her then, taking the elevator to the street below. The Porsche was parked around the back. He climbed in, started the engine, and pulled away from the kerb . Someone else did so at the same time.

MacLeod looked in his rear view mirror and saw that Bedsoe was tailing him.

‘Shit!’ He slammed the Porsche into third and took off.

Bedsoe was slow to respond and MacLeod managed to put at least three cars between himself and the cop before they reached the next turnoff.

He gunned the Porsche down a side alley, hoping Bedsoe’s Chevy was too wide to follow. It was, and it wasn’t. The cop’s vehicle touched the walls of the alley, but that did not stop him from going in. He crushed a few garbage cans in his efforts, too. MacLeod pressed his speed advantage and managed to get to the next red light before Bedsoe who, being the man he was, had to stop and watch his victim get frustratingly far ahead. By the time MacLeod turned the next bend, Bedsoe was way behind and falling back further all the time.

MacLeod turned into a scrap yard and waited. Eventually Bedsoe’s vehicle went screaming past and disappeared. MacLeod waited for a few more minutes then turned out and in the opposite direction.

He reached the SILVERCUP building about fifteen minutes later. Except for the sign the whole place was in darkness. The windows, blackly reflecting the street lights, glared at him balefully. Shadows filled every deep pocket of the building’s recesses, anyone of which could be harbouring the Kurgan’s form.

Somewhere up there that double-edged broadsword was waiting to take MacLeod's head.

He left the car and drew his sword. TheKurgan had mentioned the roof, but that did not mean he was up there. He could be anywhere on the way. The most likely route was up the fire escape.

MacLeod began to climb the rusty ironwork, trying to keep his footfalls soft. At each platform he stopped to listen. TheKurgan would have heard the arrival of the car, so Brenda was no longer in danger. It was best to travel cautiously, than not arrive at all.

Just before the top, about fifteen storeys up, MacLeod put his coat against a window and broke it with as little noise as possible, using the handle of his sword. Somewhere, in the depths of the building below, a dog barked for a while. Then all was silent again. MacLeod reached inside, through the hole in the glass, and opened the window. Then he climbed into the darkness inside. Glass cracked underfoot. He moved towards the wall and felt his way round until he came to a door. It was not locked. He opened it and crept along the passage, until he came to a stairway leading to the final storey. He went up, slowly. At the top of the stairs he found himself in an enormous, empty studio with walls of glass and a glass roof, presumably for the light it afforded cameramen. The moonlight shone through the windows - hundreds of them - and onto the empty floor. It was an eerie place, but at least MacLeod could see into all its corners and ascertain that theKurgan was not lurking there, ready to decapitate him.

How to get onto the roof, without being seen? MacLeod's eyes scanned the room. In one corner was a gantry with a rope hanging from it. Above this crane was a skylight. MacLeod put his sword in his sheath and began climbing the rope. He reached the beam swaying dangerously, but managed to haul himself on top. The window to the skylight proved to be a bit tricky. Rust had stuck it fast. MacLeod took out his sword and, balanced precariously on the gantry, ran the point of the blade around the edge of the window. This time it opened.

He crawled through and out onto the roof. He could hear someone moaning.

On the roof top hard, just in front of him, was a huge erection bearing the SILVERCUP sign and he thought the sound was coming from that direction. He studied the framework and caught the flutter of some material in the wind.

Then he saw her, tied to the metal poles.

Now, where was theKurgan ?

Chapter 33

THEKURGAN WAS waiting in the shadows at the corner of the rooftop. He had seen the car arrive and had witnessed the first part of MacLeod's ascent up the fire escape, but he had lost the figure somewhere near to the top.

It did not matter. There was very little doubt about the outcome. TheKurgan had fought over a thousand battles since he had been born the son of a peasant farmer on the shores of theCaspian Sea , over three thousand years ago. He was the oldest of the immortals, just a shade older than Ramirez would have been.

TheKurgan had fought with Tartars, Cossacks, Huns, Vandals, Goths, Visigoths . Almost always he fought on the side of the barbarian. He preferred barbaric hordes to civilized armies, because he hated treating war like a drawing-room activity. War, in his opinion, should be a noisy, disorganized, chaotic

affair, full of dust, blood and routs. The Mongols, the Vikings: those were his kind of people. They enjoyed putting the fear of God - or rather the Devil - into their enemies. The Europeans were always too neat in their wars and the Americans had tended to follow that lead.

He stared out, over the city, seeing the dark areas amongst the light. That dark area within him, there since the beginning: that would soon be gone. The prize was within his grasp now. He had waited a long time for this day, this night. Revelations were about to take place.

TheKurgan had many old memories that had hardened under the suns of many days. His first was from when he was five years old. His father, not wishing to feed him any more, had dashed his head against a stone and left him with a split skull for the wolves and bears. He had recovered, of course, within a few hours. He had followed his father's tracks, along the edge of the hills, to his camp.

He waited until his father was asleep that night and then crept out and took one of the hot stones from the edge of the fire. He carried it in the fork of a twig and it was still so hot that it burned through the bark. His father used to sleep with his mouth open because of a nasal blockage. The youngKurgan dropped the red-hot pebble into his father's mouth. The shepherd could not dislodge the stone: it burned into the soft flesh in his throat and stuck there, choking him to death. His son took his sheep down the hillside the next day, to the farm and told his mother that a bear had attacked his father and killed him.

When he was twelve, he left home to join a group of bandits who used to prey on caravans crossing the steppes betweenIndia and theMediterranean . He became proficient with the slingshot and would stand on an outcrop picking off individual members of the merchants trains, thinning down their numbers before an all-out attack.

At twenty-five his physical deterioration ceased and his bodily characteristics remained stable. He realized then that not only could he not be killed by a normal sword or arrow wound, or by a blow, but that he would not grow old. The ageing process had been arrested.

Still, he had no idea of his full potential until he met a desert Arab, a Bedu , who claimed to know the secrets of him and his kind. The Arab told him what he was and said that he was not alone. There were others like him. Not many, but he was not unique. The Arab magician taught theKurgan how to recognize other immortals and revealed that he too, was a brother in immortality. He showed theKurgan the way to the Quickening, much in the way that Ramirez had taught MacLeod, centuries later. He foretold of the Gathering and prophesied that theKurgan would be one of those present at the final battle.

Once he had learned all the Arab knew, theKurgan cut off the man's head while he slept. Then he burned the body. The only possession of the magician that theKurganretained, was the scimitar that the man had kept by his side. Later in life theKurgan changed this weapon for the broadsword.

Now the time had come.

TheKurgan 's thoughts were interrupted by a sound – a scraping of glass. He stood up and melted into the shadows of the scaffolding which criss -crossed the light from the moon. He was ready.

He saw MacLeod move out onto the roof top. He called out, softly, 'MacLeod!'

MacLeod turned and theKurgan could see the hard light in the other man's eyes. This was no mean adversary. He might have been a mere boy on the battlefield when the MacLeods fought the Frasers , but Ramirez had had a hand in his training since. The Spanish peacock had prepared him. He had also been through many fights since: had defeated Fasil . TheKurgan was not about to underestimate such a

foe.

‘We meet at last, Highlander.’

MacLeod replied, ‘And both of us armed with our favourite weapons, for once.’

TheKurgan nodded. ‘That’s as it should be.’

‘Let’s get to it then.’

TheKurgan stepped forward.

Chapter 34

THE EDGE.

The cutting edge.

He could feel his strength flowing into the wakizashi blade, flowing along the cutting edge that could slice to the thickness of a shadow. His strength was in the keto with its fine masame grain, as clear as straight-grained wood. It gathered the light to itself, a bright sharpness that looked cold to the touch. The swords met and rang out, over the roof tops.

MacLeod felt the force behind the other man’s blow. It was all he could do to contain it: take the sting out of the power by allowing the two blades to melt into one another.

TheKurgan obviously saw that his adversary was surprised by the strength of his attack and followed up with two more hefty swings, but these were a little more clumsily delivered.

‘This is no Fasil , eh?’ grunted theKurgan .

Both swordsmen knew the value of psychology. It was important to seem the more confident, the more knowing, technically skilled. MacLeod knew that his face should give nothing away. Impassive. He must be like the rock. Solid.

Unyielding. Immovable. He must appear to have been there, where he stood, for centuries. To have weathered all storms; to have withstood all the elements; to have rebuffed all onslaughts. It was important that his body looked hard, full of strength. His strokes must be sure, confident, secure . He must put doubt in the other’s mind: doubt of his ability to breach this solid wall. Doubt of the superiority of his own skills. Any hairline crack of doubt must be widened to a gulf. His self-assurance must be the greater. He must be both the irresistible force and the immovable object: two in one. There was a brief exchange of thrusts and parries.

TheKurgan said, ‘He taught you well.’ It was a grudging compliment, but MacLeod knew he had surprised theKurgan thus far.

There was an inscription in Sanskrit on MacLeod’s sword hilt. ‘I cannot cross another river.’

He repeated it to himself to give himself spiritual strength. It meant that he had a task to do. A single task. It was necessary to put his whole mind, his whole being, into the execution of that single task. All other thoughts, missions, desires, needs, concerns, must be put out of his mind until he had crossed the river

that swirled about his ankles. The next river must be blanked from his mind. He could not think about Brenda, or the danger she was in. He had to think only of crossing the river of the moment. That river was theKurgan .

The swords clashed again. TheKurgan trying to force MacLeod to the edge of the roof. Somewhere above them Brenda was calling, but MacLeod took no notice. He concentrated on stemming the flood of blows and returning some of his own, to worry the opponent.

Attitude. His was better. TheKurgan had more technical skill, but lacked improvisation, spontaneity, inspiration. 'I cannot cross another river.' Intrinsic strength.

The swords lock. Part. TheKurgan ducks and weaves. MacLeod follows through, misses. There is a clash of blades below the water tower. TheKurgan 's sword skims MacLeod's head, as the latter ducks. It bites into one of the supports to the tower. The structure begins to buckle...

Brenda screamed. It seemed for a moment that the water tower was falling her way. It teetered for a second as the two immortals fought beneath its weakening legs, then suddenly lurched to the side and came crashing down on the roof. Floods of water gushed from the fracture, the white torrents sweeping the two men off their feet. For the moment the fight had to be abandoned as they struggled in the foaming waters that poured from the ruptured tank. Thousands of gallons rushed towards the edge of the building and formed instant Niagaras and Angel Falls .

MacLeod struggled to his feet, in real danger of being swept over the edge of the building. TheKurgan held onto a support, allowing the floodwaters to take his feet for a moment. Neither man could reach each other as the currents swirled around the roof top, but gradually the waters subsided until they were only ankle deep and the fighters began to assess their relative positions again.

MacLeod was nearest to the scaffolding and he began to climb, to get the height advantage when theKurgan was forced to follow. TheKurgan was very quick. His sword slashed at MacLeod's ankles as the highlander tried to gain one of the platforms. Luckily theKurgan 's blade cut through a power cable and for the moment the air was full of sparks and black smoke, the live end snaking through the air and fizzing out its high charge. Though the cable was not of any consequential danger to theKurgan , he nevertheless avoided it. It would hamper his movements.

MacLeod waited in the darkness below the SIL of the sign. TheKurgan made the ledge and ran towards him. Their blades glanced from one another with a ring of steel. MacLeod's weapon slid down the other, over the hilt of the broadsword and dug deeply between the fingers of theKurgan 's right hand.

TheKurgan grunted in pain. For a moment it appeared that MacLeod's sword would not budge: that it was stuck in the bones of theKurgan 's hand. But then it came free.

TheKurgan quickly recovered. TheKurgan kicks out. His foot finds MacLeod's thigh. But theKurgan overbalances. He falls, crashing between the scaffolding poles. His head strikes a horizontal support. His arms and legs flail, as he breaks his fall. He hits the roof with a thump, knocking the wind from his body.

MacLeod was too high to get to theKurgan in time to take advantage of the fall. He saw theKurgan climb to his feet and recover quickly. There was nothing to do but wait until theKurgan climbed up again. TheKurgan had no such intention. Instead, he would bring MacLeod down, to the roof. He began running along the supports to the framework and, using all his strength, cutting through them with the broadsword. Each pole buckled, or was severed by the heavy blows. The SILVERCUP scaffolding began to bend outwards. Brenda screamed, fighting with her ropes, trying to free herself.

MacLeod worked his way along the poles as they began to loosen, or crumple. The S from the sign crashed to the ground, its neon tubing shattering in brilliant showers of glass. Then the C came down, exploding in the shallow waters.

Wires snapped and lashed out, into the air. Cables broke like over taut bowstrings, whipping at the poles. The structure creaked and groaned, its weight unevenly distributed now. Metal collars whined out, into the night, as they were catapulted from poles suddenly released from high tension. Pole strained against pole. Then the total collapse.

MacLeod went flying off, into the darkness, like a pebble from a slingshot. He landed on the far side of the roof from theKurgan , debris falling all around him.

Brenda, still strapped to the poles, ended up about six feet from the ground, hanging on the bent supports like a dangling crucifix. She worked free from her bonds and fell to the roof top, relatively unharmed.

The debris still rained down in showers of splintered glass and fragments of metal. Poles fell like tall, cut pines, crashing around all three people. There was a jungle of metal left. MacLeod and theKurgan struggled through the criss crossing pipes, some bent to fantastic angles, to get to each other again. As soon as they were within striking distance, the swords flashed out, sometimes hitting ironwork, or becoming entangled in a cable. It was an impossible place for a swordfight, and both men knew it.

They fight to the edge of the parapet. MacLeod is there first. He uses the height advantage to hack down, raining blows on theKurgan 's head. Then theKurgan is up beside him. They are both aware of the drop.

Their eyes locked. TheKurgan cried, 'You're weakening. I can see you weakening, Highlander.'

MacLeod responded positively. 'I am too strong for you. You thought it would be easy, didn't you? Now you realize - I'm too strong. Too late. You're going to die.'

TheKurgan responded with another flurry of strokes but MacLeod could tell that his enemy was not as confident as he had been once. MacLeod was the underdog, and the underdog survives by proving himself a greater obstacle than previously believed to be. If he could just keep theKurgan back, protect himself, theKurgan would begin to doubt...

Above them the stars swim. They both reach out for the influx of energy from the night sky. It flows, crackling along the parapet, through the shallow waters lapping within the roof. Energy. They call the Quickening to themselves. Lightning arcs through the darkness, filling both men with new strength. The parapet dances with live energy...

'Now,' said theKurgan . The swings from the broadsword, came thick and fast and MacLeod felt himself being forced backwards, towards the skylight to the studio below. Suddenly, he found himself right on the edge of the glass. His feet went from under him. He reached out and grabbed theKurgan by the jacket, pulling him with him. The pair of them fell, struggling, through the glass, to crash down onto the studio floor beneath.

MacLeod's sword landed a few feet away. TheKurgan was first on his knees, and then upright, before MacLeod could recover his weapon. TheKurgan kicked the Samurai, sending it spinning through the fragments of glass. MacLeod was on one knee as theKurgan closed. The Scot reached up and gripped

the wrist of the giant as he tried to take a swing at the highlander's head.

Gradually, MacLeod managed to climb to his feet, still forcing theKurgan 's arm backwards. TheKurgan broke free. For the first time in the fight, MacLeod felt entirely vulnerable. TheKurgan saw it in his eyes.

'So now it ends?' said the giant.

MacLeod took a step backwards as theKurgan prepared to swing.

At that moment, Brenda came up behind theKurgan and struck him with a piece of metal pole. TheKurgan staggered sideways. MacLeod ran across the glass-strewn floor. He found his sword in the moonlight.

TheKurgan gripped Brenda by the clothes and flung her at MacLeod, who caught her in his arms.

'What kept you?' he asked, frivolously.

A new strength had entered MacLeod now. TheKurgan had had his chance and failed. Now it was the highlander's turn. He stepped forward, confidently, while Brenda found the deep shadow at the edge of the studio. The swords locked.

There was a frown on the face of theKurgan . A thick, deep line marred his facial expression. The sword edges scythed along one another, causing a shower of sparks. MacLeod's blade continued past the hilt of the sword to slash deeply into the leather jacket of theKurgan . MacLeod could feel the bladed edge slicing through flesh. TheKurgan staggered backwards: pain, annoyance and a certain puzzlement fighting for possession of his face.

The split tunic flapped open, revealing a red gash, dripping flesh. TheKurgan was distracted by his wound. His left hand went to it as he, ineffectively, tried to parry another blow.

This time the cut is across the chest. The blows are getting higher, closer to the neck. Blood ran along the line of the slash: red staining the black leather.

'How.. . ?' says theKurgan . He slashed wildly at MacLeod.

The effort was desperate and ineffectual. MacLeod saw the frustration and recognized the lack of conviction behind the blow. The highlander felt the exhilarating headiness of victory surging through him. He knew - at that moment, he knew - that theKurgan was finished. The vitality had all been drained from the giant figure. He was concerned with his wounds. He paused to consider his pain.

That was enough for MacLeod.

The bright Samurai blade flashed out.

The tight grain of the wakizashi short-sword, with its undulating temper line, impacted with flesh. It sliced through the soft tissue of theKurgan 's throat.

TheKurgan looked surprised.

For one moment, MacLeod was not sure that the cut had been deep enough. Then the head lolled backwards. The cut was almost along the same line as the Ramirez wound. But this time it was deeper.

Much deeper. The spinal cord had been severed. Only a thin strip of skin prevented the head from falling to the floor. It hung there: dangled from the cord of flesh. Yet theKurgan was still not dead.

The mouth flapped, though no sound came out. From the open neck, the exposed stump, energy gushed forth. The body danced and jerked, as if on live strings. The wound coruscated, like electrified glass.

TheKurgan dropped to his knees. MacLeod was amazed at the tenacity of the man. Still he clung on to life. Still he fought against death. His head flopped on the narrow bridge of skin, yet the body fought to stay upright. The strength of will behind such action was phenomenal.

The hands opened and closed.

MacLeod thought that his enemy was going to reach up and replace the severed head on its stump. But the final gush of energy died. The body collapsed. It lay twitching at MacLeod's feet. Finally, it was still.

MacLeod stood for a moment, in silence. He felt a conflict of emotions: relief battled with supreme egotism. He had triumphed. TheKurgan was defeated. He was the one. There could be only one, and he was the solitary survivor.

'I am the one,' he cried, holding the Samurai sword aloft. 'Me!'

Then he was overcome with humility. He had not done it on his own. He had been helped by others: Heather, Ramirez, Brenda. All had played their part. MacLeod's strength, his superiority over theKurgan, had been in his ability to trust in others. TheKurgan's weakness was in the fact that he had stood alone. Not because he was stronger alone, but because his fear of betrayal was greater than his trust. He had had faith only in himself.

MacLeod stood in silence.

MacLeod stood, with head bowed, incandescent. MacLeod awaited the Quickening.

It came.

Windows began to implode. The whole studio shook and Brenda screamed, cowering in a corner, as a blizzard of glass filled the room.

The energy was now visible in the air, flowing through the storm of powdered glass. There was a swirling, circular motion to the energy, as it formed itself into a maelstrom, a vortex. MacLeod felt the power blazing through him, burning through his veins, searing through his spirit. His whole being was alive, glowing with the reward of his success.

He felt light. He was lifted from his feet through the eye of the vortex: lifted high above the floor, hidden from Brenda's view by the swirling white dust of the glass. The pain and the pleasure mingled. His brain was full of colours, full of light. He could hear himself screaming, the wind and the rain of energy still lashing into his body. He felt god-like, yet undergoing the punishment of a god. Then he blacked out.

When he came back to consciousness, his head was resting on Brenda's knee. They were both sprawled over the floor of the studio and she was stroking his brow.

'Are you all right?' she said.

‘Yes. Are you unhurt?’ .

‘I - I think so.’

He smiled up at her. ‘It’s over. It’s all over.’

They both looked at the body of the Kurgan , lying like a broken doll amongst the shards of glass.

‘Is he really dead?’ whispered Brenda.

MacLeod nodded.

‘At last,’ he said. ‘At last. . .’

Chapter 35

‘RACHEL, THERE ARE some instructions in the desk drawer. I want you to follow them.’

Rachel crossed the room and put her hand on his arm. ‘You’re going away then?’

He hated goodbyes, especially to those close to him. He touched her cheek with the back of his hand.

‘Rachel, you knew this would happen one day. Russell Nash dies tonight. It’s time again. There’s been no one in my life but you since the war. But now I have to go . . .’

She was crying, softly. ‘I’m afraid.’

‘A woman like you need never be alone or afraid. You have so much to offer.’

‘What about Brenda?’

‘She’s coming with me.’

Rachel nodded. ‘I understand.’

He kissed her cheek. ‘I knew you would. Goodbye, my dearest Rachel - my daughter - my good friend.’

‘Goodbye, Russell Nash.’

He left her then, picking up his bags and moving to the door. On his way out he turned. ‘It’s - only a kind of magic.’

She smiled.

He took the cab to the airport, where he met Brenda in the departure lounge. She was dressed in a smart suit and had her luggage with her.

‘All set?’ he said, taking her hand.

She looked up at him. ‘I telephoned my father... told him. Then I took leave of absence from my job...’

‘You’re coming back then?’

‘I don’t know. I’m a little confused at the moment. I need a little time to think things out. It would be silly to burn all my bridges.’

‘Of course.’

They caught the night flight to Glasgow and on arrival hired a car to drive further up into Scotland - to the north-west coast. It was early afternoon when they arrived in the Glenfinnan hills. Conner stopped the car and took Brenda’s hand, leading her through the heather to a good vantage point.

‘This is where I used to play, as a young boy, over four hundred years ago. It’s hardly changed at all. That burn stream - over there. That’s where Dugal caught the salmon we ate for my tenth birthday...’

Brenda was looking around her. ‘It’s - beautiful,’ she said.

He knew she was not just making conversation. It was beautiful. The low, rounded hills with the purple heather covering them like royal robes. Close by, some ptarmigans were strutting through the grasses. The long silver sliver of the burn cut deeply into the moss and found its way down into the valley. It was a beautiful country, with many faces. Out of the gentle valley, sudden mountains would rise up, bare rocky brows frowning. Sometimes the heather would run up against a thick fence of pines, hiding a herd of deer. He had not realized how much he had missed it. Loch Shiel glistened in the distance.

‘To think that this was once a battlefield,’ he said, ‘with men dying in the hollows and blood drenching the grasses. It seems so peaceful now...’

‘Yes - I can’t imagine it,’ she replied.

‘I think,’ he said, ‘that I’ve fought my last battle...’

He was glad it was all over. Now he could settle to a life without having constantly to look over his shoulder for the face of the Kurgan, or listening to the night, for the Kurgan’s footsteps. His enemy was dead. At last.

‘The prize,’ said Brenda, interrupting his thoughts. ‘You know what it is?’

‘Yes - but I cannot explain it to you. It has no name. It’s something that I feel. I’m changed - I’ve never felt so alive, so complete. I’m not as I was before, but I can’t explain what I am now. You’ll just have to see how I cope with this change - if you stay with me, that is.’

‘Is it a drastic alteration?’

‘I think so. Can you guess?’

She took his hand. ‘I can hope. Yes, I want to stay with you Conner MacLeod. I want us to be together - forever.’

He kissed her lips. ‘Forever,’ he replied. ‘Everywhere I turn, I sense my old friends, too. That Spanish peacock...’

Brenda took a bottle of wine out of the basket they had brought. ‘Let’s have a toast,’ she said.

‘Yeah - I think we should.’ He looked at the label on the bottle and laughed.

‘Nineteen seventy-six,’ he said.

Brenda nudged him.

‘Nineteen seventy-six was a very good year. America celebrated its two hundredth year of independence from Britain. “One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest” won five academy awards. And...’ He was laughing at her now. ‘... And Pittsburgh beat Dallas in the Super bowl.’

‘Really?’

‘Really. Twenty-one to seventeen.’

MacLeod said, ‘Well here’s to nineteen seventy-six.’ They clinked glasses.

He added, ‘To a great woman - Brenda Wyatt, whom I love. . .’

She looked into his eyes. ‘And I love you.’

They spent two months touring Scotland before going down to London, where they opened an antique shop in Camden Alley. On one occasion he had to go to Scotland on business and stopped off at a small village in the Southern Uplands. From there he climbed up, taking a mountain path, to a shelf overlooking the valley.

There was no croft there now, but he found some of the stones from the old tower and the spot where they were buried.

‘You would like her, Heather,’ he said. ‘I know you would. She is much like you...’

He said nothing more. Instead, he found two old timbers and built a rough cross, laying it over the place where his friend, Ramirez, and his wife, Heather, were resting together. He stayed there until nightfall, in the company of distant loved ones, comfortable with the ghosts of a different life.

THE END