

## Darkest Knight Illumination

Darkness.

It is not merely the absence of light. For one, it is a permanent state of being.

Some claim that a moonless night is the poetic epitome of darkness.

They are wrong.

Some poor souls who have been trapped underground tell of the oppressive, velvet blackness, of how they whimpered with fear as the encroaching darkness swallowed their sanity within hours.

They are closer.

There is one being alive who truly knows what darkness is. Has embraced it, welcomed it, even accepted it into his being.

He could hardly do otherwise.

For longer than any normal man could imagine, he has lain alone, in a clay coffin the precise size and dimensions of his body. For an eternity he has been held in stasis, as the rigid slate around him prevented him from moving; even prevented him from breathing.

Not that, to this being, being prevented from breathing was anything more than an annoyance. His ancient heart still beat strongly, exactly as strongly as it had for thousands of years, pumping blood with no oxygen around his body. His muscles had not atrophied, nor would they, no matter how long he remained trapped in the eternal darkness.

One thing, and one thing alone allowed this being to focus his mind, to keep the hounds of insanity at bay.

Hatred. And with it, a deep, smouldering desire for revenge.

Suddenly, like the birth of a star, the earth shuddered, and the darkness finally broke.

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The bright yellow vehicle drew to a halt outside an antiques store on Hudson Street. The driver shifted the gear stick to neutral and engaged the hand brake before turning around to face his passengers. Well, one passenger in particular. The petite red-head, who had a body to die for and legs that drew attention like magnets. The gorgeous woman, her partially Asian features twisted into an expression of innocence, whispered something into her husband's ear.

Ryan Chessman chuckled at both his wife's quip and her ability to attract the attention of any member of the male gender as he opened the passenger door of the taxi cab and tossed their meagre luggage out onto the curb. He leaned forward and passed a tightly folded bill through the tiny aperture to the distracted driver before shifting across in his seat and exiting the vehicle.

He turned and reached back in, offering a hand to his wife, and gently assisted her from the vehicle. The vivacious red-head smirked at him, obviously pleased with the effect she was having on the driver. She parted her legs slightly as she exited, allowing her husband a quick glance at her underwear. Ryan's eyebrow-raising expression and nod of approval evoked a flush of envy in the driver, who had blatantly repositioned two of the car's mirrors on the journey from the airport.

Picking up the bags, the pair left the driver to regain his drool reflex and reached the main doors to the old building. Jennifer rang the ancient door bell, which went unanswered. Looking up, Ryan frowned and shook his head. "He's not here. I can't sense him."

"Maybe he got caught up somewhere," Jennifer offered as she glanced at the door, before gesturing towards a discrete black panel with a keypad. No numbers appeared on the keys. "Do you know the combination?" she asked.

Ryan extracted a piece of paper from his pocket, stepped forward and quickly pressed one of the blank keys. Instantly, each key lit up and flashed for a second, before assuming a random number. Referring to his sheet a few times, Ryan slowly punched in an eight digit code, taking a couple of seconds between entries to search for the next number. As the last button was pressed, the keys again went dark, and a soft click indicated the door was open.

Cute toy," Jennifer noted as she entered the store for the first time.

There had been an antique store here since 1783, when a man who went by the name of Adrian Montague purchased the original holding. Since then, records show that it had passed down through the decades to five owners, ending with Russell Nash. Few people knew that Montague was Nash, and had also been each owner in between. The man had been born with the name Connor MacLeod.

The pair rode the open aired elevator to the next level, an open plan living space left so subtly empty, that in a city where space was a premium like New York, it screamed wealth and privilege.

Ryan shifted his light leather jacket slightly, unconsciously ensuring that the short Japanese sword hidden within the folds was still safe. His other hand absently patted the hilt of the combat knife likewise hidden within. He glanced around the room, noting that Connor had made exactly no changes to the setting since his first visit.

A set of fish tanks containing several rare species dominated the living area, with the specifically commissioned glass tanks surrounding a depression in the floor, which had a U-shaped leather sofa custom fitted. The wonderfully relaxing area called out to the pair.

Jennifer resisted, and wandered around the enormous studio floor, examining paintings, sculptures and historical artefacts. "This place is incredible. I can't believe you've never brought me here before."

Ryan nodded. "Connor prefers his privacy. Apparently he has a cache of even more exotic and valuable artefacts here, but he's never shown me. I think he only allows Rachel and Duncan access."

"Rachel?"

"His daughter. He adopted her after World War 2, after she was orphaned in Holland."

Jennifer gave her husband a smirk. "One of these 'adopted children', who appear older than their parents?"

Ryan grinned and nodded. He glanced around the room too, noting pictures on the wall that showed just how extensive the Highlander's life had been. At least, how extensive it had been since the invention of the camera. "Whoever manages to take Connor's head is going to become very powerful," he mused to himself, before suddenly looking around in confusion as all the lights in the building went out in a single instant.

Ryan had hardly turned back to his wife when a large, indistinct shape dropped from the ceiling and slammed two booted feet into his chest, sending him flying. Winded from the impact, the young Immortal gasped repeatedly to try and get his breath back.

Jennifer, who had no difficulty manoeuvring in darkness, hissed and leapt, moving so quickly that she became just a blur. As tiny as she was, she barrelled into the enormous dark figure with the momentum of a truck, easily tearing the assailant away from her husband.

Ryan staggered to his feet and struggled to draw his weapons from his jacket. Unfortunately, the sudden blow had pushed the wakazaki's blade through the dense leather, which had been stretched in odd directions, making it more than a little difficult to free the longer of his two blades.

The wrestling match in front of him was suddenly accompanied with a quickly-rising, high-pitched whine, similar to a camera's flash recharging. The instant the sound abruptly stopped, there was a flash of dark purple light, so far into the ultra-violet wavelength that it was almost black. The nearly invisible burst of light was itself followed instantly by a high-pitched scream of pure agony, which burst forth from his wife's throat. In monumental pain, Jennifer flinched away from the huge figure, instinctively trying to put as much distance as possible between them. The silhouette snatched hold of her blouse in one big fist and easily, no, *casually*, threw her halfway across the room. She landed hard, seemingly uncaring to her fate, moaning and sobbing softly to herself.

"Jennifer!" Ryan screamed as he finally succeeded in tearing his sword and knife from their hiding places. Hearing the piteous sounds of pain coming from his bride, Ryan snarled with anger and moved to attack, only to discover that his assailant was no mere beginner to the art of battle. In the muted gloom of the room, punctuated only by the streetlights on the other side of the curtained windows, the attacker seemed to meld into the shadows, from where he attacked and retreated with impunity.

The combat knife held in Ryan's left hand was sent spinning across the room as a heavy boot kicked the inside of his wrist, followed by a gloved fist smashing into his elbow, breaking at least two bones. With a grunt of pain, Ryan brought his wakazashi around as fast as he could. The blade whistled through the air, directly at the attacker's neck, or at least where the attacker's neck had been. When the blade met no resistance, Ryan's stance was so out of alignment that he nearly fell.

Twisted out of shape, off balance and panicking, Ryan tried to bring his remaining blade back into a defensive position and his feet into balance. At the back of his mind, he heard the voice of Duncan, his teacher, chastise him for falling so far from his centre so quickly. Ryan turned slowly, trying to discern his attacker's location, his ragged breathing echoed throughout the massive living area, merging with Jennifer's cries. He let loose a second grunt of pain as four fingers, clenched together as hard and as straight as a spearhead, were driven up under his right shoulder blade from behind, striking a knot of nerves and rendering his remaining sword arm useless. The wakazashi skittered across the polished floor, leaving deep tracks in the varnish.

Ryan threw his left elbow out behind him in a feint, hoping to get his attacker out of close combat range. Instead of halting the strike, he followed through, and with a little difficulty (since he was using his off hand), snatched the Glock from the holster at the small of his back.

Before he could bring the weapon to bear, a hand grasped his left wrist in a steel grip, twisting it so the gun was aimed directly at the ceiling. Ryan felt his attacker's second hand grasp the weapon and manipulate it. For an instant, Ryan wondered what was happening, only to have his answer as the gun fell to pieces, having been dismantled.

Ryan's curse of surprise was an elbow crashing into the side of his head, just missing his temple. Stunned for a second, he couldn't stop himself from being tossed across the room, nearly as easily as his wife had been not twenty seconds ago.

With adrenaline fuelling his perceptions, he saw his sword lying two metres away in the heavy darkness of the room. Wincing, Ryan threw himself towards it, and tried to duck and roll, knowing in his gut that the manoeuvre was futile.

Exactly as it proved to be.

A booted foot slammed down on the back of his right knee, pinning him in place while nearly dislocating his hip. A massive fist gripped the collar of his coat at the nape of his neck, hauling his up and backwards, arching his back tightly.

Ryan scrambled at his attacker's grip, trying to bring to mind the lessons Duncan had drilled into him about forcing someone to release a hold. The fist holding him was half again the size of his own hand, and felt as though it had been sculpted out of titanium.

With his captor's foot on the back of his knee holding him down (and, coincidentally, breaking his patella), and his incredibly strong hand gripping the material of his coat pulling his body up and backwards like a bow, Ryan could only act purely on instinct. He swung a free fist wildly behind him, praying that he was on target.

The angle was wrong though, and his fist lightly struck something that felt like a tree trunk, but was probably just his assailant's thigh.

The foot on his knee disappeared, but Ryan didn't get a chance to rejoice. He was bodily picked up, and tossed face-first into one of the load-bearing concrete pillars scattered around the building. He heard, rather than felt his nose break.

With stars dancing in his vision, he hardly noted being turned around and slammed back against the pillar. A forearm thicker than his neck slammed hard into his throat, smashing the back of his head back against the concrete and pinning him tightly.

"Why are you here?" his attacker demanded.

Ryan felt the man's hot breath on his face, the light sensation somehow overriding the pain from his many wounds. Even so, he had to wait a moment while his nose straightened before he could answer. "M-MacL-Leod," he managed to force past his throat, even with the pressure on his adam's apple. The idea of coming up with a lie didn't even appear in his consciousness.

The pressure increased, but in an upwards direction, forcing Ryan's face up. "What do you want with the Highlander? Do you want his head?"

At the back of Ryan's mind, something shouted for his attention, but battered and broken as he was, he couldn't think of what it was. "H-he's a f-friend," Ryan wheezed, trying to shake his head.

The forearm at his throat rose even higher, pushing Ryan's head back harder and forcing his body up the pillar. His back scraped up the hard surface until his feet dangled an unknown distance above the floor, which was slowly being stained with his blood.

"Who are you?" the man demanded.

Ryan was unable to swallow. He managed to wheeze out, "Ryan Chessman," as his vision began wavering. "Who are you?" he whispered back, the last flaring sparks of his indignation finally coming to the fore.

Instead of answering, the man leaned forward. His face became illuminated by a beam of light coming in through one of the gaps in the curtains.

The only part of the man's face visible was his mouth and chin. The rest of his face was covered in a black mask. Two pointed ears rose from the sides of the mask to peak a few inches above the dome of the mask. The eyes were covered with light green lenses, which glittered menacingly in the gloom.

"Do I need to introduce myself?"

Ryan shook his head as much as he could.

"Good." The pressure on his throat lessened. "And tell your Vampire that she really doesn't want to start something with me. I may not kill, but I'll have no hesitation in ending her existence, since she'd dead already."

Ryan's eyes swivelled slightly to look at his wife. Jennifer had risen from her curled ball of pain and was stalking the Batman from behind. In the dim light, Ryan couldn't make out her expression, but the horrific burns and peeling skin bore mute testimony to the attack she had suffered. She stopped at his words, indicating that she was at least measuring him up as a threat. Even so, Ryan knew that it was only a matter of time before she would attack to try and protect him.

Suddenly, the Batman's forearm disappeared, and Ryan collapsed to the base of the pillar, gulping air into his abused lungs. There was a sound of a billowing cloak, then nothing. Jennifer blinked, looking around with an expression of total shock on her usually beautiful features.

The shock didn't last long though, and she screamed her husband's name, leaping to his aid. Gently cradling his head in the crook of her elbow, she murmured comforting words into his ear as his Quickening slowly healed the damage done to his body.

## Darkest Knight Discussion

Ryan painfully opened and focused his eyes on Jen, jumping slightly with surprise and horror at the dark, deep burns in her skin. Some flesh had been flash-burned enough that it was hanging off her high cheekbones in foul strips, her nose had all but been reduced to charcoal. Running his eyes over the rest of her form, he noticed that the skin on her arms was black too, and cracking. Despite her stoicism, she was obviously in terrible pain.

He levered his right arm out of her grip, even though it was still rather numb, and held it up to her cracked, burned lips. "Here, heal yourself," he slurred, blood and phlegm congealing in his broken nose making his words almost indecipherable.

"But-", she whispered.

"No buts," Ryan croaked, his larynx still not recovered from the recent assault. "I'll heal. You won't without blood."

Jen blinked and nodded her acceptance, before turning her husband's forearm around slightly and, with infinite tenderness, gently bit the inside of his wrist. Ruby-red blood ran down her ruined skin and dripped from her chin, mute testimony that her damaged lips did not have the elasticity to cover the wound completely. Desperate not to lose any of her husband's precious blood, Jen cupped a free hand under her chin as she slowly suckled at his wrist.

To Ryan, the melody of pain, with riffs and chords clambering for attention from various limbs, suddenly silenced as though washed away, as once more his wife ingested his blood. He felt safe, and loved, as he painlessly drifted temporarily into the oblivion of death.

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Ryan awoke and sat up straight with a dry, raspy gasp. Whenever his wife fed from him, while it was one of the most erotic and sensual experiences he had ever had, he always awoke desperately thirsty. A hangover was more difficult to endure than this, but not by much. A large glass filled with a cool liquid was wordlessly pressed into his hand, condensation already forming on the outside of the glass.

Ryan drank deeply, without drawing breath or pause. With little more than half a dozen gulps, he emptied the large glass in less than ten seconds. Throughout it all, he kept his eyes firmly closed. There were fewer less comfortable sensations in the world than trying to re-close eyes that were so dehydrated that they were nearly shrivelled.

The empty glass was taken from him, and replaced with another. Once more, Ryan drank deeply, but more slowly this time. He actually noted the taste this time, recognising the slightly acidic lemon/lime flavour of a sports drink.

After downing two pints of chilled, electrolyte enhanced sports drink, Ryan felt confident enough to open his eyes. Though the lids felt like sandpaper, the dim light of the room didn't hurt his sensitive eyes. The lights from the streets below reflected from the roof, bathing the room in a cool, yellow hue. Ryan sat up, away from his wife's cradling embrace. He turned to face her and winced; Jen's recent injuries hadn't healed completely. Her skin was bright red, and was peeling in places, looking almost exactly like two day old sunburn.

"You look lots better," he said honestly. There wasn't any way in the world to have covered her original burns. "At least now people will just think you've been out in the sun too long," he offered, his voice still deep and hoarse, despite the recent fluids.

Jen gave him a crooked smile, one that always set his heart racing, before assuming a far more sombre expression. "What the hell was that all about? What was *he* doing here?"

Ryan shrugged, feeling very stiff at various parts of his body. "No idea. I didn't think he actually existed," he said, absently patting the hilts of his weapons that Jen had collected and returned.

Jen was about to retort when her husband's eyes went distant for a second and he tensed, before focusing again once more on her and relaxing. "Another immortal?" she whispered.

Ryan nodded, examining the aura of the approaching immortal. It was both familiar, yet brighter, stronger. *Connor has been busy*, Ryan thought. *His quickening has changed since I last saw him. I doubt he's taken a lot of lesser heads, so he must have taken a very powerful one.* "It's Connor," he said, calming his wife.

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Connor walked quickly down Hudson Street. The thoroughfare had long been an important part of the city, indeed, an important part of Connor's life since 1783, but at this time of night, it would be mostly empty. The usual hustle and bustle would calm, before again picking up again just before sunrise. The constant, steady rhythm was something the Highlander could draw strength from, something that seemed to be more permanent than even he.

A familiar sensation washed over him, and he paused in his stride.

Ah , he thought to himself. *Young Chessman has arrived.*

Connor glanced up at the windows above the door, frowning at the sight of the dark room. He had left the lights on when he left earlier. *Perhaps it is not Ryan up there* , he thought.

The Highlander quickly keyed in his code, and pushed the door open. In one smooth, practised movement, he had his ancient katana out and ready. The sight of the empty front desk set his heart racing. Rachel had not had any plans to leave, and the only thing that stopped Connor from panic was the fact that the desk had been cleaned completely. Rachel was always fastidious about her workspace, and made sure it was clean and empty before finishing for the evening.

On soundless sneakers, the Highlander crept across the ground floor of his home, to the fuse cabinet hidden behind one of the ancient tapestries he decorated the shop with. Looking and reaching in, his hand froze.

An object, some sort of remote mechanism, had been placed over the main switch. In the dim light, Connor couldn't make out what it was exactly, but it did appear capable of switching both the main breaker and the master light switch both on and off. Easing the tip of one finger underneath the mechanism, he noted that the main power switch was still on; just the lights had been turned off.

Forgoing the elevator, Connor left the power board as it was and again silently padded the length of the shop floor. At the rear of the shop a wooden panel slid back and across under his touch, revealing a hidden space containing a single, tightly-twisting spiral staircase. Leading with the point of his katana, Connor gently climbed the steps, his left hand acting as both guide and balance by sliding gently up the banister.

The Highlander reached the top of the stairs and slid this level's corresponding hidden panel aside, entering the main living area from a completely unexpected direction.

Only to have young Chessman and his girlfriend greet him face to face.

"Connor," he rasped with a nod. "Lift not working?"

Connor looked the young Immortal up and down with a frown. "Ryan, what the hell happened?" he blurted in his obscure, unrecognisable accent.

"You had a visitor!" snapped Ryan's woman. The petite red-head looked as though she had been out in the sun for the whole day without protection. She was peeling badly from one side of her face and on her arms. She sounded far more irritated than Ryan, whose clothes bore evidence that he had suffered far worse. Despite her obviously painful condition, anger and frustration filled her every action, even something as simple as pouring a large glass of sport's drink.

"You drove him off?" Connor asked as Ryan accepted the glass from his woman.

Ryan's eyes widened, and he shook his head rapidly. "Not bloody likely," he muttered to himself before drinking deeply.

Connor's eyes slowly grew accustomed to the gloom, and he noticed the three empty and two full bottles of sports drink on the coffee table. His entire supply. Flicking his gaze over the room, noting the blood smears on one of the load-bearing pillars, the rips and tears in both his visitor's clothes and the sudden addiction to electrolytic drinks, he reversed his sword to a rest position behind his arm and gestured towards the long sofas. "Sit. I'll get the lights on, and you can tell me what happened. Do you happen to know where Rachel is?"

Before either of his visitors could answer, the lights flared to life, causing each of the three to blink rapidly to clear the glare. Jen, who was facing Connor, gave a shrill squeal of surprise, and clambered back behind Ryan. Both Immortals spun around with various blades extended.

Standing, still, silent and grim, was the six-foot-six, black and grey clad Batman. Only his cowed face was visible, the rest of his enormous frame was covered by his extensive cape, pulled tight across his chest by his hands hidden under the folds. "You are a popular man tonight, Highlander," he said, his deep voice carrying easily.

Connor relaxed quickly, the tip of his blade lowering in an instant. "What, you've never had a visitor before? Heh, heh." he said with his breathy, staccato laugh. "You get them occasionally when you have people who are friends."

The Batman didn't even spare Ryan a glance. "I am referring to the three other Immortals who arrived here earlier, hunting you for your head."

Instantly, Connor's humour vanished, and he once more became intense, driven. "Who?"

The Dark Knight's cape fell in two directions as he extended his heavily muscled arms. His right fell to his side, his left rose and gestured out one window. "Those three," he said cryptically.

Connor frowned, but covered the few steps to the window and looked out, down at the alley below. After a few seconds, he turned back to his grim visitor. "What am I looking for?"

"Try looking up," was the response.

Connor turned again, this time looking up at the skyline of New York. After a few seconds, a grin formed and he began chuckling.

Ryan and Jennifer, neither of whom had moved since discovering the newcomer in their midst, tentatively followed suit. Jennifer noticed first, and grabbed her husband's arm and pointed.

Three silhouettes against their bonds, hanging upside down from the spire above the building opposite. Their struggles bounced them around, causing them to swing far enough to bump into each other occasionally. Connor left the window briefly to open a cupboard, returning with two pairs of old, bronze-plated binoculars and a retractable telescope that had, judging by the plaque attached to the box, been used by Nelson at Trafalgar. The binoculars were distributed to his guests. The Highlander, Ryan and Jennifer once more gazed out the window, only Connor feeling at home with a dark, foreboding presence behind them.

After silently examining the hanging trio, Connor turned back to the Batman. "I know two of them. They are fairly young hunters who operate in the Tri-state area. I've sent both running a couple of times at some point in the last hundred years or so. They are good at giving themselves an escape route. But the third I've never met; the one wearing the leather collar."

The Batman nodded. "The third I recognise from Gotham. He is one of several powerful Immortals who have left Gotham over the past week. I followed him here. I tried to question them, but they were particularly unforthcoming. It is difficult to intimidate someone into answering you when they can't die."

Ryan swallowed and looked the Batman up and down. "Do you usually hang people you don't know upside down from the top of a building?" he asked as sarcastically as he dared.

The Batman ignored the tone and answered the question. "Occasionally. Whenever a convenient building is nearby. It is one of the most expedient ways of making someone talk."

Ryan paled at the casual answer. Jennifer took her husband's hand. "One of?"

The cowed figure shrugged. "Holding them in front of an oncoming train, over live electrical wires, dangling them in a pit of snakes or spiders," he said in his deep, forboding voice. "Criminals are a fearful lot. Fear is a powerful motivator. But with Immortals, it's a little different." He paused, evaluating his words. "My interrogation of them was interrupted by the pair of you arriving. I feared you may be another hunter after the Highlander here. I arrived just to hear you say the one who takes Connor's head would become powerful."

Connor glanced over at Ryan. "Ouch."

Ryan winced. "Yeah, I guess."

The Batman shrugged. "Instead of intimidation, I tried primal fear and pain. The sudden shock and awe worked far better in getting answers from an Immortal." Again, he paused. "You have my apologies," he grated, words that he had almost never used.

Before Ryan or Jennifer could reply, he turned to face Connor. "The three of them were in here, staking out the layout and preparing to set traps. I took them across the alley out of your sense range and tried to interrogate them. Apart from the obvious, I got nothing. Even breaking their bones elicited nothing new," he said emotionlessly.

Connor shook his head and waved a hand, indicating that he wasn't interested in three assassins after his head at that moment. "Where is Rachel? Do you know?"

The Batman tilted his head to one side. "Rachel? Your daughter? If she is the person who mans the desk downstairs, she left with someone of her own accord before the three Immortals arrived."

Connor slumped with relief. "Did you see who?"

"He was a tall, slim gentleman. Very well dressed, neatly groomed moustache, aristocratic bearing. I only caught a glimpse of him, reflected in an indistinct mirrored surface before he departed with a well dressed, mature lady at the same time as I arrived to visit you. I presume the woman is your daughter?"

Connor nodded. "Yes, and I have an idea who the other man was too."

Batman opened his mouth to reply when the doorbell below rang out. Connor began moving towards the open-aired lift, before being stopped.

"Ignore it. There is a reason I came here tonight. I need you."

Connor glanced towards the lift, then back to the Batman, curiosity on his features. "What on earth could you want with me?"

The Batman glanced over at Ryan and Jennifer, who were watching the conversation like a tennis match. Deciding he could talk in front of them, he replied, "A powerful Immortal has staked Gotham as his own. And he appears to have changed the rules of the Game."

Connor hesitated, staring at his grim visitor long enough for the doorbell to ring again. This time, the chime was accompanied by a voice calling out, "Russ? Russell, are you there?"

Ryan cleared his throat and pointed towards the elevator. "Um, I could..."

With a sharp swing of his arm, the Batman cut him off. "Stay where you are."

The bell rang a third time. "Russell? It's Bruce! Bruce Wayne!" the slightly muffled voice from outside called out.

The Batman frowned. "I wonder what Wayne is doing here?" he murmured out loud. "He's not due in New York until next week."

Connor blinked. "You know Bruce's schedule?"

The cowl'd figure shook his head. "No. But the Manhattan based newspaper he owns has its annual board meeting next week. Wayne always attends, and always shows up late. Apart from that, he tends to avoid New York." He held up a gloved hand. "In any event, leave him be for now. I don't have a great deal of time, and I need some information from you."

Connor frowned, obviously wanting to answer the door. "What do you want from me?"

"I need information about the Quickening. What extra powers and senses it gives you. I also need to know who the oldest Immortal you know is."

Connor frowned. "The past few decades have been harsh to the older ones. There are few truly ancient Immortals left. My cousin Duncan has accounted for more than usual recently. And Damien was nearly a thousand years old himself."

The Batman didn't visibly react. "I also need to know if the amount of power you have changes as you get older. If you can do more with your Quickening than a younger Immortal."

Connor and Ryan shared a glance. "Why do you need to know all that?" the younger Immortal asked.

The glittering green gaze shifted to Ryan. "Because, Immortal, the Hunter terrorising Gotham is, as far as can be determined, approximately ten thousand years old."

## Darkest Knight Answers

The gloomy shadows that covered the front of Connor MacLeod's Hudson Street property easily hid the almost invisible presence that skilfully climbed down the face of the building, from the roof down. The slightly darker shadow paused in its descent at the window leading into the main living area of the building, and then paused again at the very bottom of the building, at the front door.

From there, the dark figure made his way along Hudson Street, avoiding the bright pools of light created by the many street lamps by the simple expedient of climbing along the face of the buildings above the level of the lights. Finally, the dark shadow gave a heave, and leapt off the building it had been clinging to, and half-fell, half-drifted in a controlled manner, directly into the open sunroof on a massive Rolls.

The heavy car shook and bounced slightly just after the shadow entered the car from a speedy, vertical drop.

Inside, Batman set the internal music system to near the maximum. With the tinted windows preventing anyone seeing in, and the music preventing anyone hearing what was going on inside, Bruce Wayne removed his cowl and pulled off the Bat's Mantle. Once free of the clothes that inspired terror in criminals everywhere, Bruce carefully folded and sealed the precious uniform into a secret compartment in the floor of the car. Next, He pulled one of the rear seats forward, to access the stash of cleaning products that Alfred carried with himself always.

One thing you had to hand to the butler, besides his unwavering loyalty, his devotion, his intelligence, medical skills, and acting talent, the man could clean like nobody else on earth. Of course, his skill was augmented by the fact that he always used the right chemical for the job. From concentrated Hydrochloric and Hydrofluoric acids down to distilled water with added fragrance for ironing, there was always the right chemical for whatever mess Bruce had managed to make.

Bruce spent a few moments examining each bottle and container, looking at the chemical components of each.

"She just had to be a vampire, didn't she?" he muttered to himself, before selecting a pair of cleaning products that had certain iron-based chemicals as their active ingredient.

He carefully mixed the two in the correct ratio, thinking back on the conversation he just had.

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"Ten *thousand* years?" Ryan blurted.

Batman slowly shifted his attention to the younger Immortal. "At least. The language he has been recorded using, a dialect of Quechua, dates back to Pre-Inca times in South America."

Ryan spun to face Connor. "But that's twice as old as..." he hissed, before stopping suddenly.

Batman continued, making a mental note. "A pyramid dated three thousand years old was recently destroyed on the outskirts of Gotham. During bulk excavations on the site, a body was uncovered. A minute or so after discovery, it awoke, tore itself out of the remaining rock, and nearly killed three people. Security on the site shot it dead, only to have it stand again.

"By the time I was called, whoever it was had left. Examining the scene, the rock from where the body was entombed is dated the same as the pyramid. Whoever it was, they had been buried alive for over three millennia."

Batman watched silently as both Immortals and one Vampire shared glances. As skilled at reading body language as one could be, the byplay between the trio elicited a great deal of information.

"It took less than an hour before the first murder. The figure made it to the outskirts of Gotham, homed in on a local Immortal, and killed him," Batman continued, still reading the body language in front of him.

Connor frowned. "Wait. How did he find an Immortal so quickly?"

Batman gave him a humourless grin. "The year after the NML order was lifted, Gotham became a Mecca for people who wished to build a new life, with a new identity. The level of proof needed to get new legal papers issued was so low at the time that every fugitive, con-man and runaway in the country descended on the city. From the information I have compiled, there were nearly sixty Immortals who had taken advantage of the 'free IDs' scam in that first year.

"The situation attracted those you call 'Hunters'. Decapitation has become a common as a method of killing. It is even separately listed as the cause of death in the statistics published by the GCPD. Since common deaths are not widely reported, Gotham is appearing like an ideal location for those with identity problems. At any rate, the Immortal who died was only sixty-three years old, had been an Immortal for less than half of that, and had, in your jargon, taken no heads. Witnesses say he simply collapsed in agony at the approach of the older Immortal, and was simply unable

to defend himself.”

Ryan gave Connor an intense look. “That can happen to the younger ones,” he said tentatively.

Connor sighed but nodded. “Until you get used to being around Immortals, the sensation of feeling an older Immortal’s Quickening can be painful, especially if that person has evil in their heart. The more heads you take, the more power you have, and the less others affect you. Not to mention that it is harder it is to kill you.”

Batman tilted his head to one side. “Is that a function of the power you receive, or simply the experience you have gained from surviving?”

Connor shrugged. “Perhaps both. Anyway, younger Immortals are easily overwhelmed by the Quickening of another Immortal. As you get older, you learn to control it, and even start to be able to read other’s auras. Once you are several hundred years old, you can even start to sense those who will become Immortal once they die for the first time.”

Connor looked over at Ryan, his eyes questioning.

Ryan swallowed, but nodded.

Connor turned back to the Batman and continued. “Ryan here is an exception. He has far more control over his Quickening and aura than anyone on this side of the Atlantic. He can even hide it from other Immortals, letting them think he wasn’t around, which is an extremely useful skill. Not only that, but he can read an aura, and tell you how old an Immortal is, when they are lying, how powerful they are, and even what sort of headcount they have.”

Batman swivelled to face Ryan. “Is that correct?”

Ryan nodded slowly. “Yeah. Saved my life the first time I ever fought another Immortal.”

Batman nodded. “Interesting.”

---

Bruce waited in the car until he saw Alfred escorting MacLeod’s daughter home. The pair entered the front door of the building quickly and easily, Alfred closing the door behind them.

Bruce emerged from the Rolls, smelling deeply of the chemical cleaners he had poured on himself. Alfred would be annoyed at the ruination of yet another Armani, but it couldn’t be helped. He needed to sew enough subconscious doubt into the minds of those people visiting the Highlander that the Batman and Bruce Wayne were two separate people.

He took a deep breath, wrinkling his nose at the stench of his clothes, and marched up to the front door, where he knocked sharply.

---

Rachel had just greeted Ryan and Jennifer when the doorbell rang once more. Wordlessly, Connor waved away Rachel’s automatic reaction to answer the door, and took the lift down to the storefront himself.

Connor opened the front door, to the unexpected sight of Bruce Wayne. Not that Bruce himself was unexpected, but the state of his clothes *was*. “Bruce! Welco—ugh!” Connor winced and turned to one side. “What the hell happened to you?”

Bruce shrugged. “Hi Russ. Sorry, but I sort of had an accident with some cleaning products.”

Connor blinked rapidly, nodding in agreement. “I can see that. No, I can *smell* that,” he clarified. “Come in, I think I have some towels or something somewhere. Rachel will know.”

Bruce nodded. “Thanks,” he said with a sigh, pulling the door closed behind him. “Sorry about stopping in like this. I tried before, but it seemed as though you weren’t home.”

Connor paused momentarily. “Yeah, sorry about that. We were here, but, ah, I was administering first aid.”

Bruce stopped. “Is everyone alright?”

Connor nodded. “Aye, it looked worse than it was.” He ushered Bruce into the open-aired elevator and pulled the steel-lattice door closed. Even in the well-ventilated lift, Connor surreptitiously put a little more distance between himself and his new guest.

“Sorry,” Bruce said, giving an apologetic shrug as they reached the next floor.

Several pairs of eyes turned to face the new arrival. “Master Bruce?”

Bruce’s face split into a relieved grin. “Ah, Alfred. I’m glad you’re back.” He turned to Rachel, and gave her a half bow. “Miss Ellinstein. A pleasure to meet you again.”

Rachel smiled, but blanched as the chemical smell hit her. “Ugh. Mr. Wayne, what on earth happened?”

Bruce looked down at his drenched clothes. “Yes, well, it’s a bit of a long story.”

Alfred braved the smell to inspect the damage done to Bruce’s Armani. “I dare say so, since I left you not ten blocks from the hotel,” he said. “Sir,”

he added, after a pause just slightly too long.

Bruce gave his butler a rueful shrug. "Well, I followed your directions, but there was a diversion half way."

"Indeed?" Alfred asked neutrally. "I saw no diversion when I left you the car."

Bruce shifted uncomfortably as Alfred assisted him out of his dinner jacket. "Well, the diversion wasn't there when you left," Bruce said defensively.

Alfred nodded placatingly. "And this distraction was a young lady, correct?"

Bruce frowned. "Hey, just because I don't seem to have good luck in keeping a girlfriend, doesn't automatically mean that I get distracted by every passing female!"

Alfred simply kept his calm, questioning gaze on his employer.

Bruce finally cracked. "All right, it was a woman."

"As I suspected. I am sure your audience is beginning to understand as well, sir," Alfred said, the amusement in his voice not at all reflected in his stoically neutral demeanor.

Bruce coughed. "Yes, well, I got out of the car to help her out, because she was sort of having a bit of trouble carrying some cleaning stuff."

"Clearly, she was carrying this 'cleaning stuff' without lids on the containers?"

Bruce frowned. "Of course not! There were lids on all the containers. No, it was all in a big box that looked heavy. So I took hold of the box, but she didn't seem to want my help."

"This young lady happened to be rather attractive, wasn't she?"

Bruce nodded enthusiastically. "Absolutely!"

Alfred just sighed theatrically. "I presumed as much. Did she, at any point, actually ask for your assistance?"

Bruce frowned. "Well. No. But it was a big box!"

Alfred sighed again. "And you decided that she needed assistance in carrying the aforementioned box," he said, phrasing it as a statement, rather than a rhetorical question.

"Um, yeah. Anyway, it took a while, but I finally managed to get the box away from her—"

"Said the six foot four gym enthusiast," Alfred mumbled.

"—but as I tried to explain that I only wanted to help, I held it out of her reach. Only, one of those courier cyclists that infest this city crashed into it, breaking the bottles and dumping it all over me," Bruce finished lamely.

Alfred surreptitiously glanced around the room at the four other occupants, each of whom was in a different state. Jennifer was openly grinning, with one hand on her mouth, her index finger covering her nose. Her husband was biting his lip so hard it was a minor miracle that he had not drawn blood. Rachel's eyes focused elsewhere, and her shoulders were shaking, but her features were well-schooled into a classic pose of grace and calm, as she handed Alfred several towels. Connor, or Russell to Bruce and Alfred, had turned away from the scene, but was laughing under his breath.

"So I can see," Alfred finally replied. "Might I ask why you didn't go to the hotel to clean up?"

Bruce looked up at his butler, his expression pleading. "Well, I sort of forgot which hotel we were staying at."

Connor was the first to recover. Coughing a few times to get control, he said, "Well, that is understandable. There are a lot of hotels in that part of town."

Alfred ignored him and gave Bruce a pointed look over his spectacles, raised a finger and adopted a lecturing tone. "Master Bruce, you have stayed in the penthouse suite at the same hotel at least twice a year for the past fifteen years. I would have thought it highly implausible that even you could forget the name of the hotel. *Especiallly* given the circumstances."

Rachel had also managed to get herself under control. "Circumstances, Alfred?"

Bruce scuffed his shoes like a schoolboy caught mid-prank.

Alfred turned and gave her a steady, amused smile. "He *owns* the hotel, my dear."

---

Bruce and Alfred quickly said their goodbyes, promising to visit at a later date, once things were a little less fragrant. Once in the big Rolls, Alfred tilted the rear-view mirror on a slightly different angle and asked, "I am not entirely fond of tarnishing your father's good name. I trust that level of humiliation was called for, Master Bruce?"

Bruce sighed. "Yes. The young red-head is a vampire. She could smell the iron in hemoglobin from several metres away, and identify the person. The chemicals I soaked myself in are iron-based, and would have confused her."

Alfred blinked. "A vampire, sir?"

Bruce nodded, stripping out of his shirt. "A fitting match to an Immortal, I suppose."

"Then young Mr. Chessman is an Immortal too, sir?"

"Yes. He admitted as such earlier."

Alfred was quiet for a time. "If you don't mind me asking, sir, why did you use such a humiliating method of disguising your scent?"

Bruce reached into a compartment in the back seat and scabbled around inside for a few seconds. "MacLeod is clever. Clever and old. I doubt he believes in co-incidences any more than I do. Having the Batman and Bruce Wayne turn up on his doorstep seconds apart would have set some alarm bells ringing," he finished, withdrawing two small devices, one with a tiny suction pad.

Pressing a button on the device, a tinny voice could be heard. "Russell? Russ? It's me, Bruce." Bruce pressed another button to stop the playback.

Alfred hardly looked impressed. "Forgive me, but that is a poor mimicry of yourself, Master Bruce."

Bruce shrugged. "It sounds much better when firmly attached to an eighteen by fourteen inch window five mills thick, fixed into a lead frame," he replied, then frowned. "From the inside of the building, at least."

Alfred nodded, gently swerving to avoid a double-parked cab. "I see. I presume you were in their presence when you activated this device?"

"Yes. I even told them to ignore it, that what I needed to know was more important. Now, to each of them, unconsciously at least, Bruce Wayne and the Batman are definitely different people."

Alfred gave his employer a gentle salute. "Most impressive, Master Bruce."

Bruce grimaced. "If it wasn't for the fact that there was a vampire present, I wouldn't have had to cover myself in this gunk."

Alfred gave him a look that could only be described as unsympathetic. "Yes. I'm sure the poor soul who has to clean your clothes will have a suitable amount of pity for you."

---

After Bruce and Alfred left, Rachel left to pick up some new clean towels. Connor, Ryan and Jennifer exited the Hudson St shop via the rear. Looking up, the ground-bound trio examined the faint silhouettes of the suspended trio. Connor shook his head, and gave a staccato laugh.

"Heh heh heh, how long could we leave them up there, do you think?" he said.

Jen pulled one of Connor's borrowed sweaters around her shoulders more tightly, something that Ryan assumed had been a nervous reaction from before she had been brought across. "Can we just get on with this?"

Ryan raised an eyebrow at his wife's snappishness. Normally more even-tempered, his wife had been waspish ever since the Batman had flash-fried her. Not even the poor bugger Wayne's situation could cheer her up for long. Not that he could blame her. The burns the Batman had given her had been deep.

"Fine. Conner? Would you do the honours?"

The almost evil grin that the Highlander returned all but forced a grin onto the younger pair. While his cousin Duncan had an air of charisma that could charm almost anyone, Connor exuded an air of determination that made those around him unconsciously want to follow him, despite the fact that the Scot had no interest at all in leading anyone.

The Highlander raised a matt black remote control the Batman had given to him, and pressed one of the unlabelled buttons.

Instantly above, the mechanism holding three bound Immortals to the spire of a building snapped open. Three distinct shrieks of surprise echoed off the buildings for a fair distance around, as the trio plummeted towards the pavement below.

Ryan and Connor both felt the sudden arrival of three Immortals into their presence seconds before the trio hit the pavement. Each struck the ground at the same time, with bone-shattering force. Both Connor and Ryan winced at the sight of one of the trio of Hunters who had landed on the edge of a dumpster, one leg in, one out. The force of the landing had nearly split the man in two, from the groin up to his navel.

"Quickly!" hissed Jennifer, easily snatching the larger of the temporarily dead figures from the slick pavement. Effortlessly, she tossed him over her shoulder and ran lightly back towards Connor's building.

Connor shook his head. "You are a lucky man, Ryan," he said, almost wistfully.

The younger Immortal could hardly hide a grin as he dragged one corpse over his shoulder. "I know. I tell myself that every day."

Instead of hauling the remaining dead Immortal over his shoulder like his two guests, Connor grabbed the leg hanging on the outside of the dumpster, and just dragged the body behind him. The gruesome display made Ryan's stomach twist and turn. "You all right, Lad?"

Ryan winced, but nodded, turning away from the bloody spectacle. Quickly, he stumbled back towards Connor's home, in an effort to put more distance between himself and the ruined corpse.

"The battlefields of war always have things worse than this," said Connor quietly behind him. "I pray that you never have a chance to get used to it."

---

Connor left his corpse at the doorway while he grabbed a handful of bed sheets. He inexpertly wrapped the bloody corpse in the white sheets, stemming the amount of blood. Frowning thoughtfully, he made his way to the main switchbox, and looked inside. The Highlander put his hands on his hips, lowered his head, gave it a shake and chuckled deep in his throat.

Ryan shared a glance with his wife before looking over Connor's shoulder into the fuse box. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary, as the Scot flipped the mains to off.

"Something wrong?"

Connor simply shook his head, a tight grin on his face.

Gesturing to his guests in the near darkness, Connor led them down a set of stairs into the basement, deep beneath the building. While Ryan and Jen carried their burdens, the Highlander simply dragged his corpse down the stairs, the wrapped head making muffled thumps on the hardwood steps.

In the pitch darkness, Connor scabbled in a pocket for a second, before pulling out a custom-made cigarette lighter. Snapping the lid open, the single flame faintly lit the musty room, filled with crates covered in dust and cobwebs.

Ignoring the contents, he dragged the wrapped body over to the other end of the room, and activated yet another secret panel, revealing a spiral staircase made of stone, leading even further down. This time, Connor pushed his burden into the staircase, and grinned at the thumping as it grew fainter. Nodding with satisfaction, he followed it down.

"Um, Connor? Where are we going?" Ryan asked.

"Someplace safe," was the cryptic response.

Ryan and Jen shared a glance, before asking in unison, "Where?"

Connor stopped, and slumped slightly. "I had it build before the building itself was put up." The Highlander seemed to struggle with himself before adding, "I used to use it for smuggling," before continuing down. Once more, Ryan and Jen shared a look, this time Ryan was grinning.

"Jen, meet Captain Carruthers, the infamous gunrunner," he said, before following along. While Jen was totally at home in dark spaces, Ryan felt more than a little nervous. Not the least because he had no room to draw his weapons, and within a couple of minutes, there would be three healed, conscious, and seriously pissed off Immortals in a confined space with him.

Finally, the stairs ended, and the pair stepped into a high-ceilinged, brick room. A single shelf ran along one wall, which contained a dozen candles. Connor was methodically lighting each.

Ryan looked around in the steadily growing light. A wooden trapdoor with a metal ring at one end was set into the floor at the opposite end of the room. A solid looking oak chest sat flush against the back wall next to the trapdoor. But what caught Ryan's attention was the dense strands of copper wire that crisscrossed the brick walls and arched ceiling, making a lattice of metal that gleamed where it had not corroded.

With a smile, the younger Immortal looked at Connor. "A faraday cage? You've built a faraday cage?"

Connor frowned, giving him a questioning look, as he drew his katana from the folds of his coat. "A what cage? I built this to keep a Quickening contained," he said, then frowned. "Mostly," he added. "I turn the power off upstairs just in case."

The Immortal Jen carried over her shoulder began stirring, his shattered bones reforming quickly. With a snarl of irritation, the slight girl pulled the awakening Immortal from her shoulder, grabbed the back of his head, and smashed his skull into the wall as hard as she could.

The man's cranium caved in like an eggshell.

Ryan dumped his own semi-conscious burden as it stirred. "Feel better, Love?"

Jen gave a sigh, but nodded and turned to Connor.

"You were a gunrunner?"

Connor frowned and looked at Ryan accusingly.

Ryan shrugged. "Duncan likes to tell stories when he's drunk."

Connor rolled his eyes. "How very noble of him. I'll have to have a little chat with him next time we meet." He poked the Immortal Ryan had carried down with the tip of his katana. "Do you want him?"

Ryan blinked. "I won't kill a helpless man, Connor!"

The Highlander gave him a long stare. "I'm not suggesting that. Do you want to challenge him, or do you want me to?"

Ryan glanced down at the recumbent figure, now groaning and shifting slightly as he neared consciousness. He closed his eyes and used his own, almost unique gift; the ability to examine and read an Immortal's aura. Though difficult to examine the aura of an Immortal who was temporarily dead, he concentrated hard on the flickering power coming from the man.

The Quickening in this Immortal was not exceptionally long, but it was quite bright. Not unexpected for a Hunter. Ryan delved further, feeling the intensity of the man's power. "He's nearly two hundred years old, but has quite a few less powerful heads to his credit. You said you've met him before?"

Connor nodded. "Slippery, but you could take him. He tends to lead with a low thrust. He did that each time we fought. Parry across your body and step inside his guard. You might have trouble with this one, though," he said, gesturing towards Jen's luggage.

Ryan looked down at the man again. He was seconds from waking. "He doesn't have his sword."

Wordlessly, Connor stepped over Jen's captive and moved over to the chest. Pulling the lid up, he dipped his katana in and scooped up the blades of nearly a dozen different kinds of swords. "He can borrow one of these."

Jen's eyes widened at the revealed weaponry. "How many times have you used this place?"

Connor just grinned at her, then turned to look at Ryan.

With a sigh, Ryan nodded. "Ok, I'll challenge him."

Jen gave her husband a smile. "You realize that if you start losing, I'm going to butt in," she said, her hands on her slim hips in a defiant stance.

Ryan tried not to laugh. "Now, Honey, you know you're not allowed to interfere." He pulled his wakazashi from his jacket and touched the point to the awakening Immortal's throat.

With a gasp, the captive's eyes snapped open, his gaze zipping around the room, getting his bearings. The man was obviously panicking, since there was at least four distinct Immortal signatures in the closed room. He recovered quickly though, and his eyes crossed, focusing on the sharp blade right in front of his face. "Who are you?" he demanded in a thick, British, aristocratic accent.

Ryan clicked his tongue. "Tut-tut. The correct protocol in this situation is that the man with the *really* sharp sword at your neck gets to ask the questions. Why are you here?"

Crystal blue eyes glittered menacingly up at Ryan. "We came to talk to MacLeod."

"Talk?" Ryan asked sarcastically.

Oddly, the man nodded. "Indeed. Rather hard to believe, isn't it, old boy? I wouldn't hold it against you if you didn't believe me." he said, enunciating each syllable clearly and precisely.

To Ryan's enhanced senses, the captive's aura remained steady, indicating the veracity of his comment. He and Connor exchanged a glance, the older Immortal nodding for the younger to continue.

"Try me," Ryan said.

The captive's eyes again flickered to each of the three in the room, dismissing Jen quickly. "We were instructed to escort MacLeod to Gotham City."

Ryan nodded. "By?"

"I am not aware of the man's name. He goes by the rather unoriginal moniker 'Master'," he said with a sneer.

"Why does this 'Master' of yours want Connor in Gotham?"

The man's pride seemed a little dented as he answered, "I don't know."

Not a single flicker.

"And if MacLeod didn't want to go to Gotham?" Ryan asked, tempting the man to lie at least once.

The man swallowed, his Adam's apple sliding up and down his throat close enough to the point of the wakazashi that it nicked the skin on his neck. "We were to take his head."

Ryan kept his face neutral, though he was impressed at how honest the blond aristocrat was. "Fine. What's your name?"

The blue eyes narrowed. "Wentworth St. John Smith," he said, pronouncing his surname 'Sin-gin Smythe'.

"Well, Wentworth, I am Ryan Chessman, and I challenge you."

The man sneered. "I have no blade, ruffian."

Ryan gestured towards the chest. "Take your pick."

Tentatively, the aristocratic man rose to his feet, and edged over to the chest. He glanced thoughtfully at Ryan's wakazashi, then down into the collection of blades. With a smile, he drew out a long rapier, a weapon that would give him the advantage of reach over Ryan's shorter blade.

Wentworth glanced at Connor. "I trust you will allow me to leave once this fight is over?"

A smile played on the Highlander's lips. "If I don't challenge you myself," he replied.

The Hunter swallowed, but nodded, and turned back to Ryan. "There can be only one," he said, and leapt straight at Ryan, the point of his rapier leading.

Ryan easily parried the expected thrust and stepped forward as Wentworth tried to recover. With his left fist clenched as tightly as he could, he delivered a hard left cross to the aristocrat's jaw.

Instantly, the man's eyes lost focus, and he staggered slightly. Ryan grinned to himself. He had felt the man's aura flicker as he staggered, indicating he was lying with his body language. It made it easy to resist the urge to follow through, remembering Connor's advice about his opponent being slippery. He stepped back and drew his combat knife with his left hand, assuming a defensive stance.

Unsurprisingly, Wentworth's eyes cleared quickly, and he studied Ryan closely. "Intriguing. I had assumed you were far too young detect such a feint so easily. You may actually be a challenge." His gaze swept over Ryan's weapons, and he realized that the advantage of his borrowed blade's longer reach he been effectively neutralized.

Clenching his teeth together, the aristocrat launched a series of high attacks, trying to force Ryan's defense up, leaving his stomach exposed. As a counter, Ryan gave ground while defending solely with his sword, keeping his knife low.

Wentworth gave up on the high attack tactic, and swept the rapier through the air in a large 'X', making the air whistle with the speed of the maneuver. Ryan winced at the unexpected noise, and shifted his knife into a different position to defend.

Using his wrist, Wentworth rolled the tip of the rapier in a circle and finished with a tight thrust, which Ryan tried to evade, rather than parry. The tip of the sword slid through his defenses and cut neatly under his left shoulder, near the armpit.

Ryan slashed out with his sword, which, because of its shorter length, wasn't able to threaten his opponent's body. Instead, he aimed at the wrist of the hand holding the rapier.

Both men hissed with pain as they began bleeding. Neither took their eyes off the other.

Ryan shook his head, sending sweat flying off his fringe. His breathing was coming harder, as the tension of the fight heightened.

The aristocrat took the offensive once more, though this time he lashed out at Ryan's weapon, trying to disarm the young Immortal. Keeping Duncan's lessons in mind, Ryan kept his grip firm, but supple, allowing his wrist and arm to absorb the harsh beatings.

Nevertheless, his wakazashi was pushed out wide to his right, and his feet were slightly out of balance when Wentworth launched a new attack, kicking Ryan in the stomach.

He let out an "Oof!" as the wind was blasted from his lungs, but kept the presence of mind to slash the attacking leg from underneath with his combat knife. The blade cut through the tough denim and deep into the calf muscle.

Wentworth aborted his follow up attack, and placed his wounded leg behind him, suddenly looking a little more concerned about the outcome of the fight.

"I give it five minutes before your wife's friend wakes up, Ryan," Connor said calmly, looking down at the corpse of the man whose skull had been crushed against the wall.

Ryan nodded, deliberately letting his gaze flicker onto the Highlander, while keeping his true attention on his opponent.

Wentworth took the bait, and lunged low, trying to end the fight quickly. Ryan swept his knife across his body and caught the rapier on his knife's blade, pushing it out past his right side. Then, holding the rapier steady (and more importantly, *away* from him), he spun left and moved forward, slashing the Japanese short sword out in a quick arc, his target now to his side.

The blade entered and exited his opponent's neck quickly.

Ryan stood still while Wentworth's corpse collapsed. As young as he was, surviving a life-or-death struggle was always a great relief. Slowly, he stood straight and turned to face Connor and Jen, both of whom gave him warm applause.

"You've improved, Ryan," Connor said approvingly. "You picked the feints from the real attacks well. But you'd better brace yourself."

Ryan's nod corresponded with the first tendril of blue fire. Quickly, he tossed his weapons to the side as azure arcs of energy leapt and danced around the enclosed space, spitting and sizzling along the copper wires. Ryan gasped in pain as the first shock hit him, filling his arm with both pain and strength.

He howled louder as more and more jolts struck his immortal body. Surges of energy, each powerful enough to fry a man's heart in his chest, repeatedly flooded through Ryan's body. The Quickening, an Immortal's birthright, was violently released and even more violently accepted.

Finally, after nearly thirty seconds of repeated shocks, Ryan fell to his knees with a low moan of agony. He could feel the unfamiliar strength coursing through his arms, but so soon after accepting a Quickening, his muscles felt leaden and heavy, as though he had just worked out for hours without stretching. With one final gulp of air, he fell backwards onto his back, his feet still trapped under his buttocks.

Petite hands encircled his shoulders, and gently aided him to sit up straight.

“Thanks. That hurt,” he mumbled.

“Aye,” replied Connor, getting to his feet himself. The release of a nearby Quickening had knocked the older Immortal flat. “It pains you more in here. But it’s safe.”

Ryan nodded, running a shaking forearm across his forehead, pushing aside the sweat-soaked hair. “What do you do with the bodies?” he asked, panting heavily.

Gesturing over his shoulder with his thumb, Connor indicated the trapdoor in the floor. “Lime pit. It used to lead into the sewers, until it was bricked up after Captain Carruthers’ untimely death,” he replied sourly.

Jen pouted, her irrepressible nature seemingly returning. “Oh, what a waste.”

---

True to Connor’s prediction, Jen’s victim woke almost exactly at the five minute mark. This time, he awoke to the point of a katana under his chin. The interrogation elicited no new information, and ended on the issue of a challenge.

Ryan and Jen watched with fascination as the older MacLeod skillfully dismantled his opponent’s defenses one by one. Though Connor’s movements were not as crisp or subtle as his cousin’s, the sheer determination and power in his strokes spoke of great experience. Despite (in Ryan’s estimation) being over three hundred years old, the other Immortal was literally no match for the experienced, not to mention powerful, Highlander. It took only half the time of Ryan’s duel before Connor efficiently separated his opponent’s head from his neck.

Ryan’s appreciation for the containing copper wire cage lessened dramatically as the second Quickening was released. His own Quickening sang in tune with the operatic destruction going on around him. Clutching the sides of his head in an effort to stop his own power from erupting through his skull and joining the azure maelstrom surrounding MacLeod, he all but screamed in concert with the Highlander.

At the end, Ryan found himself shaking, curled up tightly in the fetal position, his hands covering his ears. Slowly, he opened his eyes and glanced around; finding Jen next to him and Connor slumped against one of the free walls.

“I forgot how much a Quickening hurts down here,” the Scot muttered softly.

Ryan glared at him incredulously. “You forgot? Damn it, I’m never coming down here again!”

The sound of sheets ripping attracted the attention of all in the room.

“Forget coming down here again, youngling. You will never leave.”

## Darkest Knight Decisions

Connor rose quickly on rubbery legs, his katana out and pointed unsteadily towards the third Immortal. Ryan scrambled around for his own blades before assuming a similar stance.

The third Immortal, casually shrugging himself out of the blood and gore stained sheets, stood slightly under five and a half feet, though from his stance, he gave the impression he was nearly five foot wide. His enormous shoulders and arms flexed as he stretched, seemingly unconcerned that he was unarmed. The muscles on his forearms looked almost sculpted in their definition. His glistening black skin had an almost blue hue.

Jennifer glanced at Connor and her husband. "Perhaps you'd better leave this one to me?" she asked impishly.

Ryan spared his trembling hands a glance. The tip of his wakazashi was tracing a figure eight in the air in front of him. "Be careful," he said.

Jen's grin widened as she turned back to the stocky Immortal, who watched the byplay with interest. "You'd sacrifice your woman to me? How thoughtful."

With that, Jen hissed, and leapt. In less than the blink of an eye, she blurred towards the third hunter, picked him up bodily, and slammed him against the far wall.

Several cracks echoed throughout the enclosed space. The hunter's eyes widened in surprise and shock as Jen opened her mouth slightly, revealing elongated, pointed teeth. Over his pain, the hunter wheezed, "Nosferatu!"

Jen let her expression turn angelic. "Moi?" she asked coyly.

The hunter's expression grew set as he dropped into an almost meditative state. Suddenly, Connor clutched at his stomach while Ryan hissed and grabbed the back of his head. Both shared a pain-filled glance before they dropped to their knees. Jen's scream of pain filled the room.

Quickening, the azure tendrils of arcing energy that is an Immortal's birthright, raced over the hunter's frame, burning Jennifer where she still had a grip. With a backhand swipe, the stocky hunter sent the petite vampire sprawling, leaving a burn mark the shape of his fist on her cheek.

Over the trio's shouts of pain, the hunter stood straight and held his arms high, his injuries healing quickly as he forced his Quickening to wash over his body. With a maniacal laugh, he looked down at the three.

"You could have had this, MacLeod! My master taught me how to *use* my Quickening! Do you feel it? The pain?"

Ryan certainly did. It was worse than the time he first met Methos. At the time, the five-thousand-year-old Immortal's aura had overloaded Ryan's sensitive Quickening. Ryan had almost lost consciousness from the close contact. Even now, with all the dozen heads he had taken since becoming Immortal, Ryan was all but crushed under the weight of the hunter's powerful aura.

Connor moaned, his left hand desperately groping around for the hilt of his katana. The sensation in his stomach was worse than the day he first met the Kurgan, on a Highland glen, in a clan battle against the Frazers. The excitement and terror of the battle had overwhelmed the pain at the time, and he had managed to stand just long enough for the mighty Russian warrior to stab him through his side.

This sensation though, felt as though the man in front of him was a ball of pure Quickening. Forcing his body to obey, he wrapped his fist around the intricate hilt of his katana and looked up at the powerful hunter. The sight of bright rivulets of energy tracing over the hunter's skin shocked the Highlander.

Suddenly, the hunter dropped his arms, reining in his power, and grinned down evilly at his audience. Instantly, Ryan and Connor stopped moaning in pain; the former fumbled for his weapons. Connor even managed to rise to his feet, the point of his katana as unsteady as his footing. Instead of standing, Ryan assumed a kneeling position, and closed his eyes in meditation, trying to centre himself.

The powerful hunter ignored the younger Immortal. "You think to challenge me, Highlander?" His expression changed when he focused on Connor's weapon, a deep frown creasing his dark brow. "Where did you steal that?"

Connor coughed to clear his throat. "It was my teacher's," he wheezed. "I claimed it on his death."

The hunter grinned nastily. "Ramirez?"

Connor swallowed. "Aye."

Dark eyes glittered. "He is truly dead?"

Connor's eyes narrowed. "Aye," he repeated, his voice thick.

The hunter burst into laughter. "Then we are brothers, MacLeod. You and I are the last of that pompous fool's children. I have hunted them all down in an effort to find that blade."

The Highlander swung the blade in a circle, finishing in a ready position. "Come and get it," he challenged.

The hunter glanced down at Jennifer, who was crawling away from him on burned hands, and gave her an obscene leer. "You have a reputation among our kind, Highlander," he said, still looking at the attractive vampire. "Had you accepted our Master's invitation, you could have been among the greatest of us all."

"What does your master want?" Connor hissed, blinking away the sweat from his eyes and widening his stance, lowering his centre of gravity.

The hunter's smile disappeared as he turned back to Connor. "He wants the greatest of us at his side, MacLeod. Imagine, an army of Immortals, each of us with centuries of combat experience. Unstoppable, implacable, invincible!"

The Highlander shook his head weakly. "That is not how the game is played," he said.

"The game has changed, MacLeod. I already have a prize. How to use my Quickening!" he finished in a shout, calling forth his power. Once more, blue trails of lightning traced over his frame, sending the Highlander moaning to his knees.

"Yes, MacLeod!" he said in a booming voice, striding forward. "How does it feel to be helpless again? You are nothing compared to me. You are nothing compared to any of my Master's followers. So much that was lost, we now know. There are over a hundred of us already, MacLeod. No Immortal can stop us. We are invincible! Now, you and your friend will die. How does it feel to be a complete fai- urk" he said, his power flickering off. He looked down under his left armpit, where the hilt of a wakazashi protruded grossly.

The hunter turned his attention upward to face Ryan, who had risen swiftly and silently from his innocuous meditative pose. "Welcome back to the game," the young Immortal whispered into the hunter's face, before ripping his blade free. The Immortal fell to his knees, looking up at Ryan with a confused expression. Ryan gave the stricken hunter a humourless grin and shook his head. "Sheesh. Fourteen centuries old, and you can't stop yourself from bursting into monologue. Pathetic."

One swipe, and the powerful hunter died.

Connor groaned and looked up at Ryan questioningly.

Ryan frowned. "What? It's not like his *Master* is the only Immortal who can teach you how to control your aura."

Connor shook his head, and gestured up.

Ryan looked up and saw the copper lattice for a quarter of a second before grimacing with remembered pain. "Connor, I think I hate you. I may never forgive you for this," he said, dropping his sword, and tensing up in preparation for what was to come.

Shouts of agony filled the room for the third time in ten minutes, as Ryan absorbed fourteen centuries worth of power and strength.

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Three figures emerged from the ancient sub-basement, into the ground floor of the Hudson Street shop.

Ryan, looking rather shaky, groped about in the dark for the wall to balance on.

Jennifer, looking rather bloated, not to mention fully-healed, dabbed at the sides of her mouth with a blood-spotted handkerchief.

Connor, looking rather green, avoided looking directly at Jen. He moved over to the power box and flicked the main power back to the on position. The whole building flooded with light.

Ryan and Jen both winced and covered their eyes with the back of a hand, in almost identical moves. "Connor!" Ryan said in a mock whiney voice.

The Highlander ignored them. "You're welcome to stay for as long as you like," he said, opening a cupboard and pulling out a suitcase. He set it on the ground and opened it up. It appeared to be fully packed and ready to go. Connor tapped each group of clothing as though marking off an internal checklist.

Ryan and Jen shared a look. "Going somewhere?" Jen asked.

Connor nodded. "Gotham," he said shortly.

Ryan ran his tongue over his bottom lip, blinking rapidly as his eyes grew accustomed to the light. "You sure that's a good idea?"

Connor snorted, but looked up at him. Not for the first time Ryan wondered just what sort of event could possibly dent this man's determination. Meteor strike, possibly.

"The Bat can't deal with our kind. He won't kill."

"So? Why do you need to go at all?"

He needs help. When I went to Gotham to challenge Damien, he saved my life a few times. If he needs help, I'll be there for him."

"Damien?" Jen asked.

Briefly, Connor outlined his previous trip to Gotham. "If an Immortal is changing the Game, your little Haven isn't going to help. This new Immortal needs to be stopped."

Ryan took a deep breath. "Then you'll need my help."

"Ryan!" Jennifer said in a warning tone.

Connor just shook his head. "You're not powerful enough yet."

Ryan raised an eyebrow. "You couldn't even stand up to our third guest," he pointed out.

The older Immortal turned to face the pair. "Just how did you do that? I could hardly kneel. It felt like I was a new-born Immortal again!"

Ryan shrugged. "Cassandra taught me how to hide my aura from other Immortals. You sort of, well, suppress it. I figured that guy had been taught to do the opposite, make it brighter."

Connor looked lost. "Cassandra? The witch of Doonan Woods?" He frowned for a second, then rocked his head back and barked his trademark staccato laugh. "Heh, heh, heh. I remember her."

Ryan nodded. "I thought you knew her. Duncan certainly does," he said, studiously avoiding Jen's attempts to get his attention.

All traces of mirth vanished from Connor's face. "If I know Duncan, he probably knows her *very* well. *I've* never met a woman *he* couldn't seduce. And he has had some *odd* friends in his life."

"True," Ryan agreed, trying to keep a smile from forming. "Anyway, I tried ordering my thoughts, and concentrated on reading his aura. It was hard, but by focusing through the surging feeling, I could see his age and power underneath it. At that point I gained some control over my body. It was all I could do to stand, but then, that's all I needed to do."

Connor grunted sourly. "He said I had a reputation. Wonder what he meant by that?"

Jen cleared her throat. "You heard what he said. His master is trying to build an army. It sounds like he want's every Immortal on the planet as a disciple." She turned to face her husband. "Or dead," she finished pointedly.

Connor glanced at her for an instant before bolting to the front desk. He snatched up the antique handset and started dialing a long string of numbers. Ryan and Jen turned to face each other. "Duncan," they said in unison.

Connor finally finished dialing on the old rotary phone, and waited impatiently for a few seconds before slamming the delicate receiver down. "Get of the phone, ye damned pile o' haggis," he shouted, his highland accent becoming more pronounced in his agitation.

"If he's on the phone, then that's a good sign," Jen offered.

Connor took a deep breath. "Aye. You're right," he said darkly, and stormed over to the elevator. Ryan and Jen followed in a rather strained silence.

The trio rode the elevator to the next floor. Connor opened the grill door just as a faint buzzing came from one of the bags lying forgotten on the floor.

Ryan bolted over to the bag and quickly unzipped the side pouch, reaching in for the vibrating mobile. He pulled it out, snapped it open and said, "Hello?"

"*Ryan! Are you alright?*" a panicking voice shouted, audible to all in the room, even four metres from the phone. "*I've been calling for--*"

"Richie? I'm fine. What's happened?"

"*Everyone's been attacked. Methos is missing. Amanda and Nick have been kidnapped. Mac would have lost his head if Joe hadn't put three slugs into--*"

Ryan took a deep breath. "Whoa, slow down. Are you and Hoa alright?"

There was a pause from the other end. "*Thanks. Yeah, we're both fine. I was with Mac when three Immortals just attacked us. One just tried to kill me, but the other two tried to get Mac to go with them. I managed to take my guy, and Mac took out another, but the third sort of lit up. Don't knowhowto describe it. We couldn't even stand. He was going to kill Mac until Joe appeared. The Watchers are wandering around, scratching their heads and bumping into things. They've got no idea what's going on.*"

Ryan sighed with relief. "We do. Some ten-thousand year old Immortal is trying to put together an Immortal army, with him at the head. Three guys tried to convince Connor to join their little cause, but we declined the offer. The leader is in Gotham City. Connor and I are going there tonight."

Another pause, during which Jen again glared fiercely at him. "*Is that a good idea?*"

Before Ryan could answer, another mobile started ringing. Jennifer rummaged through her purse to find the phone, pulled it out and answered. "Hello?"

Ryan focused on his own call. "I'm not sure, but Connor is already packing his bags. If an older Immortal is hiding out there among a bunch of other Immortals, I'll need to go to identify him."

Another pause. "Ok, *but take care. I'll tell Mac and Joe what's going on, and make sure the rest of the family are all right. Keep in touch.*"

Ryan nodded. "You too. Bye." Closing the phone, he looked up at Jen, who had a look of horror on her face.

Ice crystallised in Ryan's gut. "Jen?" he asked tentatively.

"Grandma. Grandma Terry was attacked."

"Is she all right?"

Jen shrugged. "She's missing. So is Aaron. And Marcus."

The elevator pinged, and Rachel stepped out carrying a few bags full of fluffy towels. She looked at the stricken expressions of those in the room and asked, "What has happened?"

Ryan looked over at Connor. "He's targeting everyone. Every Immortal over a few hundred years old."

Connor nodded slowly. "Then they'll keep coming until we're either dead or with him." He turned to Rachel. "I think you'd better go and visit some of your old Yale friends. Ryan and I are going to Gotham."

Rachel's eyes flashed with the same fire as her father's. "If you think for one minute that I'm leaving you alone to whoever is after you, I'm afraid you've got another thing coming."

Watching the pair, Ryan finally realized exactly why Connor felt safe having Rachel as one of his levels of protection. She was snarling like a lioness.

Connor turned to Rachel. "Rachel, please. The rules of the game are being broken. Please, for me, go and visit some of your old friends in Paris," he said carefully.

His daughter's eyes flashed dangerously, and she took a while in answering, but eventually she nodded sharply in agreement. "Very well, but do keep in touch." She looked over at Ryan. "Both of you," she finished with a motherly smile.

Ryan grinned back and turned to Jen. "You coming?" he asked hopefully.

Slowly, Jennifer shook her head, glancing quickly at Rachel. "Sorry Ryan, but no one from my family is permitted in Gotham City."

Ryan blinked in surprise. "What?"

Jen sighed. "Every time a conclave has been established in Gotham, it has been burned down within days. There is no Master or Mistress of Gotham. I always wondered about that, but after meeting Connor's friend, I have no doubt in my mind why Gotham City is off limits to us. I'm sorry Ryan, but I can't go."

Ryan swallowed. Suddenly, the thought of not having a powerful woman at his side made the prospect of visiting a hostile city much less appealing. "Oh," was all he could think of to say.

Jen swallowed, but gave her husband a tight embrace. "But you can. Please, bring Grandma and Aaron home."

Ryan clutched his wife just as tightly. "I promise."

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## Darkest Knight Hunters hunting Hunters

Ryan panted heavily as he took a break from running for his life for a second and leaned his back against an overloaded, filthy dumpster. The young Immortal took a deep, long, slow breath to slow his heart. He could still sense the four Immortals after him, though the flickering aura belonging to one of them indicated that he'd be dead soon enough. A combat knife in the ribs will do that to you, even if you keep moving for a minute or so after being stabbed.

Still, he'd been running for what felt like hours, though the sun had not yet slipped totally below the horizon. He and Connor had arrived by train at Gotham Central Station an hour before nightfall, only to discover that the place was watched by nearly a dozen Immortals. Probably the welcoming committee for those who decided to join the *Master*, Ryan had concluded. He and Connor had tried to stand their ground while in the midst of the mass of mortals at the station, but several gunshots had cleared the building, leaving only a pair of overweight, overmatched, octogenarian security guards, a lot of hostile Immortals, and two seriously overmatched friends.

In their flight, the pair had made it to the roof of the station before a throwing knife thudded into Connor's shoulder, sending him stumbling. In his attempts to regain balance, he went over the edge of the four-story building. Unable to get to the wounded Highlander without dying himself, Ryan had cursed inventively and run straight on, making an adrenaline fuelled leap across the gap bridging a side road, only to break both legs landing on the building opposite.

By the time his legs had healed, four Immortals had converged on his location.

Now, after blindly stabbing one and then hurling himself down the building's internal stairwell eight steps at a time, Ryan had burst out onto the street and simply ran.

It hadn't taken him long to get hopelessly lost. Gotham was originally built on the same sort of grid pattern as the majority of major US cities, but with recent earthquakes, fires and other earth-shattering events, the property titles had shifted enough that many of the alleys were now serpentine, rather than straight. While it played hell on a man's internal sense of direction, it was a godsend for someone trying to lose a quartet of thugs hell bent on removing your head from your shoulders.

Having spent nearly ten precious seconds regaining his reserves, Ryan pushed away from the dumpster and ran on. He felt the presence of one of the Immortals following him disappear, and gave a small grin of victory. That Immortal had obviously succumbed to his wound. By the time that one woke from his temporary death, Ryan would be half a mile away.

Of course, if these guys had a way of keeping in contact with each other, like mobile phones, he could be just delaying the inevitable.

Ryan rounded a corner at top speed, nearly slipping over on the slimy pavement. The sense of another Immortal faded, and for a second, Ryan wondered if he might just live through the night.

A gunshot rang out, and something punched Ryan's right bicep hard. His wakizashi flew from his grip as the slight Immortal felt himself picked up by the shock of the blow and thrown around. With his current momentum, Ryan nearly cart wheeled down the alley before crashing into a pile of garbage bags carelessly strewn along side a building, next to an empty dumpster. He groggily looked up at his attacker, half covered in black garbage bags.

The mugger grinned down at him in the darkening alleyway. The massive, smoking Magnum in his hand that was still pointed at Ryan wouldn't have looked out of place on a tank. The mugger leaned over and picked up the wakizashi. "Nice sword. Tell me, you got anything else nice?"

Before Ryan could respond, the sudden arrival of three Immortals from around the same bend caught the mugger's attention. One took one look at the sword in the mugger's hand and laughed.

"You're mine," the Immortal snarled, and attacked.

Absolutely stunned at the overly aggressive nature of a man who did not even hold a gun, the mugger was attacked before he could aim his weapon properly. The single shot he managed to get off missed the charging Immortal, who took full advantage of the mistake. The mugger's head flew from his shoulders, complete with a now permanent expression of surprise, splashing the walls of the alley with blood.

Ryan, hidden amongst the black garbage bags, immediately took a deep breath and clamped down on his aura, hiding it from the Immortals. Instantly reddening, he estimated he would be able to hold his breath for only twenty seconds or so. Even with a dampened aura, they'd be able to hear his labored breathing.

The Immortal who had killed the mugger stood straight, his arms above his head, eagerly awaiting a Quickening. After a few seconds he frowned, and looked down. "Shit," he said, before wiping the warm blood from his face and looking at his bloody palm.

The other two grunted; one even poked the remains of the unlucky mugger with the tip of his sword. "E's not one of us. Where did the other one go

then?" he asked.

The first shook his head and wiped his hand on his jeans. "Split up. Find him, or *I* have your heads," he snarled.

The other two shared a glance before nodded and jogging off in different directions. The first bent down and tugged Ryan's wakizashi free from the ex-mugger's death grip. "Where did you get this, you idiot?" he asked the corpse.

The buzz from the presence of his two allies faded. Ryan counted to three before he let his breath out and his aura flare. Released from its prison, the sudden sensation shocked the hunter into turning around in a full circle.

Three shots struck his chest.

"He got it from me," Ryan replied, stumbling out from the garbage pile, his Glock out and pointing directly at the Immortal.

The hunter had enough time to look down at the three wounds in his chest and admire the precision of the shots before his awareness faded.

Ryan watched him fall over. He cautiously approached the fallen hunter and the corpse of the unfortunate mugger, ensuring the hunter was in fact dead before replacing the pistol to its holster at the small of his back. "That's mine, I believe," he said to no one in particular, retrieving his main weapon.

As much as expediency told him that he should take the dead man's head, Ryan just couldn't. He hadn't beaten the man in a fair fight, no challenge had been issued. While many other, older Immortals of his acquaintance would have taken the opportunity with glee, Ryan still hadn't relinquished his *mortal* values and morals. The same values made his life infinitely more difficult to live within the Game all Immortals played, but made it much easier for Ryan to live with *himself*. "Another time," he said sadly, shaking his head. Picking an alley that the two other hunters hadn't searched, Ryan set off at a loping run, conserving energy.

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Connor cursed as he rounded the corner of a twisting alley only to discover that it was a dead end. It had been pathetically easy to follow him, since he was soaking wet and leaving a trail of dirty water in his wake. He drew and rolled his katana into a ready position, then turned and faced the two Immortals who had tailed him.

While he didn't have Ryan's powerful ability to read auras, the body language these two exhibited easily told him that he had more centuries under his belt than these two combined. While both were taller and heavier than that Scot, neither wanted to come close to the whirling blade he carried. Both had already tasted the steel, as evidenced by the ragged, bloody tears to their clothes.

It had also already accounted for the head of one of their number, and was the reason that only three Immortals had chased him from the station. Since his fall from the Station roof had been broken by a car below, he had faced five different Immortals. While the car was now little more than an insurance company's scrap metal, he had survived the fall with only a couple of dozen assorted fractures. Fractures that healed far more quickly than returning from the dead.

It hadn't stop him from *playing* dead though, a tactic that had allowed him to stab one of the original five Immortals in the stomach, before tearing the wound wide open as he rolled off the car. While mostly healed from the fall, the roll did tear the knife from his shoulder. It took all of the Highlander's mental strength to ignore the pain and follow through with his strike. The five had been expecting a corpse, and were taken completely by surprise as, with a low swing, Connor buried his blade halfway through a second Immortal's side before running.

Leaving the two Immortals with mortal wounds, the remaining three began chasing after him, howling for his head. Connor, who had lived on and off in New York for the past two centuries, knew how to take advantage of crowds to put distance between himself and his pursuers. The trio following him unaccountably found themselves having to barge through crowds, jump over upended hotdog carts and charge out into traffic at inopportune times. Even so, they knew the layout of Gotham better, and eventually the trio had managed to shepherd him onto a bridge that was only partially rebuilt from the earthquake. On seeing the far side of the river over a hundred yards from the end of the partially completed bridge, Connor had turned and let loose a Highland battle cry, and charged the three Immortals. Through a mixture of luck and inspired fear, he managed to lop one head from its body on his way past.

Before he was stricken with the released Quickening, he had dived into the filthy river. Remembering his first lesson from Ramirez, Connor instantly breathed in a lungful of dirty water, perishing quickly. Just as had happened nearly five hundred years ago, he blinked himself awake seconds later with the ability to breath underwater.

It was the first time he had ever accepted a Quickening underwater. Shouting with water in your lungs was much different than normal.

The oddly muted sensation lasted longer than he had expected, but his leap into the river had prevented the other Immortals from following. As murky as it was under the water's surface, there was no way you could have identified friend from foe, even if you had the ability to swing a blade fast enough to decapitate someone underwater.

Connor made it to shore only to be immediately observed by one of his pursuers. The brief battle between the pair had been quickly interrupted by the remaining surviving Immortal joining in, and between the two of them, they had driven the Highlander away, though not before both had received some nasty, jagged cuts.

As Connor shifted his attention from one to the other, he mentally berated himself for not honing his skills at fighting multiple opponents over the centuries. He'd never expected to be fighting two Immortals at once, and mortals usually gave up the fight after receiving a few nicks and cuts to sensitive areas of their anatomy.

The Highlander shifted his attention from one of his opponents to the other; he knew that even with his superior skill, he was at a disadvantage. His

clothing stuck to his skin uncomfortably, restricting his movements and weighing him down. He was in an unkind part of the city, and had no idea exactly where to run to next. His only real advantage in this fight was that his opponents were uncomfortable in fighting at each other's side. To his left, the man wielded a large Scottish claymore; to his right, the man wielded an exquisite falchion.

Figuring that the man with the larger sword would be slower in attack, Connor sent a feint at the falchion-wielder on his right, driving him into a defensive stance on the heels of his feet, before swinging his sword down at the knees of the claymore wielder to his left. The strike was blocked cleanly on his opponent's blade. As quickly as he could, Connor whipped his lighter blade back and sent an overhand strike at the man's head. With the sudden and extreme change of attack vector, the man grunted with effort to bring his blade up in time to again block the katana.

Connor let go of the katana with his left hand and reached out, taking a handful of the man's jacket. Moving himself more than his opponent, Connor positioned the claymore holder between himself and the second Immortal, avoiding the expected thrust from the falchion. The man with the claymore snarled at his manipulation, and shoved the Highlander backwards. Connor, who had been expecting this, simply stood back with the push, and kicked the man squarely in the groin.

Despite their infertility, even Immortals have difficulty shrugging off a swift, hard blow to their genitals. The man crumpled to his knees, though retained the presence of mind to brace his claymore against the back of his neck and along his spine, protecting himself from a fatal blow.

Connor had a different idea, and simply slipped the point of his katana through his unprotected ribs into the man's heart and lungs, before twisting and yanking the blade out in time to deflect another strike from the Immortal with the falchion.

The second Immortal's inexperience showed when he looked down at his stricken partner with a grimace. Connor gleefully took the opportunity to strike the falchion hard, pushing it well outside of his opponent's sphere of control. The return strike cleanly severed the man's head from his shoulders.

Panting with the sudden loss of adrenaline, Connor quickly kicked the claymore away from his first victim and decapitated him too.

This time, the first time Connor had ever experienced a dual Quickening, his damp clothes made the experience more painful. At the end of the fireworks, the alley had been reduced nearly to rubble. Not a single window stood intact, and each building surrounding the Highlander had suffered extensive damage.

Finally, after a minute or so, Connor rose on wobbly legs and set off at an easy pace. The phone in his pocket would be useless after both the drop from the station roof and the extended bath in the river, so he had no way of contacting Ryan. He just needed to make it to holy ground before he was tracked by other Immortals.

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Ryan hid his weapons under his jacket, and made his way into the rush-hour crowds as they left their workplace. Some in the crowd headed home, some went out for a drink or a meal. Some arrived at twenty-four hour operations to take over from the day-shift. Ryan didn't particularly care what they did, so long as they stayed out for a little longer. He'd asked a shopkeeper closing up for the night where the nearest church was, and had been given vague directions towards the south.

Connor's phone wasn't responding to any calls, and Ryan was pretty sure it had been crushed when the Highlander had fallen from the roof of the station. Without any evidence to the contrary, he was determined to assume that the older Immortal had somehow survived his fall and subsequent encounter with several hostile Immortals. Of all the Immortals Ryan had ever met, he'd put half his fortune on one of the Highlanders to win the Prize. Of course, if one of the Highlanders did win the prize, that would mean that Ryan himself wouldn't exactly have a use for his fortune.

Ryan's hand was moving towards his phone before the first ring finished. He snapped it open and said, "Connor?"

"Mr. Chessman. Approximately forty metres in front of you are two Immortals," came a digitally disguised voice.

Ryan blinked. "Who is this?"

"There is an alleyway to your right. Take it."

Ryan stopped walking. "No," he said, not prepared to walk into a trap.

The voice, despite its technological changes, sounded frustrated. "I cannot explain who I am to your satisfaction in the time you have. We have a mutual acquaintance whose wardrobe is rather terrifying. Now, you need to move. Go!"

Suddenly feeling the unwelcome sensation of two hostile Immortals within range, Ryan decided to risk following the vague instructions. He stepped surreptitiously into the mouth of the alley, then proceeded to run its length. The two buzzes faded, only to be replaced rather suddenly by three others.

"Turn left at the end of the alley," came the new instruction.

"Who are you?" Ryan gasped between breaths as he thundered around the corner at nearly top speed.

There was a pause before the voice responded. "Introductions can wait for a less life-threatening time, but you may call me Oracle if you feel the need. Quickly, coming up to your right, there is a fire escape painted red. Climb it to the top of the building." With that, the call disconnected.

Grumbling at the possibility of being led into a trap, Ryan shut his phone and again followed instructions, wary for an ambush. The three Immortals following him had been joined by two others, their auras identical to the original pair he had run down the alley to escape. He reached the top just as the first of his stalkers reached the bottom of the fire escape.

The phone rang again. The person identified as Oracle spoke before he could offer an initial salutation. "There is a cable connected to the opposite side of the building you can slide down. Throw your belt over it and ride it down." Once more, it disconnected.

Ryan frowned, but looked until he noticed the cable. Some sort of metallic bolt held this end tightly to the brickwork. Feeling the posse of hostile Immortals climbing closer, he quickly whipped off his belt and tossed one end over the thin wire. With a deep breath, he checked to make sure his weapons would be secure while his arms were upright, then he grasped the free end of his belt with his free hand, muttered a quick prayer to fate, and jumped off the edge of the building.

The street below, though hardly crowded, did have several people going about their business. Many looked up as the young Immortal slid down the angled wire.

The ride down was exhilarating, even if the friction of the cable nearly cut the hard leather belt in two. By the time Ryan reached the bottom of the descent, he was traveling at a disturbingly unsafe speed. With a yelp, he let go of his belt and tried to tumble-roll, only to stab himself in the thigh with the point of his wakizashi. While the adrenaline masked most of the pain, he still hissed between his teeth as he drew the blade free. Though a fair few people glanced at him, not one offered to help. This was Gotham after all. Other people's business was often fatal to interlopers. Tucking the wakizashi under his right arm, Ryan pressed hard on the wound with his left hand. After a few seconds, he could feel his Quickening go to work.

The phone rang again. It took some doing, but he managed to juggle wound, sword and phone. "What?" he snapped, holding his wound with his right hand, his sword still clutched under the arm. His hostile tone caused the street audience to flinch, and quickly leave him alone.

The voice actually sounded amused. "You need to learn how to land correctly."

Ryan snarled. "Do you suppose you could consider warning me next time you want me to do something that normally takes years of training?"

"Go backwards, then take the next street on your left."

Ryan paused, then looked up and around, searching for whatever or whoever had their eye on him. Despite the name his enigmatic caller used, Ryan seriously doubted that he or she was telepathic. Somehow, whoever it was had their eye on him, if they knew which way he was facing. The wound on his thigh closed completely, and Ryan stood, trying to get a better view of whoever was watching him. A sudden humming vibration from the taut cable he had just slid down attracted his attention. Looking up at the building he had just leapt from, he saw a large man with a close-cropped beard was sliding down the cable, his curved saber in his teeth. Obviously, he was a pirate movie aficionado. A second Immortal began the dangerous, rapid trip behind him.

Ryan took his sword out from under his arm and sighed at the stupidity of the human race. Suppressing a wince at the damage he would do to his sword, he took one quick swing and severed the cable from its mooring at his end.

The controlled, curved descent of the two Immortals turned into two arm-waving freefalls, as one after the other thudded into the unyielding concrete. Several people in the street screamed with fright and horror at the seemingly horrible deaths. Ryan gave a tight grin and began jogging towards the indicated street when a familiar sensation ran up his spine. The air felt heavy, and tasted of tin.

With a mumbled curse, Ryan turned to look at the fallen pair. The big fellow who was first onto the cable lay in pieces. A closer look revealed that on impact with the ground, the sword in his mouth had been responsible for cutting off everything above the jaw from the neck.

"Ah, not now! I don't want the stupid bastard's Quick—" Ryan hissed, before the first bolt of the stupid bastard's Quickening silenced him by nearly knocking him off his feet.

For the next thirty seconds, Ryan quivered and shook as he absorbed the azure power of the idiotic Immortal who died by his own sword. With a final shout, he raised his arms instinctively, and his entire surrounds became enveloped in a massive, concurrent group of explosions. Manhole covers shot into the air, cars engines flared to life and windows shattered all around. Caught in the middle of the maelstrom, Ryan simply howled.

Finally, the Quickening ended. Ryan slumped to his knees panting and gasping for breath. He looked up and around once more, again noting the surprised, faces of dozens of people. He gave a tight grin, and though he felt as weak as a day-old kitten, held up a hand and addressed the crowd. "This is a movie folks, just act normal."

The majority of the crowd gave an 'Ah!' of realization and began moving off about their business, but enough of them frowned at the patently false explanation to prove that not everyone was gullible in this city. Ryan rose to his feet and, deciding to leave his now-useless belt behind, staggered towards the indicated street, knowing that he had lost precious seconds absorbing the Quickening.

Once more, some Immortals entered his sensory range, and Ryan ground his teeth together with frustration. "This was not in the bloody Gotham travel brochure!" he muttered to himself as his body recovered and he managed to put on more speed.

The phone in his pocket rang again. Though it took a bit of juggling, he managed to get it out of his pocket and open. "I'm having a really bad day right now, please leave a message after the beep, and if I survive, I'll get back to you."

"Cute. On your right is an alley that appears to end about fifty metres in. Follow it to the end."

"Are you kidding me? Ryan screeched, trying to keep his breath as more Immortals joined the chase. He could feel at least a half dozen individuals after him.

"There is a way through the wall. Check the pile of garbage at the bottom. Go!" Oracle finished, disconnecting the call.

Spitting out some choice curses, Ryan again turned into the indicated alleyway and saw the end wall. It appeared to be made of brick and

Insurmountable. The pile of black and white plastic garbage bags at the base looked as though they'd been there since before the earthquake.

Beginning to panic, Ryan violently kicked the bags out of the way. Just as the group of hunters rounded the corner fifty metres away, he found what he prayed actually existed; a gap in the brickwork.

Ignoring the rotting trash and filthy water that had leaked from the bags, Ryan threw himself onto his hands and knees and squirmed through the gap. The alley on the other side branched off into two different directions. Pushing away from the wall, he picked a direction at random and started jogging. He had the phone in his hand before it rang this time.

"You should have gone the other way."

Panting, Ryan's reply was a curt, "Tough."

Over the next quarter of an hour, Oracle led him down a couple more alleys, over a fence and back again into some alleys. Ryan's strength was very nearly spent, and he simply followed orders, keeping his increasingly irritated mood to himself. He needed every breath, and couldn't afford to waste it lambasting the person on the other end of the line.

While the Oracle person never steered him wrong, he didn't seem to be gaining anything either. More than once, he felt a group of those following him drop away, only to be led to a place where they could again take up the chase, often with reinforcements.

As this idea bubbled through the fatigue in his mind, Oracle again called, this time with something different to say.

"You're nearly there. You'll be safe in less than a minute."

Ryan's heart nearly skipped a beat, but the hope that flooded through him gave him strength. "There's holy ground nearby?"

Oracle didn't answer his question. "Take the next left, then the first right. Help is there."

Ryan took a huge gulp of air and ran while he dropped the phone into his jacket pocket. He rounded the final corner and nearly shouted with fright. The dozen or so Immortals he could sense in the pack behind him were suddenly overshadowed by the distinct buzzing of an extremely powerful Immortal in front of him.

"Well done, Ryan," he muttered sarcastically to himself, pulling his sword and knife from under his jacket. Figuring that his best chance of success was to distract, or at least disable the lone Immortal in front, he put his head down and charged.

"Ryan?"

Ryan looked up at his name, and nearly burst into tears at the welcome sight of Connor MacLeod, who also looked as though he had been running for a good while. "Connor!" he wheezed. Pointing behind him, he barked out, "Immortals! Lots of them."

Before Connor could respond, Ryan saw the look on his face, and his stomach dropped. A second later, around seven or eight Immortal signatures came into range ahead of him, behind Connor.

"Oh, shit," he offered. "You're being chased too."

Connor gave him a tight grin. "Well spotted."

Without comment, the pair stood back-to-back, their weapons drawn. The chasing Immortals slowed their chase, seemingly just as exhausted as Ryan and Connor. They carefully spread out, drawing their various weapons.

Ryan counted thirteen on his side. "How many do you have?" he asked out of the side of his mouth.

Connor tilted his head towards him. "I mark eight. You?"

Ryan's eyes flickered over the group again. "Thirteen. Want to swap?"

"Heh, heh, heh," came Connor's usual staccato laugh. "No, but thanks for the offer."

Both groups crept forward towards the pair, but kept out of sword range, seemingly not used to this scenario. Ryan spotted one with three bullet holes in his shirt. That particular Immortal looked back at him with undisguised hatred. He cleared his throat. "Connor, I've got a gun,"

Connor snorted. "If you just want to piss off the rest of them, go ahead and draw it," he said unhelpfully.

Ryan's phone rang, startling everyone in the alley.

After it had rung a few times, Connor again leaned to one side. "You gonna get that?"

Ryan swallowed. "You're kidding, right?"

"Heh, heh, heh, if you've gotta go, you may as well go in style," the Highlander replied.

"Riiiiight," Ryan replied caustically. Carefully, Ryan holstered his knife and drew out the phone. To the encroaching Immortals he said, "Sorry to bother you, folks, but would you mind holding off for a second while I take this call? It's very important."

The sudden look of confusion and uncertainty on the Immortal's faces was nearly enough to make Ryan chuckle. He flicked open the phone and said, "Care to get your gloating over and done with?"

The voice sounded amused. "Why would I gloat to you? It's the other buggers I've got trapped. Count to five, then cover your ears, close your eyes and open your mouth." The call disconnected with a loud click.

Ryan blinked. "Um, Connor?"

"I heard," said the big Scot. "...three...four..."

Ryan dropped his sword, clapped his hands to his ears and shut his eyes.

A pair of explosions that would have overshadowed any Quickening Ryan had experienced rocked the alley. The explosion in front of Ryan pushed him backwards into Connor, but the second pushed Connor into him. Both Immortals fell to the ground.

Ryan blinked his eyes open and snatched his sword up from where it lay. His ears were ringing, despite covering them before the explosions. Looking around the alley, bodies of Immortals littered the ground, most of them still, one or two moving slightly.

Two figures dressed in black dropped into the alley from above, one going to each of the groups of stunned Immortals. In front of Ryan was a petite young female (if her skin-tight suit was any indication), who gave the pair of Immortals a quick, cheeky salute before pulling a complicated piece of machinery the size of a handgun from her belt at the small of her back. The outline of a bat in flight covered the majority of her well-shaped bust. Though probably still a teen, Ryan had lived long enough to know that as small as she was, she moved like a predator.

The object she had seemed to be a sort of injection system. The girl dressed like the Batman systematically pressed one end into the neck of each of the stunned Immortals, and depressed the trigger. Ryan turned around to see a well-built young man with a long pony-tail in a black and blue jumpsuit and eye-mask do the same thing with the Immortals who had followed Connor.

Ryan and Connor shared a glance, and both shrugged at the same time.

"Welcome to Gotham City," a familiar voice said.

Ryan and Connor both spun to see the Batman emerge from the pitch-black shadows into the darkening grey twilight. The sight of the powerful figure caused both standing Immortals to breath a sigh of relief.

"Thank you for your help. This is the biggest catch of Immortals we've managed."

Ryan felt a flash of anger. "You used us as bait?" he snapped.

The Batman turned his head slightly to focus on Ryan. "You have been under surveillance since leaving the Gotham Central Station. You were never in danger. An ally of mine took it as an opportunity to help us chip more Immortals."

Ryan and Connor again looked at each other before looking over to the Batman's allies. "You're marking them?" Connor asked.

The Batman nodded. "Unlike yourselves, we have no way of determining who is an Immortal or not. When we confirm one, we inject a locator chip deep into their neck, meaning that surgery to remove it is life threatening." The big man turned back to Ryan. "The Gotham Police Force have a set of devices that allow them to identify someone with one of our chips. They know then that they can use lethal force to take them down.

Ryan's eyes bulged. "The whole bloody police force knows about Immortals?" he gasped.

The Batman shook his head, but seemed amused. "No, just the senior officers. The rank and file have been told that they are the results of an experiment into meta-human healing." Both Ryan and Connor still looked dubious until he continued. "The Gotham Police Commissioner has faced down several different aliens, dozens of insane psychopaths with advanced technology and ideological fanatics of every kind. Trust me when I say that the knowledge of a race of Immortals living among mortals hardly registered on his weird-o-meter."

## Darkest Knight Into the Lair

With Connor starting to identify those of the tagged group of Immortals he knew, Ryan left the alley, took a deep breath and leaned against a sleek, powerful, matt black automobile. It was obvious to anyone with a pulse who the owner was. The lines of the car were aerodynamically perfect, and though it called out to the testosterone Ryan's blood, he wanted to display his displeasure with the Batman's allies by giving an opinion was rather negative overall. After running for the better part of two hours at the behest of one of the Batman's friends, Ryan was feeling more than a little surly, not to mention sticky with sweat. He peeled his t-shirt off and wrung it out, grimacing at the impressive amount of perspiration that dripped out. He pulled the shirt back on, wincing at the uncomfortably damp material against his skin. The hulking figure of the Batman strode around to the other side of the car.

"You do realize you've destroyed the resale value by adding those tailfins in the shape of wings?" he asked him as the big vigilante effortlessly vaulted into the car.

The masked man glared menacingly at him for a moment, before simply saying, "Get in."

Ryan swallowed nervously. The last thing he wanted to do was be in a confined space with the Batman, especially after insulting his wheels. "No way! I'm staying here with Connor." Someone tapped him on the shoulder.

With a startled jump, he spun to find the masked girl behind him. "Aaah! Don't *do* that!" he said, clutching at his heart.

"Batman. No sense of humor," she stated flatly, before handing him a bottle of liquid and turning back to her task.

Grumbling about stating the bleeding obvious, Ryan tore the lid off and gulped the contents down, spilling some from the sides of his mouth. Swallowing loudly, he turned back to the Batman. "Connor and I are here to find this Immortal of yours. That's it."

Eyes glittering behind green lenses bored into Ryan's own. "Once he is done, he will join us. I need to speak with you."

Connor called out from among the incumbent Immortals. "Ryan, go on. I'll be right behind you."

Muttering to himself, Ryan finished the bottle and tossed it back to the young girl-bat, who caught it with practiced ease. Ryan then eased into the car, blinking with astonishment at the vast array of buttons and screens that wouldn't have looked out of place in the cockpit of a lear jet. "What ever happened to minimalism? Tach and Speedometer not good enough for you?"

The Batman slowly turned his head to face Ryan. "Are you ever serious?"

Ryan realized he was pushing the boundaries of possibly the most dangerous mortal on the planet, but he was determined not to back down. "Of course. I was serious for a whole afternoon a couple of decades ago. Didn't like it much," he spat

The Batman glared at Ryan for a few seconds longer than was comfortable, making the Immortal fidget unconsciously, before turning back to the car's controls. With the push of a silver button, the massive car roared to life, throbbing with contained power, aching to be released. In an instant, Ryan felt his entire body pushed back into his seat by what felt like several Gs, as the car roared away.

The Batman was as subtle a driver as the car was ostentatious. He wove in and out of traffic with the minimum of effort, leaving spaces on either side of the car, which in Ryan's opinion would hardly have accepted an American Express card. More than once Ryan flinched away from one side or other as the car powered through the city during peak hour, somehow avoiding accidents, pedestrians and obstacles while traveling at over 80.

Though it took all his willpower, Ryan discovered that closing his eyes reduced the stress enormously.

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Within minutes, the pair were zooming along one of the many exits from the metropolis of Gotham, heading off into the hills. Gotham, like Manhattan, was an island, which meant that with space at a premium, people tended to build up rather than out. The surrounding land was rather pretty, with large manor homes and estates dotting the landscape.

The massive vigilante finally spoke. "Why didn't you take the head of the man you shot?"

Ryan blinked in surprise at the unexpected question. "What?"

The Batman pursed his lips in frustration. "The man you shot. The one who had just killed the mugger. Why didn't you take his head?"

Ryan took a deep breath and turned to look out the window. "I doubt you'd understand."

"Try me."

With a deep breath, Ryan said, "I haven't been Immortal long. Killing another person still feels abhorrent to me. Older Immortals seem to have no trouble deciding to kill each other, with less emotion than you'd see them swatting a fly with." Ryan sighed. "I was once offered a 'free Quickening'. I can't really tell you much about it, but the two Immortals who offered it to me were surprised I didn't take it. Both of them were several thousand years old, from the Roman era. The idea of killing an unarmed, helpless man, even a murderer of non-Immortals made me sick. I have challenged others, and have been challenged, but killing is not something I feel comfortable doing."

"That does not sound like a trait that encourages longevity in an Immortal," the Batman observed.

Ryan half smiled. "I suppose not. I inherited a fortune from my wife's mother, and used it to create a haven for Immortals who wanted to retire, or at least take a break from the Game. I even called it Haven. An island resort built on holy ground. I had hoped to create a population centre for Immortals, hoping that we'd stop hunting each other if there was a place where we could live in peace, but we are too individualistic for such an idea to work."

Ryan glanced over at the Batman to gauge his reaction. Nothing. It was like he had been carved from marble.

Silence again descended for a few minutes as the car sped along. Suddenly, the car took a different path, heading directly for the side of a cliff. Ryan gave a strangled shout and covered his face with his forearms, before a sudden drop of air pressure indicated they were speeding through a tunnel. As Ryan's heart rate returned to normal, the car reached its destination, a massive, high-ceilinged cave. Gigantic stalactites hung from the ceiling, though there were a massive number of stalactite stumps, where hundreds of massive stone cones had broken off. Probably from the recent earthquake, Ryan thought.

The car's roof hissed and shifted backwards, allowing the cool, dry air of the cave in. Ryan's eyes bulged as he took in the vast complex of computers, trophies and equipment. In a distant section of the complex, a massive penny stood upright, next to what looked like a mechanical dinosaur. Bank after bank of computer terminals lined one wall, humming quietly. Ryan couldn't remember getting out of the car as he took in the awe-inspiring complex he'd been allowed access to.

"Jeez, this is incredible," he said in a low voice.

The Batman ignored him as he stalked over to another part of the cave. The lights automatically brightened as he entered the area, revealing a well-equipped gymnasium and exercise room, including a sparing area on tatami mats. Weapons, mundane and exotic, lined the walls, each displaying signs of being well maintained. And well used.

"Come," the Batman said shortly.

"What now?" Ryan asked defensively, though he did slowly follow the menacing man.

The Batman pointed to an open cupboard, filled with training outfits. "Change into a gi, and come here."

"What? Why?" Ryan stammered.

The Batman selected a wakizashi from a display stand containing dozens of Japanese blades, and a combat knife from a display drawer, heightening Ryan's nervousness. "Your technique needs some work," he said flatly.

Ryan blinked. "My what?"

The Batman turned to face him. "You were obviously taught by someone who favors a much longer, slightly curved blade. While he was just as obviously an expert with it, he imparted certain habits that need breaking." With a tug, he removed his heavy cape, letting the material pool at his feet. "Change, then assume your usual battle stance," he ordered.

Ryan swallowed, but complied. Once dressed in the thick cotton outfit, he picked up his weapons and did as instructed. Quickly, the Batman pointed out three flaws in his stance, and began giving him instructions on how to correct them.

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Three hours later, Ryan lay panting and unmoving on the tatami mats. The Batman had drilled him relentlessly until the young Immortal could assume the technically correct stance in an instant. From there, the pair moved on to the theory behind facing opponents with different weapons, styles and abilities. Ryan began suffering from information overload after about an hour, but his brutal instructor simply kept the data coming.

The practical side of things was even more painful. Without having to worry about permanently injuring, or even killing his opponent, the Batman had taken the simple path of landing lethal blows whenever Ryan's defense slipped. As he lay exhausted, Ryan estimated that he had died more often in the past couple of hours than he had in his entire life, including every time his wife had fed from him.

"Good, you lasted nearly fifteen seconds that time," said the Batman, in a particularly unwelcome voice.

Ryan growled in the back of his throat, feeling unable to even lift his head from the mats. "Yay for me," he muttered.

"Don't feel so bad, Ryan," said a familiar voice.

Ryan blinked and with a Herculean effort, raised his head. Connor stood in the entrance to the gym, leaning against a support with his arms crossed. "Damien only lasted a couple of minutes against him," the older Immortal said.

Ryan let his head drop back down with a 'thunk'. "That Immortal you told me about on the train?"

Aye." Connor grumbled towards a heavily notched sword in one of the trophy cabinets. "That was his sword. It doesn't look like much now, but it nearly managed to cut through Masamune's blade," he finished, drawing his own katana and gently touching the blade near the hilt.

Ryan again growled with stiffness as he slowly rose to his feet. "Are we done?" he asked, nearly pleading.

The Batman nodded, having already reattached his cape. "It's time for our patrol."

Connor and Ryan shared a glance. "Patrol?" they said in unison.

"We think we may have found them," said a new, feminine voice. The two Immortals turned to the main computer bank, where the largest screen was filled with a digitally disguised figure. Only her piercing green eyes were unobscured. "The chips we implant in them can't be detected from a great distance, but we have identified a few places where large numbers of Immortals 'disappear' from our screens. They must be in one of the older, thick-walled buildings, or underground."

Ryan frowned, listening to the voice. "Are you the Oracle person who sent me running on a stupid turkey hunt?"

The woman responded with an amusement-laced voice. "The very same. Nice to finally meet you, Mr. Chessman. And you too, Mr. MacLeod."

Ryan grimaced, but Connor gave a subtle, elegant bow in the computer's direction. "Nice to meet you too," the Highlander said in his odd accent.

Ryan just sighed. Older Immortals had such out of date manners. He looked down to where he had left his clothes, only to find them folded neatly, having been cleaned, repaired, pressed and lightly fragranced. Ryan shook his head. He just didn't want to know.

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The powerful car swerved in and out of traffic at high speeds, an act that had the young Immortal again trying to remember that it was highly unlikely he would die in a car accident.

"This is some sort of vigilante hazing ritual, isn't it?" he said as the Batman slid the big car around a corner at nearly sixty miles an hour.

The Batman actually smiled, revealing a gleaming set of white teeth. "Surely you are not afraid of death?"

Ryan swallowed. "Death doesn't frighten me, for obvious reasons. But it sure as hell hurts to have all your bones broken!"

The Batman grunted, the smile disappeared. "I don't doubt it. Tell me, what's it like?"

"Being Immortal? Or having all your bones broken?"

"Knowing you can't die. It must be liberating," the Batman clarified.

Ryan barked a laugh. "It might be better if you didn't know that at any time, someone with thousands of years of experience with a sharp piece of metal could challenge you. I met one Immortal who claimed that he had a bet with another Immortal as to which of them could take twenty heads the fastest."

The Batman instantly grew somber. "He hardly sounds like a paragon of virtue. What happened?"

Ryan took a deep breath, holding it as the car rounded a corner on what felt like two wheels. "He played with me. He took his time, making sure I knew I was outclassed. Broke my back and went to take my head."

"And yet here you are."

Ryan smiled at his attempt at humor. "I managed to trick him into thinking that there were other Immortals around by changing my aura. He took the bait and I stabbed him in the leg with my knife when he wasn't looking. He went down, and I managed to half cut off his head. It was enough, and during the fireworks that followed, the building fell--" he said as suddenly, a large number of Immortals lit up his senses in an instant. "--down on us. Stop here."

"What?"

"Here! Stop here!" Ryan said.

The car quickly skidded to a halt, and the Batman expertly reversed into an alley. Ryan closed his eyes and concentrated. "There's at least a dozen Immortals nearby. More move into range and out of it. There's probably a base in one of these buildings," he said, starting to look around. Getting a bearing, he pointed at one. "That one."

The Batman looked up and down the building, before pulling out some sort of a communications link, probably with that Oracle woman. "Waynetech Building, Five-Gee," he said into the device. "Check personnel for Immortal connections." With that, he put the device back in his belt.

"What now?" Ryan asked..

The cowed man punched a few buttons on the car's console. "Let's go."

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Ryan watched in awe as the Batman systematically disarmed each security device at the windows and doors they passed. While security was as tight as Ryan had ever seen on the building that housed the Immortal coven, it proved no match for the Batman. Whether it was a simple lock that

needed picking, or an infinitely more complex magnetic seal, the masked vigilante had both the skills and the tools for the job. It was an experience to watch. Eventually, the pair entered a maintenance shaft that allowed access to the various ventilation ducts. With the Batman leading the way, Ryan entered the narrow pathway, and began to scout the building.

After a while, the pair had mapped part of the layout of the complex. Ryan had not recognized any of the Immortals he spied through the grills covering the ducts in the walls, but dutifully informed his escort every minute or so on how many Immortals were in his 'range'. The Batman began moving off into another direction, through an even smaller shaft.

"How the hell do you fit in here?" Ryan whispered at the huge man in front of him. The ventilation duct was hardly wide enough for the slender Immortal to fit, and even that was a struggle. The Batman easily outmassed Ryan by a hundred pounds or more, yet seemed unperturbed by the claustrophobic confines. Indeed, he hardly even slowed in pace at all.

"I studied with a contortion artist for a while," came the cryptic response.

Ryan shook his head. "Was there anyone you didn't study with?" he mumbled under his breath. If the Batman ever gave up kicking ass and cracking skulls for a living, he'd make a great cat burglar. Suddenly, Ryan stopped crawling. "Wait!" he hissed.

The Batman stopped and looked around quizzically.

Ryan examined the auras he felt. While many Immortals were moving in and out of his senses, one aura was hauntingly familiar. The one aura that had never caused his sensitive gift any pain at all.

"No," he breathed. "It can't be her."

"Who?"

Ryan swallowed. "This way," he said, pointing down a different shaft.

Without argument, the Batman nodded and descended down the indicated shaft. At the end, after a few seconds work with a magnetic screwdriver, the pair exited into the ceiling cavity.

The Batman leaned close to Ryan, nearly cheek to cheek. "This is the void above the secure storage rooms."

"Secure?" Ryan whispered back.

The Batman nodded. "They were designed to store prototypes of anything from electronics, to weapons, to pharmaceuticals. All Waynetech buildings were modified to survive a powerful earthquake, even before the one that hit Gotham. But the rooms here were built into the bedrock, separate from the building foundations. The cavity we are in now is the only access point besides the front door."

Ryan nodded, noting in the dim light that one wall of the cavity was rough hewn strata. "Who owns the building now?"

"Still Waynetech. They built another storage facility in a different part of the city, and moved all their equipment and inventions. This one was turned into an administrative centre, since the foundations weren't damaged, but the secure rooms were left less secure than necessary."

The pair crawled through the low space until Ryan nodded and pointed down. "This is the place."

The Batman set about creating an entrance without question. He quickly disassembled the ventilation system, and began pulling the whole contraption away. The hole left was just large enough to admit someone of Ryan's slender stature.

"Hardly secure," he whispered.

The Batman glanced back at him. "If you mean the size of the vent, I accessed the designs before the building was constructed and made a few changes. Where do you think I get all my equipment from?"

Ryan blinked, but couldn't stop a smirk from his face. "So, you are a cat burglar, as well as a vigilante."

The Batman didn't respond as he finished moving the ducting system. He withdrew a small globe from his belt and shook it. Slowly, the globe began to glow a soft green.

"Who's there?" a voice from below whispered despairingly.

Ryan looked down through the hole, not prepared to stick his head through. "Cassandra?"

There was a pause. "Ryan?" came the voice, tinged with weariness.

Ryan frowned. "Yes, it's me. What's the matter?"

Another pause, before an audible sigh. "You've joined this monster too," she said, sounding defeated.

"Um, if I had, I'd probably be coming in through the front door," he replied flippantly.

"Truly?" she said in a whisper, a faint trace of hope in her voice.

"Naturally. Can you jump up? We'll try to grab you."

Again, another pause. "We?"

Ryan swallowed. "A... friend."

If Cassandra heard the hesitation in his voice, she didn't comment. "I am shackled to the wall."

The Batman, who had been silent throughout the exchange, dropped the glowing globe into the room. Ryan was astonished at how high the room was. He estimated it to be nearly fifteen feet.

"There is no one else in the room," the Batman said, and with a whisper of fabric, he disappeared head first down through the hole. Ryan heard Cassandra suck in a lungful of air in fright. "Ryan, join us," he said from below.

Wincing, Ryan awkwardly stuck his feet through the hole and slowly wriggled through backwards. He hung from the edge for a second or two, then let go, bracing for impact. As he hit the ground, he let loose an "Oof!" and fell hard onto his backside.

The Batman looked down at him dispassionately. "You need to learn how to fall correctly," he said.

Ryan grunted as he stood, rubbing his coccyx. "So long as it isn't you who teaches me, I'll be right with it," he said sourly.

The Batman turned to look at Cassandra, who was herself looking up at the pair. Dried blood caked her face, hair and torn clothes, but what made Ryan's stomach turn was the fact that she had been shackled in such a way that she could be raped at will. Even in the dim light, Ryan could see that her clothes had been torn away from her form and that she had been repeatedly assaulted.

"Dear God," he whispered, stunned into inaction.

The Batman however, didn't even blink as he began picking the locks at the Immortal's wrists and ankles. Cassandra looked up at the masked man.

"Who?" she said, clearly confused.

Ryan shook his head to clear it. "One of MacLeod's acquaintances. MacLeod Senior, that is." He helped gather the tattered remains of her clothing and draped it over her in an effort to preserve whatever remaining modesty she possessed.

Cassandra's eyes met Ryan's own. "Connor is here? What of Duncan?"

Ryan shook his head. "Connor is in the city, but not with us. Duncan survived whatever, or at least whoever, was sent to pick him up."

The Batman finished with the shackles. "Can you travel?"

She gave him a haughty look, which Ryan felt was rather impressive considering the situation they had found her in. "Of course."

Another tool was taken from the yellow belt at the Batman's waist. As he aimed it up towards the exit above them, both Ryan and Cassandra inhaled sharply.

"How many?" the Batman asked quickly.

"Three," the two Immortals said in unison. Ryan frowned, then paled suddenly in the dim light as the sheer longevity of one of the approaching Immortals overwhelmed him.

"Oh, no," he said.

## Darkest Knight Storming the fortress

"Oh, no," whispered Ryan.

Even though the storage room was hardly larger than a jail cell, Batman slipped silently into a dark corner, quickly enough that even the two Immortals who knew he was there weren't sure where he'd gone. The metal door swung open with a clang, and three Immortals filled the doorway.

"No one gave you permission to take her again," the leader snapped, before noting that the female Immortal was no longer tied down. He blinked suddenly, but didn't back away. "Ryan?" he said incredulously.

Batman glanced back at the young Immortal he had escorted here, wondering how he would handle himself in an emotionally charged environment.

Ryan had his weapons out and pointed towards the group, his face a mixture of disbelief and hatred. The female Immortal named Cassandra had moved behind him, though her body language said that it was a ruse to imply weakness. Disarmed as she was, she was confident in her abilities. She obviously had another weapon at her disposal.

"Why?" Ryan asked, his voice laced with pain.

They pair obviously had a history together, since the newcomer recognized the Immortal in the dim light. Batman judged from Ryan's voice and tense stance that they were not particularly close, but there had been some level of trust between them. Batman stayed still and steady in the corner, content to observe until the instant violence erupted.

The newcomer swallowed, his eyes flickering to the side. Whatever he was about to say, was more for the ears of those behind him, than for Ryan and Cassandra, Batman noted.

"Why what, Chessman? Why did I accept the most gracious invitation to come to Gotham? Simple. I survive. It's what I do."

Batman watched as Ryan shook his head. "You bastard, Methos."

The Immortal called Methos sighed, and raised a hand. Instantly, the two behind him drew weapons. Not swords. Guns.

"You were too young to be of any interest to the Master, Ryan. But now you are here, you can be given as a prize to someone who pleases him. Put down your weapons; they will do you no good here," Methos said, though Batman detected a hint of regret in the man's voice.

With only a faint whisper of silken material to herald the movement, two quick, lethal strikes of surgical precision left both of Methos' associates falling to the floor with broken necks. Hearing the snaps, Methos spun around, but Batman was already back in the deep shadows.

Ryan took the opportunity to place his wakizashi against the Immortal's neck. Methos stiffened and swallowed nervously, but turned back around to face him.

"You appear to have had a slight reversal of fortune," Ryan said through clenched teeth.

"Kill him," snapped Cassandra.

"I am sorry for what has happened," Methos said, his voice strained.

Batman watched the scene unfold like a spectator at a sporting match.

"So you said when you came and raped me alone last time," Cassandra snapped, her voice rising. She focused on Ryan. "*He's your enemy*," she said, in a voice with an odd echoing quality.

Batman felt a rush of hatred towards the older Immortal, before he analyzed the feeling. It was not the first time he had been mentally manipulated, and though uncomfortable, he recognized that his will was being imposed upon. No stranger to mind control attempts, he brought forth his training with a fakir in the Himalayas. Running through the meditation technique in his mind, he forcefully banished the alien sensation.

Ryan however, seemed to be more affected by her voice. He snarled at Methos, whose nervousness escalated.

"I did no such thing. Just calm down, Ryan," he pleaded.

Cassandra didn't stop though. "*You hate him. You need to kill him.*"

"Ryan!" Methos squeaked. "Listen to me!"

*Kill him*," Cassandra ordered.

Ryan's knife flashed.

Cassandra's expression of hatred vanished, replaced with one of shock. She looked down to the knife sticking out of her chest before Ryan wrenched it out again. Cassandra began to lose her balance, then keeled over, dead.

Batman was impressed despite himself. Ryan hadn't even turned around. His eyes were still focused on Methos.

"Thank you, Ryan," Methos began before Ryan jabbed the point of his sword against the man's throat, hard enough that a moderate trickle of blood ran down the older Immortal's adam's apple.

"Don't think you're out of it, traitor. I just wanted to be clear-headed when I cut off your head," he snapped.

Methos took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You need to leave here. Quickly. Take her and go."

Ryan shook his head. "Not before you tell me what's going on."

Methos sighed deeply. "There's no time."

"Take the time."

Methos swallowed once more. "The final ritual is tonight."

Ryan blinked with confusion. "What ritual?"

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Methos pursed his lips. "An entire family of Immortals is going to be sacrificed. Then, we ride. There are going to be terror acts all over the world for decades to come."

A sinking pit of dread settled in Ryan's stomach. "A family? From where?"

Methos frowned. "Indiana, somewhere. Three pre-Immortal children and a handful of Immortal adults."

"Morgan?" Ryan whispered.

"What?"

"Is their name Morgan?"

Methos nodded. "You know them?"

Ryan turned to the shadows in the doorway. "We have to save them!"

The Batman detached himself from the dark corner and bodily picked Methos up and slammed him face first into the wall, holding him steady and secure. "What of her?"

Ryan looked down at Cassandra, who was starting to stir. He was torn between helping her and saving his adoptive parents. "I, um, can you take her outside? The Morgans are my parents!!"

The Batman stared at Ryan for a moment, before reaching down to his yellow belt. He deftly extracted a pair of miniature devices. One, he gently pushed into Ryan's ear, the other he clipped to his collar. Finally, he withdrew a green eyemask and passed it over. "Stay hidden. I'll be in touch. Be ready to put this on at my signal. What of this one?"

Ryan looked at the mask with a hint of confusion, but took the offering. He reached behind him and drew his Glock. "Disarm him. He'll need to lead me there."

"Are you insane, Chessman?" Methos wheezed as the vigilante deftly disarmed him.

"How would I know if I was?" Ryan retorted.

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The unlikely pair moved through the building in silence. The single time Methos tried engaging in conversation, Ryan ground the barrel of his gun into Methos' neck. The ancient Immortal took the hint, and stayed mute. They took a circuitous route, avoiding other Immortals, but in less than ten minutes, they reached a security door. With a gesture, Methos said, "This is it."

"You first."

The room beyond was immense. It was obviously an ex-factory floor. The ceiling was six stories above the floor, with metal walkways and observation posts ringing the walls at each level. In the very centre was an oblong observation platform, with eight suspended paths leading off to the lowest walkway. The manufacturing equipment had been removed long ago, but the walkways and platforms surrounding the hanger-like space provided a huge number of vantage points.

Vantage points that were used. Hundreds of Immortals stood on the observation walkways, most standing alone, a small percentage in groups of two or three. Ryan instantly felt the tension in the room. Immortals were by nature and necessity solitary creatures. Not even the most powerful of the race could force such a large number to co-habit without stress.

On the centre observation platform, stood a man. His features were so old as to be almost alien. Neither tall nor short, neither slender nor stout, he carried himself like royalty.

“The Master,” Methos whispered, gesturing towards the figure.

Ryan pushed his senses to the limit, sorting out the hundreds of Immortal signatures he felt. Even this close to Methos, he easily located The Master’s aura.

Ten thousand years was a conservative estimate. He could have been twelve thousand. But as ‘long’ as his Quickening was, it was far brighter than Ryan expected. “He must have taken over three thousand heads,” he breathed.

Methos nodded. “Now do you see? There isn’t one of us who could stand up to him. Not me, not either MacLeod, not Grey, or his father. Cassandra couldn’t even stand, let alone fight. Even Darius would have fallen, and he was the greatest warrior I ever met.”

Ryan swallowed, the enormity of his self-imposed task becoming painfully apparent. Three walkway levels beneath him, on the stained concrete floor, a group of seven figures were herded out into the middle of the chamber.

“There they are, Ryan. What are you going to do?”

Ryan licked his dry lips. “How could I stop it?”

Methos raised an eyebrow. “You could challenge The Master. You might buy them an extra few minutes of life,” he said condescendingly.

Below them, The Master took a deep breath, and began to speak. Next to him, another Immortal picked up a microphone. Artificially amplified, she translated the ancient language; a story echoed up throughout the massive room.

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“In the beginning, there were many gods, and each sought dominion over all.

“One by one, the gods fell to each other, the victor consuming the essence and power of the vanquished. For ages, the gods battled, until only two remained. Finally, Illehakra, the god of battle, skill and power vied with Mushesha, the goddess of knowledge, wit and tactics. The pair struggled over eons, neither managing to gain mastery of the other. Finally, Mushesha, worn down and exhausted, executed her final gambit. She knew that in their current forms, neither could completely vanquish the other. So she allowed Illehakra to strike her down, before clutching at her opponent’s soul.

“For one single instant, the two were joined as one. With her dying breath, Mushesha shattered her essence. In doing so, she rent her foe’s own in an identical fashion. Many thousands of godly shards rained down, scattered over all the lands of the earth, and all over time. As each shard landed on the fertile ground, it took the form of a human baby, to grow and learn. To live, die, and then live again. To wander the earth, experiencing all.

“Each of us has some portion of the power of the two combatant gods. Some of us are stronger than the others. Some of us are wiser, or more cunning.

“Mushesha’s last desperate gambit forced the invincible strength of a pantheon to be divided amongst us all. We instinctively recognize and respond to the spark of divinity in each other. This is why we battle, this is why we slay each other. To the last of us belongs the power and knowledge of the two gods. That one being shall have all Mushesha’s knowledge and all of Illehakra’s skill.

“I shall be that being.

“But that time is long in coming. Still today, there are new avatars appearing as babes all over the world. Until the last one is found, we shall act as one, bringing the entire world under our dominion.

“Bring forth the sacrifice.”

Ryan’s breath caught in his throat. Opposite his vantage point, his parents and siblings were herded out to a raucous applause from a sizable minority of the gathered Immortals. Most observed in emotionless silence. He cursed under his breath and took two steps towards the spiral staircase leading down before Methos grabbed his elbow.

“Think, Ryan! If you go down there with a gun, you won’t last long enough to challenge anyone!” he hissed.

With a growl, Ryan jerked his arm out of the older Immortal’s grasp and almost flew down the stairs. He tried holstering the weapon at the small of his back, but in his frenzied flight, the weapon fell from his fingers. He didn’t even spare it another thought.

His descent down through the levels drew a great deal of attention from nearby Immortals. Quickly, a hushed whispering spread throughout the throng.

Ryan reached the concrete floor just as his family was forced into a tight circle. His mother Lois was trembling with fear, but kept her arms protectively around a young child, no more than seven. His father’s jaw was clenched tight, and he stood in front of his family, between them and The Master.

More Immortals were observing the apparently suicidal young Immortal. As Ryan ran across the concrete floor, The Master stalked his family,

walking slowly around them in a circle.

Over his labored breathing, Ryan couldn't hear The Master's voice, though he understood the basics, when his father defiantly stood in front of the young girl.

"Leave them alone!" he yelled, panicking at the thought of his entire family being slaughtered in the next minute.

Instantly, silence descended. The Master turned to face the young Immortal, who slowed his frenzied sprint.

"Ryan?" his father blurted.

Panting slightly, Ryan tried to give his family a reassuring smile. "It's okay."

"Oh, it is far from okay," The Master's translator responded. "Your life is forfeit, Immortal." She nodded to a group of guards.

Half a dozen Immortals drew closer, ready to subdue on command.

Ryan sneered at them. "Do you bark and roll over too?" he snapped, fighting to regain his wind.

The Master shook his head and held up a hand. He spoke quietly, which was then translated as, "Wait. I do not recognize you." He glanced between Ryan and his family. "These are... You belong to this family?"

"They raised me," Ryan said sharply. The translator quickly obliged.

A wide grin was his only response.

"I challenge you," Ryan said, with more conviction.

The translator sighed softly before speaking to The Master. He spoke back to her, a wide smirk on his face.

"Of course you do. To save your family. How quaint."

The Master strolled towards him as the translator continued. "You actually wish this? To challenge me?"

"No I don't wish to challenge you!" Ryan spat back. "Let them go and I won't need to."

A few moments of silence reigned, before The Master began chuckling softly. At his cue, the laughter was taken up by a few of the closer, younger Immortals. He replied, and gestured towards the centre platform.

"Very well then, let us proceed," said the translator.

With that, the ancient Immortal turned away from Ryan, and walked over to one of the staircases leading up to the floating platform. Halfway up, he turned back to face him, with an expression that simply said, "Well?"

Studiously ignoring his father's warnings and mother's frantic pleading to the contrary, Ryan slowly walked to the base of another set of stairs up to the platform. Once there, he took a moment to look around, desperately searching for an imposing figure in black.

Nothing. Not that seeing nothing meant that he wasn't around somewhere.

With his heartbeat reflecting his near-panicked state, Ryan drew his blades, and shrugged himself out of his jacket. The Master smiled humorlessly and brought his own sword to bear. It was a long-bladed weapon, of a design Ryan didn't recognize. The long edge glistened in the artificial light, while barbs along the back edge of the blade gave the young Immortal shivers.

Ryan climbed up onto the raised platform in the centre of the factory and carefully took guard. "Where the hell are you?" he whispered into his microphone.

"*Right here,*" replied a deep voice in his ear piece. "*We are nearly in position. Delay for as long as you can.*"

Ryan swallowed past the thick lump in his throat. The Immortal in front of him had a Quickening so bright it was almost painful. "I reckon I can give you five seconds. Maybe ten if I'm lucky."

"*You'll be fine. Put the mask on now.*"

"Huh? Everyone here knows who I am!"

The responding voice sounded almost amused. "*The lenses have light amplification. Once the lights go out, you will have good visibility for a battery life of two hundred and seven seconds. We'll cut the lights at the right moment.*"

"Excellent, that may extend my life by another five or six seconds," Ryan grumbled as he aligned the lightly adhesive mask to the skin around his eyes. Several Immortals nearby shuffled nervously at the action. Obviously those who had lived in Gotham at some point in the past twenty years.

"*Given the weapon he uses and the fact he is right handed, lead with a head-high combination, then fall and roll to your right,*" the voice continued, ignoring Ryan's cynicism.

Ryan blinked. He was facing perhaps the most powerful immortal in history, one with over a hundred times his own lifespan. Plan A had been to just block everything coming his way for as long as possible, while waiting for the Batman to respond. Plan B was fairly similar, except that it involved doing a bit more running. Plan C featured no defense at all, just lots of running. Actually taking the offensive was not even in the alphabet. "You're kidding, right?" he asked, pushing the mask tight over his eyes.

*"If your sword catches on one of the barbs, step closer to him rather than pull back,"* the voice said, ignoring the question.

Muttering a quick prayer to the heavens, Ryan steeled himself, raised his wakizashi to his face in salute, and then with a warbling cry designed to still his own fear, launched his attack.

As he expected, The Master easily picked off each of his four attacks, not a single one even getting close. Ryan took a leap of faith, and dove to his right, rolling over his shoulder and up onto one knee, finding himself under his opponent's sweeping blade. Had he remained where he had been, he would have been disemboweled.

As it was, The Master fell to one knee as his blade encountered nothing. Ryan was about to leap forward with a desperate thrust from his kneeling position when the voice in his ear shouted, *"It's a feint!"*

Ryan caught the attack before it began, rose into a crouch and almost skipped away, putting as much space between his opponent and himself as the platform would allow. "Got any more advice?" he hissed.

*"Attack faster. Keep your rear leg taut."*

"Faster, right," Ryan wheezed. He carefully stepped in a circle to his right, testing the platform.

The point of the long sword came thrusting straight at his face. Instinctively, Ryan threw up his blades to deflect, pushing the attack past his left ear. The Master simply twisted the blade, catching the wakizashi on one of the wicked barbs, and pulled.

Trusting his ally's tactic would prevent him losing the sword, Ryan buried his instinctive reaction and stepped forward. He followed the maneuver with an upward push of his blades, keeping the longer sword well away from any vulnerable parts of his anatomy. Almost immediately, Ryan found himself staring into the surprised eyes of The Master. He briefly imagined that his own eyes reflected the surprise too. He certainly hadn't expected to last this long.

The Master responded first. Ryan felt the shock of a knee connecting with his groin a half second before the blinding pain followed. Fighting the urge to curl into a ball, Ryan staggered back and lashed out blindly with his combat knife. It whispered through the air, missing everything.

A sharp kick knocked the knife from his hands. A flash of a blade opened a deep wound along his ribs.

Ryan collapsed back in agony and rolled away, clutching both hands to the hilt of his remaining weapon and pressing his left elbow against his bleeding side. With unshed tears filling the mask and blurring his vision, he tried assuming a battle stance. It wasn't much consolation that he had managed to last nearly twenty seconds.

The Master grinned nastily at him, before calling forth his Quickening. Unprepared for the sudden sensory overload, Ryan fell to his knees, clutching the back of his neck with his left hand. He couldn't stand. He could hardly move. "Cut the damn lights already!" he wheezed.

Amid the pain of his Quickening responding to The Master's aura, a faint buzzing ended with a slight tap at his throat. Ryan clutched at his jugular, finding a dart buried in the skin. He brushed it away in a panic.

A flash of nausea swept through him. He was defeated, kneeling almost helplessly in front of his enemy, and still he was being attacked by another. It just wasn't fair.

It wasn't fair at all.

Anger quickly replaced the nausea. Fury replaced the anger. His vision grew long, as though looking through a tunnel.

Time seemed to slow as The Master took two great strides towards him, sword raised for a final swipe.

Ryan growled deep in his throat. His fury turned the forlorn despair into determination in an instant. He firmed his grip on his suddenly heavy blade and roared with all the pent up anger, aggression, fear and frustration he felt in his heart.

Though it felt like he was moving through quicksand, his wakizashi arced around at waist height. It almost struck home, only hard blocked at the last instant. Slowly, The Master's expression turned into one of surprise, but Ryan had already pulled back and swung again, only halfway through his warcry.

As heavy as his blade was, it appeared that his opponent's sword was heavier by far. It almost seemed to drift lazily through the air as Ryan slashed at The Master's arms, legs and face. Deep gashes appeared on the Immortal's limbs and cheek, much to his surprise. Step by step Ryan pushed forward until suddenly, there was no more platform.

Ryan ignored the scenery as he gently floated down towards the ground. He reached out and grabbed a handful of The Master's clothes with his left hand, and focused completely on swinging his smaller sword blade repeatedly at his opponent's face and neck. The larger sword, suddenly a liability, was discarded, and a pair of desperate hands clutched at the wakizashi's blade, trying to force it away.

The pair hit the ground below with a thump. A head rolled grotesquely away.

Ryan looked down at his trembling hands. The adrenaline being washed from his system set him shaking like paint mixer. The sensation of his sword's blade passing through the neck of his opponent belatedly register on his consciousness. He replayed the final few seconds of the fight through his mind, trying to make sense of the unexpected rush of strength and speed.

Unbidden, the voice of his teacher, Duncan MacLeod resounded in his mind, words from history. Words from a time before Ryan had ever killed another Immortal.

***We may look human, but we are different. You already know this. You were one of the few who knew this even before your First Death. But you do not, you cannot, fully understand. You will learn who you are, you will learn of your birthright, but only when one of our kind is dead by your hand alone.***

Ryan shifted his gaze to the body of the man he had just decapitated. It had been a fight he had believed he could not win. Indeed, it had been a fight that he was not winning, until the final, desperate gambit.

***Feel the power in the air grow as your opponent lies before you. Feel the pressure on your skin as the tension builds. Feel the immeasurable weight of the world press down on your shoulders.***

Ryan watched dispassionately as an azure glow surrounded the Master's corpse. Around him, wearing expressions of shock and disbelief stood perhaps half of all current living Immortals, looking down at the young one who had just killed the oldest.

***We Immortals are cursed; we who live on indefinitely while all around us those we love succumb to Time's grasp. Our lives are filled with pain and regret.***

Ryan drew a shuddering breath, and let it out with a pained sigh, knowing that nothing could stop what was to come.

***Your opponent lies dead at your hand. He was an evil man, whose crimes marked him as deserving of death. This is his final gift to you. Take it, accept it. Welcome his power, his strength, and add it to your own. Remember him always, for he was perhaps the greatest of our kind who ever lived, but now and forever, he shall be a part of you.***

Ryan sank to his knees, the emotional release of survival overwhelming him. The realization that he would live another day flooded his thoughts, and he almost wept with relief. The tip of his wakizashi dragged and scraped along the floor, the bloody blade leaving an odd crimson trail on the concrete.

***We Immortals are blessed, for our potential is unlimited.***

In the still, silent air surrounding the crowd, a zephyr drifted lazily around. It ruffled hair and clothes as it grew into a breeze. Paper, discarded cigarette packets and other assorted trash blew away as it evolved into a gust. Immortal bystanders were pushed off balance as it blustered into a gale in moments. Outside the solid building, vehicles tilted and swayed as it continued to increase in strength, until only concrete buildings stood firm against its power as the oldest Immortal on the planet finally expired. In the eye of the storm, Ryan Chessman knelt alone.

***Prepare yourself as the maelstrom builds. Know it, and you shall understand it. It is pain, it is strength. It is terror, it is joy. It is death and destruction. But most of all, it is the very essence of life. Taste it as the lightning arcs above your head, as it lays waste to your surroundings.***

Azure ribbons began sizzling along the edges of exposed metal objects; dumpsters, stairwells, and window frames. Showers of sparks cascaded down where the bright, jagged tendrils of power earthed themselves on anything unlucky enough to be in their way. As far as the eye could see, inanimate objects bucked and flexed.

Machinery flared to life, alarms sounded. Light bulbs exploded in showers of sparks and glass. Further and further away, the tempest spread. Entire city blocks lost power as the ancient Immortal's cadaver released its pent life force into the world.

The entire city trembled as the earth itself quivered and heaved under the onslaught.

***Raise your blade in supplication, as your opponent's power begins to flow into you. Scream as your fingers char; howl as your blood boils in your veins. Revel in the raw strength, for you are Immortal!***

Unthinking, Ryan spread his arms and drew them together, clasping his hands around the hilt of his sword and held it aloft overhead. The first bolt struck the young Immortal's sword, acting as a conductor, filling every cell in his body with more power than he had ever felt in his relatively short life. Ryan's hair stuck out as his eyes opened painfully wide at the sensation, an order of magnitude beyond anything he had ever experienced. With one final breath, he let out a howl; the sound of a soul in agony, the sound of a warrior victorious in battle, the sound of a challenge overcome. A sound as old as the earth itself. A sound as young as a new born babe.

***This is who you are Ryan. This is your birthright.***

Not a single Immortal in the crowd was standing amid the incredible lightning tempest. Those few with the strength to keep themselves from cowering watched in awe at the young Immortal as he painfully absorbed more than a hundred centuries of power.

Over and over, Ryan felt his body buffeted and abused by the raw energy slamming into him. One strike would stop his heart, while the next would restart it.

For a lifetime, Ryan howled in agony and joy. Strength unbidden flooded his muscles, infused his bones. Flashes of times past, images of millennia

flickered across his consciousness as more and more bright blue lightning struck him.

***Ryan Chessman...***

Finally, after an eternity, the thundering rain of energy slowed.

***THIS...***

Then stopped.

***IS...***

With one final hoarse scream, Ryan flung his arms apart.

***THE QUICKENING!***

The world exploded.