Web of Fate

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Summary

It all started with a strange letter that made no sense, asking for help from the Grande discendente della famiglia Auditore. Two modern assassins make a risky leap from their familiar home and wind up in Firenze. Two become nine, pulled in by the Webs that glow when families split over 600 years reunite and discover who they really are. Secrets are revealed and history unravels as the assassins try to stop the darkest moments in their history from ever happening.

Roughly follows events of ACII with my own additions as needed to carry my idea.
Still thinking about the strange message that had been slipped under her door the night before, Emily Hunter chased her best competitor along the busy city streets, determined to reclaim the bounty he'd stolen from her. She was distracted by that message, written in a graceful, flowing script, the Italian words tripping her up for a moment before she'd figured them out.

Even as she chased her target, she kept thinking about that message and what it asked her to do, strange words for certain but their urgency could not be denied. She had to respond, as much as the message confused her. The idea of instincts guiding her towards a place she didn't know anything about to save a family that she'd never heard of, it was ludicrous to say the least.

Grande discendente della famiglia Auditore ...we need your help. Please, if you're reading this now we need your aid immediately. You know where to go, look in your heart and you will find the way home. Trust your instincts and follow the web back to where it begins, there you will find your answers. Time is short, you must hurry if you are ever going to realise your destiny. Nothing is true. Everything is permitted. Yours by blood, Giovanni Auditore.

Growling low in her throat, she broke off her chase and hurried across the street, aiming for the highest building she could see. Out the corner of her eye, she could see her closest competitor also racing in that direction, their instincts firing hard and guiding them towards a building that didn't seem all that special.

Weaving through the crowds and dodging the traffic, they hit the base of the building together and started up the walls, swinging gracefully from handhold to foothold with effortless ease. Showing no fear of the height they were going, both continued their upwards journey, using windows and decorative features on the walls to make their paths to the top.

Getting nearer to the rooftop, Emily launched up again and missed the handhold, dropping back to the decorative stone line she'd being clinging to seconds earlier. Scanning the roffline again, she shuffled to the left a little and pushed up again, narrowly missing her grip a second time. This time though, a strong hand wrapped around her wrist, pulling her up onto the rooftop.

'What brings you up here, Hunter?' Aloysius asked, stepping back and dropping his hands to his pistols. 'Seems like a strange place to be seeking a target.'

'I'm not here to hunt; I came here to see the city from a different perspective.' Emily replied, turning to look out over the city. 'Why did you follow me up here?'

'Nothing is true. Everything is permitted.' Aloysius shrugged, his strange words making Emily pause in shock.

'You received a letter from Giovanni Auditore as well?' she blinked, reaching for the parchment she'd tucked into one of her many pouches.

'You're another great descendant of the Auditore family?' Aloysius countered, pulling out an identical parchment page.

'Supposedly, though exactly what that means I have no idea. I tried researching the name but I got nothing.' Emily nodded, her attention drawn to the tower leading further into the sky. 'I think we're meant to go up there. Why, I still don't know but it feels right.'

'Agreed, there's something calling me to take the highest vantage point and open my eyes to the beauty of home.' Aloysius grinned, taking off across the rooftop towards the tower.
Tucking the letter back into her pouch, Emily laughed and took off after him, finding it was getting easier to keep her balance on the sloping roof the longer she was up here. Leaping up onto the tower, she headed up behind Aloysius, the pair working together to find the best track up onto the top of the belltower.

Getting nearer to their goal, Aloysius grabbed an unstable handhold and it gave, dropping him off the wall. Dropping down to a previous grip, Emily grabbed Aloysius by his weapon harness and held him steady until he resecured his place on the wall and caught his breath. Moving more carefully now, they continued up and swung onto the smaller rooftop, standing and looking out across their city in awe. Neither could believe just how beautiful this place looked from up here.

Clutching Aloysius' hand for safety, Emily edged out onto one of two small wooden platforms attached to the front of the tower. Crouching and grabbing the platform she was on, she looked down, jaw dropping as she saw not the ground of her modern home but a city so unlike her home. 'Aloysius, look. I think that is what the letter spoke of.' she called, pointing to the beautiful city below them. 'That can't be America; it's got to be the home of the Auditore family.'
'I have never seen anything like it.' Aloysius breathed, easing out onto the second platform. 'Look closer, I think that's a stage down there.'

Looking up when they heard an eagle calling overhead, both knew what they had to do and surprisingly, felt no fear about the idea. Getting to their feet, they approached the ends of their respective platforms and looked down at the glowing vista of a city clearly not their own. One last look at their modern home and they looked at each other again, hardened brown eyes meeting lighter brown hidden behind amber lenses.
'See you on the other side, brother.' Emily offered, a proud smile crossing her face.
'See you on the other side, sister.' Aloysius repeated, turning his focus back to the strange city.

Launching heavenward in matching arcs, the pair threw their arms wide and flew, feet together and knees slightly bent. With the precision of synchronised swimmers, they flipped over in mid air, bringing their hands in as they contacted the shimmering surface of the secret city hidden in the middle of their modern home.

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'Giovanni Auditore, you and your accomplices stand accused of the crime of treason. Have you any evidence to counter this charge?' a heavy set man wearing heavy looking robes, richly decorated called, speaking over the angry crowd gathered at the base of the raised stage.
'Yes. The documents that were delivered to you last night!' one of three men standing there replied, hands bound behind his back and a hangman's noose around his neck.
'I know nothing of these documents.' the fat man replied, walking away from the threatened trio.
'He's lying!' a voice from the crowd, a man wearing white robes with a hod that covered his face coming to a peak over his eyes.
'In the absence of any compelling evidence to the contrary, I am bound to pronounce you guilty. You and your collaborators are hereby sentenced to death.'

Landing on the beam holding the three men prisoner, Emily whipped out a throwing knife and let fly, sending it at the fat man that had just handed down such an ugly sentence. The strike was good, slamming into his right shoulder and knocking him off balance, nearly off the stage but instead he sagged against a post on the edge.

Jumping down off the railing, Aloysius made short work of the guard standing there in dumb shock, driving a dagger into his throat before hustling across to guard the lever for the trapdoor. There was no way anyone was going to get past him to pull it and kill these three. Reaching out with his left
hand, he pulled off the noose holding the younger man on this end, his dagger slicing easily through the rope around his wrists.

Dropping down off the beam, Emily lifted the other two nooses off and cut their hands free before crouching and gathering the younger boy into her arms, lifting him carefully from the trapdoor and holding him close.

'Come with us if you want to live.' Aloysius hissed, dragging the other young man off the trapdoor.

'We are grande discendente della famiglia Auditore.' Emily added, ducking as an arrow whizzed past her ear. 'Come on, this way.'

Leaping off the platform, the group raced away from the public square, weaving through the crowds and doing their best to avoid the guards. Within moments they were joined by two more figures wearing the same white robes, hoods covering their faces and small cloaks hanging from their left shoulders.

'We need to find a place to hide from these damned guards.' Aloysius called, sword in hand as they sprinted away from the guards.

'this way, I know a place.' one of the strangers in white robes offered, moving forward and leading the group down another narrow street.

'I can take Petruccio for a while.' one of their rescued companions offered, falling in beside Emily. 'No, you have clearly taken a beating, it would not be fair on either of you. I will keep him safe.' Emily replied, tightening her grip a little. 'Just hold on tight Petruccio, everything will be fine.'

'Grazie signorina.' Petruccio nodded, pressing in against her and holding onto her robes.

'You can call me Emily.' she grinned, continuing her mad rush to escape.

Leading the group to a spot where several hay carts were arranged around an open space, their guide promptly jumped into one, disappearing into the hay and staying perfectly still. Catching onto the idea, Emily curled up around Petruccio and leapt into a different one, calming her young companion with a gentle hand in his hair as they waited to either be found or told it was safe to come out.

The minutes felt like hours as they hid there, scarcely daring to breathe as they heard guards searching for them just beyond their hiding place. Eventually they left and Emily breathed again, sagging back into the hay and putting away the dagger she'd been clutching in her left hand.

Suddenly a hand reached in and touched her shoulder, drawing an instinctual response from her. Lunging to the side, she bit down on the hand and squeezed, grinding the bones between her strong teeth as she tasted blood.

'Merda! Lasciate andare, cagna pazzo.' that was the voice of their guide.

Releasing his hand, Emily gently set Petruccio down beside her and vaulted out of the hay cart, looking at their guide as he nursed his bloodied hand.

'That is what you get when you do not identify yourself to a natural killer. I had no blade to protect Petruccio so I did the best with what I had.' she shrugged, reaching in and lifting the young boy out carefully, cradling him to her chest.

'I will take my brother now.' he insisted, reaching for Petruccio.

'I don't think so. Not until you identify yourself and someone explains where the hell we are.' Emily replied, refusing to hand the child over until she knew more.

'I am Giovanni Auditore, these are my sons Federico, Ezio and Petruccio. We owe you our lives, grazie.' the eldest man in the group offered, stepping forward to rest one hand on Petruccio's head. 'Emily Hunter, at your service signore. This is my companion, Aloysius Knight.' Emily nodded, scanning the area around them slowly. 'We should leave this place, there is much to discuss and this is not a safe place to do so.'

'Of course, you are right. Come with me, I know a place where we will be safe.' Giovanni replied, leading the group on another merry race through the city. 'Ezio, did you make sure your mother and sister were safe?'
'Si padre, Annetta took them to her sister's house.' Ezio confirmed, slipping into place beside his father, bloody hand held to his chest. 'Good boy. Here, wrap your hand before you stain those.' Giovanni praised, handing him a neatly embroidered handkerchief. 'Grazie padre.' Ezio replied, wrapping the white cloth around his hand and tying it as best he could. 'We should split up, we'll be noticed for sure if we all stay together.' Aloysius warned, dropping back to walk beside Emily. 'Aloysius has a point, the guards will be looking for all of us. If we split up we will have a better chance of staying unnoticed.' Emily nodded, glancing around constantly. 'A wise idea. My elder sons both know where we must go, they can guide you.' Giovanni agreed, attention going to the fourth person in white robes. 'And who are you?' 'Libby Gant, grande discendente della famiglia Auditore.' she replied, lifting her hood just a little to reveal her stunning blue eyes. 'It is good to see you again Emily, you too Aloysius.' 'You too Libby.' Aloysius grinned, resting one hand on her shoulder. 'Our thanks for the assistance.' 'Come, we must hurry.' Giovanni coaxed, stepping back from the group. Without another word, Federico took off up the nearest wall with Aloysius right behind him and Giovanni made his way down another narrow street, Libby moving to take a place beside him. 'Looks like it's just us left, Ezio.' Emily remarked, setting Petruccio down and taking his hand. 'Idiota.' Emily muttered, slowly following him and wondering how long it would take for him to realise he'd left them behind. 'You did not mean to hurt Ezio, did you?' Petruccio asked, looking up at her shyly. 'No, it was instinct to fight back. I could let no harm befall you and I honestly did not know it was your brother reaching in.' Emily replied, smiling down at the inquisitive young boy. 'So how old are you, Petruccio?' 'Nearly twelve.' he replied, squeezing her hand lightly. 'I do not feel well at all Emily.' 'I'll take care of you, Petruccio, its okay.' Emily soothed, crouching and scooping him up again. 'grazie.' he muttered, head resting on her shoulder as she continued to walk. *~(^)~(+)(+)(+)~(^)~* Stepping into the building Ezio led them to, Emily shifted her grip on Petruccio again and glanced around, taking in the women in their provocative clothes and figuring out where they were. Shaking off her hood and growling low in her throat when it refused to fall, Emily kept looking for anyone she could hand Petruccio to so he could be reunited with his family. 'Emily, this is Annetta, a friend of our family.' Ezio offered, reaching out to tug Emily's hood back. 'Grazie, Ezio.' Emily grinned, turning to look at the simply dressed woman on her other side. 'Follow me, I can show you where you can put Petruccio down to rest.' Annetta guided, pointing towards the stairs. 'Grazie, he is clearly not a healthy boy.' Emily nodded, following Annetta up the stairs. 'Try to stay out of trouble Aloysius.' 'Stop worrying so much Emily.' Aloysius replied, leaning back against the wall near Federico. Lowering his hood and looking at the world for the first time in years without the need for his amber shields, Aloysius smiled and witnessed the Madame of this place greet Ezio warmly, just as she had greeted Federico upon their arrival. 'Ezio, I should not have to tell you what must be done now.' Giovanni sighed, stepping forward and placing one hand on his shoulder. 'But father, I am no killer.' Ezio replied, his youth showing through so much in that moment. 'We can help you there, Ezio. Emily, Libby and I, we are all trained as such.' Aloysius shrugged, pushing off the wall with a lazy roll of his shoulders. 'Do not look so shocked, Ezio, you heard what they said as we escaped. Trust in them, they will
show you how it is done.' Giovanni nodded, watching Libby stalk closer with such silent grace.  
'It's easy once you know how, I left five dead guards near the execution site, no one even knew until we were making our escape.' Libby grinned, coming to a stop beside Aloysius.  
'Emily would be proud of that, Libby.' Aloysius chuckled, looking down at her and still trying to work out how she could possibly be here. 'Who is our target?'
'Uberto Alberti, the man Emily threw her dagger at.' Giovanni replied, watching the pair interact and hoping they could teach Ezio what he had never had the courage to teach.  
'It will be done.' Aloysius nodded, already thinking about how it might be done. 'Ezio will need training first though, he moves too brashly, rushing into trouble without having a clear idea of how to get out again.'
'Spare me the lecture.' Ezio groused, turning away from the pair.  
'I can help with that.' Paola offered, coming up beside the group.  
'And why are you going to teach me how to kill?' Ezio asked, turning to Paola.  
'I'm not. I'm going to teach you how to survive. Come.' Paola replied, leading Ezio away from the group and outside.  
'When you are done with your lessons, come back and see me Ezio.' Giovanni instructed, confident Ezio would do as told.

Coming back downstairs, Emily sidled up beside Aloysius and looked around, shaking her head slowly. She was starting to get the impression that Ezio was easily distracted, his previous behaviour was not helping that opinion much.  
'He is outside, learning how to blend and act less suspiciously. When he is ready, we have been tasked with our first job here,' Aloysius explained, resting a hand on her shoulder. 'The big man you caught with your dagger, he is first to die.'
'He will be weakened after my shot, Ezio should be able to take him out with little trouble.' Emily replied, amazed by how comfortable all of this felt. 'Once it is done, there is much we must discuss.'
'There certainly is.' Giovanni agreed, stunned by how comfortable he felt around these three near strangers. 'Federico, go upstairs and find your mother and sister. Tell them I will be up shortly and stay with them. We must be careful.'
'Of course father.' Federico replied, heading up and disappearing from view.

Coming back inside after a good half hour, Ezio returned to his father as Paola wandered off to do whatever it was she did all day. In his hand he was carrying a bracer identical to the ones Libby, Aloysius and Emily all wore but he seemed confused as to exactly what it did.  
'Paola told me to go see Leonardo da Vinci, she did not say why though.' Ezio shrugged, tucking his bracer not one of his pouches.  
'I think I can guess.' Aloysius muttered, tapping his own bracer. 'For now, Ezio, we are your shadows. Wherever you go, we will be right beside you until you have done what must be done.'
'I do not need protection.' Ezio replied, glaring at Aloysius.  
'Not protection, instruction. You cannot hope to take up a weapon and kill successfully on your first attempt without guidance. We are here to guide you on making that first kill and any others that might be necessary.' Emily corrected, turning to Ezio. 'In time you'll figure it out.'
'Come, we have much to do before you are ready to blood your blade.' Libby added, slipping past Ezio and pulling up her hood.

Stepping outside, the quartet turned and headed through the narrow streets, pulling Ezio back when he tried to race ahead and making him think not just in terms of his own survival but the safety of the team. He chaffed at the restriction but did as was asked, guiding the group through the city to reach Leonardo's workshop.

It didn't quite work out, their presence caught the attention of the guards and forced the team to hurry their pace. Weaving through crowds and blending where they could, the quartet found a suitable hiding place and went for it, disappearing into the flowers and hay stacked in two carts parked along
one of the streets. It was just chance that had Emily and Ezio pressed together under the flowers, Emily holding a dagger in her right hand in case they were discovered.

Vaulting out a few minutes later, the group moved off again, slipping through the people and keeping a sharper watch for guards that would surely do them serious harm. Around past a blacksmith, they approached a half hidden doorway, the three strangers to this place taking positions behind Ezio as he knocked on the door.

Stepping inside, the three modern friends could not believe their eyes. Of course when they had heard mention of Leonardo da Vinci they had been wary of the name, not sure if there had been another man with the same name or if this was some elaborate hoax. But no, looking around this workshop that Ezio had led them to, it became clear that this was the one and only Leonardo da Vinci, famous painter and inventor.

'What the fuck is going on here?' Aloysius muttered, hanging back with Emily and Libby. 'There's no way this is really happening.'

'The rest of it I could believe but this, it's just not possible.' Libby agreed, looking around warily. 'I've heard of renaissance fairs and stuff but this is taking it too far.' Emily nodded, keeping one eye on Leonardo and Ezio.

'Oh! Ezio Auditore! I… I didn't expect to see you again. What with all that's happened…Ah! Where are my manners! Welcome back!' da Vinci greeted, embracing Ezio warmly for a moment. 'Now, how can I be of service?'

'I was hoping you could repair something of mine.' Ezio replied, glancing over his shoulder. 'Are you three done whispering back there?'

'Don't worry about what we're doing, Ezio. Just worry about your own issues. We have work to do.' Emily countered, gaze drifting to Leonardo for a moment. 'Forgive my manners, Maestro. We are friends of the Auditore family, I am Emily Hunter, this is Aloysius Knight and Elizabeth Gant.'

'Welcome, all of you.' Leonardo smiled, gazing at the trio in their matching robes. 'What was it you needed repaired, Ezio?'

Watching Leonardo as he examined the broken hidden blade, Libby was struck by how different he was to the images she'd seen of him, artists' impressions and thoughts of what the great Leonardo da Vinci looked like. She had never expected him to have the most soulful blue eyes and dark blonde hair hanging to his shoulders, half hidden under a rather fetching red beret.

'Ever think we'll figure out what's going on here?' she asked, looking up at Emily and Aloysius again. 'With my return and all of this?'

'Maybe, we'll just have to wait and see what happens.' Aloysius shrugged, gazing at the sketches, paintings and models all around the workshop. 'Whatever is happening, the attention to detail…I just can't believe it.'

Emily had no answer either, she was distracted by something faint invading her vision. It was barely there, little marks of gold and blue crossing through her eyes and leading all around the place. As she focused on them, they became clearer to see; a golden thread leading from Ezio's chest across the room to her chest, another golden line leaving Aloysius' shoulder and leading to the closed door, a third went from Libby to the door and somehow Emily knew both those lines went elsewhere, curling through the city.

A blue line linked Leonardo to the wall, the colour pulsing in her eyes as it headed towards the wall but never returned. Focusing on that line a little more, Emily realised that it did not in fact go to the wall but rather through it and onwards, completely unknown to everyone else. Reaching out, Emily touched the blue line, stunned that it felt realistic under her hands, almost like a rope but alive and pulsing with energy.

'Emily? What are you doing over there?' Ezio's voice broke into her concentration and she released the blue line, head snapping around to meet his gaze.
'I cannot explain it fully just yet, Ezio. Something is happening to me and I do not know what it is.' Emily replied, her attention drawn to the golden line connecting them. 'I will try to explain later, once we are back in the presence of your family.'

'Emily?' Aloysius asked, coming up beside her. 'What's the matter?'
'I'm seeing strange things Aloysius, lines of gold and blue linking us to people here. I do not know what they are but I can touch them and they feel like rope, pulsing with life and energy. There is a blue rope that goes from Leonardo into the wall but I can sense it goes beyond the wall, to a place I can't identify. You and Libby both have your own gold ropes, leading out the door and twisting through the city.' Emily uttered, not sure how else to say it and pretty sure she sounded insane. 'I can see my own line clearly too, from my chest to Ezio's back, thick and strong, unbreakable by any who would try.'

'Did you hit your head on something?' Aloysius chuckled, shaking his head in disbelief.
'There is something here, Aloysius. Something important that we must pay attention to. Leave it with me, I'll figure it out.' Emily shrugged, just as confused but she would figure it out.

Trusting in her instincts and trying to understand the ropes she could see now, Emily crossed the workshop to stand beside Ezio, looking down at the broken hidden blade resting on the workbench. 'I don't know, Ezio. Despite its age, the construction is rather advanced. I've never seen anything quite like it. I'm afraid, there's not much I can do without the original plans...Mi dispiace.'
'Wait a moment. Try this, it might be helpful.' Emily guided, flipping the bracer over and nudging the rolled parchment underneath it.

'What are you doing?' Ezio asked, slapping Emily's hand back.
'The contents of this page are encrypted! But if my theory is correct...Based on these sketches it may very well...' Leonardo rambled, completely focused on the page.
'It may very well what?' Ezio asked, completely confused and not liking the feeling.
'Please, sit!' Leonardo directed, pointing Ezio towards a chair by the fire.
'Leonardo?' Ezio groused, not at all pleased with being hushed before he stalked over and sat down.
'Remarkable! If we transpose the letters and then select every third...' Leonardo mumbled, focused on the page in front of him as the team waited for him to work it out.

Sinking down beside Ezio, drawing her cloak in closer and resting her elbows on her knees, Emily was still trying to puzzle out what the coloured lines could possibly mean. Right on the edge of her vision, barely noticeable even when she did concentrate on it, she could just make out a single line of red, arrow straight and unidentifiable to her. Whatever it linked, she wanted nothing to do with it. And yet the red line refused to be ignored, demanding she work out what it meant and why it was so important.

Reaching up, she curled her fingers around the gold rope connecting her to Ezio, lightly running her thumb over the cord to feel the connection humming with life and power. She also noticed that her gentle actions seemed to be having an effect on Ezio, making him relax until he drifted off into a peaceful sleep of the innocent.
'If it can be of use, it is yours to examine. So long as it still functions after you are done.' Libby offered, placing her hidden blade down beside Leonardo so he could have a look at it.
'Grazie Elizabeth, grazie.' Leonardo smiled, picking up the second bracer and examining it closely.
'I would prefer if you called me Libby, Elizabeth is too formal for my taste.' Libby added, leaning on the bench and watching Leonardo work.

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Chuckling softly at the sweet sight in the chair, Aloysius almost asked Leonardo not to wake them, quite liking this gentle side of Emily's personality. She'd fallen asleep a few hours previous, leaned up against Ezio's legs, one arm slung over his thighs as they both slept peacefully.
'There! It's finished!' Leonardo called, nudging Ezio gently.
'Hmm? What's finished.' Ezio groaned, stirring from his slumber.
'What's going on?' Emily added, lifting her head from Ezio's thigh.
'The blade! I managed to decode that parchment of yours. It showed me exactly what to do.' Leonardo replied, holding out the bracer to Ezio. 'Now all that's left is to remove your ring finger.'
'Really?' Ezio asked, leaning back a little as he gazed at the cleaver Leonardo was holding.
'I'm sorry, but this is how it must be done. The blade is designed to ensure the commitment of whoever wields it.' Leonardo continued, setting the bracer aside and turning back to Ezio.
'Bene. Do it quickly.' Ezio agreed, turning and putting his left hand on the table, ring finger extended as he braced for the pain.

Stroking as their link again to calm him, Emily got to her feet and moved back, left hand going to her pouches for something to stem the bleeding once the deed was done. She didn't have the necessary equipment to do a full repair but she knew enough to at least seal the wound and keep it clean until it healed over. They both jumped when Leonardo brought the cleaver down with all his might, imbedding the blade in the table near Ezio's hand. Leaping forward, cloth in hand, Emily could only stare at the sight of Ezio's unharmed hand.
'I was only having fun, Ezio! Though the blade once required a sacrifice, it's been modified. You can keep your finger.' Leonardo chuckled, handing over the bracer.
'Nicely done, Maestro, you had them both fooled.' Aloysius smirked, wandering over to lean on the table. 'Admit it Emily, you were ready to do whatever you could to heal the hurt.'
'I've got no shame in admitting that, Aloysius. Of course I would have tried.' Emily shrugged, resting one hand on Ezio's shoulder. 'Let's just say I feel a certain connection to you, young Ezio.'

Watching proudly as Ezio strapped on the blade and figured out how to use it as necessary, the three modern killers shared a smile at how easily he took to the life he was being shown. They knew what they were in for, they didn't exactly love the idea but they knew what they were up for now. Giovanni had uttered the word and brought it all into crystal clarity, they were Assassins now and nothing would change that.
'Incredible.' Ezio remarked, flicking his new blade out and tucking it away again with an easy movement of his wrist.
'Yes it is! Tell me: do you have other pages like this?' Leonardo asked, holding up the parchment page he'd used to rebuild the weapon.
'I'm sorry, only the one.' Ezio replied, glancing to the side as his new friends gathered around him.
'Listen, if you ever do happen to come across another one of these, please bring it to me.' Leonardo requested, taking in the team of four identically dressed killers and wondering what adventures they would share.
'You have my word. And thank you for fixing this. It-' Ezio's reply was cut off by someone else knocking on the door.
'By order of the Florentine Guard: open this door!' an angry voice called, thumping on the door again as he spoke.
'Ah, just a moment!' Leonardo replied, shifting nervously. 'Wait here!'

Creeping forward as Leonardo left the workshop, Libby peered around the edge of the doorway slowly, careful not to reveal her presence too much. Taking the chance, she slipped outside and jumped up onto a stack of barrels, her blood running cold at what she saw. Spotting Leonardo in the walled garden next to his workshop, she watched and fought down her desire to leap to his defence as the guard shoved him harshly to the ground and started kicking him.
'Ezio, come here.' she beckoned, jumping down and hurrying back into the workshop. 'It is time for you to blood your blade. Go next door, into the garden and deal with the threat to Leonardo.'
'I do not know how to use this thing yet.' Ezio worried, looking down at his hidden blade.
'Right hand to silence the guard and plunge the blade in right about here.' Emily guided, poking two fingers into his back, up under his left armpit. 'It will be quick and easy, you can do this.'
Nodding sharply, Ezio darted out of the workshop and slipped into the walled garden, sneaking up behind the guard. Treading quietly as he'd noticed Emily and Aloysius did, he followed Emily's guidance on making his first up close kill, right hand pressing to the guards' mouth as he drove his blade home and felt the wash of blood over his hand. Withdrawing his blade and letting the guard fall, Ezio offered his right hand to Leonardo, helping him back to his feet.

'Grazie Ezio.' Leonardo smiled, rubbing his aching side lightly.

'Sorry about that.' Ezio offered, helping to brush the grass off Leonardo's cloak.

'Eh. I've grown accustomed to their abuses.' Leonardo shrugged, putting on a brave face as much as he hurt right now.

'What of the body?' Ezio asked, glancing down at the corpse by their feet.

'Bring it inside and put it with the others.' Leonardo instructed, a little surprised that Ezio had been given this kill when the other three gave the impression of more knowledge.

'Others?' Ezio blanched, sounded quite disturbed by that idea.

'The city gives them to me. For research.' Leonardo explained, turning and heading back to the safety of his workshop as Ezio picked up the body and followed.

Proud smiles on their faces when Ezio returned with the body of his first kill, his three modern friends all made sure he knew just how proud they were of his first kill. He'd done an admirable job, handling his target quietly and quickly, without anyone knowing what he'd done. Returning their smiles with a faint one of his own, Ezio carried the body through to the back room and set it down among all the others.

'See? Like it never happened.' Leonardo nodded, walking over to Ezio.

'Thank you Leonardo - for everything.' Ezio replied, relaxing just a little as his friends gathered around him again.

'Any time! And remember, if you find more of those strange pages, bring them to me. Should they contain new designs, I will upgrade your blades as well.' Leonardo offered, his offer going out to all four of them.

'Grazie Leonardo.' Aloysius nodded, flicking out his own blade and touching the edge. 'Must remember to sharpen this when we get back to Paola's.'

'Send her my regards.' Leonardo requested, watching the four head for the door.

'We will, Leonardo and thank you again.' Libby smiled, pausing to brush a grateful kiss across his bearded cheek before leaving his workshop.

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Returning to Paola's house, Ezio paused to speak with her as the rest of the group headed upstairs, Emily leading their way with this new gift of hers. She was actually following the two ropes that had been bothering her, linking Aloysius and Libby to people as yet unknown to her. Trailing the ropes led them to the suite of rooms that had been given over to the Auditore family for the duration of their stay.

Knocking softly on the door, Emily waited for permission before leading her friends inside and looking around slowly. Things still didn't quite make sense but at least now she could see where these connections led. Aloysius linked to Federico, their rope thickening as Aloysius moved to speak with him. Libby was tied to the young woman in the room, likely to be Ezio's sister judging by her looks.

'Where is Ezio?' Giovanni asked, getting up from the couch.

'Speaking with Paola. He will be up shortly.' Emily replied, her vision filling with the golden ropes as they twisted in every direction, linking the Auditore family together in ways that were starting to make sense.

Only when Ezio joined them a few minutes later did things finally start to make sense in Emily's eyes. She saw not only the physical image of the Auditore family, six people, but also the glowing
strands of the family tree, tying each generation to the next throughout the ages to reach the three
great descendents standing in the room with them.

Attention drawn from their conversation when Emily started to gather the family around her,
positioning them in a circle and pulling her friends in as well, Aloysius just shrugged and took his
place, wondering just what she was going to do now.
'Giovanni, hold up your right hand, palm facing me please.' Emily instructed, her hood folded back
as she turned to him and placed her right hand against his.

To everyone's amazement and shock, a glowing golden web of lines appeared inside the circle,
starting at Giovanni's chest and reaching out to connect to each of his children and his beloved wife.
Dropping his hand and stepping back, Giovanni stared at Emily in disbelief and maybe a little fear,
not sure how she had conjured up that light show.

'Peace, Giovanni, this is my talent. You have your Eagle Vision, passed to your children as it came
down from your parents and all those that came before. I have the ability to see the tangled web of
life around us and see how it all fits together.' Emily soothed, lowering her hand and turning to Ezio.

As soon as their hands touch, the web changed, the links to his parents and siblings fading a little as
the link between them blazed into life and shone brightly. Ezio tried to back away but Emily tangled
their fingers together, holding him in place as their eyes locked.

'we are generations apart, Ezio, 600 years separates your life from mine and still the web knows, it
binds us together as surely as you are linked to your brothers and sister.' Emily offered, releasing her
grip but not breaking their contact.

'600 years? How is that possible?' Ezio asked, curling his fingers between hers so he didn't let her go.
'This cannot be possible.'

'I don't have all the answers Ezio, not yet. I can only tell you what I see and feel. I am still learning
about what this means, untangling the webs I see and sorting out what belongs where.' Emily
shrugged, looking into his eyes and trying to help him understand. 'Think on it as I finish sorting out
what I see, there is so much more going on here.'

Turning again, she gave her hand to Federico and watched as the web changed again. Everyone
gasped in disbelief as the golden link locked Aloysius into the family, bringing light to his place
within the Auditore family.

'Somehow I knew there was something special about you. I did not think it would be a blood
connection.' Federico mused, looking at Aloysius in amazement.

'I never expected this would be why we were here.' Aloysius shrugged, turning his focus back to
Emily. 'There is more, right?'

'There is more but for now we have much to explain.' Emily nodded, dropping her hand and turning
again. 'Claudia, your turn.'

Once again the web blazed to life, bringing a stranger into the family in ways they'd never imagined.
Blazing a path over Emily's shoulder, the extra link in Claudia's personal web tied her to Libby, both
women stunned as Emily turned to Libby without releasing Claudia's hand.

'and so it comes into evidence that three lines of the Auditore family continued for 600 years,
spreading and changing with every year to bring us back together at this point.' Emily nodded,
lowering her hand slowly. 'This must all sound so strange, this talk of the future and things that have
yet to happen.'

'That would be putting it mildly.' Ezio agreed, moving out of the circle to slump against the wall. 'It
makes no sense.'

'Then everything else we have to say will only make you more confused, Ezio. For that I apologise
but the truth must be told.' Aloysius replied, stepping up beside Emily.

'I have no doubt you did not actually write these, Giovanni. You could not possibly have known that
we existed somewhere far from here, in a place that has not even been found yet.' Libby added, holding up her letter addressed to a grand descendant of the Auditore family.

'No, I did not write these but this is my handwriting.' Giovanni nodded, examining the parchment closely. 'These words seem familiar but why, I cannot answer.'

'We do not have time for this, we must strike at Uberto.' Ezio groused, struggling to wrap his mind around what he was hearing. 'Paola said he was to attend an unveiling tonight of Verrocchio's latest work at the Santa Croce cloister.'

'We will stay and try to explain our stories to the family, Emily. You go with Ezio and complete the job, maybe you can help him to see sense in this chaos.' Libby shrugged, crossing the room to sit beside Claudia.

'I will certainly try, Libby. Not sure how I'll go, I'm still trying to make sense of it all.' Emily nodded, flipping out her own blade. 'Ready, Ezio? It's time for your first proper assassination. The guard was easy, he was far too busy with Leonardo and there was no one about. This time you will be surrounded by people who will not look kindly on what you must do.'

'Si, I am ready.' Ezio replied, pushing off the wall. 'And Aloysius, do not forget that you meant to sharpen your blade when we got back here.'

'I will, grazie Ezio.' Aloysius chuckled, pulling a sharpening stone from one of his many pouches and removing his bracer.

Heading back down stairs, Emily noticed another blue line pulsing brighter than the rest, leading off into a wall and further than she could read clearly. This one was another like Leonardo's, catching her attention and asking her to investigate why Paola was so important. It would have to wait though, she had an assassination to oversee and a young man in need of guidance.

'I know you have no reason to trust what we're telling you Ezio but think about it, it makes sense that there is such a connection between us. I see it in your eyes, the same defiant self-confidence that first led me onto this path and then made me stay the course I had chosen.' Emily sighed, leading him outside and then stepping back, letting Ezio guide their path to Uberto.

'Si, I notice similarities in the way you move across the rooftops and the way you handle a blade. I wish I could be as skilled as you are.' Ezio nodded, keeping to a steady walk and trying to blend in with the crowds.

'You are still young, Ezio, still learning and developing into your own person. I have been killing for many years, too long some would say. You are what, sixteen now? You still have many years to master your weapons, be patient and it will come to you.' Emily soothed, guiding him around a group of guards.

'I'm seventeen, eighteen in a few months.' Ezio countered, hiding his bracer under his cloak in an attempt to disguise what he was becoming.

'Ah, to be so young and innocent. When I was your age, I already had the blood of several men on my hands. I was probably only fifteen when I lost my innocence of killing and death, slaughtering a man who dared to harm my mother simply because she was a woman.' Emily sighed, shaking her head slowly. 'Have patience, Ezio, everything will fall into place for you.'

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Sneaking into the cloister where the art display was taking place, the pair climbed down from the rooftops and crept towards a bench, settling down together and blending in with the crowd. It was easy for Emily to tell Ezio was getting agitated at the cruel comments made about his father, she was getting irritated too but now was not the time to strike. Instead she calmly stoked their connection, looking like she was just idly toying with her necklace as she tried to calm Ezio before he did something rash.

'Wait for the right moment to make your move. This is the hardest part, the waiting and thinking of what must be done.' she uttered, resting one hand on his arm lightly.

'I am thinking more of what you told me instead.' he replied, glancing at her without looking up.
'No, here you must not think of anything but the job you have been given. Everything else can wait until this is over with.' Emily corrected, squeezing lightly. 'I promise when it is all said and done, we will sit and talk about all that you want to know.'

'Grazie.' Ezio nodded, turning his attention back to Uberto and trying not to think about the hand still resting on his arm.

Listening to the harsh words being said about his family and reining in his anger when it threatened to overwhelm him, Ezio drew strength from Emily’s presence beside him and found it easier to accept that they might be distantly related. She was so calm and in control, soothing him when the harsh words turned to him, Uberto stating that he had soft hands and an even softer head. He even went so far as to say he would have all four caught and executed before the week was out.

Feeling that the time was right at last, Ezio stood and made his way through the crowd, Emily right behind him as he squared off against Uberto. Without a second of hesitation, Ezio launched forward, grabbing onto Uberto and driving his knife into him five times in quick succession, the last going in deepest and taking him to the ground. Withdrawing his blade and going down to one knee, Ezio rolled him over and looked into his fading eyes, feeling relief that the deed was done and a flash of shame for turning into a killer.

Standing her ground beside Ezio, Emily waited for him to do whatever it was he was planning to do. This was strange, normally after an assassination the first goal was to get as far from trouble as possible, not stand over the dead or anything stupid like that. He did eventually stand and turn to look at the crowd, blood still dripping from his fingers as he glared at them from under his hood.

'Ezio, now is not the time to do anything stupid. We have to go, before there is more trouble.' Emily warned, one hand resting on her sword.

'The Auditore are not gone. I'm still here. Me! Ezio! Ezio Auditore!' Ezio challenged, his temper flaring at all the insults he had heard.

'Let's go, you idiota. The idea is to be discrete, not make a public statement of intent.' Emily hissed, grabbing his wrist and heading for the nearest escape route.

'Assassino!' someone yelled, her shrill voice piercing the air.

'Now the real fun begins. Everyone is going to be after us.' Emily spat, releasing Ezio and scrambling up onto the rooftop.

Running hard across the rooftop of the cloister, they vaulted over the street and kept on running, the voices of the guards fading behind them. Clearing another row of buildings, they dropped back down to street level and kept right on running, ducking guards and weaving through crowds. For a brief moment Emily was tempted to simply abandon Ezio and find her own way back to their hiding place but just as quickly she dismissed the idea, it would be just her luck she would be taken as the killer instead of him.

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Heads snapping up at the sound of a rather violent argument, the rest of the Auditore family got quite the shock when Ezio came flying backwards into the suite, looking like he’d gone four rounds with the guards and lost badly. His robes were splattered his blood, mostly around the collars and hood area, probably from his broken nose, split lip and various bleeding gashes.

Emily came through the door a few moments later, her knuckles bloody and swollen as she glared down at Ezio, her lip curled in a savage snarl as if daring him to get up again. Scrambling back away from her, Ezio took shelter in the only place he could find, trying to hide behind his mother’s skirt. Snorting in disgust, Emily leant back against the wall and waited, ignoring the blood dripping down her right thigh as she stood there.

'What the hell happened, Emily?' Libby asked, darting over to investigate the wound in her leg.
'How was I supposed to know it would go like that? I'm still new to all of this.' Ezio asked, peeking out from behind his mother, half expecting another beating for speaking up.

'It doesn't take a Master Assassin to know that once you make the kill, you don't stand there and make a statement about your allegiances. You do not stand over the body of the man who tried to kill your brothers and father and say things like that.' Emily sighed, sinking to the floor. 'You're lucky all those guards did was beat the snot out of you.'

'What did he say to stir the guards up this badly?' Giovanni asked, moving to check Ezio was okay. 'The Auditore are not gone. I'm still here. Me! Ezio! Ezio Auditore!' Emily recited, doing a pretty good impression of the way Ezio had addressed the crowd.

'He did what?' Aloysius gaped, jaw dropping at the thought of doing something that stupid. 'I'm not surprised you beat a lesson into him for that stunt.'

'I didn't have to beat that lesson into him, the guards caught him. Fool thought it smart to come down from the rooftops before we got to Paola's. Landed right between two groups of guards, didn't he. By the time I got to him, well you can see what happened.' Emily shrugged, accepting a clean bundle of cloth from Libby and pressing it to her wound. 'I admit to hitting him once in anger, the rest can be blamed on the guards.'

Sighing softly, Emily bound the cloth over her wound, flinching as the arrowhead pressed in deeper and struggled to her feet. Crossing the room, she gently guided Maria Auditore out of the way and sunk down beside Ezio, a firm hand on his shoulder keeping him from trying to make another escape from her wrath.

'Leave them, all of you.' Libby instructed, herding the rest of the family next door into the room where Petruccio slept and staying with them.

'What is it about you, Ezio; that means I can't seem to stay mad at you for more than a few minutes? You made a foolish mistake, opening your mouth before thinking it through. The blame is not yours alone though, we rushed you into a kill before you knew what you were doing or how to be successful at this. I should have warned you about desires to claim your kills and speak out against injustice but that always leads to pain. Perhaps now that you have learned this lesson, you will not be so hasty next time.' she offered, guiding his head to her left thigh and pinching his nose to try and stop the blood flow.

'Mi dispiace…mi dispiace.' Ezio uttered, looking like the wrong word would completely destroy him. 'I'll do better, I know I can. I just need to practise, I can make you proud, Emily. I can get this right. I swear it, I'll get it right and earn your trust again.'

'Oh Ezio, you should never have been pushed into this. You are far too gentle to deserve the life of a wanted man and a killer. This should never have been your fate.' Emily sighed, stroking his hair softly and trying to calm him. 'You made a mistake and paid the price. I know you will not make that error again.'

'No, I swear I won't. I've learned my lesson, I won't do anything stupid like that again.' Ezio promised, his confidence completely wiped out after that attack.

Crouching beside Emily, making it clear that he wasn't getting involved with any of this, Aloysius set a pile of clean rags down beside her and pointed over his shoulder to a half-open door that seemed to go into the next room.

'Maria and Giovanni have kindly offered their bathroom so you can both clean up. Federico is just filling the tub and Claudia has gone to fetch the medical supplies Paola keeps here. You can rest in here when you're done, Libby and I will handle things for a while.' he offered, keeping his gaze fixed on Emily's face.

'Thanks Aloysius, we could both use a wash. Though I'm going to need more than a bandage to fix this wound, the arrowhead is still in there deep.' Emily nodded, taking up a cloth and dabbing at Ezio's lip gently. 'I snapped the shaft off pretty much level with my skin but the head was beyond my abilities.'

'I can do it, Emily, if you'll let me of course. I have seen the doctors do it for other people, I know I
can do it.' Ezio offered, not looking at her as he spoke.
'I know you'll do it carefully, Ezio. Come now, let's get you cleaned up and then you can worry about my leg.' Emily nodded, releasing her grip on his nose. 'Go on, the bath has been filled in the next room. I will be there shortly, I just need to speak with Aloysius first.'
'Of course, Maestro.' Ezio replied, gaining his feet and stumbling towards the half-open door.

Waiting until he was gone, Emily accepted a helping hand up from Aloysius and sighed, dropping her gaze sadly. She was still troubled by the way she'd read the situation wrong, her usually sharp instincts for combat dulled by something she could not quite understand.
'Something is wrong Aloysius, I cannot explain what troubles me so much but it has something to do with the webs I see. I will try to figure it out but I do not know how far I can go while Ezio is so broken. His close call has left him shattered, his confidence in pieces and his self-belief lost to the wind.' Emily sighed, shaking her head slowly.
'Work on it, we'll cover for you. I'm close enough to Ezio in basic body shape, the guards won't know the difference. I'll see what Paola suggests we do next.' Aloysius nodded, making sure Emily was stable on her feet before leaving the room.

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Coming downstairs after a little touch up from Libby, Aloysius headed over to where Giovanni was talking with Paola, both of them looking so worried. Ezio's treatment had left them all a little damaged, they'd never thought the guards could be so brutal. For one so young to take such a beating, it tore at their hearts and made them all wish there was another option.
'I think we should leave this place.' Aloysius offered, stopping beside them and looking Giovanni in the eye. 'It's not safe here, for any of us.'
'My brother Mario owns a villa near Monteriggioni. We will be safe there.' Giovanni nodded, already thinking of how they would get there.
'Ezio is still a wanted man, it is not safe to leave.' Paola warned, looking Aloysius over quickly. 'You did not have that scar earlier.'
'What would you have us do, then?' Aloysius asked, making sure not to disturb the scar. 'Libby borrowed some make up from one of your girls and made an attempt to make me look more like Ezio to hide the fact he is temporarily out of action. So long as I don't let the guards get too close, they'll never know.'
'It might work.' Paola shrugged, not confident in the plan but it was better than nothing. 'I've seen posters all across the district. Tearing them down will help the city forget his face. No doubt the heralds incite the public. Bribe them and they'll speak of other things. Or you could hunt those that bear false witness against him. They traded dignity for coin. Their loss would not be mourned. Do any of these things and you should all be free to leave.'
'Grazie Paola, you have been a big help.' Aloysius replied, lifting his hood and hiding his deep brown eyes. 'Padre, do I pass your inspection?'
'Si, you will be fine so long as you do not let the guards get too close.' Giovanni nodded, quite impressed by the way Aloysius could impersonate his second son so believably.

Stepping out of the building, Aloysius spotted the guards and turned away from them, careful not to reveal who he was under the hood. Moving at pace with the crowd, avoiding guard patrols and keeping his hand away from his sword, he did his best to look boring and harmless towards the guards as he made his way through the twisted streets. Picking up the pace once he was out of sight of the guards, he came up behind one of the men that bore false witness against Ezio. Sneaking closer, he grabbed the man and shoved his knife deep into his back. Dropping the body to the ground, Aloysius moved on quickly, blending back into the crowd and leaving the corpse to be found later.

Here he felt comfortable, slipping quietly through the people and dealing out death to those that made
Ezio's life so dangerous and threatened their family. Ripping down posters and tucking them under his cloak until he could destroy them in a fire somewhere, or even let Ezio do it so he could feel part of this again. Maybe it would help him bounce back from the beating he'd taken.

*~(^)~(+)~(^)~(+)~(^)~* Returning after nearly an hour of running around the district tearing down posters and knifing those that caused them such headaches, Aloysius smiled at the sight of the entire family waiting downstairs for him, Petruccio sleeping safely in Libby's lap. Approaching the family, Aloysius flipped his cloak back to reveal a thick sheaf of posters he'd gathered up.

'Here Ezio, you deserve the right to get rid of these. I figure they'll burn beautifully.' he chuckled, handing the pile over and watching the confusion in his eyes. 'I'm close enough in basic shape to you that with just a little make up and a cautious step, the guards never realised the difference.'

'You…grazie Aloysius.' Ezio replied, stunned by the risk Aloysius had taken for him. 'You did not have to take such a risk for me, we could have made it work.'

'I'll do anything for family, Ezio. I might not have a direct blood link to you but you are still family.' Aloysius shrugged, clapping him on the shoulder. 'Go on, get rid of those and we can get out of Firenze before trouble breaks out again.'

Smile growing, Ezio crossed to the fireplace and scattered the parchment over the logs before accepting the steel and stone from Paola. Adding a little tinder to the centre of the parchment pile he got to work, chipping away until he was rewarded with a blazing little fire. Using one of the fire irons leaning against the fireplace, he spread out the small fires until all of the parchments were burning, obliterating the evidence completely.

'Okay, with those burning we should be safe to leave Firenze and head for Monteriggioni.' Aloysius nodded, draping one arm around Federico's shoulders.

'Raising new problems but we'll make it work.' Emily agreed, glancing at Ezio. 'Ready for this?' Ezio replied, still looking the worse for wear but there was a brightness in his eyes again. 'I am more concerned about your leg. My sewing is not very good.'

'So who is carrying Petruccio this time?' Libby asked, looking down at the sick little boy sleeping in her lap. 'Don't even say it Emily, you're in no shape.'

'I will, he's my baby brother.' Federico replied, stepping up to take him.

'No, we will need your sword arm free just in case we do get into trouble. I will take him, he is not that heavy.' Maria corrected, working with Libby to get Petruccio secured on her back.

'Thank you again, Paola. For everything you have done.' Aloysius nodded, kissing her cheek softly. 'Stay safe, all of you. Stay vigilant. I suspect the road ahead is yet long.' Paola replied, moving through the group to kiss Federico and Ezio as well.

Leaving the safety of their hideaway, the group started towards the nearest gate out of the city, protecting Maria, Claudia and Petruccio in the middle of the group. It was risky to have Federico and Giovanni on the perimeter but they refused to hide away while their family was in such peril. Making use of the crowds and taking the back routes instead of being seen in too many of the larger public spaces, they kept moving constantly, making sure to look as non threatening as possible while they were so exposed.

Getting nearer to the gate, Libby stepped forward and reached into her florin pouch, throwing a handful of coins towards the guards. Abandoning their posts blocking the gate, the guards scrambled for the money, allowing the family to pass unmolested by them. Clearing the city, Giovanni took the lead again, guiding his family towards Monteriggioni and their only safe refuge.
Spotting the walls of Monteriggioni in the distance, the exhausted family let out a sigh of relief and pushed on, finding the strength to keep going when all they wanted to do was make it someplace safe and rest. It had been a long hard trip thus far and they were all running on empty, trading roles within the group with growing frequency.

Slowing when they were confronted with a group emerging from the darkness, Aloysius respectfully tucked Giovanni behind him and turned to confront the leader of this group. Behind him, the rest of the family turned to confront the threat coming at them from all sides, bringing out weapons and sharing them around with those who had none.

'Buongiorno, Ezio! How could you leave Firenze without saying a proper goodbye?'

'Ezio!' Claudia called, watching the Florentine Guards gathering around them.

'What do you want, Vieri?' Aloysius asked, motioning for Ezio to keep his mouth shut.

'So many things! A larger palazzo, two new steeds, a prettier bride…oh and yes, your life.' Vieri replied, drawing his sword and sending his guards in to do battle.

'Feel like some family payback, Emily?' Ezio uttered, flicking out his hidden blade. 'Vieri is the one who put this scar on my lip.'

'I'll handle him.' Emily nodded, drawing her sword and leaping into battle.

Spreading out without leaving any openings where any of Vieri's men could get through and harm the more vulnerable members of the group, the combative side of the family let fly with their abilities, closing the gaps when someone needed to move out and duel individually then letting them back in when the fight was dealt with.

'What will happen now that there's no one left to help you? I have such wonderful things in store for your mother and sister!' Vieri taunted, trying to get a rise out of Ezio.

Pushed to the edge of exhaustion, the family were all a little sloppy, catching the occasional blow from their foes and a moving a little slower than they normally would. Hearing a cry of pain, Ezio finished with his latest opponent and turned, just in time to see his father hit the ground, a pool of blood already staining the ground.

'Cazzo! Stand your ground!' Emily roared, sheathing her sword and hurrying to Giovanni's side to render aid. 'Get back to the battle, Ezio. Watch my back.'

'I grow tired of this game. Finish them. And do not spare the women.' Vieri called, sending the rest of his forces into the battle.

Before his men even got close, most of them were taken down by arrows that seemed to come out of nowhere. Wiping the blood off his hidden blade using the tunic of one of the downed guards, Aloysius smiled faintly and stood, waiting for more of Vieri's men to appear.

'What sorcery is this?!' Vieri demanded, looking around for the archers.

'Not sorcery, boy. Skill!' a deeper voice called, almost seeming to echo from the surrounding trees.

'Show yourself!' Vieri challenged, bringing up his sword again.

'As you wish!' the mysterious voice replied, an arrow knocking his sword from his hand.

Stepping forward, Libby reached up and pushed her hood back, letting this Vieri character get a good look at her enchanting features and soft blonde hair. Advancing dangerously, she knew she had his attention, he didn't seem to know whether to run or try his luck with her.
This is what you get when you threaten the Auditore family, you piece of scum.' she snarled, whipping out a throwing knife and launching it at him. Her aim was perfect, slamming into his genitals at full force.

'Nicely done, Libby!' Claudia called, quite pleased with Libby's actions in defence of the family.

 Appearing from the shadows around them, a heavy set man ran straight towards the exhausted family, a motley bunch of men coming with him to join the battle. Spreading out, they readied to face another wave of guards that came up from behind them.

'Here! Use this!' the heavy set man called, throwing Aloysius a replacement sword.

'Kill them! Kill them all!' Vieri squeaked, holding his blooding manhood around Libby's knife.

Drawing a second sword from his belt, the heavy set man charged Vieri, sending the young man hobbling away as fast as he could with a throwing knife in his manhood. It was little more than a slow walk but he was leaving the battle field and so was allowed to go and tell his family of his shameful defeat.

With the aid of the heavily set man and his men, the battle was over within fifteen minutes, leaving everyone panting for breath as they looked around at the devastation. Approaching the stranger that had come to their aid, Aloysius presented the sword in both hands.

'You have our thanks.' he offered, bowing his head in respect.

'Keep the sword, Ezio.' the stranger replied, reaching out to place one hand on Aloysius' shoulder. 'Do I know you from somewhere?' Ezio asked, coming up beside Aloysius and brushing back his hood. 'At least you know the disguise is good.'

'Don't you recognise me? It's a-me, Mario!' the stranger greeted, throwing his arms wide.

'Uncle Mario?' Ezio asked, grunting as he was swept up in a bone cracking bear hug and lifted completely off the ground.

'It's been too long, nipote! Far too long!' Mario replied, setting Ezio down and patting his shoulder. 'Merda!' Emily snapped, drawing attention from all around. 'I need more hands over here!'

'Father!' Ezio cried, shoving past Mario in his rush to help his father.

Everyone rushed to surround Giovanni, lending whatever help they could to Emily's battle but it was all for nothing. Surrounded by his family, three generations separated by so many years, Giovanni lost his final battle and went limp, glazed eyes staring up at a cloudy sky.

'No! No, damn you! You are not giving up on us Giovanni! Come on, breathe damn you!' Emily cried, desperate to not fail this family she'd only just discovered.

'You tried, Emily, that's what really matters. You tried your best.' Ezio soothed, drawing her back and holding her tight. 'You gave it your best, this is as it must be.'

'Mi dispiace. Mi dispiace.' Emily uttered, sagging into his strength as she wept.

'Requiescat in pace.' Mario offered, shaking fingers closing Giovanni's eyes respectfully. 'Goodbye my brother. My only regret is our last words were said in anger.'

For a few precious minutes, there was no thought of the treachery that had forced the Auditore family to flee, no time to worry about their situation or how they all came to be united, there was only the grief of a family that had lost a treasured brother, husband, father and ancestor. Even those that had only a few priceless days to get to know him felt his loss greatly, he had helped them all in his own special way, guiding and treasuring them as much as he loved his own children.

'We should get out of here, it would not be above Vieri to send more troops to attack us.' Federico sniffed, wiping his eyes and trying to be strong.

'Si, you are right Federico. We are too exposed out here.' Mario agreed, unhooking his cloak from his shoulders and flicking it out over his brother.

Wrapping the cloak around the body, most of the family moved back, making space for Mario to come around and gently pick his brother up, cradling the limp body to his chest. Slowly he started
towards the fortified town in the distance, the family gathering behind him for the solemn procession to the town and the villa overlooking it.

Resting a hand on Ezio's shoulder as they walked, Aloysius held out the sword Mario had handed him, the intention clear in his eyes. Mario had first thought he'd given the sword to Ezio so it was only fitting Ezio carry it. Nodding slowly, Ezio took the sword and secured it before turning his attention back to Emily and his mother, comforting both women and trying to keep it together.

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With Giovanni laid to rest in a rather stunning crypt behind the Villa Auditore, Mario led the family around to the front and turned, looking at the family but most of his attention was on his two young nephews and their unusual friends.

'Now that you have had the tour, nipote, you should go and outfit yourself. My men in the market are expecting you. Return here when you're finished and we'll begin.' he instructed, not specifying either boy so both would go.

'Begin? Begin what?' Ezio asked, glancing at Federico in confusion.

'I thought you'd come here to train?' Mario queried, turning his full attention to his nephews.

'No, Uncle. We came here to escape Firenze and we intend to take our family further still.' Federico replied, resting one hand on Ezio's shoulder.

'But what about your father? He'd want you to finish his work.' Mario continued, unable to believe what he was hearing.

'What work? Our father was a banker.' Ezio shrugged, completely confused again and he didn't like it one bit.

'Wait…he did not tell you?' Mario asked, jaw dropping in disbelief.

'We have no idea what you're talking about.' Federico answered, just as baffled as his brother.

'Ma che mi combini, Giovanni? Where to even begin…' Mario groused, shaking his head. 'Go and fetch the gear in the market. It will give me time to think.'

'But-' both brothers started, looking around for any answers.

'But that's that. We'll talk more later.' Mario repeated, leaving no room for argument. 'Some spending money, should you need it. And if you find yourselves in need of rest, I've prepared rooms for you on the top floor of the Villa.'

'Don't look so worried, you two. When you return we'll leave Mario feeling just as confused and lost as you both feel right now. Just you wait until we try to explain the webs and how we all fit together.' Emily chuckled, giving them each a hug before following the rest of the group inside.

Grumbling about their tasks when they'd rather just sit down and rest, the brothers turned and headed back towards the town, their youthful energy and easy smiles long gone. It seemed that Uncle Mario was not going to give them time to mourn their father or even rest from their journey before throwing them into some mystery work their father had been doing in secret.

'What do you suppose this is all about?' Ezio asked, pulling his cloak over his left side a little more.

'I have no clue, brother. It sounds so crazy but then, look at Aloysius and Emily. Their story sounded crazy but I believe them.' Federico shrugged, draping one arm around Ezio's shoulders.

'I still think they are perhaps a little crazy but then, we probably are too.' Ezio agreed, feeling a little lighter for the joke but he still hurt.

'Come brother, the sooner we finish this errand the sooner we can get some payback on Uncle Mario for confusing us and making us run around like this so soon after losing father.' Federico grinned, picking up the pace a little.

Greaves and daggers from the blacksmith and medicines from the local doctor, the brothers headed back up to the Villa, listening for any signs of the debate having started without them. The Villa was quiet though, the family busily settling in and rinsing off the road dust as they waited. Claudia was in the front hall, complaining about this place and wishing they could go home, Libby patiently
listening to her and offering support as best she could.

'Ah good, you're back. Head into Mario's office, Emily and Aloysius are in there trying to make him see sense.' Libby directed, glancing at the brothers. 'I know you're not happy here Claudia but this is the safest place to be until we get all of this sorted out. Everything will be okay, you'll see.'

Trusting Libby to look after their sister, the older brothers made their way through the Villa towards the sounds of arguing voices. Aloysius and Emily had started the discussion without them and by the sounds of it, Mario wasn't too happy about what he was hearing.

'Sounds like you two are having fun.' Ezio called, sidling up beside Emily and putting a hand on her shoulder.

'You could say that Ezio.' Emily shrugged, turning to him and holding up her right hand. 'Come, let's try a more visual display to try and convince your Uncle about all of this.'

'You will not convince me of your lies.' Mario countered, arms folded across his chest as he glared at Emily with such distrust.

'Come now Uncle, don't be so sure of what is false.' Ezio grinned, putting his right hand to Emily's and watching the web form.

It was different this time, as was to be expected, pulling Mario into the web and showing an empty space where Giovanni's line had once been. Shimmering in the light, they came into clear sight, causing Mario to just stare in disbelief as the lines connected everyone together in a web of something he did not understand.

'The Auditore line never died out, as much as certain people wished it had. For 600 years it has lived on, twisting through places you don't even know exist yet. From Ezio through his children and down through the ages, his blood is mine. One night of passion with a woman he barely knew and onwards through the centuries, Federico lives through Aloysius. A life lived so proudly, carried through so many generations, Claudia's memory is continued in Libby.' Emily spoke, the web changing around her, the generations between these long separated relations appearing and twisting into their own stories around her.

Mario could only watch in complete confusion as Libby and Claudia entered and the web wrapped around them as well, binding them into the story of the Auditore family in ways he'd never thought possible. Slowly the three partnerships moved, stepping closer to each other and doing something strange. This whole thing was strange of course but their actions here only made it more so.

His attention was once more drawn to Ezio and Emily, the pair completely in tune with each other. Reaching out, Ezio pressed his right hand to Emily's chest, fingers slipping under the open edges of her white robes. Emily matched his actions, pressing her palm to firm muscles and brushing the silvers beads he wore around his neck. Left hands coming up, they brought their heads together, fingers sinking into thick hair pulled back with whatever was to hand. Ezio had his red ribbon, Emily used what looked to be a black length of cord.

Jaw dropping again as a soft silvery light surrounded each generational friendship, Mario had no clue what was going on as he watched and waited for something, anything to make sense in all of this. The light appeared brighter in places, strange places like lips and knuckles and legs, each partnership brightening in a different pattern.

Just as slowly the light faded out again and Mario stepped back, one hand landing on his desk before he fell in an undignified heap. In perfect harmony, the three partnerships turned to him and the family connection could no longer be denied. In each pair, features had altered slightly, blurring the lines between his family and their long ahead descendents.

'600 years fades out when the family reunites, we are blood and we will fight for the honour of the Auditore family. We will open your eyes to things you never even thought possible and we will show you just what is possible when we try.' Aloysius nodded, rubbing the spot on his thigh where
the light had been brightest. 'At least now I know I'm not the only one to take bad tumbles while free running in Firenze.'

'We all have bad days, Aloysius.' Federico laughed, brushing at a wide scar now in place just behind and below his left ear.

'My apologies that you are perhaps not quite as beautiful anymore, Claudia. My life of war is now yours to understand and share.' Libby sighed, gazing at the thin scar on Claudia's neck.

'It matters little to me, Libby. I would rather know my family than worry about looking perfect all the time.' Claudia replied, hugging Libby close.

Ezio and Emily though, their connection was obviously much stronger than those his brother and sister had with their descendants. Not only did they look more like each other now but they carried themselves similarly and both wore that half grin Ezio so often sported when he was up to his usual mischief. And there on Emily's lips, perfectly matching in shape and size, she had Ezio's scar, completely locking them together.

'You always did enjoy showing off, Emily.' Aloysius remarked, turning to regard the pair.

'This was not my doing, Aloysius.' Emily replied, rolling her shoulders quickly. 'We all have different stories to work with, apparently this is mine.'

'And I can't say I mind the idea so much anymore.' Ezio grinned, turning to her and lightly tracing his thumb over the scar they both wore.

'You don't look so innocent anymore. This scar wipes that thought away.' Emily agreed, brushing his collar back to reveal the thick scar now carving over his right collarbone and down over his back. 'A kill that went poorly, I was lucky to survive.'

'I wear it with pride.' Ezio nodded, noticing that he was completely aware of that scar but he figured eventually that would fade from his thoughts.

'We will continue this discussion later, there are more important things to be done than figuring out why we are here. Pay attention to what your Uncle is trying to tell you, Ezio. It might not make much sense now but it will in time.' Emily guided, stepping back from him. 'Listen, learn and you'll make it far Ezio.'

'Right now, Federico, just because you are the eldest does not mean this passes to you automatically. Prove you are the better man and earn your place.' Aloysius added, turning and leaving the office with Emily.

'This is not your conversation to worry about, Claudia. Let the men talk war, I'd rather talk about other things for a change.' Libby chuckled, leaving the room with Claudia and heading upstairs.

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Emerging from the Villa, still thinking about what Mario had told them, Ezio and Federico did as they were bade, vaulting into the sparring ring just outside the Villa and turning to Mario again. Neither was feeling particularly thrilled about the idea of learning to fight from their Uncle but it would give them a better chance of surviving the journey ahead.

'I hope you don't mind if we train with the boys instead of your men, Mario.' Aloysius called, flipping off the upper terrace wall and landing on the narrow low wall around the sparring ring.

'Under your direction of course. We're not here to take your place, merely see what else will be revealed.' Emily added, coming up from the lower section of the stairs and landing catlike on the wall. 'I am curious to know if blade work is instinctual to this family or not.'

'I admit to being curious about what you two might be capable of. By all means, just do not harm them too severely.' Mario nodded, moving back a step. 'You can swing a sword to be sure. But offence alone will not carry a battle. You must survive long enough to strike. I will teach you how to dodge.'

'You said that our father was more than just a banker?' Federico called, his full attention on Aloysius as he spoke.

'No use dancing around it, I suppose. Your father was an Assassin, boys.' Mario sighed, resting one
hand on his own sword.

'We told you before: our father was a paper pusher.' Ezio replied, eyes on Emily as they circled slowly in readiness for their first exercise.

'Yeah and I thought my great Italian ancestor owned a vineyard in Tuscany.' Emily shrugged, dropping a little hint of where Ezio's life would go.

'No. He was born and bred to kill.' Mario added, surprised by how easily Emily gave away snippets of things that should not be known.

'I find this difficult to believe.' Federico denied, shaking his head quickly.

'What of the list Ezio carries? Do you think it's merely a catalogue of debts? It holds the names of those responsible for the attempted murder of half your family.' Mario continued, not sure how to talk any sense into these two.

'Come, enough talk of Giovanni for a moment. You must learn to fight boys, even if you only intend to flee the reality of your fate.' Aloysius taunted, drawing his sword and motioning for Federico to come at him.

The boys proved to be quite light on their feet, easily dancing clear of the sharpened swords Emily and Aloysius were using. This was no gentle training exercise, if their concentration lagged they would surely be injured severely.

'Bene. We've taught you how to avoid your enemy's attacks. Now you'll learn how to turn them to your advantage!' Mario praised, glad to see the next generation were getting to grips with their new duties as the next Auditore Assassins.

'All this talk of Assassins and Templars. It reeks of fantasy.' Federico growled, still unconvinced about any of this business.

'Like something from an old parchment covered in arcane writing, perhaps?' Mario asked, his gaze going to Ezio.

'How did you know?' Ezio asked, thinking of the Codex page still secure in his largest belt pouch.

'You have your father's blade. I figured you'd have the Codex page he was holding as well.' Mario replied, less interested in Federico now that Ezio was showing a greater acceptance.

'Codex?' Ezio inquired, his attention caught now and his curiosity sparked.

'Si. A guide to the inner workings of the order - it's origin, purpose and techniques. Our creed, if you will. Your father believed the Codex contained a powerful secret. Something that would change the world. Perhaps it's why they came for him...' Mario explained, grateful to see Ezio taking such interest. There was still hope for him to take Giovanni's place.

'Assassins, Templars, Codex pages... This is a lot to take in.' Ezio replied, glancing to Emily again and seeing her nodding slowly.

'You need to open your mind, Ezio. Always remember: Nothing is true, Everything is permitted.' Emily coaxed, launching forward for another round with him.

Shaking his head, Aloysius refused to spar with Federico again, realising the same thing Mario already had decided. Although the eldest brother and by right of birth, the proper one to follow in Giovanni's footsteps, Ezio was proving to be the more willing to accept that he was destined to be an Assassin. Federico had no interest in taking on such a job, he would rather live a life of ease but not Ezio. Ezio was willing to throw his old life away and learn, inspired to change by what had been revealed to him.

'I will not fight you, Federico. You have already proven that you have no interest in becoming an Assassin like your father and every generation after you. You would rather sit about and do nothing.' Aloysius sighed, sheathing his blade and leaving the arena. 'I guess that explains why Emily was always better with a blade than I ever was.'

'I can do better, Aloysius.' Federico promised, following Aloysius out of the sparring arena.

'It's too late, Federico. The right to follow in Giovanni's footsteps goes to Ezio, you get to stay here and help your Uncle take care of Monteriggioni.' Aloysius shrugged, leaning back against the wall near Mario.
Spitting out a mouthful of blood, Emily smiled and wiped her chin, quite pleased with Ezio’s development. He was still reluctant to engage at times but when he did, he was an instinctual fighter, flowing with a fight that wasn't of his own creation but still he knew where the next strike would come from.

'Bene, you have come a long way already Ezio.' she praised, turning back to Mario. 'He is the right choice, Mario. The brotherhood would be lucky to have him.'

'I have no doubt of that now, Emily.' Mario nodded, proud of Ezio's development, now that just had to convince him to stay. 'Sometimes Ezio, you can force an enemy to engage before they are ready. Many a fight has been lost when someone lost their temper over something their opponent said or did to irritate them. Try it.'

Ezio's taunts were creative and cheeky, words and actions chosen that would incite a weaker man to violence. Emily responded accordingly but never really cared about what he was trying out, she wanted him to get a feel for what he could do in a real fight. He also learned a valuable lesson about keeping his distance from an armed combatant while he didn't have a weapon in his hands. Slicing into his right forearm, Emily gasped and withdrew her blade, sheathing it quickly even as Aloysius vaulted the wall again and pressed a folded square of linen to the deep wound.

'These things happen Ezio, we've all done similar things at one time or another.' Aloysius soothed, stepping aside as Emily came up.

'I take the blame for that one, Ezio. I should have put my sword away when we moved to taunting.' she offered, slipping one arm around his shoulders.

'It's okay Emily, I should have been more aware of my surrounds. I never should have let you back me into a corner like that.' Ezio shrugged, fully aware that such a hit could have been much worse. 'Come on, let's get you inside and cleaned up. You'll probably need stitches in that one.' Emily grinned, trying to lighten the mood as she helped Ezio over the wall. 'Tomorrow morning, Mario?' 'Si, there is still much to teach.' Mario nodded, moving aside quickly.

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Wearing a leather bracer he'd borrowed from Aloysius to protect his newest injury, Ezio returned to the sparring ring the next morning, still thinking about what he'd learned from the books he'd been reading in Mario's library until late into the night. He still had so many questions that needed answers but for now, he had other things to focus on. His questions could wait a little longer.

He took the time alone to get a better feel for the sword Mario had given him, testing his injured arm to make sure he was fit for training. It pulled a little but he did not feel the stitches break or tear through his skin so he thought he would be okay to push on and train. Emily had done a good job patching him up again.

'Up so early after being awake so late last night, surely a good sign Ezio.' Emily laughed, bounding up onto the wall nearby and watching him spar with his shadow. 'I trust you found something interesting in your reading.'

'I did, many things actually.' Ezio nodded, sheathing his sword. 'And I practised a few tricks I have seen you do at times.'

'You are doing so well, Ezio.' Emily praised, watching him leap up onto the wall beside her without needing to put his hand out to provide support.

'Buongiorno.' Mario called, making his way down the stairs. 'How is the arm this morning, Ezio?' 'A little tender but I will be fine, Uncle.' Ezio replied, quite content to perch on the wall beside Emily. 'Aloysius leant me a spare bracer to protect it so I could get back to my lessons.'

'Good. Come then, take your place and we will begin.' Mario nodded, approaching the wall but he knew better than to get too close.

Jumping off the wall and taking up their usual places on the soft dirt, Ezio wondered what he might learn today and if he would end up with another new scar or two by the end of it.
'You're making fine progress, Ezio! Today, we're going to teach you how to position yourself in battle. Where you stand and how you move can make all the difference' Mario began, standing tall and waiting for Emily to move. 'Don't think I haven't seen you picking apart my library. I trust you believe me now?'

'Yes. My father was... an Assassin. But why the need for such secrecy?' Ezio replied, keeping most of his attention on Emily so she couldn't sneak up on him.

'Are you familiar with the Templars? One of several Knightly orders formed during the Crusades. History teaches that they were disbanded nearly 200 years ago in France. Only they weren't. Merely pushed underground where they continued their nefarious work.' Mario guided, glad to see Ezio was coming to realise the truth, unlike Federico.

'What work?' Ezio asked, looking for answers to all the questions that bothered him.

'The Templars seem dominion over man. And we, the Assassins, are sworn to stand against them.' Emily replied, having known that truth for many years.

'Was Uberto one of them?' Ezio was on a roll now, finally getting the answers he wanted.

'Yes.' Mario confirmed, hopeful that Ezio could put the pieces together in his head.

'And the other names on my father's list?'

'Templars as well.' Mario answered, setting Ezio up to fully grasp what was going on.

'That means Vieri...' Ezio snapped, catching on and annoyed he hadn't realised sooner.

'Just like his father, Francesco. Likely the entire Pazzi family.' Mario nodded, putting it all out there for Ezio to consider.

'It would explain many things.' Ezio agreed, absentmindedly rubbing his scarred lip.

'It certainly does.' Emily chuckled, drawing her sword. 'I will try not to get you again, Ezio. But you must try harder to escape before I can get close enough.'

Moving quickly out of each danger zone as Emily advanced, Ezio proved all over again that he was a fast learner. One kiss from Emily's sword and he was not going to be caught out like that again. He danced around her, fleet of foot and wise with his steps, never going the same direction twice as she kept coming at him.

'You have come such a long way, Ezio. Well done.' Emily praised, stopping and sheathing her blade again. 'Now it is time for your true test. Plant your Uncle in the ground and show that you have learnt how to fight.'

'My... si Emily.' Ezio blanched, having never expected that sort of a challenge when he was still just a beginner with combat.

'Don't look so nervous Ezio, you can do this. I believe in you.' Emily grinned, leaping up onto the wall and vaulting down as Mario climbed into the ring. 'Don't forget, Ezio, Assassins don't always fight fair.'

Not putting too much thought into Emily's words, Ezio circled slowly, watching his Uncle and reading his movements. Choosing his moment, he leapt into the battle and claimed an early advantage, his Uncle a few seconds slower to draw his sword and Ezio claimed first blood in the battle. Pushing his advantage now, Ezio's confidence was unshakeable, he owned this fight and suddenly realised just what Emily had meant. Catching a blow against his sword, Ezio turned slightly and tangled up Mario's ankles, dumping him into the dirt.

Not sure if that was good enough for a win, Ezio skipped back out of range, blade held ready just in case Mario came at him again. Chuckling softly, Mario sat up and shook his head, almost as if he could not believe he'd just been put down by his nephew. Relaxing a little, Ezio put his sword away and came over to help Mario back to his feet, a little surprised he'd taken him out so easily.

'Well done, nipote! You've really come into your own.' Mario praised, stooping to grab his dropped sword and tuck it away safely.

'Thank you, Uncle, for all you have given me.' Ezio replied, resting one hand on Mario's shoulder. 'You're family! Such is my duty and my desire.' Mario shrugged, proud of how far Ezio and come
and confident he would go so much further.
'I'm glad you had us stay.' Ezio continued, jumping a little when Emily landed beside him. 'One more
time and it's you that will be kissing the dirt.'
'Maybe one day Ezio, maybe one day.' Emily laughed, leaning her elbow on his left shoulder.
'Good. You've reconsidered leaving.' Mario nodded, ignoring Emily's teasing for the moment.
'We sail for Spain in three days.' Ezio corrected, turning away from his Uncle and forcing Emily to
stop leaning on him as he walked away.
'But nipote, I have given you these skills that you might be better prepared to strike against our
enemies…' Mario started, distressed that Ezio still did not understand.
'And if they find us, I will.' Ezio replied, determined to leave.
'You want to leave, Ezio? To throw away everything your father fought and died for? To deny your
heritage? Fine! Come vuoi. Arrivederci e buona fortuna.' Mario snapped, turning and storming back
towards the Villa.
'Ezio, Ezio, Ezio. When will you ever learn?' Emily sighed, turning away from him and leaving the
ring. 'I really thought you were the one I could believe in. I guess I was wrong again.'
'But Emily…Uncle, wait-' Ezio called, starting after her but she was out of sight before he could
even get to the wall. 'Why are they so upset?'
'I can't say about Emily, don't really know her. As for your Uncle, how can he not be? Vieri's been
harassing us ever since you first arrived. To be expected, I suppose. Given his heritage…' one of the
mercenaries replied, approaching and leaning on the wall. 'You had best find them and fix this,
before you find yourself without a single friend left.'

Hanging his head for a moment, Ezio took off back towards the Villa, vaulting the wall and hustling
up the stairs. He just didn't get it, wasn't he doing right by his family by getting them safely out of
danger? Though he supposed that really should have been Federico's job, he was the eldest after all.
This business with following in father's footsteps should have been Federico's duty too but no, he'd
refused to go along with it, leaving the burden on Ezio's shoulders.

Still cursing Federico's behaviour, Ezio hurried into Mario's office, calling for his Uncle and Emily
but he was met only by another mercenary almost as if his presence had been anticipated and
prepared for.
'Where is everyone?' Ezio asked, deciding to deal with Federico's lazy behaviour later.
'They ride for San Gimignano to slay that snake, Vieri.' the mercenary replied, seemingly unsurprised
by Ezio's appearance.
'I wish to join them.' Ezio nodded, not even sure he could catch up.
'You'll find what you need at the stables.' the mercenary directed, leaving the office at a jog.

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Turning at the sound of a horse approaching at speed, Emily sighed as Ezio dismounted and
approached them, one hand reaching out to her but his gaze was on his Uncle. Growling low in her
throat, Emily swatted his hand away, refusing to forgive so easily this time.
'Ezio? What are you doing here?' Mario asked, surprised to see his nephew again so soon.
'Taking responsibility. Vieri troubles you because of me.' Ezio replied, trying not to show how much
it hurt that Emily wouldn't even look at him.
'He's got an even bigger ego than you, Aloysius.' Emily scoffed, shaking her head.
'Vieri troubles us because he is a Templar and we are Assassins.' Mario corrected, glancing at Emily
and wondering if she would ever forgive Ezio's words.
'Either way, I wish to help.' Ezio nodded, still not sure what to do but he couldn't just leave this
alone.
'Va bene. Then listen close: First we must find a way inside the city. Though it seems Vieri expects
us. He has sealed the gates and sent his men to guard them. Fortunately for us, the city is larger than
his host. The southern gate suffers for it. So this is where we will strike. Pronti?' Mario briefed,
watching Ezio closely and wondering if he would be able to manage this. 'Pronti.' Ezio replied, hoping he didn't disappoint anyone again.

Coming up beside Ezio as they headed towards the city, Aloysius grabbed the younger man and forced him to slow, giving them a few precious minutes to talk before the battle. If someone didn't deal with this soon, things would never be the same again.

'Ezio, you need to be the bigger man right now. Emily does not trust easily, she's been let down and abandoned by everyone who ever meant anything to her. You are blood to her, the last relative she has spoken to in nearly fifteen years. Don't let her last words to you be full of pain and regret. When this is done, go to her and make amends, before she decides to leave and wage this war alone. Only you can stop her, only you can bring her back into the family.' Aloysius pleaded, having become so close to Emily since they leapt off that belltower together and plunged into the Auditore life and were forced to learn to get along instead of their constant bickering.

'I will Aloysius.' Ezio nodded, spotting Emily moving with the mercenaries and hurrying after her. He only managed to catch up with her when she slid to a stop beside Mario, looking up at the city walls in front of them. She growled again, fist cocked back as if to lash out but Ezio was faster, catching her hands and turning her to face him, needing to make this right before he went in there and risked his life for something he still didn't fully understand. Still clutching her hands, he dropped to his knees and looked up at her, pleading with his eyes for her to forgive him.

'I forgave you easily for your mistake with Uberto, you will not wheedle into my forgiveness this time Ezio. Earn it or forget ever having it.' Emily hissed, trying to pull away but he refused to let her walk away before he'd said his bit.

'You ask so much of me Emily, every day you demand I master more techniques but you forget that I am not like you. I did not kill a man at fifteen to protect my mother. I cannot look back on my kills and be proud because I feel nothing but disgust and shame for taking another life, regardless of what they've done. I hate what I am being asked to become but I know I must do it anyway. No one else will, it must be me and I am not ready.' Ezio tried, so close to begging and fairly sure he looked absolutely pathetic right now. 'Please Emily, forgive my fear and indecision.'

'Why didn't you say anything about this, nipote?' Mario asked, crouching beside Ezio and placing a supportive hand on his back. 'Why not speak of this earlier? We would have given you time to work it out, if only we knew what troubled you so much.'

'Because you have not given me the time to work out what I feel about any of this. You're in such a rush to avenge father that you forget I am still just a young man, unaccustomed to anything more brutal than a fistfight in the street.' Ezio replied, not taking his eyes off Emily. 'I am not a killer, the very idea makes me feel sick.'

She was still watching him with hardened eyes, lip curled in an angry snarl that only made the scar he gave her more prominent. Failure slammed into him, he'd taken a risk on trying to rebuild his connection to her and he'd failed miserably. Releasing Emily, he hugged his abdomen as he dropped his gaze, his youth and inexperience shining through all over again.

'I should not be so quick to anger with you Ezio. This is all so confusing for me as well, I still do not know exactly where or when I am and I have no idea how to get home to my war with the Templars. I see things you can never understand and those things terrify me so much. I hate that we must be so hard on you but I know you are a big part of why I was dragged back here to stand at your side. Something you did or did not do affects my time, my home and we must stop it before my world is torn apart.' Emily sighed, sinking down in front of him. 'Mi dispiace Ezio, I should have been paying more attention to you and less to the evil I can see.'

'I do not understand, Emily.' Ezio uttered, lifting his gaze slowly. 'What is it that you see?'

'The golden web I share with you is just one that I see. I see the reach of our friends as well, the tangled lines that connect people we meet to people in my time that I know. I also bear witness to the Templar lines that lead through the years from yours to mine and there are so many of them, I see
more red than gold and blue combined. That means that no matter what happens here, there will always be more Templars in my time and not enough Assassins to deal with the trouble. We can change that. Uberto's death destroyed dozens of threats to my time, ending Templar lines before they even began. Together, we can not only save Italia from the Templar threat but my home as well. Emily explained, wiping his tear streaked cheeks lightly. 'Can you understand that, Ezio? One death here can save hundreds of lives in the future.'

'I think so.' Ezio nodded, the idea made his feel sick but perhaps it was meant to be like this. 'It's no wonder you're so confused, I have no idea what that must be like for you.'

'Think of it as using your Eagle Vision all the time except the world around you never fades out like it does for you. Instead of blotches of colour, see lines everywhere, all tangled together and leading nowhere at times.' Emily offered, tracing idle patterns in the air around her.

'I don't think I can.' Ezio admitted, struggling to wrap his mind around what Emily saw.

'I can show you later, once we are somewhere safe.' Emily promised, drawing Ezio into a warm embrace. 'Come, we have work to do and this time, I will make the final strike. You have sullied your soul enough.'

'No, this is my task. I will do it, just be there to catch me when I need you.' Ezio corrected, returning the hug.

'Always Ezio. I will always be there to catch you when you fall.' Emily promised, glancing at Mario and nodding faintly. 'We are Auditore, I will never let you down.'

For every fight they had, every disagreement between past and future, they would always come back to each other, draw to stand together in the present and fight as one against an evil that had no place in the world anymore. Their fights would flare fast and die out just as quickly, both stung by the discontent in their link and seeking a balm to their internal anguish.

'when this is done, I swear we will sit down, just the three of us, and go over it all until you understand everything that you need to know, Ezio.' Mario offered, keeping his men back from the pair until they were ready.

'Grazie Uncle.' Ezio nodded, releasing Emily slowly. 'Ready?'

'Let's do this.' Emily smirked, getting to her feet and hauling Ezio up with her. 'Mario?'

'Here's how it's going to work: my men and I will distract the guards. Once we've engaged them, get over the wall and find a way to open the gate. Take these throwing knives. Use them to dispatch the archers. Trust in each other, you can do this but only if you work as a team.' Mario briefed, handing them each a bundle of throwing knives for their belts.

'I'm ready when you are.' Ezio nodded, securing his new knives and approaching the wall.

'Then let us begin.' Mario smiled, watching the pair for a moment. 'All'attacco!'

Using a pile of barrels and each other for extra grip points, the united pair scaled the wall and slipped over the top carefully, peering over the edge before moving to make sure they weren't being watched. Pushing to their feet, they both reached for throwing knives, taking out the nearest archer with one in the chest and another in the neck.

Their path clear for a moment, they move forward, barely touching the wooden scaffolding on this side of the wall and leaping across to the building nearby. Ezio makes it smoothly, landing on the tiles and silencing the second archer in their path. Emily falls short, dropping low and slamming chest first in the corner of the roof. Ezio is there to catch her though, grabbing the back of her robes and pulling her up onto the rooftop.

Jumping down to the ground below, Emily is first to regain her feet and lets rip, killing the third archer and sending his body tumbling to the ground. Making use of her distraction, Ezio runs for the gate lever, cranking open the heavy wooden portcullis to let his Uncle and the mercenaries inside the city.

Without even needing to look at each other, they knew what needed to be done, drawing swords and
running back out to finish the battle Mario had started outside the gates. Slipping into the dance together, they mow through the remaining soldiers left out here, moving with a precision that most could only dream of.

The battle over, the massed team entered the city again, moving quickly through the streets and keeping quiet as much as possible so as to avoid drawing too much attention. Aloysius caught up with Ezio and Emily, resting his hands on their shoulders for a brief moment. 'Yin and yang, you two. Light and dark in constant balance. I'm just not sure which is which when I look at you.' he grinned, patting lightly before moving away. 'What was that all about?' Ezio asked, cocking his head in confusion. 'The eternal forces of light and dark, good and evil. Two halves of a whole, one cannot exist without the other. There is an image that represents it best, I'll draw it for you and help you understand.' Emily replied, brushing their hands together lightly. 'I want you to distract those guards, and keep them from raising the alarm. Hopefully it will buy me enough time to find and silence Vieri.' Mario directed, his gaze falling back to Emily and Ezio. 'Va bene.' they nodded, sharing a private smile. 'Wait, nipote. Take a few of my men with you…just to be safe. Come join me once they're dealt with.' Mario continued, signalling to a handful of his men.

Looking up the street to where the guards were standing, Ezio grinned and motioned for their borrowed men to wait even as he glanced over to Emily. Returning the grin, she nodded and flipped out her hidden blade, right hand falling to the large dagger she wore on her belt. Ezio didn't follow her lead this time, instead deciding to stick with his sword and keep a little distance around him. Launching up the stairs behind the men Mario had given them, Ezio and Emily spun back into their dance, circling with their backs together and dealing out death to anyone who came too close. Ezio had a moment to admire Emily in her full glory as she spun out to dispatch two guards in one move, hidden blade and dagger plunging into their throats before she withdrew and returned to his back once more. 'Aim for the inner thigh, there is a blood vessel there that when cut, leads to death almost instantly.' she uttered, lunging to stab another guard in the throat. 'Got it.' Ezio nodded, bringing his sword around and ripping through the throat of another guard. The battle over once more, the two Assassins took off up the street, their support team stringing along behind them and watching out for another brawl. They got another minor one not too far along from their first killing spree, taking down another four guards and continuing on without hesitation. Up yet another set of public stairs, they came across one of Mario's men slumped against the central well, bleeding from a nasty abdominal wound. 'Ezio! Your Uncle's under attack and needs help. Go to him!' the wounded man directed, looking further up the street. 'Here, you stay with him and apply pressure to his wounds. We will send someone back for you.' Emily directed, turning to the group Mario had left with them. 'It will be done.' one nodded, crouching beside his fellow mercenary and using the shirt off his back as a pressure pad.

Charging up yet another flight of stairs in this maze of a place, the pair charged into the battle already raging in the public square. Confident that Mario's men could handle their parts in this and witnessing Aloysius and Libby dealing out death with brutal efficiency, they headed straight for where Mario was surrounded by at least seven guards and taking a beating. 'Ah, nipote! There you are! It seems my plan has hit something of a snag…Vieri's men ambushed us, and now we've got our hands full. My brothers and I will deal with these guards - I want you two to go on ahead and root out that snake! Find Vieri! See that justice is done!' Mario called, flashing the pair a grateful little smile when three of his direct attackers fell to their blades.
'We're on it.' Emily nodded, weaving out of the fight and racing away with Ezio. 'If that's what Mario calls something of a snag, I'd hate to see what he considers big trouble.'
'As would I.' Ezio agreed, keeping pace as they hurried through the city in search of Vieri.

Getting up onto the rooftops and constantly scanning the area, they eventually found him near the city walls and crouched down to listen as their enemies laid out plans. By the sounds of what the four Templars below were saying, there was more trouble planned for Firenze and soon. That could only be a problem and needed to be dealt with, in due course. First Vieri de'Pazzi had to die and then they would turn their attention to Firenze.
'Peace Ezio, they are only words. Mario is a strong fighter, he will be fine.' Emily whispered, calming him when his Uncle was insulted by Vieri.
'I know, I just…' Ezio paused, not sure quite how to put words to his feelings right then.
'You don't have to explain. He's family, that's all I need to know.' Emily uttered, relaxed and calm as they waited for their moment to strike. 'Fucking Templars, they've got a lot to answer for.'
'And they will, in time.' Ezio grinned, resting his hand over hers. 'They will pay for all the harm they have done here and in your home.'

Following Vieri back through the city when he went to oversee the murder of Mario and his men, Emily and Ezio moved almost silently, flying over the streets and darting across beams barely as wide as their boots. Getting to the end of one such beam, Ezio leapt across the grabbed a single jutting brick on the inner wall of the city wall, hauling his body up and turning to wait for Emily. Soaring across the gap, Emily grabbed the same brick and scrambled up, her eyes drawn to the tower right in front of them.
'I'll get the guards. Vieri is all yours.' Emily uttered, taking the lead and running up the tower wall.
'Deal.' Ezio nodded, climbing up beside her and getting a grip on the edge of the tower wall, ready to fly into action.

Heaving up onto the top of the wall, Emily leapt right over Vieri's head and dropped down on the two guards watching out for him, driving her dagger and hidden blade through their throats. Pushing up again, she moved on to deal with the guards now climbing over the walls, completely ignoring Vieri and his squeaking voice.
'Fear not Ezio, I'll make sure your death comes quick.' Vieri taunted, mistaking Emily for Ezio.
'A little late for taunts now, Vieri.' Ezio replied, dropping down behind Vieri and driving his hidden blade into his back.

Dealing with the last of the guards that tried to overrun their position, Emily turned back to Ezio and sighed as he demanded answers from Vieri but she knew none would come. She'd tried this sort of thing before, with Templars she'd eliminated, they never gave up any useful information.
'Pezzo di merda! I only wish you'd suffered more! You met the fate you deserved! I hope yo-'
'Enough, Ezio! Show some respect.' Mario called, joining the pair up on the tower roof,
'Respect? After all that's happened? Do you think he would have shown either of us such kindness?' Ezio snapped, dropping the body and coming to confront his Uncle.
'You are not Vieri. Do not become him.' Mario warned, facing Ezio's rage and remaining calm.
'Ezio, be calm. Your anger will not help us win this war any faster. If anything, your rage blinds you to what you need to see. You said you always felt shame and disgust after each kill. Come here and I will show you how I deal with such feelings.' Emily cut in, taking a knee beside the body.

Shoulders dropping, exhaustion setting in again, Ezio crossed the roof again and matched Emily's posture, feeling nothing but anger and hatred this time. Reaching out, Emily caught his hand and squeezed lightly, offering freely of her strength until he was settled again.
'May death provide the peace you sought. Requiescat in pace.' she uttered, using their joined hands to close Vieri's glazed eyes.
'Requiescat in pace.' Ezio repeated, finding it strange to say such things over the body of a long time
enemy but also noticing that he didn't feel so bad about this kill.
'Take this. Read it when you have the time.' Mario instructed, handing Ezio a sealed letter as they stood. 'Our work here is finished. Let us return to the villa.'

Returning to the Villa Auditore after a few minutes alone to discuss a few matters, Emily wandered over to where Mario was celebrating their victory with some of his mercenaries, everyone relaxed and content with a drink.
'And here he is! Our campione, Ezio!' Mario called, spotting her approach.
'All hail Ezio!' the mercenaries cheered, turning to look at her.
'Check your facts, Mario.' Emily laughed, pushing her hood back. 'That's twice you failed to recognise when someone is posing as your nephew.'
'So where is Ezio?' Mario asked, looking around for any sign of his nephew.
'He should be here shortly. I set him a challenge to test his abilities.' Emily shrugged, jumping up to sit on the wall of the training ring.

Ezio made his appearance a few minutes later, flying off the retaining wall and leaping out onto the training ring wall. Darting around the circle, he shot past his Uncle and over the mercenaries before dropping down the wall they were leaning against.
'Emily, I am going to wring your neck when I catch you!' Libby roared, thundering down the stairs and spotting Emily sitting on the wall, her back to the stairs. 'Ezio, have you seen where Emily went? That pezzo di merda stole my money.'
'Uh no, sorry Libby. Last I saw her she was headed inside to use the pot.' Emily replied, managing a very convincing vocal impersonation of Ezio. 'But that was a little while ago now.'
'I think I saw her go running around the back of the Villa, try looking back there.' Mario added, figuring the nice thing to do would be to help out.
'Grazie Mario.' Libby nodded, turning and running from sight.
'Is she gone?' Emily uttered, keeping her back to the Villa just in case.
'Si, she's gone.' Mario grinned, astounded that he wasn't the only one fooled by the similarities between Emily and Ezio.

Climbing up from the other side of the railing, Ezio jumped down and handed the red velvet purse to Emily, a proud little grin on his face at his success. Laughing heartily, Emily tucked the pouch under her cloak and slipped one arm around his shoulders.
'I see you've wasted no time starting the celebration.' Ezio chuckled, looking around at Mario and his men. 'How did I do, Emily?'
'And why not? You've done us a great service, nipote. With Vieri dead, la Toscana will grow quiet once more. Do you know what that means?' Mario praised, keeping one ear out in case Libby came back in her search for Emily.

'Climbing up from the other side of the railing, Ezio jumped down and handed the red velvet purse to Emily, a proud little grin on his face at his success. Laughing heartily, Emily tucked the pouch under her cloak and slipped one arm around his shoulders.'
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'And why not? You've done us a great service, nipote. With Vieri dead, la Toscana will grow quiet once more. Do you know what that means?' Mario praised, keeping one ear out in case Libby came back in her search for Emily.

'No more work!' one of the mercenaries replied, drinking deep from his tankard.
'We can drink all day!' another agreed, raising his tankard in a toast.
'And with whores!' a third added, earning silent stares from the rest of the group. 'What? It's true!' 'You did a fine job Ezio, though stealing Libby's coin purse was perhaps a little more than I expected you might try for. I thought maybe Aloysius' dagger or perhaps a spare boot. This shows initiative… but now you get the fun of giving it back to her.' Emily grinned, fully expecting Ezio to back down from that challenge. He's already tasted Libby's fighting skills once.
'Actually I was thinking of pinning all this on Aloysius.' Ezio smirked, a plan already formed in his mind. 'Unless you would rather do it.'
'By all means, if you think you can.' Emily nodded, handing back the coin purse and wondering how he would pull off such a thing. 'Better do it fast, before Libby spots us both out here. She won't give up until she figures this one out.'
'I'm on it.' Ezio replied, leaping over the railing again and racing off for the back way into the Villa,
hoping to avoid Libby's watchful gaze. 'You are teaching him bad habits Emily.' Mario sighed, leaning back against the wall beside her. 'He's got to learn how to be light fingered and escape notice. Who better to train against than another assassino?' Emily shrugged, pulling her hood forward to hide her face just in case. 'He'll be fine, Aloysius and Libby both know that if they harm Ezio, I'll pay them back double the pain.'
Returning to Emily's side with a smug grin on his face, Ezio settled beside her and relaxed, legs crossed at the ankles as he looked up at the night sky. No one needed to ask; he'd done as promised and pinned the theft on Aloysius without anyone else being any the wiser.

'Come you two, walk with me.' Mario requested, leaving his men to enjoy the quiet times.

'Yes, Uncle?' Ezio asked, standing and following after Mario.

'What's on your mind, Mario?' Emily grinned, slotting in beside Ezio.

'What did you learn while you were chasing Vieri?' Mario enquired, leading the pair back up towards the villa.

'The Pazzi answer to another: a Spaniard.' Ezio replied, not exactly sure what that meant for the job that had to be done.

'He is Rodrigo Borgia, one of the most powerful men in all of Europe and leader of the Templar Order.' Mario replied, looking back over his shoulder at the pair.

'Which makes him responsible for the attempted murder of Giovanni, Federico and Petruccio.' Emily nodded, seeing the connections and not liking what she could see in her lines.

'Yes and he will try again, given the chance.' Mario agreed, wary of the dangers but he would not turn his family out.

'Then we must stand against him if we wish to be free…' Ezio decided, confident Emily would support him. 'But not until every other Templar has fallen to my blade. Father's list will guide me. As will Emily's lines.'

'Where will you go next?' Mario asked, wanting to be sure Ezio knew what he was doing.

'Firenze. Francesco de'Pazzi will share the fate of his son.' Ezio replied, his plan clear in his mind.

'A sensible next step. No doubt he intends evil for the city.' Mario praised, just as concerned about what was happening but this was not his fight to lead. 'Alright, that's enough grim talk for one night. I'll be in my study if you need me.'

Glad for a chance to rest and not think of killing for a little while, Emily nudged Ezio over to the grand staircase leading to the second floor and sunk down with a grateful groan, resting her weary feet at last.

'I guess I should read this letter my Uncle gave me.' Ezio sighed, slumping down beside her.

'Probably, it'll likely only be of minimal importance but you never know. These Templars have a nasty habit of never writing down the really important information, they prefer to meet face to face to discuss such things.' Emily shrugged, resting her chin on Ezio's shoulder as he popped the seal.

Sure enough, the letter proved to be of little consequence at the moment, speaking of the troubled relationship between Francesco and Vieri de'Pazzi and how Vieri's loud, brash and foul behaviour was a demand for attention and love from his father.

'I see what you mean about little consequence. How does this help us now that Vieri is gone?' Ezio groused, folding up the letter and tucking it in his pouch.

'It doesn't really but your Uncle couldn't have known that.' Emily replied, enjoying this minute of closeness. 'Remember I told you I'd show you the symbol of yin and yang?'

'What of it?' Ezio asked, accepting the folded piece of parchment she was holding.

'This is the symbol. Black and white in equal measure. Yin is the black side and yang the white but see how both have a dot of the opposite colour in them.' Emily continued, watching Ezio's face as he looked at the simple diagram.

'So just as the people with the best intentions must have an evil part to them, those with the worst
intentions have a little piece of good in them?' Ezio nodded, gazing intently at the picture.

'Exactly. Another way to look at it is yin being femininity and yang representing masculinity. Both are necessary to continue the human race, without one the other simply would not exist.' Emily grinned, bringing her explanation around to Aloysius' comment. 'Remember what Aloysius said?'

'Yeah and I think I'm insulted by it.' Ezio grumbled, not appreciating that dig at his masculinity.

'He didn't mean it like that Ezio. He meant the passive aggressive side of the symbol. Yin is passive, yang aggressive. Balance in all things, we constantly change between the roles. Sometimes you are the aggressive one and sometimes you pull back on my aggression.' Emily chuckled, shoving him gently. 'He was not challenging your manliness.'

'Good to know. Do you mind if I keep this?' Ezio grinned, relaxing a little more.

'By all means, I drew it out for you.' Emily replied, watching as it was carefully folded and tucked inside his tunic.

Chuckling softly, Ezio shifted a little and slipped one arm around Emily's back, pulling her closer and enjoying this chance to sit and think about what they'd done together. It was a nice change to just get to sit and think, Emily's fingers digging into his scalp and easing tension that had been building for days.

'Have you talked to your Uncle about the Codex pages yet?' she asked, eyes drifting closed in the peace. 'He will likely have more answers about their purpose.'

'Not yet, though I really should.' Ezio replied, resting his cheek against her hair. 'Can't we just sit like this for a while?'

'the longer you leave it, the less time you'll have to understand what he says before we have to get back to work.' Emily warned, trying to avoid any more confusion for him. 'Business before pleasure. Such is the way of life for us.'

'Alright, we'll go ask him about it.' Ezio sighed, waiting for Emily to sit up before getting to his feet and pulling her up.

Wandering through the villa together, enjoying the peace of a night away from the fear of coming under attack, the pair heading into Mario's study, noticing the pieces of parchment up on the wall and recognising what they were.

'Look familiar?' Mario asked, leaning on a short pillar in front of the pages on the wall.

'Other Codex pages.' Ezio nodded, looking at the scattered pages on the wall.

'Yes. Your father managed to find and translate a few before he…' Mario confirmed, still gazing at the wall.

'Here.' Ezio offered, holding out the one that had been hidden with Giovanni's robes and blade. 'This is not your father's work. Someone else has translated it.' Mario realised, gazing at the page as he approached the wall.

'Leonardo da Vinci. A friend.' Emily nodded, trying to make sense of it all but she couldn't see anything that made any sense.

'Do you see the way the words cross from one page to the next?' Mario asked, putting the newest page up with the others.

'There is something underneath it all. Some kind of map.' Ezio nodded, following a pattern Emily couldn't see on it. 'Where is it supposed to lead?'

'Your father and I managed to make out a few bits of a prophecy scrawled across these pages. It was written by an Assassin like us, who long ago held a "Piece of Eden." His name was Altair.' Mario explained, offering out what information he knew. 'He spoke of something powerful and ancient hidden beneath the land.'

'Altair…Altair.' Emily muttered, something about the name catching her attention.

'What is it Emily? What's so special about this Altair?' Ezio asked, nudging her lightly.

'I'm not sure. There's something about him though, something important.' Emily shrugged, turning her attention back to the pages. 'I'll figure it out eventually.'

'So what is he talking about?' Ezio asked, going back to their conversation.
'What indeed. Solving that little mystery is exactly why we collected these pages.' Mario shrugged, still clueless about what it all meant.
'Then let me help. It's time I take on my father's work. All of it. I'll start with the page I took from Vieri. Leonardo will decode it for us.' Ezio decided, his mind made up and his path clearer before him than it had ever been before.
'Bene. Return here when time permits and we'll add it to the wall.' Mario nodded, pleased with Ezio's decision.
'I need to get up to the highest point around here, I need to see a clearer view of my webs. Something isn't fitting in with the rest.' Emily insisted, brushing Ezio's hand again.
'The best place would probably be the Villa roof, I have not seen anything higher around here.' Ezio suggested, glancing at Mario for a moment. 'Come, I found an easier way up earlier.'

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Getting up onto the rooftop of the tower built into the Villa, Emily stood right at the highest point and looked around, the webs of the Auditore family fading out a little as the other webs became clearer to her. There was something off about the Auditore web as well, a new line that had not been there before tonight. She dismissed it for now, her focus primarily on the reds and blues cutting paths through her vision.

For now she also pushed aside the red lines, they were not her priority right now. She would deal with future Templar problems when she had a chance and there were none in Monteriggioni. For the first time since the lines appeared in her vision she only had to contend with the blues and that was just perfect for her right now. The blues were where the discrepancy was so that's where she had to concentrate.

Comforted by Ezio's presence nearby, she rifled through the tangle of blue lines, marking future Assassins of different lines and other allies either now or in her own timeline. Most were too far away for her to do anything much with but there were quite a few in Firenze that were worth looking into as time permitted.

Using her hands to manipulate the lines and knots available to her, she found the ones calling to her and examined them closely, frowning as she tried to understand the connection. From here she could not properly read the links and find out what they meant but she could at least sort out who they belonged to on this end and consider why they might be important.

One was obvious, Leonardo was a strong ally and a good friend, his ability to translate the Codex pages and his skills to build new weapons and equipment would help them with their fight. The other end of it was still lost to time, reaching further into the future and spreading out hundreds of offshoot links to other generations.

The other pulsating link was less obvious, their friendship with Paola was not that strong and she possessed no hugely beneficial skills or abilities that made her a strong ally and friend. Yet her link to the future was even stronger than Leonardo's line, thumping with life and power down through the generations. Whoever she really was, she held a great strength within her.

Not quite sure what possessed her to do it, Emily dropped her hand to her own golden link and gently pulled on it, tugging the glowing rope towards her and releasing it quickly. Within seconds she realises why this matters when Ezio pops up from below, a question in his gaze.
'Did you call my name?' he asked, looking up at her curiously.
'No, I tugged on our link gently. It seems we can use them as a way to get each other's attention as needed, once I can work out how to make it easy for you to find the other end.' Emily replied, stepping down from the rooftop and making her way down to him. 'Now, you said something about
picking up Codex pages?'
'Si, I think I know where we can find some around here.' Ezio nodded, climbing up to sit at her side and gaze across the city. 'Are you finished up here?'
'No, I could be a while sorting through all of this. Why don't you go see about finding those pages while I finish up? I'll meet you inside when I know more.' Emily shrugged, still troubled by something in her webs.

Getting to his feet, Ezio walked out onto the wooden platform extending from the roof and looked back at Emily before leaping off and plunging back towards the ground. Emily wasn't worried about him, she'd seen the hay pile down below and knew he was safe. Alone at last, she returned to the roof peak and closed her eyes, letting the full chaos of the tangled webs surround her.

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Perched atop one of the large urns decorating the stone railings near the training ring, Ezio looked back up at the Villa and froze, partly shocked by what he was seeing and partly captivated. There at the top of the Villa, right where Emily had been standing, now there was a blaze of colour reaching up into the sky and scattering out in every direction.

Now he understood what Emily meant by her webs constantly filling her vision, blue and red for the most but the golden ties to her family shone brighter than the others and her link straight to him blazed like the noon sun, leading straight from her chest to his. Reaching up, Ezio curled his fingers around the strand connecting them and stroked it lightly, letting Emily know he was with her still before bounding off, their combined glow illuminating the city.

Gradually the light faded again, first the reds, then blues and finally the golden lines blinked back into nothingness, leaving just Emily and Ezio anchoring one last line of glowing beauty around the city. It didn't seem to matter where he went, the link stayed with him, tying them together in a way he could not understand but treasured anyway.

Only when he had all four Codex pages and was back outside the front doors of the Villa did the light finally fade between them. Looking up, he smiled as Emily came flying down off the rooftop and landed in the hay cart safely. Popping out again, she brushed the hay from her hair and darted over to him, pushing aside his tunic and shirt to find a perfectly round mark on his chest, right over his heart.

'Whenever you need me and I am not by your side, press on this mark and I will know. That's what I was doing to cause the lightshow, I was marking those connected in my webs so even those of us without my vision can work out who is a friend and who is a threat.' she explained, lowering her hand and stretching. 'Did you get the pages?'
'I did, all four of them. Leonardo will be busy for a little while.' Ezio nodded, holding up the neatly rolled pages. 'So if we're all marked the same by your webs, how are we supposed to tell the difference between friend and foe?'
'Our enemies will be marked more prominently, the markings will be on their faces. Friends will be less obvious, look for the same marking on their hands.' Emily replied, resting her head on his shoulder. 'Can we go to bed now? Marking everyone on my webs took all the strength I had left.'
'Si, you have earned your rest.' Ezio smiled, supporting her lovingly as they headed inside.
'Ezio, what is going on out there? All the lights in the night sky, people will worry there is something strange happening here.' Mario called, coming in from his study.
'Emily was marking all those connected in her webs so those of us without her gift can tell friend from foe much easier. I see your mark Uncle, a glowing gold spot on your chest. Friends will have blue marks on their hands and foes red spots on their faces.' Ezio guided, starting up the stairs before Emily completely passed out. 'We will see you in the morning, Uncle. Good night.'
Perched on the balustrade the next day, the three older Assassins compared notes and considered just how much work there was to be done in order to make a noticeable difference to their own time. It was a risk to use the renaissance to thin Templar lines in the modern world but they had no other ideas on how to save the Assassin brotherhood.

'Are you sure Ezio is up to the task?' Libby asked, perfectly still on the steeply sloping stonework. 'He has to be. Federico has no interest, Petruccio is too young and he's not a healthy boy and Mario, well he's simply past his prime.' Aloysius replied, shaking his head slowly. 'It has to be Ezio or the Auditore Assassins go quiet.'

'And why can't Claudia do it?' Libby groused, turning to look at Aloysius without losing her balance on the balustrade.

'Libby, female Assassins simply aren't as well accepted as they are in our own time. We might be regarded as some of the best of our time but here and now, women simply aren't trained in the same skills as men.' Emily shrugged, shifting a little on their mutual perch. 'Besides, Claudia is even less of a killer than Ezio. There's simply no time to bring her up to speed.'

'We've started with Ezio so we're just going to have to work with him and make sure he's up to the task.' Aloysius agreed, scratching at his neck. 'Maybe this is why we're here, to make sure he gets the job done right.'

Heads coming up when Ezio called their names, the trio of senior Assassins left their perch and hurried into the large room where Claudia was now working on the accounts of the Villa and an architect was gazing at a model of Monteriggioni.

'What's the situation, Ezio?' Libby asked, getting serious with her true assignment now that Claudia was safe and otherwise occupied.

'It's been suggested that I use the extra money I earn to help Uncle Mario fix this place up a bit. I wondered if you might lend a hand.' Ezio shrugged, drawing their attention to the model on the table. 'This is the architetto Uncle Mario hired but he's complaining he's not a miracle worker.'

'Without money, I can't fix any of these buildings.' the architect added, looking around at the four Assassins gathered around him.

'And if someone brought you money?' Aloysius asked, shoving his hood back.

'Then we'd be in business. You must be Ser Aloysius. Am I right?' the architect nodded, dark green eyes flicking around the group again.

'Uncle! I like this architetto.' Ezio called, rather amused by the look of shock on Aloysius' face. 'He gets very observant when he can smell money!' Mario replied from somewhere in the next room along this range.

'If you want to fix up this town, I'm going to need it. I have a price list here for new shops and renovations. Just bring me gold, make a choice and I'll begin at once. If I build you a shop, you as the landlords, can purchase goods there at lower rates. If you invest more money in the shop, you get an even greater discount. As for renovations, well...you'll be bringing the town and villa back to life. As Ser Mario tells me, that was very important to your great-great-grandfather.' the architect explained, not sure about the other three Assassins but he'd been warned not to ask too many questions about the business of the household.

'Alright, show me the list.' Emily sighed, holding out her hand for the parchment.

Huddled around the parchment price list, the team debated quietly about what would be the most important buildings to start with. Doing some pretty heavy mental gymnastics, Aloysius worked out that between them they had enough gold to renovate the art merchant, bank and tailor as well as the brothel, church, military barracks and thieves guild. They even had enough left over to reopen the mines just outside of town and repair the well in the town too.

'That should keep you busy for a while.' Emily remarked, handing over the list of repairs and renovations they wanted done. 'They have been marked in order of preference for when we want
Of course, I will get onto all of it straight away.' the architect nodded, accepting the list and the combined gold for all the work. 'Buon viaggio!'

Leaving the architect to get to work and greeting Claudia as they passed her workspace, the team headed through to Mario's study, fairly sure he would have some other piece of wisdom to pass on to Ezio now that he was ready to take up the duties his father had left behind.

'Ezio! My boy. I think it's time I showed you something.' Mario called, turning to the group for a moment before touching a hidden switch on the bookshelf he was standing near. 'This could affect all of you so you had best all come this way.'

Sliding back and behind the other bookshelves on the wall, the two in front of Mario moved aside to reveal a wide passage leading down beneath the Villa. Swapping confused and interested looks, the team followed Mario down the wide tunnel, looking around for any clue as to what this was all about. Twisting and turning, the passage took them deeper underground before opening out into a wide circular room with seven large statues in niches along the far wall.

'This is the Sanctuary. It was built by my great-grandfather to honour the memory of the Assassin order and protect its secrets. Look around! These are the Assassins who guarded the freedom of humanity when it was most threatened.' Mario explained, leading the group deeper into the room. 'I've heard stories about this place, I never believe it actually existed.' Aloysius uttered, gazing at the statues in wondrous awe.

'And this is the armour of Altair. Little is known about Altair's life, but his armour is light and very strong. I'd give it to you, but I don't know how to retrieve it. My great-grandfather told me it would remain locked away until all its protectors were made whole.' Mario continued, stopping in front of the central statue, safe behind a locked steel gate.

'This armour is the stuff of legends, even in our time. Stories say it disappeared sometime in the fifteenth century but no one knew where it went. Many Assassins have tried to relocate it but none have ever been successful. If anyone could retrieve it and prove their success to the Grand Masters of our time, they would be hailed as a champion and granted permission to wear it instead of the standard white.' Emily added, approaching the barrier and gazing up at the armour in amazement.

'I heard rumours of crypts located throughout Italia, hidden tombs filled with treasure were these six were moved centuries ago. Maybe they have something to do with it. In my younger days, I sought the six myself...with no success. Perhaps you will have better luck.' Mario suggested, his words mostly aimed at Ezio but he knew the team of four would pull together to see him claim the armour of Altair.

'Six ancient Assassin Masters...six seals on the door sealing the armour away. Each of these seals must belong to one of the ancient Assassins but there's no way to tell which belongs where. Spear...hidden blade...bow and arrows...snake...poison...dagger...it makes no sense. We'll have to find those tombs if we're ever going to figure out this puzzle.' Libby sighed, looking at the seals closely before turning her focus back to the other statues.

'It does make sense Libby, look. The statues hold the same items marked on the seals. So somewhere out there must be a second set of these seals, designed to go into these empty holes at the base of each statue. Collect the seals and we unlock the armour.' Ezio replied, eyes drawn to the statue with a snake curled around her back.

'Brilliant, you four, brilliant.' Mario praised, astounded by the way they all seemed to think with one mind, turning their varied knowledge to any task set before them. 'Now you just have to find them.'

'That's the easy bit. I know where two of them are, I found them when I was just a young Assassin on my first solo mission. There was nothing to be found in either so someone did succeed in getting the armour once. We just have to make sure it's Ezio this time.' Aloysius shrugged, turning away from the statues.

'Well then, what are we waiting for? We have work to do.' Ezio called, approaching Altair's statue and gazing at the armour.
Returning to Firenze, the team could hardly believe how little it had changed in the two years they had been away from here. It didn't even feel like two years had been spent away from this beautiful city, only the new scars they all bore and the deeper understanding in Ezio's steely gaze served as any proof of what they had gone through as a team. Now a more confident man with numerous kills under his belt, Ezio was still a gentler man at heart but he was also a capable and mature Assassin in his own right. He still relied on his friends to get him through the worst times but on a whole, he was capable of standing on his own two feet.

Emily had changed too, no longer oblivious to the power she held, she'd learned so much about her webs and what they enabled her to do. She could not just use them to contact her family and tell friend from foe in a confusing world where everyone was under suspicion, now she'd discovered that by tapping into the sections of the web around her, she could read deeper into the lives of the people directly connected to each strand of her webs.

Libby's changes were less obvious but she was coming into her own place and becoming something that no one had anticipated. She developed an uncanny ability, something no other Assassin had ever shown a gift for. Now she could instinctively find Codex pages, their hiding places turning up as sparkling orange dots whenever she came close to them. The locations of the dots in her eyes told her where they were in relation to her current position and the flickering of the glow gave her distance to the target.

Aloysius too had shown a new ability, leading the team flawlessly to treasure chests and hidden entrances to places they otherwise would never be able to get near. His was more like Ezio's Eagle Vision, able to be controlled but if Aloysius missed one, it flared up in his eyes in green and let him know that he'd gone too far. He'd also learned how to judge distance and position based off the shape of the green flashes and could now faultlessly lead Ezio to whatever needed to be discovered.

Slipping through Firenze, careful not to let anyone get a good look at their faces, the team made it safely to Leonardo's workshop and knocked quickly before slipping inside, grateful to see that Leonardo seemed to be doing reasonably good with his art and inventing.

'Ezio…? You are still alive!' Leonardo smiled, leaving his work and coming over to put a hand on Ezio's arm and squeeze lightly.

'Look at this place! The past two years have been kind to you.' Ezio chuckled, amazed by all the new things around the workshop.

'But you are not the same at all, are you?' Leonardo asked, sounding almost regretful as Ezio looked away and shook his head.

'And what are we? Dirt beneath your boots?' Libby grinned, placing a gentle hand on Ezio's back, just above his belt.

'Of course not. How are you all?' Leonardo smiled, leaning down to kiss her cheek.

'We get by. It's not easy but we manage. No one said this sort of work was easy.' Aloysius shrugged, resting one elbow on Ezio's shoulder.

'We were hoping you might be able to help us with something.' Emily offered, resting her chin on Ezio's shoulder and stroking their connection to ease his shame.

'Anything for you, my friends.' Leonardo nodded, wishing he knew how to ease the haunted look in Ezio's eyes.
'You might regret saying that, Leonardo.' Emily sniggered, pulling out a Codex page and holding it out to him.
'Aha! You've found another one! How exciting!' Leonardo beamed, taking the Codex page and heading for his table to get to work.
'Let's just say Ezio had been a very busy young man.' Aloysius agreed, offering out another Codex page for translating.
'Now there's an understatement.' Libby grinned, handing over a third page that she'd been keeping safe until now.
'Sorry to give you so many at once.' Ezio added, two Codex pages clutch in his hand.
'Five of them? You really have been busy. What mysteries could be inside?' Leonardo laughed, gathering up the five pages and returning to his desk to get to work. 'Hmmm. This one is tricky to break…Clever use of ancient languages…Maybe if I just…Oh. Oh! It seems to be a manual of sorts for different assassination techniques.'
'May I see it?' Ezio asked, suddenly excited to learn something new.
'Wait! What's that?' Leonardo continued, holding Ezio back from the page. 'It's not so much a design this time…Just a series of sketches. Hmmm. What to make of all this…Hoho! Of course! And why not? What an inspired idea!
'Can you make them for us - while Ezio tries what's in that manual fragment?' Aloysius asked, coming up behind Ezio again.
'Take it. I'll have my assistant set up some dummies for you to practise with.' Leonardo nodded, looking over his shoulder. 'Eh, Vincenzo!'
'Why don't you take Ezio out to train? I need to talk to Leonardo alone for a few minutes…about the webs.' Emily requested, giving up her in detail explorations of Leonardo's web connection.
'But -' Ezio started to complain, he always preferred training with Emily but one look into her troubled gaze and he went silent. 'As you wish Emily.'
'Grazie Ezio. I promise this won't take long.' Emily nodded, drawing up her hood as Leonardo's assistant appeared and received his instructions.

Before they left, Aloysius and Libby set their bracers down on Leonardo's workbench, fully expecting him to do something incredible to them, something that would make them even more deadly as Assassins.
'I will not need these this time. I still have the measurements I took the last time you were here.' Leonardo grinned, looking up from the parchments again.
'I'd ask what you're planning but I'm not sure I want to know.' Aloysius remarked, picking up his bracer and slipping it back into place. 'It can only be an advantage, I'm sure.'
'I miss my other gear, this just seems…Ah, forget it.' Libby mused, shaking off such thoughts as she strapped her bracer back into place and left the workshop.

Reluctant to interrupt Leonardo's work but knowing she had to act now, Emily approached and placed a light hand on his shoulder, drawing him away from the Codex pages and turning him to her. She really didn't want to drag Leonardo any further into this but her search of the family link he had showed her so many things and she knew she could not leave this alone any longer.
'Leonardo, what I am about to tell you will probably sound like the rambling of a drunken fool and completely impossible but I need you to keep an open mind about these things. If this wasn't important, I would not ask you to keep these secrets but you are a part of this just as much as anyone else.' Emily sighed, scarred fingers brushing through Leonardo's hair.
'I tend to keep an open mind about many things.' Leonardo replied, noticing the concern and sorrow in Emily's eyes as she dropped her hand. 'What troubles you so much, Emily?'
'I am more than just a friend of Ezio's, more than a friend to the Auditore family really. I come from a place far from here, on the other side of the world to this beautiful city. Not only that but I come from a time so different to this, where men are not so noble and artists less formal with their pieces. A place where dignity means little and respect easily purchased for a few coins. You would not
recognise this place, for we have left the simple innocence of these times far behind us and moved on to create a world that is far beyond even your wildest dreams. 600 years from now, this beautiful city that you know so well would be completely unknown to you.' Emily offered, watching the confusion in Leonardo's eyes and sighing as it turned to doubt.

'So you are saying that you have come here from the future?' he asked, shaking his head slowly. 'I find this hard to believe.'

'I know, Leonardo, I find this hard to believe as well. I never thought I would get a chance to meet the great Leonardo da Vinci, a man held with such high esteem in my time and place. Your work is seen as the pinnacle of artistic talent from this age and is spoken of with great respect and admiration by peoples from all over the world.' Emily continued, drawing his attention to a completed underdrawing waiting to be painted. 'That one, Adoration of the Magi, is still a highly treasured peace and is treated with the greatest of respect, as are all of your other remaining works. Finished or not, any piece of your work is a priceless treasure.'

Stumbling back a step, Leonardo looked at the drawing he'd done in a different light. He'd never had time to finish it and still was not particularly happy with how it looked. If what Emily was saying was true though, it didn't seem to matter if he ever got around to actually painting it.

'I…this is a lot to take in at once, Emily.' he sighed, turning his gaze back to her.

'And I am sorry that I must dump more on your shoulders but these are things you need to know. As I said, I am not a friend of Ezio's, I am actually a descendant of his, we share a special bond through time and distances that are too vast to really think too much about.' Emily nodded, resting one hand on Leonardo's cheek. 'I have a special gift, I cannot explain where it came from but it enables me to see other such links. Aloysius has a tie to the Auditore family, his great ancestor is Federico. Libby is also connected to the family, right back to Claudia.'

'Why are you telling me this?' Leonardo asked, struggling to understand all of this.

'Because you have a tie to my time as well, you are linked into this adventure in more ways than you know. You have your own great descendant in my time, I cannot be specific about their life because they are too far away for me to read accurately. All I know for certain is they are a future Assassin, I am blind to all those that do not directly affect my life.' Emily guided, bringing his blue link into view and holding it up for him to see. 'With your permission, I would like to bring this connection together and let you see the world you helped to create.'

Barely even noticing when the door swung open and the rest of the team returned from their training session, Leonardo placed his hands over Emily's and nodded, ready to accept whatever adventure he was about to witness. Surprised when Emily leant in and kissed his cheek, he watched as she stepped away and moved as if she was gripping a rope, her muscles tensed in readiness.

'Emily?' Ezio's voice broke in but he got no reaction from her.

'Hush, Ezio. We are about to see something amazing.' Leonardo warned, not taking his eyes off Emily's bowed back.

With a deep grunt, Emily arched backwards and heaved, pulling on something that no one else could see or feel. The wall in front of her glowed blue for a few moments before a figure came flying through the blue and landed heavily on the floor at Emily's feet. Leonardo could not believe what he'd witnessed. A person had just come flying through a wall that he knew to be solid and part of the building next door.

Groaning softly, this heavier figure sat up slowly and ran one hand over their face wearily. Wearing a rather striking dark green tunic and black breeches mostly hidden under long brown boots, they came across as a fighter, powerful muscles bulging under the richly decorated cloth. Hanging from the left shoulder, they wore a long red cloak and on their belt an ornate hilted long sword.

'Greetings to you Master Assassin Hunter.' the voice was distinctly female, but the body unlike any woman he had met before.

'Greetings to you Senior Assassin Newman.' Emily replied, helping the new arrival to her feet. 'I bid
you welcome to the beautiful city of Firenze in the year 1478.'
'1478? What happened to 2010?' Newman asked, looking around in wonder.
'You have been called back to this era to assist in a mass assassination, ending many of the Templar threats in our own time and place. But that is a mission for another time. Until you are comfortable and ready for this society, you are assigned to keep a close eye over one of our closest allies outside the brotherhood.' Emily instructed, stepping to the side. 'Gena Newman, this is Leonardo da Vinci. Protect him from all who would harm him without leaving any corpses around.'
'It will be done.' Gena nodded, raising her left hand and flicking out her hidden blade from inside her sleeve. 'You have my services Maestro.'
'Grazie Gena.' Leonardo replied, dipping his head respectfully to her.
'Is there a place we could explain the situation fully to Gena while you complete that project from the Codex pages?' Aloysius asked, silencing Ezio with a look.
'Of course, the back room is empty or you may go upstairs.' Leonardo nodded, turning back to his workbench as he pointed to the mostly hidden stairs.
'Grazie Leonardo.' Libby smiled, heading for the stairs to find them a suitable room.

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Handing out his newest creations as the Assassin team came back downstairs, Leonardo couldn't help but jump when a heavy hand landed on his shoulder and he was forced to look up at Gena Newman. Seeming to realise that she'd made him uncomfortable, she removed her hand and wandered over to lean against the wall, separating from her fellow Assassins and watching them.

Strapping on the newer, more streamlined versions of their traditional hidden blades, the main Assassin team were all quite pleased with the improved weapons. Admittedly, these blades still had nothing on the newest versions the modern Assassins were used to but they were quite impressive for the current era and the fact Leonardo didn't have years to work on perfecting them.
'Thank you, Leonardo.' Aloysius grinned, admiring the fit of this new bracer.
'Non c'è di che!' Leonardo replied, clapping him on the arm firmly.
'There's someone we need to "see" while we're here. We cannot approach him publicly…would you know a way…' Libby sighed, careful not to reveal too much and put Leonardo in more danger.
'La Volpe.' Leonardo uttered, turning away from the group.
'The Fox…?' Ezio asked, unfamiliar with the name.
'Subtlety, Ezio.' Emily hissed, slapping a hand over his mouth. 'Certain people should never be spoken of above a whisper.'
'Capisco…' Ezio nodded, pulling Emily's hand away.
'But do you know where a Fox might roam?' Aloysius asked, keeping his voice down as he approached Leonardo.
'Perhaps, near the Mercato, where the thieves dwell.' Leonardo replied, voice barely above a whisper. 'Sta'attento amici!'
'Remember your instructions, Gena.' Aloysius directed, clapping Leonardo on the shoulder and heading for the door.
'Of course.' she replied, moving up beside Leonardo. 'It will be done as instructed.'
'Not one more guard induced injury.' Emily added, looking back over her shoulder.
'I will guard him as my own, Emily.' Gena promised, surprisingly gentle considering her bulk.

Relaxing a little as the door tapped closed, Gena released her grip and stepped back, dark eyes scanning the workshop as she returned to her place against the wall, arms folded across her powerful chest.
'You have no reason to fear my presence Maestro. I am no threat to you, only those that wish you harm.' she offered, dipping her head respectfully.
'Your presence is rather intimidating, quite unlike anyone else I have had the pleasure of knowing.' Leonardo replied, turning his attention back to the Codex pages on the table. 'Even the other
Assassins are not quite as...heavy with their presence.'
'My speciality was never slinking around on rooftops and sneaking through crowds. I specialise in close protection and brute strength. I'm the one the modern brotherhood calls on when a job needs less subtlety and more deadly power.' she shrugged, pushing off the walls with a lazy roll of her shoulders and approaching the table. 'Libby told me what you've been doing to assist the Assassins. We cannot thank you enough for your aid.'
'It's the least I can do, I have known the Auditore family for many years.' Leonardo shrugged, looking up from his work again. 'I still find it hard to believe that you are any relation of mine.'
'Family can be strange like that.' Gena chuckled, loosening the lace around her left wrist and pushing up her sleeve. 'I prefer a sword in my hand but I can certainly appreciate the subtlety of a finely made hidden blade.'
'Yours seems much more delicate than the ones your friends wear.' Leonardo remarked, putting down his quill and moving around to get a better look at Gena's slim bracer.
'It has to be to fit under my sleeve without appearing obvious.' she nodded, welcoming him in closer and letting him admire the finely etched surfaces.
'It's magnificent, all this fine etching work and detail.' Leonardo praised, tracing the Assassin symbol on the top.
'It's a pity really, you're the first non Assassin to see this bracer since it was created.' Gena remarked, releasing locking plates and pulling it off. 'It is beautifully made, much more comfortable than my other one.'
'I had never thought to put a quilted lining inside, it makes good sense though.' Leonardo nodded, admiring the rich red lining sewn with golden thread. 'Perhaps next time I upgrade the other blades I can put something inside them.'
'I wouldn't worry about it too much, those ones are designed to be worn over sleeves and other clothing, they don't really need internal padding.' Gena shrugged, using a corner of her cloak to wipe down her exposed forearm. 'this one, because it sits against the skin, needs something to not only make it comfortable but also to soak up the sweat that builds up under it.'

Slipping the bracer on again once her arm was dry, she pulled her sleeve back over it and tied off the lace easily, adjusting the cloth so her blade flashed out from the hidden gap as it was supposed to. Satisfied all was working properly again, she put the blade away and turned to regard Leonardo.
'It surprises me that Emily has accepted you so easily, she is not one who takes trust lightly.' she mused, shaking her head slowly. 'Neither is Aloysius, both have been hurt by supposed friends before. Libby, well she's a unique case. Her anger at the world makes her deadly.'
'I think perhaps Emily is influenced by Ezio. They have a unique connection, something I can only hope to understand.' Leonardo shrugged, making his way back around the workbench to the spread Codex pages. 'I really should get some painting done but these pages they bring me are always so fascinating. I never quite know what to expect.'

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Reaching the Mercato Vecchio, the Assassin team were instantly on guard, hands kept near weapons and their money pouches hidden out of reach of any light fingers that might try to take them. Ezio didn't fully grasp the idea straight away but he quickly figured it out when he noticed his friends had all shoved their pouches inside their tunics and well out of reach of any casual touch from a thief.

As bait, Aloysius handed Ezio a smaller pouch of gold and tapped his belt, his hidden fingers directing him to place it on the right side of his belt, right where any thief could take it. This was the territory of La Volpe and likely his spies already knew why the four Assassins were here. They would be ready for the group.

Moving through the area, making sure no one blocked clear sight of the money pouch unguarded on Ezio's belt, the team kept their eyes peeled for any sign of serious trouble and anything that might be
useful to them later. There wasn't much to be had but it kept them from actively seeking their target and spooking whoever it might be.

Sure enough, a thief took the bait, snatching the purse from Ezio's belt and taking off into the tangled maze of streets. Without a word said among them, the Assassins took off in hot pursuit, Ezio and Libby staying on the ground as Emily and Aloysius took to the rooftops, all eyes on their target and what would hopefully be a meeting with the secretive La Volpe.

With four against one, the chase was over in minutes, Ezio and Libby herding him around behind several buildings and right into the path of Aloysius' flying tackle off the rooftops. It was a stunning piece of synchronicity, Aloysius' strike catching the thief in the lower back as he turned away from Ezio and came to face Libby.

'We really have no interest in hurting you. So give him back his money and we'll call it even.' Aloysius snarled, sitting on the back of the thief they'd caught.

'Or we'll simply throw you over the edge.' Emily added, landing lightly beside Ezio.

'Not so fast.' another voice weighed in, drawing their attention around behind them.

Standing there was a man in beige and brown clothes, his tunic decorated with vertical stripes and small dots. Around his shoulders he wore a scalloped short cape and a deep hood shadowed his face, the front edge cut straight so he was no Assassin.

'What do you want? You are you?' Libby demanded, right hand resting on her favoured dagger.

'They call me many things: Murderer. Tagliagole. Thief. But you may call me La Volpe.' the man replied, circling around and through the group to stand in front of Aloysius. 'At your service, Messer Ezio.'

'The talents of the Guild must be slipping.' Aloysius remarked, lifting his gaze. 'Either that or you're just rude.'

'How do you know my name?' Ezio asked, backing up a step.

'It is my business to know everything in this city. Isn't that why you're all here?' La Volpe replied, chuckling softly at the group.

'Indeed. We need to find someone; to know where he'll be before even he does.' Emily nodded, nudging Ezio behind her.

'Who?' La Volpe asked, crossing his arms and taking on a wary stance.

'Francesco de'Pazzi.' Emily growled, making it clear with her body language that she held the rank in this team.

'There's word on the street of a caravan just arrived from Roma. A secret meeting at sunset tonight. You can learn something of Francesco's whereabouts there.' La Volpe offered, still fairly casual with this exchange but his sort could be slippery and everyone was ready.

'Do you know where it is to be held?' Emily pushed, keeping Ezio tucked behind her without the need to look like she was protecting him.

'Ma certo. Let me know when you're ready and we'll go.' La Volpe nodded, keeping the location a secret so he was still of value to the irritated Assassins. 'Oh yes. Here's your money.'

'Let that pezzo di merda go and let's get on with this.' Emily snarled, snatching the purse back from the flattened thief.

'You have one minute to disappear. Do not let us see you again.' Aloysius hissed, pushing off the thief and vaulting off the rooftop.

'I hate having to rely on thieves for information but we do what we must.' Emily sighed once they were alone on the rooftop. 'Come, we must hurry and catch up with that pest.'

Dropping down off the rooftop, the quartet made their way along the riverfront slowly, acting like any ordinary citizens out for a walk on such a beautiful day. Emily's webs made it impossible for La Volpe to hide from them now that she had identified him and recognised that his link held another connection to the future.

'Follow me. But we must move fast! Think you can keep up?' La Volpe taunted, purposefully aiming
his words at Libby.

'Nessun problema.' Emily spat, resisting the urge to use her web to cause La Volpe serious pain or throw him off balance by pulling on his line and seeing what came through. 'Fall in and keep it together. Lag behind and you're out of this mission.'

'Si Maestro.' three replies in good harmony, making it perfectly clear just who led this team.

Moving off the moment La Volpe moved towards the walls again, the team flowed behind Emily, bounding along the rooftops and swinging from beams and torch supports and flying across larger gaps. Emily proved why she was considered a Master Assassin, sticking right beside La Volpe despite his attempts to get her off his back. The other three had to take a slightly different route, hesitating at a gap that was larger than any that they'd cleared before.

Dropping their gazes at the sight of Emily and La Volpe already perched on a rooftop overlooking a church, the three other Assassins leapt up beside them and crouched, looking at the church and waiting for further guidance.

'You are slow today, Libby. Your smaller stature is no excuse, you must be able to keep up with those around you, lest you risk being alone when trouble strikes.' Emily warned, not taking her eyes off the church. 'Well?'

'Here we are! Francesco de'Pazzi is meeting his people inside that church.' La Volpe guided, pointing to the building in front of them.

'How do we join them?' Emily asked, having noticed a possible way in but she had to be certain.

'I see the entrance Maestro.' Aloysius offered, proving Emily's theory was correct.

'There are catacombs that run under the city. They'll lead you to a place here you can eavesdrop on the meeting. Grip that stone handle, turn it, then slide it down.' La Volpe replied, much more open with her now.

'Thank you for your help, La Volpe. We may yet have need of your services again.' Emily nodded, moving down the roof slope a little.

'Buona fortuna.' he added, patting her shoulder quickly before leaving the scene.

Picking out a fast track down from the rooftops, Emily stepped aside and let Ezio get a feel for the hidden latch into the catacombs. The others around him already know about them, these skull mechanisms were the same still in use on their own time.

'Make sure you step off the platform as soon as you pull the handle. Just in case the access is under it.' she warned, resting one hand on his shoulder.

Pulling on the skull shaped stone, Ezio quickly stepped back and watched the skull split into three before turning and reforming upside down. A clicking, grinding noise and the platform he'd been standing on folded out of sight, leaving the tunnel entrance clear.

'Now this is more like it, slinking around in places no sane man would go.' Aloysius chuckled, starting down the narrow tunnel.

'Such is the way of the assassino.' Libby shrugged, following Aloysius down into the depths.

'Mind your nose, it could smell down there.' Emily warned, motioning for Ezio to head down.

Landing right in the middle of a pile of bones, Ezio curled up his nose and quickly scrambled out of them, taking up a place between Aloysius and Libby in the shadows as they waited for Emily. She dropped down a few moments later, pausing to rest her hand on one of the skulls around her, offering up a prayer of forgiveness for disturbing their eternal rest.

Libby and Aloysius, take your own paths through and seek the tings you find easiest. Silence the guards and be unseen. This is not our realm, do not change what must happen. Otherwise, you know what to do' Emily directed, trusting in them to find treasures and maybe some other items of interest to their cause.

'As you wish.' Libby nodded, taking off and opening the first gateway for them all.

'I'm on it.' Aloysius grinned, bolting off after Libby.
They will not be seen, Ezio. Their altered missions will not change our duty down here.' Emily promised, taking off down the stairs with Ezio at her side.

Astounded to have made it through the catacombs without coming across a single guard or even a freshly killed body, Ezio had to admit that Aloysius and Libby were both a lot more advanced than he was when it came to being an Assassin. He hadn't even seen any fresh blood on the floor, there was no sign of there having even been any guards here in the first place.

Every door was open to them, giving them free passage right through until they reached another wall section with a white stone skull, still facing the right way up in the Assassin symbol around it. Running up the wall and scrambling into the niche where the doorway was hidden, Ezio pulled the switch as Emily climbed up to join him.

Opening the secret door, they crept down the revealed stairway slowly, careful not to make a single noise to give away their presence. They could hear a priest saying a prayer in Latin, the words not so familiar to Ezio but this was just another something modern Assassins had to master to counter Templar habits of passing messages in Latin to keep them secret.

'And the blessing of God Almighty, the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, descend on you and remain with you always.' she muttered, barely loud enough for Ezio to hear her and he was right beside her.

'Grazie, padre. Bernado?' another voice replied. Above the meeting, Emily and Ezio crouched beside a barred window, peering down at five men gathered around a table littered with weapons.


'I take this gift to mean the Pope consents?'

'He gave his blessing to the operation..."as long as nobody is killed"."

'We're all set for the Duomo in the morning, Singore. The bait's been laid, but it wasn't easy. His fool brother keeps changing his plans...'

'Si! We'll need to be on hand to make sure Giuliano even gets out of bed for church tomorrow!' the gathering of five laughed heartily at that.

'What is it, Jacopo? Do you think they suspect something?'

'Impossible! The Medici are too arrogant or too stupid to even notice. Likely a bit of both.'

'Do not underestimate our enemies, Francesco! Or have you already forgotten how your son was murdered?' Jacopo countered, pointing out their target and making things just that little easier for the Assassins.

'We'll suffer no such surprises this time, Maestro. You have my word.'

'Molto bene. I should be off. I've some other business to attend to before I return to Roma. Gentlemen. Tomorrow, a new sun rises over Firenze. May the Father of Understanding guide us.'

Nudging Ezio lightly, Emily turned and continued down the stairs, getting away from the window before she tried to do something stupid, like kill those Templar traitors where they stood. Ezio could almost taste the anger rolling off her and followed behind in silence, going where she led and hoping he wouldn't have to fight her to regain her focus.

She led him to a chamber, the most defining feature of it was the statue against the back wall. It was identical to one of the six unblocked statues in the Sanctuary. In front of the statue was a sealed stone sarcophagus, a white skull on the front just waiting to be turned and crouched beside the sarcophagus, Libby and Aloysius waited for them.

'We were starting to wonder where you two had disappeared to.' Libby uttered, relaxing a little at the sight of the pair.

'Did the standard thing with the guards. No one will ever find those bodies.' Aloysius added, patting a little bundle by his feet. 'Found some interesting things to hide somewhere until our chance.'
'Good.' Emily replied, still tense but refocused now. 'Grab the seal Ezio and let's get out of here. Remember, be respectful to the dead.'

Taking a knee beside the sarcophagus, Ezio pulled the switch and waited for it to finish moving before offering up a quiet prayer of forgiveness as he pushed the lid aside and reached in to retrieve the seal bearing the image of a hidden blade extended over an open hand. Moving around to the other side, he handed the seal to Libby for safe keeping and pushed the lid back into position to hide the fact they'd even been here. Finding the hidden door in the wall, it took Aloysius and Ezio pushing together to open it enough for the group to slip through and make their escape, leaving behind nothing to show future finders that the Assassins had taken the prize.

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Refreshed after a reasonable night spent on the floor of Leonardo's workshop and with Gena reassigned temporarily to give them some extra help with the latest problem, the mixed Assassin team made their way through the city to the church where the Medici's were known to go. In the square outside the church they scattered and slunk into the crowd, searching for the people they had to protect in order to foil the Templar plans.

Aloysius was first to get eyes on Lorenzo and his wife, sliding through the crowd to get closer to them and signalling for Libby to give him some backup against whatever was coming. She moved through the crowd much easier than he could, her smaller frame and soft voice made it simple for her to charm her way through.

Ezio was closest to Giuliano and his wife, spotting them coming around the corner and signalling for support. He'd expected Emily to join him, but instead Gena answered his call, right hand on her sword and left resting on her belt. Ezio didn't know where she'd gotten a set of Assassin robes on such short notice but he was grateful she would be easier to spot in the crowd.

Spotting their real target pushing through the crowd, Emily moved forward to get into a better position, a quick whistle timed with the bells informing the others that she had eyes on Francesco and was ready to deal with him once he tipped his hand. There was no point acting first, they had to wait and come off as rescuers and not threats.

The opening strike didn't come from Francesco however, instead he sent one of his fellow Templars into the battle first and followed along behind him. The attack was swift and brutal, the first strike slamming into his upper chest and staining his fine robes crimson. Giuliano tried to make his escape but Francesco blocked his path.

Thrown into action by the rapid change in the situation, Aloysius and Libby leapt into action as well, shouldering through the crowd and drawing weapons to confront whichever attacker next revealed their presence. They knew a priest was involved but the description given to them matched just about every priest they could see.

Charging into the battle as Lorenzo called for his brother just as he was stabbed by the priest behind him, Gena roared her challenge and confronted the heavily built man that had stabbed the younger Medici brother. Leaving her sword secured, she took him on dagger to dagger, using her bulk and strength to push him back and open a path for Giuliano to make his escape if he could.

Losing sight of the priest that had stabbed Lorenzo in a crowd of them inside the church, Aloysius turned back to the fight and raised his sword in readiness, watching as the first major battle of the day was fought without him. He wanted to go and help but he had to watch over Lorenzo and keep him safe.

'You are safe now Singore, just sit and rest.' Libby uttered, applying pressure to the wound the priest
had given him.
'Fuck, it's not just one priest to worry about.' Aloysius spat, fending off another priest and slicing open his arm before the younger man scurried inside to hide.

Coming in from the other side, Emily slammed into Francesco from behind, bowling him away from Giuliano and down. He refused to stay down though, launching at her with his dagger held high. Dodging the first strike aimed at her throat, she stepped back and lashed out with her own blade, ripping his tunic but doing no real damage.
'I always did want a pair of kills. First Vieri and now you.' she taunted, ducking another strike and starting to circle.

So focused on the real target, she missed the warning call from Ezio and screamed as white hot pain raced through her right shoulder, her arm and hand going numb and her dagger falling from her hand. Crumpling to the ground, she could feel the dagger still imbedded in her back, slowing the bleeding but it only made the pain worse.

Her first opponent fleeing the battle, Gena snarled and advanced on Francesco, forcing him away from Emily before he could finish her off. Throwing her dagger into her left hand, Gena pulled her sword and visually dared Francesco to come any closer to the downed Assassin. He took the smart option, turning away from the pair and going after Giuliano as he tried to escape.
'Ezio!' Gena snapped, pulling him from his shock and sending him at Francesco.

'No! In nome di Dio, vi scongiuro! Pieta!' Giuliano screamed, still scrambling backwards on the ground as Ezio raced to assist, shoving through the terrified crowd.

'Nessuna pieta, cane maledetto! Muori! Muori! Muori!' Francesco roared, driving his dagger repeatedly into Giuliano's chest before Ezio even got close.

Sword in hand, Francesco ran straight past Ezio, dismissing the young Assassin as a serious threat while his primary target was still in sight. Charging through the chaos, he raised his sword high, aiming straight for Lorenzo but Aloysius stepped in first, parrying the strike and turning to face Francesco head on.

'Your day is done, Lorenzo! Your entire family dies by my sword!' Francesco declared, looking for a way past Aloysius.

'Good, another Templar added to my tally.' Aloysius spat, trusting Libby to keep Lorenzo safe while he dealt with Francesco. 'Gena!'

Hearing the call to action, Gena was torn for what to do. She couldn't just leave Emily here on the ground, defenceless and bleeding. But to ignore Aloysius' call could see him harmed or worse and would probably spell disaster for Lorenzo.

'I will keep Emily safe, you go help the others. You are a better swordsman than I.' Ezio offered, returning to her side and standing ready to defend Emily from further harm.

'Be sure that dagger is not disturbed. It is helping to slow the blood loss.' Gena instructed before running into the next battle.

Freed from close guard now that Libby had stashed Lorenzo in a corner and stood guard over him, Aloysius left the steps and threw himself into the battle at hand, ducking and slashing through the guards to get back to Francesco and deal with him once and for all. This wouldn't be a clean kill, this assassination would be a bloody mess but at least it would be dealt with.

Twisting through her own battle dance, Gena fought dirty against the guards, taking several out by kicking them in the nuts and slashing through their necks as they crumpled to the ground in agony. Getting in a solid strike to Francesco's side as he passed her, she continued through the steps of her fighting style, blocking the guards from directly challenging Libby while she was locked in a tight position around Lorenzo.
Dealing with a guard that came too close to her position, Libby hopped back in close to Lorenzo and glanced down to check he was still alive even as she parried another blow and sent another guard stumbling back into Gena's range. The timing couldn't have been better, he stumbled backwards right into Gena's sword going full speed, removing his head from his body in one clean swipe before continuing on to slice the throat of another man.

Swearing when Francesco gave him the slip, Aloysius hurried back towards the rest of his team, pausing to check Emily was still hanging in there before running to where Gena and Libby were crouched beside Lorenzo, trying to keep him calm. 'You…saved my life.' Lorenzo gasped, looking up at the three Assassins. 'It's nothing. But the man who did this has to pay!' Aloysius replied, resting his hand on Lorenzo's sword hand lightly. 'Not now…I need help first…to my home…people I trust there…can you?' Lorenzo groaned, struggling to his feet. 'We have to make a choice here. Emily's hurt bad, she took a dagger in the right shoulder. It's in there deep, I didn't dare remove it.' Gena warned, supporting Lorenzo gently against her side. 'Pezzo! Now is not a good time for our best Assassin to be out of action.' Libby groaned, looking over to where Ezio was still standing guard over Emily. 'Merda!' 'Take Ezio to help you, get her to Leonardo's studio. I trust him more than any doctors around here. He studies anatomy, he'll be able to get that dagger out without doing more harm and you can patch her up after he's done.' Aloysius ordered, stepping up since he was the next senior in rank among them. 'Gena and I will escort Lorenzo to safety and meet up with you later.' 'Be safe.' Libby nodded, sheathing her sword and running over to Emily's aid. 'Ezio, you're with me on this one!'

Taking a chance, Gena secured her sword and came up beside Lorenzo, deftly scooping him into her strong arms and taking off across the square with Aloysius as her side. It was hardly a dignified exit for someone in Lorenzo's position but it was better than letting him walk and lose even more blood into his fancy robes. 'Quietatevi, Signore. Conserve your energy, or we'll be delivering a corpse.' Gena warned, her hold firming when he struggled against her. 'We're almost there now.' Aloysius added, avoiding the fights raging in the city and only raising his sword when people would not get out of the way.

They were so close, the doorway into the Palazzo Medici was in sight when they were surrounded again, four guards coming up from their front and another four coming in from the rear. Signalling for Gena to keep moving towards the door, Aloysius charged into battle again, sword and hidden blade spilling blood across the street.

Still clutching his bloody sword, Aloysius returned to Gena's side and thumped on the door, growling low in his throat when a little peephole opened and nothing more. 'Lorenzo's been wounded! Apri la porta!' he called, thumping on the door again. 'What's the password?' the guard demanded, peering out at Aloysius warily. 'Poliziano! Open the maledetta porta!' Lorenzo hissed, clutching at his neck again. 'By the Thrice Greatest! Come in. Quickly! The city is at war! Hurry!' the guard called, opening the door and moving out of the way for Gena to step inside.

Pushing the guard back a step, Aloysius helped Gena gently ease Lorenzo down onto a bench just inside the doorway. Delving into the largest pouch on his belt, Aloysius pulled out a folded length of clean linen and lifted Lorenzo's hand, sliding the cloth under it and applying pressure to the severe wound. Their job done at last, they stood and headed for the door, eager to get back to Emily and see how she was doing. 'Wait…' Lorenzo called, reaching out to them. 'I am in your debt. Tell me. Why did you help me?'
'You are not the only one who lost family to the Pazzi. I am a member of the Auditore family.' Aloysius replied, close enough to the truth to be comfortable. 'Ah, you're a nephew of Giovanni's…your Uncle was a good man. He understood honour, loyalty.' Lorenzo offered, eyes closing for a moment. 'The Pazzi thugs are storming the Palazzo della Signoria! We can't hold them off much longer--' another guard called, racing through the door in a panic. 'No! If they get inside, they'll murder our supporters and put their own devils in power!' the first guard replied, fear and worry colouring his voice. 'Then my survival would mean nothing. I have to…' Lorenzo tried to rise but his wounds were too much and he fell back again, reaching for Aloysius. 'Francesco de'Pazzi…help save our city, Auditore…kill him.' 'It will be done, Signore.' Aloysius nodded, leaving the building with Gena. 'But not until after we swing by the workshop and check on Emily's condition.' *~(^)~(+)~(^)~(+)~(^)~(^)*

Knocking quickly and hurrying inside, Aloysius sagged back against the wall to catch his breath. Firenze was going to chaos outside, just getting back to the workshop had required multiple fights and left them both with a few new wounds to be dealt with. 'Aloysius! Gena!' Ezio called, coming down the stairs and slipping his sword away. 'How is she, Ezio?' Gena asked, looking up at him and noticing the blood staining his robes. 'Leonardo believes she will be just fine with time. The wound was very deep but thankfully hit nothing he considered vital.' Ezio sighed, looking back the way he'd come. 'Get ready to move out again, Francesco dies today.' Aloysius instructed, shoving his exhaustion aside and hustling up the stairs to make absolutely sure Emily was holding on for them.

He found them in what appeared to be a bedroom, though it was hard to tell for all the sketches and models scattered about the place. Emily's robes and weapons sat in a neat pile atop a chest near the bed, everything except for her hidden blades stacked together. Crossing the room, he came up beside Libby and gazed down at the sleeping figure in the bed, taking in her heavily bandaged shoulder and the pain lines marring her face.

Crouching beside the bed when Emily groaned and slowly opened one eye, Aloysius reached out to stroke his bare knuckles over her cheek, reassuring her with the touch of a friend before she went and did something stupid like try and get up. 'Lorenzo de Medici is safe, we got him home and into the hands of his people. War rages through the city, Pazzi followers against Medici. We have been tasked by the Medici to find and eliminate Francesco and we will do so.' Aloysius briefed, curling his fingers into her hair loosely. 'Stay and rest, Leonardo will take care of you for now.'

'Make sure…' Emily mumbled, struggling to focus past the sedative she'd been given by Leonardo. 'I will see that Ezio learns what he will need to know.' Aloysius nodded, understanding her concerns. 'We are simply his support.' 'Good.' Emily sighed, eye drifting closed again.

Getting to his feet again, Aloysius sighed and glanced at Libby before walking over to where Leonardo was washing his hands in a bucket of water, blood staining his shirt and breeches and even a little bit splashed up in his hair. 'Thank you for this, Leonardo. You are such an asset to our work here, I just wish we did not have to keep intruding on your life so much.' Aloysius sighed, resting one hand on his shoulder lightly. 'I do not mind it as much as I thought I would, Aloysius. Though perhaps you could avoid sending me too many injuries like this, I am no dottore.' Leonardo replied, finishing his clean up and standing. 'I will do what I can to keep her safe and comfortable.' 'Do you need Libby to stay or are you confident you can handle this wound without assistance?'
Aloysius asked, his focus completely locked on Leonardo. 
'I can tend to her without aid. Libby explained what would need to be done.' Leonardo nodded, confident in his choice. 
'Good, I knew we were right to trust you Leonardo. If you need anything at all, you know what to do.' Aloysius grinned faintly, feeling like they might actually make it through this strange time without losing anybody. 
'Si, I know. Go now, save Firenze before it is too late.' Leonardo replied, turning his attention back to Emily and pulling a light blanket over her. 'We await your return. Buona fortuna.' 
'To you as well.' Libby offered, hustling back downstairs behind Aloysius. 
Wishing that he could just curl up and sleep for a little while, Aloysius sighed faintly as he returned to Ezio and Gena, already considering how they would handle the next stage of this mission. They were all tired and sore, shocked by how easily Emily had been taken out and horrified by what was happening to Firenze but they could not rest just yet. 
'We've got to finish what was started here. We're going to the Palazzo della Signoria to deal with Francesco for good. We take his life tonight, for all the people that he has killed and wounded in this insane quest for power.' he instructed, shadowed gaze drifting around the team. 'But mostly we fight this one for Giovanni and Emily! We fight for family!' 
'He will suffer as we have suffered!' Ezio declared, the kill his to make and he would make it one that Emily would be proud of. 

Buoyed by his words, the team turned and ran back out into the chaos, weapons to hand and a murderous glint in their sheltered eyes. Francesco de'Pazzi would pay for all the harm he had caused. His death would be hard earned, just like Emily would have wanted had she been the one to make this kill. 

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Splitting his force with a quick hand signal, Aloysius stuck beside Ezio to go after Francesco while Libby and Gena thinned his supporters out a little more and held their ground in case the men needed a blocking force to keep Francesco from making an escape from certain death. Already the ground in front of the Palazzo della Signoria was littered with bodies of allies and enemies alike and unleashing Gena into it made things much worse for the Pazzi supporters. 

Showing that age was no barrier to living the highly active life of an Assassin, Aloysius stayed right beside Ezio across the rooftops. Scrambling up another building, they jumped onto the roof and ran hard, just able to make out their target standing atop the grand Palazzo in front of them. 
'You, again! Why aren't you dead? Men! Slaughter them!' Francesco called, recognising the presence of two agitated Assassins and calling forbackup like they'd expected he would. 
'Templars…they're all the same.' Aloysius muttered, lifting his gaze. 'You have plagued this city for too long, de'Pazzi! Your reign of fire ends tonight!' 

Falling in behind Aloysius, Ezio followed him across the rooftops and up onto the walls of the Palazzo, hanging from ledges barely big enough to wrap their fingers over and clawing onto narrow stone decorations all along the walls. Inching around the corner of the building, they started up again, swinging from the decorative arches at the very top of the walls. 
'Oh! The boy thinks himself a master swordsman. So you've drawn some blood! My men will make short work of you!' de'Pazzi taunted, his attention locked on the climbing Assassins as they swung over the ramparts. 'Guards! Guards!' 

No one's coming…it's just us now.' Ezio growled, drawing his sword and approaching Francesco. 
'Damn it! Damn you to hell! Get the hell away from me!' Francesco screamed, launching off the building and plummeting to the ground rather than face the Assassins. 
'You first asshole.' Aloysius spat, launching over the ramparts and plunging after Francesco.
'Gena! Blocking force!' Ezio called, taking flight behind Aloysius and flipping over to drop into the hay cart Aloysius was waiting beside. 'We're on it, Ezio!' Gena replied, throwing off another skirmish and joining the chase. 'Libby!' 'Intercepting!' Libby responded, hacking down her current foe and taking off again.

Staying with their most effective team, Libby and Gena cleared the streets to de'Pazzi had nowhere to hide if he bailed as Aloysius and Ezio thundered across the rooftops, never letting that pest out of their sight and hounding him constantly. Aloysius hung back a half step, doing everything he could be make certain that Ezio would be the one to claim the life of this traitor.

Lunging forward and grabbing Francesco's cloak, Ezio didn't hesitate, bringing his left arm up and unleashing his hidden blade. The strike was perfect, slamming right through the exposed back of their target and protruding out the front just a little bit. 'Now Firenze will judge you for what you've done.' Ezio declared, lowering the dying man to the rooftop and supporting him, remembering Emily's lessons on respect. 'It's over…it's all over.' for final words, Francesco's were rather pathetic. 'Better to be content in this life, than aspire to it in the next.' Ezio offered, setting the body on the rooftop. 'Requiescat in pace.' 'Requiescat in pace.' Aloysius repeated, resting one hand on Ezio's shoulder. 'Now we make our statement to the people of Firenze and the rest of the Templars.' 'I thought we had already done that.' Ezio replied, looking up at Aloysius. 'What else is there to be done with this?' 'We make it public knowledge that this snake is dead.' Aloysius grinned, drawing Ezio to his feet and away from the body. 'Leave this step to Gena and Libby. Find peace with this kill and then move on from it.'

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Tying off the last knot, Gena nodded and moved back as Libby tipped the naked body of their defeated foe over the wall of the Palazzo and stepped back into the shadows. Waving forward the thieves that La Volpe had sent to assist with getting the body onto the rooftop, Aloysius smiled and walked over to join his friends, resting a hand on Ezio's shoulder.

Moving back to the front as Jacopo cantered his horse through the crowd, the four Assassins climbed up onto the ramparts and raised their left hands in acknowledgement of the crowd. As one, the three modern Assassins threw their heads back and howled, making the city ring with the calls of the wolves of the world.

Jumping down, the quartet turned and jumped down from the rooftop, smiling and relaxed as they made their way back to Leonardo's to check on Emily and get some much needed rest. Abandoning the rooftops, they dropped down into the streets and moved through the crowds, listening to the happy cheers of the people now that they were free of the evils of the Templars. 'I do not understand. Why the howling?' Ezio asked, fairly sure that the idea was to stay anonymous and not draw attention to their presence. 'It's something that the Assassins took to doing long after your time. We use the calls of nature to communicate over distance and make our enemies nervous. They can't be sure if the animals they hear but don't see are real animals or Assassins hiding in wait.' Gena explained, resting a hand on his back. 'Wolves over those we have killed lets our enemies know that we are on the hunt and will be coming for them in their own time.' 'I think I get it.' Ezio nodded, rubbing tired eyes. 'It may take some time to accept it though.' 'Don't rush, it felt weird the first few times for me as well. One day it'll feel like the most natural thing to do to sign off on a job.' Libby shrugged, giving him a smile. 'You'll figure it out.' 'You're exhausted, Ezio, nothing will make much sense right now. Come on, I'm sure Leonardo
won't mind us taking up his floor space to get some sleep.' Aloysius chuckled, half supporting the young man as they wandered towards their surrogate home here in Firenze.
Continuing Hunt

Rolling his eyes when Emily came downstairs, all kitted out for another day of dealing with the Templar scum, Aloysius stepped forward to greet her, holding out Francesco's bloodied hat as proof the job had been done.

'You have done well, all of you. There is still more to be done but for now we can slow down and take a moment to simply breathe. We should check in with Lorenzo, he might have more information to help us track down the rest of the troublemakers around here.' Emily smiled, accepting the hat and looking at it for a moment. 'You remembered your lessons I trust, Ezio?'

'Sì, Emily. I showed respect to the dead.' Ezio replied, relieved to see her up and about. 'Are you sure you should be out of bed though Emily?'

'I will be fine, Ezio, so long as I take it easy. I could not stay in Leonardo's bed though; he needs his sleep and is far too much of a gentleman to force his company on me just to rest.' Emily chuckled, catching sight of Leonardo out the corner of his eye. 'Did you think I did not know about you sleeping down here in the chair?'

'I had not thought you would realise.' Leonardo replied, a faint blush spreading over his cheeks. 'Such a gentleman.' Emily repeated, shaking her head slowly. 'Sleep properly tonight Leonardo, I will return to Monteriggioni and spend my recovery there.'

'Uncle Mario will enjoy the company.' Ezio grinned, turning to regard Gena curiously. 'Will you be travelling with us now?'

'Leonardo should be safe now, word quickly spread about guards disappearing after hassling him and now they treat him with the respect deserved.' Gena nodded, reluctant to leave but she would if asked. 'My assignment depends on the needs of the senior Assassin here; I go where I'm told.'

'This time Gena, it must be your choice. It took some time before Libby and Aloysius were comfortable leaving their ancestors behind and venturing out to work. You must become comfortable venturing further from Leonardo before I will consider putting you on the team fully.' Emily replied, crossing the workshop and throwing her left arm around Ezio's shoulders. 'If you would rather stay, I understand. It is not easy to face something like this.'

Closing her eyes for a moment, Gena sighed and crossed the room, gazing down at Leonardo as she lightly touched his cheek, constantly aware that the strength she had could so easily harm another. She'd done it before by accident, a training spar that had gotten out of hand so now she was much more tentative when making physical contact with friends.

'You understand that I have to go, don't you? As wonderful as this time to know you has been, I am no more an artist and inventor than you a killer.' she uttered, gazing into his expressive blue eyes and hating the sorrow she caused.

'I know, Gena. Somehow I've always known this day would come. Be safe and I will await our next meeting with great excitement.' Leonardo nodded, finding a smile for her, it was weak and shaky but he tried.

'Take this, may it bring you comfort on lonely nights and remind you always of my promise to keep you safe from harm.' Gena insisted, pulling a heavy silver chain from one of her pouches, a small silver amulet tucked between her fingers.

Accepting the chain and amulet, Leonardo turned it over and traced the faint etching with his thumb nail, recognising what she'd given him. Placing it back in Gena's hands, he reached up and loosened his high collar, parting the layers and twisting his fingers around the simple braided cord he had never shown anyone else. Unpicking the knot quickly, he looked up at Gena and hoped she
understood what he was trying to say as he offered it out.

Smiling softly, Gena slipped the heavier chain around his neck and secured the clasp, tucking it under his collar and smoothing it out neatly. Leonardo couldn't help but reach up and brush the amulet lightly, noting that she'd turned it to place the engraved Assassin symbol against his skin and leave the blank side facing out.

Showing that she understood what he was offering, Gena sunk to her knees and brushed her robes open, hood falling back to expose her neck fully. Humbled by the trust displayed, Leonardo went to one knee in front of her and reached out to securely knot the cord around her neck, fingers sliding over her skin to brush the blue stone hanging from it in a cage of silver wire. Then he straightened her collars and pulled her hood up, setting it high on her head so he could still look into her eyes.

'I will miss you, Gena. Be careful and I will see you again one day. This I truly believe.' Leonardo uttered, resting his hands on her shoulders.

'I will miss you as well, Leonardo. Take care of yourself and keep a window unlatched for me, I will return if and when I can. Even if you leave Firenze for your art, I will always find you.' Gena nodded, drawing him into a loving hug.

Letting go reluctantly after a few minutes, Gena stood and helped Leonardo to his feet before pressing a kiss to his forehead and turning away, pulling her cloak over her left shoulder as she returned to Emily's side. Almost as an afterthought, Gena reached up and tugged her hood forward, shading her eyes and becoming another mysterious Assassin, unknown and untouchable.

'Until next time, Leonardo. I will keep them safe; this is my promise to you. We are a team, five Assassins with a massive job ahead but we will succeed. Read this at your leisure, it is my pact and my promise. Take heart at these words and know that you will never be forgotten. You have earned the greatest of respect and thanks from the Assassin brotherhood.' Emily nodded, placing a sealed letter on the table near the door before ushering her team outside and back to work.

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Meeting up with Lorenzo de Medici on one of the bridges crossing the river, the group gathered around him and tried to relax, watching the people passing by and searching for danger from all sides. It was rare they had a moment when they weren't hunting someone or dealing with another job and as such, the four modern Assassins found it harder to relax and enjoy the quiet moment.

Stopping beside Lorenzo, Ezio noted the flicker of recognition in his eyes but it wasn't aimed at him, instead it was directed at Aloysius. Dismissing that thought for later, Ezio turned to gaze over the river, remembering more innocent times when he and Federico would get into mischief down along the waters edge.

'When I was six years old, I fell into the Arno. I soon found myself drifting down and into darkness, certain my life was at an end. Instead, I woke to the sound of my mother weeping. At her side stood a stranger, soaking and smiling at me. My mother explained that he had saved me. And so began a long and prosperous relationship between two families: yours and mine.' Lorenzo explained, placing a hand on Ezio's shoulder. 'I am sorry I could not help your father and brothers or lend aid when you tried to leave Firenze.'

'You have nothing to apologise for. We believe that Jacopo de'Pazzi played a role in their attempted murders. The attack on you as well. We need to find him.' Ezio replied, turning to face Lorenzo properly and trusting his friends to watch out for him.

'That coward fled before we could arrest him!' Lorenzo growled, throwing up his hands in frustration and wincing when his fresh wounds warned him of the stupidity of that action.

'Have you any leads?' Aloysius asked, stepping up beside Ezio.

'No. They've hidden themselves well.' Lorenzo replied, peering closer at Aloysius.

'They?' Libby asked, briefly wondering just how many they would need to deal with.
'Jacopo was not the only conspirator to escape.' Lorenzo confirmed, turning to look at Libby. 'If they work with Jacopo, they were surely involved in the plot against my family as well. Give us their names.' Ezio requested, eager to see the end of this conspiracy. 'Antonio Maffei, Archbishop Francesco Salviati, Stefano de Bagnone and Bernado Baroncelli.' Lorenzo listed, unconcerned about being completely surrounded by five Assassins. 'Bene. I will go and see my Uncle. He has men stationed in the countryside.' Ezio nodded, the plan clear to him now. 'Wait…before you go.' Lorenzo smiled, reaching into his belt pouch and pulling out a gift. 'A Codex page!' Emily grinned, reaching past Ezio to take it. 'Grazie Signore.' 'I took it from the files of Francesco de'Pazzi, seeing as he clearly no longer needs it. I've always had an interest in things of antiquity. As did your father.' Lorenzo nodded, noting how Emily did everything with her left hand. 'It is meaningful to all of us, as well.' Gena added, putting a hand on Ezio's shoulder. 'Then consider it a gift! Che il Signore ci protegga.' Lorenzo declared, looking at the group with a fond smile. 'And thank you for trying to save my brother.' 'I only wish we could have done more for him.' Emily replied, rubbing her injured shoulder lightly as she slipped past Ezio. 'They will pay for the death of Giuliano, I give you my word.' Chewing her bottom lip as she thought it over, Emily turned to Libby and Ezio, satisfied that they could do what was needed without holding up their responsibilities too long. That would free up the rest of them to get a few other things done before they set out for Monteriggioni and the hunt for the rest of the Pazzi conspirators. 'Ezio, you and Libby take the Codex page to Leonardo and wait for him to complete the translations and work out what might be available. We're trusting you with our hidden blades so no screwing around. While you're doing that, Aloysius will go to the nearest art merchant and check for any new maps or other things we might need. Gena, you will go to the blacksmith to handle repairs and replacements as needed. I will head for the tailor for new linens and the doctor to restock our medicine pouches. Once everything is completed, we meet at the usual place and make our way to Monteriggioni.' Emily briefed, wary of removing her best remaining weapon but it was a sacrifice worth making, even if Leonardo didn't find another upgrade for their blades. 'Is that a warning that you're bleeding under those bandages, Emily?' Libby asked, accepting Gena's bracer and tucking it into her largest belt pouch. 'No, my shoulder is fine Libby. It's a nice easy walk from one to the other and back to the meeting point.' Emily laughed, offering her left arm to Ezio. 'I had never thought you so easily disarmed, Emily.' he teased, releasing the straps and pulling her bracer off and tucking it in his pouch safely. 'I can still kill a man, Ezio. Dagger, sword or with my bare fingers, the loss of my hidden blade doesn't really affect my killing skills.' Emily warned, tweaking his nose quickly before leaving and disappearing into the crowd. 'I've even witnessed her kill a particular Templar with her teeth. Ripped his throat clean out, made one hell of a mess. Far as I know, she still holds the record for most inventive kill.' Aloysius chuckled, handing over his bracer to a rather green looking Ezio. 'Now that was plain unfair Aloysius, you could have at least waited until he made Junior Assassin before telling him about that incident.' Gena grinned, turning and weaving into the crowds. 'Come on Ezio, best not to think about that one too much.' Libby added, taking his arm and guiding him away. 'Of all the things I expected to learn…' Ezio groaned, trying to get that particular image out of his head. 'I think I may be sick.' *~^(^)~+(^)~-(^)~+(^)~*( Slipping into the workshop again, Libby smiled as Leonardo turned to them and his eyes lit up for a
moment before he frowned, almost as though he was expecting the others to come inside. When no
one else followed, he almost seemed disappointed, turning back to his work.
'It's nothing like that, Leonardo, really. We have multiple things to do so we split up to get everything
done so we have a chance of making Monteriggioni before nightfall.' she promised, pulling out the
Codex page and holding it up.
'Aloisius went to seek out new maps we might need for the surrounding areas, Gena was sent to the
blacksmith for repairs and replacement equipment we needed and Emily is picking up medicines and
linens just in case we get into trouble out there.' Ezio added, still feeling a little queasy but it was
settling slowly.
'Ah! Another page!' Leonardo grinned, taking the parchment. 'That Emily, always thinking three
steps ahead…well most of the time.'
'She did plan for it, Leonardo. She explained as we were out walking earlier. By taking that shot
meant for Giuliano, she'd hoped to save him. The plan didn't work but the idea was carefully
considered before she did it.' Libby shrugged, hopping up onto a stool near the worktable and letting
her shoulders drop.
'I am starting to think she might be crazy.' Leonardo uttered, much to the amusement of his friends,
especially Libby. 'Aha! It's a similar cipher to the last one. This won't take long…'

Listening to Leonardo muttering about whatever he'd discovered on this particular Codex page,
Libby let her mind drift to her own career as an Assassin and all the things she'd managed to pull off
when most dismissed her as too small and weak to handle the rigours of the life. She'd proved them
wrong though, taking on missions that most didn't believe she could complete and coming back alive
time and time again.
'It's another blade design - for delivering poison!' Leonardo declared, looking up from his work and
startling Libby out of her thoughts.
'Can you build it?' Ezio asked, thinking of the two extra bracers he was carrying.
'Si! It won't take very long. I just need to figure out a way to hollow out the blade without sacrificing
the-' Leonardo replied, still talking as he walked over to his mechanical workbench.
'It's alright Leonardo. Just do what you need to do.' Ezio chuckled, releasing the straps securing his
bracer and offering out his hand in invitation.
'And you teased Emily about how easily you disarmed her.' Libby smirked, coming over and placing
Gena's bracer on the bench before releasing her own and slipping it off.
'She needed a laugh.' Ezio shrugged, placing the last two bracers on the table and finding a chair to
wait for the work to be completed.
'Yeah, well this little upgrade will certainly make her happy. She likes the subtle art of killing,
poisons are a particular favourite of hers.' Libby nodded, settling back to wait. 'Don't get me wrong,
she'll go for a brazen kill if she must but subtle is better sometimes.'

Settling against the wall beside Libby, Ezio used the time to puzzle things over, thinking about
various little details he'd noticed but he couldn't quite put them together in his mind. All these little
hints niggled away in the back of his mind, trying to get his attention but he couldn't afford to be
distracted by them.
'Last time we were around my Uncle, I noticed Emily seemed to act differently around him…like she
knew something that she was keeping quiet.' he remarked, looking to Libby for answers.
'She does…we all do really. The Auditore family are legends in our own time, spoken of with
respect because of what they did, particularly what you managed but other members of your family
are regarded quite highly as well.' Libby offered, meeting his gaze calmly.
'We are? But…do I really want to be asking about this?' Ezio groaned, realising that he'd just walked
right into territory that was probably better left alone.
'Probably not, your family causes troubles even where I come from. Many a young Assassin has
gotten a long stay in the hospital after trying some crazy stunt they'd read in the library and eight
times out of ten, their chosen stunt was first performed by an Auditore. Even I've done it, the first
time I tried assassinating from a ledge. Two weeks in hospital with broken bones and another twelve
before I was allowed back to full training.' Libby shrugged, flushing faintly at the memory. 'In my
defence, one of my fellow trainees had smeared oil on the ledge and I was first up.'

Ezio looked thoughtful at that admission, his eyes going distant as he considered something. Shaking
his head slightly, he turned his shining eyes back to Libby and flashed her a grin, sliding one arm
around her shoulders and drawing her closer.

'Do not feel bad about such a fall, I have done similar. Federico thought it would be funny to rub a
candle on the window ledge in my bedroom. I was lucky for the flower cart that had stopped briefly
though father was not so happy about having to pay for the destroyed flowers and my treatment.' he
nodded, sorrow in his voice for a moment. 'Tell me more, please. You have me interested now.'

'Your Uncle…now there's a man that causes quite a few incidents when his name is mentioned in
debate and casual conversation. There is a legend that he once killed a man without ever bleeding a
weapon. His sword lost into the river, his dagger lost when an archer shot it from his hand, his
throwing knives all used up on archers and his hidden blade broken. He left no marks on his target to
indicate how, baffling the doctors in many cities with how that man had perished.' Libby grinned,
remembering hearing this story many times.

'So how did he do it?' Ezio asked, thinking of his own weapons and working out what was left to
use for an assassination.

'I can only say what is part of the legend, the truth has been lost to history. We could always ask him
once we get to Monteriggioni, though he might not tell his secret.' Libby shrugged, choosing to let
Mario keep his dignity instead of spreading what accounted to rumours and slander. 'The legend
could be wrong, it would be unkind to tarnish his name with slander.'

Pushing off the wall when Leonardo turned to them with one of the bracers in his hands, Libby
grinned and elbowed Ezio, pulling him out of his thoughts before heading over to learn more about
Leonardo's latest upgrades to their favoured weapons.

'All done! I've filled your blades with a bit of poison to start with. Should you run out, just visit a
doctor.' he explained, handing Libby hers before turning to Ezio and handing over another.

'Poison? From a doctor?' Ezio asked, examining the bracer for a moment. 'This is not mine,
Leonardo. Mine has a scratch in the leather right here.'

'In high enough doses; that which cures can kill.' Libby nodded, examining the other bracers on the
bench. 'Here is yours Ezio. You've got Aloysius' instead. An easy enough mistake, you two are
similar enough in build.'

'Perhaps you should find a way to mark them to avoid such confusion.' Leonardo suggested, smiling
as Ezio strapped his rightful bracer back into place.

'We will Leonardo, probably something on the inside so only you'll know about it.' Libby grinned,
tucking Gena's bracer in her pouch safely. 'Knowing Emily, she'll have something already.'

'We are in your debt once more, my friend.' Ezio grinned, resting one hand on Leonardo's shoulder
once the last two bracers were hidden away.

'Anytime, Ezio! Anytime!' Leonardo replied, clapping him on the arm and turning back to his other
work as Libby collected the translated page and hid it away.

'The others should be just about to the meeting place, we'd better hurry Ezio.' she warned, leaning in
to brush a kiss against Leonardo's cheek before they left. 'Grazie again maestro.'
Head coming up at the sound of several people coming towards his office, Mario first thought was that some of his men had come to discuss something with him but they usually waited for him to step outside. Then his mind went towards Templar invaders coming to deal with another Auditore Assassin but that was unlikely too, his men would not let just anyone up to the villa, just in case it was a trick to do harm to Mario.

The footsteps stopped in the next room, where Claudia and the architect were busily working, he clearly heard Claudia gasp and then a burble of voices all talking at once. He recognised some of those voices, Ezio and his companions but one was strange, deeper like a man but with some sounds that Mario had never heard come from a man before.

He would have gone to investigate the noise but right then Ezio came in from the next room, looking tired and haggard, a few stains of blood on his robes. He looked so much older than just nineteen, wiser and more aware of the dangers too.

'Ezio! Come in, come in! To what do we owe the honour?' Mario greeted him warmly, trying to dispel the uncomfortable feeling he was getting.

'We've been sent from Firenze by Il Magnifico to attend to some unfinished business. We're looking for Jacopo de'Pazzi.' Ezio replied, managing a smile but it was haunted and faint.

'Ha...who isn't? We've been at it for days.' Mario scoffed, irritated that they couldn't find that snake. 'Then perhaps what we carry will help us all: a lost of his co-conspirators. One of them will talk before he dies.' Ezio offered, holding out the scrap of parchment.

'Excellent! These men are sure to lack Jacopo's resources, which means they will be easier to find. I will put my scouts to it at once.' Mario nodded, gazing at the list of names.

'We appreciate the help, Uncle. We've got something else for you as well: more Codex pages.' Ezio continued, holding out the neatly rolled collection of pages.

'Ah! Let's see what we can learn.' Mario suggested, unrolling the first one and reading the translations. 'What is this? What Prophet?'

'What did you find, Uncle?' Ezio asked, having never actually read the translations, he was more interested in the weaponry.

'Just another damn mystery! The test here roughly translates to: "Only the prophet may open it..." There's a reference to two "Pieces of Eden". But these pages offer no answers, nipote. At least not on their own. You must find more.' Mario replied, still reading over the information revealed.

'We'll have to save it for another day, Uncle. I have a mission to attend to with most of my friends.' Ezio shrugged, turning for the door back towards Claudia's workspace.

'As you wish. Now, if you hope to defeat these bastardi, I will need to teach you a few things. Meet me on the practise field.' Mario agreed, putting the pages on his desk for later. 'Wait, what do you mean most of your friends?'

'Emily was injured in Firenze; she will be staying here until she is healed while the rest of us deal with the men on that list. We gained a new ally in Firenze too, another Assassin of their era and a descendant of Leonardo da Vinci.' Ezio explained, not sure how else to explain Gena's presence in the group. 'Gena Newman, as deadly as any of the others you know...and I think she might have you for muscle mass.'

'Are you sure this Gena is a woman?' Mario asked, stunned by Ezio's suggestion of a woman being stronger than he.

'Si, I am certain. She hugged me and I felt her figure through our robes. She is definitely a woman.'
Ezio nodded, rather enjoying the look of shock on Mario's face. 'Come and meet her, she is just in the next room with the others.'

Following Ezio down the short passageway from his study, Mario struggled to believe Ezio's words about this woman but he'd never known any of Giovanni's children to tell such fanciful stories. A woman as strong as he was, it hardly seemed possible but Ezio sounded so sure about it.

'Alright Emily, that'll do it. Just be more careful now, this wound is deep and needs a chance to heal up.' Libby warned, straightening up and looking back over her shoulder. 'Buongiorno Mario.'

'Buongiorno amici.' Mario smiled, gaze drawn to the heavyset, bald-headed Assassin standing behind Emily as she sat on a chair they'd moved out of the corner.

'I hope you don't mind another house guest Mario.' Emily chuckled, pulling her robes closed and getting to her feet. 'Damned templar put a knife in my back, right into the shoulder.'

'Of course not Emily, your company is always welcome.' Mario nodded, walking over to embrace her carefully, staying well clear of her right shoulder. 'Stay as long as you need.'

'Grazie Mario, you are too kind.' Emily replied, drawing back slowly. 'This is Gena Newman, a fellow Assassin and one of the meanest swordswomen you've ever met. Gena, this is Mario Auditore, Ezio's Uncle and a very important ally.'

Mario couldn't help the tension that built in his shoulders when Gena came out from behind the chair and approached him, her greater size becoming all the more apparent now that she was on the move. She towered over him by a good few inches, something that made him uncomfortable; he was unused to having to look up at people. Her bald head was covered in a multitude of scars, including one that slashed beside her left eye, kissing the corner and dropping off the edge of her jaw. Powerful shoulders curved down into thick arms and strong hands, her displayed knuckles showing signs of more than a few fights. Wide through the torso and hips and legs that could only be described as tree trunks, this woman could only be described as deadly.

Turning to Ezio, Mario cuffed him across the back of the head and sighed, feeling a little less off balance when Ezio rubbed his head and scowled, not sure why he'd been chastised.

'You think she might have me for muscle mass? Are you blind nipote or just foolish?' Mario asked, shaking his head slowly.

'I was trying to be inoffensive with the news.' Ezio shrugged, neatening up his hair. 'Would you have preferred I just come out and say I had found a new friend that made you look scrawny?'

'This coming from the twig of a man we're training?' Gena asked, a smirk crossing her lips.

'Alright, that's enough.' Emily sighed, stepping in before things got out of hand. 'Not everyone can be a brawler like you Gena, just as not everyone can skip so numbly across rooftops like Ezio. It takes all sorts to make a team; we must be accepting of each other and learn how to cover each weakness within any team. Everyone clear on that?'

'Si Emily.' Mario was still impressed by the way Emily commanded the respect of her fellow Assassins, getting all four of them to respond to her in chorus like that.

'Good. Now, you all have your tasks. Get to them.' Emily nodded, dismissing the group with a flick of her hand. 'I heard what Mario said, Ezio. You have training to complete.'

Chuckling softly as the four other Assassins nodded and left the room at a jog, Mario walked over to check the accounting with Claudia before joining Emily on a sedate walk out to the practise field to give Ezio a few more tricks to use against their enemies. He was already there, running through a few stretches and sparring with his shadow as he waited for them.

'Ezio seems so different now.' Mario uttered, glancing at Emily as they descended the stairs.

'He has grown into his responsibilities.' Emily nodded, chewing her lip for a moment. 'But he is struggling with some parts; he's starting to have nightmares.'

'Part of the job, unfortunately. Is he at least asking for help?' Mario sighed, absentmindedly brushing his thumb against the scar cutting through his left eye.

'He is, usually from Libby or myself. With time he will adjust.' Emily replied, putting her good hand
on Mario's shoulder. 'I will tell you more later, best he not know you know about this.'
'Of course, say no more.' Mario uttered, turning away from Ezio. 'If you'd like to assist, I was planning on teaching him to dodge and disarm today.'
'You get in there with him; I'll give him the brief.' Emily chuckled, waving Mario ahead and cursing her wounded shoulder. She would have liked another chance to spar against Ezio.

Vaulting over the practice field wall with more grace than would normally be expected from a man of his age, Mario landed lightly on the grass as Emily bounded up onto the fence and crouched, watching Ezio move through the steps they had shown him.
'Put away your sword, Ezio. You will not need it for these drills.' Mario called, keeping his distance from Ezio for the moment.
'Of course Uncle.' Ezio nodded, sheathing his sword then doing something unexpected. Unbuckling his sword belt, he carried it over and handed it to Emily, showing the ultimate of trust in her.
'I have your back, Ezio.' Emily nodded, doing up the buckle and slinging the belt over her chest.

Returning to face his Uncle, Ezio could only guess what sort of training he was going to get this time if he didn't need his sword for it. For the most part his friends had been teaching him offensive manoeuvres, helping him improve his fighting skills and teaching him how to get out of trouble if fighting was a bad idea.
'Alright, Ezio. You're familiar with counter-attacking - but what happens when your enemy is as well?' Mario asked, pulling Ezio out of his thoughts.
'I don't usually give them the opportunity.' Ezio replied with a nonchalant shrug.
'Tough talk offers little protection against Templar steel.' Mario warned, a little disappointed in Ezio's casual answer but not really surprised.
'Then by all means, maestro - teach me what to do!' Ezio countered, his voice dripping with sarcasm as he spread his hands.
'Ezio! This is your last warning.' Emily growled, her very tone making Ezio flinch. 'Our enemies can't harm what they can't hit.'
'Now dodge!' Mario barked, backing up a step and drawing his sword.

Using steps he'd picked up from Aloysius and Libby, Ezio stayed clear of Mario's sword easily enough, putting his own spin on things to try and regain Emily's full confidence as well. He could do more than just replicate moves he'd seen, he could create his own style and make it work against all threats. Stepping clear of another strike, this one aimed at his head, he grinned a little and relaxed as Mario lowered his sword.

'Ezio, you're improving. Now, things are going to get a little harder. You're in a fight; you've lost your sword and need a new one. The only way you're getting one is to disarm an opponent and use his. So go on, try and take Mario's sword.' Emily directed, perfectly still on her perch as the two started to circle again. 'Mario, you don't have to treat him like glass. He's got to learn and pain is a good motivator.'

Eyes widening at the implications of Emily's statement, Ezio stepped up his game against Mario, hoping that Leonardo's improvements to the plating on his bracers could stand up to this sort of abuse. Shoving such thoughts aside, he moved back quickly, narrowly avoiding an incoming strike as he turned away from it and looked for his opening. Spotting his chance when Mario slashed at him again, Ezio turned into it and grabbed his wrist, holding tight and using his left hand to strike Mario's elbow. Grabbing the hilt once Mario's grip loosened, Ezio lashed out with one foot, kicking him in the stomach and sending him staggering backwards.

Planting the sword in the ground, Ezio backed up and waited for Mario to grab it back before starting in again, looking for a different opening this time. This time he got around behind his Uncle, grabbing his wrist and applying pressure to Mario's shoulder as he planted his boot firmly in Mario's behind. The sword slipped free and Ezio skittered backwards, holding the stolen blade in a battle
stance.

Retrieving his sword again, Mario scowled as they circled again. Ezio was good but he was getting cocky now, smirking behind his cowl and looking for the next opening. Well this time he was going to get quite the surprise. He purposefully left himself open to a disarming move from the front and Ezio went straight for it, grabbing his wrist and punching his elbow again. Ignoring the pain of the blow, Mario let him take the sword again and braced for the kick.

As soon as Ezio's boot made contact with his stomach this time, Mario snapped his left hand down and grabbed Ezio's ankle, pulling sharply as he turned. The look of surprise on Ezio's face was really quite amusing before he went sprawling in the dirt, Mario's sword lying forgotten in the grass.

Collecting his sword from where it had fallen, Mario sheathed it calmly and walked over to help Ezio to his feet, checking him over for any injuries.

Slipping off the fence, Emily came over to join them, holding out Ezio's sword as she chuckled softly. That last disarm attempt from Ezio, although effective did prove something that she'd been trying to teach him for some time.

'Magnifico! Once again you exceed my expectations.' Mario praised, clapping Ezio on the shoulder. 'You still have a lot to learn though.' Emily added, handing over his sword belt. 'You wouldn't have gotten a mouthful of grass had you tried that technique Gena has been showing you.'

'Signore! We've found Jacopo's men, and await your word to strike!' one of the mercenary scouts called, running up to the wall of the practise field.

'Relay the following: no man moves until they have spoken with Ezio. Intesi?' Mario replied, turning to the runner leaning on the stonework.

'Or one of my companions. You will know them.' Ezio added, figuring it couldn't hurt to let the others have their fun as well.

'It will be done!' the other man nodded, turning and hurrying away again.

'Go, Ezio! Visit with my mercenaries in the countryside. See if Jacopo's lackeys won't lead you to him. But be careful. They will be expecting you!' Mario directed, focus drifting to Emily again, waiting for her to add her thoughts.

'You know what to do Ezio; call the team together and go do it.' Emily nodded, cupping his cheek lightly. 'Be safe and when you find that Baroncelli bastard…'

'He will get what he deserves, Emily.' Ezio laughed, hugging her briefly before vaulting the fence and disappearing down the stairs.

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Riding up to the walls of San Gimignano, the team of four were met by one of Mario's mercenaries outside the south gate and told where to find the four scouts around the area along with which target they would be told about by each scout. Discussing it for a few minutes, the quartet worked out their plan and decided who would get to deal with each target.

It was an easy choice to send Ezio after Baroncelli; it was his right as a blood relation to make that snake pay for stabbing Emily. Libby got to go after Maffei, Aloysius picked de Bagnone and Gena was left with Archbishop Salviati. Aloysius and Gena quickly left the gateway, mounting their horses and galloping away in the directions they had been guided, leaving Ezio and Libby to sneak into the city and complete their parts of the mission. Wishing each other good luck, Ezio and Libby split up and headed deeper into the city in search of their scouts and targets.

Running through the crowds and staying off the rooftops to avoid the dozens of archers scattered around the city, Libby headed straight for one of the public squares, following an instinct or something very much like one to track her scout to wherever he was waiting for her. She found him waiting at the top of the first set of stairs to where she'd entered the square and headed straight for
him, confident of being recognised as one of Ezio's companions.

'Salute Libby! Antonio Maffei has sought refuge atop the city's tallest structure - spouting scripture and arrows in equal measure. The man has clearly lost his mind. Making matters worse, he's posted archers all around him. You'd do well to clear them out before approaching.' he offered, saying nothing when Libby's eyes drifted to the rooffine.

'Grazie for the information.' Libby replied, pulling her gaze back to the man.

Turning sharply on her toes, she took off across the square, avoiding the bards that so loved to irritate the Assassin team and heading for the highest point she'd seen during her quick scan of the city. Though shorter than every other Assassin working on this plan, she had little trouble leaping up to grab the edge of a suitable rooftop, swinging her body up and taking off across the tiles.

Running up the wall of the tower, she leapt across onto another rooftop and sighted on the archer across the street, pulling out a throwing knife and sending it racing towards the man. Her shot was incredible, even for her skills with these light knives, catching the man in the throat from the side, severing vital blood vessels and silencing him in one swift strike.

Flying off her chosen rooftop, she grabbed a window ledge in the tower and started up, stretching her body to the limit to reach some of the handholds she could see as she hurried up, her ears filled with the ridiculous drivel her target was sprouting from his supposedly safe place.

'Citizens of San Gimignano, heed well my words! You must repent! Repent and seek forgiveness! For your wicked ways have incurred the wrath of a demon! Summoned by your sins, he now walks our world, cloaked in shadow and darkness! And everywhere he treads, death follows!' he ranted, his voice ringing out across the city.

'Except he's not always a he.' Libby muttered, bouncing across the surface of the wall from brick to brick then continuing her path upwards into the sky.

'Why you ask? Because you have strayed and sacrificed your liberty to that wretch Lorenzo de' Medici! You are puppets, enslaved by purse strings! Won over by poisonous words! You have lost your virtue. You have lost your dignity. You have lost your faith!'

'Oh would you just shut up.' Libby groaned, unable to believe the rubbish this guy was spouting. 'And this draws the demons in to feed. And feed they will! All whilst you wander lost in ignorance! Know that good men have died protecting you from his evils. Men who sought to save these lands, to purify them!'

Blocking out the drivel this lunatic was spouting, Libby made it up to the top of her winding climb and pushed off the wall, grabbing the edge of the timber walkway that blocked her from continuing up the wall to meet her target. Dangling from her hands, she slowly made her way around the wooden structure, inching past the guards and doing her best to forget about the pain in her hands from the long climb and now the hanging around.

Waiting, watching and refusing to look down, Libby hung from the boards patiently, refusing to acknowledge the cramps building in her arms or the ache developing in her lower back from her position. Glaring up at this coward of a man when he jumped down from the top of the tower to land on the platform, Libby held her tongue and bided her time.

Climbing up onto the platform once her target climbed the ladder back up to the very top of the tower, Libby shot up after him, ignoring the guards and driving her blade into the back of this traitor and murderer. Catching the dying man, she lowered him gently to the stones and knelt beside him, prepared to listen to his last words.

'Away with you, demon!' Maffei demanded, glaring weakly up at her.

'Have some respect for death, my friend.' Libby replied, not really surprised by the comment.

'I'll show you respect!' -'

'No, I will.' Libby cut him off, realising that he had nothing of value to say. 'Che tu possa alfine
trovare riposo nel corpo e nella mente. Requiescat in pace.'

Setting the body down lightly on the stones, irritated that she'd gotten no useful information from Maffei, Libby ducked the sword of one of the guards that had come after her and spun, hidden blade flashing out to slash his throat. Yanking out another throwing knife, she dealt with the guard climbing the ladder and took off, climbing up onto the ramparts and stepping out onto the beam attached to the corner of the building. Without fear or hesitation, she leapt out into the nothingness, arms spread wide as she tumbled through the air and crashed down in the hay pile at the bottom of the building.

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Twisting through the crowds around him, Ezio found his scout and slid to a stop, looking forward to levelling the score with Baroncelli. He had a plan for making that man suffer for the harm he had caused, a plan that Emily would be proud of. Now it was just a matter of capturing his target and putting his plan into action.

'Ezio! It's about time you got here. We've found Bernardo Baroncelli.'

'Ottima notizia! Tell me where he is and I'll see that he is dealt with…painfully.' Ezio replied, fairly sure most of the mercenaries under his Uncle knew about Emily's injury.

'That's the trouble. Lorenzo actually had him arrested days ago, after being returned to us from Constantinople. But he escaped! We believe him to be somewhere inside San Gimignano.'

'Va bene. I'll see if I can't pin him down.' Ezio nodded, already thinking of ways to find him.

'How do you expect to succeed where the rest of us have failed?'

'I have my ways.' Ezio smirked, trusting in his tracking skills and all that he'd learned from Emily and the others to see him through.

'I know he is the one who harmed your friend. Make him pay.'

'I have every intention of that.' Ezio chuckled darkly, turning and starting to search for places a coward like Baroncelli might hide from him.

It ended up being much easier than expected to find Baroncelli, he was in the first place Ezio considered searching, wandering around the markets by the wall, two guards behind him as he rambled on about things that made no sense.

'...I just need to take things one day at a time… He'll get bored… Lost… Confused… Distracted… Killed… It'll be okay…'

Rolling his eyes at the mangled ramblings of this idiota, Ezio moved to the edge of the roof, startling several pigeons away and leapt out into the open sky, relishing the feeling of the wind whipping at his face and clothes as he dropped down, twisting over before landing safely on his back in the hay cart.

'And if he does come… If it happens… I keep moving… Never in one place for long… Only… How to sleep… When to sleep… Where to sleep… The guard tower perhaps… They'll think me mad… They don't know… I'll pay them, yes… Then what will it matter… All they care about is coin… All anyone cares about is coin… Good for the brotherhood…'

Shoving out of the hay cart and shaking off the little bits left behind, Ezio headed down the stairs and went straight for his target, ignoring the voices around him and automatically scanning for the other guards around the area. Throwing subtlety to the wind, he waited a moment longer before running straight at the guards and unsheathing both his hidden blades into their throats at the same time, their deaths silent.

Now he advanced on Baroncelli, murder in his hidden gaze and a rush went through him at the fear he could see. Ignoring the guards that closed on them, Ezio went for the second dagger in his belt, a gift from Emily and turned a little, driving the blade deep into Baroncelli's right shoulder. Completing
the turn, he drove his hidden blade into Baroncelli’s back, catching the man as he fell.

Anger calmed now, Ezio found it much easier to focus on what he was meant to be doing, supporting the dying man and waiting for his final confession. It would come, Baroncelli was not a brave man, he would answer the question.
'I knew you would come…'

'Where is Jacopo?' Ezio asked, determined to get the answer they needed.
'So you can do to him what you've done to me?'
'There is still time for you to clear your conscience.' Ezio coaxed, knowing that time was fast running out for Baroncelli and he needed the answer.
'We gather at the church when a meeting is called…'
'Mi duole dover giungere a tanto.' Ezio offered, accepting this kill and the stain it would leave on him. 'Requiescat in pace.'

Easing the body down, the dagger still imbedded in his shoulder, Ezio drew his sword and turned to confront the guards, moving away from the body and looking for a way out of this situation. Slipping into the combat dance he knew so well now, he turned to confront the first two on scene, avoiding their blades and slitting their throats in a neatly timed one-two twist around them.

Trying to make an escape through a gap in the guards surrounding him, Ezio growled as that gap was firmly closed by another group of guards coming down the stairs. Suddenly Libby came racing past the fight, drawing the attention of the guards surrounding Ezio and getting half of them to chase her instead.

With the pressure off, Ezio dealt with the five guards left around him and left the area as quickly as he could, leaving behind quite a scattering of bodies and scrambling back onto the rooftops where it was easier to dodge guards and disappear from their notice. He wasn't too worried about Libby's predicament; she was more than capable of handling the guards chasing her.

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Eyes snapping to the nearest window, Emily smiled softly and held up her hand in a request for Mario to wait as she walked over and hopped up into the open window, gazing out towards San Gimignano and the four Assassins out there doing their jobs as needed. Smile growing at what she could feel, she nodded slowly and closed her eyes, sending pride and relief down the link she shared with Ezio.

She was hardly recognisable as an Assassin now, only the way she perched so easily on the narrow ledge and the bracer still firm around her left forearm gave her away. Mario had offered her an old tunic, a gift from an old friend that had never fit him comfortably. It was a bit big for Emily but she didn't mind it, she just pulled in the belt a little more and prized the extra space around her wounded shoulder. The deep blues and gold details highlighted her powerful frame and hid what she might have been, making her look like some bored young noble hanging around the villa. Over her tunic she wore a spare cloak of his, proudly bearing the Auditore crest across her back, connecting her fully into the family.

Not even twitching when Mario came up behind her and put his hand on her left shoulder, Emily chuckled softly and looked up at him, noting the look of concern in his good eye.
'No, Mario, I am not losing my mind. Ezio just checked in along our link, Baroncelli has been dealt with, not only for his role in the Pazzi conspiracy but also for my injury. The dagger he left in me has been returned full force.' she explained, turning her gaze back outside.
'I do not think I will ever fully understand this bond you share with Ezio.' Mario sighed, seemingly content to just stand there and keep his hand on her shoulder lightly.
'I'm sorry there is no one for you Mario…' Emily started, shifting a little and jumping down when he stepped back to give her space. 'And it's not because you never did find the right woman to make you happy.'
'More like no woman who could look at me without disgust.' Mario scoffed, turning away from her quickly, emotions warring in his chest.
'I don't even notice it Mario. I saw it once and then it simply faded from my perceptions. You are you, nothing more and nothing less.' Emily offered, leaning against his back and resting her hand on his shoulder.
'How can you not notice it? It's right there.' Mario asked, reaching up to place his hand over hers.
'Your scar isn't important in my eyes. I see what is underneath; the caring, loving heart of a man who has seen the worst of people and yet still manages to laugh.' Emily replied, resting her cheek against his back.
'Only so no one notices when I crack.' Mario uttered, hanging his head sadly.

Drawing away slowly, keeping her hand on his shoulder, Emily circled around and looked into his eyes, no longer even noticing how pale and dead his left eye was. To her it was simply an insignificant detail, she knew he'd earned it fighting for his home and that was it, she never saw his injuries and accepted him as he was.
'I'm here Mario; I can take the weight for a while. You deserve a chance to curl up and hide from the world just as much as anyone else. It's okay, no one can be strong all the time.' she whispered, slipping her hand free to lightly curl around his neck. 'You're allowed to get a decent night of sleep once in a while; no one can begrudge you that.'
'I have forgotten what it is to sleep properly anymore.' Mario sighed, meeting her steady gaze for a moment before flinching away from the understanding he found.
'Sometimes, all it takes is the presence of a friend.' she offered, resting her head against his. 'On the really bad nights, I find my solace curled around Ezio's back. We can both find comfort from the touch, banishing the shadows of our duty.'

Thinking about Emily's words, Mario barely noticed when she curled their fingers together and gently tugged, leading him upstairs and turning left. Puzzling over how she could know where to go when he'd always been sure no one had been awake when he'd finally retired for the night, Mario followed along where she led, right up to his bedroom door, the arch covered with a heavy velvet curtain. Nodding slowly when she looked back over her wounded shoulder at him, Mario tried not to think of what might happen as she slipped past the dark green velvet and tugged on his fingers again.

Not a word was spoken as Emily led Mario towards the big canopy bed and sat him down on the edge before sinking to her knees and releasing the straps hidden under the flared cuffs of his boots. Looking up at him, she grinned and curled her left hand under his right ankle, tugging lightly and shaking her head when he moved to assist.
'Relax, this is my gift to you for all your kindness.' she guided, hand sliding over the soft brown leather. 'Hush, just be grateful.'
'I am.' Mario nodded, leaning back on his hands and letting Emily do this for him.

Watching the way she almost seemed to treasure every touch, Mario honestly had no idea what this was all about. There was something almost sensual about this, the way she tended to him and almost seemed happy to do it. He barely even noticed her tug his boots off, she was so gentle and caring with every thoughtful movement, soft fingers marred with battle calluses working against his skin.

Shaking off his relaxed stupor as Emily continued to touch him lightly; Mario sat up a little more and undid his outer belt, flicking it off to the side before starting on his tunic. Emily looked up for a moment and grinned, eyes saying more than enough. Shrugging out of the heavy cloth and leather, Mario shifted a little to pull the cloak from under his rear and tossed the whole lot off to the side as well, not really caring about where it landed. Grabbing his gloves from where he put them, he flicked
them idly in the same direction, still not sure what Emily was planning but willing to go along with it.

Setting his boots safely off to the side, Emily smiled at the dreamy state of exhaustion Mario had drifted into, resting back on his elbows as he watched her move through half lidded eyes. Working off her own boots with thoughtless ease, she put them aside and climbed onto the bed, reaching out to tug on the back of his undershirt lightly. Her smile growing when she got him to move onto the bed properly and settle down beside her, she stopped him rolling over to hide his blind spot in the pillow and shushed closer, using her left hand to push the pillow out of the way.
'I know, Mario, I know. Just relax, I will guard your rest as your guard mine.' she whispered, brushing his nose lightly. 'You are safe here.'

Nodding slowly, Mario slipped his left hand into hers and closed his eyes, relaxing slowly as she continued to mutter soothing words and squeezed his hand rhythmically. Drifting peacefully, he slid easily into a restorative slumber, comforted by the presence of an understanding friend. He never even had a chance to worry about the demons of his past, he was out before they even showed up to haunt him for another night.

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Dismounting from his horse, Aloysius stretched for a moment and hurried to meet the scout waiting for him just nearby. Brushing off the discomfort of the ride, Aloysius slapped on a smirk and tried to give the impression that he was just fine.
'Ah! There you are! Listen, we've found Stefano de Bagnone. Just follow this road and it'll bring you to the abbey where he's taken refuge.' the man briefed, pointing to the right a little. 'Wait. Before you go…Take these. You can use them to create a distraction.'
'My thanks, friend.' Aloysius nodded, accepting the smoke bombs and chuckling softly. 'Oh yes, these will be very useful.'

Moving slowly through the monks gathered outside the abbey, Aloysius chose not to use his smoke bombs out here, instead he took his time moving through the men sworn to their God and started up the abbey walls, the ivy growing up the walls made it so much easier to climb up and get onto the roof so he could best see the monks below.

Picking his way cautiously along the tiled roof of the cloister, Aloysius heard two monks talking and chuckled, finding great amusement in what his target had to say on the matters of god and religion. This guy Bagnone might have been a marked man but his words struck a chord with Aloysius on such matters.
'Let us pray, brother.'
'Pray? Pray for what?'
'The Lord's protection!'
'If you think the Lord has any interest in our affairs, you've another thing coming. But please, by all means, continue to delude yourself if it helps to pass the time.'
'You speak blasphemy.'
'No. I speak truth.'
'But to deny His most exalted existence…'
'Is the only rational response when faced with the declaration that there exists some invisible madman in the sky. And, believe me, if your precious Bible is anything to go by, he's completely lost his mind.'

Making a mental note to tell the others about these comments later, Aloysius darted to the corner of the second secluded courtyard inside the cloister and leapt off the rooftop, flipping over and plunging into a deep pile of leaves the monks had left there in a wooden cart. Staying still in the comfort of the leaves, he listened for Bagnone coming closer and smirked at his latest comments, planning one hell
of a surprise for these monks.

'But you're right, I should look into replacing them - after the Assassin in dealt with.'

'Ahh! That unholy demon!'

'At least on this we agree.'

'They say the devil had gifted him with unnatural speed and strength.'

'The devil? No. These are gifts he gave himself, through training. It is disturbing how unwilling you are to credit people for their circumstances. I think you'd make victims out of the entire world if you could.'

'I forgive your lack of faith and forked tongue. You are still one of his children.'

'I told you... Oh what's the use. Enough of this! It's like speaking to the wind.'

Hidden knife already extended, Aloysius shot out of the leaf pile and twisted past one of the pillars supporting the roofline, booted feet barely making a sound as he landed behind Bagnone. Grabbing the man roughly, he sunk his blade through his back and guided him down, kneeling over another defeated target.

'Now I will see who was right...'

'Where is Jacopo?' Aloysius asked, refusing to feel pity for this man.

'Nothing to fear I suppose... They meet in the shadow of the Roman Gods...'

'Ora sei libero dalla paura.' Aloysius uttered, easing the dying man back. 'Requiescat in pace.'

Spotting out the guards disguised as monks and avoiding them as they tried to surround him, Aloysius went straight out the side door and took off, putting long unused training and techniques into practice as he sprinted across the grass. He had to get back to the others and pass on what he'd learned so they could formulate some kind of an attack plan against Jacopo.

It was a nice chance to try and outrun the guards, instead of fighting or hiding from them all the time. Back home, a speedy escape was much preferred over bloodshed in the streets or hiding from the many Templars in their assigned areas. Thoughts of home brought up memories of the friends Aloysius had left behind, they were probably frantic about him now but there was no way he could contact them.

Brutally forcing such thoughts out of his mind, Aloysius ran on, leaving the guards in his wake as he lapped the abbey and returned to where he'd left his horse waiting for him. Bounding into the saddle with feline grace, he took off across the fields around the abbey, heading back to San Gimignano to meet up with the others and discuss their plans.

*Dismounting the fine warhorse she'd been given the use of, Gena patted his neck firmly and secured him to the wall before heading into the compound she'd been pointed towards. She would definitely have to make sure that horse made it back to Mario; it would be too greater shame for such fine stock to be lost by her actions.*

Slipping past the outer wall and along a dirt track, she found her scout hiding in the semi darkness in the corner between the outer wall and an empty guard house.

'Over here Gena!' he called softly, beckoning her closer. 'Word came that you would be handling this one personally.'

'What have you got for me on the target?' Gena asked, approaching the scout and nodding slowly. 'We've found Archbishop Salviati! He's barricaded himself inside that villa... ' he briefed, pointing to the larger building behind Gena. 'Take some of my men. Use them to clear the fields. Then find a way over the walls so you can open the gates.'

'Command of my own army? A nice change of pace from the usual sneaking, stabbing and brawling. I like it.' she grinned, glancing away for a moment. 'If something goes wrong, I want you to make
sure that horse just there makes it back to Mario, he's a fine mount and should be treated right.'
'I will see to it personally.' he replied, slipping away to wait for mission success or a long ride back to
Monteriggioni to report back to Mario on a failure.

Signalling to the six men that entered the compound behind her, Gena nodded and headed straight
towards the nearest wall, cursing under her breath about having to climb and sneak around. She
always had preferred a straight fight to skulking around in the shadows but she had her orders and
would do as was needed to complete the job.

Sword in hand as she approached the gate, she went straight at the group of four guards standing in
front of the portcullis, directing her mercenary backup to deal with the other guards walking their
patrols nearby.
'I see you there, Assassin! These walls have stood for a hundred years and will stand for a hundred
more! Stop wasting the lives of your men! Vattene! Vattene via!'
'You've never dealt with an Assassin quite like me before!' Gena growled, launching into the first
four guards and making sure all of the guards inside would witness her strength and deadly abilities.
The four out here tried to rally a defence against her power but were quickly cut down in different
ways. One had his throat slashed wide open, a second tasted her sword through his chest, the third
lost his head to one lethal strike and the fourth taken out by her sword driving through his back. Total
battle time; about four minutes.
'All that awaits you here is death! Turn back!' Salviati was still trying to get her to leave, giving Gena
the impression that he'd been rather horrified by just how easily those guards had died.

Putting away her sword, Gena leapt up onto the wall and made up was up onto the rooftop,
punching the archer there in the face and grabbing his shirtfront in her left hand. Right hand latching
onto his belt, she swept him up and threw him off the wall to land in a crumbled heap on the cobbled
surface below, a sickening snap echoing out upon impact.
'I warned you to stay away, Assassin! You should have listened! Men, prepare yourselves! The
Assassin has arrived!' Salviati roared, somewhere down below her.
'Throw down your weapons and I will not take your lives! Oppose me and face your death!' Gena
challenged, fully aware that the guards could all see her sheer size and strength as she stood on the
rooftop and unsheathed her hidden blade.

Giving the guards a few moments to gave at her and make their decision, she leapt off the rooftop
and crunched down on the archer she'd thrown from the rooftop earlier, rolling through her landing
to reduce stress on her knees and ankles. Bringing out her sword again, she turned and activated the
winch to open the portcullis before starting to seek out her target.

Some of the guards had played it smart, throwing down their weapons and disappearing deeper into
the villa compound at the sight of Gena's massive frame. There were still enough guards to keep her
entertained though, and still leave a few for her mercenaries to play with.
'You're finished, Assassin! Do you hear me? Finished!' Salviati was still going on, somewhere in the
group charging her.
'You Templars, always singing the same song.' Gena retorted, kicking up a dropped sword and
catching it in her left hand.
'Do you think a few mercenari scare me? Ha!' Salviati countered, giving away his location.
'Nope, I'm the real threat here.' Gena shrugged, stepping forward to meet the guards head on.
'Shall I send your remains to that ubriacone, Mario? Hah! What's the point? There won't be anything
left of you to recognise!' Salviati really should have known when to keep his mouth shut.

Stepping into her favourite dance, Gena was glad to spot the mercenaries were merely blocking the
gateway as she cut a swathe through the guards that hadn't been smart enough to take up her offer of
a longer life. She lacked the grace of most Assassins but her strength made up for that, allowing her
to deal with attacks before she had to worry too much about dodging.

Looking down when something clanged against her left leg, she smirked and stabbed out with her stolen sword, slaughtering the man that had discovered she was more than just an ordinary Assassin. The fact she’d stopped that strike cold and was still on the move spooked many of the remaining guards and they fled, screaming about demons and unholy abilities.

'What is this? Guards! To me!' Salviati screamed, looking around and seeing he was alone against Gena's devastating power.

'One of you go and fetch my horse, this won't take long now.' Gena directed, glancing over to the mercenaries still blocking the gateway.

'I will, Gena.' one of them nodded, leaving his post and running back to where she'd left the horse.

Chasing after Salviati when he tried to run, Gena reeled him in with her greater stride and leapt, driving her dual hidden blades into his back. Taking the man to the ground, she withdrew her blades and flipped him over, supporting him lightly in her bloody hands.

'Where is Jacopo?' she asked, gazing into his fading eyes.

'He knows you come for him…emerging only in darkness to meet with the others…' Salviati groaned, struggling to stay focused on Gena.

'That answers when…now tell me where.' Gena pushed, determined to get answers but it was pointless now. 'La fede dovrebbe dare conforto, non pena. Requiescat in pace.'

Abandoning the body after a thorough search revealed a letter tucked inside the tunic, Gena stood and stalked out of the compound, smiling slightly as she was handed the reins to her borrowed horse. Swinging into the saddle smoothly, she thanked the mercenaries for their aid and told them to return to Mario with news of their success here before making her way back to San Gimignano to report back to Aloysius and the rest of the team.

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A little suspicious when Mario guided her carefully upstairs and around to the left again, Emily really did wonder if he’d lost his mind. She’d kept her mouth shut when he’d told her he had a surprise for her and said nothing when he wrapped a length of red cloth over her eyes and tied it firmly behind her head but now she was starting to wonder about his antics.

Hearing the heavy velvet curtain fall back behind her, she sighed and let him guide her across the room, figuring if he crossed the line she could still make him regret it. Then it hit her, rich scents of meat and garlic and maybe a hint of cheese under a strong scent of herbs, mainly basil and something she couldn't quite identify. Under the complex scents she could already pick up, she faintly smelled a rich yeasty smell and a hint of something fruity.

Led to a chair and given a moment to settle, she reached up a little and found the edge of a table, fingertips tripping over finely carved details and she realised this was the smaller desk she'd noticed tucked into one corner of Mario's room, holding armour and weapons she'd suspected he hadn't been worn or used for quite a few years. Moving her hand a little more, she brushed the edge of a plate with her knuckles and her confusion grew.

Blinking quickly as the blindfold came off, her jaw dropped at what Mario had gone and done without her even realising he was up to anything unusual. Flickering candles lit up a lovely table set for two, complete with a few slightly bedraggled flowers in a rather sculptural looking vase, the blues and whites of the vase complimenting the flowers nicely. The plates were clearly great family treasures, each one hand painted with the Auditore crest in the middle. The cutlery sparkled under the candle light, sending a constellation of stars flickering back into her eyes.

Picking up her jaw again, Emily turned her gaze back to Mario and just stared at him, completely lost
for words as he took his seat and poured the wine waiting for them. Not only had he set all of this up but he'd actually scrubbed up for the occasion, washing his hair and pulling out a set of clothes that she doubted he'd worn in a long time. As he turned his head she caught a glimpse of a dark blue ribbon in his hair, holding it back out of the way.

Not sure what to make of Emily's appraising look, Mario paused and glanced down, wondering if he'd made the wrong choice to pull out something a little more relaxed and informal to wear. His long sleeved white shirt was open at the collar, not so much to seem indecent on a man of his age but enough to be comfortable. Sleeves pulled in tight to his wrists with matching brown leather bands laced up on the inside and flared a little over his hands. Over the shirt he'd gone for a softer blue jerkin, richly decorated with gold and silver embroidery and a short cape from his left shoulder bearing the family crest.

Realising that she was making Mario uncomfortable with her scrutiny, Emily dropped her gaze again and smiled, amazed that he'd gone to such an effort for her.

'Mario, I know this probably isn't what you wanted to hear but it needs to be said before this goes any further. We can never be more than friends and fellow Assassins, we have to maintain the timeline lest all I know be lost.' she sighed, shoving down her desire to give in to his attempts to seduce her. 'One wrong step could destroy everything.'

'I…you…that was never my intention Emily. You have been so kind, allowing me to bask in your warmth for these past months. You've made me feel like a young man again, made it easier to forget about the troubles that plague me every day and for that I can never thank you enough.' Mario replied, putting the bottle down carefully. 'I know you are unattainable and I accept this.'

'Forgive me, this is not the kind of gracious thanks I am used to receiving. Gratitude usually means a new weapon or a chance to rest from my duties, not a home cooked candlelight meal with a good friend in the security of an Assassin stronghold.' Emily offered, reaching out to take his hand loosely in her own. 'I am used to a meal like this coming at a price.'

'My only price is that you allow me to spend more time with you when you can.' Mario nodded, thumb tracing over her knuckles lightly. 'I was not sure what you would like so I went with some of the family favourites.'

Only now did Emily actually look at the food on offer, she'd been too concerned about Mario's angle to think about the actual meal. There was a pasta dish of some sort, wide strands of pasta peeking out from beneath a luscious looking meat ragout. A basket of steaming fresh bread sprinkled with fresh herbs and studded with little bits of cheese. He'd even set out a bowl of fresh fruits, things Emily hadn't thought available at this time.

'You made all of this, Mario?' she asked, picking up her goblet and taking a sip. 'Oh wow.'

'Si, my mother insisted one of us learn and Giovanni…' Mario dropped his gaze, shaking his head slowly. 'His skills were elsewhere.'

'It's okay to miss your brother, Mario.' Emily soothed, setting her drink down to touch his hand again. 'He was a good man. I feel honoured to have known him for the short time I did.'

'Bah, enough talk of such dark matters.' Mario shrugged, offering out the bread 'this is supposed to be a good time.'

'It would be a shame to waste all your effort on poor conversation.' Emily agreed, accepting a chunk of the bread and taking a bite. 'So this is where all the Auditore cooking skills went to.'

'Ezio can't either? I would have thought Maria insisted he learn.' Mario remarked, displaying impeccable manners as they ate.

'If she did, he never picked it up. He has been forbidden from trying to cook anything when the team is out and about. He creates chaos without trying.' Emily chuckled, relaxed and content as she enjoyed the fine meal.

Wine and conversation flowed easily, the pair laughing and having a fine time in the solitude of Mario's room. The food was exceptional, better than anything Emily had tasted in the two years she'd
been back in this era. Mario couldn't keep the smile off his face as he watched her eat, making appreciative comments about his abilities in the kitchen and asking for recipes that she could keep when she returned to her own time and place.

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Perched on a rooftop with a clear view of the church in San Gimignano, the four Assassins watched and waited for their target to appear. Their plan was simple enough, locate Jacopo de'Pazzi, tail him to the Templar meeting in the shadow of the Roman Gods then assassinate him. Emily had already been notified of their progress and through her Mario had been told of it, she'd sent back her pleasure about hearing their work was nearly finished here and also Mario's praise for their quick actions.

Crouched at the front of the group, Ezio was eager to be on with this mission and done with the de'Pazzi mess so he could turn his attention elsewhere and maybe steal a few hours to grieve properly for his father.

'If I can stay my blade long enough to follow him, he'll lead us to his Templar brothers. We'll have more names for the list…' Ezio muttered, finding Jacopo in the crowd and pointing him out to the others gathered around him.

'Patience Ezio, there is more going on that you know. We must focus on what is here and now before we can worry about the rest.' Aloysius soothed, patting his shoulder lightly before turning and taking a flying leap off the roof to land safely in another pile of hay.

Following him down, the rest of the team spread out and raced ahead, taking up positions where they could better keep track of Jacopo and make sure he didn't accidentally slip their attention in the crowd. He was careful, weaving through the crowds and keeping his head down in an attempt to avoid being noticed but it was already too late for him.

Losing her patience with one of the many bards in the city following her and singing about their deeds, Libby growled and shoved the man as hard as she could, sending him toppling backwards and forcing him to drop his lute. Stooping to pick it up, she hurled it as far as she was able in the other direction before hurrying away, moving into her next position.

Taking flight off the walls of the city once Jacopo was outside the protection of the city, Ezio moved up to take the lead on the watch mission, catching sight of the others out the corners of his eyes as he continued to stalk their prey across open ground. They were still careful not to be noticed, the guards were mostly focused about threats in front but they did still occasionally look back.

They followed Jacopo to the ruins of an old Roman amphitheatre and quickly moved to regain eyes on their target, gathering on the border of the amphitheatre and making their way closer to the group of men gathered in the middle.

'How many men are responsible for my father's death…?' Emily muttered, jumping down from the bordering wall.

'Too many. This never should have happened.' Aloysius whispered, pressing up against a tree and peeking out towards their targets.

Getting as close as they dared to the meeting, the four Assassins took shelter behind trees, bushes and pillars, peering out to watch and learn what they could from these Templars. They kept moving slowly, sneaking out of sight as Jacopo headed down to the meeting.

'I am sorry, Maestro! I did all I could, but the Assassin proved too strong.' Jacopo offered, cowering before the heavyset man hiding his face.

'Clearly. Else the others would be here with you…To say nothing of the fact that Firenze remains in Medici hands.' the heavyset man replied, sounding more than a little irritated.

'It's Francesco's fault! His impatience made him reckless. I tried to be the voice of reason-' Jacopo
tried, quick to shift the blame onto his brother.
'More like the voice of cowardice.' a third man added, stepping up behind the heavy man - Borgia.
'You're one to talk Signor Barbarigo. Had you sent us quality weapons, instead of this garbage you
Venetians call ar-
'Enough!' Borgia roared, silencing the argument. 'We put our faith in your family and you repay us
with inaction and incompetence. Then, when asked to account for your failures, you make excuses
and insult us? How do you expect me to respond?'
'I don't know…'
'It's alright. I do.'

Signalling to his team, Aloysius cast Libby and Gena out around the perimeter, not liking the cold
feeling he got down his back as Borgia drew his dagger and stabbed Jacopo in the chest, not deep
enough to kill him immediately but he would bleed out before anyone could help him.
'Stay here Ezio, let the situation unfold and know that we will be close.' Aloysius whispered, locking
eyes with Ezio for a moment before sprinting off into the darkness.

Chewing on the inside of his top lip when Borgia thrust his blade through Jacopo's throat, still not
delivering a killing blow, Ezio didn't like the sudden feeling of being alone against these guards. He
was so used to having his friends around him that being alone like this felt alien.
'So sorry to have claimed your prize, Assassin!' Borgia called, sheathing his sword again as a heavy
hand landed on Ezio's shoulder.

Struggling against the two guards that grabbed him, Ezio didn't have the strength to deal with them
both on his own. For now he bided his time, putting his trust in Aloysius' words as he was marched
down to stand before Borgia.
'Did you honestly think I wouldn't expect you to follow? That I didn't plan for it? We've been at this
a lot longer than you!' Borgia taunted, turning to face Ezio. 'Kill him.'
'I know you're only doing as you're told. So if you release me, we will spare your lives.' Ezio
bargained, glancing around for any sight of his friends.
'Did you plan for multiples though, Rodrigo?' Libby called, launching from her hiding spot and
knifing one of the guards in the back.
'Hah! Listen to this one he-' one of the guards taunted, his grip blocking Ezio's hidden blade.
'You really should have listened.' Aloysius growled, popping up behind Ezio and slaughtering both
guards holding him. 'Good man, now let's finish this mess.'
'We hunt as a pack tonight, Templars!' Gena roared, emerging from hiding and taking out two
heavily armed guards. 'Ezio! You know what to do!'
'Si, I do.' Ezio nodded, jumping down onto the lowest level of the amphitheatre. 'Keep these slugs
off my back!'
'Our pleasure.' Libby replied, twisting through the guards still coming at them and letting her sword
do all the talking for her.

Driving his sword through one guard that got too close to him, Ezio dropped to his knees beside
Jacopo and thrust his hidden blade through his back, ending his suffering. For all the evil Jacopo
de'Pazzi had been involved with, he didn't deserve to die in such agony. Rolling Jacopo over gently,
Ezio held him lightly and tried to offer comfort, thinking of how he'd seen his friends treat their kills
with such respect.
'Via, amico, libero da fardelli e paure.' he uttered, finding this kill easier to bear than most of his
others. 'Requiescat in pace.'
Footsore and road weary, the exhausted group of four Assassins made their way back through Monteriggioni, stopping to repair their equipment and restock their supplies before heading up to the villa to catch up on the latest news and check on Emily's progress with her shoulder wound. It felt strange to be dealing with targets while she wasn't with them, she'd become such an integral part of all their lives.

'Do you suppose Emily is okay after having to deal with my Uncle for so long?' Ezio asked, rubbing grit from his eyes.

'I'd be more worried about Mario. Emily is not known to suffer fools.' Gena replied, resting one hand on his back. 'I have no doubt they're both fine.'

Coming off the lower stairs, the team paused at the sight near the practise field, not exactly sure what to make of what they were seeing. There were two tunics thrown over the fence, one black and the other blue. Beside the tunics sat two pairs of boots, instantly recognisable to the returned quartet. Thrown haphazardly across the fence and down onto the ground, two white shirts, one larger than the other. Scattered around the discarded clothes, quite a collection of weapons had been left where they landed.

Suddenly Emily's head popped up over the fence, blood staining her lips as she stood and moved around the ring slowly, wrapped fists raised in a defensive position. Bare-chested except for the breast wrap she always wore, she was smiling and happy, hair flying free around her head as she waited for her opponent to get back up and fight again.

A little slower to get back onto his feet, Mario wiped the blood from his nose and spat beside his feet before returning to the dance. Wearing much the same as Emily, minus the breast wrap of course, he crossed the distance quickly and swung at her, twisting clear of her incoming fist and trying to land a solid punch of his own.

Moving closer and leaning on the fence, the other four Assassins couldn't tear their eyes off the swirling dance, Emily's lithe strength against Mario's brute force. Emily had him for flexibility, twisting clear of his heaviest blows and wearing him down with rapid combinations of blows. Mario hardly seemed fazed by her speed, taking the blows and putting his strength behind every strike he sent into Emily's smaller frame.

Suddenly Emily leapt forward again, planting her right shoulder in Mario's solar plexus and knocking him back onto the ground and starting up another wrestling match. Tumbling across the grass, Mario and Emily were going at it hard, each determined to prove that they were the better fighter when they were given a chance to completely let loose against a trusted opponent.

Shaking his head when Mario pinned Emily to the ground and smirked, Aloysius chuckled softly and waited for whatever stunning display of strength and control Emily chose to unleash. Clenching her abdominal muscles and pushing her shoulders backwards, Emily arched up off the ground and flipped smoothly back to her feet. Skipping back
when Mario reached for her ankle, she straightened and flipped her hair back over her shoulder, spitting out a mouthful of blood and mucus.

'Had enough yet, Mario?' she asked, fists up again as she readied for his next assault.

'Not even close.' Mario replied, heaving his bulk off the ground and charging in to plant his shoulder into her abdomen.

Laughing lightly when Emily grabbed Mario's shoulders and flipped over him, Libby just shook her head in wonder as the older man went sprawling in the dirt again, narrowly missing a rather painful collision with the wall.

'Come now Mario, you'll have to do better than that.' Emily laughed, landing lightly and lowering her hands. 'I'm actually making this easy on you.'

'It does not feel like it.' Mario groused, pushing up again and turning to her.

'Sure you want to continue this?' Emily asked, turning her gaze to the four standing at the fence watching the fight. 'Especially in front of Ezio and the others.'

'You'll have to beat me before I back down.' Mario snarled, glancing over his shoulder at the other Assassins and nodding. 'Let them watch, it matters little.'

'So be it.' Emily shrugged, bringing up her hands again. 'Enough with the games.'

Watching with growing concern as the fight continued, getting more violent with every throw and punch the pair exchanged, the four witnesses at the fence really were starting to worry that someone was going to be seriously hurt in this fight. There was no guarantee it would be one of the two combatants either, three of them had seen Emily take out distant enemies simply by kicking her current foe into the observers.

Wincing at the sound of a heavy smack, the four dropped down behind the fence as Mario went flying again, crashing to the ground and rolling limply across the torn ground to rest against the fence lightly. Panting for breath, he struggled back to his feet and limped back in to confront Emily, a rather large bruise already developing on his lower chest.

Daring to pop their heads back over the fence, the quartet witnessed the fight swing around again as the pair continued to move, working up a grand sweat and forgetting about everything else. Then it happened, just as Emily caught Mario's right fist against her raised right forearm, he let off a devastating left cross that slammed into Emily's cheek and sent her flying across the ring.

Crumpling to the ground at the base of the wall on the other side of the ring, Emily pushed up into a seated position and groaned, shaking her head to clear the fog slowing down her mind. Rubbing her jaw lightly, she pulled her fingers back and gazed at the blood smeared across her fingertips before flicking her eyes up to Mario, standing there in the middle of the ring and waiting for her.

Jaws dropping as Emily staggered back to her full height, leaning heavily on the fence, her four friends were sure she would make Mario pay for that shot. Instead, she stumbled back into the centre of the ring and dropped to her knees at Mario's feet, looking up at him with pride in her defeated eyes.

'She's not…' Gena uttered, staring in disbelief as Emily dropped her gaze and put her hands behind her back.

'She is.' Aloysius nodded; astounded that someone had finally earned this respect from Emily.

'I never thought this would happen.' Libby whispered, jaw dropping as the respectful display continued in silence.

Hands clasped behind her back, Emily bowed forward and placed her forehead on the ground between Mario's feet, arching her back and rolling her shoulders down to expose her bared neck.

'You have defeated me in fair combat, Brother Assassin. My life is yours to do with as you please.' she offered, relaxed and calm as she waited for the decision.
'I give you your life so you may serve our order faithfully, Sister Assassin.' Mario replied, guiding Emily to her feet and gazing into her eyes. 'We are both winners here; many lessons have been learned on both sides.'

'Indeed they have, brother.' Emily grinned, wiping at her split lip. 'Come on, we could both use a wash after that one.'

'I have not had that much fun in years, Emily.' Mario chuckled, slinging one arm around her shoulders as they walked over to their friends. 'Not since I was a young man going through training with Giovanni.'

'I'm glad I could bring back some happy memories, Mario.' Emily replied, reaching up to grab Mario's wrist. 'If we ever do this again, remind me not to take a flying left to the face. Damn, I think you rattled something loose.'

Checking Emily's nearly healed wounds as she sat on a sturdy wooden stool in Ezio's room at the villa, Libby was still thinking about where they were supposed to go next. They had dealt with the threat to Firenze but surely there would be more work to be done before the team could rest and put down their weapons.

'Aloysius, I trust you have considered the next stage of what must be done.' Emily nodded, her mood still high despite the beating she'd taken.

'I have Emily. First we must return to Firenze and report to Il Magnifico that the job with the Pazzi is complete. Then we must make all haste for Venezia and continue our war against the Templars there.' Aloysius replied, his confidence unshakeable as he detailed his plan.

'I concur. There is still much to do before we can call this duty finished and now it leads us to Venezia to once more soak our blades in Templar blood.' Emily smiled, searching her webs for any indications that they were going in the wrong direction but all her lines went towards the canals of Venezia and the troubles they would face there.

'Do you think we will ever come back to Monteriggioni?' Ezio asked, thoughts drifting to his family sheltering below. 'I don't think I can say goodbye to Petruccio. Not without knowing we'll be back.'

'Of course we'll be back Ezio. We still have to get you the Armour of Altair and make sure your family gets through this.' Emily soothed, reaching out to pat his cheek lightly. 'Everything will be fine, you will see your mother and siblings again, I promise.'

They had been reunited as a team for a week now, recuperating and relaxing in the safety of the villa. Ezio had been trying to work out why Federico was being so withdrawn and secretive but he'd gotten no further than Emily had managed. No one dared to ask why Emily was spending most of her nights in Mario's room, they weren't sure they wanted to know the answer and respected her too much to pry into her private life.

Finished her examination, Libby grinned and pulled Emily's robes back over her shoulders, smoothing out the thick white cloth quickly and moving back. Getting to her feet, Emily tugged her tunic closed properly and fixed her belt, looking around at the team gathered about her.

'I can't believe it's been two years since I last set eyes on you. You hardly look to have changed much, maybe a little wiser in the eyes and perhaps a few more scars but still the same four I sent out to do battle.' she sighed, reaching out to trace her fingers over Ezio's cheek. 'You're losing your boyish features but I will always remember the frightened young man we first met and aided at the attempted execution.'

'And here I thought I was growing into a mature Assassin.' Ezio groused, dropping his gaze in disappointment at her words.

'Ezio, you are becoming a very mature and successful Assassin but you have a long way to go. You are still a Trainee, none of us have the authority here to make you a fully fledged Assassin. To me you are ready but it's not my choice. Continue as you have and one day you will be rewarded with a network of fellow Assassins that you can work with and trust.' Aloysius replied, resting one hand on
Ezio's shoulder.
'I don't understand. What are you talking about?' Ezio asked, looking around the group in confusion, seeking answers that he already should have known.
'The Assassin induction. The rituals changed over time, from the ring finger of the left hand being removed just above the hand, to scarification, branding, implanting and finally tattooing.' Libby explained, peeling off her gloves and offering out her left hand. 'It's okay, slip my ring off and look for yourself. Maybe then you'll understand.'

Cradling her hand lightly in his, Ezio slipped the simple silver band off and looked at what was revealed to his amazed eyes. There around her ring finger, completely encircling it in blood red lines, she had multiple small tattoos of the Assassin insignia from her belt, some facing towards her and some pointed towards him.
'This is the mark of a fully fledged Assassin in our time, done by those who oversaw our training and helped us grow our wings.' Emily grinned, displaying her own tattoo proudly.
'We wear our mark with pride, only hiding it because we have little other choice but to conceal who we really are.' Gena added, slipping off a similar ring to display the same marking on her hand.
'To hide the fact, we are given these rings to hide them, each one marked with the date of induction and the Assassin insignia inside the band. How we disguise the purpose of the new jewellery is up to us. I did it by getting married and using this as my wedding band. Even though my wife is dead, I still wear the ring and people think I am still in mourning.' Aloysius explained, stroking his thumb over the two-toned band he wore.

Attention drawn to Emily's right hand when she flicked her fingers and spun a wide gold band into view, Ezio snapped his hand out and caught it before it hit the floor. Angling it into the flickering light, he saw the insignia and two dates so far into the future that he still couldn't fully comprehend just how much time had passed between his life and hers.
'As you can see, Emily's is different to all the others. The different metals represent how far along in our individual journeys we are. Plain silver is for novices, just starting out as full Assassins. As they grow and develop into Junior Assassins, they are presented with silver bands marked with the ropes, as you can see in Libby's ring. Moving through the ranks to Senior Assassin, they earn the wings on their ring, as Gena displays.' Aloysius guided, pointing out the differences to Ezio's eyes.
'The two-toned ring that Aloysius has marks him as being a Secondary Master Assassin, he needs only to successfully train his own novice up to standard to be given the pure gold of a Master Assassin.' Emily continued, drawing Ezio's attention back to the gold ring he was holding.

Taking the ring from his fingers, Emily caught his left hand and turned it over, flipping the ring around and slipping it onto his finger where every Assassin was marked. The fit was a bit snug but not so much to make it uncomfortable.
'Until the day you are initiated fully into the Brotherhood or I must return home to my own place and time, wear my ring with pride Ezio. You are one of us and that will never change.' she directed, smiling fondly as he rubbed the ring lightly.
'I will Emily. Thank you for the trust, I will take good care of it.' Ezio replied, amazed that she would trust him with such a key part of her own story.
'I would expect nothing less, Ezio.' Emily nodded, patting his cheek before pulling on her gloves again and rolling her shoulders. 'Come, we must finish our business in Monteriggioni and begin our journey to Firenze.'

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It was no surprise to Emily when she found Mario brooding on his own, what did surprise her was finding him on the main roof of the villa, perched on the ramparts and gazing out across the city he was sworn to protect.
'Two years, Emily. You have been in my home and bed for two years and now you think you can
just leave? Without even a word in farewell? After all we have done, all we have shared over the past two years, how could you consider just up and leaving without a goodbye? What did I do to drive you away? Tell me and I'll fix it.' he muttered, so lost in his thoughts that he hadn't realised Emily was right behind him. 'I know we promised not to get too attached but I have failed in that.' 'As have I, Mario.' Emily sighed, coming up behind him and grabbing his tunic to stop him falling over the edge. 'Mi dispiace, I thought you heard my approach.'

Turning to face her, Mario traced his knuckles over her cheek, gazing into her dancing brown eyes as he struggled to accept that this would be the last time he saw her for quite some time. That idea hurt more than he ever thought it might, driving the air from his lungs at what it could mean. 'I tried so hard to resist you, reinforcing my internal walls and denying the spark I felt every time I looked at you. I struggled against my own desires, battling my urge to hold you as you deserve and kiss every scar you have earned.' Emily uttered, trailing her fingertips over the long scar that robbed him of so much. 'I kept thinking of the timeline and the webs in my eyes but I can't do it anymore, Mario. I am not strong enough to resist this anymore. I don't want to fight this for another moment, much less the rest of my time here.'

'I am afraid, Emily. Afraid to know you like this only to have to let you go out to do battle with the Templars while I wait here for your return. I do not know what I would do if I lost you, not now that I know you so much more. I do not know if I could handle that pain, I can't lose anyone else that I cherish so much. It still hurts to know I outlived Giovanni, don't make me mourn for you as well.' Mario uttered, such vulnerability in his eye as he brushed his hand down her arm. 'I will be careful Mario, I will let no Templar at my back and will choose my actions with wisdom and caution. Wherever this mission takes me, I will always strive to make it back to you when there is time. I will ride the fastest horses I can, battle whoever I must to return but I swear on my oath as an Assassin, I will come home.' Emily promised, stepping closer and wrapping her arms around Mario's neck. 'I will not leave you behind to mourn my loss. I will see you again.'

Giving in to the temptation, Mario pulled her close and wrapped his arms around her back, relishing the feeling of her feminine curves against him without the fear of what messes they could make of her timeline. Rocking slowly, he memorised her smell and the feel of her lithe strength, caressing her back as he buried his nose in her hair and inhaled deeply. 'Who would have thought I'd have to go 600 years back in time to find the one man I could happily spend the rest of my life with.' Emily sighed, tangling her fingers in Mario's hair. 'I am just grateful to have finally met a woman who can accept who I am, scars and all.' Mario nodded, rocking slowly as they stood there.

Reluctantly, Mario broke the embrace after a few minutes, gazing at Emily in her full regalia as the wind stirred around them, sending her hair swirling across her face. Brushing it back behind her ear, he took the chance and leant in close again, tasting her lips for the first time. His heart sang as she returned the kiss, one hand coming up to curl through his hair again. She tasted of fine wine and perfectly aged formaggio, a faint note of flowers clinging to her skin.

Left hand clutching at Mario's tunic, Emily falls into the kiss willingly, ignoring her webs in favour of his fruity lips and the scent of leather that always seemed to cling to him. A hint of garlic breath and she can't find the urge to care, tightening her grip and wishing that she didn't have to leave this haven of comfort and happiness.

Breaking the kiss, they stand there panting softly, foreheads resting together as they cherish the moment and lock it away to keep them warm on their long nights apart. For a brief moment, both are glad that they are hidden from view, no doubt trouble would erupt if anyone had any idea of what was developing between them.

Taking a half step back, Emily reached for one of her pouches and pulled out a small velvet bag
attached to a thin chain. Loosening the drawstring, she slipped two fingers in and drew out a simple gold ring inscribed with the Assassin insignia. Pulling the drawstring tight and knotting it off again, she returned the bag to her pouch and lifted her gaze, smiling fondly at Mario as she held up the ring between them.

'This ring belonged to my father, it covered the tattoo he wore to mark his place within the brotherhood. Upon his death, his ring was given to me to wear or otherwise honour as I felt was appropriate.' she explained, tracing her knuckles over Mario's cheek. 'I have decided on the most suitable honour for him, if you would accept it.'

Stunned into silence, Mario pulled his gloves off and placed his left hand in Emily's, sighing softly as she traced her thumb over the old brand scar that marked his dedication to their creed. Her hands were so warm as she caressed his calluses and scars, pressing the softest of kisses to his brand before she slipped the ring on and straightened it so the Assassin insignia faced up, tip pointed away from him.

'I will treat it with the utmost care and treasure the relationship it signifies.' Mario whispered, brushing his lips against the matching ring Emily wore.

'A fitting tribute. My father on your hand and my mother on mine.' Emily nodded, looking at the gold bands glittering in the light. 'They had a long and wonderful life together, even though they often worked separately.'

'I thought your ring had the Assassin symbol on it, surrounded by a set of wings.' Mario remarked, looking closer at her ring.

'It does, I let Ezio wear it so he felt like he was actually making progress with becoming a fully fledged Assassin. I will get it off him when the senior Assassins of this time decide he is ready.' Emily shrugged, caressing his cheek again. 'My mother never made it as far up the hierarchy as I did, hence the differences.'

Reaching under his cloak, Mario unbuckled the dagger sheath slipped into the back of his belt and pulled it out, holding up his emergency dagger with its ornate hilt and richly decorated sheath. Slipping it into Emily's hand, he curled her fingers around the sheath and squeezed lightly, making sure she got the message without him needing to say anything. He wasn't sure he could say anything in that moment, not without making a proper fool of himself.

'Ah, there it is. I knew there had to be a softer side buried under all this muscle and combat prowess.' Emily smiled, tightening her grip on the weapon and leaning in to steal another kiss.

'Love makes fools of us all.' Mario uttered, feeling like he was a young man getting his first kiss all over again.

'It certainly does.' Emily agreed, leaving a trail of soft kisses over his cheek and along his scar before moving her head back.

Gaze falling to the blade Mario had handed her, Emily fastened it to her belt on the left side, tucking it in behind her sword. It felt comfortable there, a tangible reminder of what had been started here on the rooftop. The dagger was more than just a token of Mario's love for her, it was a promise that he would be there to protect her from harm, wherever she was he would be right there with her whenever she needed him. That was a tradition that had continued down through the ages to the point that whenever two Assassins married, they traded swords in a promise to always protect each other, no matter where they went.

Pulling her cloak around to shade her left arm, Emily chuckled softly as Mario checked that his gift was hidden fully, it was sweet that he was so concerned for her safety after all the things they'd discussed in the privacy of his room.

'Time is short, mio tesoro. The others will come looking for me if I don't get moving soon.' she warned, drawing his face back to hers. 'I will write when I can, wherever I might end up. We have plans to go to Venezia after Firenze, the next step in this battle is there. Wait for me, I will come home when there is time.'
Throat tight, Mario had no words to offer in reply, he just held her close and tried not to think about the future without her brilliant smile and happy laughter to pull him from his brooding thoughts. He could handle his time without her, he would wait for her and write back whenever he received her letters but to think of life without her hurt too much to even consider for more than a few seconds at a time. Feeling her slip something under his cloak and through his belt, he laughed softly and kissed her again, not at all surprised that she'd slipped a different dagger to him and completed a promise he'd only ever heard about.

Pulling away after a few minutes lost in such a perfect embrace, Emily sighed and gazed into Mario's eyes for a moment longer before breaking all contact and moving to perch on the ramparts. Looking back over her shoulder, she smiled sadly and blew him a kiss before vaulting off the rooftop and dropping down to the leaf pile Mario knew was just down there. 'Ti amo, Emily.' Mario whispered, walking over to lean on the ramparts and watch her run freely away from the villa and into the city he guarded. 'Come home safely, I will wait as long as I must.'

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Relaxing at the sight of Emily sprinting towards them, Gena sighed and swung into the saddle of her favoured warhorse, patting his neck and offering him a treat from the marketplace. It still felt a little odd for Gena, to be back on a horse and unable to rely on anything else for rapid transportation across the lands they travelled. She was so used to the idea of automobiles and aircraft to get around quickly, not the might of a powerful warhorse.

'Nice of you to join us, Emily.' Aloysius called, sitting astride his fine black stallion, sword resting across his lap.

'Mi dispiace, Mario wanted to discuss a few final matters before I left.' Emily replied, mounting the dappled grey stallion waiting for her. 'Bravo ragazzo.'

'Is that why your lips are so swollen?' Libby smirked, calming her white mare with a touch.

'My business is my own, Elizabeth.' Emily snarled, tapping her mount in the ribs. 'Come, we have a long ride ahead.'

Coming up beside Emily as they trotted away from Monteriggioni, Ezio noticed the familiar dagger on her hip and frowned, looking back over his shoulder as he thought about where he'd seen that dagger before.

'Emily, why do you have Uncle Mario's dagger?' he asked, remembering seeing it on Mario's desk a couple of times.

'It is an Assassin's promise. The trading of daggers is a promise between friends to be there for each other when trouble stirs. Trading swords takes the promise further and is reserved for when two Assassins make the choice to wed.' Emily explained, resting one hand on the dagger. 'I did not expect him to do it but I would never insult him by refusing the gesture.'

'Let it go, Ezio. Some things are best left between those that share them.' Gena warned, reading the agitation in Emily's shoulders. 'One day you will meet someone that you feel safe to share such a pact with, then you will understand.'

Bringing his horse around and slotting in between Emily and Ezio, Aloysius reached out to place one hand on her wrist, offering his support in whatever she'd agreed to with Mario. Smiling softly, Emily patted his hand lightly and nodded, accepting the offer but she said nothing more on the subject and Aloysius accepted her silence. When she was ready, she would speak of it.
Entering the building where Lorenzo was discussing business with some of his associates, the five Assassins headed straight for him, keeping their hands well clear of their weapons so no one got the wrong idea about their presence in here. Bold and steady, they spread out in front of Lorenzo, letting him make his own choices about who played which role in his survival.

'The Pazzi are dead. Every one of them.' Ezio reported, meeting Lorenzo's gaze evenly.

'I must admit, I've never before believed I could desire the death of others so badly.' Lorenzo sighed, scanning the group slowly.

'Nor I…' Ezio admitted, averting his gaze and shaking his head slowly.

'Thank you all for the role you've played in keeping this dream of mine alive a little longer.' Lorenzo offered, reaching out to rest one hand on Emily's shoulder and the other on Ezio's.

'L'onore è mio, Signore.' five voices in harmony as the team bowed deep, paying proper respect to Lorenzo's position of power.

'What will you do now?' Lorenzo asked, impressed by their synchronicity and easy camaraderie.

'There are still others we must hunt, Signore. They're already digging their claws into the heart of Venezia.' Gena replied, fingers curling slowly into a fist.

'No! La bella Venezia…' Lorenzo sighed, turning away for a moment. 'Then that is where your journey must take you. Before you leave us…I have something for each of you. A gift.'

At his signal, five bored looking attendants stepped forward, each one carrying a folded red piece of cloth, bearing the crest of the Medici family in gold.

'These capes identify you as friends of the Medici. As long as you wear them, the city guards will be more tolerant of your actions.' Lorenzo explained, watching the team as they each reached to take the nearest cape. 'But be warned, they will not grant you immunity from the law.'

'We're rather used to such agreements with guards.' Libby shrugged, releasing her simple brown and red cape and replacing it with the Medici one.

'Hold your tongue, Libby. Such things are best not spoken of.' Emily warned, shaking her head slowly. 'Forgive her tongue, Il Magnifico, she is still young and inexperienced when it comes to dealing with those in power.'

'There is nothing to forgive.' Lorenzo replied, smiling faintly at the team as they all donned the new capes and made sure they were secure. 'Che la fortuna favorisca la tua lama!' 'Fortune prediligo il tuo dominio su questa grande città.' Aloysius replied, bowing his head respectfully before turning and following Emily back out into the streets.

'You chose your words wisely, Aloysius. A suitable response to such a man.' Emily praised, looking back over her shoulder. 'We should stop by and check in with Leonardo before we leave the city. He will be concerned that he has not heard from us for two years.'

Making their way through the city to Leonardo's workshop, they paused at an art merchant and purchased eight new paintings for Monteriggioni, paying the merchant a few extra florins to see them delivered safely to Mario for the gallery now taking shape. Emily also slipped the merchant a sealed letter along with a few extra florins, instructing that the letter be kept with the purchases for the villa and handed directly to Mario by whoever delivered the artworks.

'Not a word, Ezio.' she warned, leading the group on a nice easy jog through the streets towards Leonardo's workshop.

'Just shut your mouth and nod, Ezio. She's not in a great mood right at the moment.' Aloysius added, elbowing Ezio sharply as they continued their run.
Reaching the workshop, Gena approached the door and knocked, eager to see Leonardo again after so long apart. Strangely though, he did not answer her call, the workshop quiet behind the beautifully carved front door.

'Leonardo? Leonardo!' she called, thumping on the door again.

'Mi dispiace, Messer, but he is gone. Maestro Leonardo was commissioned by a Venetian noble to paint some portraits. He paid for the Maestro to move his entire workshop to Venezia. It's quite the opportunity!' a strange offered, stopping on his errands to inform the team.

'Grazie mille, friend.' Gena replied, stunned by their good fortune as she turned back to the others.

'We'd best get going if we're going to catch up with Leonardo. We might have a chance. If not, we'll see him in Venezia.' Emily shrugged, not really sure what else to say that might make Gena feel better about Leonardo travelling such a route alone.

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Riding through the mountains, enjoying the change of pace and the rather beautiful scenery, the team made their way to a traveller's station in the mountains and eased their horses to a stop. Dismounting smoothly, they led their horses over to the water trough to drink their fill before Ezio noticed the wagon sitting off to the side, a familiar figure kneeling beside the rear left wheel.

'Leonardo!' he called, handing the reins to Libby and jogging over to speak to the other man.

'Ezio…? What luck!' Leonardo greeted, looking up from whatever he was doing. 'I…uh…I've run into a bit of trouble.'

'So I can see. What can we do to help?' Gena grinned, taking a knee beside him. 'It's good to see you again, Leonardo.'

'It's good to see you as well, Gena.' Leonardo smiled, hugging her quickly. 'I know how to fix it - but lack the means to do so. If you could just lift the wagon?'

'We'll handle it.' Gena nodded, pushing to her feet and tapping Ezio to give her a bit of help. 'Come on, it can't be that heavy.'

Getting a firm grip on the underside, the pair strained to take the weight, lifting the wagon up enough for Leonardo to make the needed repairs. Ezio's attention was drawn to the strange looking contraption in the back of the wagon, the very same thing he'd noticed hanging from the roof of Leonardo's workshop.

'What is this thing?' he asked, glancing towards Leonardo for a moment.

'Eh?' Leonardo queried, most of his attention on the repairs.

'It looks like a giant bat.' Ezio continued, relieved when Aloysius came over to add his strength to hold the damned wagon.

'Okay, this is heavier than I thought it would be.' Gena grunted, shifting her grip a little.

'Oh, nothing. Just an idea I've been working on…I could not leave it behind.' Leonardo replied, still busy under the wagon. 'There, you can put it down now.'

Setting the wagon back down, the three stepped back as Emily and Libby brought the horses over for them, everyone so glad to see Leonardo was safe and so far untroubled by the bandits that normally loved causing such trouble for travellers.

'What is it for?' Ezio asked, taking the reins for his chestnut gelding and patting his neck.

'Well…I shouldn't really talk about it.' Leonardo hesitated, packing away his tools.

'Leonardo, after everything we've told you…don't you think you can trust us?' Libby grinned, leaning in to kiss his cheek.

'Beh, al diavolo! I can't hold it in anymore. I think I've figured out how to make a man fly.' Leonardo grinned, so excited by the idea of getting a man up with the birds.

Ezio couldn't help the laughter that bubbled out, the idea of a man flying with the birds seemed absolutely ludicrous but if it could be done, Leonardo was the man to make it happen. Why anyone would want to fly, well that was a question better left unspoken.
'Come on. I'll drive!' he offered, handing the reins of his horse to Aloysius.
'But I haven't even told you where I'm going…' Leonardo replied, hurrying around to the other side of the wagon.
'You don't need to. We stopped by your workshop in Firenze and a stranger told us you were hired by a Venetian noble. By luck, we're going to Venezia as well.' Gena shrugged, mounting up and guiding her horse forward to take up a good place beside the wagon. 'You should know better than to travel alone.'
'Don't worry about that now, we'll make sure you get to Venezia safely.' Emily added, moving up to ride on the other side of the wagon. 'Move out!'

Setting out along the road to Venezia, the team were relaxed and calm, talking about inane things and admiring the view around them. It was so peaceful out here, giving the Assassins a chance to let their guard down a little and enjoy the quiet along the mountain pass.
'Leonardo, if I gave you a sketch of a specific piece of equipment, do you think you could make it?' Emily asked, tapping her horse forward a little so she could look at him without strain.
'I suppose it depends what it is.' Leonardo shrugged, intrigued but cautious. He didn't want to agree to something he wouldn't be able to make.
'It's a simple enough thing. Here, this is only a rough draft but it should give you an idea.' Emily replied, handing Ezio a small roll of parchment.

Unrolling the parchment, Leonardo looked at the simple drawing and read over the explanations written around the diagram, turning over the options and trying to work out if he could possibly make it for her.
'Are you asking about the throwing stars?' Aloysius called from the rear of their little travelling group. 'I've got one in my belt if that'll help.'
'Throw it up here…carefully.' Emily guided, scanning their surrounds for any hints of danger.

Jumping a little at the thunk of something hitting the wagon right beside him, Leonardo stared at the quivering piece of metal stuck into the wood beside him.
'So long as you're careful of the outer edges of the blades, you'll be safe.' Emily guided, looking up at Leonardo again.
'And just what is this thing?' Leonardo asked, pulling the thing free and looking closely at it.
'We call them throwing stars. Assassins from our time them use them for silent kills at a distance, much like throwing knives but the shape of these gives us improved range.' Gena explained, searching for threats. 'Normally we carry a couple dozen of them, some specialists carry extras but 24 is considered a standard set.'
'May I keep this, Aloysius? I will try to replicate the design.' Leonardo nodded, looking back over his shoulder.
'Sure, just be careful with it. I keep my blades extremely sharp.' Aloysius replied, turning to check for any tails.
'Grazie Aloysius.' Leonardo smiled, tucking the weapon and parchment safely into his large belt pouch, slipping the weapon in amongst the rag scraps he carried to clean his hands as needed.

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'Venezia! Such a beautiful city! So many sources of inspiration!' Leonardo smiled, looking around at the scenery as the team continued their journey. 'Ponte di Rialto, Piazza San Marco, L'Arsenale…'
'Shhh!' Gena hissed, picking up on something she didn't like.
'What's wrong?' Leonardo asked, turning to look at her.
'We're not alone!' Libby snapped, looking over her shoulder as several men on horseback came cantering after them.
'What's happening? Who are they?!' Leonardo queried, clutching at his beret as Ezio cracked the reins and picked up speed.
'Rodrigo Borgia's men…' Emily replied, whipping out a throwing knife and taking aim at one of their pursuers.

'Why? What do they want with us?' Leonardo continued, caught up in a mess he didn't deserve.

'I think they want us dead.' Ezio replied, an arrow thudding down just behind him, far too close for comfort. 'Leonardo! Hide!'

Kicking his horse into a gallop, Aloysius stayed right behind the wagon as Leonardo climbed in through a roof hatch and ducked down behind the wooden walls, hiding from the flying arrows.

'Leonardo! Hold onto Ezio's horse for me, will you? We'll deal with this, just stay down and hold onto the horse as tight as you can.' he called, leaning forward and holding out the reins at full stretch.

'Quickly! We don't have a lot of time here.'
'I've got it.' Leonardo nodded, leaning out to grab the reins before ducking back down and clutching reins to his chest as he cowered out of sight.

'Ezio! Take care of your charges! We'll handle the Borgia men, you just worry about Leonardo, the wagon and your horse!' Emily roared, pulling level with Ezio and looking up at him.

'Got it, Emily!' Ezio nodded, focused on the road ahead and pushing the horses harder. 'Where is my horse compared to the wagon?'

'Right side of the rear end! Leonardo is holding the reins!' Emily replied, glancing over her shoulder quickly. 'If you must, give him the order to set your gelding loose but only if you must.'

Turning as one, the four mounted Assassins drew their swords and charged their pursuers, slashing through the first group and whirling around to chase down the others that had slipped past them.

Swords singing over their heads, the quartet showed no concern about aiming for the horses under the Borgia men, always aiming for quick kills so the animals didn't suffer too much.

'Gena, rear guard! Libby, front guard! Aloysius, ride the wagon!' Emily hollered, thrusting her sword through the back of an enemy that had managed to get up onto the wagon. 'I'm on rover!'

'Copy that, Emily!' Aloysius nodded, sheathing his sword and catching up with the wagon.

'On it, Emily!' Libby nodded, rising out of the saddle and galloping past the wagon.

'I'll handle it!' Gena confirmed, throwing another man from the saddle.

Coming up to the back of the wagon, Aloysius leapt from the saddle and grabbed the wagon, slipping through the open section of the back wall.

'Leonardo, I need you to hold my horse as well.' he directed, handing over the reins and ducking back as another arrow thudded into the wood.

'What? Why?' Leonardo asked, scared out of his mind as he hugged the floor and clutched both sets of reins.

'I've been assigned to ride the wagon and deal with any assholes that get onboard.' Aloysius replied, grabbing a spare rope off the floor and knotting it around one of the uprights. 'Just hold onto the horses unless you're told otherwise. We'll get through this.'

'Alright.' Leonardo nodded, looking up at Aloysius for a moment before curling up in a ball and waiting for this to all be over.

Climbing out of the wagon again, Aloysius moved out into the middle of the roof and dropped his centre of gravity, setting his feet wide and drawing his sword. Rocking with the motion of the wagon, he lashed out at the few Borgia men crazy enough to try and mount the wagon to cause trouble for Ezio and Leonardo. It wasn't easy fighting atop a fast moving wagon but Aloysius had picked fights against Templars in worse places with less working in his favour.

'Ezio! Just be aware I'm on the roof behind you.' he called, slitting the throat of one man just as he grabbed the wagon.

'Are you crazy?' Ezio asked, not taking his eyes off the road.

'I've done this before! But last time things moved a lot faster.' Aloysius shrugged, turning to clear the other side when Leonardo called a warning. 'Just get us to Romagna territory!'

'Working on it!' Ezio snapped, demanding more from the horses pulling the wagon.
Riding at breakneck speed, Libby was first to catch sight of the Borgia assholes setting fire to the bridge in the distance. Growling low in her throat, she pushed her horse even harder and whistled sharply, trusting in her friends to catch the hint of her call.

'I see it Libby!' Emily called, riding down a slope from above and turning her mount. 'Chase them off, I'll get the others moving!' 'Got it covered.' Libby nodded, charging forward to chase the Borgia off the bridge.

Rounding the corner and spotting the burning bridge, Ezio gulped and tightened his grip on the reins, his confidence deserting him for a moment. Of all the obstacles he'd thought he might have to deal with while driving this wagon, he'd never thought the Borgia would light the bridge on fire to block his path.

'Gena! Get up in front! They've set the bridge on fire! You won't make it on rearguard!' Aloysius demanded, still riding the roof and watching out for Borgia coming at them. 'Check that.' she replied, kicking her horse and overtaking Ezio on the outside. 'Kick it Ezio!' 'Hold on tight, this is going to be a little rough!' Ezio yelled, thinking mainly of Leonardo bouncing around in the back. 'Aloysius!' 'Don't worry about me, I've done worse shit before.' Aloysius replied, dropping to his knees and spreading his weight. 'But still, this is fucking insane!'

Leaning down over the side of the wagon, Aloysius grabbed the reins for his horse from Leonardo and pulled, smiling reassuringly when Leonardo looked up before releasing the horse Aloysius wanted. Coaxing his horse forward, Aloysius pulled him level with the wagon and held him tight, determined not to let the gifted mount fall into the river far below. Getting the idea, Leonardo brought Ezio's mount up on the other side of the wagon and held on for dear life, absolutely terrified of what might happen.

'Just hold on tight Leonardo, we won't let anything happen to your or your machine. It's going to be fine, we'll get through this and see Venezia in all her beauty.' Aloysius soothed, trying to comfort the spooked artist. 'Keep holding on as tight as you can and we'll all make it through safely.'

With the women leading the charge, the team hit the bridge and thundered across, forcing their horses through the flames and safely out the other side and back onto solid ground. Splitting up, the women charged back into the battle at hand, returning to their previously assigned positions around the wagon.

Shuffling around on the roof of the wagon again, Aloysius brought his horse back around to the rear and handed him back to Leonardo. When this was over, the horses would all need a long rest and some serious TLC to recover from their long run at such a fast pace.

'You're doing fine, Leonardo. This will all be over soon. Keep holding on, we'll get though yet.' he grinned, heaving back up onto the rooftop. 'Emily! Get me some archer gear!' 'Wilco!' Emily barked, galloping past the wagon again and gutting another man that dared threaten her friends.

It wasn't Emily that ended up coming back with the archery gear that Aloysius had requested, instead it was Libby that came charging past with a longbow and two full quivers of arrows. Tossing the collected gear up onto the wagon, she spun her horse around and raced back into action, putting her faith in Aloysius to watch out for all of them.

'Make it count!' she howled, sword swinging as she flew at the enemies. 'That's the plan.' Aloysius nodded, retying his support rope around his ankle and drawing back his stolen bow to return fire. 'Hold on Leonardo, we're almost there!'

Daring to peek his head over the partial walls of the wagon, Leonardo still couldn't believe what he was right in the middle of, even as he clutched the two sets of reins to his chest and watched the battle rage around him. He could see Gena riding hard in the back, her mighty war sword whistling...
as she cut down men and horses without concern. He also saw Emily riding the edges of the fight, dispatching anyone that came across as a threat. Over his head, he heard Aloysius moving about and witnessed arrows flying out from the wagon, taking down men on the high ground all around them. It was absolutely terrifying but also extremely exhilarating to be right in the middle of something like this.

With the women keeping the Borgia back from the wagon, Aloysius fired off his last arrows and untied his bracing rope before leaping across to land safely back on his horse. Reaching out, he took the reins back and pulled away, bringing his mount up on the other side of Ezio's horse and reaching out again.

'You did fine, Leonardo. Now go up and take over from Ezio. I've got his horse.' Aloysius grinned, fingers closing around the second set of reins.

Nodding sharply, Leonardo picked his way past his machine and climbed up, jumping down to sit beside Ezio as Aloysius came up beside the wagon with Ezio's horse on the inside.

'Go, Leonardo! They're here for us, not you! We'll catch up with you later!' Ezio instructed, handing over the reins and vaulting down for the wagon to land safely on his horse.

Wheeling their mounts around again, they dismounted quickly and reorganised their positions, Libby hanging back with the horses as the rest of the team moved forward to engage the tailing Borgia men. Libby didn't want to hang back from this fight but with the blood drizzling down her left thigh from a deep gash, she wasn't up to standard for a fight. As it was she was struggling simply to mount and dismount her horse, she needed medical attention for her wounds and fast. The location of the injury made it impossible for her to patch it up without aid.

So much more confident when it came to waging war on foot against on horseback, it only took a few minutes for the team to slaughter the eight guards that had come running towards the four Assassins. Cleaning their blades on the clothes of their fallen foes, the team returned to Libby and took their horses back from her. Gena also took Libby's horse and Aloysius held Emily's as she eased Libby to the ground and tore at her breeches to check the wound.

'Mi dispiace, Libby. I should have paid more attention.' Emily uttered, accepting the medical kit from Ezio. 'Just relax, this won't take long to patch up.'

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After spending a night in Forli so their horses could rest and be taken care of and the team could have their wounds treated, repair their weapons and restock supplies, they set out to try and catch up with Leonardo again. Considering Venezia's unique system of canals instead of roads, they made the decision to hire a suitable team to take the five horses back to Monteriggioni where they would be safe and looked after properly until the next time they were needed.

To make sure Mario didn't have a panic attack when the horses were returned without them, Emily reached into the web that surrounded her and tapped into her faint connection with Mario, strumming it lightly to get his attention.

'Mario, its Emily. I need you to focus only on my words for a minute.' she whispered, having learned that speaking in her regular voice was too loud for whoever was on the other end.

"What's the matter Emily? How are you doing this?" Mario asked, confusion and shock flooding between them.

'Calm down Mario, I am able to use the webs I see to talk to people. Distance is a factor, the further away, the harder this is for me to do. Listen to me, we're about to get a boat to Venezia and we don't need the horses there. We've hired a team to bring them back to you where they will be safe and receive the best of care. We have worked them hard along our journey.' Emily explained, sending calming vibes down the link.
"I understand. I will have the stables readied for them." Mario replied, sending his love back to her along with his pain at her absence. "Tell Ezio I got his latest shipment of artworks. They look grand on the walls."
'I will tell him Mario.' Emily chuckled, returning Mario's feelings and trying to ignore her growing exhaustion. 'I must go, I will write you again soon. I miss you, mio tesoro.'
'I miss you too, il mio amore." Mario uttered, regret in his tone before Emily released her hold on the link.
'Mario has been informed of the returning horses, he will be prepared. Oh and he wants you to know that the new artworks arrived and look grand on the walls.' Emily smiled, reinvigorated by just that brief contact with her secret love.

Weaving through the people and taking shortcuts through the swampy ground, they did eventually find their way to the Forli docks but not without quite a few detours to collect treasures and trinkets that would be needed along their journey.

'Here! Over here!' Leonardo called, waving to get their attention.
'Told you everything would be fine.' Aloysius grinned, straightening his cape quickly.
'Thank you all. You saved my life.' Leonardo smiled, so grateful for their efforts.
'We did what had to be done. You would have done the same.' Libby shrugged, leaning on a stack of crates sitting on the dock to take the weight off her leg.
'I doubt it. Bravery is not my strong suit. I owe you all a debt.' Leonardo chuckled, shaking his head slowly, refusing to believe her words.
'Di niente.' Emily reassured, waving off his debt.
'Tutti a bordo! Fra poco si salpa!' the ferry master called, breaking into their conversation.
'That's our traghetto. Venezia awaits!' Leonardo grinned, pointing to the boat.
'Where are your passes?' the ferry master asked, rounding on the weary Assassins
'What pass?' Gena asked, looking to Emily for guidance.
'You don't have a pass?' Leonardo asked, seemingly surprised by this information.
'You cannot enter Venezia without a pass. Who invited you?' the ferry master explained, sounding just a little accusing.
'Um…nobody.' Ezio shrugged, not quite sure what to do now.
'Basta! No pass, no entrance.'
'Well shit, that's going to cause trouble.' Emily muttered, thinking of how they might attain the passes they needed. 'Don't worry, Leonardo. We'll come up with something.'
'Don't just stand there! I need help!'

Everyone turned at the sound of a rather irritated woman calling for help from one of the many islands scattered through the waterways around the area. Swapping looks, the four older Assassins all pointed the finger at Ezio, earning a heartfelt groan. He was tired, he really just wanted to find a safe place to sleep but as low man in the group, he got all the best assignments. Rolling his eyes at his so called friends, he took a running dive off the docks and swam over to an abandoned boat floating nearby.

'He's going to really stink after that bath.' Gena muttered, watching Ezio climb into the boat he'd decided to use.
'Well, he already smelt pretty bad so this might actually be an improvement.' Aloysius shrugged, shaking his head in wonder. 'There had to be an easier way for him to do that.'
'When does Ezio ever do things the easy way?' Emily smirked, not really surprised that Ezio had once again leapt in head first without a fully prepared plan.

He came back a few minutes later with the woman and helped her from the boat before returning to his friends with the smugst of grins on his face. That grin quickly disappeared when Gena cracked her knuckles, a subtle warning that she wasn't happy about something.

'Got any more bright ideas? We still don't have passage to Venezia.' she smirked, regaining her feet
and hobbling over to him
'Just give it a minute, Caterina is working on it for us.' Ezio replied, looking back over his shoulder at the woman. 'She offered a reward for my aid, I told her we needed passage to Venezia. She said she would handle it.'

Eyeing the woman critically as she strode over to the group, Emily was instantly on edge, not sure why but there was something about this woman that didn't feel quite right. Another look at the face of this woman and she remembered her from the histories she'd learned as a young Assassin trainee, so many years ago now.
'He won't trouble you anymore. I…took care of it.' she offered, ignoring most of the group and looking at Ezio.
'Thank you, Caterina.' Ezio replied, dipping his head respectfully.
'Perhaps we'll see each other again. Should you ever find yourself in the city of Forli, it would be my pleasure to welcome you.' she continued, openly flirting with Ezio.
'We look forward to enjoying your hospitality.' Emily replied, silencing Ezio with a look before he flirted his way into more trouble than he could handle. 'Let's go, we still have a long way to go and plenty to do.'
'Shameless flirt.' Aloysius smirked, hustling Ezio up the ramp before Caterina could try and seduce him any further. 'One of these days you're going to flirt with the wrong woman and get your head separated from your body.'

Making his way back to where Leonardo was standing, Ezio caught sight of Caterina waving to him from the dock and smiled, wondering if he would ever see that particular beauty again. Of course, he also had to wonder if Emily would let him get away with continuing to get to know her.
'Be careful, Ezio. Do you know who that was?' Leonardo asked, also looking at the woman.
'My next conquest?' Ezio laughed, ignoring the dirty looks he got from his fellow Assassins.
'I don't think so, Ezio! That's Caterina Sforza, daughter of the Duca di Milano. Her husband is-' Leonardo chuckled, turning away from her as he dropped the H word.
'Husband?' Ezio asked, realising now why Aloysius had made that comment.
'Si. Her husband is the Lord of Forli. That woman is as powerful and dangerous as she is young and beautiful.' Leonardo confirmed, glancing over when Emily and Aloysius both groaned.
'Sembra come una donna per me.' Ezio chuckled, turning to rest his elbows on the railing and look along the length of the ship.
'You don't know the half of it Leonardo.' Gena sighed, shaking her head slowly. 'A few years from now, according to the history books, she will see that her husband meets an unfortunate end so she can claim rulership of Forli for herself.'
'She…somehow this does not surprise me, Gena.' Leonardo shrugged, turning his full attention to her. 'How have you been since the last time we met? It has really been too long.'
'Business as usual, I won't torment your soul with my sins.' Gena replied, settling back beside him and gazing out to sea. 'I probably look a little different to the last time we were together.'

Turning fully to face her now, Leonardo smiled as she lifted her hood just a little, revealing the reddish-blonde hair framing her face and hiding some of her scars. Reaching up as she lowered her head, Leonardo drew a lock out of the shadows and looked at it, admiring colour and thinking of just how similar it was to his own. His was more blonde than red but it was close enough to reconfirm their special bond.
'It's a beautiful colour, Gena.' he offered, tucking the lock of hair back behind her ear. 'Why do you shave it all off when it is so lovely?'
'I started shaving it off because people would make snide comments about the colour. I was training to be a soldier and an Assassin, I didn't need the trouble from them.' Gena replied, brushing her fingers through Leonardo's hair. 'That and it was easier to deal with a bald head instead of my hair. I didn't have a lot of time for personal hygiene.'
Ah, Venezia

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Ah, venezia
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So very glad to be back on dry land, the Assassin team kept a sharp eye out for trouble as they stood around Leonardo and the many crates of art supplies he'd brought along from Firenze. Of course, they also stood a guard over his precious flying machine, now quietly known as the giant bat. Without really thinking about it too much, they moved their coin pouches from their belts into their tunics and hung bait bags instead, fully expecting to meet up with the local thieves and discover a new secret group of informants and assistants that could offer them aid as required.

Watchful and wary, the team immediately tensed up for trouble when a stranger rounded the corner and called to Leonardo respectfully. Even Leonardo was concerned, subconsciously moving closer to Gena as he responded to his name.

'Buongiorno e ben arrivato! I am Alvise. Il Signor Dona has asked that I escort you to the workshop. Are you ready?' the stranger continued, approaching the group and not realising the potential threat right in front of him.

'Ezio, you and Gena stay with Leonardo and make sure nothing happens to him. Libby, I want you to stay here and make sure no one tries to steal any of Leonardo's belongings. Stay with them until everything is safe at his new workshop. Aloysius and I will take a bit of a look around the city, get to know the lay of the land and see what useful places we can find.' Emily directed, waiting only a second for everyone to nod before turning and jogging away with Aloysius.

Fairly sure they were being punished for something by being left to listen to this Alvise ramble on about the sights of Venezia and all the wonders of the city, Ezio and Gena sighed and trailed along behind Leonardo. But a promise was a promise and they'd sworn to keep an eye on Leonardo until he settled into this new city, so they stayed with him, tuning out their guide and getting their own feel for the city.

Entering the marketplace and witnessing some of the local guards tormenting one of the merchants, Ezio had to do something drastic to stop Gena from racing over there to intervene. In the end, he settled on stomping on her foot and hurrying after Leonardo, drawing her away from the incident and getting her back on track.

'Pull another stunt like that and I'll break your fingers.' she growled, cuffing him up the back of the head. 'I was not going to break our cover.'

'We're supposed to be watching Leonardo, not making note of the troubles in the city.' Ezio replied, picking up the pace a little.

'Smiling as Leonardo stopped to admire a little wooden figure at an artistry shop; Gena couldn't help but chuckle when Ezio lost his bait bag to a swift thief just as Leonardo asked if either would mind buying the articulated figure for him.

'I trust you had nothing of value in your bait bag, Ezio.' she smirked, digging out her coin purse and turning to the vendor. 'I'll buy it for you, Leonardo. It's the least I owe you.'

'Grazie, Gena.' Leonardo beamed, handing over the amazing little figure even as he dreamed of how useful it would be.

'No, just a few scraps of metal I picked up, nothing important.' Ezio shrugged, dismissing the thief from his thoughts.

'Good, you're learning how not to get caught out. Double check just to make sure she didn't get your real purse as well.' Gena nodded, most of her attention on her purchase.
'No, it is still safe.' Ezio chuckled, able to feel the solid weight of his full purse tucked deep inside his tunic.

Accepting the fragile little figure, now wrapped in paper and cloth to protect it, Gena turned and gently placed it Leonardo's hands, heart warmed so much by the dazzling smile he gave her. So careful with his gift, he tucked it safely into the second large pouch he wore on his belt, away from the throwing star Aloysius had given him on their journey.

'Anything to make you smile, Leonardo.' she uttered, resting one hand on his shoulder as they continued to walk.

'You are too kind, Gena.' Leonardo replied, relaxing into her touch as they continued their tour of the city.

Up onto another of the countless bridges in the city, they stopped and looked at the architecture around them, the Assassins still on the watch for trouble or potential work as they listened to Alvise going on about their latest grand sight.

'And here we have the Palazzo della Seta. Home to Emilio Barbarigo. Normally, I'd suggest a closer look. But with the way things are now…'

'Why? What's happened?' Ezio asked, picking up on something that might be useful.

'He is attempting to unify the merchants beneath a single banner. There has been resistance. Some of it violent.'

'What kind of resistance?' Gena inquired, intrigued now and wondering if maybe this had something to do with their main project.

'They say they're fighting for the people. For freedom or some such nonsense. Baggianate, if you ask me.' Alvise continued, a little wary of the two now but that exactly the way they wanted him to be.

'Emily will want to know of this.' Ezio uttered, looking up at Gena to be sure he hadn't overstepped his position.

'And we'll report back to her after we've completed our current assignment.' Gena replied, gazing at the palazzo in thought. 'All in good time, Ezio.'

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Crouched atop a cathedral tower, Emily and Aloysius gazed out across the city, watching the passage of ships at the port and getting to know the way the gondolas moved in patterns along the many canals breaking up the city. Compared to the Venice they knew, this place truly was beautiful and almost mysterious, hiding many secrets beneath the surface that had been lost to their era. But there were certain things that made both Assassins homesick for the Venice they knew, the most obvious being the fetid stench of the water that wasn't properly cleaned or maintained.

Shaking his head slowly, Aloysius moved to crouch beside Emily, reaching out to place a hand on her shoulder as they gazed out across the city together. He counted it as a victory that she didn't immediately push him away or tense up under his grip but he knew it would still be a long time before she trusted him as easily as she trusted other Assassins.

'Have you finished your first appraisals of the city, then?' Emily asked, still not looking at him.

'The appraisals can wait a few minutes. I am more concerned about you.' Aloysius replied, dropping his hand and gazing down at the city below. 'You have been off your game since we left Monteriggioni last year.'

'My abilities are not yours to question Aloysius.' Emily growled, her anger growing but she pushed it back down again.

'I am not questioning your abilities Emily, only your focus. I might only be a Secondary Master but I can tell that you are not fully focused here.' Aloysius countered, refusing to let this go.

Sighing softly, Emily sagged under his hand, rocking back to sit on the rooftop as she tugged her hood down a little more, pulling the cloth tight across the back of her head. Few had ever seen her
act like this, hiding away and trying to disguise who she was under her robes and skills. Shoulders hunched, Emily knew she was giving away her shame to Aloysius, he'd seen her hide like this before but she was so confused and spooked right now that she simply had no idea how to handle the tangle of emotions running through her.

Shifting to sit beside her, Aloysius simply held her close as she slumped and wept silently, her heaving shoulders the only indication of the grief she struggled with. Rocking slowly and whispering calming words, Aloysius held her all the tighter and tried to get her through the breakdown and back onto her feet.

'I screwed up Aloysius. I tried so hard to not let it happen but I failed. We could very well lose our war against the Templars and it's all my fault. Damn it! I should have been able to avoid this…I've avoided it before but this time…fuck it.' Emily choked, drawing her knees to her chest.

'What happened, Emily? I can't offer any guidance until you tell me what you're talking about.' Aloysius coaxed, rubbing her shoulder briskly to try and calm her. 'Come on, you can talk to me, maestro. I just want to help.'

Pulling off her glove, Emily offered out her left hand, letting Aloysius look at the gold ring she was wearing over her tattoo. She had no doubt he would recognise it, every Assassin death was carefully recorded and shared among all districts globally. On the underside of the ring, opposite the insignia, there were three small marks on the band, scratched in after the death of the previous owner of this ring.

'Your mother's ring?' Aloysius asked, cradling her hand lightly. 'I still don't understand, Emily. Who did you give the mate ring too?'

'Mario Auditore.' Emily admitted, looking away quickly.

'What? Tell me you didn't just say what I think I heard.' Aloysius groaned, unable to believe what he was hearing. 'You and Mario?'

'I didn't plan for this, Aloysius. I was able to ignore his seduction attempts for most of my two years there with him. I even resisted his monthly candlelit dinners for two in the privacy of his room. But I wasn't strong enough to turn away from the grief he showed me what I went to say my goodbyes.' Emily explained, pulling her glove again. 'I didn't mean to cause this mess but fuck…I can't help it. I've fallen for him and I don't want it to end.'

Blowing out his breath, Aloysius nodded slowly and moved one hand to cradle Emily's head, unable to disagree with what she'd done. He was in no position to judge her for falling in love with someone from her past, not after he'd been married to a Templar and came way too close to betraying the brotherhood.

'You know I won't say anything against what you've done, Emily. I shouldn't need to remind you about my disaster will Mel. If Mario makes you happy, then I wish you the best of luck with what you can have with him.' he offered, squeezing her closer and resting his cheek against her head.

'But that's just it. How can I have any happiness with him when I know that it will all end in heartbreak for us? Either I get dragged back to our time or his fate is sealed when the Borgia besiege Monteriggioni.' Emily sighed, drawing back a little to look Aloysius in the eyes. 'Do you have any idea how hard it is for me to say nothing of his fate?'

'Everything will work out in the end, Emily. You must believe that.' Aloysius replied, wiping the tears from her eyes. 'I know we haven't always gotten along but I do want you to be happy.'

'Thanks Aloysius, I needed to hear that someone wasn't angry for my choice.' Emily nodded, brushing his hand off her cheek. 'I can only hope we aren't held up in Venezia for too long, I already miss the villa and the peace that I found there.'

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Their individual duties attended to at last, the team reunited near the Palazzo della Seta, swapping information and spreading out the knowledge they had picked up along their journeys around the
city. What they had learned wasn’t enough to help them figure out why they were here and how to pick their major threats out of a city filled with corruption and trouble but it was a start. They had Emilio Barbarigo to deal with to free up the Venezia markets again.

Standing in the shadows, they gazed up at the palazzo, trying to work out how they were ever going to make it up the walls and into the building proper to confront Barbarigo. Even if they could get the guards out of the way, the palazzo was built with very few protrusions on the outer walls, leaving large sections of walling that only Emily had any confidence of clearing but she doubted that she’d be able to make repeated jumps of such distances.

‘There’s no way I can get up there, I’d be lucky to make that second window.’ Libby sighed, shaking her head as she looked up the wall.

‘I tried a jump like that once, spent three months in hospital afterwards. I’m not even going to try it.’ Aloysius groaned, eyes drawn to the large gap on the second storey.

‘Not a chance, I’m not built to scale such tough surfaces.’ Gena agreed, looking everywhere for an easier path up.

‘I’ll never make that jump; I’m not that skilled on walls.’ Ezio shrugged, also looking at the big gap on the second storey.

‘I could possibly make that jump there but I count at least six big gaps like that. There’s no way I could clear them all without an accident.’ Emily added, tracking the most logical path up the wall.

Turning to look when a group of thieves rushed past the guards and drew them away from the entrance to the palazzo grounds, opening up the way for a long thief to race inside and make an attempt up the walls. Incredibly, despite archers taking shots at her from the other side of the canal, she managed to clear the gap that had the five Assassins so concerned and looked up the wall.

Just as she was about to continue her vertical journey, one of the archers got lucky and sent an arrow right through her right thigh. Even from where they were sheltering, all five Assassins heard her cry of pain and raced to assist. Turning as they emerged from cover, Aloysius and Emily took aim and launched throwing knives up at the archers, taking both men down before they even realised the threat.

Hustling forward as the thief fell back to the ground and struggled to her feet; Gena caught the younger thief and slapped Ezio in the abdomen, warning him about making any comments about the earlier shove he’d gotten from this very same thief.

‘I need your help.’ the thief gasped, clutching Gena’s robes with both hands.

‘Kind of noticed that.’ Libby remarked, not sure why Ezio had been chastised but she didn’t care right at this moment.

‘We need to go.’ the thief panted, favouring her leg and looking around for trouble. ‘Now!’

‘Where to?’ Ezio asked, watching the guards approaching.

‘The water.’ the thief directed, breaking away from Gena and hobbling away as fast as she could.

‘That doesn’t exactly narrow it down…’ Aloysius groused, taking off after the young thief.

‘Bitch about it later, let’s go.’ Emily snapped, counting more guards than they could safely deal with right now. ‘Split up! Libby, close protection! Gena, left flank! Aloysius, rearguard! Ezio, right flank! I’m on the front.’

Spreading out and keeping pace with the thief, the team slogged their way through the guards that came, holding their angles around their new friend and making sure she didn’t get hurt again. Libby really shone in the heart of the fight, throwing knives and sword in strong harmony as she kept a few lucky guards back from their new friend and ended their lives without hesitation.

Constantly on the move, weaving through the crowds and ripping through any guards foolish enough to come too close, the team kept pushing through the city, the earlier recon of the area really helping them now that they were in the thick of battle and forced to follow a stranger. Spilling guard
blood indiscriminately, the team kept moving as one, protecting the strange woman from harm and listening to her complain as she hobbled along as best she could manage.

When she did eventually stumble, Gena didn't even pause, paying off a group of thieves to help with the protection detail even as she ran over and scooped the young woman up into her arms and held her close, trusting in the others to reorganise their defence positions around her.

'We never did catch your name.' Gena remarked, taking off at a steady jog as Libby swung out onto the left flank.

'Rosa.' the young woman replied, looking up under Gena's hood.

'Onorato, Rosa. I'm Gena. You'll meet the rest of the team later.' Gena replied, easing her pace a little but they couldn't afford to move too slowly.

'I know, I know all of you.' Rosa countered, tightening her grip and trying to calm her breathing.

'What do you mean by that?' Gena asked, instantly wary but she doubted Rosa was a real threat.

'Non ora! Now is not the time for small talk! Or are you blind?' Rosa growled, looking around for more guards or anyone else that could cause trouble.

'Nope, I just trust in my friends.' Gena shrugged, totally calm as Emily engaged four guards that had noticed their situation. 'The team will handle things while I offer close protection to you.'

Taking a knee between some scaffolding and a solid wall, Gena readjusted her grip on Rosa and pulled out her dagger, waiting for any guards that strayed too close to her position. Out in the open, the rest of the Assassin team engaged the guards alongside the hired thieves, partnering up to slaughter the guards that had located them.

'You're clear, Gena! Grab our girl and let's get moving!' Emily called, kicking the last guard off her sword and wiping the blood from the blade.

'Ready Emily.' Gena nodded, sheathing her dagger and scooping Rosa up again.

Bloodied and aching, the team pushed onwards towards their destination, guided by the blinking pink lights in their eyes. This was a new development for them, only showing up since they'd made it to Venice but it was certainly a helpful little addition to their already busy vision fields. It made finding their way so much easier and was doubly useful in crazy, twisting battles like this.

'Battle stations!' Aloysius roared, launching forward to engage another set of guards coming over a bridge. 'Gena!'

'Already on it.' Gena replied, finding cover with a wall at her back and solid protection on both flanks. 'Just relax, Rosa. We'll keep you safe.'

'You are not what I expected of an Assassin, Gena.' Rosa remarked, settling into Gena's hold and watching the fight.

'You'll find most of us aren't quite what you expected.' Gena replied, holding her dagger in readiness.

'Ezio's probably the only who who'll meet your expectations. The rest of us, well we do things our own way.'

'So I am noticing.' Rosa chuckled, flinching when Ezio took a fairly heavy blow to the forearm and howled in pain.

'Ezio!' Gena barked, motioning for him to come back to her location. Right arm cradled to his chest, he did as instructed, moving back to take up a stance in front of Gena.

'Dio that hurts.' he groaned, pulling out a dagger and holding it awkwardly.

'Let me see, you might have broken something.' Gena sighed, tucking her dagger away and reaching out to grip his hammer.

Swaying on his feet, Ezio sunk to his knees and looked back over his shoulder at the fight as Gena braced Rosa against one leg and reached out to gently remove his bracer. It had taken a fairly substantial hit, the plating on the front heavily dented and cracked along one edge but it had served its purpose, protecting Ezio from a far more serious injury.

'Here, hold this Rosa.' Gena instructed, handing over the bracer. 'Careful of the blade.'

'Of course, Gena.' Rosa nodded, taking the bracer and hiding it from view.
'Ow! Would you not do that.' Ezio yelped, trying to pull his arm back when Gena pressed against his forearm lightly.

'Oh stop complaining.' Gena replied, glancing up as she continued running her heavily callused hands over his forearm. 'I don't think you broke anything. I can't feel any deformities or anything like that. I'd say you just bruised it severely.'

Glancing over towards the fight, Gena knew she had to make a quick decision on Ezio's condition. There was no chance of her calling one of the others over to make this judgement, they were all still embroiled in the fight to clear the path. This choice had to be hers to make.

'I know you would rather finish this Ezio, but I want you to go pay a visit to Leonardo. He will be able to make a better call on your injuries and repair your bracer. If you prove to him that you're not in too much pain and can still fight, you come find us.' Gena instructed, lightly tapping at her linking mark. 'I will inform Leonardo of these instructions so don't even try slinking out of them.'

'I won't Gena. I'll do as requested.' Ezio nodded, accepting his bracer from Rosa and easing to his feet, looking around for threats.

'Bravo ragazzo, Ezio. Now go, quickly. I will inform Emily of the situation.' Gena nodded, sending him scampering away from the battle.

Cradling Rosa carefully to her chest, Gena stood on Aloysius' signal and hurried across the open ground, putting her faith in her friends that they would get through this okay. Catching the worried look Emily sent her way, Gena nodded slowly and looked around for their next step.

'Where's Ezio?' Aloysius asked, panting slightly as he joined the group.

'I sent him to Leonardo. His right bracer is mangled and there could be underlying fractures. No clear breaks; but minor damage is possible.' Gena briefed, following pink marker onto the dock.

'Ugo!' Rosa called, drawing the attention of one of the thieves standing around.

'What's this?' Ugo demanded, whirling to the group and brandishing his sword.

'Rosa's been wounded.' Gena replied, rolling her eyes at him.

'Pass her here. We'll go the rest of the way in the boat.' Ugo instructed, sheathing his sword and stepping forward to take Rosa.

'Libby, go with them and do what you can for Rosa. The rest of us will provide cover.' Emily added, blocking Ugo from leaving and pressing a small vial into Rosa's hand. 'Drink this, Rosa. It will ease your pain for the journey ahead.'

'Grazie Emily.' Rosa gasped, prying the stopper out with her teeth and draining the vial.

'Careful with her.' Libby insisted, bounding nimbly past Ugo and into the waiting gondola. 'Easy now Rosa, you're in good hands here.'

'You picked a hell of a time to act the idiot, Ezio.' Emily muttered, whirling around as an arrow whizzed past the group. 'Go! We'll deal with the guards!'

Spotting an empty gondola tied up nearby, Gena smirked and ran for it, vaulting the gap and landing as lightly as she could on the small boat. Slashing through the ropes, she took off after Ugo and Rosa, quite awkward with her steering but she was working on it. Without the agile speed needed for the rooftops, throwing knives from a second gondola was the best protection she could offer but it was certainly better than nothing.

Bounding along the edge of the canal, swinging from beams and running along the posts set in the canals linking to their chosen path, Emily and Aloysius worked in sync to manage the guards all along this waterway. As one paused to kill a man aiming at their companions, the other would race ahead to the next one and so on they went, keeping good pace with the boats below.

Hunkered down in the first gondola, Libby worked quickly to secure the arrow in place and stem the blood loss, ducking arrows whistling past them from the shore and the throwing knives whizzing past from Gena on the second gondola. She would have preferred to be up on the rooftops with Aloysius and Emily but they all had a role to play and right now, hers was medical care.
'They're shooting at us!' Ugo called, trying to get a little more cover from the other Assassins. 'Yeah, they do that. Fucking assholes.' Libby growled, sitting up and launching three throwing knives in quick succession, nailing a trio of guards out of reach of the rooftop pair and on an impossible angle for Gena to hit from her gondola. 'They're still shooting at us!' Rosa warned, ducking another arrow. 'We're doing the best we can being a man down.' Libby replied, tightening the bandages and checking Rosa's pulse below the rough dressing. 'It's not perfect but that should tide you over until we get to better cover.'

Jumping off the end of a wooden guard walk just as the two gondolas turned into an open water gate, Aloysius and Emily sliced into the water and swam after them, diving down under the boats and popping up at the dock. Ignoring their screaming muscles, they climbed out of the water and turned, reaching out to grab the first gondola. 'He's dead, idiota. Say a prayer later. I need to see-' Rosa ranted, looking back at Ugo as he rolled their dead companion into the water. 'Porco demonio!' Ugo snarled, turning his full attention back to Rosa. 'I need to see Antonio.' Rosa panted, screaming in agony when Ugo tried to drag her from the gondola on his own. 'Be careful!' Emily snapped, hurrying forward. 'Let us do it. Go and find Antonio.' 'Cristo, Ugo! Do as they say!' Rosa groaned, gripping Libby's hand like a lifeline. 'Can't believe I'm taking orders from these people…' Ugo snapped, getting up and storming away from the group.

Easing down beside the gondola, Aloysius and Emily gently supported Rosa between them, both senior Assassins looking to Libby to make sure it would be safe to carry Rosa. 'So tired…' Rosa muttered, sagging into them. 'Hey! Hey! Wake up!' Aloysius yelled, worried all their efforts would be for nothing. 'No time to waste, get her out of here. We'll be right behind you.' Libby directed, waving the pair away as Gena made her way up onto the docks from the second gondola. Supporting Rosa's limp body between them, Emily and Aloysius moved as quickly as they dared through the narrow streets of this part of Venice, doing everything they could to minimise any further blood loss. 'We need help!' Aloysius called, spotting two thieves just up ahead. 'Where's Antonio?' Ugo's voice rang out from somewhere further along these narrow streets. 'Make yourselves useful! Clear a space for her.' 'Hang in there Rosa, you're safe now.' Emily uttered, gazing down at the pale face of this woman they barely knew. 'Put her down there.' Ugo directed, pointing to a cleared table as the trio rounded the corner.

Moving up beside the table, both still supporting Rosa, they eased her down carefully, Emily moving her hands to support the injury as Aloysius cradled her head in his bloodied hands. 'Where are we?' Rosa breathed, relaxing a little more when Libby and Gena jogged up beside him. 'Thank you.' Rosa nodded, gaze drifting to Libby for a moment. 'Rosa! What's happened?' a youngish looking man asked, emerging from one of the buildings around them. 'Just get this out of me!' Rosa demanded, her voice weak as Aloysius helped to prop her up. 'Soon, soon. Let's have a look first.' the new arrival soothed, coming around beside Emily to examine the injury. 'Who put this here?'

'That would be me.' Libby replied, coming up on his other side. 'I stabilised the arrow and slowed the blood loss as much as I could without removing the arrow. We wanted a safe place to do that.'
'Clean entry and exit through the thigh. That's good.' he continued, glancing at Libby and nodding sharply. 'You did good work.'

'Get it out!' Rosa snarled, growing increasingly agitated despite Aloysius' attempts to calm her.

'Rosa, we must take care not to-' Libby tried, placing one hand on Rosa's arm lightly.

'Now!' she screamed, at the end of her tether and in serious pain despite Emily's painkilling concoction of herbs and sedatives.

'Come vuoi,' the strange man agreed, cupping her chin in one bloodied hand. 'Tenetela.'

'You get it out and I'll patch her up.' Libby offered, putting both hands on Rosa's right thigh and holding it still as the rest of the team and a couple of the thieves pinned Rosa fully to the table. 'agreed.' the stranger nodded, grasping the arrow with both hands.

Watching the way this stranger worked, Libby stored his technique away in the back of her mind, just in case she ever had to do this for one of her friends. Bracing and supporting the arrow with his left hand, he snapped off the flight and tossed it down beside his feet before grasping the other end and slowly, carefully pulling it out.

'I am sorry, piccola…' he offered, throwing the larger half aside.

'Sorry?! Ficcatelo nel culo your sorry!' Rosa screamed, staring daggers at the stranger.

'Go fetch Bianca and be quick!' the stranger ordered, looking back at one of the other thieves.

'Well, at least now we know she gets pissed at everyone equally.' Libby shrugged, untangling the rough support bandage she'd made earlier. 'Aloysius, hand me some of those clean linens.'

'Not so clean anymore.' Aloysius muttered, handing over two and setting another one of Rosa's abdomen in case Libby needed it.

'They'll do. I can clean the wound properly in a minute.' Libby nodded, taking the cloths and sliding one under Rosa's thigh. 'Ready?'

Pulling his hands away, the stranger moved back as Libby applied pressure to both ends of the wound at once, clamping down as firmly as she could even as Rosa screamed in pain again. 'Grab that third one and unfold it, I need a long strand to bind these in place for now.' Libby directed, looking to the stranger for guidance.

'Porca puttana!' Rosa growled, writing in agony as Libby applied such pressure.

'Like this?' he asked, unfurling the cloth and flicking his wrists to twist it into a suitable shape.

'Perfect. Bind the linens into place as best you can. I will finish the patch up inside where there is more privacy.' Libby nodded, smiling as the stranger worked around her hands to knot the linens into place around Rosa's leg.

'You work well under pressure.' he remarked, glancing at her as he finished the last knot.

'This isn't so bad, I've seen a lot worse than a mere arrow through the thigh.' Libby shrugged, removing her hands slowly. 'That will hold until she's been moved inside.'

'She's spirited, this one.' he continued, giving Rosa a fond smile. 'Avanti! Get Rosa inside so that Libby can close the wound. You'll be alright. The worst in past.'

'Ti venisse il canchero, brutto bastardo…a te e quella grandissima troia di tua madre!' Rosa cried as the tabletop she was on was lifted and carried towards the nearest building.

'Oh, I like her.' Emily chuckled, wiping the blood off her hands with the dirtied cloth Libby had left behind. 'Talk about a vicious tongue.'

'Yeah, she kind of reminds me of you.' Aloysius smirked, accepting the dirty cloth to clean up.

'Understatement.' Gena muttered, thanking one of the thieves when he brought over a bucket of water for her to wash up.

'Thank you. Rosa is most dear to me. If I had lost her…' the stranger offered, still looking in the direction Rosa had been taken.

'Our fifth has a soft spot for women in distress…' Emily shrugged, dunking her hands in the water bucket and shaking them off.

'So I've heard.' he replied, turning to the trio. 'Don't look so surprised. We know all about you, all of you. Your work in Florence and the rest of Tuscany. Good work too, if a little unrefined.'
'Permission denied, Aloysius.' Emily warned, eyes narrowing as she glared at this cocky man.
'Then you know why we're in Venezia?' Aloysius nodded, crossing his arms.
'I can guess.' he confirmed, looking to the rooftops as if expecting Ezio to arrive. 'When you have a minute, come see me in my office. There's something we should discuss.'
'You have us at a disadvantage here. You seem to know so much about us and yet, you don't even have the courtesy to give us a name.' Gena remarked, scraping dirt out from under her fingernails with her hidden blade.
'Antonio de Magianis, head of the Venetian Thieves Guild.' he replied, sketching a quick bow and offering his hand to Emily.
'Try it and this will be a short alliance. I am no lady to be treated with respect. I expect to be treated no different to any man you had fought alongside before. The same can be said for Libby and Gena, we are not fragile flowers.' Emily growled, swatting his hand aside.
'Va bene, va bene.' Antonio replied, turning and retreating to his office.

Waving off the team, Emily scampered up the nearest wall, pushing down her exhaustion until she was perched at the highest point. Sinking back to sit on the rooftop, she pulled off her gloves and brushed the ring she wore, thoughts drifting once more to Mario and all she was risking. Throwing these bothersome thoughts out of her mind, she instead focused on the happiness she found in his arms and smiled, feeling the burden come off her shoulders as she reached into her webs and tapped their growing connection.
'Mario, are you there? Oh, mio tesoro, are you awake?' she called softly, strumming their link to try and get his attention.
"Hmmm? Emily, is that you?" Mario muttered, sounding like he'd only just woken up.
'I'm here, Mario. I didn't wake you, did I?' Emily chuckled, her heart lightened by the sound of his sleep roughened voice.
'It's alright, I must have dozed off by the fire. How are you, mia carissima?" Mario soothed, trying to wake up a little more as flashes of discomfort and affection echoed out to her.
'Tired, irritated and missing you so much. Venezia smells worse than the back end of a horse with the runs.' Emily sighed, closing her eyes and pulling up her memories of Mario's face. 'I've had a bad day and need you.'
"You have such a way with words, Emily." Mario laughed, flooding their link with love and support. "I miss you as well, mio caro. Whatever you need, I am here for you."
'Just be here with me for as long as I can keep the link open without strain. Let me feel your rich presence and forget my pain for a little while.' Emily requested, sinking back onto the uncomfortable tiles and letting her mind drift.
"I am here, wrap up in my love and forget your troubles awhile." Mario whispered, his voice so comforting as a ripple came through their link and made her feel like she was back in his strong arms. "Chiudere gli occhi e sarò al vostro fianco."
'Grazie mille, Mario.' Emily breathed, falling willingly into the illusion of being back in his arms, listening to him whisper sweet nothing in her ear as she smelled horses, battle and country air - the unique scent of her Mario.

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Climbing down from the rooftops, Ezio landed lightly beside Aloysius and looked around slowly, relaxing when he spotted Libby emerging from one of the other buildings and saw Gena coming around the corner behind them. Strangely though, Emily was missing from the group and that was unusual for her.
'Where's Emily?' he asked, surprised when Aloysius just shrugged.
'She climbed up there a couple hours ago and we're waiting for her to come down.' Gena replied, pointing up to one of the other rooftops. 'She made it perfectly clear that she wanted no company.'
'So we just wait for her.' Ezio nodded, settling back against the nearest wall to wait.
Looking up at a noise from above, all four Assassins relaxed a little more and smiled as Emily came flying off the rooftops and picked a very technical path down to the ground, seemingly refreshed and reinvigorated by whatever she'd been doing up on the rooftops alone. 'Feeling better now, Emily?' Aloysius asked, chuckling when she jogged over to them. 'Much better actually. It's amazing what a little silent contemplation of things can achieve.' Emily nodded, warning Aloysius with a look not to say anything further on the topic. 'I trust you got your clearance from Leonardo?'

'He doubts I have any serious bone damage but advises caution until the swelling goes down. For now he has expanded my bracer a little to allow for the swollen muscles to settle again.' Ezio nodded, removing his bracer and pushing up his sleeve to reveal the large bruise spreading black and purple over his forearm. 'He repaired my bracer too, but made me swear not to try and catch another war hammer on it.' 'He's a smart man. Even we don't try and catch war hammers on our bracers. Save that sort of thing for swords, they hit with less force.' Emily nodded, examining the bruise closely. 'You were lucky. Any harder and that would have shattered bones. Then you really would be in trouble.'

Tucking her hair back behind her ears and hoping no one asked about the flush across her cheeks, Emily turned smartly on her heel and headed for the door that Antonio had stepped through earlier. Calmed by her contact with Mario, she knocked on the door and stepped inside, her team trailing along behind her. 'Prego. Can I offer you something? Biscotti? Un caffè?' Antonio called, turning to regard the five. 'What's caffè?' Ezio asked, opening his question to everyone in the room. 'Black gold.' Gena grinned, so glad to have found someone that had coffee in this place. 'You can count on four of us having a taste for caffè. Not so sure about Ezio.'

'An interesting concoction, brought to me by a Turk merchant. Here, have a taste.' Antonio explained, handing around full cups to the other four and offering a smaller sample to Ezio. 'Stick with us long enough, Ezio, and you'll be a convert.' Emily chuckled, sipping her caffè and letting her eyes drift closed. 'Not the best I've ever tasted but I've had a lot worse on my travels.' 'A little bitter if you ask me. It just seems lacking somehow…I don't know. Have you considered adding sugar, maybe. Or latte?' Ezio shrugged, a little put off by the bitter taste. 'I suppose it's something of an acquired taste.' Antonio allowed, sipping his caffè and gazing at the other four Assassins. 'You'll learn Ezio. This stuff is good, helps a lot with the longs nights perched in awkward places.'

Aloysius grinned, glad to see that he had at least one source to get an occasional cup of coffee. 'Enough about that…Now where were we?' Antonio added, setting Ezio's mug back out of the way and making his way across his office. 'Seeing if Ezio can wrap his mind around tactics and why we have such a big problem here.' Emily shrugged, her message clear to the other Assassins as they gathered around Antonio's desk.

Gazing at the model on Antonio's desk, Aloysius' mind spun into action, reading the paths through the area and working out where the guards would likely be stationed. It was all so clear to him, every possibility flashed up before him and he either stored them as a potential plan or dismissed the issue as insignificant. 'Our failure at the Palazzo cost us dearly. It will take time to recover. No doubt Emilio will use this pause to strengthen his defences…' Antonio sighed, almost delicate with his touch as he removed two small man-shaped figures from the rooftops of his model. '…and continue his oppression of the district. You may not share our motive, but know you share our goal.'

'Why not gather your forces and try again?' Ezio asked, also examining model. 'To act in haste would only bring more losses. No. We must resupply and draw new plans.' Antonio replied, looking up from the model so carefully put together. 'We can ill afford to sit around and wait…' Ezio countered, struggling to understand what Emily wanted from him this time.
'Nor would I want you to. Work with us instead. Already my men begin to mend today's wounds. Seek them out. They'll put you to work. The sooner you aid them, the sooner we can strike.' Antonio shot back, walking over to put the little figures on the mantle.

'Nope, he hasn't mastered tactical thinking yet. We've given him plenty of pointers too.' Gena muttered, looking down at Emily.

'Give him time, he is still rattled by the brutality of Venezia. He will get the idea, just as he got the idea in Firenze.' Emily replied, holding up her hand to silence Gena. 'We all grow our feathers in our own time. Ezio must be given his chance to fledge.'

'Molto bene, Messere. I accept.' Ezio nodded, picking his words wisely so he didn't get into trouble with Emily for overstepping his place.

'We all accept, Antonio. Together, we will take this district back and see it returned to the people.' Emily added, coming up beside Ezio and putting a hand on his shoulder. 'I can see we still have to work on your tactical mind a bit more.'

'It is the right decision.' Antonio nodded, so grateful to have the Assassins to help him out with his Barbarigo problem.

Ushering the team back outside, Emily gathered them around her and consulted her webs, seeking out the contacts associated with the pink dots lighting up in their eyes. Ezio was distracted in seconds, turning away from the group to speak with Rosa as she stood nearby resting on a single crutch to keep the weight off her wounded leg.

'Salute, Rosa. You seem to be healing well.' he commented, smiling fondly at her.

'How are you finding Venezia?' she asked, turning to look up at him.

'It has its charms. But how do you deal with the small? Che schifo!' Ezio replied, trying to hard to ignore the reek of Venice but it was tough.

'So what brings you to me?' Rosa grinned, chuckling softly at his behaviour.

'I was hoping you could help him with something…' Ezio shrugged, getting right into her personal space and smiling.

'And that would be…?' Rosa pushed, intrigued and enchanted by Ezio's natural charm.

'I want to learn to climb the way you do.' Ezio replied, brushing his gloved fingers against her chin.

'Oh. Va bene. I can do that.' Rosa nodded, drawing her chin out of his touch. 'Well, I can't. But Franco can. Franco! Muovi il culo! Show Ezio how to reach the top of that scaffolding.'

Turning to see what was going on, the four modern Assassins swapped grins and sniggered quietly, fully expecting Ezio to make it up but not without getting some more fresh bruises to slow him down. It was just a matter of how many bruises he would get before he learned this lesson.

'I'll pay if he drops it on the first attempt.' Gena muttered, patting her bulging purse.

'I'll take that bet.' Libby nodded, glancing over at Ezio as he glared daggers at them. 'Everyone falls Ezio, its part of being an Assassin.'

'The bets are not for our profit, Ezio. It's about who pays for your medical treatment afterwards.' Emily added, motioning for him to pay attention to Franco. 'I'll stake on the third.'

'With his injured arm? He'll be lucky to make the second.' Aloysius countered, ducking the stone Ezio flicked at his head. 'Watch it, novice. I will put a beat down on you if I must.'

Flipping the four a rude gesture, Ezio turned back to the display in front of him and listened as Rosa explained how it was done successfully. It seemed easy enough in principal but he could not shake the niggling doubt instilled by the words of his so called friends.

'Begin in a hanging position. Then jump to the ledge above you. As you reach it, grab it with your hand and pull yourself up.' Rosa explained, setting out the steps as Franco scaled the wall quickly and easily. 'There. See how it works?'

'I think so…' Ezio shrugged, ignoring the sniggering of his companions.

'Only one way to find out. Try for yourself.' Rosa coaxed, motioning him over to the scaffolding.

Watchful and ready to race in if Ezio did get hurt trying this, the other four Assassins were quiet,
giving him a chance to get the technique sorted in his mind before he tried it for real. It was rather
cute the way he went through the motions on the ground first, working out the coordination and
looking up at the beams he would need to grab to make it up successfully.
'You can make it Ezio. You have to make it, you're the reason we all know this technique.' Emily
whispered, fingers curling into a fist as she waited for the moment.

Running up the wall to where Franco had started his demonstration, Ezio looked up the wall again
and swallowed, still a little unsure about this new technique. Franco had made it seem so easy but the
words of his friends rattled around in his mind. Shaking his head to clear his mind, he launched up
towards the next level, stretching out his left hand to grab the waiting beam. He had it for a second;
fingers brushing the timber but he couldn't get a grip and dropped.

Struggling to stay relaxed as he missed the second catch, Ezio knew this was going to end badly,
fully expecting a heavy impact with the cobbled ground below. Instead he was safely caught by two
sets of arms and opened his eyes, sighing in relief as he gazed at Aloysius and Emily.
'For a first attempt, you did fine Ezio. You're not at your peak and this is a complex technique to get
your head around.' Emily soothed, leaning in to press a soft kiss to his cheek. 'Would it help if you
watched someone else go up the wall again?'
'No, I can do this. I know I can do it, I can see the path in my mind but the coordination is tricky.'
Ezio replied, so glad that his friends had been there to catch him.
'Everyone falls when first learning to climb-leap technique. I know you can master this though, how
else could all modern Assassins know it?' Aloysius added, flipping Ezio back onto his feet. 'Just
focus on the technique, you can do this Ezio,'

Spirits lifted by the praise and support of his friends, Ezio approached the wall again and ran up to
his starting position, going over Rosa's instructions again before launching heavenwards and
stretching out with his right arm. Snagging the next ledge, he quickly brought his left hand up and
secured his perch and brought his feet up in readiness for the next jump. Shoving down his pride, he
focused and pushed up again, this time reaching with his left hand for the next grip.

Getting to the top of the scaffolding, Ezio couldn't wipe the proud smile off his face as he turned and
looked down at his friends gathered below. They were all smiling proudly at him but somehow
Emily's smile was the brightest of them all. That meant so much to him, he'd failed her in the past and
caused her pain so it was nice to see that he'd done something that made her so happy.
'So? How did I do?' he asked, particularly interested in Emily's response but any praise would be
greatly appreciated after his earlier mistakes.
'I've seen better.' Rosa replied, cutting into his pride.
'You wound me with your cruel, cruel words!' Ezio teased, pressing his hands to his heart.
'Alright, smargiasso. Let's put your skills to the test.' Rosa challenged, chuckling at his antics.
'I'm all ears.' Ezio nodded, still expecting his fellow Assassins to say something.
'Meet me in front of the Frari.' Rosa instructed, turning and hobbling away.
'You did a fine job, Ezio. Keep practising and it will become an instinctual skill.' Aloysius grinned,
nudging his hood back a little.

'Few manage to learn the climb-leap without taking quite a few falls, well done on only falling once.'
Emily added, her words sending a thrill of joy through Ezio. 'Now go, learn all that you can from
Rosa and practise this new technique. We will handle any other work Antonio needs done.'
'Grazie Emily.' Ezio nodded, taking to the rooftops after Rosa.

Not really surprised by Ezio's eagerness to go chasing after Rosa, Emily knocked on Antonio's door
and slipped inside, leaving the rest of the team outside to wait for further instructions. Antonio's
earlier comments about their work being a little unrefined had irritated the four modern Assassins but
with Mario's aid Emily was calm enough to face him again and learn more about what needed to be
done. As such, she was left to deal with the smug thief on her own.
'Ah, Emily! I was hoping you might return. I want your advice on something.' Antonio smiled, looking up from his model as she entered.
'I am here to help, Antonio. Tell me what troubles you.' Emily nodded, offering her hand in friendship after their rocky start.
'Emilio has turned some of my own men against me.' Antonio sighed, turning away from her as he tried to accept he'd been betrayed.
'Bribery and blackmail, is it?' Emily asked, moving closer to rest a gentle hand on his left shoulder.
'Yes and we cannot strike until the traitors are dealt with. They're still somewhere in this district - keeping tabs on us and reporting back to Emilio.' Antonio nodded, turning to face her without disturbing the hand on his shoulder.
'Not for much longer, Antonio. I'll put Aloysius on it, he's the best I've got available. Fast and light, he'll find your traitors and silence them quickly.' Emily promised, watching the relief in Antonio's eyes. 'Any other jobs I should be aware of at the moment?'
'Ugo reported back that some of my men had been captured. Find Ugo and he should be able to tell you more about the situation.' Antonio replied, relaxing a little more under Emily's touch.
'I'll send Gena out to meet Ugo. She might not be comfortable on the rooftops but when it comes to slaughtering guards and breaking friends from cages, she's unmatched.' Emily grinned, releasing her grip on Antonio's web line and stepping back. 'If you need any further assistance or guidance, Libby and I will be close by.'
'Grazie Emily.' Antonio replied, still drifting on the relaxing feelings that Emily had stirred up in him with the touch against his web link.

Slipping back outside while Antonio got his head on straight, Emily chuckled softly and waved the team over, not too concerned about her underhanded technique for getting information out of people. As far as she was concerned, it was a delicate way to question friends without doing them any serious harm or letting them know she was playing them.
'Okay, we have two missions on the books. Aloysius, I want you to start searching for three traitorous thieves. Emilio turned them against Antonio and while they are in the district, he can't act against Emilio.' she directed, trusting Aloysius to get the job done. 'As always, watch out for posters, heralds and city officials to manage our notoriety.'
'I'll handle it Emily.' Aloysius nodded, turning and heading up the nearest wall to get to work.
'Gena, I'm sending you out to find Ugo somewhere in the district. He reported to Antonio that some of the other thieves were captured while we were escaping with Rosa. First find Ugo, he'll be able to provide more information.' Emily continued, completely confident that Gena would pull it off.
'Rooftops, oh joy.' Gena muttered, tugging her hood down over her face. 'I'll make sure they get home, Emily.'
'Libby, I want you to focus on building rapport with the thieves that work alongside Antonio. They will be helpful as we continue to fight for Venezia, we must make sure we have a strong friendship with them.' Emily nodded, hiding her worries with practised ease.
'Of course Emily, I know just where to start.' Libby replied, turning away but she stopped before she'd gone two steps. 'Where will you be? Just in case I need to find you in a hurry.'
'I'm going to see if Antonio can provide me with a quiet, windowless room where I can sit in solitude and work through my webs again. I'm seeing flickers of things that make absolutely no sense.' Emily sighed, rubbing gritty eyes quickly.
'What sort of things?' Libby asked, coming back to Emily's side.
'While I was in there talking to Antonio, I touched his link into the webs and for the briefest second, I saw one of our Assassins standing beside him. I only know him by name and reputation, he's not part of my district.' Emily shrugged, shaking her head slowly. 'I wish I understood what it means but I need to sit and pull at my webs until things start to make more sense.'
'We'll handle business while you take a break, it's okay.' Libby soothed, handing Emily a cloth bundle of dried herbs and other natural products. 'This should help to ease your headache.'
'Thank you Libby.' Emily replied, heading straight back to Antonio's office and thumping on the
door before sliding back inside out of the fetid air of Venice.
Another Threat Gone

Grizzling about the mixed up missions they'd had to deal with and the cheeky twist Gena had given Ezio, the team spent a few previous minutes sitting on the well in the heart of Antonio's complex, just making sure everyone was okay and ready for the mission ahead.

'I still can't believe you tricked me into that fetch and deliver mission.' Ezio grumbled, glaring at Gena as she laughed.

'Ezio, you spent the day bounding around buildings and flirting with Rosa, you needed to do something to help with the mission.' she replied, rolling her shoulders quickly. 'Besides, it was better that I get out of sight after knocking off quite a few guards.'

'When you say quite a few…' Libby started, always wary of Gena's kill counts.

'I'd guess around 30-40 over the course of the day.' Gena shrugged, not so bothered by the high kill counts anymore.

'Definitely wise for you to get out of sight.' Emily agreed, shaking her head slowly. 'But you got the job done so I'm not going to worry too much.'

'You're not the only one who dropped a few too many bodies. Chasing down those traitors put another suitable dent in guard numbers. Final count was 15.' Aloysius chuckled, scratching blood out from under his fingernails.

'And here I thought I'd done a good job getting most of Antonio's men on our side.' Libby sighed, shifting her perch a little. 'But hey, I thought around 50 thieves how to properly clean and stitch a wound so I did pretty well I guess.'

'You did a fabulous job, all of you. The less guards there are around the city, the easier our work is. With those traitors gone, Antonio is free to work his magic and get us what we need to complete the next step. By freeing the imprisoned thieves, we gain points with them and widen our support network. Getting the armour and boat that Ugo needed for his role will allow us easier access to the palazzo when the time is right.' Emily praised, looking around the group slowly. 'And now that Ezio has mastered the climb-leap technique, at least three of us can slip inside to deal with Emilio and his guards.'

'With the practise I've had lately…' Gena sighed, turning to regard Emily.

'No Gena, I want you outside with Libby, making sure we have a clear escape if things go to hell on us. It's happened before and it very well could happen again.' Emily corrected, jumping off the well and turning for Antonio's office. 'There will be other times.'

It came so harshly, driving her to one knee as concern and helplessness flooded the bond she shared with Mario. Something was terribly wrong in Monteriggioni, something that had rattled Mario to the core and driven him into a frantic search for answers.

'Mario! Mario, calm down! Damn it Mario, calm down!' Emily snapped, striving to push back his emotions even as she distantly felt concerned hands on her shoulders and back. 'Mario! Stop this!' "Emily?" Mario sounded shocked and all the conflicting emotions faded into shock. "Are you alright, my love?"

'I could ask you the same thing. What are you so worked up about? You broke right through the link and crashed right into me with a near panic.' Emily sighed, relaxing a little now that she wasn't being bombarded with all kinds of negative emotions.

"Forgive me, I just came across some troubling information and I do not know what to do about it." Mario replied, still agitated but he was calming. "On your advice, I sent two of my men to follow Federico when last he tried to sneak out of the villa. What they discovered is truly shocking."

'Do you need help to deal with this situation?' Emily asked, prodding at their connection but Mario
was hiding what ever he'd learned of Federico. 'Talk to me, Mario, tell me what you've discovered.'
"My men witnessed him passing letters to known Templars in the area. I do not know what this
means but I do not like it. How can my own nephew betray us like this?" Mario rushed out,
sounding torn between anger, confusion and shame. "I do not know what I should do, Emily. I dare
not confront him, who knows if he has snuck Templar sympathisers into Monteriggioni."
'Cazzo, this couldn't have come at a worse time.' Emily groaned, thinking fast and trying to work out
how to handle this one. 'Alright, send some of your most trusted men to Forli to wait for news with
your fastest horses. As soon as we wrap up this business with Barbarigo, one of us will make our
way there and ride hard for Monteriggioni to help you with this.'
"Will I see you again?" Mario asked, hope flaring under his conflicting emotions about Federico.
'Maybe not this time, it will depend on what else I can learn from Antonio and our other allies here.
Take heart, Mario. Whoever is dispatched will be the best equipped to handle your troubles.' Emily
replied, further calming him with soft brushes of love and longing. 'I will come to you when I can but
there are so many things calling for my attention.'
"Such is the burden of an Assassin." Mario agreed, wrapping her up in love and affection. "I miss
you, mio tesoro."
'I miss you too, mio amore.' Emily chuckled, sharing a few moments longer just treasuring the
connection with Mario before reluctantly breaking away.
Shaking her head to clear the last of the panic and concern Mario had flooded her with, Emily
groaned faintly and lifted her gaze, smiling faintly to reassure her friends that she was okay. They
were all huddled around her, shielding and protecting her from any that might come to investigate
their situation.
'I am fine, my friends. Mario has discovered how to utilise his link marking to communicate and just
sent word of trouble in Monteriggioni. He hasn't quite mastered controlling that connection, his
emotions and concerns flooded through and I was unprepared.' she offered, catching Ezio when he
tried to run. 'I have assured him that we will come to his aid when we can. Right now we must focus
on Barbarigo. Mario accepts this and will bide his time until one of us can get to him.'
'Did he tell you what sort of trouble?' Aloysius asked, still gripping her left shoulder lightly.
'He did, I will not speak of it though. We have to focus on our current mission for the moment. Once
Barbarigo is gone, I will brief one of you on what I know and send you on your way.' Emily
nodded, relaxing a little more. 'Now enough of this, we have other missions to focus on.
Monteriggioni will just have to wait.'
'The burden of an Assassin.' Gena sighed, getting to her feet and pulling Emily up.
'Mario said pretty much the same thing when I told him he would have to be patient.' Emily
chuckled, slinging one arm around Ezio's shoulders. 'And before you ask, no I am not sending you
back there Ezio. I need you here, learning your lessons and mastering them.'
'Of course, Emily.' Ezio replied, accepting her choice though he would rather go and help his Uncle.

Locking the trouble in Monteriggioni inside a compartment of her mind, Emily refocused on the
mission at hand as she knocked on the door into Antonio's office and dropped her arm from Ezio's
shoulder. She could ill afford to be distracted right now, they had a job to do here and the questions
of a traitorous brother would just have to wait.
'Please, enter!' Antonio called, waving the team inside when Ugo opened the door. 'Your good work
has restored us to our former strength. We are ready to strike.'
'Just tell us what needs to be done and we'll see that it is.' Aloysius nodded, gazing at the model
again, mapping out their routes and figuring the likely places to find archers.
'You'll approach from above, under the cover of night. Emilio has posted archers around the Palazzo.
Kill them. But do so quietly. As they fall, my men shall replace them.' Antonio explained, pointing
out the positions where he knew the archers to be located.
'What about the guards?' Ezio asked, also scanning the model and working our his attack plan.
'When you've finished with the archers, we'll regroup in front of this building here - and discuss next
steps.' Antonio replied, pointing out their meeting point.  
'Nessun problema. We'll take care of the archers and return to you.' Emily nodded, watching the pink markers turn up in front of her eyes..  
'Then it's settled.' Antonio nodded, coming around the desk. 'In bocca il lupo.'  
'Crepi il lupo.' Ezio replied, clapping Antonio on the shoulder as the other four assassins howled in chorus. 'Sometimes I wonder about you four.'  
'Hey, you said cracks the wolf. What'd you honestly expect.' Libby shrugged, folding her hood back and pushing her hair out of her eyes. 'Next time we have a minute, I really need someone to do something about my hair.'  
'Here, this should help.' Rosa offered, holding out a length of dark green ribbon.  
'I'll make it work.' Libby nodded, accepting the ribbon and wrapping it under and around her hair to pull it back out of her eyes.  

Turning as one, the five Assassins filed outside and took off running, scattering into the district and aiming for their individual targets. At first they hadn't known which target they would each have to worry about but as soon as they left the office, the pink marks in their gazes faded to leave each with a different archer that needed silencing and removal from their perches.  

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Making their own ways to the rendezvous point, four of the five Assassins approached Antonio and looked around, playing into his questions about where Emily might be. He was concerned that she had been captured or worse and now worried that their plans would all be for nothing if she was interrogated and gave away any small detail.  

Careful to keep his face composed as they distracted the three thieves, Aloysius watched Emily silently climb down the wall behind Antonio and turn, keeping her equipment tucked in against her legs so she didn't touch him and warn him of her presence. Stepping forward sharply, she grabbed Antonio from behind, left hand slapping over his mouth as her right pinned his arms.  

'Nice night for a murder, Antonio.' she whispered, feeling him tense up against her.  

Releasing him and stepping back, she readied for a fight as Antonio whirled to face her, chest heaving from the horrid fright she'd given him. Around them, the other Assassins and thieves were sniggering quietly, amused that Emily had so easily gotten the drop on Antonio.  

'Beautifully done, Emily. You should have seen his face.' Aloysius smirked, quietly applauding her efforts. 'No one will blame you if you need to go home and change Antonio.'  

'Cazzo…what were you thinking, Emily?' Antonio panted, still recovering from the shock of suddenly being grabbed like that.  

'You presented such an easy target, Antonio. Back to open air, anyone could sneak up and knife you in the back.' Emily shrugged, grasping his web line and stroking it lightly to calm him. 'But you are right, I should have aimed at someone else.'  

'And here I thought thieves were supposed to be aware of everything going on around them.' Gena smirked, shaking her head slowly.  

'Relax Antonio, just a little harmless fun between friends.' Emily soothed, altering her touch against his link. 'Just relax, I promise I won't do that again.'  

Shoulders drooping, Antonio sighed heavily and shook his head, giving in to the calming words and gentle touch against the link he had no idea existed. Emily was right, he should have put his back to the wall and paid more attention to his surroundings, anyone could have snuck up on him. He was just lucky that it was a friend this time. The lesson was well learned, he would not make the same mistake twice.  

'You are right Emily, I should be more careful. The guards do not know who I am but that is no reason to be a fool.' he nodded, running one hand through his hair. 'You are even more talented than
I thought.'
'You don't know the half of it, Antonio.' Emily grinned, releasing his line and moving around to rejoin her fellow Assassins. 'Now, what's the plan?'

Taking a few minutes to simply breathe and regain his thoughts, Antonio looked around the group and nodded slowly, gaze drifting to the rooftops. Shaking himself, almost like a ruffled bird resettling its feathers, he returned his gaze back to the waiting Assassins and smiled faintly.

'Well done, all of you. Everything is going according to plan. As we speak, my men are replacing the archers you've removed. The way to the Palazzo is clear now.' he nodded, getting right back to business after his shock.

'But not the building itself. Emilio's guards still patrol its border.' Ezio sighed, still not sure how they were meant to get into the building proper.

'Use my men. They can distract the guards - save you from having to fight.' Ugo offered, resting one hand on Libby's shoulder.

'And when it comes time to storm the place, remember what I've taught you!' Rosa added, most of her attention on Ezio.

'Sii cauto, all of you. We await word of your success.' Antonio offered, putting his trust in this cheeky team of Assassins.

'Gena, you handle the guards but do it quietly. Make good use of Ugo's men, I anticipate plenty of trouble. Libby, you find a good high perch and keep us informed of anyone lurking too close as we make our assault. Use our standard code and don't let the roofguards spot you.' Emily directed, the plan clear in her mind. 'We'll storm the place and put Emilio down.'

'Whatever you need, Emily.' Libby replied, bounding up the wall behind Antonio and vanishing from sight.

'Got your back, Emily.' Gena nodded, turning and hurrying away down the street.

Holding Ezio and Aloysius back from the fight, Emily waited and listened, signalling for Antonio and the others to be silent. It took a few minutes but carried on the wind, a lone owl called for a mate. Racing sharply, she released the men and took off after them, everything timed off Libby's call of a clear path through.

Racing straight through the opened gap in Emilio's defences, the trio hit the wall on the fly and raced up, the modern pair showing Ezio a few new tricks as they made their was up and threw a couple of guards down from balconies they passed. Quietly they crept up the wall further, jumping across onto the lowest rooftop and sinking closer to their target. They all froze when they heard voices and dropped down carefully, listening to the conversation.

'Ezio, go deal with the roof guards. Aloysius and I will listen for any clues in their discussion and wait for your return.' Emily hissed, sending Ezio scampering away quietly.

'Your little house of cards is crumbling, Emilio.'

'A minor setback. It will be dealt with. This povero scemo, Antonio, and his thieves…'

'Never mind them! It's the Assassins you should be worried about!'

'Why? Is…are they in Venezia?'

'They've been here for weeks! How could you be so blind?'

'Unlike you, I've been busy! Someone had to provide the weapons to our brothers in Firenze.'

'Yes. And we all saw what good that did…'

'Enough with the barbs! What is it you want, Carlo?'

'Maestro has called a meeting. Three days from now at Santo Stefano.'

'Very well. I'll be there.'

'Assuming you still live. If you want my advice, I'd find a less conspicuous place to wait. Seta is a target now.'

'Seta is a fortress!'

'If you say so…goodbye Emilio.'
'Cazzo! What if he's right…You! Call for my boat. It should be close. When it arrives, load those crates and prepare to sail. I'll be right back.'

Returning from his mission to clear the rooftops of guards, Ezio sunk down beside Emily and Aloysius and listened to the ramblings from below, wondering why they were hesitating from striking at Barbarigo.

'If Carlo speaks true, I must find a place to hide…Just until the meeting…Then we'll deal with the Assassins…They must be working with Antonio…That means the attacks…No! I've worked too hard for this…' Emilio ranted, still somewhere close to their current position.

'Okay, let's move. Quick and quiet is the aim here.' Emily nodded, getting to her feet and moving to the edge of the rooftop.

'don't they understand…There is so much less crime…The people have better lives…So some must leave…It is the price of progress…Why must the Assassins always interfere…Like Giovanni…If he had just left well enough alone.'

'Take him down Ezio.' Emily directed, climbing down the wall and glowering at the harsh words spoken about such a good man as Giovanni.

Nodding sharply, Ezio launched off the wall and chased Emilio Barbarigo down, nailing him through the back on the steps. Twisting to the side as he caught their target, Ezio eased Barbarigo to the floor and crouched beside him, fully anticipating some useless last words but he would still listen and maybe try to make something out of them.

'Do not be afraid.' Ezio soothed, ignoring Emily and Aloysius as they moved to cover him.

'I feel no fear, Assassin. Only regret. I sought unity. Stability. Order.'

'At too great a cost.'

'Progress demands sacrifice.'

'Non trovo alcuna gioia in questro, ma non c'è altro modo.' Ezio intoned, easing the body back. 'Requiescat in pace.'

Abandoning the body where it had fallen, the trio of Assassins headed back up the stairs, ducking from arrows coming down at them from the rooftops. Roaring in pain, Aloysius dropped behind and fell, an arrow driven right through his right calf.

'Ezio!' Emily yelled, dropping to the floor and scrambling back to Aloysius. 'Get up there and deal with those fucking archers like I told you to!'

'That's the last time I trust the novice to clear out guards.' Aloysius groaned, dragging his butt over to take shelter against the wall.

'But I did clear out the guards. Even those on the next rooftops around here.' Ezio protested, daring to stick his head out and look up at the rooftops.

He could see the archers up on the rooftop above them and scowled, not quite sure how he'd missed so many of them but he knew this screw up was going to cost him severely. His inattention had led to Aloysius getting wounded and Emily didn't like it when her Assassins got hurt.

'Sorry! We couldn't resist.' Rosa called, waving to him from above.

'You should have!' Ezio snapped, unable to believe his miserable luck. 'Those aren't enemy archers up there, it's Rosa and the thieves we outfitted.'

'Fucking stupid bitch.' Emily spat, checking the wound quickly and shaking her head. 'Help me get him down to the courtyard then go find Libby. I'll deal with Rosa.'

'Easy now Aloysius, we've got you.' Ezio soothed, helping Emily lift Aloysius from the cool stone and carry him downstairs.

Setting Aloysius down safely beside the well in the middle of the courtyard, Ezio ran to open the gates and find Libby as Emily knelt beside Aloysius and brushed his hair back off his forehead. She hated it when her Assassins got hurt, she always took it personally because she was sworn to protect all Assassins within her district.
'Mi dispiace, Aloysius.' she uttered, running her knuckles over his cheek.  
'It's not your fault, Emily. You could not have known Rosa was so irresponsible.' Aloysius shrugged, looking down at the arrow in his calf. 'I always did wonder what it was like to get shot with an arrow. Bullets still hurt more.' 
'Hush, you must be more careful with your words Aloysius.' Emily replied, relieved that he seemed to be handling the pain and embarrassment reasonably well.

Relaxing a little when Libby dropped to her knees beside them, Emily looked up and frowned, eyes hardening as she glared at Antonio. He missed her warning, walking over to them with his arms spread wide.

'Seta is fallen and Emilio is no more! All thanks to you, all of you!' he declared, resting one hand on Gena's shoulder and the other on Ezio's. 'Go! Tear down Emilio's banners! Return what he has stolen from the people…'

'Before you all disappear, I want to speak with Rosa and whoever was taking playful shots at us.' Emily added, shoving her anger down for a moment.

'Tell me, Emily…How can I repay you for your services?' Antonio asked, finally noticing the arrow in Aloysius' leg. 'What happened?'

'Money's always nice.' Gena replied, recognising that Emily was far too busy to deal with questions right now.

'As for what happened, Rosa and her companions on the rooftops decided it would be smart to take a few shots at us while we were making our way back upstairs. One of them hit Aloysius.' Ezio added, shaking his head slowly.

'Easy enough.' Antonio nodded, signalling one of his men to hand over a large pouch of coins to Gena. 'Rosa, is this true?'

'We weren't aiming to actually hit anyone.' Rosa replied, struggling to meet Antonio's eyes.

'Yeah, well you screwed that one up.' Emily spat, looking up from Aloysius. 'My best Assassin is grounded because of some childish joke!'

'Does this mean I'm on the Monteriggioni mission?' Aloysius asked, tensing up as Libby grabbed the arrow and snapped it quickly.

'I guess you are. The trip back will give you time to heal for what will be needed of you there.' Emily nodded, holding him tighter as Libby pulled his boot and greave off. 'Gena, come and take over. I need a few words with our friends.'

'I've got you, Aloysius.' Gena uttered, kneeling beside him and restraining him with such care.

Stalking around to stand in front of Antonio, Emily snorted through her nose and closed her eyes for a moment, pushing down her anger and agitation about what had happened. It was already done, getting angry about it would not help Aloysius heal any faster. It still stung though, it would continue to smart for some time as well.

'What else?' Antonio asked, trying to distract her from her anger.

'Emilio was meeting with a man named Carlo. He looked to be a government official. Do you know him?' Emily nodded, flinching when Aloysius whimpered in pain again.

'Carlo Grimaldi. He sits on the Council of Ten. Why do you ask? What are you up to?' Antonio offered, glancing over to the rest of the Assassins.

'We have a meeting to attend.' Emily shrugged, turning smartly on her heel. 'Ah, you five must be the archers from the rooftop. I have little interest in four of you, only the one that fired the shot that hit my Assassin brother.'

'I admit to the shot. I never meant to hit him.' one of them replied, stepping forward and meeting Emily's unshaded gaze.

Before anyone could move to stop her or even open their mouths to caution her, Emily spun and let off two shocking right crosses, sending first the archer and then Rosa flying across the courtyard to land in equally undignified heaps on the floor. Turning away again, Emily held up her bloodied hand.
to silence Antonio and walked over to help Aloysius to his feet, slinging his arm over her shoulders and grinning as Ezio came up on the other side.

'You should be grateful Antonio. I have killed men for less than harming an Assassin under my watch. Teach yours some respect and the next time we meet, let it be without the taint of this mess to shadow us.' she called, waving to Antonio as the group left the palazzo and headed towards Leonardo's workshop calmly.

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By the time they got to Leonardo's workshop, Aloysius was in absolute agony, every jostle and jolt forcing another gasp or whimper from his lips as they carried him inside and set him down in a chair by the fireplace.

'Sorry to just drop in on you like this, Leonardo but we had nowhere else to go.' Gena offered, curling one arm around his shoulders without putting her bloodied hand on him.

'You are always welcome, my friends.' Leonardo replied, watching as Libby knelt before Aloysius and removed the temporary bandages.

'Leonardo, could we trouble you for some warm water to wash these wounds before I sew them up?' Libby asked, looking up for a moment before removing the bandages and helping to peel Aloysius out of his breeches.

'Of course, I'll just go put the pot on.' Leonardo nodded, slipping away from Gena and heading to the back of his workshop.

Noticing that Emily was slowly flexing her right hand, Ezio sighed and reached out to lightly cradle her right hand in his left so he could examine her knuckles for damage. They were severely bruised and bloodied but from her reaction, he doubted there was any bone damage.

'Anything else that you require?' Leonardo asked, returning to the group.

'Something cold to rest against my knuckles for the swelling.' Emily replied, flashing him a soft smile as she held up her hand.

'The best I can offer is the stones I work on when I am dissecting corpses. But even those are not very cold.' Leonardo sighed, thinking for a moment. 'But perhaps…wait here.'

Leonardo returned to the workshop a few minutes later with another bucket of water from the nearest well. Accepting the bucket, Ezio guided Emily to a stool and set the bucket in her reach, trailing his fingers in it to check the temperature. It certainly was cold, much colder than the weather would suggest it could be. Peeling off Emily's second bracer and pushing up her sleeve, he guided her to stick her hand into the water and rinsed the blood off, careful not to cause any more pain as he tended to her.

Glancing up as Leonardo set the bowl of warm water beside her, Libby thanked him quietly and got to work, washing away the dried blood and examining the wounds closely. So calm and confident, she angled Aloysius' leg over the bowl and used a cup Gena had passed her to pour warm water over and through the wound.

'Suddenly I'm grateful we got rid of arrows.' Aloysius gasped, clutching at the chair as Libby prodded at the wound again.

'I don't know, pulling arrows out is a lot easier than dealing with bullets.' Libby shrugged, setting the cup aside and reaching for her sewing kit.

'There's good and bad in every angle of this twisted story, guys.' Emily sighed, flexing her knuckles in the cool water. 'We have to confront hidden armour, here it's easier to see the gaps. Here the Templars are much harder to pick out, sure they have power but not every man in power is a threat to us. Here or there, each battleground presents different challenges but we will survive.'

'We always survive. Whatever comes to take us down, we find a way to adapt and thrive again.' Gena agreed, leaning back against the workbench. 'I have a little something for you, Leonardo.'
It had gotten a little crushed inside her tunic but Leonardo's eyes still lit up as he accepted the battered blue flower and cradled it gently in both hands. Exactly what it was, he couldn't be certain but it was truly precious that Gena had thought to grab him something in the middle of what had clearly been a nasty fight.

'It's not much but I saw it and thought of your eyes.' Gena shrugged, looking away quickly. 'It's beautiful, thank you Gena.' Leonardo replied, carrying it over and placing it safely on the table. 'You might as well give me the brief on the mission in Monteriggioni while we're sitting here.'

Aloysius suggested, glancing down to watch Libby sewing his leg back together. 'The last thing we need is everyone distracted by that business.' Emily sighed, shaking her head slowly. 'I will brief you on the way to the docks.'

'You are going back to Monteriggioni? I thought you would stay in Venezia a little longer.' Leonardo remarked, looking up at Gena sadly.

'Most of us are staying in Venezia. Mario Auditore needs urgent help with something and Emily promised to send some help with whatever he has going on.' Gena explained, drawing him closer and toying with his hair. 'It's alright, we're not going anywhere just yet.'

Drawing her hand out of the bucket and accepting the cloth Ezio had spread across his knee, Emily carefully dried off her knuckles and examined the skin damage and bruising she was left with. It could have been much worse, she only had a couple of minor skin splits that needed no treatment, the majority of the blood on her hands came from the pair of thieves she'd punched for Aloysius. 'Huh, I really expected to have more damage than that.' she remarked, gazing at her injuries. 'Guess those two didn't have the same hard skulls as most that I punch.'

'Only you, Emily.' Libby chuckled, knotting off another stitch and stretching her back. 'I know some female Assassins aren't pleased with the scars they earn but I am proud of every one I have. Regardless of how I earned them, each mark is a story that I willingly share with junior Assassins.' Emily grinned, dabbing at her knuckles again. 'Except that one you know where.' Gena nodded, one eyebrow lifting in question.

'Oh no, that's a story I reserve only for my most trusted companions.' Emily replied, cheeks flushing bright red. 'Though I know Aloysius has no shame talking about the scar he's got in a rather awkward spot.'

'Oh, you mean the one right in the middle of my ass. There's still a pot going on just how I got a scar along my crack.' Aloysius laughed, careful to keep his leg still. 'It's hilarious hearing some of the guesses from the novices.'

'You're bad Aloysius.' Libby smirked, knotting off the final stitch and examining her work before dressing it with the last of her clean linens. 'Before we swing back into action, I need to resupply.'

'You'll have a chance while I escort Aloysius to the dock in the morning.' Emily replied, relaxing a little more and applying pressure to her knuckles. 'We have three days before that meeting mentioned by Barbarigo. We have a lot to get done before that meeting.'
Spread out across the San Marco district of Venezia, the four Assassins watched and waited for the passage of Carlo Grimaldi, blending in with the constantly moving crowds and looking as innocent as they could. The guards paid them little attention, except to make disparaging comments about troublemakers loitering in public spaces but they made no move to force the Assassins to leave their places around the district.

It was almost peaceful really, sitting on benches, perusing the stalls in the markets and talking to the thieves and courtesans scattered around the city, hiding their faces and acting like ghosts moving where they so pleased. The thieves and courtesans, and to a lesser extent the mercenaries of the city, did their best to hide the Assassins from Templar gazes, shielding and shadowing the quartet scattered through the streets.

Gena was first to get eyes on Carlo, her familiar robes hidden under a long blue cloak she'd gotten from one of the courtesans as she crouched among a group of thieves, playing dice and looking completely natural among them. It was just chance that the thieves had taken to playing their games close enough to where Carlo was met by a portly man wearing a hooded cloak.

'Where is Emilio?'
'I told him to be here.'
'You told him yourself? In person?'
'Yes, myself, in person… I'm concerned that you don't trust me.'
'As am I.' the heavier man replied, looking around quickly. 'Perhaps he'll arrive with the others. Walk with me…'

Nodding to the thieves gathered around her, Gena straightened and started to discretely follow the two men, her presence disguised by the thieves and her loosely bound hair covering her most obvious scars. Moving with her group disguise, she stayed within earshot of the two men, still oblivious to the identity of the second man but it mattered little.

'So, how go things in the palace?'
'Honestly, it's difficult… Mocenigo keeps his circle close. I have tried to lay the groundwork, making suggestions, but he has other voices at his ears.'
'Then you must work harder, you must become part of his inner circle.'
'Si. I understand. But it's harder than I expected.'
'And why is that, Carlo?'
'I don't know! He just a… The Doge doesn't like me.'
'I wonder why.'
'It's not my fault! I keep trying to please him. I learn what he craves, and I have it delivered -- The finest jams from the orchards of Sardinia! The newest fashions from Milano--'
'Yes, and that's called being a sycophant.'
'A what--? What did you call me?'
'A doormat. A flatterer. A bootlicker. Need I go on?'

Pausing at the predetermined spot, Gena whistled sharply, mimicking a bird call and turning her face away form the suspicious Templars. A moment later, she got a matching whistle in return and smiled. The baton had been passed, now Libby was able to take over the watch and Gena needed to hurry to her next position.
Looking like just another random Venezian man out for a walk, Libby smirked faintly and drifted closer to the talking Templars, chatting amicably with a stranger she'd paid to walk beside her and just chat. He had no idea what was going on and she had no plans to disillusion him. As far as he knew, her name was Giovanni and had only just arrived in Venezia.

'Bastardo… You don't know what its like. You don't understand the pressure in there--'

'Oh, I don't understand pressure!?'

'No! You have no idea. You are a government official. I am two steps from the Doge himself. I am beside him day and night. You wish you could be where I am--'

'Are you done?'

'Hardly. You listen to me now. I am close! The Doge can be recruited to our cause, I'm sure of it. I just…I need a little more time.'

'Time is not a thing we have in great supply.'

Cursing mentally that her chance to tail their targets was so short, Libby slipped away from her innocent mark and whistled her signal, chuckling softly when she heard the next answer in the chain. Ducking into an abandoned shop to change, she took to the rooftops and hurried to her next post to wait for a second chance.

Gliding out into the street with her own disguise group around her, Emily beckoned to the men around her and shamelessly turned on the charm, her tanned skin beautifully offset by the soft yellow dress she was wearing, kindly lent to her by one of the local courtesans. No one who knew her could possibly recognise her, not with her scars hidden and no weapons within easy reach save her bare hands and teeth.

'My feet are killing me. Can't we sit down inside somewhere?'

'Do you know anywhere truly safe to discuss things such as these?'

Flirting and dancing with the same grace she free-ran and stalked her prey, Emily moved her group closer to the men and continued to flirt openly with the other men around her post, smiling and giggling as she kept a sharp ear on the conversation the Templars were having. Her attention was really perked when two more men joined her targets, the four openly talking about their plans.

'Buongiorno, cousin. Signor Carlo.'

'We thought Emilio would be with you--'

'Emilio is dead.'

'What? How-?'

'The Assassin…The same one who hunted down the Pazzi! He's here, in Venezia.'

'È cosi. Silvio - did you not know? He could be anywhere. He could be here right now and we might not even know. He struck Emilio inside his own palazzo!'

'And so, what of our plans!? Silvio asked, revealing his identity to Emily's sultry features.

'There is no longer time for subtlety, my brothers. We must act now.'

'But Marco. I'm so close. A few more days. If I can just--' Carlo almost pleaded; so close to achieving Templar victory.

'No. It happens this week.' Marco replied, their conversation revealing more than they thought to their enemies.

'We should keep moving.' the last man in the group warned, leaning closer to the others.

Signalling to the three women around her, Emily glided smoothly after her targets, tempting the men around her with her exotic beauty and charm as she continued with the charade. It tired her so; she would rather be doing anything but this.

'And what does The Spaniard have to say of this change of plans?'

'You can ask him yourself soon enough.'

'He's here!? From Roma?'

'So I've heard.'

'Good! Then perhaps he's made a decision.'
'About what, cousin?'

'About which of us shall step into the robes of the Doge, cousin.'

'I didn't know there was a decision to be made. Surely the choice is obvious to all.'

'Obvious, indeed. It should be the one who organised the entire operation. The one who came up with the idea of how to save this city!'

Sending out her passing signal as the group passed a guard barrier; Emily turned away as she heard the response and made her way back across the square. Soon she would slip away, get changed and take up her next disguise but for now, the job was in Ezio's hands. She could only hope he was able to keep a level head and do as was needed.

Wearing clothes that reminded him of much more innocent times, Ezio pushed off the wall and wandered near the group of chatting Templars, sharp ears picking up their conversation as he played his role of a bored young noble looking for something interesting to do.

'There is no lack of value in tactical intelligence, good Silvio. But it is wisdom one needs to rule. Do not think otherwise.'

'Calma! Calma, amici, please. There's no need for this. You know, it's not up to either of you… For all we know, he may not even choose a Barbarigo.'

'And why not me? I'm the one who's done all the hard work.'

'Basta. We wait for his arrival.'

'Are you sure he's coming?'

'Yes!'

'Signori, we should move a little faster. I feel eyes on us.'

'Thank you, Dante. We will move at your pace.'

'This guard's a good fine, cousin. How much did you pay for him?'

'Perhaps not as much as he deserves. He's saved my life on two occasions. Though he's not much of a conversationalist.'

Recognising that his tail might be starting to get suspicious, Ezio whistled a merry little tune and turned his attention to the flirtatious courtesans nearby as he heard the response from Gena, somewhere in the next open area where the Templars would likely go. He was thankful the courtesans he was with already knew the basic plan; they would help get him out of sight so he could change and make the run to his next location.

Hiding with a different group of thieves, wearing clothes borrowed from one of them and hiding the fact she was a woman, Gena eyes the Templars from under her borrowed cap and smirked, a little amazed that they were still completely oblivious to what was going on and the fact they had four Assassins tailing them. Slinking closer to the group, Gena froze at the sight of Rodrigo Borgia joining the group. Turning her face away, she found a new place to wait and watched the group closely, waiting to see what they would do.

'Enough with your inane prattle!' Borgia demanded, looking around the group. 'The choice of Doge was never up to any of you. And you were never given permission to make plans!'

'Forgive us, Maestro. We wish only to serve.'

'The plan is this: Doge Mocenigo will die tonight. And once the deed's been done, Marco shall take his place.'

'VI ringrazio umilmente, Maestro.' Marco replied, bowing low to The Spaniard as the heavy man Gena had first seen walking with Grimaldi went to interrupt but wisely shut up.

'Good! Messer Grimaldi. You are closest to Mocenigo, your work the most vital. Serve us well, and it won't be forgotten.' Borgia continued, sounding almost bored. 'Walk with me.'

'I don't want any blood spilled. You understand? It must appear to all that he goes quietly.'

'Certo, Maestro…'

'When are you closest to him?'

'I have full run of the palace. He may not care to hear what I have to say, but he trusts me by now as
'Bravo. Then I want you to infiltrate the kitchen and poison his meal.'
'So be it.'

Not game to get too close while Borgia was with them, or be noticed trailing the group, Gena passed the job on to Libby again and slunk back into the crowd, hiding her identity when one of their targets looked back over his shoulder.

Wearing clothes more suited to a lower class man and with her hair tucked up under a cap of sorts, Libby made her way along behind the group of talking Templars and made sure she looked like she was busily working on several jobs that needed attention.

'Marco. Can you furnish us with a suitable toxin on short notice?'
'I defer to my cousin. That is really his area of expertise,'

'Ah, Silvio…'
'I am at your service, Maestro.'
'What can you bring to get this done?'
'I will confer with my associates in the streets. But chances are good that I can procure some Cantarella…'
'Yes, and what is that?'
'It is a most effective form of arsenic and difficult to trace.'
'Ah…! Va bene, va bene. Then it's decided.'

Cocking her head when Libby passed the baton to her again, Emily smiled faintly and drifted back into the crowds smoothly, a lone noblewoman out for a casual stroll on a beautiful day in Venezia. Wearing the finest clothes she could afford, she glided smoothly along near the Templar group, memorising their words and listening out for anything of concern.

Irritatingly, the Templars were silent as they moved through her observation area and went up onto the Rialto Bridge, walking straight past Ezio without realising he was standing there, looking like a younger version of his father with a few hints of Mario about him as well. Lighting up with a smile, Emily approached him and took his arm, the pair making their way across the bridge and constantly observing the Templars.

'Forgive me, Maestro. But is this not perhaps a tad dangerous for you? Involving yourself so intimately with the minutiae of our plans?'
'I feel I need to involve myself more directly…The Pazzi disappointed us in Firenze. I pray you will not do the same.'
'Do not worry this time. The Pazzi were a bunch of foolish…'
'The Pazzi were a potent and venerable family, reduced to rubble by one young Assassin. Do not underestimate this troublesome foe - who now haunts your city - or the same fate will befall the Barbarigo. I want this done promptly.' Borgia growled, leaning closer to his conspirators. 'Bene. I must return to Roma. Time is of the essence. Do not fail us.'

Emily couldn't believe what had just happened. After their successful tailing all through the district, a moment of inattention, blending in with the crowd and looking at the goods on sale along the bridge and their targets had disappeared into the crowd, slipping away without any of the Assassins any the wiser to where they had gone.

'Che idiota sono!' Ezio spat, looking around for any sign of their targets.
'We should have kept our eyes on them.' Emily sighed, shaking her head slowly.
'We need to go see Antonio if we've got any hope of salvaging the mess we made…' Ezio agreed, leading Emily further along the bridge.
'Wait for Libby and Gena, unless you'd rather have no clothes to change into.' Emily guided, slowing his pace and browsing the goods on offer along the bridge.
Libby and Gena were waiting for them at the other end of the bridge, still wearing their previous disguises under long cloaks and each carrying two large bags over their shoulders. Accepting the cloaks the other women held out, Emily and Ezio pulled them on quickly and moved off, Emily and Ezio taking their individual bags so it looked a little less suspicious.

*Dismounting smoothly, Aloysius handed his horse off to one of the mercenaries that had ridden at his side and took off through the city, twisting clear of the innocent people and keeping his focus on the grand villa overlooking the blossoming city of Monteriggioni. Their efforts as a team to rebuild this place were really paying off, the streets were filled with happy people and the place shone with a new light.*

Full sprint up the stairs, he bled off speed on the grass and approached the villa, pausing the knock the dirt and muck off his boots before entering. As much as he knew Emily would want him to get straight to work, Aloysius first spoke to the architect and paid for the final upgrades to the bank before wandering over to speak with Claudia about the state of the accounts and the paintings that they'd been collecting and sending back to the villa.

Dropping a tender kiss on her cheek, he moved on towards Mario's office, scratching at his filthy hair and hoping he didn't smell too bad. Claudia hadn't made any comment about his odour so maybe it wasn't that offensive.

'Buongiorno Mario.' Aloysius greeted, entering the study and throwing his arms wide. 'And to you as well, Petruccio.'

'Welcome back, Aloysius.' Mario replied, looking up from where he was telling Petruccio a story as the young boy sat happily on his lap.

'Buongiorno Aloysius.' Petruccio grinned, waving to Aloysius merrily.

'Ah, the innocence of youth. It's good to see you up and out of bed Petruccio.' Aloysius remarked, wandering over to take a knee beside Mario. 'And looking so bright and happy.'

'The new diet you all helped to create has done wonders for him.' Maria agreed, coming in behind Aloysius. 'I thought I would take a walk out in the gardens, would you care to join me?'

'Si madre.' Petruccio nodded, abandoning his perch on Mario's lap and scampering over to take Maria's hand. 'We can finish our story later, right zio Mario?'

'Of course, nipote, whenever you wish to hear the end.' Mario nodded, chuckling softly as the pair left his study. 'Such a bright young boy, it's a shame he is still so unwell.'

'Don't think of the negatives so much, Mario. Petruccio is much healthier and happier now than I have ever seen him, such youthful joy does the heart good.' Aloysius replied, stretching out his shoulders quickly. 'Now, what seems to be the trouble with Federico?'

Sighing softly, Mario turned and walked over to his desk, pulling out an opened letter and offering it out to Aloysius. Accepting the letter, Aloysius looked at the seal for a moment and frowned before pulling out the folded page inside and starting to read. It was little wonder Mario was so conflicted with this, here was proof that Federico was selling secrets to the Templars.

In this letter, he detailed the plans of Monteriggioni, speaking of secret tunnels under the city and the villa and where they all went on both sides of the walls. He also gave away the details of the Sanctuary under the villa and the great prize waiting down there, the Armour of Altair. He told his evil allies which windows marked Mario's bedchamber and even gave away where the rest of his family slept each night. On the second page, he detailed what he knew of Ezio's mission, thankfully not a lot but if this letter had fallen into Templar hands, all of them would be in serious danger.

Growling low in his throat, Aloysius carefully folded a blank piece of parchment taken from Mario's deck and slipped it into the envelope, along with a little something he pulled from inside his tunic.
Very carefully, he passed the back of the wax seal over the nearest candle and pressed it back into place, making it look as though no one had realised what was going on.

'For now, we do not let Federico know that we know about this. As far as anyone else knows, I was sent back to heal from my wounds and learn more about the Assassins of this time.' Aloysius uttered, holding up the letter. 'Where did you find this?'

'Federico's room, I went in to wake him for breakfast and saw it on his desk. He does not know where the letter went. He has torn his room apart looking for it ever since.' Mario replied, not quite sure what Aloysius was planning.

'Okay, now we have the start of a plan. I'll leave this somewhere that only he's likely to find it and keep a sharp eye on him until he makes his move. Once he gets this back, he won't hesitate to see it get into Templar hands.' Aloysius smirked, depositing most of his gear beside Mario's desk and opening the nearest window. 'Relax, I've got this.'

Shaking his head with how easily Aloysius accepted this betrayal, Mario gathered up the gear he had left on the floor and slid it out of sight, not wanting it to be too obvious that something odd was going on in the household.

'Zio? Did you see where Aloysius went? I just remembered that one of the merchants wanted to speak with him.' Claudia asked, appearing in the doorway.

'He needed to race upstairs and use the pot. The merchants can wait Claudia, he has ridden hard to get here from Venezia. Let him rest from the ride and have his wounds seen to, then trouble him with this merchant business.' Mario replied, fairly sure he could guess what Claudia really wanted with Aloysius.

'Of course Uncle Mario.' Claudia nodded, turning and leaving his study slowly. 'You will mention this to him, won't you?'

'Of course I will, Claudia.' Mario chuckled, deciding not to call her out on her obvious attraction to Aloysius. It would be hypocritical of him to tell her off while he was dreaming of another night in Emily's loving arms.

Returning to the study a few minutes later, Aloysius retrieved his bundle of weapons and other gear from where Mario had stashed it and chuckled as he proceeded to put everything back where it belonged. He'd heard every word Mario and Claudia had said, he'd been about to step into the office when Claudia had made her crazy request.

'I already knew about Claudia's interest, Mario. I have no intention of going anywhere with it, she's a nice girl but I've got no interest in courting a woman right now.' Aloysius admitted, shaking his head slowly. 'Not after what happened to my wife.'

'You should speak to Claudia about this, before she gets too attached and can't let go.' Mario suggested, not sure exactly what Aloysius meant but he trusted the younger Assassin.

'I will, there's not much I can do about our betrayer for now. We have to wait for them to find the letter and make a move before I can do more there.' Aloysius nodded, sheathing his sword and turning sharply.

Making his way back to Claudia's desk, Aloysius swung his sword out of the way as he sunk down to one knee beside her and looked up at her as she put her quill down and turned to him. She was so beautiful, with her unblemished skin and dark hair pulled back and tucked into the bag-cap that she wore.

'Claudia, there's something I need to tell you. This will hurt but it needs to be said before things get out of hand.' Aloysius sighed, cradling her hands lightly in his. 'I know that you harbour feelings for me, I've known since I guarded your virtue and life against the Pazzi forces.'

'I wanted to tell you but there never seemed to be the right time. For the first time in my life, I found someone that I could really believe in and dream of a future with.' Claudia nodded, drawing one hand free to stroke Aloysius' cheek lightly. 'We could be so happy together, Aloysius. I know we could if we just tried.'
'Maybe you could be, Claudia, but I couldn't be happy. No matter how hard we tried, I could never be truly happy if I pushed into a relationship with you.' Aloysius replied, withdrawing his hands and pulling off his gloves. 'This ring I wear marks my place within the Assassin family but it also reminds me of my beautiful wife, whose soft hands placed it there on our wedding day. She has been dead for many years now but still I grieve for her and our daughter who died with her.'

Of all the responses Aloysius expected for his softly spoken words, he'd never considered the option of Claudia reeling back and slapping him like that. Head snapping around at the force of the strike, he went down in a heap, managing to catch his fall with one hand before he risked cracking his head on the marble floor. Looking up at her, Aloysius swallowed quickly when she stood, a wicked looking dagger clutched in her right hand.

Discretion being the better part of valour, Aloysius scrambled to his feet and took off with Claudia in hot pursuit, screaming about how she was going to remove his manhood for playing her like that. Tossing out any hopes of looking like a dignified Secondary Master Assassin, he shot straight back into Mario's study and launched around behind the older man, clutching his shoulders and whipping him around to face his enraged niece.

'It was your idea that I tell her the truth, you calm her down.' Aloysius directed, making sure he had at least two ways out of the room that didn't involve running past Claudia. 'She did not appreciate the reality of my interest in her.'

'Claudia! Put the dagger down.' Mario demanded, pushing Aloysius back a step and moving to confront his niece. 'Come now, see reason here nipote.'

'He played me, he knew and he said nothing.' Claudia ranted, glaring at Aloysius angrily. 'Men are fools, Claudia. We keep our mouths shut so we don't get into trouble with the fairer sex. That said, you are the one who considered courting a distant relation.' Mario tried, struggling with the hypocritical words but Emily was no direct blood link to him. 'Aloysius, tell me what happened to your wife?'

'She was murdered by the Templars, six years ago now. As she fell, the life of our six month old daughter was also taken by our enemies.' Aloysius replied, dropping his gaze and releasing his grip on Mario. 'I still see their bloodied, broken bodies in my dreams every night. I vowed that I would never take another woman into my heart and bed after I lost her.'

'You have my sympathy, Aloysius.' Mario offered, turning to rest a supportive hand on his shoulder. Lowering the knife, Claudia nodded slowly and walked over to place the weapon on Mario's desk before turning back to Aloysius. Moving away from her blade, a gift from Libby before she'd departed for Venezia, she extended her hand to Aloysius and waited. He seemed almost nervous but he did come out from behind Mario and take her hand, cupping his palm under hers and lightly turning it over so he could brush a kiss across her knuckles.

'I cannot be the man you wish I was but I can still be a friend and confidant. If you need to talk about anything, I'm here for you Claudia.' he offered, trying to build a different bridge with her now that she'd realised she could never have him as a husband. 'Even if it's about girly things?' Claudia asked, flushing as she looked at him. 'I promise you, Claudia, there's nothing you can tell me that I haven't already heard before. I've been around, I've heard things that could make your Uncle run.' Aloysius grinned, ignoring the indignant splutter from Mario as Claudia giggled. 'I'm sorry about all of this, I should have told you sooner but I got…'

'Hush Aloysius, it's alright. You don't have to explain. We're family, that's all that really matters.' Claudia cut him off, pressing one finger to his lips. 'It will be nice to have someone else to talk to about things that worry me.'

'Whatever you need, Claudia, I'm here for you.' Aloysius promised, drawing her into a tender embrace. 'Just think of me as another brother or something, okay?' Considering the age gap, perhaps Uncle?' Claudia suggested, earning another splutter from Mario.
'Whatever makes you comfortable, Claudia.' Aloysius nodded, releasing her slowly. 'I'll leave you to whatever brings you back here.' Claudia smiled, leaning in to kiss his cheek before leaving the study, detouring to collect her dagger before she was gone.

Letting out his breath in a rush once Claudia was gone, Aloysius turned back to Mario and shrugged, surprised by the change in the young woman and not sure how to respond to her thinking of him as an Uncle and not a grandson. Mario just laughed, walking over to sling a heavy arm around Aloysius' shoulders. 'Somehow I think she will favour your advice over mine.' Mario grinned, guiding Aloysius over to one of the padded chairs by the fire.

'You'll always be her Uncle, Mario. I'm just a family friend looking for a way to fit in when I'm so far from where I should be.' Aloysius sighed, leaning his sword against the chair and settling. 'If it makes Claudia happy, I think I can bear to share the title.' Mario teased, pouring them both a drink and settling in the second chair.

'Not that you could say much if I did decide to take Claudia up on her offer of a romance.' Aloysius remarked, sipping his wine. 'Emily told me, she was struggling and let it all out on my shoulder.' 'She regrets our decision?' Mario asked, flexing his left hand slowly, the outline of his gifted ring faintly visible through his gloves.

'No, she regrets nothing. If she did, she would have made this trip to tell you in person. She's just concerned for what your new relationship might mean for our time.' Aloysius replied, shaking his head slowly. 'She adores you, everyone who knows her can see that.' 'Has Ezio figured it out?' Mario sighed, chewing on his bottom lip for a moment.

'I doubt it, Emily is quite good at hiding things when she needs to. She'll share her fondness for you with Libby, Gena and I but she guards it fiercely from Ezio. My guess, she's trying to avoid an ugly confrontation.' Aloysius chuckled, enjoying the chance to just sit and relax. 'Believe me Mario, you've got a real gem in Emily. She will defend you for the rest of your lives together, whatever the threat that comes your way.'

The pair slipped into companionable silence, sipping their wine and relaxing by the unlit fire. It was nice to simply relax and think of nothing but the wine they were sipping and the latest news in Monteriggioni. Even when Aloysius pulled off his boots and rolled up his breeches to reveal his latest injury, there was no pressure to speak of it, Mario understood that he was simply airing out the wound and thought nothing more of it.

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Ignoring the snigger from one of the thieves when he opened the door into the palazzo, Ezio ushered the women inside and checked for guards before darting in after them and sagging back against the wall. Their trip from the bridge to the palazzo had been much harder than necessary, all because of their borrowed clothes. If they'd been in their robes, they could have just swum across the canal and climbed the walls but because of their borrowed outfits, they'd been forced to walk the long way around and come in the main entrance.

Lifting his gaze, he noticed that the thief and Emily were watching each other warily, like two stray cats that had both spotted the same piece of half rotten meat and were both preparing to fight over it. Their trip from the bridge to the palazzo had been much harder than necessary, all because of their borrowed clothes. If they'd been in their robes, they could have just swum across the canal and climbed the walls but because of their borrowed outfits, they'd been forced to walk the long way around and come in the main entrance.

'It's over, my friend. Blood for blood, as is the Assassin way, it's over and forgotten.' Emily grinned, running one hand through her hair. 'She'd do the same to any of us, Emily leads her Assassin district with an iron fist. Step out of line and she'll make you pay for it. The fact you are still unscarred is proof that she sees you as part of her mixed up bunch of friends.' Libby added, distracting the thief with a basket. 'Here, a peace offering from our brotherhood to your guild.'
'And a request for somewhere to get changed. These clothes aren't exactly comfortable.' Gena grinned, looking down at her borrowed outfit. 'And I did promise I'd get these back before noon.' 'Apology accepted.' he nodded, taking the basket. 'There's a storeroom through that door, you can get changed in there.' 'Thanks amici.' Libby grinned, nudging Ezio in the ribs. 'You're on guard duty first.' 'What? Why? Apart from the obvious I mean.' Ezio groused, shoulders drooping a little. 'Because you're at least reasonably comfortable in that outfit. This corset is murder on my back.' Emily replied, adjusting the grip on her bag and heading out of sight. 'Besides, it's polite for you to wait for us to get changed first.' Gena added, tapping his cheek lightly. 'Not to mention, you do look good wearing that outfit.' Libby winked, kissing his cheek and slipping past him.

Coming out a few minutes later, back in their full Assassin regalia, the women moved to guard the door as Ezio dashed inside, eager to be out of his finery. The women weren't really surprised by that, they'd been just as glad to shed their disguises and return to more comfortable clothes. For them, the standard clothes of the era were uncomfortable and awkward, so very unlike the comfort and familiarity of their own garments.

Emerging with a new spring in his step, Ezio set his duffle down with the other three and rolled his shoulders, so much happier to be back where he belonged. His smile grew when Rosa emerged from one of the other doorways, walking over to the group munching on a fresh bread roll. 'Salute, bello mio. Come stai? You back to see me already?' she smiled, jogging over to them. 'Desolato, mio cara.' Ezio replied, leaning in to kiss her cheeks. 'We are not here to play. We must speak with Antonio. It's urgent.' 'Antonio! Emily's here!' Rosa called, turning and looking up towards the second storey of the palazzo. 'With her crew!'

Checking her webs quickly, Emily was a little relieved to note that Rosa was no connection to her. It was nothing against the woman but she really didn't want to think that she'd smacked her great-grandmother in the nose like that. She didn't mind making like hard for Ezio but tormenting her female ancestors just didn't sit right with her.

Showing once again that she could be such a charmer without trying, Libby stepped past Emily to face Antonio, rising up on her toes a little to brush a sweet kiss across his cheeks in greeting. Antonio looked absolutely stunned, glancing at Emily as if he expected a reaction. 'Emily! Is everything alright?' Antonio asked, choosing to simply ignore Libby's actions for now. 'Carlo Grimaldi and the Barbarigo are in league with the one they call The Spaniard. They're going to murder the Doge - and replace him with one of their own.' Ezio briefed, still rattled about what they'd discovered. 'They will have all of Venezia - her entire fleet - in their grasp.' 'And they call me a criminal…' Antonio replied, deeply troubled by the revelation. 'Then, you'll help us.' Emily nodded, relieved to have a few extra hands to manage this mess. 'You have me on your side, amici. And the support of all my men.' Antonio confirmed, keeping one eye on Libby as she eyed him like some tasty morsel. 'And women!' Rosa added, really not sure what to make of Libby's odd behaviour. 'Grazie, amici.' Gena smiled, relieved to have their support while they were two Assassins down. 'But, I must warn you. It's not going to be so easy this time. Palazzo Ducale is the most heavily guarded building in Venezia.' Antonio warned, shuffling away from Libby when she wouldn't stop staring at him. 'Nothing is impenetrable.' Emily replied, fully confident that they would find a way into the palazzo to stop this attempt on the Doge. 'This is why we like you all.' Rosa laughed, extremely confused by Libby's behaviour. 'Come! Let's go take a look. We'll come up with a plan.' Antonio suggested, motioning for the team to follow him.
'One moment, Antonio.' Emily insisted, grabbing Libby by the collar and handing her to Gena for safe keeping. 'Don't let her go, Gena.'

Guiding Antonio out of earshot of the others, Emily knew this was going to be an awkward conversation and a tough thing to handle but something had to be done to get Libby back on track. This was such strange behaviour from Libby, she was usually such a focused and unshakeable Assassin once she had a job to do. The only thing Emily could put it down to was that weird powder some street performer had blown in Libby's face before he'd been punched out by Ezio.

'Antonio, do you know anything about powders that could affect the behaviour of a person? On our way here, Libby was stopped by a street performer of some kind and he blew a bluish powder into her face. Ezio knocked him senseless before I could question him about the powder.' she sighed, glancing back over her shoulder to witness Gena forcibly restraining Libby from getting her hands on Ezio. 'She's been trying to seduce just about every good looking man we've walked past.'

'The only thing I can think of is an aphrodisiacal powder but those are quite rare around these parts. I'm not sure what else it could be though to get such a reaction.' Antonio shrugged, turning to look when Ezio let out a rather shocked yelp. 'Given her behaviour, I can only guess she got a strong dose of it, too.'

'Any ideas on how to settle her down?' Emily groaned, shaking her head as Gena got Libby to let go of Ezio and he made a hasty retreat from the area.

'Put her in a room somewhere with some willing men and let her go. As far as I know, the only way to get rid of something like this is to let it wear off.' Antonio replied, wishing he had better news for Emily. 'Rosa, come over here. We could use your insight on this.'

'What's the deal with Libby?' Rosa asked, jogging over to join them.

'It seems she's been drugged with an aphrodisiacal powder and Antonio thinks the only way to settle her is to leave her in private with a few trustworthy men. As a precaution, we're all on specialised herbs to prevent pregnancies but I want to be certain such things can't happen.' Emily explained, shaking her head slowly. 'The last thing I need is to be down another Assassin right now.'

'I know of an herb that when made into a tea and taken the morning after a rendezvous will destroy any potential pregnancies.' Rosa shrugged, sending Antonio a meaningful look. 'I could get a dose for Libby to take whenever this powder wears off.'

'Is it reliable?' Emily asked, not willing to take a risk on Libby's health.

'I have used it several times with no ill effects.' Rosa nodded, keeping one eye on Libby to make sure she was safe.

'Bene, that's good enough for me. With her behaviour, I think four lithe young men should keep her occupied for however long this takes to pass. Preferably I would like them secured somewhere, to make sure she can't get bored and cause trouble in Venezia.' Emily nodded, the plan coming together slowly. 'Provided with plenty of food and wine, they should be comfortable until this is all settled and we can go back to the lives we consider normal.'

'We do have a bed chamber with no windows and only the one door, would that suffice?' Antonio suggested, pointing up and to the right.

'Si, perfect.' Emily grinned, glancing over his shoulder. 'Ezio, go back to the markets and gather up a good supply of food and wine. Enough to last five people for three days. Take Gena with you, I'll keep an eye on Libby until you return.'

Grateful for the reprieve, Ezio came over and accepted the coin purse Emily held out to him before taking the long cloak another thief held and hustling outside. Gena followed him a moment later after handing Libby back to Emily and grabbing her own disguise.

'If I ever see that damned performer again…' Emily groaned, keeping a firm grip on Libby's shoulder. 'This is just ridiculous.'

'And here I thought Assassins were supposed to be above such troubles as these.' Antonio remarked, earning a stinging swat to the stomach from Emily.

'Rosa, would you go see about finding four men willing to handle this situation? Lithe, strapping
young men seem to be her type. Though I'm not sure why she's so fixated on Antonio.' Emily requested, allowing Libby to get a little closer to Antonio but he stayed out of her reach. 'I think I know just the four.' Rosa chuckled, turning and racing into one of the corridors leading off the courtyard.

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With Libby safely tucked away in her temporary bedchamber and her four companions warned of the repercussions if she had even a scratch the next time Emily came to check on her, the stressed Assassin team headed out with Antonio to do a little recon and try to figure out a way into the Palazzo Ducale.

Constantly on alert, the team made their way back to the Rialto Bridge and headed over, tracking the markers in their eyes and feeling the loss of Aloysius and Libby. It was so strange to just be three after so long as a team of five.

'This business with the Doge…Terrible. Though treachery like this no longer surprises me.' Antonio remarked, slotting in beside Emily.

'Nothing really surprises me anymore.' Emily shrugged, scanning the crowd slowly.

'When I was a child, we were taught that the nobles were just and kind. I believed it too. Though my father was only a cobbler and my mother a scullery maid, I aspired to be much more. I studied hard. I persevered - but the nobles would never have me. If you are not born one of them, acceptance is impossible.' Antonio continued, finding it so much easier to trust Emily now that they'd been through so much together.

'I hear you, Antonio. It's the same where we come from.' Emily nodded, careful not to give too much away.

'So I ask you - who are the true nobles of Venezia? Men like Carlo Grimaldi and Marco Barbarigo? No! I say we are: the thieves and mercenari and whores.' Antonio growled, truly believing in his words as they moved through the people.

'You're preaching to the converted, Antonio. We know all of this.' Emily chuckled, letting him rant even though she knew all about these issues.

'While we work to save this city and its people, the nobles seek to make it their plaything…' 

'Antonio, I do not disagree with you. There is so much wrong with this world and we are but one small team fighting against so much oppression and treachery. The true nobles of the world are those that are kind and just, always riving to make their surroundings better for the average people regardless of their social rank.' Emily soothed, calming him before he really got out of hand. 'We understand your frustrations, we have all seen what you speak of.'

Chuckling softly, Antonio nodded and flicked his hair back out of his eyes, not really surprised that Emily had been able to see where he was going and reassure him that they would try and make things right. He felt better knowing that he didn't have to fight for Venezia alone but he really did wish he had more permanent support.

'We need to scout the palazzo carefully, see it from every angle. We just might find a way in. I know of a tall Campanile behind the palazzo. Or we might find a way to climb the back of the Basilica. Do you have any ideas?' Antonio nodded, glancing over to their target building.

'I assume the front door is out?' Gena smirked, trying to look past the permanent gallows in the middle of the square.

'Va bene! We'll try the front door as well, saputello.' Antonio laughed, his mood lifted by Gena's straightforward thoughts.

'She's not joking Antonio. Gena has always preferred a straight brawl to sneaking around. I'm sure you can think of a few people that prefer a good old fight to anything covert.' Emily corrected, rolling her eyes quickly. 'Go Gena, scout out around the walls for any potential ways in. We'll take the higher routes.'

'You got it, Emily.' Gena nodded, moving off into the crowd again.
Making sure Gena was away safely, the remaining friends turned and went in the other direction, scouting for any potential access routes up and over the walls. Things did not look good for them, the walls were built with few decorative protrusions that appeared barely strong enough to hold Libby's weight, much less anyone else.

'So, what do you think?' Emily asked, giving Ezio a little more responsibility.

'We're not getting in this way.' Ezio replied, shaking his head slowly as he continued scanning the walls for a way over or through.

'They'll have time to murder the Doge before we're able to get through all these guards.' Antonio agreed, just as unhappy with the situation.

'Even with Gena's strength, I have to agree.' Emily nodded, satisfied with their call.

Moving slow so they didn't attract unwanted attention, the trio moved out of shelter and started to circle the palazzo, the two Assassins constantly scanning the walls as they looked for any safe passage up and into the building. Finding nothing as they went along the side of the building, they headed up the campanile Antonio had suggested, still hoping for some small change in their fortune that would allow them access without causing a scene.

Racing up the walls with feline grace and agility, Ezio made it to the rooftop and turned to look for his friends, smiling as he watched Emily help Antonio up onto a ledge that he hadn't been able to reach on his own. Bounding up to the next handhold, Emily gripped tight and reached down to Antonio, bridging the gaps for him and allowing him to follow them up much easier.

For Ezio, it really was a priceless moment, witnessing his friend and descendant ignoring the punishment she got from Antonio as she helped him get up the tower without needing to take the long way. Even when she was left hanging from a wooden board with Antonio's full weight dangling from her left arm, she never gave up or let him fall, she just kept trying.

Coming down from his perch, Ezio landed lightly on the platform Emily was clinging to and knelt, reaching down to grab her wrist in both hands. Looking up at him, she smiled faintly and strained against Antonio's weight, lifting him up and guiding him to grab her waist. Staying close, just in case Emily slipped, Ezio watched as she altered her grip on the platform and pushed up, holding their combined weight as Ezio moved around to grab Antonio's tunic and drag him up onto the platform to safety.

'You okay, Antonio?' Emily asked, swinging up onto the platform and sitting beside him.

'I think so.' Antonio nodded, turning to look at her. 'I have not slipped like that for many years.'

'We all have bad days, Antonio. Even I slip occasionally.' Emily shrugged, wincing at the pain burning through her shoulders. 'You are something special, Antonio. Why I cannot say but I can tell you are worth keeping safe.'

Catching their breath, the trio completed the climb together, both Assassins ready to catch Antonio any time he slipped or couldn't see the next step up the sheer face of the wall. Hanging from the edge of another wooden platform, they both grabbed his hands and pulled together, hauling him up onto the edge of the platform before climbing up and heading for the ladder that led to the rooftop.

'Look at that. Archers everywhere!' Antonio panted, disappointed that their climb up had shown them nothing but more barriers to their mission.

'And the walls are impossible to climb on this side.' Ezio agreed, crouching on the wooden platform leading out into open air.

'I hope Gena is having better luck.' Emily muttered, looking for any clue about getting up and into the palazzo that they could turn to their benefit. 'Cazzo!'

'We'll figure something out.' Ezio replied, looking up at her for a moment before launching off his perch and sailing down to crash into a pile of hay far below.

'Come here, Antonio. It's okay, I won't let you fall.' Emily coaxed, stopping beside the platform and extending her hand.
'I can't do that.' Antonio protested, backing up towards the ladder. 'You really want to try going back down alone?' Emily asked, putting one foot on the platform.

Shaking just a little, Antonio took her hand and stepped out onto the platform, flinching when Emily stepped up behind him and moulded to his back, tangling their hands together. She was so calm about all of this and Antonio tried to draw in some of her calm as he looked down to where Ezio was perched on a wall watching them. 'It's okay, Antonio, I won't let you go. When we jump, focus on keeping your body straight and roll forward. I've done this hundreds of times with other people, it's going to be fine.' Emily soothed, resting her chin on his shoulder. 'Relax, you're in safe hands here.'

'Ve've never...' he uttered, squeezing her hands to try and draw in a little more of her confidence. 'Shhh, it's all going to be just fine. On three, I need you to jump out as far as you can towards that hay pile then start turning over so you're looking up at the sky. You'll feel my push against you, go with it and we'll be fine.' Emily guided, pressing closer to his back. 'One...two...three!'

Jaw dropping, Ezio watched as Emily and Antonio launched off the rooftop together, arms flung wide and bodies pressed together. Somehow they kept pressed together, turning over in perfect synchronicity to look up at the sky before crashing down in the hay pile with Emily on the bottom. It was a beautiful leap of faith off the tower, one that any Assassin would be proud to have pulled off and Emily had done it with the added stress of an untrained thief along for the ride. 'Antonio, you're a wonderful friend but you're crushing my bladder.' Emily groaned, still somewhere in the hay pile.

'Oh, sorry about that Emily.' Antonio replied, the hay pile shifting for a moment before Antonio crawled out and collapsed on the ground. 'Never again, I swear it.'

'Are you both alright?' Ezio asked, jumping down from his perch and coming over to sit beside Antonio. 'From down here, your leap looked amazing.'

'Just give me a minute. That landing was a little harder than anticipated.' Emily replied, emerging from the hay and shaking off the little bits stuck to her. 'Nothing broken though so I should be fine. Antonio? You sure you're okay?'

'Si, just a little rattled.' Antonio nodded, rolling over and sitting up slowly. 'I can't believe you actually got me to do that.'

'I can't either. You did great for your first time.' Emily chuckled, getting to her feet and offering her hand to him. 'Come on, I promise I won't ask you to jump off any more buildings.'

Taking off again, the trio went over the wall and along the edge of the canal, scanning the walls of the palazzo up close and frowning when they saw no easy path up on this side. Skipping along the poles sunk in the canal, Emily had nowhere to go when Antonio stopped on one of the poles and looked down. She'd already committed to the jump though and ploughed into Antonio's back, sending them both plunging into the canal.

'I thought Assassins were meant to be graceful and agile.' Antonio groused, clinging to the marker pole as Emily bobbed in the water. 'This wouldn't have happened if you hadn't stopped.' Emily sighed, reaching up to grab the pole. 'I was waiting for Ezio to get back up after he slipped.' Antonio replied, pointing to where Ezio was climbing up another pole.

'It's not my fault the pigeon shit is still slippery.' Ezio shot back, swimming past the pole and climbing up onto the dock. Emily and Antonio couldn't help it, they cracked up laughing at that comment, unable to believe that all this had happened because of pigeon crap.

Eventually calming, the pair dropped down off the pole and swam over to join Ezio, climbing up onto the dock and shaking off the water before taking off running again. If anyone thought it was weird to see them running along dripping wet and stinking of the canals, no one said anything, mostly ignoring the trio as they passed.
Landing lightly on a square wooden panel suspending on ropes from the building they'd just leapt from, the trio examined their position and where they were trying to get to. This time Antonio took the lead, launching off the boards and knife-flying into the water below, striking out towards the other side of the canal. Swapping a knowing look, the Assassins leapt in after him, carving through the water and climbing up the stone wall of the canal.

Shaking off the water and wringing out their capes, the trio moved off again, Antonio leading them around behind the Basilica to look for another way up that might help them achieve their goals. 'Bene…we're in luck. Looks like there's a perfect path up the scaffolding to the roof of the Basilica. Shall we?' Antonio grinned, squeezing the excess water from his hair.

'Joy, climbing with wet hands and heavier than average clothes…this should be fun.' Emily muttered, motioning for Ezio to go ahead before running up the wall and starting her ascent.

This climb wasn't actually too bad, though it did leave a serious burn in their shoulders by the time all three had scrambled off the scaffolding and up onto the rooftop. Making their way across the lead sheeting roof, they were confronted with yet another cruel obstacle that they would never be able to get past, even if they could get Gena up here.

'Look! Isn't that him -- Grimaldi?' Antonio pointed, drawing their attention to the far end of the courtyard they could see.

'What do you suppose he's up to now?' Ezio muttered, getting closer to the blocking fence and trying to get a better look at Grimaldi and the Doge.

'Nothing good, that's for certain.' Emily replied, examining the area for any other hints of a way to deal with this fence.

'We're running out of time! There's no way through this fence and there are guards everywhere. Diavolo!' Antonio spat, disgusted that they couldn't solve this one.

'We should head back down and meet up with Gena, she might have found a weak spot.' Emily sighed, turning away from the palazzo. 'Failing that, I don't know what we're meant to do.'

Getting back down to the ground, the team headed back around to the front of the palazzo and met up with Gena as she stood in the midst of a crowd gazing at the palazzo entrance. The look on her face told the other Assassins everything they needed to know about her attempts to gain access.

'Nothing at all, Gena?' Emily sighed, resisting the urge to scream out her frustrations.

'Nothing that would let us through it time to save the Doge.' Gena replied, shaking her head.

'It's impossible!' Antonio growled, turning away from the group and throwing up his hands. 'There's no way in or out for men - only birds!'

'Yes…birds…' Ezio muttered, catching onto an idea as he turned and started walking.

'Where are you going now? Gena asked, baffled that the Assassins would just walk away.

'To see our friend Leonardo.' Ezio replied, looking back over his shoulder.

'Keep an eye on Libby, someone will come get her in the morning.' Emily added, trusting Antonio to protect their drugged friend.

'It will be done.' Antonio nodded, disappearing back into the crowds and heading home.

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Hoping they didn't stink too much, the Assassin team slid to a stop outside Leonardo's workshop and knocked quickly before entering, not really surprised that he was busily working and hadn't heard them come in.

'We need your help, Leonardo.' Emily called, approaching him as he turned.

'Does it work?' Ezio asked, looking up at the flying machine.

'What? What are you asking?' Leonardo blinked, completely baffled about this line of questioning.

'Does it work Leonardo? Can it really fly? Gena tried, gesturing up to the flying machine.

'I don't know…It's only a prototype. An idea. It's not ready yet. Leonardo replied, catching onto their line of thought and he didn't like it.
'Have you tried it?' Ezio asked, glancing at Leonardo as the genius scratched his head. 'No! It's too dangerous. To test it, you'd have to leap off a tower! Who would be mad enough to do a thing like that?' Leonardo retorted, waving one hand as he turned and walked away from Ezio. 'Ezio would.' Emily and Gena replied, sniggering at the stunned look on Ezio's face. 'Leonardo…I think you just found your madman.' Ezio nodded, folding his arms and glaring at the women. He would have agreed to do it anyway, he had faith in Leonardo and his inventions. They didn't have to volunteer him for it.

Finally realising that Libby wasn't with them, Leonardo gave Emily a wary look, obviously concerned for the young blonde Assassin that always had a friendly kiss for him. It was so strange to not see her among her friends, bright blue eyes shining with life and happiness as she spoke so freely of her own life in a different place and time.

'Libby is fine, Leonardo. She had an unfortunate run in with some random street performer blowing coloured powders at people. She got hit with a rather potent aphrodisiac so we left her with some trustworthy friends until the effects wore off. It was hard to control her when she was trying so hard to seduce every man we came near - including Ezio.' Emily explained, resting a light hand on his shoulder. 'She will be fine once the drug wears off.'

'And no one else was affected?' Leonardo asked, lowering his flying machine to the ground carefully. 'How very strange.'

'We were smart enough to spread out a little so no one realised that the nobles, the thief and the workman were all part of one team. Worked just fine until we had to get physical to drag Libby off an unlucky minstrel who got too close.' Gena shrugged, glancing at Ezio as he sniggered. 'I don't think that minstrel will dare go near any blue eyed folk for some time.'

'Alright, that's enough you two. Libby deserves to keep her dignity, we do not need to go spreading her problems across the city.' Emily growled, shooting them both a warning look. 'I promise you, as soon as she's feeling better I'll bring her by to say hello.'

'I would like that Emily.' Leonardo smiled, relaxing a little more now that he knew Libby was safe and being cared for in her moment of weakness.

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'Say no more, Mario. I will deal with this matter quietly. He promised to find the real letter again and get it to them within three days. The next time he leaves the city, I will make sure this threat ends.' Aloysius cut him off, doing his bit to make sure Mario's hands were clean of this mess.

'Thank you, Aloysius. You truly are a worthy Assassin.' Mario nodded, glad that he had someone reliable to help with this.

'It is my honour and my duty to serve whichever Grand Master I reside under the care of.' Aloysius bowed, his words leaving Mario stunned.

Of all the things he'd tried so hard not to think about, the fact he was now head of the Tuscan Assassin Order reminded him all over again of Giovanni's tragic loss. A reminder that Mario really didn't need right now. He'd give anything to hear his brother again, to spend an hour or two sparring like they used to or to simply look Giovanni in the eyes and apologise for his harsh words.

'Fratello…' he whispered, dropping his gaze sadly. 'You are dismissed Aloysius.'

'Forgive my painful reminders, maestro.' Aloysius offered, dipping his head again before turning and leaving Mario to his thoughts.

'I needed to be reminded.' Mario sighed, leaving his desk and walking over to a hidden wall niche.

Lifting the painting down, he reached into the niche and lifted out his old hidden blade, turning it over in his hands slowly. He hadn't touched this precious mark of his place as an Assassin since he'd gotten his promotion to Master Assassin. Since taking over care of Monteriggioni and the mercenary force based there, he'd been too busy to really think about it. But now, with his new position still weighing so heavily on his shoulders, it felt so right to pull his hidden blade out of the niche and slip it back onto his arm where it belonged.

Also in the niche, glistening faintly in the candlelight, the family signet ring he'd stopped wearing when he was just a young man. As a minor noble family, he'd never really bothered with wearing it, especially since they seemed to spend more time bending their knees to a higher power, just like Giovanni had given his loyalty to the Medici family. Tossing his gloves onto his bed, Mario plucked the ring off the shelf and gazed at the family crest for a moment before sliding it onto his right hand where it had always belonged.

Returning the painting to the wall, he turned and wandered out onto the balcony, looking up at the stars and praying that Emily was still safe and healthy in Venezia. He wished that he was out there but his responsibility had to be to the remnants of his family. One day he would talk to Emily and place the second Auditore ring on her hand, claiming her as surely as she'd claimed him.

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Checking his take off site, Ezio looked out across the city and tried to spot where Gena was standing on another rooftop somewhere close to his launch point. She was his target, if he could reach her they had a chance of pulling off this dramatic rescue of the Doge. She wasn't too far away, the distance looked to be reasonable but only time would tell.

Picking his way back up the rooftop, he looked at the flying machine again and couldn't help but think this was a crazy plan. Man was not meant to fly with the birds but Leonardo was confident that this strange bat looking thing would actually get him over the wall.

'So how does she work?' he asked, turning to where Leonardo was standing patiently.

'Have you ever watched a bird in flight? It's not about being lighter than air. It's about grace and balance! You must use your body's own weight to control your elevation and direction.' Leonardo explained, doing a final check of his machine. 'Good luck Ezio.'

'I think I may need it.' Ezio muttered, stepping onto the launch path and ducking under the creation. Crouched down, he shouldered into the wooden harness underneath, gripping the cross brace that was supposed to help him control the machine.
Three steps and he launched skyward, hooking his boot heels on the rear brace and tipping his weight a little to angle towards Gena's position. Moving his weight back, he managed to lift the front of this contraption, catching the wind and keeping up in the air. Trying to line up a little more on Gena, he shifted his weight too far forward and slammed into a rooftop just one street short of where she'd been standing.

Rattled by the heavy impact, Ezio managed to grab hold of the tiles and stop his fall before he went over the edge, the flying machine hooked around his shoulders so he'd done at least one thing he'd promised. The machine was damaged but not completely obliterated so Leonardo would be happy. 'Ezio! Ezio, are you alright? Come on, talk to me Ezio!' Gena called, her voice getting closer to him. 'Ezio! Answer me, Ezio!'
'I'm okay, Gena.' Ezio groaned, lifting his gaze when he felt strong hands wrap around his wrists. 'Come on, up you come.' Gena guided, taking the weight of the flying machine and helping him back up onto the rooftops. 'Here, clean your face off. You're a mess.'
'I tried my best.' Ezio uttered, pressing the linen pad to the deep gash on his forehead.
'I know you did, it's okay.' Gena grinned, stroking his hair lightly before turning her attention to the flying machine.

Securing the flying machine in the rope harness they'd used to get it up onto the tower, Gena glanced over the rooftop to check where Leonardo was before carefully lowering the machine down to his waiting hands. Once it was safely down, she helped Ezio to his feet and got him on her back, using a shorter length of rope to bind his wrists around her so he couldn't possibly fall. After that solid crack to the head, Ezio was in no fit condition to climb down from the buildings and walk back to the workshop.

The rope around Ezio's wrists turned out to be a good idea when he groaned faintly and passed out halfway down the building. Tightening her grip on the building, Gena continued down and eased him down onto the dirty street, crouching over him to check his wounds. She knew from experience that head wounds bled a lot but nothing could prepare her for the sheer amount of blood staining his robes and hood, leaking through the thick pad she'd handed him and it was soaking into her robes too.

'Can you carry your machine, alone? Ezio really made a mess of himself.' she sighed, looking up at Leonardo even as she pressed another thick pad to his forehead.
'Of course, it is not that heavy.' Leonardo nodded, getting under his machine and lifting it up.
'Need any help?' Ugo asked, jumping down beside them and looking around. 'Do we need to worry about Emily going crazy again?'
'No, Ugo, she knew all about this and accepted the risks of Ezio jumping off a tower to test Leonardo's flying machine.' Gena replied, tying the second pad into place and gently lifting Ezio's limp frame from the ground. 'If you could help Leonardo with his machine and see if someone can clean the blood off the ground and rooftop, we'd all be grateful.'
'Nessun problema.' Ugo nodded, glancing over his shoulder at his friends. 'Franco, help us with this machine. The rest of you fetch buckets of water and clean up this mess.'
'It's okay, Leonardo. You can trust them, they're friends.' Gena chuckled, calming Leonardo as the group made their way back towards the workshop.

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Still incredibly foggy about what had happened over the last 12 hours, Libby wasn't sure who to be most irritated with for her bizarre wake up situation. She'd just abut had a heart attack when she'd woken up in a strange bed, stripped naked and tucked in safely with four strange men sleeping on the floor around her. Surprisingly though, there was reasonably fresh food on the table beside the bed and several bottles of wine along with five clean glasses.
Emily and Antonio had explained things to her twice, going over her drugging and groping and their plan to keep her safe and entertained until it was all sorted out. Libby had to admit, the men she'd woken up to weren't too hard on the eyes but the shock of it was still lingering. At least the food had been good and the men respectful of her.

As soon as she'd woken up, they'd kept their faces turned away from her as they explained their presence and introduced themselves. Even when she'd needed one of them to hand her something, they never looked at her body, simply offered things back over their shoulders. Libby really did appreciate their care, this whole mess was uncomfortable enough without clear memories of random men looking at her naked body.

Now though, back out in the bright sun, wandering along between Emily and Antonio, she was still confused as hell about how this had happened but she was able to push that aside to focus on the mission to protect the Doge. But once it was done, she had a lot she needed to discuss with all of her friends.

Knocking on the door to Leonardo's workshop, the trio entered and paused, absolutely baffled by what was going on. Leonardo was all excited about the flight, his machine was damaged on the floor and Gena and Ezio were sitting around in their under tunics and breeches, Ezio sporting a rather thick linen pad against his forehead.

'I can't believe it! It worked! It really worked! You flew, Ezio! You flew!' Leonardo cheered, overjoyed about whatever Ezio had pulled off.

'Si…But not very far.' Ezio replied, wincing as he looked up. 'Keep your voice down, please. I feel miserable enough without raised voices adding to my headache.'

'Well, what were you expecting? The machine wasn't designed for distance.' Leonardo shrugged, dropping his voice to a more normal level. 'Mi dispiace, Ezio.'

'We're going to need at least a little more distance out of it, Leonardo.' Gena offered, checking on Ezio's wounds. 'Well, it looks like it's settling down.'

'Alright, look, let me go over my plans here. Maybe I can find some way to extend the duration of the flight.' Leonardo nodded, returning to his workbench to examine his plans.

Emerging from the shadows, Libby crossed the room quickly and placed her hand on Ezio's shoulder, guiding him to lean back a little and tip his chin up. His hazy eyes widened in excitement and relief as he recognised her then slid closed in pain as she examined his head injury.

'Ezio! My men tell me that Carlo has the poison. We must hurry.' Antonio called, earning a rather rude hand gesture from Ezio.

'Lower your voice, Antonio.' Libby warned, looking back over her shoulder. 'Emily, we're going to need another Assassin to jump off the tower. With this head wound, it's not safe for Ezio to make another jump. He's lucky he didn't cave his skull in.'

'I'll do it.' Emily nodded, taking the risk and putting her life in Leonardo's hands.

'Antonio, this is Leonardo. The master inventor who…built this…this pezzo di merda!' Ezio added, motioning to the repaired machine on the floor.

'Hey! It's not the machine's fault! It's mine. I've checked and rechecked my blueprints. It's just impossible! I don't know how to extend the duration of the flight…' Leonardo growled, his anger building as he swept some of the parchment pages off his desk in frustration. 'Ah, che idea del cazzo!'

Shaking her head in disbelief as Leonardo lobbed some of his blueprints into the blazing fire, Emily had a bed feeling that their whole plan had just gone completely out the window and there was no backup plan. Then she saw it, drifting in the flames and smiled, just waiting for Leonardo to figure it out from where he was slumped in a comfortable chair in front of the fire.

'Eureka! Of course! Genio!' he cried, realising the answer and applauding his brilliant thought.

'Leonardo, please.' Ezio groaned, slumping into Libby's gentle touch.

'What is he doing now?' Antonio asked, completely unfamiliar with the way Leonardo's mind
worked at times. 'Best you don't ask.' Gena shrugged, getting to her feet and disappearing out the back. 'Heat rises. It needs fire! Heated air under its wings will lift the machine…' Leonardo mumbled, bent over his schematics. 'Leonardo, what good is one fire going to do?' Emily asked, walking over to lean on the workbench. 'Not one fire, Emily. A dozen! Built all across the city. Enough to carry you from here all the way to the Palazzo Ducale.' Leonardo replied, turning to mark the map of Venezia spread out on the table. 'How?' Antonio asked, moving to stand beside Emily. 'Oh, capisco. My men could do that. But you're forgetting about the guards.' 'Don't worry, I'll take care of them.' Emily nodded, cracking her knuckles. 'I'll give the order to have my men move in behind you, and hold the locations. They'll light them all up the second the sun goes down over San Marco.' Antonio replied, careful to keep his voice down to avoid aggravating Ezio any further. 'No bitching, you three are staying here. Ezio is in no condition to walk, let alone fight. Libby, you're on medical duty and Gena, wherever she's gone, is on protection detail.' 'She is washing the blood out of their robes. Ezio made a bit of a mess.' Leonardo replied, pointing off beyond the room where he dissected bodies. 'No surprise there, head wounds always bleed a hell of a lot.' Emily sighed, pushing off the table and walking over to check on Ezio. 'Libby?' 'It's a mess Emily, looks like some of this tissue damage is to the bone. I can put him back together but he's going to be out of action for a while and have one hell of a scar to remind him of his maiden flight.' Libby replied, lifting the pad again and dabbing at the wound. 'Ow…' Ezio mumbled, swaying a little on his stool. 'Really not feeling so great.' 'Come on, let's get you settled on the couch Ezio.' Emily coaxed, gently guiding Ezio to his feet and leading him over to the chaise set under the largest windows. 'Just relax, you're in good hands.' 'Don't go, nipote.' Ezio breathed, clutching at Emily's tunic. 'Shhh, I'll be okay Zio.' Emily promised, stroking his hair softly. 'I've done more deadly things than this, it's going to be fine. Just rest, Libby will take care of you and Antonio's got my back.' 'Be safe.' Ezio insisted, releasing his grip. 'I will. Get well soon, we need you.' Emily grinned, brushing a soft kiss against his cheek. 'Libby, make sure Gena understands her assignment.' 'Got it covered Emily. Make those bastards pay.' Libby smirked, glancing up from her work. 'I will need some supplies, Leonardo. I haven't had time to restock my kit lately.'

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Freed from worrying about other Assassins studying and learning from her, Emily ran freely through the district, acknowledging the thieves she saw scattered around the streets. Following the target listing she'd organised to make sense of the multiple pink markings in her eyes, she made these Templar pawns pay for what had happened, unleashing her rage with deadly accuracy. An avenging monster, she stalked the streets silently, showing no concern for the families she ripped apart with every guard she left dead in the street. The only thing that distracted her from killing guards and clearing the spaces for the fires were the posters, heralds and city officials that had to be dealt with to keep their notoriety down and make sure the public didn't rise up against them. With so many of her Assassins out of action for various reasons, Emily knew they had to be careful.

Throwing subtlety to the wind, she raged through San Marco, knocking out every guard that she passed and opening up a nice wide path for her to use for her later fly over. Swimming out into the Grand Canal, she went straight up onto the deck of one of the cargo ships and nailed the two heavily armed guards there with ease, slitting their throats and throwing the bodies overboard. Abandoning the ship, she nodded to the thieves Antonio had sent and took off up the wall, disappearing before
they even realised who she was.

Running across the rooftops, she threw several guards down and watched them splatter on the pavement or sink into the canals before moving on, her blood boiling for a fight. This was one of the few times she would truly let her rage escape, her anger at seeing Ezio so badly harmed had pushed her over her limits and now she was going to thin the Templar ranks the hard way.

With feline grace, she stalked across the rope bridges slung by the thieves between the rooftops and blocked out all other concerns, feeling no pity for the guards who met their fate at her hands. She had no doubt Antonio would hear about her bloodlust and realise that his agreement to the plan had unleashed a monster but she didn't mind, it was time he learned that he'd only ever seen her gentle side. Leaving behind decapitated and mutilated bodies was her way of letting the Templars know they'd unleashed a demon disguised as a human and they would all pay.

Even with her four target areas cleared out, she continued her rampage, keeping their notoriety low and leaving behind some truly gruesome bodies as a warning. Some would end up on Leonardo's tables, she would have to apologise for that but even that could wait until after this was dealt with. No fear, no shame, she kept right on moving through the district and made it back to Leonardo's workshop, bloodied and dripping wet but her bloodlust was settled.

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Dressed in all black, features hidden in the shadows of a deeper cowl than he was used to and Mario informed that tonight would be the night, Aloysius slipped out of the villa again and took off into the city. Up on the rooftops, unconcerned about being recognised, Federico was running hard for the walls, carrying with him the letter that would hand this safe refuge over to their enemies. Federico gave no sign that he was aware of his tail and kept running, leading Aloysius straight back to his Templar allies.

Leaving the city behind them, Aloysius' job got much harder but he had no intentions of letting Federico hand that letter to his allies. Mario had insisted that the letter be returned to him for destruction and the death look like Federico had been caught out by bandits. Aloysius had agreed to his conditions, promising a believable mess and that the letter would be returned.

Picking up the pace and overtaking Federico as he ran through the rolling Tuscan hills towards his meeting, Aloysius picked his moment and leapt down from the tree he'd chosen as a vantage point, slamming into Federico from behind and driving him into the ground. The fall was brutal but it would serve the purpose nicely.

As hoped, Federico put up a fight and Aloysius let him up, drawing his sword to confront the young man. This would sell the story nicely and give him a chance to practise a few new techniques he'd been thinking about. He couldn't let this look too professional, not if it had to be believed as a bandit strike.

Swinging his sword almost casually, Aloysius easily bettered Federico, using a backhand slash to knock his sword flying then spinning and slicing through Federico's left arm when he pulled the dagger he was carrying. Forcing Federico back a step, Aloysius delivered a brutal swing, slicing right through Federico's fine garments and tearing open flesh from left hip to right shoulder.

Stumbling backwards, Federico fell heavily to the ground, desperately trying to protect his severe wound. He screamed for help, the light already starting to fade from his eyes but his fighting spirit wasn't cowed at all. Sheathing his sword, Aloysius knelt beside Federico and cradled his head, brushing back his hood so Federico would know who claimed his young life.

'Why Federico? Why betray the family like you have?' Aloysius asked, locking gazes with his
ancestor. 'Why force this choice on us?'
'It should have been me, not Ezio.' Federico gasped, struggling for breath. 'It was my right.'
'You lost the right when you refused to accept the truth.' Aloysius corrected, shaking his head slowly. 'But why sell us out to the Templars?'
'They offered me power and prestige.' Federico replied, his voice so weak that Aloysius had to bend in close to hear him.
'Instead you get death. As will all Templars.' Aloysius countered, holding Federico's head until the light faded and he went completely limp. 'Requiescat in pace.'

A quick check to make sure they were still unobserved and Aloysius got to work, riffling through pouches and pockets, taking everything of value and plucking the now bloodstained letter from the folds of his ruined tunic. Roughing up the body a little more, he finished his task and fled back into the night, leaving the body where anyone using the road would find it.

Much more careful on his return trip through Monteriggioni, Aloysius made his way up the stairs to the villa and went around the back, climbing the walls and slipping into his chambers. Stripping off his bloodied clothes, he changed quickly back into his more casual attire again and stuffed the bloodied blacks into a bag Mario had provided.

Clothes in one hand and his proof of death in the other, he checked the hallways was clear before making his way to Mario's chambers to report his success. Of all his kills, across the world from back alleys to public parks, this kill would haunt him for many nights to come. To actually take the life of his great ancestor, the idea sent a cold chill down his spine and the reality of what he had done left his stomach in knots.

The curtain was already open for him, inviting Aloysius inside to give his report. Mario sat at his desk, his attention focused on the parchments in front of him as Aloysius crossed the room and went to one knee smoothly, finding comfort in rituals he had engaged in hundreds of times before. 'The job is complete, Grand Master.' he offered, bowing his head respectfully. 'Did you do as I required?' Mario asked, putting his quill aside and lifting his gaze. 'None will know that it was my hand that removed this threat. The kill was not clean enough to be an obvious Assassin strike.' Aloysius nodded, reaching out to place his plundered goods upon the red cloth spread out on Mario's desk.

Looking at the jewellery, small arms and coin purse that Aloysius presented, Mario nodded and gathered up the cloth, tying it into a firm bundle and placing it into one of his desk drawers. Then he accepted the sheathed sword Aloysius presented, recognising the hilt and dipping his head as he curled his hands around the blade and took it from Aloysius. This he leant up against the side of his desk, settling it beside his own sword until he figured out what to do with it.

Finally Aloysius presented the bloodied letter, the ink running in places where it had gotten wet again. This Mario took with great reluctance, almost as though he was still struggling with the idea of these two sheets of parchment costing him a nephew. Carefully, he unfolded and separated the letter and slipped it between pieces of linen before placing it in the drawer beside Federico's personal belongings where it would remain hidden.

Lifting his gaze when Mario stood, Aloysius felt completely calm as Mario circled the desk and came to stand beside him. Suspecting that Emily might have mentioned a few things to Mario about their traditional way of reporting a successful mission or perhaps this was where the tradition had started. Either way, Aloysius had no issues with drawing his bloodied sword and holding it up, allowing Mario to see the traitors' blood still on the blade.

'You have done well, Aloysius.' Mario nodded, offering his hand and a smile. 'Anything for the order.' Aloysius replied, accepting the hand and getting to his feet.
'Your bloodied clothes?' Mario asked, looking down at the bag between them. 'Everything except my weapons.' Aloysius confirmed, sheathing his sword and relaxing a little. 'I will see that they are dealt with.' Mario replied, picking up the bag and swinging it around behind his desk. 'No one can know about this.' 'And no one outside this room will ever know.' Aloysius agreed, totally confident of his words. 'You are dismissed.'

Turning sharply on his heel, Aloysius left Mario to consider what had been done as he tried to come to terms with murdering his own ancestor just to protect the rest of his ancestral family and friends he'd known for years. He felt sick for doing it but part of his mandate was to protect the brotherhood from all threats and so he would do whatever had to be done.

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Climbing up onto their chosen launch tower just as the sun set over San Marco, Emily smiled tiredly at the sight of the fires blazing to life across the city. Now all she had to do was fly among the fires and not get killed by the guards that were still out tonight. 'It's time.' Gena warned, looking down at Emily with a grin. 'You did it! It's beautiful.' Leonardo remarked, gazing out at the fires. 'Si! Now let's hope your idea works. Because we're nearly out of time.' Antonio nodded, glancing over at Emily, not sure she was up to the task. 'Listen close Emily: You're going to want to fly from fire to fire. The heat of each one you pass over should lift you back up in the air again.' Leonardo guided, so excited to witness his machine in flight again. 'Got it.' Emily replied, running over the flight briefing in her mind. 'Careful though! There's archers out on the roofs tonight. Avoid those arrows or it will be a short trip.' Antonio added, resting one hand on her shoulder for a moment. 'I wish there was some way I could use a weapon while flying this thing.' Emily remarked, approaching the flying machine and looking at it closely. 'Well...you do have your feet free. If you get close enough without taking an arrow in the head - maybe you could kick them off the building?' Leonardo suggested, stunning both Assassins up here. 'I never would have expected you to say something like that, Leonardo.' Emily chuckled, brushing one finger against Leonardo's jaw. 'I'll see how I go.' 'It's now or never, amico mio.' Antonio warned, backing up a step. 'Did you position your men as I suggested?' Emily asked, climbing under her wings and settling in the harness. 'They are all around the palazzo, as you requested. But I still don't understand why.' Antonio shrugged, not sure why Emily had asked him to position teams of his men around the palazzo. 'Well, I can't be sure where I'll land this thing. Just in case it comes off the rooftops, I need people I can trust nearby to grab the machine and get it back to Leonardo.' Emily grinned, turning her attention to Gena. 'And I need you down on the waterfront, Gena. If it goes in the water, at the very least someone will need to dive in after it and secure a rope so we don't lose it completely before it can be fished out.' 'I'm on it Emily.' Gena nodded, offering her hand. 'Best of luck.' 'To all of us.' Emily replied, squeezing her hand for a moment.

One last glance back at her friends and Emily took off, three steps along the runway and she kicked off, launching into the air on wings that had never seemed real to her. But here she was, taking to the air on wings built by Leonardo and still spoken of with such wonder. Thinking about what little she'd gotten out of Ezio and the few details Leonardo had given her, she angled towards the first fire, her smile growing as she was washed with heat and sent higher into the night air.

Mostly she ignored the guards, they weren't in her direct path so she allowed them to live, even
though they were shooting flaming arrows at her. Antonio must have realised she would struggle to deal with everything going on, for in the moonlight she could just pick out teams of thieves bounding along the rooftops, picking off guards wherever they could.

Rediscovering the joy of flight, she focused on her targets, gliding smoothly from one fire to the next and relishing every moment of being up in the air, free of her duties and on the most incredible adventure. Soaring higher than she'd dreamed possible ever since arriving in this era, she couldn't wipe the happy smile off her face as she neared the palazzo and prepared for her true mission here.

Confident she'd given Gena enough time, Emily dropped lower and focused on her destination, gliding straight along the range of the Palazzo Ducale before releasing her grip and dropping to the rooftop. Leonardo's machine continued onwards, carried by the warmth of the city before knocking a guard off the edge and plummeting down to the ground.

"Emily, are you busy?" Mario's voice whispered across her mind, drawing attention from her mission and sending her scrambling for cover from the guards up here.

'I am a little, Mario. I've got to save the Doge from being killed by the Templars. We'll talk soon, I promise.' she replied, pushing aside her excitement at her maiden flight.

"I'll be waiting." Mario sighed, silencing their connection and leaving her to focus on what had to be done.

Treading light, picking her route with care, Emily made it down from the rooftop and around to the balcony where she'd spotted the Doge just a few minutes prior. Mostly ignoring the guards for now, she leapt out onto the balcony and jumped through the open archway, landing right near Grimaldi and the Doge.

'Stop! Signore, don't drink that!' she cried, keeping her hands away from her weapons as she approached the pair.

'You are too late. The Doge is dead.' Grimaldi countered, getting to his feet.

'What? Carlo…?'

'Apologies, Signore. But you should have listened to me when you had the chance.' Grimaldi continued, backing away from the Doge. 'Seems you have failed, Assassin.'

'Forgive me, Signore. I tried.' Emily sighed, knowing full well that this mission would haunt her for a long time.

'Why? What was it all for?' he asked, spitting up blood and struggling for air.

'Assassino! Assassino! He's killed the Doge! The Doge is dead!' Grimaldi shouted, running away from Emily as fast as he was able.

'Oh shit.' Emily groaned, leaving the Doge and racing for the same arched window she'd come in through. She had no time to worry about the agitated guards right now, she had to stop Grimaldi before he got away and continued his treachery elsewhere.

Flipping over the guards trying to block her path, she snapped out her hidden blade and drove it into Grimaldi's right side, pushing it in as far as she was able. Strangely, the guards hung back as she withdrew her blade and lowered Grimaldi to the ornate floor, cradling his head and gripping his arm loosely.

'It takes one Assassin to kill another, it seems.' she remarked, gazing into his dimming eyes.

'We kill thinking it's best for us, do we not, Messer Ezio?' Grimaldi replied, not realising who she really was.

'I do this not for myself.' Emily growled, shaking her head slowly. 'Compio questo sacrificio per il bene superiore.'

'You are not…' Grimaldi started, realising she was not Ezio but his life flickered away before he could finish his sentence.

'Requiescat in pace.' Emily intoned, setting him down gently and closing his eyes.

Shoving to her feet, Emily drew her sword and dagger, turning to confront the guards but their
attention was drawn to the Doge as he staggered out into the courtyard clutching his throat, blood staining his golden robes.

'You…you killed me? You killed me!?' he roared, pointing at Emily before he collapsed and was still, his life gone despite her best efforts.

'Cazzo!' Emily spat, engaging the guards surrounding her.

She might not have had Gena's brute strength but when cornered, Emily could really throw down the gauntlet and give her enemies a reason to fear her abilities. Falling into her battle mind, she showed no fear of the guards surrounding her, reading their movements and dealing with each one in turn, slashing and stabbing with brutal efficiency. Not one movement was wasted, a dodge from one sword was used to thrust her dagger into the exposed throat of a second guard. A parry against one ended up gutting another.

Almost decapitating the last guard in the courtyard, Emily spun and raced up the stairs, sheathing her sword on the move then scrambling up the walls as quickly as was humanly possible for her. Scuttling across the rooftop, she took a flying leap out into the canal, flipping over mid air to turn her leap into a rather spectacular dive.

Cutting through the water, she put some distance between her and the palazzo before climbing out and shaking off the excess water. But now she had an even bigger problem, all of Venezia would be out for her blood once word got out that she’d been there when the Doge died. Life for all her Assassins just got a hell of a lot harder and they were still weakened from their previous adventures in this stinking city.

'Okay Mario, I've got a few minutes to talk now. What's going on?' she sighed, starting to run back towards Leonardo's workshop.

"Were you successful?" Mario asked, aiming for a little distraction.

'No, this one went to hell. It's likely the Assassins will be blamed for the death of the Doge.' Emily replied, disgusted that things had gone so badly. 'We'll just have to wait and see what happens.'

"My gates are open if you need a place to shelter from the storm." Mario offered, longing drifting between them for a moment.

'We might just take you up on that.' Emily agreed, not seeing any other way to avoid the trouble they'd stirred up. 'So how are things on your end?'

"The traitor has been dealt with. The people think it was done by bandits." Mario sounded so relieved to share the news. "Aloysius plans to leave in the morning for Forli."

'How is Maria handling the loss?' Emily asked, worried for Mario's state of mind for having to order his eldest nephew killed.

"She is devastated, I have yet to see her come away from the crypt where we laid Federico to rest. Petruccio and Claudia are shaken by his loss but they do not seem quite as distraught as Maria." Mario offered, grief flickering between them now.

'Tell them that we are all thinking of them at this tragic time. Do you want me to pass the news to Ezio? I've had to put him on the sidelines for a while after a nasty accident while trying to figure out how to get into the Palazzo Ducale.' Emily offered, wishing she knew how else to help the family through this.

"No, I should be the one to tell him." Mario replied, accepting the love and support Emily wrapped around him and sending back his gratitude for her endless love.

'I love you so much. We will be together again soon.' Emily promised, soaking up the love they shared along their link and sending it right back to her precious man.

"I miss you, Emily. Come home safe whenever you can." Mario offered, pulling her into one more mental hug before leaving her again.

Reaching out through another link, Emily nudged Aloysius' mind lightly and chuckled when he just about had a meltdown at the idea of her being in his head. He did eventually calm but only after she'd invited him in to her mind to realise the truth of her presence.
"Emily? What are you doing?" he asked, completely baffled to hear her in his mind. 'I can use the web to communicate with people I trust. This is the result.' Emily explained, smoothing away his worries with a practised hand. 'Mario tells me you are planning to ride for Forli tomorrow.' "Unless you can think of another reason I should stay. I told Maria I would ride with all speed to inform Ezio of the death of his brother." Aloysius replied, relaxing a little more now that he understood the basics of Emily's latest gift.

'I want you to stay put. We're in a bad situation here in Venezia and need to clear out for a while. I'll arrange passes to get back to the city at a later date but right now, the smartest thing we can do is get out of here.' Emily directed, putting it all out on the table for Aloysius to consider. 'I was too late to save the Doge from a Templar murder plot and I think they're going to pin it on us.' "I'll be waiting for you. Ride hard, Monteriggioni will grant you shelter." Aloysius offered, giving Emily his full support and courage. "I'll talk with Mario and ensure the best horses are available at Forli for you all."

'Grazie, Aloysius. We will see you soon.' Emily chuckled, closing their connection and continuing her run.
Riding hard right up to the gates of the city, the four Assassins dismounted smoothly and handed their borrowed horses off to the mercenaries that had accompanied them from Forli before heading into the city and aiming straight for the villa. No one was particularly thrilled to have left Venezia, it made sense to have left but they would have preferred to stay with Leonardo.

Gena in particular was annoyed to have been pushed to abandon Leonardo, she'd been stung by the sorrow in his eyes as she'd held him and promised to return as soon as it was safe and their other Assassin business was dealt with. He'd wept quietly in her arms, pleading that she come back safely and she'd promised that she would take care and return when it was safe.

Leonardo's mood had been greatly improved when four sopping wet thieves had arrived with his flying machine, at least what was left of it. Most of the pieces were still there and it wasn't too severely water damaged so he could repair it but it would take some time. Accepting Emily's apologies for the damage done, he'd guided the thieves on where to put the machine down and paid for their services before spending a few precious minutes saying a heartfelt goodbye to his friends.

As a final gift to them, he handed each of them an open pass to Venezia, granting them unimpeded access to the city for the purposes of visiting him whenever they had time. His generosity was a huge weight off Emily's shoulders, taking away her stress of trying to work out how to get back to Venezia once the storm had died down.

There had been a few tears shed as they boarded the ship to Forli, some that came as a definite surprise. Emily had pulled Antonio into her embrace, muttering a promise to return to his fair city one day before she kissed his cheek and he wiped the tears from her cheeks. Eventually she'd broken away and embraced Rosa and Ugo just as fondly, making her promises and fleeing onto the ship to wait for the others.

But now, after weeks of travel, the team moved with a renewed vigour, almost sprinting through the city and pounding up the stairs to reach the villa. Aloysius was waiting for them outside the villa, a dark, hollow look on his face. As the other Assassins slow to a walk, Ezio skidded and stumbled, landing in a heap on the ground.

'Ezio, your Uncle is in his study. He needs to speak with you urgently. There has been a tragedy in the family.' Aloysius offered, crouching and drawing Ezio to his feet. 'Go, he has been waiting for your return.'

'What? Who?' Ezio blanched, staring wide eyed at Aloysius. 'It's not my place to tell you Ezio, go and speak with your Uncle.' Aloysius reiterated, giving the younger man a gentle shove towards the villa.

Needing no further guidance, Ezio hurried inside, keeping to a dignified walk as he headed for the study. Strangely, Claudia wasn't at her desk, there was no sound of Petruccio enjoying his improved health and Federico hadn't come to welcome them back. His mother hadn't made an appearance either, adding to his concerns. The only one Aloysius had mentioned was his Uncle so Ezio doubted there was anything wrong with him so it had to be one of his siblings or his mother.

'Ahh, come in nipote.' Mario called, looking up from his work and getting to his feet. 'What's going on? What's the tragedy Aloysius mentioned?' Ezio asked, crossing to stand in front of Mario, reading the sorrow in his mismatched eyes.
'There is no easy way to say this, nipote. Several weeks ago, Federico left the villa and Monteriggioni sometime in the middle of the night. Aloysius heard him leaving and questioned it but Federico stated he was merely going for a walk around the grounds. His body was found the next morning on the road to Firenze; it seems that he was attacked by bandits.' Mario sighed, catching Ezio when he sagged, head bowed in grief.

'No! Not Federico! No, this can't be!' Ezio cried, clutching at Mario desperately as he tried to understand. 'Please, no! Tell me this isn't happening! Federico!'

Guiding Ezio to the floor, there was nothing more that Mario could do except hold him tight and try to anchor Ezio as he struggled with the reality of losing his older brother. Originally Mario had planned to reveal the letter to Ezio but Aloysius had cautioned him, getting Mario to think about how he would have handled it if a similar letter had been found on Giovanni's corpse. The very idea turned Mario's stomach and he knew he couldn't do that to Ezio.

So he knelt there, holding Ezio as tight as he dared as the young man wept for his brother, the one who had taught him so much that he used every day to survive. Shifting off his knees, Mario gently drew Ezio into his lap and stroked his hair, offering freely of his presence until he was calm enough to be left alone for the minute it would take Mario to find one of the other Assassins and send them to gather the rest of the family.

Looking up at the sound of footsteps entering his office, Mario smiled softly as Emily crossed the room and sat with them, putting her hands on his knees even as she leant in to rest her head on Ezio's shoulder.

'Oh Ezio, I'm so sorry. Aloysius just told us what he knows, I'm sorry this happened.' she offered, shifting one hand to rest against his back. 'Libby has gone to find the rest of your family. No doubt they will be eager to see you again.'

Ezio just nodded, one hand reaching back to grab Emily's tunic, clutching desperately at both generations bracketing him as he grieved for his brother. Muttering soft words of comfort, Emily and Mario tried their best to calm him down, stroking his back and reassuring him that everything would be okay.

'Ezio, your mother is waiting for you.' Aloysius uttered, joining the group and crouching near the younger man. 'Come on, I'll take you out to her.'

'Ezio?' Ezio uttered, sniffing weakly as he looked at her pleadingly. 'I know; you want me to go with you.' Emily nodded, wiping his face lightly. 'Don't you think it would be better if I stayed here though? Aloysius has lost his direct link into the family; he needs to know he still matters to you. I'll come find you a little later.'

Mario blinked in disbelief as Ezio paused and seemed to think about this before releasing his grip on Emily and reaching out to Aloysius. Catching his hand, Aloysius nodded and pulled Ezio to his feet, sending Mario an apologetic look when the older man winced.

'I know I can't replace him, I won't even try but you're still my brother and always will be.' Aloysius uttered, clutching Ezio close for a moment before guiding him out of the room.

Waiting a minute longer for Ezio and Aloysius to be out of earshot, Mario reached out to snag Emily's arms, pulling her close and nuzzling her neck. After all the pain and torment of being apart, it was such a joy to hold her close and inhale that unique combination of battle, horses, leather and sweat that was Emily.

Sprawled over Mario, Emily grabbed at his tunic and sagged into him, most of her weight still on her knees as she reacquainted her mind with his loving words and strong hands tenderly caressing her lower back. It was so good to be back in his arms, her burdens falling aside as she drew back and gazed into his eyes.
'I've missed you so much, Mario.' she whispered, so glad to be back where she was safest. 'I have missed you too, mio caro.' Mario replied, sounding like he was seconds from falling apart.

Shifting her weight back, Emily coaxed Mario up onto his knees again before shuffling closer and cradling his shoulders lightly. So gentle, treating Mario like the fragile creature he was right now, Emily guided him close and held him firmly but with such tenderness. At first there was resistance, then acceptance and finally release as Mario clutched at her back and wept, unleashing his pain and grief at long last.

By the way he sobbed so openly into her shoulder; Emily could only guess that it had been months since Mario had found a chance to relieve his own grief and pain, likely not since her last visit. So she held him tighter, cooing soft reassurances as they rocked slowly. Bowing her head, Emily brushed her lips against his neck and wept with him, not for Federico but for her Mario and all that he had to bear without anyone to help him.

Throwing aside his mantles of power and position, Mario gripped her all the tighter, lowering his defences and for once, allowing himself to just be any ordinary man. No more Assassins or noble business, for a few truly precious moments he could be a man grieving for his lost nephew. No matter how hard he tried though, he would never remove the taint of being the one ultimately responsible for Federico's death.

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A little concerned when she hadn't seen any trace of Emily or Mario since their arrival, Gena stuck her head into Mario's study and smiled softly at the sight on the floor. Stretched out on the floor Emily had her right hand in Mario's hair and her left on his back as he slept half on her, fingers latched into her robes.

Treading as light as she was able, Gena crept closer to the pair, noting the tear stains on their faces and the faint wet stain on Mario's shoulder and nodded slowly, recognising what this really meant. There was nothing romantic here, they'd grieved together for Federico and along the way had fallen into an exhausted slumber.

Leaving the room as quietly as she'd entered, Gena hurried upstairs and into Emily's assigned room, stripping the samite cover from the bed and picking out the most comfortable pillow. Heading back downstairs, she turned for the office and chuckled at the sight of Libby peeking into the room. 'They do look cute together.' Gena remarked, coming up beside Libby. 'Yeah, it's good to see Emily so relaxed.' Libby agreed, looking up at Gena. 'I was just thinking of getting something to cover them.' 'And a pillow for Emily.' Gena nodded, holding out the soft blue pillow. 'I'll leave that in your hands. You've got the gentle touch.'

Taking off her boots and leaving them by the door, Libby padded silently into the room and crouched beside Emily, pillow held in her left hand and right hand held near Emily's head. Taking a breath to centre her focus, Libby eased her right hand under Emily's head and lifted, sliding the pillow into place smoothly without waking her. Libby couldn't believe it; she'd never thought it possible to put a finger on Emily without paying for it.

Just as careful with her approach, Gena spread out the cover in her hands and lightly draped it over the pair, folding the top end back neatly once she got to Mario's shoulders. There was no sign of motion from either Assassin, so deep was their slumber, not even an unexpected touch could wake them.

Tucking the blue cover around the pair a little more, Libby and Gena made good their escape from
the scene, leaving the secret lovers to sleep in peace for a while longer. They looked so peaceful together, harsh edges hidden underneath the blues of the bedding, two tormented souls finding comfort with each other.

'Reckon Ezio will figure it out?' Gena asked, waiting for Libby to pull her boots on again before they left the villa together.

'Depends on how subtle those two can be.' Libby shrugged, gazing out across the city. 'They can pass off that scene in the study as grief exhaustion but if he spots them elsewhere in a compromising position…'

'It could get ugly.' Gena finished, glancing back over her shoulder. 'I just wish they could have a happier ending.'

'When does an Assassin ever get a happy ending?' Libby sighed, running one hand through her overly long hair. 'I really do need to cut my hair.'

'Best I can offer is a sharp blade and a steady hand.' Gena grinned, scratching at her own hair and checking the length. 'Trim for trim?'

'A fair trade.' Libby chuckled, picking a sunny spot and perching comfortably on the wall. 'I've noticed that you act differently around me this time, Gena.'

'In what way?' Gena asked, digging a comb out of her pouches and selecting her sharpest knife. 'You're a little more distant than you were before. Almost cool with how we interact compared to how it used to be.' Libby offered, closing her eyes and relaxing as Gena combed out her hair.

'You've been gone for so long, Libby...we've all moved on. Scarecrow's got a new girl but it's hard for them with her being French and all. Book moved on to teasing other junior Assassins, he's still as hard to rattle as he always was.' Gena sighed, gathering Libby's hair into her left fist. 'We've gotten used to you not being around, Chickadee. The least we deserve is the same length of time to get used to your return.'

'Take as long as you need, just don't shut me out please. I'm learning too, you've changed since the last time we sat and talked.' Libby replied, relaxed and peaceful as Gena picked at her hair with the knife and tossed the removed blonde lengths over the wall.

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Dinner that night was a quiet affair, everyone thinking about the empty place where Federico belonged. The five weary Assassins had gratefully shed their heavy robes, changing into more comfortable outfits as befitted their place among the ruling family. As was appropriate at this time, they left the brighter colours in their wardrobes, joining the rest of the family in mourning over their lost son, brother, nephew and friend.

Putting his cutlery down, Ezio sipped his wine and looked along the table to Emily, a hard edge in his eyes. She was the image of sibling grief, but not directly to Federico. She behaved more like an attentive Aunt, standing in harmony with her brother to care for the next generation.

'You knew, didn't you? That's why you were so protective in Venezia, you knew something had happened.' Ezio challenged, his grief turning to anger. 'You knew and you chose to say nothing.'

'Ezio.' Maria warned, reaching out to put a hand on his arm.

'It's alright, Maria. He deserves to know.' Emily sighed, finishing her mouthful and dabbing at her lips with her napkin.

All eyes were on her, waiting to see how Emily would handle Ezio's raging emotions and deep hurt at the loss of his brother, so close to the anniversary of the day they'd lost Giovanni. Calmly, Emily sipped her wine and rested her forearms on the edge of the table, dark eyes flashing to gold for just a moment before settling back to her normal dark brown.

'The webs do not tell me everything, Ezio. I suspected there was a threat to Federico but did not know what it was. I admit to seeing a red line intersect Federico's gold and I did send word to him to warn him of the threat. I sent a letter as soon as I knew, informed Mario of the risk and directly spoke to Federico of the danger. I did everything in my power to ensure his survival but Federico brushed
off my words as ramblings of an outsider. So I sent Aloysius back to try and explain the situation properly and to offer close protection.' Emily explained, putting all her efforts out on the table and letting Ezio decide if she’d done enough.

'I tried to explain it to him but Federico refused to accept council. He would do as he pleased and it was all I could do to keep up with him. I chased him that night but lost him in the darkness…I will forever regret my failure.' Aloysius added, shifting some of the blame and guilt from Emily onto his own shoulders.

Abruptly and rather unexpectedly, Mario stood and left the table, motioning for the servers waiting quietly in the corner to continue the meal as he fled the room and headed upstairs. Rubbing her forehead, Gena went to stand but Emily motioned for her to sit, fully aware that Mario would accept comfort from no one right now.

'Let him go, Gena. It’s a particularly hard time right now for Mario.' Emily sighed, shaking her head slowly.

'But…' Gena started, not sure why Emily wasn't racing after Mario before he did something crazy. 'But nothing, Gena. Just as he honours our grief, we owe him the same respect. Leave him be, he will come back when he is ready.' Emily cut her off, returning her attention to her meal.

Slowly the tension ebbed away, the family returning their focus to their meals and trying not to think about the empty chair and forgotten meal where Mario belonged. It felt so wrong to sit at his table without him presiding over the fine meal but right now, he would rather hide in solitude and try to deal with his issues alone.

'The burden of responsibility?' Aloysius asked, thanking one of the servers when they came forward to refill his glass.

'A burden I know all too well.' Emily nodded, chewing thoughtfully as she considered how to aid Mario. 'It’s not easy leading a district, all the issues you have to balance and the lives you have to be responsible for.'

'You…' Ezio started but he fell quiet when Emily looked at him.

'Yes Ezio, back home I am responsible for the lives of hundreds of Assassins. I am lucky to get even a couple of hours of sleep each night, there is always so much paperwork to complete and often thousands of assignments on the go at any one time.' Emily sighed, shaking her head slowly. 'Being here is actually a huge step down from my usual duties.'

'Can you do anything to help Mario with his duties?' Maria asked, regarding Emily with such understanding. 'I used to at least try to assist Giovanni with his duties, even if I could do nothing more than remind him to eat and sleep.'

'I will certainly try, Maria. We all have a role to play in keeping the Order running smoothly and reminding Mario that there are more important things than work.' Emily shrugged, putting her cutlery down. 'We can only hope that he will realise what we are trying to do.'

'What do you suggest?' Libby asked, determined to do something for Mario.

'A little distraction now and then. Coax him out for a walk, ask his advice on something that is completely unrelated to the Order or even just bring him some naïve little gift. Anything to remind him that he has a family that cares about him so much.' Emily guided, her attention flickering to Petruccio as she spoke. 'Be careful not to push too hard though, he could react poorly if pressed to abandon his work for too long.'

'Maria, do you know if there was ever a painting done of Mario and Giovanni?' Aloysius asked, stunning everyone again. 'Everyone else is on the wall, looking their best and smiling faintly but in all my time spent here, I have never seen anything of them together.'

'Si, there was always one of them hanging in Giovanni’s office and he told me Mario had one very similar. I do not know where he keeps it though, I have never seen it either.' Mario nodded, her smile wavering for a moment.

'I could-' Aloysius offered, looking to Emily for permission.

'With the sun tomorrow.' Emily instructed, picking up on Aloysius' question without him even
needing to finish. 'Do not get caught.'

'Aloysis replied, already considering how he would go about sneaking into the abandoned building in Firenze and retrieve the painting Maria had mentioned.

'I require a word with you before I retire for the night.' Maria requested, looking straight at Aloysius. 'If you would not mind.'

'I am at your service, Madonna.' Aloysius smiled, dipping his head respectfully.

'Charmer.' Emily muttered, not really surprised by his antics.

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Armed with a tray of fruit, bread and cheese and a bottle of good wine that one of the servers mentioned was Mario's favourite, Emily squared her shoulders and nudged the curtain open with her foot before slipping into his chambers. He was curled up on his bed, stripped to the waist and barefoot as he trembled faintly in the candlelight.

Setting the tray and bottle down on the desk, Emily worked her boots off and climbed up beside Mario, curling up against him and draping over his back to rest her chin on his shoulder. He barely reacted to her, just the faintest twitch of his shoulder let her know that he was still awake and aware of her presence.

Slowly Mario uncurled, rolling over a little to look up at her, the tracks of his private tears still drying on his face. He felt so vulnerable, like it would take only one more painful blow to completely shatter him. But at the same time, he felt so safe and protected as he gazed up at Emily and felt her pressed up against him.

Catching her wrist when she moved, Mario tried to pull Emily close but she just smiled and shuffled back, gently breaking his grip and sliding off the bed. Pushing up onto one elbow, Mario watched, entranced, as Emily crossed the room to his desk, sliding out of her tunic and shirt as she walked. Retrieving two glasses from where he kept some for private meetings, she picked up the tray and bottle on his desk and came back to the bed.

Smiling at the way Mario watched her with such eagerness in his gaze, Emily moved past him and climbed back onto the bed, setting the tray down beside her before motioning for him to come closer. Arranged comfortably against the pillows, she couldn't help but laugh softly at how eagerly Mario came to her, crawling up the bed to settle against her comfortably.

Relaxing back into the pillows a little more, Emily brought her right hand over to trail through Mario's hair as he snuggled into her contentedly. Leaving the wine and glasses on the little side table for now, she reached for the tray and deftly flipped a piece of cheese onto a chunk of bread and offered it to Mario. He'd barely touched his meal so she knew he had to be hungry. It was just a case of if he would eat from her fingers.

Comfortably draped over Emily, settled between her thighs and feeling the weight lift from his shoulders again, Mario took the morsel from her fingers gently and relaxed, cherishing the moment between them. To be treated like he was the most important man in the world, it was a heady rush of wonder, disbelief and amazement. For once, he was actually treasured and loved, not because he was a Master Assassin or even a nobleman, he was loved just because he was Mario Auditore, a lonely man looking for someone to care.

Shifting against Emily, Mario glanced at the ring on his right hand and smiled faintly, thinking of the matching ring still hidden behind the portrait. Such an innocent little thing, a harmless lump of gold but the very idea of asking Emily to wear it left him terrified. He couldn't bear the thought of her rejection, even though he knew she loved him.
'Talk to me, Mario. You don't have to suffer alone, I'm here for you. We're staying here for the foreseeable future, whenever you need me I'll be right here.' she coaxed, perfectly content to sit and feed them both little nibbles.

'Where do I even start…' Mario sighed, grumbling when Emily took her right hand away and shifted behind him. 'It seems as though everything is piling up lately. And then there is this business with Federico.'

'I know what it's like to be let down by those closest to you.' Emily uttered, pulling the loosened cork from the bottle and pouring them both a drink. 'My second gave away a secret entrance to my compound and endangered 83 Assassins. I had no choice but to kill him and move our entire organisation elsewhere to protect my district.'

'It's different when it's family.' Mario countered, accepting the wine she offered him.

'Travis was family, we'd been raised together since we were just toddlers. Not by blood but the closest thing I knew to having actual siblings.' Emily replied, resting her forearm on his shoulder and picking up another bite. 'You have to let it go before it destroys you completely. It's hard to let go but it's necessary.'

'I don't know if I can.' Mario admitted, shifting a little so he could look up at her.

'You don't fool me for a moment. You've got enough reasons to let it go, you're just not ready to look at them yet.' Emily corrected, leaning down to kiss his forehead. 'Tomorrow I'll show you what I mean. I'm enjoying this time with you right now.'

'As am I.' Mario smiled, nuzzling her chest contentedly for a moment before taking another nibble from her fingers. 'It's nice to feel treasured like this,'

'It certainly is.' Emily agreed, perfectly happy to sit with Mario like this all night.

Listening to her heartbeat under his ear and taking food from her fingers, Mario isn't quite sure how much time passes but he can't stop thinking about the ring that matches the one he wears. Knowing that he'll never be able to relax properly until he knew the truth, Mario reluctantly slipped out of their embrace and turned to set his wine on the small table before rolling off the bed.

'Mario? What's wrong?' Emily asked, sitting up and putting her glass aside. 'Hey, talk to me. What's the matter?'

'I'll explain in just a moment.' Mario replied, looking back over his shoulder at her. 'It's nothing bad, I promise.'

Lifting down the painting of his grandfather, Mario looked at the rings still on the shelf and picked out the one he wanted, but not before brushing his fingers over the one that had always been Giovanni's until he'd decided to stop wearing it. Truthfully Mario should have left it with his body but in the depths of his heart he knew Giovanni would have wanted it to go to one of his sons.

Putting the painting back up to hide the niche, Mario returned to the bed and moved to sit before Emily, chuckling softly when she moved to drape her legs across his lap. Now if he could only find the words to tell her how he felt.

'I had given up on ever finding someone that I could truly be happy with, someone that could lift the burden from my shoulders and help me to see the beauty of the world when I was so used to seeing only the dark. I found that with you, as much as we both tried to fight what was developing between us.' Mario offered, reaching out to take Emily's hands in his own.

'Mario, I…' Emily starts, eyes widening when Mario leans over further and silences her with one finger against her lips.

'Alright, I'm listening.' she uttered, pressing a kiss to his fingertip.

'You have given so freely of everything you are, never asking for anything in return and for that I will always be grateful. For all the times you have been my rock when everyone else forgets I am still just a man. For the moments when I could forget about responsibility and pain as I looked at you
and laughed freely. The warm hugs and loving kisses and everything else you share.’ Mario continued, looking down for a moment and swallowing quickly.

Struggling to find the right words, Mario releases Emily's left hand to rest on her knee and cradled her right gently even as he turns the ring around so it will sit properly on her hand. He'd never thought it would be this hard to tell her just how much he needed and loved her, not after all the sweet words they shared and their loving kisses on the rooftop.

'I've had this ring since I turned 18, kept aside especially for the woman that I chose to make my wife. This is not a proposal, I know I can never keep you and I would never even ask that you abandon your duties to stay at my side. This is my promise to hold you above all others, as precious as a wife but with the freedom of your current life.' he offered, struggling to meet Emily's eyes as he held up the ring between them.

Left speechless by Mario's offer, Emily had no idea quite how to react. She'd expected to spend the night calming his distress and promising to be there for as long as he needed her but to get a partial proposal was completely out of nowhere.

'Mario…nothing would make me happier. If not for our twisted timelines, I would gladly take you as my husband. You are already above all others in my life, prized as the one man that I feel completely at ease with.’ she flushed, not sure what it was about Mario that made her feel like a giddy schoolgirl on her first date all over again.

Sagging in relief, overjoyed that Emily had said yes instead of slapping him as he'd anticipated, Mario slipped the ring onto her finger, the fit a little tight but it went on easily enough with a twist to get past her knuckle.

'It's perfect, simple and straight from the heart.' Emily smiled, admiring the shining gold against her skin as she shuffled closer to Mario. 'I'll wear it always.'

'Mio bello.' Mario grinned, drawing her into his lap and catching her lips in the most loving of kisses. 'Ti amo così tanto, tu e nessun altro.'

'Il mio amore, l'unico tesoro del mio cuore.’ Emily breathed, resting her head on his shoulder contentedly. 'Shall we finish our meal? You must be famished.'

'Only if you'll let me take over.' Mario chuckled, his heartache easily forgotten when he looked at Emily and heard her laugh so easily.

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Laughing merrily as he perched in his new favourite place, Petruccio reached up from his spot on Gena’s shoulders and plucked a delicate stem of flowers from the tree they were under, admiring the pale pink flowers up close and holding it for Gena to see as well. He was still thinking about what Emily had told them the night before, to try and remind Uncle Mario that he had other responsibilities apart from his work.

'Your mother would probably like those, they're so beautiful.' Gena smiled, loosely gripping his calves to keep him secure and stable.

'I was hoping to find something zio Mario would like but I can't see anything.' Petruccio sighed, resting one arm across Gena's head as he looked around.

'Maybe it's not about finding something. Maybe it's about making something.' Libby suggested, looking up from the book she was reading in the dappled shade. 'Something that makes you think of your zio.'

'Like what?' Petruccio asked, tipping his head to the side in confusion.

'Let me show you.' Libby chuckled, putting her book aside and climbing into the tree she'd been leaning against.

Using one of her knives, she cut several thin branches and stripped off the bark and leaves before starting to twist them together, using strands of bark to secure the points where her sticks crossed
over. Under her talented hands, a simple star came into being, the bare wood shining faintly in the sun as she hooked her legs over the branch she'd been sitting on and swung over backwards to hold it out to Petruccio.

'I see Mario as a star because of all he does for his family and friends. He's generous and kind, just as the stars above are generous and kind with the light they send us at night.' she explained, watching the wonder and joy light his eyes.

'May I?' Petruccio asked, reaching up to touch the star.

'Sure, you can even tell Mario that you made it yourself. I'll teach you how it's done later, it's easy once you know how. You can even do this while you're laid up in bed, so long as someone can bring you the supplies.' Libby nodded, handing over the star and dropping out of the tree.

Laughing softly at Petruccio's delight, Gena lifted him down off her shoulders and took his hand, following him through the villa. Rather than going straight to Mario's study though, he stopped at Claudia's desk and reached out to lightly touch her arm.

'I picked this for you, Claudia.' he beaming, holding out the delicate stalk of flowers.

'Oh Petruccio, these are lovely.' Claudia smiled, accepting the pale pink flowers and inhaling their soft, sweet scent. 'I'm so lucky to have a brother like you.'

'And I'm lucky to have you as my sister.' Petruccio agreed, stepping in to hug his sister close without damaging the wooden star in his hand.

Heart lightened so much by the innocent love of Petruccio, Gena took his hand again once he moved away from Claudia and followed him through to Mario's study. Bold as brass, the young teenager walked right up to Mario's desk and reached out to place the wooden star beside whatever Mario was working on. The shock on Mario's face was truly priceless as he put his quill aside and picked up the star, looking at it curiously before turning his gaze to Petruccio.

'I made it for you, zio.' Petruccio explained, resting his head on Mario's shoulder lightly. 'Just as the stars in heaven watch over the world, you watch over our family.'

'Grazie nipote, it's amazing.' Mario grinned, turning and drawing Petruccio into his arms. 'You are a very talented young man.'

'I'm glad you like it, zio.' Petruccio replied, so glad that he'd gotten Mario to smile and leave his work, if only for a few minutes.

'Now that's what I like to see. A little family time would do you good, Mario.' Emily chuckled, emerging from the hidden passage down to the Sanctuary.

Left hand snapping out, Mario caught the tightly wrapped ball of cloth Emily threw at him and looked at it for a moment before flicking his gaze to her in question. The ball was firm in his hand, a little bit of give made it comfortable to grip and it was covered with rows of neat red stitching holding the edges of the outer cloth together.

'I'm sure Petruccio would love to play a game of catch out on the back lawn and really, you do need some time in the sun Mario. You're almost as pale as my robes.' Emily smirked, watching as Petruccio perked up all over again.

'May we, zio? Please?' he asked, almost pleading in his excitement to play with Mario.

'Just for a little while, you still need to rest Petruccio.' Mario nodded, releasing his young nephew and getting to his feet. 'Come, let's go have some fun.'

Chuckling softly as Petruccio dragged Mario outside to play, Emily quickly tidied up his desk before walking over to clap a hand on Gena's shoulder and guide her outside as well. For as much as this downtime was important for reminding Mario about what really mattered in life, it was also a well deserved break for the busy Assassins. They'd been pushing hard for years, constantly trying to stay one step ahead of their enemies but now was a time to rest, recharge and go at the Templars fresh after a break.

'I've been thinking, Emily. It didn't take the Firenze guards long to figure out that Leonardo was connected to us but we were always there to keep him safe. What if the Venezia guards figure it out
and try something?' Gena sighed, following Emily outside and taking a seat on the nearest garden wall. 'If Leonardo gets hurt because of us…'
'I know Gena, that's been troubling me too. I'm keeping an eye on him as best I can, Leonardo knows I'm here if he needs anything at all. I also told Antonio to keep an eye on him up close and make sure nothing happened to him.' Emily nodded, taking a seat beside Gena.
'Let me go back Emily, I can blend in and keep him safe. You know I can, I've done it before.' Gena requested, truly concerned for Leonardo's safety.
'Gena, if you go back to Venezia, I wouldn't be worrying about Leonardo's safety. I'd be worried about when I was going to see your vibrant light extinguished. The Templars aren't idiots, they know it's not just Ezio out there. They have figured out there are multiple Assassins, one making an appearance would make them suspicious.' Emily sighed, shaking her head slowly. 'we just have to trust Antonio, I warned him of what might happen if Leonardo had so much as a guard induced scratch when we returned.'
'He's family, Emily. It's alright for you, your family is here with you but Leonardo's all I have in this place. I have to protect him.' Gena growled, desperate to go but she wouldn't risk Emily's wrath just for this. 'If anything happens to him, I'm screwed.'
'And if you're recognised as being an Assassin? They'll hang you both in front of the Palazzo Ducale and then what? There's no do over here, Gena. No miraculous escapes or rescues.' Emily shot back, trying to find the right balance but it was hard. 'It's too soon. Wait a little while and then we'll see if Venezia has settled at all. Just wait a couple of months for things to quieten down, okay?'
'I still don't like this but alright, I'll wait. I just wish you would explain this communication thing you do so I could reach out to Leonardo and talk to him while we're apart.' Gena sighed, shoulders dropping as she sat there.
'It's a simple thing. You already know where your web mark is, just place your hand over it and push lightly as you call his name softly in your mind. Keep your inner voice down low, normal levels hurt the receiver. With time you will get better until you no longer need the physical contact with your own skin to make the connection.' Emily guided, resting one hand on Gena's shoulder lightly. 'It should be easier for you, your mind isn't clouded by all of the webs I see- only your connection to Leonardo.'

Following Emily's instructions, Gena let her eyes fall closed as she sought out Leonardo, calling to him in barely more than a whisper. On the backs of her eyelids, she saw the golden rope Emily spoke of and touched it with her mind. What she discovered stole her breath away completely. Not only could she hear Leonardo talking to her but she was completely surrounded by his overactive mind, wrapped up in half-formed thoughts and musings.
"Gena? What is happening?" he asked, nervous to suddenly be so closely linked to her.
"It's okay, Leonardo. Emily is teaching me how to use our link to communicate while we are apart.' Gena explained, reaching out with her mind to calm him. 'For now it isn't safe for me to be with you, this is the best I can do.'
"I can…I think I feel your worry or is that mine?" Leonardo asked, nudging at Gena's mind with his own. "This is so strange."
"Peace, both of you. The communications along these links are very strange until you get used to them. At the moment each of you is broadcasting every thought, fear and emotion clearly to the other and I can sense it too. You must learn to shield what you would rather keep private, wrapping your minds in layers of whatever makes you feel safe and only letting certain things drift through." Emily guided, showing them both how to protect their minds from the web and from sharing too many things with each other.

Gradually the chaos along the link calmed as the pair reinforced their new barriers and worked out how to pass only what they wanted to share. Emily stayed with them for a few minutes longer, sharing what she'd learned and guiding them to explore before leaving them to their silent conversation and reassurances.
"Remember what we talked about Gena. We must be careful, I shouldn't need to explain that to you. Otherwise, you are free to discuss whatever you wish. I will be playing with the others if you need anything further." Emily chuckled, breaking the link and leaving the distant relations to speak in peace and complete safety.

Feeling so guilty for invading Maria's solitude, Libby almost turned and left the crypt but she paused when Maria looked up from her prayers and smiled faintly, motioning for her to approach. Booted feet making barely a sound, Libby approached and went to one knee beside Giovanni's final resting place, reaching out to place a few flowers beside the stone carving of the fallen Assassin.

They were complete opposites as they knelt there; Maria in her mourning dress, her widow's veil folded back over her hair and Libby in her full Assassin regalia, hood draped back over her shoulders. The grieving widow and the junior Assassin, two completely different worlds that were pulled together in their shared loss of such a great man.

Resting her right hand on the cold stone sarcophagus, Libby put her left fist to her chest and bowed her head, muttering a prayer for her fallen brother as was appropriate. It had been years since she'd attended a funeral for a fellow Assassin but like all Assassins of her era, she knew the ancient rituals and traditions of respect. After the prayers came personal promises and these Libby always found the hardest part of any visit to an Assassin's tomb.

'Anche se siamo secoli a parte, sarò sempre onorato di aver potuto chiamare mio fratello assassino per pochi giorni preziosi. Si sta dolorosamente perso Giovanni, le tue capacità e conoscenze perso troppo presto. Il mio giuramento a voi com'è, io sempre sforzarsi di vivere fino a mio nome e la tua eredità. Sono orgoglioso di essere un Auditore e devo che la conoscenza a voi soli. Requiescat in pace, fratello buono e vegliano su di noi dalla prossima vita. Fino a quando ci incontriamo di nuovo accanto. Niente è vero. Tutto è permesso. Tale è la mia promessa nella vostra memoria.'

Shocked by Libby's words and yet heartened by them for some reason, Maria returned to her own silent remembrance of her husband, unable to wipe the faint smile off her face. An idea came to her mind, she wasn't quite sure where it came from but she knew it was something Giovanni would have approved of, if not suggested himself.

'Libby, you are an Auditore in all but name. I think it would be appropriate if you took on the name. It is certainly an action Giovanni would have approved. He liked you, saw you as one of our children as much as any other.' Maria offered, reaching out to rest one hand on Libby's shoulder. 'Elizabetta Auditore…I like that sound of that.' Libby smiled, remembering what Giovanni had called her just once when she'd mentioned her name was actually Elizabeth.

'Giovanni would be pleased.' Maria agreed, feeling the lightness in her chest and knowing she made the right choice.

Slipping into silence again, the women were at peace for the moment, both comforted by feelings they couldn't quite understand but accepted anyway. Neither woman had felt like this since their last happy time with Giovanni, be it curled up in his arms as they slept or pressed up against his back as they fought the Templars on the road to Monteriggioni.

Eventually both women stood and made their way up out of the crypt, pausing in the doorway for a few moments to let their eyes adjust before heading back towards the villa. Holding back a half step, Libby slipped in behind Maria's right shoulder, treating Maria with the same respect she had given Giovanni.

'I am curious that you went to the effort of donning your full Assassin outfit just to pay a few minutes of respect to my husband.' Maria remarked, looking back over her shoulder at Libby.

'as a Junior Assassin, to approach the tomb of such a highly regarded Master in anything less than
full uniform would be considered a gross display of disrespect. Even in my own time, this rule applies though the uniform has changed in the separating years.' Libby explained, inclining her head as she spoke.

'Respect for your elders is quite important to you, si?' Maria smiled, reaching back and drawing Libby up beside her.

'It is the way we are all trained from the very beginning. To survive to make Master Assassin is a great achievement, worthy of the highest respect. To be crowned a Grand Master as your husband was is an honour very few ever earn. One day I hope to make Master but it will not be for a long time, if I can at all.' Libby nodded, brushing one hand over her belt insignia.

'I had no idea my husband was still so highly regarded in your time.' Maria commented, smiling at the thought. 'It is nice to know that his name has lived on for so long.'

Realising that Maria needed no answer to that comment, Libby just smiled and continued to walk beside the older woman, thinking about the reality of the situation. Maria didn't need to know that most Assassins of her time only knew Giovanni as a face among so many in the portrait galleries at the larger strongholds. There were no names recorded on the portraits and no one was certain if the paintings really looked like the ancient Assassins but they were still honoured and respected anyway. The truth didn't matter, not to the current Grand Masters.
Aloysius returned to the family two months after mysteriously disappearing, leading a group of Mario's mercenaries, each one carrying neatly wrapped bundles of all shapes and sizes. Filing into the villa, they sort the bundles out around the main entrance, leaning some against walls and piling others up in random groupings. Some of the men carried in much larger items, the biggest of them requiring four of the strongest to carry it inside and set it safely in the middle of the room.

Emerging from the other rooms at the constant trooping of booted feet, the rest of the family just stopped and stared in disbelief and wonder at all the pieces being carried inside and sorted neatly. Standing in the middle of the room, Aloysius directed the controlled chaos easily, looking at each bundle as it was carried in and pointing to where he wanted it placed.

Spotting something that was obviously important, Aloysius waved the bearer forward and took the soft yellow bundle before sending the man to put the rest of his burden down elsewhere as he placed his selected item down on the larger piece in front of him.

'What is all of this?' Mario asked, unable to believe the number of these different coloured bundles he could see scattered everywhere.

'A gift and a remembrance.' Emily replied, resting one hand on his shoulder. 'Wait and you will see.'

Finally the procession of mercenaries ended, leaving the villa quiet and peaceful again, the last man out pausing to roll up the heavy canvas they spread to protect the floor before leaving. Only now did Aloysius turn to the family gathered on the stairs. Picking up the pale yellow bundle he'd selected, he approached the family and un-knotted the cord around the bundle, pulling the cloth away carefully.

Going to one knee, he presented the dark timber box to Maria, holding it steady as she opened it to reveal many of her fine jewellery pieces nestled safety against the red velvet lining. Brushing aside several pieces, she lifted out the engagement pendant Giovanni had given her and turned to Ezio. There was something so right and wonderful in witnessing Ezio place the family crest back around his mother's neck where it belonged.

Placing the jewellery box in Maria's hands, Aloysius smiled and stepped back, looking over the family as he waved his hand back to the piles of other bundles he had carefully sorted and scattered around the main hall.

'It is my honour to return these treasures of the Auditore family to their rightful owners. Everything that could be salvaged is here, wrapped and protected to ensure it would return to you in the best condition possible.' Aloysius offered, moving back to pick up a flat blue bundle he'd carried in personally. 'Some items had to be wrangled back from the thieves that took them but everything that mattered is here.'

Accepting the blue bundle, Mario picked at the string and brushed the cloth back, tears coming to his eyes as he gazed at what Aloysius had returned to him. Looking up from the canvas, the faintest twinkle in frozen eyes, Giovanni looked so strict and powerful, the very epitome of a nobleman in his Sunday finest. Standing behind his brother, Mario lacked the finesse Giovanni had developed, sword on his belt and his finest clothes a little dusty.

'Giovanni deserves a place on these walls, as painful as it can be to look upon his face and know he is gone.' Emily whispered, resting her chin on his shoulder and gazing at the painting. 'Maria told us that he kept this in his office so you were always with him.'
'I have one similar to this, painted by a different artist at the same time. I put it away after our fight, I was angry and knew if I kept it out I risked damaging it in a fit of rage.' Mario admitted, brushing their cheeks together. 'This one can go up in the main hall here with the others; I'll put the other up in my study.'

'Don't forget about the family portraits that are certainly somewhere in all of this.' Emily chuckled, pulling away sharply before Ezio realised something was going on. 'It will do us all good to return both halves of the family to proper balance.'

Handing the painting to Emily for safe keeping, Mario made his way down the stairs to the largest bundle sitting in the middle of the room, working on the green cloth and heavy rope holding it in place. Under his scarred hands, a slightly beaten and worn desk came into sight, showing signs of Giovanni's long nights working. He could see where it had been repaired neatly, broken pieces reformed to bring Giovanni back into their lives in the only way it could be done.

Drawn down the stairs by Claudia, Libby helped her to unwrap a large red-wrapped bundle, not quite as big as the desk but still quite a sizeable return. Under the cloth they discovered one of the family travelling chests and inside it they discovered dresses of every colour and style. Tucked among the cloth, they found Claudia's jewellery and hair accessories, everything clean and unmarred by the family tragedy.

Taking a seat on the stairs, Aloysius watched as the family unwrapped the vast array of things he'd rescued from Firenze, sharing memories and looking for specific items that meant the most to each of them. Salvaging their possessions hadn't been easy, getting them out of the city had been even harder but with a little help from the Medici and a lighter coin purse, he'd pulled it off and the results were truly breathtaking.

Relaxing even more when Emily sat beside him, Aloysius thought nothing of it when she pushed his hood back and started toying with his sweaty hair. Most would find such a touch dangerous, considering her left hand was in his hair but to Aloysius; this touch was a sign that he had earned her respect and trust.

'Do I even want to know how you pulled this off?' she asked, watching the family discovering the treasures returned to them.

'I mentioned my plan to Lorenzo. He offered to help. I still had to pay for transport and negotiate certain pieces out of the hands of thieves but I got it done.' Aloysius shrugged, rubbing at gritty eyes. 'I would have returned sooner but it took a while to sneak everything out of the city.'

'Somehow I don't think it matters, Aloysius. Look at them, the pain of the past has been forgotten because of the gift you brought.' Emily chuckled, turning her attention to where Mario had uncovered another chest of neatly folded clothes and lifted out a long burgundy coat.

Aloysius and Emily shared a smile as Mario crossed the room and turned Ezio from him before slipping the coat into place and smoothing out the collar. They both had to admit that the cut and colour flattered Ezio's lean frame, the deep burgundy put a reddish tint in his hair and the turquoise edges along the front picked up the colour of his jerkin nicely. Even the soft white fur spread over his shoulders looked right, adding just a touch of lightness to a man they all knew to be deadly.

Everyone turned to regard him as Mario smiled and headed upstairs; idly brushing the family signet ring he wore on his right hand. Leaning back on one hand, Emily brushed her fingers against Mario's foot and smiled as he passed, the glimmer of her matching ring hidden under the shortened gloves she wore.

Getting up, Emily grabbed the portrait and walked over to lean it against the wall before lifting down a landscape Mario had mentioned he didn't particularly like. He only kept it up because he didn't have anything else to fill the space. Setting the landscape out of the way, she leant the portrait against
the wall and left it there, trusting Mario to get the message.

Lost in thought, Ezio walked over to the desk and crouched, reaching underneath for something. There was the faintest of clicks and he moved back, sliding out a hidden panel from under the writing surface. Spread out with immaculate precision over the black velvet is the deep amethyst ribbon he only remembered seeing twice in his life, both times when Uncle Mario had come to visit them in Firenze. His father only wore it when Mario was around, the tails embroidered with the Auditore crest and the Assassin insignia in white.

Leaning back against the wall, part of the moment without intruding on the family, Gena witnessed Ezio fold the ribbon loosely in his hand, curling it over his fingers and pinning the tails to his palm with his thumb. Pushing the hidden slide closed, he turned and looked up, his attention completely locked on Mario as he came back downstairs. No one dared to speak, everyone caught up in the display between Mario and Ezio.

Spotting the ribbon in Ezio's hand, Mario stopped and waited so see what he would do with it. Circling around behind him, Ezio draped the ribbon over Mario's shoulder and carded his hair back, gathering it in his left hand before wrapping the ribbon into place and tying it off neatly. He didn't bother with a bow or anything fancy, just a simple slip knot that left the embroidered tails hanging down Mario's back like they were meant to.

Reaching up to touch the ribbon lightly, Mario smiled and turned to Ezio, catching his right hand before the younger man could walk away. Questioning his Uncle with a look, Ezio allowed Mario to pull his right glove off and hand it back before he held up a shining gold ring and slipped it onto Ezio's hand smoothly. The fit couldn't have been better and Mario knew he'd made the right choice in keeping Giovanni's ring for Ezio and not Federico.

'Ah, nipote, you are more like your father than you know. Come, there is much to be done to sort out all of these possessions.' Mario grinned, leaving Ezio standing there looking at his new ring in disbelief. 'I'm sure we can find suitable places for all of this.'

'Aloysius, I trust you wrote out a proper inventory of all you reclaimed.' Emily called, working with Maria to free another chest of its wrappings.

'Of course, it's in the top left drawer of the desk.' Aloysius nodded, pointing vaguely towards the desk in the middle of the room as he helped Petruccio unwrap some of the other bundles.

Picking up the painting that Emily had cleared a space for, Mario gazed at his brother's face for a few peaceful moments before putting it up on the wall where it belonged. Though Mario would never say it, this was one of the few times both of them had been seen with their hair pulled back with matching ribbons. The dark amethyst silk had once belonged to a beautiful dress their mother had loved but when it had gotten too worn for her to wear it again, she cut two matching strips and embroidered the crests into the tails for her sons.

'It needs to come down a little on the left, zio.' Claudia called, still digging through the belongings that had been returned to them.

'How does that look?' Mario asked, making an adjustment and moving aside.

'It seems fine now.' Gena nodded, moving along the other wall to make sure it wasn't a trick of the light and the painting really was straight.

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Though it took most of the most of the morning to get everything sorted and the heaviest items put away where it would could be best utilised, Mario had no doubt that he could steal Emily away for a few hours and no one would question it. But just in case anyone did question it, he was ready with an excuse about needing some time away from all responsibilities where he could talk to someone who understood. The rest of the unpacking could easily be handled without them.
Thankfully no one questioned it but it was clear that Ezio wanted to ask about their plans. All it took was one stern look from Emily and he snapped his mouth shut. Packing a few essentials into a small messenger bag, Emily smiled and left the villa with him, looking forward to getting away for a few precious hours.

'So what's your real plan, Mario?' she asked, checking they were out of sight of the villa before taking Mario's hand.

'I really did plan for a nice casual horse ride. I thought we could go out to a quite little spot I know about.' Mario grinned, drawing her closer and slipping one arm around her back.

'Sounds perfect, amore mio.' Emily agreed, relaxing into him and looking forward to some time away from all their responsibilities.

It soon became clear that Mario really had been planning this for a while. Standing outside the gates, one of his most trusted mercenaries was waiting with two saddled horses, Emily's spirited dappled grey stallion and Mario's handsome palomino stallion.

'Bravo ragazzo D'oro.' Mario laughed, stroking his golden neck lightly.

'Alright, Spirito, we're going.' Emily grinned, feeding him half an apple as she rubbed his face.

'It's no wonder Spirito prefers you over all others.' Mario commented, checking his saddlebags quickly. 'You spoil him.'

'He's a good, strong horse. He deserves the odd special treat.' Emily shrugged, giving the other half of her apple to D'oro before swinging into the saddle. 'I've got a soft spot for all horses, they're such incredible creatures.'

'Such grace and strength.' Mario agreed, mounting up and leading her away from the city.

Relaxed in the saddle, Emily grinned as they kicked up into a steady canter, leaving behind the strict behaviours of the villa and enjoying the chance to be free. To actually be able to leave behind their responsibilities and just be normal people was a truly precious moment for both of them. No more junior Assassins scrambling for attention, no more family members asking for a few minutes of attention and no more worrying about who was watching when they stole a private moment. For once they could just be two normal people out on a date, the years and stresses falling away as they raced across the grass.

Making their way through the rolling hills, Mario led Emily along a barely visible track and around behind a dense copse of trees. Slowing to a walk, he turned and smiled as Emily came back up beside him and looked at the beauty around them. He'd first found this place with Giovanni, back when they were young teens out on a ride to blow off steam after an argument with their father. It felt so right to be here with Emily at his side, almost like sharing a family secret.

'Mario, this is amazing. I had no idea there was anything like this around here.' Emily breathed, looking from the trees at their left to the river flowing to their right and the rolling terrain that completely hid this magical little spot from view.

'Few know of this place. I know Giovanni brought Maria here for a few special occasions but I doubt he told anyone else about it. You're the first person I've shown here.' Mario shrugged, a little self conscious about his lack of a personal life.

'This is a special place. It's worth keeping it a secret.' Emily grinned, dismounting smoothly and securing her horse on a long line to graze. 'But I get a feeling you didn't just bring me out here to admire the natural beauty of your territory.'

Securing D'oro beside Spirito, Mario unhooked the saddlebags and slung them over his shoulder before taking Emily's hand and leading her down to the river. To him, the moment couldn't have been any better, Emily watching him with a soft, loving smile on her scarred lips as he unrolled the blanket he'd brought along and spread it out on the grass before guiding her down to sit against him. Delving into the bags again, he pulled out a light picnic and a bottle of his best wine, setting everything in easy reach.

'You romantic sap.' Emily chuckled, snuggling in against him and relaxing, perfectly content to take
nibbles of fruit from his fingers. 'You are worth spoiling, il mio amore.' Mario replied, nuzzling her neck contentedly. 'Would you care to take a swim before we eat too much?'

'A swim sounds lovely, mio caro.' Emily nodded, gripping Mario's wrist as she turned to catch a sweet kiss. 'But only if you'll join me in the water.'

'But of course.' Mario grinned, kissing her softly again. 'I can never refuse you anything, Emily. You know that.'

'One day you might not have much choice.' Emily sighed, reaching back to pull the ribbon from his hair. 'But that's a discussion for another time.'

Getting to her feet again and pulling Mario up easily, Emily stepped right in close and pulled at the ribbons holding his collar closed, fingers sliding over the fine cloth lightly. Pulling away the little ruffle that she absolutely detested, she flicked it down onto the blanket and smiled as Mario finally got over his shock and tugged at her own collar. She found it so adorable that he was shaking slightly, still unable to believe that she was his despite his marred features and less than glorious situation. Emily just couldn't understand why Mario couldn't believe that she was truly dedicated to him and no one else.

Wishing his hands would stop shaking, Mario unlaced her tunic and worked her belt loose, flicking the finely tooled leather down onto the blanket beside them. He wasn't sure if he was shaking from excitement or nerves, he felt both as he parted her pale green tunic and slipped it off her shoulders. The last time he'd tried anything like this he'd tasted Emily's aggression and he didn't want to taste it again, not after she'd knocked him on his ass with one hit.

'Mario, stop thinking about it so much. Provided you don't try anything I'm not ready to do, you won't get in any trouble.' Emily soothed, drawing him in for another kiss even as she pulled his gloves off. 'Remember, you are the first man to have ever gotten this close and seen the woman I am behind my reputation.'

'I can't help it, I know I have a great treasure in you but I also know how dangerous you are.' Mario replied, kissing her again.

'Right now, put it all aside. Right here, we're just two people madly in love. Nothing else is important.' Emily grinned, letting his sword fall to the blanket. Just Mario and Emily, that's all that matters right now.'

Letting their cares and stresses float away, the pair focused solely on the moment, loving hands brushing aside expensive fabrics and tracing over scars. Fine silks and velvets were tossed aside carelessly, two hearts desperate to see all that was within their reach. Mario hesitated when he had Emily down to her breast wrap and breeches, remembering her warning and not sure how to proceed. Emily just smiled and flicked aside his second belt before taking a seat and laying back, extending one booted foot to him.

Lighting up with another smile, Mario released the buckles down the outside of her calf and undid the strap hidden under the turned cuff before slipping her boot off and setting it beside the blanket. Accepting her other foot and repeating process to drop her other boot, he sat and leant back on his hands so Emily could tug his boots off and put them aside neatly. But as they got to their feet again, Mario was hit with a rather untimely case of timid nerves as he realised that the next step would be to unlace Emily's breeches and peel them off.

Smiling softly, Emily stepped back and turned, revealing her scarred back to Mario's hungry gaze. Unlacing her breeches, she wriggled out of them and smirked faintly at the sound of Mario following her lead once she revealed the simple shorts she was wearing under her breeches, the rich blue of the cloth contrasting magnificently against her skin.

Working her breeches off completely, Emily looked back over her shoulder as she tossed the black
cloth over to join the pile of tangled clothes thoughtlessly. Mario was practically drooling, his modesty protected by a basic white loincloth. Offering her hand, Emily laughed freely as Mario took her hand and they ran towards the water, two young lovers on their first real date.

The years fell away, taking them back to younger, more innocent times as they laughed and shoved playfully, wrestling in the water and rising again in matching sprays. Mario couldn't help but reflect on how much easier life was with Emily, even when she hooked his ankles and sent him tumbling backwards into the water again. Swiping his hair out of his eyes as he emerged again, Mario grabbed her and shoved her under the surface before taking off across the river as fast as he could, prompting a chase through the cool waters.

Catching up about half way across the river, Emily grabbed Mario's kicking ankles and pulled him back, wrapping her arms around his chest as they both sank under the waves of their games. Kicking off the bottom, they burst from the water again and just drift, muttering sweet nothings and stealing kisses until Emily's grumbling stomach reminded them of the passing time.

'Come, amore, lunch awaits.' Mario laughed, heading for the riverbank to dry off and eat. 'I trust you remembered to bring a couple of towels.' Emily sighed, slogging out of the water and wringing the water out of her hair.

Digging into the saddlebags again, Mario pulled out two large towels and wrapped one around Emily before securing the other around his waist and squeezing the water from his hair. Turning at a noise from Emily, Mario was absolutely certain she was trying to kill him with her teasing. Towel knotted around her chest, she casually squeezed out her breast wrap and shorts, spreading them out on another towel. With her back turned to him, she loosened her towel and let it slide down to her waist as she dug in the leather bag she'd brought along.

Flicking out a dry wrap, Emily slipped it into place and knotted it off firmly on the left before looking back over her shoulder and giving Mario a saucy wink. He flushed and turned away, adorably sweet with his efforts to give her a chance to get dressed. Pulling on a second pair of shorts, these ones a dark green, she pulled off her towel and came up behind Mario, running it over his hair firmly to pull the water out.

'You're all wound up again, amore. Just relax, it's perfectly normal for me to carry a change of underclothes wherever I go.' she uttered, continuing to rub at his hair. 'With all the situations I get into, it would be foolish not to.'

'I…you know me too well Emily.' Mario chuckled, relaxing back against her and reaching back to rest one hand on her hip.

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Pushing back to his feet, Ezio growled and jumped back up onto the wooden block that had been placed in the sparring ring for some kind of training exercise Aloysius had suggested. Ezio knew what it was all about, he'd figured it out the moment Aloysius had stepped up onto the second block and unsheathed his dagger. But knowing why this exercise mattered didn't make it any easier to accomplish what was being asked of him.

Parrying another strike from Aloysius, Ezio wobbled dangerously for a moment on the narrow block but he refused to fall again, leaning forward and shoving against Aloysius. A yelp of shock, a wobble and Ezio hit the ground again, twisting to avoid Aloysius' blade as he dropped. Sitting up slowly, Ezio frowned at the sound of someone laughing softly nearby.

'You looked so much like your father right then, Ezio.' Maria remarked, standing beside the fence and smiling at her elder son. 'And that same little yelp when you lost your balance…pure Giovanni.'

'Somehow I doubt father was such an oaf on his feet.' Ezio grumbled, getting up and climbing back onto the block.
'Do you remember when your father broke his arm, you were about eleven.' Maria smiled, watching the confusion flash across Ezio's face. 'He told you he'd been attacked coming home from the bank.'
'I remember, he let me write my name on the hardened bandages.' Ezio nodded, smiling faintly at the memory. 'Why do you mention it, madre?'
'He wasn't attacked. Unless you count tripping over the balcony and tipping over a pot plant as an attack. He put his arm out to catch his fall, slipped off the pot and broke it.' Maria explained, unable to hide her smile at the less glamorous memories of Giovanni.
'No Assassin can be graceful all the time. We all fall along the way, sometimes at the most inopportune of times but it happens. I'll bet your Uncle has some stories to tell of his falls and slips.' Aloysius added, shifting his weight and slashing at Ezio again.

Twisting clear of the attack, Ezio kept his balance on the narrow block and shoved at Aloysius with his left hand, straining with the effort of holding Aloysius' blade back before he finally removed Aloysius from his block and sent him sprawling in the dirt.
'I did mean to ask him about his rumoured bladeless kill but there hadn't been a good moment to ask about it.' Ezio shrugged, jumping to avoid Aloysius' lashing foot and landing lightly back on the block. 'Whoa…oof.'
'As graceful as your father, I see nipote.' Mario laughed, appearing at the fence with Emily.
'Not that you can say much, Mario.' Emily chuckled, bounding up onto the fence. 'Some of your slips are legendary even in my time.'
'I have no idea what you are talking about.' Mario protested, looking up at Emily sharply.

Chuckling softly, Emily shifted on the wall and smiled as Ezio and Maria both came closer, watching the way Mario went a rather stunning shade of red. It was almost like he knew something embarrassing was going to happen and there was no escaping it.
'There is a legend that you once killed a man without ever bleeding a weapon. Sword lost into the river, dagger lost when an archer shot it from your hand, throwing knives all used up on archers and your hidden blade broken. You left no marks on the target to indicate how he died.' Emily shrugged, resting one hand on his shoulder lightly. 'Come on Mario, tell us how you did it.'

Looking away quickly, Mario knew he should have expected something like this from Emily. He remembered that particular mission so clearly, it was his first as a Senior Assassin, not long before Giovanni left Monteriggioni for Firenze. They'd been sent to San Gimignano to deal with some trouble, each given a target and told to maintain a low profile.
'This will help to prove a point, Mario. Ezio doubts that even the best Assassins have bad days and fall from perches.' Aloysius added, brushing off the dirt as he wandered over to join the group.
'Very well.' Mario nodded, swinging up onto the wall and taking a seat. 'I stepped on a loose tile and lost my footing. I did try to catch my fall but missed and knew I would need help to escape this time. Instead of hitting the ground, I landed on my target, crushing him into the street with my weight. Not one to challenge a good thing, I ran from the scene, escaping the guards and disappearing into a hay cart to hide.'
'You…' Ezio tried so hard to keep a straight face but he couldn't help the laugh that bubbled out of him at the idea of anyone completing a mission by falling off a roof and crushing their target.
'Strangely, that's not the weirdest kill I've heard of.' Emily remarked, squeezing Mario's shoulder lightly and glaring at Ezio to shut up. 'I remember hearing about one kill that left the Assassin wondering if the kill counted.'
'Rufus had a kill like that.' Aloysius added, slapping one hand over Ezio's mouth. 'We were hunting in Berlin, it was a miserable and wet day. Rufus steps around the corner of the building and there's our target. The guy stares at Rufus for a moment then promptly faints. Face down in a puddle, our target drowned before we even got a chance to deal with him.'
'Not the story I heard but it's just as good.' Emily sniggered, shaking her head in wonder. 'I heard the one about the guy who was ten minutes too late to kill a target that died of an allergic reaction.'
Feeling better about his own less than standard kill after hearing of other similar mistakes that still ended in successes, Mario smiled and hopped off the fence. He knew many different training exercises but this idea with the two blocks was something new to him.

'Aloysius, why don't you run through some block work with Mario? I need some time to walk and talk with Ezio.' Emily suggested, jumping backwards off the fence.

'Sometimes I swear you still dislike me, Emily.' Aloysius groused, fully expecting this would go badly for him. 'It's all about balance and restrained power. The idea is to knock your opponent off their block without losing your footing or stepping onto the second block.'

'Sounds easy enough.' Mario shrugged, following Aloysius across to the blocks.

'The only point of contact that can be made between opponents is daggers. So before you think of simply throwing a punch, just keep that in mind.' Aloysius smirked, jumping up onto his block and pulling out his dagger again.

'Perhaps not as easy as I thought.' Mario muttered, stepping up and drawing Emily's gifted dagger.

Bidding Maria a good day, Emily waited for Ezio to hop the fence before wandering off into the city below, enjoying the peace of the day. She could tell Ezio was getting agitated though, he wasn't used to all this idleness since taking up Giovanni's robes and blade. He'd been busy for most of the previous years since that tragic day when his life had been turned upside down. But now, faced with endless weeks of leisure time, he was getting bored and wanted to go do something active.

'You hanker to get back to the killing, don't you? There is no shame in such a thing, few Assassins do well with enforced downtime. You need something to do, anything to keep you occupied.' Emily sighed, slinging a friendly arm around his shoulders and continued their walk.

'Si, I am not comfortable with just sitting around like this. I have changed Emily, I long for action now and I want to get back to the duties my father left behind.' Ezio nodded, curling his arm around Emily's back. 'But I have little interest in whores right now and I don't know what else to do with my time. I was training but now Aloysius is working with Uncle Mario, Gena was upstairs playing with Petruccio and Libby said she wanted to take a nap.'

Reaching into her web, Emily grabbed Libby's line and tugged it, shielding Claudia from the backlash as she rudely awoke Libby and summoned her to join them outside. Still weary from her childish romp with Mario, Emily really didn't care to take Ezio on a treasure hunt to burn off some excess energy but it was clear he needed something to do.

'What's going on Emily?' Libby asked, running towards them even as she finished buckling on her sword belt. 'Why the sudden wake up? I was dreaming of home.'

'We've been slack on our raids around this area. Go to the other towns around here and use your gift to locate anything of value. I am aware that Aloysius has been developing your ability for finding pages and other valuable documents so I assume that you are able to find chests and hidden passages as well.' Emily briefed, apologetic that she'd torn Libby from dreams of better times but something needed to be done.

'I am not as accurate as Aloysius but I can find them.' Libby nodded, tying her hair back quickly. 'Good, take Ezio with you and go seek out treasures for a day or so. This is not a punishment, it's something that needs to be done and Ezio really does need to burn off some excess energy.' Emily grinned, confident that they would return with all kinds of prizes.

'Are we permitted to raid any Templar site we locate?' Libby asked, excited at the prospect of testing her old skills.

'No churches or other places or worship, that's my only stipulation. You know the rules, Libby.' Emily directed, dismissing the pair with a wave and turning away. 'You have 48 hours. I don't want to see you before the end of the time.'

'As you wish, Emily.' Libby nodded, grabbing Ezio's arm and leading him towards the city gates.
Dignified Surprises

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Dignified surprises
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Today was an important day for the Assassins based at Monteriggioni, a day that meant they were pulling out all the stops to celebrate a worthy milestone for one of their number. From chests in their rooms, the four modern Assassins pulled out their best robes, saved only for the most formal of occasions. No one knew how these fine robes had gotten here but they didn't question it too hard, they were just grateful to have something appropriate to wear for the ceremony today.

Spreading out her formal robes on her rarely used bed, Emily sent a mental request to Mario to come up and help her for a moment before sending Ezio to assist Aloysius and requesting that Libby and Gena help each other with the complicated outfits. It wasn't that she had anything against Claudia and Maria helping with this, it was simply the fact Emily had always been trained that only trained Assassins of any level were permitted to touch the formal robes.

Shedding her borrowed clothes, Emily pulled on the dark blue breeches and smoothed out the hugging fabric over her muscles. Next she dragged on a light silk singlet, tucking it into her breeches before pulling the laces tight and picking up the first of many display layers.

'You need…Emily?' Mario called, stopping in the doorway and staring at her change of outfits.

'Come in Mario, I need your help with all of this.' Emily grinned, glancing over her shoulder even as she laced the dark blue apron around her waist and knotted it off on the left.

'What is all of this?' Mario asked, coming up behind her and looking at the piles of folded cloth, arranged leather and metal ornaments all over the bed.

'This is my formal robes, only pulled out when there is an occasion worthy of the hours of work that goes into preparing all of this.' Emily shrugged, picking up the first of four lightweight inner tunics and turning to Mario. 'On the rare occasions we are called to don our finery, it's customary to have someone assist with getting it all sorted.'

'I can see why that might be necessary.' Mario agreed, accepting the tunic Emily held out to him and shaking it out quickly.

'Just wait until we get to the armour and weapons, then you'll really get the idea.' Emily laughed, slipping into the tunic and smoothing the deep blue cloth across her chest. 'Now the first sash, the white one there. Sigil to the front, then cross at the back and knot to the right hip.'

Picking up the white silk sash, Mario smoothed it out and placed the embroidered Assassin symbol over Emily's abdomen before bringing the tails around behind and crossing them over neatly. Smoothing out the silk against her sides, he brought the tails back around and knotted them off neatly, trying to remember the flat knot he'd been shown before.

Next came a long sleeved pale grey shirt, decorated with beautiful gold embroidery around the collar and cuffs, left open for the most and pulled firm around her abdomen with three ties. The gap in the shirt went from her throat to her sash, displaying the blood red mark on the white sash. Tugging the sides in a little more, Emily rolled her shoulders and nodded, relaxed and calm as she guided Mario to the next piece of her formal outfit.

On went another dark blue tunic, the folds and seams cut and sewn to show the under tunic and apron across her thighs and draping lower from her hips. This tunic was held closed by a pale blue sash, the Assassin symbol embroidered onto it in black and knotted on the left hip. Hanging from the ends of the sash, a little golden sword and dagger clicked faintly as Mario smoothed out the cloth
against her body.

Another shirt slipped over this second inner tunic, dyed a darker grey than the first and with sleeves cut to her elbows and ornamented with gold and silver embroidery around the cuffs and collar. This shirt doesn't gape as much as the other, pulling tight across her chest to hide all of the layers underneath. But it does flare open at her throat, displaying part of the underlying collar and a tempting patch of skin at the base of her neck.

'Mind on the job Mario, you can play later.' Emily chuckled, tweaking his nose quickly. 'We don't have time to be messing about; you still have to get cleaned up.'

'What are you getting all dressed up for? I was not aware of any special Assassin business at the moment.' Mario asked, picking up the next tunic in the pile and sliding it over Emily's shoulders.

'Today Libby moves up in the ranks. At once point, such advancements were no big deal, usually completed in private between the Master and the junior Assassin but over the years we altered that tradition to turn such promotions into grand affairs.' Emily explained, flicking out the tails of her third tunic and holding it closed with one hand. 'Black sash this time.'

Knotting off the third sash, Mario stepped back to take in Emily in all her finery so far, gaze drifting over the tones of grey and blue highlighted with the gold and silver embroidery and other ornaments and the black sash wrapped around her waist and tied to the right again. Getting with the pattern now, he turned and picked up the final grey shirt, sliding it over Emily's head and smoothing it out as she tidied the under layers and straightened her appearance.

'One final under tunic and we can get to the real finery.' Emily sighed, already fed up with this effort but she had to be a good example to her underlings.

Circling Emily slowly, Mario was amazed by how powerful and dignified she looked already, even though it seemed like they'd only gotten through about half the pieces on the bed. Each tunic hung in a different way, surrounding her legs with layers of dark blue cloth. Each piece he could see was embroidered with a different colour to create the most amazing shimmer of expense without looking gaudy. Her sash tails could be clearly seen between the layers of her tunic tails, the little golden weapons hanging from them all added a captivating sparkle.

Shaking off his musings, Mario picked up the last blue tunic and worked it up Emily's arms, careful not to catch on her sleeves and mess up the soft grey cloth she'd arranged so neatly. There were only two sashes left on the bed, her standard wide red one and a narrower gold one with more miniature weapons dangling from the tails. He picked the gold one and brought it over, automatically moving to put the Assassin insignia at the front but Emily stopped him.

'This time the paired insignia rest on my hips. The knot sits in the middle, dangling the tails straight down the front.' she guided, releasing his hands and spreading her hands.

Positioning the sash and knotting it off neatly, Mario checked the length was right, sinking to one knee and making a few final adjustments before standing and waiting for the next instruction. Dressed like this, Emily cut an imposing figure even without her armour and weapons, it was no surprise to him that she commanded such respect and power in her own time.

'Next will be the golden cowl and tunic but first my boots and some of my armour.' Emily smiled, taking a seat and releasing her hair from the simple braid she wore every day.

'I am grateful my own outfits are not this complicated.' Mario commented, picking up her boots and coming to sit at her feet.

'It's a nightmare.' Emily agreed, glancing over towards the bed. 'Could you kindly fetch my hair cage? It's there near my bracers.'
Picking up the fragile gold cage, Mario brought it back over and held it in place as Emily twisted locks of hair around it and pulled everything into position with the small pouch of hair pins that had been attached to the cage.

'The challenges of being a Master and a District Leader, added finery when the formal gear comes out.' she shrugged, checking her hair was done properly before standing and returning to the bed. 'I do think you look beautiful. But perhaps I am biased.' Mario shrugged, reaching out to run one finger down her neck.

'Just a little bit.' Emily smiled, stealing a quick kiss before retrieving her second pair of bracers and strapping them into place. 'Not that I mind. It's a refreshing change to be desired because I am attractive, not because of my title and position.'

'This is a problem for you?' Mario asked, taking the intricately tooled leather bands Emily handed him before she turned and extended her left arm.

'It's a well known fact that if someone does manage to catch my attention and gets me to agree to marry them, they get a share of my power.' Emily shrugged, so bitter that she would lose some of her hard earned territory if she ever did marry. 'Around the upper arms here, try to get equal spacing from the embroidery lines.'

'That hardly seems fair. You worked hard to get to your place in the brotherhood, si?' Mario frowned, working out which way was up for the design before lacing the first leather cuff around Emily's right arm.

'Si, I worked so hard for my place, never accepting any of the help from the older Assassins. I was determined to earn my place with my own sweat, blood and tears. I spent vast portions of my family fortune to build my stronghold and the safe houses that would be needed across my district. To know I risk losing a portion of it is what makes me so reluctant to marry.' Emily nodded, turning and offering out her other arm. 'Then there is the concern that if I do marry, I am expected to produce at least four new young Assassins that I will never have the honour of training personally.'

Stunned into silence at what Emily was telling him, Mario concentrated on lacing up the second cuff and making sure it isn't too tight before turning and looking at the items still spread out on the bed. Making his choice, he picked up the tooled leather gloves, running his fingers over the black designs of ivy over the backs and stones on the palms before taking Emily's right hand and slipping the glove on, threading the strap through the buckle and tugging it firm.

'Bah, today isn't a day for irritation about tradition and continuing the brotherhood. Today is a good day, one of my Juniors is growing her wings and will move up to become a true Assassin.' Emily smiled, waving her left hand dismissively. 'I have already made my position clear, the Council of Elders has not seen fit to push their luck.'

'They would be foolish to push you too hard.' Mario agreed, catching her left hand and slipping the second glove into place.

'As they learned the last time they tried.' Emily laughed, the dark mood vanishing between them as Mario looked for the next piece of this puzzle. 'The gorget there, white leather with the gold lining.'

'I suppose all these pieces serve a purpose.' Mario remarked, tracing the red and black lines etched into the white leather.

'The cuffs remind us of the grasp of our brothers and sisters when we are weak, lifting us up and guiding us forward. The gorget reminds us to hold out heads high, we are strong and will never be broken.' Emily recited, lifting her chin as he slipped the detailed leather around her neck and buckled it securely into place. 'The brace reminds us of the unending support of our brotherhood, watching out for each Assassin when they stumble and keeping us safe from the darkness that haunts our people.'

'Not too tight?' Mario asked, resting his hands one her shoulders lightly.

'No, this is fine Mario. The first outer tunic, the darkest of the three golden ones.' Emily replied, catching another kiss before he turned to grab the needed clothing.

Shrugging into the heavier samite layers, Emily adjusted the fall as Mario tugged the laces down the
front and pulled the shimmering cloth firm around her torso without restricting her breathing or movement. Without being told, he went back and fetched the second gold tunic, working it into place against her back then circling to lace up the heavily embroidered cloth. Now when he looked down, the golden tails hung over and between the blue tails, swirling around her thighs and sweeping past her calves.

On Emily's guidance, Mario picked up the lightweight leather armour set out on the bed, the two panels laced together on one side. Slipping the plain panels around her chest where they belonged, he pulled the laces firm on her right side and made sure she was comfortable before tying them off and retrieving the final tunic. As he picked it up, Emily reached past him for her cowl and settled it over her shoulders, spreading her arms so he could tighten the straps that ran under her shoulders to keep her cowl cloth in place regardless of what she did.

Relaxing as Mario worked the final layer of cloth over her shoulders, Emily smiled as he neatened the soft fur sleeves that barely covered the curve of her shoulders before coming around and starting on the complex fastenings of this final layer. At first Emily had to show him how to do it, weaving the three layers together and pointing out the wire hooks and eyelets that held the fabric tight when all done up properly.

Smoothing out the bottom layer and pulling the middle piece across, Mario got the idea in seconds, taking his time to make sure the first two layers were wrinkle free before pulling across the top, richly decorated layer and dealing with the stiff toggles running down her left side. Settled on his knees as he did up the last one, he looked up at this golden display of power and felt his throat go dry. She was absolutely stunning in all her finery, golden cowl pulled low over her eyes and displaying an embroidered eagle spreading its wings over her head.

Helping Mario to his feet, Emily slipped past him and picked up her red sash, handing it to Mario as she picked up her leather and steel brace, tracing over the silver Assassin emblem as he wound the wide sash around her waist and knotted it in the back, smoothing the tails to hang down properly. Emily had little problem buckling the brace on her own, pulling the straps tighter than Mario would have but she was still comfortable so he didn't ask about it.

Picking up the glistening greaves still sitting on the bed, Mario felt no shame about going to his knees to help this fierce warrior finish kitting up, pulling the straps tight and glancing up to make sure he hadn't over tightened anything. Emily just smiled and brushed her fingers through his hair before turning her attention to the rest of her armour.

Sinking back on the bed, she slipped into her backplate and set her chestplate into position, years of practise making it so easy for her to buckle the two panels together while Mario was still focusing on her greaves. Sitting up to check the fit then standing and pulling Mario to his feet, she turned one last time and checked the last folded bundles sitting on her bed. One was pushed away without another thought before she picked up a different one and smiled as Mario took it from her fingers.

Coming back around behind Emily, Mario fastened the gold cape to her shoulders, securing the silver eagle claw clasps to her chest armour where he could see they fitted to make the design complete.

'This one over the left shoulder and the red one over the right.' she guided, handing him a dark green cape already attached to a chest harness.

'Three seems a little over the top, don't you think?' Mario asked, taking the cape and unbuckling the strap before draping it over her left shoulder.

'For normal occasions, I only normally wear the green or red one but for a special occasion like this, I am bound to wear every honorific I have earned. The green honours my position as a District Leader, red my place as a Master and the gold marks me as an Assassin Champion. We run an
annual competition among all the districts to send their best fighter of any rank to partake in a series of challenges and tests to find the best Assassin in the world. I have claimed victory twice and so wear the golden eagle cloak as proof of those victories.' Emily explained, ignoring the growing heat of being trapped inside all these layers.

Arranging the red cloak in position as well, Mario crossed the straps and buckled both securely, smoothing out the fabric and stepping back to admire Emily in all her glory. Letting Mario look his fill, Emily picked up her ceremonial weapons and secured them to her belt and brace where they belonged. Each one had a jewelled hilt and the most beautiful designs over the sheathes.

'Right, I'm all dressed and ready. Now it's your turn. Go pull out the very best outfit you've got, take this and add to it and I'll see if I can't at least find a ceremonial sword. You're going to need one.' she grinned, handing him the cloak she'd decided not to wear. 'You are a Master, you've got no say in getting out of this promotion ceremony.'

'I had no intention of trying to get out of it, I just have no idea how I am supposed to compete with such a fine display of power.' Mario replied, looking at the silvery cloak he'd been handed.

'Be glad you don't have to wear all of this get up, it's already way too hot in here.' Emily shrugged, fanning her face with one hand. 'Just come up with the best you've got, everyone will be wearing something different. Though I do wonder just what Aloysius wrangled Ezio into for this occasion.'

'What about Maria, Claudia and Petruccio?' Mario asked, turning for the door.

'This does not involve them. Ceremonies like this are restricted for Assassins only. I have explained this to Maria and she has agreed to have a celebratory meal waiting for us when we are finished in the Sanctuary. We will share the meal as a complete family, tradition be damned.' Emily explained, bundling up the rest of the formal wear on the bed and handing it all to Mario. 'If anything else fits, work with it. We'll try and keep you from sticking out too much.'

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Mario had to admit that the team had done an amazing job of things while he'd been distracted by Emily's extensive outfit. The statues within the Sanctuary were all draped in fine cloths, each cloth folded precisely to reveal weapons and match the stone outfit's the ancient Assassins wore. In front of the statue of Altair though, they'd placed a comfortable chair and a small table. Draped over the chair was one of Giovanni's coats and his boots sat beside the footrest. On the table they'd placed a book, a quill, a small plate of food and a glass of wine.

'It is customary for us to honour the Assassins that have gone before us. We drape their likenesses in fine clothes, leave places for them in our homes and offer their favourite food and drink on special occasions and recorded dates of death.' Aloysius explained, guiding Mario to where they would stand to partake in this ceremony.

'So somewhere in your time there are people doing that in my honour?' Mario asked, looking back over to where the place had been made for Giovanni.

'I know of a couple of people that have personal shrines to the Auditore Assassins.' Aloysius grinned, resting one hand on Mario's shoulder. 'It's good to see Emily has made such an effort to make you part of this, all the more proof she's deeply in love. Only her chosen husband has any right to wear her first Champion cape.'

'I wondered why she was so determined I wear this and not my Auditore one.' Mario shrugged, stroking the beautifully crafted silver cloak with the large eagle embroidered right across his back.

'It's as close as she can get to claiming you without making Ezio suspicious.' Aloysius chuckled, stopping under the skylight at the heart of the hidden chamber and turning to wait for the others to arrive. 'Gena and Libby will know what it means but it's highly unlikely Ezio will have a clue.'

'So what happens now?' Mario asked, a little confused that they were the first ones down here.

'We wait. Gena and Ezio should be down in a few minutes and then Libby. Emily will be somewhere out of sight upstairs, waiting and watching for the right moment to make her appearance. It's all about power, Emily is the top Assassin here, she might not have spent as long as a Master
Assassin as you but her power and capabilities make her the most powerful Assassin outside the Council of Elders.' Aloysius offered, resting his left hand on his sword and shaking out his red and silver capes.

Watching Aloysius from under the embroidered cowl Emily had talked him into, Mario had to admit that he still adored Emily's highly ornate outfit but the blue and silver of Aloysius' equally complicated looking outfit was quite elegant as well. Not as jaw droppingly stunning as Emily's but still very suited to the wearer.

'Here they come.' Aloysius uttered, turning his head a little to look at Mario. 'Stern and a little bored. You're not supposed to enjoy waiting on juniors.'

'I detest waiting on juniors but it happens to every Master.' Mario replied, folding his arms and waiting with limited patience.

Appearing around the final corner, Gena looked truly imposing in her black and blood red garments, dripping with weaponry and her face hidden within a deeper cowl, the angry face of a black eagle glaring out from the peak of her cowl. Her gloves gave the impression of bloodied talons with their cut and depth of colour. Even her inky black boots made her seem more intimidating, clicking faintly against the tiles as she strode out to meet the Master Assassins.

'Senior Assassin Newman.' Aloysius nodded, his words giving her permission to approach and take her place. 'Novice Ezio, approach and be recognised.'

Stepping into sight, Ezio radiated his dissatisfaction with the idea of getting all dressed up for a reason he didn't yet know. He'd ended up back in his standard robes, bracers replaced with simple black leather cuffs and a plain pale grey cape hanging from his shoulders instead of the Medici one he was so proud of. He'd been stripped of most of his weapons, left with just a sword on his belt and it was clear that he didn't like the idea.

'Take your place, Novice. We have been waiting for you.' Aloysius instructed, pointing to the simple white mat on the floor opposite where Gena was kneeling on a black mat.

'As ordered, Master.' Ezio nodded, bowing respectfully before moving to kneel opposite Gena.

Libby joined them a minute later, dressed much like the other modern Assassins but her robes were pale blue and white with brown leather accessories and a standard fit out of weaponry as well as her usual double bracers. Over her shoulders she wore a pale blue cape, the edges detailed with a white scalloped line.

'Forgive my tardiness, Masters. I have no suitable explanation for my lateness.' she offered, right hand resting over her heart as she bowed deeply.

'You are forgiven, Junior Assassin Gant. After all, you are the reason we are all gathered here.' Aloysius replied, dipping his head in response to her respectful bow. 'Take your place, I am certain Master Hunter will be here shortly.'

'As instructed, Master.' Libby replied, moving to settle on the waiting blue mat and bow her head in thought as she waited for Emily's arrival.

Making absolutely no sound as she entered, Emily motioned for silence as she came up behind Libby and drew her ceremonial sword. Stepping closer, she placed the engraved tip on Libby's right shoulder and tapped lightly in signal. Keeping her head bowed, Libby removed her Assassin ring from her left hand and placed it on the waiting sword, her fingers sliding over the silver ring with the two ropes that she'd worn for so long. Slowly the sword was lifted from her shoulder, the sound of the ring sliding along the blade so loud in the silence of the Sanctuary.

Sheathing her sword, Emily moved away from Libby and circled around behind Gena to take her place between Aloysius and Mario. She was glad to note that Aloysius had organised it so Mario was on her right as befitted his position as District Leader. It was their subtle way of saying thank you for providing a safe place to complete this ritual.
'Elizabeth Gant, I have received word that you have been christened with a second name by the widow of Grand Master Giovanni Auditore.' Emily started, combining two rituals into one ceremony since she'd been told by Maria about Libby's choice.

'This is correct, Master.' Libby confirmed, keeping her eyes on the floor. 'At first it started when Grand Master Giovanni called me Elizabeth. Maria suggested that in his honour it would be acceptable for me to take on the Auditore name.'

'Elizabetta Auditore…is this suitable to you Master Auditore?' Emily nodded, turning to look Mario in the eye. 'The decision is yours as to Elizabeth's worthiness to carry your name with her.'

'I find her worthy of the family name.' Mario replied, recognising that this was important for the memory of Giovanni. 'I recognise her as Elizabetta Auditore.'

'You object to this, Novice?' Aloysius asked, noticing the way Ezio had tensed up.

'I object that I was not given a chance to voice my feelings on this.' Ezio replied, ducking his head quickly. 'That is my only concern, Master.'

'Concerned that Libby will become a direct competitor for the Auditore legacy?' Emily asked, turning her attention to Ezio. 'Speak the truth, Novice.'

'No, not a competitor. I am uncomfortable with being asked to consider Claudia's great descendant as my sibling.' Ezio replied, lifting his head a little but he kept his eyes on the floor.

'Then consider her a cousin. I recognise Elizabetta Auditore as my surrogate daughter, niece of Giovanni and cousin to Ezio, Claudia and Petruccio.' Mario declared, his words startling everyone else in the room.

Consulting the webs quickly, Emily relaxed a little when she realised that Mario's words hadn't affected how Libby was linked into the family. She was still connected directly to Claudia and if anything had happened, her bond to the only daughter of Giovanni had gotten stronger.

'Do you accept this declaration, Elizabetta?' she asked, placing one hand on Mario's shoulder lightly. 'Are you happy to accept Master Auditore as your surrogate father?'

'I am Master Hunter. You have my thanks, Master Auditore.' Libby replied, bowing low in thanks.

'Novice, are you more comfortable with this situation?' Aloysius asked, wanting to be certain they were making the right decision.

'I am, Master Knight.' Ezio replied, also showing proper respect to his elders.

Reaching into one of her belt pouches, Emily pulled out a new Assassin's ring, this one bearing just a single thick rope that connected to the familiar insignia with two thin rings. Dropping the removed Junior ring into the same pouch, she raised the new ring to her lips and kissed it respectfully before turning to Aloysius. Accepting the ring with such respect, Aloysius repeated Emily's show of respect for the ring and what it meant before handing it back and bowing his head as the ring was handed to Mario.

Realising that Emily was showing him memories of previous promotion ceremonies she had attended, Mario accepted the ring and kissed it before approaching Libby. This wasn't much different to induction ceremonies he'd witnessed and participated in, the same words but different gestures and there was no branding of the finger.

'Laa shay'a waqi'un moutlaq bale kouloun moumkine. These are the words spoken by our ancestors that lay at the heart of our creed. Where other people blindly follow the truth, remember…' he intoned, as familiar with these sacred words as his own name.

'Nothing is true.' Libby replied, offering out her bared left hand.

'Where other people are limited, by morality or law, remember…' Mario continued, going down onto his left knee and taking Libby's offered hand in his own left hand.

'Everything is permitted.' Libby nodded, lifting her gaze slowly.

'Congratulations on your promotion, Assassin Auditore.' Mario smiled, slipping the ring onto her finger to hide her bright red tattoo. 'Long shall your blade bring honour to our Order.'

'I stand ready to lay down my life for our Order if necessary.' Libby declared, gazing at the new ring
she would proudly wear for years to come.

Rising to his feet again, Mario drew Libby up with him and smiled, resting his hands on her shoulders for a moment before turning and moving to put her on his right side. Cued off his turn, Gena and Ezio stood and stepped off their mats, staring straight ahead as they waited for the final words of the ceremony.

'It is my honour to present Assassin Elizabetta Auditore, Masters Hunter and Knight.' Mario nodded, resting one hand on Libby's shoulder again.

'Well done, Elizabetta. No longer a fledgling Assassin, now you will soar with the eagles we are synonymous with.' Emily nodded, reaching under her capes and pulling out a neatly folded bundle of brown cloth.

'Step up and be recognised as a true Assassin, no longer held back from the missions you have trained to complete.' Aloysius instructed, turning to take one end of the folded cloth.

Glancing at Mario for a moment, Libby stepped up and turned, head held high as the two Masters reached out with their left hands and released the pale blue cape she was wearing, allowing it to fall and pool around Libby's ankles. Bringing their right hands forward, they released the majority of the fabric and fastened the brown cape to her shoulders, welcoming Libby into the ranks of mission ready Assassins.

Turning smoothly, Libby went to one knee and picked up the fallen cape, cradling it like a mother would her newborn child. This was her time to acknowledge that she was no longer a Junior and was now free to truly take off and make her own mark in their Order. As gentle as any mother with their firstborn, she walked over and placed the cape in Mario's arms carefully before stepping back and waiting, a proud smile on her face as she abandoned her Junior position and stepped fully into her new wings.

'You three are dismissed. Wait in the study for us, we will go to lunch shortly.' Emily instructed, left hand flicking idly towards the door.

Waiting until the other three were gone, Emily sighed and let her shoulders drop, reaching up to brush her cowl back to drape over her shoulders. She was flushed and tired, these formal ceremonies always wore her out faster than anything else she had to deal with. She had always preferred the effort of a hard brawl to being pushed into her intricate layers and forced to act like a District Leader.

Recognising that Emily needed some time alone to think and accept that her little flock was growing and changing, Aloysius took the blue cape from Mario and placed it in Emily's arms lightly. Turning sharply on his heel, he put one hand on Mario's shoulder and guided him from the Sanctuary, leaving Emily in solitude.

'Just walk away Mario. It's normal for the supervising Master to take a few minutes of solitude to accept that one of their fledgling Assassins is now ready to leave the nest. For all of Libby's skills, this is the first time she has been cleared to go on solo missions.' Aloysius sighed, smoothing his hood back. 'She will be fine, just give her some time to accept her changed team.'

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Still admiring her new cape, Libby smiled as she looked around at the gathering in the smaller dining room of the villa, taking note of the little details Maria had organised. Emily must have explained everything carefully, wanting this promotion party to go off just like any other the modern Assassins had witnessed. There was even a place set to honour Giovanni, constantly reminding the family of his presence and legacy.

Noticing that Ezio seemed distant, Libby put her drink down and wandered over to him, resting a light hand on his back as they stood gazing out the window together. He was tense and agitated,
something was greatly irritating him and Libby had a dark feeling it had to do with her sudden advancement into the family.

'Ezio, you know I never meant for this to happen. I was happy to be a background player in all of this, hanging back to let you learn and making only enough to keep Emily from calling me out as a lazy tagalong. But it's done now and we're stuck with a situation neither of us particularly likes.' she sighed, trying to ease the tension in him.

'Then why didn't you say anything?' Ezio asked, tearing his gaze away from the beauty outside to look at her. 'Why didn't you speak up about any of it?'

'Because my position is even more tenuous than yours. Emily, Aloysius and Mario all know that they need you to grow into the great Assassin we know you can be. You have to get through the challenges ahead so the Order can become stronger and survive everything the Templars try. I'm irrelevant, no one cares if I make it out of Italia alive so long as the final mission is completed. If I'd spoken up against what was said in the Sanctuary I would have been stripped of everything I have and reduced to scrubbing the mud from your boots at the end of each day. I don't have a lot in my life so I am not going to just roll over and let someone take what I do have.' Libby replied, pushing her frustrations down harshly.

'So that whole thing with accepting Uncle Mario as your surrogate father?' Ezio pushed, letting go of some of his irritation but he still didn't like it.

'Saving face. It would be a huge breech of protocol to deny a Master such a simple request, regardless of my personal feelings.' Libby shrugged, a faint grin on her lips as she looked up at him.

'Besides, it's only a formality. Far as I care, I'm still just plain old Libby.'

'And now further up the ranks than I am.' Ezio groused, getting right to the heart of his annoyance.

'You've only been at this a few years Ezio, don't get discouraged. It took me fifteen years to get rid of my Novice position. It's different for every Assassin, just keep going as you have been and you'll be rewarded.' Libby shrugged, toying with her new ring now that she'd shed her gloves.

'I'm starting to really doubt that.' Ezio sighed, turning away from the window completely.

'Hey, trust me on this one Ezio. You're going to become a great Assassin, surpassing even what Giovanni and Mario dreamed might be possible. You'll see places you've only dreamed existed and rebuild the Order after it came far too close to being completely wiped out. Don't give up, you're such a big part of the future, you can't even guess all the things that you've got to look forward to.' Libby grinned, reaching up to stroke her knuckles over his cheek. 'It's because of your efforts that the Order exists in my time.'

Dropping his head to brush a brotherly kiss across Libby's cheek, Ezio moved past her and swept Petruccio up into his arms, still amazed by how much bigger and healthier his baby brother is looking now. It was easy enough to forget that he had ever been a sickly child, the glow in his cheeks and his energy hid his illness so easily.

'I have something for you, fratellino.' Ezio grinned, supporting Petruccio with his right hand as he delved into his tunic and pulled out several more eagle feathers.

'Grazie fratello.' Petruccio beamed, taking the feathers carefully and hugging Ezio tight.

'I know I have one here somewhere.' Libby muttered, patting down her formal robes quickly. 'I know I picked it up, where could it have gone?'

'What have you lost, Libby?' Petruccio asked, sitting back a little in Ezio's arms and looking down at her. 'Perhaps I can help find it.'

'I had a really nice feather for you, one I'll bet you've never seen before.' Libby replied, moving closer to the brothers. 'There it is.'

Petruccio's eyes blew wide in delight as Libby plucked a brilliantly coloured feather from behind Ezio's right ear and held it out to him. Round and soft as a summer breeze, it was absolutely amazing, so full of colour and it looked like it had an eye on the front.

'It's amazing Libby. Grazie, I'll treasure it always.' he grinned, taking the bright feather and watching the light gleam across it. 'What bird does it belong too?'
'It's a peacock feather. I know I saw a picture of one in a book I was reading a few weeks ago, I'll have to find it and show you.' Libby replied, tucking his hair back behind his ear. 'I also remember seeing a real peacock in the Medici menagerie. Maybe one day you'll get to see it up close.'
'I'd like that.' Petruccio nodded, leaning over in Ezio's hold to kiss Libby's cheek in thanks.
'When it is safer Petruccio, I'll see what can be done.' Ezio promised, he'd do anything to keep his remaining brother happy and safe. 'Maybe you should take your feathers upstairs and put them away where they'll be safe?'
'Good idea, Ezio.' Petruccio nodded, letting go and darting out the second door the moment Ezio set him back on the floor.

Watching the way Libby and Ezio interacted so easily, Mario sighed softly and tried to look happy but he knew he wasn't fooling anyone with his smile. He could only try and keep a smile on his face and reassure his family that he was fine, he wasn't ready to admit that he was struggling to keep it all together. The hardest part of all was constantly denying his relationship with Emily, he would much rather just out and tell the family about it but he didn't want to push the rest of his family away like he'd done with Giovanni so long ago.
'Something on your mind, Mario?' Gena asked, stepping up beside him and refilling the goblet he was holding.
'No, just thinking.' Mario replied, sipping his wine and trying to relax. 'The challenges of leadership never go away, no matter how much we wish they would.'
'I may not be as high in the ranks but I know a few things about leadership. I'm the Team Chief in my standard four-man team. My Senior knows he can rely on my guidance and the juniors working with us accept my wisdom.' Gena shrugged, giving him a quick, one armed hug before moving off to congratulate Libby properly.

Absolutely exhausted, Emily wandered into the dining room and accepted a glass of wine, hoping that no one noticed the flush on her cheeks as she settled on the nearest chair. She barely had a chance to get comfortable before Aloysius was there, taking a seat beside her and looking at the bright flush across her cheeks.
'You can't hide it Emily, you need to shed some layers before you overheat.' he guided, accepting a moistened cloth from Petruccio and wiping off her face lightly. 'At least the top three, no one is going to judge if you can't do a day in full armour without the benefits of our time.'
'I judge myself, Aloysius. I earned these honours, it would be a breech of dignity to discard them just because I am struggling. I will not do such a thing.' Emily growled, batting Aloysius' hand away sharply.
'You are below standards, it is my duty to call you out on it.' Aloysius warned, refusing to back down when he knew there was a problem.

Whipping around at the sharp sound of someone getting slapped, Mario cursed softly and ran over to restrain Emily, pulling her back up and off Aloysius. It was a struggle, Emily's blood was boiling and she clearly didn't want to be restrained. Aloysius had learned his lesson though, as soon as Mario pulled her off just a few inches, Aloysius was out from under her and away.
'Stabilirsi Emily, è fatta. Sei così liquidazione, è necessario calmarsi. Almeno lascia che ti aiuti fuori da quella tunica top, si sta bruciando in tutti quegli strati. Ho bisogno di parlare con te in privato, circa il patto che abbiamo fatto.' Mario uttered, hoping that no one else picked up anything he said.
'Va bene.' Emily nodded, sagging into him as she panted for breath.

Getting Emily back onto her feet, Mario calmly guided her from the room and headed for his study, a quick look back over his shoulder enough to ensure no one else followed them. Leading her to the coolest corner of the room, he eased her down onto the floor and started on her outermost layers, piling what he could remove off to the side and spreading out what wasn't so easily removed.
'What did you want to talk about?' Emily asked, smiling as Mario refolded one of her capes and tucked it under her head.
'I don't know if I can keep doing this Emily. I do love you, never doubt that but I do not like constantly having to keep denying my feelings for you.' Mario sighed, continuing to part layers in an attempt to cool Emily down. 'I can't keep hiding this, it hurts too much to deny us but I know I risk so much if it gets out.'
'I wish it didn't have to be like this Mario, I'd give anything to not have to hide what we have but I don't know how to reveal it without risking the family.' Emily replied, reaching up to cup his cheek tenderly. 'If there was any way to make it work, I'd do it in a heartbeat. All I want is to be with you and happy for as long as we have.'
'That's all I want, too.' Mario nodded, continuing to part layers and try to get a breath of cool air against Emily's overheated skin. 'I want to love you as my wife and have you at my side for as long as possible.'

Shifting around a little, Emily abandoned her discarded layers and rested her head in Mario's lap, reaching out with both hands. Eyes fluttering closed as Mario pressed his hands to hers, she slipped into the web fully and looked closely at the lines, working out if she could do it safely. Very carefully, she used her growing mental strength to split her own line and pull part of it from where she was linked into the Auditore web and pulled it over to connect it to Mario's line, splicing the lines together and seeing if it stayed.

Watching what Emily was doing, Mario felt a flare of something in his chest but it was gone as quickly as it appeared so he dismissed it as nothing important. The new connection in the complex web wavered and shimmered, the two lines twisting against each other like two serpents before finally settling, still firmly entwined.

'What have you done, Emily?' he asked, smiling faintly as Emily guided their hands to wrap around the new connection in her webs.

'Bound my line around yours, creating a permanent link. As this new connection matures, it will seal and hopefully start another line. I couldn't think of any other way to reveal us to the family without them getting suspicious. After all, who can argue with the twisted strands of fate?' Emily grinned, leaning up on her elbows to steal a soft kiss.

'So when can we stop all these mistruths?' Mario asked, gazing down at Emily in amazement.

'We need to keep it up just a little longer. The new join needs time to solidify fully and look like all of the other connections in the web or they might figure it out.' Emily sighed, regretting that this wasn't a fast solution but it was a chance.

'And now that we have started on this path?' Mario continued, wanting to be sure he knew what they were getting into.

'I don't have all the answers, Mario. Our link could spawn a whole new Auditore line or it might fade away into nothing, we can only wait and see.' Emily shrugged, rolling over and sitting up slowly.

'But whatever happens in the web, tonight I want to give you a most precious gift. I don't care what the future holds for us, I want you to be the one.'

'I'll take care of you Emily.' Mario promised, understanding what Emily was really saying and knowing that he'd gotten a real treasure with her. 'You're so beautiful, I'll do whatever I can to make tonight special for you.'

'Just be with me Mario, I don't need anything else for it to be priceless.' Emily whispered, shuffling closer and relaxing into his arms. 'Protect me, love me and be mine. That's all I can ask for.'

'I'm here for you, Emily. Whatever you need, I am here.' Mario nodded, determined to protect Emily from all the harshness that he could.
Lifting Petruccio up onto the saddle, Ezio looked back over his shoulder and swung up behind his precious brother, readjusting the cloak Maria insisted on when Ezio had suggested taking Petruccio out for a ride. Petruccio didn't mind the fussing; he was thrilled to be up on Ezio's chestnut gelding, fingers clutching at the saddle as he waited to go.

Right hands on the reins and left hand keeping Petruccio leaned back into him; Ezio tapped his horse up into an easy trot and waved to Maria as they headed out. They weren't going far, Ezio had promised to keep the walls of Monteriggioni in sight at all times and he would but that didn't mean he wouldn't make sure Petruccio had a good time before they had to part ways again.

The team had discussed their plans earlier in the week and had decided that now was the time to get back to work. Things had settled in Venezia, people weren't being attacked or killed just for wearing white robes and cowls so it was a good time to return and continue with their mission. Of course, they hadn't mentioned any of this to Petruccio, Ezio had insisted that it was his right to tell his younger brother that it was time for him to return to Venezia.

Slowing his horse once they were out of sight of the gates, Ezio let the gelding take his sweet time and snag a few mouthfuls of grass as they continued wandering around the city walls. Petruccio was practically twitching with excitement when Ezio pressed the reins into his hands and held him close, enjoying the peace of the day and a chance to have some brother-bonding time.

'You understand that I cannot stay here forever, don't you fratellino?' Ezio asked, smiling faintly as Petruccio looked up at him.

'I know, Gena explained that you have to go help Leonardo and some other friends that you made.' Petruccio nodded, accepting of the fact Ezio would have to leave. 'I don't want you to go but I know you have to.'

'I wish I didn't have to go but this is my duty.' Ezio sighed, leaning over to drop a kiss on Petruccio's hair. 'One day this will all be over and I'll never have to leave again.'

Falling quiet again, the brothers were content to just ride and cherish this private moment together. Ezio could vaguely remember a time when he'd been the younger one in front, held safe in the loving arms of his father as they walked a similar path. It felt like a lifetime again, taking him back to a time before Petruccio has even existed. Back to a moment when Claudia was just a child, toddling around on unsteady legs under the watchful eyes of her family.

'What are you thinking about, Ezio?' Petruccio asked, leaning back into his brother a little more. 'Innocent times long since past. Before you were born, Claudia was just a little baby and father brought the family out here for a holiday. He took me out riding, just like we're doing right now.' Ezio smiled, turning his attention back to his brother. 'But I was a bit young to be holding the reins like you.'

Flicking the reins lightly, Petruccio smiled as the horse picked up the pace a little, nothing too fast but enough that Petruccio could feel that he was in control of the larger beast. Of course he knew that Ezio was helping to keep the horse moving but that didn't make him feel any less special in that perfect moment. If anything, controlling the horse together strengthened their brother bond.
Gently brushing Emily's hair back, Mario smiled and tucked a beautiful yellow rose behind her right ear, thumb tracing over her jaw as he lowered his hand. He was the luckiest man alive to have such a beauty on his arm, even if she did prefer the comfort of breeches and shirts over the dresses Maria and Claudia kept suggesting. Mario didn't mind; he'd known from their first meeting that Emily did things her own way. That little fact was part of the reason he felt so drawn to her. She was a free spirit and that suited him just fine.

Brushing the flower he'd picked for her, Emily flushed faintly and reached out to gently pluck a single red rose from another bush, using her hidden blade to slice through the stem. Turning back to Mario, she tucked it through the top tied laces of his jerkin, admiring how the deep red petals looked against the dark blue cloth.

Softly touching the delicate petals, Mario smiled faintly and drew Emily close again, still amazed by how this beautiful young woman could break through his defences and make him feel like a young man on his first date all over again. It didn't seem to matter what they were doing, one little smile from Emily was enough to turn him into a shy, shaking wreck every time.

Continuing their walk through the gardens, Mario's mind drifted back to that special night three months ago when Emily had given him the most priceless of gifts - her purity. He'd tried to be tender and charming, wanting the night to be perfect but he completely messed it up. It wasn't like he'd never bedded a woman before, he knew how to please a woman but the moment he'd touched Emily's bared body, everything went completely wrong.

Thankfully Emily had forgiven his rather amateur fumbles, reassuring him that it didn't matter if it took all night for this to happen so long as they had fun trying out various things. The memories of that night would last his lifetime, especially the feeling of waking up the next morning with Emily's naked body sprawled across him.

Realising that Mario was lost in his memories, Emily tugged him over to a blanket she'd asked one of the hired help to spread out under her favourite tree. Getting him to sit down was easy, she just smiled and looked down and he sat, opening his arms for her. Careful not to crush their roses, Emily cuddled in against him happily, head resting on his shoulder as they enjoyed the peace.

'Ti amo, Emily.' Mario whispered, unwilling to break their perfect moment but he needed to say it. 'Ti amo, Mario.' Emily replied, catching a sweet kiss before settling and letting her mind drift.

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Understanding that she was more than just a newly accepted member of the family, more than a companion and a fellow Assassin, Libby was all too happy to sit with Maria and listen as she reminisced about Giovanni and their innocent times with their four beautiful children. It was peaceful in a way Libby hadn't experienced in many years, nothing to think about except a quieter place and time when everything had seemed so idyllic.

Occasionally Libby would chime in with her own stories, remembering the good times with Giovanni and praising Ezio's other skills. Wisely she mentioned nothing of his kills and other less than acceptable skills but she did speak of his compassion and kindness, remembering times when his gentle soul had shone through and he'd shown the world that he was more than just an Assassin and an Auditore.

Like the time he'd abandoned a chase to help up a young woman that had been knocked over by a guard and injured her leg. Ezio had passed the chase off to Aloysius and crouched beside the woman, picking her up gently and carrying her to the nearest doctor for treatment. He'd even left a few coins to help pay for her care before he'd raced away, rejoining the chase and feeling good that he'd been able to help someone.
Maria had spoken of similar situations, times when Giovanni had risked the wrath of Lorenzo Medici to assist some unfortunate soul in need of aid. Her fondest memory was of an incident when Giovanni had come home after a mission limping and covered in blood. He'd been running a stolen letter to Lorenzo when he'd encountered a group of thugs trying to harm two women they'd captured. Giovanni had stepped up and fought the six men, killing them all and escorting the women home before completing his mission for Lorenzo.

They spoke of hilarious accidents too, times that hadn't been funny when they happened but in hindsight turned into moments to laugh about. Slips and falls that ended in undignified heaps and embarrassing places, displays of grace that turned into fumbles and awkward explanations of how Giovanni and Ezio had ended up with strangely placed marks on their robes.

A stately dance that had gone backwards when Giovanni fell flat on his face right in front of Lorenzo and then endured much private teasing about it. Ezio attempting to charm a woman, only to be slapped and shoved into the canals, much to the amusement of his friends and fellow Assassins. Giovanni nimbly avoiding the guards trying to kill him and leaping onto the ornate balustrade along the bridge only to catch his heel and go tumbling into the chilly waters below. A simple courier job that left Ezio hanging by his brace from the top of the palazzo where he was meant to deliver the letter.

Somehow they moved from discussing father and son to speaking of all their family and friends trading stories easily and finding such amusement in the simple moments. Maria told of her first time meeting Mario and wondering just how two such different men could be brothers. Libby had laughed at that comment and admitted to wondering the same thing about them.

Sipping her wine contentedly, Libby regaled Maria with stories of all her friends, balancing moments of compassion with moments of embarrassment and even throwing in some of her own less than grand moments. It was wonderful to hear Maria laugh so freely, listening to the slips and falls of supposedly graceful Assassins. It did Libby's heart such good to hear such happiness after all the pain and grief Maria had been forced to deal with.

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Sitting in one of the drinking holes scattered around the city, Gena couldn't think of any place she'd rather be during her last few days in Monteriggioni. Sure, she cared about her fellow Assassins and the extended Auditore family but she felt more comfortable surrounded by mercenaries and other people that few really cared about.

Draining her tankard and holding it out for a refill, she turned her attention to the rowdy mercenaries trading war stories and trying to see who the best fighter among them was. It was amusing to listen to them brag about their kill counts and some of their most gruesome kills, they were certainly bloody stories but Gena knew better. Some of her kills made these men look like amateurs. Now she just had to decide if she was going to put her dog in the ring and show them how much better they could be.

But when one young man, probably only just old enough to have joined the mercenaries, stood up and claimed he was the best man here because he had beheaded two men in one clean swipe, well Gena couldn't let his bragging go unanswered. Sliding off her stool, she approached the braggart and tapped him on the shoulder lightly. He turned to her and jumped back a step, instantly recognising her attire as belonging to one of the Assassins he'd heard about.

'you brag of decapitating two men with a single blow, well I'm here to tell you that you've got nothing to brag about youngster.' she declared, taking a deep draught and looking around at the attentive mercenaries. 'My best to date with a single swipe at a crowd of enemies was five decapitations and one complete smash.'
'Tell us more, Gena.' one of the older mercs called, lifting his tankard in a toast.  
'Yeah, tell us the story.' another coaxed, topping off the tankard she was holding.  
'Alright boys, alright. Settle down and I'll tell you of the bloodbath.' Gena laughed, holding up her hands for silence.

Though not normally one for telling stories, Gena had discovered a real gift for spinning battle tales, drawing her audience into the hard fought battles she'd survived. Each one had at least a kernel of truth to it, even if she had to trade firearms for sword and pull the opposing sides closer together as they battled it out.

The men around her were totally caught up in the story, hooting and hollering as she carved through the foolhardy men keeping her from her team. Wielding an imaginary sword, she swept the men into the adventure, spilling nary a drop of her ale as she moved around the room. Even after a few drinks, she still had most of her Assassin grace and agility, adding to the realism of the story.

When she did eventually pull out her sword, the crowd went silent, all eyes on Gena as she whirled around, wrist flicking as she went through the five bared necks of her opponents in the fight she was recounting for them. She'd angled her swing perfectly, the deadly blade swinging right at the young mercenary that had been bragging. With a flick of her wrist, she stopped the blade right against the side of his head, just nicking his right ear and lining up the blade with the corner of his eye, a perfect strike as far as she was concerned.

'I hit that last fucker right here, carved right through his skull and sent that half flying. Blood went everywhere and I saw one of his eyeballs go flying off over my shoulder.' she finished, sheathing her sword and turning to acknowledge the applause and cheering of her audience.

Draining her tankard, she bowed and waved, soaking up the appreciation of the crowd. It was a gruesome story and one of her favourite kills, even if she'd had to modify the real story. It didn't really matter if she'd changed it, she'd kept to the core of the story and it still sounded good when retold. She knew her story would be told over and over by the men that had heard it, becoming more exaggerated with each retelling but that was fine, it helped to bolster the mystery of the Assassins when their stories sounded so unbelievable.

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Technically doing what he'd agreed to do, Aloysius waited patiently for Claudia to emerge from the tailor's shop but most of his attention was on the scraggly cat that had come out to say hello. At first the little cat had been wary of him but coaxed closer with little bits of jerky and some water poured into a shallow bowl he borrowed from the tailor.

Carefully picking the little cat up, Aloysius cradled it to his chest loosely and stroked its back slowly to calm it further. Under all the dirt and muck, he realised this cat was a sweet little tortoiseshell girl with mismatched eyes and a kink in her tail. She was as friendly as could be now that she knew Aloysius was a friend, front paws resting against his chest so she could rub her head against his chin.

Laughing softly, Aloysius stood up and tucked the small cat safely into his shirt and stroked her head lightly as she looked around. Feeling good about being able to save just one innocent life, Aloysius turned back to what he was meant to be doing and his jaw dropped. Claudia looked absolutely beautiful, wearing a dress of deep purple with delicate white stitching around the hems and a rainbow of flowers in the white cloth across her breasts.

'You look amazing Claudia.' he smiled, circling around her and looking at the matching cloth cover for her hair. 'I knew you would look beautiful but this is amazing.'

'You really like it, Aloysius?' she asked, looking down at the dark cloth. 'You don't think it's a bit dark for my skin?'
'No, I think it's perfect for you. It highlights your flawless skin and adds a charming glow to your hair.' Aloysius promised, reaching out to stroke her cheek.

Paying for the new dress and accepting the neatly tried bundle of her previous outfit, Aloysius offered his left arm to Claudia and smiled as she took it elegantly. Trying to emulate what he remembered of Giovanni and the way he'd witnessed other members of the upper levels of society behaving, Aloysius escorted Claudia back through Monteriggioni and up towards the villa. She didn't really need an escort, just about everyone in the city knew she was Mario's niece but it wasn't about simply protecting her. Her birthday was coming up in a few weeks and Aloysius wanted to get her something nice to celebrate. A complete new outfit was a wonderful gift and really didn't eat into his finances too much, even when he added in the jewellery and shoes that were already wrapped and tucked in the leather pouch slung under his left arm.

A few days previous, Claudia had come to him and dropped a bombshell, sitting beside him and explaining that she was actually seeing Aloysius as a surrogate father figure and less of an Uncle. The way she spoke gave Aloysius the impression that she was concerned he would throw her out of his room and tell Mario of her struggles. Instead, Aloysius had drawn her into a loving hug and reassured her that so long as she didn't see him as a potential suitor again, he didn't mind where she placed him in the family.

Finally noticing the cat peering out from Aloysius' shirt, Claudia stopped and looked at the bedraggled little creature with concern and adoration on her face. The cat took quite a liking to her as well, butting against her hand when she went to stroke it lightly.
'I found her while I was waiting for you to finish getting into your new dress. She's not a healthy cat but with a little loving care, I don't see any reason why she can't make a full recovery.' Aloysius grinned, lifting the cat out so Claudia could see her properly.
'I can take care of her, Aloysius. It would be wrong for you to try and balance your duties and look after this poor, defenceless creature.' Claudia offered, reaching out to take the cat carefully.
'Happy is the home with at least one cat.' Aloysius murmured, handing the little tortoiseshell over and smiling as she burrowed in against Claudia's chest. 'I know you'll take good care of her, Claudia. It's clear she likes you more than me.
'She's beautiful, in desperate need of a bath but still so lovely.' Claudia agreed, relaxing into the guiding hand Aloysius put on her back and heading back up to the villa to tend to her new companion. 'I think I'll call her Bella.'
'I think it suits her beautifully.' Aloysius chuckled, so glad he'd been able to bring a little happiness back to Claudia's life right on the cusp of his departure.

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One final check to make sure they had everything they would need and the Assassin team headed towards the main gates of Monteriggioni, escorted by Maria, Claudia and Petruccio. Mario had slipped away earlier, mentioning something about checking on the horses while everyone was finishing up their packing and final checks.

Just outside, four horses stood ready for the journey, their tack polished and gleaming in the early morning sun. Ezio's chestnut gelding, Aloysius' fine black stallion, Libby's white mare and Gena's pinto gelding were all ready to go, nickering greetings to their riders as they approached but Emily's grey was not out with them.
'Spirito!' Emily called, listening for the familiar call of her favourite horse. 'Spirito!

Instead of a greeting from her favoured horse, her call was answered by a different nicker before D'oro trotted out of the stables and came right up to her, lowering his majestic head to butt her shoulder. He was all tacked up and ready for the ride but Emily had no intentions of leaving until she
knew what was going on with Spirito.

She was just about to go in there and demand answers when Mario emerged leading Spirito, talking softly to the limping horse as they made their way across the grass. Whatever had happened, he was now quite clearly favouring his left hind leg and was covered in scrapes and cuts all over his dappled coat.

‘What happened?’ Emily asked, approaching her battered mount.

‘We’re not exactly sure. The stable hands found him fallen in his stall this morning.’ Mario shrugged, soothing the battered horse with a light touch. ‘Franco, take Spirito out to the fields and keep an eye on him for the day.’

‘As you wish, Signore.’ Franco nodded, taking Spirito's lead rope and guiding him towards the open grasslands to rest and recover.

‘But Uncle, I thought no one else could control D’oro.’ Ezio remarked, leading his horse over. ‘Easy Duca, we’ll get moving soon.’

‘Not quite, nipote. It takes a certain type of rider to control D’oro, he will not accept just any rider.’ Mario chuckled, holding out half an apple for D’oro. ‘I have seen Emily ride D’oro before, I have no doubt she will be able to control him.’

‘So we’re still on track to head out today?’ Aloysius asked, stumbling when his mount gave him a firm nudge in the back. ‘Alright Mezzanotte, I know you want to get going.’

‘Yeah, we’re still going today.’ Emily nodded, slinging her saddlebags into place and buckling them to the black saddle.

‘I’d say Feroce likes that idea.’ Gena chuckled, patting his shoulder firmly. ‘Settle down Feroce, we’ll go shortly. Just wait for D’oro to be ready.’

‘Brava ragazza Bucaneve.’ Libby grinned, not at all surprised that her horse was unconcerned about all the fuss about leaving.

Moving carefully through the horses, Petruccio wrapped his arms around Ezio's waist and held tight, still not ready to let go of his older brother. Passing the reins to Mario, Ezio turned and scooped his little brother up, holding him close and reassuring him that everything would be okay. Ezio hated doing this to his family but he understood that it was on his shoulders to complete the work Giovanni started.

‘It's okay Petruccio, I'll get home again one day soon. While I'm away, you're the man of the house beside zio Mario.’ Ezio grinned, taking a knee in front of their mother and setting Petruccio on his feet. ‘Can you do that for me, fratellino?’

‘I'll do my best Ezio.’ Petruccio nodded, releasing his grip and reaching up to take Maria's hand.

Securing Mezzanotte to one of the rails around the area, Aloysius walked over to gently embrace Claudia, careful not to hurt her on his Assassin gear. She smiled and relaxed into his arms willingly, arms locked around his neck. Popping out of the little pouch she was wearing over her right shoulder, sweet little Bella mewed softly and batted at Aloysius' brace playfully.

‘Si Bella, I know you're there.’ Aloysius laughed, left hand falling to pet the little cat. 'She's already looking so much healthier. You're doing a great job with her Claudia.'

‘Next time you see her she'll be looking even better.’ Claudia promised, drawing back a little to look down at her new companion. 'I don't think she'll ever get any bigger but it doesn’t matter.'

Nudging D’oro and Duca around a little bit, Emily and Mario used the horses as a barrier to share a few minutes alone without his family getting any the wiser. If anyone did happen to look their way, it simply looked like they were sharing a supportive hug without releasing the horses. But behind the shield of the finely trained battle horses, the pair shared loving kisses and whispered promises.

‘My wife in all but name. Ti amo Emily.’ Mario uttered, resting their foreheads together lightly.

‘Ti amo, Mario. My husband in all but name.’ Emily replied, running her fingers through his hair lightly as she took his lips again. 'Remember what we showed you in the Sanctuary.’

‘I will. Every day I will honour his presence.’ Mario promised, already thinking of where he could set
up permanent honour places for Giovanni.

Swinging up into the saddle, Gena smiled softly at the sight of Emily and Mario catching a moment and turned away, leaving them to their moment. She still felt like a bit of an outsider among the Auditore’s but she had her own special link that gave her great comfort when the others were having a family moment. It was nice to see them all so happy and she knew her happy time would come soon, she just had to be patient.

Letting go of Maria, Libby smiled softly and spared a few minutes to say goodbye to Claudia before mounting up and laughing as Ezio lifted Petruccio up to her for hugs and proper goodbyes. Setting Petruccio on her lap, Libby dug into her pouches again and pulled out a falcon feather she'd found ages ago. Tucking his hair back behind his ear lightly, she slipped the shaft through a lock she'd twisted and smoothed it into place.

'Be good for your mother and uncle, Petruccio. Learn well and anything can be possible.' she grinned, hugging him close again before helping him down off the large horse.

Hooking Bella out of his hood, Aloysius laughed softly as he handed her back to Claudia and leant in to kiss her flawless cheeks before turning away and untying Mezzanotte. Much smoother with the mount now, he settled quickly and pulled his horse into a circle when he tried to take off without the rest of the team.

'Better make it fast guys, before Mezzanotte leaves without you.' he warned, not at all surprised by the antics on display but it was certainly annoying. 'That's enough Mezzanotte!' Rolling his eyes, Ezio said one last heartfelt goodbye to his family and wandered over to swing up onto Duca's back, accepting the reins back from Mario and patting his neck firmly. Tossing his head, Duca tried to make a run for it too but Ezio quickly brought him back under control, distracting him with an apple stolen from the orchard and rewarding him only when he stopped trying to bolt.

Reluctantly slipping out of Mario's arms, Emily did the rounds to say goodbye to the rest of the family before returning to Mario and looking up at D'oro. It was no real shock that D'oro was bigger than Spirito, she'd expected the mount to be harder on such a large horse but Mario was right there to help her up.

'I think I can see why it takes a certain type of person to ride D'oro. It takes a certain size of person to even get on his back.' Emily laughed, adjusting her stirrups quickly and making sure she was secure on his broad back.

'You are not alone, Emily. Even I need a little help to get up. If not a proper mounting block, most terrain features work.' Mario shrugged, checking that all the straps were secured properly.

'Ah, now I understand the rock.' Emily nodded, rearranging the reins in her right hand as she extended her left to Mario. 'Our thanks for your aid, Master Auditore.'

'It was my honour, Master Hunter.' Mario replied, brushing back the shortened finger of her glove and brushing a kiss against her Assassin ring. 'My home is open to all Assassins.'

'The brotherhood is truly lucky to have you.' Emily grinned, returning her left hand to the reins once Mario smoothed out her glove again.

'You are too kind.' Mario chuckled, looking away for a moment. 'These men will accompany you to Forli and bring the horses back once you are safely on the boat to Venezia.'

'Grazie Mario.' Emily nodded, waiting for Mario to return to the rest of his family before tapping D'oro into a trot and leading the expanded group away from the city.
Scattering through the city, the five Assassins were all cursing their rotten luck. They'd all expected that five years would have eased the sting of the actions they'd been accused of in regards to the murder of the Doge. But no, as soon as the Venezian Guards had seen them, the chase began. Scattering like a flock of pigeons, the Assassin team split up and ran in completely different directions with a final plan to meet up at Leonardo's workshop when they shook their tails.

Leaving behind three bodies cooling in a dark alley, Gena hurried straight to Leonardo's door and knocked quickly before entering but not without one last look over her shoulder to make sure she wasn't being watched. It felt wonderful to be back in such familiar surrounds, her nose filled with the smells of paint, lavender and the faintest tang of sweat.

'Gena! Dio mio!' Leonardo called, abandoning his work and hurrying over to her. 'Why didn't you tell me you were coming back at last?'

'I tried; you were always so focused on other things.' Gena shrugged, sweeping him up into a warm and loving hug. 'It's good to be back at last.'

Snapping around at the sound of the door opening again, Gena gently pushed Leonardo behind her bulk and flipped out her hidden blades, dropping her stance in readiness for a fight. She quickly relaxed though, putting her blades away when Ezio entered and closed the door behind him. It didn't stay closed for more than a few moments before swinging open again to admit Libby.

'So much for five years being long enough.' she scowled, walking over to stand by the fire and dry off. 'Any sign of the others?'

'Nothing yet.' Gena replied, whipping around at the sound of someone stepping on the creaking board upstairs.

Once again it was a false alarm, the three Assassins downstairs relaxing when Aloysius appeared at the doorway above and smiled faintly. All four went straight back onto full alert when the door swung open again and Emily came racing inside, slamming the door behind her and motioning for silence. Everyone was tense at the sound of guards thundering past, weapons drawn as they waited to either be left alone or discovered in their hiding place.

Finally it was quiet and all five relaxed, weapons sliding away quietly as they settled back into a state of readied wariness. It was good to be back on familiar ground but at the same time, all five were irritated about the ongoing vigilance against them.

'Five years and still they hunt us. We're still the most wanted people in Venezia.' Emily groused, shaking her head slowly.

'Well, perhaps you are in luck! It's Carnevale in Venezia. This is the time when everybody goes without a face!' Leonardo suggested, looking around at the disheartened group.

'That's part of the reason we're here. Do you have some masks we could wear?' Libby shrugged, rolling her shoulders quickly and shaking out her hair.

'Of course, of course, somewhere in here…' Leonardo nodded, starting to search for one particular crate among all the crates he had scattered about.

'Grazie, amico mio. And we have something for you.' Aloysius added, holding out another Codex page, just glad it had survived everything they'd gone through to get it back to the genius.

'Ohhh! More of the Codex!' Leonardo smiled, abandoning his search for the masks to delve into the mysteries unlocked within the Codex pages. 'Aha…This one's quite complex…Hmmmm…It's a new
design, my friends...A mechanism for your wrist, but now a blade...In face, it seems to be a kind of arma da fuoco - but as small as a hummingbird!"

'Is that possible?' Ezio asked, resting his hands on the worktable.

'I have no idea. Let's build it and find out!' Leonardo replied, not sure if such a thing could exist but he was certainly going to try and put it together for his friends.

'It's possible, but I didn't think wrist pistols came into the brotherhood for another seventy odd years. In our time they're commonplace, every Assassin carries at least one and sometimes two.' Gena shrugged, stepping forward to look at the Codex page. 'It will be good to have those back in our arsenal.'

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Comfortable with their new little wrist pistols, the team picked their moment and returned to the workshop, dodging guards and trying to avoid any further trouble. Naturally they expected to cause some trouble while they were working but they all hoped that there would be no further issues requiring an extended absence from Venezia.

Slipping back inside, the team were all thrilled with their new weapons and how they performed, particularly Ezio who had never before witnessed the power of true firearms. He'd heard about gunpowder weapons but to wear one on his wrists was a strange feeling.

'You've done us good, brother.' Ezio grinned, adjusting one of the straps on his bracer for greater comfort and support against the firepower.

'Ma certo. But I'm sure your return was not just to play with new toys. Is it about this new Doge they've installed...Marco Barbarigo?' Leonardo replied, looking up at Gena for a little support and reassurance in these tough times.

'Si, we've heard all about his exploits and will set right what was fouled.' Emily nodded, resting one hand on Leonardo's shoulder. 'It's my fault this happened, I'll make it right again.'

'Then you'll want to speak with your friend Antonio. I've seen him quite a bit lately, at a, um, mutual friend's. I'd look for him there - in the Dorsoduro district - to the south. Ask for Sister Teodora.' Leonardo guided, a little nervous about something but none of the Assassins believed it was anything suspicious.

'Sister?' Aloysius asked, thinking about what he knew of Venezia and the Dorsoduro district.

'Well, um...In a way. Yes, sister...' Leonardo replied, very uncomfortable on the topic. 'And remember, you can't be carrying weapons out there today.'

'We'll make it work, Leonardo. Don't worry so much.' Gena soothed, rubbing his back lightly. 'It's going to be okay, you'll see.'

'Grazie, Leonardo. Now, about those masks...' Emily added, squeezing his shoulder lightly.

'I found them, right over here.' Leonardo nodded, guiding the group over to where he'd set out six masks on his worktable.

Looking at the set of masks, Emily selected a shining gold mask detailed with dark blue stars and a tuft of lighter blue feathers at each temple. Folding her hood neatly, she unbound her hair from the bun she typically wore under her hood and straightened out her braid before tying the mask into place neatly.

The rest of the masks were practically identical, all dark grey with silver stitching highlighting the edges and creating differing patterns under the eye holes. Figuring that Emily was already planning something cheeky, the other four Assassins didn't mind wearing the plain and near identical masks. They could be patient until she explained her plan; they all knew Emily was talented with her off the cuff plans.

'Thank you again for all of this, Leonardo.' Emily grinned, taking the last silver mask and tucking it into one of her belt pouches. 'Try not to worry too much, everything will be okay.'

'Be safe, my friends. I await word of your success.' Leonardo replied, embracing each of his friends...
in turn before they left the workshop and headed straight back to work.

Refusing to be intimidated by the guards, the team made their way through the streets calmly, the four junior Assassins slotting in behind Emily as the group walked. It was all about maintaining control of the situation, the guards they passed recognised Emily's power from the way she carried herself and didn't make a move against the passing quintet.

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Making it to the marker that had appeared in their eyes as soon as Leonardo had told them where to look for Antonio, the team relaxed a little and kept a sharp eye on the crowd around them, making sure the guards were behaving. Giving off an aura of command and deadly control, Emily approached the door and knocked sharply before pushing it open and striding inside like she owned the place.

Even though the front room was scarcely furnished, it was blatantly obvious what sort of a business was being run out of this place. Off to the side, Antonio was quite happily placing kisses on the flawless breasts of a giggling courtesan as another girl watched from his other side and a woman wearing a nun's habit kept an eye on the trio.

'Antonio. We need to talk.' she challenged, stepping around the screen half hiding the trio. The confused look she got in response told her quite a bit about Antonio's state of mind. He looked even more confused when the other four came up beside her, hanging back a step but it really should have been obvious.

Shaking her head slowly, Emily stepped forward and removed her mask, smirking as Antonio finally recognised her face. On her signal, the other four unmasked as well, hanging back and waiting to see what was going to happen.

'Emily! Emily Hunter!' Antonio called, sitting up properly and lifting his drink in a toast.

'Oh yeah, he's plastered.' Libby muttered, rolling her eyes.

'Teodora, meet the most…ahem…talented woman in all of Venezia!' Antonio continued, swaying between the two lovely young women.

'Madonna.' Emily greeted, dipping her head respectfully. 'Ah, Sister Teodora.'

'I never imagined you as a religious type.' Aloysius remarked, stepping forward and gazing at Antonio. 'Well, except the religion of women and wine.'

'Don't encourage him, Aloysius.' Emily groaned, slapping Aloysius in the gut as Antonio laughed heartily. 'Gena, would you kindly assist Antonio in sobering up? I need him thinking with his head, not his pene.'

'Si Maestro.' Gena nodded, making her way around the small table and bodily grabbing Antonio, throwing him up over her shoulder. 'This will not take long.'

Letting rip with a string of extremely crude Italian curses, Antonio tried his hardest to get out of Gena's grip, kicking at her stomach and beating his fists on her back. He might as well have been punching stone; Gena didn't even flinch as she carried him out of the brothel and closed the door behind them.

'A little something to apologise for interrupting your evening.' Aloysius offered, stepping around the table and handing each of the young courtesans a small purse of florins.

'You were going to say something, Teodora?' Emily asked, turning her attention back to the older woman still watching the goings on.

'It depends on how you understand religion, my children. It's not just men's souls that call for soothing.' Teodora nodded, eyes flicking over the group standing around.

Then everything started happening at once. Outside they heard the faintest sound of a splash as Gena dealt with Antonio but inside they all jumped at the sound of one of the girls screaming as a man fled...
from the brothel as fast as he could.
'Murderer! Butcher! He sliced Lucia and stole her money!'
'Libby! Get after that monster!' Emily snapped, pointing after the murderer. 'Show your worth!' 'On it, maestro!' Libby nodded, whipping around and taking off after the killer. 'He'll pay for this!' 'Don't give me that look, Teodora. My value comes in the fact I command multiple Assassins and can handle multiple tasks at once.' Emily shrugged, padding over to the still screaming witness and taking a knee beside her. 'He will pay for his crimes, you have my word.'

Making his choice, Ezio followed Emily over and knelt beside the women, reaching out to close the eyes of the unfortunate victim. Between them, they convinced the shaken witness to let go of Lucia so he could pick her up and carry her to the nearest table. Aloysius joined Ezio by the table a few minutes later, setting down two buckets of clean water and handing Ezio a cloth. Murmuring prayers for the young woman cut down in the prime of her life, the two men gently washed the blood off her skin and out of her hair.

Returning her mission, Gena immediately took in the scene and turned to one of the other courtesans frozen in shock nearby. Turning away from Antonio and the dead woman, Gena curled her hands lightly over the shoulders of the nearest courtesan and shook her lightly. 'Run upstairs and find a clean dress for this woman. She deserves better than to be seen in her bloodied clothes now.' Gena instructed, distracting the shaking redhead in front of her. 'Si, I know where she keeps her other dresses.' the younger woman nodded, breaking away and running upstairs.

Returning a few minutes later, the young woman handed Gena a beautiful green dress before stepping back and moving to comfort some of her workmates. Getting a few of the other women to help and dismissing the men to hold up a sheet for privacy, Gena helped to dress Lucia and arrange her on the bench neatly.

Making her way back into the brothel, blood dripping from her hidden blade and a pouch of coins in her right hand, Libby looked at the grieving girls before approaching and offering out the coins to Teodora. 'You have our gratitude, all of you.' Teodora offered, accepting the coins warily. 'The murderer had them; I do not know how much was stolen from Lucia so I took all he had of any value. I know it is not going to replace Lucia but it will at least pay for her funeral.' Libby offered, going to one knee respectfully. 'Why is it wherever you go, trouble follows?' Antonio ranted, still dripping but at least he was sobered up now. 'Antonio, I trust you know why we're here?' Emily countered; moving past the grieving women and nudging Antonio back a few steps. 'I imagine to rid Venice of Marco Barbarigo? But really, Emily, we did this once already! And this new Templar Doge is a bigger culo than the last. Never mind that he never leaves the Palazzo.' Antonio replied, growing more agitated by the minute. 'Yes. Except...for tonight.' Teodora agreed, joining the pair away from the grieving women. 'Marco wouldn't dare miss Carnevale.' 'How do you know this?' Emily asked, glad that someone was at least being helpful. 'In fact, he's throwing the biggest party of them all. But getting in won't be so simple. You'll need a golden mask for entry. And before you think about forging one, keep in mind, each mask is numbered.' Teodora explained, drawing the attention of the other Assassins. 'Fortunately for you, I have an idea. Let's see if we can't win you a mask.' 'Grey masks all around, let's try and play the odds here.' Emily instructed, setting her golden mask aside and pulling out the silver one she'd taken as well. 'For now, can I ask that you keep this one hidden. I must return it to Leonardo later.' 'Of course, just leave it on the table and one of the girls will hide it.' Teodora nodded, pointing to the
Donning their silver masks and flipping their hoods up, the five Assassins looked scarly close to identical, except for the stature differences that set Libby and Gena apart from the other three. Using his blade for a mirror, Aloysius touched up his false scar and nodded, satisfied that he was looking enough like Ezio and Emily to pass even a close inspection.

'Libby, I want you to get out of this district and make certain to be seen by Templar guards in another part of the city. The rest of us will focus on a roving pattern around the events that will hopefully lead to us winning that golden mask.' Emily instructed, confident in this plan coming together and completely baffling their enemies.

'On it, Emily.' Libby nodded, glancing around quickly. 'Is there a back way out of here?'

'Out that door there.' Teodora directed, pointing behind her.

'Grazie.' Libby grinned, dipping her head again before darting out the back and disappearing into the twisting streets.

'Lead on Teodora. Don't be concerned if people disappear from behind you, it's all part of the plan.' Emily nodded, relaxed and calm as the team left the brothel. 'For the sake of keeping the secret, just forget you ever noticed there are women in these robes.'

'A wise idea.' Teodora agreed, stepping out into the street.

Filing out of the building, the Assassin team scattered quickly and headed out according to the plan Emily sent to them all using her webs. Gena stayed behind the two outsiders as the other three fled up onto the rooftops and disappeared from view. With another manipulation form the web, the other Assassins were able to hear the conversation Gena was having with Antonio and Teodora.

'What is it my son? You want to ask me something?' Teodora asked, making her way down the busy streets slowly, Antonio at her side and Gena bringing up the rear.

'I do. Forgive me, but - why is it you wear a nun's habit if you aren't one?' Gena nodded, pitching her voice lower so it wasn't so obvious she was a woman.

'Well whoever said I wasn't? Indeed, I am married to the Lord.' Teodora chuckled, glancing back over her shoulder.

'And yet you are also a courtesan? You run a bordello.' Gena continued, struggling to understand how she could be both.

'So? I see no contradiction. How I choose to practise my faith - what I choose to do with my body - these are my choices to make. Like many young women, I was drawn to the church, but grew disillusioned by the "believers" of this city. Men hold God only as an idea in their heads, not in the depths of their hearts and bodies. Men must know how to love in order to reach salvation. My girls and I provide that to our congregation. No church would agree with me, I realised. So I created my own. It may not be traditional, but men's hearts grow firmer in my care.' Teodora explained, her words earning sniggers from the other Assassins listening in.

'Among other things, I'm sure.' Gena remarked dryly, disturbed by what she was hearing but she could also see the logic.

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Crouched on a rooftop, hidden from all views but still able to see what was going on around him, Aloysius smirked faintly as he crept closer to the marked location he could pick up on. He still didn't know why this was so important, he guessed it had something to do with getting the mask but exactly why was still a mystery.

'Signore e Signori, come one come all! The Games of Carnevale are about to begin! Do you have the coraggio to compete for as grand a prize as this?'

'Oh hell yeah.' Aloysius muttered, spotting a big bruiser of a man stepping forward and holding up the golden mask.

'This year - like every year - the Golden Mask will provide entry for one, e uno solo to our most beloved Doge's personal ball! Who would not desire such an exceptional reward? Come! Compete!
Whoever proves themselves champion in each of our four games today, shall be the Doge's personal guest tonight!
"Alright, this is our time to really shine. Gena, ask Teodora what sort of games might be going on." Emily directed, hidden somewhere nearby but out of sight for now.

There was a pregnant pause, everyone waiting to hear what they might be facing on top of the complications of the roving pattern. Basically, they had to be absolutely certain that at any time, only one of the five Assassins were visible to the crowd, adding to the mystery of just how many Assassins were working in Venezia.
"Teodora and Antonio think it's likely that there will be games to test charisma and charm, skill and agility, speed and endurance and finally combat prowess." Gena briefed, the markers appearing on their visual maps and flickering quickly.
"Okay, now the real fun begins. Ezio, you're on charisma and charm. Aloysius, speed and endurance. Gena, take combat prowess. Now we have a real challenge, we must maintain our roving pattern. Only one Assassin in view in the district at any time. Ezio, you start us off. When you are back out of sight inform the team and we'll work out who will engage next." Emily instructed, sending the team scampering towards their target destinations. "Sound off once you're out of sight near your targets."

Emerging from his hiding place, Ezio relaxed and wandered through the crowds slowly, taking his time to scope out the area before approaching his target with casual indifference. He couldn't help but flirt with the beautiful women around the man, smiling easily and reaching out to touch the delicate cheek of one particular beauty with his bared knuckles.
'Signori, signori! This may be the easiest challenge yet - or the hardest! A game of charisma and charm! Step right up, step right up! Who shall win the prize?' the man called, looking around for the next contestant in his game.
'I will certainly try.' he grinned, earning giggles from the young women around them.
'Whether you win or lose, this will certainly be your favourite game of the day! Ladies!? Here's how the game is played. All the ladies in the district have ribbons. Your job is to obtain them. Whoever has the most before my hourglass runs out - is one step closer to winning the golden mask!'
'Sounds like fun.' Ezio grinned, grateful for a chance to ply his best skills to gain favour with the ladies and win one phase of the challenge.

Turning on his heel, he took off into the busy streets at an easy lope, a flirtatious smirk on his lips. Finding the first group of women, it was all too easy for him to charm them out of a couple of ribbons, a slow start but he was confident. Moving on quickly, he found another small group and tempted them to hand over another couple.

Feeling younger than he had in years, Ezio continued to flirt and charm the women, tempting them with smiles and sweet words. It was all too easy, they giggled and gave up their ribbons just for a smile and a kiss, reminding him of carefree times in Firenze. The only real change was knowing that he was on the clock to claim as many ribbons as possible without ending up in the canals.

Wading into a larger group of women, he showed the men watching just how easy it was to gain the attention of women, flirting with all seven ladies at once and walking away with all their ribbons. He even managed to get a few whispered offers of where he could find certain women again the next day. He was tempted with a couple of them but knew he was only going to get into trouble if he tried.

Using his Assassin skills to avoid ending up in the canals, he dropped down again and aimed straight for another group of ladies, moving into the middle of them and flirting opening to get what he
wanted. He had them wrapped around his little fingers, they were practically falling over each other for kisses and to give their ribbons to him.

Finishing his circuit of the district, he returned to the starting point with thirty seconds to spare and presented his fistfuls of ribbons to the man who had set the challenge. A quick count and there was no doubting his success as he was led through the crowds to the raised platform where Aloysius had indicated first hearing the announcement of the games.

Scanning the crowd, he thought he recognised some of the faces in the crowd but dismissed it as unlikely, refusing to believe that any of the Barbarigo brothers would be lurking around in the crowd keeping an eye on him.

'We have a winner! You have more ribbons than any man here! You've proved yourself a favourite of the ladies! And are now one step closer to the greatest prize of all time!'

'On to the next game.' Ezio smirked, stepping down and taking off towards shelter.

Going for the rooftops, he found one of the rooftop gardens and leapt inside, curling up and getting comfortable as he waited for the challenge to come to an end and for Emily to reveal the next stage of her plans.

'I'm out of sight with a victory under my belt.' he uttered, curling up a little more and trying to relax and maybe rest.

"Copy that, Ezio. I'm outbound, stay low everyone." Emily replied, somewhere else in the district and already five steps ahead.

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Dropping out of her hiding spot, Emily made her way out of the darkened alley and approached the second game caller, putting on a confident strut and lifting her chin defiantly. No one could guess she was anything but a young man looking for a little bit of fun. Adding to the illusion, she'd faked out a little goatee beard and a shadow of stubble across her jaw.

Putting on a challenging smirk and pulling her cape around her left side a little more, she paused back a step and listened to the caller, getting a feeling for the game and working out how best to ensure victory for their team.

'Step right up! Come one, come all! It's time for a game of skill and agility! Who can capture the flag? Who shall win the prize?' he called, trying to drum up another player.

'I'll play your game.' Emily declared, dropping her voice to her Ezio imitation to further the trick.

'Welcome, welcome! The rules of the game are simple: Outrun your opponents, take the flag from the middle of the field and bring it back to your starting position to score. If the opposition holds the flag, you must knock them down to steal it! Be the first to capture the flag three times - and the golden mask may yet be yours!'

'Sounds easy enough. Where's my start?' Emily nodded, putting out a bored air as she waited to start the game.

'My assistant here will show you to your place.' the caller replied, pointing to a younger man waiting nearby.

Following the young man up onto the rooftops, Emily stopped outside the covered garden and dismissed the young man with a flick of her hand as she waited for the start signal. The signal ended up being a small firecracker launched into the sky and she took off, booted feet digging into the tiles as she raced forward.

Flying over the rooftops, she showed absolutely no fear as she jumped down the levels provided by the track and slid down a ladder leaning up against the lowest point of her path. Landing heavily at the bottom, she rolled to her feet and ran in to snatch the flag, spotting her opponent nearby and
smirking. Bounding back up the ladder, she left the lightly armoured guard behind and shot back to
her starting point.

The young man was still there when she made it back and handed him the flag. Turning, he went as
close to the edge as he dared and tossed the flag down to someone else who returned it to the starting
position. Another firecracker into the air and Emily took flight again, bounding along the tiles and
straight past a group of thieves handing around on the rooftops.

Sliding back down the ladder again, she launched off backwards and flipped over to grab the flag
before nimbly avoiding the lunge of the chasing guard and scampering back up the ladder with such
nimble ease. He'd come so close to grabbing her that time but Emily's modern skills gave her an
unfair advantage.

Stepping light so she didn't crack any tiles, she made it back to her start position again and tossed the
flag to her unwanted companion again. He seemed surprised that she'd made it back so quickly and
after two rounds wasn't even breathing heavily. He didn't dare ask though, he just tossed the flag
back down and waited for the next round.

Taking a different route once the third firecracker went up, Emily launched off the rooftops and
grabbed at a window on her way down. Dropping from handhold to handhold, she descended the
face of the building and took off running, spotting the guard up ahead and planning out her catch and
escape.

Slamming into him full force, leading with her right shoulder, she took the flag and launched to her
feet, spinning around and racing away from the guard. Picking her wall point, she launched off the
ground and scrambled up, leaving the guard to stare up at her as she scrambled out of sight and a few
minutes later the flag came sailing down off the rooftop.

Running the rooftops one last time, Emily took her time on the ladder and swaggered over to the
game caller, a bored look back in her eyes as they wandered towards the main area to present her
victory to the larger crowd. Pulling at her cape again, Emily hurried the man without a word said, she
just picked up the pace and forced him to scramble

She did at least let him up onto the podium first but she was only a step behind him. Scanning the
crowd with a slight frown on her face, she spotted a familiar outfit and her stomach dropped. If the
Barbarigo figured out whet they were up to, they would never succeed.
'Ve have a winner! You've protected your flag and captured the enemy's. You've proven yourself a
warrior without peer and inch ever closer to victory!'
'Two down, two to go.' Emily shrugged, keeping her voice low as she spoke then turned and left the
podium.

Ignoring the potential threat for now, she left the area quickly and darted into a darkened alley then
scrambled up onto the rooftops and moved along the building range she'd chosen. Picking her spot,
she launched down off the rooftop and plunged into a hay cart where she stayed put.
'round two is done. Aloysius, you're up. Watch it, I think I saw Silvio Barbarigo lurking in the crowd
with his bodyguard Dante.' she guided, relaxing into the hay and thinking about what risks there
were and how to deal with those problems.
"Acknowledged Emily, I'm outbound." Aloysius confirmed, much more comfortable with these
mental communications now.
"I thought I saw them when I was called up as a winner as well. Do you think they suspect us?" Ezio
asked, adding to Emily's worries.
'I doubt it but we will have to tread carefully just in case.' Emily sighed, plotting out contingencies
and consulting her webs for any other guidance.
Making his presence known, Aloysius blended together the two personalities that had already been witnessed by the figure in white robes. He put on a confident yet flirtatious smirk and strutted past ladies that were so easily charmed by his sweet words. A minstrel tried to distract him but quickly fled when Aloysius flipped him a coin and told him to disappear.

'Who's next? Step right up! Try for the best time. Can you beat your neighbours? Who shall win the prize?' the called offered his game, completely unaware of the other game being played in Venezia. 'I'll win the prize.' Aloysius declared, squaring off against the caller.

'Welcome, benvenuti! Are you ready to test yourselves with a game of speed and endurance? Many challenges lie in your path! The game is simple but finishing it near impossible! Start when you're ready. The first contestant to beat the course record is one step closer to the golden mask!'

'Nessun problema.' Aloysius nodded, looking at the simple map that the caller had and checking his tracker marks in his eyes.

Adjusting to the little timer that suddenly popped up in the corner of his right eye, Aloysius turned and kicked off into a sprint, locked onto his target markers and determined to beat the clock. In the corner of his left eye, he noted a small counter ticking down with every marker point he passed. Sixteen points in two minutes, a tight challenge but doable if he really focused on it.

The first four were all on ground level but then he had to go up, passing five on the climb and jumping across poles and balconies to get to six. Stretching out, bouncing across lantern supports and onto another balcony, he leapt across the walkway below and swung up onto another balcony for point seven. Singing around the corner of the building on a hanging pot, he skipped along another row of beams and balcony dividers to get through eight then up the wall for nine.

Over the rooftops and a rope bridge, he was doing well, over half the points passed with a minute twenty left on his provided clock. Up onto another roof peak for ten and he headed straight across another rope bridge, ignoring the burn in his legs as he jumped up and straight through the eleventh point.

Spreading his wings and launching off the end of the building, he pushed hard even as he heard a warning in his mind that he only had a minute left to clear the last few points. Over the tiles with such sinful ease, he created another peak for twelve and leapt off the rooftop. Splashing down into the canal, he swam to the far side and climbed out, shaking off the excess stinking water as he raced through thirteen.

Fourteen and fifteen were a straight run across the grass, leading him towards one of the berthed ships in the harbour. Sticking to his sprint, he leapt up onto the wall and kicked off, soaring across the gap and clearing the railings of the ship to land heavily on the deck. Sixteen markers in two minutes and his eye clock told him he still had thirty second left to spare.

Turning and jumping back off the ship, he allowed a young woman wearing a chequered red mask and a green dress to take his hand and guide him through the crowds, back to the central square where the other two had been crowned game winners. His game caller was already waiting for him, inciting the crowds to applaud Aloysius as he stepped up onto the podium unescorted then turned back to welcome the buxom brunette up beside him.

'The winner! You've proven yourself the fastest and strongest in Venezia! You are now one step closer to the grand prize!' Aloysius didn't let the praising words or the kiss from the young woman distract him, his full attention was locked on Barbarigo and his henchman in the crowd. There was a chance they were onto them but there was little that could be done about it now.

Slipping away through the crowd, Aloysius went for his organised hiding spot and settled down into
the cramped bolthole, his presence concealed further by a group of hired thieves.

'Phase three is complete and I can confirm Barbarigo and his henchmen were present. Watch your back Gena, I think they're onto us.' he warned, content to rest for a few minutes.

"Understood, I'll be careful." Gena replied, not at all impressed by the idea of their enemies working out their carefully constructed plan.

"Strike true, Gena." Emily added, sending out calming thoughts across the webs to all of her friends involved in this plan.

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Slipping out of her hiding spot, looking like some random man who had slipped around the corner to take a piss in relative privacy, Gena adjusted her tunic and headed towards the final marker, growling a warning to a minstrel that came too close. He got the message and fled, leaving her clear to confront the final challenge and hopefully pull the plan together.

'Step right up and join the fight! Do you have what it takes to defeat your opponents? Who will last longest in the ring?'

Now that was a challenge that Gena couldn't resist. She was known in her own time and place as one of the most difficult brawlers to defeat so a chance to show her true abilities was greatly appreciated. This was going to be good fun, even if it was true about Barbarigo and his henchman Dante. If they got involved, well that was all the more fun for her.

'Benvenuti, lottatori! The game is simple. There's only one rule: No weapons! Fight until you are the last man left standing! Will it be you? O tu? Hmmm? Who will win the golden mask?'

'I'll take a shot at it.' Gena nodded, stepping forward and listening as some of the other men that were considering it quickly changed their mind when they saw her stature.

Making her way past the game caller, she strode purposefully out to the fighting ring that had been set up in the canal behind him. Locking her hidden blades to prevent any accidents, she jumped down into the arena and raised her fists, waiting to see what she would face.

'Let's bring out the next contender!'

Launching forward to meet the guard that dropped in to face her, Gena ploughed right through his hasty defensive stance, feeling his nose shatter under her knuckles. Her fighting style could hardly be called graceful or even really fluid but it was certainly punishing and brutal. Keeping with the first guard as he tried to get some space, she pummelled him viciously, fracturing his jaw with her second strike and driving her right fist into his solar plexus at full force.

Landing a final blow to his head and knocking him out of the ring completely, she backed up as a heavier armoured guard jumped in to replace him. This one was at least wearing an open helmet so some of her hits were deflected but the hidden plates in her gloves meant she suffered no injuries when she did catch his helmet.

Keeping her second opponent trapped up against the walls of the arena, she aimed mostly for body blows, breaking several ribs and leaving him with bruises he would likely feel for weeks after this fight. He did manage to land a few hits of his own, splitting her lip and bloodying her nose but Gena shook it off and went at him all the harder.

He went down to a savage uppercut that snapped his head back and dropped him on his ass, head falling back against the edge of the platform surrounding the arena. Leaving him, she turned to confront attacker number three, refusing to be daunted by his heavier armour. Catching his first swing, Gena turned sharply and drive her right knee into his stomach before driving her left elbow in between his shoulders.

Throwing him down and skittering back, she waited for him to rise and put her faith in her knuckle
guards as she lashed out at his helmeted head, the force of the strike knocking him back a step.
Circling slowly, the two big bruisers went at each other hard, ducking and twisting in an ancient
dance as they wore at each other's defensive stances.

Backing him into a corner, Gena grabbed his shoulders and kneeed him in the gut again before
bringing up her other knee and slamming it into his head. It hurt her for sure but the blow also left her
opponent severely battered and struggling to stay on his feet. Distracting him with her hands, Gena
lashed out with her left foot, folding her opponent over and launching him into the water.

Spotting Silvio Barbarigo on the shore, Gena swore softly as he sent Dante in to fight her. Backing
up quickly, she waited for the big man to jump into the ring and advance, reading his movements and
figuring out what sort of a fighter he was. Turned out he was a simplistic fighter, determined to
punch her lights out regardless of the personal risk.

Stepping out to meet him, wanting to be certain he didn't back her into a corner, Gena batted away
his first punch and landed a solid blow to the point of his jaw, throwing him back a step but he
recovered quickly and came right back at her. He hit like a horse's kick, rattling her brain when he
did make contact.

Spitting blood, she danced around him and went for his kidneys, driving him back as she nailed him
with a devastating nine punch combo, putting all her force into the same small area on his torso.
Proving her ability to take a hit, she kept working at him, letting his least threatening hits through and
blocking those that would certainly knock her on her ass.

Getting up another good rhythm, Gena grabbed Dante's coat and punched him in the face before
kneeling him in the guts and letting rip with a solid head butt to drive him to the ground. Dodging his
-reaching hand, she came around beside him and lashed out with her left foot, nailing him in the ribs.
From the sound of that crack, she'd broken at least four of his ribs, possibly five and oh boy did that
make Dante howl.

'Get out of here before I break more than a few ribs.' Gena warned, helping Dante to his feet and out
of the arena. He looked back at her from above, a flicker of disbelief and gratitude in his eyes before
he hobbled away, clutching his ribs.

Watching him leave, Gena smiled faintly and raised her hands in invitation, beckoning for another
competitor to face her even as the game caller on the bank tried to drum up more competitors. Then
she spotted Silvio paying off the caller and cursed as four armed guards stepped onto the walkway
and came out to confront her.

'so that's how it's going to be, eh?' she snorted, drawing out her paired daggers as she backed up and
motioned for the four men to come at her. 'So be it!'

These four thought they were smart by spreading out and coming at her from all sides at once. The
only flaw in their plan was the fact they didn't account for just how far Gena could reach with her
daggers. Two died before they realised their mistake and the remaining pair backed up quickly.
Growling low in her throat, Gena launched right at them, daggers extended and used her bodyweight
to batter through their defences and skewer the pair in matching bloody arcs.

Flicking the blood off her daggers and sheathing them with a flourish, Gena jumped up onto the
walkway and approached the caller, a deadly glint in her eyes. He knew better than to push his luck
and walked with her to the main square to announce her victory to the constantly moving crowds.

'We might have earned a new friend along the way, Emily. I'm not sure about it but I earned some
major points with Dante Moro for refusing to beat him too severely and then helping him out of the
arena.' Gena sighed, keeping to her mental voice to avoid any complications.

"So I noticed, Gena. Stay sharp, something is still not right here." Emily replied, sounding a little
distracted by something else.

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Hunkered down together in a perfect spot overlooking the main square, Emily, Aloysius and Ezio watched as Gena stepped up onto the podium and acknowledged the cheering crowd. She was still splattered with the blood of her opponents and her nose was dripping steadily over her upper lip, staining it red to match the blood over her chin from a deep split on her lower lip.

'Signore e signori! The Games of Carnevale have come to a glorious conclusion! Come see our winner claim his Golden Mask! Our winner has proven himself the fleetest of foot, the strongest of champions, the wisest strategist and clearly a favourite of the ladies. With four games won lealmente, the winner of the Golden Mask is - '

'Oh that's not good.' Aloysius uttered, noting that Silvio was acting strangely again.

'The winner of the Golden Mask is - Dante Moro!'

As soon as Dante's name was announced, the attitude of the crowd changed completely. Instead of cheering and applause, they booed and hissed at the heavyset man, still bloodied and clutching his ribs. He looked so confused by the change, accepting the mask and glancing over at Gena like he wanted to give it to her. The slightest motion from Gena though and he clutched the mask to his chest like a child would grip a favourite toy when they were upset.

Slipping away from their position, the three near identical Assassins split up again and headed back to Teodora's establishment, still bitter about how they'd been played but Emily had another plan up her sleeve.

'Libby, mission change. I want you to return to the Dorsoduro district and take up a sneak watch on Dante Moro. We were cheated out of the Mask and will need to revert to a secondary plan. I need eyes on Moro at all times until a new plan has been discussed and is ready for implementation.' she instructed, hoping to avoid harming Dante to get the mask.

"I'm on it Emily." Libby replied, so eager to prove she was worthy of her new rank and position.

Dropping down from the rooftops, they slipped into the bordello and scattered, not sure how to handle the situation when their carefully laid plans had so easily been defeated. They'd been so close, victory had been right in their grasp and that cheater Silvio had snatched it away.

'I'm sorry, Emily. We could not have known Silvio would cheat as he did.' Teodora offered, watching Emily pace the room agitatedly.

'Careful Antonio, now isn't the time to be pushing Emily.' Ezio warned, waving away one of the courtesans trying to get his attention.

'It's my fault, Emily. If I'd just finished my job in the arena…' Gena sighed, lifting her gaze slowly.

'No, you did the right thing Gena. We all would have done the same thing, we're trained not to harm innocents. For all his strength and size, Dante really is a child in a man's body.' Emily replied, shooting Antonio a warning look when he opened his mouth.

'Sister! You told us to let you know if we saw that rottinculo who stole the Golden Mask. He's on his way to the Doge's party!' one of the courtesans called, entering the bordello and approaching the agitated group.

'I will go! I can catch him before he arrives and take back the mask-' Aloysius insisted, getting to his feet and donning his mask again.

'How? By killing the poor stronzo?' Antonio countered, still against the plan but he'd seen learn.

'No! We are not going to kill Moro at this point and you're not getting involved in the heist Aloysius.' Emily snapped, getting between the two men. 'I have already dispatched Libby to handle the situation, it's on us to be in the right place to receive the mask from her and continue with the original plan. Let me make one thing perfectly clear right now, the contract against Marco Barbarigo is to be filled by Libby alone. This is her proving ground, she must show she is worthy of her new title.'
'So we're the distractions while she's working on the kill?' Ezio asked, catching onto the plan and nodding slowly.

'Exactly. We keep to the roving pattern, one inside the party to offer close support to Libby and the other three on the outside to aid with the escape when it's done.' Emily nodded, once more silencing Antonio with a look. 'Sister, perhaps you can arrange for someone to tend to our mutual friend here. His mood could use some attention.'

'gladly.' the same courtesan as before nodded, taking Antonio by the hand and leading him upstairs. 'Enjoy it Antonio, this one is on us.' Aloysius called, laughing at the rather inventive curse Antonio shot back at him. 'I assure you, my parents were married when I was conceived.'

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Climbing out of the canal she'd used to slip back into the district, Libby moved easily through the crowds and smiled faintly, glad to be back in action. She knew Emily was testing her, wanting to be certain that her promotion to Assassin wasn't giving her any issues or boosting her ego beyond where it should be. There was never going to be an issue with her ego though, Libby had seen other Assassins fall when they got too big for their boots and she wasn't going to be one of the casualties of such actions.

Dealing swiftly with a couple of minstrels that got in her way, she locked onto the marker in her eyes and paused at the first sight of this Dante Moro. Tall and heavily muscled, Libby knew she wouldn't do well against him if she was pressed to fight him. She was fast and agile but she knew from past experiences that she didn't do so great against real brawlers. Right in this moment though, he hardly looked like a threat to their mission, dancing with one of the courtesans in a walled garden. He seemed almost innocent, holding her hand and skipping around in circles. Then she remembered the old briefing on Dante Moro and frowned, hating that she had to go up against a handicapped man and rob him of his prize.

Taking shelter among a group of courtesans, Libby waited patiently for him to finish his dance and leave the little garden, looking around nervously before he headed off again. Feeling so guilty for doing this to such an innocent slave, Libby left the group and followed him, relieved to note that the other minstrels in the area were keeping their distance.

Coming right up behind Moro, head down and every muscle tensed for flight, she spotted the golden mask inside his coat and circled around beside him. She knew this was a huge risk, she was out in public with her hood down and a flimsy mask hiding her identity but she had to try and seem innocent and naïve. It worked, she got a soft smile from Dante and a brief conversation before she slipped away, her prize hidden under her cape and her target none the wiser of the theft.

Pulling up her hood again, she darted away to the rendezvous as quickly as she could without drawing the attention of the guards. It was almost shameful how easily she'd charmed him away from his real goal and pocketed the prize. He would surely be punished severely for losing the mask to a pretty blonde in white robes.

Getting to the rendezvous, she smiled faintly and flipped her cape back just a little to reveal the mask clutched safely in her hand. It was a risk for the team to gather again, especially since they were working so hard to convince people that there were fewer Assassins than rumours stated.

'Any troubles?' Emily asked, reaching out to take the mask.

'I don't think so. I did have to charm my target, it was easy enough with my hood down and a delighted smile.' Libby replied, confident in her abilities and decision.

'Not quite what I expected but well done.' Emily nodded, passing the mask to Ezio. 'You're on close assist. The rest of us will be just outside the party on roving patterns. Elizabetta, the final kill is yours. Come back to me with proof and cement your place.'
'Ma certo, maestro.' Libby nodded, bowing her head before taking off again and working to the plan she'd set out earlier.

Picking her path around the greatest threats to her mission, Libby slipped silently into the harbour and wriggled through a gap to get under the boardwalk along the stone lined shore. Gliding through the water, careful not to splash and draw attention to her hiding place, she got as close to the marked ship as she could without losing her protection. Tucked back in the shadows, her exit routes clear to her, she could wait in reasonable safety until it was time to strike and end another threat to her people.

'Signore e signori! I present to you…the beloved Doge of Venezia!'

'Benvenuti! Welcome, my friends, to the grandest social event of the season! At peace or at war, in times of prosperity or paucity - Venezia will always have Carnevale!'

Creeping closer to the outside of her shelter, Libby looked up at the ship and swallowed sharply, realising that her plan might not have been exactly the wisest course of action. There were plenty of handholds on the side of the grand ship but there were also lots of guards and a clear field of view for her target to see her coming.

'Tonight, we celebrate what makes us great. How bright our lights shine over the world!' Barbarigo called, his words partly drowned out by the fireworks going on over the city.

Sinking under the surface of the water, Libby squirmed out through a lower gap in the boardwalk supports and climbed the wooden pillars to just poke her face out of the water in the shadows. Breathing deeply, she slipped back under and swam for the ship, working from memory and instinct to get to the right place at the side of the ship to make her attack.

'We all know we have come through troubled times. But we have come through them together, and Venezia stands a stronger city for it. Transitions of power are difficult for all. But we have weathered the shift with grace and tranquillity. It is no easy thing to lose a Doge in the prime of his life. And to the cruelty of an Assassin who still hides in our midst!'

Lip curled in anger as she listened to the poisoned words Marco Barbarigo was spouting, Libby gliding around the docked ship cautiously, having already established that a frontal assault was a foolish idea. Instead, she moved around to the other side of the ship and reached up to grab her first handhold. This was where things had to be perfect.

'Indeed, we all loved Mocenigo dearly. He was a friend to us all, and he shall be missed. But did any of us truly love his policies? Did we feel safer under his watchful gaze? Did we believe in the road that he was guiding us down? Or were you beginning to be afraid, like I was? Afraid that Mocenigo could not see clearly, that he was not prepared for what was to come.'

Moving slowly, trusting her darkened robes would hide her presence against the wooden hull of the ship, Libby climbed up the richly decorated planks and focused on her goal at the top. She could see one of the on deck guards right above her and inched up higher, already confident of how she would deal with the next obstacle.

Securing the rope to the upper railing, she knotted it off firmly before slipping the other end over the head of the guard in front of her and yanking sharply. With a choked yell, he went over the railing and cleared her path. Wasting no time, Libby launched forward and crossed the deck in three bounds, her dual hidden blades slamming into his back as he tried to make his escape.

Moving with the body, Libby went to one knee and cradled his head lightly, fully aware that Ezio had witnessed her daring assault on the Doge. Maybe now he would be inspired to try something a little bit different and show the flair she knew he had.

'No! It's too soon! I'm not ready!' Marco gasped, staring up into her brilliant blue eyes.

'We rarely are,' she replied, shaking her head slowly as she brushed a loose strand back out of
Releasing the body and spinning clear, Libby tossed down a smoke bomb on the deck and took off, performing a stunning dive off the bow of the ship and disappearing into the water. Swimming hard, she raced away from the ship and headed for a gondola dock not too far away. Getting to the stone steps, she listened for the guards before heaving out of the water and taking off at a full sprint, running on adrenaline and gut instinct to escape completely.

"Don't worry about your notoriety right now Libby, Ezio and Aloysius are working on that as we speak." Emily guided, hopefully she was somewhere safe.

'Grazie, maestro.' Libby replied, dodging guards and weaving through the crowds.

Relaxing with a quiet drink, the borrowed masks tucked in a bag slung over her shoulder, Emily smiled and put her feet up, extremely pleased with how things had turned out. The assassination of Marco Barbarigo hadn't gone quite the way she'd expected Libby to do it but it was still extremely effective and proved that the Assassins were impossible to stop. Libby had more than proved that she was ready to be a fully fledged Assassin, freed of the restrictions placed on the junior ranks.

Already Gena was settled safely upstairs in a hidden room, sleeping off the activities of the day in complete security, or at least that's what Teodora promised. The room was certainly secure, the door disguised as a part of the wall between a bookshelf and a real door. It had no windows and a second escape in the floor that led down to a narrow alley beside the bordello. Dark and quiet, it had been prepared with five comfortable beds for the Assassin team to use whenever they needed a place to hide from the guards.

Breaking out into a relieved smile when the door opened again, Emily was so glad to see Ezio and Aloysius back safely. They came to her with exhausted steps, handing over crumpled reward notices and displaying their smeared hidden blades for her judgement.

'You have both done so well. In thanks, Teodora has provided these lovely ladies to take care of your aches and pains for the night. Enjoy them, tomorrow the hard work begins again.' Emily praised, indicating four courtesans at the base of the stairs. 'We are safe here, you have my word.'

'Grazie Emily.' Aloysius nodded, drifting past her to take the blonde and the redhead by the hand and letting them pull him upstairs.

'We really have a peaceful night?' Ezio asked, welcoming the two brunettes under his arms.

'Put aside your weapons and enjoy the night Ezio.' Emily smiled, stroking his cheek lightly before moving aside and watching the women hustle him upstairs.

Not two minutes later, Antonio made his way downstairs, looking rather ruffled after what had clearly been a good time for him at Aloysius' expense. Emily spared him just a glance as he finished straightening his clothes before he came up beside her.

'Ah! The saviour of Venezia.' Antonio grinned, doing one final adjustment to his clothes. 'What can I say? Perhaps it was wrong of me to doubt so readily. Now we'll see where the pieces fall…'

'The pieces can wait until tomorrow, Antonio.' Emily chuckled, reaching up to smooth out his hair and make him look a bit more presentable. 'Right now, I wait for my last little eagle to return to me after her mission.'

'Who didn't make it back?' Antonio asked, tensing up and moving forward as if to go and search for the missing Assassin.

They both sagged noticeably when the door opened again and Libby entered, right hand pushing her hood back as her left pulled her mask free. Dipping her head, she stepped forward and went smoothly to one knee before Emily. First she reached into her tunic and pulled out Marco's bloodied and wet cap, handing it to Emily respectfully. Then she unsheathed her hidden blades and presented
both to her superior for judgement.
'I accept your proof of the kill, Elizabetta. Well done young one.' Emily nodded, reaching down to
draw Libby to her feet. 'Upstairs with you, there you will find a hot bath waiting and a comfortable
bed in a secure room where you can sleep in peace. Gena is already there, try not to disturb her.'
'What of Aloysius and Ezio?' Libby asked, retracting her blades and rubbing at her aching shoulder.
'They are safe, enjoying the comforts of this establishment.' Emily chuckled, taking Libby's mask and
tucking it into the bag she had. 'Go on, you have earned a night to relax properly.'
'Grazie maestro.' Libby nodded, ducking her head again and heading upstairs to bathe and rest.

Returning to the couch, Emily slumped down and picked up her goblet, draining the remaining wine
in one gulp. She was so tired but she knew that sleep would not come easy to her tonight. She
couldn't hide it anymore, sleep didn't come easy anymore unless she was curled up in Mario's warm
arms. For now the others were silent on her struggles but Emily suspected they were just waiting for
her to admit she was having trouble.
'What troubles you so, Emily?' Antonio asked, settling beside her and refilling her goblet.
'Exhaustion and the knowledge that I will find no peace tonight. My team is safe but I know it will
be a miracle if I get but a couple of hours of poor slumber before the dawn.' Emily sighed, sipping
her wine and trying not to think of her Mario.
'Is there anything I can offer that might help?' Antonio tried, growing bolder as he slid one arm
around Emily's shoulders loosely.
'Perhaps, but the risks are great.' Emily nodded, leaning into his light embrace a little more. 'Come up
and share my bed tonight.'
'You can't be serious. I'm not sure I could summon the energy for another round.' Antonio groaned,
pulling back a little.
'Not like that, idiota.' Emily sighed, elbowing him sharply in the ribs. 'I have no interest in any
intimacy with you, my heart belongs to another.'
'Then what exactly do you want?' Antonio pushed, settling back in close to Emily's side.
'Little more than this. A warm body in the empty place that haunts me so much.' Emily shrugged,
rolling her head across her shoulders to look at Antonio. 'A chance to rest properly beside something
that I can at least trust not to stab me as I sleep.'
'Likely I would die before I even got close.' Antonio remarked, getting to his feet and drawing Emily
up as well. 'Just so long as you don't mistake me for an enemy in your sleep.'
'Many friends have slept safely at my side before. Not just Assassins but thieves and mercenaries
too.' Emily replied, checking that they'd left no incriminating evidence behind as they headed upstairs
to rest and recuperate for another day.
Barbarigo Again

Letting the people see that there were five Assassins in the city, the team stood on the Rialto Bridge and watched the five childish little toy boats drift along on the currents. Ezio had suggested the idea first, mentioning that today was little Petruccio's birthday. So they'd made these naïve little boats from sticks and leaves and set them sailing on the Grand Canal in tribute to the sweet boy.

'Hope you have a great day, little man.' Libby breathed, lifting her gaze to the cloudy sky.

'Happy birthday fratellino, sorry I couldn't be there.' Ezio uttered, hanging his head sadly.

'I wish you every happiness, Petruccio.' Gena offered, resting one hand on Ezio's shoulder lightly.

'God bless you, dear Petruccio.' Aloysius smiled, thoughts drifting to the happy young boy.

'May you always have the good things in life.' Emily added, pressing up against Ezio's side as they watched the boats.

Their peaceful moment was interrupted by the approach of one of Antonio's thieves. He knew better than to just shove into the moment though. The thief hung back and cleared his throat, waiting for the team to acknowledge his presence. It took a few minutes but the team did eventually turn away from the water and look at him.

'Ser Antonio wishes to speak with you.'

'Grazie for the message.' Emily nodded, dismissing the thief and rolling her eyes. 'Heaven forbid he actually leaves his palazzo and come find us personally.'

'He's concerned about being identified. It's no different to the way we slink around.' Aloysius shrugged, breaking away from the group and heading for the rooftops.

Splitting up at different points, the Assassin team scattered and headed for Antonio's headquarters, making it harder for the guards to track all of them and figure out where they were going. Only Gena stayed on the ground, running hard and displaying her brute force to keep the guards from trying anything. Taking the long way around, she kept the guards focused on her so her friends could make it through with less problems.

Even with their different paths taking them all around the area, the quintet of Assassins still somehow managed to make their appearances around the palazzo walls within moments of each other. Scrambling down the walls and launching out into the courtyard of the palazzo, the four aerial Assassins touched down around Gena and brushed off their hands, overall exceptionally pleased with their timing and display.

'Ah! There you are!' Antonio laughed, turning to regard the approaching team. 'Come, I'd like to introduce you to an…associate. This is Agostino Barbarigo - soon to be Doge of Venezia - thanks to your combined efforts.'

'It is an honour to make your acquaintance, Doge.' Emily offered, bowing respectfully. 'Our condolences on the loss of your brother.'

'He had it coming. He was bought and paid for by the Borgia, a mistake I have no intention of making.' Agostino replied, his attitude setting the Assassins on edge but they could not afford to alienate him right from the start.

'Come, my friends. We have much to discuss.' Antonio added, clapping Emily on the shoulder and leading the group upstairs.

Still not sure about this whole business, Emily followed Antonio and Agostino upstairs and into the rather luxuriously appointed study that Antonio had taken over. As was her right, Emily settled at the
table with the two men and chuckled as her fellow Assassins took their places around her. She couldn't help it, not with the way Aloysius and Ezio promptly jumped up into the window and crouched there as Libby and Gena went to their knees on the floor to her other side.

'Put your eyebrows down, Antonio. You should be used to this weird behaviour.' she sniggered, handing Aloysius her sheathed sword and settling back.

'I should be, but yet I am still constantly surprised.' Antonio agreed, shaking his head slowly. 'We've located Silvio Barbarigo for you. He's fled into L'Arsenale.'

'Hah! Fled? You mean occupied - and joined by two hundred mercenari, no less.' Agostino scoffed, attention completely locked on Emily.

'You're Doge now. Can't you command them to stand down?' Ezio asked, gripping the window ledge for balance.

'The committee of forty-one has yet to confirm my ascension. And this little stunt of Silvio's has only made things worse.' Agostino explained, looking back over his shoulder at Ezio. 'He has an entire army at his command!'

'Then help us to raise our own.' Emily replied, spreading her hands slowly. 'We are but five, we do tricky missions but we can't fight this alone.'

'I figured you'd say as much. Bartolomeo D'Alviano is the man you seek. He and his men have little love for Silvio. He resides within the military district - southwest of L'Arsenale.' Antonio offered, shifting forward in his chair.

'Perfect, we'll go and see him.' Emily nodded, getting to her feet and accepting her sword. 'Our thanks for the information.'

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Giving up all pretences of being ordinary people going about their day when they heard a weak call for help from someone up on the rooftop. Without waiting for a signal, Libby took off up the wall at her best speed, making up for her small stature with the pace she was able to produce. Flying up over the edge, she really did look like an eagle, arms outstretched and no part of her body in contact with the building. The angle of her push off the edge of the roof was good enough to get her up onto the peak of the roof so it was an easy enough move to vault the simple wooden balcony railing and drop to her knees beside a wounded mercenary laying on the balcony up here.

Easing to one knee beside the wounded man, Libby examined him closely but she doubted her chances of doing anything for him. His clothes were already stained with blood, the arrow was buried deep in his abdomen and she didn't have any way to get him down off the rooftop without making things worse.

'You must be one of Bartolomeo's men. What happened here? Where is he?' she asked, trying to distract him from his pain. 'I've been trained in medical care, I can try to help you.'

'Silvio's thugs…attacked…Took him…Deeper into…the district…North of here…' the wounded man gasped, reaching out to grasp Libby's hand. 'I know…I will die…Just…'

'I'm right here, amico mio.' Libby soothed, squeezing his hand and brushing her bared knuckles over his cheek.

'Find him…save him…' the dying man gasped, struggling for breath before finally going still.

'We will.' Libby promised, closing his eyes gently. 'Requiescat in pace.'

Even though she knew this wouldn't cause any more pain, Libby was driven to show appropriate respect to this man who had helped them get closer to rescuing Bartolomeo at the cost of his life. Digging into their limited medical supplies, she removed the arrow and bound the wound before moving to the other end of the balcony and looking down to her friends. Before she could even work out what to say, Aloysius was on his way up the wall, concern making him all the faster on the surface.

From the ground, the rest of the team had no idea what was going on as Aloysius disappeared from
sight to assist Libby with whatever was going on up there. They didn't need to wait long though before Aloysius came back into sight, the limp figure of a mercenary draped over his back and secured with what appeared to be two red sashes. Practising extreme care, Aloysius climbed down to ground level and went to one knee, guiding the dangling legs of the casualty into a more natural position. Watching out for Libby from above, Ezio moved to assist Aloysius, untying the sashes and laying the man out on the ground but he didn't understand why all the effort for a corpse.

'Bartolomeo's been captured. Silvio's thugs attacked and took him deeper into the district. North of here according to this man.' Libby offered, kneeling beside the fallen mercenary.

'You four go on ahead, I'll escort this man back to Antonio's palazzo and catch up later. He deserves that small respect for his aid.' Aloysius offered, looking up from the man who had given everything to ensure his leader would be free again.

'Take care of him Aloysius.' Emily nodded, helping Aloysius lift the body and cradle it to his chest respectfully. 'Make it clear to Antonio that he gave his life for the cause.'

'I will make certain he is given the respect deserved.' Aloysius promised, adjusting his hold and slipping out of the group for the long walk back to the palazzo.

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Following the directions Libby had received, it didn't take them long at all to find Bartolomeo. Of course, it helped that he was calling out for his freedom and making it abundantly clear that he wasn't impressed to be imprisoned.

'Luridi codardi! I'll take you all on! At the same time! With one arm, no both arms, tied behind my back. You must be wondering how this is even possible. Only release me and I'll gladly demonstrate, miserabili pezzi di merda!'

'Sounds like your kind of guy, Emily.' Gena remarked, listening to the angered rant of their potential ally.

'Hell no, you're the firecracker when you're caged.' Emily laughed, glancing around quickly. 'We split up, deal with the guards and meet up at the cage. Let no guard escape alive, I don't want any surprises while we're building up a friendship with Bartolomeo.'

Sneaking up behind two archers standing close together on a platform attached to one of the rooftops around the area, Ezio shoved his dual blades through their necks, silencing them instantly. Then he went for his throwing knives and dealt with two more guards standing further away, sending one crashing to the tiles and the other plummeting to the ground.

'You have no honour! No valour! No virtue! And people wonder why is it Venezia's star has begun to fade.' Bartolomeo was still going at it, enraged by his capture and refusing to be silenced.

Sword and dagger in hand, Gena advanced with deadly intent, glaring at the eight guards holding their positions in front of the heavy cage. She didn't get too close right away, she wanted to hear more of the angry rant from Bartolomeo. Gena also knew it was smart to wait for the rest of the Assassin team, knowing full well that more guards would come as soon as they got Bartolomeo out.

'I'll show mercy to whoever here has the courage to release me. All the rest of you are going to die! By my hand! I swear it!' he was still going strong, amused Gena to no end with his sharp words.

Coming in from the left, Emily gutted two more guards and kept going, not bothered if anyone saw her as they arranged their positions. Silvio was taking no chances with Bartolomeo getting away, he'd scattered dozens of guards around the area. To Emily, the numbers of dead guards didn't matter, she had her mission and nothing would stop her from achieving it.

'What sort of man sells his honour and dignity for a bit of coin? You are all in service to a traitor and a coward!' Bartolomeo hadn't lost his steam yet, he was beyond annoyed and determined to get out of his cage one way or another.

'Keep it up, Bartolomeo. The longer you rage, the easier this is for us.' Emily muttered, slinking closer and checking for the locations of her team.
Getting up into her position, leaving behind quite a few guard bodies, Libby took a second to wipe the blood from her blades before creeping closer to the edge and taking a knee. Below her she could see Gena and Emily in their places and there was Ezio on a lower rooftop, waiting for the signal. 'Oh ho! Do you think I don't know why you've chained me up! Do you think I don't know who pulls Silvio's puppet strings?! I've been fighting his weasel of a master since before most of you were even glimmers in your fathers’ eyes!' Bartolomeo continued, completely unaware of the four Assassins waiting in the shadows for the moment.

The sound of an owl calling for a mate shattered the moment for the Assassins and they launched from their places. Hidden blades extended, Libby and Ezio sailed down from the sky and slammed into the four guards on the ends of the row, silencing them in seconds. Swords in hand, Emily and Gena thundered across the open ground and right through the middle four, leaving a tangled mix of body parts around their feet.

'Let me out! Let me out! I swear, once I'm free of this cage I'm going to make it my mission to sever each and every one of your fucking heads and shove them up your fucking asses! And I've no intention of matching ass to head either! Oh and what a grand display it will be! The likes of which shall be sung about for years to come.' Bartolomeo certainly was imaginative with his language. 'Aloysius is going to be pissed he missed this one.' Emily chuckled, stepping forward and unlocking the gate.

'About goddamned time! I don't know if I should kiss you or slap you. Maybe both. Just to be safe.' Bartolomeo remarked, stepping down from the cage.

'I'll take the kiss but save the slap for the enemy.' Gena smirked, nudging her hood back a little.

For one tense moment, Bartolomeo looked at Gena curiously before he leaned down and kissed her cheek lightly, likely recognising that she was quite a threat if he pushed his luck. Of course, having just seen them tear through eight guards with no real effort, it was no surprise he was being cautious with them.

'Who are you?' he asked, looking around at the gathered Assassins.

'I'm Emily, this is Gena, Libby and Ezio. You'll meet Aloysius later.' Emily replied, indicating each of her friends in turn. 'We're here to rescue you.'

'Let's see who winds up rescuing who?' Bartolomeo countered, looking down at Emily.

'Let's not forget who was in the cage.' Libby warned, stepping forward to confront Bartolomeo.

'Forget about keeping score. We've got company.' Ezio cut in, drawing his sword as another group of guards came towards them.

'Down there! Stop them!' Ezio insisted, scanning for any more guards.

'There we go again.' Emily muttered, whipping out her sword and bolting into the fray.

Tossing Bartolomeo her sword, Gena showed that she was just as deadly with her daggers, dodging a wide swing from one of the guards and tearing him open from collar to belt. It was chaos around them, five against four now and everyone was looking for the kill. Despite the close confines of the fight, the four Assassins made sure to keep Bartolomeo from getting seriously hurt. They needed his alliance and getting him killed was a sure way to blow their chances of that.

Driving her sword into the chest of the last guard standing, Libby kicked him off the blade and crouched the wipe his blood off, safe to lower her guard while surrounded by friends.

'Where to, Madonna?' Bartolomeo asked, handing Gena back her sword.

'We should go.' Emily insisted, scanning for any more guards.

'Agreed! There are still more heads to be smashed.' Bartolomeo nodded, looking around at the Assassins splattered with blood.

'Perhaps we should try and avoid conflict?' Ezio suggested, cradling his left arm to his chest.

'Why?!! Are you afraid?' Bartolomeo shrugged, not seeing the point of avoiding the guards.

'Course not. It's practical, given that they outnumber us at least 100 to 1.' Gena replied, nudging Ezio back lightly.
'As you wish, bella mia.' Bartolomeo scoffed, not at all impressed by the idea but he would go along with his new friends for now. 'How bad is it Ezio?' Libby asked, guiding him to sit and examining his arm gently. 'It could have been worse.' Ezio offered, trying to ignore the pain threatening to overwhelm him.

The wound was high on his arm, staining much of his sleeve bright red and leaving at least a temporary mark on his tunic. Tearing through the stained cloth, Libby examined the wound closely and smiled faintly. Though it was wide and long, it thankfully wasn't too deep. Checking for any foreign bodies in the wound, she covered it with linen squares and bandaged it firmly. 'You'll need stitches to close it properly but it's not safe to do that here.' she sighed, knotting off the bandage. 'We'll have to get to shelter before I can tend to this properly.' 'My headquarters are not far from here.' Bartolomeo offered, extending one hand to Ezio. 'You will be safe to tend your wounds there.' 'Grazie, amico mio.' Ezio nodded, accepting the hand up and drawing his cape over his injured arm to keep it from notice. 'Lead on, Bartolomeo.' Emily added, picking up one of the fallen war hammers and hiding it under her cape.

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Smirking faintly as he crouched on a rooftop, Aloysius watched his friends coming closer and inched down to the edge of the roof. He'd been sitting up here for a little while, watching the guards ransacking this particular home but he didn't now why the maps in his eyes led him here. Now though, as he gazed at his team as they approached and the man standing beside Gena, he understood. They'd successfully rescued Bartolomeo and this must be his home that the guards were ransacking so carelessly.

Easing to his feet, he flipped his hidden blades out and readied to jump, fully expecting this would hurt. It was never fun landing on guards from such heights, the risks of injury were high but the results always spectacular. 'If you value your life, you'll stand down.' one of the senior guards warned, turning to face the mixed team. 'Never! What good is a man's life if it's not lived free, eh? I'll not go back into a cage!' Bartolomeo replied, drawing his sword and squaring off against the guards. 'Then you'll go into the ground! Kill them!' 'Like hell, assholes!' Aloysius barked, launching off the rooftop.

Crunching down onto the two senior guards, Aloysius plunged his blades into their necks as he took them down to the ground in one smooth movement. The landing was anything but smooth though, his left ankle twisted sharply on impact with the unforgiving ground and folded under him. Retracting his blades, he caught his fall and looked up at his friends with an abashed grin, feeling quite the fool for that mistake. 'Points for style, Aloysius.' Emily chuckled, crouching beside him and wrapping one arm around his back. 'I honestly didn't expect you to catch up so quickly.' 'It was almost as though Antonio expected my arrival.' Aloysius shrugged, groaning softly as he was helped to his feet. 'He promised to give our guide a suitable farewell.'

Crossing the roadway and pushing open the gates that were marked in her eyes, Gena looked at the destruction waged here and frowned. The guards that had ransacked this place had gone over the top, purposefully trying to destroy everything. 'What a mess they've made!' Bartolomeo growled, looking around at the mess. 'Bianca…I hope she's unharmed…'

'And now the real fun begins.' Emily muttered, adjusting her grip on Aloysius and following
Bartolomeo into the compound.

Making their way through the ruins of the small garden, Libby reached past and pushed the door open before moving back for the wounded to enter first. The inside was an even bigger mess than the outside but still the team found a reasonably clear corner where Libby could tend to Ezio and Aloysius without being in the way.

'Bianca! Bianca!' Bartolomeo was desperate to find his Bianca, whoever she was to him and his incessant calling was starting to wear on everyone.

'Is everything alright?' Ezio asked, sinking down to the floor and folding his cape out of the way.

'What do you think? Look at this place! And poor Bianca! If something's happened to her…'

Bartolomeo replied, still frantically searching for Bianca.

Remembering some obscure reference she'd read years ago, Gena smirked and joined in with the search for Bianca. There, down behind the desk that was probably too heavy to overturn, mostly hidden by fallen papers and other debris. Going down to one knee, she brushed aside the debris and papers respectfully before lifting Bianca into her arms and standing.

'Bartolomeo, I found Bianca.' she called softly, turning to the frantic warrior with the rather beautiful long sword cradled to her chest.

'Oh, my darling! Thank God you're alright.' Bartolomeo lit up, walking over to take his sword from Gena's hold. 'Grazie Gena. But how did you know?'

'I heard about you two on my travels.' Gena shrugged, resting one hand on his shoulder. 'An honour and a pleasure to meet you both.'

'She means that on behalf of all of us.' Emily added, leaving Libby to her work and walking over to stand beside Gena. 'Charmed to meet you, Bianca.'

'Don't ask Ezio, we'll explain it later.' Aloysius warned, silencing the young man with a sharp look.

'So, I know your names but not why you're here.' Bartolomeo remarked, bringing his sword back in close and running loving fingers over the blade.

As much as she didn't like having to enforce her will on anyone, Emily knew that the only way she was going to earn Bartolomeo's respect was to show that she was a good leader too. If she couldn't convince him of her worthiness to their alliance, all the plans in the world wouldn't help them against the might of Silvio's Army. So it was, with a look from under her hood, Emily dismissed Gena to rejoin the rest of the team.

'We have…business with Silvio Barbarigo. We were told you could help.' she replied, reaching up to brush her hood back.

'Ah! It would be my honour.' Bartolomeo nodded, watching Emily bare her hidden features to him in a show of trust.

'But it's going to require more than just the seven of us to weaken his forces. How do you suggest we proceed?' Emily continued, looking back over her shoulder for a moment. 'That could even drop down to five depending on injuries.'

'I'll go and ready my men for battle. While I do this, I'd like you to rescue those who were captured during Silvio's assault. I cannot, in good conscience, leave them behind.' Bartolomeo offered, sheathing his sword smoothly. 'Your wounded can stay here, they will be quite safe. My men and I will not be far if trouble does come this way again.'

'Intesi. Gena and I will attend to it at once.' Emily grinned, drawing her hood up again. 'Libby?'

'I can absolutely get Ezio back into the fighting, it's his left so it shouldn't be too much of a hindrance.' Libby replied, not looking up from where she was cleaning Ezio's injury. 'I cannot be so confident on Aloysius' return to battle, not without closer inspection of his ankle.'

'I have confidence in you, Libby.' Emily chuckled, clapping Bartolomeo on the shoulder before heading outside.

'Good luck out there!' Bartolomeo called, watching the two women leave.
Making no effort to conceal their presence, Emily and Gena approached the first public cage containing a handful of Bartolomeo's men and advanced on the guards, swords held ready. The three guards outside the cage didn't even have a chance to draw their weapons or even call for help before they were slaughtered where they stood.

'Come with us.' Emily instructed, unlocking the cage and releasing the eight men.

'Many thanks for the aid, friend.' one replied, tapping three others and leading them away.

'We'd like to fight with you - if you'll have us?' another added, indicating the three other mercenari gathered behind him.

'Let's go.' Gena nodded, beckoning the quartet to follow as Emily turned and ran towards the next hidden marker.

The streets were quieter in this part of the district, making it easier for Emily and Gena to get from one target zone to the next without drawing too much attention. Gena took a side track to rip down another few posters, wanting to try and keep their notoriety low while they were working with two down due to injury. Emily wasn't too worried about their notoriety, she had bigger issues to contend with apart from the guards being suspicious of their movements.

Weaving through the narrower streets and over yet another canal, they swung a sharp right and ran straight into another battle. Leaving her sword in its sheath, Emily went for the war hammer she'd picked up, swinging it with lethal force as they waded into the six guards that had noticed them. Gena didn't bother with her sword either, lashing out with her daggers and gutting one guard even as she ripped the throat of another. Ducking under a mercenari sword and turning sharply, Emily drove the sharpened side of her hammer into the unprotected back of a second guard, driving him to the ground.

The last two guards went down to the combined might of the mercenari force, one losing his head and the other spilling his guts. Flicking the blood off her daggers, Gena walked over and unlocked the gate, releasing another eight mercenaries from their prison. Four offered their thanks and ran off, heading back to Bartolomeo.

'We are with you friend! Only lead the way!' one of the others nodded, leading the second half out of the second cage to line up behind the first team of rescued men.

'Stay close.' Emily directed, sprinting off past the line of men and plunging into a thicker crowd of people blocking their path to the next cage.

Side by side, Emily and Gena led the way to the third cage, reminding them both of other times when they had blooded their weapons as a partnership. The rhythm of footsteps behind them took them back to times when they’d been called on to combine their skills and pull together a mixed team from their different districts. The only thing that kept Gena from becoming a Master was her intelligence, a minor problem that she had no troubles admitting and made up for by being one of the toughest Senior Assassins.

Sweeping between the buildings, ignoring the empty cages that lined certain sections of the roadways they used, the two highly regarded women were feeling so much more confident about the mission ahead. Their confidence faded a little at a call for help from their tailing mercenari, sending the women charging back to assist. The call turned out to be for extremely good reason, the eight men were trying to deal with eight guards, including three heavily armoured ones that were proving a challenge.

Weaving through the swinging weapons, Emily lashed out with her war hammer again, setting the air ringing with the sound of metal slamming together. Everyone froze at the ugly sound, turning to look at the mangled corpse now laid out beside Emily's feet. The entire front of his head was caved in, his helmet no defence against her strike.
Taking advantage of the shock factor, Gena grabbed the second heavily armoured guard and stabbed down into his shoulders, severing as many of his vital blood vessels as she could reach around his armour. Shoving him aside, she turned to the third problem guard, only to be forced into a hasty defensive posture when he swung his axe at her.

Spotting Gena struggling to hold back the axe with just her daggers, one of the mercenari charged to her aid, thrusting his sword through the only gap he could find. With all his strength behind the thrust, he rammed the blade right through the guard from left to right and twisted, tearing out the back of the right side and dropping the guard in a crumpled heap.

'Grazie.' Gena panted, sheathing her daggers and picking up the dropped axe.

Tearing her dagger out of the neck of another guard, Emily shook her head in wonder as Gena swung her axe and ripped through the exposed back of the last guard causing them such trouble. It wasn't hard to tell she liked the axe, the grin on her face said it all. Reforming their ranks again, the team got back on the move, leaving behind the cooling bodies and aiming for the last cage.

Getting nearer to the third cage, Emily passed control to Gena and scrambled up onto the rooftops as Gena held the men back from openly engaging the guards. Picking her way quietly over the rooftops, Emily crouched on the wooden platform that shaded the guards below.

'Poor bastard. I heard Marco made him the way he is.' one of the guards remarked, his words sending a chill down Emily's spine.

'And now he's been passed to Silvio. Like a dog.' another guard added, his voice filled with true disgust and horror.

Hearing the signal to advance, Gena grinned and led the mercenari into the battle, swinging her axe with stylish ease. The eight men that had already decided to fight beside them kept out of her way and blocked the guards from escaping her anger. With terrifying suddenness, Emily dropped right into the heart of the fight, driving her dual hidden blades through the throats of two and ducking Gena's axe in one incredible motion.

With the last guard dead, Gena slung her axe from her belt and walked over to open the cage, releasing another eight back into action.

'Alright, all of you head back to headquarters and get ready for a fight. We're taking this district back from Silvio!' Emily called, securing her weapons and looking around at the gathered men.

'Let us join you. Together we will crush the Barbarigo!' one of the mercenari replied, forming up the men into neat ranks.

'There are other preparations to be made. Return to Bartolomeo for your orders, we will return shortly.' Emily nodded, not at all surprised by their eagerness to retain the military district.

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Returning to the headquarters, Emily knocked sharply and stepped inside, looking a little tired but otherwise fine. Behind her, Gena was liberally covered in blood and carrying her new axe but again, there was no indication of any injuries. This was surely a good thing, they already had two weakened team-mates, adding any more could bring their whole plan crashing down around them.

'Salute, my friends! Welcome back and well done.' Bartolomeo greeted, turning to the exhausted women and smiling proudly. 'My host is restored to its former glory. Now Silvio will see just how grave a mistake he's made.'

'How should we proceed? A direct assault against the Arsenale?' Ezio asked, stretching out his left arm to check he was battle ready.

'No. We'd be massacred at the gates.' Emily replied, pushing her hood back and rubbing gritty eyes.

'I have something else in mind. Take my men and plant them throughout the district. The trouble they
cause will force Silvio to dispatch most of his guards.' Bartolomeo suggested, pacing restlessly among the Assassins.  
'And with the Arsenale drained of mercenaries, we can move in for the kill.' Aloysius nodded, catching onto the plan and considering their chances.  
'Esatto! You'll be virtually unopposed.' Bartolomeo agreed, turning his knowing eyes to Aloysius.  
'Let's hope he takes the bait.' Libby sighed, pushing off the wall.  
'Oh, don't worry. He will.' Bartolomeo promised, unconcerned about Silvio refusing to play into their hands.  
'Ezio, you go and handle the positioning of the mercenari. Think of it as a test to be sure you're ready for the upcoming battle.' Emily instructed, still a little wary of sending Aloysius out on his injured ankle.  
'Aloysius, are you battle ready?'  
'Sì maestro, I can handle this.' Ezio nodded, securing his sword and leaving the building.  
'I should be by the time Ezio returns from his phase of this mission. It's still tender but I can still keep up and Libby has securely strapped it to prevent further damage.' Aloysius added, flexing his ankle slowly.  

Satisfied that things were starting to come together within her team, Emily turned her attention to another problem that was niggling away at her. It didn't matter how she looked at it, there was no way she could justify doing harm to Dante Moro without spitting on the creed she held so dear. Her position gave her more leeway in interpreting the creed so if she couldn't find the wriggle room, there was no way any of the others here with her could either.  
'What's on your mind, Emily?' Aloysius asked, walking over to her with only the barest hint of a limp. 'I can tell something is bothering you.'  
'Dante Moro.' Emily sighed, perching on the edge of Bartolomeo's desk. 'It doesn't matter how I look at the situation, there is no way to deal with him that doesn't violate our creed. It simply cannot be done.'  
'I do not understand. What is it that stops you from dealing with Dante?' Bartolomeo asked, settling beside Emily and unhooking Bianca from his belt.  
'Our creed clearly states that we are not to harm innocents. Okay, Dante has blood on his hands but he has not harmed a man by his own choice. Marco Barbarigo ordered a hit on Dante so he could take Dante's wife. Three stab wounds to the chest and one to the head. Dante survived his injuries, so Marco hired him as a bodyguard. Now that Marco's gone, control of Dante was passed to Silvio. In truth though, Dante Moro is a child in a man's body. His mind was severely damaged in that attack.' Emily explained, still puzzling it over and trying to find a way to avoid having to harm him in any way.  
The only way to do it would be for someone to forsake their place in the Order. Not just temporarily but permanently.' Libby sighed, moving to sit at Emily's feet. 'I won't speak for anyone else but that's too high a price for me to pay.'  
'Nor would I ask it of you, Libby.' Emily agreed, reaching out to rest one hand in her hair. 'We are so few, we can't afford to sacrifice anyone for such a minor goal.'  
'So what do we do about him? We can't just ignore him, he's a threat even if his mind is so damaged.' Aloysius shrugged, settling down beside Libby.  

Bartolomeo just sat back and watched the quartet as they tried to figure out a solution. For him, Dante's damaged mind mattered little, the man was still a threat and needed to be dealt with. But these four Assassins clearly thought much differently and would not harm him for the sins of the Barbarigo. An admirable stance but certainly a difficult one to maintain.  
'He knows me, I can try and lure him away from Barbarigo.' Gena offered, turning away from the window she'd been staring out. 'But then what do we do with him?'  
'Of course, the Carnevale fight. He was so tempted to just give you the mask after Silvio cheated us out of it.' Emily nodded, latching onto the fragment of an idea.  
'Not only that but after I broke a couple of his ribs, I got him up and out of the ring. He looked back
at me with a mix of disbelief and gratitude. My guess, that's the first time he's been shown any kindness since he was handicapped.' Gena continued, finally walking over to sit with the group. 'So we lure him away from the Barbarigo, then what?' Aloysius asked, shaking his head slowly. 'I guarantee Leonardo won't take him in, his works are too precious. He'd be constantly stressing about potential danger to his art.'

'What about Antonio?' Libby suggested, shifting a little on the hard floor. 'Like the thieves would show any compassion for someone like Dante.' Emily scoffed, shaking her head. 'Rosa's tongue is far too sharp, she'd destroy any humanity left is such a fragile spirit.'

'We could always send him to Mario. I can't see anyone there being harsh to him if the situation was explained properly.' Gena considered, fully aware that Mario would do just about anything if Emily asked him.

'It would be easier on him if we didn't send him far from what he knows. Venezia is his home, he feels safe here. To suddenly uproot him and send him to an unfamiliar city, surrounded by strangers…no, that's just mean.' Libby countered, the unspoken implications of Dante panicking and causing further problems.

Realising that the Assassin team was extremely limited in their options on who they could turn to for help, Bartolomeo considered if maybe he could offer them a solution. At first he wasn't sure if he could provide a suitable position for such a man, he was more familiar with the vulgarities and drunkenness of mercenari than people like Dante. Perhaps though, he could change that and take Dante in, teach him a new skill set and witness a big change in the man.

'I know we hardly know each other but I will take him. Surely I can teach him some simple tasks to help me here. My men won't say anything once I tell them he is my assistant.' he offered, reaching out to rest one hand on Emily's shoulder.

'Are you sure about this? Caring for someone with a brain injury like his can be difficult.' Emily warned, turning to look at him. 'I know, I've had to care for Assassins injured on various missions.'

'I am certain, Emily. Perhaps you can offer some guidance though.' Bartolomeo nodded, certain of his choice if not the exact way he would do it.

'One of the most important things to remember is to set a routine and stick with it. Make sure Dante is involved with setting up his routine, it'll help him feel more in control of his life.' Aloysius advised, thinking of friends he'd lost from active service to traumatic brain injuries.

'Encourage him to try new things, innocent things. If he wants to hire a courtesan simply to dance, let him. I saw him at Carnevale, dancing in some little garden and I've never seen a man smile so big as he did that night.' Libby added, leaning back on her hands and looking up at Bartolomeo. 'If he wants to continue with his sword training, that's fine too but make sure he understands that you're not going to force him to fight.'

'Make sure you only ever show him kindness. This is particularly important for Dante, it's likely he's only ever been shown cruelty since the attack so a little kindness will go a long way to earning his trust.' Gena warned, making it abundantly clear with just her posture that if Dante was treated badly, she'd come back and exact revenge on Bartolomeo.

'Before we leave you on your own to care for Dante, we'll stay with you for a week or so to help get you sorted. It's really not too hard once you get to understand the unique requirements. Dante's still fairly independent so as long as you set proper boundaries and teach him what you'd like to see in him, he should settle in happily.' Emily grinned, clapping Bartolomeo on the shoulder. 'Thank you so much for this, I don't know what else we would have done.'

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His part of the mission completed, Ezio returned to the headquarters and slipped inside. Something had changed though, the place almost seemed calmer. As if everyone was anticipating some grand event. There was no tension in the air though, not like Ezio had come to expect right before another big assassination.
'Ah! There you are. Is it done?' Bartolomeo called, looking up from whatever he was studying so intently at his desk.

'Yes. All your men are in place.' Ezio nodded, looking around again.

'Excellent work, Ezio.' Emily praised, emerging from a back room. 'Libby, it's your turn.'

'Take this. I assume you know how it works.' Bartolomeo directed, handing Libby a small firecracker. 'Find the highest point you can in the district and fire it from there. This signals my men to begin the attack.'

'I won't let you down.' Libby grinned, tucking the firecracker into one of her belt pouches. 'I'll see you on the battlefield.'

'That you will.' Emily replied, hugging Libby for a moment before she ran out the door. 'Aloysius, partner up with Ezio and get him briefed! We've got three concurrent missions and we can't risk screwing any of them. Gena, let's go! We've got a lot riding on this one!'

'What? What other missions?' Ezio blinked, stunned by this revelation.

'One, distract Silvio's guards. Two, assassinate Silvio Barbarigo. Three, rescue Dante Moro from slavery and resettle him in the care of a friend. Libby's on the distraction, we're the assassination team while Emily and Gena make the daring rescue.' Aloysius explained, showing no sign of his earlier injury as he grabbed Ezio by the arm and hustled him out of the building. 'Come on, I'll brief you on the move.'

Full sprint through the district, Aloysius and Ezio did everything they could to avoid being noticed by the guards, scaling buildings and diving into the canals to slip past the guard routes. As they ran, Aloysius related the discussion they'd had regarding Dante and Bartolomeo's offer to take him in and keep him safe from harm. At first Ezio had been against the idea but with patient guidance, Aloysius won him around to the idea of saving Dante from such a harsh life. The plan was all about timing and position, they had to block Dante from getting back to Silvio until Gena and Emily could work their skills and coax him away from a lifetime of servitude.

They didn't even spare a glance back over their shoulder when a resounding crack of Libby's signal split the calm night air, sending Castello into chaos as the mercenari launched from their positions and started fights with the guards throughout the district. Leaping off another garden wall, Ezio and Aloysius thumped down in the middle of another fight, right where they were meant to be.

For now they simply had to block the path between Dante and L'Arsenale, forcing him to take the longer route that would put him into range of the lure attempt. Fending off guards that came at them from both sides, the men held their ground together, twisting and defending with precision. Dante tried to muscle his way past but the timely arrival of Libby to bolster the blockade turned him back, a curious look in his eyes when some of her hair fell forward and into view. He turned and fled, taking the second route and hopefully he would be coaxed away.

'I'm going to go assist with the lure. That look proves he remembers me from Carnevale.' Libby grinned, whirling around and taking off after Dante.

'Good luck girls.' Aloysius uttered, narrowly avoiding an axe aimed at his head and whirling around to confront the two heavily armoured guards that had come up behind them. 'We could use a little help over here!'

'By all means!' Bartolomeo responded, charging over and going up against the two brutes of guards.

Demolishing the two brutish guards, Aloysius tapped Ezio on the shoulder and took off, pausing only long enough to scoop up a second sword before they raced along the streets towards L'Arsenale. They easily outpaced Bartolomeo, leaving him to rally the man to continue the fight as the Assassins took the lead in the brawl.

"Lure successful. We're getting Dante out of here." Gena chuckled, her voice in their minds no longer a worry for the men.

'Good work, we'll wrap things up here and meet you back at HQ.' Aloysius replied, bringing Ezio to a stop just short of their target.
"Negative, Aloysius. It's not our place to take Dante to his new home, it must be Bartolomeo." Libby corrected, sounding a little distracted but otherwise fine. 'He won't leave the fight until it's done.' Ezio warned, spotting Bartolomeo charging back into the fighting. 'He's outside L'Arsenale now, doing what he does best.' "I figured as much, that's why we're keeping Dante safe and out of sight nearby. We'll do the introduction once this is over." Gena agreed, sending a calming wave over the men as they flew into the fight again.

Splitting up, Ezio and Aloysius made their presence felt, carving through the guards to take up better positions deeper in the fight. Twisting sharply, Aloysius dropped from between two guards and laughed as they ran each other through. Dodging a wide swing from another guard, Ezio caved his skull in with his pilfered war hammer and came up near Bartolomeo. 'The lure was successful. Once we've wrapped this up, go find them. It's on you to take Dante home and get him settled.' Ezio briefed, pointing roughly in the direction of the women. 'They're over that way somewhere.' 'I was told of the lure location.' Bartolomeo nodded, tearing through another guard. 'It is good to know he is safe.'

'You think I don't know why you're here, assassino? But you're too late! There's nothing you can do to prevent us from obtaining it…' Silvio called, up on the rooftop of L'Arsenale overwatching the fight going on below. 'That's what you think! The prize will be ours!' Aloysius roared, plunging his sword through another guard. 'You've already lost, Barbarigo! You just don't see it yet!'

'Do you miss him, Ezio? Your fool of a father? My greatest regret is I could not have been the one to pull the lever. To watch him kick and gasp and hang!' Silvio taunted, clearly not too concerned with Dante's absence from the fight. Except for the fact he didn't hang!' Ezio shot back, nimbly avoiding the axe aimed his way thanks to another guard. 'He died in battle, like all great heroes!'

'You'll follow him into the ground! You and that condottiero both! And after we'll come for the others.' Silvio continued, still trying to ruffle Ezio's feathers. 'Not before the Assassins silence your ugly cult, Silvio!' Aloysius countered, letting Ezio focus on the fight as he split his attention between the guards around him and Silvio overhead. 'Enough of this! We're out of time. Return to me. We must depart.' Silvio ordered, giving away the weakness of his view. He had no idea that Dante wasn't down fighting among the guards. 'Go now! My men and I will remain here and keep the guards from giving chase!' Bartolomeo snapped, carving through another guard.

Sheathing their weapons, Aloysius and Ezio dug their toes in and took off, locked onto the visual cues that would lead them straight to Silvio Barbarigo. Feet pounding the pavement in tandem, they reeled the heavier man in slowly but surely, taking advantage of the high ground and their numerical advantage to bail him up. Ezio went for the rooftops, scrambling to keep up as Aloysius swung out wide and came around to confront Silvio face to face. 'You lose Templar! Dante isn't coming to your rescue this time, he's in our care now.' Aloysius growled, setting his stance and waiting for the next move. 'You don't have a chance of keeping him. His loyalty is to the Barbarigo.' Silvio replied, drawing his sword and advancing on Aloysius.

Launching off the rooftop, Ezio slammed into Silvio's back with agonising accuracy. He hadn't intended it that way but when he struck Silvio in the back, the momentum combined with the angle of their fall served to jam the point of Silvio's sword in the ground and ram the hilt back into his abdomen, tearing through his flesh to leave a devastating wound. 'It counts, Ezio.' Aloysius grinned, taking a knee beside Ezio and helping to roll Silvio over. 'I would have preferred a cleaner kill.' Ezio shrugged, supporting Silvio's head in one hand. 'What's
happened here? Why the boats? I thought you sought the Doge's seat?'
'Just a distraction. We were meant to sail…'
'Sail where?' Aloysius asked, bracing the impaling sword at the best angle to keep Silvio talking.
'I'll never tell.'
'No matter. We've still got Dante. You lose Templar.' Aloysius shrugged, certain they could finesse their information out of Dante.
'Non temete l'oscurità - accettate il suo abbraccio. Requiescat in pace.' Ezio added, getting to his feet and walking away with Aloysius. 'Do you really think we can get the information from Dante?'
'Sure, he trusts us and if the question is worded right, he'll tell us everything he knows. He might not know a lot but what he can tell us will be helpful.' Aloysius nodded, picking up the pace and making his way back to Bartolomeo.

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'Well done, both of you! Silvio is defeated and the military district returned to us! Perhaps now Venezia might finally enjoy a bit of peace and quiet! We should celebrate this victory!' Bartolomeo cheered, clapping both bloodied Assassins on the shoulder.
'I am glad for you and your men, Bartolomeo. But we cannot join. I fear our work has just taken a rather strange turn…' Ezio replied, looking around quickly.
'What do you mean?' Bartolomeo asked, his jovial mood fading in the face of further conflict.
'Silvio wasn't looking to replace Marco as Doge. He was about to leave Venezia, actually. All of this was just a distraction.' Aloysius shrugged, not giving too much away until he could talk to Emily.
'Why?' now Bartolomeo was curious, the idea of such an elaborate distraction left him concerned about what might happen now.
'That's what we need to figure out.' Aloysius sighed, shaking his head slowly.

All thoughts of the mystery left by Silvio and what to do next went out the window when someone cleared their throat behind Bartolomeo. Turning around, he came face to face with Dante Moro and he looked absolutely terrified. He was so pale and shaky, clutching on to Gena's hand and looking around nervously.
'You are safe here, Dante. These people will not harm you.' Bartolomeo coaxed, waving his men back and removing his sword belt. 'My name is Bartolomeo, I will keep you safe now.'
'Where's Maestro Silvio?' Dante asked, looking around wildly for that one familiar face.
'He's gone, Dante. He fled and left you behind.' Bartolomeo replied, stepping forward slowly. 'He decided he didn't want you anymore. I do want you around though, you don't ever need to worry about being left behind again.'

Almost like it was choreographed before hand, Gena released Dante and stepped back as Bartolomeo reached out to rest a strong hand on Dante's shoulder so he was never without a guiding hand. Lifting his gaze slowly, Dante reached up to curl his right hand over Bartolomeo's wrist, still nervous but he was calming with every gentle touch.
'You look like you could use a warm bath and a change of clothes. Perhaps even a few hours to sleep?' Bartolomeo suggested, keeping his voice low and calming so he didn't scare Dante off.
'That does sound good, Maestro.' Dante nodded, his words and posture so telling of his treatment by the Barbarigo.
'There's no need for that, Dante. You are a member of my household now, this means you can use my name.' Bartolomeo corrected, lifting Dante's chin so their eyes met. 'Or maybe a shorter version that you feel comfortable with.'
'Bartolomeo.' Dante offered, breaking eye contact again.
'Speak your mind, Dante. You will not be punished for such things now.' Bartolomeo smiled, giving up on trying to get Dante to hold his gaze. 'I want to hear what you have to say.'
'Would you object to Bart?' Dante asked, warily lifting his eyes back to meet Bartolomeo's. 'If that's what you want to use, I don't mind at all.' Bartolomeo chuckled, just grateful to have made
some progress with Dante. 'Ready to go home?'
'I think so.' Dante replied, his nerves coming back again. 'I…grazie for this. But what about my weapons? Do I get to keep them?'
'Of course you get to keep them.' Bartolomeo replied, motioning Gena over. 'She was only holding onto them until you were settled under my care.'

Stepping up beside Bartolomeo while Dante was distracted with securing his weapons again, Aloysius stretched up to whisper a quiet request in his ear. Nodding slowly, Bartolomeo waited for Dante's full attention before lightly squeezing his shoulder.
'Just before we go, there's something I need to know Dante.' Bartolomeo requested, gentling Dante when he tensed up. 'It's alright, this is nothing bad. I just need to know one little thing.'
'If I can I will help you.' Dante nodded, relaxing slowly under the strong and caring hand against the back of his neck. 'What did you need to know?'
'My friends saw Silvio running towards a ship before they lost him. Do you have any idea where he might have been sailing?' Bartolomeo asked, noting the flinch Dante gave as soon as he heard that name. 'It's okay, he will never know you told us about this. You're safe, he can't hurt you anymore.'
'Cyprus, they seek the Apple of Eden.' Dante replied, arching back a little into the soothing hand rubbing at his neck. 'That's all I know.'
'And it's exactly the sort of information my friends needed. You did good, Dante. Let's get you home and cleaned up, you look exhausted.' Bartolomeo praised, keeping one hand on Dante's broad back as they walked away.
Lover's Surprise

Reading the letter that had come as a wonderful surprise when Leonardo took up his invitation to spend some time at the villa, Mario smiled and settled back in his chair. He hadn't expected the handwritten letter, Emily's elegant script curling across the pages. Even with their special ability to speak across the webs, it was really was precious to read her words and know she'd taken the time to write. For her to find the time to sit and write such passionate words, she truly was a master of keeping Ezio away from her.

So completely focused on her loving words, Mario never realised he had company until a shadow fell across the pages. Flipping the pages closed between his fingers, he looked up sharply, a request for solitude on his lips but it died when he realised it was only Leonardo. Strangely though, he was holding a canvas and charcoal, looking a little unsure of the situation.

'What troubles you, Maestro Leonardo?' Mario asked, hiding the letter under a pile of paperwork he'd been neglecting.

'I do not know if Emily mentioned it to you but she asked if I could possibly make time for a very special painting. She asked if I could create something that could hang here in your chambers to celebrate your relationship.' Leonardo explained, glancing down at the canvas he was holding.

'She did mention it, yes. She also mentioned that she had already posed for her half of the underdrawing for the piece.' Mario nodded, leaning forward and gazing at the canvas curiously. 'I did ask more about her pose but she refused to tell me anything.'

'She chose a position that portrayed her as a little more vulnerable as she would normally allow. I believe she hopes you will agree to a pose that puts you in as her protector.' Leonardo smiled, turning the canvas around so Mario could see the beginnings of the image.

Though the image was still rough, Mario could see Emily in the faint lines picked out against the plain canvas. Sprawled on her left side, head pillowed on her forearm, she looked so vulnerable as she gazed out at the danger coming her way. Her clothes were torn and filthy, hair in disarray over her shoulders and blown into her face. And yet, as vulnerable as she looked in that moment, her right hand was raised up, elbow resting on her side as her hand grasped at nothing.

Even in this, she was showing Mario what she wanted of him and he nodded, getting to his feet and coming out from behind his desk. He knew exactly how to respond to the vulnerability displayed, the mere thought of his lady in danger was enough to set his blood boiling.

'Is the light in here good enough or do you need a brighter room?' Mario asked, pushing down on his immediate anger.

'The light in here is fine. Shall I bring in my easel?' Leonardo smiled, looking around the room slowly. 'That corner there would be the best I think.'

'You get set up, I just need to fetch something from upstairs and we can begin.' Mario nodded, actually looking forward to this painting, unlike so many other sittings he'd had to do over the years. 'Is there anything in particular you need?'

'At this point, feel free to change your outfit to suit the mood of the image and add any other elements you wish to add. Emily ended making her own torn clothes for the sketches and she left them with me for reference.' Leonardo advised, pausing in the doorway.

'Bene, I will not be long.' Mario grinned, getting an idea and running with it.
Hours later, Leonardo and Mario were still hard at it on the sketch, trying to perfectly capture the strange relationship the distant lovers shared. Resting on a soft cushion to protect his left knee, Mario held his position and kept thinking of the vulnerability he'd witnessed on the canvas, using such thoughts to fuel his defiance.

Right hand positioned to curl around Emily's raised hand, he held his left arm out to the side, hidden blade extended in readiness beyond his coiled fist. He was wearing his usual dark outfit, the heavy layers parted in places and showing bared skin that Leonardo would later bloody. His hair, usually immaculately oiled back out of his eyes was tousled and tangled, whipped across his face and plastered to his neck.

But the most poignant feature for Leonardo were his eyes, the left narrowed and cold as the right blazed with angered defiance against whoever had harmed his beloved Emily. To capture such emotion was truly a great experience for Leonardo, he didn't know how Mario could produce such a look but it worked so perfectly for this piece.

Not quite happy with how Mario looked, Leonardo came out from behind his easel and used the handle of one of his paintbrushes to rearrange Mario's hair and reveal more of his fierce expression. At the same time, Leonardo was careful not to make him look too neat, wanting to capture the exhaustion and strain Mario portrayed so magnificently as he knelt there.

Returning to his artwork, Leonardo continued sketching in the details, building up the connection between the pair. From what he understood of Emily, it was rare for her to ever allow anyone to see her in a vulnerable state, even when she was tending to her wounded friends or even injured personally. And yet, when it came to her relationship with Mario, she was all too happy to let him be the protector and show the world that she could be fragile.

Adding a few final details to the under drawing, Leonardo nodded and stepped back, admiring the completed image of the happy couple in such a powerful moment. This painting would be like no other he had ever done before, so dark and depressing yet glowing with love and compassion.

'You can get up now Mario, the underdrawing in complete.' Leonardo grinned, peering past the canvas to check on him.

'Getting up might take a little longer.' Mario replied, dropping back to sit on the floor. 'A lifetime of combat leaves the body with such aches and pains.'

'The rest of the process will be much easier.' Leonardo offered, packing away his charcoals and looking at the drawing again.

'Does it look right for the mood Emily was trying to set?' Mario asked, rubbing at his aching legs.

'Si, I think Emily will be very pleased with how this came out.' Leonardo nodded, glancing towards the nearest window. 'Would you mind if I stayed in here to paint this? The light is better to get the right colours.'

'I would prefer it, I think. I dread the questions that might come up if Claudia saw it, worse still if it was Petruccio who noted the image.' Mario shrugged faintly, getting to his feet with a heartfelt groan. 'Sometimes I wonder if Giovanni had the right idea. The life of a banker is surely less painful than a condottiero.'

Hobbling a little on his still stiff knees, Mario returned to his desk and pulled out the thick letter from Emily again, settling back and rubbing his knee lightly as he went back to her loving words. It was so easy to forget about his daily troubles as he read the letter, dreaming up her soft voice in his ear as he followed her words. She'd included all kinds of great moments in the letter, letting him know how the team was going but most of it wasn't particularly interesting for him. He much preferred to read the pieces on her latest adventures.
Over the next few days, Mario got quite used to having Leonardo sharing his study, listening to the faint sounds of industry from the artist as he got on with Assassin business. So calm and peaceful, Mario found he was getting more work than normal completed, Leonardo's presence in his sanctum a welcome comfort when things got hectic. All the great artist needed to do was make a noise and anyone that was bothering Mario hastily apologised and made a quick and quiet exit.

But for all that peace and quiet in his study, Mario sometimes had to put up with the oddest of requests from Leonardo. Once it had been a request for a closer look at his Auditore ring, wanting to double check the play of light across the crest on the surface. Another had been a brief discussion about scars that had led to Mario stripping down to his breeches so Leonardo could add the scars he'd missed. Most of the time though, he just wanted a closer look at some particular piece of Mario's clothing so he could properly match the colours.

Though the requests were sometimes baffling and left him wondering why, Mario never asked for explanations or instructed Leonardo to wait. He merely rolled his eyes tolerantly, smiled and presented the artist with whatever he required. If that meant he ended up reading correspondence from some of his other Assassins with one foot on the desk and his left arm outstretched on the desk with his hidden blade extended, well he'd done stranger things in his youth.

Day after day, the pair worked in peaceful quiet, working on their individual tasks and yet supporting each other. Leonardo found no reasons to abandon his painting, his constantly spinning mind finally quiet and focused only on completing this unusual composition. Mario rediscovered his inner peace, something he'd thought lost in the years since Giovanni had moved out of the villa and made a better life in Firenze.

Putting aside the letter from Bartolomeo about the latest Templar news in Venezia, Mario sighed and looked up at the portrait hanging in pride of place over his right shoulder. So many precious memories; good moments and bad came back to him as he looked at the portrait, taking him back to their younger days and the fun they'd had. But memories of the good times soon gave way to the angry words they'd shared the day Giovanni packed up his belongings and left Monteriggioni for Firenze. Tensions were already running high with the death of their father and Mario had felt betrayed by Giovanni's choice to leave.

Growling low, Mario shook his head quickly to dispel such thoughts and went back to the latest news from Bartolomeo. The two men had known each other for years and Mario trusted Bartolomeo with his life. So reading this news of the team decision to spare Dante Moro and set him up in a new home under Bartolomeo's care wasn't overly surprising. The real surprise was the fact Dante had been praised with helping to figure out what the Templars were up to. 'A Templar helping Assassins, who would have thought it possible?' Mario mused, shaking his head in wonder. 'You truly are an angel, my dearest.'

'News from our friends?' Leonardo asked, looking up from where he was mixing up some different colours for his masterpiece.

'One of my fellow Assassins, actually. He's now got an injured Templar living with him, all because Emily refused to allow any Assassins to harm him. The Templar in question was stabbed in the head years ago and survived but was left with the mind of a child. Due to this injury, he was declared an innocent and allowed to live.' Mario explained, flipping to the second page of the letter. 'For all her violent tendencies, Emily really is a gentle woman.' Leonardo smiled, looking out the nearest window for a few moments before going back to his colours.

'That she is.' Mario agreed, unable to wipe the smile off his face as he got back to the serious business of running the brotherhood.

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Nearly a month after beginning the second half of the sketch, Leonardo knelt in front of his canvas and proudly brushed his autograph in the bottom corner. It had been nice to focus solely on one particular piece for a while but now that it was done, he was in no hurry to be so completely focused on another singular artwork again.

'You look happy over there, Leonardo.' Mario remarked, glancing up from the letter he was writing. 'It's finished.' Leonardo nodded, getting up and rinsing out his signing brush.

'Really? May I see it?' Mario smiled, leaving his work and coming out from behind his desk.

'Of course, I hope you like it.' Leonardo nodded, turning the easel around to display his artwork.

Folding his hands behind his back to hide the way they were shaking, Mario stared at the incredible masterpiece that had been produced from such rough sketches. In the background, Leonardo had painted in the walls of a damaged city, anchoring the weary pair into the muddy battlefield and giving them a strong reason to be there. Exactly where he'd put them, Mario couldn't tell but it didn't really matter. Leonardo had weaved a story of two lovers facing an uncertain future together, beaten and hurting but unbroken despite it all.

Once pristine robes stained green, brown and red, her tanned skin streaked with blood and hair in wild disarray around her head, Emily clasped Mario's hand tight, too weakened by the fighting to rise from where she'd fallen. Her eyes told so much, glistening with pain and desolation as she clung to him, her Auditore ring sullied with a streak of blood right across the crest. Even frozen in oils on canvas, she seemed to tremble in exhaustion and grief.

Grasping her right hand firmly in his own, Mario half knelt behind her, right knee resting against her hips and every muscle tensed in readiness to leap forward and engage whoever was threatening his beloved. Where she was exhausted to the point of helplessness, he was ready to give it one more go to protect her. A thin line of blood on his extended hidden blade dripped onto her arm, a promise that he would protect her from harm. Ragged and filthy, bleeding from multiple wounds and his hair blown across his face, Mario's angry defiance was tangible, as was his love for Emily.

Bowing his head, Mario was left humbled and breathless by such a masterpiece. Somehow Leonardo had captured the internal struggle they dealt with, the pain of each parting and the joy of their reunions, their love and respect for each other and their constant war against the Templars. He didn't know how Leonardo had caught so much of their secret romance but it was all here, summing up what they felt in one truly magnificent piece.

'Is something wrong with it, Mario?' Leonardo asked, his brilliant smile fading at the look on Mario's face.

'n-no, it's absolutely perfect Maestro Leonardo.' Mario replied, embarrassed when his voice cracked.

'Somehow you saw what we've been trying to hide.'

'I think the only one who hasn't realised that you two are in love is Ezio.' Leonardo grinned, resting one hand on Mario's shoulder. 'I had a feeling that you meant more to Emily than just a friend when she asked for such a unique portrait. I knew for sure when you reacted so powerfully to the first sketches.'

"Mario? Is everything okay, mio caro?" Emily asked, sounding like she'd just woken up. "Don't worry if Leonardo is there, he knows about the webs."

'Did I wake you, Emily?' Mario asked, glancing at Leonardo. 'Emily tells me you know about the conversation webs.'

'Si, I have been taught how to use them.' Leonardo nodded, walking over to where he'd left his supplies. 'I will leave you two to talk in peace.'

"It's okay, Mario. I was just taking a short nap between contracts." Emily chuckled, sending a flicker of love between them. "Now what's got you in such a state?"

'Leonardo finished our portraiture. It's so much more than I expected. He captured everything we've tried to keep to ourselves; the pain and joy, love, respect and everything else. It's all here on the canvas.' Mario offered, completely unable to capture the essence of the image in mere words. 'It's
absolutely magnificent Emily, I wish you could see it right now.'
"Are you looking at it right now?" Emily asked, excitement filling her tone at the prospect of the finished artwork.
'I am. Why does that matter?" Mario queried, not quite sure what Emily was asking for.
"Just keep looking at it, I'm going to try something. This might feel weird but we'll see what happens." Emily soothed, ripping their link with love and adoration.

Gazing at the painting, Mario felt a strange pressure building in his head, almost like he'd taken a heavy blow to the head. Then the pain settled out into a dull ache, as if he'd simply been awake too long. Slowly even that diminished, leaving him no worse for wear.
"Oh, dio mio. It's even more amazing than I thought it would be." Emily whispered, her words startling Mario and he looked away from the painting. "I'd rather see the painting than your desk."
'What's going on Emily?" Mario asked, flicking his eyes back to the painting.
"I just thought I'd try and use the web to see what you see. I never thought it would actually work. But right now, wherever you look, I see the same thing." Emily explained, trying to calm him down again. "Close your eyes and I'll show you what I mean."

Putting his faith in Emily once again, Mario let his eyes fall closed and waited for whatever she wanted to show him. For a moment he saw nothing but black and then he was transported to a completely different place.
'Where are you, Emily?" Mario asked, looking around at the bare brick walls, training dummies and weapons in neat racks.
'Venezia. This is where we're staying at the moment, it's a little quieter here than with the thieves." Emily replied, taking them both for a walk through the building. "Ah, and here's our gracious host, hard at work."
'Bartolomeo D'Alviano, I know him well.' Mario laughed, instantly recognising his old friend. 'But who is that behind him?"
"That's Dante Moro, the rescued Templar I wrote you about. Or didn't Leonardo pass on the letter I gave him to take to you?" Emily replied, sounding a little worried.
'I did receive the letter but having never come up against Dante before, I had no idea what to expect on first sighting.' Mario offered, taking in the solidly built man sitting near Bartolomeo cleaning his double headed axe.
"He's harmless, I assure you. He's more like a child than anything else." Emily promised, walking over to him. "Feeling better today, Dante?"
'Si Emily, grazie.' Dante nodded, looking up from his careful sharpening work. 'It was nice to sleep in a proper bed for once. Everyone here is so nice, it's so much better than my last place."
"You didn't mention you'd set this up so I could hear outsiders as well." Mario remarked, astounded by the naïve innocence he was secretly witnessing.
'I didn't realise it was set up that way, Mario.' Emily replied, mentally hugging him again. 'I'm glad you're settling in Dante, you've made this place so much better just by being here.'
'I won't ever have to leave, will I?" Dante asked, putting aside his sharpening tools.
'Leave? No, you don't ever have to leave this place. Bart said you were part of his family now, he wants you to stay here and be happy.' Emily soothed, reaching up to run her fingers through his hair lightly. 'You're home now, this is where you belong.'
'You're the son I never had, Dante. You don't ever have to leave, you're safe here and I won't stand for anyone causing you any trouble.' Bartolomeo added, leaving his work and coming to sit beside Dante. 'You're wanted and loved here, never forget that.'
"Did you just say Bart?" Mario asked, still trying to understand exactly what was going on there. 'Dante's idea. My guess, Bartolomeo was a little too much for his simple mind so it got shortened to Bart. No one else gets away with using the shortened name unless Dante's in the room." Emily explained, still mostly focused on Dante.
"Mario? Mario, is something wrong?" Leonardo's voice echoed across their link, as if said from a
long distance away.
'Oops, you'd better get back to Monteriggioni. Open your eyes Mario and you'll be back in your
study.' Emily chuckled, surrounding him with love. 'I miss you and I love you so much. I'll be home
when I can.'
"I love you, I miss you and I can't wait to see you again." Mario replied, returning her love and
taking one last look at the happy smile on Bartolomeo's rugged face before he pulled away from the
beautiful scene.

Blinking a few times to make sure what he was seeing was his reality, Mario shook his head quickly
to chase away the last vestiges of Venezia in his mind and turned to Leonardo, waiting near his
masterpiece.
'Sorry about that, Emily wanted to show me something new she's learned about the webs. It seems
she can use her webs to see and hear what others in her closest webs can see and hear. She used this
new gift to admire your artwork and to show me what is happening around her in Venezia.' Mario
offered, rubbing at his good eye quickly.
'Did everyone appear in good health?' Leonardo asked, wondering just how many uses there might
be for this new ability of Emily's.
'From what I saw, everyone seemed fine.' Mario nodded, turning his attention to the artwork. 'She is
very impressed by your work, I think it almost moved her to tears such is its power.'
'You are too kind, Mario.' Leonardo replied, flushing a little at the genuine praise.
'You're worthy of such praise, this work is truly awe inspiring.' Mario shrugged, perfectly serious
with his words.
For once, the Assassins in Venezia were having a quiet day, free of contracts, local duties or anything else that might disturb their peace. Sitting down by the docks, Ezio didn't particularly care where his fellow Assassins were, so long as they weren't planning something to celebrate his twenty-seventh year of life. He had more important things to worry about, like figuring out why everything that had befallen his family had happened to them. He would much rather try to work out why this Apple was so damned important than celebrate his birthday. Ten years since the loss of his father, seven since Federico had been slain in the night and months since he'd received a letter from his remaining family.

He'd hoped the sound of the water lapping against the wall behind him would help to calm his troubled mind but all it did was remind him of the passage of time. So much was happening that he couldn't stop and he still had no idea what any of it was about.

'There you are, Ezio!' Rosa called, walking over to him. 'Why so serious?'

'It's my birthday.' Ezio replied, seeing no point in hiding that fact.

'Davvero? Cento di questi giorni! That's wonderful!' Rosa smiled, resting one hand on his shoulder.

'Is it? It's been over ten years since my father was butchered by the Pazzi, nearly seven since my elder brother was slain in the night…Ten years spent hunting the men responsible. I'm so close to the end now but…no closer to understanding what any of it was for.' Ezio sighed, shaking his head slowly as he tried to make sense of everything.

'you may not see it, Ezio, but it's better here now because of the things you've done…Basta…Look here, I have a birthday present for you.' Rosa offered, sinking down beside him and pulling out a small book she'd been carrying. 'It's L'Arsenale's Shipping Manifest, from the day the boat left,' 'The boat to Cyprus? You're serious--?' Ezio asked, reaching for the book as Rosa kept moving it out of his reach.

'And guess when it's scheduled to return?' Rosa grinned, looking into his uncovered eyes and cherishing the trust shown. 'Tomorrow.'

Watching over the two from a distance, Aloysius smiled at the young friends then paused when he spotted Leonardo headed towards them. Dropping back to the ground, he hustled to intercept Leonardo, figuring Ezio had earned a few minutes to be an innocent charmer again.

'Welcome back, Leonardo.' Aloysius smiled, effectively distracting Leonardo from his first goal.

'Ah, Aloysius. So good to see you.' Leonardo replied, turning to face the older Assassin.

'When did you get back?' Aloysius asked, guiding Leonardo into the shade where it was a little cooler. 'I trust everyone is doing well in Monteriggioni.'

'Just now and when I left, everyone was doing very well in Monteriggioni.' Leonardo smiled, relaxing into the protective hand on his shoulder. 'I bring word, about the Codex pages. I finally got those last two decoded.'

'I can tell you're eager to share what you've learned.' Aloysius chuckled, glancing over to where Ezio and Rosa were lost in their own little world. 'We'll give those lovebirds a couple of minutes while I call the rest of the team together so we can all hear your discovery.'

'Bene.' Leonardo nodded, following Aloysius' gaze and smiling at the sight of Ezio getting to do something almost normal. 'Still a charmer I see.'

'That'll never change. Ezio's got a gift with the ladies.' Aloysius agreed, leaning back against the tree to wait. 'The others are on their way.'
One-by-one the other Assassins arrived around Aloysius, slinking out of the constantly moving crowds and darting across to take up their places. Libby was first, appearing behind Leonardo and giving him such a fright.

'Mi dispiace, Leonardo.' she smiled, leaning up to kiss his cheek. 'Welcome back.'
'I should be used to the silent comings and goings of you all.' Leonardo shrugged, settling again and looking out for whoever was next to try and sneak up on him.
'Buongiorno Maestro.' Emily grinned, dropping out of the tree they were all standing under. 'Your artwork looks so perfect on the wall of the villa.'
'You are too kind, Emily.' Leonardo replied, accepting the greeting kisses she brushed over his cheeks. 'Perhaps you should speak with Mario though, he was adamant what you paid for the commission was not enough for what I painted.'
'Mario makes his own choices. If he felt you deserved more, there is little I could have done to convince him otherwise.' Emily chuckled, not at all surprised to hear Mario had insisted of paying something for such a wonderful piece.
'It's good to see you again, Leonardo.' Gena smiled, wandering casually over to join the group. 'I have missed our conversations.'
'As have I Gena.' Leonardo nodded, relaxing into the strong hand she placed on his back. Flinching a little when someone tweaked his link in the webs Emily commanded, Ezio pulled away from Rosa just a little and looked back over his shoulder. Standing under a tree not too far from where he was sitting, the rest of the team were gathered around Leonardo and looking quite bored as they waited for him.

'Mi dispiace, Rosa. I have to get back to my duties.' he sighed, brushing his thumb lightly over her swollen lips. 'Another time?'
'Si, another time.' Rosa smiled, stealing one last kiss before handing over the book in her hands and reaching over to pull Ezio's hood up. 'I look forward to our next meeting.'
'As do I, Rosa.' Ezio nodded, getting up and hurrying to join the rest of his team.
'Ever the romantic, eh Ezio?' Emily teased, clapping him on the shoulder as he joined the gathering.
'Now, what's on your mind Leonardo?'

'Walk with me. Stay close.' Leonardo guided, making his way out of the group and heading towards his workshop.

Forming a defensive circle around Leonardo, the group kept a sharp eye out for trouble even as they listened to what he had to say about the Codex. The four modern Assassins knew quite a bit about the codex and the Pieces of Eden so this was more a chance for Ezio to realise what was going on with this whole situation.

'These last two Codex pages...I was studying the copies...I don't know why I never saw it before! But when put together, I realised the markings on the back clarify into words...Here: The Prophet...will appear...when the second piece is brought to the floating city...' Leonardo started, pulling out the two copies and holding them so Ezio could see the words written across the back. 'Prophet? Only the Prophet may open it...Two pieces of Eden...' Ezio muttered, remembering the discussion he'd had with Mario so long ago about the first page Leonardo had decoded for them.

'What are you saying? Ezio, what is this?' Leonardo asked, concerned about what these mentions of Prophets and pieces of Eden might mean.

'We've known each other a long time, Leonardo. If I can't trust you, there is nobody left outside the brotherhood.' Ezio shrugged, glancing over at Emily as she kept people back from Leonardo. 'My Uncle Mario spoke of it, long ago. A prophecy hidden in the Codex...Leading to an ancient vault that holds something...very powerful.'

'Grandioso. But if you took these pages from the Barbarigo, then maybe they know about this vault too.' Leonardo replied, handing the pages to Ezio for safe keeping. 'That's not good.'

'Wait...what if that's why they sent the ship to Cyprus!? To find this Piece of Eden...and bring it back to Venezia...' Ezio mused, starting to put the pieces of the puzzle together.
'When the second piece is brought to the floating city…' Leonardo repeated, still working on what it all could mean.
'The Prophet will appear…Only the Prophet can open the vault.' Ezio nodded, turning the words over in his mind. 'My God! When my Uncle told me about the Codex, I was too young, too brash, to imagine it was anything but an old man's fantasy. But now, I see…The killing of Mocenigo, even the Medici, my father and brother - it was all part of his plan. To find the vault…The Spaniard!'
'Rodrigo Borgia.' Leonardo sighed, irritated that it had taken them so long to realise just how much of a threat that man was.
'The boat from Cyprus arrives tomorrow. I plan to be there to meet it.' Ezio decided, forging his own path without consulting his seniors. He had no doubt they would help him through this.
'Good luck, my friends.' Leonardo smiled, patting his shoulder lightly. 'And Emily, I finished the work on those throwing stars at last. They were quite the challenge to reproduce.'
'Do you have any we can trial?' Aloysius asked, excited at the prospect of having new throwing stars to work with.
'I have one completed set so far and hope to make more as I get the supplies to create them.' Leonardo offered, looking around the group to see who would claim them.
'Since we haven't had any time to train Ezio in the use of them, I propose we split the full set into four lots of six and spread them around. We'll just have to remember to make all efforts to retrieve them after each use.' Emily instructed, looking back over her shoulder. 'Gena, why don't you accompany Leonardo back to his workshop and collect them? We won't be far away.'
'With pleasure.' Gena grinned, grateful for the little quiet time with Leonardo.

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Refreshed after a peaceful night at Leonardo's workshop, sleeping in his attic to avoid complications, the team headed out to the Cannaregio district to meet the Templar boat and retrieve their prize. Well, four of them wanted the prize but Ezio's focus was elsewhere. Emily was wary of Ezio's distraction from the real purpose of their mission but she said nothing, putting her trust in her young ancestor to figure out what really mattered.

Crouched on rooftops and hidden behind barrels, the team waited and watched, looking for what was important and dismissing the things they didn't need to care about right now. Three guards came off a smaller boat, one carrying an artefact in both hands. The four modern Assassins recognised it and knew it was vital to the continued success of their missions but this wasn't their fight. They had to wait for Ezio to figure it out.

From his perch on the city walls, Ezio's attention was distracted by a familiar figure on the other side of the canal, mostly hidden behind a building but Ezio still recognised him. Why Uncle Mario was in Venezia was just another mystery that would need to be solved later, right now he needed to figure out how to get close to Rodrigo Borgia and end his life.
'Emily, I can see Uncle Mario on the other side of the canal.' Ezio warned, figuring it couldn't hurt to inform Emily of what he'd seen.
"I see him, Ezio. Focus on the Apple and getting near The Spaniard. I'll catch Mario and see why he's here." Emily directed, a flash of concern flicking between them. "I'm sure it's nothing, just focus on what you need to get done."
'I will Emily.' Ezio nodded, flicking his eyes back to the four guards on the dockside.

The Apple was handed to the guard that had been waiting on the dockside since before the boat pulled up. Securing it in a pouch slung over his shoulder, this agile guard took off back out of the district and away.
"Stay on him Ezio, we'll be around to help you out of tight spots but it's your turn to shine." Aloysius guided, his words bringing little comfort to Ezio as he picked his way down from the wall and took off in hot pursuit.
'It seems like I've been doing most of the work lately.' he groused, careful not to be seen by the wary courier. 'It's just about always my time to shine.'
"Because this is your mission. We're just here to guide you, the important missions must be completed by you to ensure the timeline." Libby explained, sending a wave of calming thoughts towards him. "This is what Giovanni would want for you."

Holding back and watching Ezio take off after the courier, Aloysius nodded and signalled Libby, the pair of them taking off in hot pursuit of him. Gena let them outpace her before turning and heading in a completely different direction, guided by a new marker in her eyes. Exactly what her target was, she couldn't be sure. All she knew for certain was that she wasn't part of this mission to keep eyes on the Apple.

Working in harmony with Ezio, Aloysius and Libby silenced any guards that saw them and moved on quickly, making certain not to drop any bodies from the rooftops and retrieving their throwing stars as they made use of them. It wasn't always easy to keep up with Ezio, his path was much longer and more complex than theirs but they managed it, never straying far from his sides. The canals proved to be annoying obstacles, forcing them down from the rooftops and risking their security by displaying multiple Assassins in one area so they were quick to get back on the rooftops once they were clear of the water.

Between the three of them, the courier was never out of sight, even when they all had to stop and dispatch guards at the same time. Moving on again, Aloysius slammed into a Borgia messenger that tried to slip past him, stealing his florins and sprinting to catch up with Ezio again. Coming to another canal, Libby didn't hesitate, diving off the rooftop and arching down into the water with barely a splash to alert the fleeing courier. Swimming along the canal a little ways, she climbed straight up another building and ran hard, her clothes slowly drying in the sun.

Dodging drunks and other people wandering the streets, Ezio swore softly as the courier went up onto the rooftops, getting far too close to Aloysius' position. Making the choice, Ezio slowed his pace and followed from the ground, confident that his target would eventually return to the streets. Sure enough, he only stayed over the streets for about ten minutes before dropping back down and continuing along the twisting streets.

Skidding on a loose roof tile, Aloysius threw his weight forward and dropped, landing full spread across the rooftop. Thankfully the clatter went unnoticed amid the usual noises of Venezia and he was able to creep closer to the edge and peer down to where the courier was standing.
'The Maestro awaits. He will not suffer mistakes. Package it correctly. Do it now.' one of the guards instructed, pointing the courier towards a waiting box.
"The Spaniard's here!? That changes things. If I can infiltrate this group…take the place of the courier…they'll lead me right to the figlio di puttana." Ezio growled, somewhere nearby but not quite in the right position to act.
'Make it fast, Ezio. These guards ain't fooling around here.' Aloysius warned, still hunkered down on the rooftop and waiting for the next phase of this crazy plan.

Throwing star in hand, Aloysius waited for Ezio to make his appearance, confident that the young man could pull this off with a little support and the knowledge that his friends were nearby. Ezio ended up coming in the back way, fresh blood on his sleeve as he launched over the wall and landed right on the unfortunate courier. Dragging the body out of sight, he crouched beside it and got to work, quickly stripping off most of his robes and undressing the guard.

Coming in from the far side of the area, Libby dropped down beside Ezio with a simple black bag in one hand. Crouching beside the pile of discarded Assassin clothing, she folded everything and stashed it in the bag, showing incredible skill with packaging a lot of gear in such a small bag with
great haste. Lacing his boots to the outside of the bag and wrapping it all in a black cloth, Libby swung the burden onto her back and took off out of the area via a different route.

Securing his weapons, Aloysius swung down to join Ezio in the private little courtyard, helping with his armour before turning his attention to the body left behind. Heaving the body onto his shoulders, Aloysius checked the area was clear and darted away, planning to ditch the body in the canals and coming back around to provide support for Ezio.

"I will get my robes and armour back, won't I?" Ezio asked, sounding just a little concerned.

"Stop worrying Ezio, I'm taking it to Leonardo's for safe keeping. You can get it back when we have what we came for." Libby promised, hopefully getting as far away from the area as possible.

'Have faith, Ezio. You will be reunited with all of your gear. But only after this mission is completed. Just play along with it, I'll be right here watching over you.' Aloysius added, throwing the body into the water and racing up the nearest wall to return to his spot.

Personally, Aloysius found it rather amusing that Ezio was getting such an uncomfortable lesson in patience and planning, now stuck in the middle of a guard team and walking through the city. He was sure this wasn't what Ezio had been thinking would happen when he made the choice to slaughter that courier and snag the box.

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Her burden delivered safely to Leonardo's workshop with a promise to explain properly once they had dealt with the current situation, Libby raced back across Venezia and hurried to take up the position her private map was showing her. Diving into the canals again, she slipped under the surface and swam hard for her point. She was really starting to hate the canals of Venezia, it seemed she spent more time in them than anyone else and she couldn't get rid of the small.

Reaching her spot, she climbed partly out of the water and curled up into the smallest ball she could, waiting for the right moment to strike. On her corneal map, she could see the marked locations of the rest of her friends. Gena was hidden in a hay cart just on the other side of the canal wall, Emily was behind one of the boarded up windows on the other side of this open area and Aloysius had just arrived up on the rooftops at the nearer end of the area. Strangely though, Libby could also see several other markers on her map, other allies lurking further away and waiting for the signal to engage.

'Emily, I'm picking up multiple other Assassin signals in the area. What's the deal?' she requested, ignoring the aches from her awkward position.

"Mario brought reinforcements. He wouldn't tell me who, only that we could trust them as fully as we trust Teodora and Bartolomeo." Emily replied, her words a little angry. "We stick to our roles in this, everything will become clear in the end."

'Understood Emily.' Libby sighed, not happy with the answer but it was all she would get.

Shifting a little to ease the tension in her muscles, Libby held her increasingly uncomfortable position and waited, wondering what was taking so damned long for them to get the signal into action. She could hear the guards moving on the other side of the wall and Ezio's marker was right there between Gena and Emily.

'Do you really have it? You were not followed?' Borgia asked, sounding expectant and wary.

'Absolutely. Everything went perfectly. We have followed your orders exactly as specified. The mission to Cyprus was more difficult than expected. There were -- complications. But we have returned with the artefact. And have carefully transported it to you, as instructed. We look forward to being generously compensated, as I am sure you have already considered...what are you waiting for, Courier?'

Just barely audible from her position, Libby heard the unmistakeable sound of a hidden blade being
unsheathed and the grunt of a dying man. According to her corneal map, Ezio was moving, finally making a move to accept his destiny and prove he was the man of future legends. 'Ezio. It's been some time.' Rodrigo didn't seem surprised to realize that in fact the guards had been infiltrated and lost control of the Apple. Again Libby heard the hidden blade go off, but this time she heard both and then the distinct gurgling of two men struggling to live with slit throats. 'Rodrigo. So, where is he? Ezio growled, sounding more than a little agitated and ready to kill. 'Who?' Rodrigo asked, playing the fool and finding such amusement out of it. 'Your Prophet! Doesn't look like anybody showed up, Rodrigo! How many people have died for this? For what's in this box!? And look -- There's nobody here!' Ezio challenged, long since passed annoyed and moving on the genuinely pissed off. 'You claim not to be a believer. And yet, here you are. Don't you see him? The Prophet is already here. I am the Prophet!' Rodrigo countered, the air ringing with the familiar screech of a sword being drawn. 'Now give me the Apple!' 'Come and take it from me.' Ezio countered, aware of the presence of his friends but wisely saying nothing of their presence.

Shifting her grip again, Libby could only hang on and wait for the signal, her trust in those that could actually see the battle going on. She hated to be left out of the fighting like this, she would have preferred being up there beside Ezio instead of hanging on the wall listening to him. "Hey, can someone with eyes on the fight tell em what the fuck is going on out there?" Gena growled, staying perfectly still under the hay pile. 'I'll second that notion. I'm getting sick of staring at this brick wall.' Libby agreed, cautiously moving to grab onto one of the mooring rings on the wall. "Our boy Ezio is owning Borgia with seeming ease. Ezio's all over him like mud on a Marine. Ol' Rodrigo can't keep up with the ferocity of Ezio's attack, more hits are getting through than he can block." Aloysius chuckled, completely focused on the way Ezio was dealing out the pain. "He's pushing Borgia all over the place."

Suddenly the sounds of battle fell away again and all that could be heard was the soft panting of the combatants as they caught their breath in readiness for another round. Down behind the wall, Libby was tensed for action, something telling her that it was almost time for them to make their move. 'Is this all you have? Where is the rest of your people?' Rodrigo taunted, breathing hard as he taunted Ezio. 'What people?' Ezio asked, still playing the dumb card and doing a good job of it. 'You really have no idea, do you? Guards!' Borgia replied, calling for his reinforcements somewhere close by and waiting for the call. Launching over the wall, Libby once again did her eagle impression before charging into the battle, twisting under a swinging sword and going for the bigger guard with the pike. Vaulting out of the hay cart, Gena ploughed right through one of the guards, her axe whistling as she took his head clean off. Springing down from the roof, Aloysius blocked their escape out the way they'd come in, getting stuck right into another guard sword to war hammer. Shoving the shutters clear and flipping out, Emily whipped up her sword and dagger and went straight into the heart of the battle, sliding past Ezio and stabbing up into the lightly armoured guard on his other side. Shaking off his shock at the sudden, scattered entrance of his friends, Ezio reengaged Rodrigo, pushing him away from Libby's exposed back and leaving them to deal with the back up that had been called against them. The guards kept coming at them though, this time from the same direction Ezio had first entered the battleground. 'Uncle!?' Ezio called, trying to track the constantly moving guards and distracted when Mario came up behind him. 'Don't worry, nipote! You are not alone.' Mario laughed, racing past and battering through another guard threatening Emily.
'Nice of you to join us, Mario!' Emily smirked, smashing the head of a guard trying to sneak up on Mario's blindside.

Knocked to the ground when another guard tried to take his head off, Ezio looked up in disbelief as another familiar face came to his rescue. This didn't make any sense, first his usual team, then his Uncle and now this. He had no idea what was going on anymore.

'Volpe! What are you doing here?' he asked, accepting the helping hand back to his feet.

'We could very well ask you the same thing!' Volpe replied, releasing Ezio's hand just as a dagger sailed into the eye of another guard right near them.

'We?' now Ezio was really confused. None of this made any sense, especially when he saw Antonio and Bartolomeo arriving on the scene.

'Save your questions, brother. Don't let Borgia leave with that box!' Antonio directed, taking stock of the situation as Bartolomeo charged into battle with a fierce cry.

'Avanti!' Mario and Emily screamed, taking charge of the double team and making sure Borgia got nowhere near his prize.

'Libby! Guard the prize!' Emily ordered, twirling through two more guards but she only hit one, the other died to a friendly sword through the back from Antonio's direction. 'Grazie Antonio.'

'Antonio, help Libby guard our prize. We cannot lose it now.' Mario added, driving his sword through another guard.

Driving his sword through another guard, Aloysius had no time to withdraw it before he came under attack again. Twisting sharply, he bent over backwards and lashed out with both feet, kicking his attacker straight back onto Bartolomeo's sword. Planting his feet again, Aloysius wrenched his sword free and nodded, rather enjoying the look of shock on Bartolomeo's face as he shoved the body off his much larger weapon.

'Appreciate the support, Bartolomeo.' Aloysius grinned, ducking another war hammer and spinning to intercept another sword.

'Now, you all shall die…' Rodrigo snarled, turning to confront Aloysius.

'I don't fucking think so.' Aloysius spat, parrying the first swing and smirking when Gena grabbed Rodrigo's robes and sent him flying back into the heart of the melee. 'Take him down, Ezio! We're right behind you!'

'Come at me, codardi! All of you! My Bianca hungers for more skulls to crush!' Bartolomeo challenged, right in the middle of a four against one bloodbath.

Itching against her restriction, Libby opened the box and hooked out the Apple, abandoning its pretentious casing and shoving the main prize deep inside her tunic. Glancing at Antonio, she broke from her place and swirled through the complex fight, parrying and thrusting in a complex dance. Slipping past Gena, Libby handed the Apple over and kept moving, trusting Gena to protect their prize from harm.

'This is pathetic. You cannot stop what is written.' Rodrigo growled, still trying to get a rise out of Ezio and oblivious to the fact the Apple was already gone from his grasp. 'What lies in the vault shall be mine!'

'Look, my friends. Our Ezio has become quite the guerriero.' Antonio laughed, engaging another guard trying to get at Libby from the back.

'A cuccia, tu. You mess with the Fox, you get the sword.' Volpe taunted, as skilled with his butcher's knife as anyone else was with their swords.

'What fun! We should do this more often!' Gena grinned, subtly passing the Apple to Bartolomeo and tearing the head off another guard with her axe.

'This is a losing battle for you, hombrecito. You will die by my hand, just like your father…' Borgia was still trying to get a rise out of Ezio but it wasn't working anymore. 'This war has been going on far longer than either of us have played a role.'

'Oh shut up and fight!' Emily barked, lunging in and using her dagger to rip Rodrigo's fine robes
open along his back.

Slowly but surely, the nine Assassins on the battlefield were taking control of the fight, depleting the guards and leaving Rodrigo with no one left to call on to protect him. The Assassins moved with such fluidity, passing the Apple from hand to hand to keep it secure from Rodrigo as they slaughtered his guards.

'Isn't this magnifico, Ezio!? All of us smashing these Templar heads together!' Bartolomeo laughed, falling back to prevent Rodrigo escaping between the buildings.

'Notevole, nipote! You've improved since the last time we fought together.' Mario praised, smiling softly at Emily for a moment before closing with Rodrigo again.

'Ah, bravissimo! We should do this more often!' Antonio agreed, staying in line with the rest of the team to force Rodrigo to engage Ezio.

Lowering their weapons a little, the majority of the massed team hung back and watched from a distance as Ezio went hard against Rodrigo again. He was unstoppable now, his anger was roused and nothing but the defeat of Rodrigo Borgia would calm him.

'Forgive me for not telling you the full story earlier, Emily.' Mario uttered, resting one hand on her shoulder lightly.

'You were protecting your people, Mario. I would do the same for my friends.' Emily replied, resting her hand over his.

Their perfect moment was shattered when Ezio came flying backwards at them and went crashing into the secret lovers. The rest of the Assassin team watched on in patient silence as Rodrigo fled from the battlefield, leaving behind the corpses of his men and the Apple.

'Paola!?' Ezio blinked, looking up at her in disbelief. 'Oof!'

'You okay, Mario?' Emily groaned, sitting up slowly after shoving Ezio off.

'Si, a little rattled but unharmed. You?' Mario nodded, rubbing at his jaw where he'd caught Ezio's elbow as they fell.

'No! I need to go after him!' Ezio argued, pulling his hand free and stepping back.

'A few minor scrapes and bruises, I've had worse.' Emily shrugged, allowing Bartolomeo to help her back to her feet.

'Do you really, now? Or are you here for another reason, my son?' Teodora asked, approaching Ezio as the rest of the team moved to gather around him.

'Teodora? What!?' Ezio looked around, trying to make sense of what he was seeing.

Everyone that had helped him find his feet as an Assassin and avenge his family was now gathered around him, Emily and her fellow modern Assassins to his left and those he'd met since fleeing Firenze on his right.

'What are you all doing here?' he asked, desperate for answers.

'Perhaps the same thing you are, Ezio. Hoping to see the Prophet appear.' another man replied, making his way along behind the ancient Assassins to stop beside Mario.

'I came here to kill the Spaniard. I couldn't care less about your Prophet. He never showed up!' Ezio countered, locking his focus onto this new speaker.

'No? But you did.' he offered, only making Ezio's confusion worse.

'What?'

'A Prophet's arrival was foretold... And, unbeknownst to us - here you are. Perhaps all along, you were the one we sought.'

'Così? Who are you?' Ezio demanded, irritated by the comments of this new arrival.

'Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli. I am an Assassin - trained in the ancient ways to safeguard mankind's evolution. Just like you, and each one of us here.' Niccolò explained, one hand drifting out to take in the gathered Assassins from both times.

'You are all Assassins? Paola? Volpe?' Ezio backed away from them, not sure who to trust anymore.
'It's true, nipote. We have all been guiding you, for years, teaching you the skills you would need to join our ranks.' Mario nodded, stepping forward and resting one hand on Ezio's shoulder.
'I think it's time.' Emily added, coming up beside Mario.
'We have our prize, but there is much to be done. Come meet us here at sunset.' Antonio guided, handing Ezio a map.

Before he could walk away, he felt a vice like grip on his shoulder and was yanked around, coming face to face with Emily and she looked seriously annoyed. Casting his mind back, he tried to remember what he could have done to raise her ire but he came up completely blank. Then he recalled their time up on the tower overlooking the Palazzo Ducale, back when they were trying to save Mocenigo. No wonder she was annoyed, he'd looked her in the eye and played his thief card and now he'd been caught in a falsehood.
'I admit to my wrong doing, sister. I should have told you the truth at our first meeting.' he offered, lifting his chin a little. 'I will take my punishment as you see fit.'
'I can respect the way you and your organisation of thieves can admit your faults.' Emily nodded, releasing her grip.

Bracing for a heavy blow like he'd seen Emily use previously, Antonio was shocked when Emily let rip with an open palm, snapping his head to the left with a sharp crack. With his weight in the wrong position for such a hit, Antonio wobbled and dropped, one hand pressed over the rapidly darkening red mark on his face as he looked up at Emily.
'Outside the sparring ring, I will not strike a fellow Assassin with a closed fist. Thieves are a different matter.' she grinned, turning and wandering back to her team. 'Come on Ezio, let's get you out of that ugly armour and back in something more comfortable.'
'Sounds like a grand idea.' Ezio agreed, pulling off his stolen helmet.
'Before you go, Emily.' Mario called, patting down his pouches to make sure he didn't have it. 'Who has the Apple right now?'
'I do.' Antonio replied, fishing their prize out of his shirt and handing it to Mario. 'I think just about everyone here touched it.'
'All except Ezio.' Emily laughed, waving to the local team before leaving the area with her smaller group.
Gathering once more in the marked tower, Aloysius choked on his laughter when Machiavelli tried to join them only to be blocked by a blue and gold barrier that flared when Niccolò touched it and faded into invisibility again when he backed off.

'Though you are one of us, Niccolò, this has nothing to do with you. There will be things discussed here that you are not welcome to know of, for fear of what might happen with the information.' Emily warned, turning to regard him. 'Those things you are permitted to know will be shared but the secrets of this meeting are not yours to know.'

'Go Niccolò, we will speak with you later.' Mario added, dismissing the younger man.

Waiting calmly for another signal from the webs, Emily extended her hand to Ezio and smiled as he removed the glistening gold ring he'd gotten so used to wearing and placed it in her hand lightly. Fingers closing around her personal ring, Emily brushed a kiss over the insignia and tucked it into the smallest pouch on her belt.

'Laa shay'a waqi'un moultlaq bale kouloun moumkine. These are the words spoken by our ancestors - that lay at the heart of our creed.' Mario intoned, gazing at the burning brazier in the corner as he spoke before turning to stand beside Emily.

'Where other men blindly follow the truth, remember…' Emily guided, stepping forward to stand before Ezio.

'Nothing is true.' Ezio replied, totally focused on Emily and their sacred words.

'Where other men are limited, by morality or law, remember…' Emily continued, ignoring the other Assassins around her to bring Ezio into their inner circle.

'Everything is permitted.' Ezio responded, feeling truly blessed to go through this with Emily.

'We work in the dark, to serve the light. We are Assassins.' Emily finished, dipping her head.

'Nothing is true, everything is permitted.' the strong chorus of all present was truly breathtaking to witness, voices of present and future in harmony.

Stepping back, Emily waved Mario in to complete the ritual, the secret lovers in harmony and so proud to be bringing Ezio into the nest together. It would have been better if Giovanni was involved but this was still good.

'It is time Ezio…' Mario guided, stepping forward as Ezio moved to stand before him. 'In this modern age, we are not so literal as our ancestors. But our seal is no less permanent. Are you ready to join us?'

'I am.' Ezio nodded, extending his left hand and trying to relax as Mario guided his hand into the best position for this.

'This only hurts for a while, brother. Like so many things.' Antonio warned, lifting the special tongs out of the brazier and turning to Ezio.

Showing startling honour and respect, the four truly modern Assassins went down to one knee, folded hands resting on their raised left knees as they bowed their heads. Ezio focused on Emily again, gaze drawn to the shining ring she wore so proudly. The light of the brazier was flickering across the ring, creating a mesmerising pattern that completely distracted him. It still hurt like hell, the air filling with the scent of burned flesh as Antonio wrapped the heated tongs around his finger. Ezio did his family proud through it, holding his tongue and baring his teeth as he dealt with the pain of his new promises.
Getting to their feet only once Antonio had removed the tongs and stepped back, Emily smiled proudly and reached out to place her left hand on Ezio's right shoulder. Stepping up beside her again, Mario reached out to put his right hand on Ezio's left shoulder, watching Emily to see what she would do next.

'Benvenuto, Ezio. You are one of us now.' Mario nodded, not really surprised that he was so protective of his injured hand.

'Welcome to the nest, Junior Assassin Ezio.' Emily added, digging into one of her pouches and pulling out a ring on a chain. 'When your finger has healed up properly, you know what to do with this. For now, keep it on the chain so you don't lose it.'

Trying to take the leap of faith from the tower that signified the end of the proceedings, Bartolomeo found his path blocked by the very same barrier that had stopped Niccolò from joining the rest of the team for the initiation.

'Uh, Emily?' Aloysius uttered, noticing the same thing when he tried to get up on the ledge.

'Peace my friends, it is time to discuss matters of the highest secrecy.' Emily replied, brushing her hood back and moving into the centre of the open room. 'What we are about to discuss can never be openly spoken of outside the protection of this moment. When we are confident of being alone and unobserved, we can discuss it in depth but otherwise, this must be the greatest secret of our Order.'

Slowly the group returned to her, forming a circle around her and waiting for her to speak. Shaking her head slowly, Emily rearranged the circle around her, putting Ezio and Mario in front of her then Aloysius and Libby beside them. Next in she placed Volpe beside Libby and Paola beside Aloysius, then Antonio went beside Paola and Teodora beside Volpe. This put Bartolomeo behind her and Gena slipped in between him and Antonio, completing the circle to her satisfaction.

'Those of you who know the truth, I apologise for going over it again but these things must be spoken of before we continue with what must be done. You see, four of us here are not from Firenze or even Tuscany. To be totally honest, we're not even from Italia, but a place so far from here as to be completely unknown to you. A great country, many times the size of Italia as a whole, our country is still undiscovered at this time in history to us. It won't be until 1492 that the first European man will step foot on the land we call home. Not until the 16th century will your known world come to realise just what a treasure was found in the New World.' Emily explained, total conviction in her words as she tried to bring both Assassin teams together and answer the call of her web.

'You lie! There is nothing to be found out there.' Volpe replied, shaking his head sharply.

'Oh yes there is. Watch and I will prove it to you.' Emily shot back, spreading her arms wide and tipping her head back as she closed her eyes.

Responding to her summons, the web blazed to life around the circle, gold and blue twisting around the team. Five blue lines twisted together over Emily's head and disappeared through the ceiling above them, leaving only Gena's blue line linking her to anyone of this time and place.

'On the other end of my web line, stands the great artist Leonardo da Vinci. I am his descendant from the New World.' Gena offered, so proud of her link to the past.

'As you can see, I am twisted into this golden web, the web of the Auditore. I am connected to this time and place by the wild spirit of Claudia Auditore.' Libby added, drawing attention to the golden rope protruding from her chest.

'You note that my line is severed here but still this smaller one twists into the web and anchors my place among the Auditore. My main connection was Federico, now buried beside his father after a late night run in with bandits. This thin line shows that the woman to be my female ancestor has already given birth and is raising the next generation that will ensure I remain an Auditore.' Aloysius sighed, tracing one finger over the thin line he displayed.

Just as Ezio was about to proudly claim Emily as his descendant, he noticed that there was something different about the link they shared. It was almost as though it had been split it half, one part remaining connected to him and the other reaching out to twine around Mario's strand.
'Uncle Mario?' he asked, turning to the older man. 'All will be revealed soon, nipote.' Mario replied, his attention locked on the twirling knot where Emily's line connected with his own. 'At least, I hope so.'

Softly, barely noticeable at first but gradually growing in strength, they all heard a man's voice calling, repeating the same words over and over in an endless cycle. Mario was first to recognise the voice and it looked around quickly, trying to find the source of that voice, unheard for over ten years. There was no way this was happening, Giovanni was dead and buried, his family had all witnessed his death.

'sibling and saviour…sibling and saviour…sibling and saviour…' there was no mistaking that voice, Giovanni Auditore was back from the grave and repeating those same words, growing stronger with each repeat.

'Sibling is obvious, he's talking about you Mario but saviour…I have no idea.' Libby shrugged, trying to figure out what Giovanni's voice wanted.

'I think I know.' Emily replied, peeling off her gloves and tossing them aside. 'Mario, bare your hands and step forward.'

Handing his soft gloves to Ezio, Mario stopped in front of Emily and tried to relax, not exactly sure what he was getting into but he couldn't stand listening to Giovanni's ghostly voice echoing around him. He loved his brother so much and would do anything for him. Anything except listen to his disembodied voice.

'I was the one who tried so hard to save Giovanni in his final minutes. His blood coated my robes, stained my hands and marked my soul for eternity. I am the saviour he calls for now.' she uttered, raising her right hand between them.

'And I am the sibling he has always known.' Mario replied, pressing his right palm to hers and tangling their fingers together.

Once again Emily's split line appeared before them, linking her to both Auditore men she'd come to know and love so much. Her link to Ezio faded out a little, drawing focus to the unexpected union between Emily and Mario. The haunting voice had stopped and now their forbidden link pulsed brightly, filling the tower with a soft golden glow. Reaching out from the knot Emily had made in the webs, a single gold strand reached up between them and exploded outwards, dividing into twelve and snaking out around the lovers. Layer by layer, twisting and shifting around them, a totally new family line burst into life from an impossible love. Spreading out, growing and changing as it reached towards the heavens, this new family line grew strong and continued to spread, twelve becoming so many in places that it was impossible to know for sure just how many new lives had been created.

Panting softly as they stood there, Emily and Mario looked around at the lines that had been created off their union and simply couldn't believe what they'd done for the Order. Their fears of damaging the family line were proven unnecessary, their relationship had instead added hundreds of new Assassins to the ranks.

'What was that?' Antonio asked, his voice little more than a whisper.

'A fourth Auditore line reaching into the future.' Libby replied, just as stunned by what had happened this night.

'But, how is this even possible? They're related, distantly but still…' Ezio added, sounding a little horrified by what he'd witnessed.

'Zio, how is any of this possible? We've jumped back 600 years in time to fight alongside and against people of modern legend and history.' Aloysius offered, confused but accepting of what was being shown.

Stepping closer, the lovers almost seemed to be dancing to their own song, swaying slightly as they raised their still joined right hands overhead. Moving in harmony, they moved their left hands to clasp at right hips, drawing each other closer and sealing their union in the webs. Right hands
coming down slowly, they broke apart and tangled into soft hair, pulling closer until they stood there body to body, foreheads resting lightly together. Without losing their grip on each other, they went down to their knees and closed their eyes, waiting for what was coming.

Again the tower was filled with a golden glow, this one emanating from the entangled lovers and blocking them from view completely. Shading their eyes, the rest of the team looked away from the blinding light, not sure what to expect but it was sure to be interesting.

'Do you suppose this is something like what happened in Mario's study?' Libby asked, glancing at Aloysius with a faint shrug.

'It's possible I guess.' Aloysius replied, truly not sure what to make of this display.

But even as the golden light grew stronger, five points of brilliant blue appeared above the embracing pair, spreading out and pulsing to different rhythms. Lifting their gazes, the spectators just watched in slack jawed wonder as the blue lights became rings and dropped five new arrivals heavily to the floor. Sprawled out where they fell, the five were dressed in the white robes of the Assassins, outstretched hands touching the five very startled old hands that were just starting to realise that all of this was real.

Building in intensity, the combined blue and gold lighting up the tower continued to grow, forcing everyone to close their eyes and shield them tightly. Then, with a sound like the fireworks of Carnevale, the lights exploded outwards, blasting into the sky and raining gold and blue over the beautiful city below.

Groaning faintly, one of the newest arrivals stirred and lifted their head, doing this uncoordinated sort of flop to their left side to ease the discomfort of their landing position. Sinking to her knees, Paola reached out to touch him, guiding him over and brushing his hood back. There was no thought in it, she simply reached out to take his right hand in her own and it happened. Both gasped as a flash of blue surrounded them. When it faded, nothing had physically changed for them but they both knew the truth of the one they were looking at.

'Rest a while Buck, I will keep you safe.' she uttered, stroking his hair lightly.

'What year is it now?' Buck asked, reaching up to touch her cheek gently.

'This is the year 1488.' Paola smiled, content to let Buck rest in her arms and adjust to her presence at his side. 'You are in the city of Venezia.

'Grazie.' Buck nodded, shifting a little closer and closing his eyes.

Looking down at the smaller figure in front of her, Teodora moved to sit beside them and carefully rolled them over, brushing the hood back to reveal the fine features and dark hair of a beautiful young woman. Mumbling incoherently, the younger woman fluttered back into awareness, eyelids slowly opening to reveal dark eyes. Slowly the newly arrived Assassin lifted her right hand, a flicker of recognition in her eyes before Teodora clasped their hands and another family connection was re-established.

'Benvenuti, Veronique, to bella Venezia in the year 1488.' Teodora offered, rearranging their positions to make Veronique more comfortable.

'Grazie, Teodora. I am honoured to know you at last.' Veronique replied, rolling onto her side and adjusting the way her weapons were sitting as she relaxed into Teodora's hold.

'And I you, my child. Rest now, you have journeyed far to be here.' Teodora soothed, amazed by how right it felt to sit with the stranger that was irrefutably her great granddaughter from the future.

Gasping for breath, still clutching to each other desperately, Emily and Mario came up from wherever they had gone and drew back slowly, taking in the changes they could see. Mario was shocked by what he found, guilt building in his gut as he gazed at the scar now marring Emily's beautiful face, slicing over her left eye and robbing her of so much. Reaching up, he traced his thumb over the scar lightly, hating that he'd been the one to put it there.
'It's okay Mario, I bear your scars as you now carry mine. But not just suffering is traded in our celebration, tell me what you see.' Emily smiled, drawing one of her throwing knives and twirling it in the fingers of her right hand, right in the middle of Mario's blind spot. 'I...I can see that. I see your blade and everything that was once hidden.' Mario replied, turning his head a little to truly see what was on his left side. 'It's not very clear but I can see again.' 'You have been blind on that side for many years, it will take time to regain full vision but now you have a chance at least.' Emily grinned, cupping his cheek lightly and tracing over the scar that had stolen his vision. 'Consider it part of my dowry.'

Drawn to the shivering figure clutching his boot, Volpe stepped back a little and crouched, reaching out to run a calming hand over this new arrival before working his hand free of the fine leather. Shifting to sit, Volpe tugged the shaking figure onto his lap and held him close as he used his right hand to brush back the white hood and gaze upon the scarred features of this young man. The deepest blue eyes looked back up at him, confusion slowly giving way to trust in his depthless gaze. So caught up in the appearance of this man, Volpe never noticed he was moving until he found his right hand clasped firmly and they were washed in blue light. 'Where am I, Gilberto?' Shane muttered, tucking his head under Volpe's chin and getting comfortable. 'I know this isn't my home.'

'You're in Venezia, Shane, in the year 1488.' Volpe replied, finding it hard to dismiss Emily's words when he was holding the proof of Assassins from the future. 'Is it true, you really came from the future? From a place that hasn't even been discovered yet?' 'Si, I came back from the year 2010 to be here. My home is far from here, on the other side of the world to Italia. To get there by sea would take many months.' Shane confirmed, keeping a firm grip on Volpe's hand as he drifted into a peaceful sleep.

Though he would never admit it, Antonio was perhaps a little intimidated by the large man on the floor at his feet. Broad in the shoulders and heavily muscled, he looked like he could tear out of his robes at any minute without any real effort. His hood had fallen back when he fell, revealing long brown hair pulled back out of the way and a longish beard that had been done up in dozens of little braids. Antonio had no doubt that this Assassin wasn't from Italia, he'd never heard of such a beard style before and he heard a lot through his contacts.

Startled by the flash of blue right beside her, Emily pulled back from Mario and snapped to look, jaw dropping as she watched Antonio tending to the heavyset Assassin now resting his head in Antonio's lap. Still clinging to Mario, she turned further and took in the rest of the newly arrived Assassins as they were welcomed into this reality by those that made their lives possible. 'Cosi? When did this happen?' she asked, swinging her attention to Aloysius for answers. 'While you and Mario were happy in your golden glow trading scars.' Aloysius replied, looking around slowly at the reaffirming partnerships. 'Four identities are confirmed, we're still waiting for number five to stir.'

'Check on number five, let's find out what's wrong.' Emily nodded, shifting to sit on the floor and relaxing into Mario's embrace. 'Relax Mario, we're not going anywhere for a while yet.'

'I am more concerned about what Ezio might be thinking.' Mario replied, tugging Emily closer and resting his chin on her shoulder. 'I'm not sure what to think about this.' Ezio sighed, settling on the floor. 'Technically you're family so I should be disgusted. But with the years between you, I worry about what the future might hold for you both. That and I'm not sure about what I saw in the webs when you two were building your new line.'

'Yeah, I'm not too sure about that either.' Emily chuckled, plucking at the air and bringing out part of the web into view. 'But there's no mistaking it, twelve kids in the first generation after our union. Well, no one can doubt your virility, amore mio.'

Finally making a move, the final figure on the floor groaned and pushed off the floor, shaking their
head slowly to clear the fog. Crouching beside the shaky figure, Bartolomeo offered out his right hand in support, angling for the right hand grasp that he'd noted was causing reactions from the others around him. Still a little unsteady on his knees, this new arrival reached out with his right hand and grabbed hold, sending up a bright flash of blue.

'Easy now Rufus, you're safe here.' Bartolomeo soothed, as gentle with his newly discovered descendant as he was with Dante. 'Welcome to Venezia, 1488.'

'Grazie, Bartolomeo.' Rufus replied, sitting up a little more. 'Hopefully I don't have to do that again for a while.'

'Sit and rest, I don't think anyone is moving anywhere soon.' Bartolomeo laughed, guiding Rufus back to sit against him. 'There is a wonderful view of Venezia from up here.'

'It's too much effort to get up and look out, I'll see it later.' Rufus shrugged, flipping back his hood and running one hand through his neatly cut brown locks.

'Indeed you will.' Bartolomeo agreed, reaching up to retie the simple black ribbon holding Rufus' hair back out of the way.

Only now that Rufus was fully settled into his new place did Aloysius make his approach, satisfied that the link between these two men had stabilised. Crouching down, he reached out to lightly trace his knuckles over Rufus' cheek, admiring his changed appearance after years apart. Gone was his bushy beard, trimmed down to a sleek moustache and goatee combination.

'Hey buddy, I've missed you.' Aloysius uttered, totally ignoring Bartolomeo for now.

'Missed me? But I only saw you moments before all of this happened.' Rufus replied, confused by Aloysius' words.

'What? That's not possible, I've been stuck here for ten years.' Aloysius blanched, leaning back on his heels. 'Uhh, Emily? We've got another issue.'

'What is it now, Aloysius?' Emily sighed, reluctantly removing her head from Mario's shoulder and looking at him.

'Apparently Rufus was talking to me just moments before he turned up here. But as you know, I've been here for ten years so...' Aloysius explained, keeping one hand on Rufus as he turned to her.

'Hmmm, well that complicates things. I guess we'll find out if it matters at all when we eventually figure out if we ever return to our original time.' Emily shrugged, cuddling back in with Mario. 'I'm not too worried about it though, if I have to choose I'll willingly give up my titles and position to stay here with Mario.'

'No real surprise there.' Libby muttered, leaving her spot and wandering over to sit beside Volpe and Shane. 'I wonder if you'll ever accept what else has changed, Shane.'

'What do you mean, Libby?' Volpe asked, turning his attention to her.

'As far as Shane knows, I've been dead and buried for years. Gena told me he's found new love but I can't help wondering if maybe I have another chance with him.' Libby sighed, shifting closer and leaning against Volpe's shoulder.

'Take a look for yourself, Chickadee. That's Veronique, Scarecrow's new girl.' Gena offered, pointing to the woman resting against Teodora.

'I guess it'll come down to how Shane reacts to my return.' Libby shrugged, not sure how she'd go against the dark haired woman.

'I can't wait to see his reaction when Shane realises he's now got three foxes in his life.' Emily sniggered, working her head under Mario's arm and looking upside down at Libby. 'You, Renard and Volpe.'

'Renard?' Libby asked, glancing over towards the dark haired woman again.

'French for Fox.' Emily chuckled, pulling back again and curling up around Mario once more.

'His reaction is bound to be hilarious.' Gena agreed, settling back in the nearest corner and drawing her cape around her chest. 'I don't know about anyone else up here but I'm quite happy to spend the night up here.'

'I can't stay, I must get back to Dante.' Bartolomeo offered, torn for what to do.

'It's not wise to stay up here, we've got a signal fire below us and one of the city bells nearby too.
We'd be safer somewhere else.' Antonio agreed, gently rousing Jean-Claude from his exhausted sleep and guiding him to sit up.

'From here, Bartolomeo's headquarters is closest and we know it is safe there.' Mario suggested, thinking about the route he'd travelled earlier.

'We have to consider how Dante will react to all of this. The last thing we need is to scare him off again. He's finally opening up to people around him that weren't there to save him.' Libby sighed, idly running her fingers through Shane's hair.

'His faith in me is unshakeable though. We simply tell him these five have finally returned from battles in far away lands and he'll accept that. He may be wary of all the extra guests but he will bounce back.' Bartolomeo smiled, thinking of ante's reactions to other guests. 'He is a resilient man, despite his difficulties.'

Roused from his sleep by the gentle hand in his hair, Shane tipped his head back and froze, staring at Libby in disbelief and a hint of horror at seeing her back from the dead. Launching off Volpe's lap, he backed up quickly, refusing to believe what he was seeing, only to trip over the happy couple in the middle of the tower and tumbling onto his back.

'Secondary Master Schofield! What is the meaning of this?' Emily snapped, shoving Shane off their legs and pushing him back across the floor.

'Forgive me, Masters Hunter and Auditore. I am seeing the impossible.' Shane replied, scrambling to his knees and bowing his head.

'Nothing is impossible Shane, your training has taught you this.' Emily corrected, beckoning Libby over without releasing her hold on Mario. 'You are concerned about the reappearance of Libby, aren't you?'

'She has been dead for many years, Emily. How can she be alive here when I know she died such an ugly death in our own time?' Shane sighed, tensing up again when Libby knelt beside him.

'I haven't got the answers Shane, I am just grateful Libby is here with us. All I know for certain is that Master Knight and I took a leap of faith in own time and crashed the hanging of three Auditore's in Firenze in 1478. Libby was already there, in position to assist with our rescue and escape. She left many guard bodies around the area without anyone realising that she had killed them. Her skills have proven to be invaluable to completing our missions. In reward for her actions, Libby was promoted to Assassin in 1485.' Emily proclaimed, her words bringing a smile to Libby's face. 'Death is not permanent when jumping through time, Shane.'

'As further reward and to secure her place as an Auditore descendant, Libby was granted a new name and taken in as a surrogate daughter.' Mario added, reaching out to take Libby's hand.

'I am Elizabetta Auditore, so named to honour of the great Assassin Giovanni Auditore and surrogate daughter of Mario Auditore.' Libby declared, lifting her chin proudly.

'You have a choice to make now, Shane. Which Fox is dearest to your heart? Elizabetta or Veronique? You bring dishonour to our creed by playing two women at once.' Emily warned, dismissing Shane with a flick of her wrist. 'Think on it awhile. I expect your answer by the end of the week.'

'As you wish, Master Hunter.' Shane nodded, bowing respectfully before standing and walking over to look out over the city.

Shaking her head slowly, Emily sighed and got to her feet, tugging Mario up with her. Still getting used to the unfamiliar pull of the large scar across the left side of her face, she rubbed it lightly as she waited for the rest of the larger team to get up. Amid much grumbling and complaining, the team did eventually rise and stretch, ready to follow their united leaders towards the next adventure. Wherever Mario and Emily needed them, the Assassins of both eras would follow, always ready to uphold the creed and do their duty.

'okay, we're heading to Bartolomeo's to get some sleep before we figure out what to do to ensure our prize stays out of enemy hands. There are still more Codex pages to find and other missions that must be completed before we can make use of this thing.' Emily called, the blue and gold barriers around
the tower flickering for a moment before disappearing. 'Machiavelli is not to know the truth of where the newest five came from, his trace on history has shown that he has little talent for keeping secrets and this is not something we want made public. If he asks any of you, tell him in no uncertain terms to speak with either myself of Mario.'

Getting confirmations from everyone else up in the tower, Mario wasn't sure what to think when Emily kissed him then climbed up onto the ledge and looked down to the hay pile at the bottom. Turning around, she hung her boot heels over the edge and Mario’s heart leapt into his throat. He stopped thinking and lunged for her just as she kicked off and flipped over backwards, dropping out of his reach. Grabbing the edge, certain she was going to get hurt, Mario watched her flip over twice more before landing safely in the hay pile.

'Relax Mario, it's all good.' Aloysius chuckled, springing up onto the ledge beside him. 'We only do the standard leap of faith to keep the locals from panicking like you just did. We're actually trained to throw our own style into things like this. Consider it agility training.'

'Agility…' Mario blanched, staring in disbelief and shock as Aloysius launched out in a tumble of limbs and weapons, spiralling down to a safe landing.

'We've all jumped from greater heights than this, it's no big deal.' Libby laughed, vaulting heavenward after Aloysius and twisting through the air to make her landing right in the middle of the hay pile.

'Nuts, they're all fucking nuts.' Mario uttered, moving back as Gena took to the air and plunged down head first before flicking over at the last minute and landing safely.

'But we do make things fun.' Shane smirked, springing off the ledge and spiralling to the ground.

Showing off their skills happily, the rest of the transported Assassins took flight and sailed to the ground in a flurry of limbs, robes and different styles. In the wake of such a display of flexibility and power, the Italian Assassins looked almost boring but they at least made it down safely. Last to hit the ground, Mario crawled out of the hay and stood, shaking off the little bits of straw sticking to his clothes.

'Are we scattering or what?' Aloysius asked, plucking a bit of straw from his collar.

'Nah, we stick together for now. Remember how reluctant you were to wander away from Federico in the early days.' Emily replied, thinking back to how she'd felt driven to spend all her time right beside Ezio in those early weeks in Firenze.

'And now you prefer to cling to Mario,' Aloysius smirked, wisely staying out of her reach.

'Word from the wise, anyone here against sodomy had better get used to the idea real fast. Where we come from, it's no longer a punishable crime.' Emily warned, shooting Aloysius a deadly smirk of her own and he knew he was beaten.

'Sod…' Bartolomeo was quickly silenced with a sharp look from Mario, such words were best not said in public.

Offering his arm, Mario showed his nephew that a life of fighting and secrecy didn't necessarily force a man to forget about his upbringing. There was something special about simply being able to wander the streets of Venezia with his lady love holding his hand. Equals at last, no longer forced to hide their relationship, Mario couldn't be happier as they headed back towards Bartolomeo's headquarters where they could sleep safely.
One hand resting possessively over the burgundy and gold bag attached to her belt, Emily led her
team of modern Assassins through Venezia to Leonardo's workshop. At her side, Mario was tense
and uneasy, not at all happy with the plan she'd told him about earlier. Also in the group, Ezio was
equally unnerved by this business, the last seal to unlock Altair's armour tied securely to his brace.

Knocking sharply on the ornate door, Emily pushed it open and ushered the team inside, keeping a
sharp eye out for any trouble before slipping inside and closing the door. Unsurprisingly, Leonardo
looked about ready to have a full panic attack at the sight of so many Assassins in his workshop at
once, five of which he didn't even know.

'It's okay Leonardo, they're all friends. They were pulled through like I was, landing at the feet of
their ancestors.' Gena soothed, making her way forward to lightly cup Leonardo's cheek. 'I know this
is sudden but they only turned up last night. There wasn't any time to give warning before we
realised we needed your help with something of the utmost importance.'

'Who are they all?' Leonardo asked, calming at Gena's reassurance but he was still wary of so many
new faces around him.

'I'm Shane Schofield and this is Buck Riley. We've been working with Gena for years.' Shane
replied, dipping his head respectfully.

'Rufus McKenzie, I partner up with Aloysius for most missions.' Rufus grinned, resting one hand on
Aloysius' shoulder.

'Veronique Champion and this is my second, Jean-Claude Huguenot.' Veronique added, her accept
throwing Leonardo for a moment.

'I am Leonardo da Vinci, though you probably already worked that out. I bid you welcome to my
workshop and will do what I can to aid you with your work.' Leonardo smiled, gaze sweeping the
larger group. 'You two are clearly not from the same area as the rest.'

'Non, we are French Assassins, descended from Teodora Contanto and Antonio de Magianis.'
Veronique nodded, lowering her hood. 'We are honoured to meet you, Monsieur Leonardo.'

'If you're done trying to flirt with our allies, Veronique.' Emily sighed, rolling her eyes. 'We have
something you might find very interesting Leonardo.'

Making her way through the group, Emily placed the Apple on the workbench and moved back,
letting Leonardo get a closer look at the precious artefact as the Assassin team gathered around him.
Sinking to his knees, Leonardo peered closely at the faintly glowing device, absolutely clueless to
what it was but amazed all the same.

'Fascinating…Absolutely fascinating.' he murmured, his brilliant mind unable to work out what
it was or why it was so important.

'What is it, Leonardo? What does it do?' Ezio asked, glancing at the modern Assassins but they
weren't saying anything about the purpose of it.

'I could no more explain this than explain to you why the Earth goes around the sun!' Leonardo
shrugged, looking up at Ezio quickly.

'You mean the sun around the Earth?' Mario asked, certain Leonardo had simply turned his words
around and made a simple mistake.

'No, he means Earth around the sun.' Rufus replied, tucking his thumbs through his brace. 'The sun is
the centre of everything, not the Earth.'

'It's fabricated with materials that shouldn't exist…And yet…this is clearly a very ancient artefact.'
Leonardo continued, already dismissing the conversation about the sun and the Earth.
'We'll go over it later Mario. Just trust us on this, the Earth goes around the sun and let's focus on what really matters.' Emily chuckled, not at all surprised that had come up. 'The Codex refers to it as A Piece of Eden.' Mario offered, trusting Emily and getting back to their prize on the workbench. 'The Spaniard…he called it The Apple.' Ezio added, working to put the pieces of the puzzle together and figure out why this was so important. 'Like Eve's Apple? Of Forbidden Knowledge? Are you then suggesting that this thing…' Leonardo stood and moved back, still thinking on the item as Ezio reached out to hold his hand over the Apple. As if responding to his presence, the glow around the Apple became brighter until Ezio curled his hand around it. Recoiling instantly from the sound and light display that the Apple put out at Ezio's touch, most of the Assassins in the room staggered back and tried to shield their eyes and ears from the display. Only three were left unaffected by the display, apart from the bright light hurting their eyes a little. Spinning to Mario, Emily flared her cape out and draped it over his head, holding it there as she went to one knee and guided him to rest his face in the crook of her shoulder to protect his eyes from the glow as she shielded hers in his back. Reaching out again, still flinching from the lights flashing around the room, Ezio slammed his hand over the Apple again and silenced the display, his vision still stained with the strange shapes he'd seen all over the place. Whatever this thing was, it was dangerous in the wrong hands and clearly had a severe affect on some people. 'Are you okay, Mario?' Emily uttered, getting to her feet and getting a firm grasp of Mario's tunic to keep him steady. 'This must never fall into the wrong hands. It would drive weaker minds insane…' Leonardo warned, amazed by what he'd seen from the Apple but concerned about what it could do. 'Si, a little dazed but I will be fine Emily.' Mario nodded, rubbing at his eyes. 'At least my vision is getting better…I think.' 'No doubt, the Spaniard will be relentless in his desire to gain it back.' Ezio growled, not sure he wanted to touch that damned thing again. 'Don't do that again, Ezio.' Emily ordered, not wanting another show like that. 'It doesn't look cloudy so I don't think you did any serious damage. How's it look when you cover your right eye?' 'Clearer…still undefined at the edges of things but it is a big improvement.' Mario replied, looking around the workshop to test his recovering eye. 'That's good, you should have full vision sooner than expected.' Emily grinned, tracing her thumb over the big facial scar lightly. Approaching the workbench, Shane poked the Apple lightly with one finger, testing to see if it reacted to him. When nothing happened, he picked it up and slipped it back into the pouch Emily had left on the bench. 'We must protect this will all the skills we have.' he sighed, pulling the cords tight and handing the artefact back to Emily. 'Take it to Forli. The citadel is walled, protected by cannons and our ally controls it.' Mario suggested, looking down at the Apple with much more respect now. 'Who is this ally?' Ezio asked, really not sure about Emily's little side plan after that display. 'Her name is Caterina Sforza.' Mario replied, turning to Emily when those that had been around Ezio the longest groaned. 'You don't say…I think I may enjoy this mission.' Ezio grinned, remembering her fiery temper and rogue attitude. 'Mind on the mission, Ezio. As much as you'd love a roll in the hay with her, it's not happening.' Aloysius warned, reaching out to give Ezio a firm cuff around the ears. 'You don't need the troubles that come from getting too close to the Sforza family.'
'Besides, you have another mission to complete first.' Emily added, opening the bag again and pulling out the Apple once more.

Although it glowed in response to her touch, the Apple didn't explode out with knowledge again, showing that Emily had a little more control over it than Ezio did. Accepting that this was going to happen whether he wanted it or not, Ezio nodded slowly and walked over to embrace Leonardo firmly, fully aware that this would be the last time he saw the jovial genius for a while.

'Thank you for everything, my oldest friend.' he offered, hoping that this wasn't a final goodbye but he didn't know what was coming his was.

'Ready Ezio?' Emily asked, waving everyone else back. 'Remember, visualise clearly where you want to be. Think about the Sanctuary chamber, the statues arranged around the walls and the locked door blocking access to the armour you've earned.'

'I'm ready.' Ezio nodded, closing his eyes and pulling up his memories of the Sanctuary.

'Then go, we will meet you outside the walls of Forli when you have it.' Emily smiled, curling both hands around the Apple now.

The glow was much softer this time, barely enough to chase back the normal shadows of the workshop as it wrapped around Ezio and distorted his presence in the room. A brighter flicker and then it faded away, revealing an empty space where Ezio had been standing.

'Ezio?' Emily called, reaching into her webs to verify his safe arrival.

"I made it. I'm standing before Altair's statue." Ezio replied, sounding more than a little rattled.

'Good. Once you have the armour and anything else you require, focus on your memories of the team and you will be returned to us.' Emily guided, leaving him to his work and looking around slowly. 'Ezio made it to Monteriggioni. He will return to us once he has the armour.'

'How did you do that?' Leonardo asked, stunned by the disappearing act.

'I have studied the Pieces of Eden since I was just a young Novice Assassin. Like most descendants of the Auditore line, I have the gift for using them. No doubt Libby and Aloysius can do their own tricks with these artefacts, it's a question of if they have ever tried.' Emily shrugged, tucking the Apple away safely. 'And before you ask, we know of 30 of these artefacts.'

'So many? How can we be certain we have the right pieces?' Mario muttered, fresh concerns rising in his mind.

'We have to get going if we're going to make Forli before the Borgia close the net around us. You five, go quickly and say your farewells to your ancestors. I do not know when we will be reunited again but the time will come. Aloysius, take Libby and head for the docks. Find us transport to Forli and see that it waits for all of us.' Emily directed, reaching out to take Mario's hand.

'Don't ask Leonardo. Those two are bending all the rules of history but somehow it works for them.' Gena chuckled, drawing him into her arms and watching the team leave the workshop.

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With no boats able to leave Venezia due to some issues with certain troublemakers trying to leave the city, the team fell back to Bartolomeo's headquarters and hurried inside, much to the shock of their ancestors.

'What happened? Why haven't you gone already?' Bartolomeo asked, reaching out to Rufus.

'Someone has already locked down the docks. We can't get out that way.' Aloysius growled, swearing softly as he tried to think of another way out.

'So how do you intend to get out of Venezia now?' Antonio asked, looking up at Jean-Claude to see if he had any answers.

'The same way Ezio got out. You are going to need to figure out your own plan just in case I drop the Apple during this. It's not a big possibility but it might happen.' Emily replied, catching Mario's eyes. 'Such is life for Assassins, each moment of joy spoiled by the calling of our duties.'

'Be safe, amore mio.' Mario uttered, fighting down his desire to wrap Emily in his arms and never let her go.
'Always, caro mio.' Emily smiled, turning her attention back to her expanded team. 'Everyone else step back, I don't want to catch you up in this.'

'Everyone focus on staying with the team as we are now. Focus on staying beside the person standing in front of you. Think of nothing but staying with that person.' Aloysius instructed, looking up at Rufus and locking focus onto the taller man.

'I have Forli in my mind.' Libby added, thinking of the team standing near Forli, nine Assassins with a precious burden to secure.

Muttering under her breath, Emily focused solely on the artefact in her hands as her fellow modern Assassins gathered as closely around her as was physically possible for them. Rippling, pulsing and starting to weave around them, the golden glow of the Apple curled around the members of the team, obscuring them from view. Then one by one, they disappeared from the gathering inside the headquarters, opening up gaps in the circle. And finally, the light growing to almost blinding levels again, there was a faint pop and the light faded, leaving behind no trace of the team that had been there just moments ago.

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Emerging from a simple stone hut not too far from the walls of Forli, the nine modern Assassins looked around in wonder and shock as Emily tucked the Apple safely back into its pouch and tightened the straps again. Personally, Emily couldn't believe it had worked so well, she'd never tried to transport nine people including herself and the Apple all at once. This time it had worked but if she ever had to do it again, there was no guarantee she could. Such was the issue of working with these pieces.

Their rapid arrival wasn't the strangest thing to happen though. Not a minute later, they were all wrapped up in another golden flash as Ezio returned to them, looking so much older and more distinguished in the black robes and armour of Altair. As the light faded, another gift of this whole adventure was revealed to them. Not one member of the team was still wearing their white robes, now they were all wearing similar black robes, replicating the patterns and lines of the fabled Armour of Altair.

'It does exist.' Jean-Claude uttered, daring to reach out and trace the edge of the dark cowl hiding Ezio's face. 'I thought it was just a legend.'

'If we don't take better care of it this time, it will be a legend again.' Aloysius shrugged, quite liking his new outfit. 'Black always was a better colour on me over white.'

'White is hardly flattering on anyone.' Emily agreed, adjusting her cape. 'Now, if everyone is done with the staring, we have a vitally important artefact to protect.'

Getting organised and making sure there was no incriminating evidence left behind, the team made their way towards the city. Without even considering it, the team automatically shifted into position behind Emily, making their positions under Emily's command clear to see. With a flick of her wrist, Emily rearranged the display, putting Aloysius on her right and demoting Shane to her third on the left.

'It's nothing personal Shane. But after ten years with Aloysius as my second, it'd be wrong to dismiss him so quickly.' she uttered, glancing down at him.

'I understand, Emily.' Shane nodded, relaxed and content with the minor demotion. No doubt it would only be temporary and soon he would rise up to be her best Secondary Master again.

Caterina was waiting for them outside the city walls, surrounded by guards and talking to Machiavelli. Pushing down her irritation at the young Assassin, Emily entered the ring of guards surrounding the pair and stopped beside Caterina, left hand wrapped possessively over the Apple.

'Well, well, look who it is.' Caterina smiled, turning her attention to the gathered team. 'I thought when we met you were a bit special. But, an Assassin, hmmm?'
'I do apologize, Caterina. You must have me mistaken for someone else.' Emily smirked, lifting her hood a little. 'Spread out, I smell trouble.'
'Si Maestro Auditore.' the team responded easily, marking their acceptance of her place at Mario's right hand.
'Asini sapienti.' Emily muttered, secretly pleased with the change but not sure how it would go if the team was ever reunited with their ancestors.
'You're going to love Forli! The cannons in our cittadella alone go back 100 years. The artefact will be quite safe there.' Caterina offered, starting to walk back towards her city.

Eyes on the terrain around them, Rufus couldn't shake the feeling that something was going to happen out here. There was something in the air, a tension that he'd gotten to know over his years training as an Assassin. Trouble was brewing somewhere nearby and it was going to slam right into them full force.

'Forgive me, but I've never heard of a woman ruling her own city before. It's very impressive.' Ezio remarked, coming up beside Caterina.

'Well...it was my husband's before, of course. He died.' Caterina replied, glancing at Ezio.

'Oh, I'm sorry.' Ezio offered, reaching out to lightly touch her hand.

'Don't be. She had him killed.' Emily corrected, shaking her head slowly.

'We discovered Girolamo Riario was working for the Templars. Making a map of the locations of the remaining Codex pages.' Machiavelli explained, glancing sideways at Emily.

'I never liked the goddamned son of a bitch anyway. He was a lousy father, boring in bed and a pain in my ass.' Caterina added, her irritation at her now ex-husband clear to hear.

'Oh shit. Here it comes.' he warned, watching the civilians running towards them.

Opening up their ranks to let the people pass, the Assassin team were on full alert, hands on their weapons as they waited to see what was going to come at them this time. Up the front, Rufus gripped his dual swords and kept moving forwards, trying to keep an eye on everything around them. The last thing they needed now was for someone to sneak up and harm Caterina.

'Aspetta!' Caterina called, stopping a young woman as she approached. 'What's happening?'

'They came as soon as you left the city walls, Signora. The city is under attack.' the woman replied, panting a little as she stood there.

'What!? By who!?' Caterina asked, horrified by the thought.

'The Orsi brothers, Signora.'

'Aw, sangue di Giuda!' Caterina spat, dismissing the woman.

'Who are the Orsi?' Ezio asked, looking around for answers.

'The same canagile I fired to kill my husband!' Caterina replied, her harsh words earning a few choice words from some of the Assassins.

'It's the Spaniard, of course.' Aloysius snarled, tired of constantly being one step behind Rodrigo.

'The Orsi have no world view bigger than their purse.' Rufus added, remembering his history lesson on those two.

'But how could he know where we were taking the Apple - before we even knew!?' Veronique asked, trying to remember anything from the history books that might help.

'They're not here for the Apple. They'll be after Riario's damned map.' Shane spat, disgusted they'd just walked the Apple right into a hostile area.

'I have to agree with that.' Machiavelli nodded, watching over the agitated Assassins all around him, weapons partly drawn.

'Basta with your map, Niccolò! My children are inside! Oh, porco demonio!' Caterina snapped, rounding on Machiavelli with fire in her eyes.

'Move out! We've got innocents in a hostile zone!' Emily ordered, digging her toes in and sprinting forward with her team.

Spotting the enemy troops coming towards them seconds after he heard them calling out challenges,
Rufus spun clear of the war hammer aimed at his kidneys and drew his dual swords, right hand going up and left hand coming down to whip the paired swords around. Normally he didn't need to worry about another Assassin stepping into his combat space, they were trained to give him a bit of space to work with. Unfortunately though, Niccolò had no idea about just how dangerous it was to get too close to him. Pulling his swing, Rufus spun on his right foot and kicked Machiavelli clear even as he brought both his sword around and carved through two opponents.

'Next time, stay out of my strike zone!' Rufus yelled, twisting clear of another opponent and parrying an incoming war hammer.

'Watch out!' Jean-Claude snapped, shoving Machiavelli out of the way and ripping his larger sword through another guard.

'Oh for fucks sake.' Aloysius groaned, grabbing the back of Machiavelli's cloak and yanking him off balance. 'Sit down and stay there before you end up getting killed out here.'

'Get up again and I will not hesitate to knock you out.' Emily warned, smashing her war hammer against the unguarded head of another guard.

'Careful Caterina, we'd hate for you to get hurt out here.' Gena offered, flashing a grin at Caterina as she smashed through another Templar.

Tearing through the last of the guards, the team secured their weapons again and charged the gates. The invaders were already inside though and the gates stood sealed against them, a truly worrisome prospect if there were children inside somewhere.

'They're already inside! Double-crossing bastards…' Caterina growled, looking up at the walls.

'Is there another way into this place?' Emily asked, scanning the walls for a weakness. 'Even if it's only a small gap, it's a good chance we'll still make it through.'

'Aspetta…Perhaps, yes. There's an old tunnel under the western wall from the canal.' Caterina nodded, pointing in the rough direction.

'Shane and Libby, get moving. Stay out of sight, back each other up and Shane, pay attention to what Libby is going to teach you.' Emily instructed, dismissing the pair and looking out for further ways to potentially get inside. 'Veronique, head out around the walls and look for any other ways into this damned city.'

'As ordered, Emily.' Veronique nodded, taking off in the other direction.

'Hey! You! Yeah, I'm talking to you, you spineless dogs! You occupy my city!? My home!? You think I'm going to stand here and do nothing about it!? How about I come up there and rip your balls off? What kind of men are you? Doing the bidding of your masters for loose change! You're not afraid of me? You will be when I come up there and cut your heads off, piss down your necks and shove your faces up my fica!' Caterina raged, glaring up at the guards on the walls. 'I'll stick your balls with a fork, and roast them over my kitchen fire! How's that sound?'

'Bitch! What do you think you're doing, coming out here at daybreak with your little army? I'll show you who's boss!' Caterina ranted, ignoring the antics of the Assassins behind her.

'Whoa, she's a feisty one.' Rufus grinned, amazed by what he was hearing.

'She could give a Marine a run for their money.' Gena agreed, leaning back against the tree and waiting for something to happen.

'Vile pack of bastard dogs! Go back to your kennel, or I'll have you all impaled along my citadel walls. Ahhh! But maybe this is the reason you are not leaving. Yes, I guess you'd really enjoy a long oaken pole up your asses.' Caterina was really on a roll, giving the men in her city both barrels.
'Such fire, such passion.' Jean-Claude uttered, finding so many reasons to respect this feisty woman. 'Control your pene Jean-Claude or I'll send you to Monteriggioni to sit out the action.' Emily warned, not surprised that he was interested in Caterina. 'God Almighty! Where did they find you? In a nunnery? Never in all my days have I laid eyes on such an abject, motley crew of cowards. What a pathetic sight! Even after I've had you castrated, you'll not be less men than you are now!'

Looking up at a flash of silver behind the guards standing over the door, Jean-Claude nodded faintly and tapped Emily, drawing her attention upwards as well. Smiling faintly, she sent a recall message to Veronique and moved forward, silencing Caterina with a gentle hand on her shoulder. 'Well done you two!' Emily called, relieved to have an opening and they could get on with finding Caterina's children. 'Seguimi!' Caterina directed, hurrying across the bridge and into the city.

Launching down from the walls, Shane and Libby popped out of the hay cart they'd landed in and flew into the battle. Swords out, they fell into a long practised rhythm and spun through the battle raging in the streets. Keeping their backs together, the made up for their smaller stature with their speed and close teamwork. 'Look at this, Machiavelli is actually fighting.' Emily smirked, swinging past them and driving the flat head of her war hammer into the unprotected groin of an unfortunate guard. 'He might be a politician but he's still an Assassin.' Aloysius replied, catching a sword aimed at Caterina against his dagger. 'I don't think so, asshole.'

Sprinting through the open gates, Veronique raced to rejoin the team as they finished with their first fight and moved deeper into the city. Running hard through the wide, filthy streets, the team rotated their defences around Caterina and Niccolò, forcing the Templars to constantly change their offensive stance to deal with nine different styles. Each Assassin presented their own unique style, but Rufus and Veronique proved to be the greater challenges. Small and incredibly quick on the feet, Veronique preferred her dual hidden blades over any other weapon she could use. 'I would ask what the fuck that was all about but I don't think I want to know.' Emily sighed, reaching down to pull Machiavelli to his feet. 'Highly trained Assassin knocked down by fleeing guard...better hope that never gets out to the others.' Aloysius sniggered, flicking his hair out of his eyes. 'Let's keep going, we've still got bigger priorities.' Emily directed, keeping her hammer in hand as they ran deeper into the city.

Making good use of the back streets and trying to avoid too many fights, the team ended up stumbling into a massive brawl right outside their final destination. Making her choice, Emily put her weapon away and grabbed Niccolò and Caterina by the arm, hustling the pair of them right through the fight and up to the barricaded doors. 'Ezio! Get over here!' she roared, shoving Machiavelli back when he tried to get into the fight. 'Trust me Niccolò, you do not want to be in the middle of that mess in the next few minutes.' Emily warned, whistling sharply and sending the full team into the battle. 'Stay here and keep these two out of the way. It's time to get serious on these assholes.'

'I will Emily.' Ezio nodded, blocking Niccolò from getting involved as Emily hefted her hammer and went at the guards.

Finally unleashed completely, the rest of the Assassin team raised their weapons and thundered into the battle with a roar. Standing guard, Ezio couldn't believe the chaos that had just been unleashed. His friends became blurs to his eyes, their progress through the swarm of guards marked only by the sheer number of mutilated bodies left behind. Few bodied that fell were still intact, quite a few were decapitated and some were even cut completely in half. Ownerless limbs littered the ground too and blood slicked the cobblestones, making the battleground extremely treacherous for his friends. They
barely seemed to notice the slicked ground though, they were still carving through the guards that kept coming at them.

'Did you know they were so vicious?' Niccolò asked, relieved that he wasn't out there in the middle of that carnage.

'I suspected it but I have never witnessed their savagery.' Ezio replied, nudging Caterina back when she tried to advance. 'I am not surprised by this though, I have noticed this team seems to work by different rules.'

Hacking the final enemy guard down, the blood soaked team of nine flicked the gore off their weapons and bowed shallowly as they secured their weapons. At least on their black robes the blood wasn't so obvious, leaving only the mess on the ground to show of their deeds.

'Apri te porta! Apri te porta! Presto!' Caterina called, banging on the doors to the citadel.

'Ambush! Ambush!' Shane roared, spotting more guards approaching.

'Battle stations!' Aloysius commanded, drawing his sword again and engaging the next lot.

'Nicolò! Out here and show me your worth!' Emily snapped, blocking an incoming strike aimed at her neck and using Mario's dagger to end their life.

Pushing past Ezio, Niccolò drew his sword again and leapt off the bridge, tapping one foot against the wall lining the waterway to thrust his sword through the open back of another guard. Wrenching his sword loose, he turned and engaged another one, giving Libby a chance to get back on her feet after she'd been thrown to the ground. He lacked the power and free flowing combat dance of the modern Assassins but Niccolò did prove that he could hold his own in a fight.

'Maybe I was wrong about you, Niccolò. Time will tell but you're still not getting the Apple back.' Emily grinned, clapping him on the shoulder.

'It's clear now that you are a better guardian for it anyway.' Niccolò shrugged, wiping off his sword on the tunic of a dead guard. 'I cannot hope to be as skilled as you.'

'Not without a good many years spent fully dedicated to your training.' Emily agreed, glancing over to where Ezio was cleaning his weaponry. 'Ezio's getting there but he's still got a few years before I'd consider him for promotion again.'

'In here! Hurry!' Caterina called, standing before the now open gates of the citadel.

'I'm sorely tempted to give Mario what for over all of this mess.' Emily grumbled, ushering the rest of the team across the bridge and bringing up the rear.

Clutching at his bloodied ribs, Aloysius stumbled and nearly fell but Niccolò was there to catch him, pulling one arm over his shoulders and helping him to safety. He didn't know it but such an action earned Niccolò a lot of respect from Emily. Not enough to earn her full respect but it was certainly a big step forward. He got a few steps closer when he guided Aloysius to a quiet corner, sat him down and ripped off his own outer robe, tearing it into wide strips and binding the deep gash as a temporary measure.

'Good man Niccolò. You might just make it under my lead.' Emily muttered, watching him tending to Aloysius patiently.

'Bambini!' Caterina cried, running to embrace her children. 'But where are Bianca and Ottaviano!?'

'Forgive me, Signora. They were playing outside when the attack began…I don't know where they are.' the wet-nurse replied, looking absolutely horrified that she'd lost the two eldest children.

'Reinforcements from the mountains! They are breaching the citadel!' a friendly guard yelled, glancing down from his position up on the walls.

'Don't let those bastardi get in here!' Caterina practically demanded, worried for the safety of her family and her home.

'Nicolò, I need you to stay with Aloysius.' Emily instructed, unwilling to leave her second unprotected with such a severe wound.

'I will take care of him.' Niccolò nodded, glancing up at the walls to check for threats.

'Aloysius, you know what to do.' Emily continued, removing the Apple from her belt and handing it
to him carefully. 'I'll handle it.' Aloysius grinned, accepting the real Apple. 'Niccolò, remove that Apple from my belt and put this one in its place.'

'Very clever.' Niccolò remarked, handing Emily the pouch from Aloysius' belt and securing hers in the same place.

Wrenching out his swords again, Rufus stepped up against the enemy troops now coming over the walls. Emily lead the rest of the team up onto the walls but Rufus refused to leave Aloysius, standing his ground in the courtyard and slaughtering anyone wearing red under their armour that dared to step foot down here. The Borgia men that did land in the courtyard certainly tried to kill the three Assassins they found, a few came close but none ever got near enough to do any further harm to Aloysius.

On one of the many guard towers around the citadel, Jean-Claude didn't bother trying to restrain his power, putting up a devastating offence with a large war hammer in his right hand and a sword in his left. The sword was mostly for defence, parrying away any strike that came too close to him before he wielded his mighty hammer with enough force to launch even the heaviest armoured Borgia man over the edge and crashing to the ground below.

Keeping a sharp watch over Caterina, Buck went for a much more personal way of dealing with the guards, using a dagger in his left hand for protection and pushing the guards back towards the edge of the tower then shoulder-checking them over the edge to leave nasty red splatters on the ground. It maybe wasn't the smartest way to deal with the situation but it certainly was entertaining and gave Buck a chance to practise his footwork to avoid being pulled over the edge.

Tearing out the throat of the last guard that had managed to get into the citadel, Veronique threw his body off the wall and made her way along the walls, climbing up to join the rest of the group atop one of the towers. They were all spattered with blood and gore, their clothes ripped and stained with gore and Libby was bustling around tending to various minor injuries. It was almost like the battlefield was taking a breath, waiting for whatever was coming their way.

'Enough Libby, go and tend to Aloysius.' Shane guided, allowing her one last look around the group before ushering her off the tower.

'Caterina! Caterina Sforza! I know you're in there! I have something you may want back! Are you missing any children?'

Holding the team back from charging the walls, Emily stepped forward alone, hiding her numbers as she stood beside Caterina and looked down at the two gaudily dressed men standing on the street below, taunting them from what they likely thought a safe place.

'And Ezio Auditore! What a pleasant surprise!'

'Not Ezio, Emilia Auditore!' Emily called, lip curling as she stared down at the men. 'I take it you worms would be the Orsi brothers.'

'Ludovico…'

'…and Checco. At your service.'

'Basta! Where are my children! Let them go!' Caterina roared, leaning over the wall to look down at the two men.

'Of course, Signora. We'll happily give them back - for something of yours. A certain map?'

Ludovico taunted, his arrogance only driving Emily's ire.

'And a certain Apple, brother.' Checco added, looking at his brother.

'Si, a certain Apple indeed. Or shall I slice your babies' necks ear to ear?!' Ludovico agreed, turning his gaze back up to Caterina.

'Bastardi! You think you can threaten me?! I'll give you nothing! You want my children? Take them! I have the instrument to make more!' Caterina shot back, lifting her skirt to reveal herself to the men below.
This time, Caterina's insults and highly unladylike behaviour wasn't as amusing. The Assassins were already planning on how to rescue her children and protect Forli from another attack.

'When you change your mind, they'll be in the village outside the city. You have one hour!' Checco warned, the sound of footsteps from below indicating they were leaving.

'Caterina, no. We can't ask you to sacrifice your children.' Ezio uttered, gently resting one hand on her hip to comfort the distraught mother.

'Nobody's sacrificing anything.' Emily growled, irritated that she'd missed her shot at Ludovico and looking for payback. 'Shane, take Veronique, Gena and Buck. Find those kids and bring them home! We'll hold the fort just in case this is all a ruse to get the map and the Apple. No mercy!'

'Consider it done, Maestro.' Shane nodded, turning and hurrying away with his assigned team.

'Caterina, we're going to need a safe place to stash Aloysius until this is over. Their plan is a ruse, to draw as many defenders out of the citadel as possible so they can get in here and take their prizes. We have to stop them.' Emily continued, turning back to Caterina.

'What makes you so sure of that?' Caterina asked, instantly wary of Emily's words.

'I've seen it before, dozens of times.' Emily shrugged, turning and starting to climb down the interior side of the tower.

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Returning to the citadel with the children, Shane got the distinct feeling that something was wrong. That feeling only got worse when Caterina and Niccolò ran out to meet them, splattered with blood and looking devastated by whatever had happened in their absence.

'What are you two doing out here!?' Buck asked, looking up at the walls for any sign of his friends.

'I'm so sorry, Shane. I'm so sorry.' Caterina replied, embracing her eldest children happily.

'What happened!?' Gena asked, stepping up beside Shane and looking around. 'Where is everyone?'

'It was a trick. To lower our defences.' Caterina briefed, such guilt in her eyes.

'As soon as you left, they attacked again. Checco Orsi - he has the Apple!' Niccolò added, shaking his head slowly. 'The rest of your team tried so hard to keep it safe but they came in greater numbers this time. The best dottore in town are tending to their wounds now.'

'What!? No! Where is he!?' Shane demanded, shoving aside his worry for his friends and prioritising the return of the Apple.

'We chased him out here. But the bastard's escaped into the mountains.' Niccolò offered, looking more than a little rattled by what he'd witnessed.

'Buck, you and Veronique stay here! Gena and I will retrieve the Apple!' Shane ordered, turning sharply and running back towards the city gates.

'Take us to them, Niccolò.' Buck directed, hating that he had been left behind but he trusted Gena to watch over Shane.

Smashing through any guards that stood in their path, Shane and Gena forced their way back through the city, smashing and hacking their way clear. None who faced them left alive, such was the desperation fuelling their actions. At full sprint, Shane was faster but the anger over what had happened gave Gena new reserves of strength to keep up with him.

Bursting out of the city, they spotted the overly extravagant dress of Checco Orsi easily and went straight for him. Shane was able to avoid the guards that came to confront them but Gena got bogged down against them, forced to engage when she would have preferred to slam full force into that Orsi bastard and take his head off.

So much faster, Shane grabbed Checco before he'd even gotten a few steps from where he'd been cowering and latched onto his back, hidden blade sinking easily through flesh and blood vessels to end the threat. Rolling once they hit the ground, Shane flipped the dying man over and curled one hand around the Apple.

'So...you have your prize again.'
'Was it worth it? So much bloodshed?' Shane asked, clutching the Apple close as he gazed down at Checco impassively.
'A prize of such value, it will not remain yours for long.'
'We shall see.' Shane spat, flipping out his hidden blade again.

Bashing through the guards, sending body parts flying around her and smashing through weapons with a strength few ever stood against, Gena tried to keep one eye on Shane but she kept having to turn away from him to deal with threats. Tearing her axe through one last guard, she turned just in time to witness Shane collapsing to the ground, blood soaking into the front of his robes as the Apple bounced from his fingers.

Shoving through civilians and hacking apart any guards that came at her, Gena was horrified to see a monk in black robes pick up the Apple and pull it out of the bag for a few moments before running away with it. She saw Shane trying to stop the monk but he was completely helpless, bleeding out into the foreign soil of Forli.

Making her choice, Gena dropped to one knee beside Shane and tore open the bloodied cloth to get at the deep wound in his torso. Going for her pouches, she packed several layers of linen over the wound and ripped her cape off, using it to bind the wound until better aid could be sought.
'Gena…the Apple.' he uttered, fighting to stay conscious.
'We'll get it back. I'm more worried about you, Champ.' Gena replied, shifting her position and gently picking him up. 'Shhh, I know it hurts but this is for the best.'

Bloody fingers clutching at her robes, Shane held on as tight as he could, refusing to fall into darkness when the city was so close. He had to hold on, he needed to fight and be there for whatever was next.
'Volpe would be proud of you, Scarecrow.' Gena smiled, picking up the pace a little while still being careful not to jostle him around too much. 'Tell me what you saw of the monk that stole the Apple. It might be helpful.'
'He was missing a finger. His left hand pinkie finger.' Shane uttered, trying to hard to stay awake until he was safe. 'Right down to the base, the whole thing was gone.'
'We'll find him, I swear it.' Gena promised, hustling through the gates and continuing towards the citadel. 'Rest now, your fight is done for a while.'

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Looking up from where he was suturing up a nasty gash in Libby's shoulder, Buck froze at the sight of Gena entering their safe room with Shane's limp body in her arms. Almost immediately she was stopped by a doctor who checked Shane's condition before pointing her to an empty cot to set him down. She was so tender with him, easing him down and stripping him to his breeches and shirt before moving back to let the doctor work.
'Gena, what happened out there?' Aloysius asked, clutching at his ribs as he tried to sit up.
'Checco Orsi stabbed Shane in the gut, it looks bad. We lost the Apple too, a man in black robes took it. Shane said he was missing his left pinkie finger right down to the hand.' Gena briefed, looking around in shock at all her wounded friends. 'What do we do now?'
'We must retrieve the Apple again.' Niccolò replied, changing the bandages wrapped around Emily's left calf. 'There are no other options. We must get it back.'
'That's easy for you to say, Niccolò. You're still standing. We're down to three Assassins, one of which I knew only by reputation until her timely arrival in Venezia. Just how do you think we're supposed to rally an assault from this?' Emily snapped, getting up onto her elbows and looking down at the bandages wrapped around her arm. 'For now we find out where it might have been taken. Once we know that, we can work on how to get it back.'
'You have seniority Gena, we're both mere Assassins.' Buck added, tying off the last stitch and
wiping some healing salve over the wound before wrapping it neatly.

'But I don't know a thing about leadership.' Gena protested, not comfortable with the burden now on her shoulders.

'You know plenty Gena, you've seen it thousands of times. You can do this.' Aloysius nodded, sinking back down again. 'There's no other choice, it has to be you.'

Turning sharply on her heel, Gena fled the room, trying to get away from the smell of injury and pain. She didn't even think about where she was going and only stopped when she was perched atop one of the guard towers overlooking the citadel. Crouching at the very peak of the rooftop, she closed her eyes and rubbed at her web mark, calling out to the one man who might be able to offer some guidance.

"Gena? Is that you, amico mio?"

'Si, Mario. Have you spoken with Emily since we left Venezia?' Gena sighed, comforted slightly by his steady presence.

"She does not seem to want to speak with me. I have tried to reach out to her but she refuses to answer. What is happening?" Mario asked, sounding strained and so tired.

'Things didn't go the way we hoped in Forli. We've been fighting Templars since we arrived, led by the Orsi brothers.' Gena offered, flicking up memories of the heavy fighting in the streets.

'I had no idea this was happening. I never would of suggested Forli if I knew." Mario replied, a flash of sorrow and pain flickering between them.

'No one could have know that those two would come here to steal Riario's map. I do not know if they got it but they did almost get the Apple.' Gena continued, hanging her head sadly.

"Almost? So you still have the Apple there?" Mario sounded relieved by that idea.

'No, Shane was seriously wounded after retrieving the Apple, Checco Orsi stabbed him in the gut before he died. Shane dropped the Apple and a monk with nine fingers picked it up. I had to make a choice, I chose to save Shane over resecuring the Apple.' Gena admitted, worried that her choice had doomed them all. 'As it is now, only three of our team are still capable of going after that damned monk and getting it back.'

"Has Niccolò any suggestions?" Mario asked, trying to get a feel for the situation.

'Only that there is no option but to retrieve the Apple again. He offers no guidance on how to do it successfully with just three when it took the full strength of your team and our reduced team the first time.' Gena replied, doubting in her abilities to pull off even a recon mission to find where the Apple might be located.

"Who do you have left to assist you with this mission?" Mario coaxed, sending a wave of support to her. "If you need help, I can ride for Forli today. It will take me a day to get there but I am willing to aid as needed."

'I have Buck and Veronique, both strong fighters in their own right but hardly what I would call an ideal team. We have to make a start on this now, we can't wait for you to arrive but I will keep your offer in mind if we do get stuck.' Gena nodded, not really surprised by Mario's offer but this felt like a test of her abilities. She had to prove she was worthy.

"Speak with Caterina, tell her what you know of the man who stole the Apple. She may be able to point you in the right direction. If nothing else works, search out churches and other sacred places. Surely they will know something of a monk with a missing finger." Mario guided, offering freely of his confidence and strength.

'Grazie Mario, I will see what we can turn up.' Gena smiled, recalling running past a church in Forli during all the fighting.

"And would you please tell Emily to stop shutting me out, I am concerned for her." Mario requested, an understandable instruction and one Gena would certainly follow.

'I will pass that message to her, Mario.' Gena promised, greatly comforted by their conversation. 'I had best return to them, no doubt they are concerned for my mental state.'

"Of course, buona fortuna." Mario replied, their connection going silent again.
Picking her way down to the edge of the rooftop, Gena kicked out and tumbled freely down into a hay cart she'd spotted earlier. That moment of absolute freedom as she fell reminded her all over again why she'd chosen to follow the path of an Assassin instead of the many support roles she could have taken up without losing her family within the Order.

'There you are Gena.' Niccolò smiled faintly, jogging over to join her near the hay cart. 'Emily was concerned when you ran out like that.'

'That's normal for Emily. I needed some time to think about what we do now that so many are out of action.' Gena shrugged, heading back towards the citadel proper. 'Do you know where Caterina is, I must speak with her.'

'She's in helping tend to the rest of the team.' Niccolò replied, forced to pick up his pace to keep up with Gena. 'Is there anything I can do to assist with relocating the Apple?'

'Not right now but perhaps later. I know what I must do, I need you to stay here and keep an eye on everyone else.' Gena grinned, her confidence returning full strength. 'It's rare that so many of my friends are knocked out of the fighting at once.'

'Such fierce fighters I have never seen before. I still find it so hard to believe you cut all through so many guards, even though I witnessed it personally.' Niccolò remarked, shaking his head in wonder at what he'd witnessed.

'It's not just about physical strength. You need the right weapon for the job too. No doubt if I tried the same trick with someone else's weaponry, it likely wouldn't be as effective.' Gena smirked, resting one hand possessively on her axe. 'Admittedly, the axe wasn't mine to start with. I stole it from a guard in Venezia and it's turned out to be a good choice.'

Returning to the room where so many of her friends were laid out in their cots, Gena slipped away from Niccolò to check on Shane, needing to be certain that he wasn't about to check out on them. His pulse was strong, breathing normal and when she lifted the blanket, his bandages were clean and showed no sign of a bleed through or the presence of leeches.

'Hang in there Champ, we need you.' she uttered, running her fingers through his hair lightly before leaving him to sleep off his latest injury. 'Caterina, I need to speak with you.'

'Checco Orsi is dead but in the process Shane got stabbed and a third man took the Apple. He wore a black robe, like a monk. Shane told me he was missing the little finger on his left hand too, right down to his hand. We have to find that monk and get it back.' Gena briefed, looking around at the mangled team. 'For now, the rest of the team will have to stay here. I'll take Buck and Veronique with me to retrieve it.'

'Of course. Then you will need this as well.' Caterina nodded, picking up a sheet of parchment from the table near Rufus' cot and bringing it to her.

'The map Niccolò spoke of. Your ex-husband's.' Gena smiled, accepting the page and looking at it closely, trying to make sense of it.

'He swore he'd uncovered the locations of all the remaining Codex pages. You will recover the Apple, but you'll never find the vault without this.' Caterina replied, looking around slowly. 'I will keep your friends secure and cover their medical costs, it is the least I can do.'

'I won't take this with me now, who knows what we'll face out there. Keep it with Emily, she'll make better use of it than I can.' Gena sighed, handing the map back. 'Buck, Veronique, grab your weapons and get ready to go.'

'You know, there is an Abbey in the wetlands near here, where I've seen monks wearing black robes. I'd start there.' Caterina offered, resting one hand on Gena's shoulder. 'Now go. Find us a stramaledetto monk.'

'Count on it, Caterina.' Gena nodded, determined not to rest until they had the Apple back in their possession. 'Before I forget…'

Crossing the room, Gena went down to one knee beside Emily and reluctantly roused her from her restorative slumber. It was tempting to leave her to sleep but she'd promised to pass Mario's message
'Hmmm? What is it Gena?' Emily muttered, cracking one eye open slowly. 'I spoke with Mario while I was outside. He's worried about you and asked that I pass you a message. He wants you to stop shutting him out, he's concerned and just wants to know you're okay.' Gena grinned, careful not to let Niccolò pick up on their conversation. 'Grazie for the message, I will speak with him.' Emily nodded, struggling to stay awake. 'Even if you can't present the Apple on your return, I will be satisfied with news of its location.' 'I understand, Maestro.' Gena replied, still determined to fetch the Apple but she wouldn't go too far from her friends. 'I wish you a speedy recovery, Emily.'

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Fully aware that time was ticking away and everything came down to her abilities, Veronique scaled the side of the simple little church they'd found in the wetlands. Dispatching a guard standing on the rooftop, she leapt up and picked her way across the tiles, doing her best to avoid becoming another casualty to this mess. Down below her, she spotted a lone monk being harassed by two guards and launched off the roof. Hidden blades out, she slammed down on the two guards and silenced them with perfect strikes through their spines. 'Blessings on you, brother.' the monk offered, gripping her arm and helping her back to her feet. 'I apologise, sister.' 'Grazie. I wonder if you can help me.' Veronique smiled, slipping her blades away. 'No need to apologise, you could not have known.' 'What do you seek?' 'A monk in black robes who lacks one of his ten fingers.' Veronique replied, a little uncomfortable to have spilled blood at the feet of a monk. 'Well…Brother Guido has only nine toes. Are you sure it wasn't a toe?' 'Quite sure. The monk I seek lacks a finger from his left hand.' Veronique nodded, trying not to let her impatience show. 'And then there's Brother Domenico, but it's his entire left arm that he's lacking.' 'Again, quite sure it was just a finger from the left hand. The smallest finger at that.' Veronique sighed, pushing down her irritation. 'Hmmm…Now wait a moment, I do recall a black robed monk with nine fingers. Yes, of course, when we had our last San Vincenzo's feast at the abbey.' 'Yes, I know the place. I'll try there. Grazie.' Veronique bowed, just glad to be getting away from this scatterbrained monk. 'Go in peace, sister.' 'I always do.' Veronique smirked, vaulting the fence and running back to where Gena and Buck were waiting for her.

As soon as they saw her, Buck and Gena emerged from their hiding place and fell in beside her, the three of them running back towards Forli at a sustainable pace that still allowed conversation. 'What did you learn from the monks?' Gena asked, charging right through a deep puddle. 'The monk I spoke to does remember a monk in black with nine fingers. He saw this man at the Forli Abbey at their last San Vincenzo's feast.' Veronique replied, relaxed and calm despite the problems that faced them. 'This just gets better and better.' Buck groaned, not happy with the idea of attacking a monk. 'Get used to it Buck. This isn't the first time we've had to dirty our blades with the blood of holy men. Libby, Aloysius and I have all done it at one time or another.' Gena shrugged, leading the team back through the city gates and towards the abbey.

Splitting her team with a quick signal, Gena approached their target slowly and with great respect, hoping to not cause a scene in this sacred place. She wasn't a believer, too many years spent fighting and killing had robbed her of any religious faith. That didn't mean she couldn't respect the sanctity of
a church though, she would always try to avoid drawing her weapons inside holy sites. 'Excuse me, brother. I wonder if you can…' she started, dipping her head respectfully. 'Unholy demon! Get away!' 'What's wrong?' Gena asked, playing her innocent card. 'You're the one who killed Brother Stefano! Brothers! The killer of monks has returned!' 'You have got to be kidding me.' Gena sighed, shaking her head slowly. 'Fine we're doing this the hard way.'

Coming out from his hiding spot, Buck tackled the fleeing Abbot and took him to the ground, going out of his way to protect the older man from harm against the cobblestones. Flipping over, careful not to crush the Abbot, Buck stood and pulled him up, keeping one hand in his robes to prevent him escaping. 'Please, no! I don't want to die!' 'We only kill those who kill others, and your Brother Stefano was a killer. I'm sure you are no such thing.' Gena replied, coming up beside Buck. 'Now, listen to me. We're looking for a black robed monk who is missing a finger.' Buck nodded, relaxing his grip a little. 'Missing a finger you say? Do you mean like Fra Savonarola?' 'Savonarola!? Who is this? You know him?' Veronique asked, joining the group around the Abbot. 'I did. He was one of us, for a time.' 'And then?' Buck prompted, releasing the Abbot now that they had his cooperation. 'We suggested he retire to a hermitage for a good long time.' 'I'm afraid to say his retreat has come to an end. Where would he have gone?' Gena sighed, getting that dark feeling that trouble was on the way again. 'Oh dear… Santo Spirito, in Firenze? It's where he studied. Perhaps it's where he would return.' 'We thank you. Go with God, brother.' Gena offered, pulling a smaller coin purse out of her tunic and placing it in the Abbot's hand. 'A gift, for the trouble we have caused you.' 'Grazie, my children.' he replied, making his way back to the church. 'Emily's not going to like this.' Buck uttered, shaking his head slowly as they made their way back towards the citadel.
Grateful to be away from the incessant damp of Forli, the ten strong Assassin team arrived at the gates of Monteriggioni in the summer of 1491. They could have been there sooner but had stopped along their journey to aid the peasants they had passed on the mountain trails. It felt good to do things for the ordinary people of the area, asking for nothing in return for their services and refusing monetary reward for their efforts.

Dismounting outside the city, they handed their horses off to the waiting stable hands and headed into the city proper. Their arrival was soon the talk of the city, the local people and the merchants celebrating the efforts and support given by the Assassins in rebuilding their great city and businesses. Setting out their best goods, the merchants all tried to get the Assassins to come and spend a few florins with them.

'You can't get too lost so long as you stay inside the city walls. If you need help, just ask someone to point you towards the Villa Auditore, everyone knows it. Make sure you inform the merchants that you are part of the Assassin team that helped to rebuild their city; they will give you better deals on everything they stock. Remember what we discussed and this will surely be a grand day for all.' Emily laughed, dismissing the team with a wave of her hand. 'And Ezio, don't forget to pay your debt at the brothel! Mario is getting tired of the girls cornering him whenever he takes a walk outside the villa.'

'I will take care of it Emily.' Ezio promised, breaking into a jog and disappearing into the twisting streets of the city.

'You're not staying around, Emily?' Shane asked, surprised with how relaxed Emily was here. 'Shane, this city is ruled by Mario Auditore. Ezio's mother and two younger siblings live here in peace and safety. Monteriggioni is the safest place we could be and right now, I intend to go forget all my troubles in Mario's strong arms.' Emily laughed, shoving back her hood and releasing her hair. 'Relax, everything will be fine here.'

Meeting up with Claudia at the tailor's stall, Emily was quickly ushered to the back entrance and ducked out of sight, eager to see what Claudia had arranged in her absence. Today was a special day in the Auditore family, Mario was turning 62 and he'd been moody for weeks according to Maria's daily updates. So Emily and Claudia had put their minds together and organised a very special birthday gift for Mario on his actual birthday. Under Claudia's watch, the tailors had been busy sewing a suitable dress for Emily, working off measurements Emily had provided over the webs with some help from Libby.

For the first time, Emily got to see the dress Claudia had arranged and it truly was beautiful. Done up in deep purple velvet with the most exquisite gold and silver embroidery around the rather high neckline and stunning floral patterns all over the skirt. With long sleeves of the finest white silk and lace edging that would drape onto her hands, it was even more stunning than Emily had expected it could be.

'Claudia, this is amazing. I knew you would organise something wonderful but this…I had no idea it would look anything this.' she uttered, reaching out to run her fingers over the velvet skirt.

'This is not everything Emily. Wait here and I will get the rest of it.' Claudia replied, so pleased with Emily's reaction. 'I even organised a chest here so you can get changed and have the town porters will take it up to the villa.'

'Very thoughtful of you Claudia. Did you remember that other special request I made?' Emily
grinned, walking over to the chest Claudia had pointed at and opening the lid. 'That's one thing I have to pick up.' Claudia nodded, slipping outside and leaving Emily to dress.

Emerging from his office when Claudia called him to come and see something, Mario naturally expected trouble and grabbed his sword on the way out the door. Strapping it on as he moved, he charged along the short route and skidded on the fine marble floor. Regaining his balance, he only made it halfway across the entrance hall before he realised this wasn't a threat. Instead, he witnessed two men bringing in a large and ornate chest.

'What is going on here?' Mario asked, approaching the two men and their magnificent chest.
'A gift, from La Signorina Hunter on the occasion of your 62nd birthday.' one of the men replied, stopping in front of Mario. 'Where would you like it placed, Signore?'
'Right there will be fine.' Mario replied, pointing them to a spot near the stairwell.
'Of course, signore.' the second porter replied, adjusting his grip on his end of the chest and heading for the indicated spot.

'What are you up to, Emily?' Mario uttered, following the two men over and waiting for them to put it down carefully. 'Grazie.'
'We hope you enjoy your birthday, Signore.' one of them offered, accepting the few coins Mario handed him and heading for the door with his companion.

Unlocking the chest, Mario was even more confused to find all of Emily's Assassin regalia neatly folded inside and all her weapons laid out ready for her to take them up again. At the other end, there were several rather lovely looking dresses in all different colours. Now he really was concerned, these clothes hardly looked like something Emily would wear and yet here they were in a chest beside Emily's working outfit.

'Has something happened to you, amore mio?' Mario whispered, greatly concerned for his dearest Emily, concern that only grew when he tried to reach out through the web but she didn't answer. 'Uncle, over here!' Claudia called, waving him back towards the door.

Standing up, Mario looked over towards Claudia and was confronted with an image of feminine beauty. For a moment he wasn't sure exactly who this woman was but as she entered the villa, it became clearer to him. At first, she was wrapped in a long dark blue cloak, the Auditore crest over her heart and the Assassin insignia on the other side. Stopping just inside the doors, his guest reached up and flipped their hood back then unlaced her cloak and slipped it off her shoulders into Claudia's waiting hands.

Wearing a dress far more suited to the wife of a great noble, hair done up in a simple yet elegant style and carrying a sword on her right hip, there was no mistaking his beloved Emily as she glided across the floor. Around her neck she wore a simple gold chain with an eagle hanging from it, wings spread over her upper chest.

'Buon compleanno, amore mio.' she smiled, walking over to him and kissing his cheek. 'I see you got my gift.'
'When did you get here?' Mario asked, unable to believe she was right here.
'About three hours ago.' Emily chuckled, stepping back a little. 'What do you think?'
'You look incredible. This is such a grand surprise.' Mario praised, reaching out to lightly touch the pearl earrings she was wearing.
'I've been so busy for every birthday previous, I wanted this one to be special.' Emily offered, turning her face into his palm. 'I've missed you so much.'
'I've missed you too, amore mio. I was going to just ignore this birthday, like so many others but I think I actually will make an effort today.' Mario smiled, stroking her cheek softly.
'No doubt the people would be glad to see their Lord and Protector on such a momentous day.' Emily agreed, breaking contact and glancing over her shoulder. 'Is it in here as requested, Claudia?'
'Si, underneath your blue dress.' Claudia nodded, leaving her spot by the door. 'Shall I have the banquet hall prepared for the evening meal?'
'I think that would be a fine idea.' Mario smiled, realising that Emily had planned something else. 'The numbers have not changed from what I informed you of last week.' Emily added, kneeling before the chest and digging around inside.
'What else are you planning, amore mio?' Mario asked, turning his full attention to Emily. 'It wouldn't be much of a surprise if I told you, now would it?' Emily laughed, digging out a piece of folded blue cloth. 'Trust me, you'll like what I organised for today.'

Getting to her feet again, Emily flicked out the cloth in her hands and swung it around her shoulders, a highly ornate gold and pearl clasp securing the cloth around her shoulders. Once it was secure, she turned and Mario got a proper look at the shimmering Auditore crest embroidered on the dark cloth. 'It took me a while to realise that cotton is as valuable to you as pure silk is in my time.' she remarked, smoothing out the light cloak and turning back to Mario. 'Shall we?'
'Would you give me just a minute?' Mario requested, turning and hurrying upstairs to clean up a bit so he didn't look out of place beside Emily.

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Picking up his purchase, Jean-Claude looked up at the sky and tried to estimate the time he'd spent trying to find a suitable gift for Mario's birthday. Distracted by the sounds of people cheering, he turned his attention back to the streets and grinned at the sight just ahead of him. There was Mario, dressed in his finest clothes with Emily holding his right hand as they walked among the common people and accepted their best wishes for another successful year for Mario.

The children of the city came out to greet their leader too, wishing Mario a joyful birthday and welcoming Emily as the Lady of Monteriggioni. Some of them had innocent little posies of flowers for her and handwritten messages for him. They were so pleased to be able to hand over such simple gifts, little smiles lighting up the streets as Emily and Mario took the time to look at each thoughtful gift before they were passed to the rather stunned mercenari following behind.

Going to one knee and bowing his head in respect when the ruling couple came near him, Jean-Claude waited a breath before lifting his gaze a little. It was so easy for Jean-Claude to go along with this, he agreed fully with the decision and felt safer in his position knowing he had the full support of the Auditore family.
'I pledge to you my blades and my life, Maestro Auditore.' he offered, leaning forward to press his lips to Mario's ring. 'Buon compleanno, my Lord.'
'Let us hope I never have a need for the second.' Mario replied, resting his hand on Aloysius' hand for a moment before moving on again.

Waiting for the pair to pass, Jean-Claude stood again and headed towards the villa, keeping his gift for Mario until the evening celebration. Most Assassins that he knew swore allegiance to the cause and their primary region, it was almost unheard of for any of them to swear their blades and life to any one person. In the past, he had been happy to keep his allegiance to the French Assassins and a private promise to Veronique and Gena to always be there for them. Here in this place though, it made good sense to give his oath to Mario and take up a place among the Italian Assassins.

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Right under Mario's nose, the modern Assassin team pulled off surprise after surprise, swearing allegiance to him and offering their support in whatever way he needed them. Each time one of them went to their knees and kissed his ring, they could feel his confusion and his acceptance, aware that he was likely casting suspicious looks at Emily as her entire team submitted to his power. Even Ezio
got in on it, accepting his Uncle as the head of the Assassins and giving his oath without hesitation.

Every event in the day was carefully orchestrated and planned, the team plotting to make this birthday one to remember and talk about for years to come. The biggest trick was keeping Mario distracted so he didn’t realise what was going on behind the scenes, this was Emily's part of the entire day and she was completely dedicated to it. She was completely dedicated to spoiling him rotten and making sure he had the most incredible day of his life.

While Emily was outside with Mario, the rest of the team were toiling away inside, preparing the smaller dining hall for the noon meal and the grand banquet hall for the evening culmination of all their hard work. The heartfelt and simple gifts from the citizens of Monteriggioni were all arranged around the walls of the banquet hall, displaying the love of the people for their Lord and Protector. The flowers were all placed out as well, scattered all around the villa to really liven the place up and welcome the Lady of Monteriggioni properly.

For now the Assassins hid their presents for Mario in the Sanctuary, confident Emily could completely distract Mario so he never went into his study and realised they'd been through there. They also cached their new outfits down there, planning to race down there and change before the midday meal. It wasn’t until the afternoon that they expected things to really get going around the villa, everything building up to the grand finale around the big dining table and over the city.

Once word got back that Emily was bringing Mario home to relax for a little while before lunch, the rest of the Assassin finished up and slipped out of the villa again, taking a different route away from the grand building and splitting up throughout the city. Heading for the walls, they took over from the mercenari who were guarding the supplies that had arrived in secret from Venezia. Hauling the supplies up onto the walls, they got to work arranging all of it and setting up the fuses leading back to safer locations. They angled the precious canisters to spread out the display across the city, trying to get the best out of these expensive things. As a precaution, they set the mercenari to work on hauling water barrels up onto the walls, spreading them out and filling them up. They also had the wooden roofs of the guard towers soaked in water to protect them from any potential danger from the firecrackers along the walls.

While they were up on the wall, the Assassins were also on the lookout for any of their other guests making their way towards Monteriggioni for the celebrations. If this was going to work, everything had to happen as they'd planned it and passed the word through the webs. This secret planning was the main reason why the modern team had taken so long to get to Monteriggioni, they'd wanted to give the other guests enough time to organise presents and make the journey without arousing Mario’s suspicions.

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As the day wound on, it became harder to keep the big reveal a secret from Mario. Throughout their midday meal, they were entertained by performers sent from Firenze with letters of acknowledgement from Lorenzo di Medici. One of them produced a personal letter from Lorenzo, handing it to Mario with a flourish and going back to his juggling. The letter confused Mario a little, he wasn’t used to such a friendly and truly personal letter from any Medici. Instead of talk of Assassin business, Lorenzo wished him a happy birthday and explained that these performers were from his court, his personal favourites and part of a very special gift for Mario.

After the meal, Emily whisked Mario upstairs to rest off the meal and talk of things that were best kept between them. As soon as they were out of sight, the rest of the team swung into action again, helping to clear up the lunch dishes and prepare for the evening. The courtly performers were sent outside to rest and enjoy the meal left for them. The table was moved aside and the chairs were
tucked back in the storeroom where they'd come from.

Out came the finest silverware and the holiday crockery, the new Auditore banners and the Master’s Chair that was never used. Decorated with the finest carvings and beautifully gilded, it was absolutely magnificent and weighted more than anyone had at first expected. It had taken a combined effort from Aloysius and Rufus to bring it out of the storeroom and up into the banquet hall. Placed at the head of the table, it really added a grand majesty to what was certain to be a wonderful evening.

Mario didn't know it yet but today, the Auditore family was changing their image, doing away with the red and black banners of the past and replacing them with purple. The colour change came about after a discussion about the two hair ribbons that were the last tangible memory of Mario's much loved mother. They'd started their plans in Venezia, going to every tailor in the city and commissioning several new banners to beautiful Monteriggioni and solidify the new colour choice.

Setting up the honour places for Giovanni, Libby made certain they were each set with the finest of everything too and making sure each small spot was set in the best place within each room. Maria delved into the chests of clothes that had lain untouched since Aloysius fetched them from Firenze, finding some of her favourite pieces of Giovanni's wardrobe and arranging them around the honour places. Most of them were informal and relaxed, matching what they hoped for the evening party. In the banquet hall though, she placed out the rich purple tunic Giovanni had worn on their wedding day and the long white boots that had looked so amazing against his black breeches that day. The tunic was carefully arranged to look like it had just been thrown there but also in such a way to show the Auditore crest embroidered on the chest.

Out in the entrance hall, Aloysius and Rufus worked together to hang the new Auditore banner at the top of the stairs, Aloysius holding the weight of the cloth as Rufus stretched up to hook it into place on the wall. Meanwhile Shane was draping garlands of fresh flowers and greenery along the banisters with help from some of the villa staff. Buck was out here too, wrapping matching garlands around the pillars supporting the upper gallery as two of the maids dusted off the paintings on the walls.

Sweeping past the busy men, Claudia approached the portrait of Mario and Giovanni and draped a length of gold silk over the frame, twisting the ends and adjusting the fall of the cloth to bring attention to the painting. For a moment she stopped and looked up at her father, feeling his loss so painfully in her chest before she walked away. Today was supposed to be a happy day and there was so much still to be done before the final big surprises.

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Waiting outside the city gates, six of the modern Assassins were starting to get a little worried about the timing of events. The Firenze guests should have already arrived and the Venezia guests were due any minute but for some reason, none of them had showed up yet. Emily had already put a warning across the webs, she couldn't keep Mario distracted for much longer without him getting seriously suspicious so something had to happen and soon.

'Oh come on, where are they all?' Shane groused, glancing back towards the city. 'We can't drop the ball on this now.' 

'Relax Shane, they'll get here soon.' Rufus uttered, trying to calm Shane down. 'Everything will work out, just be patient.' 

'I think someone's coming from Firenze.' Buck called, pointing to a carriage coming around the last corner before the city. 

'And there's a carriage coming from the other direction.' Jean-Claude added, attention drawn to another carriage coming towards them.
Relaxing at the sight of familiar faces from both sides, the waiting Assassins broke from their places and moved out to greet the guests, relieved that their plans hadn't been completely destroyed. Getting them into the city was easy, they were going straight up the main street and through the open front doors we befitted people of such importance to Mario. If everything went the way it was meant to, he would be far too busy to realise when one last guest eventually deigned to show up.

'We were starting to think you weren't going to make it.' Shane grinned, helping to lift down one of the two chests in the Firenze carriage.

'Apologies for the concern. There was so much to arrange so Firenze wasn't completely defenceless in our absence. We both underestimated the time it would take.' Volpe shrugged, going back for the second chest. 'But we are all here now by the looks of this.'

'And the best part is Mario still has no idea any of this is going on. Word has been passed throughout the city, no one is saying anything to Mario about what's going on while he's distracted.' Buck chuckled, greeting Paola warmly as he helped her down from the carriage.

'It has been many years since we all gathered for reasons outside the Order.' Paola smiled, keeping a sharp watch on her chest as two of the town porters carefully picked it up from where Shane and Volpe had put it down.

Unloading the travelling chests from the second carriage and organising the porters to carry them through the city, the reunited families couldn't wipe the smiles off their faces. They all knew that this was all for Mario but nothing could erase the joy of being back with those that meant so much to them. As an added surprise, there were a couple of extra visitors drifting about, people that had their own roles to plan in the workload,

'I take it these are a gift for Mario's birthday.' Gena remarked, holding two wrapped canvases that Leonardo had brought along.

'I just hope he likes them.' Leonardo nodded, smoothing his coat over his shoulders.

'I have no doubt he'll love them.' Gena grinned, tucking the paintings carefully under her left arm and straightening his beret a little.

'Dante, it's good to see you again.' Rufus smiled, not sure how his presence would affect the party but no doubt something could be arranged. 'Welcome to Monteriggioni.'

'It's good to see you too, Rufus. I missed you.' Dante replied, pulling his eyes away from the imposing walls to hug Rufus close.

'As much as I trust my mercenari to handle things in my absence, I couldn't just leave Dante behind. I know Mario cares about him, I saw them running about the courtyard while we were waiting for news.' Bartolomeo added, resting a supportive hand on Dante's back.

'Rosa, we weren't expecting you to show up. We thought for sure Antonio would leave his thieves in your hands.' Jean-Claude laughed, wrapping her up in a gentle hug. 'Ezio will be so pleased to see you again. He's up at the villa finishing preparations.'

'We were going to stay and take care of the Guild but when Bartolomeo mentioned Dante was coming along, Antonio suggested we come too.' Rosa shrugged, glancing over to where Ugo was standing beside Antonio. 'It will be good to see Ezio again.'

'Best behaviour Rosa, his mother and younger siblings are here as well.' Jean-Claude warned, turning his attention to Ugo. 'There's no need to look so nervous Ugo, everything will be fine.'

'We are so grateful you could make it, Teodora. I have no doubt your bordello keeps you busy.' Veronique offered, welcoming Teodora to the city.

'My girls will handle matters until I return, they are well taught.' Teodora nodded, admiring Veronique in her masculine formal wear.

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Putting up with Mario's quiet grumbling with patient grace, Emily finished the ornate little braids running back from his temples and combed the rest of his thick locks back into her left hand before taking up the purple family ribbon and twisting it neatly into place to hold her creation in place.
Getting up, Mario shouldered into the new tunic she'd provided, smoothing out the deep purple fabric and tugging his sleeves down neatly.

'I know you're not thrilled about the new wardrobe but trust me, you look so handsome wearing this.' Emily grinned, lifting his hair out of his collar and taking up the little neckerchief she'd requested to go with this outfit. 'Besides, everyone else is making an effort for tonight.'

'What else aren't you telling me, Emily?' Mario asked, lifting his chin a little so Emily could wrap the embroidered cloth around his neck loosely.

'You keep asking me that and the answer remains the same, Mario. I'm not going to spoil the big surprise, not after we all worked so hard to make this day a success.' Emily chuckled, tying off the pale blue cloth and smoothing it out around his neck. 'Just try to enjoy it, we spent a lot of time on making sure today would be a success.'

'We?' Mario blinked, reaching up to brush the soft cloth at his throat. 'Just who else is involved in all of this?'

'My team, plus Maria, Claudia and Petruccio. Oh and we got the city involved once we were here and the celebrations had begun.' Emily replied, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes as she picked up his new black cape and shook it out. 'Remember, I'm now the Lady of Monteriggioni.'

Wrapping the soft black cotton around Mario's shoulders, Emily circled him again and secured the golden clasp to keep it secure. Where hers was decorated with a ring of pearls and one large ruby in the middle, his sparkled with a ring of rubies and a single sapphire in the very middle.

'I'm starting to wonder about the amount of influence you have over this city.' Mario remarked, accepting her fussing for now.

'It's your presence at my side that gives me any influence over the people of Monteriggioni. If I tried to do anything without your presence, they would rise up against my attempts. As for them helping with the birthday celebrations, they simply want their Lord and Protector to be happy.' Emily shrugged, flicking the cloth over his shoulders a little more. 'I know this isn't your usual style but please, I promise you'll like what we have planned.'

'Alright, just as long as we don't have to keep up this pretentious attitude for the rest of our lives.' Mario nodded, turning to look in the mirror at the glistening clasp holding his new cape in place. 'Only on special occasions, I think the people would start to worry if they saw you dressed like this every day.' Emily grinned, checking her hair quickly. 'Ready?'

'As I'll ever be, I suppose.' Mario nodded, turning and taking her hand.

Making their way along the upper gallery, Emily was relieved to note that no one was in easy sight, most waiting quietly outside until she gave the signal. Mario seemed far more interested to see the big Auditore banner hanging at the top of the stairs, declaring his mastery of the villa and the city beyond. Lighting up with a smile, Emily squeezed his hand and turned for the stairs, lining up for the big surprise.

Stopping at the top of the stairs, Mario froze at the sight of his true family gathered at the base of the stairs dressed in their finest clothes. Maria and Claudia were seated just to the left of the staircase, Ezio standing behind his mother and Petruccio at Claudia's side in readiness. They were all wearing the same deep purple too, not quite to the same extent but it was there. Maria's skirt was striped white and purple, Claudia wore a shawl in the same shade, Petruccio looked quite handsome in his matching tunic and Ezio wore a long coat in the new family colour.

'Now do you understand why this colour?' Emily asked softly, waiting for Mario to get the idea. 'The ribbons madre made for us.' Mario nodded, lightly touching the embroidered tails resting on his shoulder.

'And now the official banner colour for the famiglia Auditore.' Emily grinned, squeezing his hand lightly. 'Be they of this time or the future, all Auditore's will wear this shade of purple.'

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Head held high, Aloysius strode across the main entrance hall, the guests trailing along behind him and admiring the beauty of the villa in all its glory. Wearing sleek grey velvet breeches, long black boots, open white shirt and a pale blue jerkin half hidden under the purple cape draped over his left shoulder and sweeping the floor, he was carrying on the idea Emily had placed in Mario's head with the Auditore colour. Everything going right, this was hoped to be the perfect peak surprise for Mario. It was doubted if anything after this moment would surpass his joy at being surrounded by almost everyone who meant anything to him.

Leading their guests past the grand staircase, Aloysius opened the doors into the reception hall and stepped inside, dipping his head to the seated figures at the far end of the hall. Every remaining Auditore was gathered there, waiting patiently for Aloysius to make the first move. Giving the signal behind his back and trusting in Shane to get it, he made his way over to settle beside Ezio, out on the left side of the gathering.

Pausing a moment longer for Aloysius to be settled, the modern Assassins strode into the room, heads held high and ornately decorated purple silken bands wrapped around their left forearms to show their loyalty to the family. They all wore a similar outfit to Aloysius, barring the long cape and the colours picked to match their formal Assassin robes. Together they made for a grand look, their jerkins sparkling with expensive decorations and perfectly tailored for each of them. 'Signore e Signora Auditore, the guests have arrived for the evening festivities.' Shane offered, bowing his head respectfully as he spoke.

Left hand behind his back, Shane signalled the order and stepped forward again, his black boots clicking against the marble floor as he approached the seated family. His grey breeches and green jerkin shone under the candles as he walked but the real display came from behind him. Mario perked up a little as another figure slipped through the doors and followed Shane, hands spread wide in greeting.

Making her move, Gena knew she looked fearsome in her black breeches and red jerkin, both embroidered with a feather pattern. Turning sharply on her heel, she waited for Leonardo to reach her and take a step ahead before turning again to slip in behind him as they approached the seated family. For now Leonardo had left his paintings out of sight, sticking with the agreement to keep the gifts for later.

Clad in black and pale blue, Rufus held his place in front of the doors for a few moments before striding forward, Bartolomeo at his right shoulder and Dante at his left. Stopping in front of the raised chairs where Mario and Emily were sitting, Rufus sunk down to plant his right knee on the floor, his ornate loyalty band proudly displayed. Beside him, Bartolomeo and Dante remained standing, facing Mario as near equals.

Continuing with the black but matching it with a much darker blue, Veronique extended her right hand out to the side and waited for Teodora to step up and take it before taking the long walk up to the dais and the seated family. For Veronique, it wasn't that uncomfortable to take a masculine role, she did it frequently with her work.

Bowing his head to the seated family, Jean-Claude waited a moment longer before joining the advance, his brown pants and grey jerkin glistening as he turned sharply to allow Antonio to move in front of him. As they made their way forward, Rosa and Ugo made their appearance, emerging from the shadows behind the open doors and sloting in beside Jean-Claude. No one had known they were there, Jean-Claude had positioned them while everyone else was either outside or upstairs getting ready.

Pleased with his brown and green outfit, Buck dipped his head respectfully as Paola swept into the
room and wrapped her left hand over his offered right. Left hand tucked behind his back, he escorted her across the floor to join the gathering in front of the dais. Going down to kneel in the same position as the others, he transferred Paola’s hand to his shoulder and bowed his head, looking down at the band he wore.

Blinking in shock and disbelief, Mario snapped his gaze to Emily and demanded an explanation with just a look. Of all the things he’d expected, having so many of his friends and fellow Assassins show up out of the blue on his birthday was so far down his list he’d dismissed the idea. Somehow Emily had pulled it off though, surrounding him with just about everyone that meant anything special to him.

‘Buon compleanno, amore mio.’ Emily chuckled, leaning over to kiss his cheek. ‘Enjoy it, we spent a long time on making sure everyone that matters could be here.’

‘This is the big surprise you’ve been hiding all day?’ Mario asked, amazed by just how sneaky Emily could be when she put her mind to it.

‘Well, part of it anyway.’ Emily chuckled, squeezing his hand again. ‘We’re not done yet but you’ve got some time to wrap your mind around this surprise before we hit you with another.’

‘I don’t know how much more of this I can take.’ Mario muttered, shaking his head slowly. ‘For those who have never met them personally, this is Maria Auditore and her two other children, Claudia and Petruccio.’

‘Giovanni was a good man, his loss is truly tragic.’ Antonio offered, walking over to take a knee beside Maria’s chair.

‘Thank you, Antonio. My husband spoke highly of your adventures together.’ Maria smiled, accepting his hand and getting to her feet.

This time it was Libby that signalled the continuation of proceedings, motioning for the servers to start their rounds. For now it was finger food, encouraging mingling as the local musicians struck up a happy song and more candles were lit to really brighten the place up. Some of the servers carried trays of empty goblets and others brought out bottles of fine wine and juice, giving the guests four choices on what they wanted. Conversations soon started, everyone relaxing and having a grand time to celebrate such a special day.

Petruccio turned out to be a bit of a surprise, taking two glasses of juice and wandering over to where Dante was standing, a lost look in his eyes as he tried to work out his place in all of this. It took a few minutes, but Petruccio soon had Dante talking to him about Venezia and his home with Bartolomeo. In return, Petruccio talked of what he remembered of Firenze and his much better life in Monteriggioni.

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Allowing his guests to sweep him from the reception hall and guide him to the large chair that had been set out in the second study, Mario looked around for someone to explain what they were doing in here. Instead of an explanation, he was handed a long, slim item wrapped in cheaper linen and tied with a thin rope.

‘Best wishes for another year Mario.’ Volpe grinned, resting one hand on his shoulder for a moment before stepping back.

‘Well, aren’t you going to open it?’ Emily whispered, leaning over his shoulder. ‘Don’t worry, I warned them both what would happen if it was discovered they stole a gift for you.’

Unpicking the knots and brushing away the cloth, Mario’s jaw dropped as he looked at the carved walking stick Volpe had given him. He wasn’t sure if he should be amazed by the details or insulted by the insinuation that he needed it. It was carved from some sort of dark timber, almost black and with a very fine grain so likely it was exotic and expensive. Over the surface were carved flowing ivy vines detailed in gold and highlighted further with little green gems. The rounded knob on top
had been carved with the Assassin's symbol and the Auditore crest, both picked out in gold and silver. Quite a hefty piece of workmanship, Mario finally realised the significance of the gift and smiled, looking up at Volpe.

'Grazie, Gilberto. This is a magnificent piece of workmanship.' Mario nodded, quite pleased with how the knob fit into his hand.

'Worthy of you place as Lord of this fine city.' Volpe agreed, moving back so someone else could present their gift.

Gliding forward, Paola's gift was much smaller but no less incredible to look at. Inside a red velvet lined wooden box sat a stunning gold pectoral chain. The heavy chain was a simple design but hanging from it an eagle soared freely. Clutched in the left talon, the eagle carried the Auditore crest and from the right talon hung the Assassin symbol.

'Paola, this is beautiful. Grazie, I'll treasure it always.' Mario smiled, lifting the eagle out and leaning forward a little so Emily could slip the chain over his head and drape it across his shoulders neatly.

'Only the best for you, Mario.' Paola replied, admiring the way her gift looked against the purple of his tunic.

Looking up when one of the mercenari came to the door, Emily patted Mario's shoulder and walked past him to speak with Franco about whatever had brought him up to the villa all flustered. Glancing back over her shoulder, she smiled and nodded, letting everyone know it was okay to continue in her absence. Reaching out, she placed her hand on Franco's shoulder and guided him out of the room, not wanting everyone to know the business of the city.

'What's the matter, Franco?' she asked, wandering away from the gathering with him.

'Signora, Il Magnifico of Firenze is at the gates with his retinue. What do we do?' Franco replied, looking torn between going to war or allowing the peace to continue.

'You will escort me to the gates, I will handle this personally.' Emily directed, lifting her skirts a little and heading for the doors.

'Would you permit me, Signora?' Franco enquired, offering his hand respectfully.

'Great man, Franco.' Emily praised, collecting her display sword from where she'd left it in readiness and attaching it to her belt before placing her hand over Franco's and leaving the villa.

Making their way through the city streets, the people whispered to each other, amazed to see their Lady out in the streets without Mario beside her. Emily merely smiled and acknowledged the whispers, explaining that Mario was busily entertaining their guests while she handled business. They accepted her words, recognising that things would be a little different now that Mario had a woman to keep him company and rule beside him.

Reaching the gate, Emily released Franco and placed her hands on the two men blocking her path, pushing them apart enough for her to step through the gap and leave the city. Franco's concerns were completely understandable, Lorenzo was standing there with his wife, six guards, a couple of aides and several other people gathered behind him.

'Emily?' Lorenzo asked, struggling to recognise her in all her finery. 'I hope we are not too late for the festivities.'

'No, you are still on time to join with some of the festivities but know I made it clear on your invitation that it was for you and your charming wife only.' Emily replied, resting one hand on her sword. 'The rest of your retinue will have to stay in the city, they will not be permitted into the villa.'

'And who are you to say who is or is not welcome into the Monteriggioni villa?' one of the guards demanded, stepping forward to better protect Lorenzo.

'I am Signora Emilia Auditore, wife of Mario Auditore, Lord and Protector of Monteriggioni. Do not test my patience, boy. This sword is not just for decoration.' Emily growled, holding back the mercenaries with a simple flick of her left hand. 'Hold your places men, I fight my own battles.'

'Enough Francesco.' Lorenzo warned, bringing his unruly guard back under control. 'One aide to accompany us to the villa with our gift for Mario and then he will join the rest of the retinue at the inn.
for the duration of our stay.'
'He leaves his weapons with those staying in the city. And remember, we have many Assassins in
the villa at the moment. Anyone caught sneaking around will certainly be killed and we will accept
no fault for it.' Emily countered, refusing to back down easily.
'Agreed. Jacopo, hand over your sword and gather the gifts.' Lorenzo nodded, turning to a man
standing behind him with two peregrine falcons sharing his gloved left arm. 'I thought these two
birds would make a suitable gift for Mario on this auspicious day.'
'I will take them. I have had practise with larger birds. Two such magnificent falcons will trouble me
little.' Emily offered, moving closer and extending her arm.

The falconer was clearly uncertain when Emily offered her under-protected arm but on a signal from
Lorenzo, he did coax the two birds across onto her arm and wrapped their jesses around her fingers
to secure them. Tucking the two stunning birds in close to her chest, Emily held out her hand for the
supply bag slung over the man's shoulder and slipped the strap over her head without disturbing the
resting birds.
'Truly, these are beautiful falcons. No doubt Mario will be pleased with such a gift.' Emily grinned,
running her fingers lightly over their sleek backs. 'Shall we?'
'Of course, Signora.' Lorenzo replied, offering his hand to his wife. 'Unless you disagree, Clarice?'
'No, I tire of this journey.' she replied, accepting Lorenzo's hand.
'Franco, see that the rest of these people are settled at the inn for the duration of their stay. If you
have any troubles, you know what to do.' Emily instructed, parting the mercenaries with a wave of
her hand and making her way back towards the villa with Lorenzo and his wife behind her.

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Looking at the first portrait from Leonardo, Mario was once again stunned by the talent of the softly
spoken man. This one was a very relaxed setting, the background done to make it seem like they
were in Mario's office. He was sitting in his office chair, documents spread out in front of him and a
quill held loosely in his right hand and a falcon sitting on a leather pad near his right elbow. Beside
him, Emily was leaning on the chair back with her sword on her hip and a rather handsome falcon
perched on her gloved left arm, proud head held high under its hood.
'Once again, Leonardo, you gift me with the most amazing artworks.' Mario praised, looking up from
the artwork. 'But were you not informed that I have no falcons?'
'Not yet but perhaps one day you will get some.' Leonardo shrugged, taking the second covered
painting and holding it out to Mario.

Passing the first one to Ezio for the moment, Mario accepted the second one and worked the string
and cloth loose. Gazing at the portrait for just a moment, he flicked his attention back to Leonardo
again, shocked by what had been produced this time. He knew that never had such a portrait been
done, there had never been a chance for them all to sit together for a single image and yet here it was.
There was no denying this had been created for him.

Side-by-side, wearing their Sunday finest, Emily and Maria sat in matching timber chairs, long skirts
spread out and serene little smiles on their flawless faces. Their hands folded in their laps, both
women proudly showed the Auditore rings on their right hands, the tiny crests unmistakeable to
Mario. Behind the women, dressed in their best and with their hair tied back, the brothers stood
shoulder-to-shoulder, right hands resting on the covered shoulders of their wives to show their rings
and mark their unions clearly.

So absorbed in the stunning details of this family portrait, pulling him back to joyful times at
Giovanni's side, Mario never realised Emily had returned. But when the room suddenly went quiet,
Mario looked up curiously, wondering what was going on. Instincts kicking in, Mario thrust the
painting at Aloysius waiting behind his chair and shot to his feet, right hand curling around the
walking stick he'd been gifted. 'Well, at least the Auditore fire still burns in your chest Mario.' Lorenzo commented, right hand resting on his sword in readiness. 'I did not come here to fight, Mario.'

'Then why are you here? Surely not to admit that you could have saved mio fratello and prevented all this suffering.' Mario snapped, old wounds breaking open and bleeding again. 'You were his Lord and Master, you should have been able to do something!' 'How? I was not even in Firenze when it happened! I only found out about the attempt and his subsequent murder after I returned from my trip.' Lorenzo countered, stepping forward to confront Mario man to man. 'Tell me how I was supposed to know anything about that conspiracy!'

Everyone was on edge, waiting to see what would come of this confrontation. Mario had the home ground advantage but Lorenzo was used to arguing his position and making his point clear without violence. Not taking his eyes off Mario, Lorenzo signalled for his aide and accepted the sheaf of parchment the aide was holding for him.

'I didn't come here to fight or to stir up painful memories. I came on Emily's invitation to wish you buon compleanno and give you this in person.' Lorenzo offered, holding out the document. 'I also bring a gift for your birthday.'

'And what is this about?' Mario asked, reaching out to take the document.

'A formal declaration accepting you as a Duca of Firenze. This is not a request for you to build a new palazzo in Firenze, simply repair what has already been built.' Lorenzo explained, watching the surprise and disbelief flash across Mario's face.

'Ezio, do you know where my Gonfaloniere lives?' Mario asked, turning to his eldest nephew. 'Si, zio. I got to know him when I first came to Monteriggioni.' Ezio nodded, moving out of the gathering and waiting for instructions.

'Good, take this to him. Tell him to examine it very carefully for any concerns and bring it back to me in the morning with his evaluation.' Mario instructed, popping the seal and handing the document to Ezio.

'Of course, Uncle.' Ezio replied, taking the document and hurrying from the room.

'Jacopo, you are dismissed.' Lorenzo added, accepting his walking stick from his aide before the older man bowed and left the room.

Relieved that the tension in the room had settled, Emily made her way in to join the celebrations again, twisting past Lorenzo and approaching Mario with the two falcons perched quietly on her arm. Reaching up, she removed the supply pouch from her shoulder and handed it to Mario before carefully transferring the larger of the two birds onto Mario's left arm.

'A gift from the Medici in honour of your birthday.' Emily winked, stroking the smaller bird lightly as she turned to stand beside him. 'A splendid breeding pair indeed.'

'They truly are magnificent birds.' Mario agreed, lifting the bird on his arm to admire its pristine plumage. 'Grazie, Altezza.'

'I swear, I knew nothing of this Mario.' Leonardo insisted, thinking of the informal portrait he'd created as a gift.

'I believe you, Leonardo.' Mario replied, pulling his focus away from the bird. 'Though I do have a feeling my wife might have been involved.'

'Believe what you want, Mario.' Emily shrugged, brushing her fingers against his cheek.

Chuckling softly, Mario signalled to the servers that were always somewhere nearby, watching and waiting to be called to their duty. Entering the room, two servers approached Lorenzo and his wife, offering fresh food and fine wine to welcome them properly.

'Rosa and Ugo, I expect the best behaviour from you two.' Mario warned, glancing over to the two thieves that were half sheltered behind Jean-Claude. 'Not everyone here will be so tolerant.'

'Si, signore. We'll behave.' Ugo nodded, looking like he was about to bolt out of the room. 'It's just... well we don't usually get near people of such importance.'
'Oh hush Ugo, before your mouth gets you into trouble.' Antonio chuckled, shaking his head slowly as he looked around. 'Why don't you two go see if you can find Dante and see if he wants to play chase or something outside?'
'Last I saw him, he went upstairs with Petruccio.' Claudia offered, sipping her wine slowly. 'Grazie Claudia.' Rosa nodded, tapping Ugo on the shoulder before they both fled the room.

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Glutted on fine food and feeling the effects of perhaps a little too much wine, the entire gathering headed back out into the cool evening air, spreading out on the grass in front of the villa to witness a tradition that had been going on since the Auditore family took over Monteriggioni. The villa kitchens had been busy all day, producing the shared meal that would be given to each family so they could share in Mario's joy. On every birthday and religious feast day, the villa would provide a grand meal to every person in the city, it wasn't a lot in the long run but the people truly did appreciate the kindness of their protector.

Mario had changed the tradition a little and now provided not just food but would also bring in shipments of reasonably priced, simple clothes from the surrounding towns and give them to the poorest of his people. He also had blankets and shoes brought in, doing everything that he could to make his people that little bit safer and happier.

This year Emily's team came together to add even more to the usual gifts to the people, handing out new candles to light their homes and finely scented soaps to every family. There were even toys for the children, simple little things but the smiles on their faces made them seem like the greatest of treasures to these dear little children.

Watching the procession of people coming up the stairs, Lorenzo was starting to get the idea of why it had always been so hard to wrest control of Monteriggioni away from Mario. He didn't just have the loyalty of his mercenari to fight against all attempts but every person in the city adored him, responding to his generosity and promising they would always be loyal to the Auditore family. Mario didn't just feed and clothe the people, he spoke to each family personally, enquiring after any those that hadn't made it to his door and giving extra to those who had sick relatives at home.

Spotting a young woman struggling to manage her four young children, Lorenzo didn't hesitate and surprised even himself when he plucked the screaming babe from her arms and held the sickly girl close to his shoulder, bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet to help calm the child. Once the youngster ceased screaming and snuggled into his cloak, Lorenzo just smiled and offered his hand to the eldest of the children. He was timid at first but after an encouraging nod from Mario, the young boy reached out and grasped Lorenzo's offered hand.
'Grazie signore, grazie mille.' the woman smiled, accepting the tied bundle of clothes Aloysius organised for her. 'You are too kind, Signore Auditore.'
'Nonsense Clarice. It was my word that put you in this situation, the least I can do is help you raise your children.' Mario replied, watching Emily present each of the children a small toy and wrap a beautiful little pink blanket around the baby girl.
'My home is not far Signore Medici.' Clarice added, handing some of the lightest gifts to children to carry and picking up the stew pot.
'Here, allow me.' Ezio offered, picking up the pot carefully. 'Lead the way, signora.'

Astounded by what he was witnessing, Mario couldn't wipe the smile off his face as all of his party guests got involved with his tradition, helping out wherever they could to make everything run smoothly. The women gathered around the gifts to the people, sorting out what each family would need and organising the bundles as the rest of the menfolk lit torches and escorted struggling families to their humble homes under the watch of the grand villa. Such kindness was the perfect end to a
wonderful birthday, bridging the class gap that Mario so detested and allowing the people he fought for to have a chance to relax for a night.

Picked up on the breeze, a lonely voice broke out into song, somewhere down in the group waiting to be given their gift from the family. Gradually other voices joined the song, carrying the words into the air and Mario could finally work out what was being sung. This was no grand opera or even a ballad learned from the minstrels that came to the city. No, this was something created here in Monteriggioni especially for him. Someone in his city had written these words solely for him and now it was coming together, people of all ages picking it up and lifting it into the air in his honour. It was a truly humbling moment, showing once and for all that he was the undisputed Lord and Protector of Monteriggioni. And well, if anyone caught the sparkle of a tear on his cheek, they knew better than to say anything.

As it started to get really dark over the city, most of the modern Assassins slipped silently from the gathering in front of the villa and split up, running through the streets to get into position for the grand finale of the night. With the last family on their way home with their gifts, Emily wrapped up the remaining toys in an old blanket and stood, walking over to cuddle in against Mario.

'One last grand surprise, I promise. When this is done, you can go upstairs, get changed and just relax with our friends for a while.' she uttered, relaxing against him and lifting her eyes skywards.

Drawing Dante closer to him, Bartolomeo lit a small firecracker and threw it as high as he could straight up. At the peak of its flight, it exploded in a bright flash of red and fizzled out, startling everyone but they were quickly caught up in the magical display over Monteriggioni. For as soon as Bartolomeo's thrown firecracker exploded, the Assassins arranged on the walls lit the fuses and took cover just in case.

So now the humble city was bathed in flashes of colour from high above, bringing the people back out of their homes to admire the beautiful display. Outside the villa, Mario tightened his grip on Emily and stared in wonder at what she'd organised as a finale for what had already been the best birthday he could remember.

'Grazie, amore. This has been the best day ever.' Mario uttered, pulling his eyes away from the fireworks overhead to kiss her lightly.

'Nothing but the best for you, amore.' Emily replied, so pleased that she'd been able to put a smile on Mario's face and keep it there all day.

'I do have a serious question though.' Mario whispered, shifting their positions so he could get his lips right beside her ear.

'I love you Mario and I understand that sometimes a man's love can be fickle. If something happens tonight that doesn't involve me, I forgive you in advance. Just keep it quiet and don't stray too far.' Emily grinned, catching a kiss over her shoulder. 'One last wild night before we really settle into married life, hmm?'

'Even if…' Mario couldn't bring himself to say what he was thinking, he just hoped Emily understand without him actually saying it.

'I'm giving you a free pass for tonight, just keep it out of our marital bed unless I'm in your arms alone.' Emily nodded, squeezing his hands lightly. 'Anything else is fair game, but I advise you to keep it quiet. Consider it one final, private gift.'

'You are too generous with me, Emilia.' Mario breathed, finding he rather liked how her adopted name rolled off his tongue.

'You deserve every little bit of happiness I can give you.' Emily corrected, lifting his chin. 'Now hush and enjoy the show.'
The morning after

Treading light so she didn't disturb anyone, Emily entered the Sanctuary and smiled at what she found down here. Huddled together just on the other side of the low wall that separated the entrance from the underground cavern, she found Mario, Antonio and Bartolomeo snuggled together under Mario's cape. They looked so innocent in rest, huddled together in a drunken tangle but obviously so comfortable together. Just looking at them, she got the impression that this was hardly the first time they'd done something like this.

Pressed so close together, it was hard to tell what was where under the cape draped over their hips and legs. Antonio had snuggled into Mario's chest, using his arm for a pillow as he held tight to the older man. Bartolomeo cuddled in against Mario's back, left arm hidden somewhere under them and right wrapped firmly around Mario's waist. Mario's right leg was thrown over Antonio's hips, keeping the smaller man tight against him.

Whatever they'd been up to down here alone, it was clear Mario had taken most of it. There were bite marks and bruises all over his upper body and clear scratches from fingernails cutting across his muscles. Antonio and Bartolomeo had a few scratches, bites and bruises of their own but nothing that compared to the covering Mario had gotten. The positions of some of those marks gave Emily a pretty good idea what these three had been up to during the night and honestly, she was glad Mario had gotten one last night of extra-marital fun.

Reluctant to wake them but fully expecting the Gonfaloniere to arrive any moment, Emily approached the trio and knelt by their heads, reaching out to card her fingers through their hair lightly. Setting up a rhythm, she kept working on pulling them up from their drunken stupor and shading their heads under her spread cape.

'Emily?' Antonio muttered, cracking one eye open and looking up at her.

'Si, Antonio.' Emily nodded, smoothing out his hair a little more. 'How's the head this morning?'

'Pounding.' Antonio groaned, hiding his eyes in Mario's shoulder again. 'My stomach is really roiling too.'

'I'll send one of the servers down with something to help you feel a little better but right now I need to get Mario moving. He has important business to deal with.' Emily promised, trying to coax Antonio to let go of Mario.

Looking up when someone else came into the Sanctuary, Emily let out a breath at the sight of Jean-Claude and Rufus approaching the wall. Rufus looked a little worse for wear, a rather large hickey on the side of his neck barely covered by his collar. Jean-Claude was looking brighter than expected, still a little unsteady on his feet but hopefully sober enough to be of use.

'Ah good, you two can wrangle with your ancestors while I try and get Mario going. Silvio will be here any minute to discuss that damned contract.' she sighed, trying once again to get Antonio to let go of Mario.

'There should be laws about dealing with this sort of thing with a hangover.' Rufus groused, making his way around the wall and crouching beside Bartolomeo. 'Come on Bartolomeo, time to wake up.'

Letting out a pained groan when Bartolomeo moved behind him, Mario jerked and whined low in the back of his throat. He didn't want to wake up; he wanted to stay safe in the firm embrace of his trusted friends. He wanted to stay in the warm dreams he'd been enjoying. Clutching tighter to
Antonio, he refused to stir, not ready to go back to the reality of his life. Reaching back, he grabbed Bartolomeo's hip and held tight, desperate to avoid that discomfort for a little longer. Even if it was just for a few minutes more, he didn't want to deal with anything else yet.

Realising what was potentially hidden under the draped cloth; Rufus snatched his hands away from Bartolomeo and waved Jean-Claude back from Antonio. Giving Emily an apologetic look, he lifted the cape and flinched, letting the dark cloth fall again. Trying to force this issue would only make things worse, it was best to just leave it alone.

'I hate to say it Emily but we can't force this one. You're going to have to handle matters in the city until these three come around of their own volition;' he offered, tucking the cape over them a little more to keep them secure. 'Trying to pull them apart is only going to hurt them.'

'Alright, stay here and keep an eye on them Rufus. Jean-Claude, go and check on the Medici's. Remind Lorenzo that the Gonfaloniere will be arriving soon to discuss the contract.' Emily sighed, looking down at Mario's lax features. 'I'll have one of the maids bring down a new outfit for Mario. Whenever he wakes up, remind him about the contract with Il Magnifico.'

'I'll handle it Emily.' Rufus nodded, shifting to sit watch beside the trio as Emily and Jean-Claude stood and made their way to the stairs. 'Just tell Aloysius where I am, he's forgetful when he's badly hung over.'

'I'll see that he's reminded.' Emily grinned, heading upstairs to make final preparations for the arrival of Silvio, Monteriggioni's Gonfaloniere.

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It took another hour of hard slog for those aware enough to actually function but the villa was almost back to business as usual. Many of the Italian Assassins had agreed that it would be smart for them to stay out of sight and stayed upstairs, most of them still feeling far too miserable to contemplate doing anything more than rest. The modern Assassins fled upstairs as well, sleeping off their hangovers and gratefully accepting the teas made with herbs and other natural medicines to ease their aching heads and soothe their stomachs.

Now, the only people that were seen on the ground floor were Auditore's, acting like there was nothing out of the ordinary going on as they went about their days. They'd rearranged Mario's study a little, hanging up the painting Leonardo had given him and setting up two high-backed chairs behind the desk. When everyone was feeling capable of it, they hoped to bring in a second desk for Emily to make her own space but for now, she was forced to share Mario's workspace to get everything done.

Organising the space with her usual efficiency, Emily settled at her new place to the right of Mario's well worn chair and turned her attention to something that had been bothering her for many years. Most of the time she could simply push such thoughts away but now, with time running out and still no idea what the future would hold, she could ignore it no longer. It was well past time she sat down and wrote out what she knew of Mario's fate so he would have a tangible reminder to be more aware of the treachery coming his way.

To keep the secrets safe, she wrote in a coded language that the modern masters used, the code to which she'd already taught Mario and knew he had written down and hidden somewhere in his study. Exactly where it was, she didn't know but she knew he had it and that's what mattered.

'Signora, the Gonfaloniere has arrived.' Aloysius offered, appearing at the inner door and bowing his head respectfully.

'Ach, good. Send him in Aloysius.' Emily nodded, hating that she had to keep up with this pretence for a little longer, she would have much preferred Mario handle this. 'And kindly see what it keeping Lorenzo. I told him to be prompt so we could fully discuss this matter.'

'I will chase him up, milady.' Aloysius replied, ushering an older man into the room before bowing
Setting her quill aside and hiding the letter in one of the desk drawers, Emily turned her attention to the solidly built man standing just inside the study. At best guess, he was probably in his forties, possibly his late thirties with greying hair cut short and slicked back under his cap. Wearing simple yet stylish robes in red and grey, he carried his weight with a distinguished air but he stooped a little, almost as if he was weighed down by the ornate collar he wore signifying his place in society.

'Signora.' he greeted, bowing his head to her. 'Where is Signore Auditore, if I may be so bold?' 'Still recovering from his celebrations. Hopefully he will rouse soon and be present for the final agreement. Until then, he has authorised me to deal with this in his absence.' Emily replied, motioning to the chair set before the shared desk. 'Unless of course you have a problem with such an agreement, Silvio.'

'Of course not, Signora but it would help if I was able to see some document that verified your marriage to Signore Auditore.' Silvio shrugged faintly, settling in the indicated chair and placing the contract on the desk between them.

'Of course, I have something that should ease your concerns right here.' Emily smiled, pulling open the central drawer and grabbing out the document she'd gotten Mario to sign before their guests started to arrive. Basically it was a signed agreement that gave Emily equal rule over Monteriggioni, declared her as his wife and gave her power to sign official documents in Mario's absence for whatever reason.

Handing that document to Silvio, she pulled out another contract in readiness and placed it neatly beside her elbow as she waited for Silvio to make his decision. Just as she was closing the door, Aloysius appeared at the doorway again, bowing his head even as he ushered Lorenzo into the room. Emily could tell Aloysius was unhappy with his role in all of this, he didn't like being forced to be subservient to her beyond what was normal between them.

'So much for your reputation of always being prompt to meetings of great importance, Lorenzo.' Emily sighed, shaking her head slowly.

'I do not see Mario here yet.' Lorenzo scoffed, approaching the desk.

'Unlike some, he made the best of what was arranged for his birthday. I expect he will make his appearance when he is feeling less hung over.' Emily shrugged, resting her elbows on the desk and cupping her chin in one hand. 'Besides, I am fully authorised to complete these negotiations on his behalf. I am his wife and he trusts me to do what is best for our extended family and this city.'

Though he tried so hard to hide it, Emily still caught the faint flinch from Lorenzo and knew she had him backed into an uncomfortable position. He knew how to negotiate successfully with Mario, they'd been in enough fights over territory and politics for him to know all of Mario's tricks. But he could only guess what it would be like to negotiate against Emily and try to win the concessions he wanted from Monteriggioni.

'Well, now that we're all here shall we start?' she asked, turning her attention to Silvio.

'Si, I am satisfied with this.' Silvio nodded, handing back the agreement he'd been reading. 'I did note a few concerning matters in this contract from Il Magnifico. Perhaps not quite as skewed against Monteriggioni as I expected, considering the long rivalry with Firenze but still hardly a favourable balance for our fair city.'

'Very well, start from beginning and we will address this imbalance.' Emily instructed, shooting Lorenzo a hard look. 'Of all the leaders of Italia, you should know better than to try and slip anything past an Assassin.'

Still feeling absolutely miserable, head throbbing in time with his heartbeat and stomach threatening to make an appearance at any moment, Mario finished dressed and smoothed out his hair as he headed upstairs. Rufus had promised to stay with Antonio and Bartolomeo and make sure they
stayed out of sight until it was safe for them to emerge without raising questions. Now all Mario had to worry about was maintaining his focus and control until he could retire to his bed and sleep off his abysmal hangover.

One last check of his collar to make sure all of his bite marks were hidden, using his dagger for a mirror, he turned the last corner and stepped out of the hidden staircase, looking once more like the composed leader he could be. No one could tell he’d been that drunk last night, he was bright eyed and smiling, wearing clean clothes, his breath smelled like mint and he was walking tall and straight. Inside he felt miserable but it was his outward appearance that mattered to get through this, so long as he looked sober and clear headed, he could get through this.

'Good morning, amore mio.' Emily smiled, looking up at him. 'Come and sit, we're just getting to the biggest issues that Silvio discovered in the contract.'

'Good morning, tesoro mio.' Mario replied, heading for his seat. 'Anything I should be aware of?'

'Nothing I couldn't handle. Lorenzo was trying to force too many concessions out of Monteriggioni without giving enough back to us. I set things into proper balance.' Emily grinned, taking his hand lightly. 'We're just about to start discussing import taxes.'

Delving deep for his patience, Mario settled and listened as Silvio read from the contract, going over what had been written and breaking it down into what the agreement would mean for both cities involved. Just from what he was hearing, Mario could guess some of the other concessions that Lorenzo had been trying to wrangle from him.

'So once again while Firenze flourishes, you would force Monteriggioni into capitulation through excessive taxes. You might be able to meet these exorbitant taxes, the wealth of Firenze is well known throughout Italia. But Monteriggioni is a much poorer city, we survive solely on the farmlands around us and getting good prices at the markets. Such tax rates would surely destroy what we have rebuilt since the last war.' he snorted, flicking one hand dismissively. 'The very idea is ludicrous and insulting.'

'Then what do you suggest?' Lorenzo asked, not too surprised that this was going to be an issue. He'd never wanted to put the taxation rates so high between their cities but his ministers had advised him not to give Mario too much leeway and insisted on the same rates as any other city they traded with.

Calming Mario with a touch, Emily scratched out some figures of her own on a spare sheet of parchment, balancing it out so both cities received a fair profit margin on all traded goods as a total. She got it done by offering a tax deduction on the things that Monteriggioni produced in large quantities and upping the tax rate on the products that were harder for the small city to produce or send to Firenze. Then she worked out the same figures for Firenze, based off what she knew of the city from personal experience and her history classes.

Accepting the page from Emily, Mario looked over the figures carefully and nodded slowly, trusting his wife to have worked out a suitable arrangement that would help Monteriggioni build and grow into the future.

'I believe you will find these amended figures to be fair, Lorenzo.' he noted, handing the parchment across and settling back. 'As the larger city, it is only fair that Firenze pays a higher rate for anything you import from us. Our population is lower, hence we will need to import less.'

'So you would rob us of taxes on some of our best exports.' Lorenzo countered, looking up form the figures. 'I hardly find that fair.'

'Few people in Monteriggioni can afford the luxury goods Firenze is best known for. The items where the taxes are a little higher are items the people here are likely to actually purchase.' Emily shrugged, flipping her wrist idly. 'Perhaps when Monteriggioni has more wealth we can renegotiate these taxes.'

'Very well. I will accept these figures to help improve Monteriggioni.' Lorenzo nodded, picking up the quill set out for his use and signing off on the modified taxation rates.
Noting that Emily seemed to be bracing for something, Mario kept a sharp eye on Lorenzo and Silvio as the Gonfaloniere flipped to the last pages of the contract and tapped at another item that had caught his attention.

'My biggest concern is this rather sneaky addition to the contract here. I have never seen anything like this in any similar agreement I have ever heard of. Given the position that is here for Signore Auditore once everything is signed, I can understand the insistence on repairing the Auditore Palazzo in Firenze. However, the request for a new Medici Palazzo in Monteriggioni is a very unusual request.' Silvio continued, looking at the document again.

'And just where do you propose to put it? I have no intention of ordering my people to leave their homes just to build another holiday home for your family.' Mario shrugged, pushing down his irritation. He was in no fit state to be dealing with this.

'Does it mention any agreement over who pays for the building and any modifications that must be done to the city to make space?' Emily asked, sliding open the middle drawer again and pulling out the newest map of their city.

'No, I wished to discuss that before anything was written down.' Lorenzo replied, fully aware that this was going to be the tipping point of their agreement. 'I am willing to negotiate over payment for materials and labour so ensure Monteriggioni thrives from this alliance.'

Looking down at the map Emily flicked out across the desk, Mario couldn't see any decent space that didn't interfere with his people or his villa. There was no way he was going to let anything happen to the villa, not with everything that it meant to his family. He hoped that one day he could pass the villa and all that came with it to Ezio, or his own children whenever they came. The inheritance would have to be decided once he had his own descendants with Emily.

Lifting his hand when Emily grabbed out another large sheet of parchment and lined it up over the map, Mario watched as she fished out the blue ink pot and a new quill then started to trace out a new idea. With incredible care, she traced out the locations of all the current buildings and some sections of the walls.

'I am no architetto but I know a few things about extending city walls without compromising defensive capabilities.' she grinned, adding in a few more wall sections and blocking in a smaller wall that clearly defined the villa gardens.

'What are you thinking, amore?' Mario asked, helping her pull out the old map underneath her half completed sketch.

'I had to extend my home compound to make space but I was restricted in which directions I could build without interfering with what was already there. Using that knowledge, I think I can extend Monteriggioni in a way that not only makes space for a new palazzo for the Medici family but also will give our people more space and encourage more people to move to our fair city.' Emily explained, not looking up from the map she was working on.

Using her left hand as a measuring tool, Emily simply straightened out the angles built into the city walls to square up the back half to match what encircled the majority of the city. Very carefully she matched each angle in the front half to create a mirror image in the rear, opening up two new areas to build on. Glancing at Lorenzo for a moment, she sketched in a basic layout for his new palazzo to the left of the grand Auditore villa. There was a clear difference between the buildings, making certain that there could be no mistaking who truly ruled Monteriggioni even when the Medici flag flew over the palazzo.

Eyes widening in wonder at what Emily had dreamed up, Mario smiled as his city took on a new form, brand new guard towers rising up from added walls to give better protection to his family home. For now she left the space to the right of the villa empty, designating it as gardens for now with the option to build on it as needed.

'From this point, it's a matter of who will pay for what and we can get in a professional to make a start on all of this.' Emily shrugged, putting down her quill and straightening.
'I will cover all costs involved with the wall extensions on the left side and the building of my palazzo.' Lorenzo offered, gazing at the simple drawing and already imagining what his new home might look like. 'I believe that is a fair offer.'

'And I cover the full cost of restoring the palazzo in Firenze as well as the remaining wall extensions.' Mario nodded, pulling his eyes away from the map. 'I can agree to this.'

'Did you get all of that, Silvio?' Emily asked, returning to her seat.

'I did, Signora.' Silvio nodded, looking up from his rough draft of the agreement. 'My assistant and I can have the modified contract all written out and returned for signing by late afternoon. Of course we will provide two copies so there can be no dispute over what has been agreed.'

Thinking that this was almost all over, Mario was about to dismiss Silvio when Emily presented Lorenzo with a different contract. Whatever this contract was, Mario had never seen it before. He could only hope she wasn't about to throw him another problem. Giving him a grin, Emily retrieved a document from the drawer in front of him and set it on the desk in front of him. Picking it up, Mario read through it carefully, wanting to be absolutely certain of what he was being asked to sign now.

In this document, the rules of business between the Assassins and the Medici had been spelled out in clear, concise terms. At the heart of the agreement was the simple fact the Assassins wouldn't forsake Lorenzo and his family, they simply wouldn't be able to dedicate as much time to his various troubles. It was also clearly explained that never again would he get one of the Auditore to kneel at his feet and kiss his ring, their loyalty was first to the Creed they all lived by, second to Mario and Emily and thirdly to those that hired them for work. Glancing up from the carefully worded agreement, Mario caught a flash of irritation in Lorenzo's eyes before he hide it behind his usual impassive mask. So, he wished to put another Auditore on his knees and force their obedience? Too bad such an option had been silenced by Emily's sharp mind.

Deciding to make Lorenzo even more uncomfortable, Mario took up his quill and signed the copy in his hand, a faint smirk on his lips as he created the Auditore wings on his A. Mario remembered seeing similar wings on Giovanni's signature, a little something their tutor had taught them and insisted upon. It became a source of pride for them both, a subtle way to show their status as Assassins and a reminder of innocent times together.

Sliding the contract across the desk to Lorenzo, Mario's amusement grew when Emily intercepted it and dipped her quill in their shared inkpot. Right there beside his signature, she put her own name to the agreement, sweeping in a set of wings and making sure Lorenzo never forgot about her new place in the world. Mario honestly couldn't wipe the smile off his face as Emily slid the document across the desk to Lorenzo, making it perfectly clear that his refusal to sign this contract would not go well for him.

Gently taking Emily's hand in his own, down behind the line of the desk, Mario glanced at her as Lorenzo sighed and signed the document, accepting that he would never have an Auditore kneeling at his feet again. Then he signed the second copy of the document, placing his seal under the paired lines where the Auditore would put their names to formalise this deal.

'Can you ever forgive me for what happened so long ago?' Lorenzo asked, sliding the incomplete agreement back across the table. 'For not seeing the betrayal right in front of my eyes.'

'The very fact we are negotiating should answer that question, Lorenzo.' Mario replied, picking up the sealing wax again. 'This is not a full forgiveness but it is a step in the right direction.'

'Maybe now we can all focus on what's really important.' Emily added, putting her name and seal in place on the second document.

'I will get these back for signing as soon as they have been rewritten and checked for errors.' Silvio promised, gathering up his papers and leaving the room.

'Mario, I suggest you head upstairs and bathe. You might be trying to put on an appearance of being
clear-headed and sober but you smell like you slept in a wine barrel.' Emily uttered, trying to be subtle with her words. 'Go on, I asked one of the maids to prepare a warm bath for whenever you made your appearance for the day.'

Nodding slowly, Mario eased to his feet and headed for the door, one hand on the wall to help keep him steady. Just sitting there trying to act like nothing was wrong had taxed him so much more than he cared to admit. He could admit that simply sitting had been a challenge, his activities in the Sanctuary had definitely left a mark on him and would continue to remind him of a wonderful evening for many days to come.

'Mario, before you go I have a personal request to make.' Lorenzo offered, a shadow of self-doubt crossing his face as he stood.

'You have my attention, Lorenzo.' Mario replied, keeping one hand on the wall as he turned.

'Giovanni was more than just an Assassin to me, he was the one man I could fully trust with everything. He was my friend and confidant and so many things that I don't have words for. I wish to pay my final respects to the man who was there for me more than anyone else, even my own wife.' Lorenzo sighed, struggling to meet Mario's eyes as he made such a personal statement. 'I keep expecting him to come swinging in through the window in my private chambers.'

As much as he wanted to deny the request and keep Giovanni’s final resting place a family secret, Mario didn’t feel right to say no after Lorenzo had made such an effort to be truthful and open with him. Their alliance was still so tentative, one wrong word could send them back to war again. The idea of letting an outsider into the crypt didn’t sit right though, not when so many Auditore secrets were hidden down there.

'I understand.' Lorenzo sighed, mistaking his silence for refusal.

'No, you don’t.' Mario replied, shaking his head slowly. 'Would you be so willing to allow me to walk unaccompanied through the Medici crypts in Firenze?'

'He won’t be unaccompanied, Mario. I will go with him, it has been some times since I paid my respects to Giovanni.' Emily offered, once more bridging the gap between the men.

'If you want to walk through my family crypt, you need only ask. I rarely go down there…not since Giuliano was murdered.' Lorenzo shrugged, looking away for a moment.

'Go, pay your respects and find comfort beside the fine marble that keeps his mortal remains. Emily will show you where he rests now, safe from all who once tried to harm him.' Mario nodded, removing something from a pouch hidden under his cape. 'You’ll need this to get in the back way.'

Yeah, hardly fair to make Lorenzo go in our way.' Emily agreed, catching the old crypt key and resting her left hand on Lorenzo's shoulder. 'Come on, it's easier to go out this way.'

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Needing some space to think and be completely alone, Shane climbed up onto the roof of the tallest guard tower in Monteriggioni and sat on the peak of the roof, gazing out across the rolling hills. Outside he looked perfectly calm, muscles relaxed as he watched the wind stir the grass. Inside though, inside he was in complete turmoil.

Nothing made sense, everything he thought he’d known about the brotherhood was turning out to be wrong and often completely the opposite of what he was witnessing. Mario wasn't a traitor to the brotherhood, Ezio was certainly not the respectable leader he'd been portrayed as and the other Assassins of this time and place weren't the crazy fools he read about in the archives.

Okay, maybe some of them were similar to the way they were portrayed in the modern archives. Volpe had turned out to be quite strange but so far Shane seriously doubted his so called ability to be in multiple places at once. And his violet eyes, supposedly able to bring people under his sway only served to make Shane incredibly uncomfortable when meeting Volpe's eyes without something between them.
Bartolomeo also acted a lot like his archival presence suggested, he was loud and brash but Shane really doubted about the legendary Bianca and the way Bartolomeo supposedly treated his sword as if it were his wife. And then there was the Dante thing. The archives clearly listed Dante Moro as a Templar and an assassination target of Ezio's from around the early 1480's. But here he was, alive and well, living a peaceful life under Bartolomeo's care. A child in a man's body but still a known Templar conspirator and as such, viewed with deep suspicion by Shane.

And then there was the confusion that was Lorenzo de Medici. According to history, he was meant to die in April of 1942 at his villa in Careggi, aged just 43. That was accepted historical fact, ending the Medici control over Florence and shattering the fragile peace he'd helped maintain between the Italian states. He seemed to be the picture of good health though, Shane had witnessed him being cautious with his wine and food intake throughout the party. It seemed surreal that Florence would soon be mourning his death.

Hearing someone else climb up onto the rooftop, Shane turned a little and flicked out his hidden blades, not at all pleased with being disturbed. Few dared to bother him when he was in one of his moods, they knew better than to irritate him further when he was ticked off about anything. So when Volpe popped up over the edge of the roof, Shane growled and stood, making sure the sun glinted off his revealed blades.

'Planning on assassinating someone, are you?' Volpe asked, climbing up onto the rooftop and spreading his hands.

'You're making for a sorely tempting target right now. I came up here with the sole purpose of complete isolation to think and consider everything I've learned.' Shane growled, bringing up his blades in a clear warning. 'Somewhere along the generations between you and me, everything changed. In my time, Mario is accused of letting slip secrets of the Order when he gets too drunk but from what I've witnessed, that's a load of horseshit.'

'He does have a bad habit of a loose tongue after a few drinks too many, that's why Antonio and Bartolomeo didn't leave his side last night. They kept an eye on him and when he started to get a little sloppy with his words, they got him away from anyone that could take advantage of his state.'

Volpe explained, facing Shane's raging emotions and waiting for him to calm.

'Bartolomeo is no better according to the archives. Is it true he treats his sword like his wife, calls it Bianca and frets when anything happens to it?' Shane snapped, trying to make sense of what he knew from the archives and how it compared to what he was seeing.

'That one I cannot deny. We've come to accept that he's eccentric and loves his sword like any other man would love their woman. He is devoted to his Bianca and makes sure she is tended to first after every conflict, often at the risk of his own health.'

Volpe shrugged, relaxing a little when Shane flicked his blades away and sighed as he sunk down to sit on the rooftop again.

Staring out over the rolling hills again, Shane was even more confused now. If those two stories from the archives of his part of the brotherhood were true, then perhaps all the other stories he could remember were also truth. That very idea sent a shudder up his spine, he so didn't want to think about all the legends of La Volpe and what he could supposedly do. In particular, he was deeply concerned about the legends of Volpe being able to see through walls. Apparently that was how he became such a master thief.

'Don't try to understand everything going on around you, Shane. Some things are best just accepted at face value and nothing more.' Volpe offered, settling down beside the younger man.

'That's easy for you to say but I can't take things at face value anymore. I've tried that before and gotten into trouble. Then there are the things that simply can't be accepted.' Shane replied, still looking out at the scenery around Monteriggioni. 'Libby should be dead, I remember her memorial service so clearly.'

'Then consider this a second chance. It's clear you love her, I saw the way you looked at her last night when Leonardo asked for a dance. Don't waste this chance, Shane. Whatever comes of it, don't
let this chance for happiness slip through your fingers. Our lives are always full of struggle and constant wariness, take this chance to simply be with the one you love.' Volpe suggested, leaning back on his hands.

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Sitting on the low walls of the back garden, Gena watched as Dante explored the gardens happily, admiring the flowers and talking with Petruccio. Rosa and Ugo were over further, hanging upside down in one of the trees as they talked about whatever had their attention. It was peaceful and innocent, the world almost seemed to be holding its breath to allow these weary souls a chance to revitalise and rest.

Sweeping her gaze over the gardens again, she spotted Maria and Lady Clarice walking together, Aloysius trailing a few steps behind them with one hand on his sword. His presence wasn't really necessary, the ladies were quite safe back here but he didn't seem to mind being dragged around the gardens. There was always a chance someone else knew Lorenzo was here and would try to harm him while his guard was down.

There was Buck, settling down on one of the benches under a large leafy tree with Paola lightly clasping his right arm just above the elbow. She seemed genuinely happy to sit and talk with him, learning all she could about him and sharing freely of her knowledge of Firenze, just in case they went back there. Buck was so attentive to her, accepting her not as his ancestral grandmother but more like an Aunt.

And of course, Leonardo was outside too, soaking up the sun as he sat and sketched the beauty around him. His presence was the main reason Gena was sitting so still and quiet on the wall, right hand bracing her weight and left arm curled around her raised left knee as she looked out over the lower gardens. Without knowing what exactly he was drawing, Gena felt it safest to stay still and wait for him to move first so she could be certain she wouldn't disturb him.

Wandering out from around the corner of the villa, Aloysius and Rufus were both smiling and laughing, throwing off the shackles of this place and the closed minded views of society to walk hand-in-hand. They were taking a huge risk to just share a few moments of peace, it would only take one whisper of their relationship for things to go wrong for them.

Tensing up when Antonio wandered towards them from the other direction, Gena half expected there to be a confrontation. Instead, Antonio just grinned, brushed one hand against his neck and walked away. Witnessing that display, Gena couldn't help but wonder if it was possible that some people just didn't care about sodomy.

'Leonardo?' she called, still able to hear the faint sounds of his presence. 'Leonardo!'

'Hmm? Oh, mi dispiace Gena. I was so caught up in my sketches. I did not mean to keep you for so long.' Leonardo offered, looking up from his artwork.

'It's okay, I don't mind sitting here for the day.' Gena grinned, used to sitting in uncomfortable positions for hours on end. 'I wanted to ask you something.'

'Of course, what's on your mind?' Leonardo asked, shifting where he was sitting behind her.

'I understand that sodomy is a crime at this time and I know you were accused of it once, history doesn't forget certain things. But I do wonder what might have been if things had gone differently for you. I worry for my friends, those that are also sodomites and risking it all just to try and keep their relationships strong here.' Gena sighed, turning a little to look at Leonardo out the corner of her eye.

Putting side his sketchbook and charcoal, Leonardo stood and walked over to stand beside the wall, tense and uncertain as he looked over to where Rufus had enfolded Aloysius in his arms as they sat under a tree. Shifting her balance, Gena sat up and curled her arms around Leonardo's back, holding
him close and protecting him from whatever was troubling him.
'I didn't mean to stir up pain, Leonardo. I simply want to be able to protect everyone that I care about. I swear I won't let anyone hurt you again, I'll always be right here to protect you.' she uttered, rubbing his back lightly as he held on around her neck. 'Semper, Leonardo, semper.'
'Anyone proven to be a sodomist usually ends their life at the end of a rope. I was lucky, one of my partons stepped in and stopped the trial before I was proven guilty.' Leonardo offered, clutching Gena's shirt with both hands. 'I could have easily hung for it, even though I never did anything.'
'Oh Leonardo, mi dispiace. I should never have mentioned it.' Gena sighed, hating that she'd dragged up such painful memories for Leonardo. 'I'm here, you're safe. No one will ever hurt you again. I've got you, its okay.'
'Back here they will be safe, only friends and members of the Auditore family might see then there. But outside this area, the slightest indication of their romance could be enough to see them both hang.' Leonardo continued, trying to hide in Gena's shoulder.
'I'll make sure they knew about the danger. Your guidance will be a big help, Leonardo.' Gena nodded, sending the sharp warning to both men to be extremely careful unless they wanted to dance on a rope. 'No doubt I could ask Emily for a transfer to Venezia to make sure no one causes you any trouble.'
'I will be fine, Gena. Because of your work with the thieves and mercenari of Venezia, Antonio and Bartolomeo have both made it clear to the guards that I am under their protection. If anyone gives me trouble, they both dispatch teams to ensure my safety.' Leonardo smiled, drawing back a little to look her in the eyes. 'Few guards are foolish enough to try anything with four thieves and four mercenari hanging around outside my door.'

Right hand on Leonardo's back and left on his shoulder, Gena leant back and stared at him in disbelief for a few moments before she broke out into a smile and drew him close again. Of all the solutions that she could have come up with, their mutual friends had found their own solution to ease her fears.
'Remind me to thank those two the next time I see them. I'm glad to know you're safe, padre lontano. Now I can focus on what must be done to ensure peace for Italia without worrying about my actions reflecting back onto you and causing you pain.' Gena grinned, pressing a loving kiss to his hair. 'Just promise me if you have any troubles, you'll let me know.'
'I will Gena, as soon as I've informed my closest guards of the trouble. They are aware of the web communication and have worked with some of their most trusted people to bring them into the conversations as well.' Leonardo replied, relaxing into her and closing his eyes. 'We informed Emily of the plan too, she is onboard with the idea and has verified all those who now know about the webs. She is happy that they can be trusted.'

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By late afternoon, every citizen of Monteriggioni was gathered in front of the villa, called by the heralds of the city to attend an announcement from Mario. They were told that a deal had been struck that would ensure their future was a peaceful one. Everyone was eager to hear this announcement, talking quietly among themselves as they waited for Mario to appear on the balcony above them. The moment the doors opened, a great cheer went up from the people as their leaders stepped out into view and waved down to them.

Hand-in-hand, Emily and Mario came right to the front of the balcony and looked out across the crowd, acknowledging their people and waiting for the cheering and applause to settle down. Lorenzo might have a greater wealth and a larger city but in that moment, it was blatantly clear that Mario and Emily had the greatest love from their citizens.
'Citizens of Monteriggioni, today marks another great day for our great city! On this day, a historic treaty has been signed, securing a friendship with Firenze that will save our homes from another costly war!' Mario declared, releasing Emily' hand and spreading his arms to take in the strong walls
that had done much to protect the city from the worst of the damage. 'As part of the deal, there will be some building works around the city, extending our walls and building a new palazzo to welcome our newest friends! It has been agreed that the Medici will pay for the extensions and building works to the left of this villa! The works to be done to the right will be our responsibility!' Emily added, not happy to be separated from the people like this but she had a role to play.

Joining Emily and Mario on the balcony, Lorenzo couldn't believe what he was witnessing. As soon and he came up beside Mario with his wife, the people let up another cheer, welcoming him into their city as a friend and an ally. Monteriggioni would never be part of the Medici empire, the people here were loyal only to the Auditore family. Oddly though, it didn't matter to him anymore. He was happy to be regarded with such fondness by these simple people.

They'd gone over this big announcement before making their appearance before the people. For now, the facts of the deal would be kept quiet. The ordinary people didn't care about the deals done, only the results they saw from said deals. If they got the peace as promised, they would be overjoyed at the chance to tend their fields without fear. But if there was a breakdown in communication between the cities, well Mario and Lorenzo could rework the deal without upsetting anyone too much.

Turning to face each other, the men offered out prepared gifts to solidify their new alliance in a particularly visual way, making sure the people never forgot about this new friendship. Mario ended up with a pale blue cape made of the finest damask he had ever seen. On the back, the Medici crest and the coat of arms for Firenze were picked out in fine threads and sparkling with gold and silver. Lorenzo was quite happy with his new dark purple brocade cape, the Monteriggioni coat of arms alone on the back and shining in the sunlight.

Continuing with their planned display, Emily glided past Mario as Clarice stepped out from behind Lorenzo. Waiting for the men to flick the capes around their shoulders, the wives secured the richly decorated clasps, smoothing out the fabric and making it perfectly clear that they were accepting of this new friendship.

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Listening to the cheering crowd from inside the villa, Veronique was still angered by her new assignment from Emily. She didn't care that it was due to expire before any real action for the team, she was annoyed to be sent away from the team on what was basically a punishment detail. As carefully worded as it had been, there was nothing to prove it was anything other than a training mission for Veronique. Under Emily's carefully chosen words however, Veronique had heard her judgement, chastisement and warning not to screw up all rolled together.

Abandoning her place near the balcony, Veronique headed for her shared room to pack her belonging for the long ride ahead of her. There wasn't enough time tonight so the plan was for them to leave in the morning, right after breakfast and ride hard for Firenze. Throwing aside the heavy red velvet covering the doorway, she stalked over to her temporary bed and opened the small chest beside the cot. Folded inside neatly, her robes and weapons were all ready for action, just waiting for her chance to kit up again and ride into the next battle. Instead she was being sent to Firenze to stand shadow guard over Lorenzo for the next several months.

Grabbing down her saddlebags, she packed away her extra supplies, going over everything in an attempt to calm her raging mind. Refolding the linen rags and bandages she had, she grabbed a few spares from the communal chest that Libby had told her was always kept stocked with extra supplies. Veronique also added a few different salves and some of the treated bandages that softened when
wet then hardened into a suitable cast for broken bones.

Grabbing out some extra dried rations and a second water skin, she continued her packing until someone called her name softly behind her. Tensing up for a moment, Veronique sighed and resumed her packing, looking over her shoulder to see who had come calling.

'had enough of the pomp and ceremony, Teodora?' she asked, turning her full attention back to her packing, refolding several spare shirts and tucking them away quickly.

'What is wrong, Veronique? I have not seen you this agitated since you left Venezia.' Teodora queried, walking over to sit on Veronique's cot.

'I was given a false mission and I don't know why. Emily is sending me to shadow Lorenzo for the foreseeable future. She chose her words carefully, he believes it to be a training mission but I know better.' Veronique shrugged, dealing with the other spare clothes she had set out.

'Veronique, are you decent?' Aloysius called, sending the velvet waving in the doorway.

'I am just packing for tomorrow.' Veronique replied, still deeply annoyed but Aloysius had done nothing to earn her anger.

Brushing the curtain aside, Aloysius walked over to sit on the next cot in the line, looking up at Veronique and shaking his head slowly. Under his gaze, Veronique abandoned her packing and sat, hands hanging between her knees as she waited for another lecture.

'Veronique, I know you're not happy with these orders you received but I promise you that you are not being punished with this detail. On April 8-9 1492, history indicates that Lorenzo will die. Considering that he will only be 43, Emily is concerned that his death is the final step of a Templar plot to eliminate the Medici line. In April of 1478, we attempted to deal with a plot against the Medici, but although we successfully saved Lorenzo from the murder plot, his younger brother Giuliano was stabbed 19 times in the chest and died before help could reach him. If there is anything we can do to prevent Lorenzo's death next year, Emily is determined that we try and Shane and I are in agreement that we have to do something.' Aloysius explained, reaching out to take her hands lightly.

'But why did she pick me? The Medici don't know me like they know some of the other Assassins.' Veronique asked, lifting her gaze slowly.

'Emily, Libby and I have been active in Italia since 1478. Gena joined us a few weeks later and Ezio is well known because of his family connections. Given that, we knew we had to pick someone that hadn't yet shown their skills in Firenze. We couldn't send Jean-Claude or Rufus, their stature makes them far too obvious. That left us with the choice between you and Buck. You have the rank to back you up so you were chosen to run the mission.' Aloysius continued, bringing one hand up to brush her hair back out of her eyes. 'It's not a punishment, it's a sign of trust.'

'Trust? Sounds like luck of the draw to me.' Veronique shrugged, withdrawing from Aloysius' touch against her face.

'Not even close, Veronique. Lorenzo is a close friend of the Auditore, he's known Giovanni since he was just six and Giovanni fished him out of the Arno in Firenze. Think about everything you've learnt about the Auditore line both here and in our time and then you'll see just why this is such an example of trust.' Aloysius nodded, so proud of his connection to such a legendary family.

Running her fingers over the purple silk that she wore to cover her hidden blade and make her allegiance to the Auditore Assassins clear, Veronique considered everything that she'd been told and the way she'd noticed the team pulled together. As much as she would have liked to stay with her team, she could understand the trust now and recognised that this was a mission above her rank. Normally missions of such political importance were handled by Masters, Secondary Masters at a pinch but here she was, merely a Senior Assassin and given a political mission.

'I understand now, Second Master Aloysius.' she nodded, sliding to one knee at Aloysius' feet. 'I will do as I have been ordered.'

'Safety and peace, Senior Veronique. Try and get a good night of rest, tomorrow the hard work
begins.’ Aloysius replied, resting one hand in her hair for a moment before standing and leaving the room.
Tiring of her mission in Careggi, Veronique nevertheless kept to her responsibilities, never straying far from Lorenzo and maintaining a constant watch for any trouble. He’d gotten used to her presence over the months, even accepting her late night visits to his bedchambers to make certain he was okay. Most of the time Lorenzo never knew she’d come in while he slept, but she would admit to every visit in the daylight to reassure him. Though he would never admit it, Lorenzo was relieved to have such a watchful Assassin around, Veronique's constant attention reminded him a lot of Giovanni and the way he used to fuss at times.

As January of 1492 rolled around, Veronique was even more wary of everything going on around her, double-checking on the personal staff and weeding out a few possible risks. Naturally Lorenzo asked about his disappearing staff and Veronique would tell him the truth. He never liked hearing about servants connected with the Templars and the Borgia but accepted that he would always have people trying to get rid of him. He seemed to take great comfort from Veronique's presence nearby, always alert and watchful.

Clarice had come to accept Veronique as part of their lives too, spending time with her own pursuits and trusting Veronique to never cross the line. Veronique never went even close to that line, she was content to be near Lorenzo and follow his lead with whatever he wished to do. Lorenzo seemed to appreciate the constant company, glancing around for her regardless of what he was doing with his time. Once he spotted her, he would relax and go back to whatever he was doing, a faint smile on his lips as he settled.

Sometimes, for whatever reason, Lorenzo would put aside his books and ledgers and just talk to her, reminiscing about his past and letting his mind drift. Most of these conversations were about Giovanni, giving Lorenzo a chance to deal with lingering pain about the death of such a treasured friend. These were the moments Veronique treasured most of all and she would happily sit near Lorenzo's feet and listen to stories of a man she only knew from the random and scattered mentions of him in the archives.

When there was time, Veronique would check in with Emily and the rest of the team, giving mission reports and listening to the latest news coming in from Monteriggioni and Firenze. Emily had split the team again, dispatching most to Firenze under orders to stockpile as many artworks, books and musical instruments in the palazzo Auditore as they could. They were ordered to handle their duties with subtlety and care, the slightest hint of what they were doing could cause trouble. Those not on the Firenze mission were still in Monteriggioni, making final preparations for the assault on the larger city when the time was right.

Taking a walk around the gardens with Lorenzo and Clarice, Veronique was definitely shocked when a handsome falcon circled and dropped down to land on a branch right near her. Signalling for quiet from her companions, she approached the bird and extended her left arm, coaxing it onto her bracer for a closer look. Tied to one leg with a purple ribbon it carried a neatly rolled piece of parchment bearing a hand drawn image of the Auditore crest.

Unpicking the knot, Veronique retrieved the parchment and sent the bird skywards again, watching it
wing away back towards Monteriggioni. Unrolling the parchment, Veronique read the message and broke out into the broadest smile of her life, unable to believe what she was reading.

'What is it, Veronique?' Lorenzo asked, turning to her. 'Surely this must be good news if you are smiling like that.'

'On this day, the 3rd of February 1492, Mario and Emilia Auditore are proud to announce the birth of twin sons; Lorenzo and Giovanni. Mother and sons are all in good health.' Veronique read, holding up the neatly written note.

'They named their first born for me?' Lorenzo blinked, unable to believe what he was hearing.

'Somehow I am not surprised by their choice.' Veronique remarked, still a little surprised that Emily had been pregnant and said nothing of it.

'You two were near inseparable if it could be avoided.' Clarice added, smiling softly as she reached out to take the note and read it personally.

'I admit that I enjoyed Giovanni's company. But still, to name their first children for us, this is a high honour.' Lorenzo agreed, accepting the note just to confirm this was really happening.

'I get the feeling there was always going to be a Lorenzo Auditore somewhere along the line; it was just a matter of when.' Veronique grinned, looking up at the sky. 'To start their family with twins is surely a good sign of things to come.'

Slipping away quietly with a promise to arrange for a messenger to take a gift to Monteriggioni for the two children, Clarice left Lorenzo and Veronique to wander alone. At first they were quiet, both lost on their own thoughts as they walked.

'I wish I could have known Giovanni. From everything I've heard, he sounds like such a great man. A loving brother, husband and father, a loyal friend, a highly skilled Assassin and so much more.' Veronique sighed, shaking her head slowly.

'I often wondered how Giovanni managed to do everything he did. He worked in one of my banks all day, went home for a meal with his family and to put his children to bed then went straight back out to complete the various assassinations and other contracts I gave him.' Lorenzo replied, lifting his gaze to the sky for a few moments. 'I realise now that I took up too much of his time, he was always running about doing things to keep me in power. I never thought about what he was sacrificing on my orders.'

'Such is the life of an Assassin. We all know that once we kneel and swear our blades and lives to the creed, our time is no longer our own. The first priority in life becomes the brotherhood and our creed, everything else is of secondary importance. It's not always fair but we know that it's part of the deal when we became Assassins.' Veronique shrugged, resting one hand on her sword.

'Does that not bother you, Veronique? You are a beautiful woman, any man would be lucky to have you but instead you follow a life of violence and bloodshed. I cannot understand how anyone could willingly swear to follow such a lifestyle until it claims their life.' Lorenzo sighed, closing his eyes for a second.

'Just like you were born to politics and economics, I was born to the life of an Assassin. Certainly, I could have chosen not to kill for a living but to me, such a choice was impossible. My father always said I was born with a sword in my hand and a fire in my belly. I never had any brothers, just five sisters. My aggression and interest in combat impressed my father, I became the son he'd never had and learned the skills of the Assassins from him. I was the first female Assassin in the area and carried the title proudly, finding my place in life. My sisters are all married off now, none of them truly happy but I am. I couldn't imagine being anything other than an Assassin.' Veronique explained, toying with the fine gold chain she wore around her neck.

Continuing their relaxed walk through the gardens, Veronique got the fright of her life when Lorenzo suddenly dropped to the ground, one hand pressed to his chest as he gasped for breath. Dropping beside him, Veronique screamed for help as she eased him over and fell straight into her training. Brushing his hands away, Veronique battled with the heavy layers covering him, loosening his collars and flicking his cape back out of the way to help him breathe easier.
'Come on Lorenzo, you can't give up now.' she coaxed, checking his pulse and frowning at the irregularities she could feel.

With none of her usual tools to fall back on, Veronique went back over techniques she'd been taught for emergencies far from help. Recalling a lesson she'd been taught when she was just a novice, she shifted her weight and brushed his hair back. Giving the impression that she was calm and in total control of the situation, she put that almost forgotten technique into action, trying to manually get Lorenzo’s heart back into a good rhythm. She knew this had to be hurting him, there was a bruise forming under her hand but she didn't know what else to do. She had to try and save his life without any of her usual tools and no one to help.

Checking his pulse again, Veronique was relieved to feel it was back to what was considered a normal rhythm. Drawing the heavy cape back over him, she slumped beside him and tried to calm her nerves, looking down at her shaking hands. Beside her, Lorenzo was still breathing heavily and rubbing his chest where she'd bruised him but there was no mistaking the relieved smile on his face and the gratitude in his eyes.

'You…you saved me.' he gasped, looking up at her in wonder. 'Grazie.'

'You're welcome.' Veronique smiled, just glad she'd been able to pull him back from the brink. 'Rest now, I'll stay here.'

'What's going on out here? Why were you screaming for help?' Clarice asked, hurrying towards them with a dottore and several guards around her. 'What have you done!?'

'Saved his life. I've seen similar situations in the past, it was a reasonably simple matter of getting his heart back into rhythm and he should be okay.' Veronique replied, shouldering out of her own short cape and folding it into a pillow for Lorenzo.

'Once again…saved by an…Assassin.' Lorenzo sighed, resting one hand over the bruise he was now sporting thanks to Veronique.

'I'm just glad to have been of service.' Veronique nodded, relieved that Lorenzo seemed to be handling his close call remarkably well.

Reaching out to Veronique, Lorenzo caught her hand and pulled lightly. With a grin, Veronique tensed up and reached around to put one hand on his back. Using her for an anchor, Lorenzo eased up to sit and draw his cloak tighter around his shoulders, still feeling quite shaky but so very glad to be alive. Drawing his robes loosely back around his body, he eased to his feet cautiously, Veronique right there to support him and keep him on his feet.

'I think you missed your calling, Renard.' Lorenzo remarked, trying to keep some of his weight off her shoulders. 'You have the hands of a healer.'

'My duties demand I know more than efficient ways to kill. Every Assassin must know how to heal as well, just in case their team-mates are harmed during a mission.' Veronique chuckled, tightening her grip on his wrist. 'Come Altezza, you'll feel better after a chance to rest comfortably and regain your strength.'

'How did you even know what was wrong?' Lorenzo asked, allowing Veronique to guide him back towards his grand villa.

'My Uncle Jacques died from heart trouble. You were acting much like he did before his death. I knew what I had o do, I've done it before over the course of my training.' Veronique sighed, shaking her head sharply to chase away painful memories.

'Mi dispiace.' Lorenzo uttered, squeezing her shoulders lightly in comfort.

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Throughout February and into March, Lorenzo had another three of these shocking attacks, two while Veronique was there and able to render aid but the third struck while she was relieving her bladder, leaving him alone with his wife. Thankfully Veronique had been able to get back to them before the dottore tried any of his crack methods to heal Lorenzo.
Shoving the dottore back with one hand, Veronique knelt and smiled faintly, glad to see that Clarice had at least gotten so far as to have Lorenzo's chest bared. Checking the damaging rhythm, Veronique gave him three sharp blows and checked again before giving him another round. Aware of Clarice’s watchful gaze, it took another few rounds before Veronique got his rhythm back to normal once again.

‘If I teach you the right way to do this, do you think you could do this without assistance?’ Veronique asked, one hand still reading Lorenzo’s pulse as she looked at Clarice.

‘I believe so, si.’ Clarice nodded, looking down at her exhausted husband.

‘There can be no doubt on this, milady. You need to be confident of what you're doing. This technique is dangerous, any number of things could go wrong. You have to be firm and accurate for this to work.’ Veronique warned, making Lorenzo comfortable and shading his face from the bright sun right in his eyes.

‘Teach me how, I dislike needing to rely on someone else to save my husband when he is in trouble like this.’ Clarice insisted, determined to take care of Lorenzo’s condition.

‘Very well. Not right now though, Lorenzo needs time to recover from this latest attack.’ Veronique agreed, starting to really worry about Lorenzo's health and how to keep him going.

‘Is there…nothing else that…can be done?’ Lorenzo asked, still short of breath but his colour was coming back again.

Looking down at Lorenzo, so fragile and weakened by these constant heart concerns, Veronique knew something else had to be done. She couldn't sit permanent vigil at his side, waiting for the next attack to sneak up on them. But what she could do was help Lorenzo recognise the signs that another attack was coming, help Clarice learn how to help him when another one hit and try to make a few changes to his lifestyle that would hopefully lesson the problem.

‘Let’s get you back in bed and I’ll think about what else might make this better for you. Let me make this clear, we can’t cure this heart problem, we can only manage it.’ Veronique shrugged, flaring out her cape to shade his face better.

‘Have you asked the dottore for advice?’ Lorenzo asked, relaxing a little more and rather enjoying this quiet moment.

‘Not a chance. The medical field in my homeland is far more advanced than anything your dottore might know. You condition can simply be managed with lifestyle and dietary changes, that's all. I've already had to stop that fool you consider a dottore from going overboard with the leeches and other treatments. Bloodletting could very well make this so much worse.’ Veronique snorted, dismissing the very idea. ‘Emily would back me up on this, it's amazing what a few simple diet and lifestyle changes can do for a person.’

‘I noticed little Petruccio was looking much better since the last time I saw him.’ Lorenzo nodded, accepting the help of both women to sit up slowly.

‘The best diet available, plenty of gentle exercise and a good night's rest every night.’ Veronique chuckled, fairly confident she could bring Lorenzo around to her plan. ‘Oh and he now drinks just one glass of red wine a day.’

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Late in March, Lorenzo was once more laid up in bed, recovering from attack number six. This last one had been much easier to handle, he'd recognised the signs and immediately sat down, trying to ease the burn in his chest. Remembering Veronique's lessons, Lorenzo clung to the bench with one hand and went through her routine, doing his best to get back into the correct rhythm. Poliziano had seen him and come to his aid, applying more power than Lorenzo could and forcing his heart back into rhythm.

So here he was, feeling so weak and shaky as he rested from another attack. As he relaxed into the soft pillows and heavy blanket, he thought about how he could possibly rule Firenze when even the slightest overtaxing of his heart could trigger another one. None of his sons were ready to rule yet,
Piero would be soon but he still had some lessons to learn. So that left Lorenzo with little choice but to try and get a proper handle on his condition so he could continue for at least a little longer.

Practically asleep, Lorenzo did manage to rouse when someone knocked softly at the door into his bedchambers. A moment later, Veronique slipped inside and padded over to perch on the side of the bed, offering out her hands. Clasping her hands in his, Lorenzo proved that his strength still hadn’t waned unevenly and she smiled.

'Feeling strong enough for some special visitors?' she asked, releasing his hands and checking his pulse quickly. 'You're bouncing back from that last one much better.'

'I don’t feel so weak this time either.' Lorenzo shrugged, enduring her concern with practised grace and patience. 'Visitors you say? I'm surprised you're even considering allowing them through, considering how recently I had my last attack.'

'Normally I wouldn't but these are very special visitors. I am confident they will not make your recovery any slower.' Veronique chuckled, getting to her feet and walking over to open the door. She stuck her head out for a few seconds before returning to the bed and leaning against the wall casually, waiting for the visitors to arrive.

The door swung open again and in walked Mario, a small blue bundle cradled to his chest and a warm smile on his scarred face. Emily had come too, a second bundle in her arms as she closed the door and approached the bed. She looked positively radiant as she perched on the side of the bed and leaned over to kiss his cheeks in greeting.

'Welcome to Careggi, my apologies for not meeting you elsewhere.' Lorenzo offered, reaching out to clasp Mario's hand in welcome.

'Nonsense, you're right where you need to be. Veronique explained your condition.' Mario replied, settling beside Emily and looking down at the bundle he was holding.

'Don't worry about us, you just think about getting better.' Emily added, glancing down when the bundle in her arms moved. 'Si, mio caro figlio.'

Jaw dropping in disbelief, Lorenzo watched as Mario stood and gently shifted his hold on the bundle in his arms before carefully placing the neatly swaddled baby in Lorenzo's arms. Paternal instincts kicking in, Lorenzo cradled the child closer and looked up at Mario, not quite sure what to say about this.

'Lorenzo de Medici, we'd like you to meet Lorenzo Auditore da Monteriggioni.' Mario smiled, watching his son turn and try to nuzzle closer to the warm body holding him.

'I have a feeling you will go far, prezioso bambino.' Lorenzo uttered, gazing down at his tiny namesake and lightly stroking his soft cheek. 'You and your brother both.'

Perfectly content as Emily guided his left arm back into a different position, Lorenzo kept still as she placed the second child in his arms, stroking over his swaddling lightly and lighting up with a beaming smile. Little Giovanni squirmed for a few moments before settling, the sweetest little sigh coming from his lips.

'Giovanni was actually born first, prezioso Lorenzo didn't want to come out.' she chuckled, gazing at the two precious boys now safe in Lorenzo's arms.

'I am still honoured you would name any of your children for me, I never expected such a gift from either of you.' Lorenzo replied, looking up from the children curled in against him so contentedly.

'We couldn't think of better names to encompass all we hope for our sons.' Emily nodded, getting to her feet. 'Mario, would you mind staying with Lorenzo and the children? I need a word in private with Veronique.'

'Of course, amore.' Mario grinned, catching a quick kiss before the women left the room.

Bringing over a chair, Mario moved a blue bag that had been set on the floor and simply watched his two sons sleeping safely in the arms of such a powerful man. Mario knew that the way they were raising Giovanni and Lorenzo went against most of the usual behaviour of the noble class but he...
didn't care, he couldn't imagine not being involved in the care of his sons. Though Emily and I are not believers, we do intend to have our sons christened into the Roman Catholic faith and let them make their own choices as they grow. Emily and I have discussed it at length and we'd like you to be there when the boys are christened and make your promises as one of their godfathers. We settled on three, to give them the best chance if something should happen. Leonardo, Antonio and you.' Mario explained, lifting his gaze from the children.

'I…you do me such an honour Mario. I would be proud to be a godfather to these two boys.' Lorenzo nodded, stunned by the generosity shown by Mario. 'Of course, we extend this to include your wife as well, as one of three selected godmothers for them.' Mario added, reaching out to take Giovanni when he started crying. 'Shhh, figlio, babbo has you. You're safe in my arms, prezioso figlio.'

Smiling as he witnessed an obviously very personal moment, Lorenzo turned his full attention to the little boy still in his embrace, innocence personified as he slept peacefully. This was why he kept striving to keep Firenze out of the constant bickering among the other city-states, he wanted to create a safe haven for the next generation to grow up and know peace. But Lorenzo knew his time leading Firenze was coming to an end, it was harder to recover and move on from each attack he suffered. Eventually he would have to hand control to Piero and hope he cold keep Firenze going as he had for so many years.

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Full sprint across the gardens outside the villa, hidden blades glinting in the sunshine, Emily and Veronique chased after the man they'd spied sneaking around the inner gardens. They both knew he wasn't one of the staff here, they recognised him from the archives that recorded so much of the past in the future. Splitting up, Emily stayed right on him, weaving through the exquisite gardens and crashing through any plants that got in her way as Veronique swung out to the left and tried to get around in front of their target.

Out of nowhere, one of Lorenzo's guards appeared and their target barrelled straight into the heavily armoured guard, the pair going down in a tumble of flailing limbs. Pouncing on them from the left, Veronique grabbed the target and yanked him clear, shoving his face into the grass as she sat on his back. 'Grazie Niccolò, we would have struggled to catch our intruder if not for your timely arrival.' she smiled, binding the wrists of the man under her. 'Are you unharmed, amico?'

'Si, a little shaken but unharmed.' Niccolò nodded, removing his helmet and running one hand through his soft auburn hair. 'Where did he come from?'

'We saw him lurking around outside Il Magnifico's chambers. I suspect he has something to do with the continuing heart troubles Lorenzo is dealing with.' Veronique shrugged, looking up at Emily joined them. 'We were lucky, Emilia. Niccolò just happened to be in the right place to catch our intruder before he made it into the trees over there.'

'Grazie, Niccolò. You aid has been invaluable here. Perhaps now we will have some answers about Lorenzo's condition.' Emily grinned, looking down at the man they'd captured. 'Do you know of a place where we could interrogate our prisoner here without disturbing the household?'

'Si, there is a small dungeon under the guard barracks. I can show you the way.' Niccolò guided, glad to be of service to the Assassins.

'That will be perfect. Would you kindly help Veronique escort the prisoner there and see he is secured. Do not worry about the interrogation, she is more than capable of pulling the information we need from this fica. I must go and make certain my children are safe.' Emily instructed, turning sharply and hurrying away again.

Dragging their prisoner to his feet, Veronique and Niccolò kept a firm from on him as they escorted him across the grounds. He tried to struggle and break away from them but Veronique calmly flipped
out one hidden blade and looked at it for a moment before jabbing it firmly into his family jewels. The warning was clear, only made stronger when she jabbed him harder each time he tried to escape. It took a few quite strong jabs before he gave up trying to escape and let the pair haul him across the grass and into the building in front of them.

Though Veronique was much smaller than their prisoner, she easily controlled him once she'd dismissed Niccolò and thanked him for his assistance. Left hidden blade pressed to his throat and right hand firmly latched into his hair, she forced the young man down the steps and into the dungeon proper. When the door clanged shut behind them, the man flinched slightly but Veronique just grinned and pushed him towards the chains imbedded in the wall.

'So, the Borgia are making a move into la Toscana now, are they? It's a pity you were so brash, Cesare, otherwise you might have survived to see your sister again.' Veronique taunted, slamming his head against the wall to stun him before getting to work on securing him.

Instead of the usual ways to bind a prisoner, Veronique went with a technique that she personally enjoyed and used regularly to great effect. Uncoiling the rope she'd gotten Niccolò to hand her, she threw one end through one of the hanging rings mounted from the ceiling and pulled it down to level the lengths on each side. Grabbing Cesare under the arms, she dragged him over and grabbed one end of the rope as she sat on his back. Tying a quick noose in the rope, she slipped it over his head and pushed it tight. Snagging the other end, she rolled off and started to take up the slack, pulling him off the ground and watching him start to struggle for life.

Waiting a few moments longer, she looped the rope around his ankles and knotted it off firmly, cinching him into a very awkward position. Circling the helpless man slowly, watching him fight his urge to lash out lest he strangle himself, Veronique sliced through his many layers, pulling away the heavy layers piece by piece. Even his heavy leathers were no obstacle for her, she simply went for a dagger on her belt and turned the thick leather into scraps. The only thing she didn't damage was the ornate breastplate he wore. This was carefully removed and set safely against the wall for later.

Sawing through his long boots, Veronique didn't bother loosening the ropes around his ankles, she simply pulled the remnants of his boots from under the rope. Recognising that this made the ropes loose, she loosened the knots and pulled the ropes tight again, crushing his ankles together. The growl she got for her efforts was music to her ears, she did enjoy breaking the toughest Templars.

'Had enough yet, Borgia swine?' Veronique smirked, circling back to the front.

'You will never break me, assassino!' Cesare snapped, still straining against the ropes holding him as he spat at Veronique.

Wiping the spittle from her face, Veronique lashed out with her left hand, slapping him brutally across the right cheek and snapping his head around. The hit left a spectacular handprint on his cheek.
and had him spitting blood with every breath. Grabbing his hair with her right hand, she wrenched his head around and forced him to look at her, matching his anger with hers. 'I don't have to break you, culo. Only break your line and make sure you can't do any further harm to the Medici or the Auditore.' she remarked, drawing the tip of her left blade over his cheek. 'I am regarded as the best Assassin interrogator in Italia, none have stood against my skills.' 'I will never be broken by a mere woman.' Cesare snarled, refusing to be cowed by his nudity or her empty bragging. 'Oh you will learn.' Veronique laughed, so dark and cruel now that she was freed from the constant watch of her fellow Assassins. 'Someone bring me some wet leather thongs, a lit torch, a bucket of water and a long apron!' 'Si, assassino.' one of the guards above replied, the gate down into the dungeons rattling open.

Looking up from the evening meal when the door opened, Lorenzo smiled and welcomed Veronique to join them, a meal already laid out for her. Running one hand through her hair, Veronique returned the smile and sat, sipping her wine and relaxing for a few minutes before lifting the cover on her meal and starting to eat. 'You will be pleased to know that a hidden threat has been located and neutralised today. It started with the capture of a single intruder into your villa and just ended with the capture and detainment of another four intruders.' Veronique reported, chewing slowly as she glanced towards Lorenzo. 'So, you got bambino Borgia to sing.' Emily chuckled, waving off the server with the wine and instead going for the fresh juice. 'Like a canary. He admitted to everything he's been trying to achieve here on the orders of his father.' Veronique nodded, checking quickly that her fingernails were clean. 'He said his only regret was the fact it was taking so long to kill Lorenzo and make it look natural.' 'Is there no one that the Borgia can't reach?' Mario sighed, shaking his head slowly. 'Their attempt here is broken, I saw informed they needed more time to complete their mission. As it stands now, we are ahead of their attempts to slowly poison you and leave Firenze vulnerable to a power grab from the Borgia.' Veronique shrugged, sipping her wine as she turned her attention back to Lorenzo. 'With all our efforts to ease the strain of your repetitive heart attacks, we were actually defeating their poison without even realising it.' 'So my husband will live?' Clarice smiled, reminding the Assassins that they really did need to chose their words carefully. 'I see no reason why his condition will worsen now that we know the true cause of the attacks. It will still take time for Lorenzo to return to full health but it's most unlikely that this will be an ongoing problem.' Veronique replied, turning to regard Emily. 'I will need to speak with you in private later, perhaps you can offer further aid with this poison. It is not one I am familiar with.' 'Though I use poisons regularly, you'd be better off sending that request to Rufus. He's the poisons master in our group. If anyone is going to know what it was and how best to counteract any lingering affects, he'll have the answers.' Emily guided, turning her attention to where her sons were sleeping on the floor, safely nestled into a pile of blankets to protect them.

For a while it was quiet, save for the usual sounds of domesticity in any noble household sitting down for a meal. It was nice to simply sit and be, throwing aside all of their usual concerns just for one night. But as so often happened, the peace simply couldn't last. 'I wish to see for myself just who was involved in this latest plot against my person.' Lorenzo insisted, leaning back in his chair. 'I advise against that, Altezza. Veronique is known for her inventive interrogation techniques, you will not like what you find down there.' Emily warned, looking up sharply from her meal. 'Her skills have earned her quite the reputation even among her fellow Assassins.' 'Peace, Emily. I did not need to make such a mess this time. Certainly, blood was spilled but to
nowhere near the extent of other interrogations.' Veronique shrugged, relaxed and comfortable with discussing such matters. 'But I do agree, the state of these prisoners is such that they should not be viewed as they are now.'

'So you would try and deny my wish to see those who tried to take my life this time?' Lorenzo challenged, his face impassive but his words were sharp.

'If you truly wish to see them tonight, I will escort you over after the meal. But know that we are all advising strongly against it, at least until you have properly recovered from this last attack.' Veronique sighed, disagreeing completely with Lorenzo's wish but she could not hope to stand up against him. 'Best not to chance triggering another attack, even though we now know the external influence has been removed and will weaken in time.'

'Very well, I will wait the standard four days like every other attack. But I do intend to see them before you dispose of them.' Lorenzo agreed, clearly not happy about the idea but he had learned to respect Veronique's opinions on his health.

Realising that things were far too tense for what was meant to be a relaxed family meal, Emily glanced at Mario and flicked her eyes to the fruit bowl sitting just near him. Reaching out, he picked up an orange and waited for her to stand before lightly tossing the fruit her way. Left blade snapping out, Emily twisted her wrist and slit through the skin before bringing around her right arm and bouncing the orange back up to a better height. Glancing up from her focus on the orange, she smiled softly as everyone at the table stared at her flashing blades and the fruit she was playing with. The sour mood that had been sitting over the group was gone completely, replaced with fascination and thorough entertainment.

Dropping the last scrap of peel onto the table, she flicked it up again and sent the peeled orange back down the table. Showing that she wasn't the only one who knew how to do more than kill with their hidden blade, Mario spun one of the plates out into the middle of the table and flipped out his blade, slicing the peeled orange in half and dropping the two pieces onto the plate. Sliding to a stop, the plate settled right between Lorenzo and Clarice, just waiting to be taken and enjoyed.

'Don't look so worried Lorenzo, we keep our blades impeccably clean.' Mario grinned, pulling a cloth from one of his belt pouches and wiping the juice from his blade and hand.

'Do pick up your jaw, Lorenzo. It's unbecoming of you.' Emily chuckled, wiping most of the juice from her blades before one of the servers brought over a bowl of water and a second cloth. 'Grazie.'

'Naturally I expected you were skilled with your blades, Emily. But to witness such control, I am most impressed.' Lorenzo praised, taking half the orange and tearing it apart to savour.

'Veronique, flick me that lush red apple there.' Emily grinned, moving the water bowl out of her way and pulling out three of her belt knives.

Catching the apple on the rounded blade of one of her stilettos, she made her way around the table to stand where Lorenzo and Clarice could clearly see what she was doing. Using the larger dagger in her right hand, she started the apple spinning on the stiletto and got it up to speed, totally focused on the apple and her blades. With the slightest movement of her pinkie finger and thumb, she tipped in the smaller dagger in her left hand and carefully tapped the apple with the guiding dagger again. Right in front of the fascinated eyes of Lorenzo and his wife, the peel started to come off the apple in one smooth length, the edges perfectly straight and the removed layer so thin that it glowed with the light from the candles arranged around the room and along the table. Twisting the peel into a complex shape on the table, she kept the apple spinning until all of the peel was removed. With a twist of her left wrist, she dropped the peeling blade into her right hand and set the third dagger carefully on the table.

Still spinning the apple, now using her left thumb against the little strip of peel left on the base of the apple, she carved in with the smaller blade, completely focused on what she was doing. The slightest slip now and all her careful crafting would be ruined. Ignoring the minor pains in her hands and
forearms, she continued to slowly turn the apple and slice in her design. Keeping the speed constant, she go down to the base of the apple and straightened her cut, slicing off the lowest piece, still with the peel attached. Twirling her blade in her hand again, she sliced off the upper section where she'd missed some of the peel and glanced down to the clean plate beside Lorenzo.

When Lorenzo slid the plate forward, she turned her left hand over and spun her wrist, unfurling the apple from her knife. Everyone broke into applause at what they saw in front of them. Set out on the plate, the apple was now coiled around in a loose spring, the core left on her blade and only the best part of the apple arranged so beautifully.

'You're been holding back on me, Emilia.' Mario remarked, shaking his head in wonder at what his beloved wife could create from a simple apple.

'I'm not known as a blade master for nothing, Mario.' Emily winked, picking up her blades and heading back to the water bowl to wash up. 'Back home I've worked with larger fruits and vegetables, this was a mere game. Now eat up before it turns brown.'

'It seems a shame to damage it.' Lorenzo mused, reaching out to break off a couple of coils.

'You flatter me, Altezza. The ability to peel an orange without touching it with your hands and carve an apple into a spiral is something expected of juniors. I'm not here to show off so I'm not going to carve that second apple into an eagle in flight or turn an orange into a model of my home compound.' Emily shrugged, drying off her blades and returning to her place at the table.

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Certainly feeling much better after a week relaxing with the Auditore family and spending many hours just holding either of the twins as they slept, Lorenzo wasn't sure he wanted them to go home but he understood that there were other concerns for the new family. Emily and Mario had even agreed to deal with four of the five conspirators that had been captured on the ground. Standing in the shade of a large tree near the guard barracks, Lorenzo watched the transfer and kept a watch over the young twins as the three Assassins worked together to bring the prisoners up, secure them and sort them for transport elsewhere.

One by one, the four minor players in this conspiracy were led out of the guard barracks, blindfolded and gagged with a knotted length of cloth. For having been in Veronique's hands for a week, these four were still in reasonable condition. Perhaps a little scrawny from the dungeon diet and showing signs of repeated beatings, but otherwise unharmed by her stated brutality. Lorenzo was confused by that but also by the fact each man stumbled out into the sun with fresh blood smeared down their thighs and over their groin areas.

As each one was led outside, they were grabbed by Emily and Mario and led to four large, solid oak lockboxes Lorenzo had given them leave to use. Getting the prisoners to stand in the boxes was easy, then the teamwork between Emily and Mario really came into it. As Mario held each prisoner, Emily first bound their ankles then together they would ease the prisoner down on their side in the box. Retying their wrists in front, the happy couple would secure them in their boxes and lock the lids down before the guards on hand took each box to the waiting carriage for the long trip to Monteriggioni.

With the last of the minor conspirators secured and loaded, a hired secure transport carriage was brought around onto the grass and unlocked, the heavy doors swinging open to reveal the lined and padded interior. Lorenzo hadn't really understood why Veronique had asked to borrow one of his secure carriages, normally used on bank business but for now it was clearly set up for something else. The interior was lined with a deep layer of straw and covered with cheap linen to keep the straw contained. There was also a couple of water skins and a basket of basic dungeon rations tucked into the corner. Turning to Poliziano, standing just nearby, Lorenzo dispatched him to the kitchen to fetch some better food to place in there with the simple rations. Nodding quickly, Poliziano raced away,
knowing that time was of the essence now.

Looking half dead, Cesare was slung limply between two of the guards, head bowed as he struggled to simply walk. Even though he knew torture was a common part of life and helped to keep him on his throne, Lorenzo felt sick at the sight of young Cesare so broken and bloodied. He was the same age as Lorenzo's second son, Giovanni. The two young boys had even gone to university together so to know that Rodrigo had sent his son to kill him, well that just annoyed Lorenzo. At least Cesare would get a reasonably comfortable trip back to Roma and his father. The carriage was proven tough to break, Cesare wouldn't escape from it and disappear but Lorenzo worried that the return of Cesare in such poor condition would reflect badly on him and wind up in war between the Medici and the Borgia.

Moving without even realising that he'd made the choice to go, Lorenzo crossed the immaculate grass and stopped in front of Cesare, reaching out to lift his chin slowly. Whatever Veronique had done to him, she'd completely broken this young man. Even the faint touch of Lorenzo's fingers against his jaw made Cesare flinch and whimper softly, almost as if he expected more pain. Guiding his head up, Lorenzo felt guilt over his choice for the first time in his life. Of course he knew Giovanni had tortured men in his name, getting the information he needed to ensure Lorenzo's reign over Firenze was unbroken. But to see the results of a torture session from Veronique up this close, it made Lorenzo sick.

Cesare was but a shadow of his former self, dark brown eyes full of shame, self-loathing and pain. His once proud features were heavily bruised and split open in places, leaving behind thick scabs that would surely scar. Black hair matted with all kinds of fluids, hanging limply over his bare shoulders. Everywhere Lorenzo looked, he found fresh injuries and sullied flesh, all Cesare had suffered was there to be seen.

'Il Magnifico.' Cesare whispered, the barest flicker of recognition in his swollen eyes.

'You're going home now, Cesare. This was not my plan for you, the Assassins got out of hand.' Lorenzo nodded, making his choice to try and protect Firenze from the Borgia.

'Grazie.' Cesare uttered, daring to lean into the compassionate hand against his jaw. 'Grave mille.'

'You'll be safe now, I've organised one of my secure carriages to take you back to Roma. The Assassins won't be able to get at you again.' Lorenzo soothed, determined to do anything he could to stave off another war for Firenze.

Knowing full well that he would have a lot of explaining to do later, Lorenzo unbuttoned his over robe and slid it off his shoulders. Not caring about any blood or filth he might get on his clothes, he flicked the soft velvet around Cesare's shoulders and helped to support him as he struggled with the heavy sleeves. Dismissing one of the guards with a flick of his wrist, Lorenzo slid his arm around Cesare's back and guided him towards the waiting carriage, ignoring shocked looks from Emily and Mario.

'I'll make sure father knows you had no part of this.' Cesare offered, releasing the second guard and clutching at Lorenzo and the kindness he now represented. 'I'll tell him you helped me escape.'

'I know you'll do the best you can. I just hope this doesn't bring us into war.' Lorenzo nodded, spotting Poliziano tucking two baskets of supplies into the carriage for Cesare.

'How do I tell my father about what happened?' Cesare asked, stumbling for a moment before Lorenzo caught him. 'The beatings are easy but...he will never accept I was sodomised.'

'I believe you, Cesare. Even if he won't, know that I believe you.' Lorenzo soothed, tightening his grip a little and getting Cesare leaning up against the carriage. 'Rest assured, I will punish the Assassins for this.'

Dismissing the still fussing guards, Lorenzo made it perfectly clear that he wasn't some weakling that couldn't take care of trouble when he needed to. Doing everything he could to come across as a caring acquaintance, he left Emily in shock as he coaxed Cesare to curl his arms around his shoulders
and hold on tight. Grunting softly, Lorenzo put his back into the effort and lifted Cesare up into the carriage, trying to make him comfortable on the reasonably soft straw.

'What about your robe?' Cesare asked, managing to partly sit up.

'Keep it, you need it more than I do right now. Just rest, you'll be safe in here. There's plenty of food and water to see you through the journey and I'll make sure the driver knows that he has to ensure you make it home safely.' Lorenzo replied, easing Cesare back down.

'You'll make that Assassin pay for this, won't you?' Cesare uttered, settling and trying to find a comfortable position.

'I will see she is punished appropriately for this, you have my word.' Lorenzo promised, gently brushing Cesare's hair back. 'You worry about your recovery, I will handle things here. There is only one key to unlock this door. Once I've secured the door, I can either give it to someone I trust to go with you or I can give it to you and you can decide who you want to trust.'

'If you can trust that man, I can trust you.' Cesare replied, shoving at the straw for a few moments and settling into the nest he'd created.

'Bene. Buon viaggio and buona fortuna.' Lorenzo nodded, calming Cesare with one last touch before closing the door and locking it securely. 'Poliziano, take care of him. Hopefully we can avoid a war with the Borgia over this.'

'Si, Altezza.' Poliziano replied, accepting the key and swinging up onto the seat. 'I will make certain nothing untoward happens.'

Clicking his tongue and flicking the reins, Poliziano left the compound at a good pace, smooth enough to give Cesare a comfortable ride without taking months to make the trek to Roma. Letting out a calming breath, Lorenzo turned to where Veronique was just emerging from the dungeon, her apron splattered with blood.

'Veronique, pack your belongings! You are leaving with the Auditore!' he snapped, stalking over to stand in front over her. 'You can only hope that Rodrigo Borgia doesn't decide to go to war with Firenze over the treatment of his son.'

'So that's why you spat in our faces like that?' Emily snarled, getting right into Lorenzo's personal space and tucking Veronique behind her. 'I had a sneaking suspicion that you were at least talking to the Borgia.'

'Of course I talk to them, my second son Giovanni went to university with Cesare. As much as I dislike their politics, I am not going to make an enemy of the Borgia if it can be avoided. Firenze doesn't need another war and neither does Monteriggioni.' Lorenzo replied, glancing over to Mario. 'Lorenzo is right, is Firenze ends up in a war, Monteriggioni is honour bound to join the war. You know as well as I do that Monteriggioni can't stand up to another war anytime soon.' Mario added, grabbing Emily's shoulder and pulling her back. 'The smartest thing we can do is hide Veronique until it is time to make our next move.'

'Grab your belongings and get on the carriage, Veronique. Do not argue, your presence in Firenze is not necessary. The current mission there is almost completed.' Emily instructed, dismissing Veronique from the situation. 'I trust you will never give me reason to doubt your secret loyalties to us, Lorenzo. You are still at risk, but I accept your decision to discard your protection.'

'Had I known that Veronique was using sodomy and castration as weapons of interrogation, I never would have allowed this to continue. You cannot look me in the eye and tell me that either is an acceptable technique.' Lorenzo insisted, refusing to accept what he has learned.

'Actually, I can.' Emily replied, guiding Mario aside so she could face Lorenzo again. 'If you thought that was bad, you should see what the Templars do to Assassins where I came from. I have seen dozens of Assassins rescued from those bastardi and I can assure you, they looked so much worse.'

Realising that Emily was well beyond agitated, Mario kept a firm grip of her wrists as she leaned right into Lorenzo's space again, murder in her blazing brown eyes. If not for Mario's powerful grasp, there was no doubt she would have lashed out at Lorenzo and likely done him a serious injury, if not worse.
'Rape, sodomy, mutilation and whatever else their sick minds can think of. I know of seven different women who were all tortured by a Templar shoving a red hot shaft of steel into their vaginas. Four died as a result of infections, two claimed their own lives because they couldn't live with the shame and the third, which I have known for 20 years, has never been able to trust a man to even touch her hand. So you tell me if you think sodomy isn't an acceptable technique!' she spat, tugging against Mario's grip by he refused to let go.

'Emily, it's okay. I think you got the point across.' Mario tried, straining to hold her back as she raged against Lorenzo's sheer stupidity.

'I have seen men who lost far more than just their balle to a Templar blade, one clean slice took everything - pene and balle in one bloody mess. Most men who suffer such indignities don't survive, they're abandoned by the Templars to suffer and die, further weakening our brotherhood!' Emily continued, her angered words striking a chord with both men.

Returning with her belongings, Veronique paused to whisper something in Emily's ear before wandering over to throw her bags into the carriage and check that their prisoners were still secure. Satisfied that everything was alright, she went in the other direction and gently took Lorenzo and Giovanni from the nurses that he'd been tending to them, carrying the young twins over to their loving parents.

Taking baby Lorenzo, Emily glared for a moment longer before turning sharply on her heel and walking over to the carriage to settle with her son and wait for Mario. Cradling baby Giovanni safely to his chest, Mario shook his head slowly and looked over to where Veronique was keeping a sharp watch over Emily.

'Perhaps next time you will not be so hasty to speak, Lorenzo. It is blatantly clear that my wife wishes nothing further to do with you and I will not force her company if she wishes to go home. Good luck if anything happens to you, the Assassins will not come to your aid after those harshly chosen words.' Mario offered, shaking his head slowly before turning and walking away.
Emerging from their hiding places, nine of Emily's Assassins made their way through the busy streets of Firenze, listening to the people and making their decisions based on what they were witnessing. All their efforts had been in vain, the might of the Medici in Firenze was shattered and now it was a lot more of a free for all. For now the nine assigned Assassins kept their distance from each other and angled towards their destination, doing everything they could to stay out of notice and avoid the guard patrols.

Giving up their furtive approaches once they were in the Oltrarno District, the team rearranged their positions and made their final runs on their contact, heading in from every direction to completely encircle Machiavelli on the bridge. Some came running along the bridge, some climbed up from the river below and three of the most daring jumped from the rooftops to land among their fellow Assassins, ready for the big mission.

'Didn't think we'd be seeing you around any time soon, Niccolò.' Aloysius remarked, keeping the situation under control.

'You picked a fine time for a homecoming.' Niccolò replied, spotting Ezio in the group.

'Then it's true? Savonarola has taken control of Firenze?' Gena asked, even more troubled by what they would have to face now.

'Yes. No doubt aided by that treacherous artefact.' Niccolò confirmed, scanning the group again. 'I do not see Emily this time.'

'She's still in Monteriggioni, raising her sons with Mario.' Buck replied, thinking about the happy little boys that meant so much to the family.

'We should get to work on retrieving it.' Shane insisted, pulling the team back to what was most important right now.

'That may be more complicated than you think.' Niccolò warned, scanning the group slowly.

'Hah! When isn't it? Why don't you fill us in on things?' Aloysius shrugged, not really surprised by Niccolò's words.

'Walk with me.' Niccolò instructed, turning and heading deeper into the city. 'It all started a few weeks ago. The man everyone once reviled was suddenly the one they worshipped.'

'Ah, the Apple?' Jean-Claude nodded, glancing at Veronique for a moment.

'Only in part. It's not the city he's enthralled, but its leaders: men possessed of influence and power. They, in turn, oppress the citizens and ensure his will is done.' Niccolò continued, glancing back to make sure he had all nine assigned Assassins behind him.

'The people act as if they have no say in the matter.' Veronique sighed, watching the people bustling about their usual daily duties.

'Rare is the man willing to oppose the status quo. And so it falls to us to help them see the truth.' Niccolò replied, shaking his head slowly.

Making their way up another flight of stairs, Niccolò led the group to a mangled pile of corpses, corpses easily identifiable as Borgia men. Just when they'd started to think this recovery mission might not be so bad, Niccolò gave them another challenge to deal with.

'Those bodies bear the emblem of the Borgia.' Ezio remarked, getting a dark feeling up his back at the sight of them.

'Yes. The Spaniard keep sending his soldiers into Firenze, and Firenze keeps sending them back - usually in pieces.' Niccolò nodded, looking down at the pile waiting to be disposed of.

'Then he knows the Apple is here as well.' Aloysius sighed, lifting his gaze to the heavens for a
moment. 'An unfortunate complication.'
'I think I'm starting to see why Emily didn't want this one.' Shane muttered, heading deeper into the city to try and track down the best way to reclaim the Apple for the Assassins.

Dealing with the local guards that got in the way, the Assassin team headed for the Palazzo Pitti, the seat of Savonarola's control over Firenze. If they were going to reclaim the Apple and remove this threat from Firenze, it all had to happen here, before Savonarola could take it elsewhere.
'A direct assault would be dangerous.' Rufus remarked, looking up at the imposing building they would have to defeat to get close to Savonarola.
'True. But what other option is there?' Niccolò nodded, wishing Emily was here to give them another option.
'Aside from the city leaders, the people's minds are their own, correct?' Libby asked, ignoring the building and turning her thoughts out to the city.
'And they follow Savonarola not by choice, but force and fear?' Shane added, glancing at Libby with a grin.
'Si, to both questions.' Niccolò confirmed, not sure what they were thinking.
'Then I propose we use this to our advantage. If we can silence his Lieutenants and stir up discontent, he will be distracted and we will have a chance to strike.' Ezio suggested, really coming into his own as a tactician.
'Clever. I'll speak with La Volpe and Paola. They can help to organise the uprising as you free the districts.' Niccolò agreed, quite pleased with how far Ezio had developed over the years.
'Then it's settled. We'll take care of his abettors.' Aloysius grinned, feeling good about this wild mission and all that had to come together.

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Getting up onto a marked rooftop, Gena crouched and listened to a corrupt sermon from a preacher. Most of the time she paid little mind to the ramblings of so called holy men, their words rarely had much to do with her but this priest was so far beyond what was acceptable that he had to die.
'People of Firenze! Come! Gather round. Listen well to what I say! The end approaches! Now is the time to repent! To beg God's forgiveness. Don't you see?! The signs are all around us: Unrest! Famine! Disease! Corruption! These are the harbingers of darkness! We must stand firm in our devotion lest they consume us all!

Growing weary of the pointless ramblings of this corrupted preacher, Gena left her place on the rooftop to the south and took off, her lovingly crafted throwing knives whistling through the air and silencing the guards. Flying off the rooftops of the simple houses, she landed safely on the roof of the church and moved forward, already planning out the best ways to kill the corrupt preacher and silence his lies.
'Know that I, too, once shared your uncertainty. Your fear. But that was before Savonarola came to me. He showed me the truth! At last my eyes were opened. So I stand before you today in the hope that I might open yours as well!'
'What a load of shit.' Gena muttered, inching closer to the edge and readying her best shot to end this fiasco.

Bringing up her hidden gun, Gena lined up her shot carefully, taking into account the angle of her shot and the weather of the day. Lifting her aim a little, she fired down at the preacher, turning his head into a splatter of red and grey goo all over the pavement.
'Non è un compito facile il mio. Requiescat in pace.' Gena uttered, ducking back into the shadows as she waited.

It took a couple minutes but Volpe and Paola did eventually arrive, bringing with them many of the citizens that were irritated by what had happened in their city. Climbing down from the rooftops,
Gena landed lightly between the two secretive Assassins and grinned, looking around at the people coming back to their fair city.
'Rufus and Jean-Claude are in this district. Rufus went after some artist not too far from here and Jean-Claude is working on opening up the Ponte Vecchio. The others scattered further into this once fair city.' she uttered, patting Paola's arm lightly before disappearing into the crowd.

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It took most of the day to track down the nine Lieutenants and put them to death, the Assassins given the tasks appearing and disappearing at will among the people to spread the word against Savonarola. The people responded eagerly, putting their support behind the Assassins and refusing to accept the blind falsehoods they were being told by Savonarola and his supporters. A new change was coming to Firenze, a change that no one could have dreamed until this day.

Gathering at the rear of the angered crowd, the bloodied and weary Assassins kept a sharp watch out for the Apple, their whole reason for being here today. If the Apple was lost again, there was no telling the heartbreak that could come to the Assassins for losing it.
'You've done well, all of you.' Paola praised, looking around at the group standing in the shadows.
'What happens now?' Buck asked, reaching out to take Paola's hand lightly.
'Watch.' Niccolò replied, drawing their attention to the main jeering group.
'Silence! I demand silence!' Savonarola made his appearance, emerging from the Palazzo Pitti and looking out across the crowd that had gathered to demand he leave their city. The crowd would not be silenced though, forcing him to speak over them in an attempt to be heard and force his will on the people of Firenze again. He could not see the Assassins hiding up the back, their presence would not change this now that the people were freed of this corrupting influence.
'Why are you here?! Why do you disturb me!? You should be cleansing your homes. Cleansing yourselves! There are bonfires feed! Prayers to be said! Penance to be done! You will do as I command! You will submit!' Savonarola roared, bringing the Apple out into the evening light.

Pulling out one of his throwing knives, Rufus lined up his shot carefully and nudged Ezio, sending the younger man out on a path that would hopefully end up with the Apple back in Assassin hands. Adjusting his aim a little to allow for the constantly moving crowd, Rufus let rip, sending the slim blade ripping through the crowd and knocking the apple from Savonarola's hand.
'Find the Apple Ezio! It can't be far!' Shane snapped, trying to find their prize through the moving crowd around Savonarola.
'That agile guard has it! After him!' Libby barked, spotting a lone guard racing away from the area.
'Come on, we can't lose it now!' Aloysius roared, determined not to screw this up now that they were so close. 'Get it back!'
'I'm on it!' Ezio nodded, turning and pushing his way through the crowd to reach the guard with the Apple.

With Shane and Libby right behind him, Ezio stayed right behind the troublesome guard, reading his moves and sticking on his ass until he could force that damned guard into a corner and reclaim their prize. Working together, Libby and Shane split from Ezio's tail, blocking escape routes and making sure that guard didn't get away with the Apple.

Tackling the guard from behind, Ezio didn't hesitate to slit his throat and retrieve the Apple from where the guard had tucked it. Securing it inside his tunic, Ezio stood and raced off again, fighting to stay three steps ahead of the pursuing guards that wanted the Apple back. Getting down from the rooftops again, the trio ran hard, weaving through the narrow streets and diving into a flower cart not too far from where they'd first regained sight of the Apple. Huddled down together in the flowers,
the three Assassins scarcely dared to breathe, just waiting for the guards to locate their presence here and cause untold hell.

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Standing back from the main crowd that had come to see Savonarola burn for his heresy, Emily smiled faintly and squeezed Mario's hand, drawing his attention to Ezio as he stepped away from the silent corpse now left to the ravages of flame and time. This was what they had come to see, the rising of a long forgotten son of Firenze and a proud Auditore. The people didn't know Ezio anymore, too many years had passed but to those that mattered, the actions today would never be forgotten. Generations to come would remember this way, when Ezio guided a city to create a legacy they could be proud of.

Flinching away from the people that came too close, dear little Giovanni and Lorenzo looked up at the parents for guidance, not sure what to think of these people that came so close and spoke as if they knew their parents. Swept up into the loving arms of their parents, the twins looked out across the crowds, trying to find Ezio in the gathering as other Assassins came to stand around them. 'Silencio! Silencio!' Ezio called, standing beside the flaming stake where Savonarola's corpse was already turning to ashes. 'Twenty-two years ago, I stood where I stand now - and watched my loved ones almost die, betrayed by those I had called friends. Vengeance clouded my mind. It would have consumed me, were it not for the wisdom of a few strangers, who taught me to look past my instincts. They never preached answers, but guided me to learn from myself.' Ezio declared, looking out across the crowds as he spoke and smiling faintly at his Uncle and friends standing off to the side.

Crouching down, Emily whispered something to the twins and sent them off, standing and taking Mario's hand again as the young boys made their way through the crowd and climbed up to stand beside Ezio, looking up at him with unbreakable trust and love. Kneeling between his precious nephews, Ezio picked them both up safety and looked back out over the crowds, secretly pleased Emily was here to witness this chance in him. 'We don't need anyone to tell us what to do. Not Savonarola, not the Medici. We are free to follow our own path. There are those who will take that freedom from us, and too many of you gladly give it. But it is our ability to choose - whatever you think is true - that makes us human. There is no book or teacher to give you the answers, to show you the path. Choose your own way! Do not follow me. Or anyone else.' Ezio guided, clutching the twins safely to his sides as he jumped down off the wooden platform and made his way through the crowd.

'You sure told them, didn't you Ezio?' Giovanni laughed, drawing the well loved Medici cape over his shoulders. 'Yeah, they won't make that mistake twice.' Lorenzo agreed, tucking his head under Ezio's chin. 'Only time will tell if the people have gotten the message.' Ezio sighed, so glad to be back with his family and for things to finally be going their way. 'The burden isn't yours to carry alone, Ezio.' Emily smiled, leaning in to kiss his cheek. 'Your father would be so proud of you.'

'You have done well, nipote. Far better than I anticipated when I was told Savonarola had the Apple.' Mario added, reaching out to take Lorenzo. 'Come now Renzo, let your cousin have a break. You are not so light anymore.'

'I can't believe how much these two have grown. Last time I saw them they were just helpless babes. Now look at them, causing mischief just like their father.' Gena laughed, disentangling little Giovanni and swinging him up onto her shoulders. 'More like their Uncle.' Mario shrugged, setting Lorenzo on Shane's shoulders and listening to him laugh. 'In his younger years, mio fratello was quite the terror of the ladies in Monteriggioni.'

'From what I've heard, you were as bad as each other.' Emily replied, taking Mario's hand again as the group left the plaza and planned what to do next.
'Babbo, why don't you ever tell us about our Uncle?' Lorenzo asked, quite happy to sit on Shane's shoulders and look at the city around them. 'I was waiting for you to be old enough to understand his story. I think you might be ready now.' Mario shrugged, perfectly content to walk with his friends and family.
Welcoming their friends into the villa, still showing signs of the planned alliance with Firenze that never came to fruition, the weary Assassins were all looking forward to the end of this battle against the Borgia and the eventual freedom of Italia from such corrupting influences. But it was really very hard to discuss the business of war with Giovanni and Lorenzo running about the house, getting into everything and just generally being typical Auditore boys.

Excusing himself from a conversation with Bartolomeo, Mario showed that he was becoming no slouch in his old age, whipping around and grabbing both of his sons by the collar when they tried to do another lap through his study. Instantly they were calm, dangling from his hands and trying to put on their innocent faces but they kept cracking up laughing and trying to punch each other.

'Mario have you…Ah, there you are you little rascals.' Emily sighed, entering the study and looking at the dangling boys. 'I swear I'm going to tie bells to your ankles one of these days.'

'It won't work. Grandfather tried that on us, half the fun was figuring out how to run without setting them off.' Mario smirked, handing Lorenzo over to Emily. 'They're the sons of Assassins; of course you won't contain them.'

'We're going to need to figure out a way to contain them. Unless you intend to take them after the Spaniard.' Emily shrugged, getting a firm grip on Lorenzo and holding him close.

'Not a chance. They'll stay here with Maria, Claudia and Petruccio.' Mario insisted, refusing to consider taking the boys on this next phase of the mission.

'But babbo, we can be helpful.' Giovanni complained, folding his arms and trying to show that he could be useful.

'I don't doubt that, Vanni. You're still too young though; most boys have to wait until they're at least ten before they're allowed to fight. And your cousin Ezio didn't really learn to fight until he was eighteen.' Mario replied, resisting the urge to smile at Giovanni's adorable little pout.

'Why don't you see if Petruccio will take you boys out to give Spirito and D'oro an apple? If you're really lucky, Franco might take you for a ride.' Emily suggested, fully aware that the boys were suckers for the horses.

'Can we, babbo?' Lorenzo asked, perking up at the idea of going out to see the horses.

'Alright, but you two be careful.' Mario nodded, releasing Giovanni and watching the boys run out of his study.

'Zio! Would you like me to help keep an eye on the twins?' Claudia asked, itching to get away from her desk for a while.

'That would be very helpful Claudia.' Mario replied, grateful that things were starting to come together. 'I'm glad there's only two at the moment.'

'Admit it; you'd be lost without the boys to keep you on your toes.' Emily laughed, flicking her hair back over her shoulder.

Wandering in from every direction, the rest of the Assassins gathered before the Codex pages, waiting for the final piece of the puzzle to be placed before things hopefully started to make more sense. It was now early 1499, they'd had the Apple back in their possession for two years and the Borgia had not yet come for it. Logically that meant Rodrigo would be waiting for Ezio and the others to bring it to wherever the vault was hidden.

'Ezio!' Mario greeted, perking up a little more at the sight of his eldest remaining nephew.

'It is time, Uncle. Let us finish what you and my father started all those years ago.' Ezio nodded, resting one hand on the simple pouch containing the Apple.
'Indeed. Perhaps now we can finally make sense of this prophecy - and put a stop to whatever it is the Spaniard is plotting.' Mario agreed, leaning back into Emily's strength a little more.

'We should start by locating the Vault. The Codex pages will lead us to it. Take a look, Ezio. It's your vision that will show us the way.' Aloysius added, unable to make any sense of the broken map hidden on the pages.

Placing the Apple on the small pillar where it belonged, Ezio approached the Codex wall and engaged his Eagle Vision, looking at the glowing map and trying to make sense of it. He could see something in the lines, something reminiscent of stories Emily and the other modern Assassins had told him. With no better idea what any of it was meant to be, Ezio went with that idea, lining up the pieces and setting out a map the likes of which he'd never seen before.

Old words turning to reveal what he sought, Ezio dug deeper into the map, lining up continents he'd only heard spoken of and wondering what might be out there. Thirty pieces to make a map pointing them towards destinations unknown. As the last piece was turned to line up, the Apple burst into life again, filling the room with a golden glow and making the map visible to all for a few moments.

'It…it is a map of the entire world…But…there are lands shown here that do not exist…' Ezio uttered, trying to make sense of what he was seeing.

'Apparently they do exist. I imagine they've yet to be discovered. Or rediscovered…' Niccolò suggested, coming up beside Ezio.

'How is this possible?' Ezio asked, turning his attention to the modern Assassins for answers.

'Life isn't always meant to be understood.' Libby shrugged, careful not to say anything in front of Niccolò, still clueless about their true story.

'Perhaps the Vault will hold the answer.' Niccolò added, not sure what else to say to keep Ezio looking for clues.

'Do you see where it is then?' Teodora asked, refocusing Ezio onto what really mattered.

'No! It can't be! The Vault…It looks like the Vault is in Roma.' Ezio declared, moving closer to the pages on the wall. 'Then the Spaniard…This is why he became Pope!'

'Now I understand! It's not the vault alone he's gained access to - but the staff as well.' Mario nodded, looking up at Emily as the realities came down on them.

'What staff?' Teodora asked, not sure what Mario was talking about how.

'The Codex always spoke of two keys…two Pieces of Eden needed to open the Vault. One is the Apple…' Emily briefed, waiting to see who else was getting the idea of where this was going.

'And the other is the staff…The Papal Staff is the second piece of Eden.' Ezio added, jumping to the next big conclusion and realising they had more trouble than first thought.

'For years…No, decades…We have sought these answers.' Mario sighed, shaking his head slowly.

'And now, at last, we have them…' Paola agreed, ready to end this threat to Italia.

'But so too could the Spaniard…' Antonio warned, lifting his gaze to Jean-Claude.

'If he finds a way into the Vault…its contents will make the Apple seem a trifling thing.' Jean-Claude added, resting one hand on Antonio's shoulder.

'We must go to Roma and find the Vault.' Ezio insisted, looking around for any that would volunteer to make the trip beside him. 'What of the rest of you?'

'We'll do what we do best. Cause some trouble in the city, giving you the freedom to conduct your search.' Bartolomeo shrugged, resting one hand on his sword as he relaxed.

'Just let me know when you are ready, nipote.' Mario added, lifting his chin a little. 'Next distraction, the boys are back again.'

Giggling and pushing, the twins burst back into the study and split up, determined to do whatever they could to avoid getting left behind. Avoiding getting bowled over by Lorenzo, Antonio managed to grab Giovanni by the back of his tunic and scooped him up, holding the young boy close to his chest. Lorenzo managed to stay clear for a few moments longer but was soon grabbed up by Rufus and tossed over his shoulder.
‘You two are going to behave for Aunt Maria, aren’t you?’ Mario asked, reaching up to ruffle Giovanni’s unruly mop of dark hair.
‘Why can’t we come with you, babbo?’ Lorenzo asked, trying to get out of Antonio's grip.
‘No, you two have to stay here and help Aunt Maria.’ Mario reiterated, refusing to allow his sons to get involved with this fight. ‘But when your mother and I get home, we'll see about starting combat training with you two.’
‘But only if you can hold one of the light training swords for a full session.’ Emily added, watching the boys run out of the study again. ‘They're definitely Auditore boys.’
‘If they run true to the Line, they’ll have to be at least nine before they can wield those swords for a full session.’ Mario chuckled; glad he'd had the foresight to tell Franco to watch the twins.
‘They might just surprise you, Mario.’ Emily shrugged, not too worried about how her sons turned out, so long as they survived.

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Spending one last night in the safety of Monteriggioni, the team was up with the dawn, their bags packed and everything ready for the journey to Roma. The horses were ready, tacked up and shining with life and the pack horses were loaded with the needed supplies for the journey ahead. Securing weapons close to hand and buckling on the saddlebags, everyone focused on final preparations, working together to make sure they had everything they would need in Roma.

Tightening up Spirito's saddle, Emily grinned and gave her fine mount half an apple before turning to where her sons were waiting with Maria and her remaining children. As soon as Emily's attention was on them, the boys let go of Maria and ran into Emily's arms, latching onto her robes and refusing to be dislodged without dramatic action.
‘I know boys, I don't want to leave you behind either but it's not safe for you to get involved with this. I promise, as you get older and stronger I'll let you get involved with more of the defence of Monteriggioni. Right now though, I need you two to stay here and be safe.’ Emily uttered, squeezing her boys close without harming them. ‘We'll be home before you even know it.’
‘But why can't we come along, madre?’ Giovanni asked, burying his face in her shoulder.
‘Because it's far too dangerous for either of you to be around. Next time you might be old enough to get involved.’ Emily soothed, nuzzling her sons to try and calm them.
‘You promise madre?’ Lorenzo asked, leaning back a little in her arms.
‘I'm not promising anything, little man. If you are strong enough for the next fight, that's good. But if not, there will be other chances for both of you.’ Emily grinned, wandering over to Mario and handing the twins over to him.
‘We'll be home before you know it boys.’ Mario offered, cradling the pair safely to his chest. 'I spoke to Franco; he's agreed to run you through some basic training to see what you're up to.'
‘You really mean that, babbo?’ Giovanni beamed, sitting up a little more in Mario's embrace.
‘Only if you behave yourselves. Franco doesn't have to do this so be nice and treat him with proper respect.’ Mario nodded, relishing the loving embrace with his sons. 'When your mother and I get home, we'll see what training we can do as a family.'

Kissing his sons and releasing them, Mario stood and welcomed Emily into his arms as they watched the boys run straight past Maria and latch onto Franco's hands. Returning Franco's look, Mario just shrugged and turned to head towards D'oro for the long ride to Roma.
‘Is there anything else you need me to handle in your absence?’ Franco called, rolling his eyes as he drew the twins closer.
‘Just the usual, keep the city running smoothly and see what you can teach the boys.’ Mario smirked, swinging up into the saddle. ‘And see if we can't get those new walls finished. The Medici might be gone but the extra defences will still be useful.’
‘I'll handle it, Ser Mario.’ Franco nodded, intensely protective of the young twins that marked the future of Monteriggioni.
'Mount up!' Emily snapped, bounding up into the saddle and settling quickly. 'This shouldn't take too long, Maria. We'll keep you informed as much as possible.'

Wheeling their horses, the team headed around and hit the road to Roma, spreading out and keeping a sharp watch out for each other. By spreading their numbers out on the main road and assigning some to ride the side roads, they could keep a sharp eye out for trouble and be ready to respond to any threats along the journey.

'You've raised two handsome young boys. You are both to be commended for your efforts.' Volpe remarked, bringing his horse up beside Mario and Emily.

'We've been truly blessed with Giovanni and Lorenzo.' Emily agreed, adjusting her hood. 'All things going to plan, there will be more children to keep the twins occupied.'

'Twelve in total if I recall.' Teodora uttered, coming up on Emily's other side.

'That would be the ultimate but I'll be happy with just one more.' Mario shrugged, reaching out to take Emily's hand.

'Well, I wouldn't deny that a daughter would be nice.' Emily nodded, squeezing Mario's hand lightly. 'Or even two to even it up.'

'Personally, I hope that we don't have too many daughters. The dowries required to marry them all into good families could bankrupt Monteriggioni.' Mario teased, leaning over to steal a quick kiss.

'Whereas finding enough suitable brides for a collection of sons could make us wealthier.' Emily laughed, finding it so much easier to keep her good moods now that they had great news for the family. 'But either way, the Auditore line will survive.'

Stringing out along the trail, the extended team were at peace and talking idly, catching up on the latest news and learning what they'd missed across their varied territories. Machiavelli was right in the midst of the conversations, picking up all sorts of things that might make his position a little more secure in Firenze.

'Something on your mind, Niccolò?' Libby asked, trotting up beside him.

'Just thinking about what we might find in Roma.' Niccolò shrugged, keeping a sharp watch out for trouble lurking in the distance.

'That's the easy part. We'll find another war and confront the evil that is Rodrigo Borgia. The hard part is how we defeat him and deliver Italia out of the hands of the Templars.' Libby replied, calm and content in the saddle. 'It's no different to any other war we're involved with.'

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Approaching the walls of Roma, the Assassin team split up and went in through different gates, giving a variety of stories or just simply sneaking into the city to get into position for the final battle. The ancient Assassins, led by Mario, were planning to spread out across the city as Emily took the second team up into the Sistine Chapel and right into the heart of the Vatican. Everything had to be done by the numbers; just one wrong step could bring their entire plan crashing down around their ears.

A quick goodbye behind the stables around to the south of the city, Emily took off up the wall and disappeared over the top, angling towards the Sistine Chapel and the rest of the team. She knew it was risky to be seen that close to Mario in enemy territory but there was nothing else she could do. She loved Mario, had a family with him and would do whatever she had to, to keep him safe.

Scaling up the last wall blocking her path, she swung into the room where the rest of the team was waiting and landed lightly, back to wearing her usual smirk. Up here, far from the rest of the team and once more running on their own, the team of ten had a commanding position of the city. Now it was just a matter of getting at the Spaniard and ending this threat.

'brawlers, this is going to be a physical climb so if you don't think you can keep up, feel free to go join the distractions.' she sighed, resecuring her hair out of the way.
'We'll keep up, Emily.' Jean-Claude nodded, determined not to get left behind. 'Aloysius and Rufus, team one. Shane and Libby, team two. Buck and Veronique, team three. Jean-Claude and Gena, team four. Ezio, you're with me in five. Stick with your teams, work together and we'll all make it to the chapel to finish this.' Emily instructed, holding out her hand. 'Give it over Ezio. It's far too risky for you to have it right now.'

'There's no point arguing, Ezio. Emily's got the gift.' Aloysius shrugged, hooking out the real Apple and handing it to Emily. 'If anyone can make the Apple do what we need of it, she can.'

'We all have our gifts to wield.' Emily shrugged, securing the Apple inside her tunic. 'Let's move.'

One team at a time, they headed out of their hiding place and along the wall before doubling back and heading vertically. Getting up as high as they could, they broke left again and continued along, following Aloysius across the walls and never forgetting that their target was up. Getting to the top of the wall, Aloysius waited for the rest of the team to take their positions around the ramparts before all ten launched together and came down hard on the guards.

Slaughtering the first four guards, most of the team moved back and kept watch as Aloysius hurried forward and pulled the locking mechanism that would get them deeper into the complex. Swapping looks, Shane and Libby took the lead, resting their hands on their swords as they charged at the next batch of guards. There was no subtlety or hesitation, they thundered straight through the door and gutted the next pair of guards.

Darting forward to open the next door, Veronique practically walked up the wall to pull the lever before jumping down and slotting in beside Buck to charge the opened stairs. Pounding up the stairs, they split and engaged the five guards up here, Veronique hustling to take the head off the archer as Buck went up against the four armed with swords and hammers. Wrenching around his sword and dagger, Buck carved through the four quickly, leaving a spray of blood and body parts all around his boots.

'Assassino! Assassino!'

'Whoa, time to go!' Emily snapped, sending the team scrambling up the walls as more guards came charging onto the scene.

'This way!' Gena ordered, leaping off the far side and landing on one of the horses the guards had put up here for some reason.

Partnering up, heavier builds with lighter Assassins, the team cantered along the walls, weaving through the guards and handing out easy deaths to any that got close enough to strike at from the saddles. It wasn't easy to take the strikes at the guards from the back of a horse, especially considering those were barely on the saddle at times, but they did still managed to get a few good kills as they raced away from the guards.

'Well, this is one for the record books.' Emily grinned, clutching onto Jean-Claude's back as she lashed out at the guards in her reach.

'Everything is one for the records books around here.' Aloysius replied, leaning out from behind Rufus and letting rip with a brutal cross swing.

'Less yapping, more fighting!' Shane roared, keeping a firm hold on Gena's back as they leapt a gap in the walls.

Weaving through the guards and ducking under slowly closing doors, the team kept moving until they were blocked by another heavy portcullis closing off their access. Dismounting quickly, the team turned to confront the guards, bringing up their swords and hammers to form a united front against the Borgia lackeys that came at them. Dancing to their own beats, the team cut through the encroaching guards with deadly efficiency, staining the walls red and leaving behind a gory pile of body parts for later sorting.

Sheathing their weapons once the last guard was dead, the team scaled the walls again, falling in
behind Emily and Ezio as they continued the mad rush. Silencing the single guard up top of the tower, the Auditore relations kicked off the wall and tumbled over into a waiting cart of hay. Popping up again, they launched forward and charged the guards, keeping the Borgia on the back foot as the rest of the Assassins came leaping down to join the fight.

Up and over again, Aloysius and Rufus were back in the lead, heaving up the wall of another tower, finding perfect sync as they went up and soared over the ramparts to slam down on three guards in one stunning leap. Passing them, Shane and Libby took to the air and crunched down on another guard, breaking just about every bone in his body and leaving him to drown in his blood. Up onto the next tower, Buck snagged Veronique's wrist and flicked her towards the next guard, wincing as she rammed her heavy boot heels into his barely protected groin and slit his throat as he fell.

Launching off the ramparts, Gena put her weight right where she needed it, crushing two more guards into bloody smears on the rocks as Jean-Claude ran forward to dispatch another team of four guards. Taking flight behind the two big brawlers, Emily and Ezio slammed down and engaged, splitting focus and forcing the guards to handle more than they were ready for. Taking the jump off the ramparts, the rest of the team gathered for the fight as well, working with the smoke bomb Ezio let rip and silencing the guards permanently.

Dealing with the last of the guards, the team headed skyward again, putting Aloysius and Rufus back in the front to clear out the path ahead. Reversing their path once the next door was open, Aloysius and Rufus slowed right down and headed into the Vatican proper, locked onto the Sistine Chapel and their final target. Now was the time to be particularly careful, it would only take one guard to sound the alarm and all their work would be for nothing. Watching out for each other, they dispatched guards and opened doors, determined not to screw this up.

Creeping deeper into the Vatican, they approached the Sistine Chapel and scattered, heading for a variety of positions around the area so they could see what Rodrigo was up to. For now he was standing down there in all his finery, preaching to his blind fools and oblivious to the threats lurking right over his head.

Taking their places around the room, the ten Assassins hunkered down and waited, watching this sleaze ball that claimed to be Pope but did nothing that meant anything to the people. While he stood there in his finery, dripping in gold and precious stones, his people starved and died, his guards bullied the weak and his ministers sold favours to the wealthy. Soon his corrupted Latin would be silenced and the peace of the Assassins would rise up again.

Right on the amen from below, the Assassins made their presence known, slamming down onto the guards and right down on Rodrigo Borgia's bald head. The false Pope disappeared beneath the combined anger of the four remaining Auditore children, their combined mass throwing him to the ground brutally.

'I thought...I thought I was beyond this. But I'm not. I've waited too long...lost too much...' Ezio spat, looking forward to this all being over with.

'Requiescat in pace, you bastard.' Emily snarled, flicking out her own hidden blades.

'This is for Giovanni!' Libby screamed, cocking back her arm.

'I don't think so.' Rodrigo growled, grabbing the staff from where it had fallen and using it to knock Ezio and Libby back from him.

Standing her ground when Rodrigo used the power of the staff to throw her team back and down heavily, Emily refused to be moved from her place, casting out her arms and calling upon the Apple to shield her friends from the power of the staff. Head up, shoulders back, she glared at Rodrigo and refused to be moved, regardless of what he tried.

'How is it you resist?' he asked, astounded to see all of Emily's Assassins regaining their feet. 'I see
...Kind of you to bring me the Apple. Now give it here!
'Vai a farti fottere!' Emily shot back, folding one hand over the Apple. 'This Apple will forever stay in Assassin hands.'
'So you might as well hand over the staff!' Ezio added, coming back up beside Emily. 'Before we take it from you.'
'Always the fighter. Just like your father. Well - rejoice, my child - for you shall see him again soon!' Rodrigo taunted, spinning staff slowly in his hands and thudding it top down into the floor. 'You will give it to me!'
'So be it!' Emily growled, so deep in her throat as she brought the Apple out into view.

On her command, a dazzling golden glow filled the chapel, dimming out Rodrigo's display for a moment before it faced to reveal fifty Assassins where ten had stood seconds previous. Spreading out again, the increased team completely surrounded Rodrigo, each one of them holding an Apple and there was no way to tell which was the real one.

'Fascinating! An impressive power, this. But if you think it's going to save you, you've another thing coming!' Rodrigo challenged, scanning the group as every duplicate and the original ten put away their Apples.

'No, it's you that has another thing coming, Borgia! We've already beaten you, you just can't see it yet. No doubt your precious son Cesare was returned to you, half a man but still your flesh and blood. Who do you think removed his balle? Who do you suppose dared to sodomise the son of a Borgia?' Emily laughed, watching the rage burn in Rodrigo's eyes. 'That's right! We did those horrible things to your precious son! We would have done more but the Medici interfered.'

'Hey, you're not seriously stealing my score are you? I had that little pup whimpering at my feet in minutes.' Veronique cut in, shoving her hood back to reveal her soft curves and dark eyes.

'To battle!' Shane roared, breaking the moment and charging the steps.

Following Shane up the stairs, the rest of the Assassin team flew into the battle around Borgia, mostly using their clones to block the false pope from running from their battle. Battering through his defences, the Assassin team kept pushing him back, controlling their clones to close off any potential escape routes and forcing Rodrigo to fight. For now, the men were right in close with Rodrigo, giving the women a chance to line up another prank for this pain in the ass of a man.

Signalled to retreat, the men opened up a gap and gave Rodrigo a push, dropping him to his knees before Emily. Lip curling, Emily approached and raised her sword in warning, waiting to see what Rodrigo would try next.

'No! You will not take this from me…'
'It's finished, Rodrigo. Lay down your arms and we will make sure the end comes swiftly.' Emily replied, recognising that some of her Assassins were tired of the fighting.

'Really, Emilia? And would you give up so easily were it the other way around?'

Straining to stay on her feet when Rodrigo unleashed the power of his staff, Emily spat on the floor and held her ground, fortifying her mind with thoughts of Mario and her precious sons. It didn't matter what happened here, all that mattered was the defeat of the Borgia and the rise of the Assassins into power throughout Italia.

'Such cowardice! You would hide behind petty tricks than fight me face-to-face!' Emily snapped, refusing to be beaten back so easily. "Emily, what's taking so long? We're getting a right thrashing out here!" Mario called, still somewhere out beyond the Vatican earning them this time to fight.

'Hang in there Mario! We're almost done in here!' Emily replied, sending her love and support to him to try and get him through the battle outside. 'Whatever happens, focus on the fighting outside! I have this under control!''

Roaring in pain when something hard struck her in the upper back, Emily spun to grab whatever it
was, only for the Apple to be stolen from her belt. Crashing back to the floor, she could only watch as Rodrigo put the false Apple into the staff, believing it to be the real one. The real one was hidden though, lost in the constant twisting of the battles.

'And now to deal with you.'

'It doesn't matter how many you kill, Borgia. The Auditore will live on forever.' Emily growled, unbroken even as he used the combined magic of the staff and sphere to lift her from the ground.

Hating that they had to stand back and do nothing, the rest of the Assassin team watched in horror as Rodrigo shoved a large dagger into Emily's abdomen, tearing through her robes and twisting slightly before withdrawing it. The blinding light flashed out again; red, blue and gold racing around the chapel as she crumpled to the ground and Rodrigo left with his prizes.

Breaking from their places, the rest of the team ran to Emily, gathering around her and gently rolling her over to examine her wounds. The strike was in deep, spreading out an alarmingly large bloodstain on the ornate tiles where she had fallen.

'Come on Emily, you can't give up.' Libby uttered, working to tear through Emily's robes.

'What about Giovanni and Lorenzo? They're waiting for you to come home.' Rufus added, gently cradling Emily's head in his hands.

'You can't just leave Uncle Mario, he needs you so much.' Ezio whispered, so close to falling apart.

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Jaw dropping, Aloysius couldn't believe what he was witnessing as the rest of the team tried to figure out where Rodrigo had disappeared to. Despite the fact she'd been dead, she'd bled out right there in front of them, Emily was coming back to them again. Mumbling something incoherent, she stirred and lifted her head from Libby's knees, blinking slowly as she looked around.

'Did he look further for the real Apple?' she uttered, slowly sitting up and clutching at the bloody mess made of her abdomen.

'It worked, just like you said it would.' Libby nodded, helping Emily regain her feet carefully.

'Good. Find the secret passage.' Emily grinned, straightening up and slinging one arm around Aloysius' shoulders. 'We can't rest yet.'

'Emily, you just got stabbed in the stomach. You should be resting, not charging into battle.' Aloysius sighed, holding her upright and heading towards the podium.

'I'll be fine, I've had worse hits without proper preparations.' Emily shrugged, reaching out to press the first locking mechanism.

'Let's finish this.' Gena snarled, hitting the second lock and waiting as the hidden entrance slid open to let them follow Rodrigo.

Hurrying down the stairs that were revealed to them and making their way along the corridor beyond, the team entered a single large chamber with a sunken feature right in the middle. Sure enough, there was Rodrigo, trying to force the Vault open and gain access to whatever was inside. Encircling the sunken room, the team watched in silence as Ezio jumped down to confront Rodrigo again. This time there would be no tricks, just a full on brawl until Rodrigo was dead.

Sinking down to sit on the edge of the sunken room, Emily kept one hand pressed to her abdominal wound as she watched Ezio and Rodrigo going at each other hard.

'Well, looks like Ezio really grew into his own.' Libby remarked, sinking down beside Emily.

'Yeah, now it's a case of can he keep it.' Emily shrugged, leaning back on her hands so Libby could check on her wound again.

'You know Mario is going to freak when he realises you've been stabbed.' Aloysius smirked, crouching beside the two women.

'Just like he freaked out when it took me eighteen hours to give birth to the twins? And he's the one who fell off his horse and broke his leg so badly he was laid up for almost a year.' Emily replied,
looking back at Aloysius. 'It's part of the fun of our marriage, we both do stupid shit and laugh about it a few days later.'

'Hold my wine, this should be fun.' Aloysius snorted, shaking his head in wonder. 'How have you two lived this long?'

'That's all in the chemistry.' Emily sniggered, settling back and trying to calm down.

'Get him Ezio!' Gena roared, getting into the fight going on below them.

Realising now why he'd had such a dark feeling about this whole thing, ever since they'd first come to Roma, Aloysius didn't hesitate to jump down and come up beside the younger Assassin. For all that Ezio had learned, there were some lessons that it was impossible to overcome once everyone had told you death wasn't always the answer.

'You can't! You can't! It's my destiny. Mine! I am the Prophet!' Rodrigo cried, glaring up at the two Assassins standing over him.

'You never were…' Ezio sighed, releasing the false Pope.

'Get it over with then.'

'No. Killing you won't bring my family back. I'm done.' Ezio replied, forcing Rodrigo to let go of his robes and walking away.

'But not every Auditore feels the same way.' Aloysius warned, getting a firm hold of Rodrigo's robes and pulling him closer. 'You killed my father!'

'Requiescat in pace, you asshole.' Emily roared, her anger always flickering away in the background.

'Go Ezio, see what you find within the Vault. We will wait here for you.'

Turning to face Emily, Ezio smiled as she flicked him the real Apple and settled back to wait for whatever he discovered down in the Vault. Leaving the corpse where it had fallen, Aloysius left the sunken room and returned to his hidden family, sitting behind the women and drawing them into his arms. No matter what Ezio discovered, these three would never forget that they were siblings, three long forgotten links to the past that led their brothers and sisters into the future.

'Do you suppose we'll get to go home now?' Libby asked, resting her head on Aloysius' shoulder. 'I'm not sure I want to go home now. I have a life here, I can't imagine leaving them.' Emily sighed, stroking Libby's hair lightly. 'But whatever happens, we will always be Auditore.'

'You will always be my sisters, that'll never change.' Aloysius promised, holding the girls close and waiting for Ezio to emerge.

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Lighting up at the sight of the returning heroes, the ancient Assassins broke from their waiting group and ran straight back into the arms of their distant relations, rejoicing in their victory against the odds. So many things could have gone against them, it would only have taken one small thing for it all to come apart but somehow they had survived it all.

'What did you find in the Vault, nipote?' Mario asked, refusing to let go of Emily as he embraced Ezio warmly. 'Tell me it was all worth it.'

'I found absolutely nothing of worth, Uncle. All I found was this carving on stone.' Ezio replied, holding out the small tablet.

'On the morn, you will be returned to where it all began to make the final choice.' Niccolò read, peering at the tablet over Mario's shoulder. 'What does that mean?'

'Where it all began? Well we first arrived in Firenze way back in 1478…I can't think of anything else it could mean.' Libby shrugged, taking the tablet and looking at it closely.

'Okay so let's say we're going back to Firenze but what's the final choice?' Gena asked, kicking at a loose rock. 'What final choice?'

'Gena! You're safe, I've been so worried!'

Snapping around, Gena caught Leonardo in her strong embrace, holding him close and relishing their reunion after so many hurdles. The others could have their friends around all the time but Gena
knew she would much rather keep Leonardo away from the worst of the fighting so she could focus on keeping them both safe.
'I thought you were in Milano or still in Venezia.' Gena uttered, leaning back a little to look at Leonardo properly.
'I was but something told me I had to make the trip to Roma and see you again.' Leonardo grinned, relaxing into her strength. 'I found this strange note and had to come.'
'Something about returning to where it all began to make a final choice.' Gena nodded, so glad to have him back. 'We all got the same message, we've figured out it means Firenze but we don't know what the choice is all about.'
'This is all fine and good but how about we find a place to rest for the night? Most of you might only have minor injuries but I've still got this open abdominal wound.' Emily groaned, tightening her grip on Mario's tunic.
'You should have just let me take the hit, Emily.' Ezio sighed, helping to hold her up as the team left the Vatican.
'No, it had to be someone with a strong connection to the Apple. One day you will understand this, just know that everything happened for a reason.' Emily corrected, slowly picking each step as they walked. 'You'll see it with Rufus later, he's got the gift to command the staff as I command the sphere. There are always plenty of Assassins who can wield the pieces, but not everyone has a resounding connection.'

The citizens practically ignored the weary and bloodied Assassins, going about their usual days as the team headed through the city and out towards the stables where they’d left their horses. Gathering their mounts at one particular stable, the team settled down with their animals to rest, clutching weapons to hand as they relaxed and waited for whatever was coming. The generational gap was completely gone, exhausted warriors from both ends of the timeline curled up together and rested peacefully as the sun set over Roma. Burrowed in the hay, wrapped up in their robes and blankets, the team settled peacefully, waiting for whatever would come with the dawn.
Home At Last

Chapter Notes

AN: To those readers that stuck around to see this part, thank you so much. I honestly didn't think I would ever get this first part finished and see this mixed up team thrown back into the modern world. I really do hope you'll all come back and join me for part 2 and all the associated side stories that are planned for this strange new universe I've stumbled into. I ask that you please don't be too harsh of me, I have never actually played Assassins Creed, and I got through this story thanks to Zevik on YouTube and all their awesome play through vids.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Home at last
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Bolting out of their peaceful dreams, the extended family of Assassins immediately knew something was going on and it wasn't what they'd expected. Certainly, they were back in Firenze, resting in the plaza just outside the Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore, the most well known feature of Renaissance Firenze, but that's not what they were thinking when they'd first considered finding the way back to the modern era.
'It's up there Emily, we can't see it from here but we're in the right spot.' Shane called, lifting his gaze up as he tried to find the right point for their jump.
'Tell me you didn't just suggest that, Shane.' Emily groaned, hoisting Lorenzo up onto her hip.
'I don't know what else you want me to tell you, Emily. We have to get up there.' Shane nodded, tearing his gaze away from the towering building.
'And just how do you suppose we do that with so many non-climbers in the group?' Emily asked, looking up at the walls and plotting out the best course she could make.
'We'll have to carry them, there's no other choice.' Shane shrugged, planning out his own route up the beautiful walls.

Shaking her head slowly, Emily turned her attention to the rest of the group, only to find that they were already organised into two groups. The larger team was busily securing weapons and plotting out their climbs up the walls. The smaller group, consisting of the few non-climbers, was simply waiting nearby, confident that they would be partnered with suitable climbers to ensure everyone made it up the cathedral safely.

Muttering soft words of comfort, Gena uncoiled the rope she'd taken to carrying constantly and started to deftly knot it into a reasonably comfortable harness. Leonardo didn't seem so certain about it but once she started lacing it around him, he settled and helped to adjust the ropes. They needed a little extra help from Rufus but they did eventually get the harness tied off, leaving Leonardo quite secure on Gena's back without impeding her abilities to climb.

Unwinding her sash, Emily got a firm grip on Giovanni's tunic and lifted him up, chuckling as he latched onto Mario's back and held tight. Getting a good grip on Mario's cape, Giovanni held nice and still so Emily could bind the sash around him and keep him safe for the climb. Lorenzo tried to give his parents the slip but Ezio snagged him by the belt, swinging his energetic cousin up off the
ground and holding him close. With Giovanni secured, Emily turned and moved her cape out of the way, welcoming Lorenzo onto her back and holding his wrists to keep him in place as Ezio unwound his sash and secured Lorenzo for the climb.

Apologising for any insults, Aloysius used his sash to gather up Claudia's skirt and tie it out of the way before Rufus came at them with a rope to secure her position against Aloysius' back. It wasn't easy with her long skirt and other layers but they managed it, creating a harness that didn't restrict Aloysius and gave Claudia the firmest seat possible. Just to be sure, Aloysius tried some of the lower buildings, adjusting the ropes and creating the best setup for the pair to work with.

Not sure quite how he got this job, Rufus crouched and held still as Maria was guided onto his back and settled, hands latched onto his shoulders as she found her balance point. Using Bartolomeo to prevent them both toppling over backwards, Rufus ignored the various aches and twinges that came from carrying someone else and held still as Antonio and Volpe tied off the rope harness to keep Maria out of trouble.

Gathering in the shadow of the beautiful cathedral, the expanded team didn't need to say anything, they instinctively knew it was time to make their ascents and prepare to say goodbye to this place that had taught them so much. In the middle of the group, Niccolò Machiavelli looked just a little bit confused as some of the Assassins started up, talking excitedly about what they would find once they'd made it to the top.

'I'm not going to force your acceptance of what we know, Niccolò. If you want to join us, I won't deny you but if you choose to stay, you can never tell anyone what you witnessed.' Emily shrugged, starting up the wall. 'You've got ten seconds to decide or we're leaving without you.'

'Just what are you talking about, Emily?' Niccolò asked, launching up the wall behind her. 'That's why it's called a leap of faith. You'll find out when you jump.' Mario grinned, overtaking them both and swinging from grip to grip. 'Still secure back there, Vanni?'

'Si babbo.' Giovanni laughed, hanging on tight as Mario launched them across the street and started up the campanile.

'I'm surprised you're in such a good mood, Uncle.' Ezio remarked, flying up the sheer wall with such confidence.

'Whatever happens, I'll always have my wife at my side. Even if she does go home, I need only look at Giovanni and Lorenzo to know she's still with me here.' Mario replied, kicking off the wall again and twisting over in midair to grab the cathedral wall and continue upwards.

Clawing his way up over the roofline, Jean-Claude paused to untie the ropes looped over his chest and set Petruccio back on his feet before they headed over to where the rest of the team was waiting, gazing down from their perch. Keeping a firm grip on Jean-Claude's hand, Petruccio inched as close to the edge as he dared and looked down, amazed by the glittering town that he could see below them.

'Is that…' he uttered, looking up at Jean-Claude in wonder.

'That's Emily's home town, she built all of that for the Assassins.' Jean-Claude nodded, taking a knee beside Petruccio and holding him close. 'And if your mother says yes, you'll get the chance to live the life we know in that beautiful place.'

'Just like you all came to Italia?' Petruccio grinned, looking back at the city glistening below. 'Exactly the same way. I promise you, if you do make that jump, I will be right here to hold onto you and make sure you're safe.' Jean-Claude replied, keeping a protective hand on Petruccio as they waited for the rest of the group to make their ascent.

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than a few inches apart as they considered what to do. No one wanted to be the first to jump, they were all wary of what might be there once they passed the point of no return and were committed to the long fall.

Getting to his feet, Buck helped Paola up again and padded over to the extended platforms, easing out and crouching to look down at the world he'd known waiting for him. Somehow it was easier to face the reality of the jump with Paola right beside him, her warm smile in the corner of his eye as they went flying into the wild blue yonder together.

'Thinking of taking the dive, are you Buck?' Emily asked, relaxing in Mario's arms as she fed the twins a few tidbits of fruit.

'Someone has to go first…it might as well be us.' Buck shrugged, turning to look at the team arranged on the rooftop. 'From what you remember, was there any issue about going near those portals while holding onto someone else?'

'Nah, I jumped holding Emily's hand but we landed apart. I doubt it'll matter.' Aloysius replied, relaxed against Rufus' side with Bartolomeo resting nearby.

'If you're not ready, I will wait for you Buck.' Paola added, squeezing his hand tight. 'Whenever you're ready, I will be right here beside you.'

Uncurling from his spot, Shane stood and pulled Volpe up before heading over to peer down at the portal again. If Buck was considering the jump, the least Shane could do was be in the right place to make the second jump and back his man on the return.

'If you're jumping Buck, we'll be right behind you.' Shane nodded, looking down at the compound he'd come to see as a home away from home. 'You're going to have to run that landing without me, Shane. Leonardo's not ready to fly yet.' Gena sighed, looking down at Leonardo, curled in tightly against her for comfort and support.

Turning his gaze back to the beautiful view below, Buck straightened a little more and squeezed Paola's hand again, wanting to be sure this was what she wanted to do. Smiling softly, she reached up and removed her headdress, tucking it safely into her belt pouch before taking his hand again and moving out to the very end, looking down at the future she could only dream about.

'Whatever you do, don't let go. I'll keep you safe in that world just as you guided me in this one.' Buck promised, backing up a step and launching skywards.

Watching Buck and Paola soar through the air for a few moments, Shane and Volpe took to the air after them, holding tight as they raced after the first jumpers. Seconds later, Libby and Claudia kicked off the rooftop and flew, clothes fluttering around them like feathers.

Next up onto the platform, Rufus stopped and forced Bartolomeo to stop short before turning back and extending his hand. Taking Maria's hand and reading the acceptance in her eyes, Aloysius hurried over and took Rufus' hand, leaning up to steal a soft kiss before all four of them took to the skies, gliding down into a beautiful new world.

Pausing on the platforms when her time came, Veronique turned and looked straight at Niccolò as she offered out her right hand. Looking at Emily for a moment, he nodded slowly and walked over to take her offered hand, accepted despite not knowing what was ahead.

'You've earned this Niccolò. We have been harsh to you, but only to protect the secrets that you will soon learn. Do not spit on my trust here, I can just as easily revoke the freedoms I am giving you.' Emily warned, hanging back with Mario for now.

'I will do whatever I must to earn your full trust, Emily.' Niccolò replied, turning his gaze back to the waiting ladies and jumping after the team.

Stepping out onto the platform that ran straight over the portal home, Jean-Claude shuffled right to the end and adjusted his hold on Petruccio, cradling the young man to his chest safely. He was
getting progressively weaker, they were running out of time to protect the youngest son of Giovanni and Maria and see him returned to the family in good health.

'Hang in there, little one. We'll get you home safe and feeling better in no time.' Jean-Claude uttered, looking back over his shoulder. 'Grab hold, we're going now.'

'This is crazy, even by Assassin standards.' Antonio remarked, moulding to Jean-Claude's back and getting a firm hold of his robes.

'With Petruccio's health getting worse, we don't have any other options.' Jean-Claude replied, springing off the platform and twisting down towards the portal.

Gazing into Leonardo's troubled eyes, Gena tried to reassure him that everything would be okay, he just had to trust her. To her, nothing else mattered, she would gladly stay on this rooftop until Leonardo was ready to take wing. She feared he would never be truly ready though, no matter how long she held him or how many times she promised he would be okay. She didn't count on an external factor that would help her convince Leonardo to take this jump - Ezio.

'I promise, nothing will happen Leonardo. Gena and I will both be right here to keep you safe, it's no worse than falling out of bed.' Ezio uttered, working with Gena to guide Leonardo towards the edge.

'Nothing will happen, you'll fall with us and we'll land safely in a brand new world.'

'Are you sure?' Leonardo asked, clinging to both of his current protectors.

'I've done it once, it's going to be fine Leo. You just keep holding onto us and it'll all be over before you know it.' Gena nodded, waiting for Ezio to climb up before guiding Leonardo up and holding him steady. 'It's okay, just don't let go of us and you'll be perfectly fine. We won't let anything happen to you.'

Easing towards the end of the platform, Gena kept Leonardo pressed in against her chest as they turned to get side-on to the narrow wooden boards. Pressed in against Leonardo's back, Ezio kept muttering soothing words as they inched out one more time, making absolutely certain that Leonardo couldn't possibly come to any harm. It was perhaps a little strange to have one of Ezio's hands latched into Leonardo's belt and the other tucked in behind Gena's sash as Leonardo latched onto Gena's robes and she had a firm grip on both men.

'Just keep your head tucked in and everything will be okay. You'll be back on solid ground before you know it.' Gena soothed, resting her chin on Leonardo's head before they launched sideways and headed for the portal.

Last ones on the rooftop, Emily relaxed as Mario took her hand and guided her to the platforms, looking down to see the portal below them and the speckles of colour where all their friends had landed. From up here it was hard to be certain how many of them had made it safely down and forward, the only way to know would be to take the leap and find out once they landed.

'I don't want to jump, madre!' Giovanni howled, latching onto her leg and refusing to let go.

'But I thought you wanted to be a brave man like Ezio?' Emily sighed, sinking down to sit on the edge of the wall.

'I do but not like this. I'll hit the ground and die.' Giovanni replied, shaking like a leaf as he clung to Emily's leg.

'No you won't, dearest Vanni. I promise you'll have a soft landing.' Emily soothed, gently stroking his hair. 'It's just like when you've seen babbo do it at home, right into the leaves.'

'But we're up a lot higher here than at home.' Giovanni whimpered, climbing up into Emily's lap and huddling in close to her.

'You won't be jumping on your own, Vanni. I'll be holding onto you and your babbo and fratello will be right beside us.' Emily promised, pressing a soft kiss to his hair.

'You mean that madre?' Giovanni asked, looking up at her with tears in his soft brown eyes.

'I mean that with every beat of my heart, Vanni. You'll never be alone, you'll always have family around you.' Emily nodded, shuffling over on the wall so she was snuggled up against Mario.

Keeping a sharp grip on Emily's tunic, Giovanni stood up in her lap and peeked over the edge,
shaking in fright even though Emily's arms were unshakeable around him. Courage deserting him again, little Giovanni shot straight back into her lap and curled up, way too scared to even think about going out there.

Still holding him tight and safe, Emily unwound her sash again and wrapped it around him, strapping him securely against her left side where she could keep a firm grip on him. Giovanni didn't need any further guidance, he grabbed for her Auditore cape and pulled it around his back, hiding in the embrace of family. Mario did much the same with Lorenzo, tucking him into place under his right arm and making sure he was ready for the jump ahead.

With the twins' safe, the parents stepped up onto the platforms and moved out to the ends, reaching out to clasp hands before looking down at the portal one last time and launching heavenwards. Twisting in the air, the totally devoted parents and lovers pulled each other closer, completely ensconcing their boys in the love of family as they plunged towards the portal and a whole new adventure in the modern world.

Chapter End Notes

A Little note on translations, I will go back and write up a full translation dictionary to go with this story but for now I have two of the really long translations here for you.

1. Anche se siamo secoli a parte, sarò sempre onorato di aver potuto chiamare mio fratello assassino per pochi giorni preziosi. 
   Si sta dolorosamente perso Giovanni, le tue capacità e conoscenze perso troppo presto. Il mio giuramento a voi com'è, io sempre sforzarti di vivere fino a mio nome e la tua eredità. 
   Sono orgoglioso di essere un Auditore e devo che la conoscenza a voi soli. Requiescat in pace, fratello buono e vegliano su di noi dalla prossima vita. Fino a quando ci incontriamo di nuovo accanto. 
   Niente è vero. Tutto è permesso. Tale è la mia promessa nella vostra memoria.

Even though we are centuries apart, I will forever be honoured to have been able to call you my brother Assassin for just a few precious days. You are sorely missed Giovanni, your skills and knowledge lost far too soon. My oath to you stands, I will forever strive to live up to my name and your legacy. I am proud to be an Auditore and I owe that knowledge to you alone. Requiescat in pace, good brother and watch over us from the next life. Until we next meet again. Nothing is true. Everything is permitted. Such is my promise in your memory.

2. Stabilirsi Emily, è fatta. Sei così liquidazione, è necessario calmarsi. 
   Almeno lascia che ti aiuti fuori da quella tunica top, si sta bruciando in tutti quegli strati. Ho bisogno di parlare con te in privato, circa il patto che abbiamo fatto.

Settle down Emily, it's done. You're so wound up, you need to calm down. At least let me help you out of that top tunic, you're burning up in all those layers. I need to talk to you in private, about the pact we made.

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