Life, Death or a Choice

by ThroughtheMirrorDarkly

Summary

In most cases, life and death is all we have.

Olivia Steel had thought herself no different until she was given a different way.

Now stuck in the past, she has to learn to survive and stay above the current of the past or being dragged down into the abyss, and torn asunder.

Notes

I’ve had this story on FFNET since 2012, and have it up to over thirty chapters on there if you’d like to go ahead and read further. My penname is still the same: ThroughtheMirrorDarkly. I would like to warn you, I am doing a mass edit on all story. I
have gotten the edited chapters 1-5 up on FFNET, and I’m only posted the edited product on here, so if you go read it all on there and then perhaps reread it on here chapters after 5 will be different, just to let you know. Also I am going to wrap this story up soon—I hopefully will have all the chapters ready and done on here—so I can start the sequel. Thank you all so much! Much love, my dear Brotherhood.

POSTED FIRST ON FFNET: Back in 2012
EDITED! 1/22/2018
POSTED ON AO3 FIRST TIME: 1/28/2018
Updated!
Chapter Inspired by:
“Waiting for the End” by Linkin Park
There was no even a cloud in sight that afternoon. The sun was bright and brilliant in the blue sky, painting the streets and city of Florence in gold. The pigeons twittered, sitting on the edge of rooftops as the crowd bustle about lost in their daily routines below. Far too lost in their own worlds and business to notice the red hooded woman that dashed across the rooftops like their life depended upon it. Chest heaving with desperate gasp, the red cloaked woman managed to stay three yards ahead of the guard that gave chase.

“Stop, stronzo!” The guard demanded, his face purple with exertion.

The red hooded figure sent a wicked smirk over her shoulder at the chasing guard, a chuckle of amusement working up her throat. He was putting so much effort to keep up with the cutthroat, and it really wasn’t working out for him much to her everlasting amusement. The red hood turned her attention back to the path in front of her. As much as she loved the feelings of the wind rushing past her, and the tingling exhilaration that poured her veins while her heart beat echoed the sound of her feet hitting the gable, she knew that she couldn’t afford to lose herself in the feeling. It was tempting to let the world fall away and just be surrounded in the absolute freedom that she felt. But now wasn’t the time for such idle fancy.

She had a pissed off guard to lose, after all.

_Swoosh!_

An arrow nicked the edge of her ear, and she flinched hard, stumbling for a split second. The tiny burst of pain sent a shockwave through her nerve endings, and in the next moment, she pushed herself to move faster, farther than ever before. Her heart kicked against her ribcage, and her eyes locked on the edge of the roof getting closer and closer with each sprint forward. The guard realized this too as he slid to a stop. “What are you doing, idiota?” He nearly shouted, his eyes wide and bulging out of his skull as he watched the thief make no attempt at stopping.

The red hooded woman just smiled, not hesitating one bit as her feet hit the edge of the roof and she leaped off. For a split second, she was flying. Soaring through the air like a bird in and the wind was like music—teasing and dancing past her ears, but gravity soon pulled her down and the world was coming up at her at an alarming speed. Why was Olivia Steel not so normal? It wasn't the fact she ran around the rooftops of Florence like a caped crusader; however, admittedly strange that was. There was more startling and more mind boggling truth to her that was so unbelievable that if she told it then most people would deem her insane and lock her away.

Olivia “Livvy” Steel was from the future, but we will get to that in just a minute.

Olivia twisted her body so when she hit the ground, her body rolled and absorbed the impact that would have been much, much more painful otherwise. As soon as she was on her feet, she dusted off her robes while nearby people gawked at her in shock and outrage.

“What is wrong with you? Such shameful behavior.”

Olivia snorted. If she had a florin for every time she heard something along those lines, she’d be a
very, very rich woman. She ignored the masses, and craned her head to peer up over her shoulder. The guard had just reached the edge of the building and was slowly climbing down. Ducking into an alleyway, she slid by a few groups of people before she sat down on a bench with two people and leant her head down letting her hood hide her face. Her heart was still hammering in her throat; the thrill of the chase was almost an addiction. However, getting caught was not part of the plan and her fingers clasped around the hilt of her dagger, her lips pressed into a grim line.

She strained her eyes against the bustling crowds’ chatter, and heard the guard’s voice just barely. “Did you see where he went?” He asked the people, and Livvy watched from beneath the shadow of her hood warily. Her shoulders relaxed when the guard let out a curse and a huff before he turned on heel to make his way back to his post. A pleased smirk crossed her lips, and she wiped the blood off her nicked ear. Just a scratch, though it had been a closer call than she liked. Still, it had been too much fun and a good profit, judging from the weight of the coin purse at her hip. She had little joys lately, so she took them where she could find them.

Just as she was about to rise to her feet, a young man came rushing around the corner and shouted, waving his hands excitedly, “There’s a fight! Between the Auditore and De Pazzi! At Ponte Vecchio!”

Olivia’s head shot up, as her heart sank live a cold stone into the pit of her stomach. She sat there rooted to the spot, a numbing shock settling deep into her bones. She couldn’t hide from the fear that lanced through her so sharply that it stole her breath. No, it just couldn’t be…this couldn’t be where it all starts, she thought, wishing that she could deny what she had just heard. That she could just be blissful in ignorance, but that was the way life was. Not for her. In a split second, she was on her feet and climbing up the nearest wall. She sprinted, as fast as her legs could carry her towards Ponte Vecchio. It was all too soon that she found herself kneeling down on the edge of the rooftop to watch the commotion unfold down below.

A large crow had formed, separated into two groups that stood on either end of the bridge. The tension was so palatable in the air that it could have been cut with a wooden spoon, and Livvy felt her stomach turn. The scene before her was one that was very familiar to her. Her eyes then fell upon a man, he walked—no, sauntered was a better term—to the front of the group, and a smug smirk upon his face, brown eyes lit up with excitement and mischief. With his hand clasped into a fist, he raised into the air with a shout, “Insieme per la vittoria!(1)”

The men behind him shouted, “Insieme!”

“Silenzio, my friends, silenzio(2),” he said, and the cheers and the shouts ceased as they all waited with bated breath to hear his words. Livvy's stomach curled, where were these friends when…when everything happened. Her eyes stayed riveted on this young man, a face known to many in her world, but only through a plasma screen. It was always a thing of awe to her see him in the flesh. Ezio Auditore da Firenze, the man who would be an assassin, took charge of this group without missing a beat. “Grazie. Do you know what brings us here tonight? Honor. Vieri de’ Pazzi slanders my family’s name and forces his own miseries upon us. If we—”

Her breath caught in her throat. Her worries, her fears truly confirmed by his speech. A scene she had seen played out before time and time again, but this was the first time she was here in this moment. She felt all the blood drain out of her face, and her fingers clutched desperately at the edge of the rooftop.

“Enough of your nonsense, grullo!(3)” Vieri de Pazzi had appeared without preamble, shoving his way through the crowd at the opposite end of the bridge. His face was twisted up into a sneer, and his beady eyes narrowed on Ezio filled with utter hatred.
Her knuckles blanched white, and her teeth sank into her bottom lip. Part of her wished to intervene, but she knew that she couldn’t. It would put years of work in jeopardy, and for a moment that was trivial compared to the moments that were to come. She reined in the impulse, and took a deep breath to calm herself.

“Buona sera,” Ezio said, with the best shit eater grin Livvy had ever seen in her entire life. It made a small laugh escape her lips despite the weight of the situation on her shoulders. “Vieri! We were just talking about you! I’m surprised to see you here. I thought the Pazzi hired others to do their dirty work!”

“It’s your family that cries for guards when there is trouble, codardo! Afraid to handle things yourself?” Vieri spat, darkly.

Olivia found herself only half listening. It was so much different than the video game had been, but so much the same in the same instance. Everything was sharper and clear, the smells and the sounds. All of it was more real than the digital graphic could have ever hoped to be, and every word said were ones she had memorized like the back of her head. Two years, she mused, a bit wistful about it all. Two years I have been here and I have been waiting. Through so much, I have waited for this moment. And now that I am here…I am scared shitless. The shadows of countless struggles were heavy in her eyes, and she had been so lost in thought that she did not realize that she was no longer alone until her new companion spoke.

“Ah, I see my baby brother has gotten into some trouble,” Federico Auditore commented, with a put upon sigh though the corner of his lips twitched with a smirk of approval.

“Some?” Livvy questioned, haughtily. She looked over at Federico with an eyebrow arched. Sometimes, their friendship puzzled her. It was strange how they had become close confidants when in the beginning they hated each other’s guts. Though that might have had something to do with the guards she sent his way, but to be fair, she hadn’t know who he was then. Oh, Life, how you take me to such strange places, she thought, her eyes turned back to the fight below.

“You best get down there before the idiot hurts himself,” she said.

“Indeed.” And Federico was off.

How long had she waited for this moment? The moment when everything was set into motion and it all began. This is where she could really make a difference. Where she could help turn the tide in favor of the Assassins, and help stop the Templars from their mad bid for world domination. An overwhelm panic threatened to swallow her up, and it was only by sheer will that she managed to keep it down. What if she couldn’t change anything? What if everything was forced to stay the same and nothing she could do to change it? She pressed her hands into her face, and she drew in a several shaky breath. She sat there for a long moment, and she finally peeled her hands off her face when it all when the sound of fighting came to an end.

“Your lip.”

The words broke her out of her little meltdown, and she leaned forward, to peer down at Ezio and Federico. She watched Ezio touch his bleeding lip, with a slight grimace. “Just a scratch,” he shrugged his shoulder, and looked impassively at his older brother.

“Let the doctor decide,” Federico said, firmly.

“That's not necessary; besides, I've no money for this doctor of yours,” Ezio told him, with a shake of his head.
Federico gave him a knowing smile. “Wasted it on women and wine, huh?” He teased, with a quiet chuckle.

Ezio gave a slow smile. “I would hardly call it wasted. Lend me some florins then, or have you done the same?” They both laugh until Ezio’s head jerked up to the rooftops, a deep frown upon his face.

“What's wrong?” Federico asked.

“Did you hear that?” Ezio demanded.

“What?” Federico blinked.

“I thought I heard someone call us 'pigs'.

Olivia nearly laughed. She bit her lip just in time to keep it inside, and marveled at Ezio’s good hearing. She had indeed called them pigs, though with the greatest amount of fondness. Well, half fondness. Realization flickered through Federico's gaze, knowing it was her for he just shook his head. “Search them,” Federico diverted Ezio's attention with a wave of his hand. “There's bound to be something in their pockets.”

While Ezio was doing that, Federico looked up raising an eyebrow at the red hooded woman whose head popped out over the edge of the roof. She merely shrugged like, 'What do you want me to say? It's the truth.' Federico laughed lightly, running a hand down his face.

Livvy followed the Auditore brothers from a distance, watching with keen eyes their progress over the rooftops and stood in the shadow of the Sassetti chapel while the approached the doctor. She chewed on her knuckles, a nervous tick of hers, while she watched the masked doctor—creepy bastards—examine Ezio’s face.

“You must help him,” Federico said, with mock despair. “That pretty face is his only asset.”

Ezio cursed his brother, and made a rude hand gesture.

She would have chuckled if not for the fact that each second, each word made the fear grew deeper and deeper in her stomach. This was ever fan's dream, right? To become a part of the story? To in some way matter, and what better place than a story that held your heart? Yet in this moment all the awe and amazement turned to cold, hard terror making it feel more like a nightmare. She felt like the titan Altas who bore the weight of the world on his shoulders, but she was too weak to bear it. Her clammy and trembling hands would drop it.

And that would spell disaster for all.

“We should head home, Ezio. Father should be wondering where we've gone,” Federico stated, rolling the tension out of his shoulders as he leaned back against the brick wall. His eyes however were upon a nearby tower with a thoughtful look in them. He could just make out Olivia standing there on the top of the chapel, her silhouette barely visible inside the shade of night.

“Yes. I'd rather avoid a lecture.” The tone in Ezio's voice clearly stated he had been on the end of many lectures. Livvy had no doubt of that, she thought with a snort.

“Up for a little race, then?” Federico suddenly challenged.

Ezio's eyebrows climbed into his hairline as he scrutinized his brother for a full moment and then crossed his arms over his chest. “To where?” Ezio replied, his face breaking out with a grin equally as mischief as his brother's.
Livvy watched the pair of the race off, with a slight smile on her lips. It was a fleeting smile that was stolen away too soon by the weight of her fears that seemed determined to stay, clawing deep into her heart. Closing her eyes, she allowed a sigh to fall from her lips and she pressed her forward into the cold stone of the tower.

Ezio would win the race. The two brothers in solidarity would climb to the high tower, and exchange words that were heartbreaking knowing the future events. Her heart was squeezed tight, like it was caught in a vise grip. Oh, how she knew what was to happen. Memories of how she got here unfolded in her mind like a reel of old film, a little old and discolored, but the memories of it still preserved enough to see enough.

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PROLOGUE

“C h o i c e s”

Serendipity, Kentucky December 7th, 2012

There was no clue, no sign that I could recall that can me any hint that my life was bound for strange, wonderful and terrible things. I'm not sure of the mechanics behind how it all happened, if there was some being beyond my understanding pulling my strings or if Fate and Chance just pulled my lucky number that day, but I can remember the event that triggered all that would follow. I wish it had been as simple as getting dragged through a television set, or magically find the Apple.

It was so strange how normal the day started off. Just a normally snow day, where the world felt quiet and still; almost fragile in a sense, where only a delicate touch could hold it steady. Maybe if I tell my story, then it would make things clearer to me. Illuminate the path ahead that seems so riddled with darkness, and doubt. Will you listen? Will you listen to my story? Two years ago...just two short years ago, my entire life changed in one painful moment.

The moment that I died.

The landscape just beyond the window was a winter wonderland, a white sheet of snow that covered the ground, unblemished and untouched. Large snowflakes drifted down from the clouds, and the wind made them dance to and fro. The sight of it sent a wave of solace and content over Olivia Steel. Ever a winter child, the snow made everything seem so peaceful; made every worry and every pain drift from her mind and her heart. Her stormy eyes closed for a brief moment, a soundless sigh falling from her lips until a voice, a very loud voice shouted through headset, “LIVVY! BACK UP! I NEED BACK UP NOW!”

Her stormy eyes snapped open with a jolt and focused on the zombie in front of her. She didn’t have time to think, only time to start shooting the zombies, her brow furrowed and her jaw tightened with tension. “Damnit, Leo. Why haven't you sealed up the doors yet?” Livvy demanded, her tone more harsh than she meant it to be. The muscles in her hands were taut and stiff, because one false move and she was a goner. The sweet contentment of a few seconds ago, evaporated into a hot mess of anxiety and her heart thumped against her ribs wildly.

“Dude, I'm dead!” Leo stated, as if that should be obvious. “Lying on the dirty, bloody and wholly unsanitary floor dead, does it look like I am good for anything right now? Other than being zombie lunchmeat?”

Olivia’s stomach rolled, unpleasantly at the mental image. She just had a lunchmeat sandwich for breakfast that now felt like bile swirling in her gut. “Thanks for the mental picture, Leo. You always know how to gross me out,” she said, nose wrinkled. She rushed to the window, and started to seal it
up. Sadly, the zombies were just not having it.

“Are you seriously leaving me here?” Leo asked, affronted. “Just leaving me lying dead on the ground? I thought I meant more to you guys!”

“Carl, are you anywhere near Leo?” Olivia said, with mock exasperation.

“I’ll save him,” Carl spoke, his voice a bit rougher and deeper than Leo’s. There was a few seconds of radio silence, and then a quiet curse. “Oh, hell, I'm dead too. Thanks, Leo.”

“How is that my fault?” Leo asked.

Livvy bit her lip trying not to laugh, finishing off the last of the zombie before going to heal her friends. No, it wasn't a real zombie apocalypse. There would be no witty banter if there were real flesh eating zombies around, and a lot more running if it had been a real one. She sat the controller in her lap, and popped her aching fingers. They were playing Black Ops Zombie Apocalypse online.

“Oh,” Livvy cooed, seeing Leo's character and Carl's character had died on top of each other, “exactly how you wanted to go out. On top of each other.”

Livvy cackled at the sputtering responses that came through her headset as the round ended. She twisted her neck, giving it a good pop before she picked back up the controller. “Alright, gentlemen, I'm covering the upper floor, you've got lower left Carl and Leo you got lower right because it only has one window.”

“Okay…hey,” Leo complained, indignation coloring his voice, “what's that supposed to mean?”

“I think it’s her subtle way of saying ‘you suck,'” Carl said, without a lick of a remorse in his tone.

“No, it doesn't!” Leo snapped. “I don't suck that bad.”

Olivia tried. She really tried. She was an adult, and it should have been above her to not make a joke. She should really be able to rein in her poor sense of humor, but she failed. “That's what she said.”

“Haha!” Carl guffawed.

“You're dead to me,” Leo said, stonily.

“Uh-huh. Uh-huh,” Livvy nodded, as if seriously grieved by this despite the large grin on her face as she held the x button down to seal up the window, “but let's face it, in the next few minutes you'll be eaten by zombies and then you'll be dead to me.” The next round went much like Livvy expected. Leo died, and died again, Carl screaming like a little girl—though he’d never admit it—and her moving around a mad woman trying to save their asses. Unfortunately, there were too many this time and they failed. As the red screen appeared across her tv, Livvy set down the controller and stretched out her neglected limbs, contemplating on continuing or just shutting it off.

“Well, that blows,” Leo commented, with a heavy sigh. “I think that if I play anything with zombies in it then I'm going to have an aneurysm. I suggest we switch to something else. Anyone up for some Assassin’s Creed?”

“If we’re going to play, it'd have to be AC 2 or Brotherhood,” Carl huffed out, amused. “I get tired of hearing you cry about Altair drowning again…and again…and again.”

“Fine,” Leo agreed. “Liv, you in?”

Olivia thought that sounded like a good idea. She had a couple of hours before her interview to
waste, so why not? She opened her mouth to reply when an unexplained wind rushing past her and for a moment it seemed the world distorted. The colors of it sharp, too intense, and her head felt heavy and a wave of dizziness spread out through her mind like a spider’s web. In front of the painful glow of the television, she swore she saw a figure, seen but not quite seen.

“You can’t today.”

Then the chill disappeared and the weird thing was pushing away to the back of her mind. In fact, she couldn’t remember it all when the next second passed. “As much fun as that sounds, I think I’m going to have to decline, boys. I’ve played so much Assassin’s Creed lately that I’ve started to have weird dreams. The one from last night was majorly weird,” she murmured, with a shake of her head. “Like not even normal weird. It was so real that it took me a moment to realize to wake up, and realize that it just was a dream.”

“If it was a dream where you were making out with Ezio, I hear those are perfectly normal. Even I…” Leo abruptly coughed, realizing that he may have revealed too much.

Carl laughed. “And you say you’re straight.”

“I am straight! I like the girls!” Leo said, vehemently. “I will have you know that I am big fan of the boobs.”

“The boobs,” Olivia snorted, placing her head in her hand.

“Sure. We believe you, Leo. You are completely straight…as a crooked arrow,” Carl added the last bit with relish, and took joy in the denials that followed from Leo.

“Hey, there is nothing wrong with being gay. It’s a natural thing, just like being straight, or bisexual, or pansexual is. But don’t deny who you are, it’s not healthy,” Carl told him, sagely.

“I’m not deny who I am! I am completely healthy!”

Olivia would have been rolling with laughter, but her mind had drawn back the memories of last night’s dream. It had been so bizarre, and even the thought of it sent a chill down her spine. It was as if the world was moving at hyper speed and she was stuck in the center of it. She tried to catch up, to find out what was going on, but it all moved too fast. The world was leaving her behind, and she was fading…she was fading so fast.

So much to do…Miles to go…

A flash of red and white out of the corner of her eyes, then a shot of gold through the dark, ancient symbols that made a primal understanding well up inside of her, and then the scene cut to a battle. “Stop, stronzo!” There was a blade, the light glinted off of it. And then she felt it. A deep, dark fear of something bad, moving fast, coming towards her and…then she had woken up in a cold, clammy sweat with her heart going a mile a second.

“Uh, Liz you there?” Carl asked.


“So no go for Assassin with you?” He inquired.

Olivia felt a little bad. States apart these little gaming sessions were the only real way that her and Carl got to spend time together. They tried phone calls, and letters, but they really had nothing great
in common—well, nothing that they wanted to speak of because it was too damn painful. So it was more awkward than anything. Their love for games was the only real common bond they had anymore, and was a safety zone far away from bad things. “Sorry, guys. It’s a no go. I’ll talk to you guys later,” Livvy muttered, with regret. The three exchanged good-byes, and she shutdown the Xbox, her teeth worrying on her lower lips. She sat there for a full minute, staring off into space before she gave a sharp shake of her head.

“Up we go Livvy,” she told her as she rose off the couch and stretched her arms out over her head to shake off the feeling of lethargy that still clung to her. “Have important things to do.”

Rejection was always a bitter thing. It was like acid that was poured on the soul, corrosive and peeling away at one’s self confidence. Her hands clutched her resume in her lap, and she kept the tight, painfully fake smile plastered onto her lips. “Thank you,” she bit out, through clenched teeth, “for your consideration.”

Olivia walked out of the office, with her head held high, but as soon as she stepped outside into the blistering cold air, the urge to scream increased tenfold. That was the third interview this week, and the second rejections. The first job was willing to hire her, but he had made innuendos the entire interview about what she could do to get a promotion. Olivia ignored it because the pay and hours had been good, until the bastard tried to slip his hand up her shirt. She punched his nose, and hoped that she broke it, before she marched out in a righteous fury. The other two jobs told her that she wasn’t qualified, and it didn’t matter that she was taking online courses in Business Management to become qualified. They didn’t want to hire someone with basically no experience.

It was ridiculous, she thought, her cheeks painted red with frustration. How are you supposed to get experience if no one is willing to take a risk on you and hire you? Why does finding a job have to be such a pain in the—”Ahhh!” Her world tilted as her left high heel snapped, and she barely managed to keep herself from falling on the cold pavement. She inwardly had a hissy fit because damn those heels have been expensive. They were her only good pair of shoes that were classy enough to wear to interviews, and she felt her heart tremble in her chest. “Of all my fucking luck.”

She reached down pulling the broken shoe off of her foot and stared at the shoe mournfully. “Damn it all!” She groaned, limping towards the nearest bench, she glowered at the people staring at her. “Seriously, take a picture, it’ll last longer.”

The people hurried off, quickly.

She sat down on the bench with a huff she sat down, and glared now at the high heel cradled in her lap. She really had the urge to throw at something, preferably at the bitch that was Life and demanded a refund. Sadly, she just threw it in the waste bin off the side of the bench before slumping down, looking defeat. She really needed that job. She did web designs on the side, but that was barely enough to pay her rent. Not to mention, it was about time to pay for her spring courses and she didn’t know where she was going to come up with the money. She had put in for grants and student loans, but hadn’t heard back from, either.

“This is such a lovely day,” she commented, with a heavy dose of sarcasm. Oh, sarcasm. Her way of coping and handy defense mechanism. Placing her head in her hands, she tried to push all her frustrations back. Maybe she would just go home and make herself a cocktail before passing out in her nice warm bed that was far, far away from life and it’s problems. That sounded like a good idea.

Then a pressure was put on her mind.

“You can't. Choices to be made.”
Olivia decided against going home. It would be too depressing, sitting there all alone and eating cold leftover because her damn microwave was possessed and wouldn’t work right. She glanced at her watch, it was nearly five and the sun was already setting. She got up and started walking in any direction. If she had only worn her sneakers, she sighed. She could have done some parkour—a good way that she stayed in sharp along with yogo, and aerobics, but parkour was her favorite. There was a freedom in running, and using the world around her as a personal playground. She blamed the Assassin’s Creed series, for it heavily influenced her when it came to exercise.

It was also hilarious, the look on people’s faces when they saw a person free running up the stair railing at the mall. It was less hilarious when the security guards decided to give her a hard time, and now she was banned from the mall. But it had been worth it, damn it! Olivia laughed, recalling the memory fondly. The memory got swept away by the melancholy of her heart, and she heaved a sigh, resting her head against the store window beside her. That probably wasn’t a sanitary decision given the flu was going around, and germs were everywhere, but Livvy couldn’t find it in herself to care.

Today started out so good, with so much promise. Why did it have to end really crappy? She opened her eyes and came face to face with Ezio Auditore. “Holy crap!” She jumped back, her arms flailing about as she struggled to maintain her balance. Her eyes blinked wildly until she realized that it was just a giant poster on the window of the game store. A burst of laughter shook her shoulders, and she placed a hand over her heart.

Goodness, that had honestly scared her. Running a hand down her face, she frowned as she took a moment to actually read what the poster said. Exclusive Assassin memorabilia, half price. Really? She thought, surprised. Shouldn’t they be upping prices since the new one is about to come out and wait to have a sale during the New Year’s rush? She gnawed on her lower lip, thoughtfully. She shouldn’t. She should just go home, and not waste money on things that she really didn’t need. It was so frivolous, and childish. Something moved out of the corner of her eye like a shadow that she couldn’t make out and the pressure on her skull formed again. She opened her mouth when a voice said:

“It’s not time yet. Go and find something.”

The euphoric pressure was gone and Livvy had a happy smile on her face. It had been a craptastic day, didn’t she deserve to at least have some joy? Where was the harm in treating herself? As long as she didn’t spend too much, it wouldn’t mess up her budget. She stepped through the doors of the shop, barely containing a giggle like she was getting away with something naughty.

“Ohh!” The fan girl screamed as her eyes feasted on a whole section dedicated to Assassins Creed that the clerk was attempting to put back together. Apparently, they’re had been a mob of fans and they had done some serious damaged. She walked right over and started looking through the stuff. They had a Yahzee Game where the cup to roll the dice was the Apple of Eden, there was Assassin’s Creed monopoly—damn, it was fifty dollars, she couldn’t get that—and a mug that once hot coffee was poured into it, the Assassin’s signet would appear on the outside. She was browsing when she noticed the clerk had stopped, and stared at her bare foot. She raised a brow when she noticed his eyes glance to the ‘no shoes, no service’ sign posted on the door, and then back at her. Livvy gave him a deadpanned look. “It doesn’t say I have to have two,” she stated, defensively.

The clerk held his hand up in silent surrender before moving away quickly and Livvy thought smugly, That’s right. You know not to mess with an Assassins’ fan. She browsed through the items. Well, what was left of the items that had been on sale. There were collector’s card, posters, necklaces, and in a bin off to the side, there were little plushy Altairs (Ezio was sold out). Olivia knelt down picking one up, her fingers stroking his tiny white hood with more care than was
warranted. “Poor Altair, it's just not fair.” She hugged it, ignoring the stares because she really didn't care.

She shouldn’t have come in here. She tried to be conservative with her money, but with certain things, she was such an impulse buyer. Food and games were her weakness. And right now here, she felt like a kid at a candy shop who wanted to sample every little thing. But she was an adult, so of course, she did the responsible thing and let without buying everything.

She did buy a few things. A chocolate sucker shaped like an Assassin, a necklace and plushy Altair. She couldn't just leave him there. He had been looking up at her pleadingly. How could she leave him behind after that? Finding her bench from earlier, she sank down and placed Altair beside her before unwrapped the chocolate sucker and went to take a bite…and then she saw plushy Altair staring up at her. Her brows pinched, as her lips twisted downward. “You know, I shouldn't have serious reservation about eating this in front of you, and yet somehow I do.” Reaching out, she turned the stuffed assassin away from her and then happily munched on the chocolate. “Hmm, this is a nice way to end a crappy day,” she mused, savoring the sweet taste of the milk chocolate on her tongue with a tiny murmur of appreciation. Then she jumped as her pocket started singing:

'Everybody stops and they staring at me,
I got a hidden blade in my pants,
and I ain't afraid to use it, use it, use it, use it…

I'm Ezio and I know it.'

It was Leo singing it. How the heck had he gotten it on her phone? “Pervert,” she muttered, with a laugh before she pulled out her cell phone. “Hello, Leo. I just heard the most interesting ring tone.”

“Ah…finally heard it, did you? Bet you are wondering how I pulled that off, but alas, I shan't share my secrets,” Leo stated, dramatically. “Anyways, where are you at? Carl and I are already online waiting for you.”

“Leo, calm down. I'm sure you and Carl can handle a few zombies without me.” She looked around and caught sight of a little girl. She was standing by a woman who was clearly her mother, but that's not what made her smile. The little girl was playing with a bouncy ball, colored red and white. Her mind went straight to Assassins Creed and she thought to herself with a self-deprecating smile, I'm such a geek.

“Uh, no, we can't. You tell us what to do, and we do it and survive,” Leo stated, very seriously, “but without you we are two screaming idiots that end up being zombie happy meals. You are like our General. Our leader. Without you we are lost lambs waiting for the slaughter.”

“Leo, you big drama queen, that's so sweet in a strangely geeky way,” Liz chuckled, chewing another bite of chocolate. “Alright. You’ve convinced me. Have no fear, I’m only a block or two away from my house.”

There was a silence. “You went to the game store, didn't you?” Leo accused, quietly.

“…yes.”

“You didn't buy the plushy Ezio, did you?”

Glancing down at the plushy Altair, a flush of embarrassment covered her face. “No,” she stated, certainly. Then a moment later, she admitted, “I got Altair.”
Livvy's brow twitched in annoyance. “What's so funny?” She demanded, darkly and her face felt hot. She probably looked like a tomato.

“Just you, level headed gamer, have fallen to the level of obsessive fan girl,” Leo teased, with a cackle.

“I am not obsessive, this is the first thing I bought of Assassins Creed other than the games—” Livvy defended herself. Solemnly, he told her, “And that's how it starts.”

“Oh, yeah? And what about you Mister Obsessed Fan Boy? You have posters, a custom made bedspread and besides how would you know they've got plushy Altairs and Ezios unless you've been down—oh, my God! You've got a plushy Ezio!” Livvy grabbed her side to stop the laughter, it didn't work. “You so did!”

“N-no, I don't…” Leo's reply was far from convincing.

“Uh-huh, just wait until I tell Carl you've got a plushy Ezio that you practice kissing with—” Livvy grinned, wickedly.

“I do not practice make out with it—ah! Are you going to get online and help us or what?” Leo changed the subject as quickly as he could.

“Yeah, sure.” She looked around aimlessly. “But it'll be about ten minutes. Enough time for you to make out with Ezio.”

“I don't make out with Ezio! I am a firmly straight male!”

“Me thinks thou doth protest too much,” Livvy told him.

“Ugh, whatever.”

“Talk to you later.”

“Talk to you later—oh, wait! I forgot to say it earlier though it pains me to say it now after all the abuse I've endure…Happy Birthday Livvy.”

Happy Birthday Livvy. It almost made her knees give out. Happy Birthday? Livvy thought stunned. She looked down at her watch to the date, and found it to be true. It was December 7. She had been 19 for over half the day and hadn't even realized it. “Uh, thanks Leo, bye,” she shut the phone. She had forgotten her birthday, how sad was that? Looking up at the drifting snow, she thought, It isn't a candle, but…what the heck. She closed her eyes, thinking before whispering, “I wish…I wish that I could do something that matter. Some good, just…something…that means something and something that will make me happy.” She exhaled, opening her eyes. She stood up from the bench when the color red and white caught her attention.

Livvy watched the ball bounce into the street, then watched the little girl fly from her oblivious mother's side right after it. The girl's hair flashing gold as it caught the street light when she dashed out of her mother's grasp. Too bad the little girl didn't see the oncoming car. Olivia felt her mouth drop open in a silent horrified scream, as shock tore through her like white hot lightning.

Here is where you make a cho ice…life or death. And be warned the most obvious choice, isn't always right…
The cool wind, the shade, all once again pushed to the back of her mind. And Livvy decided what to do… She burst into a run, her feet slapping across the asphalt and she threw herself into the motion, shoving the little girl out of the way as the sound of screeching of tires filled the air. Then Livvy saw the glint of metal like a hidden blade a split second before it slammed into her and she felt herself thrown into the air like a ragdoll before she fell into the pavement. Hard.

It was the most brutalizing pain she had ever felt, and she felt her body twitch and shake uncontrollably as all thought vanished from her mind. Opening her mouth to make some kind of plea, all Olivia could get out was a gurgled sob as blood trickled out of her mouth. Hands grabbed at her, rolling her over gently, but she could not make out who it was. Nor did she care to. She couldn't process anything that wasn't pain. The sky… looks red… or maybe that blood in my eyes, she thought with the sudden urge to giggle. It came out as a terrible gagging and she swore she heard someone crying. Olivia couldn't make out there face, but a voice saying, “I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! I'm so… sorry, mommy! I didn't mean it!” A seven year old Liv told her mother as the girl broke down into hysterical sobs. It was too late to make it right.

The next memory was of the funeral. Livvy was relieved. Her father was broken. The image faded and flickered. “I hate you! I hate you!” Livvy told her father, and when the next morning came, she regretted those words. She never got to make that right, either. A family broken apart, and Livvy was left all alone.

Such a heavy heart…

The blackness that settled around her before flashing a bright white and there was this horrid ringing in her ears. It felt like drowning, it felt like breathing, it felt like she was flailing trying to grasp at… something. She wasn't sure what.

Can't stop now… Miles to go before we sleep.

It wasn't weightless, or painless. It was the opposite. Heavy, painful, and it didn't seem to ever want to stop. It was pain that reached into the very depths of her soul, twisting and torturing her on a level that she never knew possible.

Vessel damaged… blood… fix… Take a breath.

Voices fluttered over her. She wished she could open her eyes, but there were too heavy and she felt way too tired. She wanted nothing more than to slip into a peaceful oblivion. So she settled on doing what she was told and took in a deep breath…

Open your eyes and remember… nothing is true… everything is permitted.

Liz's eyes snapped open and found stared up at the thick canopy of tree tops, which barely allowed for beams of sunlight to flutter through down to the forest floor. Her body trembled and shook like a leaf on a cold fall day, clinging to the tree bark with all its might. The coldness of the ground seeped through her clothing, and her mind was numb, trying to process what had just happened. Her hands pressed against the hard ground as she pushed herself up. Slowly she turned her head side to side, finding nothing but wilderness surrounding her.

And she said something that summoned up the situation perfectly.

“What the ever loving clusterfuck?”
CHAPTER TWO

'Down the Rabbit Hole…via a Hidden Blade'

It is quite irrational to believe that a black cat can bring good or bad luck. Yet around the world many don't want to cross a black cat's path…I can't help but wonder if I did. It was like a strange and vivid dream, or perhaps a nightmare. It all depended on the point of view, really. And she tried to end the dream, but no amount of pinching her arm seemed to break her free. Her arms ached, and would have bruises from the abuse she had subjected it to. She still stood in the middle of a strange forest that she did recognize neither hide nor hair of. Livvy glared at the dark, green vegetation that surrounded her with seemingly no end. It would have been beautiful and she would have loved to capture it on paper or even a canvas, if circumstances had been different. She attempted to take deep breaths and counting back to ten to keep from freaking out.

It wasn't working. Her chest tightened with molten hot panic, and she reached up her fingers delicately wrapped around her quivering neck. How did she get here? It was all fuzzy and hard for her to remember. She clenched her eyes closed, hard. Playing Black Ops, teased Leo and Carl, then job interview (those bastards), the shop, plushy Altair—girl, ball, into road—shove—pain—blood— dead—a sharp pain shot through her skull and she gasped, trying to shake it off. Her fingers shook as her eyes slowly slid open. “Car…I was hit…by a car…” She stated, her voice very faint. She looked down at her body, with a perplexed and shocked glance. Nothing hurt. Swallowing thickly, she stood up testing her arms and legs. Then she felt for any broken ribs or pain, but once again, nothing hurt.

She remembered the car smacking her body. The way her flesh torn and blood poured out of her like a fountain, the pain had been the worst pain she had ever felt and that was saying something because pain had been an intricate part of her life in many ways. So what happened to the words? And why was she dressed so strangely? She crossed her arms when her finger tips came in contacted with a silky like fabric. She looked down at her clothes—actually looking, looking at them—for the first time. They were not the same clothes she had been wearing.

She mentally roared at herself. She pulled at the silky green tunic covered by a copper leather vest, tightly secured to her body with matching copper pants and boots.

Livvy reached up messing with the feather on her hat where her hair had been tightly bound and
shoved into. The only thing that was remotely modern was leather gloves, similar to the type she used when free running so she didn't fall off the side of a building. “How the hell?” Livvy muttered, slowly. “What the hell?

Was she dead? Was this some sort of purgatory or hell because it certainly wasn't heaven? There would be a pearly gate with a Saint to greet her, or something if it was heaven. Her temples throbbed with the beginnings of a migraine and she would kill for an aspirin right about now.

“This...is so not right.” Understatement of the year there, Livvy, she scolded, rubbing her face tiredly. She swallowed thickly and took a deep breath in order to calm her frayed nerves. Okay, y'know...I...at least, you're alive! See, I found a bright side though the dark side of that is you are dressed up like a Renaissance cast away and have been dumped in a forest. This is either the best prank Leo has ever construed, or I'm going insane.

And as much as hated it, the insanity theory was the most likely considering her family’s own history with it. Stormy eyes narrowed, she turned her focus onto other things. Like how the forest wasn't as wet or vibrant green like the forest back home. The color of the leaves and vegetation was a far dark green than the one she was used to. It was also too warm to be winter, she noted, far too warm. This was not the town of Serendipity, her heart sped up with that realization. Snow didn’t just magically disappear, and winter didn’t become summer at the blink of eye no matter how bipolar the Midwestern weather was.

Olivia pressed her knuckles against her lips, and she knew she could not just sit around. Even if she wasn't sure what was going on, she had to get moving. But where to start? The forest was large and seemingly never ending; it would be easy to end up running around in circles. Looking around, she tried to spy something that would help her—”Aha!” Livvy cried in victory, kneeling down to scoop as many pebbles as she could. “It's better than bread,” she whispered out. Rising, with arms full of pebbles, she picked a direction and started walking, dropping a stone behind her every once in a while.

Okay, the whole pebbles thing while in theory was good. In practice, it wasn't helping one bit. She ended up crossing her path more than once and by the time she found another line of pebbles she was about to give up getting out of this place. Licking her dry lips, she never felt so thirsty. Her mouth felt like a balls of cotton, and hunger gnawed at her stomach relentlessly. Looking up through the green canopies above, she could see the harsh orange of the sunset peeking through. Her heart skipped a beat when some wild animal, vaguely like a wolf or coyote howled. Soon it would be too dark to move around, and it was getting cold, she rubbed her arms.

Another set of howls. “Man, I am going to get eaten. And somewhere in the universe, Leo is laughing at me,” she groused, her mood turning more foul. She dropped all the rocks in her hands, to the ground.

Plan...plan...I need a plan. Fire, is a good place to start. It keeps you warm and can be used to fend off unwanted animal attention. Livvy glanced around. “Wood,” she muttered to herself, “can't have a fire without wood.” She needed wood, and some dry grass, dry brush to start off. She walked around the edge of clearing and found a couple of arms full of twigs and sat them down. She placed rocks in a circle, and then pulled hands full of dried grass and weeds in it before setting the branches on top.

“Now, the hard part...actually creating the fire,” Livvy whispered. She tore some more grass up from the ground, narrowing her eyes for the light was almost completely gone then place it on a piece of bark she found. She took a small stick, placing her flat palms on each side and started rolling it back and forth. It was a trying process as she continued that for several minutes with no success. But she kept on doing it, looking around with a very deadpanned expression as the mere minutes
seemed to draw themselves and lasting forever. “This…is so stupid,” she whispered to herself, the reality of her situation sinking in.

Swallowing the lump building in her throat, she continued trying to make the fire. This was not how she imaged this day turning out. Nope, right now, she should be joking and killing zombies after circling ads for work in the newspaper. Instead, she is lost in the woods dressed in really weird clothes feeling like a scared little child. She wiped away the tears with the back of her hand, shaking her head and continued trying to make the fire. She would not be weak. She would not cry. She refused to cry. She was going to make it out of this forest and she was going to figure out what was going on…and she was pretty sure her fingers were going to fall off.

She was about to give up when a tiny spark came to life and smoke started to rising from the weeds. Hope flaring within her, she leaned down and gently blew air into the sparks. It lit up in an angry orange, but no flame yet. “Come on, come on,” she breathed on it again and it went aflame. A moment of pure joy filled her and she carefully lifted the bark and placed into the mesh of stick and dried shrubs, and watched as the flames grew and grew until she was lying on the ground, taking comfort in the warmth.

Finally…got something right, she stared at the bright orange flickering flame and wrapped her arms around herself. The hunger and thirst were forgotten as exhaustion won out and she was out like a light.

Light…white…it was being in the Animus, and she was running? From what? She didn't know. All she knew it was big…it was bad…and it wanted to tear her apart. “Here she is.” It was someone, and they were talking about her. “Little Miss Muffet…counting down from 7-3-0. Watch out for the cross…they are coming.(1)” An image of a red cross flared up in front of her, like on a tv screen, stopping her short. Cross? Why fear a cross?

Then she was grabbed from behind, the life choked out of her in one harsh and brutal second.

“No!” Livvy's eyes snapped open. Then her face twisted into a grimace as she snapped the shut at the bright morning light. It was morning already? She thought with a pitiful groan, and flopped back against the ground. The sleep had not been restful and it only felt like minutes. Running a hand down her face, she heaved a sigh. “At least I didn't get eaten.” After saying that, she quickly leaned up looking at all her limbs then laid back down when everything was accounted for.

“Let me go!”

This time Livvy sprang up into a sitting position, eyes moving around the forest in shock. That was unmistakably a child's voice. Her eyes narrowed as she slowly pushed herself off the ground, warily. Her eyes darted from tree to tree, tension coiled tightly in her limbs trying to ascertain where exactly that voice came from. She didn't wonder long when a male's gruff voice followed, “Silenzo, son of a putanna!”

Her blood rushed through her veins like ice, and panic pulsed through her limbs like a quickening. Her brows knotted together, and her lips turned downward. For a long moment, she stood there still as a statue as an internal debate raged on inside of. In the end, she swallowed down the bundle of nerves knotted in her throat and she headed towards the voices, despite the warning going off in her head: Danger, Will Robinson, Danger. Putting one foot as quietly in front of the other, she made it ten feet before she finally, through the thinning trees saw what was going on. A young boy was on the ground, holding his cheek. Two men in red and gold armor towered above him.

“Let me go! Let me go!” The young boy demanded.
The guard drew his sword. “They said leave no one alive. Luck does not favor you this day, child. Shouldn't have been sneaking around.”

Oh, Gods, they are going to kill him! I have to do something! But what? Livvy's heart leapt in her throat as indecision tethered her to the spot. She tried to think of something, looking around for something she could use as a weapon. Her heart pounded inside of her chest as the second guard, the more timid one standing off to the side spoke up. “We should hurry…I've heard rumors of this forest.”

“I do not believe in ghost stories,” the first guard (whom Livvy had dubbed Dumb) spat at his weaker counterpart. “Now to finish this—”

No, Livvy thought unconsciously leaning forward and under her foot a twig snapped. It was if the whole forest held its breath as the guards went still, not even a bird made a sound.

Dumb turned towards her hiding spot and hissed, “What was that?”

“Perhaps an animal?” Dumber, Livvy decided was a fitting name for the other guard, asked. Dumb and Dumber, what a pair, Livvy thought, choking back a nervous chuckle while her limbs went taunt prepared to run. Her heart fluttered in her neck, and her palms grew slick with sweat.

Dumb looked around, holding up his sword ready to fight. Olivia's eyes traced down the blade as a bead of sweat rolled down her forehead. Distraction...need a distraction. Livvy held her breath as her hand gripped the dirt on the ground, waiting as the guard drew closer and closer to her hiding place then she jumped up throwing the dirt right into the guard's eyes. Dumb cried out, holding his face while Dumber stood there stock still making it extremely easy for her to nail him in the family jewels with the hardest kick she could muster and then she ran over to the boy grabbing his arm.

“Get up! For heaven's sake, get up and run!” Livvy nearly shouted at him. The boy didn't need to be told twice and scrambled to his feet.

Dumb yelled, “You bastardo! I will get you for this!”

“Yeah, if you can catch me!” Livvy really didn't know where the bravo came from, but it felt good for all of a second. Her fingers clutched the boy’s tunic, keeping herself between him and the two men at all times. “Don't suppose there's any where we can run to nearby?”

The boy just shook his head.

This has to be a dream. This has to be a nightmare. Olivia tried to reason with her, her breaths short and shaky. The pair rushed through the forest, her eyes darted all along forest for any place, any small alcove or tree that would hide them from plan sight. Memories flooded through her, of a younger Olivia that rushed through the forest doing the same thing, and she felt the panic slice through her gut. Now was not the time for a trip down memory lane. “This way,” she tugged the boy along. She and the boy ducked into some bushes and down a steep hill, concealed by the tree leaves and branches. Livvy made the boy sit down almost huddled into the tree roots before moving to peer up the hill. The guards stopped running not too far away and Dumb stated, “Where did they go?”

“Vanished…like ghosts.”

“They aren't ghost. They are real and they will taste death on the end of my blade,” Dumb declared, viciously. He took his sword and started slashing at branches, and cutting them down.

Olivia licked her dry lips. Her heart hammering inside of her chest in time with each slash, and her fingers twisted against the bark of a tree nervously. The boy behind her was doing no better.
A loud noise—the unmistakable stomps of hooves thundered through the silence and a moment later a horse rushed into view just past where they were hiding. Olivia flinched hard, and bit her tongue to keep down the startled shout that welled up in her throat. She felt the child tremble by her side, his fist in his mouth and unshed tears swimming in his eyes. She understood why. The odds had been bad when it was two guards against them, now there were three. On top of the horse, dressed in a more fancy armor than the other two, was another guard.

“Balls!(3)” She hissed, feeling as if things have gone from bad to worse. **Seriously, who the fuck are these people? Is it some kind of cult bullshit?**

The guard on the horse approached Dumb and Dumber, giving them a harsh and reprimanding look. “Is there a reason,” he demanded, coldly, “that you are attacking woodland spirits instead of manning your posts?”

“Two miscreants have hidden themselves here,” Dumb explained, grumpily.

Olivia pinched the bridge of her nose. Her plans to dodge and hide their way out of the forest went down the drain. A horse could easily outrun them, and with three sets of eyes, the chances of them being caught had grown. She glanced down at the frightened kid and her side, and reached to rub his back comfortingly. “What’s your name, kid?” She asked, her tone light.

The boy looked up at her, his big brown eyes shining with apprehension. “V…Valentino…” He stuttered, his throat bobbed.

“Valentino, that's a nice name,” Livvy said, gently. She leaned down so that they were on eye level, and she squeezed his hand soothingly. “Well, Valentino. I'm going to get you out of this, okay?” She promised, her voice soft and filled with compassion. She made the promise even though she did not know if she could truly keep it, but she felt compelled to give this scared child a bit of comfort that she herself hadn’t been given once upon a time. “Now, I’m going to go back up there to scope out the situation. You stay here and do not make a sound.”

“Okay,” she said, reassuringly though she didn’t know if she were trying to him or herself. Her fingers dug into the ground, using it as leverage to make her way back up the hill. She kept low to the ground, and moved at a snail’s pace cautiously. She had learned self-defense. Had been brutally taught how to defend herself from threats, but it had been years since she put any of that knowledge to use. Years that had passed and muscle memory had long since faded. What had she gotten herself into? What kind of messed up nightmare was this?

“Where did that stupid bastardo go?” Dumb snarled.

The guard on top of the horse, chuckled. “He is smarter than you if they managed to slip away.”

“Okay,” she said, reassuringly though she didn’t know if she were trying to him or herself. Her fingers dug into the ground, using it as leverage to make her way back up the hill. She kept low to the ground, and moved at a snail’s pace cautiously. She had learned self-defense. Had been brutally taught how to defend herself from threats, but it had been years since she put any of that knowledge to use. Years that had passed and muscle memory had long since faded. What had she gotten herself into? What kind of messed up nightmare was this?

“Where did that stupid bastardo go?” Dumb snarled.

The guard on top of the horse, chuckled. “He is smarter than you if they managed to slip away.”

“He came out of nowhere, like a ghost,” Dumb stated.

*Wait? Are they talking about me?* Livvy's face scrunched up in offense though she supposed she could be mistaken for an extremely feminine boy. Still, her feminine pride was a bit stung though it was not the time to think upon such things. Her eyes flickered over the surroundings, and where the guards stood before an idea formed inside of her mind. A thoughtful look lingered in her eyes as she stared at a rock outcropping just to the side of the road, it was a good vantage point not far from here. Making a decision, she slid quietly down the hill and met the boy's questioning stare. “Can you climb?”

The boy nodded.
“See that rock over there,” she pointed it out. After he gave a nod, she continued, “That’s where you need to be. Keep an eye on how this turns. If it turns bad, you hurry back here. See the opening just underneath that tree?” She gestured to where the dirt had given away, and under the roots of the tree was a small niche. It was just big enough for a child his size to curl into and hide. “If this goes wrong, and something bad happens to me, I want you to hide in there. Hide in there until they are gone, alright?”

”A-alright,” Valentino whispered.

Olivia waited until she knew Valentino was up on the rock. She could barely make out his form, lying prone on the very top. Only the birds above or someone who knew where to look would know he was there. She climbed back up the heel, her stomach twisted in apprehension. You are in control, Olivia thought, giving herself a mental pep talk. You can change this nightmare.

The three guards stood arguing over where to search and Olivia took in a deep breath, and walked out right into the open like she didn’t have a care in the world. Dumber saw her first. “You!” He pointed straight at her, his eyes wide with shock.

“I’ll kill you!” Dumb ran forward, stood upward for a slash and Livvy stood still until the last possible moment and dodged. The sword slammed into the ground and Livvy spun around, her fist slamming straight into a pressure point along his arm. The man crumbled in pain, gasping loudly as his sword fell from his hand.

Her knuckle sung with pain, felt adrenaline pulse through her veins like a drug that created a high at her successful strike. She grabbed the back of his head, and brought it down while she shoved the knee up. She repeated the motion two more times before the tension slipped out of his body, and he slumped uselessly on the ground. It hurt like heck, and if this hadn’t been a dream then she would have been worried about one hell of a bruise tomorrow.

“Monstro! Witch!”

Olivia turned to see Dumber pulling out his sword, and the guard on the horse dropped down on his saddle, pulling his knife free from his belt. “Now is there really a need for such violence? I mean, we’re talking foul language, adult content…” Her lips quirked in a smirk, her eyes glittered with humor. It was a dream, after all. She couldn’t really get hurt, the deceptively benign notion crossed through her mind. It lured her in like a bait and switch, but it all came crashing down from a tip of a blade. The two guards charged her, and Olivia clumsily dodged to the left. Her feet had slide across foliage, and unsteadied her.

And the tip of the knife slashed into her arm, through her clothing and skin, causing blood to immediately rush out. It was like being prodded with a white-hot iron, the horror of the pain and the following realization that was even more horrifying: She was not dreaming! The nerve-ending of her body shuddered and trembled, and all her breath had rushed out of her lungs leaving her rooted to the spot. She panicked, barely dodging the next attack—and heard his voice reprimand her in the back of her mind. Fear like chunks of ice clotted her blood, and all the bravado and self-confidence dropped straight out of her body.

The harsh reality hit her will all the force of a tidal wave. No matter what training she did have, she was too flustered, too frightened to even put it to good use. The shock of it all was hitting her body, and she knew that the only good option was to get out of her as fast as possible. She had to get the boy and get out of her now. She went to turn when the pommel of a sword slammed in the back of her head. Pain splintered through her skull, and for a second her vision went jet black as her knees went weak right from underneath her. Tears burned in her eyes, Olivia scrambled to push herself off the ground.
She blinked rapidly to clear her vision, and she could make out the blurry image of the guards stalking towards her. The cold sensation of death clawed into her heart, and she could see her life flash before her eyes.

Don't die. Survive.

It was like a match to the flame, and her mind went into overdrive. She tried to remember everything about her training, and the self-defense she had learned with an almost religious practice. The man with the sword came at her, but she twisted out of the way as the sword impaled the ground. She kicked his arm hard, causing him to drop the weapon before throwing her whole weight into his knocking him into the other guard. Looking around, she spotted the horse and made a dash towards it. Leaping up, she grabbed the saddle and barely pulled herself up. “Giddy up.” The horse just snorted. “Come on, move!” The horse tilted its head back and twitched its tail at her. “Really? Why are you being so stubborn? You're a horse not a mule!”

“Kick its sides!”

Olivia looked up and saw the boy standing on the tall rock, shifting back and forth in nervousness. With a glance back at the two guards who were picking themselves off of the ground, she quickly took the boy’s advice. She tightened her hold on the reins until it was knuckle white, and kicked the animal’s sides, muttering an apology out of the corner of her mouth while doing so. The horse reared up letting out a cry before barreling forward.

The guards leapt out of the way to avoid being trampled on. As the horse rushed towards the rock Olivia held out her arm and the boy leapt off the rock. His fingers latched onto her arm, and used it swing onto the saddle behind her. “You good?” She asked, looking over her shoulder at the boy.

“Yes.”

“Hold tight,” she warned, and the second the boy wrapped his arms tightly around her waist, she tapped the horse’s sides again. The horse took off like a bat out of hell, and soon the yelling and shouts from the two guards were a distance memory. Down the winding road, the horse raced onward with the warm wind rushing past them, and the surrounding world nothing more than a greenish brown blur. A queasy and weak sensation gripped her from the inside out; the adrenaline that had spurred her on in the messy and ill-attempted fight drained out of her. A bitter and hysterical laughter passed through her lips.

The boy just leaned back giving her a strange look.

Olivia swallowed her insane laughter, and took several breaths. “Don't suppose you know where to go, kid?” She asked, once she managed to contain herself.

Olivia had some serious doubts about the boy’s sense of direction. She didn’t want to accuse him of lying per say, but it had been hours, and they had yet to see anything that wasn’t forest. The sky was painting in different pinks and many oranges with red nearest to the blazing ball of flames as it fell behind the horizon. Olivia's jerked her head up, as once again her eyes fell closed. Blinking, she glanced at the horse that neighed and Livvy patted its neck with a sympathetic smile. “I know, I know, you're tired. I am too, boy…or girl,” she told the beast of burden, with a deep sigh. She really didn't look when she stole the horse. “But we are almost there…I think.”

The pain in her arm had now turned to nasty burn, even the slight movement of the riding, made it sting. She waved away the flies that were surrounding it, grimacing at the dried blood caking it. That's attractive, she shuddered with disgust. She was going to have to go to the hospital, and soon
before it ripened with infection. If it hadn’t already; the red ting and swelling to the skin surrounding the world didn’t give her a lot of hope.

“We are,” the boy said. “There should be some farms up ahead.”

*Farms?* A sense of relief and hope rose up inside of her heart at that. Maybe she wasn’t as far from home as she thought. Serendipity and the surrounding areas were filled with lush farmlands. It’s what kept the small town thriving and not dying away like so many other little towns had. The trees began to thin out, and Olivia stared at the grassy plains that came into view. Flowers of purple and red covered some fields, to the left there looked what appeared to be a vineyard and in the field of hay in the distance, she could swear she saw people working it with sickles.

The Amish did not use modern tools to work their fields. Perhaps, that could explain it. And yet, Olivia’s heart sank like a stone, that wouldn’t explain everything. There were no power lines, no phone towers nearby or in the distance, and even if this were Amish country, those things should still be here. There was something off about this, and the answer was right on the tip of her fingers. For the life of her, she couldn’t reach out and grasp it. Narrowing her eyes, she asked leaning her head back as the horse galloped seemingly knowing the way. “What city did you say this was?” She asked, with a flicker of hesitation in her voice.

“You do not know?”

“No,” Livvy frowned, “nothing here is familiar.” *That's not entirely true, there is something painfully familiar about this, but I can't seem to figure out what or why.* She let the horse trot up the familiar path, it seemed eager to get to where it wanted to go. Olivia figured her best bet for answers was with the boy, but he had been so quiet and still that she knew she needed to draw him out of his shell and calm him down before she could pepper him with questions. “So…do you normally run around in forest playing with strangely dressed men or is this a onetime thing?” She asked, with a light frown.

“I…” the boy bowed his head. “My father…they took him away.”

“Told him away?” Olivia asked.

“They killed him two months ago.”

Horror burst through her body and for a moment, she couldn’t even understand his words. “You mean they killed him? What about law-enforcement? Why aren’t they in jail or being charged?” Livvy gaped, in shock.

“They are supposed to enforce the law,” the boy snarled, with a horrible pain and anger that should have never been on such a young child’s face. “But they are the ones, who hurt us!”

“Valentino!” A sharp, woman's voice came.

The horse made a snort before it came to a halt at the unexpected shout, and a woman in a dull grey dress with a wrap over her hair came rushing up towards them. Her eyes—the same shade of Valentino’s—were locked on the boy with a fierce anger that only a mother could produce, and her hands were on her hips when she came to a stop beside them.

Valentino peered around Livvy and said meekly, “Hello, mother.”

“Where have you been?” His mother snapped. “I have been searching all around the farms and the city to find you.”
Olivia could have cried with relief. A city meant that medical help, and telephone was within her reach. She could call the police, Leo and Carl, and hopefully put this nightmare behind her soon.

“I… I was…” The boy fumbled for an excuse.

“Playing in the woods,” the lie floated off Livvy’s lips. “I found him; he got his foot stuck.”

“Stuck?” The mother pinned Livvy with that said she saw right through Olivia’s smokescreen. “Stuck where?”

Olivia blushed, slightly. “Between a rock and a hard place?” She asked, with a sheepish grin.

“Yes, he is;” the mother said, a little amused but more wary. She turned back to her son and scolded him, “You went after those guards. How could you put yourself in such danger? Do you want to die?”

“Yes, of course not! And I wasn’t in any trouble! He saved me!” Valentino pointed to Olivia, with a bright smile on his face as if that would surely convince his mother to let go of her anger.

Olivia frowned, touching her face. She had never been what she thought vain, but these people calling her a man was giving her a serious complex. What was it about her that made them think her so mannish? She also was unnerved by how they were talking about those men. It wasn’t so much the words, but the context of them that made them so disturbing. They spoke about those men like they had been a problem for a long time, and she couldn’t understand why the local police or someone hadn’t down something about them.

“Mi dispiace, Ser, I cannot thank you enough to coming to my misguided son’s aid. If it had not been for you, then I would likely be mourning my child on top of my husband,” the woman stated, with a grateful smile in Olivia’s direction.

“Olivia and I’m a woman,” was the first thing out of her mouth. “And it was no trou… well, it was a bit of trouble, but it was worth it.”

The woman blinked in shock. “I’m sorry, I assumed since the way you were dressed. Not many—or any that I know of wear such attire,” Valentino’s mother flushed in embarrassment. “It is quite obvious now that you’ve pointed it out.”

“The guards thought I was a man, too,” Olivia said, giving the safe reply. It really must be Amish country if no women around here wore pants. It was the only thing that made any sense.

“Thank goodness for small miracles then,” the woman said, relieved. “They will be looking for a man, not a woman. And I cannot thank you enough for the deed you have done today. I don’t know how I will repay you.”

“There is no need to repay me,” Olivia shook her head.

“Goodness, your arm,” the woman gasped. Her wide eyes locked onto the throbbing wound, looking faint. “We should take you to the doctor. Come, I will show you the way.”

A doctor? Good. A doctor's office, where they can stitch me up and I can use the phone. I think I have all my insurance stuff memorized, she thought, the wariness in her soul soothed away. It finally felt like fortune had turned in her favor, and she went to start the horse forward when the woman shook her head.

“No, you must leave the horse. It’s a Captain’s horse. It will draw more attention.”
Glancing down at the armor and red flag hanging of the saddle, Olivia gave a tiny smile. “Yea, I would say so.” What kind of ‘Captain’ rides a dressed up pony? Despite that thought, Livvy eyed it as a memory stirred in the back of her mind, but Valentino jumping off the horse startled her. Shaking her head, she moved to follow and when she touched the ground she groaned in pain. With a hiss of pain, she straightened her spine and rubbed her thigh absentmindedly.

“Not for horseback riding?” Rona inquired.

“It’s…not something I’m used to.”

“I am Rona,” Valentino’s mother introduced herself, “it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Likewise, though I wish it was on better terms,” Livvy told her, sincerely. The trio walked up the road in silence after Olivia patted the horse on the next and said goodbye to the animal. The horse had huffed, and walked off like it knew where to go. When she got a telephone, she’d make sure to mention that someone needed to come and round it up before it got lost or hurt. Olivia looked at her surrounding, and while they weren’t alarming by any stretch of the imagination, there was a feeling of being out of place. She felt like she was a piece of a different puzzle that fit in the spot, but was a different pattern that threw the whole picture off.

It wasn’t that Olivia didn’t believe in the goodness of people’s hearts that made her wary about following the mother and son down the road. It was the fact that she had seen just as much good hearts as bad ones, and while Rona seemed like genuinely good person, a part of her was waiting for the other shoe to drop. She shook such pessimistic thoughts from her head, and looked at the farmers who toiled away in the fields with a tired glance. Surely they used tractors, at least? Or a car? She looked to Rona, but the woman made no mention of a vehicle and just kept walking up the dirt road. Was this a back road? It had to be, the main roads and highways would be paved.

“Where are you from?” Valentino asked, making her jump and look at him.

“Valentino,” Rona tried to shush him, but the little boy was persistent. “Cause you’re pale, everyone I know isn’t pale,” Valentino said, quickly. Apparently the shyness had worn off. “And you’re eyes look kinda of funny too.”

Said funny eyes blinked in bemusement before Olivia laughed out. The cheekiness was hard to get mad at. It was endearing, and it honestly reminded her of herself when she was younger.

Rona gave her son a reprimanding glare before she turned to Olivia. “You do look a little bit foreign is what he means to say. Are you even from Italy?” Rona questioned, curiously proving just where Valentino got his cheekiness from.

Olivia’s laughter ceased. A furrow settled along her brow, her grey eyes pinned Rona with a confused look. “Italy…as in Italy? Venice, Florence, Tuscany, that kind of Italy?” Olivia asked. She didn’t think she looked like she could be from Italian. Her skin was nothing like the rich dark hue that Italians were depicted to have in books or movies, though she wished she did have that kind of skin color. She got burned so easily by the sun, it wasn’t even funny. And while her hair was russet brown, it was not like rich, lustrous hair that had been attributed to the hot-blooded people. Though she had no first had accounts, only through books and seeing actors who were Italian or Italian descent as reference points.

“Yes, that Italy,” Rona replied, with a laugh.

“No, I cannot say I have the pleasure of being from Italy,” Olivia said, slowly. She was still a bit confused as to where Italy had come into the conversation. “I hope to one day get to go and see it
though. Even as a child, I would look at maps and books of places and Italy always intrigued me.”

“But you are here now,” Rona pointed out.

That startled a laugh from Olivia, who looked at Rona like she was crazy. “Uh, no. There is no possible way that I am in Italy. That’s half way across the world and…” Olivia trailed off, her eyes flickering to their surroundings. A cold, clammy sensation dripped along her spine and there was an answer if front of her face. An answer she deliberately ignored because it was too fantastical, too unbelievable to let life be given to it. “Speak some Italian if we are in Italy,” she sputtered, giving a sharp wave of her arm. When pain rippled across her skin, she regretted it immediately and gingerly rubbed the skin around the cut to soothe it.

“You are…speaking Italian,” Rona looked at her concerned.

“Unless Italy has adopted the English language and is calling it Italian now, I am most certainly speaking English,” she told the other woman, with an unladylike snort.

“But you are speaking Italian,” Valentino said, blinking up at Olivia with confusion on his face.

Olivia paused. Her mind felt like it was in a chariot face, but couldn’t keep up with anything that was happening. She looked at her surroundings—actually looked instead of avoided—and her heart gave a sharp twist. Her scalp prickled with unease and panic. There was a study that said if two answers could be true, the simpler one was the most logical choice. Except the simple answer defied logic, and even if she accepted that she was in Italy, where were the power lines? Where were the cars or machines? Her brain hurt and she ran her hands down her face, feeling a wave of dizziness shot through her mind. “But why does this sound like English?” She asked, in a very quiet voice.

“Perhaps the guard hit you too hard,” Rona stated, slowly, but she didn’t seem sure about that. “Ah! Here is my home.” They walked around a line of trees that had obscured their vision and Rona introduced, “The beautiful San Gimignano.”

“San Gimignano? Like the one in Tus—” San Gimignano in all its glory was standing there. Olivia walked through the gate just a step or two behind Rona and Valentino, her body on autopilot as her brain completely shut down in the face of the impossibility right before her eyes. People milled about in clothing that looked straight out of a Renaissance fair, except it looked way more authentic than any of the empire waist dress and tunics she had ever seen at those functions. Blame Leo, he wanted to go to one for his birthday. Even had a man draped in black with an il dottore mask upon his face, preaching about his freshly caught leeches. While the people could maybe be explained away by a carnival that was taking place, the buildings themselves could not be so easily explained away. It was not so much the buildings themselves, but what they lacked. Any modern features such as satellites or antenna, all of it was absence This wasn’t 2012, was the only tangible though that she could latch onto her. Her mind was a whirlwind where her thoughts were jumbled, and moved too fast for her to comprehend. Panic latched firmly onto her heart, and she felt her knees wobble a bit beneath her.

“Are you alright?” Rona asked, her voice sounding faint and far away. “You look rather pale, and I am not talking just about your skin color. You look sickly pale…and a touch green.”

“Not…doing so well,” Olivia muttered, her voice barely more than a whisper. Her head spun, and she was certain that she was going to pass out. It had been so obvious, but so impossible at the same time. The lack of power lines, tractors, cars, paved roads, the clothing—all of it had one single common answer that would explain everything: Time Travel. As much as she couldn’t explain how, she could not deny the fact that she was literally standing in a Tuscan city in the Renaissance time period. She swayed, the blood loss on top of the shock making her sick and dizzy.
And as if things were already worse, she heard a familiar voice behind her that made her entire body cringe with fear. “At least we found the horse,” said a voice that couldn’t be anyone other than Dumber, one of the guards’ from earlier.

Valentino went to turn around, but Olivia grabbed his shoulder forcing him to stay looking forward. Moistening her dry lips, her grey eyes met Rona’s dark gaze. “The guards,” she mouthed, her jaw trembled ever so slightly.

True fear shined in Rona's eyes as she pulled her son to her side tightly. She cradled him in her arms as if a mother’s hold could shelter him from the threat that stood at their backs. Glancing over her shoulder, Livvy saw the worn down soldiers and prayed that they were too tired to notice them. That they would just pass by and everything would be alright.

“Hey…haven't I seen you somewhere before?” A guard stared at Livvy's back.

Apparently that had been too much to ask.

Alternate Earth

Kentucky 2012

Meanwhile, Leo grabbed a soda out of his fridge and kicked it shut before he snagged his bag of chips off the counter. He glared at his pile of books, where his current thesis sat neglected. After being rejected once again to have his studies funded, Leo couldn't put his heart into. Instead, he was binge eating and losing himself in the games. He dropped to the couch with a flop, and the bag of chips were pulled open with a satisfying pop. Leo sighed, pulling his blanket over his lap. He stared dispassionately at the television, and debated on whether or not to give up on the last bloody feather. He had never realized how much of a pain finding those things in Assassin Creed 2 until he spent nearly an entire day on it. He rubbed his temples, and then put on his headset. "Hey, Carl. I'm back. Is Livvy on yet?"

"Nope! Radio silence on her end."

"Livvy should have been here…an hour ago," Leo said, glancing over at the clock.

"She probably just got caught up in something."

He pursed his lips when a strange feeling twisted in his gut. Giving a sharp shake of his head, he grabbed his controller and proceeded to go through his game until he was watching the last cut scene and the credits. He waited it to go back to the title screen when something weird happened. Instead of it flickering Ezio's face before the title screen, it flickered to someone with a red hood, not white.

"Huh," he wiped his eyes, but he raised an eyebrow at the blood red screen that was before him instead a white one. "Uh…Carl…something weird is going on…” He sat forward, his heart pounded against his ribs. "Has your AC game...suddenly got some weird downloaded content because you won't believe what my game is doing right now."

Chapter End Notes

References
1: Little Miss Muffet Counting Down From 7-3-0. A Buffy reference, that has
relevance. In Buffy it meant the countdown from season three to season five when “Little Miss Muffet” aka Dawn would show up. Here in this story, it means Livvy and that she had two years until the events in AC 2 start happening. Just in case…I don’t own it. I was just borrowing.

2: Balls: A supernatural reference. Bobby Singer, a character on the show, favors this curse word.

RRs are appreciated.
Chapter Three

'Footsteps and Missteps'

San Gimignano, Tuscany

1474

There was a saying. It went: *If things were too good to be true, they probably were.* Olivia had known this for it was a cruel lesson very early on in life. She wanted to scold herself heatedly for forgetting it now. Everything had been going so well—too well—with Valentino’s rescue, their hasty get away, and they had made it all way to San Gimignano without issue. But then life, as per usual, decided to throw a curve ball that sent everything spiraling into chaos. As if the being stuck in the past hadn’t been frightening enough, Olivia now found herself being chased down like a wanted criminal along the rooftops. An ill attempt at refuge for running about the streets from the cursing guards seemed to have gotten her nowhere. Her heart pounded in her chest, and her lungs burned with the need for air, so she saw latter and went upward.

It was a desperate choice. She also came to the realization that free running was a lot more fun when the imminent possibility of death was not just ten feet behind her. No amount of playing AC, or training, or anything could prepare her for this. Nope, real life is a lot scarier. Every sound, every movement, all of it pressed in on her and it was too much. She could barely stand the sensory overload; her eyes flickered all over the place like she couldn’t control them. Was this better than being lost in the woods? Perhaps, only marginally so.

"Stop, bastardo!"

That is if she doesn't die. She would really like not dying.

"Where did he go?"

*They still think I'm a guy?* Livvy thought with a grimace. It was starting to give her a complex. She was not that boyish, and how she was mistaken for one was beyond her. Though she supposed certain stigmas around this time could have lead the guards to such a conclusion. Women wearing pants was not exactly encourage, and considered shameful—sinful even. It was either that or they had some feminine men. And if the guards were any example—all burly, big, and rough looking—it was the former.
And that the end of the roof! Olivia bit out a gasp as her legs slid out from under her as she tried to stop, suddenly her backside slammed against the shingles and she found herself sitting on the edge of the roof looking down at her dangling feet. Her throat bobbed, unsteadily. The twenty feet drop looked like it was miles down and an icy, damp sweat broke out along her forehead. "Oh…shit," she croaked out, her voice rough with fear. She felt like her heart had dropped out of her chest, and had fallen down somewhere she couldn’t reach it. Olivia had a certain feeling that overwhelmed her when she was confronted with heights.

Heights made her feel dizzy and her ankles weak. It was a mind wrenching kind of fear that froze a person to the spot. It's why she had only stuck to free running, and had foregone most of the climbing parts of parkour. Leo had dared her to climb a building and she did because she hated backing down from a challenge. Climbing was the easy part, but the getting down? It was downright terrifying. Olivia had gotten to the top of the building only to see the ground below, and she vomited. Leo had asked her if she need a bale of hay and she cursed his very existence, very loudly. Thankfully the fire department had shown up a half an hour later, Olivia had never been more grateful to be on solid ground.

To this day it was something that Leo had never let her live down.

"I've got him! There! There!" She heard a guard yell.

Shit! A jolt of panic rushed through her drawing her sharply back into the present. She gripped the adrenaline coursing through her veins, stood up and bolted in a new direction. But there is this funny thing about roof tops…They all eventually end. Livvy realized this as she once again came to a screeching halt. Her eyes moved around at the people chatting below unaware and then her gaze landed on a really random and quite convenient cart of hay. Those were real? It wasn't just for the game? Maybe… just maybe if I could just manage to get enough courage and take the leap, she thought and then as if sensing her thoughts, vertigo slammed into her and she quickly took a step back feeling panic gnawed at her insides like greedy fingers of a hungry man grasping the like morsel of bread.

"Stronzo!" She heard from behind her.

Olivia turned and saw the guard about ten paces behind her. She quickly dropped off the side, scrambling down the wall as fast as possible and as soon as her feet hit the ground she wished she could say she was off, but her legs wobbled. The wound on her arm, burning like an inferno, was bleeding again and her head felt light. Oh, shouldn't have slowed down, ’she cursed herself, her vision was going black and her hands started shaking. All the energy that she had seemed to be slipping away and fast. Swallowing down bile that burned in the back of her throat, she tried to cling to the adrenaline still humming through her veins.

"Got you!" The voice of the guard said.

A shadow fell over her and she burst into a run like a terrified, clumsy rabbit. It felt like running was futile, but what choice did she really have? 'Where to go? Where to go? How did this happen?' She cursed inwards, her eyes darting everywhere as the events that put her here in this position all came flooding back.

"The guards…"

True fear shined in Rona's eyes as she pulled her son to her side tightly while Livvy glanced over her shoulder at the guards. All the blood drain from the woman’s face, and Olivia could easily understand why. She could feel the terror building up inside of her as well. Her fingers curled into fists so tight that her fingernails bit into her palms, and her heart felt jammed up against her throat.
She clenched her eyes so tight, and prayed that she would wake up. It didn't work.

"Hey, haven't I seen you somewhere before?" One of the guards said, thoughtful with a finger pointed in Livvy's direction.

Olivia swallowed a frightened, hysterical laugh that welled up in the back of her throat as her eyes darted to the mother and son. Rona was trembling from head to toe, and Livvy could see the cogs turning inside of her mind. "You need to move. If they notice that you are with me...they will know Valentino is the boy from the forest," Olivia murmured, underneath her breath.

Understanding shined in Rona's eyes as well as indecision. Livvy thought for a moment the woman was worried about her safety and when she went to reassure the mother, Rona began. "That...won't be...I thank you for saving my son," she said and then pulled off her coin purse shoving it into Livvy's hand without preamble. Rona pulled Valentino back as she took a couple of steps away from Olivia, the poor boy looked confused. "...but I cannot let us be put into danger. Please understand."

"Understand?" Olivia suddenly felt like there was something about the situation that she was not grasping here. A piece to the puzzle that she was missing. It all became too clear in the next moment when Rona's face twisted up with disgust, and she pointed an accusing finger in Olivia's direction. "Thief! Thief! Stop him!"

Olivia's heart jumped in her chest, as if struck by lightning and she had only a split second to stare at the woman with an aghast look before she had to run as the guard rushed her.

Most people once burnt, twice shy. For Olivia, it seemed twice stupid. Olivia cursed herself underneath her breath for trusting a stranger she knew all of thirty minutes. She held her arm tightly blood oozing through her fingers and her head was pounding, pressure building through her eyes. She leaned against the alleyway for support. It wasn't loss of blood, she knew enough about the human body to know that. So there was something else wrong that was causing this sudden turn to illness, and she needed to get help. She had to go get help, right now.

But she could barely move. How much farther could she go before she collapsed?

"I lost sight of him!" Someone shouted.

"Again? Come poteva lei manda a monte di nuovo, lei l'idiot!(1)" Was the reply to that.

Olivia held back a cry of panic by biting her bottom lip harshly. She had ducked into the alleyway after rushing headlong into a large crowd hoping to use them to lose the guards. Surprisingly, it worked. She didn't bother turning around to see if they saw her, or if they were still following her. She had kept moving until black spots danced before her vision, and her legs could not move another inch. Exhaustion came crashing down upon her swiftly, and she closed her eyes taking in a long labored breath. Oh, heavens, she felt like she was about to throw... and then she did. She threw up.

Her face scrunch up as the bitter taste of bile coated her tongue, and a shudder ran down her spine as she stared down at the yellow puddle in front of her feet with more than little self-disgust. "Lovely," she croaked out, with a faint edge of sarcasm.

"Is that him...there—?" A guard asked a bit confused.

"Run!" A crowd of people came running from the other side drawing the guards' attention. "Run! There's a murderer on the loose!" the crowd shouted.

Olivia felt her head bob up though it took much effort, and she could make out shadows rushing past her towards the guards. There were so many of them that she could feel the ground tremble beneath
her from as if they were a stampede. One was screaming, it was a woman or that was Olivia assuming by her high pitched scream, "The Lord is my Shepard! The Lord is my Shepard!"

Olivia stood there several seconds, just breathing in and out as the group of people went by. Then slowly, she craned her neck over her shoulder to peer dazedly at the end of the alleyway uncertain if that had just really happened. The guards had shouted in alarm before they aborted their mission in finding her to reign in the apparent chaos. As soon as all they were gone, Olivia let out a breath of relief before her legs gave out from underneath her.

Exhaustion was an enemy that she could no longer fight, and the world around her went completely black as her eyes fell closed. She never noticed the white cloaked figure standing on the roof above, staring down at her with a bemused frown upon his face.

Livvy liked this. It was weightless feeling, one where no worries or responsibilities weighed upon her chest. Like she was a cloud drifting aimlessly across the sky, completely free. Then a sharp, painful smell reminiscent of salt brought her back to the world of the living so abruptly that she leapt forward a cry, "Son of a biscuit eater!" She pinched her nose involuntarily making a face, vaguely aware of someone laughing next to her. "What the hell, Leo?" She cursed, certain that only he would doing something this foul.

"Such language," a male voice that was not Leo's chided her gently, "is unbecoming of a young woman."

Olivia's eyes snapped open as alarm prickled along her skin, and found herself looking straight into the face of man wearing a white mask that vaguely reminded her of a bird and dressed in black robes stood staring down at her hands on his hips. It took her a moment to process it all, and when she did all she could do was wave awkwardly. "Uh, hi?"

"Hello," the doctor said, with an amused tone in his voice. His eyes crinkled behind his mask as he clasped his hands in front of him. "Feeling better?"

Olivia paused a moment. She was still a bit sore, and woozy, but it was leaps and bounds ahead of what she had been feeling when everything had went dark. Her brows pinched, and she wondered how she got here. It was a tiny room with multiple cots set up, some of them stained with blood. What an encouraging sight, she thought a bit idly. The doctor cleared his throat and Olivia realized that she had yet to answer. "Yes," she said, hastily. "Yes, I am. Thank you for the concern."

"Good," he stated, with a nod. "I feared that your fever wouldn't break. But it has," he pointed at the sweat pouring down from her forehead(2), "but you still may feel ill for a few more days. But with this medicine, the infection and illness will pass," he stated, pushing a bottle into the palm of her hand.

Olivia took the bottle, staring at it as if she had not seen anything like it before. She then swallowed thickly, and raised her gaze to meet the doctor's. "Um…thanks?" She said, feeling very confused. She sat there in silence, letting the second tick by as she was deep in thought. "Why…why are you helping me?" She had to ask, because from her experience no one helped without a reason.

"A man brought you here after finding you hurt," the doctor explained, picking up some bloody bandages from the counter. "He paid me to help you." The doctor cocked his head at her, curiously. "…you don't remember?"

Olivia squinted her eyes, trying to summon up some sort of memory, but all she could remember was the flash of white. She could also faintly recall a voice, but the words were lost to her entirely as well
as the rest of the memory. She let out a heavy sigh, and shook her head side to side. "No, not really."

"Hmm. The fever did have quite a hold on you. Some memory loss is to be expected give the state of delirium you were in." The doctor nodded as if this made sense and was nothing to be too concerned about. "But off you go, I have other patients to attend to and only so many beds."

Livvy looked over at the man who sat waiting with his wife, who coughed so violently that her body shook like a leaf in the fall. Olivia pushed herself off of the bed, a sheepish expression on her face. "Sorry," she felt the need to apologize.

"It is no problem," the woman waved off weakly as the doctor walked over to them. Livvy just nodded, before turned towards the door. She twisted the door knob, and she stumbled across the threshold and found herself once again facing in 15th century Tuscany. Her heart stopped in her chest, and she swallowed thickly when her mouth suddenly went very dry. Oh, how could she have forgotten? Especially when faced with a doctor wearing a freaking carnival mask? Olivia almost face palmed, and just barely refrained from doing so. Closing her eyes, with a mournful sigh. "I am never going to get used to this," she hissed out underneath her breath, and she peeled her eyes open by sheer will along because she really did not want to face what was before her. She stared at the people as they walked by in groups some holding lanterns, the horse drawn carriages, the smell...she grimaced. Yep, things back here were very, very unsanitary.

Let's tally the good things, shall we? Olivia thought to herself, with a hint of self-deprecation. You're alive, thanks to a mysterious stranger. If you ever find out his identity, send him a fruit basket. Everyone loves a fruit basket. That's all the good things I can think of. The rest of this whole time travel bullshit is just bad or insanely absurd to the point that I can’t even try to think about it. Honestly, am nearly six hundred years in the past. What am I supposed to do? Her feet mechanically drew her down the street. As much as she wanted to believe in the kinder and more open people who would be willing to let a stranger in...she was a modern girl. And the thought of staying with a complete stranger made her uneasy, unless it was in a hotel. They had inns back in this time. Maybe I can find one? Olivia thought with a sense of unease. This wasn't good. Livvy wasn't a people person, preferring her own company and solitude. Being in a group of people made her feel uneasy, and closed in. It stirred up not so good memories, and she rather not have to deal with those on top of all of this.

"Are you lost, dearie?" An elderly woman jarred Olivia from her thoughts. It was then that Livvy realized she had been standing in the middle of the street, unmoving and she released the breath that she hadn't even! realized she was holding.

Olivia turned and blinked at the woman. "What?"

The older lady chuckled, not in the least bit offended. "Are you lost, dearie?" The woman repeated, with an indulgent smile on her face.

Livvy stood there for a long moment filled with hesitation before she felt her head nod. "Am I that obvious?" She tried to play her nerves off as a joke, but her chuckle came out more than a little fake.

"San Gimignano is rather small and easy to remember to us who live here. Well, the city is easy to remember. Put me out in the countryside, I wouldn’t know up from down. But yes, you were a bit obvious, standing in the middle of the street gawking," the old woman, chuckled lightly.

Livvy only allowed herself to smile weakly. Trusting Rona earlier still burnt, and while this old lady seemed nice, she knew her history and knew this time period despite its entire splendor was harsh. "I..." A frown tugged at her lips, and her brows furrowed as a sigh fell from her lips. "I don't suppose you know where the inn is?" Olivia asked, cautiously.
The old lady laughed. "Oh, yes, just down there—that way. Called the Briar Rose," the old lady told her, gently patting her on the arm. "You can't miss it."

"Thank you," Livvy replied, gratefully.

"You are welcome, dear," the old lady said, walking away.

Olivia followed the directions given to her by the old lady, while she found herself awash in a sea of thoughts once more. Everything about her situation was difficult to process. The world around her was strange yet familiar as well. The way the people acted and spoke so different from the mannerisms of the twenty-first century yet she could see some things that reminded her of her everyday life. And the biggest question: How does someone get thrown into the past? It was not like she had a time machine readily available like Doctor Who. Nor did she think any aliens were going to be decimating the earth, though don't quote her on that. Given her current circumstances, she was about to believe that anything was possible.

She wrung her hands nervously in front of her, trying hard to appear as if she knew what she was doing as she passed a group of questionable looking men. 'Great. I'm starting to look for monsters in every shadow now,' she thought, warily. But who could really blame her? This time period was almost lawless compared to her time, and a lot more cutthroat, too.

The Briar Rose wasn't hard to find. While it wasn't far apart in design from other buildings, it had lavish red curtain and a large tapestry on the outside with a golden rose surrounded by thorns. Livvy didn't know why they would have it on the outside after all it would not withstand the weather, would it not? Olivia shoot such idly thoughts from her mind and looked up at the sign. The sign was painted with briars and roses upon it with words that looked like 'Briar Rose' though why it would be written in English puzzled her. Or was she seeing it in English? Such thoughts made her head hurt, and after today…she just wanted to sleep. She would think of things tomorrow. She made her way to the door and opened it.

The smell that hit her wasn't pleasant. It was stale kind of odor mixed with sweat and alcohol and burnt food that caused her stomach to turn. Her entire body seized as she battled with the urge to gag and throw up. It took everything in her not to run out the door, and drawing in a deep breath, she took another step forward. She needed a place to sleep, and she would just have to stomach the smell. She pushed her way into the loud establishment, where men were laughing, a few woman—courtesans, judging by their attire—were groped by some very, very drunk gentlemen. Livvy moved her eyes away and made her way to the bar, hoping the man behind it could help her. "Excuse me?"

"Yes, miss?" He turned to her.

Livvy couldn't help but grin a little bit. 'Finally someone realizes that I'm a woman!' She thought and then spoke when she realized she had been silent too long, "I need a room."

"It will be 30 florins," he told her.

She pulled out the bag and found she had 30 florins, she nearly snorted. The only reason she knew what florins were was because she had desperately wished to come to Italy, even before AC came out. As a child she had been enamored with the magic of Italy, studying it on maps as well as travel guides. There was an undeniable beauty of the country that had claimed her heart so long ago. She learned everything she could, its past, the currency, past and present and foods. This isn't how I imagined coming here. I imagined running a successful little gallery filled with art of all kinds and being able to celebrate my one day success with a vacation here, Olivia thought, sadly. She looked down at the lonely six florins left in the bag and knew unless she did something then tomorrow night
she would be sleeping on the street. *I guess I have to be a little thankful to Rona.* She also felt guilty, too. Rona and her son didn't look like they had much, but then she shook her head. She understood why Rona sent the guards after her, but it had almost gotten her killed so she wouldn't allow herself to feel guilt. She tried to smash the guilt down when she handed over the money and the man had another show her to the room she was staying in.

It was a small room with a bed and a fireplace, nothing more and nothing less. She also got a bowl of soup, and bread, apparently that came with renting the room. Nibbling on the much too hard bread, she thought, *Beggars can't be choosers.* Eyeing the questionable contents of the soup, she finally ate it when the hunger stabbing at her stomach became too much. She ate it as fast as she could without actually tasting it.

The ache in her stomach was gone as she put the empty bowl and plate on the little table beside the bed. She glanced at the bed with a worrisome expression and then she slowly sat on it. She didn't bother getting under the covers. She knew what hotels were like in her time, she didn't need to know what lied under the sheets in this time. She laid down on the bed, the wariness of the day sinking into her and she felt older and younger than she had ever before. She felt older because it seemed life had thrown too much at her at once, and younger because she never wished to be a child more than now.

*The only florins I have left won't buy another night. Might be able to afford some food if I am lucky,* she thought and looked up at the ceiling watching a spider scurry and she was prayed it wouldn't fall on her. Her day had already been bad, she did not need it to get worse. Pinching the bridge of her brow, she let out a harsh breath.

**Why...why am I here?** she asked herself. *I'd like to believe I'm here, not in a coma and this being a weird dream...I'd like to think I haven't gone insane...* But even those options could be true, the question is still there. *Why am I here? Because you are needed.*

_Sweet Baby Jesus!_ She jumped up off the bed, looking around wildly. Did she...no, it must have been her imagination. She was going to say it was her imagination, she glanced around the entire room to find nothing but the flickering flames of the fireplace, and she slowly lay back down. Tension coiled in her limbs, half afraid that something would jump out at her. She didn't remember when her eyelids fell shut. They just did. But with the unfamiliar noises, and heaviness that weighed on her mind, the sleep wasn't restful. In fact in the very corner of her mind, she doubted she'd ever sleep restful again.

Several days later, Giovanni Auditore sat in his office, contemplating. He stared over his intertwined fingers, with a deep frown on his face. His dark eyes were filled with worry and very much troubled. He knew he should focus on the more important things, but it plagued him. It was an unknown and not knowing something unsettled him, he thought as his memory of San Gimignano filled his mind.

*Giovanni had just finished assassinating Agapito Bangi, a man profiting from the farmer's suffering as well as working with Templar agents. He went over the information the man had given him quite a bit before he had died. It was not staggering, but worrying nonetheless.*

"_Cazzo!_*"

_Immediately, he went on alert, tensing when he realized he was not the one the guards were after. It appeared to be a young man running away from them, and he wasn't doing a good job. In fact, the effort the young man put into running was clumsily and quite labored. Giovanni moved slowly across the rooftops, not to draw unwanted attention. He narrowed his dark eyes and they flared gold._

_The world instantly changed. Becoming a dark, grey place except the two guards lit up a bright ominous red and the young man glowed...Giovanni reared back with a hard blink, the world_
melting back into its nature colors as he tried to comprehend what he had just seen. He inched his way cautiously closer, and watched as the young man contemplating jumping into the bale of hay before scaling down quickly as the guards got too close for comfort. He followed for his curiosity had gotten the better of him, and his eyes lingered on the young man dashing about, clearly confused what to do before he threw himself into a large crowd, breaking the line of sight. Giovanni watched as the young man then ducked into the alleyway, leaning on the wall for support.

His body was shook and trembled like a leaf, and then he promptly threw up. Giovanni felt pity for him, remembering some of his first times running from guards. "Is that him... there?" One of the guards had paused, seeing the young man standing there in the alleyway. Giovanni tensed, knowing he might have to intervene when a crowd of people came running past the guards. "Run! Run! There's a murderer on the loose!"

A woman's voice echoing through the alleyway past the young man was not even bothered to stop as she yelled, "The Lord is my Shepard! The Lord is my Shepard!"

They must have finally found Agapito's body, he thought as he watched the guards abandon their current goal and rush away to contain the chaos before anyone got hurt. The young man realizing that he was safe slid to the ground with labored breath. Then he stopped moving.

Giovanni hadn't hesitated when he leapt down from the rooftops and landed right in front of the young man. It was then he realized why he had such trouble shaking off the guards. On his arm was a red angry wound, quickly swelling with infection and pouring blood. Kneeling down, he inspected him, and narrowed his eyes triggering his eagle vision again.

The young man's body flared a bright, rich emerald. So he wasn't imagining it. Emerald. It was a color that he never encountered before using his Eagle Vision. His eyes went back to dark brown and the young man groaned, turning towards Giovanni and shock ran through the assassin. It wasn't a young man. It was a young woman, about the same age as his oldest son, he guessed. He reached out, placing a hand on her forehead. It burned, just like Petuccio's when he was sick. It became clear why her movements were so clumsy and disorganized. She had taken ill; the wound most likely had some kind of poison in it. Judging by the lack of pallor in her face, he knew he had to get her to a doctor and fast. Giovanni stood there for a minute, contemplating before picking her up. She no doubt had a family that would be worried about her, he reasoned with himself, but he didn't deny he wished to know what the color emerald meant. Friend? Foe? What?

It didn't take long for him to find a doctor. The city part of San Gimignano compared to the city of Florence, though it countryside was immense and vast; like all the cities he went to on missions, he knew it like the back of his hand.

The doctor looked up and said, "What do we have here?"

"She is sick with fever," Giovanni stated, laying her on the cart and the doctor leaned closer to take a look. "She also has many wounds. She has been cut on her arm and also some bruising on her face, as for other wounds, I cannot say."

"Hmm, a little foreign, isn't she?" The doctor muttered, checking her cheek before focusing on her arm. "Perhaps slave trade?"

Giovanni glanced at her. No, it wasn't that. She was dressed far too nicely to have been brought here by slave traders, though she was indeed foreign looking. Her skin was pale, not pale sickness either and it was far from the olive tones shared by most Italians. He refocused on the doctor, and inquired, "Will she make it?"
"Undoubtedly yes," the doctor stated. "Though she will be quite sick for the next few days and the cut I will have to stitch up, it will leave a scar."

Giovanni reached for his purse, "How much will this be?"

"250 florins," the doctor informed him, while getting a needle and string.

Giovanni paid the money when the young woman groaned, "Leo…? Carl…where am I? What's… going on?" Her eyes slid open, glazed and clearly out of it. They were a shocking swirl of blue and grey like dark thunderheads. "Who…are you?" Giovanni raised an eyebrow though he doubted the woman could see that. Her eyes however looked towards him, a moment of recognition before she slammed unceremoniously hard back on the cart, out cold.

The doctor stared for a moment before shrugging, "It's the fever."

The assassin merely frowned, pondering over the recognition he had seen as clear as day in her eyes meant before he nodded his head accepting the excuse for now. "I will have someone come fetch her when you are done."

"Places to be?" The doctor asked.

"Indeed," Giovanni stated turning around.

He had sent a thief, one of La Volpe's men, to get the woman, but the doctor had let her go. Apparently, there was an epidemic brewing and the doctor said he couldn't let her stay when others needed the bed more sorely than she. Giovanni glared at the candle flame, with a thoughtful frown. His more curious side wished to return to Tuscany to find this woman, and question her, but the logical side knew there were more important things to be done. He stared down at the letter. An important person to the Templar was in Florence and would be leaving under the cover of night. Giovanni was determined not to let that happen. Then inspiration struck as he had an idea.

"Federico," he called for his eldest son.

Chapter End Notes

End of chapter
AN: I didn't want to have to make Rona like that, but I thought of it this way. If I had to choose between my family's life over a stranger, I'd most likely chose family. But Rona did give her money, so she wasn't completely heartless.
LANGUAGES AND REFERENCES:
1.) Come poteva lei manda a monte di nuovo, lei l'idiota! (Italian) How could you mess up again, you idiot!
2.) Funny little note. You know where in movies people with fevers are always sweating, the truth is: When you have a fever you can't sweat. Your body is trapping all the heat inside, so when you fever finally breaks that's when you start sweating.
Reviews are appreciated! :D
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Four

Paint It In Red Pt 1

Apple trees. They were apple trees everywhere.

A never ending orchard as far as the eye could see, and Livvy strolled casually through the meadow with a content smile on her face. The colors of autumn were all around her. The oranges, yellows and browns leaves tickled her bare feet making a carefree giggle rise in her throat. The breeze was nice and warm and gently, making the trees gently sway as the sun shined brightly above her. She twirled the ends of her skirts about her feet. It was quiet, but a peaceful quiet.

Then suddenly her foot collided with something. Olivia paused, and looked down with a bemused frown on her face. The frown melted away into some like awe. It was an apple. A bright, perfectly crimson red and delicious looking apple. Olivia knelt down, and wrapped her fingers around the fruit before she stood back up. For a long moment, she stared at the apple then slowly she wiped it clean on her dress and put it up to her lips, taking a large bite. Then she blanched, spitting it back out.

“Ugh,” a shudder ran down her spine and wiping the nasty taste out of her mouth with the back of her had. She had never tasted something so foul, and she looked down at the apple which was rotten to the core. It withered and died right in her hand and Livvy dropped it in shock. In fact, it wasn’t just the apple in her hand that turned rotten before her eyes. Everything was. The apples, the trees, everything wilted and turned brown. The sweet scent turned sour, the smell of rot and death perfumed the air. The sky was now pitch black and Livvy stood alone in the darkness with silence all around. She took in a sharp breath, hysteria rose in her heart and her hands curled into fists at her sides.

This wasn’t right. This wasn’t a dream anymore.

This was becoming a nightmare. She pinched her arms, over and over again, but the pain wasn’t enough to wake her up. Her eyes moved around nervously, the sudden feeling of being watch was over whelming. You can change nothing. The voice was sharp and vicious, filled with malice. Livvy gasped, feeling as if she was drowning in the images suddenly slammed into her head.

A blood battlefield where broken and disfigured bodies laid as if they had been thrown away. A man in a white hood stood there in the midst of it and across from him stood a person in a red hood... they started charging towards one another...then the image changed. One who knows nothing can change nothing. It changed into a house consumed in flames where a shadow dragged a smaller shadow away from the raging inferno. Every picture tells a story...pictures of a soldier, a woman, a little boy and little girl burning into nothing but ash. Sometimes we don't like the ending. The image changed and Livvy started running. Something was coming closer to her, but she couldn't let it get
her. Or all would be for nothing. Sometimes…we don't understand it.

It caught her. Nails dug into her skin and held her immobile as she felt something inside her mind torn apart. Every thought, every last inch of her being ripped apart down at the soul and she prayed she didn't remember this pain, she didn't think she could survive if she remember it. And a voice shouted, “We should have left you ignorant!”

“NO! NO!” Livvy screamed, bolting off the bed with sweat pouring down her forehead. Her heart hammered against her chest, and her eyes darted around the room wildly. Her fingernails bit into the blanket beneath her, and she released a ragged breath as the surrounding walls came into focus and the shadows of night faded away. With a shaky hand pressed to her chest, she glanced over at the window. Sunlight pooled through the glass, and it was relief not to see darkness in the sky. Olivia licked her parched lips, she was sure the innkeeper would be coming to throw her out or demand another payment soon.

And that was florins she didn't have.

With a groan, she ran her hand down across her face tiredly before she managed to convince herself to get out of bed. She let out a yawn before she went to stretch her arms out over head then she let out a violent hiss as pain flared through her arm. She looked at her arm, puzzled then remembered the injury with a light frown. With a shake of her head, she strode over to the window and peered out at it. The view from the second story window wasn't spectacular by any means, but it was a pleasant view as any she supposed.

She didn't get to enjoy the view for long when nature decided to call, but then that posed the very worrying question: was there a bathroom here? What constituted as a bathroom in this time period? Her eyes moved to a door on the left side of the room. It could be a closet, she didn't exactly explore the entire room last night. She had been too tired to bother with it, but she really hoped that it was some sort of bathroom. She quickly walked over, and she pulled it open only to feel a fear twinge through her as she stared at the cast iron bowl that sat there alone in the middle of the room.

Her nose wrinkled at what she assumed was a toilet. A chamber pot, she thinks they called it. From what she recalled of the renaissance era, plumbing got better…for the rich. This inn was not so lucky. With a sigh, she crossed herself and even though she wasn't catholic she felt that it would hurt as she stepped into the room. She did what she had to do and go it done quickly. She washed her hands in the water basin on the vanity back in the room as best she could, mourning the loss of her sink, tub and toilet. The 1500th century sanitation was dismal, and Olivia sighed, sitting down on the bed.

“Alright,” she told herself, pressing her fingers against her closed eyelids. Her head was bent downward, and her elbows braced on her knees. “I need to think. I need be calm and think of a plan. I need to find a way to get money, to save money…and get a really good bathroom even if I have to build it myself,” she whispered out, with a heart sinking feeling in her chest. Taking a deep breath, she looked up around soaking in how different this was from home. She needed to figure out a plan; for all intents and purposes she was stuck here for the foreseeable future.

She didn't have many options.

In order to get the necessities such as food or a place to sleep, she had to do something to earn money. And a bath. She really needed a bath because she still smelled of yesterday's sweat and grim. She couldn't get a job. At least none that she could think of. In this time, women were more stay at home instead of doing manual labor and if they wished to work, one of the few jobs afforded to them was a courtesan. While she had nothing against a person who chose such a way of living because she believed to each their own, Olivia could not imagine herself as one. The very thought of letting
someone…she shook her head sharply. Yeah, that was not happening.

That only left one option left.

Stealing.

Her eyes roamed over the streets as she walked up the cobblestone path. While most of the daily things of this time period were lost on her, she knew one thing. The clothing really did make the person. The people who were dressed in colorless clothes, the ones she knew were hard times and probably could not afford to spare a florin. They would be off limits. She then eyed the fine robes of a couple of men. The rich were her targets, and it was easy to pick them out for they had more colorful clothing since they afford the more expensive dyes.

She rose off the bench, carefully and without hurry. She took a breath and tried to match her pace to that of the walking group. Cautiously, she watched them part before stepped into the group, making sure not to bump them or cause them to suddenly stop.

It wasn't easy. The first time, she apologized and commented that she was in a hurry before she practically ran away flustered. The group had easily accepted it. The second group, too. The third group would have, if she hadn't bumped into a man, knocking him and her right into the ground in a tangled mess of limbs. Once he got to his feet, he shouted at her, calling her everything from a puttana to a cagna.

Olivia was not one to take insult laying down. As soon as his mouth shut, Livvy replied with her own brand of insult. “Your momma's milk is old and moldy!” She learned a valuable lesson from that moment. Never insult a man with a sword, especially when she didn't have one of her own. She had turned and bolted not even bothering to apologize to the people who were shoved out of her way that time. She turned sharply down an alleyway, and when it was clear the man did not pursue her she pressed her back to the wall. This wasn't going as well as she hoped. She grimaced, and glanced down at her hurt arm. It was itching and burning. Her hand brushed up against the pouch and she realized she hadn't taken that medicine the doctor gave her.

Indecision filled her. She wasn't sure if she should take that medicine; after all, this was the time that they believed that a weekly bleeding by leeches was healthy. Or lead and pomegranate was a miracle cure. Gnaawing on her bottom lip, her head fell to her side, and her nostrils flared as she took a deep breath. She tried to ignore the burn as she stepped back out into the main street. She couldn't give up. She didn't have a choice.

This time, she didn't just focus on the groups, instead she looked at everyone. How the busy street and its people moved, the guards standing about really doing nothing but talking. She kept her pace slow and unassuming; her gaze was steady though never lingered too long on one person. Staring made people uneasy. She wiggled her fingers as if loosening them up for when she picked a pocket. Stealing wasn't a foreign concept to Livvy. She had done it before back in her “wild child” phase, but stealing something from a store shelf and off a person were two different things. She struggled to maintain the relaxed posture. Focusing her eyes away from them, she held her breath as she grazed past them and her hands grabbing the purses. They easily pulled away. Score!

She didn't run, not immediately even though her hammering heart threatened to burst out of her chest. Her legs twitched as she slowly made her pace faster, weaving into the crowd when she heard the exclamation, “My purse! There is a thief about!”

Slowly not to draw attention, Livvy slipped the purses into the pouch she discovered on her belt earlier that day and continued to walk down the street away from her crime. Her hands started shaking as the thrill of success rushed through her. To celebrate that little success, she went to the
market and bought her a peach. Biting into it, she savored the burst of the sweet ripe fruit on her tongue as if it would be her last. Hunger never made food had never tasted so good. The day had started out bleak seemed to be getting brighter much to her surprise. As she leaned against the brick wall, a voice nearby made her ear perk up. “Everyone knows that Salmoni keeps the people's money guarded and hidden away! Greedy bastardo…” A man grumbled underneath his breath.

“Keep your voice down!” A woman near the out spoken man snapped. “You don't want to draw the attention of the guards.”

Livvy frowned. Who was this Salmoni? Apparently someone rich and important and not nice. So it's mostly like a politician, she swallowed, chewing another mouthful of peach very thoughtfully. She didn't know why, but that conversation had left her with an unsettle feeling in the pit of her stomach. A foreboding sensation that lingered over her head like a dark cloud as she managed to steal a couple more purses, and leaving her total florins sixty-two. One man had been determined to get his purse back that he had chased her half way across town before giving up. Luckily, Olivia had always been good at running.

She stared down at the coins at the bottom of the bag with a light frown. It wasn't enough for a room at the Briar Rose, but it was more than nothing. And after watching several people accosted by guards, Livvy wasn't choosing a corner on a random street to sleep for fear of the same treatment. Looking up at the rooftops, a wave of nausea hit her and she groaned realizing she had only one option. At least on that would be semi safe, where she would be out of the way and from prying eyes. Olivia spent a good hour before she chose to make herself at home on a flat roof that was lined with a black cast iron fence. With her legs curled up against her chest, Olivia let her eyes slid close and took deep, measured breath then repeated the process until her entire body relaxed and she slipped into oblivion.

Federico Auditore was many things.

A fighter, a lover, a heartbreaker, a thief, and a future assassin, but the latter was not known to him. What he did know was his father was in secret business with Lorenzo De Medici. Something illicit, something dangerous and something he wanted in on. Giovanni had been starting to ease Federico into all of it even though Federico was still ignorant of many things. His first bit of training was blending in and learning to steal without being caught had been taught by a family friend, La Volpe. Though he was not to speak of the association within anyone, save for a select few. He also went on a few missions, just a delivering letter and retrieving things.

But never had he been sent to find a person.

His mind wandered of the description his father gave him, then to why this woman was so important. His father gave him no answer, but instead he pressed upon Federico the severity of this woman needing to be found. Federico sighed, looking out the scenery with a furrow in his brow. San Gimignano was a smaller city compared to some such as Florence or Venice, but the countryside surrounded by rich grassy plains in some parts, and in others thick forests with trees as far as the eye could see. The cobblestone path smoothed out the closer they got to the city, and the carriage came to a halt as they reached the gates.

“Finally,” he breathed out. It had taken a week and a half to pack and the make the trip from his home to Tuscany. He hoped the effort wasn't wasted and the woman he was searching for hadn't gone far. He stepped out of the carriage as the driver went about getting his luggage and he smirked at a group of courtesan that passed him by. They giggled, and batted their eyelashes in his direction.

At least, not all his effort would be wasted.
Livvy stared up at the treetops, traces the branches that crisscrossed like a never ending path above her before diving underneath the ice cold water. She scrubbed her fingered into her scalp, then out through her hair in an attempt to untangle every last knot. Her skin prickles, almost painfully, the longer she stayed in the pond. It may appear to be an extra measure to go into the woods to find a pond to take a bath, but those who would think that never knew the horrors of a public bath.

The horror, she shuddered, wishing she could scrub that memory from her brain. When she had first heard the public bath where the poor could go to get clean, she had thought it was better than living in filth. Olivia had seen much more than she had ever needed to see of other peoples’ anatomy. It was a brief moment of genius or perhaps weirdness, which caused her to venture out of the city. It took her nearly a day to find this pond, enclosed by trees, safely out of the way and only about a quarter a mile from the main road leading into San Gimignano. She chose to venture out here every other day at least. It was a lot of effort, but she was a modern girl damnit, and she loved being clean.

Finishing with her hair, she made a funny face at a fish that was watching her before breaking to the surface causing it to flee. The wind chilled across her skin leaving goosebumps in its wake, and she ran her hands up and down her arms in an attempt to make herself warm. She swam over to the shore where she had left her belonging. As her hands went about pulled on her clothes mechanically, she thought about the two weeks she had been here. While the idea of it all still seemed hard to grasp, she had had found a footing in the past.

The light of dawn had awoken her from her rooftop beds, and she had chosen to use her early starts to run around the streets of San Gimignano. It helped her memorize the entire city. The streets and the alleyways, not to mention running built up stamina. Then she pickpocket at least a couple of purses, limiting herself to that for she was afraid she might draw too much attention or gain a reputation if she took too many. She had also kept her spending florins to a minimum meaning she had to sleep on rooftops instead of the inn.

The roofs were, believe it or not, much safer than the streets. Finally, she button up the vest she headed back towards the city. As she trotted up the way to the city, Livvy couldn't help the frown tugging at her lips. Usually she felt so relaxed after spending time in her hidden sanctuary, but today she felt a sense of wariness she hadn't felt since she ended up in the past creep on her. A feeling that something was going to irrevocable change. Running her hands through her hair she entered the gate, neither her nor the man looking for her realizing they had brushed right by one another.

“I told the man who brought her here she looked a bit foreign,” the doctor was stitching up a patient while answering Federico's question. The doctor continued, “I'm well-traveled, but even I couldn't place her. It is very strange.”

“How so?” Federico had nearly zoned out after the doctor's long and uninformative speech. It was not things he didn't already know, or hadn't already suspected.

“Due to her appearance, I'd say she's a nomad, a child of wanders. She doesn't have the look of just one country that I could settle on,” he said, pointing the needle at Federico, causing his patient to wince as the string tugged on his skin. The doctor continued nonchalantly. “Brown hair, pale skin, light eyes…”

“I know what she looks like,” Federico cut him off, calmly. He pinched the bridge of his nose, and let out a light sigh. “I need to know if you know where she went.”

“Oh…” the doctor paused, before he gave light shrug. “Then I am no help to you.”
“That…is abundantly clear,” Federico said, dryly. He turned stalking off, with an aggravated sigh working its way up his throat. It was only a few moments later that La Volpe seemed to mystically appeared by his side.

“No luck?” There was amusement in his violet eyes.

Federico glared. “No. But you already know that. Did my father ask you to find her also?” He said, his eyebrow arched.

“Indeed I do and no, I was just intrigued to what trouble Federico Auditore could be getting into in Tuscany,” La Volpe let his smirk fade and he turned serious expression. His eyes searched Federico’s face as they strolled down the street. “You are looking for someone?”

The eldest Auditore child let the trouble comment slide. He answered, exasperation clear in his voice, “Yes, a young woman. She must be recluse, and keep none in her company to remain so anonymous. My father brought her to the doctor, but—”

“Ah, the woman,” the master thief nodded, empathetically. “Your father asked one of my men to look after her, but she had already slipped away into the night. Her description?”

“You're willing to help?” Federico raised an eyebrow.

“I am needed somewhere, but I have a little time to spare,” La Volpe stated, with his trademark smirk. “After all Giovanni would never forgive me if I allowed his son to get hurt.”

Federico made a not so nice gesture that if anything made La Volpa grin broader. Finally Federico shook his head, knowing he would win a game of insults. “She is short in stature, brunette and pale—very, very pale—”

“Excuse me?”

Federico's eyebrows raised up as the elderly woman carrying a basket of flowers approached them. La Volpe surveyed the woman with a single gaze before he approached, and then asked, politely, “Is there something wrong, Madonna?”

The woman said, “That young woman you are looking for, would she happen to have a hurt arm?”

Federico blinked, before nodded. “Yes, yes she would.”

“Thank goodness, someone has come looking for her. I thought she was a wee lost,” the woman tapped her temple. “Poor dear, looked like a scared little rabbit trying to find its way. I told her about 'The Briar Rose'. Just down that way. If you are lucky she might be there.”

A weapon.

Her stare hadn't left the blacksmith shop for about five minutes. She was considering buying one, but swords and knives were unfamiliar territory for her…well, she did a brief time at a fencing camp, but she had been eight and remember nothing except the word 'parry' or something like that. She knew how to use a gun, but when she asked, the man had no idea what she was talking about. Apparently, they would not be invented for another twenty years or so, if her memory served her well. It was probably for the best. She only knew how to handle modern guns, and messy with anything like that here would likely blow up in her face. Literally. Running her hair through her wet hair, she thought over her options.
The weapons were expensive, but Olivia had not had the best luck. And with the sensation of foreboding crawling into her stomach, a weapon may be worth the dent in her florins. She walked up to the blacksmith and said, “I’m… looking for a knife. One that is easy used, but will last.”

The blacksmith stared at her clothing, and concealed a grimace. “A present for your father?” He intoned, rather rudely.

Livvy paused, remembering women during these times didn’t exactly buy weapons for themselves. Given his attitude, he also had an issue with her clothing. She made a mental note to put her cap back on before a guard decided to take issue with it. Nodding, she said, “Yes, but for my brother. His first weapon.”

“Ah, a knife is a good choice for a first time weapon.” The blacksmith went about searching and he pulled out a long thin knife. “Might I suggest the stiletto? While it is not good for slashing, it is good for stabbing.”

Livvy nodded slightly. “Yes. I’ll take it. How much?”

He told her the price and she tried not the grimace. That would take more than half of her ‘savings’, but she reminded herself that money wasn’t good to the dead. She handed over the florins, letting the blacksmith count to check and then got the knife. She smiled, playing her part, “Thank you. My brother will love it.”

The blacksmith nodded before turning to the next costumer, Livvy turned walking away bumping into someone. “Sorry,” she apologized.

The man mumbled something akin to acceptance, but Livvy didn’t even raise her head instead was looking down at the knife in her hands. The man was too focused on looking for a woman in a dress, never noticing the woman he was looking for just past him. Livvy slipped the knife onto her belt making sure that it wouldn’t fall before continuing down the street.

After a few moments, she allowed her thoughts to wander. Why am I here? Is there a purpose or did I randomly fall through a worm hole? Her brows furrowed and her lips twisted downward. Or am I really dead and this some kind of hell or purgatory? She came to a sudden halt. A wave of sickness flooding over her as she stared at the large podium, a stage for hanging Livvy preferred to call it. But thankfully no one was hanging there today… not like the other day.

She had just walking when she stumbled upon it. Just walking when she saw the sight and it felt as if someone punched her in the gut causing her legs to buckle. She barely caught the edge of a wagon filled with hay. Her head pounded and her mouth went dry, the urge to throw up building painfully in her stomach. Her panic breathing drew stares, but she could care less. Her eyes and mind were fixated on something else. Her eyes burned with the sudden urge to cry.

It was a hanging sight.

She had stumbled upon a hanging. It was like watching a scene from a movie; she could barely believe it was real. She didn’t want it to be real. But it was. Oh, God, how it was… her heart raced in her chest as blackness swirled around her vision as she stared at the woman and a child—no more than seven—nooses around their necks. A ringing noise soared in her ears and the wind blew across, the bodies shifting in the window. She dry heaved, leaning forward to make it stop.

It became too clear in that moment, she wasn’t in home.

“No! Please! Let me cut them down! Please!” A man roared, running towards the podium. The
guards seized him and pulled him away. No one did anything. In fact a few more jeered at him.

What am I doing here? What am I doing here? Her mind seemed to be on the edge of hysteria. People are dying and I'm...I'm just here. I'm just standing here watching it happen! Her world wobbled and went black.

Livvy awoke hours later, realizing she had fallen into the cart of hay out cold. Running a hand down her face as she shuddered, adverting her gaze. The horror of that hadn't been something she thought about or anticipated happening. It just reminded that this time was far more brutal than her own, which did nothing for her worries.

“Look. She's a short, brunette, very pale, a foreigner. She would have hurt arm,” a voice came from behind her.

Olivia felt a chill rush down her spine. Her mind processed the words slowly, and she felt her stomach turn harshly because that description sounded a helluva lot like her.

“Yes, I am looking for her. It is important…”

“I don't know anyone in this century.” It escaped her lips before she could stop it and she craned her head over her shoulder to look at the man. He was talking to a group, his back was to her, her eyes moved from his deep brown hair cut shorter than most men's hair for this time period, down to his nice (probably expensive) black and red tunic then they went further down further. Her eyebrows rose as she took in the perfectly sculpted legs filling out the tights not to mention the nice backside. Oh, I'd like to know you. It was then she realized she had been staring at the stranger's behind for more than a few minutes. Get your head out of the gutter!

Why was he looking for her? How did he know of her? Did she steal from him? Thoughts rushed into her mind and she started backing away. One of the men in group looked around him, spotting her and pointed.

Of all the luck, she thought with several curses on the tip of her tongue. Livvy shook her head, side to side with her pulse thumping against her temples.

“Is that her?”

Shit.

The man turned around and Livvy paused momentarily struck by his handsome features. If he had been in her time, he'd definitely be a male model or something to that affect. His proud angled jaw, long aristocratic nose and his lips perfect for giving a charming smile. His dark eyes were expressive and filled with ire until they landed on her. A vague sense familiarity tickled in the back of her mind, like she should know this man. However, she just couldn't put her finger on it. She started backing away as the man took a few steps forward. He held out his arm and said, “Hold on! Wait!”

“Yeah…” She shook her head. “No.” She turned and bolted.

“Wait!”

She didn't have to look back to feel him following her. The hair on the back of her neck raise up and fear swept over her. She sprinted through the crowd, zigzagging through them trying to lose this guy. Tossing a glance over her shoulder, she saw that it wasn't working and the man was quickly gaining.

She slammed into someone, and found herself rolling on the group. Groaning, she grabbed her head where it met the ground before pushing herself slowly off the ground she glanced at who she
bumped into. And cursed her luck.

She had run into a group of guards.

*Oh...why does this always happen to me?* She thought woefully, as two strong arms ripped her off the ground. “What is wrong with you imbecile? Can't walk with two left feet?”

Fear rushed through her and her hand went to her knife as the guard began to shake her demanding what was wrong with her and where were her manners. Then she glanced over. Her eyes locked with the stranger and then brilliance struck her. Thinking quick on her feet and fighting back a grin, Olivia turned to the guard and grasped the front of his tunic in a quaking hand, her eyes looked up at him pleadingly. “I'm sorry! I'm sorry! It's—” She took a moment to form a believable sob, and acted dramatically as if she were the star of a tella novella. “It's that man! He was...a suitor,” she struggled to find the words, “but I decline him! Now he's been following me everywhere!”

The guard looked at the other one, shell-shocked.

Livvy choked up, shedding a few tears on cue. “I...It's why I dress this way, sir, to fool him! But he found out!” She pretended to fell faint and almost fall to the ground. The guard steadied her, with an unsure look on his face. “He found out, and now he has been chasing me all over the city! Please, I fear for my virtue, sir! Who will want me if this monstro absconds with it?”

*Jackpot,* Olivia thought, when the guards’ ire turned away from her to the mystery man. She had to make note of that for the future. Men always wished to defend a woman's virtue. Who knew that chivalry was so multi-purposeful?

Federico was ready to punch something. Normally he was not one to so easily into those urges. Every lead he got seemed to lead to a dead end and when the blacksmith told him a story of a pale girl buying a knife just minutes before he arrived, he thought his luck finally changed. Looking around the bustling market he felt like he was at wits end. He started talking to anyone and everyone, wondering where La Volpe wandered off to.

He knew the Master Thief had gone to inform some of his group of the situation, but Federico wished he was still here. Maybe he would know what Federico was doing wrong. It was times like these he wished he was gifted with the Eagle Vision like his father or his uncle Mario, but alas that passed him and fell only to his brother Ezio. Not even Petuccio had it. One of the group, he was talking to looked past Federico at something and pointed. “Is that her?”

Federico blinked looking at the man before turning around. It wasn't hard to spot her. She did stick out, especially standing there gaping back at him.

She wasn't the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, but she was by far one of the most striking. Her skin was pale, like porcelain reminding him of his sister Claudia's dolls his father got from his travels, and looked just as smooth. Her hair was wild and wet, framed her slender heart shaped face was the color of bronze and copper. However that wasn't what he found striking about her. It was her eyes, large doe like eyes staring at him. The color of storms, deep blue and dark grey swirling together piercing right through him with a positively evil glare, stunning him for a moment then he saw she was backing away from him.

“Hold on,” he hoped his voice sounded comforting as she took another step back eyeing him like he was about to attack. He held out his hand in a peaceful gesture. “Wait...”

“Yeah...” She gave a small shake of her head. “No.” She then turned and fled.
“Wait!” He called again. Internally, he cursed before giving chase. She was clever, he'd give her that. She twisted and turned through the crowd in an attempt to lose him. However, she never made it completely out of his sight.

“That is no way to treat a lady.” Federico's eyes narrowed his eyes, lips pulled down and he started to stride over intending on saving her when she glanced his way, their eyes locked and Federico halted as a strange gleam entered her eyes. A sudden sense of foreboding filled the pit of his stomach. That gleam was one he was too familiar with. It was one he had seen in the mirror, or on his brother's face. The look of pure mischief. Oh...no, Federico watched as she appeared to go hysterical telling the guard something. This isn't good.

The next thing he knew, he was being yelled at. “You disgusting pig, chasing a poor woman around when she clearly holds no interest! Making her dress as a man and topple into guards! Do you have an excuse for yourself pig?” The guard demanded, with breath so bad that it could wake the dead.

“Excuse me?” Federico blinked, turning his gaze to the smug looking woman in the background. He tried to send her a not amused look, but it failed. A part of him, the mischief side was impressed with the quick thinking. However as the guards surrounded him, Federico sent the woman a glare thinking, I will get you back for this.

Her lips quirked upward into a smirk, making her look like a mischief little nymph from all those fairy stories he mother used to tell them. He expelled a huff of air before he asked, loudly, “Is this any way to treat me? I just wanted to talk.”

“Right,” she gave a scoff, “you wanted to talk, and that's why you were chasing me.”

Federico opened his mouth to say more when the guard stepped in front of him, blocking the woman from his view. “Do you mind?” Federico asked.

“I mind, stronzos like you preying on innocent women,” one guard cracked their knuckles, threateningly.

Federico turned a very tired and deadpanned stare at the guard before saying, sarcastically, “Because that's your job, right?”

The guard roared and Federico easily took the man down. He leaned back, dodging a punch and grabbed the man's head and brought it down onto his knee.

As Federico dodged the fist thrown his way, he gritted his teeth. Oh, yes, she would pay. The fleeing woman turn back almost as if sensing his thoughts, and gave him another smarmy smirk.

About five minutes later, she had stopped running feeling that she put enough distance between her and her pursuer. Her heart pounding in her chest, and her breath came in sharp pants. Wiping the sweat off her brow, she pressed her back against the cold stone wall. He had to be someone she stole from. She couldn't find any other explanation why he was looking for her. But the familiarity, she tried to place his face with a frown, where did that come from? Who did he remind me of? Suddenly,
she felt like being watched and glanced up to see a couple of men leering at her. It was then she realized that night had fallen over San Gimignano. One of the men made a show of licking his lips and smacking them, “She looks tasty, doesn’t she?”

“I'm not edible.” Livvy stated, with a sneer. She stood up, and wasted no time marching out of the alleyway leaving the creepy men far behind. After she was safely on the street with lots of people around, she allowed her pace to slow down and her stomach churned violently. Heavens help her, what was she going to do? She was already so lost, and uncertain. Now she had someone chasing her—

“Let me go! Please!”

Her head shot up and she saw a man being ganged up by a group of guards. He cried out as one of the guards backhand him to the group and the other two started viciously kicking him. A blistering anger boiled in the pit of her stomach and something in her chest tightened like a bow string. The next moment happened way too fast. Seemingly with a mind of their own, her legs marched her over to the guard and she yelled, “Hey, jerk face!”

The guard turned and he met Livvy's fist, up close and personal. He stumbled back in shock but that shock quickly turned to anger, “You stupid puttana!”

“Do you always insult yourself in third person?” Livvy quipped, with her eyes narrowed into slits.

The guard growled as some people smart enough to get her joke, chuckled. He ran at her and Livvy dodged one punch, but wasn't prepared for the kick he sent to her shin. Her legs slipped out of under her, and she threw her hands up blocking his other kick. She then twisted, sweeping his legs out from under him. Hastily, she pushed herself off of the ground only to find another guard in her path.

“Come on, Olivia, you can do better than that!” Her dad taunted her as she fell into the mud again. “Keep your legs bent. You can move faster that way, arms up to block, and always stay alert... understand?”

The guard's horrible breath drew her out of her memories with a gag, as he grabbed her arm and pulled her close.

“Dude, two word: tick tack.” She croaked out, harshly. The guard shoved her roughly. She fell into some kind guy sweeping the street. Why do they sweep the streets? Isn't it a kind of moot point? She thought inanely, but a cry of pain drew her away from her thought. She jumped to her feet and snatched the broom out of the cleaning man’s hand. Holding it like a baseball bat, she swung it.

“You have a big heart Livvy,” her mother told her. “Too big. So selfless, you would bleed for another if it meant they'd stop hurting...” Livvy held the dying bird closer to her chest, sheltering it the best she could.

And swung it until the guard crumpled to the ground. Livvy's was taking deep, quick breaths as she held the bloody broom tightly. Her wide panicked eyes stayed locked onto his beaten form until his chest rose with a slow painful breath. The broom slipped through her numb fingers and onto the ground and she swallowed back the bile in her throat. She...almost killed...somebody, the realization was like ice in her blood.

The man shouted fighting off his own guard. “Look out!”

Livvy spun around. Well, shit.

The guard was up. He grabbed her, his fingers digging into her wounded arm and a scream ripped
through her throat before she could stop it. With a hand around her throat, he practically tossed her.

Livvy's body hit the ground hard, and with a sickening thud. She moaned pitifully before she pushed herself up and onto her feet. It took several heartbeats for her to regain her balance, and the guard was on her in an instant. He wrapped his arms around her, putting her into a choke hold. She gasped for air, clawing at the arm wrapped around her neck.

*Never lose focus, Livvy. You have to watch your six!* A voice snapped in the back of her mind, sounding vaguely like her father.

Spots started dancing in front of her eyes, and she knew she was going to pass out. She gripped the arm and used it as leverage to lift her legs off the ground. Praying she hit her target, she kicked her right foot back. The man cried out letting her go to hold his family jewels. She stood up and her hands shot out grabbing the man she was trying to help. Her eyes met his and she asked, "Are you alright?"

"Yes…yes, I think s—" He choked on his words as a blade appeared through his chest dripping with blood. Livvy's mouth dropped open in horror, and the man coughed violently spewing blood onto her face. She let out a strangled scream, her hands letting go of the body and it fell to the ground. Her scream got louder and louder until a sharp pain went through the back of her skull.

And everything went black.

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Looking over Federico's bruise face, La Volpe's lips twitched in amusement. "She sent guards after you?" He couldn't help, but to tease the younger man. It was not often that the eldest Auditore boy’s feathers were ruffled.

"Yes," Federico sent him a glare. The wench had outsmarted him, and then disappeared. After he fought off the guards he went the way she ran off, only to find people screaming at the sight of body. It left a knot in his stomach, he had a feeling that woman got herself into trouble. Big trouble.

"I'll have Hugo go inform your father," La Volpe's drew him back into the present and he realized the thief had been talking. "You should probably head home soon. I doubt she will stay in the city after today."

"No," Federico shook his head. "She's still here."

La Volpe raised an eyebrow.

Federico leveled a stare at him. "I know it. I'm not giving up," he shook his head, decisively. "Not yet."

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The morning light hurt her eyes.

She groaned, rolling away from it wanting to sleep a few more minutes. Maybe it would get rid of the painful throb in the back of her head. A voice said, "So you *are* alive."

Livvy's eyes snapped open despite how they throb and she blinked at the man sitting on the cot next to her. She pushed herself off the ground, "Who are you? And what are you doing on my roof?"

"Roof?" The man raised an eyebrow. "Child does this look like a roof to you?"

Livvy narrowed her eyes and looked around. Her stomach sank quickly and panic burrowed into her heart, she pushed herself off the ground. All around her were metal bars, a cage…a cell. Past those
bars was a fort, with walls nearly fifty feet high and made from solid stone. And there were men were slaving away. They looked haggard and tired and guards stood everywhere keeping a close eye on them.

The man behind her commented, “I wonder what a woman like you did to end up in a prison like this.”

She stared out the cell in silent horror.

Chapter End Notes

Just to remind you that there are more chapters posted on FFNET if you can't wait for me to edit, and post them on here. I hope to have them all edited and up on her in the next couple of weeks. :D
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

I want to thank WormwoodSand31033 and guest for the kudos!
And for the reviews, thank you WormwoodSand31033! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Five

“Paint it in Red Pt 2”

The sky was deep red along the horizon with sinister black clouds rolled with horses sprinted across the grassy plain, their hooves hitting the earth with all force and sound of thunder. A burning, acidic scent was brought upon the hollowing winds, and Federico leaned forward on his mount, urging his steed faster. “How much further, La Volpe?” He demanded in a shout, for it was only way to be heard over the wind and hooves.

La Volpe glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. “Only a couple of leagues,” the master thief called back, his hood whipped off of his head by the force of the gall that cut through the valley. Distant thunder rumbled, a warning of the storm that would soon be upon them.

Anticipation burned in his gut like a living and breathing thing. His determination had drove them this far, and it would have to push them farther still for it would be no small feat to break in the fort. That’s when he heard it; the screaming, and his gaze casted upward. A cloud of smoke was billowing in the distance, just barely visible against the thunderheads above. As they reached the top of the hill, his horse reared up in shock and nearly cast him off startled by the people on horseback that rose past them, not even bothering to stop. By their tattered and rough clothing, they were not guards nor the original owners of those mounts. “Steady! Steady, girl,” Federico said, clutching the reins tight in one hand and the other stroked the back of his horse’s neck to calm the animal. Once the anxious horse was calm, a warning of the storm that would soon be upon them.

La Volpe glanced over his shoulder at the fleeing men. “I believe that we best make haste. Something smells rotten about this, and I do not believe time is on our side,” he said, his tone very serious.

Federico turned back into the direction to their destination with shock, which quickly was replaced by fortitude as his blood pounded through his veins urging the horse as fast as its hooves would take it. Past a thick grove of trees, he and La Volpe saw the fortress walls where his worst fears had been confirmed. There was a revolt or attack brewing inside, and the brightness of flames burning within was unmistakable. Tightening his hands on the reins, he was about to charge down the hill when a loud crack broke through the silence and the it was followed by a deafening boom that was so fierce it sent a shockwave through the ground. The horses neighed, frightened, but thankfully did not unseat their riders.

His brown eyes stared in shock at the stone structure crumbling down with a loud rumble like it had been made out of sand and the tower fell collapsed shortly after. Federico panted, his heart
stammering inside of his chest and wiped the sweat off his forehead. The searing heat was scorching
them even from thirty yards away. He watched the tongues of fire cracking into the night sky, bright
and white hot before sending a glance over the stunned thief.

La Volpe frowned, heavily. “It seems we are too late.”

Federico just turned back, staring at the fire speechless.

Two and a half weeks earlier

Outskirts of San Gimignano, Tuscany

1474

Olivia peered out through the bars of her cell, pacing back and forth like a caged animal. In a way,
that is exactly what she was. Anxiety moved underneath her skin like ants, running and itching,
while fear stabbed her stomach like a knife until she felt like throwing up. Her hands curled into fists
and the old man who had been taking care of her sighed. “You shouldn’t waste your energy,” he
chided her, lightly.

She turned towards her unwilling companion, her eyes swept over him from head to toe. He may be
old and frail in body from enduring labor under poor conditions and malnourished, but there was a
resilience that burned diamond bright in his greenish hazel eyes that were too keen and sharp. “I’m
not wasting it,” she told him, her tone flat. She wasn’t pacing for the sake of wasting her energy, but
to take stock of her surrounding to the fullest. Her eyes moved and traced every inch of the fort like
prison that she could see, and made note of the way the guards moved. What intervals they switched,
and changed positions. She looked for blind spots, places to climb and to hide because she had
already decided in the first minute she had awoken in this hellish place that she wasn’t staying here.

“That then what do you call that?” he pointed at her as she once again resumed her pacing around the
cell.

“Looking for a way out,” she replied, honestly.

“Hahaha,” the man nearly choked on his laughter. “You’re a funny one.”

She sent him a scowl, hands curling into fists and she barely resisted the urge to go over there and
punch his lights out. However, she wasn’t one to so easily let her anger guide, or she tried to be.
Taking a deep breath, she returned her focus beyond the cold, iron bars. “So what happens here? I’m
guessing it isn’t a place filled with puppies, sunshine where unicorns fly about with rainbows
shooting out of their asses?”

The old man sent her a look like he was questioning her sanity.

*He wasn’t the only one,* she thought.

“I meant what happens to the prisoners here. Do we sit here and rot away? Or is it worse than that?”
Olivia asked, her heart thudding so loud and fast that she thought it would beat right out of her
chest. Her hands slid around the rusty iron bars, and her entire body was taut with fear from her head
down to her toes. Part of her feared knowing the answer, and the other part of her…well, that part
was the one that felt like she already knew the answer to her question.

The old man tapped his fingers along his thigh, in such a way that made Olivia think he must have
played a lute. “It is mostly labor. Free labor. They put us to work to build and make the prison
bigger, or mine rock to be transported to other places,” the man said, glancing over at her. A flicker of hesitation moved over his gaze before he added, in a near whisper, “That is what the men are made to do. If a woman is unfortunate enough to be sent here…” He trailed off, unable to speak of the atrocities he knew had been committed.

Olivia felt her mouth go dry with terror. Her stomach did an unpleasant somersault inside of her, and bile rushed up her esophagus. She pressed her shaking fingers to her lips to hold back the way of nausea, and she clenched her eyes closed tightly. She wished she was home, safe and sound in the walls of her house. She missed her bed, she missed Carl and Leo, and she would nearly give anything to be back there. 

Good God, what have I gotten myself into? Livvy thought, dread prickling across her skin. Her hand brushed up against her belt and her eyes widened. Her pouch and knife were still there. They must have assumed a woman wouldn’t be armed, or they would have taken the knife from her before now. The money, they probably assumed to take off of her when they…she shuddered, choking on the fear and terror. She only thanked her lucky stars that they didn’t do anything to her while she was unconscious, when she couldn’t protect herself.

Her mind raced, trying to figure out of a way to survive this. Her eyes glanced over at the old man. Her teeth sank into the side of her cheek, and she didn’t want to trust him. She just didn’t see what other options she had. She was in a prison, awaiting a fate worse than death and she had no other alternatives. She approached him, cautiously for he tensed up like a wounded animal prepared to strike. She showed him her knife and money. “Do you have a place to hide these?” She asked, seriously. She was betting a shrewd man like him had a hidey hole to place important things.

He looked at the items in surprise. “They didn't search you? I cannot tell if it is arrogance on their part or sheer stupidity,” the man murmured, shaking his head. “Besides, what kind of woman?”

“What's that supposed to mean?” Livvy demanded to know.

The man just shook his head, lips curled upward lightly.

Glaring at him, she asked again, “Well, is there? Somewhere I can hide this?”

The man didn't meet her eyes.

“Is there?” she pressed.

The man shifted uncomfortable.

Olivia could have slapped him, but released a hiss through her clenched teeth. “If I die, you can have it,” she told him, sure that would convince him. She didn’t look like much, so he’d probably pegged her as someone who wasn’t long for this world.

He sent her a glare, trying to stare her down and Livvy just crossed her arms raising an eyebrow. Several seconds past and when it was clear she wasn’t backing down, the man gave a sharp nod.

“Fine, but if anything of mine goes missing, I will kill you. I don't care if you are a woman or not.”

“Fair enough,” Olivia replied.

The man stood up off his cot, looking around with a wary eye before he deemed it safe enough. He knelt down to the ground, fingers traced the stones on the ground before his hand pulled one of them up, revealing a hole beneath. There was a random assortment of things such as food and coins, and what appeared to be a letter. “There. Be quick now,” he said, in a low urgent tone. “The guards will be here soon.”

She bent down on one knee, and tossed the money pouch into the hole. The knife was about to get
the same treatment when an idea occurred to her, and swiftly brought the knife up to her hair and sliced. Her long copper hair, bit by bit, fell to the ground. The old man looked taken aback by her actions. Once it was done, she put the knife into the hole and allowed him to cover it back over. Her hands reached up to adjust her vest, loosening it up to give her body a shapeless and ambiguous shape. With a toe, she scooted the traces of her hair underneath one of the cots and got done just before the guard came around to the front of the cell.

“Time for work,” the guard stated, and then he paused. “Where’s the woman?”

Olivia felt a zing of relief move through her. She thanked heaven that people back in this time period weren’t that bright, and often didn’t look beyond the surface of things. It really worked in her favor this time. Adopting a quizzical expression, she asked deepening her voice, “What woman?”

The old man smothered a grin beneath the palm of his hand when he caught onto her act and cleared his throat, his amused expression turned into a confused look that was very convincing. Olivia felt the knots in her stomach disappear when her cellmate went along with her scheme. It was hard not to twitch underneath the piercing stare of the guard, but she managed to cling to her stoicism like it was an anchor.

“Ye Gods, man! Why don't you just feel us up if you that sure one of isn’t a woman?” her cellmate scowled at the guard.

She bit her lower lip, to catch the laughter that blossomed in her chest. Her eyes flickered downward so she didn’t have to look at the guard’s sour look. Apparently, the idea of feeling up another man was distasteful to him, but it had the desired effect. “Works starts in ten, be ready or be beaten,” the guard growled, and then he marched onward to the other cells.

When the guard was out of ear shot, Olivia shot the old man a look. “I don't know whether,” she breathed out, sitting on the cot, “if I should hit or be thanking you, though I suppose it's the latter. If you hadn’t went along with my act then…I would be in a very bad situation right now.”

“Don't thank me, kid,” the man stated, grimly. “You may have been saved from one hell, but the labor is a different kind of hell onto itself. If you can't keep up, then there is no use for you. And there is no use for you, you end up there.”

He pointed his finger to a place across the yard, and Olivia turned to look just in time to see a wagon with a mountain of tangled broken limbs loaded inside of it being pushed by two guards across the muddy ground. She found herself bent over, spitting up bile from her empty stomach. She couldn’t stay in the place. She had to get out of here, and fast.

Federico was not having a very good time. He could not recall a time when he felt more frustrated in his life. Did this woman have to be so notoriously hard to find? Not even the Master Thief had come up with any trace of her and that left him very wary. She had to be very good at hiding her tracks, which meant she might be more dangerous than they first anticipated. Federico rubbed a hand down his face, and decided the woman was a curse—some kind of albatross, sent to torment for having done something utterly wrong in a past life. Or perhaps, it was God’s sense of humor to send him this woman that had consumed his thought and left him baffled, for his loose transgression with the many women whom he had left broken hearted.

Where was she? What did his father want of her? It was driving him up a wall, not even the courtesan trying to flirt with him could take his mind off things. He closed his eyes, trying hard to remember where she had fled off to. He would need to talk with some people. Most people had a daily routine, so it shouldn’t be too hard to follow her trail and learn why it had gone so cold so
abruptly. He rose from his chair and put florins on the table, reluctantly leaving the pouting courtesan behind.

Clenching his hands into fists, he glared at everyone. ‘Where are you?’ he thought to himself.

The guard escorted them, all in a line, with their swords out. The blades were a silent threat, almost daring one of them to put a toe out of line and made it clear what the consequence of that action would be. Olivia kept her head bowed, while her eyes danced around feeling trepidation pulse through her. This was going to be bad. A level of bad that she had only experience a handful times in her entire life and she followed the guards’ orders to the letter. The large group of prisoners was broken into two smaller groups to make them more manageable, and Olivia was grateful to be in the same group as her cellmate. The familiar face, even if only known for a few hours, gave some measure of comfort. It was poor comfort considering everything, but comfort nonetheless. The guard demanded their attention before going on to spew about how they were the lowest of the low, how they were in hell and everything.

Olivia tuned him out. She had no desire to process or pay attention to his bullshit tirade. I'm getting out of here. One way or another, I'm getting out here, she thought, trying to reinforce positivity into her being.

“Low lives…degenerates,” the guard sneered at them, as the other two guards shoved pickaxes into the prisoners' hand. Livvy stumbled back slightly and looked down at it. “Scum of the earth, you will be put to work here where you won't get to make trouble and be a pustule on the face of our beautiful Tuscany. If ya do,” he pointed to the pile of dead bodies nearby, “that's where you end up.”

Fear tasted like shards of glass dipped in acid. It burned on her tongue, and nearly choked her up. She could never imagine a time where she would be used to the sight of dead bodies. Her nostrils quivered with the fast breaths she drew in order to shut down the panic that began to tighten around her lungs. The guard shouted for them to get to work, and immediately everyone rushed to a pile of rocks, and started toiling away.

Olivia moved a slightly more subdued pace, and took her place beside her cellmate—Luigi, the man’s name was which would have been amusing under different circumstances. Hushed words spread amongst the prisoners that she could make out between the clacking of pickaxe against stone about need for strong stones for renovations in the prison. Olivia wondered if that meant there was a weak spot in the prison, somewhere that could be exploited. She gave a grunt as she brought the pickaxe down onto the stone. When metal and stone crashed together, it sent a jar up the pickaxe and went into her bones. She moved her jaw around, trying to get rid of the pain.

“Keep working,” her cellmate informed her quietly. “Don't stop, not even for the pain. You won't like it.”

Olivia worked her jaw up and down, a quick glance over at the guards that were monitoring the progress. She pulled up her pickaxe, and repeated the motion over and over again. “How long do we have to do this?” She questioned, out of the corner of her mouth.

“Until they say stop,” he answered.

She continued to work, despite the pain. It was the fierce need for self-preservation that kept her moving even when her limbs started to feel overcooked noodles that were one step away from turning to mush. Her stormy eyes glanced at the prisoners that were languidly sitting about, with no reprimand from the guards. She arched a brow at Luigi in a silent question.
“They're sell outs, trading information for comforts,” Luigi informed her, with a tone of revulsion in his voice.

“Hmmm,” she made a noise in the back of her throat, and she continued with the work. She took in deep breaths, making a note to do more intense exercise to build up muscle mass. Her arms most of all needed some work. The day passed at a snail’s pace, and house later with one brief respite that barely lasted five minutes, they were sent to work on the renovations trading places with the other group of prisoners. One man had collapsed on the ground unable to get up anymore and was flogged as punishment, then taken away. Olivia shuddered, feeling her heart clenched tight in her chest. After lugging around stones and stacking them up, Olivia noticed that the walls here were not as reinforced as the others.

When the sun was nearly out of the sky, they were sent back to their cells. Olivia collapsed in the corner of her cell, drawing her sore limbs up close and curled in on herself. It took Luigi to coax the molded bread into her hand, and a sharp look from him to encourage her to eat what she could. Chewing took so much effort and as soon as the edible parts of the bread were gone, her eyes fell closed but sleep did not immediately follow. She hated it when her body was so exhausted, but her mind just wouldn't shut off. Millions of thoughts plagued her. Like why was she here? Was she going to die? Could she escape? She had no answers for any of those and didn't think she'd be getting any soon.

She laid there, all too aware of her heart beat, and told herself in a whisper that was barely audible over Luigi’s snoring, “I’m going to get out of here. I'm going to get out of here. I'm going to get out of here.”

Leo was in a bit of a predicament.

He set down his cellphone, chewing worriedly at his nails. His eyes flickered to the television where the red hooded figure—that was strangely familiar, so familiar that he swore that if he could just see the other half of the person’s face then he would know who it was—and felt a foreboding sensation roll in the pit of his stomach. He had tried googling what this was, trying to see if he had accidently stumbled into an easter egg. But there were no posts, or anything on the internet that gave him any clue that was going on. He had called the Ubisoft support line, but the person on their hung up on him after he explained what was going on.

And shortly after this happened, Carl went quiet. The headset made a pop and static followed. He tried calling his friend, but now Carl was not answering. Neither was Olivia. A million thoughts rushed through his head, and he wondered if this was some kind elaborate prank conjured up by Livvy and Carl. An uneasiness slid down his spine, and he set down the phone within reaching distance. He picked up the controller, his thumb brushed the start button. He needed to know more of what this was, he decided, and if things got anymore freaking—and if Carl and Olivia were still unreachable—he would call the police. He wasn’t sure what they could do, but it made him feel better.

‘It's just a game and no harm has ever come from playing a game,’ he thought, drew in a deep breath and pressed the start button. The image trembled, before a voice came through the surround sound speakers.

“I never imagined myself here. I don’t how I got here or why, but all I knew…”

“OLIVIA?!” he yelled. Oh, he was so going to get her for this prank, but the relief he felt was short lived. The images that appeared on the screen were too real, and were like someone had filmed Olivia’s life—everything from this morning of her playing Call of Duty with him and Carl to the job
interview and then the game store. The more he played—which was weird moving your friend around on the television screen—the more he got this nagging feeling in his chest. His heart jolted up against the roof of his mouth as he watched the car slam into Olivia on the television screen, and he pressed the pause button. He got up and walked away from the television, shaken and pale.

He turned on his police radio that sat in the corner, often covered in dust. He felt tears prickle in his eyes while he tried to calm down. This was just a prank after all. He didn’t just watch his best friend died on his television screen. Carl and Olivia hacked his Xbox—pay back for all the times he hacked their phones and gave them his special brand of ringtone, that’s all this was. He listened to a dispatcher and police officer gave the code for a car accident.

“…we got a positive ID. Young woman Olivia Steel…”

Leo felt his legs give away underneath him, and smack into the ground. His entire world felt like it had been turned upside, and he felt gutted. His best friend was gone, and the thing with the game, he couldn’t even think straight. Tears poured down his face, and his shoulders shook with a sob.

“…person was hit, and died on the scene. And I don’t have a code for this shit that just happened. Ambulance got here, and started to haul her up, ready to take to the morgue when the body disappeared! I’m telling you it just fucking disappeared, and so did all her belonging! Vanished like a fucking magic act!”

Leo’s head shot up. Vanished?

His eyes swimming with tears turned towards the game that was paused, and he swallowed thickly before he got up on his unsteady limbs. Anger and confusion temporarily pushed grief out of the way, and he picked up the controller with more force than was needed. He glared hotly at the television set, and said through clenched teeth, “I want to know what happened to my friend. You better have so answers, or so help me by whatever God is out there, I will find out what the hell is going and who is behind and make them pay.”

He hit the start button, and watched the scene unfold.

The days blurred together, monotone and repetition of them made it hard to tell them apart. Prisoners got up, worked and worked, barely had a break in between working dawn till dusk then they were feed. It was barely enough for a mouse. Eight days…for eight days now she had lived in this hell. Plotting and planning, every day she learned and saw new things for they moved them around the prison a lot. Her mind now had a layout of the place. Mentally she went over it again. 'All cells are on the south side save for solitary which were on the west side and also near the main tower and the exit. Renovations are on the North West side and a lot of guards linger there, except during dusk. The scaffolding makes climbing possible, but one reaching the ramparts were guards constantly patrol would make things dicey.'

Her feet felt like lead weights, and she had to stifle her painful gasp as they were led back to their cells at the day’s end. She hadn’t decided on a clear exit strategy. The areas that had potential also had a lot of drawbacks as well. The guards were the biggest obstacle. They patrolled in a simple, but efficient pattern and it groups of three. More than enough to give her trouble, and the hope inside of her had dwindled down to a flickering ember that she barely kept burning.

A few days later though, her fortune took a turn for the better. It had been a grim morning when she was separated from Luigi; him being the only constant in her life right now, and when he was put into the separate group, she felt more freaked out than she’d like to admit. It started when one prisoner accused another of stealing something of his while they were being marched back to their
cells, and the squabbling turned into a full fledged fist fight. The guards rushed to break it up, while the other prisoners formed a circle around the fight. “FIGHT! FIGHT!” The chant was loud and near impossible to miss.

Olivia looked around, realizing she was standing by herself. There was not a guard nearby to pay her any heed; they were all too busy trying to rein in the enthusiastic prisoners, more than a few joining on the fight. She moistened her dry lips, and took a step back…and another…and another…no one moved. No guard rushed towards her demanding what she thought she was doing. No one even paid her a single bit of notice. A moment of regret hit her when she thought of Luigi wherever he was in the prisoner right now, but she pushed it away, quickly darting away from the scene. She kept glancing, using any barrel or cover that she could to keep herself out of plain sight.

Her heart stopped when she saw the exit. She was twenty yards from the exit, from freedom. Her eyes greedily took in the sight, and she could practically taste liberty on her tongue and began to search for a way to open the iron wrought gate that was the only barrier between her and that freedom. She could climb or at least attempt to, and just avoid the gate all together. Or she could sneak up to the ramparts, and find the wheel that pulled up the gate but that would draw attention. Her first option was the far safer one in the grand scheme of things. Narrowing he eyes in determination, she had to do it or die trying.

Just when she had pulled her courage together, she caught movement out of the corner of her eye and saw a guard. She gave a soundless gasp and quickly dashed behind a couple of barrels. Her pulse jumped wildly in her throat, and she grimaced at the smell of black powder that reached her nose. It must be used in the mines—the ones that ran underneath the prison to retrieve the iron ore.

She had considered using them as an exit until she learned that it was just a bunch of dead end tunnels, and she didn’t have the time to dig her way out or the supplies to even attempt it.

She turned her attention to the guards, and realized that the fight must have been contained. With wide eyes, she looked back at her exit only to see guards effectively sealing off the only way out. ‘Damn it!’ her thoughts screamed, her hand were clenching with the sudden need to hit something. Preferably a guard, but she took in deep harsh breaths to keep calm. Closing her eyes trying to hold back frustrated tears and a small groan escaped her and she knew there was only one thing she could do now. Go back to the cell, and hope her sneaking about would go unnoticed. It was a better option than being dead…or worse.

Checking around the barrels she watched the guard turned to see if anyone was out of their cells, she was safely hidden. She held her breath, waiting for him to turn back around before making her way past him. She stayed low to the ground, and used a carriage that set in front of the main tower, to hide again when the guard turned back around. She bit her lip, letting out a slow and silent breath. This was so much easier when it she had been doing it from the safety of her sofa, and not in any actual danger. Olivia gritted her teeth about to move away when a cold, heartless voice came from the door behind her. She slowly craned her head, and looked at the main tower door.

“Another one is dead! How many bodies do we have to find before you deal with that bastardo?” a voice yelled, angrily. She heard footsteps, like someone stomping about angrily.

She should go back to her cell. She needed to go back to her cell. If she was caught then it would spell disaster for her, but the voices at the door drew her in like a spider to a fly. She moved towards it and listened with rapt attention.

“He is just one man, signori. We will find him and catch him,” another voice replied, oily and simpering in a way that reminded her of a rat. It was a voice that grated along her nerves like nails on a chalk board.
“You better will or it will be you hanging from the gallows next,” the first voice said, in a clipped tone. “We cannot tolerate such failures, and if we must make an example of you to see that your predecessor will be more effective then we shall do so, and do so without hesitation. Do not make the mistake of thinking that our alliance secures your safety. It is the results of your work that shall do that, and anything less is unacceptable.”

There was a noise, like a whimper. “He will be dealt with. I assure you,” the second voice said, with a bit of fear in the tone. “I will send his head on a silver platter, and any hope these savages have will be nothing more than fleeting.”

“Even fleeting hope is too much, and I grow tired of your assurances. Give me results, and do something about the assassi...” The man’s voice was cut off when Olivia was suddenly pulled away from the door, with a hand clamped over her mouth muffling the shock cry that burst out of her. She was so startled that she forgot to fight, and before she remembered, she was pulled into a dark alcove and found herself staring up at a guard. His dark brown eyes were unreadable and Olivia swallowed the fear building in her throat when he shoved her down into the mud. It splattered over her clothing, and face. Her heart quaked beneath her breast, and her eyes darted to see another man in the niche, one of the sellout that Luigi warned her of that stood with a sniveling look on his face.

“I told you! I told you!” the prisoner said, with a nasty smile.

Olivia grey eyes blazed with fury, and she sent the man a glare of death, which instantly had the other prisoner shutting his mouth. She tried not to tremble, looking at the guard carefully. She would be foolish to fight him when he had a weapon, and the commotion would no doubt attract attention of the other guards. She had to play this by ear, and be patient.

The guard shoved a pouch of money—currency meant something even behind prison walls. “Here. Now go before I string you up for a flogging,” he growled out, his voice low and dangerous. The prisoner scurried away clutching the bag as if it were his prized possession.

“Tattletale!” Olivia hissed, glaring at the prisoner until he was out of sight. Her eyes then turned to the guard that towered over her. A million possible scenarios of how she could be punished—and what would happened if they discovered her gender—raced through her mind, and none of them were pleasant. When the guard’s hand lifted, she prepared for the inevitable blow.

It never came.

Instead, the guard held his hand outstretched towards her. “I apologize for such treatment, but it is a necessary evil I’m afraid. Let me help you up,” he said, his voice far more gentle than it had been moments ago.

The sudden and abrupt change in his attitude left Olivia boggled. Automatically, she put her palm in his, and allowed him to pull her out of the mud. Her mind reminded her that he was the one that pushed her into it, and couldn’t quite grasp why he was being so nice all the sudden. She knew that there had to be good men who believed in what being a guard stood for, but she had imagined them to be like unicorns. Rare and near impossible to spot. “Thank you?” She asked more than said, in an awkward tone of voice with just a slight edge of suspicion.

The guard did not take offense at the tone. Instead, he gave what could have been a sympathetic grin as if completely understanding her hesitation. “You should be more careful, Madonna,” the guard told her, quietly.

Olivia nodded, lightly. “I really should...” Her entire body froze, and she was keenly aware of the hand that was held tightly in his grasp. Her head shot upward, and her grey eyes clashed with his
dark ones. Her heart plummeted into her stomach when the thought crashed through her mind will all of the force of a wrecking ball.

'Madonna...he called me madonna...'

He knew.

“Taken where?” Federico demanded from the man. He was a petty thief who had sold out the young woman who went to help him and the guards took it, knowing they'd get a good price for sending a pretty girl to prison instead of the man. Federico lips snarled as the man whimpered. La Volpe's violet eyes were filled with dark rage as he put the knife closer to the man's trembling throat.

“I believe you were asked a question,” the Master Thief said, coldly.

The man's expression didn't comfort Federico in the slightest as he whispered out, “Il luogo scuro. (1)"

A sharp gasp was rendered from La Volpe, who looked horrified. Federico took in his friend’s expression, and knew that it had to be something truly terrible to invoke such a reaction. “Il luogo scuro? I've never heard of such a place.”

“You wouldn't,” La Volpe stated, darkly. “It technically doesn't exist.”

“How can a prison not exist?” Federico asked.

“Officially one can't be sent to prisoner without a trial,” La Volpe lowered his voice to a whisper as his thief walked away. “But Il luogo scuro is a prison, but as it doesn't exist, can't have any prisoners. It's a place where they send people to forget about them, usually enemies of the city, but some guards toss whomever they like in it. It is built like a fortress, and said to be a hell on earth.”

La Volpe pulled his blade away from the petty thief's neck, and gestured for his men to haul the miserable bastard away. Once they were alone, the Fox turned to his young prodigy. “It is not impossible to get into Il luogo scuro, but it will no small feat. You need to ask yourself if this endeavor, and this woman is worth the effort because this is not a decision you should make lightly.”

'And she's there.' Federico felt his blood run cold at the thought. He could only imagine what horrors a woman—a pretty one like her—would face at the hands of the people inside there. He tapped his finger against the table in agitation, pondering his options before grabbing his drink and draining it down. He set the cup back on the table harshly and asked, “How do we get there?”

La Volpe smirked in reply.

There was a sharp ringing deep inside her ear, and she stared up at the guard’s face in shock and horror. She had not mistakenly heard him, and there was no way that he'd call a man “madonna”.

How did he know? How did HE KNOW? Her mind screamed, and the guard was silent as he escorted her back to her cell. She fought back tremors that threatened to rattle through her body, and she wondered what his game was. Why hadn’t he told his guard friends? Why wasn’t she being thrown to the wolves? What did he want? Did he want a…personal plaything? The very thought made sick and she hid her fear as best as she could. Never let them see you afraid Livvy. They prey on that, she told herself, eyeing the guard up and down. If he tried anything funny, she'd rip his arms off and beat him to death with them.

Her cell was within eyesight, and Olivia could feel relief on the horizon. She’d never thought she
would think of the dinky little cell as a refuge, but in this moment, it looked like heaven. But before she could go a step further, the guard brought them to a halt. His dark eyes scanned the area before he looked at her with a questioning look on his face, like he trying to figure something out.

Olivia glared. “What?”

“Why were you eavesdropping on the warden?” he asked, his voice filled with genuine curiosity. No malice, no anger like the other guards had. It made Olivia blink in surprise.

So that had been the warden. Or one of the voices had been the warden. The conversation didn’t give her any real clues as to who was who, only that there was obvious someone that was causing so much trouble in Tuscany that someone wanted them locked up tightly. Studying the guard, she asked, “Why do you want to know?”

“Curiosity,” he replied.

“How do I know you won't tell the warden?” she asked carefully.

“You don't,” he said simply. “But I won't.”

And for some odd reason, she felt compelled to believe him. Livvy bit her lip, her head tilted to the side. She wasn’t certain about this, but what could she do? It wasn’t like she could stop him if he didn’t keep to his words. Defeated, she let out a sigh and whispered, “In for a penny, in for a pound. Fine…I was trying to escape. Not actually spy on him, but I ended up there…well, you know the rest.”

They stood there a moment, analyzing each other. “I won’t tell anyone what you have told me,” he reassured her, kindly. His dark eyes seemed to evaluate her and come to some conclusion. He reached into his pouch and pulled something out. “And if you need something, like say a person to get you out of trouble to dropping some eaves…” he jested, even though his tone was deadly serious and he pressed something into the palm of her hand. “Make a line on the side of your wall. I will come to you.”

“What?” Livvy stared at the piece of chalk in her hand before looking at the guard with a frown. Good things like this didn’t happen to her. Not without some kind of price and she needed to know what that price was. If it was too high, then she wasn’t willing to pay it. “Why? Why are you doing this?”

“Not all of us care for Salmoni and his ways. He's a tyrant that is bleeding Tuscany dry, and if he could he wring blood from stone and heart of our beloved city and counrty side. Instead, he settled for the blood he can take from the people. Few like myself…we do what we can, where we can,” the guard confided, and started them towards her cell once more at a slow pace. “However, not all of us are against him either.”

'A real, truly real, good guard? Color me surprised,' she thought, but then her surprise faded into confusion. “Salmoni?” She said, recalling the men on the street on one of her first days spent under the Tuscan sun. “Who is he? This isn't the first time I've heard his name.”

Surprise flickered in the guard's eyes before he answered, “Salmon's a politician. He had the whole of Tuscany in his hands. He is the one that oversees this prison from the safety of his villa in the city, allowing the Warden do his dirty work. Here we are,” he said, opening the cell with his key and let her get inside.

She stepped inside the cell, with a strange feeling pulsing through her blood. She watched the guard
secure the cell door, and registered Luigi’s shock at seeing her alive and well. Her grey stared at the
guard, trying to unravel his good intentions for any hint of deceit that lay beneath them. “What’s your
name?” She felt compelled to ask him.

He tilted his head, pondering then answered, “Graham’. My name is ‘Graham’.”

And then he strolled away.

Olivia narrowed her eyes after him. ‘Graham’ was not an Italian name by far, though she supposed
he could have an English parent or something along those lines. It just seemed rather unlikely, and
with his coloring and features—lustrous dark hair, rich brown eyes, and dark skin the color of
caramel—she had a feeling that he was a full bred Italian male. If her suspicions were right, then why
lie about his name? She watched him until she could not see him anymore. Silently, she wondered if
he was an ally as he presented himself, and despite trying not to get her hopes up, she felt a sense of
steadiness that had sorely eluded her.

“I can’t believe you are still alive,” Luigi commented. “I was sure when you went missing that you
were dead or worse.”

Olivia turned to her cellmate, gifting him a smirk. “You aren’t getting that knife that easily.”

Luigi laughed. A real, actual laugh.

Federico had already made his decision. It was a fairly quick decision, and it was not just to make his
father proud. No, he felt a sense of responsibility for the young woman and her predicament. If he
had not been chasing her, would she have ran into the trouble that she did? Or would she be safe and
sound?

“We are going,” Federico asserted.

“Not without a plan,” the Master Thief stated, edgily.

“We don’t have time to plan! We have to act,” Federico countered, putting his saddle onto his horse.
He went about securing it when La Volpe without warning, pulled out a knife and cut the straps of
the saddle making it worthless.

Federico stared, shocked. His shock soon faded into anger, and he whirled around on his mentor.
“Cosa l’inferno la questione è con Lei?(2) We have to go get her out of there! You heard him! You
heard what they do to prisoners!” He growled, his fists clenched tightly. If he had been a lesser man,
he would have given into his temper and lashed out, but he pulled back the impulse. “Especially the
women! We have to go now!”

La Volpe didn’t even flinch at the rage that was being directed at him. Instead, he watched
Federico’s fit with a stoic and passive stare until the man stopped shouting long enough for him to
speak. “And I said not without a plan,” he said, coldly.

There was a moment where the glared at each other. A battle of wills between mentor and
apprentice, and finally La Volpe broke the stare with a mutter under his breath about how Auditore
men were imbecile. His piercing gaze then flickered back to his prodigy and he heaved a deep sigh.
“Il luogo scuro is a fortress. It is heavily guarded by well trained and well armored guards. We
cannot let ourselves be rash, especially if we are to get in and out of there quickly with a prisoner in
tow. We have to tread carefully, giovane aquila(3).”

Federico made an aggravated noise in the back of his throat, and reluctantly his fierce countenance
wilted. “Alright,” he said, his shoulders slumped. “What do you suggest we do?”

La Volpe rubbed his chin in thought as he paced the stall, careful of anything the horses had left behind. “Let me send a couple of my men, to survey the prison. Look for weak spots and so on. When they return with the information we will go from there,” he proposed, with an eyebrow arched.

Federico gave a small nod. It was a sensible plan, and the one most likely to produce any positive results. He only hoped that the young woman would last that long, and while he did not often send prayers, he sent one in this moment.

La Volpe didn't had it in him to tell the young man, that he thought this was a lost cause.

Olivia always had vivid and often strangely lucid dreams.

She had a few nightmares where plushy Altair had become possessed and come to life, then proceeded to try to kill her because he angry she left him behind. The current dream she was having seemed to be running on a similar theme. Altair had been sitting on a table eating what appeared to be a cookie, and then froze upon the sight of her. She felt her brows drift up to her hairline as she watched the plushy assassin drop his food and charge across the table with a battle cry that was more adorable than frightening. He leapt off the edge of the table, did a front roll as he hit the ground and slid out his hidden blade and went to stab her in the ankle.

Thankfully, like the rest of Altair, the blade was plushy too.

“An ankle biter assassin, would you look at that?” Olivia said, with no small amount of amusement. She stared down at Altair, who continuously tried to stab her with no success and she nudged him with her big toe, sending him on his stuffed butt. The plushy assassin jumped up, enraged, waving his little nub arms around angrily at her, his words coming out as a series of squeaks. “Careful now, you wouldn’t want to pull a seam from throwing a temper tantrum and having all your stuffing come out.”

“He does have a temper, doesn’t he?” a soft, childlike, voice drew her gaze to the pink table and chairs setting in front of the window. A young girl with short curling hair, a cherub like face and with a small smile on it sat in one of the chairs with a plushy Ezio in her lap. She was dressed in a fancy little blue dress with white frills, all nice and neat for the tea party she was having. The little girl was none other than Olivia herself, at a much younger and more innocent age.

Her brows furrowed. “This is different.”

Her younger self laughed lightly. “You have no idea. Come…sit.”

Seeing no reason not to, Olivia did as was requested. She took the seat adjacent from her younger self and watched in fascination as her younger self played tea with a plushy Altair and a plushy Ezio. It was a strangely endearing and adorable sight with Ezio perched up on younger Livvy’s shoulder, nestled up to her cheek while Altair pouted, refusing to eat because he couldn’t kill the intruder. The scene played on for a few minutes, before finally the young girl lifted her head and acknowledged Olivia once more. “Hello,” she said, politely. She settled Altair in the pink chair, covering him over with a napkin that was being used as a makeshift blanket. The tiny assassin huffed, but fell asleep anyways. Ezio, however, was not forced to take a nap. Instead, he climbed down from the young girl’s shoulder and sat in the palm of her hand. Younger Olivia held him close to her, protectively.

“Hello,” Livvy replied back, though her tone was unsure. “What are you doing here?”
“It’s all connected,” the girl stated seriously, while pouring her some tea and handing her a piece of cake. While she appeared child-like, her mannerisms were too crisp and refined in a way that did not match her face. “One domino pushed, and the others fall, but some are not always where we would like, for others have dominos as well and they like to block our way. You’re going to need to remember that and not feel so bad.”

“Okay…?” Livvy looked at the tea in the cup, wondering if the prison food was spiked.

“Other dominos are falling around you and fast, you need to hurry and put yours up, or you’ll be buried under them,” the child elaborated, nodding her head towards the man suddenly guarding the door.

Olivia blinked at the sight of the guard ‘Graham’.

“He’s a domino, if you let him, he’ll help you set up your own.”

A thoughtful expression settled over Olivia’s face, recalling her interaction with the man. She then cast a long, searching look at her younger self. “Why do I need his help?,” she asked, with an unsettled feeling in her gut.

“He’s helping you to stop the bad guy,” the girl replied.

“That’s why he was nice? He wants me to stop this Salmon guy?” Olivia asked, with an eyebrow arched.

“He was nice because he meant what he said,” the child said, bemused. “Don’t you pay attention?”

The child gave Ezio a sip of tea, and Olivia never realized just how creepy it was to see the plushy assassins move about. Almost as if he could sense what she was thinking, plushy Altair’s head popped up over the edge of the table and he had eerie smile on his face. She repressed a shuddered, and placed her tea cup delicately down onto the saucer. “I still don’t understand.”

“It is not his desire to stop the bad guys, it is your own that counts,” the girl pointed out, with a roll of her eyes. It was the only bit of behavior that was befitting of a child that her younger self had exhibited so far.

“They?” Olivia frowned, deeply. “That implies more than just one.”

The younger Livvy clucked her tongue. “It’s amazing how it is always the self that is harder to know and strangers are easier to understand,” the young girl grumbled, seemingly aggravated that her older self was slow on the uptake.

“I don’t need this,” Olivia said, her voice filled with frustration. She was barely surviving the days in that prison, she didn’t need some messed up dream version of her kid-self giving her grief. “I’m already quite on edge.”

Approval shined in her younger self’s eyes. “Good. If you aren’t on edge, you’re wasting space.”

Olivia scowled, “You sound like dad.”

Younger Livvy’s expression faltered for a heartbeat, before she waved off the perceived insult. “Can you just stand there? Can you stand there and watch knowing what you know?” The girl demanded, very grim. It was strange to see such a serious and severe expression on a girl who was little more than a baby’s face.
“Know?” Livvy’s voice raised slightly, making both the plushy assassins glare at her. Her grey were bright with so many emotions, but the most powerful was fear. “Know? What am I supposed to know exactly? I know that I’m in the past and I know that I’m in Italy and stuck in a 15th century prison! Everything that I have perceived to know about the universe and how it works has been tossed out the window.”

“That’s because you aren’t thinking right,” the younger Livvy said, tersely. “You can’t just look at the world around you. You have to look through it.”

Olivia stared, her jaw worked up and down. Her temper that flared so hotly, so quickly died away in a quick and harsh moment. Her head moved side to side, and she tunneled her fingers through her hair. “I didn’t come here looking for a fight. I mean, I didn’t come here intentionally period, but I don’t fall asleep just to dream about fighting with my younger self.”

“Pity,” the little girl replied scathingly, “one has come looking for you.”

“What?” Livvy asked startled.

“Wake up!”

Livvy looked down at her shoulder. It shook back and forth as if someone was shaking it. The younger Livvy’s lips pursed in annoyance before she said quickly, “Remember and remember well because it’s your time to be a hero like you always wanted.”

“When I was a kid,” Livvy defended, panicking.

“That want has never changed. Chances like this only happen one in a lifetime. No only once in every other lifetime, so don’t let this go.”

Olivia narrowed her eyes. “You aren’t me, are you? You are something else.”

The younger Olivia smiled, mysteriously. Plushy Ezio leapt out of the girl’s hand, and rushed up older Olivia’s arm. He jumped, using a strand of her hair and swung towards her face. His hidden blade smacked her in the forehead, and—

Olivia felt her eyes snap open, and she shot up off her cot. Luigi startled at the sudden movement, but the settled back down. She looked at him, confused and a little wary. “What’s going on?” She croaked out, blinking her bleary eyes. “It’s not time to get up yet. And why do I feel the sudden need for a crumpet?”

Luigi sent her a look as if he were questioning her sanity before he shook his head, lightly. “No, it is not. But you were having a strange fit in your sleep, and I didn’t want you drawing guards here,” he told her, scratching the stubble along his jaw. “Especially not right now.”

“Especially not right now why?” Olivia asked, puzzled.

Then a horrific scream cut through the silence of the night, and Olivia leapt to her feet. She stared wide eyed out into the inky blackness, and the only light was a torch so far in the distance. Her heart thumped in her chest, and fear spiked through her veins when the screams got louder and more painful.

“It seems the guards have taken to torture to amuse themselves tonight,” the bitter man said, before he rolled over on his side. He placed the palm of his hand against his ear, trying to muffle out the screams and fall back to sleep.
Olivia didn’t even bother trying, knowing that sleep would not greet her again on this eve. The words from her dream were coming through louder and louder with each terrified shriek. By the time dawn broke, Olivia were red, tired eyes glared at her surroundings. There was a dark resolve that had festered in her heart. This brutality had to be stopped. There was nothing about this that was right or lawful. There was no justice in this place.

A somber chill fell over them all, even the sell outs did not seem so lofty and smug, and not a one said a word. Olivia flinched as another scream rippled through her and stared down at the rock, feeling sick. Quietly, she questioned, “Is it always like this?”

“It's always been like this,” Luigi replied, in a broken tone.

Olivia’s frowned deepened. She needed an escape. A way out.

“You're not thinking right…” The voice of younger self rattled in her brain.

How was she supposed to think? How was she supposed to function? Each morning, she’d got up more sore and broken down than the previous day. Her heart had hardened as she watched new prisoners come in, and old ones disappear for no apparent reason. Men who had did little to nothing. From stealing or insulting a guard and being imprisoned for it. Though she knew, glancing at a few men, which did deserve to be here, but the innocent outweighed the guilty. Was this the way of thinking she was supposed to be doing? Go back to the observant little soldier she once was?

Livvy scowled at the thought. She couldn’t go back to that. She remembered how much she had sacrificed to earn that bastard’s approval, to earn his love, but it had never been enough. She was too much of a bleeding heart, too forgiving he had said, and that would be her downfall. Bringing the pickaxe down with a grunt, Olivia knew that running away from this place wasn’t an option. This burning in her heart—this anger and outrage—demanded more of her than that.

The screams ceased, and the entire prison seemed to still.

Olivia prayed that the poor soul had been put out of his misery, and that he wouldn’t have to endure anymore. It was far better than any other alternative to be had, and judging from the look on everyone’s face, she was not alone in that thought. If he lived, he would likely have been driven insane by now. A human’s body and mind could only be pushed so far before it broke. A memory flashed before her mind’s eye that made her heart clench tight.

The blizzard raged down on the without mercy. It was so cold, the vicious wind cut right through Olivia’s tiny limbs and no matter how tight she pulled her coat, she couldn’t find an ounce of warmth. “Daddy! Can’t we go home now, daddy?” Her teeth chattered together, her eyes narrowed against the snowflakes to keep sight of her father who was a few steps ahead. “I-It’s so cold!”

Her father did not slow, and did not look back. “You have to keep moving, Olivia,” her father ordered, the snow and wind almost drowning out his voice. “You can’t be weak. You have to always remain strong. If you let someone see you weak, they’ll take everything. You have to stay strong and keep moving.”

“But daddy, doesn’t Ca—” she questioned, pointing to her brother that lay bundled up on the sleigh that her father drag behind him.

“Keep moving, Olivia. That’s an order.”

The image shifted.
The black car pulled out of the driveway, and then moved down the road without stopping or turning back. Olivia watched her with scalding hot tears streaking down her face, and her shoulders shook with heart wrenching sobs. A sense of an abandonment and loss tore through her, and she had never felt so helpless in her entire life. Her sorrow swiftly turned to anger, and she turned towards her father with a look of pure resentment etched onto her features. “This is all your fault,” she told him, angrily. “They wouldn’t have taken him away if it wasn’t for you.”

“He was weak.”

“He was sick because you pushed him too hard!”

Her father pinched the bridge of his nose. Emotions warred on the man’s face before it settled into a cold and detached expression. “We do not have time to bemoan what has happened. We have to keep moving forward, and continue on,” her father stated, his tone callous. “Let's get back to training.”

“No!” Livvy yelled.

He lost all composure and turned to her, shell shocked. His eyes became hard as flint as he demanded, “What?”

Normally, she would have backed down. A part of her too afraid to disobey her father, but today wasn’t like other days. Today she felt a rage so deep and dark that it overrode her fears. She glared into his eyes—eyes that he had passed down to her—and she felt her upper lip curl in a snarl. “I said no. I said no to your stupid training. All you care about since mom died is “survival this, survival that”. Mom died because she was sick, not because some mysterious enemy is lurking in the background. You are a paranoid and sick man!”

“Olivia,” her father said, taking a step toward her.

“No! No more! I'm done,” Livvy screamed, pointing an accusing finger straight at him. “You've taken everything away! All the good, all the happiness, all of it gone because of you! I hate you! I HATE YOU!”

Her father's jaw went slack, as if she had physically hit him. He stared at her for a moment as if didn't understand, or perhaps was understanding too well. Without a word, he turned and went back into the house. She felt vindicated and satisfied with her rage, until later that night she heard her father's broken sobs that came from behind his locked bedroom door. Her anger soon became guilt that relentless stabbed her heart, and she promised to herself that she'd apologize in the morning. But when morning came, her father was gone.

She never understood the man her father was. She never understood where his paranoia stemmed from, or why he was so desperate to train her and her brother. He had been brutal in all his lessons, and did give them an ounce of comfort through all the hurts. The warm loving man he had been before her mother’s death replaced by a cold-hearted general who never allowed his emotions to rule him. The night before he disappeared out of her life was the first time in years he had ever expression emotion other than disapproval and disdain. But now, she was grateful for that training for it gave her a strong sense of honor and will power to survive as along as she had.

But just because she knew how to survive, didn’t mean she could just play the hero and save the day. Why am I letting this dream get to me? Is it because I am looking for some sort of purpose? Some sort of reason for being? She thought, staring down at the crushed rocks with a severe expression.
“You angry?” Luigi commented, carefully.

“No,” she moved on to the next pile, “just thoughtful.”

Could she make a difference? If she were to be this hero that her younger self said she wanted to be? The unbidden thought came and she shook her head trying to bat it away, but it came back buzzing around like an annoying fly. She worried her lower lip with her teeth, and her eyes were downcast. She was what she was. A young woman who had been a bit good at everything, but not outstanding in anything particular that pointed her to a clear path of what she wanted. While she wanted to pursue a gallery before landing here, her art was a hobby to her. Not what she expected to define her life by. Was she supposed to just change that? Change who she is because her reality had changed? Take a chance to grasp at something more? The very idea of it gave her sharp palpitations that she almost thought she was going to have a heart attack.

The guard called for a break, and there was an audible sound of relief from all prisoners. Livvy let the pickaxe fall to her side and she stood there, her gaze moving around all the workers. All tired, sweaty, their thin bodies barely more than bones. Scars, burns, all of them looked defeated and slumped. Much like the homeless people of San Gimignano, whom she joined the ranks of shortly before her lovely little stay here in this hell, and the way the city seemed to be forever under a dark cloud. The city with a broken spirit full of broken and beaten down people who lived in fear, day in and day out. Did they still hope for a savior? Did they hope the end of the oppression would come? Or were they all out of hope?

You are no one’s hero, Olivia Steel. Why play one now? Olivia thought, her head moved side to side.

She tried to push away the thoughts, and her dream, but the more images hit her. Memories framed in her mind from all that she had seen in her short time in the past, and then ‘Graham’s—so not his name, the liar—words came into her head. She could almost hear them as if he were right beside her, and she gripped the pickaxe with a knuckle white hold. These people needed someone to stand up for them. They needed someone who would shout at the top of their lungs from the rooftops that enough was enough; someone who would bear the burden of their pain, and lift them upwards.

You aren’t a hero. Stop kidding yourself.

The guards ordered them to get back to work.

She felt anxiety flood her throat, and ring loudly in her ears. The motion of bringing the pickaxe automatic and done without thought. She continued to toil underneath the cloud sky, and beads of sweat dripped down her throat. She felt too uncertain, too paralyzed with the option presented to her even if it was her own subconscious that had supplied it. She felt like she was boxed into a corner, but she didn’t see how wearing a white hat would help with that. Heroes were often holier than thou people with dandelion white morals, which would help put away the bad guy, but never make the hard decisions. Never make the call to kill someone, or to sacrifice because heroes were always supposed to “save the day and everyone”. That just wasn’t realistic. She couldn’t be a hero like that.

But maybe you don’t need to be.

It was such a tiny thought, but the ripples that followed were anything but small. It was like someone had flipped a switch inside her mind, illuminating her thoughts in such a way that her perception of the situation grew. Her views broadened in a split second, and her heart thundered inside of her chest. It was a seductive feeling—the sense of purpose that flowed through her blood like a warm balm, soothing all her aches and fears away. Her grey glanced at her cellmate out of the corner of her eye, and she asked, “What if it wasn’t?”

“What?” the man asked and looked at her, pausing in lifting his pickaxe.
“What if,” she said, slowly with a quick wave of her head to their surroundings, “it wasn’t... like this? What if it was different? What if someone stepped up and made it different?”

Luigi stared at her, a frown along his brow. His hazel eyes seemed uncomprehending—no, not uncomprehending, but looking at her like she was some poor little naïve soul for daring to even try to have this conversation. Which frankly only pissed Olivia off, and a mad Olivia was not a good thing. She brought her pickaxe down, and waited until the guards were a safe distance away. “What if there was actual justice for people like them? For people like the Salmony man? What if it wasn’t like this?”

“But it is,” Luigi said, shortly. “So let's get back to work.”

“But what if…” Livvy gave him an apologetic smile when he sighed aggravated. “What if it wasn’t just men with power suppressing the people? What if someone won power for the people? What if someone stood up for them?”

“It won't work,” he said simply.

“Why not?” she asked, not willing to accept that answer.

Luigi attempted to ignore her, but she pointed her pickaxe at him threateningly. “Why not?” She repeated, more hotly than she intended. She watched him ponder whether her threat was valid or just a bluff, but in the end, he elaborated on his answer.

“Men have tried before, they have failed,” Luigi told her, bitter sorrow coating his words. “All of them have hanged before any real change could happen. A man’s life is easily taken, and when you gamble against higher powers, you are doomed from the start. It takes more than a man to overturn tyrants.”

Olivia hummed underneath her breath, and went back to her work. After a moment, Luigi did, too. The strain of her muscles only seemed to harden her, and make her more determined than before where only a few moment’s ago, it had been wearing her down. “You're right,” she said, thoughtfully.

Luigi sent her a look that said 'I know.'

“A good man can die, many have and many more will always follow,” Olivia continued, chipping away the stone piece by piece. It was now cathartic. The stone felt like it represented her soul, being chipped and worked until something new and better could be revealed underneath. “It will take more than a man.”

“Good that you see reason,” he said, with a sardonic tone.

Oh, she did see reason. Just not the one he thought she saw.

“Mortal lives will always end. It cannot endure the test of time,” Olivia said, a knot settled along her brow. It was like a puzzle, almost all put together, and she just had to make the last piece fit. “But ideals...those can stand through time. They can survive and thrive where lives may be lost. A person is just lost in the scramble for peace or money, his own gain. He can be destroyed, physically or through a weak point. He can locked up, and left to rot and be forgotten. But what if someone becomes more than that? What if a person devotes themselves to an ideal?” A flicker—a spark—that grew into a diamond bright blaze in her greyish blue gaze, making the color glint like the keen edge of a blade. “It makes you something else entirely, a symbol. And that's what men like Salmoni fear.”

Luigi actually looked curious. “And why is that?”
“Symbols can be the rallying cry, an emblem that people will follow like a ship at night looking for the blaze of a lighthouse to lead it to shore safely. Hope burns eternal, and ideals are not so easily put in the ground as flesh and blood,” Olivia said, a brilliant and bright grin stretched across her lips. “I think if there was ever a time for ideals, then it would now, don’t you?”

Luigi stared at her like he had never seen anything like her before. There was awe, disbelief, and dare she say it, hope in his gaze. “You already have something planned, don’t you?” He accused, his voice barely more than a scarce whisper.

Olivia twirled her pickaxe in her hand, and gave him a mysterious smile as a reply before she got back to work. She didn’t need to be a hero, a white hat good doer that could save the day. All she needed to do was rise to the occasion, to be a beacon of hope and hopefully, it will show the people that could be their own heroes. She had never considered herself an optimist. She had been always the glass half empty kind of gal, but in this moment, she believed. She believed with all her heart.

Palms pressed against the grimy and dirty ground of her cell, Olivia did push up to pass the time and to help ease the pain in her body. The muscles would become use to the expectations she put upon her body; after all no pain, no gain. Fifty...fifty-one...fifty-two...fifty-three, she counted in her head. Reciting the numbers helped kept her focus, and away from the part of her that wished to collapse in a useless pile of flesh on her cot. Perspiration coated her skin, her clothing was soaked—though the work on the stones had done most of that—and her hair stuck to her skin in a way that was wholly unpleasant. Olivia ignored all of this, her eyes narrowed in fierce concentration.

“You know you are the biggest idiota, I have ever known,” Luigi commented, as if he were merely discussing the clouds in the sky rather than her intelligence or lack thereof. “There are fifty guards in the prison at one time, at the very least.”

“If you are trying to make me nervous,” Olivia pushed herself up, and then lowered herself until her body was scantly away from the ground, “you can’t. I’m already there. And yes, I know. I keep count of them.”

“So you are aware that you are going to get yourself killed? I suppose your self-awareness does you credit,” he replied, scathingly.


“And you don’t care if you do?” he asked in surprise.

Olivia tilted her head, slightly caught off guard by the question. She got up off of the cell ground, and wiped her hands off on her tattered shirt. “That’s not true. I don’t want to die, but if I stay here that will happen regardless of what I want,” she denied, pulling her hair out of her face. “So I’m choosing not to stay, and I’m choosing to send a fucking message while I’m at it.”

That, for whatever reason, seemed to make Luigi angry. He stood up off his cot, and stalked over towards her. “Why the hell are you so damned confident that you can get out of here?” He demanded, hotly.

“Confidence?” Livvy said, as if the word was foreign to her. A little cutting chuckle made its way past her lips, and she looked up at him solemnly. “This has nothing to do with confidence. It’s a power of will,” she emphasized, her tone harsh and dark. She watched his expression fall, and her jaw clenched tightly. “See, this is how it is. I will not stay here, I will not die here, I will fight and claw my way out because I would rather give my last breath knowing I tried then to withered away until they’ve used me up, and dump in some nameless grave with all the other poor souls who have
already died. Now, I like you Luigi. If I can help you escape, too—"

“Don’t make me false promises,” Luigi told her, a crack in his voice.

Olivia nodded her head. “Fine. I won’t. But this is how it is going to be? You can help me, or get out of my way,” she told him, with only a tiny bit of guilt. She turned away from her shell shocked cellmate and walked over to her cot. She put her feet underneath the edge of the cot, before lying on her back and starting a set of curl ups. The cell went silent save for her shaky breaths. She was already on her seventy-fourth curl up before Luigi dared to break that silence.

“Why?” he interrupted again, but this time there was no antagonizing tone in his voice. “Why do you want to get out?”

“I told you why,” she said breathlessly.

“There's more than the need to survive,” the man commented, quietly. “Your big speech about ideals and giving the people something to fight for, that's more than just wanting to escape. It's more than just talk, too.”

Olivia laid back against the ground, her hand over her pounding heart. “It was,” she confirmed, swallowing thickly. “I believe in it. I believe it can be done.”

“But would you do it?” he asked, seriously.

Her nostrils flared as she let out a long slow breath, and she craned her head back to look at him. Her eyes gleamed with brooding anticipation, and her lips pulled into a small smile. “I guess we’re going to find out,” was her reply.

The chalk line on the wall plagued him all day.

‘Graham’ had to hide his eagerness when he was released from patrols, and made his way cautiously to the cells. It was supper time, so there should be only a few souls about and no other guards would pay him much mind if he did not linger overly low. His dark eyes found her, leaning against the bars of her cell with arms looped through the gasp and her face turned towards the red sky, the sunset behind walls and beyond her view. She was a woman that did not belong in this place. Not that he believed many of the souls that came here deserved to belong here, but something about her seemed more out of place than anyone else. ‘Graham’ slowly came to a halt beside the cell. He looked at her cellmate, who was sound asleep before he turned his attention to her. “What do you need, Madonna?” He asked, politely.

“My name is Olivia though my friends call me Livvy. Depending how this goes, you might just get that privilege. So you can stop with the Madonna. Not that I don’t appreciate your politeness, but it honestly just keeps bringing up memories of—” She cut herself off, and gave a slight laugh. “That doesn’t matter. My silly thoughts are really not important, especially not right now.”

She tilted her head and regarded him in a manner that sorely reminded him of a cat, deciding whether or not to sharp it's claws. “And that's an unspecific question. I need a lot of things,” Livvy stated, with a mock sigh.

‘Graham’ raised a brow.

Her lips twitched. “What do I need from? Just a few things really…” Her humorous façade faded away into the sharp and that had him rooted the spot. This—this was what really caught his attention the other day. While anyone eavesdropping on the Warden was alarming, ‘Graham’ wouldn’t have
been inclined to just partner up with anyone. Something moved in that gaze that went beyond just intelligence or worldly knowledge. It was the way that she watched everything, and anything, taking in every little detail and allowing nothing to escape. They were the eyes of someone who had endured pain and had survived it, and that was determined to survive it again. “They are not little requests either. I need to know if you can me these things, because if not then I have to strategize, and the bad thing with time is that you don’t know how much you have. But I feel like we really don’t have a lot, do we?”

‘Graham’ pressed his lips together and studied her before repeating the question. “No, we do not. The Warden suspects subterfuge within the prison walls, and I like my head right where it is,” he said, hands folded in front of him. “Now, what do you need?”

A pleased and approving smiled danced fleetingly across her lips before once again she turned somber, with the weight of their discussion. “Is there anything you can get your hands on that can be used to make a mark on your armor? Preferably red,” she stated, her tone light.

“I would say paint, but we do not have any painters in these walls. There is…is red dye though. It would not be permanent, but it should leave a mark well enough to see for a time,” ‘Graham’ replied, bemused by her strange question.

“Use it to mark your armor and anyone else whose loyalty doesn’t fall in Salmoni’s hands,” she requested, with an air expectation that he would follow through. He saw no reason not to, though he wondered what she got from such a request. What kind of message was she attempting to send? He did not know, but it would be a powerful one, his gut told him. She continued on, “The black powder? If you can, place it at any weak spot the fortress has. The only way this is going to success is keeping the element of surprise on our side, and chaos is a good way to sabotage the rest of the guards neat little patrolling schedule.”

‘Graham’ blinked. He had never thought to use the black powder against the other guards, or to create a distraction in such a way. It was an inspired idea, and if done right, it would give them an advantage of the number of guards that would be against them.

“Oh,” she said, as if remembering something. “One more thing, my clothes.”

“What about them?” he asked.

“I need them back…and a cape with a hood. Actually,” she tapped her fingers, a hint of mischief shot through her grey gaze, “if you could manage it. Dye it red while you are marking up your armor.”

‘Graham’ shot her a curious look.

Olivia smiled, beatifically.

The next day passed too quickly, and by the time evening had fallen, ‘Graham’ felt anxiousness crawl across his skin. It took everything in him to remain composed, and stoic underneath the heavy weight that was chained to his heart. The air was cold and the night was silent. No torture was taking place as of right now, which he was grateful for. He steeled his nerves, and approached the two brutes whom were returning the barrels where they belonged. “You are needed at the front gate,” ‘Graham’ stated, his tone serious. “We are expecting some new prisoners, and they apparently are quite an unruly bunch. Extra eyes and hands are needed to help mind them.”

“What about the barrels, sir?” One asked.
“I'll take it from here,” he told them, with a nod. The two guards shared a look before one the shrugged. They were happy to deal with prisoners rather than lug around a heavy cart. It was a bit off effort to move the cart away in the shade, and out of sight. He clicked his tongue, and more guards with their armors marked with a red slash across the front of it came out of the shadows. While they stared to unload the barrels, ‘Graham’ made his way to one in the very back of the cart. With his knife, he jabbed the edge downward so he could pop the lid up and pulled it off. “We are good. You can come out now.”

Olivia pulled herself out of the barrel, sucking in a deep breath of fresh air. She grimaced as her bones cracked, stiff from not moving for hours on end. “About time,” she said, rolling the tension out of her neck. “I thought I was going to suffocate.”

“Told you it'd be a while,” he said.

“Well, next time I think hiding away in a barrel is a good idea, you can remind me of this moment,” she sassed, but there was no heat behind her words. She looked at him with a grave expression. “Everything's in place?”

“Yes, the last few of my guards,” ‘Graham’ informed her, gesturing the men who were hurrying as if their lives depended upon it, “are setting up the barrels now, but we must hurry. The other guards will start getting suspicious soon. Your clothing,” he removed the knapsack off of his shoulder, and held it out to her. “Dyed red, as per your unusual request.”

“Thank you for indulging my unusual request,” Olivia smirked, broadly.

The guard looked at her, head cocked to the side. “What are you going to do?”

She reached in and slowly pulled out a red cape from the parcel. Her fingertips brushed over it while her eyes lit up at the brilliant shade of red that the dye had turned the clothes into. She looked up at him, and said as if it were the simplest thing in the world, “Become a symbol.”

The other guards obviously thought she was crazy, and her plan was insane. But desperation made for strange bedfellows, and they could not complain. Beggars could not be choosers, and if her plan even had a chance of working, it had to be done. Olivia could read that in their expression, and knew that ‘Graham’ had chosen his friends wisely. Olivia pulled the hood over her head, obscuring her face in shadows and she admired the bright sheen of vermilion her clothing was. The right shade that would hide bright red blood if she became wounded; symbols had to endure, and had to appear untouchable. It wouldn’t help the image that she was trying to cultivate if she looked like a bloody mess that barely managed to survive, no matter how likely that was to be.

Her palm clutched tight at the key that ‘Graham’ had given her. She made it to the tower door, and gestured for the guards to move on. They were to take out as many enemies as they could and quietly if it could be managed. The less enemies in their path to freedom, the less messy the escape would be. She slid the key into the door, and unlocked it. Her gaze darted all around her before she pushed open the door, and slid across the threshold as soundless as a mouse. The door shut behind her with a soft click, and she appraised the room she found herself in. Weapons mounted along the walls in every sharp and variant imaginable.

She headed towards the staircase, but not before she nicked some knives on her way. Better to be safe rather than sorry. Her footsteps were as quiet as she could make them, and the stairs creaked ever so slightly underneath her weight. A shadow moved up above on the landing, alerting her to the presence of another in the tower. Being quiet, she walked up a couple of more steps until she could peer through the railing, and saw two guards silently talking in the tower. Her eyes scrutinized them;
the one furthest away had a knife, but the one closest to her had no weapons on him that she could see. Her eyes raked across the room, until she found a hammer lying on the table to the closest guard’s left.

Pulse thumping in her chest, Olivia felt the cold realization of what she was going to do. God have mercy, because she saw no other alternative. She lunged up the rest of the stairs, without warning or preamble. Before the guards had even a second to react, she grabbed the hammer from its idle spot and brought it down with all the force that she could muster right against the back of the nearest guard’s head. There was a sickening squelching noise when the weapon made contact, and the man went down like a sack of potatoes with a choked cry.

The other one did not go down without a fight. As soon as he comprehended what was happening, he drew out his knife and lunged. He slashed at her in a wide arc, and the hammer slipped out of her hands, clattering to the floor. A sharp gasp pivoted through when she felt the back of her heel dip, and barely caught herself from falling backwards down the stairs. The guard came at her again, but Olivia reached out, grabbing his wrists in a vice grip. They battled over the blade; it glinted in the torchlight as it swayed back and forth between them, and she grunted with the guard whirled around, sending her hip harshly into the side of the table.

He was trying to pin her back, so he could use all his weight to push the knife through her throat. Olivia felt fear sear up her spine, and she grunted, trying to force the blade away from her. A feat that was becoming hard and harder to do as her palms grew slick with sweat, and she glared up at the man’s face, her teeth bared in a snarl. She would not die, she told herself. Not to today! She gathered enough spit in her mouth, and spat directly in his eye. He flinched back, startled and gave Olivia just enough space to bring up her leg between them. She planted the flat of her foot against his chest, and kicked with all her mighty.

He let out a sharp yelp, the force of her kick sending him back towards the stairs. He wobbled, to and fro, until he lost his footing and fell down the stairs. There were a series of the thuds the echoed through the tower, until silence reigned. Her heart pounded in her chest, adrenaline pulsing through her skin and she laid there for a few moments before she called out, “Are you awake? No? Good.”

She rolled off of the table, scattering papers about. She almost stepped right over them until her eyes caught the sight of something familiar. It took her mind a moment to process what it was, and when she did, she did a double take at the papers at her feet. Kneeling down, she gathered a letter—sealed and unopened—in her quivering hands. Her fingertip traced the Templar cross on the wax seal like she wasn’t sure if she were really, truly seeing it and in the next moment, she broke the seal and pulled out the letter from within. Unfolding the parchment, she bared it to her eyes and read the words on the page.

Signori Salmoni,

She swallowed thickly, the paper shaking in her hand.

_I would like to thank you for your support during these trying times. Your provision has been nonpareil, even given the recent troubles that have fallen over San Gimignano. Though from what I have heard, you have given your assurances to the Grandmaster that they will be dealt with, and for now, your word has been enough. See to it that does not change. If the Warden Salvatore cannot hold the prison, and hold loyalty of the dogs guarding it, then you will have to replace him. He is a sniveling man of no importance, and easily discarded. Now onto the matters which you wanted to discuss, these interlopers you fear are of no importance. My associates and I have already put things in motion and they will be dealt with before long._

_The time draws near that we will soon be looking for allies to herald in a new age over Italia, and_
keep in our good graces, and your name shall not be forgotten. You have proven yourself well with the idea for your prison, and it has been a force that has made our enemies wary. The time for you’re to join our ranks shall be soon.

Yours in confidence,

Francesco De Pazzi

Heart was pounding in her ears, the letter slipped out of her fingers. She felt very faint and she couldn’t remember what breathing was or why it was important. In that moment, all she could feel was her heart that twisted in a violent knot. She tried to tell herself that the Pazzi family did exist. That this letter did not imply what she thought it did. It just couldn’t, but it did! Grandmaster was a Templar title. The Templar cross on the wax seal. It all led her to a new startling conclusion that her brain just couldn’t understand. “Holy shit,” she whispered, sinking down in the nearby chair when her legs grew too weak to keep her upright.

Time travel had already been so hard to believe, and she had been living it. Now... all this was beyond time travel. This was breaking dimensional barriers, and a bunch of scientific stuff that had only been theorized about, but never proven possible. How the hell was this happening to her? Now she had to deal with the fact that she in a dimension were the Assassins and Templars were real—her inner fangirl was panicking and shrieking—on top of the other crap that she had already been dealing with. Olivia’s throat bobbed, and idly thought that Salomini was going to be disappointed not to get his letter. She pressed her palm to her forehead, and closed her eyes when a face flashed through her mind. She leapt out of the chair like she had been burnt, and she barely got her hand over her mouth in order to stifle the horrid noise that erupt out of her. It was something between a gasp and a screech.

“Oh, my God. Oh, my God,” she whispered, frantically. She now knew why the guy following her in the streets of San Gimignano had been so familiar. She felt like she was having a heart attack, and fanned her sweating face. “I sent guards after Federico Auditore. Oh, my God. Holy shit…”

Leo stared, blankly at the screen. His entire face was vacant of any expression, and he set down the controller onto his coffee table with more care than necessary. He brought his hands up, pressed together as if in prayer, and pressed his fingers against his mouth. He drew in one breath, then two, and then his hands dropped. “You got sucked into Assassins Creed without me? I mean, sure you got hit by a car to get there, but I could totally handle being hit by a car!” He ranted, because there really was nothing else he could do. “This...this is so not fair! I mean, I am the one who introduced you the series! You wouldn’t have known about it unless I hadn’t browbeaten you into playing it! The injustice of it all!”

The room when quiet, and he sat there, cooling down after all his frustration was aired. “Though you are dealing with chamber bots and the possibility of getting the plague, and I hate germs—like hardcore OCD hate as you well know— so maybe it’s a good thing it’s you there and not me,” Leo said, as if Olivia could hear him. It was nice to talk like that because it helped ease the panicking that was crashing through him at the impossibility of this situation right now. “Though I still wish I knew how this was possible, and wish I could help you out. I know you Olivia, and you always land yourself into hot water. Someone is going to be needed to pull you out, and let’s face it, that’s usually me.”

Olivia might not have been able to hear him, but something else did.

She supposed this was the part where she squealed like a fangirl.
She didn’t.

Instead, she felt a heavy and cold stone sink into her gut. The unconscious man at her feet, and the sight of the blood coating the hammer she used to bash his skull with made her stomach roll unpleasantly. This was real. This went beyond a game made up of pixels, and that revelation hit her with all the force of hurricane. She looked over the information on the letter, before she tucked in away in her vambrace. She wasn’t sure how she was going to handle this, or even if she should at all. All those stories of people who knew too much about the future never really end well—the gritty, realistic ones, that was.

But she did decide on a couple of things.

One: get the hell out of this prison.

Two: Find out why Federico Auditore was chasing her, and how exactly he had become aware of her presence in the first place.

She grabbed the important looking documents, tossing them in a parcel bag that had been sent to the floor during her scuffle with the two guards. She rushed down the stairs, and paused to look around the armory. Where is the barrel? She stepped over the guard’s body, and took the torch off the wall to help her look around. After a bit of searching, she found it tucked in the corner hidden behind a couple of crates. She used one of the knives to pry the lid off, and then kicked it over. A great wave of black powder scattered across the floor, and Olivia was careful not to step it in.

She made her way over to the door, and hesitated for all of a moment before she tossed the torch towards the massive pile of blackpowder, before she turned on heel and ran for her life. She got about five feet before the building behind her exploded, a shockwave threw her forward into the muddy ground there followed by a rush of heat. Her eyes went wide, mouth dropped in a silent scream as horrible ring stung her ears. No noise, no sound could be heard over the painful bells that clanged against her eardrums and she winced, glancing back at the tower. White-hot flames snaked up the entire building, and plum of black smog rose up into the skyline. “Boom, baby,” she whispered, a half-hearted smirk on her face.

She still felt a prickle of guilt for the two lives that she took. They would have killed her—and had likely contributed to many others’ deaths, but she wished that such things didn’t need to be necessary. She pressed the thoughts away—guilt right now would only slow her down. She could go into shock or be horrified once she wasn’t in danger. She got to her feet just as the other explosions erupted all around her, and the screams started. Whether it was from the prisoners or the enemy, she did not know.

She rushed through prison that had dissolved into chaos. Prisoners making a bid for freedom while guards fought other guards, but Olivia pressed past the unfamiliar faces, her red cloak glowed in the firelight. Some prisoners glanced at her with wide eyes when they passed her by, and she imagined with severity of posture, the cold uncompromising line her lips had formed, she looked like some vengeful angel. But she had no time to feel amusement. Her eyes desperately searched out for the two people who had her concern out of everyone here, but she found no hide nor hair of Luigi or ‘Graham’.

Someone had jumped on her back, wrapping their arms around her throat before Olivia could take another step. On instinct, she leaned forward as fast as she could, using her body and momentum to send the guard over her shoulder. She scrambled back onto her feet, and lunged forward grasping the guard by his wrist. With both her hands, she pressed her finger tips into his pressure points, just like her father had taught her, and then twisted the limb sharply. The bones in the hand were delicate, and when pressed in the right way, could be broken very easily. It was sickening how easily, Olivia
repressed a shudder as she felt the bones break, and the guard shrieked.

She released his hand, and walked away. She had no desire to take any more lives than absolutely necessary. The flames had engulfed the prison and the sky turned red as they grew higher and higher. The smoke billowed out, making her eyes sting and her breaths became harder to draw in. Many people were fleeing now, even guards who had abandon the fighting all together to save their skins.

“You!”

She whirled around, tensed up for a fight. Immediately, the fight drained away into relief. “Luigi, you are alive. Thank goodness,” she said, reaching out to grasp the man by his elbow. She tugged him along the path, while her eyes tried to peer through the smoke and flames to find a clear way out.

“I thought you were dead!” Luigi said, shocked.

“Wouldn't be the first time,” Livvy replied, with a brief flicker of amusement. “Why haven't you escaped yet?”

“I had to go get my things,” he told her, with a stubborn frown. “It was very important.”

Olivia recalled the letter he had in his hidey hole, tucked away, but did not mention it. It was not the time for such things. “Do you have a weapon?” She asked, her chest rising and falling rapidly.

“Your knife,” he replied.

“Good. Keep it out,” she said, not offended in the slightest. “We may have to fight our way out. This way,” she pointed after remembering the layout of the prison. Ash floated down around them, like snow and covered them and the ground. The smoke was now becoming nearly suffocating. They had to get out of here now, or they would be smothered. Turning right, she slid to a stop and almost fell to the ground, but she caught herself at the last moment.

Four guards were shouting and trying to contain the mess, even though there was no containing this. Their shield and armor were clean and bright, with not a single trace of red. “Shit,” Olivia hissed out, putting Luigi behind her. “Wrong turn.”

“Hey, you there!” one of the guards shouted.

Livvy slipped her hands into the knife pouch she 'liberated' from one of the armory, and pulled out a knife and then threw it. One guard grabbed the side of his neck, shrieking. She had been aiming for his eye, but judging by the blood that was pouring out, her throw was sure to be fatal. The other immediately charged her, and Livvy didn’t have time to pull out another knife as a sword came down at her. She moved to the left, but felt the blade cut through her sleeve. It was just a scratch, but it was still too damn close.

Luigi charged on of the guard's burying his knife into the man's neck, cutting clean through bone and flesh. Olivia charged one guard, tackling him to the ground hard and cursed when she felt a blade slice into her side. It was just a scratch, but it made her heart stop for a split second. Rolling off of him, she kicked out with her leg and knocked the other guard’s legs out of from underneath him before he could plunge his sword down through her back. She jumped to her feet, and grabbed Luigi’s arm pulling him away from the guards. “We have to go before they get back up,” she told him, her tone rushed and frantic.

“The smoke,” Luigi grunted. “It is getting too hard to see.”
Olivia tried to remember what she was taught when it came to fires, and then urged Luigi to duck down like she did. “Keep your head low. The smoke rises,” she told him, her voice barely audible of the crackling of the fire and groans of the prison falling apart bit by bit. The fire is getting too out of control, and given the setup of the prison, if they didn’t fire an exit soon we’ll be trapped in a ring of fire that either burn them to death or suffocate them.

“This way…” she said thinking that she saw a clear path. It wasn’t meant to last. The second they started towards it, a building buckled down in a fiery wave of white-hot embers and burning wood, blocking their exit. “Damn it!” Livvy screamed, and then something inside of her told her to look over her shoulder. She did and blanched when she saw the guards up and moving, who looked very, very pissed off. “Go!” She told Luigi, fear burning wild in her gaze. “Go! Find a way out! Now!”

Luigi looked like he was about to protest, but then nodded. He darted away from her, just as a shadow fell over her form. A fist landed on the back of her skull, and she twirled around, only to hiss as a sword sliced across her stomach. It wasn’t deep enough to be fatal, but blood rushed down from it like a fountain. She dodged the knife, only to have a harsh kick right on her knee cap sending her to her knees. She gasped at the shock of pain that jolted through her joint, and then gagged at the hot ash that she sucked in. It burned down her esophagus, and made her eyes water. She fought back when the guard grabbed her by the hood and tossed her into a nearby cell.

Olivia felt a growl reverberate up her throat, and tried pushing herself up off the ground, only to have a foot pressed into her back. Like a dog being forced to stay, and a horror swept through her when she exactly what their intentions were. They were going to lock her in the cell, and leave her to burn. She got her elbows underneath her, and shoved upward to get the foot off of her back. And she was reward with a kick to the face. Pain splintered through her skull, and she hissed, tasting blood in her mouth. The guards gave her a few more kicks for measure when one of them, said, “We have to get out of here!”

Olivia blinked her bleary eyes, and looked where he pointed; the ceiling was now encased in flames. She looked back to the stunned guards, and knew this was her chance. She saw a wooden board lying on the ground, which had burned and fell from the ceiling at some point. It was still hot, judging by the glowing embers, but desperate times called for desperate measure. She grabbed the board, and used it to knock their feet right out from underneath them. Her head shot up as there was a loud pop from the ceiling. Terror rushed through her when she realized it was going to collapse. She flipped over, quickly scrambled over the guards and ran to the door. As soon as she was out of the cell there was a large crash behind her. Hot embers pressed against her back in a wave, and sent her stumbling forward. On unsteady legs, she looked back to see the burning remnants of the building and felt a sense of satisfaction fill her and then she heard a shout, “Olivia!”

Turning she peered through the smog and saw Luigi, he was pointing to an exit. Her eyes widened as a shadow came up behind him and she screamed her voice filled with fright, “Look out!”

He didn’t have time. He didn’t even get a chance to look over his shoulder before the stomach slid through his back and out his stomach, dripping with blood. Olivia let out an anguished noise, shocked and shaken as she watched the man who had become a friend to her fall to the ground. A red haze flooded across her vision as a rage so deep filled her body, driving out all common sense. She watched as Luigi dropped the ground after the guard pulled his blade free, and she ran forward with every intention of making him pay when an arrow whistled through the air. It struck the guard straight in the face, and he dropped to the ground dead.

Olivia slid to a stop; her head whipped around and on the other side of the only escape left stood ‘Graham’ with a bow. “You…!” “You…!” She was so angry she couldn’t find the words. She wanted to avenge Luigi. It was because of her that he had stayed. He was waiting for her, and it was
her fault that this happened.

“Olivia, you have to hurry!” ‘Graham’ shouted.

Livvy nodded, and then rushed to Luigi’s side. She reached out, and then hesitated before she placed her hands over his bleeding wound. The blood oozed and bubbled up between her fingers. “Come on, Luigi. I need you to get up and walk with me,” she said, her voice trembling. Tears filled her eyes, and fell down her cheeks with no way of stopping them. “We are almost there…we’ve almost made it. So you have to get up…”

Luigi let out a bit laugh that gurgled in his throat. Blood and spittle dribbled out of the side of his head, and he shook his head side to side. “You…will not make it with me as your burden,” he choked out, his breaths shallow and weak.

“Don’t say that,” Livvy demanded, stubbornly. Her hands shifted away from the wound, and she grasped his arm, attempting to put it over her shoulder to haul him up when he wretched it back with a surprisingly strength for a dying man. “We have to…”

“There is no we. There is only you,” he told her, grasping her hood to drag her face down near his. His hazel eyes stared intense up at her, and he shook her slightly as if it would grant her some magical common sense. “Look at what you did…you did something others failed at. You have people hope. You gave me hope…”

A sob tore through her, and she looked away from him.

“You can’t die in here with me, not when…not when you can do so much more,” Luigi said, tears glinted in his gaze. He swallowed thickly, his shaken hand released her hood and he reached into the bag he had been carrying. His quaking fingers fumbled for a moment before he pulled out a letter. There was a name Ciana written on the front in cursive lettering. He grabbed her hand, and pushed the letter into it.

“It’s about to collapse!” ‘Graham’ shouted. “You don’t have time! You must come now!”

“My daughter…she is in San Gimignano…please give it…to her…” Luigi said with a painful gasp. A small tiny smile appeared on his lips, and he looked up at Olivia with a fond, proud expression. “I…I imagine…she will be a lot…like you. That is…a wonderful thing.

“I promise. I will get it to her,” Olivia promised, her voice fractured.

Luigi nodded, his eyes turned towards the sky and whispered, “Io assaggio questa aria, come un uomo gratis.” Then his face slumped, lifeless as a last rattling breath went through him and the light in his eyes went out.

Livvy stared down at his face, completely rattled by the sight of him. It was by some sheer force of will that she managed to get her feet, and she whispered, “I’ll never forget you, Luigi. Thank you for being my friend.”

“Olivia!”

Olivia was jerked out of her stupor at the sound of beams giving away, and saw the flames grew taller, separating her from freedom. Her eyes scanned the area, all the rumble and bodies, before she rushed forward. She dodged the bodies that would trip her up, and then she dashed up the pieces of rumble to get her elevated off the ground away from the flames. She ran across the scaffolding with fast steps as it crumbled underneath her. She leapt downward, feeling flames lick upward wanting a piece of her. Her hands grabbed what was left of the gate, using it to swing forward.
She bit her lip so hard that blood filled her mouth and she slammed into the ground feeling heat surround her until her body tumbled over and over and then overwhelming cold wrapped around her. She gasped out when her body rolled to a stop on her side, and she brought her hands up towards her face. Her fingers were twitching and shaking and burned across each palm was a red angry line, a mark that would never ever fade. A reminder of bloody and bitter day, she thought to herself.

She barely reacted when ‘Graham’ helped her off the ground. The fort burned, and would do so for a couple days by the inferno that raged onward, and above it all, the men freed from their prison shouted and celebrated their freedom. “Libertà! Libertà!”

Olivia slumped, shamelessly using ‘Graham’ as a leaning post. A handful of minutes passed before finally the guard looked down at the tiny woman and asked, “You don’t do anything by half…do you?”

“It’s a gift,” Olivia replied, with a small smile. The pain—physical and emotional—still corded through her like a rope threatening to strangle her, but it was tempered by the sense of accomplishment. She knew that she had done something right by helping to destroy this prison, even if she wished certain things had ended differently. The letter to Ciana shoved in her vest, just over her heart felt heavy. She didn’t know what she was going to say to Luigi’s daughter, or how she was going to handle that situation. As for what would come after the burning of the prison, she would see where that path would lead. *You can’t get an omelet unless you crack a few eggs, and you can’t get peace unless you crack a few heads,* she thought, with a tired smile.

One of his guards walked up, bringing a horse, a brilliant bronze sheen to his coat, towards them. ‘Graham’ nodded his thanks and gestured for Livvy to get on the horse, “Here, for wherever you intend to go.”

Olivia chuckled. “You got me a pony. I always wanted a pony,” she said, in jest. Humor could deflect from her really feelings, if only for a time. “Thank goodness, I feared my feet would fall off if I had to walk back to San Gimignano.” She got on the stead, looking down at the man who had helped her. She looked at him, now all her fears and doubts about the man gone and told him sincerely. “Thank you, ‘Graham’. If you hadn’t taken a chance on me, then this would have never happened. I owe you a debt that I’m not sure I will ever be repaid.”

“I feel that it is I who should be thanking you,” he replied. He then tilted his head curiously and wondered. “What are you going to do know?”

“Sleep,” she replied.

“That’s not what I meant…” ‘Graham’ grumbled.

“I know,” Livvy said, with a good-natured grin. “Good-bye, ‘Graham’.”

‘Graham’ blushed at the emphasize she put on his name, and he scratched at the back of his neck sheepishly. “Ah, yes…about that…I lied about my name,” he confessed, a touch of pink in his cheek.

“I knew it,” Olivia said, more amused than upset.

“It was just a bit of caution on my part,” he explained, with an apologetic smile. “I didn't know if I could trust you. If I couldn't and you told them about me then all that I had done so far would have been for nothing.”

“Don't be. I get why you lied,” Livvy said, shifting her hands on the reigns of the horse. “Though,”
she gave him a crooked smile, “you do have me curious. What is your real name?”

“Gaspare,” he replied with a genuine smile. “My name is Gaspare.”

“Well, see you around Gaspare.”

“See you around as well, Olivia,” he said, giving a slight bow. “Ai migliori giorni, loro sono l'abbondanza.”

Her eyebrows rose up and a small confused smile crossed her face. “And to you as well.” Livvy tugged on the reigns, before kicking the side of the horse. The stallion gave a sharp cry then rushed forward.

Gaspare watched her become nothing, but a black dot against the dark horizon. He let out a breathless laugh of amusement, “I look forward to it.”

“Sir?”

He turned to his guards. “Sir, what do we tell Salmoni? He’s going to want to know what happened and if have nothing to tell him...he’ll know...he’ll know we are the traitors.”

“Tell him…” Gaspare gave a slow smile. “Tell him…that a Red Hood has fallen over Tuscany.”

The news about the prison was all gossiped around. The politicians couldn't deny its existence any longer and were struggling for damage control while the citizens of all of Tuscany—namely San Gimignano which was the closest province to the prison—were alit with rumors of the Red Hood. A thief, a lover, a prisoner, each story changed from person to person, but there was little doubt that a legend had been born. Federico however did not share in these festivities. His mind was on the prison and the woman most likely dead. His father had heard of it and sent for him to return home feeling it was a lost cause. La Volpe had just given him a squeeze on the shoulder telling him, “Some mysteries aren't meant to be solved.”

Neither answer, from the two men he looked up to, had settled well with him. It left a rancorous and sour taste in his mouth, and a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach. Perhaps once he returned home to Florence, and put San Gimignano behind him these feelings would ease. He handed over florins to the vendor and tossed the apple he had bought into the air about to head to his carriage when he suddenly felt a strange sensation of being watch. He whirled around, but saw no one really paying him any mind.

‘I'm finally losing my mind,’ he thought.

“You're leaving.”

Astonishment shot up his spine when hot breath tickled his right ear and he whirled around, catching a figure dancing out of the corner of his eye. He jumped when his apple was taken right out of his hand and the thief darted out of his gaze once again. Frustrated he whirled to face them an insult on his lips, but instead found himself incapable of speech. His mouth fell open, his brain going blank unable to comprehend the person standing in front of him.

The woman that his father sent him to find stood there, alive and in the flesh. “And after all that effort you put into finding me. What a pity,” she smirked at him, biting into the apple.
RRs are appreciated.

Again, if you want to read ahead you can go to my account on FFNET, same penname ThroughtheMirrorDarkly, but understand that chapters after seven have not been edited so some things may have changed or seem different because I post only the edited and updated chapters on here.

Possible historical inaccuracy: Gunpowder or black powder. I know that in twenty years from around 1474 thanks to AC Brotherhood that guns are around so I assume that black powder had already arrived into Europe around this time. Was it specifically in 1474 Italy? Don't know, but for the sake of the fic it is. You think it was since fireworks exist and they needed black powder to explode.

Translations via Google Translate (so may be inaccurate, am working on Rosetta Stone to learn Italian and will fix this over time):
1.) Il luogo scuro (Italian) The Dark Place
2.) Cosa l'inferno la questione è con Lei? (Italian) What the hell is the matter with you?
3.) giovane aquila (Italian) young eagle
4.) Libertà (Italian) Freedom
5.) Io assaggio questa aria, come un uomo gratis (Italian) I taste this air, as a free man.
5.) Ai migliori giorni, loro sono l'abbondanza (Italian) To better days, may they be plenty
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I want to thank Askia, WormwoodSand31033, and guest for the kudos!

I want to thank JammyONE for bookmarking my story!

Thanks a bunch! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Inspired by the Songs:
“Heavy” by Linkin Park

Chapter Six

'Of Courtesans and Thieves'

“When the world changes around you, you can’t survive by staying the same person. You have change and adapt to the strange new world surrounding you. You have adapt to survive, to live, and in the end, maybe that’s all we can ever do.” —an excerpt from Olivia Steel’s Chronicles, dated circa 1474 (article found in Shawn Hasting’s Database)

Her life had in the last few days had been a whirlwind of explosions, revelations and life altering choices that once made couldn’t be taken back. Olivia was sure she couldn’t understand the entire gravity of the situation, of what cause and effect that her choices would have on the world around, and while that was a frankly terrifying thought, it didn’t dull the burst of excitement in her chest. It bubbled up within her like a pot about to boil over when she looked Federico Auditore over from head to toe, with a silence sense of awe shining in her eyes. She imagined that this is what people felt when they met their idol or heroes. The fact that a story that had been so close to her heart was now real, and the people that she had grown fond of through that television screen were real, too, was absolutely amazing to her.

God, this is real, Olivia thought, chewing the bite of the apple. She watched with veiled amusement as his mouth open and close like a fish, while he stared at her like she had just dropped straight out of the sky. Though it wasn’t fair that he still looked so handsome as a gaping fish, not many in the world had such a talent. Anticipation hummed through her blood like a siren song. With the uncertainty of her fate at the prison no longer looming over her head, she could fully appreciate the opportunity—an opportunity of a lifetime—that she had literally been smacked into. It would have been nice to not have been smacked by a car, or left all that she known without a chance to say, but knowing what she knew now, how could she not make the most of this?

Swallowing the succulent fruit, she wiped the juice that ran down of the corner of her mouth with her glove delicately. She peered down at the red fruit with a thoughtful look and gave a light snort. “I’m sensing a theme...(1)” She muttered, before her eyes turned back to Federico. She put on her best smile, and tilted her head to the side. “What? Not happy to see me?”
It was probably wrong for her to get a sick sense of glee out of this. She felt like a cat toying with a mouse, with no real intention of eating it. However, after the time her stint in prison, wasn’t she entitled to a bit of enjoyment? Maybe not at Federico’s expense, but life couldn’t be all perfect.

“You…h-how…” His brow puckered into a frown, and he tried to formulate a response. He looked so utterly dumbfounded, and bemused that it caused Olivia to giggle.

“Now, now, speak up,” she taunted, light-heartedly. “Some of us have places to be, and can’t wait all day for you to put together a sentence.”

Irritation flashed in his dark eyes, and his eyebrows drew downward. He folded his arms over his chest, and straightened out his spine to where he stood at his full height. “You're the one who came to me,” he pointed out, contemptuously. His disconcert over her approaching him had eased away, and he had a humorless smile on his lips.

She knew he was trying to work out of her motives for approaching him now, but even if he guessed a million times over, he’d never get anywhere close to the truth. “Ah, yes. How rude of me to forget,” she said, with a demure tone. The edges of her mouth twitched when he narrowed his eyes further. Apparently, he didn’t find her attempts at politeness after her little showmanship of sneaking up on him and stealing his apple all that amusing. That was alright though. She had enough amusement for the both of them. “Of course, I am not the one that has been searching all of San Gimignano for me. That would be rather impossible actually, so what do you want?”

“What?” Federico asked, taken aback.

He hadn’t expected her compliance or her being so straight forward. Good, if she were to navigate this improbable situation, she needed to keep people on their toes. “You mean there isn’t a real reason you've been chasing me?” Olivia said, making her voice soft and breathless, taking a dramatic step back as if she were about to faint from fear. “Are you some kind of weird and dangerous man who stalks unsuspecting women?” Her act faded away into a mischievous grin crossed her face. “Should I call the guards again?”

“No!” Federico hissed, taking a step forward. He hesitated when he realized the great number of eyes that watched the exchange with interest. He gnashed his teeth together, and his dark eyes swept back towards her. “Yes, there is a reason.”

When he made no attempt at follow up, Olivia frowned at him. “And that reason would be…?” She prompted, her tone significantly less amused now. Now she wasn’t the only one playing coy and that put her on edge, because what card did he have up his sleeve that he thought he could play here?

Federico smirked. “I'll tell you mine, after you tell me yours.”

Olivia gave him a flat look like she couldn’t believe he was serious. “I passed the 'I show you mine, you show me yours' stage of life when I was like five,” she told him, in a deadpanned tone that might have meant more if she had not followed it up with, “And besides, I asked first!”

“Now there’s a real adult comment. It is obvious that you did not grow out of that stage and into maturity,” Federico said, with a disapproving cluck of his tongue. His eyes glittered with mischief now that the tables had turned more in his favor.

That brought her up short, for all of a second. Her eyes narrowed with renewed annoyance burning through her veins. “I should get my answer first because I have the more pressing concerns,” Olivia told him, voice filled with exasperation.
“Ah, yes.” He purred in such a way that would have women swoon. Heck, even a few men would have flushed at the tone. It made Olivia’s heart beat stutter ever so slightly, because she wasn’t entirely immune to it, either. “Your virtue, if I remember correctly.”

Heat rushed to her cheeks and she glowered. “No, that is not one of them,” she informed him, through gritted teeth. That was not a topic open for discussion. It reminded her too much of the taunts her ex-fiancé had sent her way when they broke up.

“Pity,” he laughed, his smoldering eyes moved over her form in a slow, tantalizing way that made her very, very suddenly aware of herself. “It should be.”

“Whatever you are thinking, don’t.” She sneered, crossing her arms over her chest where his gaze had lingered for far too long. Handsome or not, she was not liking the ogling. Under different set of circumstances, she might have thought it flattering, but not right now when she was pretty sure he was using his charm just to unnerve her.

“Too late,” he shrugged. “Now that reason…”

“You know what?” She tilted her chin upward in defiance. A taut and mocking smile that held so much freezing disdain, she was surprised that icicle didn’t form upon her lips. “You’ve annoyed me. I don’t think I shall tell you anything.”

“Then I shall have to return the favor, and not tell you anything, either,” he replied, giving her a look like he was patiently waiting for her to come to the realization that he had just won.

Olivia felt her frustration grow hot in her belly. Damn it. He has me hook, line and sinker. If I refuse to answer, I don’t get any answers and I’ll just be cutting off my nose to spite my face, she thought, her teeth chewing on her lower lip. She had been so excited about the revelation of being here—in a world where the Assassins and Templars were real—that she had literally leapt before she looked. She literally had a brain fart—and idly wondered if she could ever get Federico to say that, because she is pretty sure it would be amusing—and felt her right eye twitch with annoyance, she sent him a sharp look. “Why are you such a jerk?” She demanded, visibly fuming. “Really, tell me. Cause I’m curious here. Is it a thing you learned or is it genetic? If the latter, I have few ideas of sparing the next generation your brand of stupidity.”

“Excuse me?” He asked, glaring in offence.

Oh, Olivia. Why do you have to lash out when things get too tough? Your tongue will get you into hot water, haven’t you already learned? She mentally scolded herself, with a slight wince.

His chest puffed out, and he placed his hands on his hips. “I’ll have you know that my family is held in the highest regard—” he started, with his nose in the air and a haughty air about him.

“I am well aware of the Auditore family that work and great allies with Medici,” she interrupted him, pinching the bridge of her nose. Those she was also aware they were far more than bankers. “I know who you are.”

Federico’s demeanor instantly changed. His face became something detached, and he regarded her through stoic and wary eyes. “Is that so?” He said, his tone all too light with an undercurrent of suspicion. As soon as the words were uttered, they hung in the air between like razor sharp shards of ice that waited to drop down upon her given the slightest provocation.

Livvy realized she had tipped her hand and shown too much. “It is kind of hard not to notice someone following me. A few questions here and there, someone is bound to place a name and face
even if San Gimignano isn’t your usual hunting grounds,” she covered, smoothly. She wondered if he believed it. If he had been meticulous in his search he likely knew of her trip to the prison, but hadn’t put a time frame on her lie. If he called her out on it, she could simply say that once she returned to the city that she had followed up on her would-be stalker to see if she was safe, and thus be led to his identity. It wouldn’t be an easy lie to disprove. “So Federico Auditore, huh?”

Federico wasn’t sure what game this woman was playing. He was certain that she was not telling him the full truth of how she knew about him and his family, but the lie was so vaguely worded, he couldn’t just cut away the deceit and grasp the truth. “Yes, I am,” he admitted, seeing no problem with allowing her that much. He waited for a heartbeat, but when the woman just stared back him, he let out a sigh. “Might I have the honor of having your name, dear lady?”

Though I'm not sure that's an honor, he thought, looking at her thoroughly vexed. She was a mess of contradictions, and her emotions seemed to go from one end of the spectrum at the drop of a florin. And she most certainly is not a lady.

“You may have the honor of getting lost,” the woman replied, shortly. It seemed whatever good mood that had made her approach him in the first place was long gone, replaced by a fiery temper that threatened to burn him with each word out of her mouth. “But not my name.”

His brows furrowed in confusion. He did not understand what she meant. He knew San Gimignano very well, so there was little chance of him “getting lost”. “I have no intention of getting lost,” he replied, and by the flicker of amusement that cut through her anger, he felt like had missed out on some kind of private joke.

“Such a pity,” she said, a lack of conviction in her tone. No matter how irritated she was with him, there was a part of her that was enjoying this exchange. It just made this encounter all that more puzzling, and left him even more bewildered than before.

Federico sighed. “Look, there is no need for this run around—”

“I beg to differ.”

“Just,” he stressed, ignoring her interruption, “let's go take this to a more…private place, if you would not mind. There are a lot of eyes and ears about. Too many, in fact,” he added, with a light frown.

The woman snorted, very unladylike. “Right. That’s a great idea. Why didn’t I think about it? I mean going to a remote place with a stranger,” she said, in a tone so dry that a desert would feel envy. “I think I’ll pass.”

He huffed, with a sharp shake of his head. “I'm trying to compromise here,” Federico told her, his tone serious. With his mission in mind, he needed to learn more about her and possibly persuade her to return to Florence with him. He didn’t think that she would come willingly.

Olivia would have appreciated his compromise maybe a few words back, but now she felt a knot twist in her chest. It was a hint of anxiety that broke up the bits of happiness, and replaced them with a cold burn that ached down to the marrow of her bones. “I just want to know why you were following me,” she said, her tone forthright and honest. She had done nothing remarkable or noteworthy for him to have chased. Well, before blowing up the prison that was. “Is that so hard of a question to answer?”
Many people would have been overjoyed to have one of their favorite characters stalking them, but it just left her with a foreboding feeling in her gut. She understood so little of her situation, and was at a loss for most answers. She needed to know the why about this. She needed, at least, an explanation to ease the burden of worries in her head.

“I’m just making things as difficult as you are making it for me,” he pointed out, with a humorless smile.

“Quid pro quo, Clarice?” Livvy remarked, dryly. The reference went completely over his head, like most of her references would given this day and age. “I don’t play that kind of game, it always ends up with someone wearing a skin suit and lotion in the basket. And honestly, that’s a bit messed up.”

Federico stared for a full minute before a curse slipped out of his mouth. “Do you just enjoy messing with people?” He demanded, vehemently.

So vehemently that Olivia’s entire body rooted the spot stunned by his question. Her eyes were wide and watched him with rapt attention. Her breathing quickened, she was suddenly having trouble getting enough air into her lungs. “Normally, I do,” she replied thickly, as a cold sensation ran down her spine.

“Well, I don’t enjoy being messed with,” he glared at her.

An unfathomable realization swept through those stormy eyes, and stole the light out of them in one second like the fragile flame of a candle being snuffed out. His words hit her with more accuracy than he could have known, and she felt her heart pivot painfully against her ribs. Her neck shifting as she swallowed, her face turned an interesting shade of green. “God…” she breathed out. She placed a hand to her clammy forehead. “I’m…I’m sorry…I…”

Federico blinked in astonishment as she turned and bolted. He stood there for a moment before hissing, “Not again…”

“Do you enjoy messing with people?”

“Well, I don’t enjoy being messed with.”

I’m not…messing with anyone.

But wasn’t that exactly what she is doing? The thought made her stomach turn violently. Olivia had never felt so sick in her entire life. It was a horrible ache of dishearten, leaving her weakly against the wall gasping for breath. What is wrong with me? She thought, stumbling over her own feet. This was real; there was no escaping that reality. So why had she walked up to him, entitled and tease him? This wasn’t a game. He wasn’t some character. He was a real person, with real worries and while she had always known that, that fact hit her with more force now.

She had never thought of herself as a manipulator. With the way her father had been pinning her brother and her against each other with words, she swore to never be like him. Yet that was what she was doing, right? Putting herself smack dab in the center of other peoples’ lives who could get up ended because she decided to play hero and change the script. Even if she wanted to save people and stop the Templars, should she? What if all the choices she made, swearing up and down it wasn’t selfishness that spurred her towards her favorite characters, she just made things worse? Step on a butterfly, somewhere there is an earthquake. Ripples in the pool start out small, but become larger touching so much. You’re not a god, you’re not even an angel, and what designs do you have on destiny? Olivia kicked a few shingles off the rooftops, listening to them shatter below with a deep,
unsettled frown on her face.

But could she just leave things be? When she knew so much of the future and what was to happen, could she just stand by and be a spectator? Could she just stay silent and be a coward as good people died? Earlier she had been so confident in her decision. Swoop in, save the day, save innocent lives (namely the Auditore family), kick Templar ass. It sounded so easy when put like that, and perhaps if it had been just another story—just another game, it would have been. Now, she realized with stunning and painful clarity how real the lives that were on the line here were.

The decision she thought was set in stone, was really made in sand. And each thought was waves, crashing across that line moving it all over the place. What if she became part of this story and only made things worse? What if one decision, turned everything upside down and everyone got hurt just because she played a game? But what if she didn’t and everything stayed the same? Olivia glared down at the streets below where people milled about merrily in their blissful ignorance, and wondered why everything was so heavy. Her heart and heart thoughts just weighed too much, and both were attempting to drag her down in the black pit of indecision.

She had to figure this out. She had to make a decision, and once made, there would be no take backs.

It was surprising easy to find this Ciana. Some carefully posed questions to a barkeep, a couple of thieves and courtesans and few coins in the right purses; she finally stood in front of a small house. She looked over the tattered, building barely standing on its own, and she wondered what had driven it to such poverty. There was a hint of beauty from days when it had been cared for, and Luigi’s hand writing was not that of a common man. If this was a family home, Olivia with all the she was given as clues, assumed they had been once a well-to-do family. She wished she had been open and asked more about Luigi’s life. Perhaps, if things went well then she could ask Ciana.

She walked up to the door, and drew in a deep, cleansing breath. She lifted her hand and rapped her knuckles against the door. Her eyes strained to her the shuffle of footsteps from the other side of the door, and finally it pulled open. In the doorway, was a blonde courtesan hand on her hips. She had a pretty heart-shape face, with a pixie nose. Her lips had been painted bright red, and her lips were pulled down into a frown. She asked rudely, “What do you want?”

“Are you Ciana?” Olivia asked, with a steady gaze.

The woman's gaze filled with distrust, her hand curling around the door ready to slam it in Livvy's face if necessary. “And if I am?” The courtesan asked, carefully.

“I have a letter for Ciana, but it’s an important letter. I can’t just hand it away unless I know it goes to its proper owner,” she stated, her brows furrowed together. She did not envy the woman her mistrust, but she didn’t have all day to play courier. She had spent a pretty bit of coin on getting Ciana’s whereabouts, and had to make up that investment by procuring funds from unsuspecting and contemptible individuals. In lay man’s terms, she was going to steal from undeserving assholes that wandered the streets with an arrogant and reprehensible attitude towards others.

The blonde blinked, surprised. “A letter? From who?”

“From Luigi—” As soon as the name passed her lips, the door was slammed shut with enough for to make the windows rattle. Olivia stared at the wooden door with a bit of bemusement and shock. “At least, I know have the right house,” Olivia whispered, underneath her breath. A person wouldn’t have such a strong reaction to a stranger’s name, and she was beginning to realize that Luigi’s relationship with his daughter was more tumultuous than he had ever gotten to tell her. With a sigh, she reached up knocking again. And again. And again. “Come on, I really have places to be.”
Livvy now glared, hotly at the door. “Look I promised him I would get this to you,” she said, loudly. When that didn’t illicit a response, she knelt down and shoved the letter underneath the door. She didn’t like doing that. She would have preferred to know that the woman actually read it, instead of possibly tossing it or burning it. But a shut door and unwilling subject didn’t allow her much wiggle room to see this request done. She was about to leave when the letter slipped back right out. She stared, and then blinked. “Are you frickin’ kidding me?”

She shoved the letter back under the door again.

It was shoved back out.

Olivia let out a fierce growl. She laid flat on her stomach, ignoring the whispers from people passing by while also hoping that the liquid that touched her cheek was rain water and not something less pleasant. She glared through the bottom of the door, not even a little bit amused by the green eye that was glaring back.

“Take the letter and leave,” the courtesan's muffled demanded floated through the door.

“Take the letter, and I will,” Livvy back in the exact same tone.

“I want nothing from that man,” Ciana hissed.

Olivia gave a snort. “Just read the letter. What harm comes from reading a letter?” She asked, with a roll of her eyes.

“There is always harm when that bastard is involved,” Ciana snapped.

“Hey! That bastard saved my life!” Olivia defended her cellmate. His death was still raw, and she hated that she hadn’t managed to get him to freedom. That he had died because of her.

“And he abandoned mine!” Ciana hissed, angrily. She disappeared from the other side of the door, and Livvy heard angrily foot stomping away and door from somewhere inside the house slam shut. Olivia pushed herself up into a sitting position, and felt her anger at the courtesan’s callous attitude dull into a low simmer. The word ‘abandoned’ had pulled viciously on her heartstrings, and as much as she wished to fulfill Luigi’s dying request, she also knew Ciana’s pain.

“Fuck my life.”

In a dark, barely lit room a secret meeting was taking place in San Gimignano safe away from any prying ears. Tension so thick that it could be cut with a dull knife hung in the air as all of the occupants wore sullen and sour expression.

“What are we going to do? We cannot recapture them all…” One man said.

“Not from a lack of trying,” another voice replied darkly. “Put the names out, offer rewards. We must do what we can to appear that we still have control over the Tuscany countryside. We cannot take this failure lying down.”

“Of course,” the first voice replied, swiftly.

“And more importantly,” the second voice added, silkily, “this new development. This Red Hood that the people are carrying on about. He inspired too much hope amongst the masses. The Hood must be dealt with, and swiftly before he manages to incite a revolution.”
Dawn broke over the horizon and herald in a new morning. Olivia watched the ray or pink and purple beam across the sky, and sent a silent prayer hoping that today would be far better than the last. She finished her breakfast of bread and jam. She had spent a pretty penny—or florin as it were—on that apricot jam, but she still had some left over that could be eaten on another day. Also a jar to use once it was empty. Also looked for that silver lining, Livvy thought, drawing in a deep breath and she held it tight in her lungs. She held it so long that her insides started to burn, and then she released it slowly.

She needed a new weapon, preferably a sword. She wasn’t sure how much she recalled of her fencing camp, and there was a big difference between a spar and a real fight, but it was the only weapon she had any familiarity with. It seemed the safer option, but she knew she was going to have to train. She needed not to swing a sword about and hope the pointy end stuck into the enemy. She needed to be able to wield it with deadly precision, and be a threat with one in her hand. And with the threats in this time, she needed to learn quickly. Her nimble fingers found place of the wall and latched onto them as she heaved herself up to the rooftops wary of any guards that might be lingering there.

After glancing around, she saw no movement and walked down the rooftops towards the blacksmith shop. She stretched her arms over her head with a yawn, causing her back to pop. A content sigh slipped out of her mouth, and the tension that had been tight along her spine eased up. The last few days stress had taken it’s toil on her body, and she exhaustion stay with her like an old friend. She tapped her feet across the thatching, picking absentmindedly at the cracked ones until they fell off.

That was until a shout came down from below.

She blinked. Did I hit someone? She leaned over the edge of the rooftop, to carefully peer down at the street below. What she saw made her blood turn cold, and a shocked gasp to tear from her lips. The crowd rushed on past not ever bothering to help the poor courtesan who was fighting for her life. A few even turned up their noses with slight sneers on their faces as if they were too good to stop and help her.

“Let go! Let me go!” The blond courtesan shouted, struggling in the man’s grasp.

Her stomach jolted. It was Ciana!

“Shut your mouth or I will do it for you!” The man hissed, backhanding Ciana across the face so hard that the crack echoed across the stone buildings. “I swear if I am dissatisfied you’ll end up dead like your friends!”

The courtesan let out a small sob, tears rolling down her cheeks and she looked so afraid. But she didn’t stop fighting. No matter what the man did, she would keep on fighting until the end, Olivia realized. A spark of anger in the pit of her stomach and she narrowed her eyes with a deep frown. There were no guards nearby, and she highly doubted they would be of any use. Climbing down the building would take too long, and the man could seriously hurt Ciana by then. Killing her or worse. So much worse, a shudder rushed down her spine.

Olivia knew what her only option was. Her heart pounding her chest, she swallowed down the burst of panic and she came to the edge of the rooftop. “Hey, asshole!” She shouted down at the man.

He looked up, and Ciana pulled herself out of his grasp just as a shadow descended upon him. The shadow landed on him, the air so forcefully knocked out of his body that he went out like a light.
Olivia had her eyes clenched tightly closed, and then carefully opened them. She glanced down at the man that she was sitting upon for a moment before she got to her feet. “Wasn’t that fun?” She remarked, with a half-hearted grin. “That had to be a twenty foot jump. I jumped down from a rooftop like a boss. Leo can go suck it for always saying I would never do something like that. Seriously, how cool am I right now?”

She was babbling. She knew she was babbling. Once she started it was hard to turn it off, and it usually happened when her anxiety was high. Jumping off a rooftop when she had a deep fear of heights would be just the kind of recipe for some major anxiety. Ciana who stood a few feet away had strange expression, somewhere between perplexed and amusement, on her face. Olivia caught this and felt a flush rise onto her cheeks. “Uh…right, hello there,” she greeted the courtesan, rubbed the back of her neck sheepishly. “Are you alright?”

“Yes…I am.” Ciana nodded. “Thank you for stopping that bastardo.” The courtesan sent the man a glare as he moaned pitifully, and looked painfully tempted to kick him while he was down. Instead, she looked at Olivia with a sharp gaze. “Why did you help me? I mean, I wasn't exactly nice to you.”

“Just because you aren't a nice person doesn't mean you deserve that—” Olivia started to say, but was interrupted by the courtesan.

“What's that supposed to mean? Not a nice person!” Ciana scowled.

“Well, you weren't!” Livvy pointed out. “You even admitted it.”

“No, I admitted I wasn't nice to you. I can be a nice person,” the courtesan retorted, folding her arms over her chest. “When I want to be,” Ciana added after a moment, with a rather petulant pout on her lips.

“Fine,” Olivia said, deadpanned. “You can be a nice person. Bye.”

Olivia turned on heel, and walked away. She didn’t need to deal with aggravating people today, even if she tended to be an aggravating person herself. She had made it all the way back to the main street when a hand wrapped around her elbow. She jerked, instinctively bracing for a fight until she saw it was Ciana standing there. She let out a harsh breath through her nose, and demanded, “What?”

Ciana immediately released her arm, as if realizing that touching her was not a good idea right at the moment. Her lips pursed, and her green eyes looked everywhere, but at Olivia’s face. She seemed agitated and upset. Given what had just happened, Olivia supposed she could understand that, but for some reason it felt like more. Her annoyance faded, and her eyes searched the courtesan’s face. “What?” She asked, this time with her tone far more gentle than before.

It did the trick. Ciana’s gaze finally met hers. “I…need a favor,” she said, hesitantly.

“Pardon?” Livvy’s brow arched.

Ciana bit her lower lip then gestured for Olivia to follow her away from the bustling streets, and great many ears that were nearby. In a small alcove just in the shade of the Santa Maria Assunta, she finally broke her silence. “I am not the only courtesan to be attacked like this. Several others have been assaulted and injured. Two others—my friends Cara or Meela—have gone missing entirely. I fear that something bad has befallen them,” Ciana said, worriedly. “I think that man that…attacked me may have something to do with it.”

Olivia studied her, already having a feeling where this was going. “And you want to do what
“exactly?” She asked, just for clarification’s sake.

“I want you to save them.”

Livvy bit the inside of her cheek, and caught herself pointing out that several days missing was not a good thing. She couldn’t promise that she could save them, when it could be very likely that they were already dead. Common sense told that it would be best not to get caught up in this mess, but the pleading look that Ciana was trying to hide made her resolve melt like ice on a summer’s day. “Alright,” Olivia agreed, and then an idea formed in her mind. “On one condition.”

Ciana stiffened. “What?”

Olivia reached into her bag, and pulled out the letter. She held up and waved it back and forth to showcase it off. Her lips pulled into a smile when Ciana reeled back, as if being near the letter would set her on fire. “Take the letter. Read it. And I will go look for your friends,” she bargained. “That’s not such a bad price to pay, now is it?”

Ciana glared, looking mighty tempted to tell her where she could shove the letter. In the end, the courtesan let out a frustrated groan and snatched the letter while giving Olivia a look of death. “Fine. I will read the stupid letter,” Ciana snapped, stormily.

“Then we have a deal,” Olivia smiled, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Do you have any suspicion of where they were taking you? Or perhaps why?”

“I do not know exactly why, but I believe it was to the Antico Teatro Romano. That is where the poor excuse for a man was taking me, but he could have just been trying to get me alone to—” Ciana broke off, her voice trembled. She let out a shaky breath, and squared her shoulders before she continued. “The fastest where there is through the south gate. If you hurry, you might find some answers to what is going on.”

Olivia nodded. “Stay in the inn, I'll bring your friends back to you.”

The courtesan nodded.

Livvy waited until the courtesan was safe within in the inn before she briskly made her way down the street. She made her way through the crowd and past the south gate. Following the road, she thought about how she always had dreamt of seeing famous landmarks, but she always imagine seeing them while on a vacation. Laughing and taking pictures. Not when innocent lives could hang in the balance. The ancient theater was easy to spot, and she took a second to marvel at the structure. Even broken and crumbling it was still a sight to look at. The beauty of it undeniable and it must have been extraordinary back in it’s glory days. A shout made Olivia startle and she ducked behind a pillar, pressing her palms flat against it. She carefully peered around at what used to the stage, and saw a courtesan sitting on the ground tied up.

Her bottom lip busted and cheek bruised. She held her chin high even though her eyes were swimming with unshed tears. Olivia felt a pang in her chest, and felt her somewhat flimsy resolve harden like steel—pun not intended. Her eyes then went to the two well-dressed men who stood off to the side, like they were keeping the courtesan from escaping. This wasn’t some sick fuck looking for a good time, and just didn’t have the coin. No, this was something just as sinister, but in a different way entirely.

While their motive was unclear, one thing was: she needed to get the courtesan to safety before whatever was supposed to happen here, happened. One man brought away from his partner in crime to patrol while the other guarded the young woman. A knife was tightly clasped in his hand. She
couldn't approach him; he would mostly kill the courtesan if there was any sign of panic or enemy. She could take out the other one first, and hurried out of her hiding spot before ducking into the area underneath the seats and into the tunnel area, out of sight and making her way towards the man patrolling. She pressed her back to the tunnel wall, creeping along it silently eyeing the darken path warily. She shook her arms lightly to keep them from tensing up. Tensed limbs gave enemies something to grab and use against you. Relax the limbs and slip out of their grasps. She halted as a dark silhouette was casted on the wall adjacent from her. The man was coming this way.

Livvy took a few steps, knowing at the curved angle she wouldn't be seen until he was right on her. The man came into her sight, she held her breath and curled her hands into fists. He wasn't a tall or particularly strong looking man, but Livvy saw something glinting in his hand. A knife. Startle him, get the weapon out of his reach then take him down. She thought as he was within reaching distance and she detached herself from the wall like a shadow.

The man's head snapped towards her in a comical double take, Livvy would have laughed if she hadn't been so focused on twisting the knife out of his hands. She grabbed his wrist and slammed it against the stone wall. The fleshy squelch did not echo loudly, and for that she was thankful or it would have alerted the other man. He gave a soundless cry, his fingers loosened around the knife just enough to cause it to clatter to the stone ground.

Anger by the attack, he rushed her.

The brute force of his body slamming her into the wall knocked all the breath out of her, and Livvy gasped as pain streaked up her back, then rattled through her skull. Black spots danced her and she shook her head, desperately to get her sight back. She heard him take a step back and then lunge forward again. She allowed her legs to slid out from underneath her, and his fist slammed over the top of her head straight into the wall.

"You bitch!" He cursed.

"That's what they call me," she hissed out, sarcastically.

Olivia didn’t allow him to regroup for another attack. She leapt at him, her fingernails dug through his hair and into this scalp. Throwing all her weight into the motion, she slammed his head as hard as she could into the wall. The first hit stunned him, and his resistance slipped away. Over and over she repeated the motion, until he fell to the ground out cold. Her fingers jerked and quaked after she had released him, and she watched his chest rise and fall with harsh breath. He is gonna wake up to one helluva a headache, she thought, feeling proud to be the cause of it. Wiping the sweat off of her forehead, she took in a breath repressing the shudder that threatened to run through her.

She slowly made her way back through the tunnel after nicking the man's knife off the ground. She paused at the edge, and peeked out. The guy guarding the courtesan was looking around, getting more and more agitated with each passing second. "Where is Marco? He should have been back by now…” He whispered to himself, pacing a couple of steps to the left and then back to his original position.

He glanced at the courtesan and then at the tunnel before hitting the courtesan across the face. She cried out briefly before slumping over, out cold. The man then strode towards the other entrance of the tunnel. Eyes widening, Livvy realized she would only have seconds to get the courtesan out of there before he found his unconscious friend. She had to move, and to move quickly.

Once he was out of sight, she swiftly made her towards the courtesan. She shot a glance to left, and let a sigh of relief went through when the man was nowhere in sight. She burst into a run, her feet remained surprisingly steady on the uneven stone and she slid to the woman's side. "Hey, hey, you
need to wake up…like now…” she whispered, urging the woman to wake up. She used the knife to slice through her ropes, and then shook her shoulder. “Come on. Really wake up. We have to go now.”

The young woman didn’t even stir.

Livvy hissed, worriedly, “This is a really bad time to not wake up!”

“Oh! You!”

“Shite.” Olivia was on her feet in a split second, and turned to see the man charging towards her at full speed. Holding the knife like it was meant to be in her hand, she bent her knees and stood on the balls of her feet ready to dodge either way. Never give your enemy anything to use, her father’s words echoed in her mind. The sunlight glinted off the knife as it cut through the air towards her, her ducking to right at the last second. The man gave a growl and tried to bring the knife towards her, but she threw up her arm blocking his. The blades met with a clang followed by a sharp hiss.

Her heart thundered inside of her, and her eyes darted all over his form. She tried to pick him apart. To find anything that would give her an advantage of his size and strength in this fight. He has a limp, she thought, when she pulled back to the left. When he moved to follow, his right left quaked underneath the effort. Her foot shot out, slamming down on his knee. He screamed, buckling over and she slammed her blade through his hand. Bile rushed up her throat at the feeling of the blade sliding through flesh and bone, and the man screamed bloody murder.

But he dropped his knife which had been her goal.

She ripped her blade free from his hand, and placed it against his neck. “Why are you kidnapping courtesans?” She demanded, her voice gravely and rough. It sounded so different from her normal voice that if she had been paying attention it would have shocked her.

The man spat on her feet before his fist shot out, and hit her in the stomach. She stumbled backwards a half a step, and then she gnashed her teeth together giving him a look that could kill.

“You shouldn’t have gotten involved!” The man sneered, getting to his feet with more swiftness than Olivia had thought him capable of.

“Probably, but I've always had this problem doing what I should,” Livvy snapped back, swiping at him with her knife. It met its mark, tearing through the shirt and into his arm leaving a trail of red behind it.

“Cazzo!” He growled, and then he was on her. His fist landed right across her temple, jarring the bones in her skull. While she was briefly stunned, one hand wrapped around the back of her throat and the other grabbed her hand with knife, twisting it until the blade was pointed at her own throat. It was a mocking parody of a lover’s embrace, and the tip of the blood touched her skin, white hot fear lanced through her chest. She couldn’t kick him away, her feet planted on the ground gave her the leverage to keep him from plunging the blade into her neck.

Olivia swallowed thickly as pushed all her weight backwards. At the angle, it forced him to tumble forward as her back hit the ground, and she twisted her neck out of the way just in time for the knife to be buried into the ground right beside her. Grabbing his shirt she tugged him the rest of the way down, and planted her feet against his chest, using his own momentum to send him flying over her head.

A sickening crack echoed through the ruins and Livvy tilted her head back and saw the man
groaning holding his bloody forehead. His head had hit a very large stone, thankfully. Rolling onto her stomach, Livvy pushed herself up off the ground taking unsteady breaths. Pausing, she reached up to touch the side of her neck. She flinched when pain flared underneath her fingertips, and she pulled her hand back to see her finger coated in blood. This would likely mean another trip to the doctor who thought everything could be cured by leeches.

“Uh…” A whimper rose from the courtesan who blinked her eyes, a painful grimace on her face.
“What happened?”

“You’re finally awake. Sorry to tell you that you missed the show, but you’ll be happy to know those men won’t be bothering you anymore,” Olivia commented, making her way to the woman’s side.
“How bad are you hurt?”

The courtesan seemed dazed, like she could not believe that someone had come to her aid. “They… they just hit us,” the courtesan stated, slowly. Her shoulders rose with her shaken breaths, and the fear was still there in her eyes. “That’s all that happen this time thankfully. Why did you help me?”

“Ciana sent me.” Livvy replied, helping the courtesan to her feet. Once she said Ciana’s name, all the suspicion and wariness fled out of the young woman and the courtesan slumped with relief. “Are you Cara or Meela?”

“Meela,” the courtesan answered, softly. “Who are you…if you don't mind my asking?”

“A friend,” She replied, vaguely. She wasn’t comfortable giving out her name. She might not be known in any way, shape or form here in the past, but that could be easily changed with so whimsically giving out her identity. Knowledge was power her, and the wrong word to even a decent person could prove to have consequences. “Where's Cara?”

“I…I don't know.” Meela's eyes filled with tears. “They separated us. Saying it would be easier and draw less attention, than if they tried taking us all together.”

“Who said?”

“Salmoni,” she answered, placing her hands on her hips. “He is the brother of our Madame—Madame Carlotta and also the so called 'governor' of San Gimignano. He thinks he has the right to use us whenever he pleases and has taken some away to sell them to slave traders. Slave trading pay is an easy way to make a lot of coin. And there is nothing we can do to stop it.”

“What does Madame Carlotta do?” Livvy asked, head tilted to her head.

“Turns a blind eye,” Meela stated.

“Isn't that bad…well, for business?”

“You've seen San Gimignano, right? It's a hell hole. They are only the rich, the poor and the richer than rich. Most people have so little money, they can only afford to live on the streets and not in homes,” Meela said, angrily. “There are no shortage on desperate people willing to do anything to survive, so we courtesan are replaceable.”

Livvy frowned, deeply. “Alright. Let's get you back to Ciana and then…we'll see what we can do from there,” she proposed, her tone lighter than she felt. As the two started towards the city, Olivia could feel it in her bones.

This was going to be a long week.
Olivia stared down at the amber liquid in her drink. Meela and Ciana were both sitting and discussing things, quietly. Despite being so happy that Meela was alive and alright, Ciana still looked sick with worry. Given what she had learned from Meela about how things were being run in San Gimignano, she could not fault the blond courtesan for her troubles. She sighed, letting her fingers dance on the table as she tried to fight off the urge to rearrange the items on the table neatly. Her OCD habits decided to rear their ugly head once more. It was a nervous tick that she developed during her father’s training, and had stayed long after. It was a habit that transferred over into her everyday life making her a good student, if not an awkward and mostly isolated individual.

It had taken years to break several habits. Like the need to constantly watch her back, to constantly be prepared for a fight, and now all because her trip down time line lane, it was all came rushing back. A tired groan slipped out of her lips, and she buried her face into her hands.

“Are you okay?” Meela asked.

“I’m fine,” she said, her fingers brushing the bandages around her neck. It took every last coin she had taken from that man to pay the doctor. Meaning, she was once again left with no place to stay and no food save for apricot jam that was going to be so toothy aching sweet by itself. “Are you sure you have no idea where your friend Cara is?” Olivia asked, because it bothered her that a young woman likely frightened and scared.

“No,” Ciana said, regretfully. “We do not.”

Meela shook her head, sadly.

Olivia slumped in her chair with a sigh. “Has it always been like this?”

Ciana gave her a weird look. “The bar?”

“San Gimignano,” Livvy corrected, slowly. “Has it always been this bad?”

“No, it was not. It had once been beautiful. Not just the countryside, but even inside these walls there was goodness and hope. That was when I was child, but then about seven years ago Salmoni happened,” the blond courtesan replied, wrapping her arms around her midsection. “He was not fit to govern. Everyone knew so, but a few murders and bribes later, he is what the law in this part of Tuscany has become. Ever since then everything has turned dark.”

“Why hasn't anyone stopped him?” Livvy asked.

“He is very good at, how do they say it, kissing ass?” The blond courtesan said, with a light snort. “He had put his money with the right people, de Pazzi, de Medici, but he also invests in other things. Things if the public were to know, he would be easily demoted, perhaps even executed.”

“Why not tell them what you know?”

“We are courtesans, darling,” she reminded Livvy, gently. “We are not...the most popular people. Nor the most believable. Besides, those who make stands against him disappear, and he is very good at covering his tracks. It is why he has stayed in power for so long. It would take more than a mere man to stand against him.”

More than a mere man, Olivia had heard similar words from Luigi though she doubted Ciana would appreciate the comparison. Chewing on her lower lip, she grabbed her ale from off the table. She took a sip, grimacing at the taste and set it back down hastily. “What about...” She cleared her throat, roughly. “What about the Red Hood?”
“What about him?” Meela blinked.

Olivia was careful about her next words. “He took down that prison that was supposed to be impregnable, and has slipped the guards at every turn on his memorable and rather wild adventures,” she said, her tone very thoughtfully. Though besides blowing up the prison, the rest of the stories were hogwash—flattering hogwash, but still. “Who’s to say that he couldn’t take down Sal…the Salmon guy.”

Ciana looked horribly amused by Salmoni’s misconstrued name. “Well, I suppose if there was one to bet my money on to take him down, then it would be the roguish Red Hood,” she said, with a slight smile. “But such thoughts of poppies and daydreams, nothing that really help hope come true.”

Her fingers tapped out a beat of a song that was playing in her head. Hidden Citizen’s ‘Stay Alive’ when her scalp prickled with unease, and she felt someone’s gaze press down on her like it was physical touch. She raised her head up carefully, and looked past her drinking companions. A curse fell out of mouth before she could help it.

There across the tavern, sat Federico Auditore whose gaze bore straight into hers. After a moment of his staring, she raised her glass to him with a sarcastic smile on her lips. He gave her a small glare before rolling his eyes. Ciana turned to see what she was looking at, and asked, “Friend of yours?”

Olivia smiled. “Not sure yet, but I’m hopeful.”

Slowly he sipped the ale, flinching at the bland taste curled around his tongue before sliding down his throat. Federico mulled over the confrontation, wondering what to tell his father of the woman across the bar. He watched her give him a haughty smirk and raised her cup at him. He returned the gesture with a glare, and then glanced over her companions. He had to admit, he was surprised that she was freely associating with courtesans. Not many would. He watched her few minutes longer and couldn’t help notice the change within her. The shoulders were slumped down, her face looked tired and her eyes filled with some kind of inner struggled.

Not that he was concerned. It was just his mission to get her or news of her back to his father. He wasn't concerned, at all. Federico threw down some florins and headed outside to clear his mind.

Olivia went of her way to escort the two courtesans to their dwelling, though it puzzled her why they weren’t at the brothel. Most courtesans worked and lived there, giving the nature of their work, safety in numbers was always a good thing. She supposed it had something to with this Madame Carlotta given how she was obviously turning a blind eye to her workers harm. She wasn’t willing to risk another kidnapping, but nothing had happened. Meela lived in a little apart with what looked like several others; an older woman, a family of three, and a couple of men. She realized that all of them must have had pulled together to afford it. Olivia bid the woman farewell after Meela tearfully gave her thanks once more, and the courtesan shut the door to her home tightly.

Ciana wrapped her arms around herself, the cool Tuscany air whipped around them and the courtesan stared enviously at Livvy’s long sleeves. “You don't have to do this, you know that right?” Ciana asked, quietly as they resumed walking down the street.

“I know.”

“Then why are you bothering? Why do it if you don't have to? Why do it if you gain nothing from it? I don't understand…” Ciana asked, like she couldn’t believe that someone would just help for the sake of helping.
Livvy shot her a long look. “Why does it matter?”

“Because everyone has a motive, they have some reason for the things they do,” Ciana muttered, cynically. “No one is selfless.”

That made Olivia sad beyond the way worlds could say. She knew the world was a cold place. She often held a bit of cynicism towards it herself, but she never had been so brow beaten to see the world the way Ciana did. “You must have not met many good people,” she said, quietly.

“No, I haven’t,” Ciana told her.

A canyon of silence swelled between them, and for a long time, there footfalls was the only noise in the quiet even. Finally, Olivia broke it, subsequently changing the subject, “You read the letter.”

“Yes,” Ciana answered, shortly.

“Good.”

Annoyance flared in green eyes. “How do you do that?” Ciana asked.

“Do what?” Livvy looked at her blankly.

“Seem so certain of yourself. I could have burned the letter and be lying,” Ciana pointed out, darkly.

Olivia smiled, lightly. “You could have, but you didn’t.”

“And how do you know that?” The courtesan asked.

She could tell the blond woman wanted a serious answer, so she expelled a sigh and came to a stop behind of in front of Ciana’s home. There was a brief hesitation before she turned towards the courtesan, and offered her a thin lipped smile. “Because the anger you had in you before, it’s not there anymore,” she replied, simply.

“You're saying I've forgiven him?” The courtesan said slowly.

“Not so much what he did. You can’t forgive him for being there, but you have let go of the pain, allowing your heart grow beyond it so it doesn’t stay broken,” said Olivia, knowingly. She chewed at it, stewed over it, and then decided to confide a bit in Ciana. Maybe it was because of their similar background that she felt the need to do so, knowing the hurt that Ciana had carried for a long time. “I know because I’ve been in your shoes, in a way. My father…abandoned me when I was just a teenager. Truth be told he had abandoned us a lot earlier than that. He was there physically, but…not in the right way.” Livvy rubbed the center of her forehead, as she moistened her dry lips. “After my mother died, he couldn't…he just couldn't handle it, so he didn't and he became this cold, detached person.

“He was the most depressing sight I have, and probably ever, will see. He never tried to be better or make it right for…” She couldn't choke the next words, so she drew in a deep breath to calm herself. “Your father tried to make it right in some way. And you're thankful for that. I can see that.”

Ciana stared at her for a long moment before slowly going into her home and shutting her door. Olivia stood there for several moment, before she turned on her heel and walked into the alleyway, heading “home”. Home being the abandoned house just on the outskirts of town that was a lot better prospect than sleeping on the rooftops again.

Then a shadow blocked her path.
“I've got you now,” said a familiar voice.

“No-o-o,” Livvy whined pitifully. Why did everything have to happen in the same day? Why couldn’t life take breaks and spread all its hits out? She gave Federico Auditor, who looked all too smug, a glare and then turned it skyward. “I just want to sleep!”

He observed her little tantrum to the sky, with amusement.

“Salut(3),” he greeted, sauntering over to her. Her head snapped down, and her body slumped with a sigh as she eyed him like he was a slug or something equally as disgusting.

“What are you doing here?” She asked. Her fingers twitched with the urge to shake or throttle him. With her sleepless nights and tiring day, she had a short fuse. One that Federico seemed all too good at setting off.

He inhaled slowly, and pinched the bridge of his nose. He murmured something that sounded like a prayer for patience before he plastered a polite smile onto his face. “Looking for you.”

She just gave him a wry look. “I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“Just the pretty ones.”

Her lips twisted into an ironic sort of smile and she shook her head lightly. “Stop trying to get on my good side. I no longer have one.”

Federico's black onyx eyes sparkling, a charming dimple appeared on the side of his mouth. Olivia raised her hand to stop him. “Don't. I have a feeling what's going to come out of your mouth, and don't,” she warned him sternly, though her lips bent upward slightly.

“You are a mind reader, hmm?” He asked, looking over her frowning. Her posture was a far cry from the self-assured woman he encountered earlier and he couldn't help but wonder what happened to her.

“Yea…” she said, with a bitter kind of sarcasm. “I'm a regular Charles Xavier…(3)”

“Who?”

“It's…It's really not important. Don't worry about it.”

Silence fell between, awkward and harsh. Neither one of them knew what to say next, or where to take the conversation. Trying to wring blood from a stone would have been far less difficult, Olivia mused. She ran her fingers through her hair, and the morose expression on her face prompted Federico to show concern for her.

“What troubles you, bella?” He asked, lightly.

Olivia startled. It wasn’t some pretense, some way to buy her trust. Just genuine concern, and a self-conscious flush pooled into her cheeks. “No offense, but I don’t know you all that well. I don’t share my personal issues so readily with strangers,” she said, even though she had made an exception for Ciana.

“Sometimes it's easier to talk to a stranger.”

“Sometimes it's not.” Especially since the stranger in front of her was attached to the troubles that were plaguing her mind. It would have been more distracting and caused her more anxiety to try and...
place her burdens on his shoulders. Not that she even could. *What would I even say? I’m from the future of another a world, and I know things about what is going to happen to your family, including your own execution?* She thought, with a slight grimace. Straight-forward was not the way to go with this situation.

“Federico Auditore,” he introduced himself, politely even with a slight bow. “Tell me your name and we won’t be strangers anymore.”

“That's not how it works, and you know it,” she said, with a humorless smile.

He smiled and gave a small shrug. “Can't blame a man for trying.”

“Suppose not,” she agreed, rocking back on her heels. She crossed her arms over her chest, and tilted her back so she looked upward at the moon. It was only pale sliver in the sky, and tomorrow would not be there, at all. “Going to tell me why you're really following me?”

“Ah, are we going to go through this again?” Federico asked, a strained smile on his lips. “Could we not enjoy each other company?”

She sent him a cool look. “I really don’t think so.”

“Then we fight,” Federico stated, seriously.

“You want answers, I want answers,” Federico said, simply. “Seems the only way for either of us to get those answer is to fight with more than just words.”

“You want…to duel?”

“It would certainly settle matters, and give a clear victor while a battle of words only ends up making victims of us both. Normally, I would not do something so drastic considering you are a woman, but —” Federico started to explain, but was cut off by the venomous glare that was pinned on him.

“Oh? And you think being a man gives you such a great advantage over the poor, weak woman before you?” Olivia said, her tone slow and quiet. Her eyes stared at him unblinkingly, and she wondered if Federico was at all aware of the landmine he had just stepped on.

“Well, that is one concern,” he stated, after a moment.

“Oh, you male chauvinist pig!” She snapped, placing her hands on her hips. “Just because you're a man, doesn't mean you're stronger than me. I could take you any day I wanted.”

“I'm sure you could take me any day,” Federico quipped, with a smirk, “but let's just duel for now.”

“Ohhh,” she growled, a self-righteous fury in her eyes. “You are so going down.”

Olivia dropped her hand to the pommel of her knife, and hesitated for a split second. A duel didn’t necessarily mean weapons, but when Federico drew his sword out of its sheath, she pulled the knife from her belt. “I knew I should have bought that sword,” she muttered, to herself. Her eyes narrowed into slits, and a tight smirk appeared on her lips, she added tauntingly, “You any good with that?”

She knew that her innuendo hit its mark when he blinked, and flushed ever so slightly. It was almost endearing to know that the womanizer could still blush at a dirty joke. And more importantly, it threw him off just long enough for her to get the first strike. He swiftly brought up his blade,
blocking it. A loud clang echoed through the alleyway. Olivia felt her smirk turned into a genuine grin, an exhilarated feeling pulsed through her veins. It had been so long since she had a good clean fight—a battle where death wasn’t a concern—and even more longer than she had let herself remember anything to do with her father’s training.

It was like a first dance. Both of them testing, seeing what moves the other was capable of all while trying not to step on someone’s toes. Adrenaline swirled inside of her, hot and burning, as the fight grew more intense. He was by no means an easy opponent. Each move he made was made with purpose and intent. He wasted no energy on flourish or dramatic showmanship, and she felt a bit flatter that he thought her such a worthy opponent to treat her so seriously. It was a battle that was more than just blade against blade, but a matter of will. And whose willpower would give out first. Olivia dodged, his blade passed right beside her face.

“You should be careful, darling,” he taunted, tilting his sword showcasing the little strands of bronze locks that clung to the tip of the blade. Livvy's eyes widened a fraction, her left hand reaching up to feel the uneven edge of hair.

“My hair is already too short! Do you have any idea how long it will take to grow back?” She roared, lunging forward with renewed vigor. She brought her blade forward, and he used his sword to block it. Livvy threw her a few more hits, studying the way he fought for a good minute or so before changing her stance. Her blade caught his, and then after shoving him back, she twisted in her whole body around in a twirl. Her blade slashed outward in an arc, and Federico leapt away from her with a hiss.

He glanced down at his hand. An angry red line oozing blood across his palm stared back up at him.

“You should be careful, darling.”

He wiped his bloody hand on his shirt and admitted, albeit reluctantly, “You're good.”

“I know,” She looked at him smugly.

“But I'm better,” Federico said, in two movements, her knife went flying out of her hands.

Olivia stared down at her empty hand in shock.

Federico grinned. “I believe I have won.”

Olivia eyed him with a glare before staring at the sword, and smiled. “You wish,” she said, and then did a roundhouse kick. Her foot smashed into his hand, forcing him to drop his blade with a shout of shock. She then made to rush by him in an attempt at escape, only for arms to wrap around her midsection. She hissed, angrier than a wet cat, “Let go!”

“I don't think so!” Federico snapped, holding tight.

Olivia couldn’t break free. He was too strong and his arms were like a vice that bound her tight. In a burst of ingenuity, she lifted her legs off the ground and pressed them against the nearby wall, pushing off which such force that it sent them toppling to the ground. Federico gasped in pain, as Livvy's elbow was buried into his stomach with merciless force. His grip slackening and Olivia rolled away from him, scrambling to her feet.

Federico growled, shoving himself off the ground.

“Why were you following me?” Olivia demanded, her chest rose and fell with struggled breaths.
“Why did you seek me out?” Frederico retorted, fiercely.

Olivia’s hands reached out, as if to wrap around his neck before she forced them back down to her sides. Her stormy grey eyes flashed with a rage bright like lightning, and if looks could kill then the eldest Auditore child would have been toast. “Because you were following me!” She replied, frustrated and tired. Her body was beyond sore, and she didn’t want to even contemplate how badly it would ache come tomorrow morning. “You know what? Forget it! Just leave me alone!”

“Anybody with common sense would do that.”

Olivia flinched back. His words hurt more than he knew, but she wasn’t going to let him know that. “Ha!” She responded, scathingly. “That must mean you none since you keep on bothering me!”

Federico nearly groaned at how he walked into that one. “You bothered me!” He defended himself, glowering at her. “I distinctly remember you stealing my apple.”

“It was rotten,” she fired back, curtly. “And again, I stress this, I only bothered you after you’re stalkery behavior, or did you forget that?” It was clear that neither of them were willing to back down, too damn stubborn for their own good. She decided to bend just a little to prevent one of them from breaking underneath the pressure. “I just wanted a reason. Why? Why were you following me? What could possibly want from me? I am just…I’m just a girl, who so out of her depth, so far from home and I’m scared and have no answers! I just wanted some answers,” she said, honesty ringing in her voice as clear as a bell.

Federico was stunned by the sudden outburst, the change in her demeanor that he didn’t stop her this time when she turned on heel, and ran away.

Olivia made her way into the abandon house, silent as a ghost. Her feet shuffled across the dusty floor, and her eyes flickered across the cracked and faded walls. It might not be much, but it was four walls and a roof—a leaky one, but she didn’t have to sleep on it so that was nice. Finding her red cape and other articles she had hidden away, she laid her cape out like a blanket before she lied down upon it. She hated the quiet and loved it at the same time. The silence meant no noises to press in on her like sharp daggers, causing her pain and heightened anxiety, but at the same time, the silence gave voice to her thoughts. It gave them room to grow and fester inside of her, and would not allow her to close her eyes and merely fall asleep.

It was these moments. Moments where she let herself think too much, let herself remember too much. Her eyes traced a spider’s progress as it built a web in the corner, weaving its masterpiece for it and it alone. It did not need to spin its web to show off, but out of necessity. If she were to spin a web, use her knowledge to help protect the future would it be out of necessity or that selfish part of her that always belonged? That little child whom still lived in her heart that got lost in stories and games to cope with tragedy and sorrow inside her past? In her heart, she knew that trying to save the Auditore’s would be the right thing to do.

They were good people. They did not deserve the injustice delivered upon by the Templars through a trusted friend. But how would she go about such an endeavor? What steps did she take? She would need to make a list of pros and cons, to have it all out in front of her to make a well-informed decision. Though her heart was already swayed to save them, her mind kept going on about how bad an idea that was.

And there was the business with the courtesans. The missing one Cara whose fate was unknown, and then there was the threat that remained to the others. It had to be stopped, and the men had given no indication of whom they worked for. The encounter had not left any time for questions, and their
apparel did not have hit of any afflictions with anyone in particular. And if she were to solve this riddle, then she needed some answers. A thought sprung into her mind that gave way to a plan, and she knew exactly what she needed to do. At least, with the courtesans disaster. Not so much with the Auditore front. Still very conflicted of that.

The moonless sky was pitch black, and with the storm brewing overhead, even the stars were beginning to disappear. The San Gimignano streets were eerily quiet with only a brave few souls that dared to walk around at this time. Ciana being one of those brave few who made her way down the cobblestone path, with her arms folded over her chest. Her throat trembled, and she tried to calm her nerves to no avail. The courtesan was worried that she was placing too much trust in Olivia Steel, though the other woman had proved herself more worth than anyone else. But this mysterious friend of Olivia's? She wasn’t happy to extend trust to him. Her eyes glanced worriedly across the impassive faces of the buildings that seemed so cold and unwelcoming in the shade of night when suddenly she felt a chill ran down her spine and she whirled around. Her eyes widened and she swallowed thickly, at the two men lumbering towards her.

“Hello there, pretty,” the man cooed, his smile revealed yellow crooked teeth. “What are you doing all by your lonesome? Want some company?”

“I'm waiting on someone,” the courtesan replied, evenly.

“Oh, me thinks she's lying.”

The first man laughed. “I think you are right,” he agreed, his grin turning into something dark and sinister. His beady eyes bore into Ciana with an uncomfortable intensity that made her blood run cold with fear. “Tonight's not your lucky night. You shouldn't have been out of here.”

“And you should never have come here,” a voice said from above. The two men looked up as a shadow descended upon them, and it landed right behind them. The shadows moved, not allowing them to get over their surprise. Fists, and kicks hitting where they'd do the most damaged. The third man stumbled back, away from the fight, his knees quaking and his eyes wide. “It's the Hood! It's the Red Hood!”

Ciana watched mesmerized. It was clear that the Red Hood was trained, albeit a little rusty, but it was more than enough to tackle these unruly thugs that were purely about brute force. The Red Hood narrowly dodged a punch and the drove a snap-kick straight to the man with the bad teeth’s scrotum, sending him to his knees with a high pitched whine. Clasping both his hands together, the Red Hood raised them above his head and brought it down with all the force he could muster. It was a surprising display of strength for such a slight man, and Ciana wondered if his size helped make his enemies underestimate him.

The man dropped to the ground hard, and Ciana felt a bitter satisfaction at that.

The Red Hood whirled around on the scrawny, stalking forward like a lion about to devour its prey. The scrawny man looked terrified and his weapon quivered in his hand. His eyes darted towards Ciana, and she knew the man thought about using her as a hostage. She glared at him with an unholy fury, and revealed her two knives that would plunge into his beating heart if he dared to take a step towards her.

The Red Hood batted the weapon away once in arms reach of the man, the scrawny man’s sweaty palms could not hold onto it for anything. The rogue’s hand slid around the man’s neck, and he shoved the bastard back against the wall harshly. “How many bones,” the Red Hood asked, voice deep and gravelling though to Ciana’s ears it sounded a bit forced, “do I have to break until you tell
Ciana felt a jolt of shock run through her. This was Olivia’s friend? It suddenly made sense why she started making all those remarks in the tavern earlier. Her strange way of trying to see perhaps what people made of her rather popular friend, whose mystique had captured the imagination of San Gimignano.

The scrawny man didn’t need any more persuading. Like the coward he was, he was willing to sing like a canary. “I'll talk! I'll talk!” He all but shouted to the high heavens, and urine stained down the leg of his pants, dribbling onto the ground below.

Ciana wrinkled her nose in disgust.

“The courtesans,” the Red Hood demanded. “Where are you talking them?”

“An abandoned building just beyond the Antico Teatro Romano, outside of San Gimignano,” he stuttered, all the blood drained out of his face. “I do not know what happens to them after that. I swear it, now please let me go! I won’t tell a soul about you!”

The Red Hood wasn’t easily convinced. “You are going to show us the way,” the rogue decided, in a tone that was cold as it was sly. “And if you are lying, then you will pay the price.”

Ciana was impressed. Perhaps this Red Hood really could make a change to San Gimignano for the better, and she wanted to know exactly how Olivia knew this rogue. How did a selfless do gooder come into contact with a roguish cutthroat well enough to call him a friend?

Olivia, or she supposed she should call herself the Red Hood—if DC had existed in this time period, they would be calling for a copyright no doubt—held a knife threateningly against the man’s throat. She happily informed him of how quickly he would die if she sliced the oh, so delicate artery right there along his neck if he dared to make a peep to alert any guards, and he put up little resistance not that she expected any. The man had literally pissed himself after she shoved him into a wall and growled at him. He wasn’t a pillar of constitution by any stretch of the imagination.

Ciana had, against her wishes had tagged along, and glowered at their “escort” while twisting her knife between her fingers with a thoughtful expression on her face. And thoughtful in a way as if she were determining exactly what to cut off first.

The walk was long and tedious. The air was stained with wariness and fear, pulled tight by the weight of the situation and Olivia had to remind herself to breath. Slowly, they came upon a building hidden such behind a group of trees. The wood framing of the house had warped and turned a greyish color underneath time’s erosion. The windows had been boarded shut, and the only way in was through the door with a guard in front of it.

Olivia pulled the man behind the trees, shoved him to the ground. “You doing anything, I will make you wish for something as sweet as pain,” the Red Hood threatened, with a snarl. He had only a chance to give a nod before she punched him so hard in the face that it made her knuckles sing with pain. Resisting the urge to shake her hand as if it would make the pain fade away, she instead turned towards the courtesan. “You stay here. Keep an eye on our illustrious guest, and a look out for anyone else.”

“Why is there one guard?” Ciana asked, quietly.

“Windows are boarded up. It is the only means of leaving the building. You don’t need to guard something that can’t get out,” Olivia stated, her throat burning from keeping up her “Red Hood”
“Those bastardi…” Ciana cursed. “How do you intend to get in?”

“I’m going to ask nicely,” the Red Hood smirked. She turned away from Ciana and the scrawny man, and carefully made her way up the path. She used the greenery and shadows to shield from plain sight, it was only when she was five feet away did she reveal herself. He immediately started to shout at her, demanding for her to leave and that there was nothing for her to see. “I whole heartedly disagree,” she hissed, through clenched teeth. Her righteous fury made her feel like she could take on the entire world, and that one guard would not stop her now.

He pulled his sword on her, and the fight was on. In a clangor of metal, the fight was swift and brutal. She busted his lip with her fist; he slashed her across the side with his sword. On and on, they fought until Olivia saw an opening and slammed her knee into his family jewels, and he went cross eyed in pain. His knees buckled, and he collapsed the ground, his hands cupped his wounded pride. And Olivia brought the pommel of her dagger down on the back of his neck. He was out for the count, and she wiped the sweat off her brow before she knelt down searching him for the keys.

She found them, and stared confused by the many keys that were set upon the ring. There were four keys, and she wondered why he had four keys on him until she had a closer look at the door. “My God,” she whispered, horrified. There were four separate locks on the doors. They really were desperate to keep these poor woman trapped inside this building, and her stomach turned sick at the very thought.

“Did you find the keys?”

Olivia did not jump. She thanked her lucky stars she did not jump, nor release the girlish scream that slammed up against the back of her throat. That would have revealed her little secret, and she wasn’t exactly ready to tell Ciana that she was the Red Hood yet. “I thought I told you to keep a look out,” she growled out.

“And I chose to follow,” Ciana responded, as if that was that.

“What about the man?”

“He’s tied up.”

Olivia gave her a look from underneath the shade of her hood. “How did you do that? We had no rope,” the Red Hood stated, frowning.

“I always carry rope,” Ciana replied.

“Right. I don’t want to know,” Olivia decided, with a shake of her head. She walked up to the door, and one by one undid the locks. As soon as the door slid open, she was greeted by a stench that made her reel back. It was followed by frantic whispers and cries of fright that cut through the silent night like a knife. The nearly dead torch gave a loud whoosh as air wrapped around it, and Olivia couldn’t imagine how suffocating it must have been in the dark locked away. Her eyes widened at the sight of the dirty, bruised and battered women, some clinging to each other and others curled in on themselves. “It’s alright now. You are safe. You are free.”

No one moved right away. They all looked at her with wild fear in their gaze, not daring to hope. It crushed Olivia’s heart to see that, and she swallowed thickly to keep back the sheer heartbreak she felt for these poor women.

It was Ciana who managed to get them to their feet. “It is alright. Truly. The guard is put down. You
are all saved. The Red Hood saved you,” the blond courtesan said, her voice shook with emotions.

Olivia imagined that Ciana saw herself in those stricken faces, of how close she came to sharing their fate. She watched as the young woman recognized Ciana, and it was then that they realized this wasn’t some cruel trick. That they were indeed saved and freed. In a split second all the women start to clamor to their feet, and like a stampede, rushed towards the door. Ciana had to the dart out of the way, in order not to be trampled. She looked across the rushing sea of women, looking across their faces, but she had an upset look on her face. “Cara? Cara! Cara!”

No reply. Olivia realized immediately what the issue was. “You don’t see your friend?”

“No!” Ciana said, frightened. She grasped one of the fleeing woman that she recognized by the arm, and brought her to a halt. “Iona, have you seen Cara? Where is she?”

Iona flinched back, an uneasy expression on her face. Her dark eyes flickered towards the house, and she looked ill. “She tried to protect us. Tried to fight the guard to give us a way out, and they punished her for it. I can still remember the scream,” Iona said, visibly shaking. “…her body is in there, but you wouldn’t…”

Ciana let out an anguished scream, and launched herself towards the threshold. It was the Red Hood’s arms that kept her from going through and finding her friend. “You don’t want to do this!” Olivia told the courtesan, who thrashed against her with all her might.

“No! I need to see her!” Ciana choked on a sob. “I have to…”

“This isn’t the way she would want you to remember her!” Olivia said, urgently. “Spare yourself this torment.”

“I can’t! Don’t you understand that I can’t?” Ciana cried out, and wretched herself from the Red Hood’s arms. She rushed into the house and Olivia went after her, with her heart pounding in her chest. She found the blond courtesan standing by a door that led into the back room. Her body was so still, so lifeless that it made Olivia’s breath catch in her throat.

“C…C-Cara,” the courtesan whispered.

Olivia made it to the other woman’s side, and she already knew from the stench—rotten with hint of something sweet—that invoked memories of road kill, and she flinched back jarred by the sight of the body. It was too horrible to put into words, and Ciana’s sobs seemed to stab into her soul, deeper and deeper until she could not take anymore. Turning on heel, she marched all the way to the scrawny man who was tied up and shook him violently. “Wake up! Wake up this instant you miserable bastard or I swear that I’ll make whatever hell you are going to feel like a playground in comparison!”

The man groaned, his eyes opening. Fear shot through him a like a bolt of lightning when he realized just who had him in their grasp and he let out a whimper.

“Who is responsible for this?” She asked, her fingers dug painfully into his throat. “Who told you to bring courtesans here? Answer quick enough and you might make it out of this alive.”

The man blanched. “We told to on Salmoni’s o-orders…”

“Why is he taking courtesans?” Olivia asked. “What does he get out of it?”

“Money. Lots of money. Slave trades are good, especially for women who know what a man wants and no one will bat an eye if a whore goes missing,” he said, and then he gasped as a fist buried into
his stomach.

“And what about what those women want? That doesn't matter?” The Red Hood hissed, the urge to give into her violent impulses almost too tempting to reign in. “You sold human beings into slavery. Women who had lives and family and you sold them to people who would use and abuse them. You are a cowardly sick fuck.”

And then she brought her heel down on his face, a grim satisfaction flared through her when she felt his nose break. Olivia watched his eyes roll into the back of his head, from the fear or the force of her attack she did not know. She watched the women flee, towards the city of San Gimignano with a heavy heart. They had been freed from a dark fate, but that didn’t mean the threat was removed.

As long as Salmoni remained in power, the threat would be there.

It was time for that threat to be removed, and Olivia swore she’d be the one to do even if it was the last thing she would do.

Federico couldn’t put off going back to Florence. With the way things had gone, he felt it prudent to go home, tell his father what was going on and...regroup. Everything inside him cringed to admit any sort of failure, but the damned woman was stubborn. More stubborn than him by far, and that was saying something. And honestly he was out of options or ideas. He even went as far as to duel her; honestly hadn't expected her to accept the duel, but she did and showed him a thing or two in the process. Federico hated to admit it, he sighed laying down in the carriage seat, but she had impressed him.

He could understand his father's interest. And he was hoping his father or La Volpe could handle the situation better than he did.

“Knock, knock,” a voice said.

Federico jumped up and eyes widened in surprise as the very woman plaguing his thoughts was leaning in through his carriage window. “Going home?” She asked, her left eyebrow rose slightly.

“What are you doing here?” He asked, with a put upon sigh.

She held her hands up in a gesture of surrender. “Just to merely talk. No snarky comments, and no duels, I swear,” she said, with a sheepish smile.

Federico sighed. He gestured to the carriage man to hold on and turned towards her. “Continue.”

“I sought you out,” she said, bluntly, “because you were following me. I just wanted to know why. Why go through all that trouble to find me? I just didn't understand it.”

Federico just shook his head. “I don't understand much of it either,” he admitted, with a frown. His father did not give him any explanation, or reason for this search for this woman. At least, not one that was so vague that it could mean anything.

“It’s alright. In the end, I’ve decided it doesn’t matter,” she told him, with a lopsided grin. The shadows and hardness that had been present in her eyes days before had cleared, making her seem like a whole different person all together. Federico wondered if this was the real woman behind all the fear and aggression that he had missed out on seeing because the rather unfortunate first encounter. “I’ve decided that sometimes it is better not to look a gifted horse in the mouth. It didn’t work out for the Trojans, and I suspect it would work out even less spectacular for myself. I just need to accept certain things, and go with it.”
He understood the reference to the Greek tale, but failed to understand why she made the metaphor. He searched her face for a hint of deceit, expecting some kind of trick laid beneath her words. The longer he stared at her open and guileless expression; he realized that she was truly sincere. “This is…going with it?” He said, his eyebrows climbed up to his hairline.

“Kinda,” she said, tilting her head. “I don't know. Never tried it before. Anyways, I also wanted to apologize to you. I didn't make things easy…actually truth be told for the most part, I enjoyed making trouble for you.”

He stared at her for a moment. “What's changed? What's changed from last night to now?” He asked, frowning.

A shadow passed across those grey eyes, and she looked down regretfully before sending him a solemn look. “I just…I just don’t want to have regrets. I have enough of those to last me a lifetime. I just want to…to make things right. Or at least try,” she replied, quietly.

Federico smiled at her lightly. He could appreciate the sentiment. He, too, tried to live his life as though to leave no regrets behind. “You know if circumstances had been different…I think I would have liked you,” he commented, with a small chuckle.

“Who says they can’t?” She got a mysterious sort of smile on her face. “I think we'll see each other again, Federico Auditore. And you know what? This time I'm actually looking forward to it.”

She pulled her head out of the window, and hopped down away from his carriage. She turned her back on him and started to stroll away, when Federico found himself calling out to her. “Wait!”

“You still haven't given me your name,” he said.

“You'll figure it out, eventually!” And she smiled back before walking away.

The carriage ride had taken several two days at the most. The trip and planning to San Gimignano had taken quite a bit longer than the return and Federico could have wept with joy at being surrounded by Firenze’s beautiful walls. He arrived to his family Villa, and he was glad to be home. However, his thoughts still lingered in San Gimgnano and the maddening woman he left behind. His mind had replayed every encounter; especially the last one and he recalled all that she said. It probably wouldn’t have plagued him so if it hadn’t been for the note that he found half way on his way home that the troublesome woman managed to sneak in his carriage without his notice.

Hello Federico,

I can only imagine the surprised look on your face. Truly, it must be a sight. You probably didn’t expect me to write you a letter. Shocking, I know. The bizarre woman that you had been stalking is literate. The world must feel like it has turned on its head. However, I didn’t write this just to poke fun at you. Correction, I didn’t just write this to poke fun at you. I also felt that I needed to explain myself further, and given the fact that you already seemed set to leave for Florence, I figured that a letter would be my best chance to do so. I do not generally get along with people. It is just a sad fact about my life, and my first instinct against unknowns is to fight. Fear is not an emotion that I handle very well.

That had made him feel rather horrid. He had been so hotheaded he hadn’t really stop to truly consider that her fear was indeed genuine to the point that she would feel the need to lash out and protect herself. If his mother had known about his behavior, she would have him by the ear.
I apologize for my behavior. Well, most of it. You brought some of that onto yourself, but I did antagonize you. That didn’t particularly help the situation. In the end after all that has happened over the last few days—nope, not going into details so suffer not knowing about my mysterious and awesome life—I have decided why you were following me isn’t important in the grand scheme of things. I’m alright not knowing and I know you meant me no harm, at least I hope so. And strangely enough, I am very glad I met you even though the circumstances were less than ideal.

Don’t think just because I own my mistakes and apologizes means that we are going to be best friends. You are still annoying. However, I am hoping that will be able to start anew, a second chance if you will. Hope you have a safe journey back to Florence and hope you won't mind a letter from me from time to time. You know just to annoy you cause I have nothing better to do. Other than to live my mysterious and awesome life that is.

Not sure how to end this,

Olivia Steel

Olivia Steel. It was a strong proud name. Olivia, derived from the Olive Tree that was a symbol of peace and prosperity. Steel, a hard and strong name that comes from the enduring and powerful metal that has been crafted into many weapons as it had been used to build. He held the letter in his hands, waiting for his father to enter his study. He knew he should tell his father about this Olivia Steel, and all that has happened. So why did the thought make his stomach feel so unsettled?

“Federico,” Giovanni greeted him, warmly. He pulled him into a quick embrace, and then placed a hand on his son's shoulder, squeezing it slightly. “I am glad you are home.”

“I am happy to be home, padre,” Federico smiled, eyes shining with happiness. A split second later, his face fell into an uncertain expression. He looked at his father with a hint of worry. “Has La Volpe informed you of all we found in Tuscany?”

“Yes,” Giovanni nodded, looking slightly regretful. “He told me what happened. Poor child. Too young to die is a place like that.”

Federico was about to correct his father and the master thief's assumption when he paused. “Padre, may I ask you something?” He asked, after a moment’s hesitation.

“Of course,” Giovanni replied, sitting in his chair.

Federico looked around the walls, trying to summon the nerve to ask and finally met his father's curious gaze. “Why were you looking for this girl?”

His father did not reply right away. His brows furrowed into a frown, and he made a steeple with his hands. “She…was different. And I was mostly curious and a little bit worried,” Giovanni admitted, with a deep sigh. “Perhaps, I was not meant to know.”

Federico was sure his eye twitched. Curiosity? Curiosity? I went through all that for mostly curiosity? He took a deep calming breath, telling himself his father must have truly had worried, too. He would not have put him through all that for an idle curiosity. At least, he hoped not. “Perhaps,” he said, lightly. He opened his mouth to tell him about Olivia and the truth, when the words failed him. Instead he found himself saying, “I am going to see mother. Tell her I'm home.”

“She will be happy to see you,” Giovanni nodded his dismal and Federico rose heading towards the door. As he closed the door behind him, he felt a guilt eating up at him for not telling his father.

But he reasoned with himself, it wasn't like it was life or death. And he touched the letter from Livvy
thinking about the start anew she proposed. His father was right, she was different. He didn't know how, but he was sure he would find out. One thing was for sure that Olivia Steel would certainly make things interesting. He grinned strolling into his home, strangely calm.

Chapter End Notes

1.) “I am sensing a theme…” Livvy is talking about the apple. Reference to the Apple or the random women in brotherhood that are eating apples.
2.) The ruins of the Roman theatre outside of Tuscany on AC 2. Place where Rodrigo Borgia killed the eldest Pazzi member, or well left him for dead and Ezio mercifully finished him off.
3.) “I am a regular Charles Xavier…” I love X-Men, and it felt more better than the Twilight reference I had in the original version.
4.) Olivia versus the Red Hood: How can Olivia be so confident and fierce when she is the Red Hood as opposed to when she isn’t wearing the cloak? Olivia is the real heart of who she is, the reality of all her fears and hopes and is very strongly swayed by her emotions. As the Red Hood is sort of a dream or ideal that Olivia strives for. When she puts on the Hood, she separates herself to an extent from Olivia Steel, and is able to put away her emotions. There are no personal fears or memories that can touch her in those moments. It’s almost like a defense mechanism or emotional crutch she has created not only to wield for the good of the people, but to preserve her sanity in a rather insane and improbable situation.
Chapter Seven

'Through the High Venice Pt 1'

Tuscany 1474, November

Beads of sweat rolled down her cheek, as her dark stormy eyes concentrated on a spot on the wall. It had been a week since Federico left and a lot of things have happened. Firstly, Olivia realized much to her chagrin, she missed the banter Federico provided. She would never admit this out loud; she would rather stab herself with a hidden blade right in the eye. Secondly, Livvy finally broke down and went to a doctor, though it was touch and go for a split second. The words goat urine and lead almost sent her sprinting in the other direction. But she couldn't (even if she had tried.) Her nostrils flared as she drew in a long shaking breath, pulled herself up and chin over the wooden beam. Her running around playing hero and dueling left her with so many bruises, cuts and sore limbs. When she got up the morning after, she had barely made it to bid Federico farewell. Seriously, she found out she had muscles in places she had never been aware had muscles!

Which is why, Livvy despite the pain, was trying to push herself. The more she worked her body, the more it would become accustomed to the strain that it would be under. So she continued her pull ups, despite the fact her sore limbs shook under the effort. She bit her lip forcing her thoughts on something other than painful burn coursing through her.

The Auditores and the Brotherhood.

She wasn't sure how to approach them, or even to approach them yet. They were a group that needed more than someone's word. For heaven's sake, their motto was: Nothing is True. If that doesn't scream of some deep seeded trust issues than she didn't know what did. So that meant she needed some kind of proof, and that was not something she had. It was partially why she had offered Federico an olive branch(1), hoping he would accept. It would give her a way to keep an eye on them, and protect them from a distance till she could find or needed another way. She felt slightly guilty about using Federico, but it was to save him, so that eased the churning emotion up at little bit.

Her plan was by no means complete or cohesive. It was more like the cliff notes of a plan rather than the whole thing. But she did have two years before the events of Ezio's story started to unfold. Two years to learn and adapt to this new world, and hopefully by the time came, she would be strong enough to save them all. Her fingers slipped off the wooden beam and she landed hard on her
backside. Pain shattered up her tailbone, and she let out a low-pitched whine before she flopped back against the floor with a defeated expression on her face.

She hoped two years was really enough time.

Gaspare had been raised by a God fearing father with a big heart, and mother who had been so strong that she could have carried the world onto her back without breaking a sweat. They had no great wealth, or title, but they had what mattered. They had love, respect, and a strong sense of right and wrong that had taught him a great many things, and had engrained upon him a strong set of morals. His parents had been taken by a plague, and he had become a guard when their family farm had been seized by the city to pay off a debt that his father supposedly owned, though Gaspare had been shown no proof. But he had been in no position to fight it like so many others, and that’s when he learned about the shadows of grays that sat between the rights and the wrongs.

And that sometimes—most times, that is where people fell.

He had done things that his father would have been disappointed in order to protect his life, and to help a dying city thrive in some small way against Salmoni. But his mother would have smiled at him, and said, “Always push back, Gaspare. If you give people an inch, they will take the mile.” It was how he managed to survive and stay alive. Even now in the face of Salmoni giving a violent tirade from beyond the door he stood stationed at, he clung to the notion that biting his tongue to fight another day and that eventually his efforts would pay off. However, after the prison incident and where all the guards knew that there were traitors—the Marks they called them for the red mark that had been upon their armor that fateful, dogs of the Red Hood—amongst them. Some had been caught, but they revealed no names.

All knew what was on the line here, and Gaspare only hoped that his identity was still hidden.

“I have everything under control,” Salmoni stated, his tone confident yet deferent to the other person in the room. “There is no need for such a visit.”

“Years of wasted effort on a prison, and in a single night under your control, under the men in your command, it goes up in flames. My allies and I are not pleased by this,” another voice came, as sharp as a black and hissed like an angry snake. “I have heard reports of all manner of things, but none of this Red Hood. Are you telling me by saying there is no need for such a visit that he has been dealt with?”

Gaspare felt his heart jolt in his chest, and it took everything in him not to have an outward reaction. He had known that Olivia’s theatrics down at the prison would make a stir, but he had not realized how quickly enemies would be upon San Gimignano in hunt for the Red hood.

“He is a minor concern in the grand scheme of things. I will not lose my power because some street rat has gotten a notion in his head that he can the save the people. A man is a man, he can be easily crushed,” Salmoni’s arrogance was impossible not to hear in his voice.

“Hmm. Our plans for Italia have been put in place for several years now, meticulous and well thought out like a well-kept garden. Everything has a proper place, and it must be carefully maintained so weeds cannot be tolerated to fester, cannot grow because where one weed sprouts up more will surely follow. This Red Hood is like a weed, planting seeds in the minds of the people and thus they grow idealistic with thoughts of heroes, thoughts of hope,” the other man said, in a tone so dark and cold that Gaspare was surprised not see icicle form along the threshold. “Do take care of the part of the garden you monitor, Salmoni. If you cannot keep everything the way it must be, then you will find how easily you can be replaced. We wouldn’t want to be forced to take such drastic
measures, now would we?"

Dread clawed at Gaspare’s heart. His mind raced with the implications of this conversation, and a feeling raced through his blood like quicksilver.

There was a moment of complete silence, and then came Salmoi’s voice quaking slightly in fear, “Of course.”

Footsteps grew closer to the door, and Salmoi opened it allowing his visitor to step through. The guest wasn't a tall man, but he was stocky built covered in a velvet black cloak with red trimming. Upon the left breast of his cloak was an intricately woven red cross. His eyes raised and he sent the two guards a slightly piercing gaze before walking away with two of his own men flanking each of his sides. Gaspare watched him, feeling the ice in his blood slowly unthaw the further and further the man walked away.

“Guards,” Salmoi said, stiffly.

Gaspare and the other guard turned to give him their undivided attention. Salmoi’s beady and black eyes were filled with rage and loathing. “Both of you were stationed at the prison? When the Red Hood was there?” He asked, his tone dark and forbidding.

Gaspare felt a twinge of panic course through him as he watched Salmoi’s hand rest on the pommel of his blade. He could see his death at the end of that blade, but by some grace, he said in an even tone, “Yes, sir.”

“Y-yes, sir,” the other guard replied, a second later.

Gaspare wouldn’t lie that when Salmoi’s gaze flickered on him, he was sure the other man knew he had helped Livvy take down the prison. The sheer intensity of his glare that seemed to pierce right through him, but instead of fear, he felt a strange sense of respite. He had always known that his actions could—and likely would—come back to haunt him, but he did not regret them for a second. He could go into the next life with his head held high.

Salmoi pulled out his blade and Gaspare watched the man stepped towards them, but Gaspare didn’t flinch. Didn't back down. He would not to a man like Salmoi. The blade struck out, piercing flesh and Gaspare waited for the burst of pain to flood through him. Instead, no pain came and the cry of pain came from the guard beside him. He turned his eyes looking shocked as his fellow guard gurgled and coughed up blood, before Salmoi ripped the blade free from his chest. He crashed to the floor, and after a few agonizing moments, went still.

Gaspare swallowed, barely keeping the sweat off his face. His dark eyes spared a sympathetic glance to the dead guard before his face turned into a blank and stoic mask. He tensed, when Salmoi turned to him, but to his surprise the man put his sword away.

“You've been promoted,” the man snarled.

“Promoted?” Gaspare asked carefully.

“You will be heading the hunt for the menace known as the Red Hood,” Salmoi informed him, coldly. His beady eyes drilled through Gaspare, searching for any sigh of discomfort or ill ease. “You have any qualms about that?”

Gaspare glanced at the other guard once more before looking Salmoi straight in the eye, replying coolly, “Of course not, sir.”
Federico was not one to be at a loss for words, so why then was it so damn hard to pen a letter? It was rather aggravating situation he found himself in for he did not know what to say, or even how to sign the letter. They were not friends yet if their fresh start even managed to grow into such, and therefore did not share each other’s confidence. However, he did not want the letter to feel cold and detached. If she was earnest in wanting a fresh start, then Federico must repay her in kind. He just wished there had been an easy answer as where to begin.

“What are you doing, Federico?” A nearly seventeen year old Ezio Auditore questioned, his older brother who sat at the table, seemingly frozen with pen and paper in hand.

Federico's head jerked upward in slight surprise before a smile crossed his features. He set the pen down and said, “Nothing of great importance.” Tilting his head, he intently studied his younger sibling. “What troubles you, Ezio?”

Ezio shuffled before admitting. “Father.”

Federico's eyebrows rose. “What about father?”

“Is it…normal for a banker to be going on so many trips out of the city?” Ezio asked, after a flicker of hesitation.

Federico was slightly startled by the question. He had known that eventually Ezio’s curiosity would get the better of him, just as Federico’s had. Father wished Ezio to have a couple of more years before officially training him, and allowing him on the secrets that Federico knew. Even though, Federico knew there was still much to learn. “Whatever makes you ask that?” He asked, his head tilted to the side.

“It's just…” Ezio trailed off for a moment, then muttered a curse underneath his breath. He ran a hand through his dark locks, frustrated. “It's just something Vieri said earlier.”

“Ezio,” Federico shook his head, “you know better than to listen to that drivel Vieri sprouts. Father is just a banker; don't let Vieri's words trouble you any longer.”

Ezio stared at him, his dark tawny eyes trying to find any lie on his older brother’s face before his shoulders slumped. “You are right. I should not have let Vieri get to me so. So, who are you writing a letter?” He asked, leaning forward to peer at the paper. It was completely blank, not even a name had been scribbled yet.

He blinked momentarily thrown by the sudden change in subject. “It is…it is a friend,” he replied, once he got ahold of his wits.

“A friend, huh?” Ezio waggled his brow suggestively.

Federico cursed himself for teaching Ezio such ways in that moment and stated firmly folding the piece of parchment up. He would finish it later, he promised himself. “Just a friend.”

“Bah!” Ezio teased. “Keep up this attitude, and you'll be all work and no play like Padre.”

“I will not,” Federico denied, faintly frightened by the thought.

“Oh? Then prove it,” Ezio challenged.

“I will,” Federico rose from the table, taking off after his younger brother.
Olivia made her way down the street, wearing her normal ‘civilian’ clothes. Wearing a red hooded cloak all the time would draw a bit of unwanted attention, after all. Today was the day when Olivia was going to decide just what to with this new crazy life she had been thrust into, and what to make of it. For now, she was purchasing all the necessities she needed, and was looking over the vegetables to check just how fresh they really were when she spotted a familiar soul out of the corner of her eye. “Good morning, Ciana,” she greeted, with a smile and a tilt of her head.

Ciana looked momentarily surprised. “Good morn, Olivia. How are you?” The courtesan finally replied, with a basket looped on her arm and she looked a little bit restless.

“Well,” Livvy answered, honestly. Her grey eyes took in the dark circles underneath the blond’s eyes and the pale pallor to her normally glowing caramel colored skin. She also looked like she had lost a little weight since last time they saw each other. “Yourself?”

“I’ve…been better,” the courtesan whispered. “Cara…Cara's funeral is today. If you wanted to come, that is,” the courtesan said, her fingers tightened around the basket handle until they were bloodless. “I think she would want you there.”

Olivia felt like her entire body had been dumped into a vat of ice. The images of Cara’s broken and twisted body pressed right up against her mind’s eyes, and then were followed by memories of her mother’s horrible funeral. She shoved down the sickness that threatened to spew up past her lips, and let out a slow, shaky breath. “I cannot promise anything more than to try to be there,” she replied, after a good minute.

“Oh…alright,” Ciana said, clearly disappointed.

She felt bad. She knew that Ciana was having a tough time, and part of her wished to help out. But funerals and death were things that Olivia had never been able to handle very well. Not since her own mother’s funeral. Even after all these years, it was a phobia she hadn’t been able to conquer. She went to turn away and walked onward when she literally bumped into someone. “What the hell?” she whispered out.

Ciana looked very confused. “What's going on?” the courtesan asked.

“Haven't the slightest clue,” Livvy said, then reached out tapping a man on the shoulder. “Hey, buddy, what's going on?”

He frowned, but replied, “Salmoni. He's giving some kind of speech.”

The effect was instantaneous. Ciana looked wide-eyed with in panic and fear, probably wondering what the horrible man was going to do now. Olivia had a more subdued reaction, her spine stiffened and her eyes narrowed his suspicion. There was a foreboding cloud that hung over her head, and she raised her chin, pushing herself onto her tippy toes to try and see over the crowd. She did so with little success, and made an aggravated noise in her throat. She went to push her way the front when a desperate hand seized her wrist.

“We should stay here,” the courtesan whispered, holding tight.

Olivia frowned slightly, but abandoned her attempts to get closer. She crossed her arms over her chest, a sense of apprehension falling over her as she spotted guards moving through the crowd almost as if they were searching for something.

“Is that a guard?”
Livvy whirled to look where Ciana was looking through a break in the crowd and felt her mouth drop open in shock. It was Gaspare who stood upon the podium with a blank look on his face. She stared at him for a long moment unsure of what to make of this, only that she hoped he wasn’t up there of his own volition.

“I thought all guards were ugly brutes.” Her green eyes appraised Gaspare approvingly. “Such a shame he is a guard, I would like to…”

“Don’t,” Livvy choked, whether on laughter or shock, she didn't know. “Don't be that girl.”

Ciana just smirked slightly then her smirk dropped into a venomous snarl. “It's him.”

She didn't need clarification as a man strode out. He was thin hair, plump man dressed in overly extravagant finery that was a blatant smack in the face to the people whose money he extorted with unlawful taxes and more. What hair he was black as his beady malice filled eyes, and his large bristle mustached twitched, jiggling his oversized jaws that resembled a bit of bulldog. There was a sense of entitlement in the way he held himself, as if he felt himself truly above his common man like he was some sort of saint to their sinners. A hush fell over the crowd when he had a strolled out, and Olivia could taste the fear and apprehension in the air. Fear tasted sharp and unkind on the tongue, and her tongue raked the back of her teeth in aggravation.

He displayed himself so openly. If only she had been an archer, then one good shot would have taken him and spared the people of San Gimignano his oppression. He eyed them all like they were bugs, no better than cockroaches to be smashed beneath his heel and it made her heart turn black with anger.

“Something is not right about this,” said Ciana, warily. “Salmoni is many things, but he hates dramatics. He says such things are distasteful, and I can tell you a great many poets and bards have fallen prey to the noose because of that.”

Livvy didn't say anything, but kept her eye on the man. Her expression was tight, and her stormy eyes darkened. If that were true then something had prompted Salmoni to change his behavior—desperation perhaps? The prison explosion couldn’t have made his Templar handlers all that happy, but to what end did he come out her posturing like a rooster?

“Our beautiful San Gimignano, our city of towers has fallen prey to the most vicious kind of criminal. He does not only terrorize our little piece of Tuscany with theft, debauchery, but he also has taken to make you, the good people, to believe he is a friend, a kind hand in a desperate time. A hero,” Salmoni sneered the word, his face twisted up in distaste. “But do not be deceived by this liar, The Red Hood.”

A murmur broke out amongst the crowd. Ciana gasped, while Olivia closed her eyes in mute despair. *Fuck, I knew it,* she thought to herself, as her stomach plummeted ten stories. When her eyes pulled open, she sought out Gaspare and his expression remained unchanged. His dark eyes empty and unreadable, and she chewed on her lower lip worriedly. A guard passed them by without so much as a second glance, and Olivia glanced back at Salmoni, the rage of a thousand suns burning in her eyes.

“This person is a murderer, a cutthroat and a thief,” Salmoni stated, firmly. “He is not some shining knight to place your hopes upon for he will only abuse your good will. He is nothing more than a selfish vagabond who does not deserve your loyalty, for he will only drain you and the city dry. I have done all that I can to apprehend this criminal, but he is still a large because of coconspirators that aid him at every turn. Know this, those found consorting with him will be considered equally as guilty and sentenced to death.”
At least, that meant Gaspare had not told Salmoni about her or her identity. She had for a fleeting moment worried he had sold her out for his own protection, and now felt a margin of guilt for thinking such things about him. That guilt was buried underneath a fresh wave of ire at Salmoni’s words. “I can’t believe this,” Livvy hissed to Ciana. “They are making the Red Hood sound little more than a… petty murdering thief. Which I… he’s not.”

*But aren’t you? An unbidden voice came to the forefront of her mind. You stole from people, and you blew up the prison, don’t tell me you didn’t think everyone survived. Olivia felt her whole world still, and whatever Salmoni’s said next became little more than a mesh of unintelligent sounds to her ears. Her palms became sweaty and her heart was pounding painfully against her ribcage. A murderer? Me? The thought made her dizzy and horrible sick. It took everything took keep her standing.*

Ciana sent her a concerned glance. “Are you alright?”

She fought against the wave of emotions that threatened to swallow her whole and held onto one thing. The fact that she had to do something about Salmoni’s speech, and do it swiftly because the Red Hood could afford to take such an affront lying down. It would be seen as a sign of weakness, and right now, the only thing hope San Gimignano had was hope that the Red Hood would stand against Salmoni. “How much longer do you reckon he’s going to be blowing hot air?” She asked Ciana, out of the corner of her mouth.

“He’s a politician,” Ciana pointed, out dryly. “He could be up there for days.”

“Good point,” Livvy admitted, with a humorless smile. “Stay here.”

The courtesan frowned. “Where are you going?”

All Ciana received in reply was an enigmatic smile.

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The people listened uneasily to the speech as the guards continued to move through the crowd. “A reward has been set for anyone who will help in the capture of—” Salmoni’s pompous speech was cut off by a loud wolf whistle. Everyone’s head turned to the rooftops and there standing with legs languidly crossed at the ankles, leaning back against the balcony railing stood the Red Hood. The Red Hood crossed her arms over her chest, with a tight smile upon her lips.

The Red Hood savored the baffled expression for a split second, but had to be more mindful of the fact he was precariously perched on a metal bar where hanging pot of flowers swayed on a chain below her. “Looking for me? That’s what your little speech was all about, isn’t it?” She asked, carefully to keep her voice deep enough to be passable as a male’s. “Just a reason to blow hot air and hope for me to make an appearance, and have your guards march around like such good little sheep.”

“Y-You!” Salmoni sputtered, shocked.

“Yes, me! After all the trouble you went to lure me out, I decided you deserved to be rewarded for such efforts,” the Red Hood commented, tone suspiciously idle. There was a scattered laughter throughout the crowd, but the people were either too stunned by her appearance or too afraid of the guards to draw too much attention to themselves. “Now, I believe you wanted to talk?”

Salmoni finally gathered his wits. “Guards! Guards!”

“Guards! Guards!” The Red hood mocked him, underneath her breath, though not quietly enough judging by the way Salmoni venomous glared at her. His face turned a frightful shade of purple. The Red Hood waited for the guards to climb up to her, and hopped over the balcony railing to have good solid ground underneath her feet. When only two guards appeared, she shouted loudly, “Only
two? I'm insulted!"

They drew their weapons out, and the Red hood felt her mouth twitch. She mentally berated herself for not putting her weapons with her suit in the hidey hole just above the Briar Rose Inn that was smack dab in the middle of the city, and only a minute away from here. She had noticed a few rocks crumbling, and at night time had cleared out a big enough space to make cache. Pulling herself back into the present, she glared at the guards. “Well, are you going to stand there? I haven't all day!”

One guard leapt forward, bringing the sword down in a large arc. The rogue sidestepped, feeling a whoosh of air flow past her letting her know that she missed that attack by the skin of her teeth. The second guard tripped her, sending her sprawling to the ground. She caught something shiny out of the corner of her eye and rolled out of the way, hearing the sword clang against the terrace. The guard stumbled back, jarred by the force. The Red Hood took this moment to roll to her feet and to tackle guard number two, shoving him straight off the balcony. There was a cry of panic, and she heard a loud thud. *He's out. If he isn't, well, I actually pity the poor bas*—A hiss escaped her lips as something ripped through her left leg. She whirled around, clasping her thigh with one hand and glared at the guard who held his blood stained sword proudly.

“Alright, now I'm pissed off,” the Red Hood announced, angrily. She lunged forward, sending a fist to the guard’s face. Her knuckles slammed against the brim of his helmet, barely scathing his face and painful tingles shot through the bones of her fingers. He elbowed her right in the cheek. Her skull rattled painfully and she nearly bit a hole clean through her lip. Blood filled her mouth, and she spat it out with curse. “You ass.”

Her eyes moved over his form, taking his stance and when he lunged, she knew what to do. She fell to her knees, letting the sword flying over her head and sent a punch straight to his family jewels. The guard let go his sword, his hand reaching down as his eyes bulged so far out of his skull, the rogue was sure they would pop out. “And that is what you get for being a male chauvinistic society,” Livvy told him, lightly before she grabbed him shoulders and shoved him with all her might off the edge of the balcony. There was a cry of panic before it was drowned out by a thud.

“Look at me!” The Red Hood said, proudly. “I'm all bada—aah. Ow.” Doing that made her head throb, she pressed a hand against her cheek trying to soothe the pain away. It didn't work. “Okay, maybe only half of a badass...” She made her way over the edge of the balcony, and scalded up to the rooftop enjoying the burst of awe whispered that filled the air. Once she stood upon the roof, she turned and her eyes found Salmoni.

“I’m not an angel. I’m not a saint. What I am, and who I am is something I have fully accepted. You call me, thief and murderer. I will not deny my sins, I will bear them proudly like battle scars and if one day I am to pay for them, then I shall because I bear responsibility for who I am. Do you, Salmoni, bear the responsibility of just exactly what you are?” The Red Hood said, voice low and dangerous. Once the words started, they just flowed out of her soul and were filled with rage over the injustice that she had seen in this city. Of all the worn down people breaking underneath the subjugation, and how he dared to try to play like he was saving this city. It brought out her temper like nothing else had before. “You come out here to play to masses like you are some caring benefactor who wants what is best for San Gimignano when you are the abhorrent, disgusting soulless man who feasts upon these peoples’ misfortunes like a glutton at dinner. How many lives have you destroyed? How many children starve in the streets due to you? How many families are now broken because of you? You have built you entire fortune and power upon the back and bones of the people you have exploited, the very people that you preach to on this very day.

“I say no more! Consider this a personal warning, Salmoni,” the Red Hood finished, taking a step back and hid the wince as pain shot up her leg. “Your days are number. Soon San Gimignano will
no lower have to cower in fear the shadow of the monster you are. When you die, the city will rejoice with dance and song and you will be nothing more than a bad memory.”

*When in doubt, use bravado. It throws off your enemies and makes you feel better.* She thought to herself, eyeing Saloni who looked like he was having an apoplectic fit of some kind.

“Guards! SEIZE HIM! I WANT HIS HEAD!”

“On a silver platter?” The Red Hood blurted out before she could help herself.

The laughter from the crowd was nice, but the loud roar of anger that spurred the stunned squadron of guards into motion. It also made the Red Hood’s sense of self-preservation kicked in—yes, it did exist, it was just a bit like a unicorn and was very hard to find. “I think this is a good time to take my leave, no?” She said, with a jaunty wave and then turned on heel before the guards had even made it to the top of the roof. Their armor clinked and clanked, in their haste to catch up to her.

The Red Hood, thankfully, had always been a fast runner. It was a talent she was extremely grateful for, especially when she ducked around a corner and avoided an arrow that went spiraling past her head.

Holy shit!

She slipped down the side of the building to the other scaffolding below, looking like a crazed squirrel with hurried pace and minor flailing. Her muscles ached and contracted underneath the effort. She definitely needed to build up more stamina. Arms wrapped around her waist, sending her to the ground. She rolled, burying her elbow into the guard’s stomach before rolling again and ripping his arms away from her and then she quickly rolled off of him, and kicked him off the edge.

“AAHHHHH!” Thud.

That pesky emotion of guilt hit her, but she reminded herself that they would kill her given the chance. She needed to worry about what was going on now, and she would drown in her emotions later. She flinched, when a kick to the face sent her back down. She tried to push herself up, but guards apparently liked to kick people when they were down. A white-hot fear and anger sliced through being reminded of the prison and the guards that were going to lock her in that cell to burn. The Red Hood hissed, holding up her arms trying to block the attack as one tried to stab her, and twisted his wrist. He cried out stumbling back, the other guard catching him to keep him from falling backwards.

She swiftly grabbed the knife and buried it into the ropes tethering the scaffolding to the roof and cut.

“What are you doing, idiota?” The guard demanded.

She ignored him and threw the knife, the guards leapt back, but he wasn’t her aim. It was the other rope and the other end of the scaffold, bringing her heel down upon the knife and did it again, the rope severing. The guards lunged forward, and that when the scaffolding shifted unsteadily beneath them. She quickly curled her feet up, and then pressed them against the scaffolding. It quickly, creaked and started tilting away from the roof. She had only a split second to grab a nearby post, and cling to it before the scaffolding fell away. She took a moment, holding tight to the post and collected her breath. She felt a giggle—half hysterical, half mischievous—fall from her lips at the groans and cursed that came from below.

“You bastado!” One managed to shout, as he held his leg that was twisted in an awkward angle.

The Red Hood pulled herself up with a grunt, and got back onto the main part of the roof before she took off again. At least, she was getting fit and toned with all this running; every cloud has a silver
lining. Throwing a glance over her shoulder, she saw more guards that had climbed up on the rooftops, searching for her. *Damn, why won't they just give up?*

Her strength was failing, adrenaline would no longer be enough to keep her sprinting, and especially with each step it torn the wound on her leg wider and longer. She blanched, feeling the waterfall of blood pour down her leg like a fountain and it soaked her pants. One guard had caught up with her and slashed her side with his knife.

She bit her lip as a scream tore through her throat. Her feet stumbled and the next thing she knew was she stumbled off the roof. The drop, luckily hadn't been fatal, but sent a searing pain through her calves when she landed. “Damn,” she cursed, sparing the people who back away from her a quick glance before running forward. She couldn't trust to blend in, she was barely good at it but how many people were wearing red hoods nowadays and were injured? There had to be somewhere to hide, she could hide. She turned around a corner when she saw it.

Her escape and she had never been happier to find a cart of hay in her life. She dove for it like a man dying of thirst would for water and her vision was filled with hay. Holding her breath, she listened while pressing down tightly on her side.

“Where did he go?”

There were a few exclamations and the Red Hood closed her eyes tightly hoping that they wouldn't check the cart. Her hands were curled into tight fits, and she fought hard to stay still and not move at all. She strained to hear what was going on over the pounding of her own heart, and her mouth was dry with panic.

“Can't believe that bastardo got away!” Another exclaimed.

She fought the urge to let out a laugh of relief, and waited until their voices faded away before she even dared to give her lungs the air they were begging for. Carefully, she placed a hand to her forehead and told herself that she would not pull another stunt like that. Not until she had trained more and could put up a better fight against a hoard of guards. After a moment, the Red Hood’s lips quirked to the side as she thought that this certainly hadn’t been what she had in mind when she woke up this morning. *Note to self, tyrannical asshole don’t like to be called out in public.*

Four of the Brotherhood met within the safety of Monteriggioni’s walls. It was one of few places that the Assassins could go without fear of the enemies’ eyes and ears watching and listening. Niccolò Machiavelli stood, with his dark eyes were serious and sharp with intelligence. His arms were folded over his chest, and he studied the few codex pages that had been found and put on the wall in Mario’s study. “The news coming out of San Gimignano has been grim and filled with bad tidings,” said Niccolò, with a deep and heavy sigh. “I had thought if we cut down enough of Salmoni’s allies then we would have a clear way to ending his reign.”

“But the bastardo manages to replace all those in his organization,” Mario grumbled, with a shake of his head. “Or someone is doing it for him.”

“You fear he has already allied with the Templars, brother?” Giovanni asked, his eyes traced the map on the table carefully.

“Yes, I do. A man on his own is easily swept away. He is getting outside help to maintain his power of San Gimignano, but to what end would someone give such aid?” Mario replied, frowning. “The Templars do, and now through him they control the city and he is nothing more than a puppet.”
“Who puppeteer has grown wholly dissatisfied,” La Volpe commented, darkly. “Only a short time ago, messages that my spies had intercepted showed a great rapport between him and Francesco de Pazzi. Reassurances that he would soon official join the ranks of the Templars. In light of recent events, the offer has been receded and from what I have gathered Salmoni has grown desperate to prove himself.”

“What do you think that he will do to prove himself?” Niccolò asked.

“He could do a great number of things. I believe he could even go as so far to attack Florence, given that the Medici family is one of the Templars biggest threats,” La Volpe answered, as he languidly paced the length of the room.

“Could Florence’s forces hold them off?” Mario asked.

“Perhaps,” Giovanni stated, wearily. “If all were on our side, I would be certain of this, but I’ve seen too many of men being bought off by the Pazzi. We may very well be on our own.”

“Perhaps, I should go,” La Volpe offered, “and see just what Salmoni's play is?”

Niccolò nodded. “Do that. And, La Volpe, if you determine him to be an immediate threat then do away with him. We have let him go too long,” the man stated, seriously.

“As you say,” La Volpe replied, with a slight smirk.

“I suppose that leaves us with one last thing to discuss,” Giovanni said, standing up straight and away from the map that he had been examining. “The Red Hood.”

“Yes,” Niccolò tapped his chin, thoughtfully. “I have heard the strangest rumors of someone called the Red Hood.”

“Ally or enemy?” Giovanni asked.

“That has yet to be determined.”

Gaspare watched Salmoni who seemed rather smug of himself for one had been bested earlier the day by the Red Hood, in public. And yet, that didn’t wipe the hideous grin off his face. It made his insides feel dirty and cold. He stood rigidly, his spine stiff and straight as he waited warily for the orders they were to receive.

“Tonight, gentlemen,” Salmoni’s voice sliced through the silence with all the subtle of a raging bull, it boomed and echoed off the walls. “Tonight, the Red Hood shall be no more.”

Gaspare took in a careful breath, and bit his tongue harshly. If he asked what Salmoni meant by that, it would only draw unwanted attention to himself. After the close call, he needed to blend in with the rest of the guard and be just another faceless man amongst them. That didn’t mean that he didn’t feel his gut jerk harshly by the implication of Salmoni’s words.

“Men like the Red Hood are inherently weak. It is their sentimental and bleeding hearts that make them vulnerable and allow them to be bled dry if only one learned just where to apply the pressure; a tricky little pest, the Red Hood, one that we need to kill before his ideals pollute the minds of the people,” Salmoni stated, with a haughty sniff. “It our duty to see that does not happen.”

Gaspare felt a spark of anger at the good woman he knew being called nothing more than a pest, but there was nothing he could do to defend her honor. Do to so would brand him a traitor and meet a
grisly and senseless end.

“Do you know what my secret passion is? Poetic justice,” Salmoni chuckled, darkly. “And when done right, it can be a man’s greatest tool. I believe that this Red Hood should meet his demise in the same way that he brought shame down upon me.”

The laughter that spilled out of Salmoni sent a horrible chill down Gaspare’s back and the guard’s eyes turned towards the military fort with a troubled stare.

Olivia had to keep herself from chewing at her lower lip since it was busted. The doctor could only give her a bit of salve—no goat urine—to treat the wound, and then proceed to stitch up the long cut along her thigh. Her hands clutched the edge of the cot in a knuckle white grip as the string tugged on her flesh when he pulled the thread carefully through. An uncomfortable prickling sensation ran along her skin, and a damp sweat broke out along the nape of her neck. She had never been more happy when the Il Dottore finished up his work.

“There you go,” the doctor stated, setting down the curved needle into the tray next to the bag of coins that Olivia had paid him with. “This is the second time you’ve been here in that last week, I expect a much more time to pass before I see you again.”

“Bene. I shall try,” Livvy smiled, inclined her head in a nod. She stood up off the cot, gingerly putting weight on her leg. She stayed to the shadows, using them to her advantage and ducking down the alleyways to avoid the main roads. The guards rarely patrolled the dark, dank little corners and her red cape billowed behind her almost dramatically in the wind. If this had been a movie, then that would have been a money shot. She was almost to the little place she had made home when she heard a scream cut through the night. It was a bloodcurdling scream that jarred her down to the depths of her soul, and her head shot upward. Her eyes peered down a long alleyway and she just caught sight of two guards dragging a courtesan around the corner. “Fuck, not this again.”

Anger soon replaced the fear and surprise, boiling up in her throat in a scream that she held tight behind tightly pressed lips. Olivia felt her feet twist abruptly from her pursuit of home, and heading straight towards the rescue. She couldn’t let anything happened to that poor woman. She knew what men like that were capable of. The horrible and haunting image of Cara’s body was never far off in her thoughts. It was by far not the only thing that filled the dark places of her mind, but the new addition had been the starring role in her most recent of nightmares.

Her heart thundered in her chest, and her hurt leg burned and ached in protest at the hasty pace that she set. Fresh adrenaline spiked through her blood to chase it off in the light of panic and wrath that surged up inside of her. She came around the corner, and there was no clear sight of the guards nor the courtesan they had abducted. Fright pierced through her heart like a lance, and then she heard it just beneath the wind. The sound of sobs just off in the distance, and she started forward only to stop for a moment. Her eyes looked up at the arch way to the walls and the turrets that were eerily similar to the prison.

Suppressing the shudder that rolled down her spine, Olivia crept underneath the archway and eyed everything around her warily. It was so quiet and there wasn’t a soul in sight. A weighty unease fell over her mind, and she looked to her right to see the courtesan sitting on the cobblestone ground. Her hair was matted and tangled, the fabric of her dress ripped and torn. Bruises and dirt covered her skin, and she sat there with her face buried into her knees, rocking back and forth.

Every instinct in her body told her to run, but Olivia took a step forward anyways. “Are you alright?” She asked, her grey eyes stared unblinking at the mentally distraught woman. “Let me help —”
The courtesan had lunged forward, and Olivia dodged on instinct. The knife that had been aimed for her heart sailed past her, but the courtesan’s attempt on her life had never really been intended to work. Livvy came to that realization when she felt something had bludgeon the back of her head, and her entire vision went black. Her entire body seemed to slump with shock and sets of hands grasped her, and dragged her about a foot or two, until she felt rope being wrapped tightly around her hands. She fought as best as she could, but she couldn’t clear the dark dots in front of her eyes until the large metal gate slid shut.

She barely made out two guards and the courtesan standing there on the other side.

“Feel up to a little celebration afterwards?” The courtesan flirted, shamelessly. She wrapped arm through each of the guards, and giggled loudly as they pawed at her like she was nothing more than a piece of meat.

Olivia shook her head, with a slight gag. Nausea rolled in the pit of her stomach for two very different reasons, and she fought to undo her bonds when suddenly a thought occurred to her. Why had they just left her here? Her eyes darted all around—all around what was obvious a military fort without a single guard in sight!

It was a trap.

A distinct smell littered the air, and she glanced down to see black powder covering the ground like snow would have if it had been winter. Her eyes went wide and she looked at the one guard on the other side who held a torch in his hand, and she knew immediately that it was the torch that would sent this place off with a boom. She had underestimated how crazy Salmoni truly was. He was so desperate to be rid of her that he had no qualms about blowing up the military fort right in San Gimignano. What kind of person did that? She tugged at her restraints that kept her tethered to a pole, and bent her neck so she could use her teeth to tear at the knot around her wrists. The coursing and foul tasting rope was abrasive and harsh against her tongue, causing her to gag and saliva to drip out of the corner of her mouth in reaction to it.

But she held tight with her teeth, and pulled as hard as she could until miraculously the knot loosened just enough for her to pull her hands free. She saw the guard shout in alarm, as if realizing that she was escaping and he dropped the torch to the ground. Her feet set off at a pace she hadn't been aware she could muster; the pain and soreness of her body shoved to the background. Only a need to survive remained and chased her up the scaffolding, and her feet touched down on the flat of the ramparts when the world exploded around her.

__Chapter End Notes__

ONE MORE CHAPTER UNTIL LIVVY HEADS TO FLORENCE! What AC assassin (not Ezio, Giovanni or Federico) would you guys like to see in the next chapter? Vote now! REVIEW ALWAYS FUEL MY WRITING DON'T BE SHY! lol

Author Note: This story will be upped to Rated M because of the context of the next chapter leaves me worried, so I just wanted to let you guys know.

References:

1.) Olive Branch—it means a truce or alliance. Dates back to the Greek City of Athens, where Athena gifted them with olive trees. Also on American currencies, the eagle holding an Olive branch to symbolize united country that stands for peace and freedom.
Italian:
Bastardo-I think the translation is pretty self explanation, no?
Il Dottore- the Doctor
Bene- good?
Chapter 8

Modern Day Interlude 1

'A Change That Begins'

Desmond Miles life had been turned upside down many times throughout his entire life. Sometimes, it had been his own doing. Other times, it had been far out of his control. Right now, something—Miraculous? Terrifying?—was happening so beyond the realm of control that had not only upheaved his perception of reality and life, but everyone in the Sanctuary as well. It was all due to the mysterious Red Hood, Olivia Steel that had cropped up in Ezio’s memories like she had belonged there the entire time. She was new, he had never saw her in any memories prior and her appearance had them all in tail spin. Ezio talked and trusted her like she had been with him for years, and when Rebecca went to look back in the memories they had recorded so far…

The files before Olivia’s appearance had been corrupted.

His pulse pounded in his temples, and he could feel the tension crackle in the air. No one had really spoken since this had happened, all trying to decipher just what was going on and then suddenly the answer—a bizarre and impossible answer came to them. Ripples beyond the Sanctuary walls had taken place; small changes at first. Just memories that had been overlooked until Lucy, Shawn or Rebecca actual stopped to think about them. And then the big ones came, like the Templar’s reach over the world had diminished. Abstergo and the Templar Order were still formidable foes, but several of the benefactors that made them untouchable were suddenly gone. Reports of their assassinations archived in Shawn’s database like it had always been there.

The Assassins who had been a dying breed, suddenly were flourishing. Desmond would even saw that they were on par with Abstergo with political backing and power due to Knights Corporation—an international security business that was a front for the Brotherhood. It gave them avenues and paths that the Assassins in the modern age had desperately needed. As if that had not been enough, members of the Brotherhood that had died in the never-ending fight against the Templars were suddenly alive and well.

And the only people who seemed to know these changes were even taking place were the four of them hiding away inside of the Auditore Villa in Monteriggioni.

Shawn pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m telling you, I was there. I saw him get killed—no, I am not having issues with PTSD or nightmares. No, Lara, I do not need a therapist. Just because we are cousins doesn’t mean you can get sassy with me and question my mental state. I just need some damn good answ…” he trailed off, and gave the phone in his hand an aggravated glance. “She bloody well hung up.”
“This is insane. I mean, you all realize how insane that this is right?” Desmond asked, running his hands down his face. “Is there any way to explain this? To explain her?” He pointed to the still picture of Olivia Steel. There was a smirk on her face from where the memory had been stilled, where she was taunting Ezio, but in this moment, it felt directed straight at them. “Is it time travel? Did we fall into some kind of alternate universe? And how come we are the only ones that are noticing this bullshit?”

“Maybe because we are in the eye of the storm,” Rebecca said, thoughtfully.

“What do you mean?” Lucy asked, with an eyebrow arched upward.

“Think of this all of this, the changes to the past and the present—think of it like a hurricane. The motion of the storm, the clouds and how they spin around and around with such force that it can wipe entire cities off the map, except in this case it is wiping away what we knew about history and the second half of the story doesn’t bring destruction, but instead reconstructions. Some things that are sturdy and strong stay the same, but the smaller things—the more fragile to change become different, creating a new world in its wake,” Rebecca commented, fiddling with her headphones that sat around her neck. “The reason we aren’t getting caught up in the storm is because we are in the eye of it. We are too close to the heart of what is going on here.”

Desmond paused, thinking over Rebecca’s words. It was an interesting and scarily accurate metaphor for what was going on here. He just didn’t know what to make of it. It was a good thing that the Brotherhood was not dying out and now there once again a force to be reckoned with. He just didn’t understand how one tiny woman could affect the future in such a way. He heard all that cockamamie bullshit about that time was a river, and every choice was a stone that made ripples. It was the first time he actually believed it, and that was unsettling to him.

“That…actually makes a scary sort of sense,” Lucy replied, with a slightly faint look on her face. She dropped down into the nearby chair, and wrapped her arms around her midsection. “But if even you are right, what the hell has the power to cause something like this?”

“There is obviously some serious power play going on here. The past doesn’t just change, and people don’t just appear out of thin air. Not like this unless something serious beyond our ken and understanding is going down,” Shawn stated, wearily. He took off his glasses, and rubbed his tired eyes gingerly. “Normally, I’d be the last person to be stock in higher powers or the like, but I think we are all going to have to broaden our views. Especially if we want to keep our sanity.”

“I am beginning to question if I had any in the first place,” Desmond grumbled, with a frown.

“Your self-awareness does you credit.”

“Shawn!” Rebecca scolded him, half-heartedly.

Desmond merely rolled his eyes, used to Shawn’s witty being sharpened on his ego. His dark brown eyes stared a moment longer at the picture on the screen before he turned around, and looked at the others. “It is so strange. I mean, one day we are all hiding away down here afraid of being discovered by Abstergo, and now we can walk the streets without batting an eye. I feel so weird interacting with the other assassins in the Villa and town. Half the time I don’t know whether to say ‘nice to meet you’ or ‘good to see you again’,” he stated, folding his arms over his chest. He leaned back against the desk, and crossed one ankle over the other.

“You think that’s weird try looking into the face of someone you seen die. The face of someone you felt like you…” Rebecca spoke, her voice wavered. Her eyes looked down at her shoes, and she shook her head side to side. She swallowed convulsively. “I suppose we should be grateful for it all.
To go from barely surviving to being a force that is capable of fighting and standing against the Templars.”

“I know what you mean,” Lucy said, quietly. Her greenish blue eyes were troubled and worried. “It’s like having two sets of memories inside your brain. One contradicts the other, but in your heart, you know they are both true.”

“Nothing is true,” Desmond whispered, lightly.

Lucy’s lips twitched into a smile. “And everything is permitted. I wonder if the assassin that came up with that ideology had ever pictured something like this being permitted. While so many things are uncertain, we can be sure about one fact,” the blond stated, pointing a finger to the Red Hood’s picture. “Olivia is that catalyst that put this all into motion. I wanted to know who or what added her to the mix.”

“You don’t think she did this on her own?” Shawn asked.

“No. Something in my gut tells me that she is caught up in this like the rest of us,” Lucy replied, placing her hands on her hips. Her brows furrowed, creating that little indentation that Desmond noticed she got when she was thinking very serious and very hard about something. “Desmond, I hate to ask this of you. With the bleeding effect and the nightmares, I would never put you through more than was absolutely necessary, but—”

“You want me to go through Ezio’s memories from the start,” Desmond said, with a small nod. He had already known that they would need to start over, and while he was always leery of bleeding effect, he knew that this was something they needed to do. “Don’t feel guilty about it, Lucy. I had a feeling that we were going to have to. Besides, I want to know where Olivia fits into all of this. I want to know the affect and impact she had on Ezio’s life.”

Lucy smiled at him brilliantly.

Desmond felt his heart flip-flop in his chest, and warmth crawl up the back of his neck. He couldn’t stop the responding smile that appeared on his face even if he had tried. He had it bad for Lucy, and he wasn’t even sure she was interested in him like that. Turning his mind away from that depressing thought, he added with a slight wince, “But can we try to skip all the sex scenes? Seeing my ancestor do the dirty is just not my idea of fun.”

Lucy let out a snort of laughter while Shawn just rolled his eyes and Rebecca full out laughed out loud. For the first time in days, the dark clouds that lingered over the four seemed to disappear. “I am sure, Rebecca and Shawn can work something out to that affect,” the blond woman chuckled, biting back a grin.

“We can,” Rebecca confirmed, with a bob of her head. “But it’s going to take a little while. We had to recalibrate the animus after it went all wonky when we tried to search Ezio’s past memories. It will be a little while until it’s up and running.”

“Good. That means Desmond can go with Lucy to grab some groceries,” Shawn said, pleased.

“Shawn,” Lucy sighed.

“Look, I want to believe that these changes are all good and well. But we can’t just rule out the possibility that the Templars managed to get ahold of a Piece of Eden that has somehow distorted reality. We know the objects are capable of a great number of things,” Shawn told her, seriously. “I am doing some digging and verifying all that I can to eliminate that possibility to the best of my
abilility, but just in case, we are being had…we need to watch our backs.”

And like that the dark clouds were back.

The afternoon air was warm, and held a low undercurrent of dewy humidity that made clung to her like a second skin. Lucy had many things on her mind, and the recent changes to reality—and despite Shawn’s suspicious, she believed this was real—had changed her in a profound way. Shortly after joining the Assassins, she had experienced a loss that had broken her in a way that she could not heal. She had blamed the Brotherhood for it, never out loud but inside her head. It had turned her heart cold and dark, growing with intensity as she became disillusioned with the war. She had never intended to become a double agent. She had never imagined in the beginning that she would have betrayed the Brotherhood, and she tried justifying working with the Templars by telling herself that she just wanted the war to end. That it needed to end, and the never ending bloodshed to cease all together.

It had been a weak lie. A lie that she could not fool herself with anymore, now that her eyes had been opened. The painful loss had never happened. With the Brotherhood strong and thriving, the death of her family had never changed her. The moment of weakness that had made her become a double agent never happened. The intended betrayal erased from the script that was life, and replaced with a part that Lucy was so afraid to grasp with both hands. She didn’t deserve such a second chance.

Her sins might have been erased, but the weight of them still choked her. The shame of her actions plagued her and haunted her, stealing into her thoughts and dreams. She thought to confess, to reveal to the others the dark truth of what she would have done, but each time she went to speak, her voice would falter. They were her friends. Maybe that was hypocritical given what she had once intended to do, but the thought of losing them was so agonizing that she couldn’t bear it. She couldn’t see the trust turn into a look of betrayal. In Desmond’s eyes most of all.

It was made worse by the icy fingers—a lingering part of her darkness—that still had a hold on her heart, but like spring come to thaw out the winter snow, a warmth blossomed inside of her. It grew with each new memory that faded out the old and broken ones, making them seem dull and unimportant in comparison. It was melting the ice in her soul away, and bringing back a light that she had thought lost to her forever.

She just wished it had been enough to ease the guilt, too.

The passenger side door of the Honda opened, and jolted Lucy out of her thoughts like bolt of lightning. She tapped her fingers along the steering wheel as Desmond settled down into the seat beside her. As much as she fought it, she was intensely aware of Desmond Miles. In this timeline and the other, she had been aware of him. If anyone had the ability to change her cold heart away from betrayal, it would have been him. She had forged a bond with him, despite it all. She felt underserving of his trust and friendship. She felt the same way about Rebecca and Shawn, but there was difference with the one she had with Desmond.

She had asked so much of him. She had made him take leaps of fate, convinced him to join the Assassins, and go under the animus even when it could drive him insane. He had placed so much trust in her hands, and she had almost thrown it away. It was one of the reasons that Shawn’s theory about this all being some kind of setup just didn’t make sense to her. If Abstergo had masterminded this whole thing, why would they have undone her loyalty to them? Why lose an asset that would have given them access to Desmond, the one assassin whose blood line and genetic history was so tied to the Piece of Eden that Abstergo hunted him and his kin like no other? It made her stomach sick thinking about how selfish and cold-hearted that she had become.
“Lucy, are you alright?” Desmond asked.

Lucy looked up, and felt her heart clench at the genuine concern shining in his dark eyes. God, she felt like a bitch for all that she had done. No amount of cleaning the slate could change that. “I’m fine,” she replied, softly. “I just have a lot on my mind is all.”

“I think we all do,” he smiled. “Given the circumstances, no one can blame you.”

_Oh, they most certainly could and I wouldn’t blame them if they did_, she thought, hiding a wince. She turned the keys in the ignition the second that he got his seatbelt on. The drive was a short one, just to a local grocery store that was about a mile beyond Monteriggioni’s walls. There was a little store near the villa, but it lacked many of the items that were on the list.

“Do you really think Abstergo could be messing with our minds?” Desmond questioned, lightly.

“I think that after all the cruelty and madness they are capable of…we can’t rule it out,” Lucy answered, carefully. “But if you are asking if I believe that this all just some sort of mind game in the grand scheme of things? No. I believe that it is real. This is something beyond what we have ever faced. Something beyond what Abstergo has ever faced, though it is exactly the kind of power they want to harness.”

“Now that is a scary thought,” Desmond said, his lips twisted. Cold, ghostly fingers danced across the nape of his neck. “Abstergo with the power to alter history, or send someone back in time? That is terrifying to imagine all the good that they could undo, even good things that have nothing to do with the Brotherhood.”

Lucy shivered. “I don’t want to even think about what Abstergo would be capable of if they discovered a power source like this,” she said, with a small shake of her head. Her blond bangs swayed side to side with the motion. She flipped on the headlights because the sun was setting, and even though it wasn’t too dark yet, the last thing they needed was to be pulled over. “I just can’t help, but feel leery of the machinations going on here. To what end would someone or something do this? What did they get out of putting Olivia Steel in the middle of Ezio’s way? And why specifically her?”

“I wish I knew,” Desmond shrugged, lightly. “Hopefully through the animus, and Ezio’s altered memories we can find some answers.”

“I hope you are rig—”

A great flash erupted from the backseat of the car followed by a thud. The car swerved violently on the road, until Lucy managed to get control of the steering wheel and pulled the car off of the road, slamming on the breaks. The truck that almost hit them head on blared its horn as it passed by, and the driver flipped her the bird. She twisted her head to peer into the back seat, and shock filled her when she saw a young man sitting there. “What the—how the—” Lucy sputtered, her eyes wide. Her heart hammered in her chest, and she shared a quick look with Desmond. He looked as shocked and confused as she did. “Where did you come from?!” She demanded, withdrawing the gun from the glove department.

Desmond looked as unnerved as she felt. He blinked his eyes rapidly, and pinched himself harshly a couple of times as if to make sure this wasn’t just a dream.

“Oh, God. That was…what the hell?” The young man groaned, lifting himself up. His green eyes then caught sight of the gun barrel pointed steadily at his head and he scrambled back. “What the hell!”
“This might be a good time to tell us your name,” Desmond said, tersely.

“Uh, the name is Leo. I’m harmless, so you could point the gun away from my face that would be shiny,” the young man stuttered out, his face bloodless and his eyes riveted on the weapon. His pulse jumped erratically in his throat, and he pressed his body so hard against the backseat like he was attempting to sink into it.

“That’s not happening,” Lucy told him, her voice sharp. Her heart hammered in her chest, and the only reason that she hadn’t put a bullet in the man’s skull was because Desmond relaxed ever so slightly. She knew he had just used his special talent, and that his eyes had shown the young man wasn’t an enemy. “How the hell did you get into the backseat of my vehicle?”

“Backseat of…” Leo became as still as a statue, not even a breath rattled through his chest. He stayed that way for several seconds as his eyes nearly bulged out of his skull while he truly comprehended just where he was. He drew in a great gust of air, and frantically whispered, “Shit. What the fuck? I was just at home, and now I am here. What the fuck? What the everlasting fuck?”

“People don’t just appear in the backseat of a car!” Lucy snapped.

Desmond put a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Lucy, calm down. We aren’t going to get any answers to this…whatever the fuck just happened if you fill him up with bullet holes,” he stated, awkwardly. It was obvious that Desmond was not use to being the voice of reason.

“This is Olivia’s fault. I mean, all this weird shit started with her,” Leo talked to himself, his arms wrapped tightly around his waist. He seemed lost inside of his own world, not even seeing or hearing them. “She dies and gets sent to the past. Carl goes as silent as the grave, and now I just get dropped into some random car with random people. I always joked that my life was like the Twilight Zone, but I never figured Murphy and his fucked up laws would actually go through with making it a reality.”

“Olivia?” Desmond said, his dark eyes shared a look with Lucy.

Lucy frowned, deeply. Olivia Steel mysteriously appears in Ezio’s life, and now a person was magically dropped in their car that had a friend named Olivia whom he was blaming for his predicament. This was no coincidence, and Lucy had a feeling that their troubles were only about to grow in size.

Leo blinked at them, bemusedly.

Desmond let out a breath through his nose. “This friend that you are blaming? Wouldn’t happened to be Olivia Steel, would it?” He asked, with a resigned note in his voice.

“Uh, yeah…” Leo replied, with a hint of hesitation. “Why?”

Lucy dropped her forehead against her headrest with a groan. “Son of a bitch. Can this get anymore fucked up than it already has?” She demanded, hotly underneath her breath. Taking a deep breath, she lifted her head and looked at Desmond. “In the glove compartment, there is a pair of handcuffs. Until we know more about him, and Olivia, I think we should be cautious and keep him restrained.”

“Uh, really there is no need for that,” Leo reassured, quickly. “I’ll be good, and there is no need to put me in handcuffs or anything.”

He was ignored.

Desmond raised a brow, the corner of his mouth quirked upward. “You keep handcuffs in your
glove department?” He asked, more than a little amused. His dark eyes held a wicked gleam that made all of Lucy’s insides tremble.

“Desmond, don’t be dirty,” Lucy told him, her voice more breathless than she cared to admit. “We don’t have the time.”

“And if we did have the time?” Desmond looked intrigued as he withdrew the handcuff. His thumbs brushed across the metal with more care than necessary, almost like a man caressing his lover’s skin.

A flush stained her cheeks, and she froze like a computer did right around being hit by a bolt of lightning. The thought of Desmond, her and handcuffs seemed to short circuit her brain. Finally, she gathered her wits and tossed him a glare. “Now is not the time,” she told him, her voice a little more high-pitched to be normal. “Put the handcuffs on him.”

Leo let out a strangled laugh. His eyes darted between the gun and the handcuffs, sweat dripping down his brow. “Look, I didn’t agree to some kind of weird threesome. You two can carry on with your passive aggressive flirting, and I will leave after apologizing for unexpectedly dropping in on you, but I’ve got to go…” His voice trailed off, and his eyes narrowed at Desmond. His eyes held an intense look like he was working out a puzzle, and then slowly, he said, “Did she just call you Desmond?”

“That would be my name,” Desmond said, dryly.

“Desmond?” Leo said, tonelessly. “As in Desmond Miles? Descendant of Altair, Ezio and bunch of other Assassins?”

The temperature in the car plummeted. The mischief dropped off of Desmond’s face in the blink of an eye, and his right arm tensed. The hidden blade slid out from where it was hidden underneath the sleeve of his loose hoodie. Leo’s throat bobbed, and Lucy swore that the young man recognized the sound.

“Then I think there is only one response I can give that sufficiently describes what I am feeling,” Leo said, with a nervous laugh. His eyes rolled back into his skull, and he promptly fainted.

Desmond and Lucy stared for several moments. And then Desmond looked over at Lucy, and said, “Well, that’s convenient.”

“Convenient isn’t a word I would use for any of this.”

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: I always had this idea that Ciana is Lucy ancestor, and then I realized in one chapter I had Ciana just randomly carry rope around and now I had Lucy randomly have handcuffs. It made me chuckle a bit. :D
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

I want to thank, JammyONE, Mar_mi, for the Bookmarks!
I want to thank, Mar_mi, delphinepryde84, DannyPhantom619, Tenebrariae, CharlemagneGryffis, Gygapudding, Lillium23, Askia, WormwoodSand31033, and WormwoodSand31033 and the 3 guests, for all the kudos!
I want to thank, WormwoodSand31033, for commenting! :D

I apologize for the delay. It’s been crazy real life wise and has been a struggle. I lost my dog a couple of weeks ago as of yesterday, and so that’s been difficult. He was old and we knew it was going to happen, but had him for thirteen years so it’s strange not seeing him every day. Taking care of arrangements and then other real life craziness all has left little room for writing, but I got this chapter done. I hope to have another done by next weekend, but depending on the length of the next chapter might be two weeks until the next update. Thank you all for being so wonderful and patient, and I hope that you are enjoying this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Eight

'All That's Gold doesn't Glitter Pt 2'

There was something to be said about being blown up. It’s incredibly quick, a flash of pain that snapped through the body like a firecracker, and doesn’t let the life flash before your eyes. So moral of the story...it really sucks. —an excerpt from Olivia Steel’s Chronicles, dated circa 1475 (article found in Shawn Hasting’s Database)

Tuscany 1474

The military fort was a bright blaze in the night, and ashes floated down from the sky like snow. Rumble covered the streets of San Gimignano, and the nearby residents that holed up in their homes lived in fear that night. Waves lapped up the docks, and the Red Hood laid unconscious on a piece of wood that kept her afloat of the water. Blood dripped down along her forehead, and her lips trembled with the shallow breath that rattled through her chest. A large piece of the broken wall collapsed into the water about ten feet away, and violently sloshed the water. The board that Olivia had been clinging to tilted over and she slipped down into the dark, murky underwater.

Gaspare felt panic grip his heart, his brown eyes watched the building exploded and erupt into flames. He managed to slip away from the other guards as they went to celebrate their great victory, and in the shade of the buildings, he made his way as fast as his feet would carry him towards the flaming mess. He had known that he had only a handful of seconds to find her, if she still lived. If there was enough of her left to find, the grim thought lanced through his mind. The acidic smell of black powder tainted the smoke, and made his throat close up painfully tight. Flames licked the charred wood and scattered stones, but there was not a soul in sight.
No guards to patrol the area for which he was thankful, and civilians would not come near the place even if they were paid in gold to so. He also had not a flicker or spec of red that caught his eyes. Gaspare moved across the ground, his dark brown eyes swept over the bleak scene; the only noise was the cracks and pops of the wild fire. The entire military fort was in shambles, and poured into the streets over into Tuscany. Even some rumble dropped into the dark green water, hissing as the hot flames were extinguished and a puff of steam hissed up into the air.

That’s when he saw it. A tint of a red that was just beneath the surface of the water, and he rushed towards the docks. Now with a more clear view, he saw the outline of a body attached to the red cape. “Olivia,” he breathed out. Without hesitation, he jumped down into the water. His body cut through water and his arms curled around her tiny body, weighed down by blood and water. Kicking his legs, he broke to the surface and swam towards the docks. Hoisting her body up out of the water, he laid her out on the ground and knelt down beside her. His eyes frantically searched her from head to toe, and his heart skipped a beat when he realized she wasn’t breathing. “Merda,” he cursed, tearing back the hood.

Her skin was the color of ash, with her forehead and cheek bruised and bleeding. Her blue lips unmoving and she looked beyond death. “No, no. Stay here, Olivia,” Gaspare urged, gently tilting her head back slightly before placing both of his hands on her chest. He pressed down on her chest, five times, and then he pried open lifeless lips and breathed into them. He pulled back and pressed down on her chest again. “Come on. Not like this. Not after everything.”

Each passing second, his hope dwindled. “Come on!” He nearly shouted, pushing on her chest and tried to force the life back into her. When he was about to lean down, and push more air into her mouth, a harsh gurgling noise rippled through Olivia’s body. Water gushed out of her mouth followed by a harsh cough, and her face scrunched with pain. Gaspare wrapped his hands around her shoulder, and leaning her up so she could cough up the water better. As soon as she last bits of water dribbled out of her mouth with a hard cough, she sucked in a greedy breath and her heavy eyes fluttered, struggling to pull open.

“Thank heavens,” Gaspare whispered out.

He sorta wished he hadn’t. Stormy eyes snapped towards him, no longer blurry but filled with recognition and anger and betrayal. “You,” her voice, even though low and cracked, was like thunder and she drew in a giant breath summoning all her strength. Next thing his head snapped backwards and his jaw stung. He lifted his hand, rubbing the jaw and looked down at the slumped form glaring at him. “That hurt…”

Her eyes narrowed into slits, and she looked smug—as smug as a person who had been on the verge of death could be, at least. “I didn't know,” Gaspare told her, seriously. He held tight when she jerked trying to break free, but he could let her move too much. Her wounds were severe and she could harm herself even worse if she decided to fight him.

Her breaths harsh like a wounded animal waiting for its moment to flee, and her eyes cut into him like blades.

“I swear, Olivia,” he whispered, looking her straight in the eye and his tone earnest. He raised his head to peer around the docks, and then looked back down at her. “I didn't know about any of this. I don't know how to convince you, but all I can tell you is that there will be guards here soon. They will search the rumble for your body, or any sign of your survival so we have to move and now.”

She stared at him, dispassionately for a moment longer, before she gave a sharp nod of her head. He slipped one arm around her back and the other arm underneath her knees, hauling her up off the ground bridal style. He felt her body tense and then quiver with pain, but all she did was release a
harsh breath through her teeth. He briskly made his way from the docks down a dark alleyway. Livvy's harsh breaths breaking the tense silence and they went to step out into the main street way when Gaspare abruptly pulled them back. Livvy hissed, sending him a dirty look while he put a finger to his lips before pointing.

Olivia’s gaze followed and eyes widened as she saw a large group of guards rushing down the street. She glanced at Gaspare, who remarked, “Salmoni isn't taking any chances. I've never seen him want to kill someone so badly as you.”

She raised a brow with a look that said: I’ve noticed. The sarcasm in her gaze was immediately replaced by a weary and exhausted gaze that prompted him to ask, “Is there anywhere safe I can take you?”

Ciana nearly jumped out of her skin at the loud bam on her front door. The door rattled and groaned with each strike, and her heart slammed to the top of her throat. Scrambling out of her back and shaking off her sleepiness that addled her mind, she grabbed her knife that lay beneath her pillow and crept down the stairs. The knocking increased in volume and insistence, making Ciana’s teeth gnash together. She could not imagine who would come knocking at her door at this ungodly hour of night, and when she wretched the door open, she never imagined a more stranger sight.

A guard stood there—the handsome guard, she had noticed at the podium during Salmoni’s speech—with Olivia held in his arms, her face pale and battered. The edge of her red cloak singed and blackened. Ciana stood there, gaping like a fish for a couple of seconds before she managed to find her voice. “Olivia? What happened?” Ciana demanded of the guard, sending him an impressive glare.

“Livvy…blew…up…” Olivia panted, with a high-pitched noise that was between a laugh and whine of pain.

It was moments like these where Ciana was certain that Olivia was insane.

“Is there somewhere I can set her down?” The guard asked, drawing Ciana’s attention once more. “She needs to rest, and someone to look at her wounds.”

Ciana was half-tempted to throw a few insults at him, but a quick glance at Olivia stifled such pettiness. Reluctantly, she stepped aside and allowed him across the threshold of her home. She shut the door tightly, and slipped the lock in place. “Follow me. The only place I have that is suitable is my bedroom,” Ciana said, with a knuckle white grip on her dagger. Green eyes watched the guard unblinking and she waited for him to step one toe out of line.

The guard, however, did not. Instead, he followed her to the bedroom with cautious and carefully movements. She was not sure if it was for Olivia’s benefit, or her own that he took great pains to be so genial in manners, but she wouldn’t let his pretty face or pretty manners pull the wool over her eyes.

Olivia sank into the mattress with a deep sigh.

After whatever hell she went through, Ciana must imagine the bed felt heavenly. She watched with her gut jolting sharply in her stomach when Olivia’s eyes fluttered closed, but the guard did not let her slip away into oblivion.

Granted it was nothing like mattress from her time period, but it was heavenly after being nearly blown to pieces. She could have just closed her eyes, and fell asleep. Instead, she got Gaspare
shaking her shoulder and pulling her back before oblivion could claim her. She gave him the dirtiest look that she could muster up, and wrinkled her nose in distaste.

“Olivia, where does it hurt?” The guard asked, gently.

If looks could kill, Olivia’s grey eyes would have obliterated the guard on the spot.

Ciana snorted. “She looks as if she has been beaten within inches of death. I imagine that she hurts all over,” the courtesan snapped, arms crossed over her bosom. Her green eyes flickered over the red clothing. It was still shocking to see it, but she had a realization when Olivia had slipped away seconds and then the Red Hood appeared that they were indeed one in the same. “She is going to need a doctor.”

Olivia made a high pitched whine in protest. Her throat was bothering her, stifling her voice. Ciana wondered how badly damaged her body was, and why. She knew it had to do with that noise that erupted into the night, only a little while earlier. The courtesan had been used to strange disturbance, such was the life under Salmoni’s rule, but she had never imagined Olivia ending up so lifeless and near death. She should have though, with the way that Salmoni was desperate to end the Red Hood quickly before the rogue could gain too much favor with the people and incite a revolution.

“No,” the guard said, firmly.

Ciana felt annoyance burst into her heart. She looked at the guard and raised a cool eyebrow at him. “Excuse me? Do you not see her? She looks like she’s been knocking rather vehemently at Death’s door! She needs a doctor to see to her wounds.” Then she added, indignantly, “And did you just tell me what to do?”

The guard wiped a hand down his face, exhausted and weary. “The streets are filled with guards sent to find the remains of the Red Hood. The fire lingered because of the black powder, but does not burn hot enough to turn an entire body to ash. Once no body is found, they will go on alert. They will suspect the Red Hood’s escape, and I can tell you that no sane person would be out on the streets right now. If you go get a doctor then you will draw unwanted attention on yourself, bella,” he stated, with sincerity in his concern. “They will no hesitant to hurt you, and brutalize you.”

Ciana frowned, shifting on the heels of her feet. She did not know what to make of this man’s concern for her. Regular people never seemed to give a thought to a courtesan’s wellbeing, not even the people who made use of their bodies. So instead of looking any deeper in an effort to not feel out of her depth, Ciana marched over to her trunk. She lifted the lid and gathered the few medicinal items she kept on hand for the times when costumers roughed her up. She set them down on the dresser next to the small bed, and went about lighting the candle. The tiny flames illuminated the room, just enough for Ciana to make out Olivia and her injuries better than by moonlight from the far window alone.

“My god, guards did this to you?” Ciana gaped, horrified.

“Salm…Salmoni ordered…them to b-blow me up. Didn’t quite…mak-ke it out of the way in…t-time,” Olivia choked out, her voice raw and ragged. Her face wrinkled in discomfort and pain, her fingers clutched the sheets with a knuckle white grip.

“That bastardo is a fucking menace!” Ciana scowled, fiercely. “If I could I would slice that shit-eater open and feed him own entrails so he could choked to death on them.”

“Crea…creative,” Livvy muttered appreciatively.
Ciana shook her head. “You are a mess, and an idiot,” the courtesan stated, gingerly inspecting the bruises on Olivia’s face. “But San Gimignano is lucky to have you, Olivia Steel. I was a fool to have doubted you, or your intentions.”

“D-don’t get soft on me now,” Olivia said, managing to grin through the pain.

“Hush,” Ciana chuckled. “You there—”

“Gaspare,” the guard introduced himself.

“I don’t care,” Ciana retorted, bluntly. “I need your help removing Olivia’s clothing. You need to invest in something tougher than cotton next time you decide to take on guards. Even leather armor is better than nothing.”

Olivia gave her a flat look.

Ciana just returned it with one of her own, and unfastened the cloak, pushing it out of the way. “I am going to need you to lift her so I can fully get the shirt removed. Are you alright with, Olivia?” She asked, lightly. She knew that some women were very modest, and while she did not think modest was quite that important—especially when wounded, she wouldn’t overstep her boundaries. When Olivia gave a short breath and a sharp nod, she proceeded to undo the tunic. “You don’t have delicate sensibilities when it comes to nakedness, do you?” She asked Gaspare, a mocking tone in her voice.

Gaspare let out a chuckle under his breath. “I suppose if I had such sensibilities that I would have to overcome them, just this once,” he retorted, undeterred by Ciana’s ire. Which, of course, only made her exceedingly more frustrated at him and she made sure to give the most unwelcoming glare that she could muster. It was a shame that such looks had to be wasted on someone like him. He was rather ruggedly handsome, and all the other courtesans would have happily seduced him if he had ever shown up with the other guards when they came in hoards to Madame Carlotta’s bordello.

“…all yours…” Olivia hacked, in a voice so low that only Ciana would hear it.

Ciana felt her cheeks burn at being caught looking so blatantly at someone who by all rights should be an enemy to her. She prodded—accidently of course—on Olivia’s bruised shoulder causing the young woman to hiss. That’s when she noticed the tear in Olivia’s shirt that had been obscured by her cloak, and the dampness of her tunic. Her finger reached down, peeling the fabric from the skin revealing a ghastly wound. Shards of wood had been imbedded into her stomach just above the right hip bone, and Ciana could not tell just hope deep the wound went. The skin around it however was purplish and swollen. The wood kept the blood from pouring out in great amounts, but what was beneath the skin? Ciana had heard horror stories from streets about how someone could be bleeding from the inside, and how it could be deadly. “Oh, God,” the courtesan blanched, her eyes flickered up towards the guard. “We are going to need that doctor.”

Gaspare took one look at the wound, and he inclined his head in a swift nod. “I’ll go get one. It will be easier for me to roam the streets than you. Don’t open the door until I am back,” Gaspare instructed her, his dark eyes grave and solemn. He immediately rushed out of the door and the house with Ciana following him long enough to lock the door behind him. When the courtesan returned, she noticed that Olivia was significantly paler and her breaths more labored than before. Whatever energy she had scrounged up seemed to be finally failing her. “You must not fall asleep, Olivia,” Ciana said, grasping the woman’s chin when the Red Hood’s eyes started to flutter close. “You have to stay awake. I do not know how badly you are hurt, and if you fall asleep then I don’t know if you will wake back up.”
“I don’t…think I can…think…” Olivia struggled, eyes closing.

Ciana could see her losing the battle, and did the only thing that she could think of. She pulled her arm back and brought the palm of her hand across Olivia’s face as hard as she could. The Red Hood jolted, eyes snapped wide open. Stormy eyes stared up at Ciana with a look of utter disbelief, and Ciana just rewarded it with a fierce glare. “Stay awake,” she stated, her tone demanding to be obeyed and that there was no room for compromise.

It had to be a testament to her willpower, Olivia figured as she clung to consciousness. She felt like a giant sore, useless lump of flesh lying there in agony and her teeth gritted together as she tried to shut out the pain. Her heart beating inside of her chest was the only noise that she could focus and hold onto as the darkness crept in around her vision. She didn’t even realize that Gaspare had returned with the doctor until she sat a long beaked mask in her face, and cringed back into the bed, even if her whole body felt like it had been tore to shred by the minute movement alone.

“What did I say earlier?” The doctor said.

Recognizing his voice and realizing he was the doctor from earlier, Olivia felt a little bit of embarrassment work its way up her neck and into her cheeks in a flush. Livvy made a painful face which was supposed to be a smile, but failed epically. “’elp?” She slurred out the plea.

The doctor snorted, setting down the bad he carried. He started to pull out tools that looked like medieval torture devices, and Olivia felt horror burst through her chest. Her head shook side to side, delirium mixed with anxiety filled her eyes with feverish and frenzied gaze. “N’elp! N’elp! ’Et m’ die! (2)’ She croaked out, but her words were too unintelligible to be made out. She watched with her eyes nearly bugling out of her skull as the doctor brought a shiny, sharp tool towards her.

“You will have to restrain her. If she struggles, she could only make her wounds worse,” the doctor told Ciana and Gaspare, gesturing to Olivia with a wave of his hand.

Olivia wondered why it just couldn’t have been a needle. She hated needles, hated being pricked by them, but it was way better than dodgy medical practices from the renaissance that could likely kill as much as it could help. She let out a whimper when Gaspare held her arms down, pinning her to the bed and Ciana did the same to her legs.

The doctor began his work. He carefully worked over the wound, taking out fragments of the wood before he cut at the flesh in order to get the ones buried deeper within her skin. He was tenacious and determined, and didn’t even flinch with every cry that tore from Olivia’s lips, nor at the not so subtle threats she tossed his way when her tongue actually decided to work. A slight screech escaped her as the doctor had to tug not so gently on a piece. “This one is going to hurt a lot worse,” the doctor warned, a split second before he wretched the piece free.

Gaspare pressed the palm of his hand over her mouth as she arched off the bed with a howl of pain, and Ciana cringed with a sympathetic look in Olivia’s direction. Olivia could give two shits about her sympathy right in this instance. A ragged breath was dragged deep into her lungs, and she slumped back against the bed. It felt like someone had racked white-hot knives along her nerve-ending, trying to tear her asunder from the inside out.

“Shhh,” Gaspare ran his hand through her hair in comforting motion. Blackness swamped her vision as she tried to make sense of the words the Il dottore exchanged with the guard and courtesan. Her consciousness slipping through her fingers like water, and she couldn’t hold onto to no matter how hard she tried. Her eyes fluttering, it was getting harder to keep them open.
“Infection…fever…needs stitches…”

“Will she be alright?”

Livvy didn’t get the answer before she was out.

Violet eyes surveyed the wreckage that was once San Gimignano’s military fort. The Fox sat back on his haunches, a solidarity figure on a nearby rooftop watching the wind scattered ashes across the cobblestone streets. “Dear God, what happened here?” La Volpe whispered, underneath his breath. A silence had fallen of the city of towers, and the dawn break brought the townspeople who viewed the chaos with wide and frightened eyes. The guards seemed agitated, and displeased. He caught the whispers of the Red Hood and Salmoni. Obviously, the red rogue had caused things to escalate dangerously in San Gimignano. He rose up on his feet, and made his way briskly along the rooftops. He would have to send word to the others about this development, but first he had to gather information about Salmoni.

He made his way to the bordello, the corner of his mouth tilted upward when he dropped silently to the terrace. A shy little thing of a courtesan, fresh faced and far too young stood in the shadows. She startled when he approached, her wide eyes meeting his only for a split second before she ducked her head and opened the door to allow him passage through. He pressed a coin pouch into the young woman’s hands, and she hurried away from him. Her footfalls clacked against the stairs that led down the street until they could be heard no more. He had gambled with putting his plan in the hands of an untrained youth, but luck favored him.

The Fox stepped into the room. The heavy scent of seductive oils and perfume scented the air, but underneath it was the unmistakable stench of sex and blood that no matter how hard could never be cleaned. The candlelight was low and dim, the warm colors of red and gold—it all made it so intimate and inviting, like the pretty scales of a snake. He stared at Madame Carlotta whom was tied up on a chair, naked as the day she was born. Drops of red stained her lips and chin. She must have realized the cunning little courtesan had put something in her drink, but it had been too late to stop it. Her vicious jealousy had been her undoing. Beautiful she may have once been, but time had ravaged her body, only enhancing the darkness in her heart. She tormented the younger and more nubile women—and men—in her employment. It was her so-called induction ceremony that had allowed the Fox to gain the advantage. He had followed Madame Carlotta to where she picked up new and fresh faces for her bordello. The woman lured them in with promises, and gave them a false sense of security. She used them, under the guise of teaching them the art of the courtesan before she tied the poor souls and allowed a high paying individual to enter the room. The Madame allowed the man to do whatever he pleased to the unlucky girl. ‘A test to see if they could handle the life,’ one of his contacts told him, and he felt rage boil white hot in his gut. While he was a man of little virtues, the Fox knew that some sins were unforgivable.

Little had the Madame known, the Fox had planted a young soul in her path and in her arrogance, the older woman hadn’t even seen the trap until it had closed in around her. La Volpe glared down at the woman, his violet eyes burned with righteousness for all the lives that she had ruined. Regardless if she gave him the answers he sought, she would not survive the night.

Olivia was lost. Drowning in the deep abyss.

Drowning in all the red.

The current was too strong, pushing and pulling her. Her fingers clawed, breaking the surface of the
water, but no matter how hard she kicked her legs, she couldn’t escape the cold, red water’s embrace. Her lungs were on fire, and the ache pulsed throughout her entire body. She had to get out of the water. She had to get up and run.

A malicious voice cut through the vision. “Running again, Exiled? Always running, always will.”

Olivia opened her mouth, but the red flooded into her mouth. The foul, stagnant water with a copper tang of blood mixed in, and she choked violently on her. Her hands reached for her throat, clawing at the skin as if to rip the bile out of her through her flesh.

The dark, ancient and violent entity that was beyond her line of sight crept closer, the very essence of it flayed the layers of her soul as if trying to tear her apart from the inside. “Runaway. Leave. There is nothing you can change here!” The voice hissed, bitterly.

Was the voice right?

She did always run away. She ran away from things that made her afraid, things that compromised the shell and mask that she hide the strength of her emotions behind when the world got tough. How could she face what was to come when she was so afraid? When all she wanted to do was run away and hide? But...she had to try, the thought cut through her fears like a lighthouse on a dark, moonless night. It lighted the darkness, and the way to shore. She kicked up with all the strength she had inside of her, and broke the surface of the water. Her hands grasped at the loose sand on the shore when hands grasped her shoulders, preventing her from making it onto land. She looked up and stared in shock at Carl’s face. “Carl...what are you doing here?”

Carl's face was blank, lifeless so very unlike him. It chilled Olivia to the marrow of her bone, and before she could say another word, his grip became painful. With one violent motion, he shoved Olivia back underneath the water and held her there. She struggled and fought, but she couldn’t break away.

“If you do not stay away, Exiled, I will destroy you.” The cruel female voice stated, smugly.

Olivia drowned in the darkness.

Hours had passed since the doctor left. He gave reassurance that Olivia was doing remarkable well, and he had hopes that she would survive and recover. He told them it would be a lengthy process, and that she would need much rest. Daylight wafted into through the windows, the sun unhindered by a single cloud in the sky. Ciana cut up an apple, with more care than necessary while Gaspare dozed in and out of sleep in a nearby chair, but the fragile silence was broken when a sharp knock came on her front door.

Gaspare jerked awake, and was on his feet in an instant. He shot a quick glance at Ciana, who shook her head because she was expecting no company. Gaspare walked towards the window, peeking out before darting back behind the tattered curtain. “Guards,” he hissed, warily. He didn’t know what they were doing here. Had someone seen him bring Olivia here? Or were the guard going from house to house making sure none housed the Red Hood?

“What?” Ciana's eyes widened. “What do we do?”

“Open up!” Demanded a voice from the other side.

Gaspare licked his lips before his eyes darted towards the bedroom where Livvy was. He muttered a curse underneath his breath, and rushed to the bedroom. He picked up the red clothing and shoved it into Ciana’s trunk. “We have to find a way to distract them. We cannot allow them to search through
your belongings,” he told Ciana, feeling desperation claw at his gut.

The courtesan stood there in the threshold, her green eyes pulled away from the front door that the guards were undoubtedly going to break down to Gaspare. Her brows pinched together, and her tongue darted out moistening her lips. “Take off your shirt,” she demanded, abruptly.

Gaspare felt shock jolted through him. “Pardon?”

Ciana walked up to him and jabbed a finger at his chest. “Take off your shirt.”

They had only seconds to set up the scene before the front door was busted open, and the two guards marched into the house. “We are coming in! We are under orders to check every house in the vicinity of the fort!” The guard hissed, gesturing for his compatriot to check the cupboards of the kitchen. He marched towards the bedroom door, and shoved it open only to stop dead in his tracks at the sight before him. The poor bastard flushed at the sight of a half-naked woman straddling a man.

With the covers positions just so, it created the illusion that Ciana and Gaspare were completely naked, in the middle of a very intimate act. They bodies also shielded Olivia from plain sight. Ciana arched her back exaggeratedly, her breasts thrust towards Gaspare’s face with his palm cupping one of them—she had to put it there because Gaspare was too gentlemanly to do it himself—and let out a high-pitched moan like she was lost in ecstasy. An art she had perfected over the years as a courtesan. She pretended to startle at the sight of the guard standing at the doorway, and shouted, angrily, “Pervertito!(3)”

She made no attempts at covering her bare to preserve her modesty, especially since the rather young guard seemed flustered by the sight. It would drive him off quickly, as was intended by making it appear that she and Gaspare were in the middle of an intimate act. The courtesan eyed the man beneath her for a split second, he was tense and the hand on her shoulder held tight. He looked like he was half prepared to be bitten by an angry snake, and Ciana admitted that the idea to take a bite of the male perfection beneath her was not unappealing. Though she’d never say that outloud.

“I’m s—sorry,” the guard at the door choked out. “I was just following orders. We had to search and see—”

“And now that you’ve seen, go away!” Ciana stated, venomously. “And shut the door behind you, idiota! This is not some free show!”

The young guard stuttered out another apology and slammed the door with a snap, his hasty footsteps signaling his rush from the vicinity. There were sharp whispered with his fellow guard and Ciana only relaxed when the sound of the front door closed echoed through the house. “That was close,” Ciana sighed, running her hands through her hair.

“Do you mind?” Gaspare asked, finally.

“Mind what?” Ciana asked, blankly.

“Sit on me,” Gaspare said, exasperated. He shifted underneath her, and Ciana went pink feeling just how effected he was by her. Well, he certainly had no need to compensate for anything, she thought, her pulse spiked in the base of her throat. She shouldn’t be so hot and flushed over this. It was hardly anything compared to the intimate acts she had to do to make a living in the city, but for some reason seeing desire on this man’s face made her feel more inflamed than anything she had ever done before. “It is getting…”

“Hard?” Ciana joked, with a tiny smirk.
Gaspare shot her a glare. “Difficult,” he corrected.

“You know,” a third voice interjected, “I don’t recall agreeing to this threesome.”

Ciana jumped, like she had been stuck by lightning while Gaspare went still as a statue. The two looked over at Olivia who peered at them with a bleary and questioning gaze. “You,” she pointed at Ciana, “hate guards. Why are you—” She trailed off when her eyes fell on Gaspare’s impressively toned upper body. “Whoa!” Olivia stared unabashedly at his pectorals and abdominal muscles. “Does the rest of you look like that?”

Ciana couldn’t stop the laughter that fell past her lips, as the guard’s mouth dropped open and his face went red as a freshly ripe tomato. Olivia seemed to battle with herself before she snuggled up against one of his muscled arms. “My god, you are really warm,” she sighed, contently.

“Olivia,” the courtesan trying not to laugh, “are you okay?”

“No,” Livvy said, pouted when Gaspare carefully drew his arm away from her and the courtesan watched on, eyes glittering with amusement. “I think I’m stoned. And a pervert,” she tossed Gaspare’s abs another glance. “I think that doctor stoned me and now I’m a pervert.”

“What?” Gaspare blinked. “No, Livvy, you’re alive and not stoned.”

Ciana noted he decided to leave the pervert comment untouched.

Olivia frowned, her head bobbed until she flopped back against the pillow unable to keep herself up any longer. “Are you sure? Cause I’m pretty sure this is what being stoned feels like. I got stoned once with Leo, and we ate a lot of food,” she said, drunkenly. Her nose was wrinkled, and her lips twisted into a deep frown. “Stupid pot doctor with all his…pot.”

“Pot doctor? Why would a doctor have a pot?” Gaspare asked, even more confused.

“I think,” Ciana guessed, just as lost as he was, “the medicine is still…affecting her.”

“Yes, that must be it,” Gaspare said, shifting uncomfortable when Livvy poked his arm with a finger. Olivia, even in her drugged haze, comprehended the look and she pointed an accusing finger at his face. “You’re uncomfortable? You? You aren’t the one who woke up with two half naked people, and had to sit through an entire conversation with her straddling you!”

Ciana felt her face fall, and then her eyes locked with Gaspare’s. Slowly, they both looked down and seemed to realize they were still in a very compromising position. Embarrassment and horror flashed through her, and Ciana leapt off of the man like he burnt. “I…I am so sorry,” she apologized to the guard, though she wasn’t exactly sure what she was apologizing for.

“Pants, thank god,” Olivia whispered, then her eyes trailed to Gaspare’s abs. Her face became speculative, and she tapped her fingers against her chin. “Then again…”

“There is no need to apologize, bella,” Gaspare ignored Olivia. He rubbed the back of his red neck and his dark eyes were everywhere but on Ciana. The apple of his throat bobbed, and he reached for his tunic that had been thrown on the end of the bed. “It seems we both forgot ourselves for a moment.”

“I bet,” Livvy looked amused, glancing between the pair intently. Too intently for Ciana’s liking, and the courtesan could see the wheels turning in her drug addled mind. “You two are certainly chummy for two people who are at each other’s throats, when I was last awake.”
Ciana drew in a deep breath. “I hope this medicine wears off soon. It appears that with it you can’t hold your tongue, and say the very first thing that comes to mind,” the courtesan stated, with conviction.

Gaspare gave a nod of agreement.

“How do you know this isn't my natural state of being?” Questioned Livvy, brusquely.

“I hope not,” the courtesan whispered. “Otherwise, you are going to have a lot more people wanting you dead.”

Ciana was amused by the half-hearted glare sent her way, but she watched with growing hilarity when Olivia turned her glare upon Gaspare. The poor guard just sat there bemused by the look that only a woman could give a man, and then Olivia demanded, “Get out of the bed.”

Gaspare hastily obliged.

The sun rose, and the sun fell.

The sun rose again, and fell once more.

On the third day that the sun rose, Olivia needed to be anywhere that wasn’t Ciana’s house. Restlessness itched underneath her skin, her body demanded to get up and be active. She had never been good with idle hands, and there were no books or games that could occupy her mind. Oh, she had tried to read the trashy novel that Ciana had offered her, and don’t get her wrong she had read her fair share of romance novels, but if she read one more line that spoke about “his sword sliding into her sheath” or “heaving bosoms”, she was going to have an aneurysm. It would be at least a week for her to be able to walk without a walking stick. Two and half, until the pain and wounds were healed, save for the hole in her side. That would take nearly a month. That's what the doctor said. That was time that Livvy didn't have, gingerly moving around the room with a walk stick ignoring the scowl that Ciana sent her. After another minute, she finally tiredly plopped into the chair and scowled at the peach placed in front of her.

“So they think I'm dead?” Livvy's lips pursed. “Despite finding no body?”

“Indeed those seem to be the rumors,” Gaspare nodded, solemnly.

Livvy sighed, brushing her hair out of her face. “I have to do something.”

“You can't go out there,” Ciana glowered, placing a drink in front of Gaspare. “You won't stand a chance against the guards.”

“They should be afraid of me, not the other way around,” Olivia stated. Perhaps that was a bit prideful statement, but it was true none the less. The point of building up the Red Hood in the first place was to become a boogey man in the night that would make venomous people who preyed on the weak or innocent to think twice. Otherwise, what was the point of all the effort? After taking a bite of her food, she continued, “I need…I need them to think that I am a phantom that can appear out of any shadow, and when I do, they don't stand a chance. No matter how much damage they do to me.”

“Well, you can't do that now, with your hurt leg, your side…” Ciana listed off, with a hand on her hips, but stopped when Livvy made an aggravated noise in her throat.

“I'm aware of that,” she shifted uncomfortable, her sore muscles quaking. She was painfully aware of
the poor condition her body was in as a result of her carelessness three nights ago. “Believe me, I'm aware of that. But the longer I stay down, the more Salmoni wins and the harder it will be to come back from that.”

A deep, troubled silence filled the room. It was silence filled with all the worries and hopes that now stood on the edge of falling apart. Gaspare was the one to break it, and he rose up of his chair; the legs scraping loudly across the wooden floor. “I have to get back to my post,” the guard sighed, heavily. “If I stay here any longer my absence will become suspicious.”

Livvy nodded. “Be careful.”

Gaspare took the word with a nod. “You as well.”

He glances over at Ciana who looked everywhere but at him, then shook his head and walked out the door. Olivia tapped her fingers across the table, filing the awkward moment away for later. She pushed her food away, too nervous to eat. “What am I going to do?” She asked. “I thought I could do this, I thought I could show people they didn't have to be afraid. That people like Salmoni don't always win. If the people start to believe that I am dead…”

Ciana sat there for a moment, just staring at Olivia with a long and hard expression. Finally, the courtesan seemed to come to some sort of decision and got to her feet. “Stay here and rest,” the blond said, gently.

“What are you going?” Livvy's head shot up.

“Don't worry about it,” the courtesan told her.

“You saying that makes me worry about it,” the Red Hood commented, dryly. Then a sly look entered her gaze, “Are you going after Gaspare?”

“No!” Ciana snapped, defensively. Her green eyes narrowed into a dark glare before she let out a huff, and then marched out of her home, shutting the door loudly behind her.

Olivia sat there for a moment. “Is it possible to die from boredom?”

It was well into the day nearing noon, and several origami swans later, did the courtesan return home. Livvy settled her latest origami swan on the table, fashioned from paper she found. It was thick and brittle parchment, but did the job. Glancing up as the door slid open, she eyed the courtesan who looked very smug. “What have you been up to?” She asked, almost afraid of the answer.

“What makes you think I've been up to something?” Ciana retorted, placing a few things she had retrieved at the market away in the cabinets. She picked one of the swans, looking at it with an amused smile.

“Because of that look,” Livvy remarked, pointing at her. Her grey eyes glittered with thinly veiled amusement. “It’s a coy kind of slyness that is in that smile of yours, and you look way too satisfied with yourself. I am pretty sure it was the look I was wearing when I interrupted Salmoni's speech. Now what did you do?”

Ciana snorted. “The Red Hood had some adventure last night.”

Olivia paused, tearing her eyes away from the latest swan she was crafting and raised a brow at the courtesan. “And how did that exactly happen?” She asked, very slowly with clear confusion in her gaze.
“Apparently, the Red Hood has many clandestine rendezvous with several women, quite a few who are married. Some married to Salmoni’s officials,” Ciana said, looking like the cat who ate the cream.

A snort of laughter escaped Olivia, and she leaned back in her seat. She had her hands pressed over the impressed smile that stretched over her features. “You…you made these rumors?”

“Not on my own,” Ciana smirked. “You wanted to be a legend.”

“And allegedly having sex with several woman makes me a legend?” She had to ask.

Ciana rolled her eyes slightly, before gesturing for her to follow. Not one to pass up the opportunity to leave the house and breathe fresh air, Olivia grabbed the makeshift walking stick and followed the courtesan. It was a couple of minutes before they reached the market place, and Olivia noted it was particularly loud today. “A legend must encompass a great deal of things in order to endure the test of time, and win favor with the people. These must see your ideals, but more so they must want to be you. To emulate you, there are many ways to do this. The fight, there is a primal need to fight in every human, seeing you and what you fight for will have some rally towards you.”

“Still not seeing the affair part,” Livvy was bemused.

“I'm getting there,” Ciana shushed her. “Listen.”

“Did you hear about the Red Hood and Lord Di Angelo’s daughter, Elisabetta? He snuck into her room and stole her virtue,” someone whispered, in shock. “Absolutely scandalous.”

Olivia felt her mouth drop open ever so slightly, and her brows crept up to her hairline. She tossed Ciana a look of pure amusement and disbelief, while the courtesan just preened proud of her rumors and the life they had taken on.

“The lord's daughter has done nothing but swoon of her lost love,” another giggled.

“With a big strong man like that, who can blame her?”

“Big…strong…man…” Olivia whispered, glancing down at her thin and short form. She bit her lower lip in order not to burst out into a fit of laughter. She knew from high school that rumors got exaggerated and grew worse than weeds in a garden, but to see these people let their imagination run away with them filled her with hilarity of the situation.

Ciana tapped her shoulder, gesturing to a nearby group of men exited a tavern.

“The lord's daughter, a few men's wives, a couple of courtesans from what I heard,” a man stated, his cheeks red from all the ale he consumed. “All in a single night!”

“…all those women, man, I wish I were the Red Hood!” Another man crowed.

One of his buddies nudged his arm. “You wouldn’t have the stamina to keep up!”

The group of men burst into laughter, shoving each other and rough housing.

“I get it. Men want to be me, women want me,” Livvy murmured, with a touch of awe in her tone. “Not sure how I feel about this new found popularity. Not sure how I feel that the people so quickly took said rumors, either.”

“Be grateful,” Ciana told her, with a small nod. “It will come in handy. Especially since with all these rumors, the Red Hood appears alive and well. And the people? They cling quickly to the
stories because you give them hope, and San Gimignano has been scarce on that for so long. You are like a fable character that has jumped off the page of a storybook, a hero—with albeit loose morals and a heartbreaker—that through these stories whether they be true in deed or not, helps them get through the weariness of the day. You give them just enough to help them believe that maybe tomorrow will be better.”

Olivia felt an inexplicable emotion surged beneath her chest, and for a moment, she found that words were impossible for her. She had known that the Red Hood had the potential to be something extraordinary, like a Robin Hood that would inspire people. To see the reality of that was powerful, and the fears she had about doing this quieted in this moment. “Thank you, Ciana,” she whispered, gratefully.

“You'd better thankful. I don't normally go to other courtesans and ask for favors, but they do not like Salmoni and were more than happy to help...especially after being paid,” Ciana stated, with a slight smile.

Livvy looked at her with serious eyes. “I owe you. A lot.”

“Well,” the courtesan whispered, “the way you can settle it, is by putting an end to Salmoni, once and for all.”

“I will. I promise.”

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It was a small building where the Fox had holed up in San Gimignano, but it was out of the way of patrols and prying eyes. La Volpe drew the tip of the quill pen across the parchment. The flow of his words refined and honed after years of practice under a tutor in his youth. His free hand reached out, drawing the small dying candle near so that he had better light. Exhaustion pinched around his eyes for the night had been long few days, dealing with the Madame and her guards. They had hunted down the young courtesan who had helped La Volpe, and he in good conscious could not allow her to suffer for his machinations.

To my friend Niccolò,

I can only hope that this letter finds you well. It has been days since my arrival in San Gimignano, and things have appeared to taken a turn for the worse. Salmoni has been driven to madness, even destroying the military fort in order to claim the life of the Red Hood. The city had been quiet in the aftermath when Salmoni seemed victorious over the unknown rogue, but yester eve, rumors slithered down the grapevine. Salacious and decadent rumors about the Red Hood—a man after my own heart with his theatrics and various affairs. I am not sure how much truth there is to his nightly activities, but it certainly have incurred Salmoni’s wrath once more.

The Master Thief paused, considering his next words carefully. Machiavelli did not care for details to be written down. He would wish to hear such face to face, so the Fox proceeded to give a brief summary of what occurred in the last few days.

Confronting Madame Carlotta provided no answers, beyond that which we already knew. She has been silenced and no longer will pose a problem to the city. I suggest that we have our allies skilled in the art of running a profitable bordello to come in and secure Madame Carlotta’s former patronage. It would do us some good to have more of a foothold in San Gimignano given the current political climate. There may be a way for light to shed on Salmoni’s workings. It seems to me that the Red Hood’s misadventures purposefully targets Salmoni. It does cause me to wonder if the newly renowned thief knows something that we do not regarding the Templar’s ally. I ask your advice, should we approach the Red Hood?
He allowed the ink to settle and dry before he folded up the parchment. Sealing it in an envelope with red wax and stamped with the Assassin’s brand, he passed it off to one of his most loyal agents. “Get it to Machiavelli with haste,” the Fox told him, seriously. “He must be made aware of all that has transpired.”

His agent nodded and scrambled out the door as if demons chased him.

Another week had come and gone.

Olivia had gradually worked her body through easy calisthenics, increasing the time and difficulty of her exercises with each day that passed mindful of the stitches on her side. Her bruises had faded into a sharp yellow with blotches of green, and her sprained ankle no longer hindered her when she walked. She ran her fingers over her side, feeling the new stitches through her tunic. They had to be removed and changed to avoid infection. Staring up at the side of the building, Livvy took a deep breath and ran towards it. Using a little boost, she kicked off the wall to reach the handhold above. Her side protested the movement, and she bit her lower lips with a hiss. Wiggling her fingers to get a better grip on the misshapen brick, she found footholds to steady and balance herself before she started to climb upward. She made it to the roof before she heard a voice call from down below, “I see that you are feeling better.”

Olivia craned her neck to peer over her shoulder. Her brows rose in mute surprise at seeing Ciana back so soon. The courtesan had grumbled about how she had to return to the bordello or Madame Carlotta would be searching for her soon. Carefully Olivia made her way back down, and then dropped the last two feet to the ground. She grimaced, placing a hand to her side.

“Better but not quite fully healed,” Ciana murmured, worriedly.

“Yeah,” Livvy said, disgruntled. “What happened to work? I thought you feared Madame Carlotta’s wrath if you did not show?”

The courtesan’s green eyes flickered with a strange tangle of emotions. “It appears that Madame Carlotta is no more,” Ciana stated, biting on her lower lip. Her cheeks had blanched of all color, and her mouth tightened. “She was found dead in her quarters with her throat slit from ear to ear.”

“What?” Olivia looked stunned. Of all the news that the courtesan could have brought back with her, this had not been what she had been expecting. A cold sensation pinched tight in her stomach, and she turned to face Ciana head on. “I thought Carlotta had guards. Some of the toughest that San Gimignano had to offer given that she is Salmoni’s sister.”

“It seems that this person had slipped by them,” the blond sighed, worriedly. She clasped her hands together, to quell the tremble in her fingers. “Rumor has already pinned the Red Hood as the culprit.”

Livvy closed her eyes, and let out a light groan. “As if Salmoni didn’t have enough reason to hate me, and he’ll retaliate. He won’t take this lying down,” she whispered out, running her fingers through her. Her grey eyes opened, and she looked over at Ciana with concern. “What about you? Where does this leave you and the other courtesans?”

“Meela has taken over running the bordello,” Ciana replied, a little bit of color returning to her face. “With her authority so new, I fear that many will try to take advantage of us during this time. And I fear that Salmoni will take a pound of flesh out of us courtesans’ for Madame Carlotta’s death. Her
guards were slain too, so it is unlikely that they helped her murderer which leaves us as the only suspects. I am not sorry the woman is gone. I am glad that she is no longer of this world but…” the blond crossed herself, and muttered a quick prayer underneath her breath. “But at least when she was Madame, we knew where we stood in the mess of the city. Now we are cast adrift, I fear that we are all hanging by a noose.”

“Hey, nothing is going to happen to you or the others,” Olivia said, with a reassuring smile. There was a slight hesitance to the tenor of her voice, a little frisson that belied her uncertainty when it came to such words.

“You can’t make such promises.”

“I am,” Livvy countered, a grimness settled over her features. “You have helped me more than you needed to. You could have tossed me out onto the streets when Gaspare and I arrived at your door. Instead, you brought us in and you’ve sheltered me during my recovery. I intend to pay that forward, and if that means making sure that Salmoni doesn’t take his revenge out on the bordello workers than I will.”

Ciana opened her mouth to speak, but no words were uttered. Instead, she seemed even more stricken by Olivia’s proclamation. Olivia knew from personal experience how hard it was to believe in the genuine goodness of others. She had her heart stomped on many times, and recalling such was never a pleasant experience. She was betting that Ciana was of a similar mindset. Catching movement out of the corner of her eye, Olivia twisted her head and then smiled at the newcomer. “Found your way back, did you, Gaspare?”

“I thought it would be prudent to check in on you two. Make sure that no one has given you any trouble,” Gaspare replied, coming to a halt when he stood beside her. “The city is on high alert for the Red Hood after Madame Carlotta’s death. I assume you already know,” he spoke, with his dark eyes on Ciana.

“Yes, I have been made aware of that,” Ciana said, her tone clipped. “If that is all?”

Gaspare was not so easily dismissed. “How are you feeling?” He asked Olivia.

Olivia rolled her neck to the side, relieving the built up tension with a swift crack. “Been better, been worse,” she replied, folding her arms over her chest. Her grey eyes solemn and wary; she studied the underlying tension in Gaspare’s posture, and the darkness underneath his eyes. “There is something more than Madame Carlotta’s death that you wanted to speak of. So, what’s up?”

“Pardon?” Gaspare asked, casting a confused look upward.

“I meant, what’s the matter?” Olivia rephrased her question, a good-natured chuckle in her voice. She would have to be carefully with too much modern terminology. It would require too much explanation, and make her appear more vastly out of place than she already did. “So what tidings have brought you to my doorstep?”

“My doorstep,” Ciana corrected, exasperated.

“Her doorstep,” Olivia amended, with a twitch of her lips.

“I can assume that you already know that Salmoni has not taken the death of his sister well. He had already been wroth to learn of the Red Hood’s survival through his evening activities,” Gaspare stated, the briefest dash of amusement in his voice before the graveness returned. “If he already was mad like I believe he was, he is now beyond the void of insanity into depths that no one can return
from. He has started to build up the garrison’s rankings, and arming them with new weapons and armor."

A bolt of shock sliced through her from head to toe. “That sounds like he is building up an army, not just guards to maintain the peace of the city—if San Gimignano could be called peaceful,” Olivia said, her eyes wide. “Who does he think he is going to war with?”

“You,” Gaspare replied.

“Me?” Livvy frowned. “I warrant an army?”

“Salmoni certainly thinks it will take an army to take down the Red Hood,” Gaspare commented, his jaw clenched taut. “He is being spurred onward by a mysterious man—a Spaniard.”

“A Spaniard?” Olivia parroted, a horrible dread spread through her chest. Italy and Spain were by not so far from each other that travel was impossible, though it did require a bit of gold to transverse between countries. However, it wasn’t a leap to the conclusion that the Spaniard that Gaspare spoke of was none other than Rodrigo Borgia. The letters were evidence enough that Salmoni was under Templar influence and obviously, Borgia was the leader of the Templars in Italy. It was terrifying to think she had been caught in the man’s crosshairs. The game, while portraying him as a villain and rightly so, did not capture the truly horrifying picture of the future Pope. Historians had painted him as the devil himself, and while she conceded that some of that could have been born out of the stigma against the people of Spain in Italy during the Renaissance, Rodrigo Borgia had more than earned his infamous reputation.

Olivia had no desire to meet the man face to face to learn the truth behind the stories. “Let’s go inside,” said Livvy, her eyes flickered to the people that passed by. The streets were becoming too crowded as people got up to start their busy days. The three of them went inside Ciana’s house and settled around the dining table. Olivia entwined her fingers, creating a steeple and her shoulders rose with a great breath that she pulled in. “Tell me what you can about this Spaniard.”

“I know not his name, only his face and from what I gathered he wasn’t a pleasant man,” Gaspare stated, a frown ran along his brow. “He was an imposing man, though not great in height. Eyes like the devil, dark and dangerous. His voice was deep, but held a hiss like a snake.”

Ciana’s lips pursed together. “Someone you know, Olivia?”

Olivia didn’t reply. She sank back against the chair with a soft oath muttered underneath her breath. It certainly sounded like Rodrigo Borgia, and that made the knots in her stomach all that much worse. Outside there was a shout and peels of children’s laughter. People giggled and chatted enjoying the bright sunny day and her stomach rolled unpleasantly. She knew that Salmoni would use his army to track her down and stomp on any unfortunate soul that was in his way. These people would be the ones to pay the price, and she would be the reason that happened. The Red Hood was meant to protect people, not making things worse. “But with the Templars involved, that’s exactly what will if I don’t stop Salmoni soon,” she said, quietly.

“Templars?” The courtesan asked, confused.

Gaspare gave a light shrug asked, confused.

Olivia looked up at them, and then gave them a lopsided smile. “Sorry, that was meant to stay up here. Feel free to disregard,” she said, tapping her fingers to her temple. She dropped her hands on top of the tabletop, and felt determination begin to simmer in her blood. “Where is Salmoni stationed right now? Where has he taken sanctuary?”
“Olivia,” Ciana said, in a warning tone. “Your wounds…”

“We don’t have time for me to be better. Salmoni is planning and plotting, and while I think it’s flattering that you two think that he has created that army with the sole purpose of coming after me, realistically speaking I feel there is more to it,” Olivia told them, her tone sharp and brusque. “Remember what you stated? That the people felt inspired by me? I think Salmoni intends of breaking the spirit of the people, and I shudder to think what he will do to ensure that happens.”

“You think that he’ll attack the city?” Ciana asked, dismayed.

“I think he blew up a military fort to try and kill me. He didn’t care who got hurt in that. How many homes took damage from that blast? How many nearby people suffered wounds? He won’t care who gets caught in the crossfire of this,” Livvy replied, earnestly. She ran the pad of her thumb across the underside of her chin, and gave a small shake of her head as she stared sightless down at the table. “Gaspare, do you know where Salmoni is?”

“The Torri Gemelle in the Piazza del Duomo,” Gaspare answered, after a split second of hesitation. “It once belonged to the Ghibelline family, but as far as I know is now under the power of the city.”

Olivia chewed on her lower lip, the cogs in her mind turning carefully. “We have to do something. We can’t risk an army being unleashed onto the city,” she stated, a disquiet swelling up in her heart. Her hand was being forced in this matter. They were not a force that could combat an army, so that meant the only chance they had was to remove Salmoni from power in order to send those loyal to him in disarray. And those who held no love for the man, to abandon whatever schemes the monster had planned. “We have to stop him.”

Ciana opened her mouth, but then closed it for there was no protest she could give in light of the current events. Gaspare inhaled sharply, and then narrowed his dark eyes on Olivia. “Very well, but if we are to do this, then we can’t go charging in the dark. We have to be wide eyed and prepared.”

“What do you have in mind?”

Machiavelli pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger, expelling a deep sigh. Several sleepless nights weighed heavily on his shoulders, and the news that La Volpe had sent had no eased his mind. With other reports from Bartolomeo that Salmoni seemed desperate to amass forces in San Gimignano, he feared that the madman would truly march against Florence. As if that were not nearly enough to be concerned about, the Red Hood also presented several problems. Namely the one of his loyalty. Did he serve a master, or his own interests? And did his goals align with the Brotherhood? Too many variables in a dire situation, and he glanced down at the letter he penned in response to La Volpe.

La Volpe,

News from San Gimignano and the surrounding countryside are troubling. It has plagued me for hours on end, mi amico, but until we know whom holds the Red Hood’s leash or what motives he has, we should not approach him. Our focus must remain on Salmoni and the Templars. Should these two problems coincide, we shall cross that bridge then. Continue to track Salmoni and his dealing, but most of all be wary. He gathers his forces, and for what, I shudder to think.

Be vigilant, my friend,

Niccolò

Machiavelli sealed the letter with a stamp from his ring, and then extinguished the candlelight.
Olivia leaned idly against a brick wall out of the way of the people making their way through the market, soaking the warmth of the sun. Her eyes were closed, her lashes fanned down across her cheeks and she listened to the noise of the city. There were times that she needed solace and silence, but other times that the noise of people and life was comforting, too. It reminded her that there was so much more than just herself here. That she was a small part of a bigger world. A sense of sonder that seeped into her bones and soul, but such thoughts could not be dwelt on for long. She opened her eyes at the sound of approaching footsteps, and saw Gaspare had returned. “You have been gone a long while,” she commented, tilting her head to the side.

“The blacksmith worked as fast as he could,” Gaspare replied. He held up a shiny piece of armor the likes of which she had never seen. “Custom-made to strap along your chest and it will shield your injured side. Wounds are a distraction that one can ill afford in battle. I took it upon myself to not only ease your mind, but mine and Ciana’s as well.”

Olivia accepted the gift. “Thank you. I appreciate this, and I promise to use it well,” she said, with a thankful smile.

“Don’t thank me just yet,” Gaspare commented, with a trace of wry amusement written upon his lips. “You are decent at fighting, I’ll give you that, but you need to learn how to take down guards quickly and effectively. Unless you want to end up like you did at Salmoni’s speech, scrambling to outrun and outdo them.”

Livvy rolled her eyes, amused. “I would never do that.”

The air grew cold, as the blue light of day faded into the dark rich lavenders and pinks. Stars started to appear of the darker side of the sky and even the moon showed half of its face tonight. Everyone was starting to finish their day, but for Olivia, it was just beginning. It an abandoned barn, with torchlight surrounding them Olivia faced Gaspare. “Arm up, knees bent,” Gaspare instructed her, his hands guided her arm into the correct posture. When he was satisfied, he stood in front of her and launched another attack.

Olivia defended herself, blocking his attacks the best she could. Her father had taught her in a similar fashion, strict and militant, but the style of fighting was almost as different as day was to night. She supposed after roughly five hundred or so years, that military training had changed and varied quite a bit over time. Gaspare tapped her right side, in reprimand for favoring it.

“Don’t favor your side. They will see that and take advantage,” Gaspare warned her, as she shoved him back. Sweat pouring from her brow, she straightened her stance and bit the inside of her cheek fighting against the pain. “You may have a piece of armor covering your wound, but that is not a failsafe. Do not count on it to be one.”
He lunged, she dodged. He lashed out, and she defended. Gaspare was firm and fair teacher, and Olivia—while not a sponge for everything—learned combat swiftly. *Adapting to survive like good ol’ daddy taught her to*, she thought, with a grimace. Her father had been more in her thoughts of late, and she didn’t like because it brought up old feelings that she’d rather not deal with.

“Bene. Bene,” Gaspare complimented, finally relenting and allowing her space to breathe. “Your form is good, and it seems your wound is doing little to hold you back. I think you are ready.”

“Idiots,” Ciana muttered passing by them.

Livvy just shot her a grin. “You're just mad you are not a part of the club.”

Ciana snorted, with an eye roll.

Olivia let out a gush of air, and turned towards Gaspare. “So we have a battle plan, or do we need to decide on one?” She asked, hands settling upon her hips.

“Salmoni is ever worried you will get to him, so he has archers all along to towers. His 'base of operations' or 'evil villainous lair' as you have so aptly called it will be secured tightly,” Gaspare sighed, with his lips twitching upward. “It will be no small task to gain entry to it.”

Olivia nodded, carefully. “The archers will have to go first. If they spot any of us, they could raise the alarm or worse shoot us down. And just so we are clear being shot with an arrow has and never will be on my list of things to do,” she said, half in jest and the other half quite serious. “That leaves the guards at the door, and the ones remaining inside. I am doubting that asking politely is going to get us into the building…” She paused, and then gave Gaspare a slow speculative glance over. “Or maybe it’s not so ridiculous now that I have given it a second thought.”

Gaspare raised a brow. “You know, I’m beginning to hate when you get that look in your eye.”

“What look?” She composed her expression into one of pure wide-eyed innocence.

“You *know* what look. The one that spells nothing, but trouble.”

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Olivia had a few phobias. It was natural and normal part of life.

She hated spiders, despised clowns, and a crippling fear of *heights*.

Which is why her heart felt like it would burst right out of her chest the further and further she inched up the side of the tower. Her palms were sweating, her gloves slipping slightly as she sought out and clung to any footholds or handholds she could find along the stone work. Her stomach felt like it was in a never ending pitfall towards the ground, and she could feel her ankles quake underneath her weight. *Just a little further*, she told herself, wondering idly how she was going to get down. It had been roughly five minutes, and she had made it halfway up. She thought that was very good timing considering she was scared shitless.

She wouldn’t be ashamed to admit that once her fingers hit the top of the building, there might have been a tear or two of relief. Easing her way over the edge, her grey widened as the patrolling guard turned and saw her. Well, fucking shit, the thought slashed through her mind as a bolt of panic shot up her spine and slammed into the base of her skull. She scrambled the rest of the way over as the guard lunged. She threw herself to the ground, dodging the blade. It clanged against the stone, and jarred the guard for a split second.

Olivia took immediate advantage, and lunged at the guard. She threw all her weight, and shoved him
as hard as she could. His legs hit the side of the tower, and the top half of his body bent backwards until he toppled right over. Olivia’s hand caught the side, barely keeping herself from tumbling after. “Ooooh,” the strangled moan left her throat as she watched the guard plummet down the ground. She clenched her eyes closed, and recoiled at the sound of impact. She pulled away from the edge, and mumbled a prayer for the man before her grey eyes settled on the other tower where the other guard was unaware of his buddy’s downfall. A decidedly disgruntled look crossed her features, and she heaved a deep breath before she made the long climb down.

Did she mention she hated heights?

After much cursing and a busted lip, Olivia found Gaspare after she had disposed of the other archer. Her legs were slightly unsteady, the prickle of panic ran underneath her skin from the harsh vertigo that still clawed at her mercilessly even now when she was on solid ground.

Gaspare paused, taking in her the paleness of her face. “Are you alright?” He inquired, concerned.

“Heights and I have a complicated relationship. Best to leave it at that,” she said, repressing a shudder. Her words were strained, and she gave a light cough to ease the knot in the back of her throat. “Archers dealt with. Best to get moving before a patrol spots the bodies, if they haven’t already done so. You ready for this?”

“As ready as I will ever be,” Gaspare told her.

It wasn’t an ingenious sort of plans, but more often simplicity worked better than anything elaborate. Olivia used the plant and shrubbery as cover, staying low to the ground while covering Gaspare who feigned being severely wounded. Clasped tight in the fist against his stomach were pomegranate seeds which he squeezed tightly. The juice dripped down through his fingers, as red as blood. A little touch to make the act more believable, and it was amazing how little things like fruit and everyday items could be used to set the stage.

One of the guard’s exclaimed upon sight of Gaspare. “Dear God, what has happened?”

“The…the Red Hood…” Gaspare panted, making his legs give out from underneath him. One of the men leapt forward to steady him while the other pushed open the door, and they hurried him inside while whispering frantically. The door was left open in their haste, and Olivia took her chance, knowing it was now or never. She dashed across the cobblestone path with lightest footsteps she could managed, while pulling her stiletto free from where it was held on her belt.

One guard had returned to the doorway just as she reached it, and his eyes widened in horror. His lips parted with a shout, and Olivia lashed out, dragging the blade across the man’s throat. In morbid fascination, her grey eye nearly bulged at her skull at how deep the blade had went and the waterfall of blood that slid down the man’s neck. It made her stomach turn, queasiness sliding through her veins like molasses, but she turned eyes away. Not letting the feeling take hold of her because there was still so much more to do. She stepped through the threshold just in time to see Gaspare ram a knife underneath the guard’s breast plate, a quick and clean kill.

Gaspare turned towards her as the body dropped the ground. “The other guard?” He inquired, lightly.


“Oscar worthy?” His brows furrowed.
“Trust me, it's a compliment,” the Red Hood reassured him, a faint smile on her lips. It slipped away and was in the next moment, as her grey eyes scanned the room. “How long until the outside patrol returns to change shifts?”

“Half an hour, maybe a little,” Gaspare said.

“Lock and barricade the door. If that doesn’t hold, then find another way out,” the rogue ordered, her tone one that would have no arguments or refusals.

Gaspare wiped a weary hand across his lips, his jaw set tight. “It is up the stairs and down the right corridor,” he stated, a knuckle white grip on the pommel of his sword. “Beyond that I do not know. I have never personally guarded Salmoni here, and I do not know where his office is, but it will be somewhere beyond there. Be quick and be wary. No one guarding Salmoni will hesitate to strike you down. I know how hard it is to take a life. How hard the decision is, but when it comes down to it, this world and its people are better off without men like Salmoni ruling like tyrants.”

“I know,” she whispered, her voice barely audible. She made her way towards the staircase, only to pause to look back at the guard over her shoulder. “And Gaspare? Thank you. If not for you or Ciana, I don’t think I would have made it this far.”

Gaspare smiled, slightly. “Give me your thanks if we both make it through this night alive,” he said, pulling the two to the building shut. The lock slide into place, and the last thing Olivia seen of Gaspare was him moving furniture towards the entrance to build a barricade. His words rattled around in the back of her skull, and her feet drove her up the stairs. Once she reached the second floor, the Red Hood came across a brute. A filthy word fell from her lips when the brute charged her with a shout, and her back slammed against the wall to get out of the way of the axe that crashed down, splintering the wooden floor. The brute turned and the Red Hood tried to dart out of the way, but he got her, catching her around the throat.

A hoarse shout got lodged against the rooftop of her mouth when the hand clasped tighter around her airway, and her fingers fumbled with her dagger. The guard laughed, like he had already won, but he had counted his chickens before they had hatched. The Red Hood managed to grasp her stiletto and drove it into the man’s wrist. The small blade was just thin enough to sink in-between the joint of his gauntlet, and he jerked back, with a cry of shock.

The Red Hood twisted herself around until his back was towards her, and then threw herself forward with all her might. The brute had been flummoxed, and had steadied himself trip forward. He landed with one knee to the ground, and the axe that he had buried in the floor just inches away from his face and neck. Before he got a chance to recuperate, the Red Hood leapt on his back and put her entire weight on him. That on top of the bulk of his arm sent him crumbling to the ground, and the blade of the axe sank through into his neck. A horrific noise between a gurgle and a gasp reverberated through the man and the Red Hood wretched herself off of him, sickened that she felt his last breaths. Even more so, that she had been the cause of such.

Lock it in the place where childhood traumas go and never think of it again, the Red Hood thought, viciously stomping the feeling away. She blinked back the shocked tears, and forced herself to take deep breath before turning on heel and marching down the hallway. It was a bit of touch and go, peeking in doors. One was a broom closet, and another one was a room filled with five inebriated guards who luckily didn’t hear her open or swiftly close the door. She made haste away from that door, and took great pains to make each movement she made as soundless as possible. She was aware of every creak of the floor beneath her feet, and each breath that move in a frisson through her lungs. Moistening her parched lips, she followed the torch light that danced along the wall and eyes darted along taking in every shadow. Tension knotted at the base of her skull in a white-hot ball that
spread out in agonizingly slow through her veins, and limbs.

Her instincts screamed at her that the danger was not over, and that feeling proved true when a guard came waltzing around the corner. At first, he didn't notice her. Then when he did a double take, the Red Hood lunged at him. He flailed his arms, stumbling back with a comical fright on his face and she brought her knees straight up into his family jewels. A high-pitched squeal tore up through the guard’s throat, and his eyes went so wide that they nearly popped out of his skull. The Red Hood hesitated for a split second, and the swallowed hard when she stabbed the stiletto deep through his throat. She slashed the carotid artery, and the guard dropped to his knees clutching his throat.

Bile coated the inside of her mouth, and she stumbled past him. Her teeth ground together, and she made her way into the only room left at the end of the hallway. It was an office with a luxurious mahogany desk, a fine selection of wines and crystal decanter on a table just in front of the fireplace. It seemed that Salmoni was not here, but as her fingers skimmed the documents left on the desk, she knew that she would be back. All she had to do was sit back, and wait.

His heart was nearly beating out of his chest with panic when he stumbled over the body of two guards. Salmoni had no idea how his enemies had infiltrated his safe hold, only that he must flee while he still could. He rushed towards his office, not caring of the body he trampled on his way there, and shoved through the door without thought. He rushed to his desk, and started to gather all his documents. If he were to convince his allies to give him sanctuary, he couldn’t leave anything that would implicate them in the conspiracy. Suddenly, a blood chilling sensation dripped down from his head towards his toes, and he realized that the fire that had been blazing in the fireplace had been doused.

He went utterly still, not even daring to breath. His wide eyes traced the shadows that had stretched forth, covering the floor and the walls. The only was the moonlight sliding through the drapes, and casting to pattern on the center of the floor. His jowls wobbled when he swallowed down his panic, he slowly turned around with beads of sweat rolling down his face. “Who are you? Why are you here? Show yourself!” He demanded, angrily.

There was a low flutter, and he caught sight of the edge of a red cape. Icy fear sliced through his gut, and he growled out, through his clenched teeth, “You.”

“Now, darling, don't sound so disappointed,” the Red Hood mocked, with a tone filled with hellfire and brimstone. The cocky attitude on the day of his speech had been replaced with something far more dangerous and dark, and Salmoni realized that this was a whole different kind of beast than he had expected to come across. His eyes fell to the hand that held several pieces of parchment, and quaked with anger. “You have your fingers in some many pies, one must wonder how you to do. Embezzlements, murders, sex trafficking! Even children aren’t spared from your depravity!”

“How did you get in here?” Salmoni gasped, his chest hurting with each desperate gulp of air. His fingers reached up, tugging on the collar of his tunic and he took a shaky step backwards. His eyes glanced at the door, but even he knew that the rogue would be faster. In his dotage, sampling the finest wines and food had taken a toll on his body. His mind flashed back to a Sunday morning sermon by the priest who preached against gluttony and greed; the inside of his mouth ran dry, and he grasped at his desk to keep himself upright.

“A lot of people don’t like you,” the Red Hood smiled. It was the smile like a crocodile that had its prey corner and trapped. “A lot of people want you dead, and for very good reasons.”

“I have allies!” Salmoni snapped, his hand clumsily grasped the pommel of his sword. “You have no idea what you've stirred up, thief!”
“Ah, yes, the Templars. I am aware of their presence,” the Red Hood chuckled, low and deep in his throat. “Put away the sword now. If you were ever skilled at using it, that time has long since passed.”

“And allow you to kill me?” Salmoni spat out, pulling the sword free from its sheath.

“You are going to die here. There is me, who make it as quick as possible. Despite my hatred for the atrocities that you have committed, I am not without mercy,” the Red Hood told him, matter-of-factly. “Or there are my allies who will make short work out of you, if the mobs of people in the street don’t catch you fleeing like a coward first. Do you suppose they will find mercy in their hearts after all you did to them?”

Salmoni sputtered. “The Templar—”

“Aren’t here and don’t matter right now. Besides, after failing to keep this city under their control and for failure of stopping me, they aren’t going to give you any more chances. You’ve spent and cost them far too much,” the thief told him, with a wan smile. “In this moment, you have choice. To die gracefully with the façade of repentance for what you have done, though I doubt you any have a soul to even find redemption for. Or like a coward that will torn apart by the hounds in the streets that want nothing more than to make you suffer. Now, make your choice.”

“Burn in hell!” Salmoni rushed the rogue, swinging his sword wildly.

“After you!” The Red Hood snarled, catching the sword with the stiletto dagger. Sliding it downward, she put her blade through the intricate handle of Salmoni’s sword and then twisted it sharply. Both weapons clattered to the ground, and Salmoni barely had a second to step back when a fist swung at him. Knuckles smarted his cheek, and he felt anger boil hot in his blood.

“Why can’t you just die?” He screamed, balling up his fists and throwing them at the hood. Each punch seemed like it would land, but then sail through the air. He was lucky if it managed to strike the cape, let alone the thief that danced about him on nimble and swift feet. He felt like a madman, each second passing driving his heartbeat upward and the pain in his chest became more vicious and pained, splintering outward until movements became sluggish. “Why can’t you just die?” He shouted at the top of his lung, and then his knees quaked beneath him. Gasping, he could draw in a single breath of air to fill his aching lungs and collapsed to the floor below him. His cheek pressed against the wood, his slick palms tried to pick him up, but to no avail. He saw the tip of the Red Hood’s boot appear in his line of vision, and his sight was becoming more blurred by the minute.

“My dying would not have changed this outcome. When death and greed are all a city knows, the people will eventually rise and cry out for blood,” the Red Hood said, the voice a distance sound to his ears. “Shortness of breath? Heart palpitations?”

“What…did…you…do…to me?” He growled, spittle sliding out between his lips.

“Nothing really. The toil of the fight likely triggered your condition, yes, but something tells me that it was bound to happen eventually,” the Red Hood said, with a faint trace of sympathy. It just made Salmoni all that more angry and he spat on the thief’s boots, feeling satisfied that the rogue made a disgusted noise and stepped away. It would be the last thing, he ever felt.

Olivia eyed the man with a strange sympathy going through her. She had seen a man in his nineties at the mall experience a heart attack, and had been a person there to help him through until the paramedics arrived. It was strange to sit back and do nothing when her instincts told her to heal. Her hands were now covered with blood, and she wondered how much more blood would be necessary.
Do the ends justify the means? She thought to herself, and then her spine stiffened when the door shoved open. She whirled around to see two guards standing there with eyes filled with horror at their dead boss, and then in tandem looked at the Red Hood.

Livvy knew she didn’t have any fight left in her. Narrowing her eyes into slits, she made her voice as menacing and as lethal as she could. “This is the part where you run away,” she hissed, her teeth bared like a wounded wolf about to tear into flesh.

There was a beat, and then the guards bolted away like Hades’ furies were chasing their heels. When the clinks and clanks of armor faded out of her hearing range, she allowed herself a moment to laugh. She couldn’t believe that had actually worked, and reminded herself to tell Ciana when she returned to the courtesan’s home. *But your mission isn’t done just yet,* she reminded herself, her laughter dying upon her lips. She turned back towards the desk, looking over the scattered documents intently. *If there is a hint of the Templars’ plans here, I need to find it and maybe put that knowledge to good use.*

Footsteps alerted her to someone’s approach, and she retrieved her dagger from the ground, fearing that perhaps her words had not been as frightful as the fleeing guards had led her to believe. Her fear was short lived when her eyes met the tired and bloody vision that was Gaspare. Her shoulders sank with relief, and she slid her dagger through the notch on her belt.

Gaspare stared down at the dead body at her feet. Awe and shock flashed across his face, and he breathed out, “You did it.”

“We did it,” she corrected, lightly.

Gaspare shook his head. “The Red Hood did it.”

A smile stretched across her lips. “However, the story goes, I could not have done this alone,” the Red Hood stated, eyes glittering with a tangled mess of emotion. Clearing her throat, she gestured to the desk. “Feel up for a bit of light reading? I could use the help sorting through these documents, and while I may have spooked a couple of guards, I doubt that tactic will work on all of them.”

“Are you looking…” Gaspare began but another voice continued, “for something?”

Panic shot up her spine like lightning, and the Red Hood whirled around, her cape fluttering a bit dramatically. Gaspare was immediately at her side, with his weapon drawn out as the two stared at the figure that detached from the shadows. From under the hood, Olivia caught sight of violet eyes studying them intently and her stomach clenched tightly when she realized just who they were dealing with. The window leading out the terrace was now open, but in the windless night, no breeze had alerted them. And the man before her would no doubt be skilled enough to unlock anything and not make a single sound, far more skilled than she by far.

“What do you want?” She bowed her head forward, using the shade of her hood to further conceal her features and deepened her voice. She only hoped that he had no suspicions of her true gender, and her heart raced wondering just how much he had heard. Nothing was too incriminating, but she did not wish for the Brotherhood’s eyes upon her just yet.

“Such a broad question. I want many things, Messer Red Hood,” he smirked, tauntingly. “But what I want in this moment is merely to know what you are looking for. Surely giving all the labors you have endured tonight that would not be such a burden to answer, no?”

“I am just wondering why my personal matters seem to be of interest to one such as you, La Volpe,” the Red Hood tossed back, with a thin smile.
A slight flicker in his violet eyes was the only indication that she had startled him. He hummed underneath his breath, and Olivia’s stomach clenched, wondering what thoughts raced through his mind. Her body was more tense and taut than it had been during any of her fights, and she struggled to maintain the stoic. “It seems that the fool has finally fallen and that my job has been done for me,” the Master Thief commented, clucking his tongue at Gaspare who bristled underneath his gaze. “One wonders what motivations drove you to seal Salmoni’s fate.”

“My motives are my own,” the Red Hood declared.

La Volpe lips twitched into a lazy smirk. He casually sauntered towards her, intent on closing the distance. Olivia had no desire for that to happen, and wagged her finger at him while taking a measured step backward. Her hand grasped the back of Gaspare’s armor, and forced him to step back with her as well. “Uh-uh, Swiper, no swiping,” Livvy told the other thief, her tone not one of jest.

La Volpe quirked up an eyebrow at that. An indention allowing his brow expressed his mute confusion, before he glanced over at the guard. “What colorful company a man such as yourself keeps.”

“I could say the same about you,” the Red Hood countered, without thought.

“And what do you know of the company I keep?” La Volpe’s voice went cold and Livvy realized she had just crossed an invisible line. That’s when shouts from outside startled the group, and filtered in through the open window.

“Il Signore è il mio pastore!”

Another shouted, “Scappa, scappa via!”

Olivia grasped Gaspare’s arm, and she pulled him out the door without a split second of hesitation. The two sprinted down the hallway, and were out the door, but too paranoid that the Fox would give chase, they kept on moving. Olivia had no desire to cross daggers with the Master Thief, and knew in her heart that it was not a battle that she would win. They hauled ass through San Gimignano until she was certain that La Volpe did not follow. It burnt her pride knowing that if he actually intended to follow, he would have caught them. Got to work on that, she told herself.

“What a night. I can hear the bed calling for me,” Olivia said, bending forward to catch her breath with her hands braced on her knees. She reached up, touching her split lip and grimaced. “After another trip to the doctor, I guess.”

“That would be wise,” Gaspare smiled, faintly.

Olivia straightened her posture, and let out a big huff. “Is it always going to be like this? A struggle to get things done?” She asked, truly wondering if killing Salmoni would make such a difference. Depending on what kind of power the Templars held at this point in time, they could easily replace one cockroach with another and the horrid cycle could very well start over again.

“I think if it weren't such a struggle,” Gaspare found his words carefully, “then it wouldn't be worth it.”

Livvy stared at him, searching his expression for the truth behind his words then gave a slightly nod. “That true enough, I suppose,” she said, limping down the path towards Ciana’s house with Gaspare trailing beside her.

“You did good today. A lot more than I had originally thought possible,” Gaspare said, reassuringly.
He put a comforting hand on her shoulder, “It makes me wonder what you intend to do next.”

“Staying in San Gimignano isn’t an option. Salmoni may be dead, but regardless I will target painted on my back. Fools who want to prove themselves or allies of Salmoni who have a vendetta will come after me,” Olivia stated, with a touch of sorrow in her tone. Just when the city of towers was starting to worm its way in her heart and feel like home, she would have no choice but to move on to greener pastures. “Besides, there are things that I need to do. Things that can’t been done within these city walls.”

“Do these things have anything to do with why you became the Red Hood?” Gaspare questioned, with his head cocked to the side.

“Not originally, no,” Olivia admitted, chewing on her lower lip. “But they are part of the reason I chose to continue being the Red Hood. Not simply allowing the thief of the night to fade into obscurity when it would have been the safer option.”

“Safer, but by far not the better option,” Gaspare smiled.

The pair came to a halt upon Ciana’s doorstep. “What about you? I don’t think the rest of the guard will take your betrayal lightly, even if you did for the right reasons.”

Gaspare sighed. “No, they most certainly will not. I knew that by the end of this that I, like you, would no longer have a permanent place here within San Gimignano’s walls. I will make for Venice. I have family there that will be willing to hole me up for a while.” He pursed his lips, looking away for a moment before his eyes swept back towards her. “Does Ciana know you’re leaving?”

“No, not yet. Somehow I don’t think she is going to take it well,” Olivia replied, with a wince.

“No, she will not.”

Olivia froze, and then slowly turned to face the open door and the courtesan standing there with an eyebrow arched. “Ah. Heard that, did you?” She asked, hesitantly. There was a strange sort of reliance the two had on each that had grown over the time she was healing here, and the buds of a good friendship, too. It made her wonder just what the fallout of her leaving would be.

“I did,” Ciana said, with a sharp smile. “Won’t you two come in? I believe we all need to have a talk, and its better where the walls block curious eyes and ears.”

Olivia had a bad feeling about this.

Niccolò,

The news I write to is good and ill, in equal measure. The threat Salmoni posed is no longer, he has been slain—in a manner of speaking—by the Red Hood. While this thief did not draw a blade to finish the deed, the man’s life has expired due to a sudden burst of illness. It was a failure of the heart, if my suspicions are correct. It seems that Salmoni’s excess has finally extracted it’s price. I know not by what reason the Red Hood was driven to kill the man, though I suppose the price on his head could be consider a good enough motivation to do the deed yet my instincts tell me there is more to the Hood’s machinations than self-preservation.

I have gathered documents that will prove fruitful for our cause, but we must make use of them quickly. The Templars will hear of Salmoni’s demise before long, and will make haste to protect themselves, changing plans that will render our foreknowledge useless. I implore you, also to think more on approaching the Red Hood. He proves cunning and resourceful which could make him a
great ally, or a deadly enemy.

In your confidence,

La Volpe

The next morning came, bright and sunny. The storms that had gathered the evening before had dissipated and cleared away before so much as a drizzle of rain could coat the streets. Olivia sat in a chair, nibbling on a dry biscuit while watching Ciana rushed about with a morbid fascination. “You know when you said we needed to talk last night this isn’t where I imagined things going,” she commented, running her fingertip across the rim of the metal cup.

“Oh?” Ciana craned her head to peer at Livvy over her shoulder, while she tossed a few garments onto the nearby chair before she rifled through the cabinets and cupboards. “And what did you imagine?”

“More yelling, less compliance,” Olivia replied, propping her elbow on the table and resting her chin in the palm of her hand. “Are you sure you want to do this? I know that Firenze isn’t that far away from San Gimignano, but you are still cutting your roots that you have here, and to follow a mad crusader to boot.”

“My roots have been withered for a long time now. There is not pain in cutting them, besides I will rent out the house to Meela and the courtesans for use bringing in some spare coin, and I can finally make a life that isn’t spent on my back,” Ciana snorted, brushing a strand of blond hair out of her face. She placed a couple of jars of vegetables on the table, intent on bringing some food for the road. “Do you know how long I have waited to be free of that kind of life? Living day in and day out as a courtesan? It is exhausting, and not in an enjoyable way despite all appearances. No, I think there is not hardship in following a mad crusader across Italy. Besides, you would be bored without.”

Olivia grinned. “Fair point.”

“Are you sure you want to go to Firenze? While I hear it is beautiful, Venice is surely more tantalizing by far.”

“I am not going there for a vacation,” Olivia laughed, eyes twinkling. Her smile took a mischievous edge, and she feigned innocence, adding, “But if your heart is truly set upon Venice, Gaspare has told me that he intend to go there. I’m sure he’d be a willing escort if you were—”

“Florence is wonderful,” Ciana immediately changed her tune. “Florence is lovely. Who cares about stupido vecchio venezia?”

Livvy chuckled into her cup, and took a sip of the tea. The two talked idly over the next half an hour while Ciana packed away her things into a large leather bag. It was old, but of good quality. The courtesan frowned at the much smaller bag that contained all of Olivia’s earthly possession, and had to ask, “Is that all you own?”

“Yes,” Livvy quirked up a brow. “Why?”

“A monk owns more stuff than you,” Ciana commented, dryly.

“Well, I had more things…I just,” Olivia hesitated, rubbing the back of her neck. It had been quite a few days since she had thought about her home, and the things that she had left behind. Homesickness sank deep in her chest, slightly wishing she had a few familiar things to comfort her. “Just left them back at home. Too much to carry traipsing all over God’s creation and such.”
The blond got a curious look on her face. “You know, it has occurred to me that you haven’t spoken of your home and that I never asked you about it,” the courtesan said, softly.

Olivia set down the cup of tea, and twisted it lazily around on the table to occupy her fidgeting hands. “Not much to tell of it. It’s a little town that survives on the surround farmland. Safe and boring,” she replied, vaguely.

“Do you have anyone special you left behind?” Ciana asked.

“Why, Ciana, are you interested in making me an honest woman,” Olivia joked. She laughed while dodging the piece of fruit that the courtesan lobbed half-heartedly at her head, and picked it up off the ground when it rolled by her feet. “No. I don’t have anyone special that I left behind. I don’t do the whole romance thing. It’s just no meant for me.”

Ciana paused. “I know that look. Some fool trampled on your heart, didn’t they?”

Olivia gave her a look.

“Alright, alright. You don’t have to confide in me about it just yet,” the courtesan said, allowing the matter of Olivia’s past romance to drop entirely. “What about family? Did you have anyone like that you left behind?”

“I have a brother and a friend who is like a brother. They are the only family I have left in this world,” Livvy answered, shortly. The conversation dried up after that, but whether it was because the two had to finish packing or the topic had gotten too uncomfortable for the both of them, Olivia wasn’t sure. With all they owned on their backs, the two women met Gaspare at the gate. “Gaspare, I thought that you had left already!”

Olivia noted that Gaspare’s eyes immediately honed in on Ciana, but forced his attention aware from the blond and onto Olivia. “I could not leave without saying a proper good-bye,” Gaspare said, with a toothy smile. “I hope the road finds you well, my friend, and that one day our paths will realign.”

“The same to you, Gaspare,” Olivia nodded. “Take care of yourself.”

“I will do my best.” His gaze turned to Ciana, and his tongue darted out to moisten his chapped lips before he reached out, clasping her hand. Before the courtesan could murmur one protest he brought it to his lips, and kissed the back of her knuckles. “Goodbye, Ciana.”

Olivia put a hand to her chest, watching the interaction with wide eyes. There was a dust of pink on Ciana’s cheeks, and surprise flashed through her green eyes. The courtesan nodded, her lips firmly pursed together failing to repress the smile. “Goodbye, Gaspare,” Ciana whispered, her voice a little breathless. There was something vital going on there, even the air seemed to halt and still between the pair. The spell was broken when Gaspare released Ciana’s hand, and stepped away from her. Olivia swore that Ciana even swooned a bit, but would never say this out loud within earshot of the courtesan because she liked living.

Livvy returned her gaze to her friend. “Goodbye, Gaspare. Until we meet again.”

“Until we meet again, il mio amico(10),” Gaspare gave them a slight bow. The three of them stood there at the gates of Tuscany, giving one last lingering stare at the city before all three going down their chosen paths.
Author’s Note: In 2012, when I started this fic I had a lot of it done. Then I lost my writings and had to rebuild, and unintentionally created a lot of loose ends in this story as well destroyed my enthusiasm towards writing it. And I ended up losing my writings twice more due to a faulty hard drive in my laptop, so it was hard to keep writing all together. Anyways, one such loose end I forgot was: Madame Carlotta. I had intended for this to be a bigger plot point to crop up later, but it never came about. I think I may have mentioned vaguely about Federico and Olivia doing something about, or implied that they handled it which for obvious reason with be edited since in this version La Volpe has taken out Madame Carlotta. It also makes since to have her death happen now because given the fact she is Salmini’s sister, she would not have taken his death lying down. But Olivia needed to get to Florence in order start rolling the ball towards the AC2 plot, and writing Madame Carlotta’s revenge I felt would just drag things out in a snail’s pace that would ultimately hurt the flow of the story.

End of Chapter
References and Languages

Please understand that I am in no way well versed in Italian. The only reference I have are online sites, or Google Translate—which I know can be so inaccurate. If you happen to know Italian, and see any mistake with the phrases or words, please feel free to point it out. I do wish to be as accurate as possible. :D

1.) Merda (Italian) Shit
2.) Livvy's slurred speech, “N'elp! N'elp! 'Et m' die!” (Translation) No help! No help! Let me die!
3.) pervertito (Italian) pervert
4.) Che diavolo (Italian) What the hell?
5.) This is the part where you run away.” Shrek reference
6.) “Swiper, no swiping.” -Dora the Explorer reference to Swiper the Fox
7.) The Lord is my Shepherd (Italian) “Il Signore è il mio pastore!”
8.) Run, run away (Italian) “Scappa, scappa via!”
9.) stupido vecchio venezia (Italian) Stupid old venice
10.) Il mio amico (Italian) My friend

Reviews are always wanted. Like cookies. Always want cookies. Next chapter: Livvy and Ciana make for Florence, will Livvy be able to change things? Or will unknown enemies stand in her way? Stay tuned.
Chapter 9

'Fast Thieves, Bar Brawls, and Mona Lisa's'

On Route to Florence

Marcialla, Tuscany

1474

String.

Olivia weaved it around her middle finger on her right hand, with thoughtfulness and great care. The red and white string, she had gotten from a tailor shop on a discount because it had come from a bat batch. Her grey eyes flickered around the village called Marcialla they stopped had taken refuge at for night, and to Ciana who bartering the stable hand for a horse. Firenze was by carriage two days from San Gimignano, but longer by foot. It would make things significantly easier on them, if they were able to procure the stead. Securing the string with a tiny knot, she ran the pad of her thumb over it tightly woven band. As idle as her action may appear, the string had a purpose that was important. When she was younger, she would find her mother busy moving around the kitchen—strings all along her fingers.

“What are the strings for, mommy?” A four year old Olivia had asked her mother.

Her mother smiled serenely. “To help me remember. See when I have something to remember, I tie a string to my finger so when I see the string, I'll remember what needs remembering.”

The four year old nodded her head, though she really didn't understand it one tiny bit.

Her stormy eyes regarded the strings on her fingers with a solemn, if not sorrowful look. It was a silent promise not to forget what she was striving for, a little reminder that would act as a guide and friend to keep her along her path, and make her remember what she intended to do here. Her chin
lifted when she saw Ciana walked away from the stable hand in a quite a huff, and she cocked her head to the side. “Went that well, huh?”

“What do you think?” Ciana scowled, her green eyes flashed with anger. “The bastard. I offer him more than a fair price on a cazzo horse, and then he says that he wants more than coin and grabbed my ass!”

Olivia’s spine stiffened. Her eyes flickered towards the man, and any trace of amusement seeped out of her expression. “Do you want me to take care of it?” She asked, narrowing her eyes on the stable hand.

Ciana seemed to contemplate it, before her shoulder slumped with a great sigh. “No,” she said, with a small shake of her head. “Men like him aren’t worth the effort.”

“If you are sure,” Livvy said, studying her for a second.

“I am.”

“Alright then. Let’s go to the tavern and get something to eat before we find a place to rest for tonight,” Olivia suggested, her stomach growling. Her cheeks turned red when Ciana laughed because it was not a quiet noise.

“I think that would be for the best before your stomach decides to devour itself,” Ciana chuckled. The two turned and headed towards the tavern and had almost made it when a shifty looking man approached them. It was not his clothing, or his appearance that made Olivia instinctually wary to him. It was the way he held himself, the sly and slick gait that reminded her of herself when she was on the prowl, preparing to steal something.

“Messer Red Hood,” the man spoke up, he intelligent dark blue eyes locked onto Livvy. A quirky grin was on his lips, his perfect olive toned face lit with mischief. “You are the Red Hood, aren’t you?”

Ciana made a disgusted noise. “I told you to change your clothes.”

Livvy repressed an eye roll, and kept her focus on the man. Her lips curled in a sharp sort of smile, and she stepped forward to place herself between Ciana and the perceived threat. “That depends on whose asking,” she replied, the handle of the stiletto dagger in the palm of her hand.

“I am D’Angelo,” the man introduced himself, without hesitation. “I’ve heard that you are one of the fastest thieves in all of Tuscany. Care to put it to the test?”

Olivia momentarily was taken aback. It had not been what she had been expecting in the slightest, and laughter bubbled up out of her like a babbling brook. She had never thought that the races had been actually true, chopping them up to a game dynamic meant to help the player hone their skills. “You mean you wish to race me?” Livvy asked, endlessly amused by these turn of events.

“What else?” He added with a cheeky grin, “Unless you are afraid of a little competition?”

“What would be the terms?” Olivia asked.

“We race across the creek, down the steep hills and around the farms, first one back to the town,” the man told her, “gets 200 florins from the loser.”

It was a bit of a gamble to bet such money. Her pockets weren’t exactly lined with gold despite popular belief, and if she won such a gamble would be worth it. “Very well,” Olivia agreed, feeling
a tremble of anticipation rush through her blood. It wasn’t often that an opportunity came along that she could make coin without a bit of danger involved. “Ciana,” she glanced at the courtesan who watched her with amused eyes, “count to three.”

“You…are an idiota,” Ciana sighed, fondly. She stepped out of the way as the man and Olivia stood side by side. “One…” Livvy bent her knees, preparing to sprint. “Two…” Her limbs tensed, watching the man out of the corner of the eye. “Three!”

She was off. Her legs carrying her as fast her across the dusty and rocky road. Euphoria tingled through her body, vibrating through her limbs from head to toe as nostalgia filled her lungs and heart. Memories of summer days before everything had turned so dark, chasing the sun towards the horizon and impossibly trying to catch it. The wind rushed past them, howling against the shell of her ear and blistering sun caused beads of sweat to dot along her forehead. The creek was not deep, but Olivia sought rocks in effort not to slow herself down. Water splashed and soaked her ankles, her eyes darted towards her competition.

They were practically neck and neck.

Olivia pushed herself further and harder as the shadow of the cliff side fell over them, and she had a sinking feeling in her chest that she would not be able to keep up this pace for very long. Her competition was fast, and she knew that he could easily win this race if she didn’t think fast. The climb up the hill made her shins and thighs ache, Olivia gritted her teeth together with her eyes scanning for any sign of advantage. They reached the top of the hill, and got an spectacular view of the valley below. She sadly didn’t have time to spend admiring it all, and her eyes fixated on the few buildings that were up here.

More importantly the pulley system attached to the top of the house. Her heart shivered at the thought of the height of the cliff, nearly a fifty foot drop, but something in her spurred her off the path, earning a weird look from the thief. She climbed the side of the building in haste, and her foot slipping, but she caught herself. She pulled herself up on the rooftop, and unhooked her bag from around her shoulder. She leapt forward wrapping it around the ropes after checking their tautness and leaped off the roof without allowing herself given another thought. If she thought about it then she wouldn’t be able to do it. The world swirled around her in a mess of colors and her stomach flew up into the back of her throat, her heart felt like it had stopped in her chest.

There was something that unfurled inside of her. A burst of freedom so sweet that it overrode the pungent taste of fear that coated her tongue and her heart began to beat anew. The ground approached quickly, flying up at her and she released her handmade zip line to drop into the water below. Her body plunged beneath the surface, and she kicked towards the surface. A ragged gasp tore through her when she broke through the water world, and with a short swim, she got on solid ground. She heard the thief’s surprised laughter and Olivia looked over her shoulder to see the thief running down the hill. Rising on her shaky legs, she resumed her running with great effort down around the farm lands, startling the workers who looked in confusion at the soaking wet person running from nothing.

“Only the wicked run from nothing!” One onlooker proclaimed loudly, but Olivia didn’t care. The town was within arms-reach. With each sprint the town drew closer and closer, and as soon as her foot hit the edge of the town, she threw her hands up and let out an elated yell, “Yes!”

Olivia had won, though she did wonder if the thief would honor the agreement given her colorful way down the cliffs. She leaned over and took in deep, breaths trying to sooth her burning legs. Her feet stumbled, her legs literally feeling like jello. She really needed to work more on her stamina. “Did you see me?” She asked Ciana, loudly.
“You look like a drowned rat,” Ciana laughed.

She probably did, but it did not dull the satisfaction humming through her veins. Her stomach pitched when she thought about the drop down the cliff she did, but she had to remind herself that she was safely on solid land. She straightened her posture when her competition approached her, but judging by the big smile on his face there were no hard feelings for her burst of ingenuity.

“I cannot be mad,” D'Angelo said, as he handed over the money. “Ingenious such as that should be rewarded. It was a good race, mi amico.”

“Indeed it was,” Livvy nodded, shaking his hand. Though she was going to hold off on future racing, the way it had left her muscles felt like they would ooze right off the bone into a pile of mush. She spoke a little bit to D’Angelo further, and he told her that he could always be found in Marcialla. She stored that information away, and they parted ways with the thief. The bistro was noisy, but warm and comforting. They had gotten a seat in the corner, and Olivia thanked their server when she brought them their drinks. Olivia slid the courtesan her drink, and watched Ciana glared at a couple of men eyeing her up. The courtesan pulled out her knife and cleaned her underneath her fingernails. The men got the point and turned away.

“Pigs,” Ciana muttered.

“Hey now,” Livvy stated offended, “don't say that.” Upon Ciana's incredulously look, she added with a broad smirk, “You'll offend the pigs.”

Ciana gave a small laugh before it withered away, and she looked down into her drink. “I wish we were already in Florence. I hate small town idiots,” Ciana muttered, darkly.

“It could be worse,” Livvy told Ciana, before sipping her drink. Her faces muscle clenched as the sour taste washed into her mouth and she set the cup of foul liquid aside with a wrinkle of her nose. It was official. She hated 1500th century food. If she was going to get any decent meals, she was going to have to cook for herself. Livvy started picking at the chicken in front of her. “We could be broke and have to sleep on top of a roof.”

“Who in their right mind would sleep upon a roof?” Ciana gave a snort.

“Hey now,” Livvy said, with a half-smile. “Don't knock it before you try it.”

“Perhaps,” the courtesan mused, “I should have stayed in Tuscany.”

“Then you wouldn't be here enjoying my company,” the Red Hood grinned.

“Enjoying isn't the word I would use.”

“That's okay. You'll eventually come to love my brand of insanity,” Livvy assured the courtesan, tossing a piece of the burnt chicken in her mouth. It was tough and hard to chew, but the herbs on the meat made it easier to swallow.

“CHEATING NO GOOD BASTARDO!” A woman's shriek cut over the noisy and rowdy bar. A ripple seemed to move through the crowd, and people were careful not to look the woman in the eye, especially the group of guards in the corner.

Her brows lifted to her hairline as she watched the woman march up to the bartender and demanded that he tell her everything he knew. When the man backed away out of her reach with his hands help up in surrender and a terrified look on his face, the woman growled out, “All you men are pigs! Pigs, I tell you!”
“Oh, look Ciana. There is a new friend for you,” Olivia whispered, gesturing over to the woman with a slight grin.

The courtesan didn’t look amused. “I try to stay away from women scorned.”

“Why?” Upon the dry look she received, Livvy held up her hand. “Never mind. I got it. I was a bit slow on the take up, but I got it.”

Ciana shook her head slowly. “Your words…are so strange.”

“Yes…what of it?” Livvy questioned, trying to appear nonchalant, but a ball of nerves and anxiety twisted in her stomach as well as a longer and need to tell someone her story. However, she bit her tongue. She didn’t want to send one of her two friends, running thinking she was an insane psycho.

“Nothing.” The courtesan shook her head. “You wouldn’t be you if you didn’t talk funny.”

Olivia wondered if she should be offended, or not.

“Damn that bastard. Cheating on me again,” the scorned lady hissed, underneath her breath. She was a fairly young woman, maybe in her mid-twenties yet stress had already settled lines into her face. “And the rest of you, bloody cowards. No good men left to stand up for decency and morals and willing to beat my pig of a husband.”

Livvy felt a twinge of pity. It was worst kind of pain to have someone swear love and devotion, only to break it at every opportunity. She didn’t know the full scope of that pain, but she knew enough.

“Was going to even pay to have the bastard's face beat in.”

Olivia perked up, slight at that.

Ciana shot her a look. “Never mess with a woman scorned. It never ends well.”

“I could be careful.”

“I've seen your version of careful and frankly I am not impressed.”

Livvy would have normally agreed, but let it float in one ear and out the other. Perhaps that race had left her feeling that fortune favored her, but coin was coin. She had no skill set for the time period, save for her thievery and that wasn’t exactly kosher. If opportunity to make good clean coin came around, she should seize them when they appeared. Less stealing she had to do, and less chance of being skewered by the guards. Draining the rest of her drink and fighting her gag relax, she rose from her seat. “I’ll be back shortly,” she told Ciana, who just looked at her like as if she measuring her casket.

Olivia approached the woman, hands clasped in front of her. “Good evening, Madame,” she spoke, in her “male” voice. She wasn’t sure why it seemed so convincing to everyone, but she wouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth. “I couldn’t help overhear your…predicament and wanted to offer my help.”

The angry woman whirled around, resembled more of a dragon with tongues of flames shooting out of her snout. Her lips parted with no doubt venomous words, but then she paused, her eyes focusing in on Olivia. She seemed baffled and shocked. “You are the Red Hood, yes?”

Olivia felt unease crawl across her skin. She had been recognized again, but she supposed the red cloak was a big give away. That paired with the new infamy she lived by, she supposed it was only
natural for the woman to ask such a thing. “Yes,” she said, then immediately regretted it. A calculated gleam entered the woman’s eyes, and she felt dread tap along her spine like the fingers of death. *In for a penny, in for a pound,* she thought, warily.

“Ah, Messer Hood, I’ve heard so many things,” the woman sighed, her demeanor changed in an instant. She had gone from a scowling, bitter woman to a blushing, young lady in the blink of an eye.

Olivia wondered how anyone managed to make themselves blush, and also cursed the rumors that Ciana started. She was about seventy-six percent sure that the jilted woman was flirting with her, and had a feeling that her supposed “amorous” reputation was about to bite her on the ass. “I can imagine.”

The woman stepped forward, a coy smile on her lips. “I would appreciate any help you have to offer, and I am willing to pay any price.”

“Coin will do just fine,” Olivia clarified, swallowing down a nervous giggle. She prayed that this woman would make no advances on her because that would become awkward. For one, Livvy wasn’t attracted to women like that. Though she lacked a full blown sexual experience due to certain phobias, she had learned enough to know she preferred the hardness of a male body to the softness of a woman’s. Secondly, if it came out that she lack certain appendages that the Red Hood was supposed to have then things could get sour quickly. All it would take was a wrong grope or squeeze to find that she didn’t exactly the right equipment between her legs to be the licentious seducer that stories said stole women’s virtue and more.

*I should have taken Ciana’s advice.*

The Auditore household sat at the long mahogany table, with warm food spread out across it and chatted amicably between one another. Federico watched Petuccio speak to their father, his voice low and still weak from his latest bout with sickness. His color had improved though, and he was extremely thankful for that. Claudia teased Ezio about his beloved Cristina. The Vespucci woman had stolen Ezio’s senses, and their parents were confident given enough time that it could become a good match. Federico would have to help guide his brother; he was horrible at trying to woo a woman. Lifting his spoon to his lips, Federico halted when Annetta came running in with a letter in hand.

Giovanni looked equal parts surprised and worried. “A letter? At this hour?”

“It just arrived,” Annetta replied, with a small nod. “It's for you, Ser Federico.”

There was a flicker through his dark eyes, and he reached out to accept the letter from Annetta. He felt his family’s curiosity press in on him, and he sent a quick smile at Annetta. “Thank you.”

She blushed, prettily before she left the room.

“Aren’t you going to open it?” Claudia asked, unable to curb her curiosity any longer.

“Claudia,” Maria admonished her daughter.

“Oh, come now, mother,” Ezio grinned, broadly. “You are just as curious as we are to know who would be sending Federico letters at this hour.”

Federico glanced at his father for permission. When Giovanni inclined his head, the eldest Auditore child used his knife to slice open the envelope and retrieve the parchment that lay within. He unfolded it, and immediately recognized the strange bubbly script as Olivia’s. His eyes slightly
widened, and he sat forward, reading the short letter intently. She wrote about the dangerous climate in San Gimignano and that after much struggle, she had chosen to leave the city. Seeing how Firenze was only a few days travel depending on way of transportation, Olivia implied that this was her chosen destination.

She ended the letter with three simple words: *See you soon.*

Federico couldn’t fight the grin on his face. All of the personality that he had seen beneath the wary and skittish surface for the most part of their interactions in Tuscany, bled through her words written on the page. Her quirky description of all that had transpired in San Gimignano to her swearing that she saw the Red Hood—“a crazy man swinging about rooftops, likely to break his neck”, she ranted in her letter—to her complaints on traveling. He could practically see her vexed expression, the way she spoke with her hands and scathing tone in her voice through it all.

“Whose it from, Federico?” Maria inquired, while Giovanni was gauging his son's expression.

Federico jolted. He had completely forgotten about his family, to his shame. “It’s nothing,” he cleared his throat. “Just a small message from a friend.”

“A friend, hmm?” Ezio smirked, an eyebrow arched. He had a twinkle in his golden eyes, and he shared a mischievous look with Claudia. “Could it be your mysterious woman you've been sneaking letters off to?”

“Mysterious woman?” Maria asked, her dark eyes met her husband's who looked equally as amused as she did. “You have not told us that you have found a female of interest, Federico.”

Federico blushed though he'd deny it later, at the teasing. “She’s just a friend. There’s nothing to tell,” he shrugged, setting the letter down by his plate. He feigned nonchalantly while picking at his food.

“A friend you are constantly writing too,” Claudia decided to chime in. “Everywhere I go in the house, Federico has a paper and quill in hand.”

“Bah!” Federico flicked a piece of his food at his sister who gave a screech of outrage. Petuccio giggled behind his hand, while tossing a piece spinach at Ezio. Ezio's mouth dropped open, and then he grinned, a hand shooting out tickling Petuccio's side.

“Alright! Alright,” Giovanni held up his hands and instantly everyone quelled. There was no anger on his face, instead a great love and fondness glowed on his features. “None of that at the table. And Federico,” he garnered his son's attention. “I look forward to meeting this friend of yours.”

Federico stilled, for all of a second. “Of course, Padre. I’m sure she’d be delighted to meet you,” he stated, without batting an eye. If his father ever put together that the woman he wanted Federico to find and presumed had died, was his mysterious friend…he did not look forward to his father's reaction.

“She must be quite something to gain you attention brother,” Ezio shot him a grin.

Federico just smirked. “Don’t even think of it, Ezio. She would eat you alive.”

With no small amount of reservation, Olivia trailed after the woman to her enclosed garden. The bartender was convinced with a glare—the deadly glare that put the fear of God into a person, she had inherited from her father—and a few curt, cold words to disclose the information he had known. It also summed up why she hated small towns. Everyone knew everyone else’s business, and not in
the fun way that the television show Cheers made it seem.

“My husband thinks he can get away with doing this to me. Well, he is in for a surprise now, isn’t he?” The woman ranted, underneath her breath.

Livvy hesitated, wondering if the woman was looking for some kind of reassurance. Instead, she felt it best to stay silent. She had the strangest feeling that she was about to be in over her head, and cursed the untouchable high that she had been left with after the race with D’Angelo. *Gotten too big for my britches*, she thought, swallowing a hefty sigh.

“We are here,” the woman gestured to the garden, a fierce scowl on her features. There were moans and the sound of flesh slapping against flesh that left no illusions of what was happening. “Time to see what puttana he has been consorting with.”

Olivia blinked. “No, I think that I should go alone…”

Her protest fell on deaf ears. The woman marched into the enclosed garden, and a swear word dropped from the Red Hood’s mouth. She hurried after the woman, hoping to prevent the situation from escalating any more than was necessary. She entered the garden, and recoiled back at the sight of the half-naked man thrusting upward into woman whose skirt was hiked up around her waist. That was more than she needed to see, and she was pretty sure the image was going to branded on her corneas. She shuddered, her hand blindly reaching for the woman to drag her back out of the gardens before it was too late.

The wife had other ideas.

“Bastardo!” The wife roared.

The man and his mistress jumped apart.

Olivia gagged, looking away from the sight. This was more than she signed up for. The games never depicted these illicit affairs so graphically. Why could real life mimic that in this instance? When she got back to the tavern, she was buying more of the horrid alcohol to block this from her memory. Her eyes then looked at the armor that sat on the ground beside the cheating man and his mistress. *Oh, shit. That’s a Captain’s armor,* the thought rushed through her and her eyes flickered back towards the man, more wary than before.

*That would have been nice of her to mention before now.*

“What the hell is this?” The Captain demanded, not even bothering to pull up his pants. He didn’t even attempt to hide the fact that he had been basically screwing his mistress from his wife, and glared at her with annoyance.

“Payback.” his wife snapped, venomously. “You thought you were the only one with a lover? Where do I think I’ve been sneaking off into the middle of the night?” The wife sent a scathing look at the mistress. “What is your puttana compared to my Red Hood?”

Olivia felt her eyes close in despair, and she could practically hear Ciana telling her, “*I told you so.*” There was a tightening sensation around her neck, like a noose, and if the Captain has his way, it would be a literally one if his rage was anything to go by. “This was not in the job description,” Olivia hissed, darkly.

The woman blatantly ignored her ire, and flung into Olivia’s arm. The Red Hood caught her, and barely moved her to the side to avoid a slobbery, wet kiss on the lips. Instead, it landed on her neck and grossed the thief out. She didn’t like touching all that much, and having someone cross a clear boundary made her blood heat up with irritation. She tried to shove the clingy woman away, when a
bellow echoed into the night. The woman immediately broke away from Livvy, and just in the nick of time for the Red Hood to catch a fist to the face. Her teeth rattled in her jaw, and she reeled backwards a couple of steps. Blood dripped down out of her nose, and she reached up to touch her face in mild shock. *Shit, shit. Not part of the plan. Not part of the plan,* she thought, this time dodging the punch.

The Captain snarled, redoubling his efforts and tried again. Livvy growled, jumping back as his fist contacted with her shoulder so hard that it popped. “Okay, I'm going to give you one warning—” He tried to hit her again. “No second chances,” she snapped and with all the strength she could muster up, she kicked him right between the legs. It was his fault, Olivia decided as she watched him fall to the ground with a loud squeal of pain. He didn’t put his pants back on, and wouldn’t stop attacking despite her attempts to dissuade him.

The wife and mistress gave a cry of despair at the manner of the Red Hood’s attack. The rogue didn’t understand why. It wasn’t that impressive in size, and she knew that thanks to the internet and movies. The mistress and the wife ran to the man's aid. Livvy caught the wife by the arm, and stopped her. “My pay?”

“You'll get no florins from me, fiend,” the wife snapped.

“And here I thought we were going to run away together,” the Red Hood rolled her eyes before looking back at the Captain. “That's what you get for messing with the Red Hood.” Then she walked out of the enclosed garden, and then came to a halt. There was a crowd of people, just standing there and waiting. Whether they had come to see the outcome of the fight or to watch the mistress and Captain get it on, she didn't really know. And really didn't want to.

“Seriously, people? Get a life, or go get laid!” She barked out, vehemently. She took out the white hot frustration coiled in her gut on them. She marched through the throng of crowd that dispersed, a trail of whispers floating behind her. She shoved the coin purse that she nicked off the Captain’s wife into her satchel on her hip. “And here I thought I was going to make an honest florin.”

It took her only a couple of minutes to return to the tavern. Her skin prickled and her stomach rolled, if she had been a cat then her tail would have between flicking back and forth with an ill-tempered. The courtesan smiled, knowingly when Olivia approached the table. “Judging from you sour expression, I say things went not as well as you planned.”

“No,” Olivia sighed. “It didn’t. You were right. I was an idiot.”

The Red Hood disclosed the tale and Ciana laughed so hard, she had tears in her eyes. “Oh, hehe, oh, you poor, dumb idiota,” the courtesan wiped her eyes on the back of her hand.

Livvy rolled her eyes, but couldn’t deny it. It had been stupid and impulsive. Suddenly, the mood of the tavern seemed to change at the drop of a dime. The air grew taut, and the talking ceased all together. Craning her head over her shoulder, Olivia felt her eyes widened when a group of guards walked into the inn. “Oh, ain’t this a bag of dicks? I had a feeling that my beat up the cheatin' husband thing would reach a whole new level of backfire. It seems my fears were well founded.”

“What does that mean?” Ciana inquired slowly, her eyes darting from Livvy to the group of guards.

“The wife's husband…may have been a guard,” the Red Hood answered slowly, pulling her hood down farther to hide her face.

“A guard?” Ciana hissed.
A guiltily grin made its way onto Livvy's face, as she amended, “A Captain.”

“A Captain?” Ciana said, in a strangled scream. “Are you mad? What were you thinking?”

“I didn’t know until I caught with his pants down,” Olivia defended. “Literally,” she added, her teeth gnashed together. She saw the guards fan out, and start to search for someone. That someone was her, of that she had little doubt. “Head to the door with our things. I’ll meet you out there, and prepare to run.”

“I am not just leaving you!” Ciana glared.

“Just trust me and go!” Olivia grabbed a booze bottle from the floor, twisting in nervously in her hands. “Don’t worry. I’ve got this.”

“Just go!” Livvy grabbed a booze bottle from the floor and said, “Don’t worry…I’ve got this.”

The guard said, “Hey, you there!”

Livvy waited until she felt a person right behind her before she whirled around, a battle cry on her lips and slammed the bottle on their head. She then froze, her eyes widening. Not only did the bottle not break, the person she assaulted did not drop to the ground, out cold.

And to make matters worse, the man she had assaulted wasn’t even a guard. The man merely gripped his head in pain before shaking it off. He rose to his tall height, like a giant towering over the Red Hood by nearly a foot.

Blowing the strand of hair that hung down in her face, Olivia shot Ciana a smile that was strained. “I don’t have this,” she whispered, a nervous chuckle bubbling up her throat.

“Duck!” Ciana cried.

Olivia obeyed without hesitation. The man punched the wall not her, and she rushed away from his reach before he could recover. She grabbed her bag from her seat, slinging it over her shoulder before she grabbed Ciana by the hand, tugging her away from the enraged man. “Plan…plan…” the Red Hood whispered, as if one would just fall out of the sky. She bumped into a nearby table, and her hand ended up in someone’s food.

“What are you doing?” Ciana asked, eyes bugling out of her skull.

Livvy however did not heed and shoved her hand into the bowl. “What are you doing?” Ciana hissed.

“Being creative!” She said, launching the thick stew in her hand at the enraged man’s face. The man stumbled back, shocked, and knocked into a nearby table. It was a like domino effect, the chaos just spread out through the occupants in the tavern. Food went flying as well as a few punches, and the guards quickly tried to contain it. Olivia led Ciana through the chaos in an effort to escape. When her hand fell on the door, it was wrenched open and the Red Hood groaned, “Ah, hell, not you again!”

“You! É figlio di una cagna,” the Captain, this time clothed, charged and Livvy noted with amusement that he was limping. “You defiled my wife!” He pulled out his knife.
“To be fair,” Livvy held up her hands in mock surrender and figured she was already in a boat load of trouble so why not go for the gold, “she did throw herself at me, quite eagerly as you well remember—”

“RAAWH!” The bellow left the man, and he raised his blade to strike her, but before he could even bring it down, she kneed him right where the sun didn’t shine. He made a noise, something like a scream and choking sound. The Red Hood glanced down at the Captain who was on his knees, his face blanched of all color and his eyes glaring daggers up at the thief. “Stupid and predictable is no way to live life,” she told the Captain, with a patronizing tone.

“Red Hood!” Ciana screamed, and Livvy found herself being hauled off the ground then thrown into the air before landing onto a table, knocking it over. She managed to stumble to her feet and she turned facing the man she accidentally knock on the head with the bottle.

“I don’t suppose sorry would mean anything to you?” Livvy asked, hopefully. The man snapped something in a language she didn’t understand and she said, “I don't speech French.”

“Je vais briser tous les os de votre corps,” the man snapped getting closer, shoving people out of his way.

“This is going to suck.” Livvy raised her fists, prepared to not go down with a fight. It was brutal fist fight. Her knuckles stung with each punch she landed on his face, or sides. His fists made her ribcage ache and feel like it shattered with one harsh punch to the gut. She was outmatched in strength here, and really no good way out with all the people fighting around her.

The man was about to charge her when a bottle shattered over his head, and he stood there, looking absolutely bewildered before dropping to the ground like a sack of potatoes. Behind him with a broken bottle in hand, stood Ciana who looked very proud and smug. “Not that's how you bust a bottle over someone's head.”

“You must teach me your ways, maestro,” Livvy grinned, visibly relieved.

Ciana smirked, but before she could reply, a tiny man sailed through the air between them, landing on the wooden floor hard.

“Let's go,” the courtesan pointed towards the door.

“Right behind ya.”

With a horse, the two left the tiny town of Marcialla behind him them with haste. The traces of light had disappeared completely out of the sky, leaving only the stars and moon. The soft chirps of crickets’ melody surrounded them, and even the hoot of an owl could be heard in the quiet of the night.

“I had been looking forward to sleep,” Ciana complained, poking Olivia in the spine with her bony finger. The horse trotted along, happily content after the apple Olivia had fed it. “And now because of you we got kicked out of the village.”

“We left. They didn’t get a chance to kick us out. Besides, how was I to know that woman’s husband would turn out to be a Captain? And a bar fight was better than being strung up and executed by guards or worse,” Olivia reasoned, trying to find the silver lining in the mess that she had made. “It wasn’t a total loss. We got a horse, after all.”

“And you got a busted up and battered, too,” Ciana added, dryly.
Said busted face and cheek throbbed, and Livvy had yet to rid of the copper tasted in her mouth. Not mention she was pretty sure she bruised her ribs when she slammed into that table, and from the French guy’s fists. It didn’t dampen the grin that stretched across her features. “I think a busted up a little compared to the fact that asshole will be singing soprano for the rest of his life means, I win!”

Ciana rolled her eyes, looking upward for some divine answers. None came. “Having the horse does mean we won’t have to walk all the way to Firenze,” the courtesan said, and then frowned. “Where are we going to stop to sleep?”

Olivia shifted in the saddle. “We aren’t.”

“Why not?”

“I barely got up on this horse. I don’t want to break my neck getting down without help.” Livvy then added, “And I may have…stolen it rather than got it so even if we were to stop somewhere we could stay put for long. I’d rather not risk a patrol coming across us. With the mess I made, something tells me the guards aren’t too happy with the Red Hood right now.”

“Ugh…” Ciana made a disgusted noise.

The night drew onward. There was a brief stop by the stream, along the horse a moment’s rest. It took a bit of coaxing from Ciana, but she did actually get down off the horse without breaking her neck. Ciana had curled up by a rock, sleeping for a few moments while the horse grazed. Olivia ran her hand across the stead’s neck, gently and the horse leaned into the touch. “I always wanted a pony, even asked Santa Claus for one when I was five. It’s cliché, I know, but my life was a bit of a cliché in the beginning,” she confided to the horse whom she named Thor in her head. His long golden mane was beautiful, and he was far too stout and strong to be a farm animal. “Happy parents, the white picket fence, it was something right out of a 90s family comedy.”

Thor neighed, nipping at her fingers where she held an apple. She chuckled lightly, and unfurled her hand to allow him to eat the fruit. “And then it wasn’t perfect. Everything changed in the blink of eye. The house wasn’t a home anymore, and the people inside were no longer family, but strangers,” she whispered out, sadly. “Sometimes, it doesn’t feel like it was mine. It feels like it was someone else’s life, or a story that I heard. Then other times the memories come back, sharp and vivid. No way to escape them, so I do stupid stuff. Jump head first without looking, desperate for any feeling or chaos that will replace the one inside of my head.” The horse head butted her hand, as if chiding her. “I know, I know. It’s not a great coping mechanism, but it’s the only way I know.”

Olivia bit her lower lip, looking out across the landscape. She was caught between two forces inside of her. The past that she had buried that seemed to be dug up more and more with every passing day, and the path that lay in front of her. The only path that she could see for herself given this new world that she was now a part of, and she knew that being in Florence would be a step forward that she wouldn’t be able to take back. Livvy only hoped that it was the right thing to do.

In the end, that’s what anyone ever had.

Hope.

Destiny was a tapestry eons in the making, a well thought out a meticulous design started when the world and its people were new. Forces beyond the humankind’s ken took the strings out of their hands, and played with humanity like puppets to forge a better world. A brighter world where their previous one had not survived; every movement, every moment, every choice and piece of the game of destine had been plotted.
It was of divine design.

And now, a slip of a girl who was barely more than a child created waves that shook the fabric of this design. Each choice she made was like a frayed string, she kept pulling and pulling, unraveling the tapestry. It would fall apart, and fate would fall into mankind’s hands. It must not be allowed. The Exiled could not be allowed to continue its plan. Destiny must prevail, the stars must stay aligned, and no child should have the power to rewrite the world with her selfish desires.

The Exiled would have to be destroyed. And the plan to rid this world of such nuisance was already in motion.

Dawn’s splendor broke across the green tree tops and covered the plains in beams of golden light. The sky was blue with only a small crop of clouds in sight, and mercifully no guards had followed them. Olivia counted her blessings, and passed Ciana a pear when the courtesan awoke from her slumber. They had set out after two hours of rest, and Ciana had fallen back asleep, using Olivia’s shoulder as a pillow.

“Grazie,” the courtesan murmured, before biting into the fruit. “It occurs to me that you were quite prepared to leave San Gimignano. I know that it was the retaliation you feared from Salmoni’s death that made you ultimately leave, but something tells me that you had been planning it for a while.”

“That’s a fair assessment.”

“What is so important about Firenze?” Ciana asked.

“A lot of things really. I’ve always dreamed of going there, even as a child. I was enthralled with maps and books on distant places. Italy was a place that captured my heart and my imagination. Firenze was one of the cities that I had marked down and swore I would always travel to,” Olivia answered, honestly. They passed by farms and people who toiled in the fields to bring along the harvest. “I never dream that I would actually have that come true. I also have business in Florence, so travelling there is like killing two birds with one stone.”

“But where will you go? Where will you stay?” Ciana felt compelled to question. “I intend to head to Madame Paola’s bordello and seek employment there. I have heard that she is a good and fair woman who treats those in her employment well. But you…do you have a destination in mind?”

“Paola is a good woman, so you won’t suffer in her house.” Olivia frowned, delicately. She had many options to look through. She would find an inn, and stay there for as long coin allowed before she devised a plan for a more permanent residency. “I don’t know. I will figure it out as I go.” I’m good at that, she thought with a shrug. Shouts from down the road cause their horse to buck and shift on its hooves nervously. “What was that?”

“I…I think someone is being attacked,” Ciana said, pointing to the carriage just ahead of them on the past. It was so small, like a little dot in the distance.

Grey eyes narrowed at the carriage, and knowing that she couldn’t in good conscious ignore a person in need, she leapt down from the horse. Her legs buckled slightly in pain when her feet hit the ground, but she steadied herself. She passed her possessions to Ciana, who strapped them to the saddle. “Ride ahead. I will met you at Paola’s,” she promised.

“What about you?” Ciana looked worried.

“I’ll be fine,” Livvy replied, frowning. “Cut through the woods, don’t let them see you. And if they do, you don’t stop riding until you get to the gates and guards will be there to help.”
The courtesan appeared torn, but finally did as she was told. Olivia turned and sprinted towards the carriage. Her grey eyes assessed the situation in a split second; There were three men, dressed in ratty and torn clothing with cloths covering half of their faces. Obviously bandits, that were equipped with old knives. Culinary knives, and not ones made for battle. Either foolish or desperate, perhaps both. Two of the bandits forced one of their captives to the ground, and started to beat him in order to make their second captive compile with whatever demands they had.

“Hey, asshole!” Olivia shouted.

The third bandit whirled around and Livvy punched him. It was like out of those old westerns where the startled man literally spun in a circle after getting punched. What you didn't see was the hero shaking their hand wildly because it hurt! Her knuckles smarted with agony, the fragile bones in her hand gave a loud and unpleasant pop when her fist contacted with the man’s face. She should probably invest in some brass knuckles, or something similar. A hiss passed through clenched teeth when the other two turned to see what happened to their fallen friend.

“Hello?” She offered, wiggling her stinging fingers.

And all hell broke loose.

The other two bandits charged her, blades swinging wildly as they spat angry curses at her. She jumped back from the blade that would have sliced her gut open, and grabbed his wrist. She placed her fingers just so, and twisted sharply. His wrist gave a loud, disgusting pop. His bones frail by obvious lack of nourishment, confirming her suspicion that these were desperate men and while that made her feel guilty, it didn’t stop her from fighting back. With his knife dropped to the ground, she grabbed him by the back of his shirt and slammed his face right into the side of the carriage. He let out a shout of pain and crumbled to the ground, holding his face. Out of the corner of her eyes, she caught movement and pulled back. She gasped, as a blade nicked her neck.

Her hand reached up to her neck in shock. Luckily it hadn't been deep, but it had been enough to distract her. The man went to stab and she jumped throwing her hands up in defense. The blade slide straight through the palm of her hand, and the thousand—if not more—nerve endings in her hand sent a jolt of lava hot panic through her system. She wretched her hand off the blade, likely making it worse. Curling her good hand into a fist, she punched the man square in the nose. He cried out, dropping his knife to ground to hold his nose. Livvy then brought her knee straight into his stomach and he fell to the ground. She stepped forward, bringing her heel down with a loud crunch and the man stopped moving.

Olivia looked for the other two bandits, to make sure they hadn’t gotten to their feet and would attack her while she had her back turned. Instead, she found the two limping away as fast as they could. Livvy watched him for a long moment, until she was satisfied that he was really gone before turning to the man who was on the ground. “Are you alright, sir?” She asked, holding out her hand to him.

“Si, si. Thank you,” the man took her hand, and she helped off the ground. As soon as he stood on his own two feet, he brushed the dust off of his clothing before raising his gaze to her. Olivia was taken aback by his crystal clear blue eyes, for she had never seen such clear and intelligent eyes. There were intense and bright, like he could see into the world deeper than others. He was a youthful looking man perhaps in his mid-twenties, if she were to take a guess. He had a long prominent nose, paired with a boyish smile and chiseled cheekbones. He had light brown hair with strands of gold that hung loosely, and stopped just above his shoulders. Along his angled jawline was a big of scruff, but not quite just a beard. He had charcoal and paint smudges along the tips of his fingers, so she assumed that he was a painter.

“And you, sir?” Olivia looked to the painter’s companion.
“Si, I am well. Shaken, but better now with those bandits gone.”

Olivia nodded, and then inspected her hand. A twinge of pain pulsed through it, and it burned like fire when she wiggled her fingers. The cut had been clean through, with no broken bones. She, however, didn’t know if any damage had been done to the nerves. Most likely, and it was bleeding rather nastily. “I am glad that I could help. Is all of Italy so keyed up, or does something resembling peace exist somewhere in these lands?”

“Keyed up?” The painter asked, his head tilting to the side.

“Chaotic. Hectic,” Olivia explained, with a half-smile.

“Tis a most strange way you have of speaking,” the artist said with a small smile before holding out his hand. “Leonard Da Vinci, and this is my companion, Angiolo. We thank you for your help, Madonna.”

Her entire world froze at his introduction.

Leonardo da Vinci.

It was no secret she had a love affair for all things Italy, and the Renaissance era which had been the height of knowledge and growth, had made Italy the shining example that the rest of the world looked to during that time period. It heralded in painters, scholars and so much more. It was one of the reasons she fell so in love with the world that Ezio’s story was set in, and she had been a great admirer of the proclaimed “Renaissance Man” long before she ever played the Assassin Creed games. He had been brilliant, not only creating his own designs but built upon the foundation of older inventors, enhancing and improving upon the foundation laid by those who came before him. His ideals and morals were decades, if not more ahead of his time and she regarded him as one of the greatest people to ever have lived. Stormy eyes zoomed in on the man’s face with a shocking intensity. “You're...you're Leonardo Da Vinci...”

“Yes,” Leonardo blinked.

A slow smile blossomed on her face, eyes twinkling in a way that Albus Dumbledore would have envied. “You're Leonardo Da Vinci.”

“I'm sure that hasn't changed from a few minutes ago,” Angiolo pointed out, softly watching the woman bounce up and down on her heels clearly ecstatic over meeting the painter.

“You're the Leonardo Da Vinci! Man, you are awesome!” She announced loudly.

Leonardo blushed under the strangely worded compliment. He rubbed the back of his neck in a sheepish gesture and he said, with a light smile, “Thank you, signora, for your praise, but I'm not sure I deserve.”

“Oh, yes, you do,” Livvy assured, with a bright grin. How many people could say they've been to the past and meet Leonardo Freakin’ Da Vinci? “I'm...” She started, holding out her hand.

“The Red Hood,” Leonardo nodded. “I heard all kinds of stories about you though none of them said you were a woman.”

Olivia paused, a knot of worry trembled in her heart. She abandoned the handshake in order to adjust her hood, and conceal her features better. She wasn’t surprised that of all people, he would see through her charade. The man was a certified genius, after all. “Uh...I'd appreciate it if you kept that to yourself.”
“Of course, of course,” the artist nodded, not at all bothered by the request. If anything, he had a knowing look in his eyes as if he understood why she would want this to be kept secret. “The least we could do since you saved our lives.”

“Thank you,” she sighed, relived. Though she had just met him, she knew that Leonardo wouldn’t betray her trust and the inventor would not have chosen an assistant that would betray his. Perhaps it was easy to give him her loyalty. He had earned it when she lived through Ezio’s story, and admittedly her hero worship of him probably played a great factor as well. But there was also this feeling in her heart, an instant realization that this man would be one of her closest friends. She didn’t know why or how this feeling came over her, it just did. “May I escort you to your destination? Just in case,” she sent a look over her shoulder, warily.

“Thank you, signora. That would be much appreciated,” Angiolo answered, helping Leonardo onto the carriage. He offered a hand to Livvy, but she said she would walk along side. She tore a piece of her tunic off, and wrapped around her wounded hand.

“Where you are headed if you don’t mind my asking?” Livvy asked, politely making conversation as she secured the cloths with a tight knot. Her mother would be proud of her manners. Her father would admonish her for being so trusting.


“I make for there as well,” Livvy grinned.

“You look quite excited. Your first time in Florence?” The painter inquired.

“Yes. I hadn’t planned on coming to Italy.” Understatement of the century. “But I have found that it was a journey well worth it,” Livvy admitted, feeling there was no harm in the information. She wiggled her toes in her boots, her feet were starting to cramp. She needed shoes that were actually tailored to fit, and not two sizes too big.

“Why come to Italy?” Leonardo asked, curiously.

“Because there is something magical about it, isn’t there?” Olivia answered, and yet didn’t at the same time. “The people, the places, it holds this fire and passion within it. An eternal flame that beats onward no matter how many times it had nearly been stomped out, and I’m glad that I ended up here. It was always my dream, and I honestly don’t think if...certain circumstances hadn’t allowed it, that I would be here at all.”

Leonardo looked at her, sympathetically. “That's sad.”

“How so?” She turned her confused eyes on the artist.

“It is always sad when dreams never measure up.”

Livvy pondered this. “Perhaps it's the dreamer's fault.”

Leonardo nodded. “Indeed. Sometimes fear can quell even the most spirited of dreamers. Even myself, at times, am quelled by that fear.”

There was a long moment of silence. “I'm sorry,” Livvy suddenly apologized on a laugh. “I've made this too somber. My mind wonders sometimes.”

“Only those whose mind wonders can understand the profound meanings of life,” Leonardo told her, with a grin.
“Who said that?”

“Me,” the artist laughed.

Olivia did, too. His personality was infectious, and she swore to do what it took to endear herself to this man. He would be a friend well worth having, and she had seldom few friends as it was. Gaspare and Ciana were the only two people in all of Italy she had bonded with. There was Federico, too, but they hadn’t exactly become what she called friends yet. She hoped that the day came she could call Federico a full fledge friend, but only time would tell. “Thank you,” she smiled, beautifully at him. “It has been a long time since I’ve had someone, albeit someone I just met, to talk to.”

“It’s no problem. I can’t image that your…activities leaves time for friends,” Leonardo murmured, gently.

“No, it doesn’t. I have a few, but…” Olivia trailed off. It was startling how easily she opened up to Leonardo whereas she kept so much back from Ciana and Gaspare. She knew that when she built a friendship with Federico that he, too, would stay in the dark about certain things. Yet with Leonardo, Olivia felt the compulsion to tell him everything with no lie in sight. Perhaps, it was because she felt like she had known Leonardo for years. He wasn’t really a stranger to her, but more of an old friend.

As if sensing her train of thought, the artist stated, “Sometimes it is easier to unburden oneself with a stranger, than someone they know.”

But you’re not a stranger. Livvy bit her tongue for the comment would have been something she could not easily explained. “I’ve never thought it that way,” she commented, her tone soft and gentle.

“Not many do,” Leonardo said, with a chuckle. He tilted his head, observing her with a little frown upon his brow and his lips pursed in thought. “Your accent is very…unique. Where do you hail from, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Ameri…” She cut off, abruptly. Her cheeks went hot with mortification, and she looked away from the inventor as she tried to compose herself after such a slip up. The word “America” would mean nothing to him, but if he were to go searching for such a land, Olivia didn’t want to think what possible repercussion it could have. She didn’t know the intricacies of time travel, but she knew enough to know that even the smallest variation could have a big impact. “It’s very far away, and not well known. I doubt you’ve heard of it.”

“Can’t say I have,” Leonardo mused. “What is it like, if I may ask?”

Olivia knew that avoiding the subject would just seem more suspicious, so she chose her words with great care. She had to come up with an answer that was vague, but that would satisfy the man’s curiosity. He honestly reminded her a bit of a kitten, each new discovery or bit of knowledge dangling in front of him like a string of yarn. “It is a lot different than here, and yet in many ways the same. I guess the biggest different is the freedom and choices. Where I come from, everyone is to be treated equally, no one is more important than the other. Well, that is the way it is supposed to be, but it is not always so. Ignorance and hate make monsters out of humans, who’d rather focus on the differences as if they should divide us when those differences are beautiful, and should bind people closer together than ever. Until that kind of hatred cease to exist, I don’t think true understanding and peace will ever be found.”

“Such darkness has plagued humankind since the dawn of time. It is a battle that all must fight within themselves, feeding the hatred or holding tight to the good. In the end, people have to choose which side of them wins,” Leonardo commented, bowing his head with a sad little smile. “But what you
have said of your homeland, Ameri, sounds fascinating despite the obvious drawbacks. I would love to hear more if you are ever of a mind to speak more openly of it.”

So he had noticed her hesitance, and bless him, he hadn’t taken it to heart. Olivia felt her lips pulled into a big smile, part of her wondering what he’d do if she were to tell him the truth of her origins. It’d almost be worth it to see his reaction, but she dismissed the silly thought. “I think I would like that,” she replied.

“We are here,” Angiolo announced.

Olivia had been so enthralled with her conversation with Leonardo that she hadn’t even noticed that they had walked right through the gate and into Firenze. She felt her heart seize in her chest, and her breath caught tight in the back of her throat. Her grey eyes didn’t know what to look at first, trying to take everything in all at once. The city was more gorgeous in person, and any picture she had ever seen hadn’t even captured half of the beauty of Firenze. The morning sunlight bathed the city in light, leaving no room for shadows or darkness. The buildings were works of art, build with care and attention. Everything was eye-catching from rusty red rooftops, to the tall cathedral, to the people all walking around, greeting each other with smiles and polite conversation. A feeling welled in her chest, as if a piece of her that she didn't realize that she was even missing slid into place.

Leonardo got off the wagon, and stopped at her side. “Does it measure up to your dreams?” The inventor asked, grinning at the unabashed awe on her face.

“It is far more than any dream I could ever conjure,” Livvy whispered out, breathlessly. She hesitantly took a step forward as if she were afraid the city would disappear like it always had before in those dreams of hers. Disappeared right before she could make it real, and make it hers; she felt tears swarm her vision, and she didn’t care who saw it. This moment was profound, and one she would recall for the rest of her days. It was the first step on a long and obscure path where she did not know the destination, only the wish to protect and help save these characters—these people, who were very real and very dear to her heart.

Olivia took a deep breath, brushing the string that was bound around her finger and took another step forward. And then another followed, each step cementing the fact that there was no turning back. *I know that I can do this. I have to do this*, she thought, clenching a hand over her heart.

There was no other choice for her.

Chapter End Notes

End of Chapter

Author’s Note: I had to leave this chapter on a high note. It’s not often that a chapter will end on a good note, and not a harrowing cliff hanger or the like. *Olivia’s Fear Of Heights—This chapter overall is a bit filler, but actually does have a crucial moment for Olivia personally. In the last chapter, Olivia’s fear of heights and falling was revealed. As we know she will eventually be working alongside of the Assassins, this poses the problem: Can Olivia do a Leap of Faith? Will she need to? While she is not over her phobia, the fact that during the race when she dared to use the pulley system as a way
down to the cliffs and she felt more than just fear—but a freedom that she hadn’t felt in a long time, is a step in that direction. Is she likely to perform the feat again unless absolutely necessary? No, probably not. And also the race was a nice way to nod to the games.

NEXT CHAPTER PREVIEW: Something waits for Livvy in Florence. What could possible want to destroy Livvy and by what means will it get the job done?

References and Languages:
1.) Mi amico (Italian) My friend
2.) Cheers-Television show of the late eighties and early nineties. Theme song 'Everybody Knows My Name'
3.) É figlio di una cagna (Italian) You son of a Bitch
4.) Je vais briser tous les os de votre corps (French) I will break every bone in your body.

FYI, I use Google Translate for most of my translations, so if anything is amiss then let me know. Thank you
CHAPTER NINE

‘The Pieces Come Together…Then Fall Apart’

Firenze, Italy

November 29th, 1474

Olivia parted ways with Leonardo, but not before the artist extracted a promise that she would come visit him. It left her grinning like a madwoman, and put a spring in her step for the rest of the day. She was in such a cheerful mood that Ciana had been certain that she was up to no good. (“I have never known anyone so prone to life threatening idiocy until I met you,” the courtesan had told her.) It was mind boggling to her that it had only been five days since then. Every day she woke up to Firenze’s surrounding walls, her heart trembled in excitement and fear. Madame Paola accepted Ciana into her bordello, and Olivia had narrowly missed meeting the woman herself. Anxiety had twisted in her gut because even though she was here, she just wasn’t ready to meet any of the Brotherhood. She would have been a fretful mess; alright, more of a mess than she already was. She spent her days roaming across the rooftops, learning the layout of the city and finding some good places to set up some caches to store supplies and weapons.

She had a found a house that was empty on the outskirts of the city, and had been doing some surveillance on it to make sure no one came and went. It might be possible safe house down the road. She had been forced to purchase more cloaks, of the none red variety. The point of blending in is to not stick out like a sore thumb, and dressing up like the Red Hood 24/7 would draw some unwanted attention. And with her hair growing out, it was harder to pass as a man. She had gotten into a fight with some guards who shouted obscenities for daring to dress as man. It was apparently consider uncouth and disgusting to do so during this time period. Though she managed to take down two and escape the third, she had a bruise on her left cheek to match the one of her right. Olivia rolled her shoulders to alleviate the tension; her grey eyes stared at the world around her.

It was up here that she could really see the difference between her time and this one. The women, even the noble ones, were obedient to their husbands or males in general. Even the courtesans, were demure to a point in presences of males. The majority of the people were content with their lives, not seeing how little rights they had compared to the upper crust. The freedom and rights from her time
was something she had never to question through her life, and part of her shudders wondering how different of a person she would have been if she had been restricted by clever chains as the crowd below. Also the ways things worked, social etiquette, like the cost of things or how to even find food or make food similar like the kind she had been used to, it just all lost on her and confused her. She wished she could say that she was getting used to this, but that would have been a lie.

Not to mention, she really wanted to buy a house. She knew women could own property though it was rare. Like really, really rare. But where would she even begin? It was not like she had a guide to the 1500th century. She supposed she could ask Ciana, the courtesan had owned a house back in San Gimignano so she might know the intricacies of home owning in this time period. Putting that into the back of her mind, Olivia looked for her victim…she meant to say, new friend who should be out and about. She had been stalking the area surrounding the Palazzo Strozzi, more better known here and now as the home in which the Auditore family resided.

Her spine straightened when her eyes caught a familiar head of hair, and if she had been a cat her tail would have started twitching madly. A broad grin stretched across her face, and she twirled the apple between her dexterous fingers. *I’m going to have too much fun with this,* she thought, chuckling to herself.

Federico Auditore was strolling down the street, with a languid gait and all too smug pleased look on his face. Her teeth sank into her lower lip, having to bite back the laughter that bubbled in her throat. She held out the apple, and waited until the last possible second before she released it. The dumbfounded look on Federico’s face when he was struck right on top of his head was priceless. He gaped at the apple that rolled around his feet before coming to a halt right beside his boot. “*Che diavolo*(1)?” He demanded, his voice sharp and shock.

“I owed you an apple,” Olivia smiled, beatifically when his gaze rose skyward. She imagined she looked as wild as the Cheshire Cat with the smile that split her face so greatly that her cheeks hurt. Her legs swung to and fro from where she sat on the edge of the roof, and she waited his response.

“You…you…” Federico looked at her through narrowed eyes. “Are late.”

Olivia blinked, her smile slipped just a fraction. “Not what I’d thought you’d say.” Her eyebrow then ticked up in annoyance, as she slipped down and tugged on her blue hood. Carefully, she dropped over the edge of the rooftop and scaled down. Her feet hit the ground with a light clap, and turned to him with her hands on her hips. “And what do mean by late?”

“Do you not recall what you wrote in your letter? I believe you ended it with a simple: *See You Soon,*” Federico stated, with an eyebrow arched. “It’s been over a week.”

“Soon doesn’t mean a specific time,” she sniffed, haughtily.

“Soon means soon, which you are not,” he smirked. “Therefore you are late.”

“You know, I’m beginning to remember why I had a headache during that period you were in Tuscany, it’s all becoming clear to me now…you are here my headache!” Olivia chuckled, sarcastically.

“Headache?” It didn’t take a genius to figure out the strange term, and he quipped, “I assure you that the feeling is very mutual.”

A laugh burst out of her lips. “Are you saying you don’t enjoy my company?” She asked, with an over dramatically gasp.
He rolled his eyes. “There are others company I prefer.”

“Ah, the kind you pay for.”

“Courtesans are more charming,” Federico stated, lips twitched into a smirk.

“Of course they are. You pay them, if you paid me…” She trailed off, her mouth shut with a clack. Embarrassment burned white-hot in her cheeks, and felt like she swallowed her tongue.

“You were saying?” There was that dimple on the right side of his mouth as his smirk broadened.

“That is not what I meant,” she said, her voice strangled by mortification.

“Of course not,” Federico chuckled, taking delight in her torment. “I dare say we do not know each other well enough for you to make such offers. That, of course, can be remedied.”

“I hope you mean that in a non-biblical sense,” Olivia said, a dry humor glittered in her eyes. “I’m not that easy, just so you know.”

“I will be sure to make note of it. You proposed some kind of cautious friendship or did I misconstrue your letter?” Federico asked, inquisitively.

“You didn’t misconstrue the letter.” She hadn’t felt so nervous about making friends since she had been younger, and she held out her hand, glad to report that it did not shake. “Olivia Steel,” she introduced herself, with the best smile she could do, “it is nice to meet you and start over.”

She could tell he was looked her over, trying to find a hint of deceit beneath her smile. Her heart gave a thump of relief when he reached out, clasping her hand into his. “Federico Auditore, at your service, bella,” he replied, and then brought her hand up to his lips to place a kiss along the back of her knuckles. He released her hand a moment later with a self-satisfied grin danced on his lips. “So, how are you enjoying the beautiful city of Firenze?”

Olivia felt her mouth drop in shock, not expecting the kiss to her hand. Chivalry was a lost art form, she decided and one that her time could do with a good revival of it. “So far I am very impressed,” she replied, once she gathered her wits about her.

“Any interested at seeing it from a different angle?” Federico asked.

“And just what is your idea of a different angle?” She studied him, warily.

He let out a bark of laughter, and then gestured for her to follow him. She watched him start to climb up the nearby building with a nimbleness that came to him with such ease that it made her envious. There was a foreboding knot in her gut, but unable to resist the challenge, she followed anyways. He helped her with a hand over the edge onto the rooftop before he darted off, as fast as lightning. “Follow me!” He shouted, over his shoulder at her.

“Well, wait up then!” Livvy scolded, sprinting after him.

He didn’t. Instead, his laughter filled the air and he sprinted faster, forcing Olivia to speed up in order to catch up with him. Instead of annoyance, it made her feel light-hearted, calling back memories of childhood innocence where there was nothing but laughter and play. She couldn’t fight the grin on her face, even if she had tried. When he shot her a stunned look when she reached his side just made her day.

He turned to the left, and Olivia dutifully followed. The people down below were none the wiser,
even as they rushed down a stack of crates to drop back down onto the street. Federico sent her a look, “I’m surprised you managed to keep up.”

Olivia blew the strands of hair out of her face, and shot him a mirth-filled glance. “If I were not a polite person I’d tell you were you could stuff that surprise at,” she said, with a breathless laugh.

Federico chortled. “I can see your sharp tongue will always be a source of amusement though I do hope you will find other targets to test it on besides myself.”

“Well—”

“Well, well, look who it is,” the person said, a familiar and unpleasant voice cut Olivia off before she could give Federico a proper retort. It belonged to a small, thin and nasty looking individual. His face was made ugly by the sneer and superior attitude he evoked; there no mistaken that he was a wholly unpleasant person, someone that no one wanted to meet in a dark alleyway. A familiarity tugged at Livvy’s mind, and she studied the new comer with a wary scrutiny.

Federico looked upon the newcomer with nothing short of disdain. “What are you doing out? I thought your father learned to put on a leash so you didn’t inflict your presence on the populace?” He commented, his eyes hard and narrowed into a vicious glare.

The man’s face reddened with rage. “I’m not the one runs around the streets, acting no better than dogs consorting with thieves and whores. You Auditore scum sully Firenze with your ways, making a mockery of noble society.”

A light bulb with off in her head. “You are Vieri De Pazzi.”

“No, you’ve heard of me, have you?” Vieri looked smug.

“Yes. I’ve heard of you. Can’t say I’m impressed,” Olivia replied, nose wrinkled with distaste.

For a split second, Vieri went pale and then just as sudden, his entire face went purple. His eyes glittered maliciously, and he hissed, between clenched teeth, “And what does your opinion matter, che cazzate(you stupid shit)?”

“If you know what is good for you,” Federico snapped, taking a step in front of Olivia to shield from Vieri’s gaze, “will not speak to her like that again, understand?”

“Her?” That peaked Vieri’s interest, and Olivia held back a shudder of revulsion when his eyes swept over her body with a little too much concentration. “A woman dressed a man? How revolting! Can you Auditore sink no lower?”

Olivia felt her fist curl, wanting to punch him right in the face.

“Unless you want a beating, Vieri,” Federico said, seeming to be of a similar mind to her own, “you will leave now and quickly.”

“You shouldn’t make threats, Federico. Didn’t your father teach you to respect your betters?” Vieri smirked.

“When he finds some he will,” Livvy retorted, without hesitation.

Federico went to laugh when his head snapped towards her, his eyes locked on something just beyond her shoulder. “Look out!” Was all the warning he got out, and Olivia immediately obeyed. A fist sailed right over her head, just where she had been standing a second before. She twisted around,
and elbowed the man in the stomach. Apparently, Vieri had friends who decided to defend his honor.

Federico was rushed by another man, and he grabbed him in a headlock. Whirling him around, Federico swung him straight into some scaffolding. The man’s head hit square against the board, splintering it and he groaned, sinking weakly to his knees. A split second later, the scaffolding fell down on top of him. “Oooh,” Federico hissed, a hint of pity in his eyes, “that had to hurt.”

Someone grabbed her by the back of her hood, and jerked her backwards. Her feet slipped out of from underneath her, and she was sprawled on the ground looking up at Vieri. His hand wrapped around her throat, tight and constricting all air that flowed inward; her fingers clawed at his hands, and she gritted her teeth in anger. Striking out in a cat-like manner, she scratched the man across his face. He gasped in pain and his grip slackened, backing away in shock. Olivia got to her feet, and kicked Vieri in the gut for good measure. She backpedaled until she was at Federico’s side and rubbed her throat gingerly.

“Not bad,” Federico commented.

Livvy smirked opening her mouth, when her eyes widened in panic. “Federico, behind you!”

Federico whirled around, catching Vieri trying to clobber him in the back with a piece of scaffolding. His hand shot up, catching it, a grimace of pain filter across his face before he twisted the piece of wood out of Vieri’s hands. He then brought his leg up, planting it on Vieri’s chest and kicking him hard. The De Pazzi heir slammed backwards into the wall with a painful force. Livvy stuck close to Federico’s side as Vieri’s men with groans and got up off the ground. However, they did not stick around to continue the fight and opted to flee. Olivia pitied them because Vieri would not be kind for such a slight.

Vieri rose up and charged them, and Livvy slid out her dagger. She sliced at him, but did not intend to inflict a wound. To harm Vieri now would bring trouble where it could not be afforded at this current time, so Olivia decided humiliation would serve just as well. Her knife cut through the belt that held his trouser tight about his waist, and in the next moment Vieri was scrambling to pull his pants back up from around his ankles. “Huh. It really is a small world after all,” Olivia commented, eyes flickered towards Federico who struggled to breathe through his peals of laughter.

“You will pay for this!” Vieri shouted.

“You and what army?” Federico chuckled, pointing at his fleeing companions.

Vieri’s eyes widened as he realized he was on his own. “This isn’t over Auditore! I will get you! You and your whore, too!” Vieri cried, desperately holding up his bottoms to preserve his dignity as he ran away. Too bad he really didn’t have any to begin with.

Olivia chuckled. “That was rather fun.”

Federico wiped the tears away from his eyes, and nodded. “Indeed, it was much fun. You’re fighting is to be commended. Your skill has grown since Tuscany, I can tell,” he commented,

A flicker of disquiet crossed her features. “I’ve had a lot of practice.”

“From a mentor?” Federico posed the question.

“I suppose so,” Olivia said, with a half-smile. Experience had taught her, but she also had a great deal of help from Gaspare and Ciana. She supposed in a way they were mentors to her. “Though a fight Vieri is probably not what you had in mind when you said you wanted to show me Firenze
from a different angle.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Federico shook his head. He led her through the streets, passed several shops along the way, and more than a few courtesans who giggled and waved at Federico. “Morning ladies,” he sent them a charmingly smile.

“Swine,” Livvy coughed.

Federico laughed good naturedly, not offended. A few moments later, he finally halted. “Here we are.”

Olivia was momentarily bemused, because while Firenze was all beautiful and spectacular to her, she failed to see what was specifically special that it would warrant Federico to bring her here. And then she looked upward, and her stomach sank like a stone to the bottom of her feet. She stood in the shadow of a great tower though it was not nearly as tall as those at San Gimignano, it still sent a shaft of fear through her. “You want me to climb, don’t you?” She asked, her voice took on a squeaky quality that she would later deny.

“Yes,” Federico stared down at her, raising his eyebrow. “Or is that too daunting for you?”

She gave him the stink eye, before she whipped her hair out of her face and marched towards the tower with her shoulders ramrod straight. She tilted her head back, swirling her tongue against the side of her cheek and her eyes looked for the easiest route up. It was a matter of pride here, not to cave in and wimp out. Whether for good or ill, Federico Auditore’s opinion mattered to her. Discreetly, she wiped her sweaty palms on her pants legs before she reached out to the grasp proper handholds to boost her up.

“We haven’t got all day,” Federico said, playfully.

Olivia jumped out of her skin because the bastard snuck up right behind and said that right in her ear. She barely curbed the reflex to punch him in the solar plexus, and asked herself why she showed such restraint. It would serve him right for being all sneaky. With the utmost carefulness, she began her climb and didn’t care how slow her progress was. She didn’t want to become an untimely splat on the Florence streets. She gritted her teeth together when Federico climbed right past her at a pace that easily made him the rabbit to her turtle, and she glowered up at him because she knows that he was laughing at her. Cheeky bastard with your hazing ritual, just wait until I concoct some weird test for you to preform and then see if you laugh, she thought, taking vicious pleasure in coming up with various scenarios inside her skull.

The climb didn’t take long, but it felt like forever. She took Federico’s outstretched hand to help her up over the edge of the rooftop, and she let out a grateful sigh, moving her arms that were burning and aching. She shouldn’t have looked down, but it was an impulse she couldn’t stop. Her stomach lurched at the sight of the street below, but what made her heart skip a beat was the bale of hay below. “I’m not jumping,” she told him, point blank. She didn’t fucking care if he got suspicion about her knowledge of the convenient placed hay bales because seriously they were too convenient to be just random. She was betting the Brotherhood would set up areas when a mission was taking place, giving an Assassin the best advantage possible.

“I was not going to make you,” Federico grinned. “We will leave that for another day.”

“What have I gotten myself into? Is it too late to take the offer of friendship back?” Olivia said, only half-joking. If he made her climb and jump off buildings, she was seriously considering labeling him as public enemy number one. Her heart would expire from having to endure the horror of heights and the crippling vertigo that came along with them.
“What do you think?” Federico gestured out towards the Florence skyline. She also noticed how he just smirked, and ignored her question. He wasn’t as sly as he thought he was.

But she allowed the subject to go without note, and took in the vision of splendor that lay before them. The view was most striking up here, even the rooftops that she normally frequented couldn’t hold a candle to the unobstructed view she had now. The afternoon light blanketed the world in sharp colors, the amber and crimsons that beamed out from the distant horizon. It created a skyline so beautiful that the artist in her wanted nothing more than some oil pastels and a sketchbook to capture the sight. “It’s amazing,” she breathed out. Her irritation and fear melted away, and a gentle smile fell upon her lips. “I can see now why you brought me here. Thank you.”

He smiled back, dark eyes twinkling. “You’re welcome.”

For a moment, they admired the sunset in silence before Federico felt compelled to speak again. “For the sake of truth, I must inform you that I did not actually believe you mean your words or would pursue the idea of a truce and a friendship,” he stated, a hint of sheepish in his voice. “I am glad I was wrong.”

Olivia laughed, lightly. “For the sake of truth?” She asked, and when he gave a small nod she continued, “I didn’t think you’d actually accept. You had every reason to turn me away given everything that happened in San Gimignano, but I am happy I was wrong, too.”

Federico gave a light sigh, his gaze flashed back towards the sunset. “As much as I wish I could spend all day up here, I had best be off before the supper bell is rung. My mother is never happy when any of her children are late, and no doubt, my father has heard of the fight with Vieri by now.”

“Good luck with that,” Olivia told him. Was it strange that she felt envy and relief at his words? It would be nice to have a family waiting at home that cared about her, but in the same moment, she was glad that she would have to face a dressing down. “I, too, have responsibilities to attend to. A friend who will likely tear down all Firenze if I don’t check in with her soon.”

“Sounds like a formidable friend,” Federico quirked up an eyebrow.

“She is. She really is.”

The pair of the climbed down, and Federico to his credit did not make mention of her whispering prayers underneath her breath until her feet hit the ground. She went to say goodbye when she noticed Federico’s attention had been caught elsewhere. “What is it?” She asked, worriedly. “Is it Vieri’s men?”

“No, just my baby brother,” Federico smirked, gesturing down the lane. “Looks like he has learned well.”

Olivia felt her heart slam into the back of her throat. Petuccio was sickly, from all accounts and even if he was well enough to be out on the streets, he would not be alone. That only left one other person that Federico could be talking about, and all she could think was, I’m not ready. Her eyes followed his line of sight and it was like a sledgehammer hit her straight in the chest at her first real life glimpse of Ezio Auditore.

His silky dark hair had been brushed out of his handsome face with a hair tie. There was a hint of a teasing smirk on his sensually sculpted lips as he talked the group of girls who giggled and simpered underneath his attention. Olivia couldn’t help, but admire the chiseled line of his cheekbones and
chin. And there was something about those light brown, almost golden like eyes that made her heart flutter. He was dazzling. She took in a deep breath and looked away, hoping that the blue hood hid her flushed face. She didn’t want Federico didn’t realize she had been checking out his younger brother. Even though there was only two years difference between herself and Ezio, she still felt a little dirty for checking him out since he was seventeen and in her time considered jailbait.

“Something wrong?” Federico asked, noticing Livvy’s red cheeks. “Are you sick?”

“No!” She said, perhaps a little too vehemently. His head tilted to the side, his brow furrowing and he got this look like he was deeming her slightly insane. Better insane, Olivia decided, then for him to realize and then mercilessly tease her about having the hots for his younger brother. Though it wasn’t just a mere crush that fueled her fascination with Ezio and this world; it was vastly more complicated than a mere crush or fangirl obsession, she was beginning to realize. Being here and seeing Ezio was a bit like coming home, his story and the people in felt more familiar to her than her own life. A tiny hopeful part of her wondered if there was a place, a small niche where she could fit in that world somehow. She choked back the sudden wave of emotions that choked her, and added her voice stifled, “It’s just a bit humid out here, isn’t it?”

“I suppose it is a little bit hotter than usual, yes.”

“Uh, well, see you soon?” She offered as a goodbye.

Federico chuckled. “See you soon.”

She then hurried away before she made a bigger fool out of herself.

Federico arrived at the Palazzo Strozzi, and cautiously looked about. There was no sight of his father, so he felt like he was in the clear. If his father had been home, he would have been chewed out for the fight with Vieri. The gossip on the street could not be missed, and he knew that some soul would have eagerly delivered the news to his father by now. He strolled into his home, feeling a sense of relief only to have the hair on the nape of his neck stand on end.

Turning around, Federico saw his mother standing there all stern-faced and eyes filled with disappointment that stabbed him in the gut. “Madre, you look lovely today. Is that a new dress? May I ask what the occasion is?” He asked, with a weak and cautious smile.

Maria’s brow lifted, but the severity of her expression did not ease. “Not only are you late for supper, young man, but what is this I hear about you fighting with Vieri? He claims that you hired thugs to beat him and his men.”

“That was not the way of it—”

A laughter from the stairs cut Federico off, and he glared up at Ezio. He made a rude gesture with his hands, and his mother caught him by the ear making him give an undignified yelp. He was dragged into his father’s office, and when he caught sight of his father sitting at the desk, he realized that he was going to be given the lecture of his life.

It was going to be a long night.

The sun had disappeared from the sky, and the world was cast in shadows. Thick clouds stretched across the night sky, concealing the city from seeing the stars and moon and any light they could offer. With his children sleeping soundly in their beds and pressing a kiss to his wife’s head, the Assassin slipped out of window of the Palazzo Strozzi and onto the rooftops. It was getting harder
and harder to leave them, Giovanni admitted quietly to himself yet the Templars were a threat that
could not be ignored. He had committed his life too long to the Brotherhood to be able to leave it
now, and some days he feared that his family would pay the price for his oath.

He remembered in the midst of preparations for his mission, and gathering his weapons that he
peered into the dining room where his children sat and ate none the wiser to his activities. They were
all sitting down to eat diner, laughter and happiness in their eyes. His gaze lingered on his beloved
Maria and as if sensing him, she looked up. Her eyes locked on his through the small crack in the
door. A frown of worry crossed her face and he sent her a small smile, trying to comfort her. It was a
small consolation, he knew.

He raced soundlessly across the rooftops, the cool night air whipped around him. If his informant had
been correct then his target would be trying to flee Firenze under the cover of darkness, and he could
not allow that to happen. His eyes flared gold as he looked across the street, only thieves, courtesans
and the homeless were out at this time of night and they flared blue or grey. Some days he wondered
about this gift he had been given to see the world in such a way. His father once stated it was an
increased perception, and that the colors that people glowed with was the mind’s primal self-
preservation able to see friend from foe. The answer did not appease him entirely; he wished to know
how the gift came to be and more, but had to accept long ago that the answers would forever elude
him.

Suddenly a flash of red broke through the dull and mute world.

There you are, he looked down his nose at his target.

Rodrigo Borgia. An important man in Italian high society, he schemed and bought his way through
politics. If anyone stood in his way they were silenced, or disappeared with no clear evidence that
could be traced back to the man. And what made him even more dangerous was he was a Templar
using his rank and power to push the Order’s agenda onto the populace. The assassins had been
tracking his movements for months and now, Giovanni had to strike. He eyed the three bodyguards
trailing behind Borgia and knew he would have strike them down quickly or be at the mercy of the
greater odds against him.

As Borgia and his group slipped into one of the back streets, Giovanni followed swiftly and leapt
down off the roof right in there path. Borgia was taken aback and eyes flashed with panic, his hand
falling to his sword. The three guards halted as well, startled. Giovanni threw out a knife, catching
one of the bodyguards in the arm. That spurned the other into action, drawing out their swords and
launching forward. With swift and deadly movement, Giovanni countered and dodged their attacks
and stabbed one man sending him to the ground then he spun around, his sword moving in a wide
arch towards Borgia.

Rodrigo’s eyes widen as Giovanni’s sword was an inch from slicing his throat right open. One of the
bodyguards drove Giovanni backwards, and Borgia turned and fled. Giovanni’s eyes narrowed and
sliding out his hidden blade, he buried it into one of the man’s chest then pulled back with a hiss as a
blade sliced open his arm.

With a snap-kick to the man’s gut, Giovanni sent the man to the ground. Kneeling down swiftly as
the man went to grab his weapon, Giovanni held his hidden blade to the man’s throat. The man froze
with terror.

Giovanni looked away, sending the dead and quiet look a speculative glance, but he saw no sign of
Borgia. He caught an aggravated sigh in his throat before he pinned a vicious glower on his captive.

“Please…please don’t kill me,” the man pleaded.
Giovanni looked down at him, raising a cool eyebrow. “No, I have better use for you.”

Olivia had checked in with Ciana, who heard about a fight and just assumed that Livvy had somehow been involved. Which was true, but she hadn’t let Ciana know that. The courtesan was happy, though so Olivia was glad for that. She had a slight fear that Ciana would regret coming to Florence with her, but she had seamlessly fit in with Paola’s girls. Paola was a much better than the late Madame Carlotta. It gave Olivia a sense of comfort to know that the people there would have her friend’s back. She also asked Ciana about how to purchase housing.

Ciana sat something about having to go through a bank and some such to get a house. The Red Hood pulled her cloak tighter around her with a look of annoyance on her face, she hated dealing with people, but if it got her a house she supposed she could suffer through it. All that remained was getting sufficient enough funds to buy a house, which Olivia had no idea how much coin that would be. And there was no way she could get a loan nor would she wish to place such a debt upon herself. She passed by the Palazzo Strozzi, and her thoughts unwittingly turned to Ezio.

It was no grand secret that she longed to meet him, to get know who he was beyond the game version that while insightful couldn’t show the full depths of the man. Ever since she arrived in Firenze, he hadn’t been far from her thoughts. How could he not be? Everywhere she turned, she was reminded of being in his shoes and walking these streets through the ups and downs of his life as an Assassin. As much as she would like to meet him, she didn’t feel she knew Federico well enough to ask him to be introduced to his brother and she couldn’t trust herself not to say something completely stupid which knowing her track record was likely to happen.

The Red Hood hurried away from the Auditore home with anxiety pumping through her beating heart, and she ran her fingers through her hair. Why was she here? She didn’t belong, that much was certain and she didn’t think she did anything to warrant her favorite video game as an afterlife. “So whose pet hamster am I and why did they pick this wheel to put me on?” Olivia asked, underneath her breath in a scathing tone. She didn’t have a lot of control in her childhood, forced to flow along with the chaos and stay afloat. She shook such thoughts from her head, and looked down at the house she intended to rob. She saw the man who owned it, a rich and snob shove a poor seamstress about. Apparently, the fabric he specifically ordered just suddenly wasn’t good enough anymore. This was the kind of man who needed to be taken down a peg or two, and with a wicked grin Livvy slipped in through the window intending to do just that.

The lack of security on these homes astounded her. The doors were unlocked and the hallways vacant, or so she thought until a servant came waltzing down. Livvy slid behind a curtain, holding her breath as the man passed. Once he was out of sight, she released the breath and continued onward. Glancing into each room she passed, she realized that for the amount of people that were here this house was too big. Such a waste, she shook her head.

“A house is a home,” her mother once said, “and it’s meant to be filled with joy in each and every room, filled with love and hope.”

She missed her home, as shabby and unkempt as it had been. It had been hers, a sanctuary to keep the outside world at bay and she wanted something like that again. It was why she was so set on getting a home, and hopefully this robbery proved fruitful helping her along the way to having that again. A sudden noise made Livvy pause. There were two large doors, open that she was about to pass. A brilliant light from a no doubt fireplace filtered out into the hallway and she heard voice coming from the room.

The Red Hood walked to the door way, before peering around. There was that man, sitting at his dining room table eating with no manners. Apparently that was only for public appearances, she
thought wrinkling her nose. His wife didn’t look too please either, but she said nothing. The thief hummed underneath her breath, before she darted passed the door when she was sure they weren’t looking. She slowly made her way up the stairwell, and she entered a long hallway full of doors. Which one? Which one? She went to everyone, testing the handles. The ones she could turn, she immediately left. One doesn’t leave an unlocked door on something they wanted protected. It was the fourth door she tested, the handle taut and wouldn’t budge. Taking out her stiletto dagger, she slid it into the keyhole. A tight fit, but she’d make it work.

A sorrow-filled smile found its way on her lips. If Carl and Leo had been here then they would have made every dirty joke imaginable at that. Her heart ached, her momentary excitement dampened by the wave of home sickness that swelled beneath her chest. They had been her family, the only people she had been able to rely on before her untimely demise and she missed them dearly. Biting her lip, she worked on the lock, gently twisting the dagger with a carefully.

Locks from this time period were a lock less sophisticated than the ones from her time, and she gave a light chuckle when the lock finally gave it. Rising, she slipped the door open and gently closed it behind her. She found herself in an office of sorts, her eyes scanned over the desk and bookshelf full of scrolls and books. She moved past them, seeing nothing of interest when she stumbled upon her prize. A chest tucked away to the corner of the room, meant to look unassuming but Olivia busted the lock open, she lifted the lid open. She gave a low whistle at the amount of gold, and valuables squared away. If she had to guess, she would say that the man of the house was preparing to take all his wealth and run away.

Her smirk dropped, something in the air immediately set off the alarm bells in her head. Whirling around, her dagger in her hand she held it up ready for an attack. Her mouth opened in shock as La Volpe sauntered out of the shadows, looking at her with a speculative eyebrow raised.

“How?” The Red Hood demanded, stunned. “I’ve been here a week. There is no possible way that you could have known about me.”

La Volpe smirked mysteriously. “I have eyes and ears everywhere…”

The Red Hood didn’t buy it. “Or an annoying knack for coincidences,” she stated, her tone dry as the Sahara desert. “This my haul, Swiper, back off.”

“I am not here for the coin, though it is a nice windfall,” La Volpe stated, after grimacing at the distasteful nickname. “No. I am here for this.” He held up the documents and in the moonlight filtering in through the window she caught sight of a bold cross stamped on the bottom.

“Templars?” She hadn’t known that. “Those sneaky bastards were everywhere. Like cockroaches, templars are a lot like cockroaches,” she muttered under her breath.

“You did not know?” La Volpe appeared amused. “Perhaps I am not the only one with, how did you put it? Annoying knack for coincidences.”

She glared. Her options were few. She did not want to outright confront La Volpe, she was outmatched and she knew it. That left her one thing: to flee again. She edged towards the window sending one last glance at the gold she was leaving behind. That would have been her house. “Well, this has been nice and all, but I think I best be on my way.”

“I don’t think so,” La Volpe’s voice was seemingly the same, but the Red Hood heard the edge there. She looked up and caught his violet eyes, hard and flinty. “I believe we have something to discuss—”
The door to the room burst open, and his wife trailing behind him nagging. The man paused and looked at La Volpe then the Red Hood. His eyes widened in panic, “Have mercy!”

La Volpe was across the room in an instant throwing the wife out the door. He slammed it shut, and locked in one smooth motion before he drew out a blade on the frightened man. “Only,” La Volpe stated, coolly, “if you tell me what I want to know.”

The Master Thief’s eyes looked over at the Red Hood, who was stock still uncertain of to stay or take this time to flee. Her lips twisted downward, a part of her wanting to know that this Templar would tell, but it was not information that would help her in the long run. She needed a solid support before she danced with Templars again, and besides any knowledge La Volpe learned would be passed along to the Brotherhood. There was no reason for her to stay.

With a jaunty wave, the Red Hood darted towards the window and out onto the rooftops. She ran as fast as she could, putting distance between herself and the Master Thief. She hated running away again, but she had to be smart about this. She was unknown, and her only ties to this world were through Gaspare, Ciana and Federico. Those ties weren’t what she’d call binding just yet, the friendships still new to be such though she like to think if she up and disappeared that she would be mourned. Still it was easier to make a person drop off the face of the earth in this time, and the Assassins were experts in that kind of thing. She wasn’t to press her luck when she rarely had any of the good kind. She slid into the abandon building where she had been storing away her red cloak and weapons, and wiped the sweat off her brow.

She dropped her stiletto dagger on the seat of an old, rickety chair when she heard something move behind her. “For the love of God, you have to be kidding me,” she hissed out, her first thought was that La Volpe had found her.

“Olivia.”

The voice felt like a punch to the gut, and she whirled around with wide eyes. She stood there for several moments, unable to breathe or speak. She was rooted the spot, her mind raced to comprehend what she was seeing and trying to figure out if it was reality or just wishful thinking. A slow hesitant smile stretched across her face, and she took a small step forward.

“Carl, is that you?”

Chapter End Notes

End of Chapter
Next Chapter: How is Carl here, but is there more to his appearance than meets the eye? And more! :D

Author’s Note: My concept on the eagle vision: Red, Blue, Yellow (Gold) are primary colors. Blue—cool, refreshing. Red—warning, hot, dangerous. Yellow—bright, sharp, standing out. The Eagle Vision is an extra layer of perception and the mind can only perceive what it can conceive. It uses colors because we as humans instinctively associate colors with words or feelings. Now Origins deviates from this, but that doesn’t discount my theory. SPOILERS IF YOU HAVEN’T PLAYED ORIGINS, MINOR SPOILERS BUT STILL. In Origins, Bayek doesn’t have eagle vision like those who came after. I believe this is because Senu is his Eagle Vision and literally he is seeing through his eagle’s eyes. The reason he doesn’t see the colors, is because this mysterious
connection is funneled through Senu’s mind and animals don’t perceive the world in the same manner as humans. Since not every assassin has a companion as awesome as Senu, this trait likely evolved at some point out of necessity for survival and the descendants like Altair no longer needed an animal guide to be their eyes able to use their own.

Reference and Languages
1.) Che diavolo (Italian) What the hell?

Thank ya for all the support. I am glad you guys all liked the last chapter and hope this one did not disappoint
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Edited 5/30/2018
Posted 5/30/2018

I want to catchsmi, MsLilly, Immortalization, mid_2_Knight, PetiteFeline, Forest_Stars, Caratris, Shade95, EurydiceAnstice, Sky_Fall, Rainny, ZetaSol, Mar_mi, delphinepryde84, DannyPhantom619, Tenebrariae, CharlemagneGryffis, Gygapudding, Lillium23, Askia, WormwoodSand31033, and 25 guests for the kudos! You all are wonderful! Thank you!
I want to thank JammyONE, Mar_mi, Judex, EurydiceAnstice, YalenaYardeen4Queen, delphinepryde84, Caratis, aadele123, TheOneKrafter, MsLilly for the bookmarks!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Modern Day Interlude 2

What Is Happening Here?

Leo was done with life and all things in general.

After being sucked into the vortex from hell that spawned out of his television that belonged in a cliché fanfiction than it did in reality and being unceremoniously dumped into the back of a vehicle only to be held at gun point by fictional video game characters, one could understand why he felt this way. It was completely reasonable given the improbability of the situation he found himself in, and to make things worse, he woke up tied by to a chair. Now he had been in situations like this before, but those were entirely voluntary and a lot more enjoyable than the Spanish Inquisition recital that he was currently undergoing. “Seriously, the ropes are a bit much and the whole gun waving. Could you put it down before you accidentally set it off?” Leo stated, blandly. His eyes flickered between each individual in the group of four that stood before him, and mentally fumed at his predicament.
“I’m really just a hapless victim in the grand scheme of things. Honestly, I’m pretty sure whatever is going on is entirely Olivia’s fault. I’m not complicit in any way.”

Leo felt that he got the raw end of this deal. Olivia got to see the past, got to hang out with Ezio and he’d bet every last cent that was in his bank account that she was making moon eyes at the assassin. And Leo got to see the barrel of a gun, and four modern assassins who had their panties all in a wad.

“Lucy, I think you can put the gun away,” Desmond sighed, heavily. “I don’t think he is here to cause any trouble.”

Lucy sent Desmond a skeptical look, but lowered the weapon.

“Now the ropes?” Leo raised a brow.

“Those stay on,” Desmond replied, dryly.

“Desmond Miles, who knew you were a kinky bastard,” Leo said, with a sharp smile. It didn’t reach his eyes, and the apple of his throat bobbed, harshly. “So, you know I don’t know how I got here let
alone explain it to you, or explain why my best friend is hopping all over 15th century Italy like it’s her playground, so is there any questions you have that I can answer?”

“Yes,” Shawn took a step forward, his hands shoved into his pockets and a suspicious look on his face. “For one, how do you know who we are?”

“That’s a hard questions, but doable. Given the fact that time travel existences, and is quite literally happening, it shouldn’t be so hard for you all to swallow the fact that there are alternate dimension to this one that exist,” Leo rambled, a tad nervously. His eyes occasionally flickered to Lucy and her gun. “You see, Olivia and I aren’t from around here. We are from a world where this is all a story, a game and does not exist.”

Shaun stared, blankly. “Does not—”

“And exist,” Leo said, his voice a bit too pitchy for his liking. “No Assassins. No Templars. It’s just a story that a group of game designers and Ubisoft created for the public’s enjoyment as well as to rake in some serious cash.”

“That’s insane,” Lucy stated, visibly disturbed.

Leo chuckled. “I feel pretty insane. I am sitting here tied to a character talking to people that up until a few hours ago didn’t exist, and this really shouldn’t be possible. I mean the science geek in me is like going crazy at the many theories here that are being verified by some unknown source such as time travel and multidimension, but the normal part of me is ready to pee myself.”

Rebecca looked upset. “So our lives, our battles, everything that we’ve gone through has been used as fodder for your entertainment?” She asked, hands balled into fists at her side.

Leo paused. “Well, yes, I suppose though it sounds a lot more callous when you put it that way.”

Desmond raked a hand through his short hair, and heaved an aggravated sigh worked its way up his throat. “Do you have any idea why this happened? To you or to Olivia?” He asked, pinching the bridge of his nose.

His brows furrowed together into a knot, his eyes glanced downward. “I don’t know,” he replied, softly. “I mean, it was just a regular day. No expects this shit to every really happen. I mean, sure people dream about getting swept up into an adventure, but it doesn’t just magically happen no matter how much they dream, you know? I wish I had answers, not just to tell you so won’t kill me but because I don’t get why this happened to me.”

Lucy’s green eyes flickered towards him. “But you would understand why it happened to Olivia?” She asked, finding the wording of his statement strange.

“No. Maybe. I don’t know,” Leo said, disgruntled. He shifted against the ropes that were honestly quite chafing, and cutting of his blood flow a bit.

“What a helpful answer,” Shawn rolled his eyes.

“Do I look like a god to you?” Leo snapped, his upper lip curled and he glowered at the man. “I don’t know why we were chosen or why this was happening. I just…” He swallowed thickly. He didn’t know why he was chosen, but maybe he could construe why Olivia was. While Olivia looked unassuming and normal, there was always something strange about her. It wasn’t the way she acted, or presented herself. She just seemed to function on a different frequency than everyone else, a high level than the everyday people around her, and sometimes, Leo could swear he felt a buzz in the back of his mind when he was near her. A little hum as if she put off more energy than was normal.
“I just don’t know. I’m sorry. I wish I had better answers than that.”

“You have any idea of what Olivia intends to do?” Lucy questioned, worriedly.

“No, I don’t. If I had to guess, she would try to not interfere. She overthinks and worries constantly, and she would be afraid to hurt the future. In the end, she wouldn’t be able to help herself. She isn’t one that could walk away from people being hurt,” Leo commented, with a small frown. His eyes flickered to Shawn’s computer screen where they had paused in memory. It was a picture of Ezio and Olivia, hands clasped with both heartbroken looks on their faces. His stomach twisted uneasily, and his gaze dropped to his lap. “I don’t know what more I can tell you. I know a bit of the Assassin’s history, maybe some things that might be helpful. Some rumors of what is supposed to happen on chatrooms. The fanfiction is probably exceedingly less helpful.”

"Fanfiction?" Lucy asked.

"Yes. Little stories people write of how they think the Assassin story line should go, or write themselves into a story, or who they think should hook up like Shawn and Rebecca," Leo rambled when he was nervous, did he mention that? "Lucy and Desmond, or Shawn and Desmond—"

Desmond made a choking noise.

"I'm sorry did you just say me and Desmond?!!" Shawn looked horrified.

"Desmond and I," Lucy corrected, her lips pursed trying to hide a smile while Rebecca laughed loud.

The British man shot her a glare. "Who cares about proper English in a time like this!"

"That's a joke, right? A sick joke?" Desmond groaned, pitifully.

"A lot of girls think you guys would be cute together," Leo murmured, feeling a knot of dread twist in his heart. He really hoped that Lucy kept ahold of the gun and did not give it Shawn for any reason. Perhaps I sayeth too much, he swallowed down the nervous laughter that bubbled up his throat, and he wiggled in the chair, wondering if he could get out of the binds. Even if he did, where would he go? He was literally in a whole new world, and he doubted that he even existed.

"Cute? Cute?" Shawn sputtered, while Desmond stuttered out several curses and denied ever having thought of Shawn in that kind of manner. "What kind of deviant, young woman are you Americans creating? I mean, you already have a lack of culture, but this...this is a whole new level..." The British man's face was red from his vehement denial, and immense embarrassment.

Rebecca cackled, "Me thinks you two protest too much."

Shawn sent her a glare and pointed, "See. My point is proven."

"Look at the bright side, Shawn," Lucy's lips finally curled into that reluctant smile.

"Bright side?" Shawn looked at her. "There's a bright side? Please, explain to me the bright side!"

Lucy shrugged, "At least in one world you are getting laid."

Lucy and Rebecca laughed, while the two men grumbled.

Leo let out a low groan, leaning his head back against the chair and giving up on his struggles. He clenched his eyes closed very tightly, and prayed that Olivia was alright. He also had a bad feeling
Carl had been dragged into this mess, too, and he feared just where his friend had ended up.

What the hell was going on? Why was this happening?

Who or whatever had done this gave no reply.

Desmond paced, nervously across the floor. His dark eyes flickered over the animus that Rebecca was setting up, and his stomach seethed violently. He hadn’t told anyone, but the bleeding effect had been getting severely worse. There was no a day that went by anymore that he did not have some sort of vision that appeared of Altair or Ezio in Monteriggioni, and what was worse, it almost seemed purposeful. Like they were intentionally trying to lead him somewhere, and it made his hair stand up on end. He didn’t want to get back into the animus, but it seemed like the only way to get answers. The boy, Leo, seemed just as lost as they were; probably worse if he really did come from another dimension.

“Are you alright?” Lucy commented, a worried frown on her lips. “If it’s too soon, we could—”

“We don’t have time, Lucy,” Desmond shook his head. “You know that. I know that. Each second we waste, the Templars are getting close to the Piece of Eden and whatever master plan they are going to enact. We have to keep moving forward.”

“But not at your expense,” Lucy argued. “You are important, Desmond. Maybe one of the most important people in this world, in this war and if we were to lose you—if I—” the blond halted, her eyes darted away from him when his head swung towards her. “Look, I don’t want you to get hurt. You’ve been through enough, and it’s just not fair that you have to go through more.”

“The world isn’t fair,” Desmond smiled, grimly. He caught the silvery ghostly form out of the corner of his eye. The figure moved towards Altair’s statue before it disappeared entirely, and his heart dropped out of his chest. “But we can right the wrongs where we can, and when we can.”

Lucy hesitated for a split second before she reached down, sliding her hand into his and she squeezed his fingers lightly. A great breath left him and his shoulders slumped ever so slightly. His face pulled into a gentle smile, and he held onto her fingers tightly. “Thank you, Lucy.”

Her blue eyes fluttered, in surprise. “For what?”

“For just being you,” he answered, honestly.

A tangled mess of emotions flashed across Lucy’s face, but they passed too fast for him to pinpoint what they were. Her lips trembled, and parted as if she had something to say when Shawn called for him, “Everything’s ready, Desmond. Let’s get you in so we can start to unravel this mess.”

Desmond nodded, his hand slipping out of Lucy’s and he got into the animus. He was hooked up to the IV drip, and heart monitor as he settled into the seat, and let his eyes fall closed when he heard the whirling on machinery start upward. Soon he fell into the vision of whiteness, and everything that Desmond was narrowed down into Ezio Auditore, leaving the present time far behind.

Chapter End Notes

This was a short Interlude, but I hope you all enjoyed it. Please leave comments below!
:D
“Carl, is that you?” Olivia was afraid to believe it. She was afraid that this was an illusion conjured up by her lonely mind to ease the longing for home, and her friends. She tried to stifle the joy that trembled within her, and she reached out with a shaky hand to touch this arm. Her hand didn’t pass through him, like she had thought it would. Her heart slammed into the back of thought upon the realization that he was really here, that he wasn’t some figment or ghost to taunt her. All five foot seven inches of him, dressed in a simple brown tunic and tights. His bright red hair that he had since the day he had been born was neatly styled out of his face, and his icy green eyes with flecks of grey stared down at her. “I can’t believe it’s you!” She went to hug him, so overjoyed, but he stepped away from her. The unspoken rejection had hurt, but neither of them had ever been the hugging type thanks to childhood traumas. Still she couldn’t help, but think that there was something more to this than that. Her smile slipped off her face, and she studied him with an unblinking stare. “Carl, I am happy to see you. Ever since I ended up here, part of me has been going crazy with wondering how the hell this happen. Got any answers? If so feel free to enlighten a girl,” she babbled, trying to ease the sudden wave of fear that prickled along her nerve endings.

He looked still, like a living statue and so unlike the Carl that she knew. His eyes were cold, unfocused as if he was looking through her instead of at her. There was something so fundamentally wrong with the image of him that her brain couldn’t process it.

“Carl?” She tried again when he didn’t respond.

“What do you think you are doing, Olivia?” His voice was flat and robotic, like an automatic recording. It held no emotion, no life as if he had been hollowed out and was merely a husk of his former self.

“Talking to you?” Olivia attempted to joke. Her half-heart grin felt awkward on her face, and her
heart hammered against her ribcage. A cold, damp sweat broke out along the nape of her neck, and as casually as she could, she took a step backwards. “Look, I don’t know what’s going on or how we got here, but we should catch up. It’s been forever since we had some family bonding, don’t you think? I know a good tavern that had some decent grub, even if the ale is piss poor stale.”

“But we aren’t meant to be,” Carl stated, voice cold and eyes dead.

“Aren’t…meant to be what?” Olivia asked, slowly. The air was too heavy, too suffocating to breathe in and she felt her lungs quiver inside of her. It was the same type of anxiety, the helplessness like all those times her father had pitted her against her brother. The ill feeling that made bile boil up in her stomach, and where she felt there was no other choice, than to fight to survive.

“We aren’t part of this story, Olivia. We’ve seen how the story has played out and we aren’t a part of it,” his monotone response was frankly creepy. “We need to leave, Olivia. We need to go home.”

“Go home?” Olivia parroted, with a hard blink. The possibility of going home had never occurred to her. It always so felt so final, her death like going back was never an option. As much as she missed home, would she choose to go back? She couldn’t deny that it had its appeal. The familiar things always did, but remorse tugged at her heart. For all the things she had missed, Livvy had never felt more like herself than she did when she came to Italy. She had a purpose, she had a reason to exist, and perhaps it was selfish to cling to that and forsake all that she left behind. “Going home isn’t an option for me, Carl,” she whispered out, a sheen of guilty tears in her eyes when she looked at him. “Maybe that’s horribly selfish, but I was just wasting away there. Here I can do so much more and bring so much good. I can’t give that opportunity up.”

“You will only bring harm,” Carl snapped.

The accusation stabbed her where she was most vulnerable. She always felt clumsy, like she would just break all the good things she had ever had; it was a fear she had never quite been able to tame. “How can you say that?” She demanded, hotly. “You know nothing about what I’ve already managed to accomplish and the people that I have already managed to help. How can you say something like that when you don’t know?”

“I know you, Olivia,” he stated his eyes filled with anger and madness where only moments ago it had been bleak and empty. “You always run. You are coward. How can you expect to be more when you are nothing really at all?”

He lies. His words are spider silk spun from a poisonous puppeteer. Do not allow them to take heart, the same voice that she heard on the day that she had died whispered in the back of her mind. There was something dark and malevolent inside of Carl, something that wasn’t him and Olivia felt fear spike in her blood. He is the harm right now, Olivia. You have to fight. You have to survive.

“Fight?” The word unconsciously escaped her lips. Any thought of the voice was swept to the back of her mind, and locked away tightly.

A slow, evil smile spread across Carl’s face and he drew a sword from his belt. “You should have chosen to go home. I was magnanimous to allow you to have a choice, but you would always choose this,” he spoke, and his voice sounded off. Like there was another voice just underneath his, filled with anger and hatred so dark that it made her cringe back from him. “It is in your nature to clamor and scramble for power beyond your ken. But this design has been set in stone long before your arrival, Exiled. You will not become a part of this story.”

Dread filled her heart as she stared at him as if she couldn’t believe how things could turn from so right to so wrong so quickly. “Carl, I don’t know what is wrong with you, but please let me help. I
don’t want to fight you…” He held no such reservation, drawing his sword from its sheath and launching an attack on her with a wicked smile on his face. Olivia managed to dodge, just barely and grabbed the nearby chair, slamming it into him. It broken apart and Carl grunted, falling back against the impact.

She scrambled to pick up her dagger where it had fallen on the floor, and she watched him pick himself up off the floor. He wasn’t even winded by the blow of the head with the chair, and she licked her dried lips. “Carl, snap out of it. I don’t understand what is going on, but this isn’t you,” she pleaded, hoping to somehow break through whatever was happening to him. “You need to stop!”

“Can’t,” was his reply.

Olivia gritted her teeth together, because she didn’t want to hurt him. The only choice she had was to escape, and then figure out what to do next. The sword sliced through the air, and Olivia ducked underneath it and passed him. She ran out the door without a glance behind her, and out into the rain. It started slowly at first, and then became to come down in sheets so thick that she could barely see what was in front of her. She didn’t know what was wrong with Carl, or how she was going to deal with him. She refused to kill him. This just wasn’t him, and she feared just what was capable of controlling him this way.

She couldn’t kill him, but she didn’t want to die, either. Shaking her head, she took to the rooftops via a few crates. Her heart beat boomed in her ears, over the roaring wind. There was no light, the clouds blocked the heavens and the rain drenched out the torch lights. Lightning struck across the sky, illuminating the world for a split second and the thunder that followed made the world tremble it was so fierce. Her feet stumbled over the slick rooftops, her heart hammering wildly in her chest. One wrong move, and she’d be a goner.

She had to talk sense into him, she just had to. Whirling around, she came face to Carl who was hot on her heels. “Carl, please!” She cried over the rain.

He snorted, and swung. Her arms snapped up blocking his arm from coming down, and the sword stopped inches from her face. “Carl…please. Stop this…We shouldn’t fight like this,” she growled, shoving him back. He stumbled backwards, and her stomach dropped when she thought he was about to fall. Instead, he somehow managed to balance himself and renewed his efforts to kill her.

“Well? Doesn’t it remind you of old times?” Carl’s voice held a bite and Livvy struggled to keep out of reach of the blade. She had never seen him looks so maniac, so insane and she wasn’t sure she had ever experienced a fear so powerful as the one that now resided in her heart. “You always liked to win, Olivia. Where is that fighting spirit now?”

“Damn it, Carl! You aren’t like this! You were supposed to be the better one of us!” She snapped, angrily. Years of pain and agony twisted her features into a snarl, and she glared through the rain at him. It had been one of the main reason there still existed a rift between them. The sick twisted game their father played, pitting child against child and Olivia had won more than her fair share of those games. She had only been thinking about her survival, and hadn’t taken into account all the things that Carl had endured. She was a young child, selfish in the way that children were with their wants and needs. It wasn’t that she didn’t care about him, because she did. She hadn’t been old enough to see beyond herself, her vision too narrowed in her earlier childhood years. It wasn’t until they were about seven that Olivia started to see just how bad things were, started to comprehend just how wrong their lives were, but the wounds had already been made. The scars just too painful to erase, but Olivia did her best to shield Carl from then on out. Most days she still felt it was too little, too late. “You were supposed to be better…”

Carl faltered, the blade fell to his side and there was a strange flicker in his eyes. An internal struggle
played on his face, and Olivia tried to reach out to him again. “Please, I don’t want to fight you. For
god’s sake, you’re my brother,” she said, looking at him beseechingly. “This isn’t how this was
supposed to be. You are my family, and I don’t want to hurt you.”

She had a barely a second before she dodged when Carl lashed out with his blade. Carl growled,
bitterly, “When has family ever mattered to you?”

Anger and hurt eclipsed any reservations she had about not hurting him and she punched him, right
in the nose. He stumbled back, but not before backhanding Olivia. Normally, it would have just
stung really bad and made her stumble. On the wet rooftop? She slipped and fell. Fear pounding in
her veins as gravity started pulling her downward, her hands shot out. The shingles scrapping against
her skin painfully causing her to cry out, but she managed to stop herself from tumbling off the roof.
Letting out a frazzled sigh, she tasted blood on her tongue, and she grabbed her throbbing lip then
looked up at Carl, who slowly stalked towards her. “Carl,” she breathlessly stated. “Carl, snap of out
of this. I know that we have a lot in our past that needs to be work through, but this isn’t the rational
way to do it. This isn’t you that wants to fight. I don’t know what has you under its control, but you
can fight back. You just have to fight back!”

“Know who you sound like Olivia? You sound just like dad.”

Olivia made a face. “I feel that despite the circumstances that was uncalled for.”

Carl choked on his bitter laughter, wiping the blood from his nose. “I’m more in control of myself
than I have ever been. If I had been just a little more honest with myself, I would have killed you a
long time ago. You were always the weaker of us, Olivia, no matter how well you fought. You
never had the conviction to see it through, but I’m not like you. I won’t run away from my purpose.”

Olivia scooted back, on her hands and trying to not slip on the roof. Her hands searched for her
dagger, but she had a bad feeling that she wasn’t going to find it. Her heart thundered in her chest as
she tried to figure out some way to stop this, but none of her pleas had worked. None of her trying to
talk him down.

“Got nowhere to run, Olivia. The soldier is dead and you will be, too.”

“Soldier?” Her eyes flickered. “You mean father?”

“Cazzo! What are you doing up here?” There wasn’t time for either Carl or Livvy answer before an
arrow went soaring through the air and narrowly missed Carl. Carl’s teeth gritted and he sent on last
glower at Olivia before fleeing. Against all reason, Olivia called out for him to stop, but he had
disappeared into the darkness. She stumbled to her feet, but before she could chase after him, the
guard was on her. There wasn’t even a split second warning she had before he crashed into her,
almost knocking her off and to the ground below. Her eyes caught the glint of her knife before it
rolled right off the edge of the roof, and she let out a harsh curse. She gasped, stumbling on the water
slick shingles and let out a cry of panic when arms clasped around her in a parody of an embrace.

The man was taller than she, and a lot stronger. Rain pelted against them, and Livvy twisted and
turned, trying to find something to give her an advantage. He cursed violently as she fought him,
“Stronzo!”

“Suck it!” Using her leg, she curled it around his and jerked. He slipped, giving a cry of alarm. So
did Livvy because he did not let go. The world spun around and she struggled, her arms slipping out
of the man’s grasp and she grabbed at the roof to slow her descent towards the edge. Her fingers
scratched at the shingles, trying to find something to hold on to, but nothing came. She kept sliding
and then with a fiery pain as her body jolted to a stop, her hands caught the edge of the roof. Her
fingertips were scarped raw and she could feel the blood seeping out of them. The guard fell right past her and hit the ground below with a sickening thud.

A breath escaped her shaky lips, Olivia fingers tightened around the edge of the roof and she hauled herself back despite the pain. She rolled over onto her back, taking in a breath to calm her thundering heart. Her body shook and trembled like a leaf, and she pressed the palms of her hands against her eyes. Too much came rushing in at her, too many emotions and she just wanted to scream. Her lips parted, but no sound came out. She had always known that her and Carl would never have the brother-sister relationship they had before their mother’s passing, but she had never thought he had hated her so much to want her dead. She knew something was controlling him, but that had seemed like an ugly truth.

They both had been children who hadn’t known any better. When would they stop paying for their father’s sins? Above her the thunder dwindled and the rain stopped. “Shit,” she breathed out, pushing herself up. Something was not right with Carl, and she couldn’t afford to confront him again without figuring out what that something wrong was. It wasn’t safe.

She wasn’t safe.

Nightfall split over the city, the everyday citizens were safely nestled into their beds leaving the streets in the possession of the thieves, courtesan, and vagabonds that still roamed around, careful to avoid the guardsmen’s eyes. A soft, haunting voice that drifted off the rooftops of Florence along with the drifting of a red cape swirling into the shadows. “Are you sleeping? Are you sleeping? Brother John…Brother John…All the bells are ringing, all the bells are ringing…Ding, dang, dong…ding, dang, dong…” A group of thieves paused, glancing at each then around at the shadows, in drunken confusion. One finally asked, “Did you hear that?”

“Three tigers, three tigers, Are running fast, are running fast, One doesn’t have eyes, one doesn’t have ears, Really strange, really strange.”

“That song is really strange,” a courtesan muttered.

“Ah, true…but so is the Red Hood. Suppose it fits.”

“Blacksmith boys, blacksmith boys, working hard, working hard. Hanging lots of iron, hanging lots of iron. Day and night, day and night. Ding, Dang, Dong,” the Red Hood sang to herself. The thief’s strange behavior left the citizens baffled and frightened, and the guards twitchy and on edge. Normally, it would have amused her but instead it just soured her heart. Her prancing across the rooftops and singing was not done out of happiness nor idleness. (Though she had been known to on occasion to sing the “The Song that Never Ends” just to annoy Leo, future Leo by the way not to be confused with Leonardo.) It wasn’t done out of playfulness to creep out the guards that were worriedly looking around. No, as strange as it seemed it was a way to channel her energy to keep herself from drowning in the sadness.

Olivia sighed deeply as she stared at the rising sun. The sky painted in light pink hues, and mesmerizing purples and the moon still hanging onto to that sky even though it’s time was drawing to an end. Livvy clasped the edge of the rooftop, slipping down into the alleyway before easily making her way onto the street without a second glance. Her encounter with Carl has stirred up many emotions and she brushed her bangs out of her eyes as she glanced around out from her hood.

It had been awhile since then, the days and weeks blurring together until the date became January 5, 1475. Over a month and she hadn’t seen hide nor hair of her brother. It left her with a conflicted knot in her heart. Part of her glad that she hadn’t seen him, and hadn’t had to confront him because that
would mean confronting the possibility that she may have to go to unsavory lengths to stop him. She got sick just thinking about it. The other part of her was devastated. She wanted to help her brother, to somehow fix him and make him better. She just wished she had some magical answer that would show her how.

“Hey, isn’t that you?” The small, soft voice drew Livvy from her thoughts. Livvy looked down at the child who pointed innocently to the wall beside her. Livvy slowly turned and cursed, loudly. There beside her was a poster with a picture of a red hooded person. Written on the bottom in bold letters was:

Red Hood Wanted Dead or Alive

Livvy noticed with faint amusement that price for bringing her body dead was quite a bit more than bringing her in alive. Was it wrong to feel a twinge of smugness? Turning to the kid, she pressed her index finger to her lips in the universal sign of silence while her other hand reached up, tearing the poster off the wall and crumpling beneath her palms. It was silly to think that tearing down a poster would immediately make people forget about the Red Hood, but she could admit there was a method to the madness. Out of sight, out of mind after all.

The kid’s eyes went wide and he nearly shook with what appeared to be excitement before he gave her a shaky nod. Livvy smiled lightly watching the kid dance off. She watched him and her smile slipped. That was once you, Carl, Her hands shook slightly and she locked her jaw against the wave of pain. Did I take that away from you? By being father’s perfect little soldier? I tried to make up for it. I tried to let you win and protect you, but father always knew. “No good deed goes unpunished,” he’d say and it always made things worse.

Olivia dropped the piece of parchment to the ground. She was hit by many emotions, each as unpleasant as the next. Her teeth grinded together and she continued down the street. The days had been hard ever since Carl appearance, even more paranoid than before about the target that was on her back. The nights even worse, filled with nightmares and memories. Painful questions were like worms digging into her brain, and driving her further down the path to insanity. What did he mean that ‘the soldier was dead’? Had he been referring to himself, or their father? And more importantly why was this happening? Why her and her brother of all people? Anger boiled in her gut at the unfairness. She had known life was unfair, but hadn’t her and brother gone through enough to earn a reprieve? She had thought that the dark cycle of being pit against Carl had ended in their childhood, but history has sought to repeat itself. To what end? She wondered, with a deep frown.

“You’re late.”

Livvy didn’t deny it, instead she took a leaf out of Gandalf’s book. “I’m never late. I arrive precisely when I mean to,” she turned towards the courtesan, with a tired smile on her lips. “How are you, Ciana?”

“Conosci meglio, peggio. Yourself?” The courtesan came to stand beside while looking casually over the small shop, careful not to face the Red Hood. One passing by wouldn’t even think they were talking to each other.

“I’ve had better days,” the Red Hood muttered. “I’ve also had worse. Did you get the information I needed?”

“Yes,” Ciana gave the tiniest nod. “From a friend of mine.”

“You have a friend here?” Livvy blinked.
“Luca. He used to run the Briar Rose in San Gimignano until a better business opportunity arose here in Firenze. He may also have been not well liked by Salmoni,” the courtesan stated, with a slight smile.

“Sounds like my kind of person,” Olivia said, eyebrow arched. “I assume there is a reason you are giving me so much information regarding your friend.”

“You are right,” the courtesan commented, checking the apples for ripeness. “He wants to meet you. The Red Hood.”

“Why?” Livvy asked, warily.

“That is not for me to say. He wishes to speak to you on a personal matter that he feels you can help with, but I will give you my assurance that Luca is trustworthy,” Ciana stated, quietly. “Please, go and listen to what he says at the very least?”

“Since this friend is the one that procured the information, I can go and hear him out,” Olivia agreed, easily. Ciana was not one that had ever steered her wrong, and if she thought that Red Hood would gain an ally in Luca, then she was willing to give it a shot. She could use more allies in these dark times. “So what did he uncover?”

“Giovanni and Maria Auditore are guests at a party that Lorenzo de Medici is holding tomorrow night to celebrate the start of a new year and the day of his birthday. It had been postponed due to the recent snow that halted Il Magnifico from returning as planned, but is scheduled tonight at the Medici Villa di Careggi. It is a masquerade of sorts, and masks are optional. A perfect opportunity for a wily one such as yourself to slip in unnoticed, yes?” Ciana asked, with an amused smile.

“If only a fairy godmother could bestow a gown and mask upon, I wouldn’t have to go in search of proper attire myself,” Olivia chuckled, lightly. “Know where a girl can find a dress and mask for such an occasion to blend in with high society on such short notice?”

“Put you faith in me,” Ciana grinned. “I will not let you down.”

Olivia decided, upon review of the night that running and climbing in a dress was a onetime thing. She lost count how many times she had tripped and thought she was gonner, or worried she tore the dress that would somehow get her kicked out of the party before she even had a chance to sneak in. She stayed vigilant, and slipped into the crowd from an alleyway. The guards didn’t even notice, for which she was thankful for. She resisted the urge to fiddle with the mask, a silvery metal that had been shaped into the face of a wolf. Her dress was made out of heavy blue velvet with long fitted sleeves, and puffed shoulders that gave her a high class look. There was delicate silver trimming accenting the lines of the dress, and amber rhinestones decorated the sleeves and the lined the bodice. It was a fine dress, and part of her wondered just where Ciana obtained it and then thought it was probably better not to ask.

Finding the place had been no hardship. There wasn’t a soul in Florence that did not know who and where the Medici family lived. They must be bold to have such lax on security; there weren’t even guards on the roof. Either they were extremely confident in their abilities to take down a threat, or someone was shirking off their responsibilities. She let out a small relieved sigh, once she was inside the building and broke away from the flow of the crowd. Her heels were soundless against the marble floor with the noise of conversation and music echoing off the walls. People were dancing in the middle of the room, and there was something magical about it the way they swayed with measured and practiced steps. The dances were joyful, but the partners were never within arm lengths of each other. She could never be so graceful, and kept an eye out to outmaneuver any poor
male that dared to ask her to dance.

She wasn’t here to dance or charm. She was here to play messenger, and her heart was like a drum, beating rapidly and out of sync with the rest of her body. This felt so foolish, and she prayed against all hope that this would not backfire. She moved through the crowd, like she belonged here. Chin up, shoulders straight and with an unhurried pace. While there were smiling faces, others were cold and calculating reminding her that among the gentry laid snakes willing to wait to strike when the back was turned. Her eyes flickered to the people that passed her, and she prayed her mask would hide her fear well. That when she spotted them, just across the dance floor.

The Auditore family.

Maria and Giovanni looking fondly at Federico and Ezio who went to charm the ladies while Claudia rolled her eyes lightly before turning back to the handsome man she was talking to. Petuccio sat near his parents in a chair, a little pale, but was smiling as Lorenzo de Medici spoke to him. It was beautifully domestic scene, all of them happy and content. Olivia felt her heart clenched at the sight, and she couldn’t help think that Carl was wrong. How can saving them be wrong? How trying to prevent another family from being broken be wrong? If someone could have saved her family from being shattered, she would have praised them to the high heavens no matter how wrong it would have been deemed. She accepted a glass from a passing servant and politely thanked him. She found a spot that gave her a whole view of the room. *How can I approach them? If I just walk up to them then it would just draw unwanted attention,* she thought, biting her bottom. *And that would end badly for me.*

Her eyes flickered across the sea of people and she stiffened in panic. She swore she saw a pair of violet eyes in the background. She really hoped not. Having to deal with La Volpe was not on her schedule for tonight.

“Uberto!” A woman’s voice cried.

“Ah, Isabella, how have you been?” A familiar voice stated and Olivia felt a wave of nausea overcome her. Her back stiffened ever so slightly, and she looked out of the corner of her eye. The hair on the nape of her neck rose like an angry cat and she gritted her teeth together. There was Uberto Alberti, the man that would betray the Auditore family. Her heart beat was loud, thunderous drums in her ears and her hand went to the dagger hidden up her sleeve. If she ended him right here, would it save them? Or would another take his place? The idea was tempting, so tempting.

*But you don’t he’s betrayed them yet,* the voice of reason told her. Livvy’s hand trembled, and dropped back to her side. If she killed Uberto before he sided with the templars or without evidence, it would be bad. The Brotherhood would look upon her as an enemy, and not the ally she truly was. She watched Uberto laugh as the woman dragged him to the dance floor and she felt like she might get sick. Drawing in a cleansing breath, she looked back to Giovanni and Maria, except they were no longer there. Petuccio still sat dutifully beside the Medici family, under their care and guard. Claudia was dancing just a few feet away with the young man she had been charming, but their parents were nowhere in sight. Federico and Ezio, too, were gone.

She bit her lip, her eyes moving over the crowd and she set down her drink on the table before going into the crowd. She weaved past the dancers and the crowd before she saw them. They were speaking to Lorenzo, before they went out the ornate door behind him. It led to the gazebo, she was sure, but she could not go that way. Trying to pass Lorenzo and his guards would draw far too much attention and would get her thrown out faster than she could say ‘Templar’. Pressing her lips together, she tried to remember the outline of the home inside her mind. The gazebo was an open place with a tiny garden and two doors, so she just had to find that second door. She turned, going
down the empty hallway and then turned left. She vaguely knew where the door could be and she only had one chance to get this right.

“What was that all about?” A male voice asked. It was familiar, but she couldn’t place. It was right there on the tip of her tongue, but she couldn’t quite spit it out.

“Oh, you know how mother gets.” The second one she recognized immediately.

*Shit. It is Federico,* Olivia was forced to duck into a darken threshold and hid behind the door. She held her breath, waiting for them to pass.

“I know, but don’t you feel that father and her are hiding something from us?” The first voice asked, and now given context she realized that it was Ezio. Her pulse throbbed in the base of her neck, and she pressed her palms against the wood of the door.

“Ezio, if they want us to know something, they would tell us,” Federico told him, patiently. “Do not let it bother. Besides, I heard a little rumor…”

“Oh?” Ezio was intrigued. “What of?”

“Cristina Vespucci…she is supposed to be here tonight,” Federico informed his little brother.

“Then what are we waiting for?” Ezio stated, loudly.

*Well, at least I know I’m on the right track,* Olivia thought to herself, hearing the echoes of their hurried footsteps even after they were long gone and back at the party. She waited until she could hear them no more before slipped back out. After a long sigh, she headed towards the gazebo where no doubt Maria and Giovanni would be. She checked several rooms, until she found a door that could lead nowhere but outside. She opened it, feeling a rush of cool air pass her and she slipped out into the night. Olivia shut the door as quietly as possible, sticking close to the green hedges and keeping out of plain sight. Gnawing on her lower lip, she fiddled with her mask and peered around the corner.

Maria and Giovanni stood out of the gazebo, softly talking to one another with adoring smiles on each of their faces. The love they had for one another radiated off of them like a beacon of light in the dark, and seeing them in this private moment reminded her of her own parents. Her father and mother in the kitchen teasing each other as they made breakfast for her and her brother, how happy life had been. Closing her eyes against the memories, Olivia pressed her back against the thicket and waited until an opportunity presented itself to catch Giovanni alone. She did not think it wise to approach with Maria there, especially giving how fiercely protective Giovanni was of his family. While Giovanni hadn’t had a large role in the game, the movie Lineage had shown that he was dangerous and a force to reckon with. She didn’t want that turned on her if she misspoke or made him wary which given the circumstance was a sure thing.

“Mi amore,” Giovanni breathed before pressing a gentle kiss to Maria’s lips. Livvy flushed, feeling uncomfortable at intruding on them like this. It made her feel like a Peeping Tom, no matter how benign her motives were. There were a few words exchanged, and a couple of more kissed before Maria decided to head back to the party. Giovanni however lingered on the gazebo, a heavy weight sat along his shoulders. Olivia looked up at the sky, sent up a quiet prayer and hoped someone was listening.

*Here goes nothing,* she told herself, with a grimace.

Giovanni lingered for a moment, with the weight of his thoughts after the door shut behind his wife.
who returned to the festivities. She knew that much was plaguing his mind, but he had not the heart to worry her just yet. The fond and loving smile faded off his face when a warning tingle ran down his spine, and he turned to see a young woman in a blue dress walk out into the open. A silver wolf mask concealed her features save for solemn grey eyes and red stained lips that were thinned out in a worried line.

“Oh,” the woman drew back, half startled. “I didn’t mean to intrude…” She looked away, scratching sheepishly at her neck which turned red with embarrassment. “Alright, admittedly that was a lie. I didn’t want to intrude, but I needed to speak to you.”

Giovanni’s brows furrowed. The girl seemed nervous and anxious, but why would she be looking for him? Could she be a Templar? It was not beyond the Templar Order to exploit the young and naïve. His fingers brushed the hidden throwing knives on his person, and he carefully scrutinized the young woman who was hesitant to take another step forward. “And what do you want of me?” He inquired, fastidiously.

“I am here to warn you.”

His whole body tensed and his eyes narrowed upon her. “If you are threatening—”

The woman quickly shook her head, the ill-fitted mask wobbled ever so slightly. “No. No! I am not the threatening you. I just came to warn of a danger, but I suppose just telling you that won’t help things. You simply won’t believe me…whoever said the direct approach was easiest is the biggest bloody liar in the whole world!”

Bloody was a curse term for the English, but the accent was not from England. In fact, he had never heard such an accent like the one she possessed. He felt a wealth of suspicion rise up in him, and he narrowed his eyes at the woman. “Speak,” he demanded, sharply.

She jumped a tiny fraction but hastily obeyed. “The problem is I don’t know when it starts, and I can’t condemn someone who has yet to do anything for something they will—”

“Do you have a point?” Giovanni raised an eyebrow.

“I—” The woman looked down, her jaw set tight. She seemed to be struggling with something, and her hands curled into fists at her side. Her body trembled with a harsh breath, and she shook her head side to side. “Just be careful, Messer Auditore, there is a plot against the Assassins and your family. I am…” Thud. It was metallic thud right next to head, shutting her up. Her eyes looked to the knife buried into the tree beside her and shudder ran through her before she raised her gaze to meet the golden eyes narrowed in her direction.

“You.” The accusing tone couldn’t be missed.

“Me?” The woman blanched. “You know me?”

“The woman from the alleyway, the one I took to that doctor,” Giovanni spoke with a harsh tone. “Emerald. I didn’t understand it. Why that color? What does it mean?”

The woman swallowed, convulsively. Her hand wrapped around her delicate throat, and eyes flickered back to the knife embedded in the tree. “Because it’s my favorite color?” She asked, with a shaky laugh. When he glared at her with no trace of shared amusement, she looked away with a hefty sigh. “Look, I am trying to warn you, okay? There will be men who you think are on your side, men with supposedly noble intention that really aren’t so noble and he will betr—”

“I think I will be able to tell traitors for myself,” he tapped right next to his eye. His special talent
would be able to let him know if a traitor was in his midst.

“Unless they are like the heralds, they change from blue to red—”

He took threatening steps forward, and she flinched at every one. He came to a halt stopping three feet away, giving her just enough space so that she would not holler for the guards. That was trouble he could not afford, but also couldn’t let her leave now without answers. “How do you know about that?” He asked, his voice cold and frigid.

She wilted, slightly. “That…that isn’t what is important. The important thing is to make sure you remember what I am saying, and even though you don’t trust me and probably want to kill me, I know you will still remember what I said. At least, I hope so,” she whispered, her worry sincere and earnest. There was something in her gaze that compelled him to believe what she said.

His shoulders relaxed a fraction, and he opened his mouth to change the tone of the conversation in hopes that she may reveal more. However, before he got the chance he heard Lorenzo’s voice beckoning him back into his home. He made the mistake of turning his back on the woman for a split second, and only to glance back and see the spot she once stood vacant.

She was gone, and whatever answers she held gone, too.

Olivia cursed herself in every way she knew how. The sense of failure weighed heavily on her chest, and she could feel angry tears prickle at the corner of her eyes. She blinked the away, and scrubbed her face the palms of her hands. That had not gone as smoothly as she hoped. In fact, she made a right mess of things. She should have laid a firmer foundation of trust before she approached him. December 29th, 1476 was just under two years away, and perhaps she should wait closer to the time range before trying to change things. There were so many unknown variables at this instance that she could end up making things infinitely worse. She knew more about what was happening behind the scenes closer to the time of the execution than she did now, but the thought of just waiting until then seemed agonizing. Running her hand down the rhinestone along the bodice, Olivia heaved a deep sigh.

“Come on, Cinderella,” she whispered to herself. “Time to get this dress and mask back to Ciana before the clock strikes twelve and the magic wears off, if there was any to begin with.”

The very next day, Olivia was dressed far more sedate compared to her fancy clothes from the evening before. She hadn’t even gotten a good chance to relish the expensive wine that she drank, it was far tastier than the drinks found local taverns. She wondered how badly she would mess up the timeline if she introduced the idea of mixed drinks to the world, and she eyed the bar that she was supposed to meet Ciana’s friend. Luca apparently owned and ran the place called, The Huntsman. It was a catchy name, if little else.

She stepped through the door, eyeing the interior. It was better than most taverns she had visited, but that may be the fact that there were hardly any costumers this early in the morning. She immediately spotted the man named Luca; he was exactly how Ciana described. Bronze hair with sharp defined features and a slightly crooked nose from where it had once been broken and did not heal right; his eyes were jade and just as hard as the gemstone, he moved around the drunks stumbling about with a practiced swiftness. He was not short, but was not very tall either. His body was lean and lithe, his baggy clothes meant to hide his tones form. But what caught her attention the most was the way people acted around him.

There was a couple openly talking about an affair, and even guards speaking about moving a chest of gold. (She would be checking in on that little tidbit later.) They talked like he wasn’t even there,
like he possessed no ears or eyes. She settled into a chair along the far side of the bar, and waited until he walked up to her. “What can I get you, sir?” He asked.

Contemplating whether or not to make small talk or just simply get down to business, she decided on business. “The sparrow flies at midnight,” she said, simply. She then paused briefly shooting the bartender who had frozen in place a look, adding, “I did get it right, right? It was twilight or moonlight or daylight? I told Ciana I had very good memory, and I really don’t want to hear her say ‘I told you I should have written it down’.”

“You are the Red Hood?” Luca looked her up and down, unrestrained surprise in his gaze.

“What?” She raised an eyebrow, tugging at the plain tan attire resisting the urge to pull her hood further down self-consciously. “You expect me to be dressed the part all the time?”

“No, I suppose not,” Luca said, with a reluctant smile.

“You need my help,” Olivia prompted, leaning back in her chair to eye the two guards from afar. “For what exactly?”

Luca sent a cautious look around the bar then leaned forward. “I want you to make La Volpe back off us,” Luca replied bluntly.

“La Volpe?” Her eyebrows shot upward in shock. “Why is La Volpe after you?” The man certainly did not give her templary vibes, but Livvy had only met a handful, so what was her knowledge compared to the Fox’s? Her grey fixated on him with an unblinking look, and her hand had dropped belong the bar to where her dagger sat on her hip. One false move would see Luca’s blood all across the wooden bar.

“I may run some businesses other than my bar,” Luca stated, carefully. He was a cautious man, and did not want to give out any information that may hurt him or his men. “Business that might not be entirely permitted by local authorities, and I have a group of men who I must protect, you see?”

Olivia paused, her brows climbed to her hairline. “You mean that you are band of thieves?” She spoke, her mouth barely moving and her words not even a whisper. Upon his nod, she placed her fingertips to her lips and sat there quietly pondering this man and his plight for a good solid minute. “I get that. I’ve been there myself, and I have no room to judge anyone’s way of life. What does La Volpe have to with it?”

“La Volpe wished for us to join his company, but we, my men and I, do not wish to do so,” Luca groaned, setting upon the task of cleaning the stack of cups to look busy. He looked more at ease when the guards left, but he was still worried and frazzled by what was going on. “But we may have little choice given our current circumstances.”

“Those current circumstances being?” Olivia asked.

“We are a small group,” the bartender explained, with a hearty sigh, “but even our escapades draw unwanted attention and we are ill equipped to deal with that kind of publicity. That’s why La Volpe made us this offer to help give us security.”

“Then why not take it?”

“The man’s an ass. And…I have bit of personal and very bitter history with him.”

“Oh. Well, that’s fair,” Olivia snickered, slightly. She traced the strings along her fingers when the wheels in her mind started to turn, and she looked up at Luca with a sharp gaze. He did give her
information about the Auditore, and he must hear many things at this bar and through his people. That would be a useful network to have as an ally, and she cocked her head to the side. “If there was no other choice but to join La Volpe, would you? To protect your people?” she asked, carefully. She was evaluating his character, as a leader and as a man.

Luca eyed her. “What?”

“Answer the question.”

“Yes. As much as I dislike the Fox, I have too many people counting on me to put my feelings before their safety,” he replied, frowning.

Livvy nodded, slowly. She was satisfied with his answer because she could tell he meant it. “Then I have a proposition that I think will work out for both of us,” the Red Hood told Luca, with a lopsided smile. “I believe it was the outcome you were wanting in the first place, or at the very least, close to what you hoped I could do. I will tell you about any place or person that has something of worth that you could procure and with the money you earn you’ll be able to equip your men better,” Livvy offered, shifting on her seat. She really didn’t want to put trust in someone else, but the possible information that Luca could provide was too good of an opportunity to pass up. “In exchange, you will be my eyes and ears through the city. You hear things, people speak in front of you without thinking twice and you have contacts through the city, am I wrong?”

“No, you are quite right,” Luca admitted, after a moment.

“I am in desperate need of someone like that,” Olivia told him, not ashamed to admit that she needed help or allies. “What say you?”

Luca paused, then brought his hand up and held his chin with his eyes narrowed in thought. “This offer…is not a bad one, but it is not my place to decide for my men. We make decisions together. I will tell them of your offer and give you our answer.”

“I look forward to it,” Livvy flashed him a quick smile before she rose out of her seat. She walked out of the bar when something struck her on the back of the head. She gave a yelp, before she looked down at the apple that rolled about on the ground. Her brows furrowed into a suspicious knot, and she turned around slowly to face her attacker. “I knew it.”

Federico wore his signature smirk as he strolled towards her in a walk that had passing women looking at him as if were a piece of meat and wondering how much the price would be to sink their teeth in. “A bar at this time in the morning?” Federico chided, with a mock disappointed face.

“I wasn’t drinking,” Livvy sent him a dry look.

“Then whatever,” he cocked his head to the side, “would you be doing in a bar?”

“Business proposition,” she answered, with a shrug.

“Oh?” He looked intrigued, linking her arm through his. She snorted in light amusement, and allowed herself to be tugged along down the street. It wasn’t as if she had any plans at this current point in time.

“Yes,” Livvy said.

“So,” Federico prompted, “what is this business proposition?”

“You’re so nosy,” she accused. “Has anyone ever told you that?”
“You’re so avoiding,” he shot back. “Has anyone ever told you that?”

“Fine. Fine. I’ll tell you,” she drew in a breath, turning to face him with the utmost seriousness on her face. “I met a man about becoming a courtesan. I figured I could make some easy money.” The gobsmacked look on Federico’s face was worth it and she immediately let out a bark of laughter. “Oh, my goodness,” she sucked in a breath between her laughs, “the look on your face!”

Federico wasn’t one to let such go without returning it in kind. “So you aren’t really thinking of becoming a courtesan?” He raked an intrigue look over her, the right side of his mouth quirking up and she knew he had some kind of dirty mental image inside his head. “If you are ever looking for a tutor—”

“That’s a kind offer, but no, not happening,” Olivia cut him off, with a burst of laughter. Twin spots of pink appeared on her cheeks, and she looked everywhere that wasn’t his face. She had to admit that his presence was a welcomed distraction to her dark thoughts. Not even the beauty of Florence had been able to sway her thoughts far from her brother and her past. “I haven’t been thinking of becoming a courtesan. I haven’t really been thinking of much lately.”

“You mean you haven’t thought of me at all?” Federico mocked hurt, placing a hand upon his breast.

“As if I would tell you that,” Olivia said, dryly. “You are already full of yourself as is.” Federico chuckled, lightly. “You are probably right.”

“So I heard the most tantalizing rumor. I’ve heard that the lady’s man was almost caught by guards sneaking out of a woman’s house this morning…” She commented, with a smirk. She would hold onto this distraction the best she could, and leave her worries behind if only for a little while.

Federico, to his credit, didn’t blush though she got the feeling she had embarrassed him. “I have no idea what you are talking about,” he said the lie without batting an eye.

“Uh-huh,” she said, unconvinced. “I totally believe that.”

“Beh!” He flicked her shoulder and managed to ignore the half-hearted swat in his direction.

“Where are we going?” Federico asked.

“To the center of the earth,” she informed him, seriously.

“The center of the earth?” He repeated back, slowly.

“I was jesting,” Olivia rolled her eyes. “I am on my way to see a friend.”

The bordello was not hard to find in the city, draped in red flags and flowers. Olivia did not break stride when heading towards the place but Federico’s steps suddenly became uncertain. “I think you have the wrong place,” Federico commented, recognizing the building.

“I know where I am going,” Olivia said, waved off his concerned. She picked out Ciana amongst her peers, and made her way over with Federico in tow. He still was being in a gentleman, and escorting her with his arm in hers. Although, the way he eyed up the courtesans, she was betting his chivalry was more for his own benefit than hers now. “Sister,” Olivia greeted Ciana, with a smile and detached herself from Federico to pull the woman into a hug. It was part of the agreement they had made to cement a background story if need be that they were sisters that left San Gimignano for a better life. Ciana did not object to the ruse, and in fact seemed pleased that Olivia held her in such high regard.
“I see that your adventure hasn’t done any permanent damage,” the courtesan stated, with a tone of exasperation.

“Can you sound any less enthusiastic about it?” Olivia raised a brow, with a half-smile. “Federico, this is my sister, Ciana. Unless you two are already acquainted?”

“I can’t say I’ve had the pleasure,” Ciana stated, with a flirtatious smile.

“Oh, what pleasures they would have been,” Federico smirked.

The courtesan suppressed her amusement, eyebrow arched upward. “He’s every bit the womanizer you said he was.”

“Ah, so you do think of me,” Federico shot Livvy a grin.

Livvy laughed, with a roll of her eyes.

“Federico!” A group of courtesans giggled.

Federico turned towards them, a charming grin on his face.

“Go, you big flirt,” Olivia nudged him, with a good-natured shake of his head. He flashed her a quick smirk then strutted over to the group who all blushed and giggled at his approach. “I just don’t get it…why do they fall for it?”

“Or why does he fall for it?” Ciana retorted, with a smirk.

Livvy snickered. “Touché.”

Ciana shifted, her posture nervous. “Did you get the house?”

“Not yet. I managed to nab some funds from guards, but the paperwork isn’t quite done,” Olivia commented, her tone suspiciously light. Even if she had a home, she didn’t think she was going to move into it just yet. She didn’t want Carl knowing where her home was. Not until she beat some sense into him and figured out what the hell was going on. She gave a delicate shrug of her shoulders before she cocked her head to the side, peering at Ciana intently. “What’s wrong with you? You seem nervous.” Ciana gnawed on her lower lip, and then released a hearty sight. She reached into the sleeve of her dress, and wordlessly held out a letter. “This was awaiting me when I returned to the bordello for the night. At first, I almost dismissed it as a note from an admirer, but felt compelled to open it. It is a rather disturbing letter and it wasn’t for me,” the courtesan told her, when Olivia gently took the letter. “It was for you.” Olivia went still, a cold sensation slide down the length of her spine. Her breath fell across her lips, more shaky than she liked to admit and she knew in her heart that the letter had to be from Carl. It took her a minute before she unfolded the letter, and she forced air painfully into her lungs.

_I never thought you were one for such sentimentality. So cold and distant, so remote that you never let anyone in until now and that is your fatal mistake, dear sister. You think you have a purpose, a greater good that you could serve and you see the people you have gathered to you as a reason to adhere to your delusions. You’ll find how easily destroyed your so-called noble notions are, and how easily the things you care about can be taken away._

-C

Olivia gulped down the knot in her throat, and felt each written word like a blade to her heart. She felt rooted to the spot, and her grey eyes flickered towards courtesan filled with concern and most of
all an apology. If it were for Ciana’s association with her then Carl wouldn’t have taken noticed of the courtesan at all. “Have you been threatened in any manner, or felt unsafe?” She asked, grim-faced.

The courtesan shot Federico a glance, but he was still too busy flirting with the others to notice anything amiss. “The man that I…serviced that night was found dead in the alley behind the bordello,” Ciana whispered, green eyes glittered with fear that she was trying to hide. “And I certainly took that as a threat.”

“I’m sorry, Ciana,” she apologized, bowing her head. She crumbled up the letter angrily in the palm of her hand, and she lifted her eyes to meet the gaze of her friend. “It’s my fault that you’ve been caught in the middle of this.”

“Middle of what?” Ciana asked.

Olivia pinched the bridge of her nose. “My mess—a mess that I should have done something about years ago, but now has come back to bite in the ass,” she replied, with a bitter and tight smile.

“I was hoping for a most specific answer,” the courtesan said, dryly.

“I promise I will explain soon,” Livvy swore, quietly. “But for right now, it’s…it’s hard to talk about. Just know that I’m not going to let anything happen to you. I will—” She paused, her brows knotted together and she ran a hand down the back of her neck. “I will take care of it.”

She had always prided herself on keeping her promises, trying to adhere to a moral code that she expected from no one save for herself, and it killed her inside that she felt like she was going to have to break one. She swore when her and Carl reconnected after their many years apart that she would always take care of him. They weren’t close, living states apart, but when Carl needed money to help pay his bills or anything, she was had always tried to be there in some capacity. She was there for as much as he would let her be. She admitted that it was partially to assuage the guilt that she hadn’t done more when they were kids. She knew that she had been in the same helpless position he had been in and neither of them were truly to blame for the way their father had become, but she had been the older sibling. She was supposed to be the one to watch and look after her little brother.

But now she was at the crossroads of a horrible choice.

And she didn’t know if she could save them both.

Giovanni Auditore had too many things on his mind. The Templars and their plans, and on top of those concerns, now he had to contemplate the mysterious woman that approached him at the festivities earlier this week. He did not know what to make of her words, or how much truth to place in them. Despite the suspiciousness of her actions, Giovanni felt compelled to believe her even against his better judgment. He paced the length of the room where he and Lorenzo awaited Uberto to arrive with news on their Templar captive.

“Are you alright, Giovanni?” Lorenzo inquired, with a hint of a frown on his features.

“Sì,” Giovanni replied, glancing briefly at his old friend. It was a nauseating feeling to suspect his friends were capable of betrayal, utterly horrible that seeped into his blood and left him cold. The thought of Lorenzo or Uberto being a traitor was wholly unconceivable, and yet he knew the Brotherhood’s history well. Traitors existed amongst its long history, and he had to consider the woman’s words even if he didn’t want to. Until the allegations could be proven true or false, he had to tread carefully. He had so much to lose to not take any threat serious; his family meant everything
to him, and he would do anything to protect them. “I just have a lot of things on my mind. This whole mess about Rodrigo…” He trailed off, allowing Lorenzo to make his own assumptions.

“Yes, I understand,” Lorenzo nodded, sagely. “It seems that whatever plans the Templars have for all of Italy are coming to fruition, despite the fall of one of their most loyal in San Gimignano though Salmoni being dead is one less blade to stab us in the dark.”

“Indeed,” Giovanni smiled, slightly.

The doors to the office swung open revealing Uberto, and he walked in with a tired look on his face. He managed a smile upon sight of his friends, and shut the door tightly behind him. “Lorenzo, Giovanni! I take it that both of you are well?” He asked, his voice soft and hospitable.

“Sì, everything has been well enough,” Lorenzo smiled. “And what of yourself, Uberto?”

“Never better.” Uberto looked over at Giovanni. “What of you and your family, Giovanni? All is well I hope? I saw Petruccio at the party, and he is looking quite healthy. One can only hope that he has finally outgrown this illness.”

“He is doing much better now. We do pray that it is only a childhood illness that he has been afflicted with, but we shall see if his progress continues,” Giovanni replied, with a dip of his head. He hated that he had to keep them at arm’s length, and that he had to treat his good friends with cautious.

Uberto nodded. “It is a blessing I think. A herald of good things to come.”

“Uberto is right,” Lorenzo nodded, with a light laugh. “I have no doubt that in a few years Petruccio will be a strong young man much like his brothers and his days of illness will be forever behind him.”

Giovanni accepted their kinds words, and if God be merciful, they would prove true in time. “The templar I captured…has he given you or your men anything?” He asked, straightening his spine and turning the discussion to the business that brought them all here.

Uberto shook his head. Lorenzo gave a great sigh, and collapsed in his chair while Giovanni’s shoulders slumped slightly. “Whatever he holds it is so great that not even bribes break him. Money, women…beh, he would have none of it. Then I tried threats. Frightened him, but even fear did not loosen his tongue. I believe it’s time we explore other methods to make him talk,” Uberto stated, seriously.

Giovanni tensed slightly. An assassin of the Creed was supposed to be merciful and give a quick death, but that did not mean they wouldn’t torture to procure intelligence. Coercion usually was enough. A man valued their lives very highly, after all but there were times that Giovanni had to do things that even he was not proud of. In the end, one life on a scale against several others would always outweigh and desperate times called for grievous measures. “If you feel that you must, I will trust you judgment,” Giovanni stated, with a small nod.

Lorenzo let out a long sigh before giving his consent. “Very well. Do what you must.”

“I will,” Uberto assured them.

Olivia impressed upon Ciana to stay in plain sight and with a group no matter what. There was safety in numbers, and Carl wouldn’t dare to attack out in the open given his whole mentality of how wrong it was for them to be the past. He wouldn’t want to do anything to draw attention, or at least,
that was the assumption that she was working under. She leaned against the wall, studying the dirt underneath her nails—an unfortunate side effect of climbing up walls and stuff. She was waiting for Federico to return from his little “discussion” with the ladies, and when he returned, his hair was quite messy and he smelt of woman’s perfume and sex. She raised a brow at him, with a pointed look while trying not to laugh at the dopey expression on his face.

“What?” He looked at her, innocently. “You told me to flirt.”

She gave a snort of laughter. She pushed herself off of the wall, and climbed up the side of the building. She had just got to her feet when Federico pulled himself over the edge, and she waited until he was standing before she set out across the Florence rooftops.

“I admit I was starting to get concern about your well-being,” Federico spoke up, when they walked a good distance. “You have been distance as of late. I have to admit I have been missing our group efforts to annoy Vieri.”

“I apologize,” Olivia said, true regret in her gaze. She had stopped visiting Federico a couple of weeks ago, afraid that it may spur Carl into doing something. She didn’t think he would hurt the Auditore family, but the fear was still there. “I haven’t been much like myself lately.”

“Something happened, didn’t it?” Federico guessed, with a heavy frown. “You do not need to speak of it. I can tell that whatever you have gone through is bothering you greatly, so I will not force you to talk about it if it that upsetting, but may I impart some words of advice?”

“Will you be upset if I choose to ignore it?” She tossed him grin that didn’t reach her eyes before slipping down to the street below. He rolled his eyes, then followed suit and then came to a stop beside her.

“Do not let the bad things drain the life from you. Bad things happened, they come and go whether we want them to or not,” Federico told her, brushing the dust off his pants. “We can’t always prepare for them, but we can control how we react to them. Don’t stop living your life because of it because that’s when you let the bad things win.” Livvy stared at him, stunned.

“What?” He snapped, after her stare became unnerving.

“That was pretty good advice,” she murmured, surprised.

He threw her a scowl. “You don’t have to act so surprised!”

“Can you blame me?” She asked him, lips twitching.

After a moment, he reluctantly stated, “No.”

“Federico!” A blur raced at him, hugging him around the middle.

“Petuccio!” Federico caught his younger brother in his arms, a surprised smile flashed across his face that was swiftly followed by concern and worry. “What are you doing out here, bambino? You should not be out here running around. The evening air might make you sick again, and you only just got better.”

Olivia bit her lower lip, watching the brotherly interaction with a twinge of envy and wistfulness. It was obvious to anyone that Federico cared much about his little brother, the way he spoke and hugged him as if he were fragile and meant to be guarded. Her stomach jolted, an image of Petuccio hanging from a noose flickered through her mind and her teeth sank so deep into her lip that she almost drew blood.
Petuccio pouted, a tadbit sullen. “Madre said I could wait outside for you.”

“Well, I suppose Madre knows best,” Federico chuckled, with a smile. He lifted his gaze to meet Olivia’s, and blinked hard as if just remembering she was there. A brief thoughtful look passed over his features before he placed a hand on his brother’s shoulder and turned him towards her. “You know that friend of mine that I was writing to that you and the other wanted to meet so badly? This is my friend Olivia, and Olivia this is my youngest sibling, Petuccio.”

“Hello,” Petuccio greeted, shyly. He had a cherub-like face, still so young and innocent yet she could see hints of the similarities between Petuccio and Federico; same shaped nose, and chin. But the young boy’s eyes were much like Ezio’s—wide and almond shaped.

“Hello there,” Olivia beamed, with a big smile. It was the first real smile to grace her features that day. “It is so nice to meet you. Federico never told me he had such a handsome brother.”

Petuccio’s cheeks flushed in embarrassment that was utterly adorable, if Olivia did say so herself. “It’s a p-pleasure to meet you, too,” he stuttered out, a small bashful smile on his face.

Federico clapped his little brother on the back with a smile that radiated pride. “Just like his big brother,” he stated, with a wide smile.

Olivia laughed, rolling her eyes. “Of course you’d make it about you.”

“Petuccio! Federico! Hurry up, supper is ready and you know that madre does not like it when you are late!” A female voice came from the inner courtyard of the Villa, and Olivia glanced up to catch a quick glimpse of Claudia Auditore whirling on heel and marching back inside the home.

“I suppose we should go in and eat. Head inside Petruccio, I will be in a minute,” Federico told his younger brother. Petuccio glanced at Federico and then Olivia before he gave a small nod, whispering a barely audible goodbye before he darted off towards the house.

Livvy watched, a fond smile on her lips. She was already fond of the Auditore family from the Lineage episodes, and the game, but she found that piece of her heart was growing larger and larger with each passing day. If it grew anymore, they could ask her to walk to the end of the world for them and Olivia wasn’t sure she’d be able to say no.

“Why did you introduce me?” She asked, curious to know his motivations.

“I felt that it was only fair seeing as you introduced me to your sister, Ciana,” Federico replied, with a sincere expression. “I felt that there was no harm introducing you to a member of my family. You showed me trust, and it was only right that I pay it in kind.”

Warmth flooded through her, her eyes widened a margin in surprise by his earnest answer. She looked away, blinking rapidly to stave of the burning sensation of tears and she swallowed the knot of emotion wedged in her throat. “Thank you,” she whispered, once she found her voice.

“For what?” Federico cocked his head to the side.

Olivia smiled from ear to ear. “For being a friend.”

La Volpe was not a man easily vexed, or thwarted. He kept a healthy distance from all those around him, playing life like it were a chess game and keeping his thoughts close to his heart. Still he was just a man with emotions and a past, so that is why he extended an olive branch to Luca. They shared a history that was glorious as it was ugly and tainted with bad blood. He made the offer,
reminding himself that it was what she would have wanted him to do. “Has there been word from Luca?” He inquired, sharply. His violet eyes bore into his scout that stood there, fidgeting nervously with a letter in his hands.

“Yes,” the scout sweated. “H-he told me to give you this.”

La Volpe grasped the letter, tossing it on his desk and unfolding it carefully with a dagger. One could not be too careful to be wary of poisons or worse. His brows rose towards his hairline when he read the message, rereading it twice over before he could comprehend the meaning.

*Messer La Volpe,*

Luca has informed me of your generous offer to protect him and his compatriots. I fear, however, that you have been outmatched in this endeavor. I have given them a most pleasing offer to which they have accepted, so you can return to your foxhole, Swiper and leave me and mine alone.

*The Red Hood*

La Volpe felt a bark of startled laughter escape him, a wave of admiration and annoyance through him in equal measure. “Bold you are, Messer Red Hood,” La Volpe folded up the letter and tossed into the fire. “Bold indeed.”

Olivia took the hammer and slammed it down against the nail while holding the piece of wood as still as she could. She had taken Federico’s advice to heart, and decided that she couldn’t let the situation with Carl—and the many unknown aspects attached to it all—keep her from living her life. So after the house was cleared, and the deed firmly hers, (the hoops and bullcrap she had to go through to purchase it was really best left unsaid) she started to work on it in between her nightly adventures. Her home was coming along nicely if she did say so herself, and it was nice to have some semblance of normal to counterbalance the craziness that had become her life. She lifted up the hammer, her arms ached with the strain of a hard day’s work and brought it down with a loud crack.

The nail sank deep into the wood, securing the board in place.

“Olivia! Olivia Steel!” A voice screeched from the streets below, and Olivia nearly jumped out of her skin by the unexpected shout. She caught herself before she fell off the edge of the rooftop, and her thumb scraped against the nail. The corner bent upward just enough to catch her skin and draw blood. She hissed, bringing her thumb to her lips and sucked on it lightly to ease the sting while eyeballing the hysterical courtesan down below. She vaguely recognized her as one from the group that Ciana worked with, and her gut sloshed about uneasily at the wave of déjà vu that overcame her.

“I am Olivia,” she said, leaning over the edge of the roof so the courtesan could see her better. “Who are you?”

“Oh, thank heavens I have found you,” the young woman wept, eyes filled to the brim with tears. She looked pale and shaken as if she had seen a ghost. “I am Marceline, I work at the bordello alongside of Ciana. Something terrible has happened!”

Olivia felt a rush of panic burst through her heart, and she was off the roof in the blink of an eye. “Has something happened to Ciana?” She asked, the pulse hammering along her clenched jaw in a rapid and frantic beat.

“She’s been taken! I went to awake her this morning when a man attacked me. I thought I was dead, but he spared me only if I promised to bring this to you,” Marceline trembled, big tears rolling across her red blotching cheeks. She pressed a small scrap of paper into Olivia’s hands, and broke down
into inconsolable sobs.

Olivia felt her throat tightened, like a hand wrapped tight around it. Her fingers quaked, even as she fought to keep the steady and she unfolded the tiny piece of paper. The words written there left her blood running cold with fear.

*I gave you a warning, Olivia and you ignored it.*

*Now your ‘sister’ is going to pay the price.*

-C

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Chapter End Notes

END OF CHAPTER
References and Language:
Soretta (Italian) Sister
L’asino (Italian) The ass
Mi Amore (Italian) My love
Conosci meglio, peggio (Italian) Been better, been worse)
Next Chapter: Cain and Abel
Livvy gets unexpected help in the search for Ciana, while someone figures out Livvy’s from the future, and one person shall perish. Who will be? *cue evil laughter here*
Also Luca and La Volpe’s history will be hinted at, but never fully disclosed until the last bit of the story.
Rrs are appreciated! Thanks. If you see any mistakes or flaws with this chapter, tell me and I will fix them. :D
Chapter 14

Disclaimer: I own nothing.
In the next chapter we will get to AC 2 storyline and finally I written Ezio's stuff.
Honestly I had a more lengthy trip to the AC2 beginning, but I really wanted to get the ball rolling. Thanks for being so patient.
AUTHOR’S NOTE: This chapter was intensely difficult to the edit for the sheer fact that I had swapped point of views between character’s too readily, and that was a big mistake I did in a lot of my earlier works. As I am now as a writer, I like to limit point of view to one character (two on occasion) because I don’t want to give too much of a story away, or going into unnecessary depth when it’s not needed. But I got it down so yah!

I want to thank Valshaena, Serya, Library_Drone, Boomer1125, ValentinaRose, silverroses14, Milday_Readsalot, helygen2017, snowfiredragon78, WormwoodSand, WinterChild1994, Shivex, FireBirdOn, MsLilly, The OneKrafter, aadele123, Caratris, delphinepryde84, YalenaYardeen4Queen, EurydiceAnstice, Judex, Mar_mi, JammyONE for the bookmarks!
I want to thank WinterChild1994, Snowfiredragon78, MorriganFreeman and Heather Tshudy for the comments!

Chapter Inspired by the Songs:
“Happyland” by Mans Zelmerlow
“Don’t Think Just Run” by Beth Crowley
“This is the Time” by Nothing More

Edited: 11/11/2018
Updated: 11/13/2018

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Edited: 11/11/2018
Updated: 11/13/2018

Chapter Eleven

“Cain and Abel”

There are moments where I wonder just how I came to be where I am now. Thoughts so heavy and
La Volpe was no fool.

His situational awareness had been honed since a young boy, so he knew the exact moment when he had garnered a little shadow. If he had truly wished to lose the tail, he could have escaped his pursuer with ease. When his violet eyes caught a flash of red, he held back the impulse for his interest had been piqued. What did the Red Hood want with him? Turning into an alleyway where the buildings casted shade, the Fox hid himself well and withdrew a dagger. The corner of his mouth lifted in a dark smirk when the Red Hood stumbled forward, past his hiding spot almost desperately. How someone so careless become so famed for being a notorious thief was beyond him.

He struck out as quick as lightning, arm wrapped around the slighter man and his dagger pressed tight against the red hood man’s jugular. “How did you find me?” La Volpe asked, darkly.

The Master Thief felt the scathingly look even from under the darkness of the hood. And in a smarmy tone, the Red Hood replied, “When you go so far away, my heart can feel your absence.”

La Volpe let the knife bit into the Red Hood’s neck, watching the other thief flinch back and it brought a rather vindictive smile to his lips. “I don’t take well to pests stalking me,” La Volpe intoned, his voice as sharp as the blade. “I will hear your motives because my curiosity demanded satisfaction. That doesn’t mean however, that I won’t still slit your throat without hesitation. Now, I’ll have your explanation for following me and remember, make it a good one. I imagine you can fathom the outcome if I find it lacking.”

The Red Hood stood taut, like a bow string. La Volpe could see how the man wanted nothing more than to bat the dagger away from his throat, but refrained from the urge to do so. Instead, the thief let out a deep and resigned sigh. “I… need your help,” he replied, the words choked and bitter as if they cost the Red Hood a great deal of pride to even say them out loud.


The Red Hood’s nostrils flared as he let out an exhale, his grey glittered from underneath the shadow of his hood. It was strange how the shadows concealed his face, almost unnatural in a way that made the hair on the Fox’s neck to stand on end. “A friend of mine has been kidnapped. I fear that time is not a luxury I can spend, so if you cannot help me then I must find another way.”

La Volpe considered the Red Hood for a long moment, before he released the other thief and slid his dagger back into its sheath. “Do you know who took her?” He asked, his tone nonchalant. He wasn’t sure he would help just yet, but he did wonder just who or what could make the Red Hood so desperate.

“A man…” There was a split second of hesitation, followed by a soundless curse. “A man named Carl. He is about average height, pale in complexion, with green eyes and reddish brown hair. He doesn’t want to be found. He is trying very hard to not make waves, sticking close to the shadows. I need you to find him.”

La Volpe tilted his head, thoughtfully. “Hmm. I’ll do this, but for a price.”

“Deal,” the Red Hood stated, without hesitation.
He gave a bark of laughter, his smile sharp and borderline vicious. “You don’t even know what I am asking for,” the Master thief said, clucking his tongue in light disapproval. “You should not be so eager to make deals with mean such as me without knowing the details.”

“I’m willing to give anything to save my friend,” the Red Hood replied, chin raised defiantly.

La Volpe slanted an indecipherable look at the other thief. “I will send my men out looking for this… Carl,” he rolled the strange name off of his tongue, slowly. “I will seek you out if anything is found.”

“Thank you,” the Red Hood breathed out, shoulders slumped in relief.

“Do not be so quick to hand me your gratitude. This is not out of the goodness of my heart. It is a transaction, and I will one day name my price,” the Fox warned her, his voice deep and grave. “Be hopefully that the day I do come to collect the day be a kind one.”

“Price or no price,” the Red Hood responded, unflustered by his coldness. “You still have my gratitude.”

La Volpe watched the thief turn on heel and leave, feeling rather bemused by these turn of events. He stood there in the shadows for nearly five minutes before he decided to climb upward and moved across the Florence rooftops with new zeal in his step.

The scent of earth and musk permeated the hidden underground chamber. Torchlight flickered bewitchingly along the stone walls, and Giovanni Auditore made a steeple with his fingers and pressed them thoughtfully to his mouth. The new information that had been brought to the Brotherhood had been unexpected as it was alarming. His dark eyes flickered up to his good friend, Uberto. “Are you certain of this? If we make a mistake based on this information…” The Assassin trailed off, with a deep and unsettled frown etched into his features.

“As certain as we can be of the validity of information given under duress,” Uberto responded, his tone weary and carefully. He paced the length of the room, with slow and measured steps. “The Templar we tortured was quite convinced in his story that the Red Hood has allied with the Templars. That the thief is gathering intelligence and artifacts of great importance for the Grand Master as we speak.”

Giovanni’s brow furrowed. “This does not align with the actions of the Red Hood thus far. The actions of the thief against Salmoni in San Gimignano and the encounter with La Volpe, has indicated that the Red Hood has a great distaste for the Templar Order,” the Assassin stated, shaking his head lightly.

“It could have been a calculated effort on the Templar Order’s part to present the Red Hood as such,” Lorenzo de Medici murmured, with a troubled look in his eyes. “It could have been a well-built and clever façade to make the thief appear as a potential ally.”

Uberto folded his arms behind him. “It is a possibility. Regardless, if this information is true then the Red Hood is a threat that needs to be dealt with swiftly. He had already won the heart of the people. I do not think a day has gone by that I do not hear some rumor or story about the Red Hood on the streets. It would be best to pull the roots while they are not deep.”

“Yet we cannot afford to act with haste,” Lorenzo commented, twisting the signet ring on his finger idly. “The truth of the matter cannot be determined without further investigation. I would not make a potential ally an enemy based on rumor alone.”

“Then what do you propose?” Uberto demanded, cuttingly. “Wait until the Red Hood comes after
Giovanni intervened before an argument could spiral out of control, as it was prone to do as of late between Uberto and Lorenzo. “I will look into the matter myself. If the information proves well-founded, then I will deal with the Red Hood,” the Assassin stated, firmly.

Lorenzo nodded, after a moment. “Very well. I trust your judgment Giovanni.”

“As do I,” Uberto agreed.

Giovanni inclined his head, in acknowledgement. “Then I bid you all farwell,” he said, quietly. “Pray that I bring good news the next time we meet.”

The Assassin strode up the stairs, and through the crawl space that led out of the hidden space in the Medici Bank. He sealed the entrance behind him before he exited the backroom, and out into the foyer where the crowd was light for a Sunday. Silently, he hoped that his friends’ judgment wasn’t misplaced.

Olivia closed her eyes in despair, sinking wearily down on the stool. Her head was pressed into her hands, the throbbing in her skull from frustration and helpless increased with each passing hour. Fear was a constant companion in these recent days, stealing the ability to rest or eat. “You have found absolutely nothing?” Livvy asked, hands dropped down to her side. Her eyes peered at Luca from underneath her cowl, and she sighed when the bartender shook his head side to side.

Olivia had sent out her own network of spies to keep an ear and eye on the streets, not merely content to have La Volpe and his men to do all the work. The more people on hand then the more likely Carl, and thus Ciana, would be found.

“I have my men still searching for signs of this man,” Luca reassured her, grim-faced and severe. “But if there is any more information you can share that would aid us in our efforts, then now would be the time.”

“I cannot think of a single that would help. I have searched my mind a thousand time, and come up blank every single time. Carl and I were close as children, but…” Her voice trailed off, eyes swimming with a sea of regrets and sorrows. For a moment, she just pressed her fingertips to her lips as if willing no more to spill past. It felt like if she said another word, then she would breakdown and she couldn’t allow that to happen. Swallowing the knot of emotions burning in the back of her throat, Olivia looked back at Luca who studied her with a sharp gaze. “Anything I knew of him is unlikely to help now. He is not the same boy that I knew. He’s something far more darker and dangerous than I ever imagined. Keep looking, and report to me if anything no matter how small is found.”

Luca nodded. “As you wish.”

Olivia rose off the stool, and left the bar with tension drawn tight along her spine. It was as if the world rested its woes upon her shoulders and she could feel her knees buckle underneath the weight of it all. Was this punishment for all the things she couldn’t protect Carl from as they were children? Punishment for all the failures, and bad choices she had ever made? She wasn’t a saint by far, but she did not think she was so evil to have karma take such a vicious swing at her like this now.

Her eyes flickered across the crowd, searching for any sign of Carl or Ciana. She knew it was an effort made in vain, but there was a kernel of hope inside of her that wouldn’t die. Her hands curled into fists, the urge to strike or lash out at something bubbled with her like a boiling pot. She watched a group of kids getting into a heated argument, but the nearby guards broke it up quickly when fists
started to fly. For a brief moment, Olivia saw herself and Carl in the children’s shoes. Saw the bitter past where the two siblings were pitted against one another, and the steep shadow of their father that still hovered over her to this very day.

“Psst, psst.”

The sound snapped Olivia out of her dark thoughts. Her head whipped to the side to see a man dressed in torn rags, at the mouth of the alleyway, beckoning her attention. This made her leery for a number of reasons. Thieves or worse took advantage of the alleyways of Firenze. The man could be looking to steal a bit of coin, and thought that a slight man—as Olivia appeared to be with her clothes and hood—would be easily overpowered. The man could also be looking to hurt her in more vicious ways, and revulsion darted down her spine with a shudder. “I beg your pardon?” She sneered, eyes narrowed.

She didn’t not move closer to the alleyway, and laid her hand upon the hilt of her sword. She watched the man fidget nervously, before he dared to leave the safety of the alleyway and approach her.

When he was within arm’s reach, he stopped and asked in a voice barely more than a whisper, “You are the Red Hood, yes?”

Olivia eyed him, disdainfully. She gave a slow nod, her hand tightening around her sword. She watched him the gaze of a hawk, and one false move, she would strike him down without mercy.

“Good. It is good that I finally found you,” the man trembled, eyes darting about with fear and anxiety. “I am one of La Volpe’s. He told me to tell you that the one you seek is in there,” he added, pointing a finger at the large unfinished cathedral that stood haloed in the sun just behind her.

There’s something about this that makes my nose twitch, Livvy thought, with a skeptical brow raised. One of La Volpe’s men just happened to be stationed at the cathedral just as she walked by from Luca’s bar? The cathedral that Carl was supposedly holed up in? She hated to be so pessimistic, but it was a bit too convenient for her taste. Still she couldn’t just walk away without investigating this new “lead”. There was a great chance that this was a trap of some sort, but she had to risk those odds—if not for her, then for Ciana’s sake. She looked back at the raggedy man, committing his face to memory before she tossed his a small purse full of coin. “Thank you,” she said, with a saccharine smile.

“God bless you, sir,” he replied back before running away.

Livvy snorted, lightly underneath her breath. She walked towards the cathedral with a tight expression on her face, and she glanced around the entrance to note a strange lack of guards or people. This only increased her paranoia, so she entered with caution and care, eyeing the empty pews with more than a little worry. Her heart was a steady rhythm beating in her ears like a drum, and she kept one hand on her sword. She approached the front of the church, when a voice called out from behind her, “Red Hood.”

The Red Hood whirled around, blade half withdrawn when the thief went completely still, like a statue. Shock jolted through her like she had been struck by lightning when she found herself faced with a familiar white hood, the Assassin Giovanni Auditore. He was truly a terrifying sight in his white robes, the hint of blood splattered along the edges and the air around him was artic cold and merciless. She felt panic trickle through her blood like a quickening, and she could swear she heard her heart hammering wildly in her throat. It took her several moments to find her voice, and she whispered out, evenly, “Assassin.”
Giovanni frowned, deeply. The flash of his eyes made her spine stiffen, knowing that he was using the eagle vision to scan her. Breath caught tight in her throat, she realized that he would likely see the strange green aura that he had said she had when she approached him the party. She waited for the inevitable reveal, but it did not come. Instead, his eyes flashed back to normal and she could feel the waves of frustration coming off of him ten feet away. *Is…is his eagle vision not working? The Red Hood thought, worriedly. Or is something else?*

Regardless, it just made the female thief all that more concerned.

“What do you want? What are you after?” Giovanni questioned, darkly.

“Want?” the Red Hood's voice went shrill, nearly too shrill for a man and she cleared her throat roughly. “I am afraid I don’t follow. There are many things I want, but not a thing from you. If you think I have intentionally sought you out here, then you are sorely mistaken. Mere coincidence that you and I happened to collide.”

Not that she believed that.

“I don't believe in coincidences,” Giovanni stated sharply.

“Good policy,” the Red Hood inclined her head, sagely.

Giovanni hummed deeply, before he took calculated and measured steps towards her. His boots echoed softly against the marbled floor, and he circled her lazily like a vulture would. “Your conspirators sold you out,” he informed the Red Hood, darkly. “Perhaps you should have put your faith in better people.”

“Conspirators?” the Red Hood replied, a note of confusion in her voice. She carefully made sure to keep her eyes facing him at all times, and her back faced away from him. Anxiety prickled at her skin white hot and burning, and sweat dotted along her brow. “And I'm afraid I don't have time for games. I have more important things that require my time.”

“Yes…your friend, was it?” Giovanni's voice was light, almost mocking. “She is missing?”

The Red Hood upper lip curled, ever so. “I think I smell a fox in the henhouse,” she grounded out, between clenched teeth. She had no doubt that La Volpe would share her plight with the Brotherhood. It was not an unreasonable assumption given the way she had gained notoriety, and had gotten herself mixed up in the middle of the age old war. Still it raked across her skin like hot coals, having tales of her passed around by the some of the most dangerous people in all of Italy. Olivia felt her scowl deepen when La Volpe sidled out of his hiding spot with his arms folded over his chest, and the Master Thief shot her a cutting smile.

The Red Hood scoffed. “Who invited you to this party, Swiper?”

La Volpe grimaced at the nickname, unable to mask his distaste and ignored the questioning look that Giovanni sent him. To his credit, the Fox quickly regained his composure and glowered at her darkly. “So…the Red Hood, a Templar. I expected better of you,” the Master Thief stated, an undertone of disappointment in his voice.

“Huh?” Came the intelligent reply. The Red Hood stood there, posture slipped into something less focused and more dumbfounded in nature. The words repeated on loop in her ears until she finally managed to comprehend the accusation, and a number of emotions swelled up inside of her. A trickle of laughter that felt too sharp and too ugly to be real amusement tumbled out of her mouth before she could hold them back. “Did you…did you really just call me a Templar? Why on God’s green earth
“Would you ever think that?”

“A reliable source,” Giovannit told her, after sharing a brief glance with the Fox.

“Forgive me, but I fear that you must have a skewed understanding of the word **reliable**,” the Red Hood stressed, sardonically. Her heart hammered at the base of her skull, and her mouth went dry with panic. “**Reliable** means able to be **trusted** or **dependable**. And clearly since I’m not a fucking Templar by any stretch of the imagination, I would have to say that your so-called source sucks big, sweaty donkey balls.”

There was a moment where both the Assassin and Master Thief absorbed the colorful and unusual insult. If the situation hadn’t been so serious, she might have been tempted to genuinely laugh. As it stood, she was too pissed off to find humor right this very moment.

Giovanni was the first to recover. “Our source gave information that you would be here in this cathedral, recovering an artifact of grave importance to the Templar Order,” the Assassin said, with a slight tilt of his head. “How do you explain your presence if not for that?”

Understanding blossomed in her mind, and she cursed quietly. “I had not planned on coming to the cathedral, recovering an artifact of grave importance to the Templar Order,” the Assassin said, with a slight tilt of his head. “How do you explain your presence if not for that?”

Understanding blossomed in her mind, and she cursed quietly. “I had not planned on coming to the cathedral, recovering an artifact of grave importance to the Templar Order,” the Assassin said, with a slight tilt of his head. “How do you explain your presence if not for that?”

“I had not planned on coming to the cathedral. A man approached me claiming to work for the Fox. Given that our association was likely not well-known, I had thought to take a risk to come here anyways despite every warning sign I saw,” she spoke, her tone rushed and hurried. There was a flutter of panic that went through her heart, and she drew her sword free from the sheath. “It’s a trap, for all of us.”

La Volpe breathed in through his nose sharply, his violet eyes narrowed when a great number of mercenaries entered the building with weapons drawn and approached them. “I hate Templars,” he growled out.

The Red Hood’s jaw clenched. *Was it the Templar’s who planned this? Or Carl? No, this trap reeks of Templar desperation. Carl is too well devoted to not messing up the timeline, and putting Giovanni and La Volpe in a potential death trap would cause massive ripples beyond repair for the future.*

Giovanni tossed the Fox a triumphant smirk. “I told you something was off.”

“Alright, alright, you were right. You can gloat about it later, I fear we have more pressing issues right now.” La Volpe rolled his eyes, with a good natured grin. The fight erupted in the blink of an eye, the Red Hood charging straight into the fray while La Volpe threw a smoke bomb to give an edge to his subterfuge. The Assassin dodged a blade, cutting a mercenary’s throat open wide with his hidden blade. Rushing forward, he dropped his body to the ground and slid underneath the pews, circling around with the swiftness of a lion to charge the mercenaries from behind.

“Afraid of a few mercenaries, La Volpe?” Giovanni called out, grabbing a mercenary and using him as a shield against an oncoming arrow.

“The odds are in their favors,” La Volpe stated, burning a blade clean through a man’s gut.

“Oh, get a room,” the Red Hood huffed, rolling her eyes at their antics. Her sword clanged against an oncoming blade, the force of the blow made her wobble ever so slightly. Steadying herself quickly on her feet, the thief kicked out and hit the man right between his legs. He gasped out, shocked and eyes bulging. She shoved him backwards with all the force she could muster, knocking him into another mercenary about to throw a knife straight at the Fox’s back. Turning her focus onto the enemy closest to her, she parried his blade and then pulled free her dagger to bury it to the hilt in his eye. His body slumped, and Olivia felt her stomach roll violently. Violence was a part of her life,
a part that would always feel wrong even though she was good at it.

“Behind you!” Giovanni called out to her.

The Red Hood dropped to her knees on instinct, as a sword sail over her head. She reached up, grabbing the mercenary’s arm and twisted it at an unnatural angle, slamming down on the corner of the nearest pew. The man stumbled back in pain, and the Red Hood brought her sword around in a wide arc, with such force that it went clean through the man’s neck and severed his head off of his body. Olivia recoiled, at the blood that splattered outward and she trembled, feeling a trail of it slid down across her cheek.

“Move!” the Fox barked.

Olivia was jolted out of the fog, and then pain exploded from the back of her skull. It was her quick hand, grasping the nearby pew that kept her from crumbling into a heap on the ground. “Son of a bitch,” she said, through gritted teeth and leapt out of the way to dodge the strike of the hammer.

“May I cut in?” La Volpe slipped seamlessly between her and the mercenary.

“All yours,” the Red Hood choked.

With a deadly grace and precision of a person who had trained all their life to be lethal, La Volpe moved like music with each strike and dodge a note in the song. She held a healthy admiration for his abilities as well as a great deal of envy, though she would never say that out loud. The mercenary fell to the ground with a blade buries in his heart, and Giovanni swept the last mercenary’s feet out from underneath him before he plunged the hidden blade into his neck.

The cathedral went quiet in the aftermath of the battle, and her breaths seemed too harsh and loud in the wake of it. There was a moment where she felt too fragile, like cracked glass that was one second away from shatter and it took all of her willpower to turn away from the blood sight left on the church floor. Her fingers trembled, brushing along the back of her skull and she let out a shaky breath at the feel of blood on her scalp. She only hoped that her skull was not fractured, because there would be no doctor skilled enough in this time to save her if so. “So…killing people in a church, does that add being a heretic to my growing list of attributes?” She commented, latching on to her sarcastic wit like it was a lifeline.

“A badge you will wear with honor, no doubt,” La Volpe replied, dryly. His left cheek was swollen with a darkening bruise, and he touched it with a slight wince.

The Red Hood gave a noncommittal shrug.

“As much as I enjoy a good battle,” Giovanni commented, wryly. “I do not think we should linger here.”

It was if his words had jinxed them, for in the next moment the telltale footsteps and the clinking of armor grew louder and louder. “Guards,” the Red Hood whispered out, her eyes darted towards the entryway. “They sent guards after us, too? They really do want us dead.”

“Take it as a compliment,” La Volpe told her quickly. “Now run!”

Olivia didn’t need to be told twice. She pushed herself up off the ground, following the heels of the Assassin and the Fox. The sheer number of guards that entered the cathedral was easily double the number of the mercenaries, and that made the Red Hood say enough curse words to make a sailor blush. She scrambled up the scaffold with less than half the finesse that the two men possessed, but she managed to make it to the top.
“Up there!” A guard yelled.

She rose to her feet, when a throwing knife soared through the air. It buried deep into her back, the pain made her body sway backwards and her foot had nothing underneath it. Her life flashed before her eyes when the Assassin spun around, his hand clasped on the collar of her shirt and stared to pull her upward when his Eagle Vision seemed to flare to life. Everything went still, Giovanni looked torn between being confused and sheer disbelief.

Olivia felt her heart pounding in her chest because she was precariously hanging off the edge of the scaffolding, and the knife in her back was more than little bit painful. Self-preservation told her to bit her tongue, to not say a word to the man who literally held her life in his hand.

“What is the matter?” La Volpe asked, his gaze fixated on them.

There was a moment, where something dark flickered across the assassin’s face. Olivia was certain by the way his fingers loosened ever so slightly that she was about to plummet to her death, and the irony that it would be by the hand of someone she was so desperate to save wasn’t lost on her. The darkness faded after a great moment, and he blinked hard as if trying to rid himself of a particularly painful headache. He hauled her up the rest of the way to safety, and Olivia went to pull the dagger from her back when he halted her. “It will bleed worse if you remove the blade now,” Giovanni ordered, lightly. “Wait until we get somewhere safe.”

“You want me to flee with a knife in my back?” The Red Hood asked, incredulously.

“You could stay and chat with them if you find the idea so grievous,” La Volpe pointed to the guards who attempted to climb upward.

“Running sounds fine,” she said, without batting an eye.

“Good. Now, this way.”

Across some questionable boards, La Volpe led them out through an opening in the wall that had yet to be sealed up. Slicing through the thick material to protect from weathering, the unlikely trio found themselves on top of a scaffold that was easily three stories above the ground. The sun was setting and the shade of night was slowly claiming the city, which would give them much needed cover for their escape. “Where do we go from…” Her voice trailed off, when she looked straight down—way down—to make out a hay bale down below. “Oh, no. No, just no. I am not jumping.”

“Scared?” La Volpe taunted.

“No,” the Red Hood denied, vehemently. “I just don’t…think it's in good taste to jump off a building and hope that I land in a tiny bale of hay.”

Giovanni and La Volpe shared an exasperated look that made her all kinds of offended. The two were literally have a conversation with their eyes alone, all hand gestures and pointed glares, that was cut abruptly short at the sound of thunderous footsteps behind them. Apparently, the guards had made it up the scaffolding. The Assassin shot her an apologetic kind of smile, and without warning grabbed her arm in a vice grip.

Olivia felt her breath seize in her chest. “No, no, no! Don't you dare! That is way too HIGH!” She screamed the last word, when she was thrown off the side of the scaffold. The world flew around her in a blur of colors, and then with a painful thud, she landed in the bale of hay with grunt. All the air in her lungs had been knocked right out of her and she was pretty sure, her heart burst in her lung. The knife in her lower back was pressed deeper into her body, and the agony seemed to scrap her
nerve endings raw. She was mindful enough of the situation to pull herself clumsily out of the cart, and she shakily collapsed to her knees on the cobblestone path, fighting the urge to vomit. Her hands wrapped around her hood, pulling it right to conceal the pale and sickly hue of her face from bystanders.

She was barely aware of the Assassin and Fox making the same jump, until they were right beside her and she flashed them a glare so full of ire that it made La Volpe chortled. She picked herself off of the ground, her legs a bit unsteady and she pointed an accusing finger at the Assassin. “I should kill you,” she hissed.

“It will have to wait,” the Assassin murmured, darkly.

Olivia followed his gaze, and saw the guard patrol exiting the cathedral. “I take it we run?” The Red Hood suggested, glancing over at the two of them.

“Only a fool would stay and fight,” the Fox smirked, and Giovanni returned it as if the two were sharing a private joke. “Now where to run? We cannot just go blindly.”

“I know a place that we can hide them out,” the Red Hood replied, shifting on the ball of her nervously. “Follow me,” she turned and ran as fast as she could.

It had taken fifteen minutes, a few close calls with a couple of guards, before they reach an abandoned and rundown shack—one of the many locations that Olivia used to place cache of supplies for herself if ever needed—and entered through one of the upper windows that had nothing barring the way in.

The Red Hood stumbled forward, her hand reached around to the back to pull free the knife. She choked the sob wedged in the back of her throat like a broken glass, and she dropped the blade to the floor aimlessly. She knelt down on the floor to pull free the floorboard to retrieve the bandages that she had stowed away with some medicine and alcohol among other things. She grasped the bandages with her bloody fingers, and started to carefully work it around her body. It was a shoddy job; the bandage would have been better if she could strip and wrap it properly around the wound, but she didn’t have that luxury with her two occupants. When time permitted, she would go to a doctor and have it stitched and bandaged properly.

Grasping the small vial of medicine, she glared at it. She wasn’t sure what they put in this so called medicine, but she wasn’t entirely sure she wanted to ingest it. Putting the medicine back away, she opted to grab the bottle of ale instead.

The Fox had leaned propped against the wall, closest to the window while the Assassin peeked through the boarded up window on the opposite of the room to keep an eye on the streets. The Red Hood stumbled over to an old rickety chair and settled down into it. “How long do you think we are going to have to hide?” She inquired, quietly.

“How long do you think we are going to have to hide?” She inquired, quietly.

“Is there somewhere else you need to be?” La Volpe had a mocking smile upon his lips as his violet eyes regarded the Red Hood.

The Red Hood sneered, fiddling with the edge of her hood self-consciously. “Let me see, where would I rather be? Stuck in the dark, with an ass of a fox and an assassin, covered in blood and hay or—”

“There is no need to be contrary,” the Assassin told her, with a look. “We have little choice in venue and with the amount of guards,” Giovanni spared a glance out the window and watched the squads march up and down the street, “we will have to wait it out here until they move elsewhere.”
“What a joyous occasion this will be,” La Volpe muttered, sarcastically.

The Red Hood caught it and glowered at him. The Master Thief returned the glower, ten-fold.

“Be civil,” the Assassin told his friend. “If it is in your nature to be so.”

“Yes, Swiper,” the Red Hood innocently agreed. She popped the cork on the ale, and her lips twitched into a small smirk. “Maturity is what we are striving for here. One would think you would understand that concept, giving your…advancement in years.”

“Stronzo!” La Volpe barked at her.

The Red Hood laughed.

“Enough,” the Assassin's voice was sharp, and filled with exasperation. “Or I will toss you both to the guards myself.”

Olivia immediately went quiet. He had literally thrown her off scaffolding, so she wouldn’t put it past him to do throw her out of a window if he felt so inclined. La Volpe on the other hand, took a moment to grumble a few colorful words underneath breath at his friend. Dark eyes glared into violet and the Master Thief let out a great sigh before he relented and went quiet.

“This trap worries me,” La Volpe turned to the Assassin.

“It does me as well,” Giovanni nodded. “I had my reservations before this all occurred, and it seems that now more than ever we need to be on our guard.”

Olivia idly sipped on her ale, pretending to not be interested in the cryptic tone of their conversation. She raised a brown when the Fox suddenly turned to her, and warned, “You should be on your guard as well. The Templars appear all too eager to get rid of you.” He then added, scathingly, “Like many others.”

The Red Hood ignored the jab. “You suspected it was a trap as well. That is why you didn’t immediately attack me,” she said, trying to gauge their reaction to her words.

La Volpe gifted her with a scornful smile. “You’ve made no secret of your disdain for the Templar Order. What was it that you compared them, too? Cockroaches, I believe?” The Master Thief smirked, the tiniest hint of amusement in his gaze. “It was our belief that the Templar intentionally planted the information to take out two birds with one stone, by pitting the Assassin and yourself against one another.”

Olivia worked her jaw, up and down. “I had hoped to avoid their attention a little bit longer…” the Red Hood took a healthy sip of the alcohol, and let her eyes fall closed while her mind conjured up all different ways that this would be bad.

“I am afraid that won’t be possible,” Giovanni said, sympathetically.

The Red Hood nodded, gloomily.

“Should you be drinking that?” La Volpe arched a brow when she took another sip.

“Dulls the pain,” she replied, with an eye roll. “I’ve been knocked around too much today for my liking, though I’ve had worse so I’m sure I’ll live.”

“What a pity,” the Fox said, scathingly.
“Ass.” Her comeback was sweet, simple and straight to the point. There was a weight-less, dizzy sensation that weaved around her forehead that made her close her eyes for several seconds until the world righted itself. “Keep it up, Swiper, and you’ll find out there’s still a little fight in me after all,” she added, with a smile that was all teeth.

La Volpe snorted.

Giovanni heaved a put upon sigh. He was probably wondering how he got himself into this situation.

Olivia rolled the tension from her shoulders, with her brows furrowed together. “I can’t help, but to wonder how the Templars knew that I had come to La Volpe for aid. Who have you told, you stupid fox?” She demanded, eyes pinned on his back.

La Volpe didn't appreciate being called a stupid fox if the glare he shot her was any indication, but his eyes darted to the Assassin shortly after that. She would have to be a fool to miss the tension in the air, and her heart clenched tight in her chest. There had to be a traitor amongst them, amongst the Brotherhood. Was it Uberto or someone else? She thought, gnawing on her lower lip.

“Have you told anyone?” La Volpe countered, after a moment.

Olivia huffed. “No. I haven’t. I don’t outsource my problems, often keeping them close to home and deal with them on my own. If anyone’s going to screw and get kill because of my mistakes, it'll be me not…” Her hand pressed to her forehead, another wave of dizziness overcoming her. She needed to get out of here. This blood loss was loosening her tongue and she needed to get out of here before she went from sarcastic babble to spilling her guts. She pursed her lips not saying anything further.

A few awkward and tense moment ticked by before La Volpe broke it. The Master Thief stated, “As exhilarating this little adventure has been, I have a thief imposter to catch. And we,” he shot Giovanni a look, “a rat to sniff out and answers to find.”

Giovanni’s expression darkened, eyes as hard as steel. “That we do.”

“Good luck. And when you find him, Swiper, make him choke on those florins I gave him, hmm?” Olivia tried for a smirk, but it looked more like a grimace. She took another strong swig of the ale, and then looked at the Fox with a carefully guarded expression. “One last thing…our agreement. Do I still have your help?”

“I will keep to my end of the bargain, as we agreed. Don't forget my price,” La Volpe told her, before he vanished out of the window silent as a ghost.

Giovanni peered at her for several seconds, as if weighing something heavily inside of his mind. For a moment, it seemed that he was going to hold back his judgments and slip away into the night when he stopped at the edge of the window, and turned back towards her. “What is that you are really after? A mere thief to be caught up in the Templar’s game seems unlikely. There is more to you and your motives than gold coins and a notorious reputation,” the Assassin stated, with clarity.

“That is…not a question as easy answered as you might think. It is not because I harbor any ill intentions, but that it is a long and frankly warped tale that I’m still trying to figure out for myself. I’m not sure that I could explain it to anyone else right now,” the Red Hood said, regretfully. She had a knuckle white grip on the bottle of ale, and drew in a deep breath. “But I don’t think this is the last time that we will meet. Mayhap the next time our paths cross, I have a better idea of what is happening to give you answers to sate your curiosity.”

Giovanni conceded, with a small nod. “We will meet again. I can promise you that.”
Under the splintered light of the crescent moon drifting in through the opened window, Giovanni dashed away into the night. The Red Hood released a relieved sigh, feeling her knees wobble ever so slightly. “Damn, that man is scary,” she whispered out, pinching the bridge of her nose. She was now left shaken and with a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach, the today’s events all crashing down on her shoulders. What am I going to do, she thought, mournfully.

Hooves drummed against the cobblestone path while the Assassin slipped through the shadows, and people scurried away off the darkened street into whatever place would have them for the night. “Why do you follow, La Volpe?” Giovanni demanded, after he swept into a dark alcove. The Fox dropped down off of the nearby scaffolding, with a worried furrow to his brow.

“We must speak.”

“About the traitor?” Giovanni asked.

“That amongst other things,” La Volpe replied, swiftly.

Giovanni released a sharp breath. He had known the change in his demeanor had not gone unnoticed by the Fox, but he had hoped to avoid an interrogation at this moment given the prospect of a betrayer in their midst. “You wish to ask me about why I hesitated,” he said, quietly.

“Yes. As the most starch supporter that the Red Hood could be a good ally, when you saved the thief from a messy fall there was a moment that you were going to let the man fall to his death,” La Volpe stated, arms folded over his chest. “I have to question why.”

Giovanni wiped the sweat from along his brow. “There was a moment…when I did not feel of my own mind,” he admitted, displeasure etched into every line of his face.

“What do you mean?” The Fox asked, alarmed.

“I know not how to describe it. Ever since I stepped into that cathedral, my vision showed the Red Hood as a target or an ally. It was as if the colors were battling with one another, as if something was trying to get me to see the infamous thief as an enemy when she was not,” Giovanni whispered out, pinching the bridge of his nose between his forefinger and his thumb. It felt like a darkness had invaded his mind, burrowing deep into his mind and twisted it. It had been a relief when La Volpe had spoken, the sharp command had snapped him out of the spell he had fell under. “And when I stood upon that scaffolding, I felt a sensation as if I were outside of myself and I could feel my fingers begin to let go. If you had not been there, I am not sure I would have been able to stop myself from dropping her where she stood.”

“What would be able to manipulate the eagle vision?” La Volpe wondered out, visibly disturbed by the implications. “Do the Templars have a Piece of Eden? Was the trap a way to test its effectiveness?”

“I know not,” Giovanni shook his head side to side. “If the Templars had a Piece of Eden, I believe we would have been made aware of it before now, but if it is not a Piece of Eden that was responsible…”

La Volpe’s jaw went tight. “I shudder to think what has such power.”

Giovanni dipped his head in agreement. “The others will need to be told.”

“I will inform them with haste,” La Volpe promised. The two parted ways, both grim in the face of the drastic turn that today had taken. Neither could imagine the turns still yet to come.
It was an extremely delicate organ, the heart. Leonardo da Vinci was busying dissecting the organ with a careful meticulousness in order to create a perfect diagram, and learn all of the secrets of one of the most vital organs in the body, second only to the mind. With a steady hand, Leonardo peeled back the layers with a skilled precision to make sure to learn all that he could without damaging the organ too much. He had only so many cadavers to work with, given the city finding his scientific research in poor taste so he had to do as much as he could with what he had. He was so lost inside of his work that he nearly missed the soft sound of the door opening and close.

Alarm skirted up his spine, Leonardo lifted his eyes from his work with a suspicious frown settled upon his features. His assistant, Angiolo, would not be here and not at this time of night. There were several unsettling conclusions that immediately came to mind, and his hand clenched around his dissecting knife. It was small and thin, unfit for defense but he had no other weapons. With his breath held tight in his chest, Leonardo moved across the room and made his footsteps as quiet as he could. He edged his way out to the parlor wishing he had thought to keep the hearth lit so the room wasn't blanketed in darkness.

Leonardo swallowed, heart pounding in his chest. He strained to hear any trace of movement, or breathing. And then, he heard the eerie groan of the floorboard and a rustle of clothing. He whirled around with a battle cry, and his intruder yelped, toppling backwards of something. There was a loud clattered and a thud when a familiar voice yelped, “Shit!”

That curse with the flash of red and Leonardo had his answer. “Olivia,” he breathed out, hand over his thundering heart. The artist hurried over to his cupboard and fumbled around until he found the items necessary to light a candle, and he held up to illuminate the room. “What are you doing here?”

The Red Hood pulled her leg free from the chair and set it back up with great care. “I came here…” the thief turned, and then paused at the sight of him. She blinked her blurry gray eyes, sweat beading along her temple and her head cocked to the side. “Why…why are you covered in blood?” Her nose wrinkled. “And smell like road kill?”

“I was working on a corpse before you snuck in here like a thief in the night,” Leonardo explained, nonchalantly.

“Oh.” Olivia blinked. “And I am a thief in the night,” she added before a groan slipped out of her. Her hands shot out, and she steadied herself against the wall as her legs threatened to buckle.

“You're hurt!” Leonardo rushed over to her side. “Sit, sit.”

“Yeah, it tends to happen from time to time,” she told him, flashing him a weak smile. She collapsed back into the seat, and pulled her hood down off of her head. It had become quite normal for the famed thief to stop by at least once a week to consult or speak to the painter. There were very enlightening conversations and he found himself pleasantly surprised by Olivia’s knowledge and outlook on the world. To his surprise, Leonardo found himself a friend in the young woman who seemed to house a wealth of secrets.

“Do you even know how to be careful?” Leonardo asked, heavily. Her armor had been stripped and laid aside while the artist checked the damage of the knife had done to her back. Running with the weapon in her back had not helped matters, the blade had torn the wound wider but it was not a lethal injury which was a case of extreme luck. The knife had been two inches from her spinal cord. He cleaned and sterilized the wound to the best of his ability.

“It’s hard to be careful when there are guards after my head.”
He glared, and despite being a known pacifist, he had managed to cultivate an impressive glower. He watched her sarcasm melt away into a sheepish blush, and she relented with a slight roll of her eyes. “I will strive to be more careful…mother hen,” she accused, a flicker of amusement in her eyes.

Leonardo picked up a clean needle, and lined it with thread. “Now that is something that I have never been called before,” the painter stated, with a wry sort of smile.

Livvy grinned, wincing ever slightly due to the split and bruised lip. “I apologize for scaring you. It wasn’t my intention. It has been a very…stressful day to say the very least,” she hissed when he pressed the needle through her skin and began to stitch up the wound. “I didn’t think I could make it home, or to a doctor. You were the only person I could think given the situation.”

“Olivia, don’t apologize,” he scolded her, gently. “My door is always open to friends.”

“You might come to regret that offer,” she chuckled, wearily.

“Never,” Leonardo asserted. He finished up the stitches, and Olivia rested back against the chair. Clearing away his supplies, he found a piece of charcoal and parchment, sitting down in a chair adjacent from her. “Perhaps now you will sit still enough for me to get a proper sketch.”

Laughter bubbled up out of her, Olivia smiled at him. She was ever elusive as her alter ego, constantly in motion in such a way that made it difficult for him to capture her entire likeness on paper. “Maybe,” she responded, running her fingers through her tangled hair. “Have the guards given you any trouble as of late?”

“No more than usually,” Leonardo stated, with a dismissive flick of his finger.

A disgruntled winkle settled along her brow line. “I wish you would allow Luca’s men to guard you. He has readily offered his assistance,” Olivia said, very quietly.

“There have been a great number of days that I have been tempted by the offer, but you know my fears,” Leonardo stated, with a patient smile. His fingers busied bring the charcoal across the parchment, and the candle light wavered in the darkness. “If the guards noticed that I had people protecting my shop, it would only bring more suspicion upon my head. There are many that wish to see my failure, even jailed for my work.”

“I understand,” Livvy nodded, eyes falling closed and she rubbed them tiredly. “It is just with everything that has happened; I just want to make sure that everyone I care about is safe.”

“I know,” the artist commented, with a sympathetic look.

Olivia chewed on her lower lip, peeling her eyes open slowly and looked around the room with a crestfallen look. There was an absent of light there, that made her look hollow and lost inside of her own world. “I’m at the end of my rope and I feel like I am slipping. I have been around Florence more times than I can count, hoping to pick up any trace of where he has taken Ciana. Luca and his men have found nothing, and I have even broken down to crawl to La Volpe for help.” The column of her neck, trembled with a upset breath and it took her several seconds to fight to keep her composure before she was able to continue. “A week has passed with no notes, no threatens, no insurance that she is alive. And my imagination is running rampant with endless worst case scenarios. What if his intentions were never to lead me into a trap? What if his purpose was to punish me by killing her? She could be dead somewhere and I am just running around—”

Leonardo halted in his drawings, and peered up at her with serious and piercing blue eyes. “Listen to me, Olivia,” he interrupted her, with a heavy frown. “You cannot torture yourself with the
possibilities, or you will drive yourself into insanity. Whatever your brother has intended, he has gone through a great deal of effort and I do not believe that merely killing Ciana is his goal. His goal is to get to you, to shake you to your core and thus making you what he believes to be a weaker opponent.”

“So what would you have me do?” She demanded, jaw taut.

“Stick to your convictions,” Leonardo cautioned, his head leaned forward. “Stick to what you know. You know that he has Ciana and you know that you will find her. You know that you will have to face him. You can’t allow yourself to be intimidated by this. You can’t allow yourself to break now. You can fall apart once the battle is over, but not a moment before.”

Olivia chewed on the edge of her nail, fidgeting in her chair before she gave a small shallow nod. “You’re right. You always right,” she murmured, eyes downcast and shaded with thought. “It feels too heavy, too much, but I can’t let that control me. Life is a trial, right? Must be taken day by day?”

“Ideed it is so thought I imagine that it must be even more difficult on yourself than others,” Leonardo ventured, picking his words with great care. He had come to many conclusions about the woman in front of him, and his curiosity bid him to learn if there was truth to the absurd notion that was rattling around in his skull. “Given your displacement.”

He watched the way she stilled, saw the great number of emotions that slashed across her face until an expressionless mask settled there. It was a very good mask, and if he hadn’t been paying attention then he would have second guessed himself entirely.

“What do you mean displacement?”

His parchment and charcoal had been settled onto the arm of his chair, and he made a steeple with his fingers while determining what next to say. “It is a bizarre conclusion I have drawn, but given all of my observations,” Leonardo smiled, something akin to sheepishness in his smile. “I have wanted to ask you since I am admittedly curious about the future.”

Her mouth dropped open in pure astonishment. Her eyes flared so wide that he imagine they nearly popped out of her skull, and she sat there completely froze like that for a good moment. Her eyes fluttered dazed, and she sat up slowly, burying her fingers into her hair. She asked him, in a voice breathless with confusion, “How?”

“Everything about you is different, your demeanor, your idiosyncrasies, the way you carry yourself. It is nothing like other women I've seen. Even the courtesans cannot escape society's lessons of a woman being subservient. However you…you move with a freedom, a strength of a woman I've never known and it's natural to you. It's just the way you are, but here…” His voice filled with a smile, completely amazed that his outlandish assumption had been proven true. His mind raced with all the questions he would dare to ask, and wondering if he even should. “It is something strange and out of place. You are a stranger in more ways than anyone could have guessed.”

“Except you,” she whispered. “What my demeanor all that gave me away?”

“No. There were other things,” Leonardo spoke, his eyes glimmering brightly. “There are times that you reference events, and you have to catch yourself before you reveal too much. The other day you spoke about my work for the Medici family, when no one else knew of that yet. Even I was uncertain of their patronage to my works, but you spoke of it as if it had already been written in stone. And in your eyes, it had been.”

Cheeks flushed, Olivia looked away guiltily.
“Not to mention the minutiae of daily life escapes you, if not downright confuses you. The price of things or how to light a fire. How one gets in and out of a carriage, or on and off a horse. How you prefer trouser and tunics, and are uncomfortable in dresses. It was a matter of putting all these pieces together,” Leonardo finished, his head tilted ever so. His eyes took in the way she rubbed her temples, and could see the stirring of fear that rose inside of her. He felt a stab of guilt for putting such emotions into her.

“So what happens now, now that you know?” Livvy asked, quietly.

“Must it change things?” The artist frowned, his stomach curdled at the thought. “I suppose if I attempted to leverage this against you in attempt to extract this information then that would perhaps change things, but I have no intention of doing that,” he reassured her, very earnest in his words. “I understand that foreknowledge of the future can be…dangerous in the wrong hands. My interest in this is purely academic, I have dozens—no, thousands of questions and so many that I am tempted to ask—” He halted his speech, his hands lifted up to his mouth and his fingers pressed against his lips. “But no, it is better not to ask. One should not have knowledge of the future even when I have the unique position of having an individual from there right before me. The temptation…no, it is better to not indulge it at all.”

Leonardo was very decisive about this. His inquisitiveness was normally without bounds, but in this moment, it had to be reined in. It was knowledge that would be too easy to abuse, and even with his high moral standards could fall into such a trap.

Olivia stared at him, weighing his words. “But I have knowledge of the future.”

“No, you have knowledge of the past which is now your present and your future. I assume this because if you could return home, you would in a heartbeat. Your homesickness and wistfulness shows quite often,” Leonardo countered, with a small laugh. “You have no choice in the knowledge you bear, but you do have a choice in what you do with it. I cannot force you to give me answers to questions just for the sake of my curiosity. It would be selfish and an abuse of our friendship.”

There was a heartbeat before her expression softens. The warm glow returned to her eyes, and the corners of her mouth turned upward. “Thank you,” she whispered out, folding her arms over her chest. “Not just this, but your acceptance of this. It was not…” Her voice cracked, the surge of emotion overwhelming her for a moment. “It was not something that I expected, so thank you.”

“You are my friend,” Leonardo said, with a smile. “Is this not what friends do?”

Olivia gave him a beaming smile in return.

In was a bleak and dark morning, where not even dawn had ruptured over the city when the Red Hood had been given an urgent message and she barged into the tavern, skirting through the few drunks still out to the back room of the bar. She raised an eyebrow at Luca who had a glower etched on his face and a dagger twisted between his fingers. His eyes flickered up to her as she crossed the threshold and the relief there was so paramount that it made her lips twitch into an amused smile.

“About time. I was about to slit the insufferable bastard’s throat if I had to entertain him a moment longer,” the gruff bar owner sneered, a dark look shot towards La Volpe who seemed to appear out of nowhere in the blink of an eye.

The Red Hood stared. “Where do you come from?” She demanded.
La Volpe smirked, a slight roll of his eyes before he glanced over at Luca with a peculiar glance. “I have a way of being where I need to,” the Master Thief replied, as enigmatic as ever.

“And you need to be here, why?” The Red Hood asked.

“The information you so desired,” La Volpe said, with a bitter edge to his words. “I hope that it was worth the life of one of my men.”

Olivia sucked in a harsh breath, her heart plummeting down to the soles of her feet. The shock of the Fox’s words had made her feel like she had been plunged into a vat of ice, and she looked away from those sharp and accusing eyes. Those words made it all too real. Her brother was capable of taking a life. Even after the fight they had where he seemed more than ready to kill her—even happy to do, she still had doubt. She still believed that she could reach him somehow, but this news seemed shattered that illusion into a million pieces. “How?” She asked, her voice muted.

“He was strung up like a gutted pig. A note stuck to his chest with a blade,” La Volpe informed her, fury rolling off of him in waves. His anger just drove the dagger of emotion deeper into her soul, and guilt made its home there inside of her. “A message for you from your quarry. It seems he tires of the games of cat and mouse.”

The Red Hood stared at the bloody piece of parchment clasped tight in La Volpe’s grasp, and she reached out with a shaky hand to grasp it. She unfolded it to read her brother’s words, how he told her exactly where to meet him and the dark, mental cloud that hovered over her head seemed to crackle with thunder.

“I had half a mind to confront him myself, but this isn’t my battle, now is it?” La Volpe stared down his nose at her.

“No,” the Red Hood replied, thickly. “It isn’t.”

“I hope you make him suffer.”

“I’m sorry,” she apologized, but not sure for what. Was she apologizing for the loss of one of his thieves? Or was she apologizing because she couldn’t grant him his request? For all that has happened, if this fight were to end in death Olivia still couldn’t make Carl suffer. This wasn’t about pain or vengeance anymore. It was something sadder and something that felt so tragically inevitable. “He won’t get away with this.”

That was all she could promise.

La Volpe gave her a critical once over. “I will hold you to that, Ser Hood,” the Master Thief stated, caustically. He made his way to the door, only to linger there for a heartbeat. “We will have to put it behind us one day, Luca.”

“So you say,” Luca replied, coolly. “But forgiveness is not my charity, and even if it were, I have none to waste upon you.”

La Volpe released a suffering sigh, tapping his fingers along his brows before he shook his head side to side. Olivia marveled at how the tension seemed to make the air so thick that it was damn near impossible to breathe, and only when the Fox departed did the room seem to grow tolerable again. She was admittedly curious as to just what bad blood was between Luca and La Volpe, but the sorrow on the weathered man made her bit her tongue. She slid the note into her breast pocket, and told him, “Pull back your men, Luca. I don’t want anyone else caught in the crossfire of this…” She paused, contemplating a word sufficient enough to describe what was going on. “This fucking
tragedy.”

“As you say,” Luca inclined his head. “And be careful, Messer Hood. I’d hate to have to replace you.”

She gave him a half-hearted smirk. “As if you could.”

The broken down building was on the outskirt of Florence, on a dying farm where the land seemed to desolate and nothing was able to grow. She approached the building, dressed in a simple tunic and pants. This wasn’t about the Red Hood. This was about Olivia, and she had to face it as herself, not with a mask. Every single step forward seemed to take all of her courage, and her lungs were so painfully tight inside of her chest. A mountain of regret led to this moment, and she wondered if someway this was always going to happen. It might not have gone to this extreme, to the point of death and blood, but something wholly as painful. Maybe there was no rectifying the past, only accepting it for what it was and where it had brought them now.

Her childhood seemed so distorted, by her guilt and all the bad things that she found difficulty clinging to the bright moments of good. Carl had been one of the good things, until he wasn’t. Had she been blind to how much pain he still heard so tight? Had he been that good at hiding how much he despised her? Her mind struggled to unravel the twisted and mangled knots that was her family history. She stepped through the threshold and into the living space. Candles almost ceremoniously placed lined the floors near the walls, giving the room an eerie glow and Olivia placed her hand upon the pommel of her sword nervously. The door was left open, allowing a draft into the stifling room and the candles flickered ominously.

She followed the candles, like a trail they had been left, down into the cellar. The stairs were old and creaky, the dampness of the earth and soil pungent with the faint trace of days old blood. Her eyes flew open wide when she saw a familiar face, and she rushed over to the courtesan bound and gagged to a chair in the corner. Ciana weakly lifted her head, eyes guarded until she saw it was Olivia standing there. Hope swarmed in green eyes like tears, and Livvy reached out to remove the gag with great care. “Ciana, are you alright?” She asked.

“I’m alive,” Ciana replied, through dry and cracked lips. Bruises lined her body from head to toe, and she looked half-starved, but her spirit was still fierce and unbroken. “You know that this is a trap, don’t you?”

“With a calling card as obvious as the one left, there was little doubt of that,” Olivia said, grimly. “You know it’s considered rude to enter someone’s home without giving the host of the party a proper address,” a scathing voice interrupted the conversation, and Olivia bristled, sending her brother a glare over her shoulder.

“I think given the circumstances, my lack of manners can be ignored for just once, Carl,” Olivia spat, eyes flared with ire. She pulled out a dagger and cut Ciana free, before she rose to her feet to face him head on. There was a smile on his face that was not kind, but dark with a hint of cruelty. It had no place on his face and seemed so foreign, and again there was that feeling that there was something about this that he couldn’t quite grasp.

“I almost thought you were going to ignore my invitation,” Carl commented, almost sociable in his mannerism. If it were for the dead eyed stare he had pinned on her and the knife he twirled between his fingers methodically, she would have been fooled.

“I’ve had better invitations,” Livvy replied, caustically. “Ones that don’t require blood to be spilt.”
“What can I say? I thought a point needed to be made,” Carl said, with his teeth bared in a dark grin. He showed absolutely no remorse for the life that he had taken, nor the gruesome display that he had made out of the man’s corpse. “I had to make sure the proper message came across.”

“That you’re a ruthless bastard?” Olivia retorted, blithely. “That message came across loud and clear. Now, let Ciana by so we can finish this, hmm?” A dark brow rose in a silent challenge, as she tried to figure out just what Carl’s next move was. Would he keep Ciana here, to force Olivia to defend not only herself but the courtesan, too? Or would this battle be one on one like the many they had fought before?

“Why should she leave? You hold these people so close, call them friends and call them… family,” Carl spoke in a scathing voice, looking Ciana up and down like she was something he had scraped off the bottom of his shoe. “And yet you can look them in the face and lie to them day in and day out. Everything about you is a lie, and you don’t give an ounce of consideration to those that you fool. Don’t they deserve to know the truth about you, Daddy’s Little Soldier?”

Her teeth bit down into her lip so hard that it drew blood.

Ciana had gone still, eyes flickered between Carl and Olivia warily.

It took Olivia several seconds to find her composure, the sheer amount of anger and bitterness at being called that almost enough to cause her to lash out without thought. Swallowing down the blood, her eyes were diamond bright with fury and cheeks red with indignation. “This is between you and me,” she told him, tersely. “It’s always been between you and me, ever since our father pitted up against each other in one fight after another. You want to hurt me? You want to punish me? Make me the villain of your story? You can do all that and more, but I don’t have to take it. And I certainly don’t have to let anyone more people be drawn into the mess that is our past.

“You… sicken me. I see you now and my stomach just turns. The boy who cried when father killed a deer, the boy who would rather stomp on his own foot than hurt a fly, and now you are just this…” Olivia’s jaw trembled, her eyes filled to the brim with despair and sorrow. “Someone who cares so less about who gets caught in the crossfire more than he actually wants to get back at the person you blame for all that went wrong in your life.”

“Anyone I have killed, their blood is on your hands as much as it is on mine,” Carl told her, through clenched teeth. He took a dangerous step forward, with the knife clutched tight in his hand. “You had a choice to walk away, and you chose not to.”

“Leaving here was never a choice,” Olivia responded, her expression fierce and eyes narrowed. “If I walk away and let things just stay as they are, then that still have consequences outside of myself. Standing by idle doesn’t absolve of me, and given all that I know… it brands me as a coward and selfish. And I have been selfish too much in my damn life, I have run away from things so much bigger than myself because I was afraid to let something change the status quo. I was afraid to be pushed beyond the cozy boundaries of my life, but now I see a new world, one that maybe I can make better. People that I can protect and save, and I won’t just sit by and not do that. I made my choices and I live with them,” she stated, pointing an accusing finger in his direction. “But you made your choices, too. You can’t place the weight of them on me, and you will have to learn to make peace with them one way or another.”

“You aren’t a god, Olivia.”

“No, I’m not,” Olivia shook her head. “But I am human, and heaven knows I will make many mistakes along the way, but I will never, ever stop trying. You seem to think that there is only one path, one way for things to unfold, but there are always other choices. You can choose to stop this,
no one else needs to get hurt and we can both walk away. You have the power to make that choice, Carl.”

“Free will is an illusion, sister,” Carl intoned, darkly. “She showed me that. She made me see beyond myself, and made me better and brand new. I am stronger and faster, more than what father could ever make me.”

She stared at him, jaw set and thrust forward. She didn’t know what to make of his comment, or what to think of this mysterious woman that somehow affected him in such a way that it had placed a monster where her brother once stood. “Strength doesn’t mean wisdom,” Livvy whispered, a twinge of sadness in her eyes. “If you choose to make this a fight, then only one of will walk away and you can’t take that back. Once that choice is made, once the deed is done there is no changing it.”

“I’ve already made my choice, Olivia,” Carl told her, sardonically. “You are the only one that is trying to cover their indecision with platitudes that you think will sway me.”

She went silent, stormy eyes fixated on him. “I just had to be sure.”

“That my brother is really gone,” Olivia replied. In the blink of an eye, she lunged forward with a swiftness that took Carl by surprise and shoved him against the unforgiving wall. Candles scattered, wax and embers scattering across the wet earth. “Ciana, go!” She shouted, slamming her fists against his skull with an untamed fury.

Ciana rushed up the stairs without a single look back.

Olivia caught the flash of steel, reeling back just in time to avoid a knife to the gut. It glanced across her clothing, tearing through the fabric. Carl rose to his face, his face a mixture of murderous wrath and charged her with a roar. She ripped her sword from her scabbard, and blocked the dagger he tried to plunge straight through her chest. Like a man maddened by rage, her brother fought with lightning quick strikes, driving her backwards and forcing her to be on the defense. There was an unworldly determination inside of him like a black fire, consuming him slowly from the inside out and Olivia felt terror ping off every single nerve ending from head to toe. She ducked and weaved through his attacked, but there was hesitation in her every motion.

There was a part of her, despite her words that wanted to save her brother.

She slashed the tip of her blade across of his arm, causing him to draw back.

“You are going to die, Olivia,” Carl hissed out. “You are going to die and no one will care.”

“That’s always been your fear, Carl,” Livvy told him. “Never much of mine.”

Carl sneered, throwing a wild fist at her face. His knuckles glanced off of her cheek, and elbowed him sharply in the stomach. He stumbled back, his leg knocking into a vase and it knocked over, sending a dark wave of black liquid onto the ground. The smell of the oil was overpowering, and in an instant the candlelight touched the oil, flames burst to life with a whoseh. Greedy and untamed, the fire snaked up the steps and ate at the old, dry wood.

Olivia felt a chilling bone deep fear surge through at the sight of the fire. A childhood memory lanced through her with an unforgiving force, of her mother holding her too tightly while the kitchen table that ablaze. Carl took advantage of her stupor and lunged forward, tackling her to the ground. The air was knocked out of her lungs, and she only had a split second to twist her head out of the way of the knife. Carl’s other hand wrap tight around her throat, squeezing tight as he could and
pulled his knife free from the soil. He jammed it down, and Olivia used her forearm to block, a noise of pain rippled up her throat. He twisted the blade and she let out a scream, bringing her knees up to shove him off of her with all the strength she had.

Bile burned up her throat and she choked on it, while black smoke filled up the room. Nearly half of the stairs were consumed by flames, and Olivia knew if they wasted anymore time then neither of them would escape this building alive. Her sword was clutched in a quaking hand. “Carl, we need to stop,” she coughed, blinking her watery eyes. “This building is burning!”

“No,” Carl refused.

“Carl—” Olivia tried to speak, but he rushed her forward.

There was sickening sound of metal piercing through flesh, and Olivia found herself staring up into her brother’s wide and shocked eyes. It was a heartbreaking feeling that trickled down the back of her throat like ice. The second that her mind caught up to her instincts, and she glanced down at the sword buried into his stomach right beneath his ribcage. A noise between a breath and a sob passed through her lips, her eyes slowly trailing back upwards to see blood pool out between his lips. “Carl,” she whispered out, brokenly.

Hot tears rolled down her cheeks, her fingers letting go of the sword like it burned and he collapsed to his knees like that had been the only thing that had been keeping him standing. “So it was to always end like this,” Carl breathed out, his hands pulled the sword free as blood dripped out of the fatal wound like a fountain.

“It didn’t have to,” Olivia sobbed.

His eyes were dull and distance, as if he hadn’t heard her at all. “A broken tool…serves no purpose…” Each word said through a labored breath, and rivulets of blood spilt down his chin.

“You were never just a tool,” Olivia shook her head. “How can you think that?”

The despondent amusement that filtered across his expression looked more like her brother she had known. “We’re all tools in the end… but if I was to die, I guess I’m glad it was you… we’ve come full circle…” His body pitched backward, falling like a puppet whose strings got cut. It hit the soil with a soft thud, and with one rattling breath, his chest fell still.

Olivia stared at him, unblinkingly and took a single step forward. The lifeless eyes that stared up at her were an image that would haunt her soul until her dying day, and a keening noise tumbled out of her lips. A bleak void had ripped open inside of her heart, creating a vast chasm where only pain existed. It was a moment of pure grief that swallowed her, where she forgot how to breathe and where she forgot all the danger still present around her. Loss was not an emotion that she was unfamiliar with, but one that she had no way of combating. It was a feeling that she had no way of escaping, and her hands were trembling violently as she reached out towards her brother when a voice cut through roar of flames.

“Olivia! Olivia!”

It was Ciana calling out to her. It was like a fishing line, bright and shining in the murkiness that gave her something to latch onto and her self-preservation surged to life, moving like ants underneath her skin. She stumbled over to the stairs, each step felt like a betrayal to the boy—to the body—that she was leaving behind. Reasons one by one slid into her mind, reminding her that she couldn’t breakdown and couldn’t just give up here in this cellar where it would be so easy to do so. Reasons that reminded her that there was so much more than herself here, and somehow she fumbled up the
stairs, the hair on the back of her neck raised up at the feeling of the steps buckling underneath her weight.

The stairs remained strong just long enough to see her to the top before a couple gave away, and she felt Ciana’s hand on her arm like a vice, pulling her towards the entrance like an errant child that could not find their way. Olivia felt her eyes sting with tears, and she wept uncontrollably. “I left him,” the words tumbled out of her mouth, the entire world a blur around her and she didn’t even register until the cold morning air brushed against her skin that they were outside. “I left him behind…I shouldn’t have left him. I should have grabbed him, I should have brought him with me!”

“Olivia, the building was burning! There was nothing you could do!” Ciana whispered, her hands gripped her shoulders tightly. “You barely made up the stairs by yourself let alone with a body.”

Olivia stared at her, sightlessly. Her expression then scrunch up, a cry expanded up through her chest and she buried her face into her hands. “My…my brother is dead,” she wailed, her body shaking with wet and watery hiccups. Her knees hit the ground as smoke spiraled upward into the shining dawn. “I killed my brother.”

Ciana slowly knelt down beside her, and wrapped her arms around the inconsolable woman in a tight embrace. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” the courtesan whispered, rubbing soothing circles along her back. “But we can’t stay here, Olivia. Guards might be here soon, and you are hurt.”

“I can’t…” Olivia peered at her through red rimmed eyes. “I can’t leave him. It was my fault he was all alone. It is my fault that he’s…he’s dead.”

“We’ll send some back for him,” Ciana promised, gently. “We’ll have Luca come get him, alright? Please, please let’s get you somewhere safe.”

There was a moment where Olivia wanted to fight, but the impulse fell away in the wake of marrow deep exhaustion. She didn’t want to think, she didn’t want to worry, she was just too tired and spent to do anything more. Slowly, she nodded her head. “Luca…Luca will come get him.”

“Yes,” Ciana reassured her, tugging the brunette to her feet. “Luca will get him.”

Olivia leaned on Ciana, as the pair stumbled back towards the city gates. No one batted an eye at the pair, assuming them to be nothing more than drunkard who had managed to rub enough coins together to buy a night of pleasure. Bystanders pointed at the smoke in the sky, even one woman whispering about how it was a bad omen. Olivia was too dazed to even muster up a biting retort, especially when her heart felt the same way.

“We are almost to the house—”

“Olivia! Ciana!”

Ciana jolted at if shocked, while Olivia just raised her head slowly in a delayed reaction to see Federico jogging towards them. There was a wide grin on his face that fell the closer he drew and by the time he arrived at their side, it had vanished entirely. “What has happened?” He demanded, a hand resting upon Olivia’s shoulder and his jaw went taut when she flinched back from the touch. His dark eyes flared, darting towards the courtesan. “What has happened?”

“Please, ser,” Ciana said, beseechingly. “Wait until we are in the house. Away from prying eyes and ears.”

Federico’s lips parted, a sharp word on the tip of his tongue before he thought better of it. He closed his mouth, his lips thinned into a severe line and he nodded. “Lead the way,” he said.
A five minute walk made in silence, fractured only by Olivia’s labored breaths and occasional sob. The house was small and worn by the years, but she had put so much love into repairing it. Now all that seemed like a hollow endeavor, the home she had envisioned in her mind distorted and wholly wrong. The door closed behind them, and Olivia sank on the makeshift couch, laying down on it. Her skin was cold and clammy, and nausea rolled in the pit of her stomach. She pressed the back of her hand against her mouth, and forced herself to take deep breaths.

“Loosen your tunic,” Federico told her, his tone very quiet. “It will help.”

Livvy sent him a tired glance, but undid the string of her vest, allowing it to go slack. It did feel a lot better than the tight leathers bound around her, and she shivered lightly, grasping the back thrown over the back of the couch and draping it around her shoulders. Federico grasped her hand in his, drawing her arm out stretched and inspected the bleeding wound on her arm. “That…looks like it will need to be cauterized,” he stated, grim-faced.

“That’ll hurt,” Livvy said, her voice scratchy.

“Olivia,” Federico said, in a reproachful tone.

Her lips quivered at the edge’s as if she wanted to give him the same taunting smile she always did, but in the end, she just couldn’t do it.

“What happened?” Federico asked.

Ciana chewed on her lower lip. “It is Olivia’s story to tell.”

Olivia didn’t want to tell it. She just wanted to let her eyes fall closed and slip into oblivion, ignoring the two pairs of eyes that watched her like hawks. She felt the hand around hers tighten, and she craned her head back to look up at him through her damp lashes.

“Olivia,” he said, kneeling down beside the couch. His brows knotted together, and concern written in his deep brown eyes. He looked like he was struggled to find the right thing to say, and then finally he asked, “Do you need anything?”

Livvy bit her lower lip, and gave a shallow shake of her head.

Federico blew out a deep breath, tunneling his fingers through his hair. “Alright. If you think of anything, from something you need me to grab to just lending an ear you can ask it of me. I want to help.”

“I know…” her voice was low and raspy. Her fingers squeezed his, and she smiled weakly at him. She felt so helpless right now, like she was drowning and her limbs were too numb to swim up to the surface. “Thank you. And I will tell you what happened, just not right now…”

“I understand,” Federico whispered.

Federico sat down on the floor, his back braced against the front of the couch and Ciana tended to the fire while casting worried looks over at Olivia. Olivia stared at the fire, watching as the courtesan placed a blade on the edge of the fireplace. The steel blade slowly bled white hot with each passing second, and closed her eyes tightly.

The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Two long days later, Olivia stood underneath a rainy sky with a freshly dug grave in front of her and
flowered clasped in her bandaged hand. A body wrapped with linen laid six feet down and she trembled, the rain pelting down in a steady sheets. She wished she had listened to Luca, and had not seen what was left of the body that pulled up out of the ashes. Guilt had claws deep into her heart, and refused to budge. Questions swarmed through her mind, at least a dozen different ways that things could have been different to the identity of the woman that had turned her brother into the worst version of himself.

Federico stood a few yards away, with Ciana to give a few moments of privacy. Her two friends giving her support without question, and the words that Carl venomously spewed at her rose in her mind. Did she really deserve such loyalty when she couldn’t give those that she called friends and family honesty in return? Her chin quivered, while she ran her fingers over the bit of soil in the palm of her hand. “I don’t understand why it had to come to this. I don’t believe that free will is an illusion. I don’t think fate marks us in some grand scheme. I think we choose what path is ahead of us. I just wish we had chosen a different path for ourselves.”

Olivia dropped the dirt into the grave, and the workers took that as their signal to start shoveling the dirt back down into the hole. It took several minutes until the grave was completely covered, and she set the flowers onto the grave. “I’m sorry, Carl Lee Steel,” she whispered out, her voice barely audible. “I should have been a better sister to you. I will never be able to take that back. I will promise that I will find out who did this to you, who made you into the thing you hated and I will make them pay for it.”

Olivia wiped her eyes, scrubbing away the tears before they could fall. She got to her feet and walked towards her friends with her eyes cast down at her feet.

“Who was he?” Federico inquired, lightly.

She inhaled, deeply. Her blue eyes lifted to meet his, and her teeth abused her lower lip for a second. “My brother,” she responded, brushing her hair out of her face. She rocked back on her feet, and wrapped her arms around her waist. “The man I just had buried was my brother.”

Federico sucked in a harsh breath. “Oh, Olivia…”

“It’s difficult. We were close as children as twins are, but that…that changed. There was a lot of hurt and misunderstandings that just made it seem impossible for us to bridge that gap. I had always hoped that someday in some way that we would,” Olivia spoke, her voice very faint and light. “I blamed myself for a long time for things out of my control, but this…” Her grey eyes flickered towards the grave and her face contorted with pain. “But this wasn’t beyond my control, and now it will never be alright.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Ciana told her. “Your brother…he wasn’t right. Something was really wrong with him. He was sick in the head, and he didn’t give you any choice.”

“Any choice?” Federico asked, bemused.

Her fingernails bit into the palms of her hands sharply. “He attacked us. I…I had to…” She shook her head, unable to say anything more. Federico said a quiet oath underneath his breath before his arms enveloped her into a tight hug, and Olivia buried her face into his chest.

“You did nothing wrong,” Federico whispered, against the crown of her forehead.

“Then why does it feel like I did?” Olivia choked out.

“You have a right to protect yourself,” Ciana told her. “You can regret how fair you had to go to
protect yourself, you can regret your brother’s death, but you did nothing wrong with wanting to protect yourself and live.”

Olivia knew she was right. In her heart, she knew, but her mind was making it a very difficult pill to swallow. “I don’t know about either of you, but I could a drink,” she told them, breaking the hug and mustering up a big smile. It didn’t quite reach her eyes, but wasn’t entirely fake either.

“I’ll buy,” Federico offered.

Ciana chuckled. “You’ll regret that offer.”

“Nonsense.”

Olivia and Ciana shared an amused look, looping their arms together. The two women strolled down the street while Federico trailed behind them. All were unaware of the silent observer that watched with a guilt ridden expression from the shadows, and then disappeared entirely as if he hadn’t been there at all.

Chapter End Notes

END OF CHAPTER

The song “This is the Time” by Nothing More is Olivia's guilt over killing Carl and their childhood.

NEXT CHAPTER! Enter Ezio and feathers! Scandal, and possible betrayal? AC 2 is here. :D

This chapter was a massive overhaul from the original chapter. I edited the flow of the chapter, kept it from changing perspective so much and completely changed the battle between Olivia and Carl. In the original what was happening to Carl was revealed and he had absolved Olivia of the guilt she carried onto. In the end, I decided it was too neat of an ending and lacked an emotional impact that Olivia would have to carry with her. I like this edit more than the original and feel satisfied with in a way that I hadn't been with the other. Overall the plot of the full story remains unchanged, but note if you are ahead in FFNET version of this, I haven't updated this chapter yet on there and there may be discrepancies in later chapters that I haven't got to change yet to fit the earlier edited chapters.

Please leave some kudos and comments!
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I own nothing from Assassin’s Creed, this is just for my amusement only and to teach me how to be a better writer. I hope that you all will enjoy! :D

In the next chapter we will get to AC 2 storyline and we finally get to see Ezio’s point of view.


I want to thank Monarch372, nauravanaaka, Gracie191, Valshaena, Serya, Library_Drone, Boomer1125, ValentinaRose, silverroses14, Milday_Readsalot, helygen2017, snowfiredragon78, WinterChild1994, Shivex, FireBirdOn, MsLilly, The OneKrafter, aadele123, Caratris, delphinepryde84, YalenaYardeen4Queen, EurydiceAnstic, Judex, Mar_mi, JammyONE for the bookmarks!

I want to thank aadele123 for the comments!

Author’s Note: This is a bonus chapter, not originally a part of the story but added in after it’s completion. The time jump between Carl’s death to the AC 2 beginning was a year, but I felt there was too much there to simply jump over. I wanted to give more depth to Olivia’s grief and so this new chapter was kind of nice way to do that while expanding on the friendships and overall tale of the story.

Chapter Inspired by the Songs:
“Sound of Silence” by Disturbed
“Blood//Water” by Grandson
“This is the Time” by Nothing More

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twelve

“Unsteady Hands”

I always had difficulty with emotions. I can expression anger and agitation easily, but vulnerability was difficult even around those that I trusted. I felt that if I opened up too much, I would lose everything that I was. It was such a foolish fear, but it was one that existed inside of me.—Olivia Steel’s Personal Journal, 1475 (Expert found in Shaun Hastings’ Database)

Firenze, Italy

March 24th, 1475

Grief was like wet sand sliding down her throat.
It clumped and choked her, bringing tears to her eyes and her chest went too tight. And somehow, she still managed to obtain her next breath after several moments of stillness. Her footsteps no matter how well paced down the street felt unsteady, and her body felt two sized too small to fit all the churning emotions that she held back. It had been months since she had taken her brother’s life and she hadn’t been quite right sense then. A bit off balance and like she was viewing the world through a filter, not actually seeing it firsthand. Insomnia drove her from her bed in the middle of the night, and the sour feeling in her stomach made it difficult to swallow down food.

If it hadn’t been for the sheer stubbornness of Ciana and the disappointed look that Leonardo wielded so well, Olivia wasn’t sure that she would have eaten at all. Federico had been there, sparingly because he told them that his father had insisted that he must join the accounting business. Olivia had a feeling that was an excuse to cover up his training to become an official initiate of the Brotherhood, though she wasn’t entirely sure. It was never explicitly stated just how much training Federico had, or how much he knew about his father’s activities.

Giovanni Auditore’s job—both banking and assassin—had taken him to Milan only a month prior, and while the Auditore patriarch had not arrived back to Firenze, the news of the Duke of Milan’s assassination had rippled through society. It had been a daring plot on the Templars’ part to go after one of Lorenzo de Medici’s most notable and powerful allies, and had disabled the power of Italy’s high society just enough to help the Order gave more foothold. It was most disturbing, the boldness that the Templar displayed and all her eyes on Uberto had not yet given any hint of the man’s treachery.

He had yet to turn against the Brotherhood, or he was more cunning than Olivia first anticipated. And she couldn’t go to the Brotherhood with her word alone. With the Templars trying to besmirch her name and turn the Assassins upon her, the Red Hood had to make sure she was beyond reproach. She may have gotten La Volpe and Giovanni to vouch for her innocent in the trap laid only months ago, but that didn’t mean she could just walk up to them as if she were a trusted ally. She needed to prove herself to them, and the more Olivia thought about it, the more it was driving her crazy.

If she was correct in her timeline, then she had an under a year to save the Auditore Family from the plot against them and the Brotherhood. She released a heavy breath, the soft clomp of her feet against the stoned path her sole companion this earlier in the morning. Would it be enough? Would all the hard work she was doing be enough to change the course of history for the better? She prayed beyond all the doubts that lingered in her veins like razor blades that it would be.

“It has to be,” Livvy whispered out.

A heavy silence was her only reply.

Step by step drew her through the city like a puppet beckoned on invisible strings until she found herself at the last place that she wanted to be. She stood in front of the grave, not even comprehending where she was for nearly a minute before the full weight of her pain crashed down on her shoulders. Her breath careened, the breath she drew in too sharp and violent. She found herself kneeling before the ground, and settled dirt because her legs refused to hold her up any longer. It was hard to reconcile the fact that her brother—the body that was once her brother was buried in the earth, where the worms and insects crawled.

She choked on the rush of bile that rushed up on her throat. Her hands clasped tightly over her mouth, her brows scrunched together and her eyes clenched closed. Carl’s death had been different from any other that had been done by her hand. It had been close, it had been personal, and no matter how accidental his death had been, it had been one of the most cruel experiences in her entire
life.

Would the cruel edge been softened if she had been able to understand? If she had been able to know who had made Carl into the monster that wanted her dead so badly or would knowing that all make it somehow worse? Olivia didn’t know, but still she craved the truth like a drug. She longed for answers, as if they would give her some measure of clarity in a well of darkness that swallowed her entire life up. The damp earth soaked into the fabric of her leggings, chilling her skin and causing her to shiver ever so. It was always coldness before the dawn broke.

She blinked her sore and bleary eyes, lifting her chin to stare at the makeshift cross. It was just a simple wooden cross meant to mark the grave, and in front of the cross set a bundle of flowers that made Olivia’s heart skip a beat inside of her chest. The pale blue petals of the forget-me-nots were bright against the dark soil, and with a trembling hand, her fingertips brushed against the flowers in almost trance-like state. She had not seen these flowers anywhere in all of Firenze, no sign of such blooms in the many plants that burst with life as the season crept closer to springtime.

They were so out of place, as much as she was.

*Mother’s favorite flowers…*

The thought sliced through her daze and she recoiled as if physically struck. Her hands wrapped around the sides of her neck, her pulse stuttered against her palms and she stared at those flowers as if they were the devil himself. Had she found them and placed them there? Had she forgotten about it? Who else would deliver flowers to this grave? There were moments where she felt like she lost track of time, sleep waking through certain moments. Still she could recall what she did in those moments. If she were losing track of time and had no memory of it…

Olivia let out a harsh breath, squeezing her eyes shut. “I’m not my mother. I’m not my mother,” she whispered, frantically underneath her breath. She was bombarded by a tidal wave of panic along with memories that she wished she could scrap out of her skull and throw into the rubbish-bin without a glance back. Her jaw clenched painfully tight, she forced herself to her feet and stumbled back away from the grave.

“I’m not becoming my mother,” she repeated, one final time.

And then she turned on heel and fled.

It was midday before Olivia left her humble abode and ventured out to visit Leonardo at his studio. It was almost mandated that she come see him every other day. She just hadn’t been herself these last few months, putting all her effort into being the Red Hood instead of focusing on the part of her that Olivia. It seemed to take extra effort to carve out time to put away the Hood, which was probably not a good thing to be perfectly honest. It was one thing to build the persona of the Red Hood to use as a weapon against the Templar Order, a foe much bigger and more engrained into every foothold of society. It was another to live that day in and day out, and forget the person behind the cowl all together.

She entered the door of the studio greeted happily by the great painter’s assistant. A small genuine smile flickered across of her face when she looked to Leonardo. He always got so engrossed in his work, a life lived by his curiosity for all things and yearning to know more. She raised a curious brow at all the manner of leaves, branches and flowers that sat all along the table top. “I didn’t know that you had an interest in botany,” Olivia mused, with a tilt of her head.”

“Plants are quite fascinating. Take example the local cherry laurel blossoms. In the springtime, the air
is sweetened by the blooming flowers, but as beautiful as they are in appearance they can be just as deadly,” Leonardo spoke, with an excited gesture towards the specimen on his work table. A bundle of white flowering spikes were tied together, sitting there benignly and innocent looking. “If any part of the plant, mostly the seeds and leaves, were to be ingested then it causes respiratory issues and in some cases can be quite fatal.”

“Ah…” Olivia eyed the flower, committing it to memory. “I shall endeavor to be more careful about the shrubbery that I have to dive into when guards chase me from now on. How are you, my friend? Everything has been well?”

“Very much so,” Leonardo chuckled. “Indeed. The Auditore matriarch has requested some of my work. She is a special lady that Maria Auditore, a fine noblewoman who knows and appreciate artwork beyond just a pretty picture to hang on a wall.”

“I know of her,” Livvy nodded, after the briefest of pauses. “She is a good woman.”

“May I ask what prompted your visit today?” Leonardo inquired, with a smile.

“I was wondering if you’d like to visit the market place with me. After all, it is not only I that could do more fresh air nowadays,” she stated, with the right corner of her mouth upturned.

Leonardo pondered if to a long moment. “I suppose a bit of fresh air would not hurt.”

It was a beautiful day in the market. People milled around, the buzz of chatter layered over the clanks and clangs from the nearby blacksmith and the doctor shouting out the daily remedy of pomegranate and lead. Olivia shifted the edge of her brown hood back—not enough to expose her as a woman and draw the guard’s ire—but enough that she could bask in the sunlight. She savored the warmth on her skin, and loved the scent of the spring that danced upon the gentle breeze. She watched a bird hopped along the edge of the rooftop with a piece of straw in its beak, looking for the best place to build a nest before it settled on a little corner where a shingle had fallen off and created a nice niche.

She was almost envious of that little bird. How easily it found a niche in the world where she was still searching for hers, and shook her head with a silent but humorless laugh. She watched Leonardo bargain over the price of parchment with a vender while she stroked the strings tied around her fingers. Different spools of thread in different colors decorated almost every finger like ringers, each holding a different reminder than the next. The string of black was a reminder of loss and the cost of her brother’s life.

Who was behind Carl attacking her? It was vaguely implied by his own words that “she” had made him stronger. It didn’t take a genius to put together enough of the puzzle to realize that Carl had went through something traumatic and damaging, and given that her twin and her shared troubles with PTSD, she was willing to bet whoever this “she” was preyed upon that. “She” found the cracks, and pressed and pressed until something in Carl broke. This mysterious person or whatever “she” was, then filled those placed with a poisonous and cancerous hatred, and then pinned a target on Olivia’s back for Carl to bury his blade deep.

Anger and helplessness swelled up in her chest. She was still not sure if she could have saved Carl. There were quiet, resigned moments where she knew she couldn’t have. And other moments where she had wished that she had been given more of a chance to try. There was also the looming fear of just what this “she” was. The gargantuan fear that there was some force greater than herself working against her, one that she had no way of fighting back against made her shudder. It brought up all those pesky questions that Olivia had no answers to. Why was she here, instead of dead? Why was she in the past, if not to change it? Why did it feel like she was in a game of stakes higher than she could possibly imagine, stepping underneath the feet of Fate?
Olivia gave a mute groan, rubbing her throbbing temples to fight back the growing headache. She hated being caught in the spiral of those thoughts, down the rabbit hole with no end in plain sight. Until she came face to face with whatever instigated the fight between her and her brother, she was likely to never get any answers to her plight. She pushed off the wall that she had been leaning upon, and started towards Leonardo’s side when a spark of alarm splintered up her spine.

The sensation of being watched fell over her shoulders like an oppressive veil. Her head snapped around that she was supposed that it didn’t give her whiplash, and she peered through the crowd with a heavy scowl on her features until she caught the face staring back at her.

Olivia felt her take a step back while astonishment shot up her spine like white hot lightning. Her brow furrowed together into a severe knot and her mouth fell slightly agape while she stared unblinkingly at the wizened face that she saw through the crowd. There stood a man dressed in a green camouflage army outfit that was out of place for this day and age. He had salt and pepper colored hair cut in a short and severe haircut and a weather beaten face was etched with lines from a hard and weary life. But it was his eyes that drove a danger through Olivia’s heart, the deep-set stormy grey eyes that returned her piercing stare with guilt and regret.

And then the crowd swallowed him up.

Livvy startled forward, heart pounding in her ears while she was caught in between two conflicting urges. One to turn heel completely and run away, and the other to chase down the man and demanded answers. “Did…did you see him?” She demanded, her voice cracking violently.

“See who?” Leonardo asked, his eyes widened with concern.

Olivia stood there, her eyes transfixed on the crowd and the column of her throat shuddered with a shallow breath. The man had simply vanished, no trace of him the flow of the people like he had been nothing more than a ghost sent to torture her further. Her head shook ever so slightly, her hands reached to clasp over her mouth and all the blood drained out of her face. It took her several moments to come out of her stupor, and she turned towards Leonardo. “I think you are right. I think I need to get more sleep,” she whispered out, tunneling her fingers through her hair nervously.

“Livvy,” Leonardo whispered out, placing his on Olivia’s arm.

Olivia dropped her hands to her sides. “Leonardo, please…”

“Who did you see that had you so worried?” Leonardo questioned, too stubborn to simply let this go.

Closing her eyes, Olivia rubbed them tiredly and released an oath under her breath. A wrinkle set steadfast on her brow, her features twisted with agony and anger in equal measure. “It doesn’t make sense for him to be here,” she spoke, her voice strained with the weight of an emotional wound that she had carried for too many years. “It has to be a mistake.”

Leonardo considered her, a sympathetic tilt his mouth. “You thought you saw your brother.”

“No. Not him,” Livvy said, biting her lower lip.

“Then who?”

“My father,” she responded, her voice barely audible. There was a deep and haunted shadow that swelled up in her eyes, and her jaw blanched white because she clenched it so tightly. “I thought I saw my father.”

“Is it possible that it was him?” The painter asked, frowning.
“I...I am not entirely sure,” Olivia said, worrying her lower lip with her teeth. The odds of her ending up in the past were already astronomical. Add the fact that her brother shared her face, and now she thought she saw a glimpse of her father? The chances of it being all a cruel coincidence were too slim to even consider, but if she were to believe her own eyes...that just opened up a whole plethora of worries that she didn't need right now. “We should return to the studio. Please.”

Leonardo acquiesced, with a sharp nod. The walk back to the studio was brisk and rife with tension, and Olivia felt the air in her lungs steadily become less and less until she couldn’t breathe at all. If it wasn’t for Leonardo’s hand on the small of her back to push her through the threshold and into the safe walls of the studio, she would have collapsed there in the middle of the street. Her fingers clawed at the fabric around her neck, tearing it away as if it were responsible for stealing all the air out of her. A blubbering sob fell from her lips, and she barely heard Leonardo sharply order Angiolo for some tea.

It all passed like a scene being viewed through a kaleidoscope. All the shapes swirled into an indecipherable mess until she wiped her teary eyes clean roughly on the back of her sleeve. She sat there on the floor, trembling and looking down at her feet. “I—” Her grey eyes look at Leonardo who knelt on bended knee beside her with a steamy hot cup of tea in his hand, and her gaze darted away quickly as shame burned white hot on her cheeks. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what overcame me.”

“It is alright,” Leonardo told her, gently. “You have nothing to apologize for.”

His words seemed sincere enough, yet Olivia still couldn’t shake the feeling like she had done something wrong. She had never been one to voice her problems, not the personal soul cutting ones. No, those were the type that she let simmer inside of her and kept locked up tight in silence. Years of resilience were lost when she thought she had seen her father’s face in that crowd. All the loss and childhood trauma compounded in her head with all the subtly of a freight train and slammed through what little composure she had left.

“It’s just...bad, you know? Memories are heavy,” Livvy spoke, the words tumbled freely from her lips. She wanted to give some sort of explanation. She felt that she owed them that, but it just wasn’t easy to speak about. She reached up to rub her gritty and sore eyes, she had spent too much time crying these days. “A lot of my identity is wrapped in a not so good place, in those bad moments that never really leave me. I cope by compartmentalizing everything. I stow away certain feelings or memories away in certain boxes inside my head. Some boxes I visit regularly, and other I try to leave untouched as much as possible. When I thought I saw my father...” Her bottom lip quivered, and with a quaking hand she accepted the tea cup carefully. She rose to her feet, rather gracelessly and Leonardo caught her by the elbow leading her to the nearest chair. “When I thought I saw my father it opened one of those boxes. The ones I don’t like looking into.”

She sat down, her eyes looked down into the dark liquid. She could see the reflection of her eyes—his eyes—starting back at her and the pinch of panic that followed almost made her burst out in a bitter and bleak laughter. She lifted the cup to her mouth, and sipped gingerly. “Do you know I hate to be touched?”

“No, I did not,” Leonardo replied. His expression caution, his blue eyes viewed her for the wounded animal she was and everything about his posture screamed that he was going out of his way as not to startle her. Did she look so dangerous? Did she look so jagged and broken? She wasn’t sure what she looked like, but whatever was on her face in that moment, it made the artist feel alarmed.

“I associated touch with pain for a long time. There was a period in my life where there were no hugs, no being in tucked into bed at night, no little pats on the head when good. It was a vicious fight
to survive. It took me years to uncross those wires, and some days I still struggle with it,” Olivia confided, a little startled by her own boldness. She watched Leonardo draw in a sharp and raw breath at her admission which made tears flood her eyes anew. “I was taught that I couldn’t let my guard down. Not around anyone, because that meant leaving myself vulnerable. My father was adamant that a soldier must be prepared for attack even in their own home. For roughly seven years of my life, I lived under that hell and then one day, I drove him away with words alone where my fists had never made due. And do you know what I felt?

“Shame. Anger. Sorrow.” she listed off, her face contorted with pain. “When I saw the pain I caused him by accusing of him being heartless, for being responsible for my mother’s death and everything that had ever gone wrong in my brother and mine’s lives, I saw a glimpse of something expected. I saw a glimpse of the father that used to pick me up when I scraped my knees and sang me to sleep after I had a nightmare. I saw a glimpse of the father I would have given anything to have back, and the next day he just up and disappeared out of my life like a ghost. I felt cheated in a sense. I felt cheated because I didn’t really get him back, but I didn’t get answers as to why he did what he did. The thought of him appearing now?” She let out a harsh scoff, sloshing around the steaming drink idly. “It makes me want to scream, to shout. I just want to scream and ask why he changed, why he became such…such a monster. Why did he make us, his children into such monsters?”

“You aren’t a monster, Olivia,” Leonardo shook his head.

“I’ve killed people, Leonardo. No matter what justifications I have for my actions, those people had family. And the families will likely not understand why they died. All they know is that the Red Hood killed their loved ones,” Olivia replied, tonelessly. She lifted the tea cup to her lips, downing the rest of the tea in one gulp. The burn was acute and scalding, but she barely registered it so lost inside the darkness swirling up inside. A mirthless smile danced across her face, and her eyes met his. “The truth is…I’m somebody’s monster.”

Leonardo briefly glanced in her direction, a grim touch to his visage and his eyes were a wreath of sorrow. “Though there may be truth to your words, you do yourself a disservice to paint your actions underneath such a dark veil,” the artist informed her, his hands clasped together to make a steeple. “How much of a monster you believe the world sees you as, there are a great many that look to you as a champion as well.”

“I don’t know about that…”

“I do,” Leonardo said, his tone firm and without compromise. It startled Olivia into looking up at him, and he leaned forward just a little bit as if to impress upon her his next words with greater importance. “The path you walk is a tedious one. In a world filled with good and bad, you have to discern what is right and what is wrong. Others may not be able to see through your eyes, and maybe even some will blame you for this, but do not forget yourself in their blind hatred. Remember what you fight for Olivia, and don’t lose sight of that.”

Olivia would leave the studio an hour later, flummoxed by the painter’s words.

What did she fight for? Was it for the Auditore family? For the Assassins?

Or herself?

“Daddy,” a little girl’s voice echoed through thick and swirling mist, “can you tell me a story?”

“Of course I can, doodle bug. Once upon a time, one the edge of a great forest, there lived a very poor woodcutter with his wife and his two children, Hansel and Gretel. His wife often ill-treated the
children and when a great famine swept across the lands, the woman saw her chance to be rid of the children forever,” Daddy replied, with a voice that was comforting like a warm hug. Slowly the fog peeled back away revealing a farm in the midst of famine, the image like an ink drawn popup book that and an old woodcutter form appeared, his face twisted in misery and regret. His eyes pinned back to a forest while his wife looked utterly pleased. “There is not enough food in the for us all. There are too many mouths to feed! We must get rid of the two brats!” The wife declared, and eventually the woodcutter was convinced this was the best way."

The scene changed, like a page of book being flipped and from the new blank page appeared a forest with two children cast in its shadow. “I will take them miles from home, so far that they can never find their way back! Maybe they will find a new place and call it home!’ The downcast woodcutter prayed, as he led his children astray. He had taught them all that he knew, being cruel to be kind before he left his children to the mercy of the forest. After all that had happened, such a fate was much kinder than to remain in his care. His children were strong, the wood cutter reasoned, he continued the story, a strange sorrow in his tone. “They could survive through anything, but he had always assumed they would weather the storm together. They would not.”

Hansel and Gretel’s clasped hands slipped away from each other, and the two children marched in too different directions. “Hansel left a trail of a breadcrumbs, hoping to find his way back home. Gretel refused to go back, shouting, ‘Abandon to our deaths, I will not joyful skip back into the arms of the Grim Reaper who calls himself our father!’ And so, Gretel went one way and Hansel went another, the twins that were once inseparable had been divided. Underneath a full moon, two children wept—Hansel curled in a tight ball heartbroken and Gretel who walked forward determined to never be heartbroken again.”

“Gretel made her way out of the woods. Hunger gnawing at her stomach and weariness upon her shoulder, she was careful and smart and when the dawn broke the next morning, she found herself out of the forest and in a town full of people who came to her aid. But Hansel did not share such a kind fate like his sister,” Daddy narrated, the ink on the pages bleeding red. Dripping and drowning in red, blood coated the images and the fine lines of the pictures became warped and damaged. “So hungry and alone, Hansel went blindly through the forest. He ignored all reason and thought, too afraid of the shadows and evil eyes that surrounded him. He ran and ran until he came across the cottage made out of a candy. A cruel trick—a promise of sweetness to hide the pain, and driven by his hunger, he pulled free a piece of chocolate plaster from the house and ate it with relish. He never once thought about the consequences, until the door swung open to the house revealing an old crone.”

“Nibble, Nibble, little mouse, who is nibbling at my house?” The old woman demanded, leaning on crutches. The old woman peered at the frighten boy, and nodded her head. “My, my you poor child, who has brought you here? Come right in and stay with me. No harm will befall you.”

Hansel was shocked by the display of kindness, and took the woman’s hand allowing her to drawn him near. He never realized until his heart stopped beating that the old woman was a wicked witch that had torn him to pieces—

And devoured him whole.

Olivia shot up off her bed with a start. Her chest heaved and then collapsed with shudder, beads of perspiration dotted along her forehead and she had a knuckle white grip on the blanket. Her throat felt raw, with a scream lodged painfully in the back of it. Tears blurred her vision and she sat there, shaken by the nightmare that rattled through her mind on an excruciatingly slow repeat. It had been one of the most terrifying nightmares that she had ever had, and that was quite frankly saying something. The shadows in her room were stifling and unwelcoming, but she couldn’t break free of
them.

In her mind, it hadn’t been Hansel and Gretel. It had been Carl and Olivia.

She let out a light groan, pushing her hair out of her face. She jolted, like she had been stuck by a cattle prod when a loud knock came from the bedroom door. Biting back a curse, Olivia sighed and rubbed her eyes. “It’s open,” she called out, loud enough for the person on the other side to hear. The door creaked open, and a familiar tuff of blond hair appeared. “Ciana…what are you doing back here? I thought you were going to your apartment.”

In the building just down the way from the Palazzo Strozzi—home of the Auditore family—a great number of apartments had been rented out to farmers and low income families. The building was not the best kept, which is why the room and board were so low. Ciana wanted an apartment, the coin afforded to her by her profession was more than enough to afford one and while she did not say it out loud, she did not like staying all the time at the bordello. It was a fair and warmer place than the one in San Gimignano, but Olivia knew that Ciana feared that one day she would look back and see that all her life had been spent as a slave to someone else’s pleasure.

“Vieri de Pazzi and his vagabonds has been roaming around the streets in search of easy prey,” Ciana replied, her nose wrinkled in distaste. “Like mad dogs, they are and it has put all of Florence on edge. Paola has even withdrawn a great deal of courtesans off the streets. Rumors have spread that the Pope’s nephew, Girolamo Riario, has been seen within the company of them and given his reputation for the flesh since his bride, Caterina Sforza, is far too young for such acts though there are number of people that claim that didn’t stop Girolamo.”

Olivia stared at the courtesan, horror reflected in her gaze. It was difficult to image the calculating and independent woman as little more than a child that had been married off far too young, but the thought was still a very heart wrenching one. If the rumors were true it was no wonder that Caterina grew to hate the man who was her husband. With a furrow upon her brow, Livvy shrugged off the blanket and got out of the bed. She paced the length of the floor, her eyes casually glanced out of the window as she passed it.

Girolamo Riari was not all that mentioned in great detail that she recalled in the game, even though historically he had been one of the main co-conspirators in the assassination attempt on the Medici family. If he was here in the company of the De Pazzi family then that more than likely meant that the Templars were gathering their forces. Shoving the blankets off of the bed, Olivia immediately went to the trunk stowed away in the bottom of her closest to retrieve her armor. “Stay here and keep the doors locked,” she ordered, striping off her nightclothes without a care.

“You know something,” Ciana accused, a tremble of worry in her voice.

“I know a lot of things,” Olivia replied, binding her breasts with a thick cloth. It was discomforting to do so, but she had little choice if she wanted to keep up her guise. She slipped on her tunic, followed swiftly by her pants before she started to buckle her pieces of armor into place. “What I know is that having Girolamo here isn’t good. It means the Pazzi family is up to something, and I don’t like that one bit, do you?”

“No,” Ciana said, quietly. “But are you sure that the Red Hood should meddle here? If something should happen to Girolamo and you are implicated, the Pope himself would be after your head.”

“I do not intend of confronting him,” Olivia reassured the courtesan, with a lopsided smile. “I just intend to go and stay within the shadows to see what all I can learn from this meeting. There is something afoot here, and it makes my nose twitch.”
“Everything makes your nose twitch nowadays,” Ciana chided, giving a slight roll of her eyes. “Your increasing paranoia makes me wonder if I should start packing and going to greener pasture before some doom befalls all of Firenze.”

“If I have my way, no harm will befall anyone,” Olivia countered, lightly. She dodged the blond’s attempt to wheedle information out of her, knowing that Ciana was just concerned but she was quite ready to share the truth of the matter with her just yet.

A storm brewed overhead, grey clouds building up into towers that reached new heights and the scent of rain brought upon the winds that swept up the streets. The Red Hood stood perched on a ledge, obscured in shadows with a knuckle white grip on the shingles. Her grey eyes narrowed into slits as she watched the drunken group of gentry stumbled up the way. It was easy to pick out Vieri amongst the group, he was the helm and loudly swearing to fight the next fool they came across. The people unwise enough to be out on the streets quickly made themselves scarce. It was well known that Vieri was vicious and had a taste for blood. He would often hold competitions with the other young nobles, using sabotage to win and if by some chance another competitor would win, Vieri would host a dinner to die for. He would poison the winner and the winner’s family.

If a competitor was wise enough to decline such an invitation, some tragic accident would befall them or their loved ones. It set a precedence that anyone that crossed Vieri de Pazzi would suffer and suffer dearly. The only ones that had slipped through his fingers were Federico and Ezio, whose father’s position as a close friend to Lorenzo offered them a bit of protection that others did not have. The Templars wanted the Assassin and his brood out of the way, but they were not foolish enough to simply strike them down. There would be a backlash, which is why the Templars sought to dismantle the Auditore’s good name and reputation before spilling blood.

The Red Hood ground her teeth together, the burn of bile rising up through her chest before settling sourly on the back of her tongue. Her eyes slid from the Templar to the man standing closely next to him, he was of average height draped in lavish finery from head to toe. His dark thick hair was mussed up, and cheeks flushed red from being deep in his drinks. His droopy and dark eyes were glazed over, and he could not walk a straight line to save his life. This must be Girolamo, the thief reasoned, with a deep frown on her features. Vieri is keeping him awfully close. Likely trying to win his favor and friendship.

It was the game of politics, the wealthy trying to line their pockets with favors and allies in order keep themselves above the law or in power. The Templars were experts at navigating the game, while the Assassin chose to be more subtle. That subtlety and hesitation to get involved from beyond the shadows is exactly how the Templars would gain the upper hand in such a year or so time. Tilting her head to the side, the Red Hood listened to the conversation down below.

“I saw we go to the nearest brothel,” Girolamo chuckled, swaying wildly on his feet as he walked down the incline. “I always love the whores there. Willing to suck or fuck and squeal for a bit of cock.”

“It’s not your cock they squeal for,” Vieri snorted, in amusement. “The puttane put on a good show if giving a nice bit of coin. But why waste coin when I have some maids that will do? I’ve trained them quite well to be ready and willing to fulfill all their duties.”

The Red Hood sneered in disgust.

“Giralomo can barely stand up, let alone get it up!” One of their companions crowed.

The entire group burst out in raucous laughter, even Girolomo. She followed the group for a great
distance, taking great pains to avoid in rooftop patrols. Such patrols were rare, given that not much could convince guards to climb up to such heights except a nice pay check and the city official were miserly when it came to coin. The group came to a halt just in front of a villa just eastward of the marketplace, and Girolamo mumbled something in reply to Vieri before he stumbled through the archway and into the gardens to take a piss. The group continued onward, after a moment or two and The Red Hood raised her brows.

She silently crept along the ropes anchor that connected the two buildings. She wasn’t sure if thieves had put these into place, or the guards did so they could chase culprits easier along the rooftops, or if there function they served beyond being used as a bridge. Still they came in handy and Olivia wasn’t willing to look a gift horse in the mouth overtly long. Hesitation filled her because she wasn’t sure what she was exactly going to do here. The only information she had gained was that the men viewed women as toys for their pleasure, which made her stomach churn, but unfortunately a stigma that existed. Though she made note to see if any maids in the Pazzi’s family service would be willing to take bribes to spy, or needed a safe escape from the city in the near future.

She couldn’t kill him, for obvious reasons. Olivia pinched the bridge of her nose, letting out a frustrated sigh. It seems like she completely wasted her time here, and she could feel the irritation bubble in her gut like a boiling pot on the stove. She was about to turn away when she noticed a young woman, clothes raggedy and covered in dirt, making her way up the street. She was obviously homeless and nothing more than skin and bones, and suddenly a menacing sensation curled along The Red Hood’s spine. She narrowed her eyes at the young woman, who could be no older than sixteen and mentally urged the girl to turn and run.

She didn’t, and out stumbled Girolamo.

Her nostrils flared angrily at the way his expression lit up like he had been bestowed a present when he saw the woman making her way down the street, and it didn’t take a genius to see where this was headed. The young woman startled, eyes growing wide with shock at his appearance and fear froze her to the spot when Girolamo reached for her. The Red Hood dropped from the ropes, rolling forward to absorb the impact of her landing and surged to her feet in a heartbeat, grasping Girolamo by the collar of his outfit. It took not great strength to pull the drunken man off balance and shove him back into the gardens.

She spared the frightened women one word. “Run.”

And the woman took off as fast as her feet would carry her.

The Red Hood entered the garden, staring down Girolamo who picked himself messily off of the ground.

“Yo—you are the Red Hood,” Girolamo slurred out.

“You will not prey on the innocent on these streets,” the Red Hood stated, her gaze ice-cold. If she could, she would end him here and now yet she couldn’t just simply do so. “If you know what is good for you, you will go to your villa and stay there until you leave my city.”

“You city?” He cackled, as if the thief just told the funniest joke. “Pig shit!”

The Red Hood watched Girolamo fumble for the dagger on his belt. “I will not fight a drunken fool,” the thief snapped, turning her back sharply. She exited the garden intent on making a hasty escape down the stairs to the right, and using the marketplace to hide out in case Girolamo decided to call the guard. She was already halfway down the block when she caught a glint of metal coming at her from her peripheral vision, and she reacted bringing up her arm to block the blow. She shoved him
back away, and he tripped backwards over his own two feet, landing hard on his backside. “You idiot! What are you trying to prove?”

“You will make a nic…nice trophy,” Girolamo hiccupped, fighting to get up on his own two feet. “You death will…will…make a lot of people…”

“I’ve never seen a sadder fucking sight,” she whispered, underneath her breath. It was like watching a train wreck, the man couldn’t slur a sentence together and get to his feet at the same time. She shook her head side to side, and took another step back away. “I’m not fighting a defenseless man. There’s no honor in that.” And you aren’t worth screwing the timeline up over.

She made her way to leave again, hearing him curse violently. It was her fault that she underestimated his tenacity or his desire to kill, whether it stemmed from his own misguided ego or to impress his the Templars with his accomplishment was anyone’s guess. Her feet hit the top of the stairs leading down to market area through the small alleyway, when suddenly she heard sloppy footsteps rushing towards her. She only a split second to react to the hand that wrapped around her upper shoulder, and she pulled her arm forward in a sharp movement.

Girolamo was pulled forward, and lost his balance, his body pitched forward down the stairs. Olivia watched his body smack against the stone stairs at unnatural angles, his arms flailing wildly as his heels was up in the air. Seven steps he fell down and his neck bent sharply against the rock, a sickening crack that seemed to echo into the silence of the night before his body became a lifeless heap at the bottom of the stairs.

Olivia forgot how to breathe, her eyes growing to the size of saucer and her arm left trembling in midair where she had threw him away from her. Second ticked by, the scene frozen like time had come to an entire standstill and then finally by some morbid form of courage, she found herself slowly walking down the stairs towards the body. Her stomach squelched tight and a cold sweat prickled along her skin from head to toe, her heart galloped in her chest like thunder. She knelt down, feeling her knees quake with the effort and her fingers reached out towards his twisted neck. She searched for a pulse that wasn’t there, and she didn’t know why she even tried.

Maybe because she didn’t want this to be real.

She ran away—away from the body, away from the accident. She wasn’t even paying attention to where she was running; she just picked a direction and kept on moving. Her pulse pounding in her head and heart wedged in her throat, she kept on running even when her lungs felt burnt to ash in her chest. She was trying to outrun it, a sense of failure and doom that threatened to swallow her whole. Everything moved in a blur and the next coherent moment was her slamming through the door to Leonardo’s studio, and coming to an abrupt halt at the utter wreckage of the place.

Leonardo jumped out of his skin at her arrival and cursed, vehemently. “Are you trying to scare me to death, Olivia?” He demanded, half-heartedly.

Olivia froze, survey the place with a wide eyed stare as she shut the door with much more care than she had went she entered. “Did…did the guards harass you again?” She asked, her grey eyes flickered over the papers and chairs strewn about before she looked to Leonardo himself. Her lips dipped downward into a frown, when she noticed the bruise swelling up on his cheeks and the rumpled state of his clothing. “Did they hurt you? Did you need a doctor?”

“No, no, nothing more than a little roughened up,” Leonardo waved off, kneeling down to pick up an overturned chair. “I will be alright, no need of a doctor.”

“Shouldn’t a doctor decide that?” Olivia asked, with a dark brow arched.
Leonardo chuckled. “Perhaps.”

“What was there excuse for coming after you now?” She inquired, leaning down to pick up some papers off the ground. Her heart ached when she saw the muddy foot prints ruining several notes and pictures that had Leonardo had meticulously created. It made her angry at the injustice done to him, and how he had to bear it with a smile.

“Certain so-called pious people in the church are likely responsible,” Leonardo said, with a grimace. He dragged his hand through his disheveled hair and the apple of his throat shook when he drew in a deep, calming breath. “As always they fear my experimentation with anatomy, deeming it the devil’s work and such madness. The truth is that they fear enlightenment for knowledge is power, and they wish to keep such to themselves, for what good is a church if people do not flock there for answers, no?”

“They believe science will uproot the faith in the church,” Olivia said, her eyes fell closed as she reached up to massage along her brow where she felt a headache building up behind her eyes. “And the church holds a great deal of sway over the people, and the government as it stands. They want to consolidate power by keeping the masses ignorant.”

“Essentially, yes,” the artist nodded.

“That is terrifying,” Olivia stared at him, the blood drained out of her skin. “What if they attempt to persecute you?”

“I have the backing of the Medici family, and several others. I don’t normally like to boast, but I am well enough known also should my ties to the community not stop them from attempting to persecute me then I know several places in all of Italy that would offer me sanctuary,” Leonardo stated, with a tiny smile on his lips. “Their baseless accusations cannot hold weight in a trial, so instead they attempt to intimidate me with the only means left at their disposal. I’ve never been susceptible violence nor will I cower in the face of it.”

“If you ever need anything—”

“I will let you know,” Leonardo reassured her, with a smile. “Now what is the matter? You seemed upset when you arrived?”

“You have been beaten and had your studio ransacked,” Olivia admonished him, with a slow shake of her head. “You have enough troubles of your own shoulders. You don’t need me adding anything else on top of that.”

“Nonsense,” Leonardo replied. “If you came here for my advice, it is yours. All you have to do is unburden your worries and allow me to help you.”

Olivia decided then and there that she didn’t really deserve someone as wonderful as Leonardo da Vinci as her friend. Not only was his intelligence far ahead of his time, his compassion and kindness were so pure that it was hard to believe that he was actually human. She twisted her hands together, her eyes darted away from. The gravity of what happened earlier returned tenfold, leaving her pale and slightly trembling. It took her a few moments to compose herself enough to speak. “I really messed up,” Olivia whispered, brokenly. “I made a mistake tonight, and messed up so bad. There is no way to fix what I did.”

“What do you mean?” Leonardo asked, worriedly.

Olivia breathed in deep, her quaking hands grasped the back of a chair to keep herself upright. The
cords of her throat were taut, and she had difficulty swallowing down the tightness caught in middle of her neck. “I went after Girolamo Riari,” she confessed, in a voice so small and tiny.

“Olivia,” Leonardo gasped, with an astonished look.

She bowed her head, her hair falling like a curtain concealing her features. “I didn’t follow him with the intent on harming him, just to discover the depths of his interactions with the Pazzi. There is… going to be a disturbing develop in the year to come, and from what I recall, Girolamo is heavily implicated in it. I just went to keep my ears to the ground and to gather as much information as possible, not for a confrontation,” Livvy stated, her voice strained. Each word seemed to take all of her strength and effort to get them past her lips, and her thoughts were overcrowding her head making her temples ache and throb.

“But some kind of confrontation happened?” Leonardo guessed, tugging at his bottom lip.

“Yes. I was about to turn and leave when a homeless woman ended up in his path. The vulgar comments he had made earlier, and the way he put his hands on her, I knew what was going to happen and I—I just couldn’t walk away from that. I let the woman get away, and I postured, hoping that my reputation might buy me out of a fight, but he was all too eager to claim the Red Hood’s head in a battle. I did my best just to ward him off, just long enough for me to get loose and away,” Olivia explained, with a dreary laugh. She released the knuckle white grip she had on the back of the chair, and walked over to the fireplace to stare down at the flames, soaking in the warmth to provide an ounce of comfort in this moment. “I made the mistake of thinking that he was drunk meant he was slow and defenseless. I was halfway down a flight of stairs when he grabbed on my arm. I just reacted and jerked my arm away, and he went flying—” Oliva reached up to trace the column of her own throat, looking more than a little sick to her stomach. “He went flying down the stairs and broke his neck. The sound—oh, God, the sound of his necking breaking.”

Leonardo absorbed the story, with a deep frown. “I understand that such situations can be traumatic, but this is hardly your fault, Olivia. You were not looking for a fight, but Girolamo in his intoxicated state would not take no for an answer. You had a right to defend yourself.”

“That isn’t why I am upset. That’s not why I am blaming myself. Girolamo was supposed to be alive for years to come, he was supposed to get married to Caterina Sfroza, supposed to have two children—by God, I erased two people from existence! Two lives that will never be born, two people who had accomplishments, who were important to history, and I—I just erased them by a stupid choice I made?” Her fingers knotted into her hair, pulling on her scalp until it burned and her chest quaked with the thin breaths that she drew in through trembling lips. “How do I reconcile that? How can I be alright with that? I made a choice that not only altered the future in ways that I can’t even possible comprehend, but I destroyed lives in the process!”

Leonardo clasped his hands together, and considered her plight. His brow wrinkled in a knot, and he chewed on his lower lip while he paced over to his art table. His eyes roamed sightlessly over the great manner of objects and projects he was working on, until his blue eyes lit up with an epiphany. “You have a good heart and steadfast morals, Olivia,” he started, flashing a quick and reassuring smile at her. “Many would eagerly fill your shoes, and play God as if it was their right, and not agonize a second over the changes that they have made. You may stumble about and be foolhardy at times, but you don’t play with people’s lives like they are just a game to you.”

I once did, Olivia thought, stomach churning violently. This had all been a game to her a lifetime ago, and had been a story that was just ‘make believe’. None of it had been real. None of it had been personal. It was startling to realize how much had changed. She was no longer that girl who shied away from the world, with so many walls that no one was every truly close to her, save for the Leo
from her original time. There were still walls and still hesitations, but Olivia cared—and she cared deeply.

Here and now, she had so many people that were important to her. People she knew and people she hadn’t met yet, all dear to her heart and she couldn’t imagine losing or bringing harm to. What is she made another mistake like tonight? What is she made a wrong choice and it cost her more than she could imagine? What is she destroyed and screwed things up for the worst? What if she was exactly the albatross that Carl warned her, she would be?

“Olivia, it is natural to mourn the loss of life. It natural to despair for things that once was, but is no longer. However, you cannot let these things keep you from living your life and trying to do right by all that you know,” Leonardo responded, his voice so calm and soothing. He seemed to have a better handle on her situation than she did, and always knew what words to offer. “I think you have to consider that the future you know changed the second you came here. That all these choices that you’ve made are like ripples in a pond, some greater than others, but waves of change nonetheless. The people you’ve saved, would they be here if not for you? What changes have their continued exist brought upon the world, or will bring upon the world? What about the people you’ve killed, what lives would they have lived otherwise? What accomplishments or choices now will never happen because those lives were cut short?”

Olivia swallowed, thickly. “I started to feel better in the beginning of this talk, but now all I feel is exceedingly much worse. I need to sit down, or stiff drink,” she mumbled, with a miserable expression on her face. Tears glittered in her eyes and she scrubbed them away stubbornly. “Both would be preferable.”

“You are only human, Olivia,” Leonardo said, reaching out to place a hand on her shoulder. “All we humans can ever do in life is to do the best we can with what we have, and it is no different for you.”

Olivia gave a light watery scoff. “I have knowledge of the future. I think that makes things different,” she sniffled, crossing her arms over her chest.

“So you have more tools than the average individual. Many people have advantages in life—wealth, wit, charm—all manner of tools they have, but it is what you do with those tools that matters most,” the painter told her, nudging her chin with his knuckle gently causing her lips to twitch in a reluctant smile. “You’ll make mistakes and there will always be doubts, but without doubts faith means nothing. The future that once was may be gone, but there is still a future worth fighting for. And I have faith that you were brought here for a reason—a good one, to make the future just that.”

Olivia started to cry, she tried to hide by wiping away the tears that swelled up in her eyes before they fell but she knew there was no fooling the perceptive man standing beside her. “It doesn’t stop my fears or ease my guilt, but your words bring much needed comfort,” she told him, with a bright smile. “I am grateful for your friendship. I hope that one day I will be able to pay it forward in full.”

Leonardo chuckled, a bit bashfully. “You could start by helping me…” He gestured to the mess of his studio that the guards had left behind after they had ransacked his things.

“Of course I’ll help,” Olivia agreed, easily.

As they picked up the pieces of the studio, Olivia mused over Leonardo’s advice and thought over it carefully. He was right that there was still a future, no matter how changed and it was worth protecting no matter what. Her actions and inactions would always come with consequences and prices, and she would have to make sure that those were always prices that she was willing to pay.
Firenze, Italy

August 28th, 1475

In the late August, Caterina Sfroza gave birth to a baby boy.

It was quite the charade, Olivia had to admit. There was no way for anyone to claim the child that Caterina had birthed was not that of her husband’s, without impugning her honor and earning a great deal of enemies. Given the unrest of Milan due to the assassination of the well-loved Duke Galeazzo Maria Sfroza several months ago, to make such bold allegations against the Duke’s beloved daughter would only cause further discontent in all of Italy. And no one would be able to find fault in Caterina as a mother to this child—whether she birthed or adopted it, because Caterina had learned given that there was more to family than blood, given the fact that she was an illegitimate heir that had been brought into the family without an eye batted and had even been adopted by her father’s second wife. From all historic accounts, Caterina had a healthy lifelong relationship with not only her mother, but her stepmother as well.

Olivia departed, stepping back into the shadows casted by the tall building. The tension coiled in her loosened, and her fears of having completely shattered the timeline eased. While Caterina may face some opposition down the line if interested parties grew bolder, since the young girl—and she was a girl of only thirteen—she inherited whatever properties or power came from her husband’s estate, Olivia knew for now that the young mother was safe with allies poised all around. The Templars could not afford to earn the ire of the Pope by approaching Caterina in any capacity. From what little information brought to her by her spies, the Sixtus was displeased with those that placed him in such harm’s way. Despite the well-known love that Girolamo had for spirits, the Pope still held the Templars liable for not seeing his nephew safely home that night. (No one knew that the Red Hood was involved, a fact that she was much grateful for.)

It was not nearly enough to destabilize whatever alliance the Templars’ had with the Papacy, for Pope Sixtus IV had already invested heavily against the Medici Family to cut those ties now and his dislike for Lorenzo de Medici ran deeper than his fondness for his nephew.

Olivia took the familiar path towards Carl’s grave, it was like a familiar rhythm now. She went to visit the grave almost ritualistically, and she knew it was out of the guilt that burned inside of her. She knew it was out of the pain of loss that still hit her at unexpected moments, and maybe she was trying to appease her inner demons by going to the grave, even if it really didn’t change anything at all. She knelt down in front on the ground, staring down at the patch of earth were nothing grew. Her brows were puckered together, and her grey eyes swirled with sorrow.

She had been sitting there for a long time, when a shadow fell over her and she tiled her head back to see Federico standing there. “Somehow I knew that I would find you down here.”

Olivia silently turned back towards the grave, her fingers curled into the palms of her hands and rested on her knees. Federico slowly came to sit beside on the ground, and the warmth of summer surrounded them, bring the sweet smell of flowers and the bakery that was just down the way. “Does it help?” Federico inquired, quietly. “Coming to pay vigil, does it help?”

“I’m not sure,” Olivia admitted, her head bowed. “It feels like the right thing to do. To visit his grave and make sure he isn’t forgotten, but does it make me feel better? Not really, no.”

“I wish I had words to help,” Federico told her, with a deep frown.

“Words honestly make it worse,” Olivia said, giving him a weak smile. “Everybody tells you how sorry they are for you. Asking constantly what you need. And then in a couple weeks’ time, when
you aren’t over your grief, the well wishes turn into comments about how you should move and shouldn’t linger…” She reached up and rubbed her tired eyes, releasing a soundless sigh. “So please no placating words. No condolences.”

Federico leaned back slightly. “Then what would you have me speak of?”

“Tell me about anything—about your day, how you’ve been. Anything under the sun, just not anything to do with—” Her voice broke off, and her eyes darted away from the grave as her chin quivered.

So Federico did. He spoke about his work with his father at the bank, him hiding money on the rooftop which caused a whole mess of panic. He kept talking, finding things to say to fill the silence so Olivia’s minds could not fill it with dark and depressing thoughts. She closed her eyes and listened, allowing everything around her to melt away. The two friends sat there in front of the grave for a long time, never noticing the grey eyes watching them from the shadows.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: Initially this chapter never existed. It wasn’t a part of “Life, Death and a Choice” but going back and re-editing all the chapters, it didn’t feel right just skipping over an entire year straight to the beginning of AC2. Not when Carl’s death impacted Olivia so hard. While this doesn’t move the AC2 arc forward a lot, it is a very personal chapter on Olivia’s arc. It was nice to dig into this character and reveal depths of her that I initially didn’t get to—or perhaps wasn’t well-equipped as a writer to do so—when I first wrote this fic. It was kind of seeing this fulfillment of this character in a way, and it is nice to slowly incorporate more of that into the Edited version of Life, Death and a Choice. I think it takes a good character, and makes them into something great. :D

1.) Girolamo Riario (DIVERGENCE FROM ORIGINAL STORY)—He honestly isn’t in the game all that much. I didn’t even known he existed until I went back and studying the Pazzi Conspiracy a little more closely. The matter of Girolamo’s marriage to Caterina is up for debate. Documents show that Caterina agreed to marry him when she was ten, but if the marriage was consummated before her fourteenth birthday is up to speculation upon. (Still gross on so many levels.) Given that Caterina had two children with him after her fourteenth birthday in 1478, and Girolamo wasn’t assassinated in 1488, this has obviously changed the timeline. How it changes is just background details that will mentioned. I would say the greatest impact will be for the future that benefits from the changes Olivia has made greater than the present time of 1476. This is actually probably the biggest divergence from original Life, Death and a Choice that I have inserted into this edited version.

2.) Cherry Laurel—While it is an innocent looking shrub that is commonly used as hedging, or border plants, it can be very dangerous as well. Ingesting any part of the poisonous plant, especially the leaves or seeds, can cause potentially fatal respiratory problems. The plant holds traces of hydrogen cyanide, a toxin that deplete the nervous system of oxygen and in rare cases, cause death.

Thank you all for the fantastic support! Hope you all Happy Holidays and will a
fantastic New Year!

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